

IRANIAN DOCUMENTARY FILM CULTURE:  
CINEMA, SOCIETY, AND POWER 1997-2014

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by  
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## ABSTRACT

Iranian documentary filmmakers negotiate their relationship with power centers every step of the way in order to open creative spaces and make films. This dissertation covers their professional activities and their films, with particular attention to 1997 to 2014, which has been a period of tremendous expansion. Despite the many restrictions on freedom of expression in Iran, especially between 2009 and 2013, after the uprising against dubious election practices, documentary filmmakers continued to organize, remained active, and produced films and distributed them. In this dissertation I explore how they engaged with different centers of power in order to create films that are relevant to their society. To focus this topic, my research explores media institutions, their filmmaking practices, and the strategies they use to produce and distribute their films.

This research is important because it explores the inherent contradictions in the existence of a vibrant documentary film community in a country that is envisioned as uniformly closed and oppressive in the West. The research is also personally motivated, because I have close connections to the Iranian documentary film world, where I previously made films and produced television programs.

I conduct the study with a multi-faceted approach, utilizing participant observation in the field in a four-month period, in-depth interviews with key players, personal reflections, and textual analysis of the films. I focus on about twenty filmmakers and their films, chosen from a pool of more than 500 documentary filmmakers, giving a cross section of this community based on their age, sex, and their professional history and success within Iran and internationally.

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## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

Films embody in their own internal structure and meaning the forms and values of the social relations they mediate, making text and context interdependent.

*Faye Ginsburg, 1994*

From the early days after the 1979 Revolution the Iranian state has supported locally produced films and enacted strict Islamic moral guidelines for these productions, attempting to make Islam the dominant discourse of the nation. State supervision of various phases of funding, production, and especially broadcast and distribution of the films has limited and shaped their subjects and styles. Regulations determine music, taboo themes, male and female behavior and their appearance on the screen (Devictor 2004, p. 70).

In the realm of documentaries, state television executives prefer documentaries on religious themes, traditional life in rural regions, or nature documentaries. Nature documentaries enjoy high audience ratings and are not controversial. A growing number of independent documentary filmmakers, however, value and make documentaries that address social issues, such as problems of family life, local activism, health problems, the elderly, addiction, HIV, women's lives and other topics. This dissertation is focused on their working conditions, their interactions with one another and with state institutions, and their films. It explores the scope of independent<sup>1</sup> documentary filmmaking in Iran, during the years of growth for documentaries, from 1997 to 2014.

Independence is a relative term, because filmmakers rely on funding from state institutions. Their connections to these institutions ranges between those who are

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<sup>1</sup> According to the Documentary Association, IRDFA, their members are independent filmmakers, who are not employed by state television system or other governmental entities. Most of these filmmakers have more autonomy and explore styles and topics that do not always fall within the dominant discourses.

officially hired by them to those who receive state funding indirectly, through private media companies. A very few receive funding from international media institutions or through alternative means. This research examines why and how documentary filmmaking expanded after the 1979 Revolution and the eight-year war with Iraq, in a country where freedom of expression is limited and the state supports and shapes cultural production. This work of media studies engages with ethnography to explore the relationships between the practice of documentary filmmaking, Iranian society, and its political system. I study the conditions of media production and distribution and inconsistencies in regulations that allow for the making of documentary films that often defy the dominant discourse. I also conduct textual study of some of the significant documentary films that have emerged in this period and their stylistic choices. This research is significant because it explores the inherent contradictions that exist in a vibrant documentary film community in a country that is envisioned as uniformly closed and oppressive in the West. It studies the filmmakers as active agents that shape their working conditions, their films, and their authorial personality.

### **Research Questions**

In order to place Iranian documentary cinema in its social and global context, the dissertation explores how media representations in Iran are encoded by Islamic, Iranian, and Western cultures.<sup>2</sup> It looks at the practices of independent filmmakers that contribute to the production of culture in Iran. Raymond Williams (1976) proposes that culture is “a

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<sup>2</sup> The term ‘West’ is burdened and overlaid with many uses, as Williams (1976) notes. It goes back to the Roman Empire, history of Christianity confronting non-Christian East, and post-war divisions between capitalist Western Europe and communist East. Therefore, geography is overdetermined by politics (Shohat & Stam, 2001). In this dissertation, the term points to its roots in the colonialist history of Europe and the U.S. It is complicated with many exchanges that have shaped the “West.” The filmmakers also adhere to filmmaking trends and styles that set standards in Europe and the U.S., in order to market their work.

whole way of life,” (1958/1989, p. 93) made up of all artistic activities and social organizations that produce them (p. 95). Documentary film production between 1997 and 2014 involved a complex form of political, cultural, cinematic, and authorial negotiation and contestations between the filmmakers, the state, the private sector, and foreign entities. I address how documentary filmmakers in Iran produce their work, how they engage with different institutions that provide funding or issue permits, and how they organize in order to protect and promote their work, particularly through their guild, the Iranian Documentary Filmmakers Association (IRDFA). I also explore how filmmakers use inconsistencies in the regulations and their relationships with state executives to push the boundaries of what is allowed and accepted in the dominant discourse.

My personal ties to Iran and my history of working there contribute to the ethnographic research I conducted between 2013 and 2014 and provide an insider perspective to the documentary film world in Iran. Reflexivity is an important aspect of the dissertation, because as a native of Iran, with Kurdish background, a filmmaker and scholar who is trained and works in the U.S., I have professional connections to both Iran and the U.S. This knowledge shaped my research and my relationships with the informants in the field. I draw on my personal history in Iran to provide added depth to the topic. Since the primary concern of the dissertation is its focus on the filmmakers and their agency, my main method of inquiry is the observation of and interviews with filmmakers in their own environments. Textual analysis of their films and their writings provide additional perspectives on the documentary film world in Iran.

To focus the topic, my research pursues the following questions:

- How do Iranian documentary filmmakers organize to support one another and protect their interests?

- What kinds of films do they produce and what shapes their creative decision making?
- How does the funding and permit process influence their work?
- How does Iran's relationship with the West impact filmmakers' work and their films?
- How do they define their work in discussions and in the articles they write?

The ways in which the filmmakers work, their organization in guilds or in social activities, the topics they choose for their films, and their distribution reveal the interactions between the filmmakers, their society, the state, and the world at large. George Marcus (1995) explains that ethnographies of cultural formations are also ethnographies of the system. Faye Ginsburg (1995) suggests that we study film and video production as part of a social process engaged in the mediation of culture (p. 70). In answering these research questions, I make sense of how filmmakers cultivate an active and creative sphere through the production processes and practice strategies of negotiation and resistance, and how their relationships with each other, with the state, and with the world impact their work. In the Iranian film world the dominant view belongs to the ruling party, as they control the main sources of funding. However, other discourses, such as Western influenced thinking and behavior, which is rooted in Iran's encounter with modernity<sup>3</sup> and the Shah's reign, as well as emergent influences of the Internet and

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<sup>3</sup> Modernity is an ambiguous term that is often viewed as a stage in history that is connected with scientific progress, centered in Europe that gave rise to capitalism. Timothy Mitchell (2002) views its origins in the *interactions* between the West and the non-West. He draws on Marx's observation regarding the development of capitalism in the financial arrangements of the colonial system (p. 2). In this study modernity is used loosely to designate 'new,' secular ideas that intellectuals and artists formulated by studying or emulating Western thinkers and philosophers or European and American films to counteract traditional, religious forms of belief and organization in Iran. Some Iranian intellectuals adopt the discourse of modernity that offers them the possibility of rejecting restrictive, religious thinking and conduct.

globalization are present simultaneously in the Iran's cultural sphere.<sup>4</sup>

This study of the Iranian documentary film community and their films is significant for several reasons. It demonstrates the richness and complexities of social life in Iran and the possibilities for diversity of opinion and dissent, despite restrictions. It reveals the significance of cultural workers that preserve or counter dominant ideology and bring about change. The Islamic ideology of the ruling bodies competes with the secular, nationalist, and Western influences to dominate the public sphere, and results in the flourishing of an active artistic environment. Documentary filmmakers are a part of a thriving film community in Iran, and their films are seen on television and in cultural organizations, even if they are much less visible than feature filmmakers.

Second, scholarship on Iranian documentary cinema after 1997 is sparse, particularly with a social and cultural perspective. Most of the existing scholarship is focused on Iranian feature films that have won international critical acclaim (Dabashi, 2001, 2006; Mottahedeh, 2008; Naficy 2011, 2012; Sadr, 2006; Saeed-Vafa & Rosenbaum, 2003; Tapper, 2006; Varzi, 2006). One of the few works that addresses documentaries is Hamid Naficy's four-volume *Social History of Iranian Cinema* (2011-2012), a significant and comprehensive body of work that looks at the entire history of Iranian cinema and its relationship to Iranian society. There are sections dedicated to documentary filmmaking before and after the revolution. Mohammad Tahaminejad's ongoing research in Iran has focused on documentary films and filmmakers, though most of his books and writings are not translated to English.

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<sup>4</sup> Raymond Williams (1980) complicates Gramsci's discussion of hegemony and posits that culture is dynamic and the dominant culture incorporates residual views from the past and new, emergent thought as well. He explains that different practices, views, and values can exist simultaneously and over time what was emergent might become dominant.

Finally, I am invested in the Iranian filmmaking community because of my filmmaking background, producing documentaries and a program of Iranian documentary films for American media companies, and writing about them.<sup>5</sup> In this process I have, at times, been part of their world and witnessed their struggles and victories during the years that are the focus of this dissertation. My experience in Iran is informed by my gender and identity. I am a woman, from a secular background, with a Kurdish-Iranian father, who came from the marginalized border region of Iran, with a history of separatism that has been suppressed by the central government. I have lived my adult life in the U.S., except from 1997 to 2002, when I worked in Iran for American media companies. My background makes me an insider to the field I am studying and gives me added perspective to problematize the prevalent assumptions about life in Iran.

### **Time Frame**

The dissertation focuses on professional life of Iranian independent documentary filmmakers between 1997 and 2014, after the early revolutionary year and the eight-year war with Iraq. It includes a period of growth for documentary films (1997 to 2008) and subsequent limitations that were imposed on documentary filmmaking (2008 to 2013). This has been significant period in which large numbers of young filmmakers started to make documentary films. It was a period of dramatic political changes in Iran and globally, influencing artistic expression and film production. The technological transformation in digital technology made filmmaking cheaper and available to young people globally. At the same time President Khatami's edict of "Dialogue Between

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<sup>5</sup> I worked in Iran from 1997 to 2000 for Internews Network on media projects on Iran. Then from 2006 to 2014 I worked on the Bridge to Iran series on Link TV that featured Iranian documentaries and interviews with filmmakers.

Civilizations” opened the Iranian government to the West for the first time since the Revolution and established cultural ties with European countries. The opening was short-lived, however. The U.S. wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, Iran’s neighbors, and President Bush’s naming of Iran as part of the “axis of evil,” alarmed the ruling bodies in Iran and pushed them further to the right. In the 2009 elections conservative candidate, Ahmadinejad was reelected after a disputed voting process that resulted in street protests by millions across the country. The security forces clamped down on the unrest and arrested hundreds. In this period of upheaval and fear, the severity and intolerance of the early revolutionary years of the 1980s and the Iran-Iraq war seemed to have returned, making it difficult to work as a journalist or a social documentary filmmaker.

While documentaries are as old as cinema itself, in Iran they flourished in the 1960s within the state support in television and cinema networks in the Shah’s regime. Organizations such as Center for Development of Children and Youth, in the National Iranian Television (NIRT) and ministry of culture and art (MCA) supported documentary production (Naficy, 2012, p. 49). These state institutions followed the Western professional model, particularly those that were put in place by Syracuse University and USIS in the 1950s. After the Revolution funding for documentary films was provided by several governmental and semi-governmental organizations and through tariffs and restrictions on film imports (Naficy, 2004, p. 40).

In the early period after the 1979 Revolution, the films were in the service of state propaganda for the most part, and limited to the subject of the Revolution and the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988). At this time most documentary filmmakers, even those with unique voices, like Ebrahim Mokhtari, Rakhshan Bani-Etemad, Maouchehr Moshiri,



Mohammad-Reza Moghadassian, Khosrow Sinaii, Mohammad Tahaminejad, Orod Zand, Mohammad Reza Aslani, and some others worked in the state television system. In the early period after the 1979 Revolution filmmakers made social documentaries for various state institutions' internal use. Ebrahim Mokhtari made *The Tenancy* (1982), about housing problems in Tehran; Mohammad-Reza Moghadassian made *Brick Ovens* (1980), about child workers in brickmaking factory; and Banietamad made *Concentration* (1986), about immigration from the provinces to Tehran, (Kalantari, 2004. They were commissioned by Iranian state television (IRIB) or Tehran municipality to help formulate housing and labor policies and were not broadcast. Because of their high quality, in later years they were shown in art house screenings and continued to influence younger filmmakers. During a period of purge and restructuring at IRIB, many of the television filmmakers who had worked with diligence on sensitive social documentaries were sent to the provinces to limit their influence (Tahaminejad, 2011, p. 132). Some left the country; others continued their work in the provinces, and some remained in Tehran.

While filmmakers made a few acclaimed social documentaries films as early as the 1980s, it was after restrictions were eased and better governmental policies were put in place in the 1990s that they produced greater numbers of social documentaries. In 1993 Rakhshan Banietamad made the seminal film, *To Whom Do You Show These Films Anyway?* (1993), funded and produced for the Tehran municipality. It is an in-depth, observational film about housing problems in a poor section of Tehran that continues to be shown in workshops and art houses and inspires young filmmakers.

Other state organizations such as Jahade Sazandegi (Ministry of Construction Crusade) engaged filmmakers like Morteza Aviny. His films on the Iran-Iraq war

exemplified the ideals of Islamic Revolution, such as faith in God, martyrdom, self-sacrifice, and spirituality (Naficy, 2012, pp. 12-21). During the final years of the war and the “restoration” period that followed the war and Imam Khomeini’s death in 1989, the state encouraged privatization. Some filmmakers eagerly left the television system and formed companies, such as “Dideh No”, with Banietemad and Moshiri (Tahaminejad, 2011, p. 137) or Vesta with Kalantari, Mokhtari, Rashtian, and Moghadassian (Kalantari, personal communication, 2014). They made social documentaries or industrial documentaries to support their companies. Most of their funding came from various state institutions for the production of industrial films about the rebuilding efforts.

In 1997 the participation of women and young people in the public sphere led to an unexpected surge of support and victory for Mohammad Khatami, a moderate and reformist candidate. His positive reputation as head of the Ministry of Islamic Guidance and Culture from 1982-1986 (“*Profile: Mohammad Khatami,*” 2009) garnered him wide support. Filmmakers and artists pushed for more freedoms and the officials in the Ministry of Culture supported their efforts. Digital technology freed filmmakers from large budgets and state control, and globalization of media opened up media connections with the rest of the world. Some of these changes met with internal suspicion and clampdown on filmmakers’ freedoms.

President Khatami’s (1997-2004) social reforms provided opportunities for diverse opinions to be expressed in the public sphere, including in documentary films. Global technological advances also helped independent filmmaking in Iran. The availability of video and digital cameras on a wide scale globally and their affordable prices made it possible for younger people and filmmakers from different regions of the

country, to make more films outside the state system. The globalization of media and the expansion of satellite transmissions that could reach Iran despite their ban, led to proliferation of satellite dishes in most households, making them capable of receiving television programs from outside the borders. The availability of American and European films on DVD and a new access to international broadcasts precipitated sweeping changes in the Iranian media world. Instead of only three or four state television channels, controlled by Islamic state strictures, tens of European and Middle Eastern channels that followed Western discourses became available, which influenced Iranian sensibilities in terms of production value and their variety of topics.

Access to the Internet became possible in this period also and growing numbers of younger generations became interested in connecting to the rest of the world via this new medium. Iranians took to Internet to such an extent that Iran became one of the most active blogging nations in the region. This period of expansion continued into the first term of conservative president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2005, even though his administration moved to restrict journalism and artistic output.

The uprisings against unfair election practices at the time of Ahmadinejad's reelection in 2009 led to violent state backlash and more restrictive measures were put in place. These events led to a period of demoralization and reduction in film production, as filmmakers were closely scrutinized, and were seen to collaborate with Western media institutions. Naficy (2004) observes that periods of transition and social turmoil often generate innovative films and new filmmakers (p. 29). The conflict between the conservatives and intellectuals with views that do not follow the Shi'a discourse

manifests continuously in Iran and leads to a flourishing of ideas and increased production of creative work.

In the 1990s print journalists who dealt with political topics met immediate reprisals by the state security forces because of their direct access to the public. Documentary filmmakers were at first not seen as threats by conservative groups. Their films were not widely seen and their topics were usually about ordinary life in rural and urban settings. However, with globalization of media and the reach transnational channels inside Iran, conservatives began to pay closer attention to this medium. Diaspora-run Persian speaking channels that broadcast from California, Washington, D.C., or London, including government sponsored Voice of America-Persian and BBC-Persian, were threatening the hegemony of the Islamic state. When a few Iranian filmmakers started to sell their mildly critical films to these Persian-language channels, conservatives were alarmed. To contextualize the rise of documentary filmmaking it is necessary to review the social and historical frameworks that gave rise to these developments.

### **Background: History of Iranian Documentaries after the Revolution**

Before and during the 1979 Revolution clerics made incendiary proclamations against cinema, which resulted in multiple acts of arson in movie theatres. Of the 525 movie theatres that existed in Iran at the time of the Revolution, 195 were torched (Haghighi, 2002, p. 110). Some of the arson was lethal, as when Rex theatre in South Iran was burned down in August 1979. Hundreds of moviegoers were trapped inside and killed. This heralded an ill start for the Iranian film industry after the Revolution. Revolutionaries blamed the Shah's government for the tragedy, but consequently it

became known that Islamic radicals were behind it (Naficy, 2011, p. 2). Religious factions distrusted cinema due its connections to Western influences that were deemed corrupting. Ayatollah Khomeini, the leader of the revolution, shaped the dominant state discourse against Western influence, using Shi'ism and Third-Worldist frameworks. According to Khomeini, "Westernization (theatre, dancing, and mixed-sex swimming)... rape the youth of our country and stifle in them the spirit of virtue and bravery" (Naficy, 2011, p. 5). He warned against the media and a "culture of idolatry" that came from the West, as ominous activities of Western agents that contaminate the unknowing youth of Iran. Khomeini denounced the *taqut* "Culture of idolatry" that was based on the belief that Western capitalism worships materialism instead of God (Naficy, 2011, p. 6). Iranians understood that he was addressing a culture of materialism that was prevalent in the Shah's regime, infused with imported European, American, or Hollywood styles.

Khomeini condemned the pre-revolutionary bourgeoisie as *taquti* (idolterers), who were a small elite strata of the population that had benefited from the Shah's policies and had Westernized values (Matin Asgari, 1995). To establish Islamic hegemony Khomeini relied on popular support, rallied by revolutionary and anti-West language – slogans against *Taqut* and the previous regime and in favor of Islamic values. Due to uneven development, Iran's oil revenues had enriched the Shah and those who had access to education and could participate in his modernizing plans. The large rural and disenfranchised population often migrated to urban areas without support, and did not benefit from the riches of Iran (Matin-Asgari, 1995). Over the years leftist intellectuals, students, and the religious factions worked together to topple the regime and brought about the 1979 Revolution.

After the Revolution, Khomeini consolidated power, but unlike some hardline clerics, he recognized the power of cinema and culture to facilitate a new regime of thought and showed conditional support for the film industry. He differentiated a moral, Islamic cinema from a Westernized and corrupt cinema that had existed during the Shah's regime. Western influence in films was denounced, particularly, the popular *filmfarsi*, a genre that featured song and dance numbers and semi-nude women, popular with the urban working class men and youth (Naficy, 2011, p. 149). Khomeini stated, "We are not opposed to cinema, to radio, or to television... 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" (Naficy, 2011, p. 84).

### **Shi'a Discourse and Its Alternatives**

During the early years of the Islam Republic, the notion of self-sacrifice was an effective discursive device to mobilize young people to fight not only for Iran, their homeland, but also for their souls. The Islamic state used films as one of the tools to propagate this view. Cinema, radio, and television were widely utilized to spread the dominant message, and they made an organized and aggressive effort to purify local culture from what was deemed corruptive, materialistic, and imperialist Western culture. However, the residual discourses of democracy and socialism, with roots in the struggle for modernity in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, remained entrenched among secular intellectuals, artists, and the educated public.

Soon after the Revolution language was altered to accommodate religious notions and mobilize the population. Words like *jahad* (struggle), *shahadat* (martyrdom), and *mostazafin* (the deprived, dispossessed) proliferated in public language to prepare the

population for a new Islamic era and for war. Ansari (2003) notes that Islam, its symbols and cultural constructs, is quintessentially the language of popular mobilization and Khomeini was adept at using the public's religious and revolutionary fervor (p. 55). Khomeini encouraged people to channel their dissatisfactions and alienation into appropriate Shiite venues and spectacles in the form of religious rallies and passion plays, tazieh, Ashura processions, mass demonstrations against US imperialism, and in support of the ideals of the Islamic Republic (Naficy, 2011).

Khomeini declared his support for a positive and educational cinema that would shape the new Islamic identity. His interpretation of the media as the educator of the new Islamic self, which was spiritual, sacrificing, pure and ethical, synthesized some of the goals of the Iranian left-leaning intellectuals and signaled an opening for independent and artistic films. He held the progressive and secular filmmaker, Dariush Mehrjui and his film *The Cow* (1969), as an example that valorized the plight of the *mostazafin* (the dispossessed). Dariush Mehrjui was one of the directors of the new wave movement of Iranian cinema, which had started during the Shah's regime in the 1960s and in opposition to it. *The Cow* (1969) was a poetic and allegorical film about the struggles of a villager. It was banned during the Shah's regime because of its critical stance on ignorance and poverty in an Iranian village. It won a prize at Cannes Film Festival that resulted in some limited circulation inside Iran. After the revolution, Iranian and non-Iranian oppositional and secular films like Mehrjui's *the Cow* (1969), *Battle of Algiers* (1966) by Gilo Pontecorvo, and *Z* (1969) by Costa Gavras, which were banned during the Shah's regime, but were praised and released or broadcast on national television. After the Ayatollah's declaration, films that supported the plight of the poor and dispossessed,

particularly those located in remote villages proliferated. European and international festivals also welcomed the shift in Iranian cinema to more poetic films that had a moral message and featured exotic landscapes.

Saddam Hussein instigated the Iran-Iraq war in 1980 with Western powers' support. He believed Iran's position was weakened with the fall of the Shah, and laid claims to some disputed border regions. However, the Iranian regime used the war to govern the population.<sup>6</sup> The war was fully incorporated into the discourse of the Islamic Republic in public speeches, on murals, in television programs, and films. The war and was formulated in terms of jihad and battle with evil to form a young generation that was dedicated to the regime. The language of martyrdom and war against inner and outer enemies became Khomeini's opportunity to entrench a Shiite discourse that helped him consolidate the Islamic state. Television programs featured the Ayatollah's comments and films reflected revolutionary ideals. On television war martyrs' families recounted the bravery, selflessness, and religious fervor of those they lost to the conflict, and painted the war in holy terms, fully legitimizing it in the eyes of most Iranians. The war helped the new regime define itself and its ideals and suppress opposition. Khomeini refused to end the war for several years until 1988, when the new state was well established.

Documentaries in the early period of the Revolution, and the eight-year war with Iraq were mainly produced by state television (IRIB) and were mostly infused with the

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<sup>6</sup> Foucault's definition of 'governmentality' in the modern state entails the control of the population through institutions, procedures, reflections, analysis and tactics that allow for complex forms of power to develop, using the apparatus of security and knowledge (Foucault, 2006, p. 142). In this framework, power can be defined by discourse as "a corpus of knowledge that presupposed the same way of looking at things" (Foucault, 1972, p. 33). He suggested that we ask why particular statements occur rather than others, and when "ready made syntheses, groupings" occur (Foucault, 1972, p. 22).



dominant ideology of the Revolution and the war. Morteza Aviny, a war filmmaker who filmed in the front lines and was finally killed in the war, made a series of candid television films about the sacrifices and the braveries of Iranian soldiers in battle, titled *Revayate Fath* (Chronicle of Victory). These films were shot in the observational style, and stayed within the strictures of the Islamic discourse, glorifying the war as a battle for the soul. They focused on the soldiers. Unlike other propaganda films that featured heavy voice-of-God narration, they featured the poetic narration of the filmmaker, interspersed with the soldiers speaking about their spiritual goals.

A few years after the war ended, the Iranian state ideology of Shi'a Islam could no longer fully produce a dominant way of thinking. Purely Islamic views were unable to maintain a hegemonic conception of the world that was “implicitly manifest in art, in law, in economic activities, and in all manifestations of individual and collective life” (Gramsci, as cited in Comaroffs, 2007, p. 210).

### **Documentary Films After the War**

Immediately after the war, films focused on the war and the martyrs continued with some exceptions, including one noteworthy series: a fifty-two part series of documentary films, produced by Mohammad Reza Sarhangi, about children and rural life in Iran. It was titled, *Children of the Land of Iran* (1990), filmed by Morteza Poursamadi in 16mm film (Kalantari, n.d.). In these films the ideas of Iranian identity outside of religious strictures re-emerged, as the country was moving towards reconstruction. Sarhangi was a semi-independent producer who acquired funding from state television's channel 2, but invited renowned filmmakers from outside the television system to each make a film on this theme. He initiated a new form of production, funded by television,

but produced outside its institutional framework. It was a difficult feat, as he had to accommodate the requirements of television executives and the needs of many filmmakers. It was not fully completed, but forty plus segments were finished. Some episodes were broadcast on channel 2 and were shown at the fifteenth Fajr International Film Festival (Naficy, 2012, p. 74).

The series set itself apart from the Islamic Republic's discourse of war, sacrifice, transcendence, and stayed away from religious rhetoric. It focused instead, on rural life in diverse and remote regions of Iran. The films were all shot on 16 mm film and directed by well-known filmmakers, often in a stylized fashion. Many of the films kept a distance from their subjects and recreated daily routines of an idealized rural life, often showing it untouched by modernity and the intrusions of the state and other external forces. Films like the *Kamas Dolls* (1995) by Bahram Azimpour about a Kurdish tribe, mythologized rural life in an idealistic and picturesque image. It preserved ideal qualities, such as purity, self-sufficiency, and nobility of those who lead simple lives and live close to nature. Some filmmakers used the observational style, including Farshad Fadayian's *In Seyyed Ghelich Ishan's School* (1996). The film is about young religious students who travel long distances on foot in the rural terrain of Turkeman Sahra, to reach their religious school, erected 200 years ago. A few films took note of the realities of the day with an observational style, like Kambouzia Partovi's *Angels on Earth* (1995) about the tragedy of Kurdish refugees fleeing Saddam Hussain, housed in camps in Western Iran. Subsequently, this semi-independent model of documentary filmmaking became common among many producers. Producers proposed documentary series to one of the IRIB channels for full funding and commissioned filmmakers made each episode.

It was no longer sufficient to govern the population with a strictly religious discourse. In the late 1990s the global expansion of digital technology contributed to changes in Iran's media landscape. Light-weight cameras enabled many to make films at low costs. Most rooftops in Tehran and other cities were outfitted with satellite dishes and homes were equipped with digital receivers, which brought alternative and Western views and culture inside the borders. Hard-liners were threatened by the intrusion of Western media. Conservative cleric Ahmad Khatami expressed the leadership's anxiety that the channels were used by the country's enemies, to "fight against Islam, the Islamic Revolution, and the great Iranian nation" (*The Observers*, 2012).

With Khatami's policies of opening to the West, the conservative elements of the state campaigned to combat *tahajome farhangi* (cultural invasion), what they perceived as Western cultural assault and attempt to dismantle the regime by "soft power." They feared another Velvet Revolution, which had contributed to the fall of the communist block (Naficy, 2012, p. 206). Naficy (2012) sees this as a reaction to the neoliberal thesis of 'clash of civilizations,' put forth by Bernard Lewis and Samuel Huntington in the U.S. Huntington envisioned the menace of Islam as the new foe for Western civilization (p. 207). The culture wars against Iran culminated in 2006 when the Bush administration made an emergency request to Congress for \$75 million in additional funds to mount a large propaganda campaign against the Islamic Republic, in order to destabilize the presidency of Ahmadinejad (MacAskill and Borgen, as cited in Naficy 2012, p. 290). These funds supported the launch and operation of satellite television channels like Voice of America (VOA) and Iranian expat formed channels. The channels provided news and

cultural programs that countered the official Iranian state ideology, and promoted democratic ideals and freedoms.

Many Iranians, particularly those who lived in urban centers welcomed this new access to entertainment, which provided an alternative to the often didactic and ideological Islamic state television programs. They had maintained their connection to Western media even in the early days after the revolution. Bootleg videotapes and later DVDs of European and American feature films were available. These films were distributed clandestinely through ‘videoyi’ or ‘video men’ who visited homes by appointment. They offered clients films from a large selection of mostly banned Hollywood, European, and Asian films, and sometimes banned Iranian films. Watching bootlegged films was and is so common that well-known film magazines such as *Film* and *Tassvir* regularly feature reviews of international films that would never be theatrically released.

During Khatami’s Reformist administration moderate and left-leaning newspapers and journals proliferated and were widely read. Journalists who followed discourses outside the dominant ones were writing incisive and critical articles about civic and social issues. Eventually, there were harsh reprisals against these journalists, but they left their mark on intellectual life in Iran. Similar to print journalists, filmmakers began to expand their range of topics beyond religious or rural life to comment on social issues, including problems of youth, women, addiction and city life. However, the problem of their films distribution remained, as state television IRIB would not provide sufficient broadcasting opportunities to films that diverged from their narrow ideological imperatives.

International festivals, such as the Kish Documentary Festival and film events that were held in Tehran incorporated global documentary standards. Filmmakers and intellectuals were exposed to international trends and acclaimed documentaries from around the world. Channels like *ARTE* based in Europe and later, on *Aljazeera* based in Qatar, featured notable documentaries, that could be seen locally. Occasionally, even Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB) showed strong European and American documentaries, if they were on topics that were critical of Israel, the U.S., or other Western powers. Works by filmmakers like Laura Poitras and Michael Moore were among those that were broadcast.

The international appreciation of Iranian films extended to documentaries as well, and retrospectives of Iranian documentaries were held in festivals, such as the IDFA in Amsterdam, Cinema du Reel in Paris, and Hotdocs in Toronto. Filmmakers were invited to festivals and conferences in Europe, the US and Asia. The inception of *BBC Persian* in 2008 and U.S. government sponsored Voice of America-Persian in 2007 also opened a space where films by Iranian documentary filmmakers could be showcased and discussed on these channels (*Wikileaks*, 2009). BBC initiated a program called *Aparat* at the start of its operations, which features Iranian, Afghani, and Tajik documentaries. A number of Iranian filmmakers sold their films to *Aparat*. However, conservative elements in the Iranian leadership believed intellectuals, artists, and filmmakers were easily manipulated by the culture wars that the Western powers carried out in these channels. They were determined to counter such influences.

With the Presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2005, and the shift in the political leadership to the right, the conservatives tried to re-establish their hegemonic

hold over the country. They appointed conservative executives in all the ministries, particularly in the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. New measures and policies against freedom of expression were enacted in different realms of society. As a result, in the 2009 elections when moderate candidate Mir Hossein Moussavi ran for presidency the youth, women, and many urban dwellers supported him, wearing green shirts or headbands. But he lost decisively despite widespread support, and people suspected blatant tampering with the votes. Huge numbers of demonstrators took to the streets, asking peacefully for the recount of the votes. However, the Supreme Leader did not support the demonstrators, and security forces clamped down. As the demonstrations grew and Western media was filled with the news of Iranian demonstrators, the government was worried they were losing ground and they banned foreign reporters and Iranian journalists and documentary filmmakers from reporting on the crisis. People used their phones to record the events, and then uploaded them on to YouTube and Twitter. News channels like BBC, CNN, and others used these citizen journalists' films for the first time to report on what was happening inside Iran (Baird, 2010). In 2009 Iranian demonstrators' use of their cell phone cameras was ground breaking in bringing citizen journalism into the mainstream of international media reporting.

What was an uneasy accommodation between the public, the civil society, and the government during the Khatami years turned adversarial during Ahmadinejad's bid for a second term. After harsh confrontations by security forces resulted in the death of several demonstrators and hundreds of arrests, most people backed away from the streets. The conservative judiciary and security forces took repressive steps against the Green Movement leadership's, holding degrading televised trials and imprisoning many in

leadership posts in Khatami's government. Mir Hossein Moussavi, his wife, and another candidate, Mehdi Karroubi were placed under house arrest that continues to the present day. The complete victory of the right wing factions during the elections led to further intimidations and arrests of journalists, bloggers, and documentary filmmakers. In these difficult conditions filmmakers made fewer films, and steered away from controversial themes, though alternative views and expressions did not halt completely.

### **The Independent Filmmakers and the Research**

Despite setbacks, since 1997 the numbers of Iranian documentary filmmakers grew exponentially. The Documentary Filmmakers Association (IRDFA) is a guild of documentary filmmakers. They require that their members be independent professional filmmakers and not in the hire governmental institutions, such as state television or Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. Funding for most documentaries, however, comes from these institutions.

The dissertation draws on the professional life of these independent documentary filmmakers, and their films between 1997 and 2014. I employ ethnographic methodology, mainly observation of the filmmakers' working life, their interactions with institutions, analysis of their films and writings, and extensive interviews. I also relied on my own knowledge and observations, in light of my extensive history of working in Iran as a filmmaker and television producer, connected to American media companies.

The efforts of the Iranian state to establish its hegemony by Islamicizing the cultural realm has been challenged continuously by many artists, intellectuals, filmmakers and segments of the public. My research explores the filmmakers' working life in light of the struggle between the dominant discourses of the state and those of the

filmmakers. I use Gramsci's conception of hegemony,<sup>7</sup> based on his understanding of Marxism as a "philosophy of praxis," to explore specific and concrete historical events and their relationships to broader developments and structures. I also employ Foucault to distinguish the competing discourses that contend for dominance in Iran, since neither the state nor the filmmakers follow only one discourse.

Despite the conservative leadership of state television, some critical Iranian documentaries were made and even broadcast on national television by directors who have been able to maneuver the gaps between state control and personal expression. Sometimes it happens by chance. In 1996 Pirooz Kalantari made a 10-part series for IRIB on the history of documentary cinema titled, *A Report on Iranian Documentary Cinema*, which was archived for a time. This series included a segment about 1950s filmmakers, Ebrahim Golestan and his collaborator, poet Forough Farrokhzad. She was a female poet in the 1950s and 1960s, but her legacy was controversial after the Revolution, due to her bold expression of the female voice and sexual desire. Pirooz made this segment because of his own interest in the topic. The series was broadcast unexpectedly in 2010. Laughing, he recounted that when the next day someone wrote about it in the newspaper and they stopped the broadcasts (P. Kalantari, personal communication, June 3, 2013).

### **Personal History and Working in Iran**

In conducting this research, I once again, used my connections with the Documentary Association and its membership. During the Reformist President Khatami's

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<sup>7</sup> Gramsci theorizes the importance of intellectuals and culture in procuring consent and preserving power in a society (Gramsci, 2000, p. 335). Stuart Hall draws on Gramsci to describe hegemony as a *process* of establishing dominance by rulers, not by brute force but by voluntary consent, through strategies of negotiation and concession (Procter, 2004, p. 26). In Iran the cultural arena is a site of continual struggle and between the ruling bodies and cultural producers.



administration (1997-2002), I collaborated with the IRDFA to organize the documentary film week of 2000. I was working for the American media company, Internews. Subsequently I became a member of IRDFA, the union of documentary filmmakers. I have been aware of many aspects of the guild's activities, yet I also have a distanced relationship. I have used my membership to obtain permits to film in Iran, but due to my translocal position I could not be an active member. (In Chapter 4 I discuss the IRDFA and the House of Cinema in some depth).

My close relationship with the Iranian documentary filmmakers could affect the objectivity of my observations and ability to interpret the field. However, I offer an insider perspective that helps discern the subtleties of the filmmakers' actions and motivations. Ethnographic writing is seen as a constructed medium (Clifford, 1988). Furthermore, anthropology's contributions to colonialism have been critiqued (Said, 1978; see also, Abu-Lughod, 1991; Jackson, 2004; Narayan, 1993). For these reasons, in a region that is beset by geopolitical claims of Western powers, seeing the field from an insider's perspective offers advantages. I am invested in the documentary film world and want to present its complexities and contributions to Iranian society. John Jackson (2004) suggests a new work ethic for scholars: to move away from the question of neutrality to engagement. He argues that rigorous reflexivity clarifies issues of class, race, gender, and other characteristics that influence interpretation of the field (p. 37).

My multicultural and binational position—liminality, interstitiality — and my gender, provide me both intimacy to understand and the necessary distance to analyze the field. I am trained in the Western systems of knowledge, which give me some distance to observe the field critically. My film experience in Iran started with yearly visits to Iran to

see family, which eventually led me to film personal experiences that I witnessed as a returning expatriate after the Revolution. My first film was about my impressions of the Iran-Iraq war. The second dealt with my dilemma of living in two countries that opposed one another. I used small format cameras to shoot and filmed without permits. In the late 1990s I began to meet some Iranian-based filmmakers who were making very different kinds of films. They were up and coming feature filmmakers like Kambouzia Partovi and Jafar Panahi, whose films were winning prizes at international festivals. I frequented their close-knit communities, where they socialized together and worked on one another's projects. To them my background was interesting because I had lived all of my adult life in the U.S., and because I was a connection to the film world in the U.S. At this time I was in Iran to work on my personal film, *A Place Called Home* (1998).

The footage that I shot in Iran led Internews Network to hire me in New York in 1997. They were searching for an associate producer who could work in Iran for their upcoming PBS documentary project about countries in conflict in the *Vis a Vis* series. This job led me to move back to Iran, at the start of Khatami's presidency and the period of opening for Iran. I worked on this documentary project and on other programs that helped Western viewers understand Iranian culture beyond the antagonistic rhetoric. *Vis a Vis, Beyond the Veil* (2007) was commissioned by PBS, and it involved an Iranian and an American school teacher and their face to face interactions discussing their lives, their similarities, and differences.

The production of a major PBS documentary that involved satellite transmission between two women, one living in Tehran and the other in Maryland could not be made without official approval. Hiring the right production manager was the key to facilitating

the production. The producers of *Rooz Film*, a production company that had connections inside national Iranian television system, and some international experience agreed to facilitate the making of the documentary. Since the Revolution no American television productions other than news reports had been produced in Iran. With a remarkable optimism and enthusiasm, *Rooz Film*'s Vahid Nikkhah-Azad, who was an insider in the film and television production world, was able to convince officials that our project was safe and got us the necessary permits. Our team was a strange sight in Tehran. One day we were shooting with our American and French crew in a crowded park in Northern Tehran, as we set up a large, intrusive satellite dish in public view and aroused much curiosity. Surprisingly no one stopped us. In the relatively open cultural environment that Khatami had created, we successfully completed the very first American documentary that was shot inside Iran. PBS released it in 1998. Soon many other European and American productions began to come to Iran and many documentaries and articles were produced about Iranian society, particularly about the changing face of Iran, its women and the youth.

With that experience I realized that working in Iran was feasible, and I decided to stay on in Iran until 2002. In Tehran I worked on several American and European television programs, and made another independent film, *Women Like Us* (2002), about five ordinary Iranian women. I wanted to make this film because I noticed that the international television programs that focused on Iranian women looked at exceptional cases. They were either about very successful and renowned women or about disenfranchised women who had become the victims of the system. In the U.S. most people thought that Iranian women were victims, a view that was reinforced in American

media and by the many memoirs written mostly by Iranian women. I wanted to show how ordinary women lived, worked, or dealt with economic and social hardships.

During this period I became more familiar with the Iranian film world mostly as an outsider, since most of the professional projects I worked on were for American or European television channels. Because of my involvement with the film community I decided to join the Documentary Association (IRDFA), and became familiar with their goals and needs. In 1999, I proposed that Internews Network in collaboration with the IRDFA, help fund a documentary film week in Tehran that would feature some of the best Iranian and international of the last decade. Internews accepted and raised the necessary funds. It was the first such effort by the IRDFA. We selected films from American filmmakers, such as Errol Morris, D. A. Pennebaker, and Ross McElwee, and Europeans like Wim Wenders, Werner Herzog, Heddy Honigmann, and Sergei Mrishnichenko. The Association members selected prominent Iranian films of the decade. This project brought me fully inside the documentary film world in Iran. It was one of IRDFA's first attempts to organize a festival that featured international films. The director of the Association, Ebrahim Mokhtari enlisted a large group of documentary filmmakers from their membership to facilitate all the different aspects of the organization of the festival and film selection. The festival was held at the Tehran Museum of Fine Arts in April 2000.

My work and my membership in the IRDFA increased my identification with the Iranian filmmakers. The filmmakers were eager to bring critically acclaimed international documentaries to the public and to invite international filmmakers to Tehran. Internews was eager to promote cultural links between the U.S. and Iran, especially since President

Khatami had declared his interest in “Dialogue Among Civilizations.” Internews secured funding via Soros Foundation, and Rockefeller Foundations. These foundations were subsequently blacklisted by the Iranian government. The conservatives believed that Soros Foundation was an instigator in the ‘velvet revolution’ that toppled the Eastern block and they feared that Soros wanted to do the same in Iran. At this time I became aware that Internews’s name was listed as a suspicious organization by Kayhan newspaper, a conservative daily. This was alarming, but there were no attempts by the authorities to stop our work. However, fearing backlash, we limited our publicity and outreach to make the film week mainly an event for film insiders. The experience made me aware of the limitations of international cultural enterprises in Iran.

During this time there was a strong opposition to the reformist movement of President Khatami from the conservatives. More than fifteen reformist newspapers and journals were shut down by conservatives in the judiciary system of the Islamic Republic (which is supervised not by the president but by the Supreme Jurisprudent). Then from 1998 to 1999 notorious and mysterious ‘chain murders’ of a number of authors who openly protested certain policies of the regime scandalized the public (Sahimi, 2009). The public outcry led by reformist journalists and newspapers and denunciations from human rights groups abroad pressured the conservative elements to back down. A culprit from within the intelligence system was named and declared to have worked autonomously. Under suspicious circumstances he committed suicide in prison (Boghрати, Oct. 26, 2006).

We had invited two international film directors to the Film Week, Ross McElwee from the U.S. and Sergei Miroshnichenko from Russia, together with the director of the

European Documentary Association, EDN, Tue Steen Muller. The Europeans got their visas, but Ross McElwee, whose films were featured in the festival, was denied a visa. We decided to make use of Internews's technical facilities to connect McElwee in New York with the Iranian directors and film enthusiasts in Tehran, via a satellite link. It worked well and a group of Iranian filmmakers were able to speak to Ross McElwie and journalists wrote about this exchange.

The festival was a relative success because it involved so many films and filmmakers and brought acclaimed international documentary films inside Iran; but attendance was thin because of our limited exposure. In that difficult climate with suspicions rising against Western media, we were nervous that our activities could be stopped at any time. As a filmmaker and organizer working with American media companies, I felt very vulnerable to the uncertainties and upheavals. The organizers from IRDFA also felt similar pressures, but they understood the limits of their freedoms and pushed back and made complaints when necessary. When I was asked by authorities to respond to their questions about the Film Week, the leadership of IRDFA was indignant, and asked me not to talk to security officials without IRDFA representation.

After five years in Iran working on various television documentaries for Internews, PBS, ARTE, and National Geographic, I returned to the U.S. in 2002, but I continued my ties with yearly visits. In 2006 I began to work with Link TV producers in New York to launch their *Bridge to Iran* documentary series, acquiring Iranian documentary films and contextualizing the films with interviews with filmmakers. My experiences in Iran helped me bring an insider's vision to this series, in which Iranian culture is shown through the eyes of Iranian documentary filmmakers, reversing the usual

dynamics of mediation by Western filmmakers and journalists who interpret the non-West other to the Western self (Abu-Lughod, 1991). These working relationships once again took me to Iran for work, sometimes for extensive stays, and helped me remain in close contact with many of the documentary filmmakers. These experiences and the insider knowledge have made me aware of the intricacies of the Iranian documentary film world, its challenges and opportunities.

Lila Abu-Lughod (1991) defines the predicaments of ‘halfie’ researchers in the Western academic discipline who have multiple and conflicting identities. ‘Halfies’ work in an academic tradition that is “built on the historically constructed divide between the West and the non-West, which continues to be primarily the study of the non-Western other by the Western Self” (Abu-Lughod, 1991, p. 139). Since they have partial non-Western backgrounds, for them the field is not an exploration of ‘otherness.’ I am at once a filmmaker of Iranian background, and have much in common with the filmmakers I am studying. Additionally, as a U.S. national, I also occupy an outsider position, though an ‘accented’ one, in the words of Hamid Naficy (2001), as an immigrant. I have ties to the American academic world and media companies. The trust that had developed over the years helped me observe the filmmakers’ world and gain access to their leadership as an insider. My local and simultaneously global position allowed me to witness and understand their challenges and decisions beyond easy assumptions regarding issues like censorship and negotiating with powerful state players.

### **Geopolitics and Film Production**

The influence of Western powers and Western thinking in the shaping Iranian culture and film industry began with Iran entering modernity in early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The

Islamic state took hold in Iran in opposition to Western interference in Iran's political and cultural affairs, and many key figures in the ruling bodies use anti-imperialist discourse to define their policies. Iran sees itself as a leader in the Middle East that is in opposition to Western powers, particularly the US with its history of intervention in the region. The tensions between Iran and the West impact global alliances and relationships within the region and influence all aspects of life in Iran.

The global dominance of American and European cinema influences creative life in Iran both in style and topics choices for films, as it does around the world. Global economic policies have impacted life and cultural production as well. In 1990 World Bank pressed Iran to privatize its industries, which led to a massive privatization initiative by the state (Kianpour, 2015). These efforts resulted in the formation of private companies, including those that produce films and commercials and a few that produce documentary films. Since 2005 additional, economic and political pressures from the U.S. and E.U. have limited private businesses, including filmmakers to work independently. International isolation of Iran, which began after the 1979 Revolution, but intensified after President Bush declared Iran as part of the 'axis of evil,' has resulted in global media policies that restrict the life of intellectuals and affect people's livelihoods and ability to plan projects. Sanctions have caused an inflationary process that pushed up the price of most items and runs as high as 50% a year (Katzman, 2015, p. 51). The economic instability resulted in the closure of private businesses and increased unemployment. The Iranian currency was devalued by two thirds in 2012 as a direct result of the stiff U.S. and European sanctions that blockaded Iran's Central Bank ((Dehghan & Borger, 2012; Hakimian, 2012).



These measures escalated the suspicions against those who worked with Western institutions. Between 2009 and 2012 filmmakers who made critical films and showed their work internationally were questioned and interrogated. One filmmaker told me that during this dark time she felt that doing her work had become like committing a crime. Even the subjects of her documentary were questioned. Another filmmaker who had sold a film to U.S. based Link TV, where I worked at the time, suddenly called and requested to have her film pulled. For many filmmaker restrictions were placed on travel and the ability to work or distribute their films.

Filmmakers who hope to have a global presence and believe in the issues that interest foreign media outlets face difficult choices. They highlight topics such as gender-based identities, problems in the Moslem world, poverty, or Iran's pre-Islamic grandeur. European and American festival coordinators and media buyers usually prefer to see films from Iran that confront and challenge the Islamic Republic's limitations. These themes satisfy international tastes and lead to more global exposure and revenues for such films, but they are censored at home. Notable examples that cater to international tastes include, *Birthday* (2007) about transgendered people; *This is Not a Film* (2011) about the prohibition that forbade director, Jafar Panahi's to make films; or the semi-documentary, *No One Knows about Persian Cats* (2010) about underground music in Iran. They were distributed widely in Europe and the U.S., but their filmmakers faced many difficulties in Iran, and a few had to go into exile. Sometimes films appear to prioritize foreign tastes instead of internal concerns, which leads to criticism not only from authorities, but also from their peers.

