

A SOCIAL HISTORY OF IRANIAN CINEMA VOLUME 1

The Artisanal Era, 1897–1941



HAMID NAFICY

A SOCIAL HISTORY OF IRANIAN CINEMA

Volume 1: The Artisanal Era, 1897–1941

Volume 2: The Industrializing Years, 1941–1978

Volume 3: The Islamicate Period, 1978–1984

Volume 4: The Globalizing Era, 1984–2010

PRAISE FOR *A Social History of Iranian Cinema*

“Hamid Naficy is already established as the doyen of historians and critics of Iranian cinema. Based on his deep understanding of modern Iranian political and social history, this detailed critical history of Iran’s cinema since its founding is his crowning achievement. To say that it is a must-read for virtually all concerned with modern Iranian history, and not just cinema and the arts, is to state the obvious.”

—HOMA KATOUIAN, author of

The Persians: Ancient, Mediaeval and Modern Iran

“This magisterial four-volume study of Iranian cinema will be the defining work on the topic for a long time to come. Situating film within its sociopolitical context, Hamid Naficy covers the period leading up to the Constitutional Revolution and continues after the Islamic Revolution, examining questions about modernity, globalization, Islam, and feminism along the way. *A Social History of Iranian Cinema* is a guide for our thinking about cinema and society and the ways that the creative expression of film should be examined as part of a wider engagement with social issues.”

—ANNABELLE SREBERNY, co-author of

Blogistan: The Internet and Politics in Iran

“*A Social History of Iranian Cinema* is an extraordinary achievement, a scholarly, detailed work in which a massive amount of material is handled with the lightest touch. Yet it is Hamid Naficy’s personal experience and investment that give this project a particular distinction. Only a skilled historian, one who is on the inside of his story, could convey so vividly the symbolic significance of cinema for twentieth-century Iran and its deep intertwining with national culture and politics.”

—LAURA MULVEY, author of

Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image

“Hamid Naficy seamlessly brings together a century of Iran’s cinematic history, marking its technological advancements and varying genres and storytelling techniques, and perceptively addressing its sociopolitical impact on the formation of Iran’s national identity. *A Social History of Iranian Cinema* is essential reading not only for the cinephile interested in Iran’s unique and rich cinematic history but also for anyone wanting a deeper understanding of the cataclysmic events and metamorphoses that have shaped Iran, from the pivotal Constitutional Revolution that ushered in the twentieth century through the Islamic Revolution, and into the twenty-first century.”

—SHIRIN NESHAT, visual artist, filmmaker, and

director of the film *Women Without Men*

A Social History of Iranian Cinema

VOLUME I

Hamid Naficy

A SOCIAL HISTORY
OF IRANIAN CINEMA

Volume 1

The Artisanal Era, 1897–1941

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*To my parents,
who instilled in me the love and
pleasure of knowledge and arts*

*To my country of birth, Iran,
and its extraordinary culture and history*

*To my adopted country, the United States,
and its cherished democratic ideals*

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ORGANIZATION OF THE VOLUMES

The book is divided into four volumes, covering the social history of over a century of Iranian cinema, from around 1897 to about 2010. The history of Iranian society and the cinema it produced in this period is bookended by two revolutions: the 1905–11 Constitutional Revolution, which brought in a constitutional monarchy, and the 1978–79 Islamic Revolution, which installed a republican theocratic state. While the impact of the first revolution on cinema and film culture was apparently limited and inchoate, the latter revolution profoundly affected them, resulting in their unprecedented efflorescence.

As a work of social history and theory, these volumes deal not only with such chronological developments in society and in the film industry but also with the synchronic contexts, formations, dispositions, and maneuvers that overdetermined modernity in Iran and a dynamically evolving film industry and its unique products. I locate the film industry and its mode of production, narratives, aesthetics, and generic forms in the interplay of deeply rooted Iranian performative and visual arts and what was imported, adopted, adapted, translated, mistranslated, and hybridized from the West. The interplay between Iranian and Islamic philosophies and aesthetics complicated and channeled cinema, particularly that involving women, in ways unique to Iran, which are discussed throughout the volumes. Likewise, the contribution of Iranian ethnoreligious minorities, both widespread and profound, gave Iranian cinema additional specificity.

The volumes also situate Iranian cinema at the intersection of state-driven authoritarian modernization, nationalist and Islamist politics, and geopolitics during its tumultuous century, charting the manner in which local, national, regional, and international powers competed for ascendancy in Iran, affect-

ing what Iranians saw on screens, what they produced, and the technologies they adopted.

