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“Cinema is a Machine of Empathy”: Restoring and Curating Iranian’s Cinematic Heritage. An interview with Ehsan Khoshbakht

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## DOSSIER THÉMATIQUE :

Soulèvements iraniens. Enjeux contemporains du cinéma et des arts visuels en Iran

### “CINEMA IS A MACHINE OF EMPATHY”: RESTORING AND CURATING IRANIAN’S CINEMATIC HERITAGE.

#### An interview with Ehsan Khoshbakht

**André Habib**

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The international recognition of Iranian cinema parallels its presence on the world festival circuit, from Gaffari’s 1963 *Night of the Hunchback*, through Kiarostami’s Palme d’or for *The Taste of Cherry* to Rossoulof’s *in extremis* addition to the 2024 Cannes Festival selection. These last few years, festivals (in particular Cannes, Venice, Berlin, Locarno) have been pivotal in diagnosing the “state of affairs” in the Islamic Republic of Iran, the ongoing creative struggle and resistance filmmakers have opposed to the regime. We could also add that, over the past ten years, it is also via festivals, and particularly those specialized in showcasing film restorations, that we have witnessed a reappraisal and renewed appreciation for works, mostly shot before the revolution, that had fallen into relative oblivion and which all, in some respect, display eloquent forms of politic and poetic resistance. It is safe to say that nowhere is this truer than at the Cineteca di Bologna, via its now world-renowned *Cinema Ritrovato* festival and through the work of the *Immagine ritrovata* laboratory. Crucial to this new wave of rediscoveries is Ehsan Khoshbakht, who has, since 2018, worked as co-director of the *Cinema Ritrovato* festival, apart from curating many ambitious programs across the world (notably, recently, the October 13th to November 27th MoMA program, *Iranian Cinema Before the Revolution*, spanning fifty years and presenting close to 70 feature and short films). He is also a filmmaker, an architect and an essential figure, with others, of the contemporary reassessment of the importance and richness of the history of Iranian cinema. Shortly before the launch of the Fall of 2023 MoMA cycle, we had a chance to interview him for this special issue of *Regards*.

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■ **What has been the relationship between the Cineteca di Bologna and Iranian cinema these last years and what were the projects you were directly involved in? There was an important focus on Iranian Cinema in 2022 (with among other things films by Shahid Saless (*Far from Home*, 1975), Ovanessian, *The Spring* (1971), Karimi, *The Carriage Driver* [1971]), and many wonderful films were shown in 2023 as well (Beyzai's *The Stranger and the Fog* [1974], and *The Ballad of Tara* [1979]), without forgetting the major rediscover of Aslani's *Chess of the Wind* (1976) in 2020. It seems to be an important thread of the Festival since 2015.**

2015 was the first year I got involved with the festival in a curating capacity. We started with a bit of antipasto — a small programme showing the work of Farrokh Ghaffari, Sohrab Shahid Saless, Kamran Shirdel, and Dariush Mehrjui. Its success led to programmes that in terms of size were not necessarily larger but could delve deeper into the notions of Iranian modernist and popular cinemas after WWII. That's how the Golestan Film Studio retrospective in 2016 and the Samuel Khachikian in 2017 tribute came about. Thanks to an encounter between the work and a new audience, the necessity of initiating restoration projects came to the fore. When the 35mm prints of film by Golestan were shown, first, their timeless beauty was rediscovered and then the fragile state of the prints was noted. Only two years later, the very same film that shook the Bologna audience – *Brick and Mirror* in a 120-minute version – was restored in 4K in its original 130-minute length and premiered at the Venice Film Festival. *The Spring* by Arby Ovanessian was shown in 2022 from a French print belonging to Langlois, and then the next year it was restored by the filmmaker himself. The ongoing success of Iranian pre-revolutionary films has encouraged us and others to seek for more titles and try harder to save them. Of course, being an Iranian, it feels almost like a moral responsibility although one that often comes with too much headache and heartache.

■ **In part because, luckily, many of the filmmakers are still alive, in part because it is the only way to access the material, you've had to work directly with the artists to obtain prints and information. How does that change the work, instead of working directly with estates or archives?**

First, I should say that even when the filmmakers are with us, the majority of them have absolutely no idea where the original elements of their films are. This is unbelievable and very sad but it is the reality.

Except for Ebrahim Golestan who was the sole producer of his films, in other cases, the films were produced by individuals or institutions that no longer exist. I mean how should one approach “The Ministry of Culture” of Imperial Iran in a post-revolutionary context? Should we consider “The Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance” as the new owners of the film? Legally speaking, they are the owners, and whenever they can make money out of the less problematic titles (meaning films with no unveiled women in them, such as films by Shahid Saless)

they happily do that. But ethically speaking, this is the very ministry that has suppressed the freedom of speech and the free production of moving images and has forced many of the great talents of Iranian cinema into exile. So how can one acknowledge their patrimony over some of the classics of Iranian cinema?