I approach the study with my interstitial and intercultural perspective, located at the intersection of local and global. The dissertation is based in on-the-ground observations and in-depth interviews with more than twenty filmmakers and producers. It contributes to the existing scholarship with its focus on a key period in contemporary Iranian documentary filmmaking: a period of upheaval and transformation after the revolution (1997-2014) and increased documentary production. The dissertation situates the place of the films and the filmmakers in the context of history and various Iranian, Islamic, and Western discourses, and explores how the creative process both thrives and is limited by local and global social and political processes.

The research questions guide the study and explore the working life of documentary filmmakers and their relationship with the state and international players. These inquiries focus the dissertation on the filmmakers' agency, how power is distributed and challenged, and possibilities for alternative discourses. The filmmakers' struggles and accommodations illustrate the limits of institutional restrictions and possibilities for creative freedom. Their activities demonstrate how power is dispersed in the cultural sphere, among various state institutions and the filmmakers.

## **CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORY**

In this chapter I discuss the main theoretical frameworks I use in my research to analyze the Iranian documentary film world. These theories and texts help illuminate the interactions and activities of the filmmakers with institutions that fund and regulate them, their relationships with their audiences, colleagues, and peers, and the kinds of films they make. The holistic examination of the filmmakers working life is inspired by Raymond Williams's proposition that culture is "a whole way of life," (1958) made up of all artistic activities and social organizations that produce them (p. 93). This expansive view of culture in its many forms helps explain the ways in which Iranian documentary filmmakers are involved in cultural production through their films, writings, and public appearances. Through Foucault's work I analyze the different discourses that are produced and prevail in this complex cultural arena and how alternative voices and views are formed and expressed. To explore the role of intellectuals in Iranian society I employ Gramsci's conception of the role of the intellectual. Finally, I use Bill Nichols's categorization of documentaries to discuss the prevalent forms of documentaries produced in Iran.

Williams (1989 /1958) understands culture as ordinary, produced and lived by people in their social activities, like work, leisure, and education. Culture also manifests in its forms of signification, in making media, its exhibition, and the interplay of these activities. In his view, art and literature do not hold privileged positions. They are "part of the general process which creates conventions and institutions, through which the meanings that are valued by the community, are shared and made active" (Williams, 1961, p. 55). This conception is counter-posed to Frankfurt School's theory of "the

culture industry,” manufactured to serve the economic interests of capitalists. It serves to appease the masses by giving them false choices. Frankfurt school theorists Horkheimer and Adorno did not give agency to people, apart from their role as consumers of culture. Real art was produced by geniuses and remained separate from the determinations of the market. Williams proposed that there is no mass culture that is low and trivial. He explained that Frankfurt school theorists saw mass culture as alienating because they were witnessing and documenting the break down of old structures with industrialization (Williams 1989/1958, p. 98). Even though according to Williams’s Marxist framework, culture must be interpreted in relation to the system of production that it rises from, it is produced by communities of people, by the working class as well as the bourgeoisie, and reflects shared meanings. “If arts is part of a society, there is no solid whole outside it, to which, by the form of our question we concede priority. The art is there, as an activity, with the production, the trading, the politics, the raising of families. To study the relations adequately we must study them actively, seeing all activities as particular and contemporary forms of human energy” (Williams, 1961, p. 55).

In the context of Iranian documentary filmmakers who are the focus of this research, their working life, their films, their relationships with each other and with state institutions constitutes the cultural life in Iran. The growth of cinema and filmmaking is a testimony to the active presence of people in their social environment, in working with and confronting power, and in promoting alternative discourses to dominant ones. Those who are making documentaries are no longer only professional filmmakers who are in the hire of the national broadcasting (IRIB) and other major institutions; the passion for making films has spread to all kinds of people, young and old, men and women, in

Tehran and in the provinces, who aspire to express and document the issues of their society or their own lives.

Iranian filmmakers are aware of the spread of documentaries and filmmaking and use concepts like 'microhistory' to theorize this phenomenon. Microhistory, according to Carlo Ginzburg (1993), is a way of understanding history in small events and individual lives. It is based on the idea that 'on the ground' experiences of individuals and small communities reflect the larger whole and defines history (Magnusson & Szijarto, 2013, pp. 148-149). In several special events and screenings filmmakers employed this outlook for documentary films. My research also relies heavily on 'on the ground' activities of the filmmakers and utilizes ethnographic observation to reach its conclusions.

Raymond Williams (1980) discusses the complexities of culture and the different viewpoints and values that coexist and vie to dominate. His theoretical analysis is based on Gramsci's discussion of hegemony, emphasizing that culture is dynamic and continuously changing. The dominant system of meaning and behavior encourages certain values, acts, and thinking and incorporates alternative views. Residual and emergent views exist at the same time as dominant ones, as they did in Europe when bourgeois society emerged (Williams, 1980, p. 41). Europeans valued the old aristocratic milieu, but they were also fascinated by emerging forms of mechanical innovations. In the Iranian film world the dominant views belongs to the ruling party, because they control the main sources of funding and define the regulations. But Iranians have been influenced by nationalism since modernity set in. This view was a residual view after the revolution, but found more resonance after President Khatami's term and was adopted by the conservative administration of President Ahmadinejad. Western views that are

hegemonic and dominate globally also challenge Shi'a ideology. Furthermore, the ruling body is also not unified. The conservatives interpret their ideology based on Shi'a religion and anti-imperialism, and some are also inspired by nationalism. The moderates aspire to nationalism and more democratic ideals. Western influenced views, which were residual views from the Shah's reign, or emergent ones, brought on by the Internet and globalization, inspire the youth and intellectuals to resist the narrow scope conservatives in the ruling block. The struggles between these ideologies is what animates the Iranian social and cultural spheres and inspires so many to express themselves artistically and through films.

My approach to the Iranian documentary filmmakers and their work is through examining their world in a network of national and global institutions and thoughts, guided by Islamic thought and traditions, modernity, Iranian aesthetic practices, and Western documentary trends. Their relationships and interactions with fellow filmmakers, producers, distributors, and with governmental executives and administrators define their work. Their films need to be studied as a product of the amalgam of these influences, and also by taking account of how they see their work and talk about it.

To explain the cultural terrain and the place of filmmakers in Iranian society, I use Gramsci's discussion regarding the role of intellectuals in shaping ideology in a 'terrain of struggle' (Barrett, 1991, p. 53). Documentary filmmaking is a relatively new medium of expression for the Iranian intellectual and artistic communities. Some of the filmmakers support state ideology, particularly those that are broadcast on state television. But independent documentary filmmakers expose other views, lifestyles, and problems that exist in Iranian society. They follow and influence the professional

standards that are informed by their history and society, their peers, international standards, and the state's requirements.

Gramsci tried to explain the failure of class revolution to occur in the developed capitalist societies and the threat of the rise of fascism in these societies (Hall, 1986 p. 9). Gramsci argued against overstating the role of economy in determining social conditions. In the Gramscian view, the ruling bloc operates not only by yielding political and military force, but also through popular knowledge and culture (Barrett, 1991 p. 54). He proposes that civil society is made up of schools, families, unions, and media prime society to promote certain forms of ideology.

In Iran the state has not procured an undisputed hegemony based on religion, even though the education system and the cultural networks are closely regulated by official edicts. Popular culture is a site of struggle for the ruling bloc who mainly adheres to an ideology that draws on Islamic ideals that are set forth by its founder, Ayatollah Khomeini. During the Revolution and the war years there existed considerable hegemonic unity. However, over the years, this unity has been dismantled by various internal and global influences. Many of the intellectuals, artists, and filmmakers are informed by various thoughts, including Western philosophy, Iranian philosophy, poetic tradition, history, as well as Shi'ism.

Dominated social groups often organize their opposition in a way that produces alternative hegemonies (Forgacs, 2000, p. 420). Stuart Hall further explains Gramsci's conception of hegemony as a 'process' in which one set of ideas eventually replaces another in an ideological struggle, as a new historical phase replaces the old (Hall, 1996, p. 41). "What was previously secondary and subordinate, or even incidental, is now taken

to be primary—becomes the nucleus of a new ideological and theoretical complex” (Gramsci, as cited in Hall, 1996, p. 41). What were dispersed and repressed voices of dissent during the early post-Revolutionary years grew and flourished in the cultural and artistic spheres, once a new generation of filmmakers and artists entered the scene.

### **Discourse**

Foucault’s theory helps discern the different behaviors, expressions, and actions that compete and activate the cultural arena; they are the dominant or alternative discourses that filmmakers follow, resist, or produce. Discourses are not only groups of signs that merely represent a concept, but practices, language, and organizations that shape the objects of which they speak (Foucault, 1972, p. 49). For example, when historians take dispersed and discontinuous events and integrate them into a cohesive system, they are producing ‘history’ as an object. In this manner, Foucault looks at subjects like sexuality, madness or punishment, which are shaped by discourses about them in a particular society and historical context. Discourse entails production of knowledge through language and through social practices that create meaning, and regulate behavior. In this context, all practices and language have a discursive function (Hall, 1992, p. 291). Discourse rules in certain ways of talking, writing, conducting oneself; it constructs knowledge across a range of texts and institutional sites (Hall, 1992, p. 292).

The actions, language, and forms of expression of filmmakers, as they create and promote their craft, produce discourses that comply with or challenge the dominant ones. The policies of cultural institutions support and restrict filmmaking in order to maintain and produce dominant discourses. The films and programs that are funded and produced



by conservative state institutions like IRIB (state television) fall within the dominant discourse. The language and behavior they feature comply with and promote the Islamic moral guidelines of the state. The interactions of the filmmakers with the institutions that fund and regulate them shape their films, even independent ones. Filmmakers have to avoid “red lines” and adhere to written and unwritten restrictions in order to make and distribute their work. However, their relationships with their audiences, colleagues, and peers also influence the stylistic choices they make as independent filmmakers and lead to alternative forms of expression.

Since culture is produced in everyday activities and in the ways in which people interact and make artistic work within certain historical contexts, Foucault’s theory of discourse helps unpack cultural production in today’s Iran. In Foucault’s (1991) view truth is not an absolute but is historically produced within discourses that define its meaning. Discourses reveal power relations that reflect the material and economic structures of a society within a historical context (Foucault, 1991, p. 94). Dominant discourses create regulatory processes that limit or promote certain concepts and behaviors.

Foucault questions the application of power and how it intersects with knowledge. If knowledge assumes the authority of truth, it has the power to make itself true (Hall, 2001, p. 76). When the discursive occurrences appear in the same style, and support institutional or political patterns, it creates a ‘discursive formation.’ For example, in the nineteenth century medical science was characterized by a certain style that presupposed the same way of looking at things (Foucault, 1972, p. 33).

The kinds of films that are made in Iran are the result of the dominant discourses or discursive formations that are in effect in Iran in this historical period. They are defined by the religious Shi'ite beliefs that the state promotes in the context of an Iranian style, religious modernity that incorporates technological accomplishments. The leadership also criticizes American imperialism and the European history of colonialism. Most of the intellectuals and filmmakers adhere to a discourse of Iranian secular modernity, which is a hybrid of secularism, technological advancement, the discourse of nationalism, and Marxist influences. In this way, the cultural realm is a site of struggle for these discourses and the production of meaning. Sometimes there are agreements between the leadership and intellectuals, particularly regarding U.S. intervention in the region.

Stuart Hall (1993) examines the production and dissemination of media in terms of the dominant discourses that prevail and define media in the West. The professional code has to do with seemingly neutral technical questions, such as quality, staging, choice of images, selection of personnel, etc. Broadcasters work under the professional code, which Hall notes, "operates within the 'hegemony' of the dominant code.... Television professionals are linked with the dominant institutions, not only by the institutional position of broadcasting itself as an ideological apparatus, but also by the structure of access" (Hall, 1993, p. 171). Dominant meaning prevails, connecting events implicitly or explicitly to ideological views of the world. In this framework, the viewer can also have a 'negotiated position.' Even with the unequal relations in the discourses of power, while accepting the dominant definitions of events, viewers can negotiate their own 'local' position. In the third instance, if the viewer is knowledgeable of class distinctions and

“‘reads’ every mention of the ‘national interest’ as class interest, then he or she is operating with the oppositional code” and instigating a significant political ‘moment’ (Hall 2001b, p. 173). Following this model, the ways in which Iranian independent documentary filmmakers create their films within the process of production and exhibition, the obstacles they face, and their actions vis-à-vis cinema officials and institutions that give them funding and permits, or in relation to international markets that sometimes support their films, constitute their negotiated position. These struggles determine which discourses prevail. Some work within the dominant view, some negotiate their position and adhere to the dominant discourse partially, while expressing their own voice. A group of filmmakers take the oppositional stance. The positions of filmmakers within these competing discourses lead to the production of certain kinds of films and discourage other films.

In the 1980s, Islamic notions of sacrifice and martyrdom dominated in the cultural realm that was controlled almost unilaterally by the conservative religious leadership. In the 1990s with moderates in power, religious notions were mixed with other thoughts such as, nationalism, socialism and development. Documentary filmmakers began to once again explore Iran’s folklore, rural communities, and their national roots. The opening of the public sphere by moderate ruling bodies also gave rise to an interest in civic participation. The filmmakers chose subjects in their films that fit within the discourse of the moderate ruling bodies, but also emerged from the personal interests of mostly middle class filmmakers. In the 2000s a new generation of filmmakers was coming of age, who were highly critical of the ruling clerics and looked outside Iran or to their historic roots for inspiration. The dominant discourse about cinema in Iran draws

from intellectual traditions that have roots in modernity, Western thought, secularism, in Iranian aesthetic traditions, and sometimes religion. They value films that break boundaries stylistically and thematically and feature increased visibility and influence of women and younger generations.

Foucault asks us to determine locations of power by asking whom the discourses serve, and what are its techniques (1980, p. 115). Locations of power and resistances to power could be determined within professional codes, regulations, and the dynamics in the relationships between various actors. The filmmakers, producers, and funding and decision making groups each follow their own preferences, inspirations, and interests, and certain types of films and topics. The ways in which filmmakers conceive of their work and their world, how these are historically situated, and their choice in topics are determined by the discourses they follow. Discourse enables us to understand how what is said fits into a network or context that has its own history and conditions of existence (Barrett, 1991, pp. 123-126).

Many filmmakers operate in insular environments and are interested in creating work that engages them, their peers and friends. Since the Revolution they have created separate environments from the religious order around them. But they also have to interact with decision makers in governmental agencies, such as DEFC that parcel out funding and permits. Due to their differences, artists and intellectuals challenge the hegemonic grasp of conservative institutions, such as IRIB. As a result, the cultural realm has developed in many ways that are not aligned with conservatives ruling bodies.

The films' distribution networks could be viewed in the light of competing discourses in the cultural arena. Some are firmly controlled by the dominant forms of

power. Television is usually the natural outlet for documentaries. Yet independent filmmakers have a difficult time procuring national broadcast for their films on state controlled IRIB (state television). IRIB broadcasts films that fall within the conservative discourse of the ruling elite, though some slots are offered to films about ancient history, local rural cultures, and nature films. Documentary and Experimental Film Center (DEFC) is another major distributor of documentaries. They are under the auspices of the Ministry of Culture. They try to promote independent documentaries, particularly during moderate administrations. However, they mainly concentrate on the production of films and fail to enact effective strategies for documentary distribution.

To remedy the problem of distribution for many years independent documentary filmmakers and producers have organized semi-formal and informal exhibitions in spaces such as, The House of Cinema, The House of Artists, in universities, galleries, and homes. Most of these exhibitions are free of charge and offer partial exposure to their work. Since 2013 and the moderate leadership of Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (MCIG), a group of filmmakers and film critics have developed a new theatrical outlet for independent films called Honar va Tajrobeh [Art & Experience]. With the support of MCIG they exhibit independent and alternative films in movie theatres in major cities. (Distribution outlets are discussed further in chapters 4 and 5). These limited means of distribution have generated a system in which the filmmakers receive funding mainly in the production phase and many films are archived and not seen widely after their completion. Films that follow alternative discourses can only be seen in small exhibition spaces and their national exposure is limited by IRIB's policies.

However, their impact is not negligible because these films are seen by the intellectuals and students who discuss and write about them and the ideas they put forth.

The officials' rhetoric and regulations adhere to Khomeini's concept of *towhid* as an Islamic ideology, in which moral guidelines of Islam permeate of all aspects of state and society. They aspire to create a righteous society, full of moral individuals that resist foreign forms of influence and safeguard Islamic values (Martin, 2007, p. 199).

Moderates and intellectuals often follow values that are aligned with European ideals of secularism, civic duties, and rights of individuals, rather than the spiritual goals of the Islamic *umma* [community]. Iran's ancient traditions, for example Zoroastrian teachings of "Good Thoughts, Good Words, Good Deeds" or Iran's rich poetic tradition also provides inspiration.

The tensions between these different discourses are displayed continuously in debates and fights between the moderates and conservatives and among secular and religious factions. Dramatically, they contributed to massive demonstrations against the alleged improper voting practices during Ahmadinejad's second term bid for presidency in 2009. In Shi'ite Islamic tradition that Ayatollah Khomeini brought to Iran, the concept of *maslahat* or expediency allowed the Supreme Jurist to make decisions and legislate based on the interests of the Islamic public (Ridgeon, p. 277). The Supreme Jurist, Ali Khamenei decided to support the conservative candidate. Moderates and secular citizens saw this act as a breach of the electoral rights of the people to select their candidate. However, according to the concept of *maslahat*, Khamenei believed he was protecting the interests of the Islamic nation. His interpretation of the religious edicts led to widespread public demonstrations and a period of political repression.

The filmmakers and conservative governmental officials in charge of cinema also differed in their visions about the goals of cinema. Disagreements broke out in the planning, production, and release of films, and in the organizational structure of cinema institutions. For example, the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance shut down the House of Cinema (a collective of cinema guilds) in December 2011, ostensibly because of flaws in the organization's charter. The filmmakers used moderate newspapers to voice their objection to this act. They also held demonstrations to defend their rights to have unions, to gather, and to take collective action. The filmmakers' union leaders discussed their position in terms of civil society and the laws that give them the right to form unions. One of their defenses against the Ministry of Culture's attempts to reorganize the House of Cinema was to state that the Ministry of Culture, according to the law, did not have a say over union activities, but only over cultural institutions (Mokhtari, 2012). So they were acting outside their jurisdiction. The conservatives in the Ministry of Culture discussed their problems with the House of Cinema in terms of religion and Western conspiracy. They termed it *fetneh*, which has Quranic roots and means division or conspiracy. They believed that over the years, the leadership of the House of Cinema had promoted programs that supported professional ties with Western media and ignored Islamic values. These opposing views illustrate the divisions between the religious and secular discourses in Iran, which are in continuous struggle.

### **Censorship and Films**

Taboo subjects such as representations of the Revolution, the ruling elite, gender, the Iran-Iraq war, and some other topics are considered 'red lines' and have to be handled delicately. Many filmmakers avoid these topics altogether or use allegorical and indirect

approach to deflect criticism. Filmmakers often choose to exercise self-censorship when they conceive, plan, and execute their films. This could also be considered a negotiating stance in relation to authorities, so they can carry out their projects and avoid censure and bans. When I was working on the Documentary Film Week in 2000, I was on the committee to review the international films and prepare them for screening. Knowing the limitations of the Islamic Republic and not wanting to endanger the festival, we, the organizers, felt the need to make adjustments to some films. Censoring films was usually performed by officers of the Ministry of Culture. However in one instance, due to time limitation, I worked with an editor and together we removed a few shots from Ross McElwee's film, *Sherman's March* (1986) that had scenes of women in their bathing suits. McElwee was informed, and did not object. I could have insisted that nothing should be removed from a festival film, but then we would not have been able to show several important films, depriving interested Iranian audiences.

I felt ridiculous taking on the role of state censor. This experience showed me how filmmakers often faced decisions to either comply with the authorities or to disengage and stop working in Iran all together. Artists and intellectuals constantly negotiate the line between complying and pushing. Here I was no longer the neutral outsider, but was engaged to make an event happen and decided that I had to follow rules that conflicted with my training in the U.S. filmmaker. Like the filmmakers, I censored my project to continue it.

In *The History of Sexuality* (1978/1990) Foucault argues that censorship leads to a proliferation of discourses around the censored subject. After the seventeenth century in Europe a growing regime of repressive measures resulted in the study and analysis of sex



in order to control and discipline the population. Foucault shows how censorship of sexual behavior and talk resulted not in its suppression, but in the proliferation of discussions and analysis of the forbidden subject in a systematic and scientific manner. Instead of silence around the subject, a “discursive explosion” occurred that imposed the institutionalization of sexual heterogeneity in matrimonial relations (Foucault, 1990, pp. 37, 17). There was a policing of statements, control over their enunciation, and an institutional control of the topic of sex, in order to transform the discussion into a morally acceptable one that was also technically useful in psychiatry, medicine, and education.

In Iran state imposed taboos led to the proliferation of discussions, writings, and films about the restricted subject. Topics like woman’s appearance and dress, Western music, intimate relationships, and other sensitive topics were debated, not only nationally, but also by Iranian expats and critics of the Islamic regime outside Iran. The West’s interest and criticism of Muslim women led to many discussions by officials, artists and filmmakers on the problem of depicting women and the censorship of women’s bodies or intimacy between opposite sexes. In the early days after the revolution filmmakers avoided including women in leading roles to dispel any potential problems and close up shots of females were banned. By the 1990s due to pressure from progressive or hostile elements inside and outside the country, a growing number of films were depicting a variety of female representations on screen and leading female characters. To display its progressive values, the state was also supporting measured topics regarding women’s role in society. Many of the films that featured strong female leads were finding audience support and critical acclaim. Director Tahmineh Milani’s *Two Women* (1999) became a national and international hit. It explored women’s issues

in a popular melodrama that followed the lives of two bright university students and friends. One came from a progressive background and the other from a restrictive religious family. She was held back from continuing her studies, resulting in a tragic life. Rakhshan Banietemad also focuses on women in her films. Her documentary, *Roozi Roozegari* (Our Times) is discussed in chapter 6.

In Iran, censorship did not curtail the production of films, but was a discursive event that resulted in the production and discussions of certain films. Filmmakers devised ways and styles to make films about sensitive subjects. The self-imposed censorship sometimes resulted in the avoidance of certain topics, in poetic representations, the use of metaphoric imagery, and focus on children rather than adults. There are divisions within the Ministry of Culture and IRIB (national television) that are dedicated to determining the ‘red lines’ that films cannot cross. However, censorship also provokes interested parties to negotiate, debate, fight back, or find creative ways avoid it.

Rakhshan Banietemad (interview with the author, June 2013) relayed her memories of her early days working at IRIB and then leaving the institution due to restrictions. She and other filmmakers like her, including Ebrahim Mokhtari, Mohammad Tahaminejad, and Mohammad Reza Moghadassian made strong social documentaries, some of which were broadcast on IRIB. Then a conservative wave took control of the broadcaster and their group was dismantled. Many of the filmmakers either left the country or were exiled to remote provinces. Some continued to make strong films in the provinces and helped to develop local filmmaking. Eventually, filmmakers realized that television was no longer a place to work, so they formed independent companies and

separated themselves from direct supervision by IRIB. They started the independent documentary movement and trained younger generations to find their own voices.

Another strategy that Iranian filmmakers utilized over the years was to avoid approaching taboo subjects directly by addressing them through metaphor and allegory. The films of Abbas Kiarostami use minimalistic techniques to demonstrate the existential conditions of human beings through long shots of winding roads in barren landscapes, without much dialogue. These contemplative scenes reveal the complexity of the human condition. In a scene in Massoud Bakhshi's documentary *Tehran Has No More Pomegranates* (2006), a village girl carries a ripe pomegranate in an acted sequence that alludes to the loss of innocence and beauty in a modern Tehran. In Khosrow Sinai's film, *Gizella* (1993), Sinai employs a poetic voice-over that features his wife's voice, a Hungarian-Iranian painter, as she recounts her history of immigrating to Iran. She speaks of her experiences of settling into her Iranian life with her husband, his second wife, and the war, in a poetic language over still images that evade direct discussion of the issues.

Censorship in Iran led to the proliferation of institutional divisions that enforce various forms of restrictions. It also produces various forms of resistances in everyday acts that young people perform to defy restrictions. For example, young women wear the veil in public spaces because they have to, but some wear scanty, colorful scarves and ample makeup that renders the original purpose of the veil obsolete. These acts provoke the ruling bodies to increase discussions on the benefits of veiling on television, radio, and print media. In films representation of intimacy is not eliminated, but is approached poetically and through various creative devices. Filmmakers who defy censorship are rewarded in other ways, by their peers and audiences who oppose censorship and by the

international community.

Progressive female filmmakers have recently made personal films in which they avoid representing themselves veiled in their private environment. We see them in dark rooms in *Profession Documentarist* (2014), or in a bedroom scene in *21 Days and Me* (2011), Shirin Barghnavard's body remains hidden by the bedroom door. We only hear her voice, and the rustle of the bed sheets. Her absence fills the screen, because she cannot be seen unveiled. Showing herself veiled in bed would also be untrue. In a later shot when her husband arrives after a trip, Shirin hugs and kisses him. This is not normally seen in Iranian films, as men and women are forbidden to display closeness on screen, unless they are related. However, since this film documents their life as husband and wife, they are not crossing red lines; they are crossing the usual norms of screen convention. Her filmmaker husband seems highly aware of the presence of the camera and awkwardly hugs his wife back.

According to the dominant Shi'a discourse, artistic production has to adhere to the Islamic teaching of *Amr-e be maroof va nahy az monker* [to enjoin good and prohibit evil]. It is a refrain that is repeated in Friday prayer sessions, in speeches by the clergy, on television programs, and on wall murals around the nation. It promotes behavior according to Islamic edicts that uphold the Islamic community. This edict is contested by individualistic freedoms valued by artists and filmmakers, which produces discursive tensions. Documentaries that show difficult realities are labeled as *siahnamayi* [giving a dark version of reality] and they are censored. This label provokes filmmakers to respond publicly and defend their work.

Oppositional filmmakers push back the limits imposed by the State and promote their individual authorship. They voice their views in discussions with their colleagues, in blogs, and sometimes in the media. They are punished for infringements in various degrees, but some receive attention in the West, in European and regional film festivals, and in the diaspora. When their plight gets publicized, their careers are boosted internationally and in Iran. A few filmmakers have used the discourse of censorship to promote their films and push the limits. They create publicity in Iran and internationally for their banned films and demonstrate how censorship can lead to productive and creative activity. Jafar Panahi is an award-winning feature filmmaker, well known for his critically acclaimed and award-winning films like *The White Balloon* (1995) and *The Circle* (2000). Many of his films have been banned in Iran and he has used the bans to promote and publicize his films globally.

In 2011 Panahi was arrested and imprisoned for making a film without proper permits, but mainly he was punished for his open support for the Green Movement and against President Ahmadinejad's second term election. He was released after several months but prohibited from making films. Despite the ban, after his release he completed several films with the help of other filmmakers. One is a personal documentary about his predicament, ironically titled, *This Is Not a Film* (2011), made in collaboration with Mojtaba Mirtahmasb. The film evolves as a conversation addressing the camera and Mirtahmasb. Panahi reflects on the predicaments of making films in Iran. It is centered on the filmmaker in his spacious Tehran apartment, living through one ordinary day. He voices his frustrations for not being able to make films and his plans for his next film. By making the film and calling it "This is Not a Film," Panahi and Mirtahmasb challenged

the authorities. Though Panahi could not make the film he had planned, the documentary was completed and received wide distribution and attention globally. Panahi's case demonstrates the limits of censorship, where it often leads to resistance and a "discursive explosion."

Censorship and pressures from authorities lead to debates and discussions on local, transnational, and international media. Restrictions have not curbed the production of artistic work, but in fact have generated increased attention and publicity for films that defy them. Conservative newspapers and leaders in inflammatory tones object to films and filmmakers that defy the rules. Moderate publications and filmmakers defend their actions, gather and discuss their working conditions, and publicly discuss the difficulties they face. Transnational media highlights filmmakers' defiant acts and lead to their exposure in international film circles.

### **Anti-Western Discourse**

Since its inception, the Islamic state has stood against Western powers, particularly the U.S. in its rhetoric and actions, like its support for the 'hostage crisis' and the naming of the U.S. as 'the Great Satan' in public discussions. Because of its anti-Western stance, the state<sup>8</sup> usually opposes independent actions of civil societies, especially if they are in collaboration with western institutions. They have challenged and limited women's rights activism and are suspicious of organizations that work in connection with international women's rights or human rights groups. They often dismiss these organizing efforts as western ploys to discredit the Islamic Republic.

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<sup>8</sup> It has to be clarified again that the state in Iran is not a unified body, but a complex system of competing institutions: the Presidency, the Guardian Council, the *majlis*. the Supreme Judicial Council is overseen by the Supreme Leader. This formation of dispersed power made up of elected and appointed officials is unified by an Islamic Shiite ideology that was shaped by Ayatollah Khomeini and his anti-West stance.

To achieve unity and suppress division, since the first days of forming a government, Khomeini combined Islamic and Shi'ite moral guidelines, with liberal/Marxist critique of capitalism (Ansari, 2003, p. 57). By reconstructing Shi'ite myths for revolutionary purposes they explained the tumultuous world of a modernizing Iran, as it faced its Western enemies. This mythology brought life under control, rationalized transitional and difficult circumstances, and promised eternal safety and salvation to believers (Chelkowski & Dabashi, 2002, p. 35). The religious leadership used symbols of Shi'ism, which were the most common feature of the culture in Iran throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, to mobilize the nation (Chelkowski & Dabashi 2002, pp. 6-9). During the Revolution and the eight-year long war with Iraq, Shi'ite myths worked discursively to produce revolutionary and self-sacrificing youths. One of the most significant events for Shi'ite Muslims is the story of Imam Hussein's small army in Kerbela battling against what was thought to be the corrupt leaders of Islam in 680 CE, and their massacre by those forces. This event is mythologized and commemorated in yearly processions in Shi'ite countries and regions. In Iran it was used successfully to elevate the struggles of Iranian Muslim activists and soldiers against the Shah before the Revolution, and then in the war against Saddam Hussein, who had U.S. and European backing. Education, media, and cinema were charged with conforming society to a political Islamic model prescribed by the leadership, who closely monitored the production and distribution of culture. Their mission was successful during the tumultuous revolutionary and war period, from 1978 to 1987, promising eternal bliss to young volunteers in the battleground of the Iran-Iraq war. It made the world meaningful by turning the war into a holy site. After the war ended and the reconstruction of the

country began, economic difficulties surfaced. The Shi'ite discourse lost some of its appeal for the wider population.

Religious filmmakers during the Iran-Iraq war years produced heroic films that showed the idealism of self-sacrificing soldiers and volunteers in the front lines. In these films soldiers rarely talked about themselves, but praised the war and Imam Khomeini, their leader. According to Naficy (2011), modern subjectivity, based on the individual did not exist in sacred subjectivity, which was based on martyrdom and the union of the self with God (p. 12). In this framework since humans are never separated from God, they acquire their identity through worship of the beloved. The war films of the revolutionary period often drew on religious motifs and spirit of *tazieh*, Shi'ite passion plays, for their content and structure. *Tazieh* is a popular dramatization of the battle and murder of the Prophet Mohammad's grandson, Imam Hussein in Kerbela in 630 AD. It is reenacted yearly in Iranian neighborhoods, towns and villages. One of the prominent documentary filmmakers who was influenced by Shi'ism was Morteza Aviny. He verbalized the self-effacing nature of the artist who is inspired by Islamic art. "Anything an author writes emanates from inside. All art is this way. Likewise, a film is the result of a filmmaker's inspiration. However, if one entirely immerses oneself in God, then God will inspire his works and appear in them. That is my goal, not my claim" (Aviny, cited in Naficy, 2012, p. 13). Naficy (2012) explains how Aviny problematized authorship, which is emblematic of modernity, by dissolving the author in the Will of God.

The Islamic Republic's anti-Western discourse was aligned with liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s, and continues to inform its foreign policy and cultural policies. The Islamic state's critique of the West incorporated the discourse of



resistance to Western colonialism and post colonialism. Shohat and Stam (2001) have shown that dominant European/American forms of cinema established a powerful hegemony through the control of film distribution and exhibition throughout much of the world (p. 103). These media structures influence Iranian filmmakers as well. Many filmmakers adhere ideas and thematic preferences that are set in Western cultural institutions, despite pressures from the Islamic state. Some of the tensions between the conservative ruling elite and filmmakers and their guilds are also shaped by these rifts.

Some in the ruling elite also follow more moderate religious beliefs or they are informed by Iranian nationalism. These executives look to procure the collaboration of cultural workers. Another dimension of Foucault's theory of discourse is defined by Said (1978) via Gramsci in the distinction between civil and political society. They are both needed for the creation of consent and hegemony. Political society is made up of state institutions, the army, police, a central bureaucracy whose role is direct domination (Said, 1978, pp. 6-7). Hegemony is achieved when the ruling body procures consent and secures the participation of masses without coercion, through civil society (Barrett, 1991, pp. 54-55). As discussed earlier, this is where the role of intellectuals or producers of culture becomes important. While the Islamic ruling elite have control over the political society, their coherence in adopting religious symbols and anti-Western stance (which for them signifies moral decadence or imperialism) is challenged by its civil society. Iranian intellectuals and even some of the reformers in the government trace their political heritage to the 1906 constitutional revolution or Mossadeq's oil nationalization movement (1951-1953), more than the 1979 Revolution (Ansari, 2003a, p. 54). They also value nationalist movements. These agreements and tensions open spaces for dialog and

discussion and lead to creative production.

Islamic Republic officials are not all conservatives and some interpret Islamic guidelines more liberally and allow for dissenting views to be present. President Khatami's administration from 1997 to 2004 opened up civil society and encouraged the publication of alternative journals and books. Journalists, writers, and filmmakers used the opening to publish and make work that incorporated their aspirations for democratic and people-centered discourses. Documentary filmmakers like Rakshan Banietemad, Ebrahim Mokhtari, Mohammad Reza Moghadassian, and many others made films about the political participation of ordinary people, especially women.

Said shows that colonial European powers used various institutions to dominate the 'orient,' not only through force, but also discursively, through the study of the orient, writing about it and exhibiting its arts and culture. Said (1978) made use of Foucault's notion of discourse and examined the idea of the "orient" and defined it in the systemic discipline that Europe used to produce and manage the region politically, sociologically, and imaginatively (pp. 2-3). The Islamic state in Iran has made its anti-Western stance a defining strategy, in light of the region and Iran's history of colonialism, foreign interference, and domination. Transnational media is seen as a disruptive and interfering force in Iranian society. Conservatives in particular, view Institutions that promote and help expand democratic developments in Iran like unions, NGOs, and private cultural institutions with suspicion. The Iranian state is wary of its own people's Westernized leanings that do not contribute to the ruling body's vision of unity under Islamic guidelines. In order to win over more moderate Iranians who are well aware of the Western powers' duplicity and history of intervention in Iran, the leadership also adopts

nationalism to attract the public's cooperation.

When the House of Cinema invited members of the Academy of Motion Pictures from Hollywood to visit the Iranian film industry in 2009, conservative Iranian officials in the Ahmadinejad government used the discourse of nationalism and Third Worldist ideas to criticize the delegation and demanded that the group apologize for Hollywood's negative depictions of Iran in films like *300* (Mostaghim, 2009). Anti U.S. sentiments are a favorite topics of discussion in Iranian state media, where they often hold programs on the topic, even in discussions of cinema. With close analysis of films they reveal how Hollywood intentionally portrays the Middle East and Iran or even ancient Persia in negative terms. These films are seen as part of the American and European plans to dominate the region and discredit Iran.

### **The State and Cinema**

Following the constitution of the Islamic Republic there are two parallel ruling bodies in Iran that are at times in conflict with one another. Before the 1979 Revolution the Shah held centralized control over the state apparatus, the army and state radio and television, and appointed the prime minister. The *majlis* (parliament) was elected from a narrow pool of selected elite. These representatives oversaw various ministries, like the Ministry of Health, Ministry of Roads, Ministry of Culture and Arts. The Ministry of Culture was in charge of media organizations, such as the motion picture industry, but not of state radio and television, which was under direct supervision of the *hokoomat* or the main governing complex of the Shah and the court. This structure was replaced by that of the Supreme Jurisprudent, who is the commander in chief of the armed forces, controls the state radio and television, and the judiciary. The elected office of the President

appoints heads of ministries, such as the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, the Ministry of Work, Public Health. The President heads the government, working with the elected representatives of the *majlis* (parliament), who are charged with legislations. Additionally, local governments in Iranian provinces are formed through local elections of councils. They elect the mayor and the governor, who is appointed by the Ministry of Interior (Jamshidi, n.d.). They all get their final approval from the Supreme Leader's power complex, though the presidential office and the *majlis* usually shape the internal policies of the country.

Timothy Mitchell (1991) uses Foucauldian analysis to explain the modern state by tracing the evolution of state structure, from something that was external to society to its integration into modern society. He explains how discipline and surveillance transformed state apparatuses like the school system and the military, and produced disciplined, industrious subjects. "A negative, exterior power [gave] way to an internal, productive power" (Mitchell 1991, p. 84). In Iran these structures were formed with the start of the modern state, but much of it was enforced from the outside, through the authority of the Shah, his family, and the elite. His Westernized style did not resonate with most of the population who lived in rural areas, and his effort to modernize and Westernize Iran only worked with a small elite strata who lived in the capital, Tehran and in a few large cities.

The Revolution in 1979 integrated the modern state by including much of the rest of the country, when religious ideas and leftist thinking merged and worked together to overthrow the monarchy and spread development to remote regions and villages. Khomeini who led the revolution was a pragmatist who tried to incorporate the many strands of revolutionary interest. A liberal republican constitution was adopted, but the

religious authority of the *velayat-e faqih* (The Guardianship of the Jurist) was placed above it (Ansari, 2003, p. 58). As the Islamic state consolidated power, they violently quelled resistances from leftist intellectuals and ethnic minorities like the Kurds, Azeris and Arabs.

In this complex state structure, documentary filmmakers are regulated and supported by various institutions that draw their authority from the ‘velayat’ power complex or the elected officials. State television, IRIB falls under the jurisdiction of *velayat-e faqih*, and the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance that takes direction from the President’s office. Another source of funding and sponsorship are the municipalities of different major cities, particularly the Tehran municipality. Filmmakers often position themselves to work with these funding and regulating offices, especially when it comes to the distribution of their films. Sometimes funding opportunities are increased, since these institutions are regulated separately. Filmmakers who adhere to discourses that lie outside of traditionally approved ones, including Iran’s intellectual traditions of the 20<sup>th</sup> century modernism, post-modernism, or draw from Iran’s pre-Islamic history, have to maneuver between these institutions to find sympathetic producers, administrators, and executives who might approve their work.

### **The Intelligentsia**

Negin Nabavi (1999) traces the evolution of the *Rawshanfekr*, which literally means ‘enlightened thinker,’ the label used for Iranian intellectuals, artists, and urban educated people (pp. 334-336). The Islamic state needs the cooperation of its cultural workers to establish its hegemony, but since the *rawshanfekr* usually follow discourses outside of Shi’ism, they are regarded with suspicion and are penalized. In the early 1900s

these intellectuals were inspired by European discourses of modernity and by nationalism. They wanted to rid Iran from the despotic rule of the Shahs and they led the 1906 Constitutional Revolution. In the 1940s and 1950s intellectuals were inspired by and joined leftist movements, particularly the Soviet aligned Tudeh party and other leftist and Marxist organizations who confronted the Pahlavi regimes. They were also influenced by Third Worldist proclamations of Franz Fanon, as they witnessed British, American, and Soviet imperialism determine Iran's fate (Nabavi, p. 346). The influence of these groups continued into the 1970s, when students, artists, journalists and writers and other intellectuals aligned themselves with the religious factions and brought about the 1979 Revolution.

Modernity was taking hold in Iran through most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the 1960s many of the *rawshanfekr* and technocrats were also inspired by American technological innovations and culture. Hamid Naficy (2011) identifies the rise of “dandy” filmmakers and spectators in modern Iran in early 20<sup>th</sup> century (pp. 281-282). These young urban men and women were inspired by Hollywood movies and movie stars, and mimicked those lifestyles, clothes, and hairstyles. They looked down on the traditional culture of the majority of their compatriots. Cinema entered Iran by the ruling class in 1900 shortly after its invention. During a trip to France Mozzafar-al Din Shah was enchanted by cinema and ordered his court photographer, Akkasbashi to buy the necessary equipment for his court (Naficy, 2011, p. 12). Then entrepreneurs brought cinema in to the society by producing and exhibiting the first films, often with the objection of the clergy.

The Pahlavi Shahs used the discourse of modernity to organize the country, with the help of Western powers. During the Cold War in the 1950s, at a time when Iranians

were aroused by nationalism and supported Mohammad Mossadeq to nationalize their oil, the United States helped dismantle Mossadeq's bid for power. Then the U.S. Information Agency's (USIA) began efforts to produce educational and propaganda films to help modernize Iran and promote pro-American and pro-Shah sentiments. They produced newsreel films like *Iran News* and *Washington Report* that were distributed widely around the nation (Naficy, 2011, p. 36). They also funded a team from Syracuse University who collaborated with the Ministry of Education to produce films on health, agriculture, and educational services, which at its height employed more than 300 Iranians (Naficy, 2011, p. 47). Some of them continued to work as filmmakers on documentaries and on intellectual and artistic films with the help of government patronage system, the state owned television complex and in the Center for the Intellectual Development of young adult and children.

Naficy (2011) discusses the statist structure of documentary filmmaking that began in the Ministry of Culture and Arts in 1960, to communicate the plans of the Shah for the country. They produced newsreel films and held mandatory screenings in cinemas around the nation (Naficy, 2011, pp. 49-51). During the Shah's reign in the 1950s and 1960s, the state supported documentary production as well as, large state institutions such as Iran's national oil company. Private film companies were involved in producing commercial feature films for entertainment, usually of the song and dance or fighting genres, that targeted young men. While most of the documentaries and newsreel films provided information on the technological changes of the country and praised the Shah and his family, some of the films that were commissioned by the Ministry of Culture and Arts or the Center for Intellectual Development of Young People were artistic or critical

films made by educated, young filmmakers, like Dariush Mehrjui, Abbas Kiarostami, Kamran Shirdel, or Bahram Beyzai. Even though they were working for the state, they saw themselves in the tradition of *rawshanfekr* and offered an alternative to the dominant discourse of the monarchy and its pro-Western thinking.

The independent movement in cinema continued after the Revolution, when the state bolstered its support of cinema and limited American and European imports. When Ayatollah Khomeini praised Dariush Mehrjui's film, *The Cow*, it inspired other like-minded filmmakers to make films of artistic merit. State patronage covered even commercial feature film production. In order to have full control over the content of the films and produce an exemplary Islamic public they had to support and regulate all films in the script, production, and distribution stages. Governmental institutions like IRIB and the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance were charged with the task.

Since the 1990s some independent documentary filmmakers freed themselves from direct state control thanks to technological advancements that have reduced the cost of making documentaries. Apart from television documentaries and those that the Documentary and Experimental Film Center (DEFC) funded, a few independent producers have produced films for national or international markets. Companies like Sheherzad Media (now Noori Pictures) have produced notable Iranian documentaries with international or private monies, and distributed them internationally. The films they tend to support are in line with European styles and standards of documentaries. They are character driven and have an intimate style, or are about topics that resonate in the West, such as women's issues, gender, or personal freedom.



For decades Iranian filmmakers have been inspired aesthetically by masters of cinema from the U.S. and Europe, like Hitchcock, Orson Wells, Antonioni, Fellini, Scorsese and many others. The dark humor and style of Eastern European and Russian films that rise out of disharmony and absurdity of everyday life, such as films of Sergei Parajanov, Emir Kusturica, and the early films of Krzysztof Kieslowski have also resonated with them. Since the 1990s documentary filmmakers were exposed to documentaries from around the world in festivals and film weeks. Filmmakers and critics wrote about them and discussed their aesthetics and styles. Retrospectives of French Documentaries, Dutch Documentaries, The International Documentary Film Week in 2000, the yearly Vérité Film Festival all featured documentaries by internationally known filmmakers, like Ricky Leacock, Heddy Honigman, Ross McElwee, Jean Rouch, and Chris Marker. Scholar Mohammad Tahaminejad has translated works of documentary theory from Bill Nichols and David McDougall. Even IRIB broadcasts critical documentaries by well-known American and European filmmakers, if they fit the leadership's anti-American rhetoric. Films like Michael Moore's *Roger and Me* (1997) and *Sicko* (2007), Alex Gibney's *Taxi to the Dark Side* (2008), Oliver Stone's *Untold History of the United State* (2012), and recently, *Citizen Four* (2014) by Laura Poitras have all been shown on IRIB channels.

### **Iranian Aesthetics and the Discourse of Nationalism**

Iranian cinema has also been influenced by Iranian aesthetics, particularly its strong poetic tradition. The high period of Persian poetry was in 7<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> century CE. There was a transformation in the 1950s and 1960s with the rise of modern poetry. Cinema is also influenced by Iran's pre-Islamic history, Zoroastrian traditions, and the

geometric designs and miniature paintings of the Islamic period. Many fiction and documentary films have philosophical or poetic elements in their narration or form because Iranian audiences are highly appreciative of poetic aesthetics and language (Dabashi, 2001, Naficy 2011, Sheibani, 2011, Tapper, 2005). The use of poetry is prevalent among all kinds of filmmakers, whether they are secular or religious. For instance, renowned director Abbas Kiarostami uses poetry in his films to structure space, language, and mood. In some films he uses poetry direct, like in *Wind Will Carry Us* (1999) or his short poetic reflection, *Roads of Kiarostami* (2005). Khatereh Sheibani (2011) explains that Kiarostami's films are inspired by the Persian *ghazal*, a form of poetry that was mastered by 12<sup>th</sup> century poet Hafiz, though he is also inspired by modern poets. *Ghazal* is a non-linear and non-narrative poetic form, without formal harmony, which has spatial unity and conveys a hidden spiritual or philosophical meaning (Sheibani, 2011, pp. 27-33). Kiarostami's films are without a strong narrative and are removed from political concerns; they mark the poetic essence of everyday, simple events. He has also written and published his own poetry.

Many documentary filmmakers use poetry in their films' narration, including the religiously committed filmmaker Morteza Aviny who used it to laud the heroics of young Iranian soldiers in the battle ground. Sometimes these poetic narrations are quite formal and removed from the content and spirit of the topic. They are not synthesized in the structure of the film. However, in the films of filmmakers with strong poetic vision, Abbas Kiarostami, Forough Farrokhzad, the well known contemporary poet, and in the early documentaries like Parviz Kimyavi's *P for Pelican*, the story and the poetic style

are well integrated. Some other documentary filmmakers that bring a poetic sensibility to their films are Mahvash Sheikholeslami and Azadeh Bizargiti.

In the 1940s and 1950s Nima Yushij and his followers started and popularized Iranian modern poetry. They reconciled poetry with contemporary concerns and realities. All the arts, including cinema, were impacted by this new development (Sheibani, 2011, p. 57). In the same period documentary filmmaker and producer Ebrahim Golestan drew on poetry to make metaphoric yet critical commentary about the abuses of power in Iran, in a style known as poetic realism, that juxtaposed lyrical voice-over with gritty, realist images (Naficy, 2011, p. 80). Naficy (2011) argues that filmmakers used poetry in order to veil their criticisms in an authoritarian environment (p. 80). Golestan's films and formalism continue to inspire younger generations of documentary filmmakers. In an interview, he commented that his main inspiration formally and stylistically was the 13<sup>th</sup> century poet, Saadi (Jahed, 2005, p. 118). "When you have read Saadi's *Boostan* ten times from start to finish, it leaves its impressions" (Golestan as cited in Jahed, 2005, p. 18). His collaborator, Forough Farrokhzad, an important poet of the modern period, made one of the most acclaimed Iranian documentary films, *The House Is Black (Khaneh Siah Ast*, 1961), which won the best documentary prize at the Oberhausen Film Festival in 1964. She directed and edited the film about a leper colony in northwestern Iran, with a poetic structure and narration that evoked her deep humanism. The film mixes actual documentary footage and scientific, medical information about lepers. Forough's poetic sensibility and her voice accentuate scenes of the lepers' daily life with piercing sorrow.