The logic of dividing the work into four volumes is driven by both socio-political developments and the evolution of the film industry. While these volumes are autonomous, each contributes to the understanding and appreciation of the others, as certain theoretical, stylistic, industrial, commercial, cultural, religious, sociopolitical, biographical, authorial, and governmental elements form lines of inquiry pursued throughout, gathering momentum and weight. Each volume has a table of contents, a bibliography, an index, and when needed appendices.

Volume 1: The Artisanal Era, 1897–1941

This volume offers a theory linking Iranian modernity and national identity with the emergence of an inchoate artisanal cinema and with an othered cinematic subjectivity. Qajar-era cinema consisted of the exhibition of foreign actualities and narratives and the production of a limited number of domestic actualities and comic skits by pioneer exhibitors and producers, all of whom are featured. The image of women on the screens and the presence of women as spectators in movie houses proved controversial, resulting in the first act of film censorship. Borrowing from the curtain reciting tradition, live movie translators (*dilmaj*) helped increase narrative comprehension and the enjoyment of Western movies.

Reza Shah Pahlavi dissolved the Qajar dynasty in 1925 and ruled until 1941. During his rule, the first Pahlavi period, the state implemented an authoritarian syncretic Westernization program that attempted to modernize and secularize the multicultural, multilingual, and multiethnic Iranians into a homogenous modern nation. Cinematic representations of a fast modernizing Iran in documentaries and fiction movies were encouraged, photography and movie production were tightly controlled, movie houses were regulated, and perceived affronts to Iran in Western documentaries were taken seriously. The veil was outlawed and dandies flourished. All these developments receive extensive coverage in this volume. Despite efforts to centralize and control cinema, film production proved marginal to state formation and remained artisanal. Only one silent feature film was produced domestically, while all sound features were produced by an Iranian expatriate in India. This latter fact and others discussed in the volume show Iranian cinema's transnational nature from the start.

Volume 2: The Industrializing Years, 1941–1978

During the second Pahlavi period (Mohammad Reza Shah, 1941–79), cinema flourished and became industrialized, producing at its height over ninety films a year. The state was instrumental in building the infrastructures of the cinema and television industries, and it instituted a vast apparatus of censorship and patronage. During the Second World War and its aftermath, the three major Allied powers—the United Kingdom, the United States, and the USSR—competed with each other to control what Iranians saw on movie screens. One chapter examines this fascinating history.

In the subsequent decades, two major parallel cinemas emerged: the commercial filmfarsi movies, popular with average spectators, forming the bulk of the output, and a smaller but influential cinema of dissent, the new-wave cinema. The commercial filmfarsi movies, exemplified by the stewpot and tough-guy genres discussed extensively in two chapters, were for entertainment purposes and drew their power and charm from their stars and their rootedness in Iranian traditions, which were juxtaposed favorably and often comically or melodramatically with modern Western traditions. A dynamic nonfiction cinema evolved, which receives a chapter. Ironically, the state both funded and censored much of the new-wave cinema, which grew bolder in its criticism and impact as Pahlavi authoritarianism consolidated. The new-wave films, produced by the collaboration of Westernized filmmakers with modernist dissident writers, did well in international film festivals, starting the globalization of Iranian cinema. The impending revolution could retrospectively be read in the fear-driven narratives of the new-wave films and in the various cultural struggles around official culture and arts festivals, the censorship of films, religious sermons on audiocassettes, poetry reading nights, television trials and confessions, and underground filming, all of which I discuss at length.

Volume 3: The Islamicate Period, 1978–1984

Identified toward the end of the Shah's rule as one of the agents of moral corruption in the country, movies and movie houses became targets of a rising anti-Shah movement, resulting in the destruction of a third of all movie houses nationwide. This volume charts both such revolutionary destruction and the subsequent rebuilding and evolution of the film and media industries. Many above-the-line personnel in these industries found themselves

sidelined, banned, arrested, deprived of property, or exiled. The star system, a major attraction of filmfarsi cinema, was thus dismantled. Movies were banned, cut, redubbed, and painted over to remove offending features.