When the filmmakers are around, we can always prioritize intellectual rights over legal ones. Iran is not part of the international copyright treaties which makes it slightly easier to bend some of the rules. Their presence in tracking down the material or restoration could be extremely beneficial.

With the estates, it depends on their dedication to the memory of the filmmaker and the extent of their familiarity with the process of our work and its outcome. Certain unrealistic demands, financial or otherwise, can hinder embarking on restoration projects but fortunately, in the case of Iranian cinema, it usually ends in collaboration and cooperation because they know it is the only chance to preserve the memory of the artists in question.

■ **Can you talk more precisely of your involvement with the restoration and presentation of the two Beyzaï films this year at Cinema Ritrovato ?**

Let’s start with *The Ballad of Tara*. I had no role in having it restored, except the knowledge that it was being restored in Tehran. So through Mr. Beyzaie I first got the news and then the copy and the permission to screen the film. I heavily modified and edited an existing translation of the subtitles too. Mr. Bayzai’s language is a fascinating combination of formal, informal, and classic Persian spoken by different characters. I wanted that to come across better.

*The Stranger and the Fog* was a different story. I was in negotiation with Mr. Beyzaie to let the Cineteca di Bologna handle his film legacy in terms of depositing the existing material, preserving and, when possible, restoring them. Cecilia Cenciarelli has been pretty much holding the helm on this and other similar projects, including the Golestan Project. However, in the early stages, the whole Arsene Lupin stunt of shipping the film out of Iran with the help of a famous actor was orchestrated by me. When the original camera negative reached Bologna, the usual process of submitting it to the Film Foundation was carried out by Cecilia. Then I had some supervision on color grading (on behalf of Mr. Beyzaie) and also creating new subtitles for the film. We plan to continue this with other films Mr. Beyzaie made between 1969 and 1979, so it’s a fantastic and essential preservation project.

■ **What is the role of the Iranian National Archive in Tehran in these projects, and do you know if they are actively working to preserve their national heritage (and in what respect)?**

I do know they are actively engaged in preserving their collection but because of the secrecy around what they do and because Iranian institutions don’t feel obliged to report to the citizens about what they are doing with their culture



The Stranger and the Fog (Beyzaï, 1974)

(and their money), there's usually no information about what I'm almost certain are some worthwhile and noble activities. So it is often left to rumors and hearsay to get what they are up to. Despite the obvious limitations they face, they have been supportive of the projects in Cineteca by either lending prints from their collection or facilitating the shipment of privately-owned prints belonging to individuals.

■ **Does the Tehran Cinema Museum play a role in these restoration projects?**

It doesn't. It has been defined as a place for showcasing the history of Iranian cinema and documenting its past. The restoration works are carried out by Filmkhaneh and two or three private companies based in Tehran.

■ **You are also a filmmaker. You made recently *Celluloid Underground* (2023) and also *Filmfarsi* (2019), a wonderful documentary on the Iranian popular film genre, but which was also a personal journey into the Iranian cinema of the 60's and 70's leading to the Revolution. What has making films such as these brought you in terms of understanding of the films and filmmakers you've been engaged with restoring their works?**

Making *Filmfarsi* was an extension of my work as a curator, meaning that I decided to make a film of fragments about a cinema that I couldn't show. Cinema is a machine of empathy but most people don't realize that empathy is generated

not only for when the films are viewed in darkness but it’s also a feature of the process of making a film, maybe because empathy is an offspring of time.

Speaking of time, I spent five years making *Filmfarsi* and throughout that period, I allowed my change of perception of Iranian popular cinema, from dismissal to understanding and even admiration, to become part of the narrative arc of the documentary.

There were more tangible revelations too. When the opportunity arose to scan two films by one of the greatest talents from that period – Samuel Khachikian – the amount of details we could see in the film suddenly transformed our notion of Iranian popular cinema: a shot of a scorpion climbing a wall in a derelict basement where an alleged serial killer on the loose hides. Previously, we were not able to see that (real) scorpion in the shot. All those great efforts for authenticity or particular expressionist effects and many innovations were lost or unseen in ghastly and unwatchable bootleg copies.

■ You mention “tangible revelations” during the making of *Filmfarsi*. Similarly, what do you think are the most significant repercussions of the restoration work (carried out in Bologna in particular) on the writing of the history of Iranian cinema, not only in aesthetic terms, but also politically? What do we get to learn when we work on such a restoration process?

How subversive and innovative these films have been is something I always understand better when working on the restoration of the Iranian films. For instance, we restored the original version of *The Crown Jewels of Iran* (1965) by Ebrahim Golestan. The previously circulating versions had nearly 80 percent of the narration removed/censored.