Secular intellectuals often draw on Iran's ancient history, poetry, and mythology as alternatives to Shi'ite discourse. According to *Zartosht's* (Zarathustra, the Zoroastrian

prophet) path there are three means to the ancient wisdom of Iran: ritual, epic, and metaphor (Fischer, 2004, p.17). Ritual is practiced in religious rites, while epic and metaphor have been practiced through poetry. Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* (Book of Kings) is the mythological epic classic of Iran in verse (50,000 couplets), written between 977 and 1010 C.E. Ferdowsi wrote it after the Islamic domination of Iran with the intention to revive Iran's pre-Islamic history. It tells the stories of four dynasties which recount the fall of humans from paradise. The first and second parts are based on the creation stories of Zoroastrianism, in a narrative of the mythological kings and heroic kings. The third and fourth are based on actual Iranian dynasties, the Ashkanian and the Sassanids (Fischer, 2004, p. 17). Drawing from Zoroastrian beliefs, in which the universe is divided between the light Ahura Mazda and the dark Ahriman, the epic is narrated with stories in verse of battles between good, wise rulers and heroes who live in the light and ignorant and flawed ones, who live in darkness. The stories of *Shahnameh* feed the nationalist discourse; over the ages they have been recited orally in tea houses in every village and town in Iran, and later, on radio and television, in music, theatre, and in children's stories. Most Iranians are connected to their ancient history through Ferdowsi's epic book of poems. These sources provide an alternative framework for Iranians, to think about justice, right and wrong, and their history. They inspire a sense of nationalism connected to the glories of the Persian Empire. Documentary films that focus on Iran's ancient history often draw from Ferdowsi's themes and poetry.

With the revival of nationalism in different periods, some documentary films have focused on ancient Persian themes like architecture, history, and crafts. During the Shah's time these were featured in many documentaries made by the state to promote

secular nationalism among the population. Naficy (2011) discusses several prominent films, including Feraidun Rahnama's *Persepolis* (1960) a lyrical film, with a dynamic editing style, about the historic Achaemenid palace's rise and destruction (p. 93). *The Lover's Wind* (*Bade Saba*, 1969), a film commissioned by the Shah to French director, Albert Lamorisse, was filmed mostly from a helicopter, and featured much of Iran from above, including the Persepolis ruins and the archaeological site of the ancient city of Shush. Once the traumatic years of the 1979 Revolution and the eight-year war were over, interest in these kinds of films were revived. Paradoxically, Ahmadinejad's conservative government relied on both Shi'ite myths and ancient Persian themes to rally nationalism among Iranians and support military build-up.

Hassan Naghashi, a documentary filmmaker from the historic city of Yazd, is in his thirties, is passionate about ancient Persian religions, rituals, mythologies, and historical topics. On his website he has pages dedicated to mythological lore that have inspired several of films, such as *Mashi and Mashianeh* (Adam and Eve, 2006), *Persian Tree* (2006), *Norooz Parsi* (2012). He writes about his inspirations from Jamsheed, the heroic, mythic king of Iran who was the confidant of Ahura Mazda, the Zoroastrian God (Naghashi, 2011). Jamsheed saved animals from extinction by the great flood, had a cup in which he could see the whole world, and even discovered the benefits of wine (Naghashi, 2011). Naghashi makes films with state support; most of his films have been broadcast on Iranian television channels. The strength and endurance of the discourse of nationalism has even led the Islamic state to use it to rally for unity. National television, IRIB, occasionally programs films on Iran's pre-Islamic history.

Since Ferdowsi's time and his epic *Shahnameh* (997-1010 C.E.), Iranians have found the mythology of ancient Persia as a means to connect themselves to something greater than their present conditions. Barthes states that myth is a system of communication and signification, chosen by history, and supported by the written text, photography, or cinema (pp. 109-110). While a sign has a direct relationship to its signifier, myth is a form of speech, where a sign takes on a secondary meaning. It is depleted of its original meaning and a cultural meaning is attached to it. Throughout the decades, the repeated images of the ruins of Persepolis have signified connections to an imagined history. *Shahnameh's* verses have transformed history, signifying the grandeur of ancient Persia and a sense of nationalism. At the same time, its ruin at the hand of Alexander, the Macedonian conquer, invoke loss at the hand of foreign invaders.

Mohammad Reza Shah, the deposed Shah of Iran, attempted to replace Islamic myths with ancient Persian ones. For years his queen Farah held costly art, dance, and music celebrations in Persepolis. Well known avant-garde European, American, Asian and Iranian artists presented their cutting edge performances that were often removed from Iranian cultural traditions. The Shah's infamous and lavish commemoration of the 2500 years of Persian history and his speech in at the tomb of Cyrus (Kourosh) the Great in 1971 was meant to affirm his connection to the Persian kings. The celebrations were recorded on film and were reproduced and broadcast on television. In a speech addressed to the Achaeminid founder, Cyrus the Great, the Shah with great theatrics declared, "O Cyrus Great King, rest in peace, for we remain awake." Subsequently Khomeini and other critics of the Shah ridiculed the speech and pointed to his alienation from ordinary folk, who were not interested in grandiose celebrations, but in making ends meet. With

the Revolution, interest in ancient history was considered reactionary and connected to the Shah. Neither the Islamists nor the leftists were interested in drawing from ancient Persia for their legitimacy. In 1978 the television production of a documentary series on Iran's history in collaboration with Michigan State University was halted because of anti-Shah demonstrations in the U.S. (Naficy, 2011, p. 141). The discourse of secular nationalism, which the Shah drew on, ran its course and was replaced by revolutionary fervor and Shi'ite mythology.

However, the mythology of ancient Persia affected many non royalist and intellectuals as well, including the influential Sadeq Hedayat. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century he regarded Persia's history with nostalgia, traveled to India to learn ancient Iranian languages, and wrote several stories to revitalize ancient myths and heroes (Fazeli, 2006, p. 62). His writings continue as a source of inspiration for contemporary writers of fiction, theatre, and journalism. His style, independent thinking, and critical writings speak to the early period of modernity in Iran. In his fiction Hedayat adopted a biting and satirically fierce language to critique his contemporaries, whether they were like him, from the small, elite bourgeoisie, or Islamic clerics and illiterate, common people, whom he thought were backward and petty. He used dark satire to ridicule the clergy, the conservative merchant class, and the ignorant masses (Katouzian, 2013, p. 197). At the same time, he loved folklore and contributed to its revival by documenting folk stories and proverbs. He was a nationalist and a modernist who strongly dismissed both Islam and despotism of the Shahs (Fazeli, 2006, p. 63). Iranian prose, according to Homa Katouzian (2013), reached its peak during the early part of the constitutional revolution 1906-1910, in works of authors like Hedayat and Jamalzadeh, who studied their society

with cynicism, poking fun at the religious, the French educated elite, and the common man. Hedayat also criticized the newly instated and chaotic parliamentary system, which was trying to function under the rule of a despotic Shah (Pederson, 2002, p. 26).

Echoes of early 20<sup>th</sup> century writers' interest in folklore and humor can be observed in the early period of documentary films in Iran, in the 1950s and 1960s. Filmmakers like Ebrahim Golestan, who was a friend of Hedayat's, Parviz Kimiavi, and Kamran Shirdel made singular and artistic non-fiction films about real events. Kimyavi's *P Like Pelikan* (1972) observes the ancient ruins of Tabas and a hermit who lives there with delicate humanism and poetry. Kamran Shirdel's *The Night It Rained* (1974) humorously casts doubt on the possibility of any documentary truth and the very nature of investigative reporting. Ebrahim Golestan's "poetic realism," can be traced to the rich tradition of Iranian literature of early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the discourse of modernity that was inspired by Iranian constitutional revolution and European Enlightenment. In turn, these filmmakers created memorable documentaries that continue to inspire today's documentary filmmakers in Iran, with their unique stories, visions, and styles. Massoud Bakhshi's 2007 film, *Tehran Has No More Pomegranates* was directly inspired by Shirdel's *This is Tehran, the Capital of Iran* (1966), a film that contrasted Tehran's modernization by the Shah to scenes of dire poverty in the slums of Tehran. Forty years later, Bakhshi's postmodern film incorporated scenes from Shirdel's film and pays homage to his work, with its ironic narration. He even employed the same narrator, the beloved actor and director Nosrat Karimi, to subtly critique the paradoxes of the megacity of Tehran in the mid 2000s.

The Iranian documentary films that were made between 1997 and 2014 follow



international traditions, as well. Nichols's (2001) classification of documentaries was translated and discussed among filmmakers. They are divided in six modes of documentaries: poetic, expository, observational, interactive, reflexive, and performative modes of representation (Nichols, 2001, p. 99). Nichols (2001) observes that documentary filmmakers outside of North America and England often favor subjective and openly rhetorical films, while North American and British filmmakers prefer a more journalistic and non-interventionist approaches (p. 31). Iranian films usually follow the rhetorical and subjective style, with some notable exceptions, like Ebrahim Mokhtari or some of Rakhshan Banietemad's films.

### **Subjectivity in Iranian Documentaries**

The formation of the subject in documentaries is influenced by many models that are available to Iranian filmmakers: the devotional/self-sacrificing subject of religious films, the idealized subject of salvage ethnographic films that are located in rural regions, the de-stabilized subjects of playful or satirical documentaries of the younger generations of filmmakers, and individualized self portrayals in personal or confessional films. In his discussion of the subject in documentaries, Michael Renov (2004) draws on Foucauldian discourse, Lacan's psychological framework, and Barthes's essay form to tease out the place of the subject in personal documentary films. For example, in discussing the essay form as employed by Barthes (1972), he states that, "the subject's unwillingness to be pigeon-holed even by a discourse of his own making, results in an 'internal doctrine' pertinent to the essay form" (Renov, 2004, p. 106). Renov illustrates that the contemporary elusiveness of the subject to assert certainty is a necessary characteristic of the essay and the autobiographical forms. He claims that the presence of the subject in

the “new autobiography” is not due to unnecessary self absorption or coherence, but to the “instability, flux, and perpetual revision” of the subject (Renov, 2004, p. 110).

This discussion is useful for analyzing why there is a recent trend among contemporary Iranian documentary filmmakers to make personal and autobiographical documentaries. They live in a an uncertain environment, pulled by Iranian and Islamic traditions on one hand and global influences and concerns regarding their place in the world. They use the personal form to speak of their questions and predicaments, so that in this process they may find answers to the predicaments and absurdities of their lives in the crossroads of modernity and tradition. The more secular, younger generations fall outside of the dominant discourse, since they are not ordinarily addressed or acknowledged in the official public sphere of Iran. Yet they know they are not isolated, as the issues they are addressing are relevant to many of their peers. I focus on three films that have been impactful in recent years, provoking interest and discussions among secular filmmakers outside the dominant discourse.

The subject in personal, self-portrait, or essay films, especially those made by the younger generation, speaks to a broken self image, where the filmmaker examines pieces of her life to make herself whole but is not usually able to do so. *21 Days and Me* (2011), an autobiographical film by Shirin Barghnavard, has a contemplative style and rhythm. The filmmaker has moved back to Iran from Australia with her husband and is trying to figure out whether they should have a child. Her husband is cynical about the state of the world and against it. Their families are more firmly rooted in traditional roles and encourage the couple to have children. Her friends are for the most part childless and against it, believing that it is selfish to bring a child into a difficult world. Shirin’s

subjectivity is elusive and uncertain. She incessantly puts this question to her family and friends, but does not or cannot answer it. She seems fearful of her choices. Her medical situation puts the questions to rest, as she has to remove a large fibroid from her uterus.

In Mina Keshavarz's film, *Alone in Tehran* (2010) the filmmaker chronicles her search for independence after she proposes to her husband that they should separate for a time. The film is shot in an observational style and spans the capital city and the more conservative smaller towns to explore how young women live in the late 2000s. Like Barghnavard, Keshavarz also questions her family and peers. She wants to know if it is possible for a young woman to live alone in Tehran. She uses the observational style as her camera follows her when she meets many young women who are living on their own. Most of them admit that it is socially difficult, and their traditional families frown on their life style. Her own more secular, urban family is not directly against her decision, but her parents also want her to stay in her marriage.

In Mehdi Bagheri's *PirPesar* (Reluctant Bachelor) (2011), the filmmaker confronts his father's financial incompetence that has left him and his family struggling. He refuses to talk to his father and does not even want to attend his brother's wedding. The filmmaker honestly chronicles his anger with his family and his efforts to stay away from them. All three filmmakers record their journeys away from traditional family values and structures. They candidly show the financial and familial difficulties that young people face in making life decisions, to get married, divorced, or have children. They live their lives amidst difficult economic conditions, in a volatile region.

To expose one's personal life runs contrary to many Iranian norms that have been in place for centuries. In Iranian architecture, private and public spaces are distinguished

between *andaruni*, the interior private space of the family and intimates, and *biruni*, the exterior, public space. The domain of the female is usually in the *andaruni*. The veil also separates the female from outer, public spaces, when she ventures out. For a woman filmmaker to expose her inner world and her dilemmas and make them public on film runs contrary to these traditional norms. Filmmaker like Barghnavard, Keshavarz, and others who make personal films have broken taboos by exposing their own lives.

The three films were produced by Sheherzad Films with funding from an unnamed European source according to Kalantari (2014, personal communication). He was one of their advisors, who helped the filmmakers navigate the process. Those involved did not want to talk about the funding institution, probably for fear of reprisals. After the 2009 uprisings collaborating with foreign media became grounds for censure. The styles of these films stand in stark contrast to the moral, self-sacrificing films that promote Islamic idealism and are brimming with moral certitude. In the Islamist films the notion of giving all in the way of Islam and country is central. In the personal or essay films, the self is usually a fragmented, post-modern self that is central yet elusive. This “self” poses questions which have no clear answers.

### **Conclusion – Documentary Trends**

This chapter has explored the theoretical premises of the dissertation that help explain the Iranian documentary film world. Foucault illustrates how discourses work to shape human behavior and language; Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall explicate how dominant and residual discourses help reveal struggles in the cultural sphere; Gramsci’s concept of hegemony explains the role of intellectuals in aiding the state or challenging it. The discourses of Shi’ite religion, nationalism, and various Western trends such as

modernism, post-modernism, and feminism sometimes co-exist or lead to disagreements and tensions in Iran. They are adopted by artists and filmmakers according to their backgrounds and outlooks, to express their perspectives on art, life, and society. Sometimes their views are aligned with state ideologies, but they are often in conflict. During the second term of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's conservative administration, from 2009 to 2012, those in power became increasingly intolerant of other views. Using the IRIB's broadcasting facilities they promoted the earlier revolutionary ideals of self-sacrifice for salvation and upliftment of Islam and confronted the Western discourse of individualism, individual freedoms, and personal voice that was practiced by younger filmmakers and artists. These efforts did not influence the filmmakers who were following other discourses and could use the Internet to explore their own sources of inspiration.

The history of modernity in Iran and the development of the modern state was facilitated by Western and American technological aid. Mohammad Reza Shah's regime was supported by USIS and American Aid programs to modernize the nation. Documentary filmmaking was developed and infused with American ideas about state building. The Syracuse University team produced documentary films that educated Iranians about modern systems of health, agriculture, and governance. Much of these efforts were implemented in a top down manner that were not incorporated into the fabric of society. With the revolutionary fervor, the population was at times closely aligned with the state and many of the development goals were implemented.

Foucault's theory of discourse helps unpack the ways in which Iran has continued to develop as a modern state after the 1979 Revolution, which incorporates different

ideologies and preferences, limiting and enabling cultural and artistic productions. The Iranian state has enacted different forms of censorship to promote its ideology and fight against Western influence. Their anti-Western discourse is informed by the history of colonialism and American and British meddling in the internal affairs of Iran. It garners support among certain parts of the population. On the other hand, censorship by the state has increased the aspirations for freedom and individual rights in Iran and has led “subversive” filmmakers to make more films and some have gained global acclaim. The conservatives in power see the Iranian intelligentsia or *rawshanfekr* complicit in employing and creating alternative discourses, sometimes influenced by Western thinking regarding individual rights, women’s rights, or gender into the cultural realm. They label documentaries that show difficult realities as *siahnamayi* [giving a dark version of reality] and censor them. The intelligentsia and Independent filmmakers see this rhetoric and confrontation as infringement on their artistic freedoms and ability to express reality and they fight back. They publish their views in sympathetic newspapers and journals, boycott government run institutions and festivals that promote conservative views, and form their own alternative venues. All these activities and tensions give rise to a dynamic cultural sphere.

Some religious thinkers and artists continue to be inspired by the discourse of Shi’ism and the ideology of the Islamic Republic. They are often supported by various state institutions and receive funding easily. The war films, including some *Revayate Fat’h* episodes, feature devotional voice-overs that invoke the historic and mythic battle between forces of good and evil, and the soldiers are likened to Imam Hussein’s entourage. However, contemporary films by religious filmmakers feature forms and

styles that are used by other filmmakers as well, such as observation and reenactment. A new series on IRIB, *The Commanders* (2014) features a reality television format, where Basij Militia personnel search for new recruits among upstanding religious youth.

Despite threats of censure and lack of funding for films that diverge significantly from the ideals of the Islamic Republic, Western documentary trends continue to inspire many younger filmmakers. They make character-driven observational films or personal, self-portrait films. In these films individualism, even if it is fractured, is central and the voice of the filmmaker directly engages the viewer and is foregrounded. Essay films are also of interest to *rawshanfekr* filmmakers. In them they draw from Iranian prose traditions of early twentieth century. They challenge the dominant cultural preferences, where filmmakers create innovative films that influence their peers.

The discourses of Shi'ism, modernity (and post-modernity), and nationalism have prevailed in Iran. The state attempts to utilize and incorporate all these forms if they fit its rhetoric, and challenges and punishes those who diverge too far. Nationalism has been a discourse that has endured throughout the modern era in Iran. Even the conservative leadership has adopted it as a means to garner wide support in the face of regional and international conflicts. Divisions and disagreements curb opportunities for creative production. They also encourage filmmakers to organize separate spaces and push the boundaries of the state's hegemonic grasp and express their own views and subjectivity among their own interlocutors. They create active, creative environments that challenge dominant discourses.

### **CHAPTER 3 METHOD**

In this chapter I explain the research methods that I draw on in the dissertation to study the Iranian documentary filmmakers working environment and how they think about their craft, make meaning, and create films. Ethnographic analysis, with its situated, local, up close perspective, is the main methodology of the research. Drawing on my ethnographic data, I examine the filmmakers' film production processes, their organizing efforts, and their interactions with one other and with funding organizations. Because they are also engaged in global systems of media, in the distribution and exhibition of their work, this study necessarily takes on a global dimension as well. In order to uncover lifestyles and social behaviors I looked at the filmmakers' actual situations through ethnographic observation. I investigated personal documents and used open-ended interviewing. Then it is necessary to provide context, as meaning is invested by the cultural or historical environment that it arises from (Christian & Carey, p. 361).

By studying filmmakers' work environments and their relationships to each other and to various national and international institutions, I demonstrate the contemporary system of documentary film production and distribution in Iran. My professional experience working in American media with a focus on Iran, and my situated perspective as an Iranian-American give the study a transnational dimension. I reflect on how my own background and professional experiences shape my work in the field, my relationship with my Iranian interlocutors, and ultimately the knowledge I produce about the field. Therefore this study also contributes to ongoing intellectual inquiry about the insider/outsider position of the researcher and its consequences, which instantiate the geopolitical dynamics between the West and Iran.



In addition to observation, interviews, and analysis of the working life of Iranian filmmakers, I conducted textual analysis of a number of films to address the stylistic and aesthetic choices filmmakers make, and the treatment of their films' topics. Finally, institutional analysis engages with organizations that facilitate and regulate documentary filmmakers, such as their guild, Iranian Documentary Filmmakers' Association (IRDFA), and the institution that is charged to facilitate and promote documentary filmmaking, Documentary and Experimental Film Center (DEFC). DEFC is a major funder of documentaries and organizer of the main documentary film festival, The Vérité International Film Festival. The filmmakers also regularly interact with the cinema division of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (MCIG), and national television, IRIB.

In the examination of institutions I include a section on the documentary workshops organized independently by the filmmakers in the summer of 2013, and the filmmakers involvement in film festivals, such as the Kish Documentary Film Festival which began in 1999 by veteran filmmaker Karan Shirdel and the Vérité International Documentary festival, which I attended in 2007 and 2013. The Kish Festival, which operated for only a few years until 2004, with funding Kish Free Trade Zone Organization (Naficy, 2012, p. 88). The Vérité festival was launched in 2007 by DEFC, with the leadership of Mohammad Afarideh, a film and television producer and administrator. In my analysis of film festivals, I draw on my own experience of attending the festivals, often in connection with American media organizations. I also reflect on my experience of organizing a film festival with the Iranian Documentary Filmmakers Association (IRDFA) in the Spring of 2000.

I examine the world of Iranian documentary filmmakers who live in Tehran, the center of cultural activities in Iran, from the point of view of the filmmakers as they interact with the economic and administrative decisions of Iranian media institutions, and the strategies they employ to promote their independence. I explore how the institutions help produce certain kinds of artists and artistic productions, since as Mary Douglas (1986) shows people who interact with institutions tend to adopt the classification system that the institution imposes (Douglas cited in Lipartito, 2006, p. 139). I build on Foucault's approach of detecting mechanics of power by examining discourse and draw on Gramsci's concept of hegemony in order to study resistances and collaborations. Filmmakers' interactions with the institutions that regulate, promote, and limit their creative productions are sites that reveal cultural formation and power dynamics in Iran.

I also use the framework proposed by George Marcus (1995), inspired by Appadurai's (1990) study of complex global cultural economies to organize this chapter. Marcus encouraged interdisciplinary and multi-sited studies of culture due to the global nature of sites that cut across dichotomies, such as global and local (pp.104-105). He suggests several modes of conducting research of cultures through links and chains of connection, to 'follow the people', 'follow the thing' or the material object that engages the subjects, 'follow the conflict', metaphors, stories, and so on (Marcus, 1995). Following these guidelines, to research the world of documentary filmmakers, their culture and their films, I primarily 'follow the people,' the documentary filmmakers, and their activities; I 'follow the thing,' their films from production to distribution and in terms of their styles and content. I also 'follow the conflict,' between the filmmakers and the funding and distribution organizations and institutions.

By following ‘the thing,’ I trace the documentary films’ development, their planning, production, release and their national and international screenings. Additionally, the professional dynamics that shape the films and the impact of national and international distribution comes to light. I look at the poetics of the films and how Iranian history and literary traditions, as well as global and local trends determine the style and content of the films. In order to evaluate the films in depth in terms of their style and content I use Bill Nichols’ and Michael Renov’s frameworks to analyze several prominent films of the last fifteen years. I also discuss how the films are received by audiences and reviewed by Iranian critics and other filmmakers.

In ‘following the conflict,’ I follow the clashes between the filmmakers and conservatives in the government, and the incongruity between internal media policies and the influx of usually Western, mostly American and British media that reaches Iran and disrupts national borders and the hegemony of the Islamic Republic. It is well established that imbalances exist when global news flows are controlled for the most part by The West or ‘the North.’ Persian-language media channels have popped up in neighboring Turkey, Dubai, and farther in London and Washington D.C. Many are funded by American, British, German governments, or by large media conglomerates, who hire Iranian ex-patriots with anti Iranian regime views. They often broadcast news and entertainment programs in Persian that challenge the political and moral codes of the Islamic regime. These programs are usually very popular with Iranian viewers, since most Iranians are wary of the didactic and ideological programming of the conservative national broadcasting system, IRIB. This phenomenon has seriously diminished the viewership of the local channels, and affects the production of local films. At the same

time international Iranian channels that promote Islamic Republic's views have been banned from European satellite network, Eutelsat, since 2012, following the EU's imposition of sanctions against Iran ("Satellite Channels," 2012). These restrictions have resulted in formal complaints by the Iranian government against unfair global media practices.

In following the conflict, I conduct a case study of the fight between the House of Cinema, which is the organization of cinema unions, and the Ministry of Culture (See chapter 4). This conflict sheds light on the institutional problems that the filmmakers face. The confrontations lasted from 2011-2013, as they were influenced by different ideologies about cinema and the relationship of the filmmakers with global media. The filmmakers wanted more openness to the West, and the Ministry of Culture during President Ahmadinejad's administration had a belligerent attitude towards Western media institutions. But these conflicts cannot be simply explained in terms of the binaries of tradition and modernism or Westernization. For instance, Islamic exceptionalism proposes that in Iran Islam is the determining factor in the realm of culture and communication. As Sreberny -Mohammadi, and Khiabany (2010) have argued, the Islamic state also embraces and promotes cinema and technology, which has helped the development and expansion of cultural activities in Iran (p.1).

### **Following the People - Thick Description and Reflexivity**

I employ ethnography as my main research method to "follow the people," or the documentary filmmakers whom I am studying. This method allows me to immerse myself in their world and experience their points of views. An ethnographic approach is suitable for gathering information because it allows the researcher to observe interactions

in the field, in their actual settings, and study how members of the community strategize and make decisions. The strength of ethnography is its explicit and well-developed sense of location, that knowledge is about somewhere and from somewhere, and since location and life experience are central to the knowledge produced (Gupta & Ferguson, 1997, pp. 37-39). Attention to location, and the epistemological and political issues of location are the strengths of ethnographic research. But the field is only one location in a multi-stranded methodology, along with knowledge from reading newspapers, websites and blogs, analyzing documents, tracking the interaction of the filmmakers with the institutions, and personal experiences of working in the field.

As Sherry Ortner (1995) observes, the ethnographic stance is a commitment to what Geertz called “thickness,” to understanding the topic through richness, texture, and detail. However, this detailed knowledge that is acquired by bodily entering the field has to be contextualized in the global world system, which as Marcus prescribes is a multi-sited design based on the connections that exist between history, politics, and culture and the institutions of media, states, and markets (1995, pp. 96-97). Furthermore, Ortner suggests that a good ethnography provides the meaning of an event and the politics of its meaning (1995, p.189). She also prescribes using multiple texts, including our field notes, and what is produced by others in the field, and contrast and complement various sources, in order to tease out the truth. In this way, studying the filmmakers working life must be complemented by a study of the institutions they interact with, the films they create, and their writings about their craft and activities. These texts and observations help us understand their way of life and work from the filmmakers’ perspectives, as well as from that of the researcher. Because my informants and the subjects of the study are

artists and intellectuals who think and write about their own work and activities, they are also interpreters of the field. In-depth interviews, along with their articles, blogs, and websites makes for a “thick description” of their working world.

### **Observer as Participant**

I engaged in ethnographic research because it offers unique insights into the everyday practices of the documentary filmmakers, and because their work has not been researched and written about extensively. My personal relationships with the filmmakers and my work history in Iran aided me in gaining entry to the field and understanding their interactions and the nature of their conflicts. I was focused in Tehran, which is the center of documentary film activity. Coming from Kurdish background, I also visited Kurdistan and talked to Kurdish filmmakers. They thought of the Kurdish film world as an active environment, where a lot of cinematic work was conducted, even though they also recognized they were a marginalized population. One of the few distributors of documentary films in Iran, Satar Chamanygol resides in the Kurdish region, in Sanandaj. He has been able to make connections to Iraqi and Turkish Kurdish regions and helped me to send my film on Kurdistan to some of these regional festivals. As Abu-Lughod (1994) elaborates, the question of the field is complicated for the ‘halfie,’ researcher for whom the anthropological site is not an exploration of otherness, but partially a study of her own society and her particular relationship to that society. My own Kurdish background helped me access the Kurdish filmmakers and producers, because I could speak Kurdish (with an accent). However, I was also based in the U.S. and conducted my research mainly in Tehran, which limited my reach outside Tehran. I focused on Tehran, where I was often regarded by filmmakers as their peer.

John Jackson (2004) explains that traditionally ethnographers' aim was to master the life-ways of specific cultures thoroughly and completely as though they were looking through the natives' own eyes (p. 33). This "emic" perspective approximated the native's self-understanding, and with the aid of an analytic or "etic" layer of analysis, which is applied to the ethnographic data, deeper meanings that were not necessarily apparent to the natives themselves, could be revealed (Jackson, 2004, p.33). This led to claims about the production of scientific knowledge, which involved translating local understandings to general theories that are supposedly objective. These claims of scientific knowledge led to tensions between native and non-native anthropologist. While the scientific researcher engaged in an intense long-term participant observation and utilized supposedly crucial scientific distance to understand the culture deeply, native anthropologists were believed to start from an overly identificatory position. Thus, even if the native anthropologist understood his/her population intimately, they were judged to lack the necessary objectivity and detachment to properly interpret the emic etically (Jackson 2004, p.34).

However, anthropology has since questioned these claims with arguments of the constructed and fictionalized nature of ethnographic writing (Clifford 1988). Furthermore, the orientalist history of anthropology has been critiqued by cultural anthropologists (Abu-Lughod, 1991, Asad, 1973, Clifford, 1983). Therefore, in studying one's own people, the researcher needs to foreground one's native status as an empowering fact (Jacobs-Hey, 2002 cited in Johnson 2004). Jackson (2004) suggests that rigorous self-reflexivity be utilized to examine the border between native and foreigner to offset the pitfalls outlined earlier, and because issues of class, race, gender

could determine the interpretations of the field. And Kirin Narayan (1993) eschews binaries of native-foreigner, insider-outsider, colonizer-colonized in favor of viewing “each anthropologist in terms of shifting identifications amid a field of interpenetrating communities and power relations” (p. 671). She calls for “enacting hybridity in our texts” and understanding that all ethnographic authors are bicultural. (Narayan, 1993, p. 672).

In order to clarify my relationships and access to my informants, in this dissertation I foreground my own position as sometimes insider and sometimes outsider to the field of documentary filmmaking in Iran. My experience of working in Iran, particularly organizing a film festival in 2000, when I worked closely with the IRDFA leaders and members, initiated my relationship with the filmmakers. My complicated position as an Iranian-American filmmaker at times empowered my relationship with the filmmakers, and was also a drawback, as it aroused the authorities’ suspicions. My work as an researcher from an American institution in 2013-1014 sometimes confused my position as an insider who as a filmmaker and festival organizer had worked with Iranian filmmakers and members of the Documentary Association over the years. When I attended monthly meetings of IRDFA, I had to remind myself and others whether I was attending as an observer or as a member. In one instance, board director admonished me to stop recording the session unless I also planned to share the recording with them.

Although I identify as an Iranian, speak Farsi fluently and view Iranian documentary filmmakers as my colleagues, I also faced skepticism and distrust in some situations. I realize that most of the year I do not attend monthly meetings of the IRDFA, so I cannot contribute to their discussions. I do not confront the same struggles. I once



asked a filmmaker where the funding for the film they were advising on came from, and they retorted that I should ask the producer and not them. There had been issues around the foreign funding for this film, and no one seemed to know or admit the source of funding. Native researchers are seldom viewed as purely insiders, rather they experience “gradations of endogeny” in their fieldwork (Jacobs-Huey, 2002, p. 792). My position was very close and similar to the filmmakers, but I realized that in process of the research, I was there mainly as an observer. My identification with the filmmakers and their issues made it difficult for me to act only as an observer. When I attended a demonstration against the closing of the House of Cinema in the Summer of 2013, I was there both as a filmmaker who was a member of IRDFA and opposed the actions of the Ministry of Culture, and also as an observer/researcher.

As a woman in a world that is dominated by men, despite the increasing numbers of women documentary filmmakers in Iran, my gender influenced the nature of this ethnography, and further complicated the field. Accessing informants in institutions was challenging as a woman, since most of them are men and many identify with the dominant discourse, and behave and dress according to religious prescriptive. Narayan (1993) argues against the fixed distinctions between “native” and “non-native,” since the identity of researcher is in a continuous state of flux depending on the dynamics in the field, which are defined by questions of gender, education, class, and race (pp. 671-672). In official settings, even at the *Vérité* Film Festival, I could not easily blend in with the organizers to observe their activities. They were mostly men who huddled together in a separate section of the movie theatre. I could approach them only if I made a specific request for an interview. The two women organizers, Shirin Naderi and Leila Hosseini,

were more accessible to me. I felt freer to spend time with them, partly because of our established relationship over the years, and partly because it was not inappropriate for me to remain in close proximity with them. Among male filmmakers, even those who did not conform to religious dictates, I felt at ease only if I knew one of them well. My entrance to women's groups, whether it was at a screening club, or a group of women filmmakers who were working on a film collaboratively, was more comfortable, and led me to write about these encounters in greater detail.

### **Voice and the Question of Power and Gender**

My identifications as an Iranian woman, a filmmaker, a scholar, and an Iranian-American defined my relationships and my work in the field. These multiple identities open the study to pertinent and revealing discussions regarding various discourses and the question of power. The position of the neutral, Western scholar has been scrutinized and critiqued in the post-structural scholarship, with its awareness of ethnography's colonial roots (Abu-Lughod 1997; Murphy 2003). Western researchers have often been critiqued for their blindness to global power dynamics in the field (Asad, 1983; Abu-Lughod, 1991; Sanjek, 1993; Jackson, 2004; Said, 1979). Jackson (2004) proposes, rigorous reflexivity can help define the researcher's perspective. Personal reflection situates me in relation to the Iranian film world and helps me draw connections between the field and the global forces at work. It illuminates how professional life in Iran is experienced by filmmakers, in contrast to how it may be seen in the West.

Many anthropologists (e.g., Bird, 2003; Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod & Larkin, 2002, Marcus & Fischer, 1986) and media and cultural studies scholars (Murphy, 1999; Murphy & Kraidy, 2003; Kim, 2005) have addressed the crisis of representation in

ethnography, in terms of power imbalances, partialities, and limitations. Scholars who usually come from the West encounter the local subjects who are often from less developed countries, and this results in power imbalances of which researcher needs to be aware of. Marcus and Fischer (1986) have suggested the exercise of self-reflexivity or “critical reflection” by the researcher about the relationship and “connections and interconnections,” between the researcher and the community that is studied (p.116). These are instances where facts are constructed and the impact of the observer could be minimized through reflexivity (Abu-Lughod, 1991; Murphy, 2007).

Reflexivity is also important during the analysis and writing of the fieldwork experience, because the researcher exercises power to shape the representation of the research exchanges. Murphy (2007) suggests that ethnographic analysis could benefit from documentary filmmakers and theorists’ recognition of the importance of storytelling devices and style because ethnographers like filmmakers, author and *produce* ethnographies (p. 273). My approach includes direct observation, contextualization of the Iranian film world, and reflections, which could be categorized as “interactive” representations, according to Nichols’s categorization system that includes “a mixture of narrative, polyvocality, contextual information, and reflexivity” (Murphy 2007, p. 278).

However, it is also important to note the limits of the researcher’s power. Researchers have also found that participants can exert much control over access to the field, particularly if they are powerful actors (Abbot, 1983; Abu-Lughod 1986; Hammersley; 1992, Murphy & Dingwall, 2001, Ortner, 2010). I experienced the power of my informants because many are renowned and respected in their field. I had to conduct my interviews on their terms and within their time limits. In some cases, the

informants' reflections and their analysis defined and influenced my understanding of a situation. Ebrahim Mokhtari's analysis of the closure of the House of Cinema determined my understanding of the events. Pirooz Kalantari's analysis of the role of documentary filmmakers also influenced my understanding. I did not presume to hold an advantageous position interpreting the field, and I relied on their interpretations of their work and their world along with their writings to complement my own data and analysis.

At times I was held back and was not permitted access or was limited as to when and where I could participate. For example, I had access to the monthly meetings of the IRDFA, but my request to attend the IRDFA board meetings was considered, but denied. When I asked a group of women filmmakers who were collaborating on a film if I could be present their meetings, they determined which of their meetings I could attend, and which I could not. I accommodated my informers' needs and worked around their schedules. One draw back was my time limit in Iran for doing the research. I believe that if I had one continuous year in the field, I would have gained further access to inner circles of decision making in institutions, as there would more continuity to my presence and I could build more trust with gatekeepers who limited my access.

My interactions in the field were limited at times by the formalities of invitations and hierarchical relationships of the Iranian social order. Bourdieu (1977) explains these interactions in terms of 'habitus,' or the ways that societies maintain and reproduce the hierarchies of power, which manifest in the unconscious ways that individuals maintain the norms and rules of their societies (cited in Meneley, p. 106). In the Iranian society with traditions that go back hundreds of years, power in relationships is determined by gender, age, and social status. Tehran, as the modern capital of twelve million, is home to

a diversity of cultures. Women face more barriers in reaching higher administrative positions, though many enjoy social status based on their traditional family roles, or as professional women, and as artists. Documentary filmmakers, especially women, occupy a liminal space, as artists and creators, since their work places them at the margins of their society.

My position as an unmarried, female researcher based in the U.S. placed me in difficult and sometimes advantageous positions. My peers did not consider my attending workshops, social events, festivals and meetings unusual. At times I felt quite different from the other participants, who often had their own networks of colleagues. As a single woman, based in the U.S., I occupied a place in between existing social boundaries, including gender ones (de Almeida, 2003); I had to negotiate my position and role among mostly male filmmakers by being aware and respectful of normative gender roles. In some social environments I felt uneasy about joining groups of male filmmakers who were hanging out and talking to each other, which is not that different than a similar situation in the U.S.

In some situations my gender was advantageous to me because it rendered me less threatening, especially among other women. I felt at ease and welcomed in groups of mostly women, as with a group of women who organized bi-weekly documentary screenings in their home, though I continued to also feel as an outsider. My main filmmaker guide, Pirooz Kalantari introduced me to one such group. An educator and wife of a documentary producer was the organizer. Having worked with her husband in his office, she knew many of the filmmakers and realized the limitations of their film exhibitions. She decided to hold informal screenings at her home, and invited the

filmmakers to speak about their films. Those who attended were mostly women who were her colleagues and friends or those like me, who dropped in; most were educators. A few were men. I called Mrs. Nasrin (it is a common formality to call people by their last name in Iran) to get her permission to attend, but in the tradition of Iranian women's gatherings, which historically were religious events, it was an open environment and I did not require an introduction. I entered her middle class home, where a group of about 20 women and a couple of men gathered around a medium size television set. Afterwards we moved to the living room, where tea and sweets were offered. One of the women introduced the filmmaker, and she described her intentions for making the film. Each presentation was a little different, but the women did not socialize, which made it easy for me to blend in. The focus was clearly on the film and the filmmaker. The women then asked questions based on the film's content or about the characters in the film. I attended several sessions.

The first film I attended was *Aseman Amn Ast* [The Sky is Safe] by a female filmmaker, Mojgan Inanlou about the grown children of the Iran-Iraq war veterans or martyrs and their mothers. They were often ashamed of being recognized as children of martyrs. The filmmaker fit in well with the women in the group, as she also seemed to be from a well educated, moderately religious, and middle class background. Later I found that she was brought up as a devout Moslem, but had softened her views in recent years, and now only wore a scarf and not the full chador. During the Q & A I asked her if her films were usually about religion in Iranian culture. She informed me that she had studied religion and was often interested in the lives and disappointments of those who were dedicated to religious life and conduct. One of her other films was about religious

seminarians and the ways in which their interactions on the internet is changing their world views.

In the women's group I framed my question by giving a little background about myself. I felt it was an opportunity for me to introduce myself to the group. I was aware that my language skills in Farsi were not as sophisticated as some other women in the room, most of whom were educators. I noticed that my connections to the U.S. mostly mattered to those who were also in some ways connected to Western institutions. Most of these women were not eager to talk to me. When I took a group photo with them, a few asked me to erase their images. There is pressure on cultural workers who have affiliations with the state to not engage with foreigners, particularly those in media.

During my research I felt indebted to my guides and interlocutors, and tried to reciprocate their contributions by being available to do English translations of their writings or help with proofing the subtitles of their films. I began a column of English translations of articles on Pirooz Kalantari's website *Vamostanad.com*, so I could remain connected to Iranian documentary film world and to 'give back.' I also gave advice on fundraising, festivals, and film market in the U.S. In these ways I tried to reciprocate and help in some small ways. Since I had to maintain long-term relationships with them, I did not want them to have the impression that I was taking from them without offering something in return, which is an accepted form of politeness.

### **The Interpretive Community**

In a vibrant and creative environment, choosing from among thousands of filmmakers was a difficult task. I chose to focus on independent Iranian documentary filmmakers and their professional guild, the IRDFA, because of my involvement with

them since the late 1990s. I realized that in the American media and academic context very little is known about the active cultural sphere that exists in Iran. My personal history allowed me to interact closely with the documentary filmmakers and its leadership. When I petitioned to join the IRDFA in 1999, I was accepted, despite being based in the U.S., because of my role in launching cultural exchange programs between Iran and the U.S.

Since the 1990s the numbers of filmmakers have expanded primarily due to governmental support through film institutions, like the DEFC and Iranian Young Cinema, which support first time filmmakers by providing initial funding and training. The increase in the number of schools, universities and workshops that offer filmmaking, combined with the success of Iranian films in international festivals, and the availability of low cost video and digital equipment have also contributed to this growth. Many of the younger filmmakers had been trained in these institutions or in workshops that veteran filmmakers organized over the years. As one producer remembered, “all of a sudden we were seeing a tremendous increase in the submissions to film festivals that we were judging. We were amazed how many young filmmakers from across the country were on the scene. We wondered who these young filmmakers were and where did they appear from?!” (S. Rashtian, personal communication, July 2013)

I began my research in the summer of 2013 by attending the IRDFA meetings. The members are considered independent documentary filmmakers because one of the conditions of admission is to have completed four documentaries that are not shaped by a state institution. I wanted to talk to a number of filmmakers who were also involved in their community. I was looking for different ages, genders, and levels of experience. I



began with those I already knew. They were established filmmakers and leaders of DEFC, and younger filmmakers whom I met through veteran filmmaker and activist Pirooz Kalantari, as he seemed to know everyone in the field. I knew some of the experienced filmmakers like Mojtaba Mirtahmasb and Rakhshan Banietemad, and I set up interviews with them independently. I also attended workshops and film events to gain knowledge of the field.

There were many filmmakers that I knew and had worked with over the years, and many newcomers that I got to know during the research. I first met my main interlocutor, filmmaker Pirooz Kalantari in 1998, when I worked on organizing an international film festival in Tehran. Pirooz was very involved in the association (IRDFA) and helped me get a perspective on what was happening in documentaries. He became one of the fellow organizers of the Film Week. Subsequently we became friends and in 2004 I invited him to the U.S. to show his film, *That is Life/Zendegi hamin ast*, about university students in Tehran. Rakhshan Banietemad is an internationally renowned filmmaker, but she was also a good friend of one of my close friends in Tehran. Ebrahim Mokhtari was the head of IRDFA at this time and played key roles in the House of Cinema and the debates that were shaping the relationships of the filmmakers and government executives. Mojtaba Mirtahmasb was another filmmaker that I had known over the years and met him again at a seminar about Iranian documentary cinema at St. Andrews University in Scotland in 2007. Nahid Rezai held positions on the board of the House of Cinema over the years, and I had interviewed her in the past for Link TV. Our similar backgrounds (she had also lived and studied in the West for many years) and age brought us close together. I met the very independent spirited and critically acclaimed

filmmaker Mohammad Shirvani over the years in Tehran and interviewed him for a piece for Link TV when we purchased his film *President Mirqanbar* for broadcast in 2008. Mahvash Sheikholeslami was another veteran filmmaker that I knew over the years of working in Iran, particularly during the Documentary Film Week in 2000, and later when Link TV obtained one of her films for the Bridge to Iran series.

They were the leaders of the interpretive community of filmmakers and very active in shaping the discourse and setting the agenda for documentary film world in Iran. Their long term connections with the executives in IRIB and other media institutions allowed them to exert power and help determine some media strategies – to open it up to include films on variety of topics. They also maintained their connection with younger filmmakers through workshops, IRDFA meetings. They helped create jobs and recognition by organizing television series for IRIB and other institutions and in their roles in film festivals. Through them I met younger filmmakers like Shirin Barghnavard and Mina Keshavarz who were also active in this world. In their meetings and workshops they organized the documentary film world and led it towards diversity of thought and expression and more independence from the ruling bodies.

### **Encountering the Field and Gaining Access**

Part of my plan in the field was to follow several filmmakers while they made their films. However, I found that not many films were being made in the summer of 2013 and filmmakers were mostly busy with other activities. The decline in production was mainly due to the restrictive environment imposed by cinema officials in the Ahmadinejad administration, and economic difficulties imposed by Western sanctions. I adjusted the original plan and decided to participate in a series of documentary

workshops that were led by well-known filmmakers and attended by young film enthusiasts and some filmmakers. Openness to what we encounter in the field is a distinct feature of ethnography (Fortun, 2009, p. 171). I observed their organization and attended four of the classes that were held all day long on consecutive Fridays in July and August, 2013 at Karnameh cultural center in uptown Tehran, and a series of workshops at the home of Mohammad Shirvani in midtown Tehran. I sat in on two editing sessions, and went to several meetings of a group of seven female filmmakers who were making a compilation film titled, *Profession: Documentary Filmmaker*. It was their personal reflections of their life and filmmaking in Iran. I also spent a few days in the province of Kurdistan, talking to filmmakers there, and observed a class in a film school.

Gaining access and time are the dual constraints on ethnographic research. Vicki Smith (2001) highlights the ways in which in ethnographies of work the “organizational gatekeepers” throw obstacles in the path of researchers and limit their research (p. 226). She outlines her own problems of spending months waiting for the required permissions and authorizations to do her research in the corporate world. My focus was on the filmmakers who mostly worked without direct state involvement. However, they also interacted with governmental institutions. Gaining access to governmental offices proved more challenging for me. It was facilitated only by the intervention of a filmmaker or film producer who knew me and made the necessary recommendations on my behalf. Sherry Ortner (2010) also describes the daunting task of gaining access. In her case it was in the Hollywood movie industry, which had been studied ethnographically only once before by Hortense Powdermaker (1950). Ortner notes that most of the “quasi-ethnographic” work on the movie industry was done by journalists and Hollywood

insiders (p. 212). Even though my project has some similarities with Ortner's (2010) experiences of Hollywood, the Iranian movie industry, and particularly the documentary field is not as restrictive, but it has its own gatekeepers. The "gaining access" phase of entering the field was facilitated for me by my history with the Iranian documentary filmmakers and their trust in me. I was also fortunate that my main focus was the working life of independent filmmakers and not those who are employed by national television or other governmental entities, where access is a bureaucratic process.

To facilitate access Ortner (2010) suggests invoking the "interest" of the insider in the movie business, either for their professional gain or for intellectual curiosity (p. 218). My position as someone connected to Western media institutions provided the professional "interest" of many Iranian filmmakers and producers. Additionally, they welcomed an academic study of their activities and its documentation, which had only been done sporadically.

One of the problems of gaining access was that in the summer of 2013 as I was conducting my research the filmmakers were still reeling from their difficulties under the conservative cinema administration of the Ministry of Culture. Many had been interrogated by security forces and questioned about their relationships with foreign media institutions like the BBC. Six were arrested and imprisoned for allegedly selling films to BBC Persian. Although I had not worked with the BBC, the filmmakers needed to carefully consider how closely I could observe their work, as I still posed a risk to them. While many agreed to have me interview them, they were reluctant to allow me on their shoots or in their discussions with institutions or producers or distributors.