After such iconoclastic destructions and purification the new Islamic regime undertook a wide-ranging effort to institutionalize a new film industry whose values would be commensurate with the newly formulated Islamicate values. The first rules and regulations governing film production and exhibition were adopted in 1982. Like the second Pahlavi regime, the ayatollahs' regime put into place a strong, centralized, and draconian system of state regulation and patronage to encourage politically correct movies. The import of foreign movies oscillated but was eventually banned, leaving the field open for a new domestic cinema. The long war with Iraq, the gendered segregation of space, and the imposition of the veil on women encouraged certain ideological and aesthetic trends. Foremost was the reconceptualization of cinema from a despised agent of corruption and othering to an agent of nation building and selfing. However, the resulting Islamicate cinema and culture were neither homogeneous nor static. They evolved with considerable personal, institutional, and ideological struggles.

Volume 4: The Globalizing Era, 1984–2010

The revolutionary experience, the bloody eight-year war with Iraq, and the perceived Western cultural invasion of Iran all encouraged soul searching, national epistemophilia, and a desire for self-representation, resulting in an array of documentary films and film forms about the revolution, war, and the various social ills and inequalities that accumulated under the Islamist regime. The state-run television and fiction film industries, too, funded and supported filmmakers committed to Islam who made powerful “imposed war” movies in which sacred subjectivity replaced modernist subjectivity. Women’s presence both on camera and behind the camera increased significantly in all genres and types of films, in both the television and movie industries, leading to a veritable “women’s cinema.” The veil evolved from a repressive social institution to a dynamic social practice and critical aesthetics.

A deepening sociopolitical and cultural struggle over cinema, media, and culture, and ultimately the legitimacy of the Islamic Republic, emerged in the country. This was reflected in, and shaped by, a new form of public diplomacy, chiefly between Iran and the United States, during Mohammad Khatami’s presidency, which intensified under his successor, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

In a new “cultural turn” the antagonistic governments began to recruit all sorts of mutual domestic, diasporic, and international film, television, radio, and Internet media and formations to serve this diplomacy, sometimes with dire consequences for the participants. Foreign and exile videos and satellite televisions were officially banned, but enforcement was chaotic, encouraging a thriving culture of resistance that continues to date. With the rise of opposition to the Islamic Republic regime a dissident Internet cinema emerged.

The postrevolution era bred its own dissident art-house parallel cinema, involving some of the best Pahlavi-era new-wave directors and a new crop of innovative postrevolution directors, placing Iranian cinema on the map of the vital world cinemas. They brought self-respect and prestige for Iranians at home and abroad. The displacement, dispersion, and exile of a massive number of Iranians, many in the visual and performing arts and cinema and television, resulted in new formations in Iran’s social history and cinematic history—a diasporic formation of people with a complex subjectivity and an “accented cinema,” made by first-generation émigrés and their second- and third-generation descendants. Both the wide circulation of Iran-made films and those Iranians made in the diaspora, as well as the vast diasporic dispersion of Iranians, helped globalize Iranian cinema. Each of these developments is discussed in its own chapter.

A WORD ABOUT ILLUSTRATIONS

I have used several types of illustration here, each providing supplementary or complementary material to the text. Production stills show something of the behind-the-scenes process. Frame enlargements, taken directly from films or videos, offer visuals for textual analyses of the films' aesthetic and generic systems. Posters offer not only an encapsulated rendition of the film by artists other than filmmakers but also showcase the art of poster design and production, which form important components of the movies' publicity, exhibition, and reception. Like the movies themselves, this art also evolved over time, an evolution discernable in the posters included in the present volumes. Cartoons and other material objects about cinema demonstrate the wider circulation of things filmic among Iranians. The flyers announcing film screenings and cultural and political events featuring screenings served as important vehicles in exile for advertising, political agitprop, and film exhibition immediately after the 1978–79 revolution. They provide a good sense of the films, of the political culture of the time, and of the sponsoring groups. Finally, the many tables in the book offer other forms of data for the analysis of the films' cultural contexts, such as audience demography, production output, film export and import, organizations involved in production, and the regulations concerning censorship and banning of movies. Because of the diversity of sources and the deterioration of some films and videos, the quality of the pictorial illustrations varies.

PREFACE

How It All Began

History is written by individuals who have their own personal and intellectual histories and perspectives. This preface is a history of my engagement with the subject of Iranian cinema and its place in the world. It is not my autobiography or my family's history, but a cultural autobiography about my contentious love affair—and that of other Iranians—with cinema, Iran, and the West. As such it offers a microcosmic perspective on Iranian culture and society during the second Pahlavi period and its transition to the Islamic Republic.

I watched Western movies, made films, and taught and wrote about cinema. My affair with cinema began early with a fascination with photography and translations of Western novels, adapted to the screen. Like all love affairs it had moments of disillusionment, misunderstanding, hostility, and betrayal.