■ In February 2023, at the Cineteca di Bologna, you curated a three day program, *Bologna per l’Iran*, in solidarity with the popular uprising in the streets and the “Woman, Life, Freedom” movement. The program showed many films from the 60’s, 70’s and 80’s as well as many more recent classics, from Satrapi to Panahi. In particular, the cycle began with the presentation of *Streets of Fire*, a short film that is part of a work in progress by Majed Neisi, culled using private images from demonstrations and protesters he found on Instagram or TikTok<sup>1</sup>. It was a very moving and heartbreaking moment and it became very clear that all these films that were presented, in some shape or form, allowed us to better understand the current situation. How do you see this dialogue, and in particular the role of film restoration and curation of Iranian’s past (and in particular the films of the 60’s and 70’s) with the current uprising and continuous repression filmmakers and citizens are subjected to.

This was a new experience for me to combine the old and the new. It came out of the sheer necessity to address the key question posed by the institution

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1- The film was completed during the summer of 2023, under the title *Inside the Iranian Uprising*.

(a cinemathèque in Bologna, hence the film history angle) and the current situation in Iran. So in a way, it was a clandestine type of programming: taking risks and looking for new, even explosive encounters of moving images. The first risk I took was with Neisi's teaser for his upcoming film which he eventually finished by June 2023 (the final version became one of the most viewed original documentaries on both BBC and PBS during its initial broadcast.) His film went beyond a documentary and became a document. Neisi, 41, apprenticed with Kamran Shirdel, the most militant of the 1960s documentarians. Therefore, I included films by Shirdel who was the first filmmaker to deal with the problems of women in Iranian society. Then it made sense to go as early as Ebrahim Golestan, because it was he who first used documentary cinema as a means of disobedience and even quiet rebellion. The defiant nature of Iranian cinema continues to this day and films by Panahi and Rasoulouf are the most obvious examples of it though as fighters and dissidents they can make stronger statements in real life than in their cinema. By starting with a female filmmaker, Feroz Farrokhzad in 1962, I wanted to remind everybody that the so-called Iranian New Wave had a godmother, instead of, like its Western equivalents, a godfather or godfathers. The programming was done quickly – within a couple of days – and it was put together even faster and that brought the energy and urgency it required. The same format won't work in a film festival. I'm usually a slow curator, meaning that I think at least two years ahead, therefore, my programs can't necessarily address the most immediate issues of the day and what's going on in the street. In this case, and by using the format of cinemathèque screening, I could respond faster. However, the flexibility of Cineteca is missing in other Western European cinemathèques as they have unnecessarily long leads which results in killing any possibility of spontaneity and immediate reaction to the state of things.

■ **The juxtaposition of the old and the new that you mention in connection with the *Bologna per l'Iran* program is very interesting indeed. Have you seen other cinemathèques working in this same direction over the past year in support of what's happening in Iran? And why doesn't this kind of approach work seem to work for festivals?**

As far as I know, no. It's because they haven't yet realized how tied past and present of cinema and society in Iran are. Festivals have specific objectives and since most of them focus on contemporary cinema perhaps the imagination for linking it to a larger picture of the history of Iranian cinema is missing.



■ **You told us about the programming dedicated to pre-revolutionary Iranian cinema that will take place this fall at MoMA. Can you tell us a little bit more about it? Will it follow this same approach, or does it aim to explore other aspects? Will the link with current events be explored, and in what way?**

The program in New York is a historical overview that aims for a new kind of inclusivity and totality of the different types of cinema existing in Iran, including (for the first time) popular films, education films and documentaries about religion, along with more often shown Iranian New Wave films. It’s a program put together with a specific film history narrative in mind, though, again, for a contemporary audience seeing these films in relation to recent events in Iran is perhaps inevitable.

■ **A final question concerns the distribution of Iranian films in Europe. It’s interesting to note that the delay in the distribution in Europe of Iranian films made before the latest events (we think, for example, of *The Wastetown* with Baran Kosari, 2023) offers the opportunity to take a different look at these films in relation to the present, or even Jafar Panahi’s last film that was obviously read through the lens of what was occurring in the country. How to account for this “delay effect” and has Iranian cinema often had that type of “semi-prophetic” quality (no pun intended)?**

Not all the films are released with delays. Many are seen by non-Iranians first. A Panahi film is most likely discussed (and seen as work-in-progress) with major festivals even before it is completed. Does Iranian cinema have a prophetic side? It does. But it’s not because of some supernatural element assisting Iranian filmmakers, it is simply because those who look closely and patiently discover situations that are about to unfold fully in the future. Their meaning is not very clear in a 1974 movie but when the revolution in 1979 happens one can see why people reacted the way they did in 1974. It explains the tensions felt in a film in 1974. Therefore, some films seem to be about events in the future rather than about their time of production. *Chess of the Wind* and *The Stranger and The Fog* are brilliant examples.

*This interview was conducted via email by André Habib, with additional questions by Claudia Polledri, between August 28<sup>th</sup> and November 23<sup>rd</sup>.*



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