Pirooz Kalantari was one of the filmmakers involved in the BBC workshops and had been interrogated by security forces, but was not detained. He was the first person I called to help me navigate my work in the field. Despite his difficulties, he felt free to talk to me in several sessions. In our informal meetings in my apartment he brought me up to date on the state of documentary work: National television was out of money; he had made three films the previous year, but none in 2013 because of lack of funding and the restrictive environment. He had recently stopped writing for one documentary film website and had started a new one, *Vamostanad*. He and many other filmmakers had boycotted the Tehran Vérité Documentary Film festival for the last three years, while conservative officials were heading it. According to Pirooz the leaders of the Documentary and Experimental Film Center (DEFC), who organized the festival at that time were “government people” and were doing a “terrible” job for documentary cinema (personal communication, June 2013). “Festivals are a business now, they don’t care about films as art. They are markets and they are political; it’s all a show” (P. Kalantari, personal communication, June 2013). To provide an alternative space for films to be seen and selected Pirooz and some other filmmakers held their own “Best Documentary Films of the Year,” event on the *Vamostanad* website in 2011 and screened the films at the screening space in Moje No production office. It was not a recurring event because the organizers decided that there were not enough strong films made in the following year, and probably because organizing a festival on a voluntary basis was not sustainable.

My informal interviews with Pirooz were a short cut to understanding the current situation of Iranian documentary filmmaking and opened the door to meeting other filmmakers. Because of his activism and reputation as an organizer, Pirooz could

facilitate my access to many. Having him as my main guide also steered the study to filmmakers who worked with him. I looked for other filmmakers by attending screenings and following recommendations from one of the organizers at DEFC. In one interview Pirooz suggested that I attend a production that was under way in Mashad, a city in the northeast of Iran. He picked up the phone and called the filmmaker, Khatereh, who agreed that I could attend. But they were already on the third day of their shoot, and were finishing up in a few of days. Arranging a quick trip to Mashad was not feasible. I was, however, able to attend a few of her editing sessions.

### **Interviews**

Participant observation and interviewing are both part of being present in the field. Ortner (2010) classifies them as the two main strategies of fieldwork, since much of the data gathered in participant observation comes from informal interviewing in the field (Fontana & Frey, 1994, p. 165). Interviewing was an easier strategy than observation for me and was more agreeable to the filmmakers and administrators, as it took less time, and was planned on their terms and time limitations. I conducted about 25 semi-formal interviews, which I organized and took about 1.5 – 2 hours to complete. Interviewing helped me gather a great deal of information about the filmmakers' backgrounds, how they got funding, how they came up with their topics, how they worked with the funding institutions distributed their films. I asked general questions about their work, their history, what they were working on at that time, what constituted barriers for them, and what helped their work, and how they reacted to some events that were affecting documentaries, such as the closing of the House of Cinema, and the Presidential elections. These were open-ended questions that led to other topics as our discussion

progressed. Sometimes the interviews took place while they were engaged in their work, at a social event, or in an editing session. In these cases the interconnected nature of interviews and participant observation made it difficult to differentiate between data gathered from pure observation and informal interviews (Fontana & Frey, 1994, p. 166).

There were a few filmmakers who extensively helped this study. I interviewed Ebrahim Mokhtari several times; he is one of the founders of the documentary guild, and director of the board at that time. I had first met him in the late 1990s when he was instrumental to the organizing of the Documentary Film Week. He is a well respected veteran filmmaker, and one of the first documentary filmmakers who made his mark after the 1979 Revolution. He helped me with his knowledge of the history of the IRDFA and his organizing history, and he explained and contextualized the continued fight between the cinema guilds and the Ministry of Culture, which had led to the closing of the House of Cinema in 2011. I observed him leading guild meetings, leading a workshop, where he talked about his history of filmmaking. I interviewed him twice, and read the articles he had written and posted on his website, and read his books. As explained, Pirooz Kalantari was also a co-founder of the IRDFA, and my main guide. I observed him in guild meetings, in organizing and conducting panel discussions in workshops, in semi-formal interviews and in our social gatherings. Well known documentary and feature filmmakers and one of the leaders of the House of Cinema, Rakhshan Banietemad gave me two interviews. I attended a workshop she led and sat in on a shoot about a family of musicians that she co-directed with Mojtaba Mirtahmasb. Mohammad Shirvani, the innovative, talented and oppositional filmmaker, whose large body of films are internationally recognized and defy documentary boundaries, was another filmmaker I

interviewed at his home and also observed a filmmaking workshop he led that was attended by some forty young filmmakers. I interviewed and attended several film events with veteran filmmaker Farhad Varahram. I also sat in one of his editing session about Iranian people of African origin and their culture in the southern regions of Iran. These guides and my own background shaped my study, because I did not reach out to religious or ideological filmmakers. This is also because most of them are connected to government institutions, and I was researching independent filmmakers.

My connections with younger filmmakers were mainly made through Pirooz Kalantari, because of his role as advisor and guide to younger generations. I first met Shirin Baghnavard, who makes independently produced and personal films, in an office she shared with other female filmmakers. I continued to meet her in group meetings she participated in while making her collaborative film with six other female filmmakers. I also saw her on several social occasions at her home, and at the IRDFA meetings. In addition, I attended an editing sessions with a young filmmaker Khatereh Hanachi, who had started a film about a charity in Mashad, a city in northeastern Iran. The charity was run by a family who took care of children from broken families. She finished the film with DEFC funding in 2015.

### **Festivals as ‘Interface’ Spaces**

Ortner (2010) suggests using all opportunities to enter ‘halfway’ or ‘interface’ spaces, which are public events that reveal the filmmakers and producer’s ways of thinking, talking, and presenting themselves. The weekly film series at the House of Artists, which was followed by Q&A with filmmakers, the House of Cinema theatre, and the Vérité documentary Film Festival were such spaces, not only to screen the films and



hear from filmmakers, but to observe how the Iranian cinema officials worked and interacted. In December 2013 I attended and observed the Vérité Documentary Festival. It took place in Cinema Felestine (Palestine), a theatre in central Tehran that had remained from the pre-revolutionary years. Its 1970s architecture featured large film screening spaces and a spacious entrance that admitted 5-800 viewers. The festival was usually packed with young film lovers, filmmakers and university students.

I had previously attended the festival in 2007 and 2008, during the first years of the festival, as a producer from Link TV. During those years, the festival was flourishing under the leadership of Mohammad Afarideh, a cinema lover and supporter of young filmmakers. Dozens of filmmakers' films were exhibited and hundreds attended the screening of their colleague's work. Heated discussions ensued informally after the films. However, the 2009 demonstrations and the violent backlash and internal difficulties led Afarideh to step down. Filmmakers boycotted the festival for several years in objection to decisions of the leadership to crackdown on filmmakers and the conservative direction of the new leadership. House of Cinema was shut down by the Shamaghdari's cinema administrations and filmmakers lost another venue for showing their films and discussing them. In 2013 after four years of difficulties, the festival was once again a place to meet and discuss strong documentaries of the year and see documentaries from around the world. Filmmakers came to watch their colleague's films. Several filmmakers objected to the way their films were handled by the Festival, their screening schedule, or the theatre it was shown in. Festival directors had to negotiate and appease filmmakers and uphold their own standards. They asked some filmmakers to censor certain scenes in their films before they could obtain screening permits to be

shown. There were quite a bit of arguments between indignant filmmakers and over tired festival organizers. (In chapter 4 there is a discussion on the Vérité Festival)

### **Following the thing - Textual Analysis of Documentary Films**

The topics and styles of documentary films and the aesthetic decisions filmmakers make are influenced by different discourses. These are often informed by Iranian literature, visual history, Western thought, and Islamic thought. The photographic (or filmic) image is never simply a phenomenological construction, but is ultimately discursive (Petro, 1993 p. ix), and can be studied. Eisenstein's (1969) theoretical discussions about the relationship between image and form is useful, since the Iranian film tradition is permeated with Iranian, Eastern, and Western cultures and influences. The filmmakers to lesser or greater degree draw from Iranian visual and aesthetic codes, such as Islamic architecture, the miniature, and metaphoric language of poetry, which influences the content and structure of their films. They also draw from Western philosophy, particularly the philosophy of Nietzsche and Kant, recent influences of post-modernism, and current trends in Western visual language. In chapter 6 I conduct textual analysis of several films by well-respected filmmakers including, Ebrahim Mokhtari, Rakhshsn Bani Etemad, and Shirin Barghnavard. For historical reasons, I have chosen to also discuss *Marjan, Moj, Khara* (1962) by Ebrahim Golestan, from the period before the flourishing of documentaries. It illustrates the conditions of documentary film production in an earlier and the reasons for its impact on history of documentary cinema.

The construction of the subject in the films is a productive way to probe the interplay between the subjectivity in the films and the social order that gives rise to them. In Iran the recent interest in personal documentary filmmaking and the discussion around

it is a case in point. Since the Revolution Iran has tried hard to produce exemplary Islamic youths who would belong to its Shi'ite *umma*. When that effort was largely unsuccessful after the Iran-Iraq war, government leaders summoned younger generations to gather around the ideals of the nation and religion to become moral citizens. Some filmmakers, particularly those that remain within the discourse of Shi'ism and the ruling hegemony have realized these idealized moralistic views in their films. But recently many young, urban filmmakers are expressing their personal anxieties and shortcomings about contemporary life by various means. Some have turned the camera on themselves, using their own voices, and reflexive techniques. I explore the trend of making the presence of the filmmaker central and visible in chapter 6. I use Michael Renov's (2004) discussion of the "confessional mode," to understand this trend. He explains that video confessions satisfy Foucault's formulation of confession as a discourse (pp. 191-201). Some filmmakers have chosen the first person point of view and what the films say about the contradictions of contemporary life in Iran and the intrusions of modernity and post-modernity in traditional social structures. These films articulate urban life's complexities, anxieties, and joys for the generation that grew up after the Revolution and the Iran-Iraq war. It is a mode that be regarded as oppositional, using the self to voice problems that are not normally discussed in the public sphere.

The writings of the filmmakers and film critics regarding these films and their aesthetic preferences augmented my own analysis. The influence of international media is evident in many personal films, such as *Pir Pesar*, *Unwelcome in Tehran*, and *21 Days and me*, which were funded by a European television channel. However, the interest and discussion that the films aroused led to the making of other films in this vein.

Traditionally, the use of poetic voice is common in many Iranian documentaries, which provides some distance from the narrator and filmmaker. Another new development is the intertextual characteristic of some recent films that draw directly from earlier documentary films. Massoud Bakhshi's *Tehran Has No More Pomegranates* (2007) borrows from and is influenced by *Tehran, Capital of Iran* by Kamran Shirdel's and his *The Night It Rained* (1974), a playful film that casts doubt on the construction of truth. Bahman Giarostami's films also uses irony and humor to question dominant discourses.

### **Following the Conflict – The Filmmakers and Institutions**

Since the dissertation is primarily focused on filmmakers, it is also concerned with the institutions that they engage. Some historical explanations, facts, and data lead us to consider the many governmental institutions that are charged with promoting, supporting, and regulating film production and distribution in Iran. Mary Douglas (1986) defines institutions as “legitimized social groups” which include a family, or a ceremony, legitimized by a common founding principle, an authority figure, or common assent on general founding principles (p. 46). Douglas (1986) points to the relationship between political power that leads to the institutionalization and classifications of social roles in societies (p. 49). She explains that it is individuals who constitute a society, but institutions also bear on individual behaviors and actions, and they produce codes and regulations that engender certain kinds of person. Her observation is a reminder that even large institutions are made up of many types of people with differing thoughts on the role of media, though they are restrained by dominant ideology of the ruling groups. The Islamic state intends to produce exemplary Shi'ite Moslems, who practice self-sacrifice, high moral values, gender-specific roles, and follow historic examples of Shi'ite leaders

and war heroes. At the same time ideas of democracy and civic participation are also promoted by the moderates in the leadership. Western media and Iran's history of engagement with the West engenders social groups such as the intellectuals or the youth who want to keep up with global trends. While governmental institutions enforce Islamic values, some of the non-governmental institutions, like guilds or film festivals follow a more secular model, resulting in conflicting discourses.

I examine sites of professional organizing, workshops, and festivals which are influenced by global models and are secular in nature to illustrate the inner workings of filmmaking institutions in Iran in relation to the development of the filmmakers' craft and their films. This examination was carried out through interviews with a few administrators, reviewing their organization's literature, talking to filmmakers about their interactions with the institutions, and participant observation. For example, in the case of the Documentary Filmmakers Association, IRDFA, I am a member and through the years have attended many of their meetings and events. In the summer and winter of 2013 I attended several monthly meetings and recorded the discussions, at a time when tensions and difficulties were still high for the filmmakers.

Studying the main institutions that support documentary filmmakers allowed me to probe the structural interplay between Iranian society, the government, and the filmmakers. The Iranian Documentary Filmmakers Association (IRDFA) is a non-governmental professional guild, and is one of the twenty-nine guilds that make up the House of Cinema (The Iranian Alliance for Motion Picture Guilds). The House of Cinema supports the guilds by providing a forum and a location to meet and organize. The Documentary and Experimental Film Center (DEFC) is a funding and distribution

organization that is charged by Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance to support and fund documentary, experimental and animation films. They also organize the Cinema Vérité Festival. They provide funding to less experience and established filmmakers in an open call system. State television, IRIB is the only broadcaster in the country and it has historically employed and worked extensively with documentary filmmakers. The study of the filmmakers' interactions with these institutions informs the key question of how the filmmakers in Iran are shaped by and negotiate with powerful decision-making centers to make their films and to distribute and screen them. (See chapter 4)

The public fight that broke out between the House of Cinema in Iran and the Ministry of Culture's cinema division shows the limits and possibilities of independent cinema in a cultural system that since the 1960s has been under governmental patronage. The tensions between the House of Cinema and the Ministry began in 2010, leading to its shut-down in 2011, ostensibly due to problems with its charter. It was reopened in the fall of 2013 when a moderate administration came to power. The reasons why the House was shut and the activism and resistance of the filmmakers to re-open it and maintain their guilds illustrate the conflicting ideologies of the leadership of the institutions and the goals of independent filmmakers to pursue their craft. (See chapter 4).

### **In Summary**

By "following the people" through ethnography this dissertation illustrates the dynamics between Iranian filmmakers, their working conditions, and the world at large. Thick description of the filmmakers' world helps us observe the different players involved in the documentary field and influences that affect their work. It illuminates why in a socially restrictive environment artistic and creative processes continue to

flourish and filmmaking proliferates. It also explains the contradictions of Iranian social and cultural life.

Abu-Lughod (1990) suggests that acts of resistance could be used as a diagnostics of power. She uses Foucault's (1978) claim that where there is power there is resistance, to reason that power is not only a negative construct, but also positive. It can produce forms of pleasure, systems of knowledge, goods, and discourses. By inverting Foucault's statement she states, "where there is resistance there is power," so we can use resistance as a "diagnostic of power" (Abu-Lughod, 1990, p. 42). In "following the conflict" and examining how Iranian filmmakers negotiate with the governmental organizations, I found that filmmakers have used collaborative strategies and organizing as effective means to resist institutional policies that curb their profession. At the height of their struggles with the conservative administration from 2010 to 2013, they worked collaboratively to make films, shared offices, wrote blogs, organized festivals and workshops, and continued to meet as a guild, even while the House of Cinema was officially closed. The relationships between the filmmakers and governmental institutions manifest sometimes as acts of cooperation and sometimes as acts of resistance, depending on their common interests and goals or diverging ones. Usually when conservatives take charge dissent and strife increases. With moderates in office, there are more collaboration between administrators and cultural producers. These interactions demonstrate that power is not only concentrated in the ruling elite, but as Gramsci noted, it is also legitimized by various popular forms of participation. Without the support of cultural and artistic community, the ruling elite loses their legitimacy. This is what happened in the last years of Ahmadinejad's presidency.

By following a multi-cited and multi-faceted research plan, which provides historical and social context, I explore documentary filmmaking as a site of cultural production that reveals how artists can function and even thrive despite limitations, and how their films are received and accepted locally and globally. Ethnography provides “thick” description of their working life and struggles. I use interviews to highlight the main issues. I contextualize the ethnography by reviewing the historical framework of this period in journals and newspapers and draw on the filmmakers’ writings. By “following the thing” and applying textual analysis to their films, I explore the various Iranian and Western traditions that shape the films. The filmmakers’ work habits, their involvement with various institutions that enable them produce work or limit their choices, and the kinds of films they make, all provide an in-depth and well-rounded picture of documentary film production in Iran.



## **CHAPTER 4**

### **THE INSTITUTIONS OF IRANIAN DOCUMENTARY CINEMA**

The productions of Iranian documentary filmmakers are defined by their aesthetic choices, their intended audience, their budgets, and by institutions that provide funding or issue permits for producing and exhibiting films in Iran. The central government has created several institutions that are tasked with aiding and regulating filmmaking and some have been formed by the filmmakers. They are significant in shaping the dynamics of the documentary film world and the films that emerge from it. Gholam Khiabany (2010) proposes that even in free market economies, the nation state remains the primary actor in setting national, political, and economic agendas (pp. 10-11). In Iran media policies are set forth through media institutions. Documentary filmmakers use the resources the state provides to make and present their films. They also resist governmental restrictions by organizing in their guilds and in informal groups to protect and promote their work. This chapter looks at the institutions that fund, regulate, and distribute documentaries or help filmmakers organize and demonstrates how decision-making is enacted in various ways.

Contrary to views that the Islamic Republic is taking the country back to the pre-modern age with its adherence to Islam, it has acted in many ways as a modernizing state. The cooperation and participation of the public have been channeled through state institutions and policies that include expanding educational possibilities, civil rights for women, and support for music and films (Khiabany, 2010, pp. 46-47). Much of these efforts have resulted from the demands of an educated population and the intelligentsia. They are also due to the structural divisions within the ruling body. The ruling clergy and the office of the Supreme Jurisprudent coexist with an electoral system that relies on

popular participation. These divisions are disruptive to the smooth operation of the country politically and economically, but they also provide possibilities for opening the public sphere and for civic participation. Artistic and cultural opportunities have expanded due to the multiplicity of formal and informal institutions.

Figure 1.

Elected Institutions	Unelected Institutions
PRESIDENT	SUPREME LEADER
CABINET	ARMED FORCES
PARLIAMENT	JUDICIARY
	EXPEDIENCY COUNCIL
GUARDIAN COUNCIL	
ASSEMBLY OF EXPERTS	

Some factors that contribute to increased participation in the political and cultural processes are high literacy levels achieved after the 1979 Revolution, the increased participation by women, and the expansion of the press. Advances in the communication industry globally, with the advent of the Internet and digital technology have also been significant. Literacy levels reached 85% in 1996 from pre-revolution levels of about 15%, and led to the growth in university attendance (Khaibany, 2010, p.77). The reformist and relatively open press after the 1997 election of moderate Mohammad Khatami, was short-lived and but it was significant and continued to affect intellectual activity. It was curbed by censorship and attacks by hardliners. The moderate press continues to serve as a forum where reformists, artists, and intellectuals can voice their criticism in the articles

they write. Several top journalists who fled the country in 2009 now provide astute commentary on transnational channels that broadcast news and cultural programs to Iran.

After 1997, the reformist newspapers opened the path for young people, women, intellectuals, and artists to realize that it was possible to participate in their civic and social life. Daily articles about the political process, the problems of the society, and stories of international achievements by Iranian filmmakers and artists triggered public interest. More young people were attracted to the arts and chose filmmaking as their path. The University of the Arts became one of the five highest sought destinations for students with the best ranking in the yearly university entrance examinations (“Ten universities,” 2013). Aspiring students and young people attended formal universities, workshops, and professional schools to receive film training and their numbers grew considerably. The increase in the numbers of documentary filmmakers led to wider inquiry into the social environment – more films are made that question inequality, women’s social and legal status, addiction, and other social conditions.

Since the main concern of the dissertation is its focus on the filmmakers and their agency, the primary method of investigating media institutions is through observation and interviews with filmmakers. Their engagement with various institutions provides the context for examining the institutions they work with, such as Iranian national television (IRIB), Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (MCIG) and its division that is in charge of documentary production, and The Documentary and Experimental Film Center (DEFC). They are state-run organizations set up to promote, produce, and regulate media production and its dissemination in Iran. It should be noted that some other institutions, such as city municipalities, particularly those in Tehran and other large cities, also

provide funds for documentary production and sponsor festivals. The cultural division of Tehran municipality holds the yearly Shahr Festival that began in 2010. They have funded filmmakers during different periods to make documentary series about the city of Tehran.

Filmmakers mainly engage with IRIB state television, which is controlled by the power complex of the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, and the Documentary and Experimental Film Center (DEFC), which is under the purview of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, the *majlis* (parliament), and the presidential office. Institutions can be viewed as temporarily congealed tastes, frameworks of rules, procedures and arrangements, in which actions are required, prohibited, or permitted (Powell & DiMaggio, 1991, p. 7). They are also considered as governance structures, social arrangements geared to minimize transaction costs. They homogenize and reproduce standard expectations and stabilize a given order (Powell & DiMaggio, 1991, p. 7). The Iranian state uses institutions such as the national television and the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (MCIG) to set its agendas, for example, to educate the youth in the ways of Islam and promote political ideology regarding Iran's role in the world. However, since many of the filmmakers and intellectuals have more secular thinking that do not conform to the leaderships' views, their participation in the decision-making process either leads to the moderation of those views or to conflict, as it did during Ahmadinejad's presidency.

Media institutions fall under different branches of state power and offer different possibilities and restrictions to filmmakers. Foucault's definition of 'governmentality' in the modern state explains how institutions are instruments of power that help shape and

control the population through procedures, reflections, analysis and tactics. They are part of the complex forms of power that are developed in the modern state, using the apparatus of security and knowledge (Foucault, 2006, p. 142). Media institutions are part of the state's infrastructure that transmits dominant discourses of the ruling bodies. Stuart Hall (1980/1993) shows that the production and circulation of media are discursive forms that are transformed into social practices through the consumption of media (p. 164). In the West the discourse of neutrality and impartiality shape the dominant Western view of news production. Journalists and politicians in the West seem to have separate interests and goals, but they follow some of the same fundamentally capitalist discourses that are protected, secured, and reproduced.

In Iran the competing discourses for media content are determined by the conservative practices of the Supreme Jurisprudent's office, the elected presidential administration, which appoints the leadership of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, and the discourses of independent filmmakers. Transnational channels that are permeated by Western discourses also impact media production and distribution. State policies are informed by ideological imperatives, Islamic values, and Iran's anti-imperialist stance. Independent filmmakers follow some of these imperatives, but they are also influenced by Iranian nationalism and Western media discourses.

Institutions can be thought to constitute actors as well as constrain them. They train and 'discipline' large numbers of media and film students and employees and channel their work into existing dominant discourses. Media institutions are bureaucratic organizations that produce employees that for the most part comply with directives that come to them from the higher ranks. They set agendas and act as gatekeepers. In

reviewing some of the dissertation topics from University of Seda va Sima (Iranian national television), many of them are on the adverse affects of transnational media on Iranian society and family values. It is apparent that the leadership's concern with transnational media encourages students to align their research and their views with the dominant discourse regarding the problem of transnational media. These students hope to join the large television conglomerate, IRIB. Filmmakers who work closely IRIB or are officially employed by them produce films that are steeped in its dominant institutional discourse, even if personally they don't adhere to those views.

Most independent filmmakers cooperate with state power to some degree, in order to advance their work. Some also hold advisory positions within these institutions or have representation in them, as these relationships are not static and solely top down. Filmmakers who are not directly employed by these institutions often produce their films with professionalism and high production standards and negotiate with governmental institutions to receive funding and distribution for them. The institutions that are created by the filmmakers also benefit from state funding and support through the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (MCIG). Some of these institutions are their guilds, IRDFA, AIDP, and the Art & Experience Group that exhibits alternative films in theatres.

### **Iranian Documentary Filmmakers Association (IRDFA) and AIDP**

Independent filmmakers organize formally through their guild, the Iranian Documentary Filmmakers Association (IRDFA) and the Association of Iranian Documentary Producers (AIDP). These institutions exist within the structure of the House of Cinema, which is under the supervision of MCIG. The cinema guilds are approved by the state and press for more favorable conditions for independent

filmmaking. The founders, Mohammad Tahaminejad, Ebrahim Mokhtari, and Pirooz Kalantari formed their union, IRDFA in 1997. There was some objection from other cinema guilds in the House of Cinema, who did not consider documentary filmmakers on equal footing with other cinema professionals (Introductory notes, n.d.). One of the founders, Ebrahim Mokhtari recounts that the director of the House of Cinema at the time, Seifollah Daad and many others did not want to admit the Documentary Association (1999). They did not consider it a viable independent profession because documentaries were mainly funded by state television and were not exhibited in theatres. Mokhtari and Tahaminehad reminded them that documentary was one of the branches of cinema and if the condition for admittance was that their films had to be screened in theatres, then they needed to call their institution, the House of Cinema of the Screen. Later, a group of documentary filmmakers met with Daad, who was impressed to see that so many of them were renowned directors and changed his mind (Mokhtari, 1999).

IRDFA was established as a trade union and an NGO of documentary directors in an effort to create job security and career opportunities, support union rights, and help improve the professional efficiency of its members (“About us,” n.d). The documentary producers formed AIDP in 1999 to help them promote their professional interests and improve their working relationships with state institutions. Today, IRDFA has a membership of more than 300 professional documentary filmmakers. It protects the general rights of independent documentary filmmakers, in order to develop and promote the art of documentary film. One of the main conditions of membership is that filmmakers be independent.

They define independent filmmakers as those who are not officially hired by IRIB or other governmental institutions—they are not civil servants, even if they may have continued relationships with them. Those in the hire of IRIB have to fully follow the restrictive directives of the broadcaster, as their jobs are on the line. Filmmakers who are commissioned by outside producers to make films for a television series, follow some general guidelines, but they are generally free to choose their specific topics and styles. Those who are retired from the IRIB and now make films independently also qualify. New members have to submit at least four films or a total of 100 minutes.

The guild helps filmmakers by facilitating organizing efforts, issuing production permits, sponsoring film screenings, and arranging mediation with producing, funding, and distribution agencies. It also provides a venue for communication between documentary filmmakers and other cinema guilds and international film organizations. For two years IRDFA was recognized by the House of Cinema as their most active guild (Behdad, personal communication, 2013). In 2010 the European Documentary Network (EDN) awarded them for their outstanding contribution to documentary culture (Esway, 2010).

Iranian Documentary Producers Association (AIDP) is another guild that promotes independent filmmaking. Its members are independent producers who have close connections to DEFC and IRIB, and provide these institutions with expertise in film selection committees. The guild organizes various screening events for documentaries at the House of Arts and in cinemas. The producers are generally more beholden to state institutions, as they receive most of their funding from them and have to maintain good



working relationships. IRDFA members often criticize producers for their dependence on state institutions.

The guilds lobby for better contracts, fairer proposal process at DEFC, and enhancing filmmakers' right at the Ministry of Culture. Members also resist the state's efforts to bring them under its full control by challenging restrictive regulations and by negotiating with the management of governmental media institutions. Some members of the guilds have taken on high-level positions in the House of Cinema or DEFC during moderate administrations. Outside of their guilds, some also organize in small, informal groups, even virtual ones, hold screenings and events. These practices have developed alternative documentary discourses.

Filmmakers cooperate and resist state power through their guilds. James Scott (1986), Lila Abu-Lughod (1990), and Sherry Ortner (1995), among others, have theorized the everyday forms of resistance to confront or to live with domination. Scott (1986) looks at the "everyday forms of resistance," the constant strategies that those with less power use, like foot dragging, pilfering, and false compliance instead of outright or organized confrontation (pp. 6-7). Complaining against state policies, joking about the ruling bodies, and poor working habits in governmental jobs are some of the prevalent tactics Iranians have used to undermine power. In studying Bedouin women Abu-Lughod (1990) uses Foucault to explain that power works not just negatively, by restricting, prohibiting and repressing, but also positively, by enabling and producing systems of knowledge, goods, and discourse (p. 42). She explores how Bedouin women's response to power is through negotiation, acceptance, and subversion. Ortner (1995, p. 175) points to the complex nature of resistance and argues that because the powerful have much to

offer, the subordinate is often ambivalent about resistance, or at least outright resistance. These discussions of resistance help unpack the contradictions in the relationships of Iranian filmmakers with various governmental institutions that they work with, while trying to maintain their independence.

During the moderate governments of Mohammad Khatami (1997-2004) and Hassan Rouhani (2013-present) individuals with backgrounds in documentary films or administrators who had previously worked with filmmakers and had similar goals were appointed to official positions. In the administration of Rouhani, the director of DEFC is Mohammad Mehdi Tababayijjad, who was well respected as producer in IRIB. The deputy director of DEFC is independent producer, Morteza Razagh-Karimi, who was previously AIDP's board director. Since they have taken office, relationships with filmmakers have improved significantly. Weekly screenings and discussions take place on the premises of DEFC, and filmmakers are included in the decision-making process. During conservative administrations, filmmakers viewed the DEFC as a governmental outpost that only distributed funding and they kept their distance. Some cynically looked at it as a stop gap measure to keep filmmakers in place and thwart their independence. Even during Rouhani's moderate administration, many filmmakers feel they do not benefit from DEFC policies, because they control productions from inception to distribution stages and do not allow for true collaborations. Additionally, AIDP and IRDFA guilds have representatives in the film selection committees of IRIB as well as in DEFC's, or these institutions come to them when they need jurors or experts to lead various projects.

## **IRIB Iran's National Television**

Iran's National Radio and Television Broadcasting is a vast governmental institution decreed by the Iranian constitution to be the only broadcaster to serve the country, and reaches up to 90% of the Iranian population. National television, IRIB is known as an 'orthodox' institution, linked to the Supreme Leader (Devictor, 2006, p. 69), and acts independently of the elected government. However, many veteran documentary filmmakers got their start in television and are intimately aware of its operations and have friends and allies in the large complex. The head of IRIB is appointed by the Supreme Leader, and is not beholden to the Presidential office or to the *majlis* (parliament), which results in more strict observance of morality codes. They issue their own production permits and determine which films are broadcast on their channels.

The national broadcaster was formed before the Revolution, under Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's rule in 1967. It was under the Shah's purview and was called National Iranian Radio and Television (NIRT). Today the huge conglomerate operates more than 12 channels in Tehran, 34 provincial channels, and ten international channels ("Vice presidency of *majlis*," 2014). In 2005 IRIB produced more than 60,000 hours of programming. Sixty percent of its programs were created in Iran (Semati, 2007). The numbers of channels increased after a digital system was put in 2012. The budget of the broadcaster (about 890 billion tumans in 2009 (900 million USD) is generated mainly through direct government subsidies and licensing fees that are part of household electricity billing. About 13% of the budget comes from advertising (Khiabany, 2010, p. 177). With even a larger budget now, it is one of the largest spenders of state funds, with

46,000 personnel and an income which is only half of its expenditures (“Seda va Sima and IRNA,” 2014).

The ideological goals and practices of IRIB are evident in its main principles and policies:

- a) "The majesty and supremacy of Islam over all of the programs so that the programs which are against Islamic criterion would be avoided"
- b) "The majesty of spirit of the Islamic revolution as well as that of constitution over all of the programs"
- c) "The fulfillment of the Supreme Leader's point of view as the Islamic Jurisprudent";
- d) "Setting the situation toward the self-sufficiency and embodiment of the policy of 'Neither East, Nor West' in all of the fields of politics, social affairs, culture, economics, and military within the framework of the Islamic Republic's Laws." (“The structure of Iran,” 2009)<sup>9</sup>

The mission of IRIB, as the main media arm of the ruling clergy, is the propagation and defense of the values and ideals of Islam, and the territorial integrity of the country (Khiabany, 2010, p. 141). To promote the political and social imperatives of the Islamic regime some of the programs are directly ideological, especially on the main channels 1 and 2, as well as on the news channels. The broadcaster is thus entrusted with reinforcing the ruling body’s hegemonic hold over the country. This has resulted in a plethora of religious programs and some overtly ideological ones that transgress public trust. There have been broadcasts of demoralizing show-trials of those convicted of conspiring against the Islamic Republic, including intellectuals and writers. These programs instill fear, though they also turn public sentiment against the regime. Additionally, Sepah

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<sup>9</sup> This is from Open Source Center, a CIA-run website that tracks Iranian media, according to Hamid Naficy (2012).

(army of the guardians) controlled production companies such as Owj produce many programs that find their way on the IRIB airwaves.

According to producer Saeed Rashtian (personal communication, July 2014), Iranian television's programming is shaped by political concerns rather than by audience tastes. Due to its centralized structure various production divisions vie for a few available programming slots. Because of these restrictions, they only occasionally solicit documentary series from independent producers. In recent years IRIB has been compelled to diversify its programs and provide more entertainment options for its viewers. This is due in part due to an effort to compete with popular transnational channels that broadcast Western-influenced Persian language programs from outside the Iranian borders — some with the intention of disrupting the hegemony of the Islamic Republic. IRIB's efforts are continuously challenged by the appeal of transnational media, particularly their entertainment value. With the digital transformation of IRIB there is more diversity in their programming and there are channels that are dedicated entirely to showing movies, TV serials, sports and documentaries. However, they still cannot compete with the entertainment programming of transnational channels.

In 2014 the IRIB channels that broadcast programs in Tehran were as follows:

Channel 1 – national channel with reach to the entire country

Channel 2 – Life channel. It has more family, cultural, and children's programming, but also political and social programs

Ch. 3 – Youth channel, with a focus on sports

Ch 4 – Focuses on intellectual matters, broadcasts documentaries.

Ch. 5 – Previously Tehran and other provinces local channel

News channel [Most of the first 5 channels have national reach]

The Learning Channel – Instructional channel, mostly technical

Quran Channel

Documentary Channel – broadcasts Iranian and non-Iranian documentaries

Shoma Channel – Provincial channel and tourism

Bazaar Channel –News of the marketplace

Namayesh Channel – Movies, Iranian and non-Iranian, including American films.

Sports Channel

Pooya Channel – Animation, cartoons

Tamasha – Serials and films, mostly domestic

Salamat Channel – Health

Nasim Channel – Game shows

Ofoogh Channel – Focused on disseminating the values of “The Sacred Defense.”

Press TV – English language news programming on IRIB satellite network

AlAlam – Arabic language news programming on IRIB satellite network

Besides the last two there are six transnational IRIB channels that include iFilm, Jame Jam, and Sahar 1 and 2, that have programming in several languages, including Azeri, Kurdish, Arabic, and Bosnian.

The Ofoogh channel began its temporary broadcast in the month of Ramadan, 2014 with only two hours of programming daily, and then it was expanded to a full schedule. There has been no official explanation for the channel’s operations. Its programming is created by a private company, Owj that receives its budget from Sepah, Iran’s powerful paramilitary group (*Tadbir*, 2014). The programming is limited but includes several big budget shows, including the reality show, *Farmandeh* (commander). It features Sepah commanders rounding up groups of young volunteers and putting them through tests to select the best candidates to join their forces. The goal of the program is to promote and disseminate the values of the “Sacred Defense” (*Tadbir*, 2014), referring to Iran’s war against foreign aggression, namely the Iran-Iraq war and present day threats in the region.

Asr is another upcoming channel that is connected to Sepah military groups. Owj Arts Media also provides Asr's programming. Asr is reputed to be the first independent channel that has been given the green light to broadcast, but Sepah officials have rejected this news ("News of first private channel," 2014). The inner workings of IRIB and its connections to Sepah remain shrouded in some secrecy.

The Documentary Channel buys completed documentaries and sometimes commissions them, but their budget is minimal and IRDFA filmmakers usually dismiss it. The channel also showcases young documentary filmmakers' films or segments of them in their programming. Channels 1, 2, and 4 also commission and broadcast documentaries, and have stronger budgets for their productions and acquisitions. In recent years many filmmakers complained that television does not offer adequate budgets for documentaries and less are produced, despite the increase in the numbers of channels.

Nahid Papian, a former managing director of programming at IRIB, who continues to serve on IRIB's selection committee, claims that a large portion of IRIB's productions involves some form of documentary production. About 50-60% of them are produced internally and the rest are purchased from filmmakers or from international distributors (N. Papian, personal communication, 2013). According to Tabatabayi-Nejad, the current director of DEFC, documentaries' natural home is television, but in recent years television executives have not taken documentaries seriously (Journalist Club, 2013). This is a sentiment that is shared by most documentary filmmakers and producers, in their continued struggle to persuade IRIB to support documentary production and its distribution.

Papian explained a three-tiered approval process. Proposals from filmmakers come in to IRIB's various production groups in various channels and sections, such as the "political division," "family," or "education." Each division has a council that reviews the proposals. Once it is approved it moves to the programming division's council. If approved it goes to the vice presidency council and gets the green light, or not, and receives a production permit. All programming decisions follow this routine, even those that are initiated within the organization. There are several vice presidencies, *Sima* is for internal productions, and there are divisions that oversee foreign broadcasting channels. Program proposals from 30 provinces are also approved in the central vice presidency office (N. Papian, personal communication, 2013). This process points to a centralized system, which is highly regulated from the top. However, there are some exceptions to this norm.

In 2010-2011 a decree was made by the division of provinces at IRIB to strengthen documentary productions in the provinces. It was called *Nehzat-e Mostanad*, with a budget of 5-6 billion tomans (A. Rouhani, personal communication, 2013), a substantial budget for documentaries. Eight supervisors were selected from among well-known documentary filmmakers and producers to lead the production series in several provinces. Filmmakers like Mohammad-Reza Aslani, Manouchehr Moshiri, Farhad Varahram, Morteza Razaq Karimi, Farhad Mehranfar, all established documentary filmmakers with connections to the television system, led the effort and solicited proposals from local filmmakers. They conducted workshops and advised and supervised young filmmakers, who were encouraged to develop their proposals and make films. They were paid 500,000 to 1 million tumans (\$900 in 2010 rates) per minute for its



production and broadcast. These were high rates for often inexperienced filmmakers, which irked experienced filmmakers in Tehran, who were left out. Reportedly, Mr. Zarqami, the head of IRIB at the time, showed his support by visiting the film set of Farhad Mehranfar in Daylaman in Northern Iran (A. Rouhani, personal communication, 2013). This was a high profile example of the support that television executives offer independent filmmakers. Though this effort involved independent filmmakers, the decision making process was made in the executive level. There are no consistent programming slots for independent films.

Many independent filmmakers remain critical of IRIB's complex system of production. Director and Producer Orod Zand, who was previously employed at IRIB and later became an independent filmmaker, explained that there are different tiers for rating and funding for documentaries, based on quality and the stature of the production team (2014, personal communication). Before the triple digit inflation of 2010-2011, the maximum a documentary director was paid was five million tumans (\$3000). Filmmaker, Farhad Varahram is a vocal critic of IRIB, though he is also connected to the television system and was one of the producers in charge of production in the provinces. He claims that 90% of the funding for documentaries in Iran is controlled by the state, which leads to a lack of "professionalism" among producers and lack of proper supervision. "I would throw tar on the *Seda va Sima* University [IRIB University].... I told one of their professors that you train bureaucrats, [not filmmakers]" (Varahram, personal communication, June 2013).

Varahram believes that independence from government funded television system was impossible for many filmmakers in the earlier days after the Revolution because they

controlled the entire process of production and distribution. The car they took on location belonged to IRIB; the sound person and camera were TV personnel, and the editing room was located in the television grounds. Later, alternative venues for funding documentaries became available, though private capital is still limited, and often controlled by networks that are connected to the ruling bodies.

In different periods the state has paved the way for privatizing various aspects of the economy, including the communication industry. The World Bank may have initiated privatization efforts according to a neoliberal agenda when their representatives visited Iran in 1999 (Kianpour, 2015). Private production companies came into being in the early 1990s during the ‘reconstruction’ period to produce commercials, television serials, and documentaries. State policies promoted the expansion of a private sector, which does not compete freely to make the best media products. Independent production companies need to acquiesce to the ideological imperatives of their ultimate sponsor and client, which is usually a state institution.

In the 1990s IRIB started to commission programming to outside companies. However, the funding for these companies continued to come from IRIB, with an inflated price that private companies charged for their services. The discourse of privatization in Iran is therefore a mix of economic liberalism and centralized government control and funding. It was the state that initiated and encouraged privatization. Private media companies relied largely on funding from state sources, and since many of their owners were previously employed by IRIB, they remained economically dependent on the state. Without private television networks, even the production of commercials is dependent on state funding. Therefore, the concept of privatization remains a rhetorical proposition.

However, many independent filmmakers have taken their label seriously and follow topics they care about and make stylistic innovations, as films made by Rakshan Banietemad, Ebrahim Mokhtari, Mohammad Moghadassian, and many others demonstrate.

### **Governmental Funding and Privatization**

Advertising was introduced to IRIB only in 1996 (Khiabany, 2010, p. 177), since within the ideological imperatives of the Islamic leadership, advertising was at first seen as a corruptive, Western concept. During the ‘reconstruction’ period the state’s imperatives changed and this policy was reversed. Since independent television channels do not exist, private companies relied heavily on IRIB to provide funding and broadcast for their work. The Iranian state has been intent on modernization and development without giving up its ideological control, which is not conducive to market pragmatism (Khiabany, 2010, p. 181). The push for privatization in the 1990s was facilitated by bank loans that were given liberally to companies to start operating. Companies bought equipment and even buildings with the help of the *tabseer* 3 bank loans (M. Razagh-Karimi, personal communication, 2013). Then in 1997 IRIB gave its division for the production of commercials to independent companies at favorable rates. Many newly formed production companies and even those that made documentaries took on the lucrative business of producing commercials (M. Razagh-Karimi, personal communication, 2013). Established companies like Razagh-Karimi’s Dega Films or Saeed Rashtian’s Vesta specialized in documentary and cultural production. Though many documentary production companies continue to make their income from commercials, Dega Films continued to produce documentaries and industrial films for

IRIB and for large governmental companies like Ebne Sina Medical Center, Iranian Airlines, Ministry of Roads, and Ministry of Housing, among others (M. Razagh-Karimi, personal communication, 2013). Vesta produces documentaries and is also a publishing house. Its director, Saeed Rashtian believes that there are no companies that can survive by producing documentaries alone (personal communication, July, 2014).

The heads of these companies are leading members of the Producers Association, AIDP and have pushed for representation in governmental agencies like IRIB, Ministry of Culture, and Hoze Honari, to preserve the interests of filmmakers and independent producers (M. Razagh-Karimi, personal communication, July 2013). They are a few voices among mostly governmental decision makers. They work with the executives and try not to cross the main ‘red lines,’ and usually stay away from political topics unless they are aligned with the ruling elite.

When state media institutions do not solicit the cooperation of cultural actors their efforts are rendered ineffective. In 2009-2010 during the administration of Ahmadinejad when conservative Javad Shamaghdari was in charge of cinema affairs, the AIDP began a series of successful theatrical screenings of documentaries at Azadi Cinema. Azadi is one of the newer Tehran film theaters, which is frequented by middle class and upper middle class families and young people. According to the AIDP member and organizer Sanei-Moghadam, the screenings they organized at Azadi Cinema were so successful that they had to move them from a small theatre to a 450 person space. The Ministry of Culture at that time had set up their own film screenings in Sepideh theatre in downtown Tehran. They showed DEFC produced documentaries that were on religious or ideological themes. Sanei-Moghadam claimed that Sepideh remained empty while Azadi was sold

out. Ministry of Culture leaders tried to sabotage the Azadi screenings by not issuing necessary screening permits for them, but eventually they had to close down Sepideh (Sanei-Moghadam, personal communication, July 2014). “Ministry of Culture was paying 8 million for Sepideh Theatre [to screen their selected documentaries], but it remained empty” (J. Sanei Moghadam, July 2014).

Sanei-Moghadam believes the success of his efforts were due to his good relationships with the director of Azadi theatre, his connections with filmmakers who gave him their new films to screen, and selecting films that audiences enjoyed. He believes that the DEFC set up failed because they acted ideologically, lacked connections to acclaimed filmmakers, and did not respect audience tastes (J. Sanei Moghadam, July 2014). He recounted the first documentary screening he organized, which was Orod Attarpoor’s *One Hundred and One Years of Baladiyeh*, about the Tehran’s municipality. It was raining hard and no one had come 15 minutes before the film’s start time. Everyone thought it would be a failure, but ten minutes later the crowds came in and the theatre suddenly filled up (J. Sanei-Moghadam, July 2014). Some weeks later they had close to 700 people and had to hold extra screening times because they showed films by popular filmmakers, like Mohammad Shirvani and Asghar Farhadi.

Tickets were free, but Sanei Moghadam believed that charging for tickets would not have deterred audiences. Having regular screenings required a committee and a budget, and if tickets were sold it could have generated income. The Azadi theatre’s director was prepared to give half of the revenues to the filmmakers. They needed some backing from Ministry of Culture to organize and promote the films, but they weren’t supportive. AIDP had to stop the series after two years. Sanei Moghadam is now one of

the organizers of *Honar va Tajrobeh* (Art & Experience) screenings that were initiated successfully in 2014.

While filmmaking relies on state funding and interaction with various institutions, filmmakers and producers have devised effective ways of making films they care about and open venues for their production and distribution. Privatization of media has been fraught with state control and interference. However, lack of private capital has not deterred the spirit of independent productions. Often in this centralized system, filmmakers whose works are not commercially viable have been able to influence media executives to provide more support for experimental and documentary films.

### *Art & Experience*

A successful example of collaboration of independent filmmakers and producers using state funding is the new theatrical series, *Cinema va Tajrobeh* [Art & Experience]. Sanei-Moghadam along with critics, producers, and filmmakers, Jamal Omid, Houshang Golmakani, Majid Messchi, Iraj Taghipour, Mohammad Reza Faraji, Seifollah Samadian, Amir Hossein Alamolhodi, and Shahram Mokri launched it with the backing of the cinema division of Ministry of Culture. They organize special screenings of independent fiction and non-fiction films in theatres and art houses in Tehran, Isfahan, Mashad and other major cities. Beginning in the Spring of 2014, they programmed fiction, animation, and documentary films that normally would not have theatrical release. The first documentary film they showed in this series was Mojtaba Mirtahmasb's *Six Centuries, Six Years* (2014) about the revival of Iranian classical music from 600 years ago. The series is focused on films that have ground breaking stories, styles, or form.

The series has garnered critical attention and support of the young and intellectual population. One of its founders Amir Alamolhodi explained the benefits of this new theatrical series in terms of national security. In order to appease possible conservative critics of their programming, he claimed the series provided a venue for alternative filmmakers and allowed cinema lovers to remain connected to their country (Alamolhodi, 2015, p. 6). They provide viewers with films that fall outside commercial cinema and allow them to see older Iranian classics. In 2014 they held a series of Sohrab Shahid Saless's films, an influential independent and formalist filmmakers from the 1960s and 1970s. They also program documentaries that have strong narrative structure, such as *The Trucker and the Fox* (2013) and *Atelan* (2015).

### **Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (MCIG)**

MCIG is the main organization concerned with cinema affairs, through its Cinema Division. Hamid Naficy (2012) observes that in the 1980s MCIG was led for a decade by Mohammad Khatami (he was later elected president of Iran in 1997). His reformist policies helped enhance the film industry. Farabi Cinema Foundation was created by MCIG in 1983, to implement the cinematic policies of the ministry (They did not include documentaries). Farabi was run by a group of movie aficionados who helped professionalize the industry (Naficy, 2012, p. 127). Other divisions of MCIG, DEFC and Young People's Cinema were created to support documentary, experimental, animation, and short films. The head of Farabi explained their policies regarding cinema: "to support (*hemayat*) to supervise (*nezarat*), and to guide (*hedayat*) cinema (Naficy 2012, p. 128). These policies are reflected in MCIG's booklet of policies regarding cinema, (which broadly includes documentaries, as well). The production and distribution permits they

provide cover films made for DEFC and Young People's Cinema or exhibited in those institutions or at the House of Artists. They do not cover IRIB or Howzeh Honari, another film institution that is regulated by the office of the Supreme Jurisprudent. The Ministry of culture's policies are revised and reprinted every few years, and determine MCIG's goals. In 2009 some of the guidelines for the arts and cinema were to prioritize the following topics:

Religious and Quranic values

Qualities of Islamic prophets

*Mahdaviyat*, belief in the Prophet

Family values

Children and youth

Culture and civilization of Islamic Iran

Islamic Revolution

Islamic history and contemporary history

Soft war (includes West's media wars)

Fighting global imperialism

Sacred Defense

Political themes (internal and external)

Renowned historical personalities

Scientific developments ("Duties and policies," n.d.)