Taking Photographs

I was born in the historic and magnificent city of Isfahan, and I roamed the place with my father's Kodak Brownie box camera. I remember the small color image of the viewfinder and its sharp contrast with the resultant black-and-white photos. That image was as vivid as a dream, like the single 35mm color frames of American movies, which I used to purchase from street hawkers in my hometown.

I acquired my own camera as a gift from our neighbor, Heshmatollah

Dehesh on Jahan Nama Street, near Darvazeh Dowlat. He had three children: The eldest, Keyvan, was blind. One fine, sunny, wintry day the haunting music coming from Dehesh's household attracted me, and I went up to our rooftop to investigate. From there I could see Dehesh's yard paved with brick, in the center of which sat a raised, oblong pool. Four garden plots separated the pool from the paved yard, and four thirsty tongues of the yard reached between those plots and rested on the side of the pool. It was a cold day, and the white mulberry trees in the garden were bare. To my amazement I observed that it was Keyvan who was playing this beautiful tune on his violin as he walked around the pool casting his shadow on the gently rippling water.

Keyvan's father took him to West Germany for treatment, where he stayed. His father returned, however, and brought me a present—a 35mm Agfa camera. I was thrilled and grateful. Five decades later, I am struck by this irony: gaining a second sight with the camera at the age of thirteen or fourteen thanks to a sightless boy.

Using this camera I documented bicycle outings with my family and excursions with school friends to the countryside—Kuleh Parcheh, Abshar, Chirun, Kuh Donbeh, Atashgah, and Bagh Abrisham. I felt lonely most of the time in those days, and taking pictures helped cement our relationships, as for weeks afterward we traded and copied photographs. In a fatalist society, pictures were proof of our existence, shoring us up against the vagaries of time and history.

My current interest in documentation must have begun then. I assiduously took pictures of my two favorite subjects: the very young and the very old. I thought that children needed documentation to celebrate their arrival into the world (and besides, they were very cute), while the elders needed to prove their existence before departing into the netherworld. But I went beyond simply taking photographs, mostly in our new house on Jahan Nama Street, which since then has been torn down and rebuilt in honor of my father as “Doctor Naficy's Clinic.” I asked the elder family members whose pictures I took to write some words of wisdom for me in an “advice notebook.” Following the custom of gender segregation, I had two notebooks: one for women and one for men. Looking over these books now, I see the Islamic, moralistic, and modernist ideologies of the authors shine through the variety of elegant handwritings (good penmanship was valued then), colors of ink, and length. (Uncle Alinaqi's moralistic advice, for example, is thirty pages long and in green ink, while my dad's advice, written in 1961, is ninety-seven pages in blue ink, ending with the French adage “La fonction fait l'organ,” form follows function.)

The usual mise-en-scène of my family portraits is a single individual in the center, standing near a tree in our backyard, or seated on a sun-drenched balcony. Expressions in these medium shots are generally serious, composed, and the subjects are looking directly, sometimes with a hint of a smile, at me behind the camera. This aesthetics of portraiture somehow migrated into the hundreds of freehand drawings that I have made over the years of public intellectuals and cultural critics (figures 1–12). The modernist belief in individuals’ uniqueness, subjectivity, and agency informing this aesthetic is also inscribed in the portraits of filmmakers strewn throughout the book.

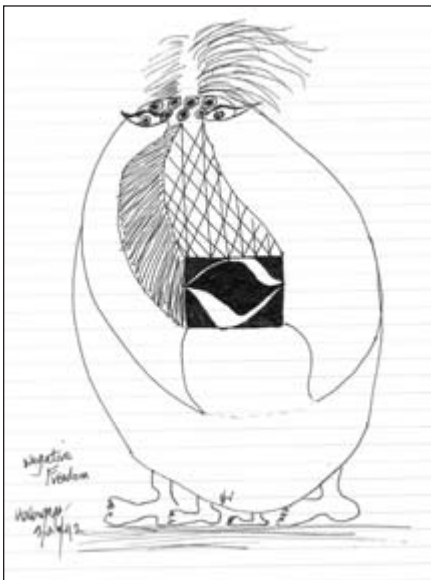
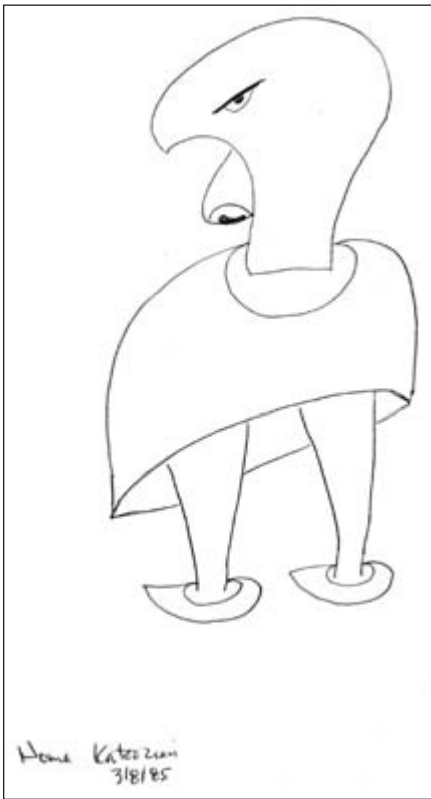