Most of the guidelines express the ideological and religious prerogatives of the Islamic regime, which are determined by the office of the Supreme Leader. Films that



are concerned with these themes have an easier path to production and distribution. Cinema institutions prioritize support for films that promote these principles.

### **Documentary & Experimental Film Center (DEFC)**

DEFC supports the production of first feature films, long format, short feature documentary, experimental, and animation films, from preproduction to final stages of post production and their distribution. They also hold specialized workshops to promote filmmaking, either independently or in collaboration with universities and NGOs. In 2012, deputy director of DEFC reported that they approved 136 projects for production in the different divisions of the institution (“Production of 136 films,” 2013), which included documentaries, first features, animation, and experimental films. A 2013 DEFC report stated that they produced eleven animation films, 49 documentaries (of which 12 were on religious themes), six features, thirteen short fiction films, and 24 feature documentaries (“DEFC,” 2013).

Because of the value of the term, “independent” in cinema, the DEFC leadership and staff boast that their institution is partially non-governmental, since a portion of its revenues comes from selling and the distribution of their vast film collection. However, the income from distribution of films is a small share of their budget, and the Ministry of Culture & Islamic Guidance determines their policies. Since they present themselves as partially independent, they promote creative projects and are proud of their close relationships with filmmakers. However, they are limited in their distribution policies. They take over most of the rights of the films and do limited work on distribution, by producing film catalogues in Persian and English and presenting the films in international festivals. Some of their films are broadcast on state television or they are featured on

various national and international festivals, mainly with the active participation of the filmmakers.

The International division of DEFC has the goal of “introducing Islamic Iran’s rich culture to the world and marketing and promoting films in international festivals and cultural events” (“DEFC,” 2014). In 2013 the Deputy Director of DEFC explained to me that the Cinema division of Ministry of Culture, which oversees their operations, views DEFC as a more independent organization and accords them some freedom to produce different types of films, some of which might never receive a screening permit. These films are about controversial topics, like underground music or drug abuse. They support the production of such films as a form of documentation about Iranian society, to serve and educate decision makers in the *majlis*, (the Cabinet), and in the Ministry of Education (M. Lasani, personal communication, July 2013). Though DEFC funds documentary, experimental, and animation films, Lasani claims that 70 to 80% of the filmmakers that approach them are documentary filmmakers.

DEFC became an important supporter of documentaries and experimental and animation films when Mohammad Afarideh took over its operations in 2002 and expanded its support of filmmakers. He also launched the Vérité Festival, the main documentary international film festival of Iran, in 2007. During moderate administrations DEFC is beholden to the prevalent views of Iranian filmmakers, who for the most part believe in professionalizing their industry and do not adhere to strict ideological imperatives. To accommodate the religious leadership of the Islamic Republic, DEFC also held the Shahid Avini festival, with the theme of Sacred Defense War and The Razavi Festival on the theme of Imam Reza and his sacred shrine in the city

of Mashad. To appease his critics, Afarideh used language that connected him with religious discourse of the Islamic Republic's leadership. He explained the goals of the Razavi Festival in this way, "Filmmakers, the artistic community, and the people of Iran adore their Islamic home (*velayat*), and if they are supported, they will produce many films and creative productions about Imam Reza and offer them to the country and to the world" ("Call for films," 2008).

When DEFC and the *Vérité* festival lean towards the moderates' views in the leadership and mainly feature films by secular filmmakers, they come under attack by the conservatives. In 2007, the website of Hawzeh Honari, a governmental cinema institution that falls under the auspices of the Supreme Jurisprudent's office and is usually more conservative, criticized the *Vérité* Festival for its liberal leanings. They claimed that the festival showcased DEFC produced films and those produced by independent filmmakers, while disregarding strong films from Sacred Defense or religious filmmakers. They also criticized the absence of films on Israel's war on Palestinians, since several Iranian films were made on that topic (hawzeh.net, 2008).

The programming and direction of some television channels also depend on their executives' tastes and the stature of the filmmakers who collaborate with them. For these reasons, IRIB and DEFC executives have at times funded films that are not aligned with the dominant ideology, leading to controversies or public scandals. Even conservative IRIB has put out monies to fund films they will they never broadcast. The right wing media condemns such aberrations. In 2008 Massoud Bakhshi, with the support of Mohammad Afarideh, DEFC's director at the time, and a French production company, made his first feature film. *A Respectable Family* was a dark tale about a college

professor who returns to Iran from France and is faced with family problems and a corrupt system that does not allow him to publish his book or work in the university system. Bakhshi's previous film, *Tehran Has No More Pomegranates* (2007) was a well-received documentary produced by DEFC, when he was the head of the international division of the Vérité Film Festival. However, the dark theme of his new film soon made headlines in conservative papers. The Ministry of Culture and Sima Film, which had also given the money to the project, claimed the film portrayed life in Iran negatively [*Siahnamayii*], which was why it was well received in international festivals like Cannes and Abu Dhabi. Sima Film, a division of IRIB who had also supported the film, said they had trusted the film's producer, Mohammad Afarideh, but they were misled (Ejmali, 2012). Consequently they sued Afarideh.

The tension between the more secular, independent filmmakers and institutions that support them and the conservative factions that hold powerful positions, often leads to withdrawal of support, negative press, and bans for the films. Over the years a few filmmakers had to leave the country, like Mohsen Makhmalbaf, Bahman Ghobadi, and Mohammad Rassoulf, because of pressure from right wing factions and lack of freedom to make the films they aspired to make.

DEFC became more conservative during the Ahmadinejad administration, under the directorship of Agha Mohammadian, and many filmmakers stopped working with them altogether. A scandal emerged at this time regarding a very expensive production, which provoked filmmakers to accuse the DEFC leadership of ineptitude and squandering their budget. *Laleh*, a fictional film about a female race car driver was funded by DEFC in 2010, with the blessing of the Cinema division of Ministry of Culture

and President Ahmadinejad. Filmmakers believed that funding that was earmarked for documentaries and experimental films was illegally dispensed on this expensive production. DEFC is not mandated in their charter to produce commercial, feature films. They spent 6.7 billion tumans (\$2.3 million) on the project (“Suspension of *Laleh*,” 2013), which was more than several years of the institution’s budget for documentary and experimental film production (“All we need to know,” 2013). With the change in the administration in 2013, the film was never completed and remains a stain in DEFC’s recent history.

From 2009 to 2011 many independent filmmakers boycotted DEFC and did not submit their proposals or submit films to the Vérité Film Festival. At first they were objecting to the state’s ban during the 2009 uprising for filmmakers to document the events. They also objected to the ideological bent of the leadership of DEFC during this period. By 2013 some independent filmmakers began submitting their proposals to DEFC once again, including Nahid Rezai, Mehdi Bagheri and Farhad Varahram. In an interview Mehdi Bagheri said it didn’t make sense for the filmmakers to continue boycotting DEFC, because the funds were theirs rightfully and legally. “Taking DEFC money does not turn filmmakers into governmental employees” (M. Bagheri, 2013, personal communication). He did not see a discrepancy between taking money from the conservative administration and remaining an independent filmmaker.

On the other hand some filmmakers refused any collaboration with the state during this period. Mojtaba Mirtahmasb, a filmmaker who has had many difficulties with the conservative regime and was imprisoned for three months for his alleged collaboration with BBC-Persian, said he did not participate in any festivals since 2009.

He returned the money DEFC had paid him earlier for a production (personal communication, 2013). He continued his work with no governmental support. After his release from prison, he collaborated with well-known feature director, Jafar Panahi to make *This Is Not a Film*, an intimate portrayal of Panahi, under house arrest. He was penalized for his support of the moderate candidate in the 2009 elections and the Green Movement, and was not allowed to make films. *This Is Not a Film* was not officially shown in Iran but was sent clandestinely to the Cannes Film Festival in 2012. It received great critical attention and garnered a solid international distribution deal.

Mirtahmasb believes the systems that are in place at DEFC and IRIB are flawed, because filmmakers and producers get their money up front and make a film for less than what they charge the funders. They take their fees from the production budget, rather than rely on a robust distribution process. This leads to a lack of interest about the quality and usefulness of the films, or whether they are exhibited. On the institutional side, DEFC and IRIB want to demonstrate they are successful in producing films, but they are not concerned with their exhibition. Mirtahmasb and many others want the system to change so that filmmakers and producers make money in the distribution stage (M. Mirtahmasb, personal communication, June 2013). Producer and distributor Mohammad Atebbai explained that most festival submissions are conducted by the filmmakers, and if their films are accepted in festivals, then DEFC takes credit for their distribution and success (personal communication, May 2013).

### **Production and Distribution Permits**

There are many “red lines” that films including documentaries cannot cross. Though these are not clearly stated in policies, filmmakers and audiences recognize them.

They include women's veiling, intimate relations between sexes, and many political topics such as the 1979 Revolution and the Iran-Iraq war. Films require production and exhibition permits to be made and exhibited. Some red lines are negotiable. Television is more strict in its requirements regarding veiling and political issues, while the Ministry of Culture allows films that have women showing some hair and wearing colorful scarves.

Besides MCIG many institutions are able to issue production permits, including IRIB and Hawzeh Honari that act independently of the Ministry of Culture. Others that are connected to the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance are DEFC, the guilds, including IRDFA and AIDP, and production companies. They write an official letter to police and security outposts that issue the permits easily to organizations they recognize as legitimate. Shooting permits are necessary when filming in public spaces. When shooting inside homes it is possible to avoid the permit, though most filmmakers have them on hand.

Exhibition permits are issued only by the Ministry of Culture, which covers most official screening spaces and film theatres. However, a number of spaces, such as the screening room of the House of Cinema and galleries show films without screening permits. Exhibition permits are more difficult to obtain and the films have to consider the red lines mentioned above, such as veiling, intimacy between males and females, and other controversial topics. Often before a film is allowed exhibition in a festival the director and producer have to make adjustments to their finished film, which results in many discussions and disagreements. Conservative administrations impose more stringent requirements. Theatrical exhibition requires screening permits that are even more rigorous. Art & Experience group is a special case. They include films that have

high production and artistic value, but appeal to specialized audiences. These films still avoid the red lines, but they have more nuanced approaches and experimental styles.

### **The Vérité International Documentary Film Festival**

The Vérité Documentary Festival began in 2007 with the guiding principle, “Truth is the best guide,” from Islam’s first Imam, Imam Ali. However, the festival does not have a particularly Islamic tone, particularly during moderate administrations in the first years of its operation, and since 2013. At the Festival films by independent and governmentally sponsored filmmakers compete with invited international films from around the globe. In the peak years of the festival in 2007 and 2008 they received close to 900 film submissions for consideration in the festival. These were produced in various institutions, and also independently. In 2013 the acclaimed American documentary *Act of Killing* (2012) was shown at fully attended screenings, and much was written about this controversial film in film publications. The discussions were mainly about the style of the film and its innovation in incorporating performance in a documentary film, rather than its content about torture and genocide in Indonesia.

In 2008 Richard Leacock, the famous English direct cinema filmmaker, attended the Vérité Festival as their guest of honor. Filmmakers from Europe and Asia have been featured at this festival, even though international views of Iran often affect attendance. After the 2009 uprisings and the sanctions, attendance by Western filmmakers and festival representatives sharply declined, and many refused their invitations. With the election of moderate President and DEFC’s new administration, international attendance was once again on the rise.



Ortner (2010) notes the usefulness of festivals as spaces where the film industry promotes itself and where one can learn about the social relations in the industry (p. 220). These are public events that reveal the filmmakers and producer's ways of thinking, talking, and presenting themselves. The weekly film series at the House of Artists, which was followed by Q&A with filmmakers and the Vérité documentary Film Festival were such spaces. They provided opportunities to not only screen films and hear from filmmakers, but to observe how the Iranian cinema officials worked and interacted. In December 2013, with a new administration in DEFC, I attended and observed the Vérité Documentary Festival. Most of the DEFC staff worked as festival organizers. They were in charge of the many sections of the festival's workshops, conferences, and screenings. After many years of a conservative cinema administration, there were some noteworthy changes. Fewer foreign guests had come, but there was increased attendance by young filmmakers. The organizers were mostly men, though two key personnel in the international division were women.

The organizers usually did not mingle with the filmmakers, as they adhered to embodied forms of state discipline. Hall (1980/1993) discusses how professional codes, such as neutrality, operate within the dominant code. These codes govern media institutions and determine standards of professionalism (Hall, 1993, p. 191). DEFC employees are mainly civil servants, who hold their government jobs until retirement. They adhere to the Islamic codes of behavior and dress, which for the men consists of wearing a suit without a tie, and for women, it is a long, dark-colored coat and special headdress that keeps all their hair covered. They are the visible markers of the religious discourse that most civil servants follow. Filmmakers usually dress more casually and

women filmmakers wear colorful clothes and scarves, which signals a different discourse that is influenced by their secular thinking, Western thought, and Iranian nationalism.

Previously, I had attended the 2007 festival with other Link TV producers, when we made a film about the festival, following two young American filmmakers who were in Iran for the first time. The first two years of the festival were successful events that brought in many Iranian and international filmmakers and festival organizers. The unrest of 2009 led to Afarideh's resignation and his replacement by a conservative administrator. When the 2009 uprisings took place, 136 filmmakers boycotted the *Vérité* Festival and advised the international film community to also boycott the event. The festival administration reeled from the difficulties of that year. Notably when Fredrick Wiseman pulled out of the festival at the last minute, embarrassing the organizers. Shirin Naderi, who organized the international division, posted a scathing letter on the DEFC website, lamenting the festival guests' political actions. She felt their actions were unprofessional because the festival was a non-political space that promoted documentaries (Naderi, 2010).

For filmmakers who were objecting to government policies, the government-sponsored festival was a political sphere. Filmmaker Rakhshan Banietemad explained that during the uprising documentary filmmakers were prohibited from using their cameras, though it was their job to document such events, and a few were arrested. Filmmakers wrote a statement objecting to government interference in their work and published it in a number of newspapers. The boycott was a response to official actions that restricted documentary filmmaking. It was effective in signaling objections to state policies. In 2013, in the moderate administration of President Rouhani many filmmakers

once again attended and participated in the Vérité Festival. Banietemad was a jury member, and it appeared that the filmmakers and the organizers were reconciled.

This period of transition from one administration to another (2013-2014) demonstrated that cultural and political conditions in Iran are not homogeneous and timeless (Abu-Lughod, 1991, p. 160). In December 2013, in the span of only a few months after the new President took office, filmmakers were much more relaxed and hopeful. They spoke freely, with less fear of consequences. That summer, no one knew for sure who would be heading DEFC and the Vérité Festival. Even in June 2013, the House of Cinema had not yet reopened, and filmmakers met unofficially at a temporary location. In one meeting they gathered to decide what was the best course of action for their guild. Once the result of the election was announced, they were emboldened and even held public demonstrations against the actions of the Ministry of Culture.

#### **Case Study: House of Cinema and the Iranian Documentary Filmmakers Association (IRDFA)**

The House of Cinema was formed in 1993 by the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance for regulating and organizing the cinema sector (Devictor, 2006, p. 72). They define themselves as a NGO, non-profit organization that is not political and is made up of legal unions of the cinema industry (khanecinema.ir). The organization consists of 27 different cinema guilds, including the Guild of Film Directors, Guild of Cinematographers, Guild of Film Editors, and the Guild of Documentary Filmmakers, and Documentary Film Producers. Their board is made up of representatives from the guilds. The Iranian Documentary Film Association (IRDFA) has the reputation of being one of the most active and outspoken guilds in the House of Cinema, though it was a latecomer, joining it in 1997.

The IRDFA monthly meetings that were held during the difficult years when the House was closed, at a time of scrutiny against filmmakers, demonstrated the ways in which the guild held on to its principles of protecting documentary filmmaker's rights. Ebrahim Mokhtari who was the guild's board director at the time, explained that the activities of the guilds were meant to strengthen the independence of the filmmakers from the government and provided a source of support (personal communication, May 2013).

When in 2011 documentary filmmakers were detained and imprisoned for selling their films to the BBC, the IRDFA and the House of Cinema published statements of support. The House leadership declared there was no law that stated filmmakers could not sell films to foreign media groups and since documentary filmmakers did not enjoy state support or funding, they had to act independently ("Declaration of Iranian Alliance," 2009). They claimed that their arrests were due to their independent actions rather than any illegal activities. Ministry of Culture executives were offended that the leadership of the House of Cinema contradicted their leadership and led a campaign to discredit and eventually shut down the House of Cinema in January 2011. They claimed the House was operating illegally with a charter that was not approved by the Ministry of Culture.

The board of directors of the House of Cinema responded that the defense of its members was part of its duties, and the legal problems in their charter were minor technicalities that could easily be remedied with the cooperation of the Ministry of Culture. According the board members of the House, the conservative leadership of the Ministry of Culture was using these issues to change the organization of the guilds and limit their independence. They wanted to form a new institution and bring the guilds under complete jurisdiction of the government (Khaneh Cinema, 2012).

## **The Conflict**

During President Ahmadinejad's second term, particularly after the 2009 uprisings against unfair election practices divisions between moderates and conservatives became more pronounced and antagonistic. The arrest of six documentary filmmakers and the support of the House of Cinema for them expanded the rift. The Ministry of Culture's cinema division initiated a complaint that the House of Cinema's charter was flawed. Iran's Public Culture Council (IPCC) ruled that the House of Cinema was operating illegally and their operating documents had irregularities (Mokhtari, 2010). They proposed a new charter and invited the guilds to register with the Ministry of Culture to gain legal status. The House resisted these proposals and was eventually shut down in 2011 by Javad Shamaghdari, the conservative head of Ministry of Culture's cinema division. Many filmmakers speculated that the main reason for the shutdown was the independent stance of the House on various issues, especially their support for six documentary filmmakers who were arrested for collaborating with BBC Persian ("Iran's House of Cinema," 2011). Additionally, the board of the House of Cinema had been vocal in criticizing the actions of Ministry of Culture's leadership and had publicly denounced them for their preferential treatment of their allies and friends. They claimed that these insiders were generously awarded state funds.

Board members actively sought to defend the House and fought the Ministry of Culture's actions against it. Ebrahim Mokhtari published articles in reformist newspapers, rejecting the new charter proposed by Ministry of Culture in July 2012. He questioned the legality of the proposed charter and explained that unlike cultural organizations, guilds did not fall under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Culture:

Nowhere in the Laws and goals of The Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance do we see guidelines concerning guilds or overseeing their activities. What we see is reference to overseeing cultural institutions, centers, and associations. And they now call our guilds ‘cultural guild associations,’ which is an inaccurate term. This proves that regulating guild activities is not part of Ministry of Culture’s responsibilities. ... For years these associations, under the umbrella of the House of Cinema have resolved professional disputes of those who work in Iranian cinema, and for this reason they have taken on the characteristic of guilds. Changing their identity to cultural organizations rather than guilds is against the interests of about 4000 members of House of Cinema, as well as the state’s interest. It is through these guilds that the state can provide benefits for professionals in cinema. (Mokhtari, 2012)

The differentiation between cultural organizations that come under the supervision of the Ministry of Culture, and professional organizations or guilds that normally fall under the jurisdiction of the Department of Work, was key to the fate of the cinema associations. After reviewing the House of Cinema’s complaint, the justice department declared that the Ministry of Culture did not have legal authority over the guilds and the House could be reopened. However, the disagreements continued and the House was not reopened until the conservatives left office in the summer of 2013.

According to filmmaker and activist, Ebrahim Mokhtari, the fight between the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance and the House of Cinema and the filmmakers was ultimately a struggle between the government and the private sector (personal communication, 2013) The conservative government wanted the filmmakers to follow its discourse and control the production and distribution of culture, while the filmmakers and their associations wanted to follow their own path and interests.

### **Transnational Television and Iranian Audiences**

The Islamic ruling elite consider transnational television a threat, which influences their policies regarding media. Transnational channels that are mainly based in

Europe and the U.S., offer alternative discourses that counter Iran's Islamic ideology and are steeped in American and Western media discourses that promote individual rights and freedoms. They provide seemingly unbiased news and entertainment programs that are very popular inside Iran. Iranian leaders are fearful and concerned about the influence of these channels, and have attempted to diversify their television and film industry, sometimes with the help of independent filmmakers and producers.

There are about thirty Persian-language transnational channels based in the U.S. and Europe that broadcast Persian-language programs to Iran. The channels that broadcast from Los Angeles are smaller channels without major backing and are run by Iranian expats who are active against the Islamic Republic. VOA-Persian and BBC-Persian are major news and cultural channels that are funded by the U.S. and British governments to offer alternative and ostensibly 'neutral' news programming, though their programming is steeped in American and British media discourses of neutrality and impartiality that promote dominant media discourses in the American or British news (See Hall, 1993, p. 149). Other newly formed commercial channels, such as Farsi 1, Gem TV, Manoto, and PMC mainly feature family oriented sitcoms or serials. Farsi 1 started its operations in 2009 by Saad Mohseni, with backing from Rupert Murdoch (Mohammadi Seif, 2014).

In 2010 at a strategic meeting of Council of Expediency, experts and academics concluded that transnational channels have reduced the viewership of IRIB, due to its ideological programming (Shams, 2010). The entertaining and engaging programs of these transnational channels, particularly those that program dramatic television serials, shows and news programs, draw up to 48% viewership from Iranian homes. A cultural

commission member of the *majlis* explained the attraction to foreign based media in this way, “As much as good programs are created on national television, there are still some people who watch satellite television... these channels have attractions that IRIB cannot compete with, due to religious constraints” (“Seda va Sima and IRNA,” 2014).

Documentary filmmaker and theorist for the conservatives, Nader Talebzadeh hosts television programs like *Raaz* (Secret) (2015), that discuss how popular Hollywood movies and American television programs are infused with U.S. political agendas.

The transnational channels adhere to various Western discourses that view Iran as a threat and emphasize the weaknesses of the Islamic regime and their human rights violations. They pool from the vast numbers of disenchanted Iranian expats and opposition groups in the diaspora to host their programs and offer their political and social expertise. Manoto is funded by Marjan TV; its Iranian owners have not disclosed the funding sources for their operations (Torbaty, 2012). Iranian officials and analysts believe that transnational channels like Manoto that broadcast Persian language programs are carefully planned by foreign powers to dismantle the Islamic Republic (Khalaj, 2013). Manoto features upbeat entertainment programs that create a positive picture of life in the West by showing how musicians and artists are free to express themselves as they wish, and people are free to live and enjoy themselves. In their news programs that lack depth and analysis, they highlight negative news about Iran and place their reports in a pro-Western framework. Iranian state media spends a great deal of its programming and attention on these broadcasts to discredit their points of views. The state also spends millions to disrupt the transmission of these channels. However, the channels remain hugely popular throughout Iran.



Naficy (2010) states that after the 2001 Al-Qaeda attacks, the distribution of American popular culture was instrumentalized to combat the growth of Islamic ideology. More than \$80 million were allocated to media groups to encourage democratic efforts inside Iran, which bolstered the broadcasting of Los Angeles based Iranian opposition channels. Voice of America - Persian television channel was launched in 2002. These actions affirmed Iranian officials' fears that the U.S. was conducting a policy of cultural invasion that implicated intellectuals, journalists, and media workers inside Iran (Naficy, 2010, pp. 212-213).

In 1980 after the Islamic Revolution, Voice of America stepped up its Persian language radio broadcasts from 30 minutes to six hours daily. Then in 2002, after President Bush in his State of the Union address labeled Iran as part of the "axis of evil," VOA launched its "American style" television news and analysis broadcasts in Persian. In response, the Iranian government jams VOA and BBC television satellite signals, making it difficult for people inside Iran to receive their programs. In 2003 VOA Broadcasting Board of Governor's chairman condemned Iran's signal interference. "Iran is waging a 'systematic campaign' to keep the truth from its people" ("New American-style TV," 2003). After the disputed June 2009 elections, VOA spokeswoman Joan Mower said in response to Iranian accusations of meddling, that even though VOA is funded by the U.S. government, it steers clear of partisanship. "We are congressionally mandated to provide balanced coverage," she said. "We don't have in our charter 'promote democracy' or 'change the world.'" (Chu, 2009). Hall shows that even neutral and technical qualities of media production in the West, such as visual quality and professionalism are extensions of hegemonic qualifications and serve to reproduce

dominant-hegemonic definitions of the political and military elites (Hall, 1980, p. 101). The institutional structure of broadcasting draw on topics, treatments, agendas, “images of the audience... and other discursive formations within the wider socio-cultural and political structure” (Hall, 1993, p. 92). These news programs are popular inside Iran because they are professionally executed and counter the dominant-hegemonic definitions of the Iranian political and military elites. A BBC survey in June 2009 showed that 12 million viewers in Iran (in a country of 70 million) watch its programs (Maryniak, 2010). Many Iranians see the BBC and VOA as sources of legitimate news, since IRIB’s programming is visibly ideological. They express their oppositional stance by rejecting IRIB’s news coverage. Though many others watch both news programs and determine their own position accordingly.

### **Summary**

The main state institutions in charge of media are overseen by the office of the Supreme Jurisprudent or are mandated by the cinema administrations under the supervision of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. They are also shaped by the personalities and tastes of the officials in charge of them. While moderate the Seifollah Daad led the cinema division of the Ministry of Culture in mid the 1990s and promoted Iranian cinema by easing the production and exhibition process, and strengthening the House of Cinema, Javad Shamaghdari, a hard-line Basiji filmmaker, defined the cinema policies based on his ideological preferences, from 2009 to 2013. He alienated many filmmakers, closed down the House of Cinema in 2012, and required that documentary films obtain exhibition permits in addition to production permits. Many filmmakers

believe that the weaknesses in Shamaghdari's management were detrimental to Iranian cinema during those years.

IRIB, which falls under the jurisdiction of the Supreme Jurisprudent has the strictest guidelines and follows the conservative, religious discourse closely. However, there are executives who are interested in strong programs and reach out to independent producers and filmmakers and commission them to make television serials and documentaries. The appeal of transnational television and its pervasive reach into Iranian homes has also affected the structure and content of IRIB. In order to offset these threats to the hegemony of the Islamic Republic, there is an effort to make their programming more diverse and entertaining. IRIB changed its system to digital and offers at least fifteen channels in Tehran, up from six in 2011.

Documentary and Experimental Film Center (DEFC) continues to work closely with filmmakers and funds their films, particularly in moderate administrations. The Vérité Documentary Festival is currently the main documentary festival that promotes the yearly productions of Iranian documentaries and exposes them globally. There are a few other outlets for screening documentaries, particularly in small art house venues. However, filmmakers are now working to showcase their films theatrically and move away from state control. While many independent documentaries are produced without a formal relationship with government institutions, they do not all receive screening permits or broadcast opportunities. This is what the filmmakers have termed *moshkel-e khorooji* [the problem of output], as many films are made but they do not have the proper channels for exhibition.

To resolve some of these problems, filmmakers and producers have grouped in their guilds the IRDFA and AIDP, and recently have formed the Art & Experience group for exhibiting alternative films, all with the blessing of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. Guild members pay dues and meet regularly to discuss their issues and benefits. They elect a board that is active within the Iranian cinema system, and push for better media policies. The unions follow a different discourse than governmental institutions. They promote professionalism, expertise, and the enhancement and expansion of documentary filmmaking above ideological prerogatives. These differences sometimes lead to conflicts during conservative administrations and inhibit mutual cooperation between media makers and their overseeing bodies. Since the collaboration of intellectuals and cultural workers is necessary for procuring consent in a society (Gramsci, 1992, p. 21), these conflicts signal rifts between the Iranian public and the ruling elite. Moderate administrations work more effectively to acquire the cooperation of cultural producers, without relying on brute force, which is costly and ineffective in the long run.

## CHAPTER 5 INFORMAL FILMMAKING AND ALTERNATIVE DOCUMENTARY VENUES

Mojtaba Mirtahmasb is a well-respected filmmaker who has been making social documentaries since early 1990s. He is an active member of Iranian Documentary Filmmakers Association (IRDFA), and was its board director from 2010-2011. Mirtahmasb was one of the six filmmakers arrested in 2011, suspected of collaborating with BBC Persian. He was released on bail after a few months, but the charges against him were not dropped until a new, moderate administration was elected in the summer of 2013. Walking towards his office in a nice, quiet, residential neighborhood in northwestern Tehran in May 2013 I was apprehensive. I wondered if I was being watched or if meeting him would be considered crossing a 'red line.' His arrest did not stop Mirtahmasb from working or remaining active. After his release from prison he made *This is Not a Film* (2012) with well-known feature director, Jafar Panahi. It was very well received at A-rated international festivals, like Cannes, and garnered world-wide distribution. Mirtahmasb believes that collective action provides a support system in difficult conditions, and Ministry of Culture's issues with the IRDFA and House of Cinema from 2010 to 2012 were not about the law.<sup>10</sup> "It was the continuation of the policy that was against our gathering and organizing; they believe that communication should not continue in our society" (M. Mirtahmasb, personal communication, May 18, 2013).

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<sup>10</sup> During President Ahmadinejad's second term the House of Cinema, which is the umbrella of all the cinema guilds in Iran, was increasingly at odds with the conservative leadership of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, which legally oversees it. After the House defended the six filmmakers and members of the House who were arrested on charges of collaborating with BBC Persian, the differences grew, and the Ministry of Culture claimed that The House was operating with a flawed charter and shut it down in December 2011. (See chapter 4).

During the repressive post-2009 period, one of the charges against Mirtahmasb was that he was leading a “team house” (M. Mirtahmasb, personal communication, May 18, 2013). His production office was likened to a political or drug dealing cell. After the 1979 Revolution, “team houses” indicated dissident political group homes, where leftist activists fought the Islamic regime. To consolidate power, the Islamic militia raided these homes and imprisoned and executed large numbers of activists. Later on, drug dealers’ homes were similarly labeled.

Like many other filmmakers Mirtahmasb continues to work in his informal office, a spacious first floor office, where he and his colleagues plan and edit their films. During my visit in May 2013, an editor was working in a suite and one of his colleagues and a well known blogger dropped in. He was busy working on his new film, *Six Centuries, Six Years* (2014) about a group of musicians who attempt to restore music from six centuries ago. He proudly stated that he returned the money he had received from DEFC and produced the film outside the state system.

Mirtahmasb explained that his office was not registered because he did not consider it an official company; just as an attorney or a therapist would not register their business if they were working in their homes. He argued that guilds should be responsible for approving their members’ work permits, to allow them to operate and get certified, but that the state should not intervene in such matters. Like many other active members of the IRDFA, he wants to professionalize documentary filmmaking and reduce the direct role of the state in filmmaking.

In this chapter I discuss the activities of independent documentary filmmakers, most of whom are secular and believe in more artistic freedoms and limited state

intervention. As demonstrated in the previous chapter, the state allows and encourages artistic activity and has created several institutions that fund and support cultural productions. However, they want to control cultural and artistic productions and bring them in line with the dominant discourse of the Shi'ism they profess. In an environment where political activism is limited to political insiders, artistic expression has become the preferred outlet for intellectuals and young people in Iran. They express their thoughts and feelings and channel them through the visual arts, music, theatre, and film. I argue that independent filmmakers have been able to create dynamic environments, where they make and exhibit their films that follow different discourses, discuss their work, and some times they influence policy makers. These are spaces where they collaborate and exchange ideas, despite restrictions and repression. These activities allow them to continue their work outside the dominant ideologies. In the summer and late fall 2013 and in the summer of 2014, I observed the activities of more than twenty documentary filmmakers, most of them members of the IRDFA. They were involved in many forms of engagement, such as workshops, screenings, and productions that aimed to professionalize and expand the documentary film world. They met informally in galleries, at official and unofficial spaces where they organized film events, at their monthly guild meetings, and other social gatherings, where they discussed their work and profession. They also worked together, helped each other find work or on their productions. They adhere to different discourses than the dominant one of the religious leaders and believe in individual and artistic freedoms of expression. Their activities and social engagements around documentary filmmaking and their exhibition have increased the visibility and importance of social documentaries.

Many who make alternative and independent films are from the younger generations; they are part of a large population in Iran that is under forty. Many are women filmmakers, writers, and artists, who express a perspective in their films and writings informed by their female gender identification. These women's define themselves and their work in different ways, shaped by their class and background. Filmmaker Mojgan Inanlou comes from a traditional and religious background and believes in the ideals of progressive, Islamic values that shaped the Iranian society after the Revolution. Others have a more radical stance or look to the West for inspiration. The seven female directors of *Profession: Documentarist* (2014) challenge most of the norms of being female in the Islamic Republic, and look nostalgically at an imagined pre-revolutionary past.

Many moderates in the leadership who follow the political Shi'a discourse are not against measured independence and do not prohibit social and cultural activities. To govern effectively, they need the cooperation of artists and intellectuals and accommodate them. There are many sites and blogs that operate without interference from censors. Several governmental institutions provide financial and logistic support to cultural activities and filmmaking. For example, filmmakers and artists organize regular screenings, performances, and art exhibitions at the House of Artists. The Art & Experience group, the Documentary and Experimental Film Center (DEFC), and the House of Cinema operate with the Ministry of Culture's approval and show documentaries. Semi-independent film companies and organizations are also active, such as *Tassvir* magazine that holds an annual exhibition and festival of photography and film.



## **On-line Activities and Activism**

In *Blogistan* (2010), Sreberny & Khiabany look at the communication industry in Iran, which they claim is Iran's fastest growing economic sector. They observe that the immense desire for access to informal channels of communication and cultural consumption has led to "astonishing rise and popularity of weblogs" (Sreberny & Khiabany, 2010, p. 2). They also explain that the development of this technology cannot be placed in the binary of people versus the government. They propose that while the state invests and encourages the development of new media technologies, because of its centralizing nature, the state attempts to control these technologies (Sreberny & Khiabani, 2010, p. 1). Their discussion is relevant to the documentary film world as well, as new digital technologies and local organizing have helped the expansion of documentary filmmaking. The state is not in full control of all the productions or exhibitions, but attempts to regulate the process by designating institutions that fund filmmaking and enable their exhibition. Most documentaries are made within the state supervisory system, but yearly, dozens of films are made and shown outside of it. In 2014, a crowdfunding site, Hamijoo has emerged that operates like similar sites in the West, such as IndieGoGo and KickStarter. It allows filmmakers and artists to collect money from their friends, colleagues, and admirers (Keshavarz, 2015). Filmmaker Mina Keshavarz is using this system to raise funds for her new film about a female political organizer, *Will She Win the War?*

Global political conflicts also play out in the ways these technologies are used on the ground. Western media represents the young Iranian bloggers as freedom seeking, tech-savvy youth, confronting a religious, totalitarian state. This portrayal plays into a

neoliberal and inaccurate view of Iran that pits an unchanging and uniform Islamic state against freedom-loving, Westernized youth (Elahi, 2012, p. 2). The situation is complicated because the state is also active producer and supporter of well-developed websites or film production that engage cultural actors and different segments of the Iranian public or the Shi'ia *umma* around the world. Many independent sites exist that are not about resistance to the state. *TehranAvenue* and *Tavoos* were some of the earliest sites that disseminated information about art and culture connected to the world beyond the national borders. *TehranAvenue* closed after the 2009 uprising, but many others have emerged since then.

With the aid of social media sites and anti-censorship software (some were developed in the West to circumvent Iran's restrictions on the Internet) individuals, activists, and artists defy the centralizing efforts of the Iranian government. Social media sites such as Facebook and YouTube are officially banned but are widely used by the younger generations to communicate, help disseminate information, and organize. For example, Facebook pages are created that provide information about films and filmmakers or call for support for journalists and documentary filmmakers if they are sanctioned by the state. On-line petitions are circulated to support different causes. If a filmmaker or journalist is arrested, they provide information and support. Furthermore, filmmakers use online video platforms to present their films to a global audience.

Filmmakers launched two documentary websites during the restrictive period of Ahmadinejad's presidency: *Vamostanad* by Pirooz Kalantari and Mina Keshavarz, and *Raybon Mostanad* by Amir-Hossein Sanai. They provide reviews of documentary films by colleagues, discuss issues that filmmakers face, and provide forums for talking about

documentaries theoretically and as a social vehicle. The websites also provide forums for filmmakers to discuss issues that affect them and counter the dominant discourse.

Previously other sites such as *Peyke Mostanad* and *Robertsafarian.com*, an Armenian/Iranian filmmaker's blog, were in operation, but *Peyk* became inactive due to lack of resources. Usually, sites do not last long, but are quickly replaced by other ones.

Three documentary websites organized the first informal and independent documentary film festival in 2011, during a period when many filmmakers were boycotting the state-supported Documentary and Experimental Film Center's (DEFC) Vérité Festival, because of its conservative leadership. Vamostanad, Peyk-e Mostanad, and Raybon Mostanad websites together organized Mostanad-e Bartar (Notable Documentary) festival in 2011, to honor strong documentary films that were made independently during that year. A group of judges were selected from different generations of filmmakers and critics. The top ten films were awarded. They started with 28 jurors, but several did not participate actively and finally, only nine reviewed the films. Each of the judges selected their favorite films of the year. Thirty six films that received the highest votes were shown at semi-private screenings at Moje-No offices. The top films were *Safe House* by Amir Hossein Youssefi, *Pir Pesar* (Reluctant Bachelor) by Mehdi Bagheri, *Reading Salinger in Tehran* by Pirooz Kalantari, and *Ghamar Khanoom's House*, by Aida Panahandeh ("Working report," 2012). None of the selected films have religious themes, though a very few have characters who are visibly observant. The decisions were based on aesthetics of the films and their professional standards. The judges evidently did not consider the dominant discourse of religious moralism as a criteria.

The following year, according to organizer Pirooz Kalantari, the films were not as strong, though their subjects and topics were more diverse. The organizers decided to hold off the competition one more year to include a stronger selection. A second festival was never held. It was not continued according to Kalantari, because the numbers of strong films dwindled in 2012, due to difficult conditions for documentary production (personal communication, June 2013). Operating a festival with voluntary participation of organizers and filmmakers, and without institutional support proved to be a challenging feat. Their efforts were effective for the year when filmmakers were disheartened and alienated from state support. Once the governing bodies in charge of cinema moderated their policies, the filmmakers returned to participate in state supported festivals and events. The interdependence of filmmakers and state supported media institutions was evident in these efforts.

### **Resistance and Collaboration**

Iranian people fought hard to gain their rights over the span of a century, with two revolutions, the Constitutional Revolution of 1906, and the Revolution of 1979, deposing the Shah. They feel they have a rightful presence in the public sphere. They express their presence in different forms, in various types of publications, in their political participation through their votes, on city streets when they gather in large numbers to support their chosen politicians or football teams, and in their cultural and artistic productions, films, art and poetry.

Popular sovereignty and religious sovereignty accommodate one another, but are also often at odds. In 2009 widespread popular uprising challenged the balance between these two spheres. Hundreds of thousands went into the streets to support a moderate

presidential candidate and object to the compromised voting process. The demonstrations against President Ahmadinejad's second term in office and Western media's coverage in support of the uprising resulted in the state reprisals and accusations of treason. State security forces were given free reign to attack demonstrators and activists. Throughout the years there had been many instances where authorities disrupted gatherings by intellectuals and artists who challenged the state's Sh'ia ideology. They shut down publications, exhibitions, or concerts. These reprisals spread to filmmakers and on-line bloggers. After a period of relative opening during President Khatami's administration, the oppression that followed the vote shocked the public.

By examining the filmmakers' organizing, their social world, and the ways in which they make films and their impact on their society we can decipher the scope and limits of their independence. As filmmaker Kalantari expressed it, "the Iranian public is active and present in the public sphere, often without any recognizable leadership and filmmakers are an integral part of it" (personal communication, August 5, 2014). The moderate leadership of the regime supports public and popular involvement in various forms of civil society, while the conservatives usually limit those forms of popular participation.

### **An IRDFA Meeting**

The Independent documentary filmmakers' guild has provided a space for lobbying the state for better working conditions. However, during the conservative cinema administration of Javad Shamaghdari, the House of Cinema that oversees the cinema guilds' activities was shut down. (More information on these events is provided in chapter 4). The closure in 2012 caused some confusion for the IRDFA guild members,

but they continued to meet monthly in an annex building called the House of Cinema #2. These meetings signified acts of resistance to state actions against their guild because the Ministry of Culture wanted to reorganize the guilds.

In one of these meetings on a hot afternoon in May 2013, before the presidential elections brought in a moderate administration, about thirty filmmakers gathered in the annex building of House of Cinema in an old section of downtown Tehran. The old but well-kept building was nearly empty, with a sleepy guard who greeted the members. Large framed posters of Iranian films and directors adorned the rooms. The meeting was held in a large, air-conditioned conference room. They were mostly men, about five or six women, most were in their thirties and a group of veteran members in their late fifties and sixties. They knew each other and were friendly, chatting, laughing, and a few smoked in the balcony. Once the meeting started the debates would get heated and often continued for hours. On this day they gathered for a discussion on the fate of their union. Board members sat near each other at the head of the table. Ebrahim Mokhtari, the head of the board, Nasser Saffarian, Nahid Rezai and Mohammad-Reza Moghadassian were some of the board members present. After a short introduction Moghadassian called the meeting. Members were instructed to speak by taking turns. Some members objected the board's decision for not planning the annual meeting to elect a new board. They had not elected a new board for two years due to the closure of the House of Cinema.

Kalantari objected to another postponement. He thought that during the threatening conditions of the previous year the board was justified to postpone elections, but they needed to explain its reasons for doing so again. Mojtaba Mirtahmasb also questioned the board's hesitations. According to their charter the yearly meeting had to

take place to elect new board members. The board responded that they had been advised not to hold the general meeting because of the House of Cinema's closure; holding a large annual meeting with 300 members posed difficulties. Some members argued that the leadership of Ministry of Culture had weakened when Mr. Sajjadpour, one of the leading conservatives in cinema division was indicted and imprisoned for corruption charges.<sup>11</sup> Nasser Saffarian, another board member, explained that though the leadership of the Ministry of Culture had weakened, they continued with their threats as before. For example, they had requested that all the guilds come forward within 10 days and apply for legal status. "They say the House will be re-opened, but only to serve their so-called legal guilds. Those are guilds that cooperate with them. If we hold the annual meeting they could bring the police and stop us" (Saffarian, 2013). Kalantari pushed back and questioned why the Association was always reacting, instead of acting. "What if the new President says there should be no House of Cinema? Should we wait for them to shut us down completely" (Kalantari, 2013)?

The more independent-minded members wanted the guild to continue functioning without being intimidated by the Ministry of Culture's threats; they emphasized their independence. Mina Keshavarz suggested that the Ministry was not able to legally dismantle the guilds, "Since we continue to meet monthly and we pay our dues, it means that this Association still exists. Our Association has an internal structure, which includes these meetings and the annual meeting." Their discussions illustrated that many in the Association wanted even further independence and did not want to wait for the Ministry

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<sup>11</sup> *Emruznews.com* reported the arrest of Alireza Sajjadpour in April 2013, for extortion and forcing a female producer into intimate relations.

of Culture's green light. Others wanted to work within the structures that the state imposed.

Even with pressures and arrests during President Ahmadinejad's second term, by the end of his presidency the cinema guild members felt justified to publicly protest the House of Cinema closure. In July 2013 a number of directors, actors, film professionals, and members of cinema guilds gathered outside the chained doors of the House of Cinema and threatened to open it by force. Well known actors and directors also participated, which led to wide coverage of the protests in Iranian media. Public opinion grew in support of cinema professionals, while the conservative leadership of the Ministry of Culture who was imposing the closure was further isolated. When the new moderate administration was voted into office in August 2013, one of their first official acts was to reopen the House of Cinema. These acts of resistance from the filmmakers and other cultural actors eventually discredited and brought down the conservative administration.

### **Workshops As Spaces of Engagement**

After the 2009 uprising when filmmakers were faced with threats and their union activities had diminished, governmental support in their traditional channels had become problematic. While some filmmakers were working closely together to make their films and exhibit them, some others with extensive experience organized filmmaking workshops. Pirooz Kalantari, Mehrdad Oskouie, Saeed Rashtian, Mojtaba Mirtahmasb, Kamran Shirdel, and Mohammad Shirvani were some of the veteran filmmakers and producers who held workshops during this period, to remain active and pass on their knowledge of the field and encourage young filmmakers. In 2013 I attended a summer



workshop in northern Tehran, at Karnameh Cultural Center. This uptown section of the city, with tree-lined streets and winding alleys is where well-off Tehran residents live. Mostly well-dressed, young film lovers attended talks by well-known filmmakers such as Rakhshan Bani-etemad, Ebrahim Mokhtari, and even Abbas Kiarostami, Iran's most celebrated filmmaker.

Filmmaker, Pirooz Kalantari and film critic and architect, Shadmehr Rastin were the main organizers. Unlike most film workshops that focus on filmmaking skills, this series of classes that were held in June and July 2013, mainly featured lengthy discussions followed by screenings of guest filmmakers' films. Many of the participants were not filmmakers, but young people interested in culture and filmmaking. During hot, quiet, summer days, in the month of Ramadan, this space offered the young men and women a place to connect with well-known filmmakers and their work, and to socialize in a cultural environment. The cost was about 120,000 tumans for 3 sessions (about \$40), which was average for Tehran standards. There were rumors among some filmmakers that it was a fancy place and cost a lot. With my IRDFA discount it was even less for me. However, for a young person, this amount was not negligible.

Karnameh was a well known literary journal and workshop space, housed in a fifty-year old, two story house with a large balcony and a large enclosed yard with fruit trees. The first floor had a small café and a large room for classes, where the young, aspiring writers, filmmakers and film lovers socialized. On the second floor, in the large but informal office of Mrs. Eskandarfar, the owner of the literary institution, a preparation session with filmmakers Rakhshan Banietemad, Ebrahim Mokhtari, and the organizers demonstrated their close ties. It was a friendly and informal meeting, held a

few days before their presentations. The two veteran filmmakers and Pirooz who knew each other for thirty years, talked for a long time, reminiscing about their work in television (IRIB) in the early days after the Revolution, and their working styles. Banietamad remembered that when she had first arrived at IRIB to join the directing group, Mokhtari and his group were making the *Sarpanah* films about rental conditions in Tehran, and the law. She said she would sit quietly and listen to their discussions to learn from them. Rastin interjected that Mokhtari's film and her film, *Who Do You Show These Films to Anyway?* were the most influential documentaries that changed conditions for documentaries and educated the politicians about real lives of people (Rastin, personal communication, July, 2013). The organizers explained the format of the day-long classes. Banietamad's session would focus on the influence of her documentaries on her feature films and vice versa. Rastin noted that most of the attendees were people with little experience of filmmaking.

I attended three sessions that were led by Ebrahim Mokhtari, Rakhshan Banietamad, and Mehrdad Oskoui. After a morning period of discussion between the organizers and the filmmakers, they opened the session to questions. During the first session, one of the attendees expressed his reservations about this format. He wanted the participants to be able to engage with the filmmakers more directly, early on, but the sessions continued as planned. The filmmakers explained their work process: how they 'impregnated' the situations that were unfolding in front of the camera with leading questions or by filming continuously for long periods, in order to capture deciding moments in their characters' lives.

Later Pirooz Kalantari talked about the effect of the workshops. He recounted that after some of the workshops that he and Saeed Rashtian organized in the past, several of their students started to work together in an office. One of the offices was Moj-e No (New Wave), where young filmmakers like Babak Behdad, Mehdi Bagheri, Azadeh Bizargiti, and Shahrooz Tavakol shared the rent and worked together in a friendly environment. They helped each other get film jobs, fund their work, obtain permits, and make films (P. Kalantari, personal communication, June 2013). Other filmmakers used their offices to edit their films or get help with their productions. The owner of the space, Mehdi Koohiyan is a producer of films and charges filmmakers reduced rent.

Previously some female filmmakers like Farahnaz Sharifi, Shirin Barghnavard, and Sepideh Abtahi were at Moj-e No. They later went on to work together on the film *Profession: Documentarist* (2014). Proximity with other like-minded filmmakers helped them make their segmented film. Exchanges of ideas and collaborations among filmmakers even in the face of restrictions and repression allowed them to continue to work in their areas of interest, outside the dominant discourse.

Another set of workshops that was available for young filmmakers was held by independent filmmaker, Mohammad Shirvani. Shirvani is known for his unique style and vision and is often at odds with Iranian cinema administrations, though he has also received funding from them. In the summer of 2013 he held a series of workshops, in which about 30 young filmmakers participated. I attended one session, which was focused on dialogue in films. Shirvani did not distinguish between documentary and fiction when conducting the workshop. It took place at his home, a large, old brick house, with an expansive open space, and a dilapidated, enclosed garden in central Tehran.

About fifty young people in casual clothes, female and male, participated together. The workshop was costly, but popular, because of Shirvani's track record as a truly independent filmmaker. He told me that some even came from other provinces. The sessions were full days, from morning until evening.

Shirvani makes both experimental features and documentaries, and his documentaries use fictional devices. Some of his films were made with partial funding from DEFC, and only one film, *444 Days* (2007) was made with funding from Press TV, the international branch of IRIB. The film recounts the events of the hostage crisis from points of views of hostages and hostage takers. Due to disagreements with the supervising editors from Press TV, Shirvani left the project in the end, and they created their own edit, which was broadcast in 2007. It was also sent to festivals. He showed his version at Vérité the Film Festival in 2008. During the Q&A, right wing zealots blasted the film for its 'balanced' approach to the sensitive subject of U.S.'s presence in Iran. His films usually do well internationally. His last film, *Fat Shaker* (2013) won the first prize at Rotterdam Film Festival and was featured at Sundance – the first Iranian feature to be accepted at Sundance (M. Shirvani personal communication, July 2013).

### **The Case of *Profession: Documentarist* (2014)**

In 2011-12 the conservative ruling body was strictly enforcing their ideology on various segments of society, including the filmmakers. Producer and distributor Mohammad Atebbai reflected on the 2009 events and their aftermath: "It was a major upset for people... there was widespread depression. Young people resorted to making many, many films, plays, and photographs.... People wanted to express themselves" (personal communication, June 2013). During this period many filmmakers worked

quietly on their archives, helped other filmmakers, and led classes. A few were making films. One group was made up of seven women who decided to make a film collectively, in order to express the difficult creative environment they were living in. I wanted to see how they were able to express their alternative views in the restrictive climate.

They were mostly women in their thirties who followed Western ideals of personal freedom and women's rights. They were frustrated by the cultural and political conditions after the 2009 uprisings, and decided to make their collective film about their experiences of growing up in Iran during the Revolution, their position as female filmmakers, and their thoughts on their difficulties of their profession. They worked in their shared offices, their homes, or neighborhoods, usually without a permit, using their personal archives and home movies to make the episodic film. They each helped others formulate their stories and edit the seven segments of *Profession Documentarist* (2014). The camera work was completed by Mohammad Reza Jahanpanah, a professional cinematographer and the husband of one of the filmmakers, Shirin Barghnavard.

Some of the women like Shirin and Sepideh Abtahi had shared an office space, and they all knew each other and socialized as peers. A few had learned filmmaking in workshops held by experienced filmmakers or in the BBC-sponsored workshops that were held in 2008, before the BBC was black listed. They were secular and believed in personal and gender freedoms for women. Several of them had connections with Western countries or had studied in other countries. Their views were shaped by Western discourse regarding modernity and freedom for women. Abu-Lughod (1998) argues that the discourse of modernity in the West is complicated and is sometimes charged with the problematic dichotomy of West as progressive and modern, and non-West as traditional

and backward (p. 7). But for Iranian women who are inspired by the West, modernity is often an inspiring notion that provides a means to confront the limitations that their country imposes on them.

I attended a few of their group meetings, in which during long sessions they argued heatedly with each other about narration, length of scenes, music, and voice, to help polish the films. These were lively meetings, where the women discussed and argued about their work, laughed, and ate together until late hours. In one session they discussed Sepideh's segment in which, a political anthem played over scenes of reflecting on the Revolution. They discussed the sensitivity of portraying the 1979 Revolution and how to demonstrate Sepideh's memories of it as a 3-year old, and of her aunt, who died at this time. It was obvious that the filmmakers were close and were comfortable voicing their disagreements about the significance of the 1979 Revolution. Honest debates about the Revolution can only take place in private spaces, since in the public domain the Revolution is defined by the Islamists. They debated about how to portray the scenes of the Revolution and what music to overlay the images. Some did not want to politicize the film and preferred to only approach it from the perspective of personal memories. The finished film provides an alternative discourse regarding the Revolution; it relies on Sepideh's personal perspective, which highlights the losses endured and questions the dominant narratives. In her segment she says, her childhood, which was a golden age for her, ended with the death of her aunt and the start of the Revolution.

Other themes they tackled in their films were the fear of another war for Iran, memories of the 1980s Iran-Iraq war, the disappointment with the 2009 elections, thinking about emigrating, the importance of music in a family, and their profession.

Most of the segments have a first person narration and feature a dark atmosphere of living in the midst of oppression and confinement. The somber mood of the film contrasted with the lively, communal environment of its production and the editing sessions that I attended.

*Profession Documentarist* starts with Shirin Barghnavard's segment, with a scene from Electronic Arts war game Battlefield 3 that features a U.S. military raid on Tehran. Shirin's voice-over gives a personal context to the war game. She explains that the American soldiers are about to enter her city, specifically, a part of Tehran where she grew up in. The film goes on to tell us her personal story of returning to Iran after a few years in Australia, where her parents live, and her daily life under the threat of war. The fear of an impending war, the effects of the eight-year Iran-Iraq war, and the difficulties of living in a police state are present in the segmented film.

In Sahar Salahshoor's segment we see her packing, while we hear her thoughts on moving out of her apartment, which has a view of the notorious Evin prison. The entire film takes place in the confines of her modern apartment, with its large windows that overlook the highway and the Evin prison across the way. As she packs her belongings her calm voice-over reveals her inability to work during the one year she lived there. She recounts the story of her parents' arrest in the 1980s and their imprisonment in Evin when she was a little girl. She was placed in the care of her grandparents. Her chilling memory frames her simultaneous attachment and repulsion to the view out her window and her memories of the prison.

With an experimental approach, Sepideh Abtahi's film looks back at her family's memories of the Revolution, and a beautiful, activist aunt who died right before the 1979

Revolution succeeded. With family archives and repetition of images she tells the story of the lost hopes of the Revolution, when she herself was three years old. Firoozeh's film recounts how she was stopped at the airport and questioned in 2012. She was accused of *Siāhnamāyi* [negative portrayal]<sup>12</sup> because her earlier film contemplated the headless and breastless mannequins in store windows of Tehran. Only Nahid Rezaei's segment, which ends the film, offers an optimistic view. Her film reviews what she did during the months when it was too difficult to make films. She considered opening a café, but realized that many others had done the same. She studied yoga, and tried to see more of her friends. We see her outside her home most of the time, exploring her neighborhood's charm. Her segment ends with the 2013 elections euphoria, among the cheering voters who were celebrating reformist President Rouhani's win, bringing back hopes of more freedom and better times for young people and intellectuals.

The film has a French distributor and was submitted to several international festivals, and won prizes at the Sheffield, Mumbai, Cairo, and Asiatica festivals. As discussed earlier, connection to international festivals and distribution is very desirable for Iranian filmmakers, because it translates to world-wide exposure, prestige at home, and can lead to better sales opportunities. For years Iran had been marginalized by the U.S. and some European countries, and particularly during the Ahmadinejad administration, it was severely sanctioned. Aside from the possibility of monetary gain, the possibility of invitation and travel to European and Asian festivals is the kind of cultural capital that artists and filmmakers in Iran vie for. Sanctions and stringent visa

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<sup>12</sup> "Siāhnamāyi" is a term used discursively by Iranian officials and in the Iranian media in response to American and European "media wars" against Iran. It is discussed in some length further in the chapter.



restrictions that are imposed by many countries have cut off the Iranian population from much of the world. Younger Iranians who are connected to the rest of the world via the Internet, long for foreign travel and better relationships with the West.

### **Alternative Screening Venues**

Independent filmmakers' discourse of individual rights and freedoms influence moderate politicians and persuades them to allow some alternative voices in the public discourse. Screening permits are given by the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, but for a film that crosses many red lines, such as *Profession: Documentarist*, which features pre-revolutionary women singers, discussions about Evin Prison, and the 2009 demonstrations, a permit was not possible. The seven women filmmakers were aware of their limits and showed the film in private, informal screenings at various unadvertised locations, such as in an acting school, in galleries, and in homes. When the Rouhani administration began opening up the cultural sphere and the House of Cinema was reopened, the film was selected for the annual festival of the House of Cinema in August 2014. It was one of the 58 finalists for best documentaries of the year, but as expected it was not a winner. However, its inclusion among the finalists meant that it would be shown at the House of Cinema's screening room during the documentary film week, when finalists were screened. The filmmakers were pleasantly surprised to be able to show their work in a semi-public space. Sahar Salahshour, one of the filmmakers, said she never expected to have the film shown at a venue like the House of Cinema ("A report from discussions," 2014).

In Iran alternative screenings were usually limited to private showings in colleges, homes, and galleries, like Kaf or at Mrs. Nasrin's home. In Iran it is customary to call

women and men by their title and last name. She held bi-weekly screenings of social documentaries in her home for her friends and anyone who loves documentaries. In these screenings filmmakers were present and could have a space for dialog and discussion. Unlike the formal or semi-formal environments in festivals like DEFC's Vérité Festival and The House of Artists, where screening permits are required and filmmakers and their audience all observe the veil and practice self-censorship, in these informal screenings the setting was more relaxed and filmmakers and their audience could discuss the films in depth and freely in a friendly setting.

At Nasrin's the viewers were mostly middle-aged, middle class women with backgrounds in education or journalism. They were the products of the Revolutionary years, aware of their social conditions, well spoken, and interested in bettering their society. They were generally supportive of the invited filmmakers and the topics of their films. I attended several of their bi-weekly sessions. One was a film by Mojgan Inanlou, *The Sky is Safe* (2012), about the children of Iran-Iraq war martyrs, who are now ashamed of their fathers' fate. They refuse to be used by the state for propaganda purposes, in return for benefits that are normally awarded to martyr families. They believe that Iran's situation has worsened rather than improved with their fathers' sacrifices. The government uses the legacy of the martyrs to promote the values of Islam and sacrifice, but martyr's children are often shunned by their peers, because of their perceived privileged position. These privileges range from access to housing, easier entrance to universities and monetary benefits. As a result some choose to remain silent about their background.

The women in the audience were sympathetic to the film and commended Mojgan's work and courage. Her film had won a prize at the Parvin Etesami Festival, which features female documentary filmmakers. But she could not broadcast it on IRIB because of its sensitive subject matter. It did not have an international presence either. Mojgan believes that her films do not portray Iran in a negative light and that is why she hasn't had much success abroad. However, the film follows the discourse of Iran-Iraq war that is not familiar to Western audiences, with many references to the history of the war. It features a slow paced and poetic language that are common in Iranian aesthetics and difficult for European or American television audiences to appreciate.

Mojgan Inanlou comes from a similar background as the women in Mrs. Nasrin's home. She is middle-aged and with a background in journalism. She expressed her thoughts in a literary language, utilizing the poet Hafez's well-known verses to accentuate her thoughts. The women found her topic focused on a group that has remained invisible in the Iranian society interesting and important. She explained that it took her two years to convince the adult children of martyrs to participate in the film, but a few pulled out after seeing the rough cut of the film. Even though Inanlou's film featured a taboo topic, it did not paint a dark environment. The interviews with the mothers and their adult children were interspersed with scenes of hand-gliding lessons for young people. She spoke of her film's structure in terms of a triangle of father, son, and mother. The father had died in search of adventure and heroism and the son or daughter was critical of their connection to that legacy. Mojgan believed that the mothers were the real heroes. They suffered greatly because of the loss of their husbands and having to raise children who were unhappy about their place in Iranian society.

The film spoke to the views and criticisms of many middle-class Iranians who were active during the Revolution, but now believe their country is going in the wrong direction. These women viewers were not radical in their beliefs and did not operate outside the system. As retired educators and journalists, they believed in reforms and improving their society by educating themselves about the ills of their society and they were thankful to Inanlou. She and her audience spoke in a formal language that is a characteristic of well-educated, middle class Iranians; most of them kept their scarves on, even though they were in a private setting.

Alternative venues have continued to be important during different administrations and provide spaces where young people or women can freely gather, discuss, and view films that challenge the status quo. They are also places where young people can connect with Western aesthetics and intellectual thought. In these discussions organizers and audiences often follow the discourse of individual freedoms and expression. Kaf is a group of young intellectuals and artists who program artistic and alternative films in various empty apartments around Tehran. At Kaf the organizers and the audience were mostly young film enthusiasts in their 20s, who watched films on a makeshift screen. I attended their screening of *Profession Documentarist*. They were all dressed very casually, similar to how young, artistic people in the U.S. might dress. The women did not observe any form of the veil, which is mandatory in public spaces.

Three of the filmmakers of *Profession: Documentarist* were present to respond to comments and criticisms of the viewers. The audience was very critical. One man objected that the film could not be considered an “alternative documentary” because several episodes were cliché ridden, fetishizing the music of Googoosh (a pre-Revolution

pop icon). He thought the film was more like an old album of photographs. He liked Sepideh Abtahi's segment, because in it the discussion of the 1979 Revolution was trauma-ridden, and not an expression of resistance. He thought it was direct and honest, like a traumatized patient. In response filmmaker, Mina Keshavarz explained that they were not trying to make an alternative film, but wanted to document the reality of their situations and the issues they were dealing with. Three years ago the conditions were dark and in that historical period they were thinking and dealing with war, immigration, and the possibility of changing their professions. Amir Hossein Sanaei, who organizes the *Raybon Mostanad* website, defended the filmmakers and said that 99% of Iranian cinema is government sponsored. He thought that it was important that these independent, personal films were made. But many in this audience believed the film needed to reach deeper.

Another event at the Aran gallery in mid-town Tehran in August 2014, demonstrated how filmmakers and scholars connected to the West and spread new ideas among their colleagues. A group of filmmakers and intellectuals were invited by *Vamostanad* website for a discussion on 'microhistory' and how it applies to Iranian documentaries. Behzad Khosravi Noori, one of the organizers, is a visual artist and educator who teaches at University of Gothenburg in Sweden and is connected to Iranian cultural world. He helped the Swedish academy invite filmmaker Pirooz Kalantari in February 2014, to show his film, *Reading Salinger in the Park* (2013), in the context of talks and screenings on microhistory. In their website they defined microhistory in the following manner:

Microhistory, as a distinct approach to scientific historiography, grew out of wider post-war concerns about the failings of Western modernity while also

contributing to the overarching project of a “history from below”. Spearheaded by a group of Italian historians, it gained momentum during the ‘70s and received its international breakthrough in 1980, when Carlo Ginzburg’s *The Cheese and the Worms* was first translated into English. (“Microhistories,” 2014)

Back in Iran Behzad, Pirooz Kalantari, and Mina Keshavarz decided to hold similar events on the topic. Since this subject resonated with what some Iranian filmmakers have pursued in their films, they decided to hold discussions and film screenings on the idea of history, based on individual stories and experiences. Their aim was to highlight personal films’ and essay films’ power to tell stories that are overlooked in the grand histories of our times. These discussions and screenings were a direct outgrowth of the Swedish university event.

I attended the first event of three, held in the summer of 2014 at Aran gallery. Behzad gave a talk about microhistory, highlighting its principles. It was the idea that a small unit (an individual, an event, or a small community) can reflect a larger whole (Magnusson & Szirarto, 2013, p. 149). Then they showed two essay films, *Madame and Little Boy* (2009) by Swedish filmmaker Magnus Bårtås, and Pirooz Kalantari’s film, *Reading Salinger in the Park* (2013), about his contemplation on Park-e Shahr (city park). The topic of microhistory resonated with Iranian documentary filmmakers because of the proliferation of filmmaking among non-professionals and interest in personal filmmaking. In recent years many have begun to document ordinary lives and events, which according to producer Saeed Rashtian (2013), is due to living in difficult conditions and the need to make sense of them.

Aran was located in a small alley in central Tehran, in a middle class neighborhood in an older section of the city. The renovated and simple interior space featured large

canvases. The audience was mainly other filmmakers, artists, and writers, most of them in their 20s and 30s; many knew each other. During the discussion, Pirooz talked about new forms of filmmaking, which he thought should expand to include non-filmmakers recording their daily lives. He distinguished between film and cinema – that all films need not be part of the cinematic tradition. Films can be made by all sorts of people who want to visually record their thoughts and lives; they can be shown in spaces other than theatres, as in galleries and homes. This discussion was not limited to the space of the gallery and the audience who were present there. Organizers planned to bring this topic to a wider public by putting it on the *Vamostanad* website and publishing an article about it in the nationally distributed newspaper, *Sharq*.

One person commented that the film was against the prevalent narratives of documentary cinema. Someone else asked if the film was a discussion of what is absent, rather than what is present. Pirooz responded that he did not plan the film with precision and as a closed structure. He expressed his hopes that documentary filmmaking would become freer and filmmakers could have fun in the process, without expecting their films to enter festivals or find formal distribution. He was inspired by the hundreds of films that are submitted to Iranian festivals, which come from non-filmmakers, as well as filmmakers. They are valuable records of every-day life. Pirooz is one of the influential documentary filmmakers and organizers. His writings and organizing has led filmmakers to be more independent and make films on personal stories.

The Aran event led to a follow up screenings, including Poorya Jahanshad's film. *A Woman at My Side* (2014) is a personal film about the filmmaker's wife and her experiences during pregnancy and the birth of their child. Another event was inspired by

the microhistory discussion and held by documentary filmmakers' guild (IRDFA) members. In the fall of 2014, Nahid Rezai organized a symposium with the participation of younger filmmakers, titled, "Representations of Everyday Life in Documentaries." The importance of these private screenings led the moderate administration of Rouhani to accept the proposal of Art & Experience group to start an alternative screening series in a number of Tehran theatres.

These activities demonstrate how an idea or a movement in the West, such as in Sweden with Bartos Bärtås's writings on essay films and their screenings resonated with groups of filmmakers in Iran. This transfer of information and knowledge to Iran was not a simple, a one-way exchange. It took place via an Iranian expat who is involved with visual artists in both countries, and was guided by Pirooz Kalantari, who is rooted in Iranian documentary cinema, and is a proponent of non-cinematic filmmaking. However, the Swedish event solidified Pirooz's thoughts, and legitimized it further, because Western artistic and intellectual movements are held in high esteem in Iran. These exchanges brought the ideas of Western filmmakers and intellectuals to Iran, but in the process, those ideas were transformed and adapted to the needs and aspirations of Iranian filmmakers.

### **International Film Festivals and Local Venues**

The relationship of filmmakers with European and international markets is complicated and needs to be explored, as it leads to difficult predicaments. As Shohat and Stam (2001) note, global distributions of power often make "'First World' countries cultural transmitters, and to reduce most 'Third World' countries to the status of 'receiver'" (p. 30). Filmmakers vie for international attention, because traditionally film



markets in the West determine documentary standards. Prizes in these festivals bring national and in some cases, international recognition and possibility of working with major television channels, globally. The same recognition places filmmakers inside Iran on a watch list, especially if their films are critical of life in Iran, and they are accused of *siāhnamāyi* [negative portrayal]. Additionally, among their peers and intellectual audiences, catering to foreign tastes is also shunned and ridiculed. Most filmmakers make films for their national audience or their peers, though they also hope for international recognition. A few who are internationally recognized appear to consider their European markets above and beyond the national one.

In the screening of *Profession: Documentarist* at Kaf, I witnessed the criticisms their film provoked even among some of their peers. The young viewers at Kaf felt that the film catered to foreign audiences and did not delve deeply into the topics they were exploring. They critiqued its Western perspective. One viewer said that to talk about the dark environment of that period was to describe what was obvious, but what the film required was more precision and exploration of the different layers of the issues. She thought the film was made for foreign audiences, not Iranians. This was a charge that is often made against films that have a strong international presence. One of the filmmakers answered that they did not see themselves as activists, but wanted to record the psychological conditions they found themselves during this this difficult period.

The European and Western interest in Iranian art and films is part of a complicated history, with roots in colonialism and Western interest in oriental art. Edward Said (1998) argued that that orientalism as a system of knowledge was developed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to support the hegemonic belief that European

identity was superior and the orient was backward and in need of Europe's civilizing mission. Iranian cultural history of the early and mid twentieth century has been shadowed by European influence and cultural superiority. Many filmmakers look to Western festival acceptance as ultimate validation which exposes their films to larger markets, a desirable outcome for any filmmaker. Since the 1990s Iranian filmmakers have done well in these festivals and continue to receive international attention. Film festival programmers in the West, often with the best intentions, act as unwitting gatekeepers. They usually admit films from Iran that fulfill European and Western preconceptions that are historically determined by Orientalist tendencies. Bill Nichols (1994) outlines the attraction of programming foreign films for festivals, particularly those from inaccessible regions. He compares the audiences to tourists who "submerge themselves in an experience of difference," which allows them to temporarily "go native" (Nichols, 1994, p. 17). Nichols (1994) guides us to think about the frameworks of film festivals, "what processes govern it, what goals propel it, and what sense of self [they] engender" (p.19)?

While Nichols (1994) wants Western viewers to ask questions about the nature of film festivals and the kind of self it produces, we may also question the types of films and filmmakers festivals and film markets engender. Filmmakers are subtly encouraged to repeat the discourse of repression in Iran, which in turn antagonizes state officials. State repression exists and documentary filmmakers rightly believe that they need to express the problems of their society. During the Ahmadinejad presidency, the *siāhnamāyi* [negative or dark portrayal] charge was made against many documentary filmmakers and

they defended themselves against this term. They challenged the term, as Mina Keshavarz explained it in her article in the Vamostanad website:

If anyone expresses the truth in any manner, he or she will be accused of “siāhnamāyi” .... It is a word that Iranian documentary filmmakers know well, because in various situations and conditions they are accused of it. Your film could be about a simple environmental issue or a tough social problem like addiction, but the presentation of truth makes it problematic. You are accused of giving it a negative expression, because you have shown the actual conditions.... This label is unjust for a documentary filmmaker whose heartfelt films are made so that the problems of his or her society are discussed, and addressed. (Keshavarz, 2011)

Filmmakers are often stuck between Iranian leaders’ paranoia of the West and the anti-Iranian discourse in the West. Another aspect of the structures of inequality between the West and the global south exists in imbalances in the international media outlets and markets. American or European produced films about Iran that enjoy world-wide distribution like, *Argo* (2012), *Rosewater* (2014), *Not Without My Daughter* (1990), and *Persepolis* (2010), all highlight the difficulties of life in Iran, and most television programs and news coverage of Iran also follows the same trajectory. Such negative portrayals of Iran are so pervasive that in some rare programs when this kind of representation does not exist, explanations have to be provided. In a 2014 CNN program, Anthony Bourdain visited Iran to examine Iranian cooking. The host had to repeatedly express how surprised he was to find that Iranian people were friendly, welcoming, and happy to meet a foreigner, and that women were outspoken and active in the society (Bourdain, 2014).

While it is not possible to fully experience the lives of Iranians through their films, a great many of the films that are selected in international festivals communicate frameworks that Westerners are already familiar with, such as exoticism and mystery, oppression of women, political and social intolerance, and Islamic extremism. Iranian

officials and many of the intellectuals are keenly aware of the colonial history of the region and the Iranian Revolution was in part a reaction to foreign domination. *Estekbar-e jahani* (world oppression) is a term that is often used by the leadership in their anti-Western discourse, when they talk about the U.S. and its allies' global ambitions. Filmmakers are accused of collaborating with dubious Western agenda regarding Iran's governing body, and terms like *siāhnamāyi* are used to censure them. For this reason filmmakers have to carefully thread the borders of self-expression, critical voice, and international success.

If a filmmaker sells films to transnational channels that broadcast programs critical of the Iranian political system, they are placed on a watch list, questioned, and sometimes imprisoned. Mojtaba Mirtahmasb, Mahnaz Mohammadi and many others who sold their films to BBC-Persian were subjected to lengthy interrogations, arrests, and imprisonment. After the 2009 uprising and the belief of the hardliners that Western powers and Western media was complicit in the uprising, restrictions against filmmakers escalated. Internationally, the most publicized case was that of Mazyar Bahari, a Canadian/Iranian journalist and filmmaker who was very active in the documentary world in Iran. He was arrested during the unrest, and subsequently wrote a book about his prison experiences. His book was well-received in the U.S. and Jon Stewart was moved by his story. Stewart subsequently directed the film, *Rosewater* (2014), based on the book. Despite Stewart's efforts to lighten up the film, it was yet another film that fit in the Western discourse regarding Iran.

## Summary

Informal screenings in people's homes or in galleries are ways that filmmakers have devised to circumvent stringent rules and the lack of opportunities for presenting films that fall outside the dominant discourse. In Iran, where productions are increasing many fold, official venues have not expanded significantly. Organizing and attending events have also become a part of filmmakers,' intellectuals,' and artists' social life, where they meet like-minded people, and form friendships and networks. These activities are part of an alternative discourse that is informed by a desire for expanded freedoms and Western influence. They are inspired by artistic events in European and American cities, as the Aran gallery events demonstrated. They consist of forums for young filmmakers to learn about the craft and the philosophies that support documentary filmmakers, via veteran filmmakers or scholars. They program ground-breaking and experimental films or social documentaries that are not allowed screenings or broadcast on official channels, to discuss and debate them.

The authorities know that these spaces exist, but they do not prohibit most of them, for fear of further disenfranchising the intellectuals and youth. The large numbers of these artistic and cultural events in Tehran prohibit inspection and as Gramsci explains it, forceful intervention is often counterproductive and results in resistance. Particularly in Tehran, hundreds of galleries and informal spaces, many official and some unofficial, have sprung up to meet the needs of younger generations and intellectuals. Some of the smaller events lead to larger events, to articles in national newspapers and spread to formal institutions designated for filmmaking and artistic activity in Iran. Some of the

ideas of the ‘microhistory’ events were later taken up by the IRDFA in a conference and in the 2015 Vérité Film Festival.

Without a screening permit, the seven filmmakers of *Profession: Documentarist* worked hard to present their work nationally in free screenings they offered their public in order to expose their work and to discuss it. Without a screening permit, they could not show it at Vérité Festival or other official festivals. The House of Cinema screening, dedicated to the selected finalists, was the culminating event for their film inside Iran. The film had a stronger presence in international festivals and was invited to the prestigious IDFA in Amsterdam. The discussions at Kaf demonstrated the high expectations that young artists and intellectual placed on filmmakers, challenging them to make more honest and relevant films that resonate with Iranian film viewers, instead of catering to foreign tastes. However, the discussion of the film in several venues and the many articles that were written about it, were signs that the international success of the film had generated greater interest for it at home.

At the same time, the history of Western cultural domination shadows international media institutions, like festivals and complicates the filmmakers’ desire for recognition and produces internal criticisms regarding catering to foreign tastes. This history has constructed an inferior image of countries that do not conform to Western standards and produces subjects that see themselves, their work, and their culture through the eyes of the dominant other, as inferior. Hollywood-produced films about Iran normally offer a dark picture of life in the country, and Western broadcasters and programmers often select films that follow this view. Officials and cultural leaders are critical of Western imperialism and see most interactions with Western institutions with suspicion.

Because of Iran's problematic history vis-à-vis the West, filmmakers are well aware of these difficulties. Many continue to take what is useful to them from the West, such as theoretical concepts or social media, and adapt them to their interests and needs. Filmmakers feel justified to document oppression and difficulties of life in Iran, not just because it sells better in the West, but mainly because it is the domain of their profession. However, in this process they face a dilemma. On the one hand, there is internal repression if they transgress the existing "red lines," while internationally their criticisms of internal issues could be misconstrued in the framework of neoliberal views of Iran that further isolate the country with sanctions and threat of war. Most of the time filmmakers do not push back on the limitations and their films are about ordinary life situations. They make films about having children, how villages deal with water shortages, the megacity of Tehran, its parks, its longest street, its impossible traffic, Iran's historical artifacts, their presence and meaning in people's lives, and various other topics that do not cross 'red lines.' Some of these films get national exposure and broadcasts, despite IRIB's preference for films that fit the ruling elite's discourse of religion, or benign nature films or environmental films. Filmmakers want to be free to pick the subjects that are important to them and to exhibit them to wide audiences. Since social documentarists are limited in their access to broadcast channels in Iran, they have created these alternative spaces for presenting their films to their own audiences. They have created an active film world that engenders discussions and debates and lead to the production of even more films and articles about life in Iran.

## **CHAPTER 6**

### **DOCUMENTARY APPROACHES TO REALITY: WAR, THE CITY, AND THE SELF**

Iranian documentary films are made on many topics and with various styles, inspired by Iran's poetic aesthetics, Western trends, and institutional preferences. Like elsewhere, some of the genres of documentaries are nature films, historical films, social documentaries, industrial documentaries, and recently, personal documentaries. My focus in this chapter is on social and personal documentaries, because independent filmmakers have to surmount various economic, social, and political conditions to make these films. I examine how since 1997, the social and political environment influenced filmmakers to make films mainly on women, the city, the arts, and their own lives. Filmmakers have followed the discourses of Shi'ism, nationalism, realism, post-modernism, or a hybrid of these to create their work and portray the world around them.

In Iran popular expression via documentaries began with the Revolution, it subsided when the state tightened its control in the 1980s, and grew again in the 1990s when moderate administrations took office. Since the 1990s a growing number of trained and untrained, young and veteran filmmakers have made thousands of documentaries of different styles and shapes. This growth also came about due to technological transformations of filmmaking that expanded documentary production worldwide and allowed filmmakers to make films with small, inexpensive cameras and edit them easily. Technological changes in filmmaking coincided with the opening in political and social environment and the coming of age of a young generation, giving rise to increasing interest in make various kinds of films, including documentaries.



In this section I review a small selection of documentaries that are illustrative of some of the main discourses that Iranian social documentarians follow. The poetics of films, as Bordwell (2008) defines it in terms of style and form, are determined by artistic intention, peer norms, institutional and technological constraints, and social and cross-cultural influences (p. 11). These films are selected based the artistic and social influences that gave rise to them. They were mainly made after 1997, when documentary filmmaking became more popular and moved towards relative independence from state institutional determination. Two older films that continue to influence younger filmmakers are also included, due to their historical significance. In recent years filmmakers have referred to them and have been inspired by them.

The most prevalent types of documentaries made in Iran are expository, observational, essay, and personal films. Bill Nichols (1991) explains how these modes developed historically, mainly in the U.S. and Britain. Expository documentaries, under the influence of positivism in the West featured voice of God narration and explained aspects of the historical world in factual terms. Observational films utilize the technical aspect of camera's ability to observe unobtrusively and record events and life as it unfolds. The observational mode features non-intervention by filmmakers while filming and shows life as it unfolds in the present. It is also prevalent in ethnographic films that stress non-judgmental, unobtrusive mode of observation and a sense of unmediated approach (Nichols, 1991, p. 42-43). Interactive films demonstrate the involvement of the filmmakers in the filming process through interviews and their presence. Interactive films bring awareness to the situated presence and local knowledge, which comes from the filmmaker's interaction with the subject (Nichols, 1991, p. 44). They are best exemplified

in the films of Jean Rouch in France and the ‘cinema vérité’ style. Jean Rouch is one of the admired European filmmakers who came to Iran and his films are studied and admired by many documentary filmmakers.

Finally, via Michael Renov (2004), I add the category of personal, ‘self portrait,’ or autobiographic films, made under the influence of second-wave feminism in the West (p. 171). These films foreground “politics in everyday life [and] encourage the interrogation of identity and subjectivity.... Struggles for equity in the public sphere [are] joined by interrogations of personal conflict, of private histories and interiorized struggles” (Renov, 2004, p. 171). At this time ethnography was also moving away from universal truths towards what Clifford Geertz called “a keen sense of the dependence of what is seen upon where it is seen from and what it is seen with” (As cited in Renov, 2004, p. 176), it became evident that cultural identity of the observer also influenced the observation. The women’s movement in the West brought with it an awareness of personal and identity issues of race, sexuality, and ethnicity. Personal and experiential knowledge became politically charged (Renov, 2004, p. 177). In Iran essay films developed from Iran’s literary history. Essay films and autobiographical films are also the outcome of limited funding or restrictive political environment and the desire of marginalized filmmakers to express themselves and find their voice.

### **Expository Films and Poetic Expression**

The expository form entered Iran via the United States Information Service (USIS) sponsored documentary initiative led by Syracuse University team from 1951 to 1959. They created propaganda films in support of the Shah or informational films on development projects in rural areas of Iran. They also trained about eighty Iranian

filmmakers (Naficy, 2012, p. 63). However, Iranian expository documentaries seldom fully embraced the all knowing, objective stance of American or British documentaries. Today filmmakers, particularly those who work for IRIB use this mode. However, Iranian expository films are usually imbued with poetic sensibilities that are rooted in Iranian literature.

Expository films and observational films usually require the support of institutions, either because of their formal structure or in the case of observational films they rely on funding for the length of time their production requires. Personal and essay films are more easily accomplished independently, which attracts younger filmmakers and those who have come from literary or journalistic backgrounds and want to express their personal vision. Western influence has also steered filmmakers to express their personal voice.

Cultural interactions with Western countries began during the Shah's reign and brought various ideas through exchanges in film festivals and film clubs. Educated and elite documentary filmmakers like Ebrahim Golestan, Kamran Shirdel, and Parviz Kimyavi in the 1960s developed their own styles that were influenced by Iranian and European aesthetics. They had become interested in making films that critiqued inequalities and other problems during the Shah's totalitarian rule. They were part of a small, elite group of filmmakers and intellectuals, some Western educated, with access to state-owned institutions that sponsored film production.

One of the major forces in documentary cinema in the 1950s was Ebrahim Golestan and his collaborators, mainly poet Forough Farrokhzad and Fereydoun Rahnama. Golestan made classic documentaries like *Moj, Marjan, Khara* (1962), which

were commissioned by the oil industry, but they transcended the industrial genre. He helped poet Forough Farrokhzad make *House is Black* (1962), commissioned by a women's charity group. This influential film that won the Oberhausen festival prize in 1964, was a poetic, impressionistic film about a leper colony in northwest Iran. It is illuminating that in this film some sections follow the scientific, expository style, in which a male narrator describes the facts about leprosy, while most of the film bears the voice and poetic structure and tone of Farrokhzad. Golestan Film Workshop was a hub for the development of documentary filmmakers in the early 1960s, taking commissions from the government and industry, but remaining doggedly independent, thanks to Golestan's fiery personality, and his tough, critical vision. His belief in professional work ethics and staunch resistance to pre-revolutionary government officials, who were in charge of cultural production, shaped the quality of their documentary productions. Golestan's expository style was influenced by realism, formalism, and poetry. His literary inspirations came from Persian poetry of Saadi, Hafez, Molavi (Rumi), and Khayyam, as well as literary works of English and American authors, such as William Faulkner (Jahed, 2005). His films were, according to Hamid Naficy (2011), poetic industrial documentaries (p. 91); they were noticed by Europeans in festivals and by the intellectual community of Iran, and inspired subsequent filmmakers.

Kamran Shirdel was another significant figure from this period. He was educated in Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia in Italy, with well known Neorealist filmmakers like Roberto Rossellini, Michelangelo Antonioni, and Vittorio De Sica (Kamran Shirdel social, 2013). *The Night It Rained* (1967) featured Shirdel's playful style, in line with French New Wave filmmakers that challenged surface assumptions of a

news report. It used multiple layers of contradictory testimonies to re-tell the story of a teenager who apparently stopped a train disaster because of his heroic deeds during a dark, rainy night. However, under the mischievous scrutiny of Shirdel, the truth is elusive. Various characters involved in the story report boastful, but inconsistent versions of the events, and before reflexivity was current in Western films, Shirdel questioned the nature of news reporting and documentary truth. Naficy (2015) attributes reflexivity in Iranian films to the tradition of Tazieh, religious passion plays (personal communication). Shirdel's earlier film, *Tehran, Capital of Iran* (1966) is a harsh indictment of the Shah's uneven modernization that benefited the bourgeoisie and left the majority of the population in dire conditions, even though it was made with government funding. It begins with shiny images of modern Tehran and then unearths the miserable conditions of those living on the margins, in shacks and caves. Unlike Golestan, Shirdel remained in Iran and continued to work on industrial films after the Revolution. For several years he organized the Kish Documentary Film Festival, beginning in 1999.

Poetic language, which has its roots in Iranian classical and modern poetry, had significant and lasting influence on Iranian cinema and in documentaries. A number of the films follow the expository form but adopt a poetic voice in their narration or structure. This type of narration takes historical, industrial, or war documentaries away from the certainties of scientific expression.

Such disparate films like *Moj, Marjan, and Khara* (1962) by Ebrahim Golestan made for the Iranian Oil Consortium, or Morteza Aviny's *Revayate Fath* series on the Iran-Iraq war use metaphor and allusion. Golestan's films are expository but also incorporate a poetic structure. He has named 13<sup>th</sup> century Iranian poet, Saadi, as his main

influence (Jahed, 2007, p. 18). Aviny's poetic narration is influenced by religious poetic traditions of *noheh* and *marsieh*, which are elegies sung in praise of the Shi'ite imams. Contemporary filmmakers continue to use the poetic voice-over for many of their expository films. Filmmaker Hassan Naghashi uses tenth century poetry of Ferdowsi to illustrate the ruins of Persepolis or other historic sites in his films.

*Moj, Marjan and Khara* (Wave, Coral, Stone, 1962) by Ebrahim Golestan was commissioned by Iran Oil Consortium, to document the building of the largest pipeline of that time, in the Persian Gulf's Khark Island. It was an expensive film project that took three years to document the process. Golestan worked with European and American companies, but maintained his independent vision. *Moj, Marjan and Khara* is an industrial documentary but it surpasses the genre and takes on formalist and poetic qualities that display work and human struggle. In the film's opening a large oil tanker approaches the port and workers prepare the dock for its arrival. The voice-over begins, "The ship hesitates for a couple of days, holds on to land, and puts its anchor into the depths that are centuries old" (Golestan, 1962). Then it cuts to underwater scenes of the ocean, the fish swimming among coral and reef. The voice over contemplates the fish that roam the sea, unaware of progress and construction, in the hands of their destiny. Once the camera emerges above the water, it nears a deserted section of the island of Khark and enters an ancient ruin. Again the voice over ponders the passage of time and times gone by, when the world was the abode of fish and people prayed to the stars. "The waves, the waves come and go, they search, they take away. People have gone, people have come, the sun rises, the sun sets..." (Golestan, 1962). What follows are scenes of the locals, steeped in their ancient traditions interrupted by the arrival of airplanes,

helicopters, and ships as modernity suddenly transforms their island, which is chosen as a new port for the transport of oil.

The slow tempo of the shots changes to furious cuts of machinery and modernization. Machines cut into and explode rocks and land. The classical Persian music of the earlier scenes is replaced by loud and repetitive sounds of machinery. The locals, Westerners, and urban Iranians were filmed for over two years, as they worked hard to prepare the island for the new industry. Roads were built, land and rocks were moved with machinery, and explosions made way for a new port and for the longest pipeline of its day. They built giant tanks that held thousands of gallons of oil. While the film celebrates modernization and the hard work of Iranians and Westerners in building an oil industry, some of the narration shows ambivalence towards progress. The expository narration that outlines each step of the construction and excavation of oil is juxtaposed by contemplations like, “Now rocks and stone remain with the pain of loss of treasures, stolen by humans from the depth of the centuries” (Golestan, 1962). The final scene of Golestan’s film celebrates the result of hard work and modernization, but ends with a famous final line, as the camera stays on the wake of the departing oil tanker, “The land of pearls is resting; coral and fish are in the hands of destiny; nothing is gained except a frothy wake” (Golestan, 1962). Some have interpreted this final line as criticism of foreign oil interests during the Shah’s reign, which took the oil away and left only a frothy residue for Iran. However, in the framework of the entire film, the line appears to be a reflection of the inevitability of modernization and its benefits, while it questions what is left behind for the land and the earth. The film was lauded as a classic in Iran. Houshang Kavousi a contemporary critic praised it, “Your film is a poem of mythical

proportions about human struggles against nature” (Mehraban, 2009). To this day Iranian filmmakers study it and are inspired by it.

In Golestan’s documentaries, the poetic language and the structure of the films do not lead the viewer to an agreed upon conclusion about the world, but open the subject to questions and analysis. The narration, though poetic, often has an official tone and rhetorical style that lauds the modernizing efforts. Then there are reflections that question what the process does to the earth and the ancient traditions.

*Chronicle of Victory* (1985-1995) was a television series on the Iran-Iraq war made by one of the Islamic Republic’s most respected and ideological filmmakers, Morteza Aviny. He was entrenched in the discourse of the Islamic regime, professing faith in God, martyrdom, self-sacrifice, and spirituality (Naficy, 2012, vol. 4, pp. 12-21). Documentaries in the early period during and after the Revolution and the eight-year war with Iraq were mainly produced by state television and were predominantly about the Revolution and the war. Aviny is lauded for years of tirelessly filming in the front lines with his crew and finally dying in a mine explosion. His *Revayate Fath* (Chronicle of Victory) series were shot in an observational mode, but stayed within the dominant Islamic discourse and glorified the war. The films focused on the soldiers on the front lines as they prepare and fight the Iraqi enemies. There is a mix of observational filming and the self-conscious reconstruction with poetic voice over, as Aviny sits in front of the editing table, watches and contemplates their heroics. At times we hear the soldiers’ declarations regarding their sacred mission. The poetic narration written by Aviny, praises the soldiers with *noheh* and *marsieh* style of Shi’a religious singing in praise of slain martyrs. He speaks to the sacrifices the soldiers made willingly to uplift their soul



for humanity. In this period there was little discussion of nationalism as a motivation for fighting the war. Nationalism entered the dominant discourse later with Khatami and Ahmadinejad's presidencies. Though for the soldiers, defending their home and country was a strong motivation.

Aviny believed that a revolutionary filmmaker's mission was to promote Islamic values. "... a film is the result of a filmmaker's inspiration. However, if one entirely immerses oneself in God, then God will inspire his works and appear in them. That is my goal, not my claim" (As cited in Naficy, vol. 4, 2012, p. 15). This series was the longest running television documentary program that was broadcast almost daily for ten years on state controlled IRIB (Iranian Radio & Television Broadcasting) (Varzi, 2006). Speaking about it, Aviny explained it in terms of the sacredness of war, as it was practiced by the Islamic regime, "The film shows you how to get closer to God. We made a film that kept the war holy" (Varzi, 2006, p. 96). According to Naficy, Aviny's films are shaped by sacred subjectivity, which is based on martyrdom and the union of the self with God (p. 12). The soldiers are seen as holy instruments that fight for justice and God.

One episode, *Yaadi az Se Delbākhteh* (Remembering Three Lovers, 1986), begins like many of the segments, with Aviny looking at the screen of his editing table. It shows a soldier saying he loves the Imam [Khomeini]. Aviny writes in his pad and his poetic voice-over declares that his duty was to tell the story of the war (fat-h), "but how could language express what was happening?" In another segment, the camera follows a group of soldiers as they assess the position of the Iraqi enemy. A soldier explains that the Iraqi's are surrounded in Mehran, and they have no choice but to retreat. There is a stark contrast between the immediacy and liveliness of the observational images of soldiers in

the heat of action and Aviny's poetic and formal exaltation of their actions, which freezes them in a mythologized space. He explains that three of the men were martyred and by remembering them, their path is kept alive. In re-editing the images of the soldiers to meet the Islamic ideals, the original meaning of the image is depleted and a cultural meaning is attached to it, as Barthes (1957) explains it (p. 110). In this film, soldiers on a battlefield take on the ideological position of holy fighters for the righteous mission of Imam Khomeini.

Although the highly ideological war years are in the past, the office of the Supreme Leader closely monitors the moralizing discourse of state television. The ruling elite hinders honest depiction of social issues and critical documentaries usually do not have broadcast opportunities on IRIB channels. However, critical social documentaries are still made independently or in connection with other branches of government that are more civic minded.

### **Poetic Narration in Historical Films**

Hassan Naghashi is from a new generation of filmmakers and began his career in the historic city of Yazd, in central Iran. His films focus on history and architecture and are inspired by nationalism. Naghashi's films are usually funded by Iranian state television or DEFC and are often shown on state television. They feature a straightforward use of poetic voice-over that evoke idealized and mythic pre-Islamic history. In many of his films made in the last decade, like *Mashi va Mashianeh* (Adam and Eve, 2006), he uses poetic verses from Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* (1010 CE), The Gats (Zoroaster's words), and the Vedas. He employs a poetic narration that is laid over images that are not always integrated with the text. These films are well-crafted and

follow an established tradition. In these documentaries the poetic narration is used stylistically.

*Mashi va Mashianeh* (2006) is about the myth of creation of Adam and Eve, as they are represented on the old door knockers of historic homes, in Yazd. Nowadays due to their value in the antique market, many of these knockers are stolen and sold to tourists. People in the old neighborhoods explain that their ancestors lived there for many generations and are saddened that the knockers are disappearing. For them it signals the loss of their ancient culture. They say the knockers were like the *Shahnameh* (Book of Poems) and without them, they are separated from their history. Naghashi uses shots of different brass koubehs (knockers) and animates the doors and knockers with a voice over that employs various scriptures. On the sound track, different gods from Iranian mythology introduce themselves and come to life via the koubeh designs: Anahita, Tishtar, Khorshid, and Kiomars, expressing their qualities. They recount the story of the birth of the first man and woman, Mashi and Mashianeh.

Shots of old sections of Yazd are used, without any intrusion of contemporary life. There are no other shots of Yazd beyond the old city. The koubehs and old streets and homes are the focus of the film and the residents who have remained there. The stories of the koubehs and the discourse of ancient traditions do not allow traces of recent developments. Unlike Golestan's film that shows the remnants old giving way to the sweeping changes, Naghashi's Yazd freezes in an imagined past, that is nostalgic and mythologized. The poetic voice over and the montage of shots of doors, isolates the old artifacts and mythologize their significance and meaning.

## **Social Documentaries – Realism, the Observational Style, and the Ethnographic Present**

The 1979 Revolution was disruptive to filmmaking, but also liberating in many ways. During the revolutionary years some television filmmakers and cinematographers broke institutional barriers of state television under the Shah, went into the streets, and followed the people. They documented the upheavals and liberation movements that were changing the country. The administration of state TV (NIRT) had been disrupted and many in the rank and file were sympathetic to the revolutionary movement. Scholar and filmmaker, Mohammad Tahaminejad (2011) recounted the significance of a television reportage segment about student demonstrations in front of Tehran University in the fall of 1978, by filmmaker Parviz Nabavi (p. 125). Since the channel never covered news of anti-Shah demonstrations, the broadcast of this report alerted the public to a major change (Tahaminejad, 2011, p. 83).

During the first years of the Revolution, filmmakers like Manouchehr Moshiri, Kianoush Ayyari, and Kamran Shirdel recorded the unrest and demonstrations on the streets of Tehran. The immediacy and importance of the events lent itself to the observational style. Kianoush Ayyari's film, *Taze Nafas-ha* (Newborns) (1979) is a lively, observational film without narration that witnesses the excitement and fervor of the streets of Tehran in the summer of 1979. Young girls distribute Marxist pamphlets to passing cars, people gather around street vendors who sell clothes and revolutionary books, theatre actors perform popular comedies that reflect the changes, and in a park that used to be the center of uptown bourgeoisie, working class teenagers play gleefully, exhilarated with their newly attained freedoms.

Immediately after the Revolution, filmmakers made films on social inequality and the Revolution. Most of them were in the hire of state television, IRIB. Ebrahim Mokhtari (*The Renters*, 1982), Mohammad Reza Moghadassian (*Brickoven Workers*, 1980) and Mohammad Reza Aslani (*Children & Exploitation*, 1981) were some of the filmmakers who made films on social inequality. Mohammad Tahaminejad (*January in Bushehr* 1980), Morteza Aviny and Mostafa Dalaayi (*Revayate Fath* television series, 1985-1995), and a few others made films about the Iran-Iraq war (Kalantari, 2004). Many of them had to leave IRIB during the 1980s purges. Some left the country or they were sent by television executives in 1982 to work in the provinces. Some continued their work in the provinces and awakened interest in documentaries about rural and remote regions of Iran.

From 1985 until early 1990s, during the period of reconstruction after the war, state institutions and industries funded films about various Iranian industries, such as Shirdel's *Gas, Fire, Wind* (1986) about the oil industry and *Cradle of Sun* (1991) about the free port in Kish Island (Kalantari, 2004, p. 32). Films by Morteza Razagh Karimi's Dega Film were made for Iran Air and Ebne Sina Medical Center or Kalantari's *Mobarake Steel* for the steel industry. IRIB was not directly producing documentaries during this time. Then in the early 1990s the series, *Children of the Land of Iran* (1990) was an ambitious fifty two-part documentary series (forty nine were actually made), produced by Mohammad Reza Sarhangi and sponsored by IRIB's channel 2. It was about children from different regions of Iran. With state television funding Sarhangi invited renowned fiction and non-fiction filmmakers to make documentaries on this theme. The series was a huge success in bringing a different model of documentary film production

to television (P. Kalantari, personal communication, 2004). Independent filmmakers each created a separate segment about their visions of children in rural regions. The films were often stylized and nostalgic.

The series signaled a new era in television production and independence for filmmakers; it also featured some of the last documentaries that were shot on 16 mm film. However, the exhibition of the *Children of the Land of Iran* ran into difficulty and television executives did not broadcast many of the episodes, since they fell outside the dominant discourse of the Iranian state television system. The series was left incomplete when Sarhangi tragically died from a heart attack. Some episodes were broadcast on Channel 2 state television and were shown at the fifteenth Fajr International Film Festival (Naficy, Vol. 4, p. 74).

After the Iran-Iraq war, documentary filmmakers were commissioned by state institutions to make social documentaries. Rakhshan Banietemad, Ebrahim Mokhtari, and Pirooz Kalantari made films about housing problems in Tehran, elections, women and youth issues. *Who Do you Show These Films To?* (Rakhshan Banietemad, 1994) is an interactional film that features Banietemad, wandering through a poor neighborhood and talking to the residents about their living conditions. It was a significant film about the dislocation of poor householders in a section of Tehran. A version of the film was made for internal use of the Tehran Municipality, to expose the dire conditions of some residents and helped city leaders enact policies to help poverty stricken neighborhoods. Banietemad then returned to observe the conditions after the changes were made, and the film challenges the benefits of the improvements. She also made *Under the Skin of the*

*City* (1997) about addiction with the collaboration of Pirooz Kalantari. These films led Banietemad to later make successful feature films, based on the same topics.

Other examples of social documentaries of this period are *Cold Hell* (Delaram Karkhizan, 2000) also about drug addiction and Ebrahim Mokhtari's *Zinat, One Special Day* (2000) about a rural woman from the island of Qeshm, who against all odds runs for a seat in local elections. Mokhtari's films featured strong research and an observational style. These films were shot on video, which allowed filmmakers greater access to their subjects, along with sync sound. They were made mainly in observational style, but included some interviews. Some were hard-hitting films that focused on the problems of the country and were deemed by authorities as dark and cynical, and did not get much exposure. Some like *Zinat, One Special Day* (2008) were widely seen and had an international presence. During this period, thanks to workshops led by experienced filmmakers and exposure to international films and festivals, strong films were made in larger numbers and younger filmmakers and women, in particular, entered the field.

Some social documentaries are inspired by leftist discourses that influenced younger generations of Iranians for decades before the Revolution. Films like *Who Do You Show These Films To, Anyway* and *Taze Nafasha* were influenced by leftist and revolutionary discourse. One of the earlier examples are Kamran Shirdel's *Tehran, Capital City of Iran* (1966-1979), about Tehran's development and poverty and *Qaleh* (Women's Quarters, 1966-1980), about terrible conditions of prostitutes in Iran. These films were banned during the Shah's reign, but some were shown after the 1979 Revolution (though *Qaleh* is still not shown widely because of its sensitive topic). After

the Revolution, the state encouraged films that demonstrated the bad conditions during the Shah's regime, though not in the post-revolutionary period.

Social documentaries that were made in the 1980s, such as *The Renters* (1982) by Ebrahim Mokhtari, were commissioned for internal use and not for general viewing. *Renters* is an observational film/reportage about several renter families who are forced to evacuate their homes, due to lack of any protection under the law. It closely follows the family's desperation, arguments, and fights in the face of imminent eviction. As the police stand by, their furniture remains in the street, depicting a devastating situation. This film, along with other films about housing by Fereydoon Javadi and Mohammad Tahaminejad, were part of the *Sarpanah* (Shelter) series, produced by national television for the Ministry of Housing (Kalantari, 2003, p. 23). It featured strong research and its observational style made it very impactful. Reportedly, when they showed *Renters* to members of Majlis, it led to changes in the rent laws (Kalantari, 2003, p. 23). Rakhshan Banietamad made *Who do You Show These Films To?* (1991) is about a poor section of Tehran before and after the neighborhood was upgraded. It includes some testimonials from residents about the changes. This film was also produced for the authorities to educate them about the problems in some Tehran neighborhoods. However, Banietamad returned and followed a few of the residents, to make a more impactful film.

In later years, Mokhtari, Banietamad, and others, made independent social documentaries for general viewing. Social documentaries that honestly depict social conditions are usually not shown in their entirety on state television. They challenge the dominant discourse that proposes the Islamic state is surmounting the social ills of the Iranian nation. On IRIB there are television programs like *Shock* that recounts traumatic



events, such as bank robberies, drug busts, and traffic accidents. They are edited in a fragmented, repetitive manner that does not challenge the dominant discourse. In these episodes, the police and security forces bring a strong sense of order and morality and reestablish order. The perpetrators are portrayed as wrong doers, who often apologize on camera for their wrong deeds and promise to change.

*Our Times* (2001) was made independently by Rakhshan Banietamad, about the presidential elections and a young, female presidential candidate, who despite her high aspirations, struggles to find decent housing for herself, her child, and her blind mother. In her earlier film *Who Do You Show These Films To?* (1994), discussed previously, Banietamad and her camera crew are present in many scenes, as they ask the locals about their lives and housing problems. Interactive films according to Nichols (1991) feature filmmaker's interactions with the subject. In Iran these films are praised in the film community for "inciting reality," rather than remaining passive. Even though Banietamad's job for the municipality was over and the mayor's office had decided to improve the neighborhood based on her finished film for them, she went back with a video camera and a small crew and continued filming. Banietamad sees herself as a documentary activist and the residents opened up to her and told her their problems. For them it was first time anyone wanted to listen to their woes. The municipality decided to demolish the neighborhood. They start anew and moved the residents to other housing. Banietamad followed several of them but found that except for a few, problems were not alleviated.

Several years later, Banietamad made *Our Times* about female presidential candidates in the 2001 elections. President Khatami's first election in 1997 had brought a

lot of hope for the public for freedom and the rule of law. His slogan “Iran for All Iranians” was an inclusive statement that intended to do away with differences between those who followed the regime closely and the rest of the population. It promised more rights for minorities and women. Though he was able to open the political sphere and freedom of press was enhanced, the backlash from the conservatives was severe. They accused, attacked, and imprisoned moderates and those who did not adhere to the dominant discourse. Then with the worsening inflation, Khatami lost some of his appeal among the wider public. Banietemad has positioned herself close to the reformist agenda and has been a supporter of Khatami and his followers.

In *Our Times* and in many of her other documentaries the director is present in the film. In the opening scene we see her driving her car and her voice-over expresses her fears and hopes for the upcoming elections and women’s participation in it. In the open call for candidates in the first round, 700 people had signed up, and 48 of them were women. Banietemad wanted to see who these women were, who had aimed for the highest elected office in their country.

The first 19 minutes of *Our Times* is about young people’s activism for moderate, reformist candidate, Khatami’s reelection. The film begins with Banietemad’s 16 year-old daughter, Baran and her friends, as they set up an elections headquarters to help raise awareness about Khatami and encourage people to vote. On the streets the young activists have a hard time convincing middle-aged passersby that Khatami is the right candidate. Many are cynical and complain about inflation. Yet Khatami is popular with the young. At an event for his election, held in a stadium, there’s a stampede when doors open to attendees, and several people get hurt. One of Khatami’s advisors, Saeed

Hajjarian, who was severely injured from a terror attempt on his life, speaks of his support for Khatami. When Khatami appears the young supporters cheer him on. Although the film starts with a personal voice over and is about her daughter, Baran, it remains detached from the young characters and does not follow them closely. Most of what we understand about Baran and her friends comes from informal interviews, when they relate the joy of voting for the first time and working for their cause.

The second, and the stronger part of the film, which bears Banietemad's style, looks closely at the female presidential candidates, who were all rejected in the first round. It is titled, "Arezoo." She visits several of the candidates to see why these ordinary women decided to run for the highest official position. Several of them are young women, from very modest backgrounds, who felt that women's voices needed to be heard in the Iranian political sphere. They were emboldened by Khatami's reform movement. Among them is Arezoo, a young, personable woman, who claims she understand the public's needs because she has experienced poverty, unemployment, addiction, and wealth. Banietemad decides to follow her more closely.

Arezoo lives with her blind mother and ten year old daughter in a room with a kitchen in a lower middle class neighborhood. She has been told by her landlord, a nice and friendly woman, that their son and his new wife will be moving in and she needs to find other housing. Arezoo reassures and starts looking. We follow her in her neighborhood, at work, in an office job, and in her search for a place. She visits several real estate agencies and they all ask if she lives with a man, like a husband or brother. They appear reluctant when she says she is with her daughter and mother. They take her

to see rooms in homes; some are very small or if they seem suitable, the owners are wary of renting to an unmarried woman. She grows more desperate, as her deadline nears.

While the elections are reaching their final stages and the streets of northern Tehran, where the well-to-do live, are in a frenzy, Arezoo does not have the time to follow these developments. Now she is thinking of sending her mother and daughter to their village, while she continues searching. In the car on her way to the next appointment, she talks about her past, her first marriage to a man she loved, but had to leave because of his addiction, and her second failed marriage. The film concludes with Arezoo moving out, after she is able to secure a place, thanks to a loan from the filmmakers.

Intervention from the director in the life of the film's subjects might raise concerns regarding preserving distance and neutrality in Western documentaries. In an Iranian context, helping someone in need is prized. Arezoo's troubles are not over though, as her boss fires her for not coming to work for three days, while she was desperately searching for a place. The film's bitter-sweet ending is reminiscent of Banietemad's other films and her humanistic outlook and sympathy for the downtrodden. The film is effective, thanks to its character-driven premise and Arezoo's engaging personality. Banietemad is successful both in her documentary career and her feature film directing. She claims that her features are often informed by her documentaries. Her films provide a strong sense of realism and socially relevant topics such as the problems of the poor, housing, and addiction.

***Zinat, One Special Day*** Ebrahim Mokhtari is a veteran filmmaker who has made his mark on Iranian documentary cinema along with the likes of Mohammad Reza

Moghadassian, Mohammad-Reza Aslani, Farhad Varahram, and Manouchehr Tayyab, Khosrow Sinai, and Farshad Fadaiyan. His focus is on social documentaries, usually about women. He began his career as a director in the Iranian television system. He then worked as an independent filmmaker and is one of the founding members and leaders of IRDFA, the Documentary guild. In some of his earlier films, like *Saffron* (1990) he used the reenactment style to capture events. In an earlier film, *The Renters* (1983), made for Ministry of Housing and Iranian Television for their internal use, he used the observational style effectively. The film follows the events of an eviction that unfold naturally, with editing that is based on the logic of the story (Tahaminejad, 2011, p. 136). Mokhtari returned to this style of filmmaking in his subsequent films.

Starting in the 1990s he turned his camera on traditional women in small towns or rural regions, who go beyond the norms and restrictions of their environment. *Mollah Khadijeh* (1996) is about a kind, middle aged woman, who teaches the Quran to children in her home in Yazd. *Mokarammeh* (1999) is about a village woman who discovers art and paints stories about her difficult life as the second wife of a violent man. *Zinat, One Special Day* (2000) is also about a strong, provincial woman, Zinat, who was Mokhtari's inspiration for many years. She was the wife of a local man he knew in Qeshm, who worked in a health center. He first made a feature about her in 1993 based on her life, and then wrote a book on her. He was fascinated with Zinat because in the island of Qeshm in the Persian Gulf, women are traditionally very constricted, embodied in the face masks they wear, even though their clothing is colorful. They shy away from cameras, as Mokhtari stated in his book. "The women of Salakh avoided men in the streets, as if they were carriers of a deadly virus... But the removal of the Burqa (face mask) in such a

closed society, where they view the burka as hijab, was unusual; and I was sure that Ahmadi's wife [Zinat] had suffered greatly for her actions" (Mokhtari, 2005). It was unprecedented that this woman had put aside her facemask and was working as a nurse in her village, which badly needed health care. After a successful career, in 1999 Zinat decided to run for local office in local elections, against her own husband. Mokhtari who had been following her life for many years, decided to make a documentary about the elections. Mokhtari was able to make this film because of his long history with Zinat and her family, who were comfortable with his presence.

The film is shot mostly with a hand held video camera and follows the characters intimately. It starts with a photograph of Zinat when she was 16, and her voice tells us she wanted to be a health worker and after much struggle, she was able to do it. We then see shots of women from Qeshm, with their face masks (burqa) standing in a line outside a building, while inside the men are sitting on the floor, in the dark. This empowering shot visually reverses the position of men and women, as it slowly reveals that the women are casting votes, and the men are collecting them. Mokhtari's voice tells the viewer in one of the few voice-overs, that after 13 years of working as a health worker, Zinat decided to run for local *shora* elections. However, the governor of Qeshm asked his team not to film in the voting area or anywhere in the town. So he and his small crew were restricted to Zinat's home. The film continues in an observational mode.

We see Zinat in her kitchen preparing a meal and a few other women help her. A girl, also without face mask, enters and tells her she was helping illiterate voters write their votes. In Zinat's open house, children and women come and go and they all talk about the elections. They discuss how people vote and about those who are for her and

against her. A woman, who may be her in-law, sits on the floor fully covered in a dark veil and remains silent. The camera rests on her from time to time, contrasting Zinat's lively, visible, and eloquent presence.

Early in the film, an elderly man enters and Zinat calls him, uncle. He is out of breath and Zinat takes his blood pressure. He gives her advice not to run and instead help her husband run for office. He says the work is hard and it's a man's work. She laughs and reminds him that he was also against her taking off her burqa, and also against her career as a health worker, but later became supportive. He insists that her job as a health worker and midwife is enough for her, and Zinat gently tells him that their village needs a lot of improvement, like roads, a fire house, and school for girls. She gently declines his advice. In their long discussion he reminds her she has three children to care for and her husband, and she responds smilingly that she cares for all the children of the village. She delivered most of them. He is disappointed, but leaves amicably.

In another scene they watch the news, where President Khatami talks about the importance of the *shora* elections. She is excited and apprehensive about the votes, and worries that she will lose face if she doesn't get many votes. Some of her friends talk about possible cheating. Her husband who is also running is good tempered and she asks him to go vote and bring back some news. Towards the end of the film, someone brings news to a nervous Zinat, She got the highest number of votes, followed by her husband.

Like his other films, Mokhtari allows the events to unfold in an observational style and there seems to be very little interference from the filmmaker. At times Zinat acknowledge their presence when she serves her family's lunch and offers the crew food. Later, she advises them to go to the voting place to film and ignore the ban. Mokhtari

(2013), who is an activist and has spent much of his career on organizing documentary filmmakers and their guild, praised Zinat's soft demeanor and her willingness to listen and converse. He believes that was why she was successful. The protagonist of Moghadassian's film, *Conversation in Fog* (2002), also about the *shora* elections, was inflexible. She argued and was rigid, which Mokhtari thought resulted in her defeat working with the men in her village (E. Mokhtari, personal communication, 2013). Mokhtari likened the difference between Zinat and Azar's behavior to the fate of *Eslahat Talaban*, or President Khatami's moderate followers. Many of them, after their sweeping victory in 1997 and 2002, tried to circumvent conservative politicians, instead of including them. Once the conservatives regrouped and took charge in 2005, they persecuted the moderates mercilessly.

Mohammad Reza Moghadassian's approach to his film *Conversations in Fog* (2002) demonstrates the filmmaker's active presence, as he guides the characters or attempts to convince Azar's stubborn rival to cooperate. There are also many scenes that are set up by the filmmaker to dramatize the events, such as Azar's conversation with her husband at his school. They appear to be reenacting their arguments, as he awkwardly tells her he wants to leave the village to continue his education, while she wants to stay and work for their well-being.

Moghadassian's interventionist or interactive style is not uncommon in Iranian documentaries, due to restrictions on budget and time. But in this film he foregrounds his presence by including himself in several scenes, as he cajoles officials or village elder to give Azar another chance. Moghadassian's film was impactful in that village. After screening the film there, many became supportive of Azar and recognized her good will.



It opened the door for other young women to enter political and social activities (N. Rezai, personal communication, July 2015).

### **The Ethnographic Gaze**

Documentaries about man's survival in nature have a long history. The earliest and best known example is *Nanook of The North* (1922), by Robert Flaherty. Though it was made in the early days of cinema, when the distinguishing features of documentaries had not been firmly in place, *Nanook* was later critiqued for being inauthentic and for its presentation of ethnographic "taxidermy." (Rony, 1994, p. 101). *Nanook's* igloo was reportedly built for filming, and he had acted in many of the scenes, so that the film does not accurately represent his life during that time. David MacDougal (1998) discusses *Nanook's* success in terms of its dramatization. The drama of man versus the elements is built up effectively to a climactic blizzard scene (MacDougal, 1998, p. 103). Flaherty commented about these devices: "Sometimes you have to lie. One often has to distort a thing to catch its true spirit" (Heider, 2006, p. 25).

In Iran the presence of ethnographers in Iran throughout 20<sup>th</sup> century and the success of the 1925 silent film *Grass* led Iranian and Western ethnographers to make many films about Iran's diverse cultures. *Grass* by Merian Cooper and Ernest Schoedsack, who were more adventurers than ethnographers, documents the struggles of the yearly migration of a Bakhtiari tribe in central Iran in the context of Orientalist views of the region. They believed they had returned in time and were witnessing the ways their Aryan forefathers had lived (Heris, n.d.). Many of the films of the series, *The Children of the Land of Iran* (1990) had ethnographic elements and a few used reenactment to portray a way of life that was disappearing. Mahvash Sheikholeslami's films often focus on

characters in remote regions, they also feature a sense of timelessness. In *The Old Man of Hara* (2001) the lone fisherman's life in the Persian Gulf island of Qeshm seems unchanged and unaffected by his environment. The structure of the film is constructed around the serenity of a fisherman's existence. Nichols (1991) discusses the resemblance of this type of documentary to fiction, for its aesthetic choices, character-centered structure, its organization around "the emotional geography of space," rather than an argument, and the nature of the relationship of the viewer to the subject (p. 41-42). The viewer observes the character's behaviors and his development or destiny.

*Old man of Hara* (2001) was shot on video, unlike Sheikholeslami's earlier films. It is typical of her observational style that has many features of ethnographic films. She was educated at London University, and worked on feature films and television series with well known directors. She began making documentaries in the 1990s. Her 1998 film *Youfek/Silk* won the Grand Prix prize at Tempere International Short film festival, but was described by them as a fiction film about a pregnant village woman who breeds silk worms. At the same time, the film was presented at the International Documentary Festival in Amsterdam (IDFA) in 2000. This confusion about the nature of the film is due to its observational style that follows one character closely without voice-over, and its narrative structure.

In *Old Man of Hara*, the presence of the filmmaker and her crew is only felt in the first and final scenes of the film, as their motorboat approaches the old man's abode and finally leaves it. There are no explanations or context. The old man is first seen in a long shot as the boat approaches, working outside his isolated hut. He is closely observed by the camera in a beautiful and serene setting that seem to be untouched by modernity,

without any external explanations, music, or even dialogue. We see him prepare tea on an outdoor wood stove built into the rocks. In the next scene he carefully takes some gasoline from bottles hanging outside his tent and drives his motorbike along the dunes and deserted, unpaved road. He is inside a cave with a shovel, and collects salt from the rocks. We then see him patiently and carefully place long sticks into the inlet area of the shore and attach his net to the sticks. He then prepares his food with rice and dried shrimp; later, he takes a nap. The camera rests on the water rise slowly over the net, while he prepares for his prayers, by washing and doing his ablution. In the morning he untangles his net from the sand, and takes it out of the ebbing water. It is now filled with shrimp and a few fish. He separates the fish from the shrimp, then prepares big pot of water and throws a great deal of salt in it and boils the shrimp. He takes the cooked shrimp and spreads it on a cloth and lets it dry. This sequence moves slowly at his pace and explains what he lives off of, eats, and perhaps sells.

The observational style allows us to witness a few days in this solitary man's daily routines, on the shores of the Persian Gulf. Its poetic serenity emerges from observing his gentle survival in the elements. Unlike some other survival documentaries, it is not dramatized. We do not hear him speak, since he is always alone and we are not made aware of the filmmakers' presence. His connections to the nearby town are not part of the film, whether he sells some of his goods, or just lives on subsistence. There are signs of his connection to contemporary life, like his motorboat, his motorbike and a gold ring. In one of the final scenes we see him watering a cactus and praying, when the camera pulls back we realize he is in a cemetery. He sits next to a grave and is surrounded by other simple graves, thus we are made aware of the cycle of life and the

simplicity of his existence. The ending provides a subtle commentary that his simple life is part of the natural cycle of life and death.

The question arises why the filmmaker has decided to show him alone and untouched by the world around him? These are decisions the filmmaker has planned for in the filming and editing process. It presents a poetic, romanticized, and frozen impression of man's quiet existence in nature, away from modernity. The old man does not speak, which adds to the simplicity of the film and its mystery and his routine and action seem to have remained intact throughout his life and perhaps those of his predecessors.

Several of Sheikholeslami's films, like *Youfek* (1998) and *Persheng* (2002) fall within the tradition of Iranian documentaries that have strong fictional structures. They are centered on individuals or cultures that seem to be spared by the presence of time or modernization, and the director chooses scenes for their beauty and poetry. More recently, Sheikholeslami has made social documentaries that are structured around interviews and hard hitting topics, concerning women's issues. *Article 61* (2005) is a portrayal of several women on death row, who have committed murder to protect themselves or their children. *Where Do I Belong?* (2007) is about Iranian women who marry Afghani refugees and lose their privileges as Iranian citizens. The films were made originally for BBC's Channel 4, and are thus imbued with Western ideological concerns regarding women's position in Iran.

### **Oppositional Filmmakers**

Mojtaba Mirtahmasb makes many kinds of social documentaries since the 1990s. He is best known for his interest in music. He made *Offbeat* and *Back Vocal About Rock*

musicians and the prohibition for women to sing publicly. Although he started making films about religious ceremonies and about art in Iran, he has also been concerned with the social situation of artists who defy dominant restrictions. Mirtahmasb was imprisoned for several months in 2011, accused of collaborating with BBC Persian. He worked with Jaffar Panahi on his 2012 documentary, *This Is Not a Film*.

*Offbeat* [*Saaze Mokhalef*] (2003) by Mojtaba Mirtahmasb is 44-minute film about underground rock music groups who participated in a website contest, sponsored by TehranAvenue.com. The film begins with a traditional musical ensemble packing up. Despite proper permits, they are not allowed to hold their third performance. The frustrated band members are upset, as they are not told what caused the problems. The kind of music they play normally does not arouse difficulties in Iran, while musicians who play Western music face these issues all the time. The rest of the film takes place in young, rock musicians' work spaces, where they music and hang out, or when they are in the offices of TehranAvenue.com.

The objects to senseless official restrictions. Much of the film is based on informal interviews and filmmaker's questions that provoke the musicians to share their hopes and anxieties. We hear from the young musicians that they practice in their basements, or storage houses. Some were kicked out of their spaces because of the sound of their music. They suffer from lack of money and exposure, but they mostly laugh and joke about their hopeless situation. In one scene they talk about their dreams and what they would do if they had money. One young man says he'd buy a decent guitar, since they all play with mediocre instruments. Another dreams of driving a Lamborghini. We

hear some of the questions that Mirtahmasb poses and much of the discussion appears to be in response to his questions.

The scenes of TehranAvenue.com organizers show them planning and discussing the contest. They decide the prize would be a concert in a university hall. These scenes are shot in an observational style, without the intervention of the filmmaker.

TehranAvenue.com was a hip cultural e-magazine, where writers and artists shared their views about the arts and culture in Tehran, and sometimes held events. They started their activities in 2002 and ended them in 2010, after the crackdowns against the 2009 uprisings.

In the final scene of the documentary, the winning musicians gather at the TehranAvenue office to hear that their concert is cancelled. They joke about it. It seems that they never believed that it would actually take place. One of the musicians didn't even show up to the meeting. In Iran conditions are dire for non-traditional musicians, particularly when it is rock music, which is seen as a Western import that corrupts the youth. Rock musicians and their followers are seen as undesirables by the authorities, for openly challenge the values of the Revolution. Mirtahmasb's film exposes these difficulties. The players express the hopelessness and passion of their situation with a nihilistic attitude and jokes.

The film does not give depth and texture of the musicians' lives, which would result from spending long periods filming them. We have a glimpse of their world when they are seated in front of the camera and talk about their dreams, but most of the film is based on informal interviews rather than observational footage. Some of the limitations of independently made documentary films are due to their small budgets. There are some

scenes of the bands practicing, with rough sound recording. We see little outside the jamming sessions or their work spaces to understand the sacrifices they make in order to play. The efforts of TehranAvenue.com writers and organizers in planning the first underground music contest was evident in the articles they wrote about this event. Tehranavenue.com was one of the first sites to pay attention to underground activities of Iranian youth. They admitted that they were able to operate because in Iran few were aware of their music contests but they knew they were being watched by the authorities (Kristianasen, 2004). Many of the contributors left Iran and emigrated and the website was filtered by the Iranian government.

The film is an important document of that period, the lives and cultural expressions of Westernized Iranian youth and the activities of TehranAvenue.com. Subsequently a number of films were made on youth and music, the best known of which is Bahman Ghobadi's film, *No One Knows About Persian Cats* (2013). It a mix of documentary and dramatization about various underground groups and one musician couple's attempts to flee Iran, in order to practice their music freely. Ghobadi made the film right before he left Iran for good. The film was well-received in the West, but it provoked criticism, even among artists and writers. TehranAvenue.com writer, Sima Saeedi, criticized the film as "neo-liberal schlock," that romanticized slick musicians oppressed by the regime, attempting to escape Iran for freedom in the West (Elahi, 2014, p. 18).

### **Documentary and Fiction**

Mohammad Shirvani follows a tradition that began with Abbas Kiarostami, the most famous Iranian filmmaker, whose films thread between documentary and fiction.

Kiarostami reportedly denies that any of his films are purely documentary. He said his acclaimed film *Closeup*, about a man who impersonates filmmaker Mohsen Makhmalbaf, included many instances of interference by the filmmaker, to recreate a particular story (Tahaminejad, 2011, p. 146). Similarly, Shirvani threads the space between fiction and documentary and believes his latest film, which is an experimental fiction film, is closer to how his imagination works than his documentaries. However, due to its experimental nature he could not show *Fat Shaker* (2014) at the Fajr International Film Festival.

Though the funding for some of his documentaries come from the Documentary and Experimental Film Center (DEFC), he rarely finds any distribution for his films in Iran.

In this way Shirvani is a filmmaker with an independent vision, who challenges the status quo in Iranian cinema. He relies on income from workshops he holds for young filmmakers and at times gets funding from the government. He claims that once he bought a bootleg copy of his first film *Naf* in the streets of Tehran for a dollar, and ‘video-yi’ men who distribute bootleg films, have a few of the films (Shirvani interview with the author, 2013). Some of his films have shown at festivals and art centers though he has never made any money himself from their distribution in Iran. He grudgingly contends that his films are at least widely seen among artists and intellectuals. He states that he doesn’t want to play to “the other side” either, and make exotic films that Western markets are interested in (Shirvani, personal communication, 2013).

Shirvani’s documentaries and films have shown in Europe and the U.S. One of his documentaries, *President MirQanbar* (2005) about an elderly presidential candidate from a northwestern village, was broadcast on Link TV. It was while I worked there as a producer for the Bridge to Iran Series. The film is a quiet and humorous examination of



an old, rural man's simple life and passion for politics. Along with his odd assistant, they travel together on a horse and buggy. The film shows villagers' surprising sense of entitlement to the political process. MirQanbar had first run for town council and failed, and then for presidency. This is a topic that many documentary filmmakers have worked on, like Rakshan Banietemad's *Arezoo*, Ebrahim Mokhtari's *Zinat, One Special Day*, and Mohammad Reza Moghadassian's *Conversation in Fog*.

***Iranian Cookbook*** Mohammad Shirvani's *Dastoor Ashpazi (Iranian Cook Book, 2010)* is a film that is both personal and about Iranian women. The film portrays the women's daily work in the kitchen, cooking for their families. It is an astute observation of women's work and their role in the family and their relationships to their families and husbands. Shirvani is one of the auteurs of Iranian cinema, who has an original voice and his films have garnered international attention. His latest film *Fat Shaker* (2014) is an experimental feature that was shown at Sundance Film Festival, the first for an Iranian film. It also won the best picture prize at the 2014 Rotterdam festival. He has strong connections with European producers and distributors, and has received European and international funding and distribution for his films. Most of the women in the film are related to Shirvani, like his wife, his mother-in-law, his sister, his aunt, and a friend's mother.

The first woman he features is his mother's friend, dressed in a chador. She declares to the still camera in a frontal shot that she will prepare lunch for twelve people. Shirvani states the time, it is 6:44. She says that her work is not tiring and she has been doing it for 37 years. The next woman, his sister, is in a more modern kitchen. Again the camera is still and she addresses Shirvani directly, facing the camera. He states the time,

12:15, when she begins the cooking process. There are a few cuts in each sequence and the camera holds a long shot of the woman cooking. His mother in law's kitchen is an older style eat-in kitchen. She is a lively, middle aged woman who says she has toiled for 35 years for her husband's tribe. Finally, we are in a modern apartment and a small kitchen, which does not look like it is used much. His wife, in her early thirties, checks a recipe on her cell phone and takes out frozen greens to make an Iranian dish. She says making eight cups of rice in the rice cooker will do the job and talks about starving people in a southern province of Iran. The last kitchen is his aunt's where a group of women are preparing a family feast for *iftar*, breaking their Ramadan fast. They are cooking a saffron rice pudding, which is traditional in the month of Ramadan. She says she started cooking at 13 and there is no retirement from cooking. The women appear to be done with most of the cooking, since it's only 50 minutes left to the end of the fast. Finally, we are in an old house, where a very old woman sits next to her son on the carpeted floor. Her son, who we are told is a friend of Shirvani, asks her questions about preparing food. She says she doesn't remember anything anymore. She is the only woman who is shot in a close up, for us to witness the wrinkles of time more clearly on her aged face.

The film goes back to each woman at different intervals, as they continue their cooking rituals, in the lengthy process of preparing Iranian food. Some times other members of the family or children walk in to the kitchen, but the cooking continues. Shirvan's wife is still in an empty kitchen and Shirvani exposes his own expectations. He complains that when he had European friends over, she told them that their food was

prepared from cans, which shocked everyone. She responds that she had almost no time to prepare and she couldn't lie to them.

In the following scenes the women, each in their own kitchens, prepare the lunch spread. Some have help and some do it alone. His mother-in-law's cooking is the most elaborate, as she prepares several complicated dishes. Later the camera records the men and asks them about their wives' cooking. Most of them think it takes an hour or two to cook, while we have witnessed their work for nearly four hours, or more. One of the men, his aunt's husband, says his wife's work is harder than his and believes that a woman needs love and appreciation to be satisfied and happy with house work. In his own apartment the food is set on the counter, as his film crew help set the store bought dishes. They don't seem happy with the situation. By contrast the large family gathering is boisterous and happy. Many dishes are placed on the *iftar* spread and the family eats happily together, suggesting a healthy balance in his aunt's home.

In the first woman's house the old woman clears the table alone after her husband finishes eating. He tells the camera he thinks it took her an hour to prepare the food. At his sister's house, she also cleans up the entire lunch spread alone. Her husband and her kids do not help, despite her requests. She looks exhausted and unhappy. At his own home the dishes are left on the counter, no one cleans and his wife turns off the light. This scene and most of the ones with his wife appear to be scripted and directed. It conveys a stark contrast to the others who serve their families and spend most of their time in the kitchen. The end credits inform us that his friend's 100 year old mother passed away, his wife divorced him, and his sister also divorced. These facts reflect the high numbers of young people who do not remain in their marriages, unlike their parents.

Shirvani's camera keeps its distance from the subject, and casts the characters in sometimes staged, *Don Quixote*-like space. We see his characters as peculiar products of a strange locale, rather than as passionate people with dreams. The distancing and reflexive aspects of the film occur early in the film, when we see the camera crew and Shirvani trying to direct MirQanbar and his assistant. They do not follow his directions when he calls out, "camera, action." This cinematic reflection and distancing is also maintained to some degree in *Dastoor Ashpazi* (Iranian Cookbook, 2008), as the camera remains still and distanced from the women, in a wide shot, and occasionally we hear Shirvani's voice ask questions, or stating the time of day. However, through the repetition of the stories of women, who spend long, arduous hours in the kitchen, we can detect his sympathy for the subjects and for their dedication to their families.

In films that features fictional devices real characters are involved in unusual circumstances in remote regions of Iran and their situations reach dramatic climax and find resolution. Mohsen Abdolvahab's 2001 film *The Wives of Haj Abbas* (Hamsaran-e Haj Abbas) is about the strange relationship of two elderly women. They are the wives of deceased Haj Abbas, who couldn't bear children who live amicably in an old house. It won an award at IDFA. *The Vacant Place of Mr. and Mrs. M* (2012) is about a childless couple's efforts to conceive, *The Trucker and The Fox* (2013) is about a truck driver's passion for filmmaking, and *Atelan* (2014) is about horse training in Turkeman region of Iran. These films have strong production values, are well received by audiences and critics and do well in international festivals. *Trucker and the Fox*, by young filmmaker, Arash Lahooti is an observational record of a trucker's passion for movies and for nature. The film features a fictional structure and is centered on an engaging character. It follows

a truck driver who makes short films about his favorite animals, including his pet fox and birds.

*Trucker and the Fox* (2012) by Arash Lahooti - The film begins with the distraught driver in a hospital, telling another patient about his depression after his favorite fox and the star of his films died. Following his therapist's suggestion he finds another animal and starts another film. The film follows his efforts to search for a fox and a donkey to make his new film with his small format camera. In one scene the truck driver sets up a makeshift screen on the side of a truck on a deserted road and shows his fellow truck drivers short films that his favorite fox starred in. They watch with interest and ask him questions about his animals. The widespread passion of Iranians for cinema and cinematic expression is evident in this scene.

*The Trucker and The Fox* was produced by DEFC, has won prizes in national festivals, and has been presented in several international festivals. Producer and distributor, Mohammad Atebbai believes that the film's strong presence internationally was due to the filmmaker's own efforts and not to DEFC (personal communication, 2013). The film was also included in the Honar va Tajrobeh theatrical series, during the Spring and Summer of 2015, as were the other documentaries that have a dramatic structure. Most of the income of the film's theatrical distribution was collected by DEFC, because of the nature of DEFC contracts.

### **The Younger Generation of Social Filmmakers**

Mohsen Ostad Ali looks at the social ills of society with patience and humanity. *Daybreak* (2014) is about an Iraq war veteran who killed his wife and *Silence* (2013) is about murders committed by family members. In *A Place to Live* (2014), the dark

cinematography, the observational scenes of a group of men who share an apartment, and informal and relaxed interviews honestly depict their difficulties. The film demonstrates Ostad Ali's directing strengths. His films have not been broadcast on IRIB, but have been awarded in Iran and distributed internationally by international distributor, Katayoon Shahabi.

Some of the other young filmmakers that focus on social life are Bahman Kiarostami, Mohammad Kart, Farahnaz Sharifi, Sahar Salahshour, and Mina Keshavarz. Bahman Kiarostami mainly focuses on artists or religious performers. In his film *Tabaki* (2001) he follows professional mourners that are hired to enhance mourning rituals. They perform religious texts that make their listeners cry. The short film is shot in an observational style. Kiarostami with a mischievous eye accentuates the performance aspects of Shi'ite mourning rituals. In one session the men are crying and beating their chests. Then it cuts to the same men relaxing and checking their cell phones when the mourning session is over.

Mohsen Ostad Ali, according to Pirooz Kalantari, is one of the strongest directors of the younger generation. His films usually explore difficult social situations and his character-oriented films bring us close to men and women who have lost a great deal in their lives.

*A Place to Live* (2013) by Mohsen Ostad Ali, is an observational film about men with delinquent histories, who live together in an apartment. We do not see Ostad Ali, or hear his voice, but we feel his presence in few instances when the subjects address him directly. The intimate film brings viewers into collective apartment that functions as a dorm for the men, most of whom suffer from drug addiction. It opens with a lengthy shot

as the sound of radio welcomes another morning and the camera follows a young man, Reza, who wakes up, looks for tea and sugar, while smoking his cigarette. Another man, Pooya, who is a little older, is bent over the kitchen table as he awakens. The young man smokes and addresses the camera, talks about his difficulties living in the house with so many others, having to take pills to fall asleep. He complains about the lack of privacy. He blames it on just one mistake he once made. The older man in the kitchen, Pooya talks to the camera and says he's been there for more than a year and has seen all types in the house, doctors, engineers, and thieves. Some of his voice is over verite footage of the men doing their chores and preparing breakfast. There are bunk beds in each room, but the rooms are neat, and the men are seen cleaning and putting order to their place.

The 70-minute film continues in this vein, as it follows the men closely in their jobs and in the apartment. They are candid about their defeats and problems, the main ones are addiction and being abandoned by their families. One of the men, Saeed, was a Taekwondo champion and had a business. He lost it all and regrets his past. Another man, Abbas, thin and worn from his addiction, cleans up and goes to visit his daughter, carrying a box of sweets. At his ex's house the girl comes down and meets him in the stairway but doesn't want to go out with him. The camera stays on him as he sits alone in a café and talks to her on the phone. She calls and says she is sorry not to see him. There is only one scene where we see the men use drugs; Pooya helps another guy take his dose.

Among these men is a young clergy, an anomaly among the others. We see him inside his mosque. When his unruly congregation argue and complain that it not quiet when they want to pray, Ali gets upset and tells them that if they want peace and quiet

they can pray at home and leaves. Back in the house we see him singing and smoking a cigarette. He says he likes the dorm, feels close to the men, and likes smoking. Later in the film we see him say goodbye to the others and leave, as it is obvious that he has other options.

In one of the final scenes the men prepare for the Persian New Year celebrations on the first day of Spring. They shop and gather together. Hossein sings a melancholic song, *mastiyam darde mano dava nemikone* (Even drinking doesn't heal my woes) and they dance. The sympathetic eye of the filmmaker allows us to share the men's friendships and their sorrows. The title reads, "A few months later." It shows the same apartment lying vacant. We are informed that the place was shut down because it was operating illegally. This mixture of informal interviews and observational shots allows us to closely and without any judgment follow the men and get an intimate picture of their lives. We see the humanity of these men, who are normally shunned in society.

*A Place to Live* garnered strong reviews and was awarded first documentary prize at the Fajr Film Festival in 2014 and received a prize at the Vérité Film Festival. Ostad Ali studied in an Iranian university's cinema program and learned his craft by watching documentaries (personal communication, July 2014). British filmmaker, Kim Longinotto's award winning documentary, *Divorce Iranian Style* (1998) about an Iranian divorce court, was an inspiration to him; especially its closeness to the subjects impressed him (Ostad Ali, personal communication, July 2014). He was also inspired by Ebrahim Mokhtari's films. Ostad Ali runs an independent production house, *Khaneh Film Mostanad* (Documentary Film House), with his wife, where they have production and



post production facilities. In a truly independent fashion, they make their films with income that is generated from their company.

### **Personal Documentaries and Essay Films**

Writer and filmmaker, Poorya Jahanshad (2012) discusses how trauma and voids are the subject of self-portrait films. Filmmakers objectify the subject of the film, their own person, to talk about their dilemmas. This dual role of the filmmaker as the director and at the same time, the subject and object of the films, is what differentiates self-portrait films (Jahanshad, 2012, para. 6-7). Additionally, using oneself as subject circumvents the problem of access, for those with lesser means. After 2009 and during difficult conditions, some young filmmakers turned inward to explore their own world and their immediate environment. By recounting their small stories, they were expressing what was taking place in Iranian society at this time. *Pir Pesar*, *Unwelcome in Tehran* by Mina Keshavarz, and *21 Days and Me* by Shirin Barghnavard are other films that follow this trend. They were also part of a trio of filmmakers who received funding from a foreign broadcaster via Producer, Katayoun Shahabi to focus on their personal lives.

*Pir Pesar* (Reluctant Bachelor). Mehdi Bagheri's 2011 film about his conflicts with his father starts with scenes of his brother's wedding. Though he is not present, he is the main focus of the scene. His voice over explains his absence from the celebrations. At one point his father walks out of the party to call him, but he doesn't answer. Scenes of young people celebrating in another part of town for the start of the new year accentuate his absence. We first see him in a small, dark room, looking at footage of his father on a hiking trip, when they were on better terms. *Pir Pesar* is a self-portrait film that is shot mainly in an observational style. There are some departures; the scene of him talking to

his mother in her toy store is presented in a split screen of two talking heads. Mehdi asks his mother why she doesn't confront his father and she sympathetically defends her husband and asks Mehdi to stop blaming him and move forward. The scene is five minutes long and static, which temporarily slows down the film.

Mehdi's character is ever present, and his continuous voice over tells viewers how he can't move forward at age 30 because of his financial problems. He is stuck living at home and he blames it on his father. His situation exemplifies the difficult life of young people in Iran. Behind the camera he talks to his friends, grandfather, and brother about his financial problems. They all tell him to stop blaming his father and move on. His brother says he is thankful for their father. He sacrificed and did demeaning work to reach his goals and get married. The film shows vulnerable men burdened by difficult economic times. His father's generation had fought for the Revolution. He and his uncle had boasted about bringing down the Shah's statue, while Mehdi and his friends could only walk quietly in the 2009 uprising, which was not successful. His father reprimands Mehdi on camera and says, if he is to be blamed for the financial difficulties he created for his son, Mehdi had done worst. He broke his father's spirit. The final scene is Mehdi's triumphant jumbee drop, as he dares to take a step into the space below. It signifies a new beginning.

In an interview with Hadi Alipanah (2014) Mehdi Bagheri was impatient with critics in Iran who faulted his relationship with his father, and accused him of taking advantage of his family for the film's benefit (p. 140). He defended himself, saying they had a choice to participate or not, and gave him feedback about their roles in the film. He said the film was cathartic for some viewers who had similar situations and confirmed the

therapeutic characteristic of autobiographical or self-portrait films. In these films the filmmaker expresses a traumatic situation and through the process of filmmaking, overcomes his difficulties. He admitted that in the process of making the film he understood his father for the first time (Alipanah, 2014, pp. 142-143).

*Pir Pesar* was part of a documentary series, funded by Sheherzad Films, an independent production company that works internationally and is run by Katayoon Shahabi. She is one of the strongest documentary producers in Iran, who works with international channels. She paid three young filmmakers five million tumans (about \$4000 in 2010 rates) each to direct their self-portrait films, with the supervision of Pirooz Kalantari, Mehrdad Oskouie and Saeed Rashtian (Bagheri, personal communication, 2013).

Bagheri complained that directors usually also perform the producer's jobs, as they hire and contract cinematographers, audio people, and editors. They procure equipment and worry about expenses, yet they are not credited or compensated as producers. Then they lose sight of their films after they are completed because they often cannot retain any of the distribution rights. Their only income is prize monies from festivals. *Pir Pesar* (2011) won prizes at Tassvir Sal Festival and Mostanad Bartar. Bagheri was proud of the film's many sold out screenings and good reviews in Iran. He did not make another film with Shahabi or another independent producer and instead made his next film with DEFC. He is paid a higher overall rate to make the film, but again has little control over the distribution income of the film.

## Essay Films

The essayists are usually filmmakers who come from writings background, like Robert Safarian, Nassim Najafi and Pirooz Kalantari. They offer their thoughts about issues they address, such as the city of Tehran or the 1979 Revolution. They focus on people that define the city, make it quirky, unpredictable, and plentiful sources of stories. Essay films are usually reflective; they remunerate on a topic that is important to the filmmaker, and in doing so, they are personal (Rascaroli, 2009, p. 23). These films weave text and images to produce personal reflections on a topic.

Armenian-Iranian filmmaker, Robert Safarian's films. *Conversation With the Revolution* (2010) is a collage of Safarian's photographs and video images that questions the difficult topic of the 1979 Revolution. The narration is interestingly in a female's voice, suggesting that Safarian distances himself from the text. It begins with categorization of the Revolution, dividing it in terms of symbols: fire, large numbers of people, fists, screams, blood, flowers. The next section is "The Streets," which to him is "the location of the theatre of the Revolution." It ends with questions on what is left out of the images from the Revolution, the mysteries, the laughter, the fear.

The third section is "Recreating the Revolution." In this segment Safarian directly challenges the dominant discourse of the Revolution by analyzing films on the topic and how they use music and voice over to make images speak according to their intended discourse. The female voice-over explains that the images do not necessarily support such conclusions. The final section asks, what is going on inside the houses, beyond the streets. We see his photographs of Safarian's parents and family at home, celebrating weddings, going on trips, wearing the fashion of those years. As an Armenian-Iranian, his

home photographs lack revolutionary fervor. As a religious and ethnic minority, his family's concerns appear different than what was happening on the streets of Tehran. The voice over speaks of what is missing in the photographs of demonstrators: Their worries over the future and the violence. The voice over speaks of his father's breakdown (and possible death) and taking his mother to a demonstration to show her that the demonstrators were not scary, but people just like her, which calmed her down.

Nassim Najafi's film *Revolution, Intersection of Ostad Nejatollahi Street* (2013) is an investigation about a murder that took place in the revolutionary years when a young college professor was shot by a sharp shooter. Though it moves forward like an investigative film and uses interviews, Najafi frames it by stating her personal quest to put together the pieces of the puzzle of the professor's death in order to understand something about the 1979 Revolution. The film does not present a single voice, but it works out a problem with a "reasoned line of discourse" (Lopate, p. 246). Like Safarian's film, it offers a different discourse on the Revolution, by giving voice to the intellectuals who paved the way and were sidelined by the Shi'ite leadership.

Piروز Kalantari's films are often concerned with life in his city, Tehran. He weaves his own life and memories with the parks and streets of Tehran. His previous essay film, *The Unfinished Streets of Tehran* is about city in poems. He asked five poets to describe their relationships to the city, though he admits there are many more poets who write about cities. Their words and poems are interspersed over shots of people in subway trains of Tehran, in their cars, at home, or walking.

***Reading Salinger in Tehran*** (2013) by Piروز Kalantari is an essay film that features the filmmaker's voice and can be categorized as a personal film. Piروز Kalantari

is one of the most active filmmakers in organizing, writing, and making documentaries. He founded the Association of Iranian Documentary Filmmakers (IRDFA) with Ebrahim Mokhtari and Mohammad Tahaminejad in 1997. He commented that in recent years he and some other filmmakers have focused on the city and essay films. Filmmakers like Mohammad Reza Farsad (*Gom va Goor* and *Falگوosh*), Robert Saffarian (*Conversations with The Revolution* and *Tehran in Images*), Ahmad MirEhsan (*Lahijan in Revolution*) and Mehdi Bagheri (*Malek o' Shoaraye Bahar*) have all made such films. His earlier work, *A Few Richter Degrees* about the possibility of an earthquake in Tehran, was his first effort in this genre. These essay films feature a personal voice, where the filmmaker expressing his or her views on a subject. Filmmakers and critics have written about these films in film magazine and on-line blogs. Pirooz claims that many filmmakers who make personal or essay films came from writing before filmmaking, so this style is natural for them.

Pirooz Kalantari started making films in 1990, after earlier work in political activism, photography, journalism, assisting in feature films, and a brief career in state television. He edited a photography column in the 1980s for *Kayhan* newspaper with Robert Saffarian, Massoud Biniyaz, Abbas Youssefpour, and Nader Mehraban. And he wrote film reviews, particularly about documentaries, in a column called 'Kheshte Kham' in *Film* magazine. In the 1990s he made industrial films, like *Mobarake Steel*. In 1995 he worked as an editor on Rakshan Banietamad's *Who Do You Show These Films To?* and made an episode for *Children of Iranzamin* documentary series, produced by Mohammad Reza Sarhangi. He made his more serious and independent documentaries in 1998 with *Alone In Tehran* and *That is Life*. He has made some television

documentaries, particularly with producer Orod Attarpour. He has also made films for series sponsored by Tehran municipality about Tehran. Pirooz continued his writing during this time in various magazines and launched on-line sites, such as Peyk-e Mostanad, which he started with Robert Saffarian in 2008. More recently he manages and writes for Vamostanad.com.

*Reading Salinger in The Park* is part of Pirooz Kalantari's focus on the city of Tehran. The film is narrated by Pirooz, but not shot by him. The film begins with a moving shot in the streets surrounding Park-e Shahr, and Pirooz tells us this was an old part of the city that was torn down 60 years ago to make a new Tehran. We see Pirooz walking outside the fences of the park, and he begins his personal story by telling us he is only a few years younger than the park. Through his eyes the camera enters the park and it moves and hesitates on scenes of people, trees, crows, families, women and old men. Walter Benjamin connected the dawn of modernity and strolling, which is possible only in a modern city like Paris or Tehran. Benjamin and his compatriots were estranged by the instances of modernity and realism, brought on by devices such as photography. Benjamin connected photography with death and alienation, since it recorded an instant and froze it in an unnatural manner (Petro, 1995, p. 221). However, Iranian film essayists and documentarists seem to revel in busy megacity and its many stories.

Pirooz is the stroller, in the tradition of Baudelaire and Benjamin's flaneur, as he walks aimlessly and observes. We see from his at point of view, since he addresses the viewer directly. Pirooz narrates memories of his early childhood, when his family would take a carriage to the park to picnic. He talks about his years as a student in the park, when he read novels instead of study, and his fun times as a soldier spending leisure time

with other soldiers in the park. One scene is reenacted, when Pirooz recounts how one day as he was reading Salinger, a girl sat on his right then a boy sat on his left. The boy placed a wrapped paper on his book, which the girl picked up, and they left. The scene is reenacted with a tight shot focused on the book, and hands that place the small packet and remove it. The park for him is defined in such memories. Pirooz tells us his many ideas for portraying the park, and making films about it, but made only this one. The park is recounted as a place to exercise, to walk through, to hang out and socialize, to play, and to observe.

Remunerating to himself about the park, he has two approaches, one is strolling in the park, the other seated and watchful. For him the park and the city are defined by individuals and not by the buildings. This is a refrain we hear from Pirooz in other films as well. The day in the film on Park-e Shahr begins in the morning hours when pedestrians who are mostly office workers pass through the park. Pirooz tells us their eyes not on the park, but focused on their destinations. But he lingers on those who spend time in the park, the families, the women, the crows and the old men. He declares he is closer in age to them than to the young visitors. Unlike the passersby, the old men are regulars in the park, have their usual benches, and “the park is defined by them” (Kalantari, 2013). The film ends with night shots of the mostly empty park, and Pirooz admits that his time is up. We see him heading home, seated in the subway train, as his voice over echoes Salinger, “Stories don’t end, the narrator comes to a stop.”

Pirooz has been showing this film in galleries and at the House of Cinema, and addressing the importance of the every day events and ordinary lives in documentary films. He was invited to show his film in Sweden for a seminar on microhistory.



Conventional history has primarily focused on major developments and dramatic events, and on powerful actors. According to the Swedish academy and Magnus Bårtås, microhistory, theorized by Carlo Ginzburg (1993), relies on the “reduction of the scale of observation” and its investigation of ‘on the ground’ processes, and the idea that experiences of individuals or a small community reflects the larger whole (Magnusson & Szijarto, 2013, pp. 148-149). Ginzburg (1993) takes inspiration from Tolstoy’s belief that a historical phenomenon is comprehensible only by reconstructing all the activities of all the participants (p. 24) and Kracauer, who uses the concept of the cinematic close-up to illustrate the importance of details from individual perspectives that complement the larger visions of macrohistory (p. 26). Essay films outlined here offer interpretations of contemporary history from the points of views of the individual filmmakers. Such public discussions on topics that are the domain of the dominant discourse push the limits of what is permissible and filmmakers threat this territory very carefully.

The films discussed in this chapter demonstrate that the formation of the subject in Iranian documentaries is influenced by various discourses that were available to the filmmakers since the 1979 Revolution. The devotional/self-sacrificing subject of religious films follows the Islamic regime’s dominant discourse; the idealized subject of salvage ethnographic films that are situated in pristine rural regions respond to Iranians’ discourse of nationalism; the realistic depiction of civic individuals, stuck in difficult conditions corresponds to leftist leanings of social documentarians; the de-stabilized subjects of playful or satirical documentaries of the younger generations of filmmakers and self portrayals or essay films by filmmakers who express their personal relationships and views, rise from contemporary interests in subjectivity and identity issues that have

originated in Iran's encounter with their own history, with the West, and with modernity. In the last twenty years, filmmakers have used a range of styles and aesthetic sensibilities, from observational realism to poetic expressionism, or distancing irony. Some of these styles have been modeled on acclaimed European or American films that have been discussed and reviewed among filmmakers and intellectuals, such as Ross McElwee's or Chris Marker's films. Iranian literature and poetry, ranging from the sparse and satirical style of Sadeq Hedayat in the 1920s and classical poetry of Saadi and Hafez, to modern poetry of Farrokhzad and Shamlou have influenced Iranian documentary filmmakers as much as the art filmmakers. Reality has been portrayed directly with a camera that simply records the unfolding events around them or is reconstructed or reimagined. Often the sensitivities and limitations imposed by dominant discourses lead filmmakers to express reality through allegory and poetic language that distances and aestheticize it. This is a choice that comes naturally to Iranian filmmakers thanks to a cultural tradition that is steeped in poetic language. Poetic language and structure has also been used to critique and question prevalent thoughts and beliefs as practiced by essay and personal filmmakers.

## CHAPTER 7 CONCLUSION

Cinema entered Iran with the dawn of modernity, early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the 1950s, the U.S. Information Service (USIS) aid program trained documentary filmmakers to make films that helped modernize the nation. Thus, cinema and documentary films have worked to communicate and promote development and modernity.<sup>13</sup> These efforts led to the growth of professional documentary filmmaking and state-sponsored media institutions. After the 1979 Revolution the state expanded its support for documentaries to propagate Islamic teachings. However, various global and national influences converged to produce an expansive field in documentaries, where professionals as well as those on the margins of society, young people and women, could visually document their world. Filmmakers increasingly produced and exhibited films they deemed important that were outside religious state ideologies. They were inspired by contending and conflicting discourses, defined by democratic ideals, freedom of expression, nationalism, modernity, Islamic thought, and various strands of Western philosophies. These conflicting encounters help us see how power is manifested and challenged in Iran.

On the political front the Islamic Republic's leaders have worked to provide an alternative to the dominant world order, which is largely determined by Western powers. They have imposed their Shi'a Islamic vision on Iranian citizens and disciplined them to be part of a moral, Shi'a *umma*. After the Revolution, the state wanted an Islamic culture to prevail and transformed existing institutions such as the education system and state television, IRIB. At the same time they created new institutions that supported their

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<sup>13</sup> As noted earlier, modernity is a contentious term that often designates scientific progress and capitalism, connected with Europe and the West. Modernity was developed as a result of European colonial encounters with the non-West.

cultural mandates. They also incorporated other discourses to win citizen's cooperation, through the rhetoric of nationalism and anti-imperialism. There are policies to regulate films in the funding and exhibition stages, and a continuous pushback by filmmakers to increase alternative ways of making films and exhibiting them. Filmmakers have been successful in opening up new cultural spaces thanks to the existence of several state institutions that support documentaries, the backing of some cinema executives who respect artistic freedoms, and their connections with one another and their organizing efforts. Their struggles and victories have enabled documentary filmmakers to expand their creative work and influence decision making in the media sphere. The dissertation shows how power is not only concentrated in the ruling elite, but also in the filmmakers' activities.

In the West Iran is seen as a repressive regime, characterized as a theocracy. There is a fog of misinformation and political rhetoric that promotes a dreary picture of life in Iran, which is intensified by the lack of formal and cultural relationships between Iran and the West. However, the existence of a vibrant artistic and intellectual community complicates such simplifications and gives rise to the question of how and why filmmaking and the arts are flourishing in Iran.

From 1997 to 2014, the years that are the focus of this research, Iranian documentary cinema has been an important contributor to the Iranian cultural scene. After 1997, a process of political, cultural, and authorial negotiations led to the expansion of documentary field. The filmmakers have made films on topics of interest to them and according to their stylistic preferences. This dissertation explains the complex system of state support, civic engagement, global influences, and technological innovations that

have made it possible for documentary filmmaking to flourish. Documentary filmmakers are at the nexus of intellectual, cultural, and artistic communities in Iran. The expansion of their numbers, their films, and activities speak to the significance of a cultural sphere that has been developing in Iran since the early days of modernity in the 1900s and has grown since the 1979 Revolution.

Closely observing this community, I studied their creative and social contributions in the public sphere. By ‘following the filmmakers’ through interviews, ethnographic observation, participant observation, and textual analysis of their films, I responded to the question, why filmmaking and cultural activities remain strong in a country that is known for political and social repression and isolation? Several research questions have guided the inquiry, including, how Iranian documentary filmmakers have organized to support one another and protect their interests; how the funding and permit process influences their work; how they interact with the West; the kinds of films they produce; and the ways in which they define their work.

I located the interpretive communities of filmmakers during three research trips to Iran between the summer of 2013 and winter of 2014. Epistemological and political issues of location are strengths of ethnographic research and are especially important in this study of the Iranian cultural sphere, due to the lack of cultural and scholarly relationships between Iran and most Western nations. I relied on my own knowledge of the field, based on several years of producing and making films in Iran, since 1997. My insider and at times, outsider perspectives, provided opportunities to interpret the intricacies of the relationships among the filmmakers and various institutions, as well as their attraction and ambivalence towards the West. As a female filmmaker and researcher

from Iranian-Kurdish background, and connections to U.S. institutions, I reached out to independent filmmakers who worked outside of formal state institutions, like IRIB. I was more at ease among women or Westernized filmmakers, who are also marginalized. I followed their work and activities closely as colleagues and witnessed their struggles to make films that expressed their vision. My on-the-ground experiences illuminated the multiple layers and possibilities for participation in professional activities which are available for filmmakers from different backgrounds.

Observing the female filmmakers of *Profession Documentarist* (2014), while they discussed and worked on their ensemble piece, showed me how they negotiated the real and imagined 'red lines' that their film threaded to create an episodic film that pushed against the religious discourse of those in power. Stuart Hall, drawing on Foucault explained that television viewers created their negotiated 'local' positions based on their national and class interests, even while they were influenced by dominant discourses of power. Viewers can develop a negotiated position or even an oppositional one. Iranian filmmakers had similarly developed alternative production practices based on their background and experiences. Through their collaborative strategies, they created a relatively safe environment to make films that expressed their views regarding various topics including, censorship, the position of women, the 1979 Revolution, and their personal lives. Some of these filmmakers had working relationships with European and Western countries. But as Shirin Barghnavard recounted in her segment, she lived in the West but decided to return to Iran, despite the difficulties of such a move. Her close connection with fellow filmmakers was what made her work possible and enjoyable.

This study shows that filmmakers yield to pressures and restrictions in order to

secure funding and exhibition for their work. They also have opened up alternative spaces outside established venues. The efforts of filmmakers who adhere to the discourse of independence for filmmakers and artistic freedoms has resulted in the development of institutions like cinema guilds that were formed before and during President Khatami's administration. The IRDFA was organized in 1997 to help the documentary filmmakers improve working conditions and enhance their independence; now it has a membership of more than 300. They meet monthly to discuss the structure of their guild and filmmaking issues, hold film events, and provide benefits to their members. They continuously negotiate with MCIG (Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance) and DEFC (Documentary and Experimental Film Center) to create more amenable conditions for filmmaking and have helped shape DEFC policies. Other semi-independent institutions that they formed to support and promote documentaries are the House of Cinema, the umbrella organization for all the cinema guilds and the producers' guild (AIDP). Their members have worked on festival organizations, such as DEFC's Vérité documentary festival, Tehran municipality's *Shahr* documentary festival about cities, and House of Cinema's yearly film event. They also lobby for the development of alternative venues to showcase films, such as the Kish Documentary Festival, *Mostanad Bartar* (Notable Documentary), IRDFA's screening series, and limited theatrical distribution in major cinemas. Tens of smaller venues are also organized by women's groups, young filmmakers and intellectuals.

The cinema unions promote professionalism, expertise, and the enhancement and expansion of documentary filmmaking beyond the ideological mandates of the state. They provide permits, contracts, and arbitration. Filmmakers also hold workshops and

organize informal events in art galleries, art houses, and homes to screen and discuss their films and encourage the development and growth of different documentary trends. These filmmaker-organized institutions follow discourses that adhere to a hybrid of Western discourse of professionalism in media production, while also respecting many of the internal regulations.

### **The Funding and Permit Process and How Documentary Filmmakers Organize to Enhance Their Profession**

Iranian intellectuals or *rawshanfekr*, have historically followed different discourses than the ruling elite. They engage with traditions like nationalism, Iran's history and poetic practices, Islam and Western philosophies like Marxism, Enlightenment, and post-modernism. These traditions inspire them produce different forms of expression, behavior, dress, and beliefs, which are reflected in their films. The state does not encourage alternative views, but to establish its hegemony there have been many instances, particularly during moderate administrations, to incorporate some of these different discourses. The dissertation also draws from Gramsci's observations regarding the importance of intellectuals and their contributions to "the process by which power is produced, reproduced, and transformed" (Cited in Abu-Lughod, 2005, p. 9). For many Iranians, even in the leadership, the expansion of cultural activities is desirable because it contributes to the production of a nation (Abu-Lughod, 2005 p. 8). It leads to increased communication and connections among citizens and with the world.

The expansion of documentary filmmaking has been uneven and has often faced set backs from various state authorities and administrations, as was evident during President Ahmadinejad's second term in office from 2009 to 2013. Since the 1979 Revolution, cultural authority and decision-making have been determined and contested



by two main sources of power, due to the segmented and divided nature of the ruling spheres. The authority of the Supreme Jurisprudent, the highest clerical body, follows a Shi'a political ideology that was developed by Ayatollah Khomeini. This office controls significant power centers, including the military, the state broadcasting complex (IRIB), and the judiciary. The elected government, led by the President and the *majlis* (elected representatives) follow the Shi'a political ideology, but are also shaped by other discourses that their electorate adhere to. They oversee various ministries, such as the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. Intellectuals and artists, including the filmmakers, negotiate with these ruling bodies to expand the possibilities of creative expression and film production. Filmmakers form alliances with different institutions and use the resources of state television, the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (MCIG), and other funding institutions to make and exhibit their work.

State support has been crucial to the expansion of documentaries. Particularly in moderate administrations, the leadership of Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (MCIG) has supported filmmaking and film exhibition. Filmmakers have worked with these institutions or have developed other ones and have been active participants in the shaping of state media policies. Chapters 4 and 5 on documentary film institutions and informal venues demonstrate the various systems of support that were developed by the state and by the filmmakers to enhance documentary filmmaking.

Foucault suggests we can locate power and resistances to it in professional codes and regulations. State television (IRIB) is a large multi-faceted institution with branches in all Iranian provinces. It needs programming for its more than fifty channels and solicits work from independent filmmakers, though not always in an easy and productive manner.

The IRIB complex is a conservative institution that derives its authority from the office of the Supreme Jurisprudent. Throughout the years it has commissioned filmmakers and independent producers to make multi-part documentary series. IRIB incorporates the dominant ideology of the ruling clergy. Task groups in different departments of IRIB commission films on various topics, including the Revolution, Iranian history, Iran's diverse people, its nature. These films need to follow the dominant discourse which often conflicts with how filmmakers make documentaries according to their own world views. Filmmakers often adhere to these limits or occasionally push back to create their individual voices. The channel also showcases films by well-known filmmakers with unique visions. For example, the documentary series, *Shabhayeh Mostanad* [Documentary Nights] is a nightly program that presents films and interviews with respected documentary filmmakers on the Documentary Channel. I watched films by important documentary filmmakers like Aslani, Tayyab, Shirdel, Sinaii, and Varahram on this program. Younger and more independent filmmakers are usually excluded, as are women documentarists.

Even veteran, independent filmmakers who started their careers at IRIB do not have a regular and non-contentious relationship with the channels. IRIB commission films, but after they are completed, some are rejected for broadcast. In this system, many films are produced, yet they do not find proper distribution or broadcast outlet. It is called the problem of output, *moshkel-e khorooji*. Filmmakers have to actively organize and work on the distribution of their films, without much financial return. If they have secured funding from state television for their films, they may still lose control over their final cut by state television executives or their films end up in television archives.

Before 2009 screening permits were not required for showing films in official venues, but after the 2009 uprisings against the disputed presidential elections, MCIG tightened its requirements for documentaries and imposed screening permits. However, generally low budget, independently made documentaries that have limited exposure are not strictly scrutinized. Films are produced in large numbers, but find limited possibilities for exhibition without the active efforts of the filmmakers.

The Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (MCIG) is another conglomerate state ministry that plays a key role in cinema affairs. It is in charge of providing funding, permits, and regulates content according to the strictures of the Islamic Republic. Several smaller institutions, such as Documentary and Experimental Film Center (DEFC) and Young Cinema also operate under the purview of MCIG, to help fund and support documentaries. DEFC has been instrumental in mediating between the filmmakers' desire to make creative, independent films on topics of interest to them and the state's needs to conform cultural production to its own discourse. They dispense funding and distribute films world wide and promote filmmakers in the yearly *Vérité* Film Festival. They solicit the filmmakers' participation, particularly during moderate administrations. Filmmakers have participated as panelists and jurors on selection panels that dole out funding and awards; a few have held key cultural positions in moderate administrations. Other ministries and institutions, such as city municipalities, Ministry of *Jahad Sazandegi* (Development & Construction) or the Ministry of Petroleum also have their own documentary divisions that filmmakers turn to for funding their films.

Many notable films are shown in semi-private screenings and are discussed in on-line forums and in newspapers, and therefore they impact cultural life in Iran.

Filmmakers also use festivals to showcase their films. Thanks to high levels of filmmaker participation in the shaping of the Vérité Film Festival, it has become an important showcase for the latest films made by independent filmmakers. Young and unknown filmmakers can begin their careers in this festival.

Besides the Vérité International Documentary Festival, which began in 2007, the Kish Documentary Festival in the early 2000s, Forough Festival for women's films in the late 1990s, Parvin Etesami Festival for women's films, Shahr Festival, sponsored by the municipality on films about cities, are some of the significant venues for new films. Filmmakers present their films to their peers, their national audiences, and gain some international exposure. Many of the films that are included are not inscribed by the state's ideological frameworks, but some are even awarded. Those who enter their films vie for recognition and financial awards that benefit cash-strapped filmmakers. Intellectuals and film lovers attend the festivals in large numbers to see the latest documentaries that are produced in Iran and globally.

Documentary's expansion was also aided by technological developments. The advent of high quality, small format digital cameras and computer editing in the late 1990s freed filmmakers from complete reliance on large state media institutions. Private individuals and companies were able to purchase lower cost equipment and make them available to larger numbers of filmmakers. In Iran technological developments coincided with the relaxation of restrictions on expression during President Khatami's administration (1997-2004) and the coming of age of the generation that was born during the 1979 Revolution and the war years (1980-1986). They resulted in a dynamic expansion of the field.

Additionally, satellite technology led to the operation of several transnational Farsi-language television channels that broadcast news and entertainment programs that challenged the Islamic Republic's ideology. They exposed filmmakers to possibilities and problems of global media. Some oppositional transnational channels are run by dissident groups or by independent media organizations. Some operate under the license of other nations, such as Britain's BBC- Persian or the U.S.'s VOA, Voice of America-Persian, and promote those nation's foreign policy goals regarding Iran. In the early 2000s a few of these channels provided new venues for funding and distribution for Iranian documentary films. However, after the 2009 uprising Iranian authorities banned such transactions, because the channels had sided with the demonstrators and from the authorities' perspective they fanned the unrest or even produced it.

Periods of relative openness in the artistic and cultural realm enabled filmmakers and other cultural workers to gain ground and develop their craft as chroniclers of their society. One of the most significant periods of opening and collaboration took place during two terms of Mohammad Khatami's presidency from 1997 to 2004, when his reformist government pushed for press freedom, expansion of popular representation, and promoted participatory notions of state rule. They were open to writers, artists, filmmakers and other intellectuals and promoted some democratic and socialist ideals and incorporated them into Islamic discourse. Khatami also encouraged the strengthening of civil society by holding local council elections in villages, towns, and cities. Various types of social organizations and NGO's were formed at this time.

Documentary filmmaking grew and social documentary filmmakers began to document the participation of the public in the political process. Large numbers of young people

entered various artistic fields, including documentaries and made their first films in the early 2000s. In some years close to 2000 documentaries were made (Atebbai, personal communication, June 2013).

When the state exerted pressure and impeded artistic development and freedom, as it did from 2009 to 2012, following a period of political unrest, filmmakers actively resisted state institutions. This repressive period resulted in boycotts and public criticisms of state cultural policies, and international criticism and sanctions. After the 2009 uprising many filmmakers were taken in for questioning, including myself, and eventually several were imprisoned in 2011. They were charged for their alleged relationships with the BBC and for selling films to them. The filmmakers' guild, IRDFA and House of Cinema's leadership defended them, because selling films to foreign media had not been against the law. The resulting war of words between the cinema administration of President Ahmadinejad and the cinema guilds' leadership led to the closure of the House of Cinema for a year and half. Such acts created more headaches for the conservative administration and tarnished their image.

President Ahmadinejad's restrictive cultural policies aggravated the relationship between the cultural sphere and the ruling bodies and resulted in negative press and widespread sentiments against the conservative administration among the general public. The closing down of the House of Cinema was unpopular with the majority of middle class, city dwellers. Filmmakers held public demonstrations and wrote about their plight in reformist newspapers. Poor economic conditions, numerous financial scandals, and the repressive environment turned many Iranians against Ahmadinejad's administration and the conservatives. It became evident that when the intellectual segment of the society did

not cooperate with the ruling elite, the ruling bodies could not enforce their hegemony. The polarizing actions of the administration on various fronts motivated most Iranians to vote against the conservatives in the 2013 elections. The youth in particular, mobilized and participated to ensure that a moderate president would be elected.

Women and young filmmakers often fall outside of the dominant discourses. They form smaller groups and organize their own venues, all of which impacts social and cultural life, particularly in Tehran. Some of the ones I participated in were the bi-weekly film series that were held at a woman organizer's home in Tehran and the Kaf screenings, organized by young artists and intellectuals. They sent notifications by word of mouth, via SMS, and other informal means of communication. There are tens of daily events organized by different groups in galleries, offices, and homes. Some small venues grow into larger venues with the help of institutional state support. Honar va Tajrobeh (Art & Experience) film series began its operation in 2014, when the new, moderate cinema administration of President Rouhani took charge. A group of filmmakers, producers, and journalists programmed experimental and documentary feature films in movie theatres in Tehran and major cities. They show films that cannot find exhibition in major cinemas and the organization provides financial and promotional assistance for their exhibition. A similar effort had lasted only a year and half, when independent producer, Sanei-Moghadam organized documentary screenings in one of the popular Tehran film theatres in 2009-2010, without state support. Honar va Tajrobeh receives funding from the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance's cinema division to program an extensive series of independent features and documentaries nation-wide. They are popular with young viewers and the intellectuals because the featured innovative films that push the

limits of dominant discourse.

### **What Kinds of Films Do Independent Documentary Filmmakers Make, What Shapes Their Creative Decisions, and How Do They Define Their Work?**

Filmmakers are interested in a variety of topics that are relevant to the society they live in. The restrictions vary among the different state media institutions and in different administrations opportunities exist to produce and release films that are concerned with sensitive topics. When filmmakers make films about social issues like women's roles, family, addiction, and youth culture, they often end with a moral conclusion that adheres to the dominant discourse of Shi'a morality. Films that do not adhere to the dominant discourse of Shi'a morality are censored or banned.

An enduring feature of Iranian documentaries is the use of poetic voice and structure, because of Iranians' historic familiarity with this trope. Poetry has been the strongest medium in Iranian literature, beginning with short hymns of the Zoroastrian Gathas 3,500 years ago and culminating in the 12<sup>th</sup> century in the *ghazals* of Hafiz and Rumi's Sufi poetry. Modernity changed poetry when Nima Yushij reconciled poetry with contemporary concerns and freed it from the constraints of rhyme. Ebrahim Golestan's narrations incorporated poetic language successfully, adding another dimension to his montages of industrial progress in the 1960s. In the same period, Forough Farrokhzad employed her feminine voice and poetry in her memorable film, *The House is Black* (1963). The tradition continues today in the poetic structure of many of Mahvash Sheikholeslami's lyrical and observational documentaries or the poetic narration in Hassan Naghashi's historical films or Aviny's war films. Poetic traditions are valued for their aesthetics and because deeper truths can be alluded to in allegorical language.

Iranian documentaries follow many models and styles. Some are delineated by



Bill Nichols (1997) that include expositional films, observational films, and interactive films. I explore the formation of subject in Iranian documentary films in chapter six. After the Revolution and during the eight-year war with Iraq, the ruling complex with the leadership of charismatic Ayatollah Khomeini was able to promulgate a form of political Shi'a idealism and anti-imperialist discourse. The notions of martyrdom and the edict, *Amr-e be maroof va nahy az monker* [to enjoin good and prohibit evil], were the guidelines they provided. Good deeds included fighting for Islam, and avoidance of evil acts like following Westernized behavior. *Revayat-e Fath* [Chronicle of Victory] was a long-term and successful series of documentaries about the heroism of soldiers in the Iran-Iraq war, shot mostly on the front lines and narrated by filmmaker and author, Morteza Aviny. Aviny's films informed and were informed by the ruling elite's religious discourse. They soldiers were featured as devoted, self-negating heroes of the war and were mythologized to exemplify the positive aspects of Islamic behavior.

After the war ended in 1988 and Khomeini's death, the state could not continue to gain popular consent with only Islamic idealism, except in its small inner circles. The electoral center of power relied on other inspirations to manage the country. To gain popular support various presidents shifted the focus to the post-war development of the nation (Rafsanjani), 'dialogue between civilizations' (Khatami), and a combination of Shi'a and pre-Islamic mythology and nationalism (Ahmadinejad). The social documentaries of the 1990s examined people's participation in the political process, as a moderate administration paved the way for civic engagement. The films demonstrated their filmmakers' discourse of nationalism and democratic ideals. President Khatami's administration, 1997-2005 encouraged documentary filmmaking and other artistic and

social activities, including women's participation in the public sphere and in political and in social activities. During this time, filmmakers were taking advantage of small format cameras, inexpensive production methods, and the opening in political and social environment to make films about the changes they were witnessing. New camera and editing technology allowed more people to enter the field. Many of these films reflected on the lives and conditions of the society, including women's participation in the political process and its challenges. Well known filmmakers also used the new technologies to make noteworthy films independently. Ebrahim Mokhtari made *Zinat, One Special Day* (2000), Mohammad Reza Moghadassian made *Conversations in Fog* (2001), and Rakhshan Banietemad made *Our Times* (2002). They were all about women's participation in the elections. These films mainly used small format cameras and were shot in the observational style to tell stories of social change.

The personal, self-portrait, and essay films of the late 2000s were the outcome of the younger generation of filmmakers' interests, and their focus on themselves, and their alienation and refusal to adhere to dominant familial, social, and political orders. The repressive cultural environment of Ahmadinejad's presidency led filmmakers to look inward at their own worlds and their personal stories. In this environment the personal became political. Films like *Profession Documentarist* (2014), which presented personal reflections of seven female directors about their lives as documentary filmmakers in Iran, *Unwelcome in Tehran*, (2010) about the filmmaker's exploration of whether she could live a single life in Tehran, and *The Reluctant Bachelor* (2010), about the filmmaker's struggles with his father, were completed at this time. In film circles, self-portrait films provoked a great deal of discussion for their approach and their sometimes controversial,

intimate topics. Many of these films could not be included in official, public screenings, since they crossed 'red lines' regarding family problems and marital relationships. Some of them offered alternative narratives about the 1979 Revolution, a topic that is exclusively defined by the ruling elite. However, the success of the films and the filmmakers' efforts in showing them in alternative spaces resulted in widespread interest in and discussion of the films.

Several critics including Poorya Jahanshad (2013), a writer and filmmaker, wrote about personal and self-portrait films that record everyday life. In an article he discussed how trauma and voids are the subject of self-portrait films, where the camera unravels issues they grapple with. Furthermore, using oneself as subject circumvented the problem of access, for those with lesser means, such as young people or women; they have limited access to funding and institutional support.

The urge to 'document' comes from the understanding that the official media does not represent large segments of the society or misrepresents them. On state television, IRIB, reports about the youth or social life are placed in the discourse of Islamic morality and painted as black or white. Due to their ideological framework they ignore the complexities of Iranian society. Filmmakers and non-filmmakers, particularly women and younger directors, want to express their realities on their own terms. They want to 'document' their lives, be visible, and not remain unseen and un-recorded. As Foucault (1990) has shown, censorship often leads to a discursive explosion around the censored topic. In Iran restrictions and censorship have not diminished filmmaking, but have resulted in increased desire to make films.

Another reason for the dramatic increase in their numbers is that Iranians from

different backgrounds and classes are passionate about cinema. As Williams (1958) explains culture as a whole way of life, cultural activities, including cinema have become an important part of many, particularly the youth's lives. Artistic activities, including filmmaking and watching films is an integral part of their social life. Their love of the medium has been documented over the years. This passion stems from Iran's strong cinematic history and the success of Iranian films in international festivals, as well as a restrictive environment that pools young people together to creatively resist its strictures. For Iranians the difficulties of life after the 1979 Revolution have been marked the eight-year war with Iraq, and later, living under the threat of war and sanctions, the maligning of Iran in the West, and internal political repression. One of the few bright spots in Iran's recent history has been the positive reception of Iranian cinema world-wide. Mohsen Makhmalbaf, a leading Iranian feature director, who now lives outside Iran in exile, made a semi-documentary film in 1995 about the casting call for his new film. Thousands of young film enthusiasts stormed the studio where auditions were held and Makhmalbaf filmed their auditions. They imitated famous actors or singers and clowned in front of the famous director, hoping to land a part. Some of the auditions were dramatized. *Salaam Cinema* (1995) was his tribute to these fans. Renowned director Abbas Kiarostami made the seminal film, *Closeup* (1991) about Hossein Sabzian, a man who was indicted for impersonating Makhmalbaf. He conned a family to let him make a movie about their lives. The main character's passion for cinema did not diminish with his arrest.

*The Trucker and The Fox* (2013) is another film about a truck driver and aspiring filmmaker in one of the provinces. The main character loves his animals and seriously films them and shows the results to fellow truck drivers. The film demonstrates strong

fictional elements, such as the centrality of its character and the cohesiveness of the film around the theme of the character's passion for his animals and movie making. This film was successful in national and international festivals and garnered theatrical distribution, through Honar va Tajrobeh. In recent years, documentaries are also crossing the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction. Reenactment documentaries were prevalent before the 1990s, due to budget and film stock limitations, when films were shot on 16mm stock. But they followed a documentary or ethnographic logic. The fictional structures of documentaries since 2010 speak to the demands of the market and global trends. A number of films that followed this structure were successful nationally and internationally.

The interest in documentaries led to the launching of several documentary film websites by filmmakers and film critics since mid 2000s to 2014. Pirooz Kalantari, Robert Safarian, and Amir Hossein Sanaie and others created websites and blogs that followed the latest films and trends in documentary cinema and discussed the problems that existed for documentary film. Others filmmakers and critics contributed to these forums and some wrote regular columns, as Mohammad Tahaminejad's "Historicizing of the Present Time" in the Vamostanad.com site. Tahaminejad is a filmmaker and film historian who has documented the activities and trends of Iranian documentary cinema in the last 30 years. His translation of Bill Nichols's book, *Introduction to Documentary* (2001) was published in 2010 and his other important scholarship on documentaries have influenced filmmakers and made them aware of Western theories regarding this cinema.

## **How does Iran's relationship with the West impact filmmakers' work and their films?**

Western culture and economic policies have affected life and business in Iran historically. The European and American economic sanctions on Iran since the 1979 Revolution have shaped the Iranian economy. The Shah's regime was supported and shaped by American and European interests. The large numbers of Iranians who study or live abroad directly impact their families and their views that have spread among those in the middle or upper middle classes. Transnational media has also influenced Iranians to take on Western perspectives.

Filmmakers adopt Western discourses because of global pressures to connect with international media institutions, such as major film festivals and global television channels. Films that follow trends that are popular globally do well in their distribution and are rewarded. Women filmmakers and the younger generation turn to the West for inspiration and sometimes for support and distribution of their work. The anti-Western discourse of the ruling elite discourages these tendencies. They offer support through state institutions and punish those who cross the 'red lines.' However, those who want to resist the state use ideas that come from the West to create an alternative discourse.

A few filmmakers worked directly with foreign media organizations and made films that were critical of the Iranian state. Some of the most prominent were Mazyar Bahari's *And Along Comes a Spider* about a serial killer who targeted street women in 2001, in order to purge society, Mahvash Sheikholeslami's *Article 69* about women who were facing death sentences for committing murder in self-defense, or Swedish Iranian Nahid Sarvestani's 2004 film, *Prostitution Behind the Veil* that focused on two women who lived as prostitutes within the Shi'a tradition of *sighe* [temporary marriage]. They

offered accurate yet stark representations of Iranian society that raised the ire of officials. Officials labeled the films as *siahnamayi* [portraying a black image] and censored them. Filmmakers defended their rights to make films that portrayed realities of Iranian life. Since these films were made for foreign media they held to the critical discourse of Iranian or Moslem society that is prevalent in the West. Mahvash Sheikholeslami is a veteran, well-respected filmmaker who mainly makes ethnographic styled films about remote regions of Iran. Her only two socially critical films about Iranian society were made for European channels.

Conservative officials are particularly sensitive to the films that portray Iran negatively. They have incorporated *Siahnamayi* [producing a black image] as a discursive device to dismiss the films as products of Western conspiracy against Iran. Conservative journalists and officials use the term when discussing transnational media or the work of some Iranian filmmakers. Those who engage in such portrayals are criticized and censored. Iranian documentary filmmakers want to participate in global exchanges and distribute their work internationally. However, the aesthetic and thematic preferences in the West often set filmmakers against the limits imposed by the Islamic regime. This dynamic leaves filmmakers who are interested in portraying the difficulties of life in vulnerable positions, having to face criticism, interrogation, and even arrests at home. During periods of high tension some had to leave their home country for an uncertain life in the West.

The younger generations have been interested in connecting to the rest of the world by using new technologies and social media. While the women's movement in the West had brought with it an awareness of personal and identity issues of race, sexuality,

and ethnicity (Renov, 2004, p. 177), in Iran opening to Western and global media trends, as well as reaction to internal repression led young filmmakers to use the personal voice and focus on their own stories. Western influence, however, has been fraught with contradictions.

The U.S. placed Iran in a discursive “axis of evil” sphere even before the 2009 uprising against unfair election practices and the conservative backlash against it. In 2006 the Bush administration significantly increased funding to mount a large propaganda campaign against the Islamic Republic of Iran, in order to destabilize the presidency of Ahmadinejad (Naficy 2012, p. 290). The U.S. supported oppositional Iranian expat channels based in southern California and satellite television channels like Voice of America - Persian. Later, commercial, entertainment channels like Manoto Television and Farsi1 were launched. They provide cultural, and entertainment programs that counter the Iranian state ideology and advocate Western life styles, individual rights and freedoms. The conservative elements in the Iranian leadership have been threatened by these developments and saw some of their own intellectuals, artists, and filmmakers as supporters of the West’s plans.

Since 2005 Western media has mainly discussed Iran in the framework of the state’s nuclear ambitions and threats. Dialogue and cultural exchanges between Iran some Western nations and institutions that were shaping up during Khatami’s presidency were replaced by antagonistic speeches and actions. They culminated in more severe sanctions that further isolated Iran and caused widespread economic difficulties.

The Western media’s support for the protesters aggravated the fears of the officials. Hundreds, including many journalists and filmmakers, were arrested and



mistreated in prisons. The Iranian-Canadian journalist and filmmaker, Mazyar Bahari wrote a memoir of his arrest. It was incorporated into the Western media's framing of Iran and was widely promoted and then adapted to the film *Rosewater* (2014), directed by Jon Stewart. Other documentarians like women's rights activist, Mahnaz Mohammadi and Hossein Dalir were arrested for demonstrating and recording the protests ("Documentarist, Hossein Dalir," 2008, June 23) ("Arrest of Mahnaz Mohammadi," 2009, July 30). Filmmakers took these actions as assault on their civic and civil rights. One hundred and forty two documentary makers signed a letter of objection to the state's restrictions during the unrest and boycotted DEFC and the Vérité Festival for several years.

Eventually even those in the ruling elite realized that the majority of the Iranian public had lost faith in the system after the 2009 election debacle and years of repressive measures against moderates and cultural figures. They were also further isolated internationally and sanctioned. The Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei made an unprecedented plea to the public in the 2013 elections, asking all to participate, to support the country even if they did not support the regime (Barzegar, 2013). As Gramsci (1916-1932) had theorized it, intellectuals and filmmakers were significant in influencing public consent. The Iranian public voted decisively in favor of a moderate administration in August 2013.

One of the first acts of President Rouhani's cultural administration was to make peace with the cinema sector and reopen the House of Cinema. The new cinema administration met several times with the guilds' leadership to accommodate filmmakers' needs and goals. The new DEFC leadership was selected from the ranks of respected

documentary producers. They began to support films that were not completed during the conservative administration. After several years of boycotts, in 2013 the Vérité documentary began to operate with the participation of the filmmakers and young supporters.

Filmmakers are influenced by the prevalent documentary styles that are prized in Europe, U.S., and other Western regions. Since the advent of video and digital technologies, observational documentaries have been on the rise. New technologies make it possible to spend extended times on location and with the subjects. Some of these films are intimate and startling portrayals of their subjects, as exemplified by Arezoo in Rakhshan Banietamad's *Our Times* (2001), or the disenfranchised men of Mohsen Ostad Ali's *A Place to Live* (2013). International festivals and film weeks feature award-winning European and American films that provoke discussions and articles. These exchanges lead filmmakers to make films aware of other trends. In the last few years, much has been written on personal, autobiographical, and essay films. By writing and making films about their own lives and thoughts filmmakers define their country's history and challenge dominant discourses.

Much of filmmaking is supported by state institutions that are charged with cinema affairs. Extensive support often dampens filmmakers' and organizers' efforts to remain independent. For example, a mobile film and photography festival began with industry support and state approval in 2013. Respected documentary filmmakers, like Mehrdad Oskouie helped in the effort. They solicited films shot on mobile phones and organized a site that provided relevant information about mobile photography and filmmaking, featuring well known filmmakers and cultural figures. The festival was

organized by the mobile industry, independent filmmakers, and state media institutions. It incorporated mobile filmmaking into accepted channels, rather than oppositional ones. Mobile technology continues to be used occasionally to record some forms of injustice that reach on-line or transnational, oppositional channels. The state has made such connections difficult, by lowering the bandwidth to upload media, closely monitoring the Internet, and arresting bloggers who post oppositional information.

### **Communities of Filmmakers**

The dissertation shows that the flourishing of the film and art world in Iran results from filmmakers and artists communicating with their peers, exchanging information that comes from Iranian and Islamic philosophies, from working together, receiving the support of state institutions and from exchanges with the West. In reviewing the literature on various forms of resistance, Sherry Ortner (1995) shows that there is much ambivalence on the part of the subordinate towards power, because the powerful have much to offer (p. 175). Most Iranian filmmakers receive funding from state institutions and hope to broadcast their films on IRIB or show them at national festivals.

At times filmmakers refuse to collaborate with state institutions to object state policies. Mehdi Bagheri and a group of filmmakers boycotted DEFC and the Vérité Festival from 2009 to 2012, to protest the conservative administration of DEFC and practices that were not supportive of documentary cinema. Bagher's film, *The Reluctant Bachelor* (2010) was independently made and produced by Katayoun Shahabi, who had garnered funding from foreign broadcasters. Its personal theme about his struggles with his father countered the family values that the Islamic regime promoted. It was not broadcast on IRIB, but was shown in many festivals and small screening venues,

and several articles were written about it. He was able to make and distribute the film largely without any state support. However, for his next films, Bagheri returned to DEFC for funding.

Additionally, the subaltern groups are divided internally in terms of their age, status, and gender. My experience of participating in filmmakers' activities showed that men cooperated with centers of power in greater numbers than women or young filmmakers, because they have more access and opportunities to benefit from institutional support. Male filmmakers in their middle ages have stronger established relationships with the leadership of media institutions. Some were their colleagues earlier in their careers. Women and young people have to develop their own independent channels of support and distribution. Often they follow discourses outside the dominant religious discourse that alienates them; their films often focus on intimate relationships and personal interests.

Pirooz Kalantari, a filmmaker and an active organizer of documentary workshops and blogs, and others like Mina Keshavarz, and Nahid Rezai, and Poorya Jahanshad have taken note of the trend of personal films about daily life and are seeking to expand the definition of documentaries. They hold events and write about films that focus on small, intimate stories. Pirooz differentiates between documentary cinema and documentary films. For him the former is a professional, artistic expression, with a history and tradition that goes back to the masters of documentary cinema, while the latter includes non-professional and amateur films that mirror details of Iranian life (Kalantari, 2013, personal communication). He talks and writes about the necessity of including documentaries in their different forms and modes. He was influenced by the concept of

“microhistory,” After a 2013 trip to Sweden. These emergent ideas entered the dominant discourse when filmmakers held several events and wrote about this concept.

Though some filmmakers feel shut out of state media institutions, or they do not want to submit to their restrictions, most filmmakers work within the institutional system. The female filmmakers of *Profession Documentarist* (2014) see themselves apart from dominant discourses and institutions. One of them, Mina Keshavarz, is finishing her new film about women’s rights and portrait of a woman activist in Minab with the help of a European-based, multi-national film development program. She is raising funds nationally and transnationally through European and Iranian crowdfunding sites. But another filmmaker, Farahnaz Sharifi, recently made a short film titled, *Employment Notice* (2012) that was part of a 13-part series for IRIB about the city of Tehran. It was produced for IRIB by independent producer, Sanei-Moghadam, and broadcast on Channel 4.

A few filmmakers are able to take the oppositional stance, because of international support. Feature film director, Jafar Panahi has often been censored for his films and his beliefs. He was banned from making films during Ahmadinejad’s presidency. He defied the authorities by making *This Is Not A Film* (2011) in collaboration with documentary filmmaker, Mojtaba Mirtahmasb. It was funded initially by the filmmakers and then through international distribution. Films that are funded by transnational funds often do not adhere to the ‘red lines’ that restrict films in Iran and are not given screening permits. Without screening permits their exhibition in Iran remains limited to unofficial sites. However, Panahi is mainly interested in international distribution. Locally, his films can only be shown in private galleries, homes, and at best,

in the screening room of the House of Cinema.

This study has shown filmmakers up close, examining their interactions with state institutions, their peers, and the world outside their borders. It also has focused on their films and what shapes their style and topic choices. As George Marcus (1995) explains, ethnographies of cultural formations are also ethnographies of the system. The reality on the ground shows a dynamic and diverse cultural sphere that receives extensive state support. The state has to engage its large, educated population that doesn't readily find employment, but has to remain active in various ways. Those who are marginalized by the state, like women and Westernized youth organize alternative venues and engage more directly with Western discourses. With all the economic and political challenges facing them, the urge to make films, to express, to document their world on their own terms, leads young and old filmmakers, non-professionals, men and women, to organize and attend workshops, festivals, galleries, and cultural events. They make documentary films that use different styles and modes to tell stories of life in Iran. Yearly, they produce around a thousand documentary films and actively work to exhibit them nationally and sometimes internationally. All these activities result in a colorful and bustling cultural and artistic field that engenders an active community of artists and filmmakers.

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## APPENDIX A



**TEMPLE**  
UNIVERSITY®

**Office for Human Subjects Protections  
Institutional Review Board**

Medical Intervention Committees A1 & A2  
Social and Behavioral Committee B  
Unanticipated Problems Committee

Student Faculty Conference Center  
3340 N Broad Street - Suite 304  
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19140  
Phone: (215) 707-3390  
Fax: (215) 707-9100  
e-mail: [irb@temple.edu](mailto:irb@temple.edu)

### **Certification of Approval for a Project Involving Human Subjects**

Protocol Number: **21216**  
PI: **MURPHY, PATRICK**  
Review Type: FULL COMMITTEE  
Approved On: 03-May-2013  
Approved From: 03-May-2013  
Approved To: 18-Apr-2014  
Committee: B BEHAVIORAL AND SOCIAL SCIENCES  
School/College: MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION (1700)  
Department: SMC:MEDIA STUDIES AND PRODUCTION (17040)  
Project Title: Iranian Documentary Film Culture after the 1979 Revolution

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The IRB approved the protocol **21216**.

If the study was approved under expedited or full board review, the approval period can be found above. Otherwise, the study was deemed exempt and does not have an IRB approval period.

Before an approval period ends, you must submit a "[Continuing Review Progress Report](#)" to request continuing approval. Please submit the form **at least 60 days before the approval end date** to ensure that the renewal is reviewed and approved and the study can continue.

Finally, in conducting this research, you are obligated to submit modification requests for all changes to any study; reportable new information using the Reportable New Information form; and renewal and closure forms. For the complete list of investigator responsibilities, please see the Policies and Procedures, the Investigator Manual, and other requirements found on the Temple University IRB website: <http://www.temple.edu/research/regaffairs/irb/index.html>

Please contact the IRB at (215) 707-3390 if you have any questions.