Figures 1–12 Author’s freehand portrait drawings, 1980s–1990s.
Collection of the author

clockwise from top left:

- 1 The American historian Barbara Metcalf
- 2 The Greek philosopher Cornelius Castoriadis
- 3 The French cultural critic Jean-François Lyotard





clockwise from top left:

4 The Iranian-British social critic Homa Katouzian

5 The Algerian-French philosopher Jacques Derrida

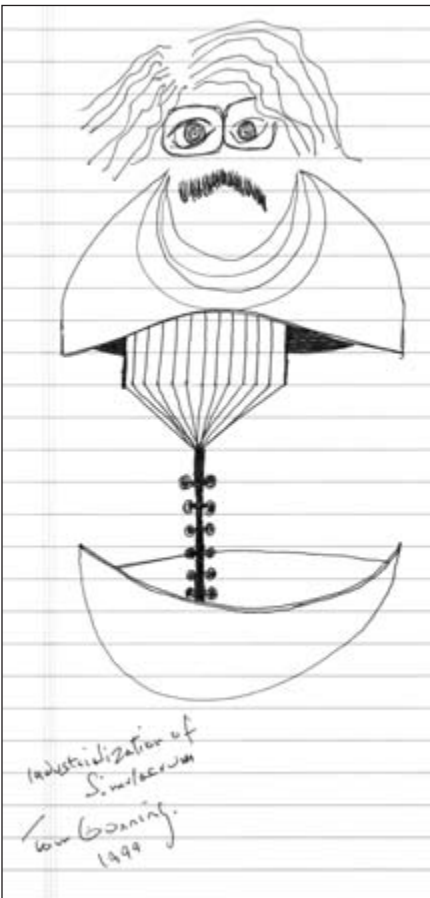
6 The German philosopher Jürgen Habermas



clockwise from top left:

- 7 The Iranian American women's studies scholar Nayereh Tohidi
- 8 The American anthropologist Paul Rabinow
- 9 The British filmmaker and film scholar Peter Wollen





clockwise from top left:

10 Author's self-portrait

11 The Ethiopian American film scholar Teshome H. Gabriel

12 The American film historian Tom Gunning

Elder Muslim women objected to being photographed unveiled; some even objected to being photographed altogether. It is true that I was *mahram* (related) and thus *halal* (permitted) to them, and they did not have to wear the veil for me, but the technicians who developed the pictures in the photo shops were not.¹ I resolved this dilemma by taking candid shots without veils or taking posed photos with veils. Clearly, technology was intruding into the gendered domestic space: it was making the sacred profane and the private public.

Building a Film Projector

Chaharbagh Avenue was Isfahan's Champs-Élysées: ancient, beautiful, soulful, and lined with tall sycamores and modern shops, including most of the city's movie houses. Street vendors there sold short strips of movies, single movie frames, movie posters, printed lyrics of pop songs, lottery tickets, cigarettes, and candy. The film frames I bought there as a young boy typically showed Tarzan or handsome and beautiful movie stars. At night, I would go to one of the unoccupied rooms in our huge three-story house, shine a little black flashlight onto each frame, and watch the projected color images on the wall. I also found other creative uses for these film frames: Sometimes I folded a frame over itself so that when pressed on one side it produced a loud click. In a small way I had appropriated a Western commodity as raw material to make a native product, reversing the usual economic relationship. I enjoyed squeezing my clicker over and over to annoy my mother, who would shoo me away.

A little later, I built a wooden light-box with a window in its top. Inside, I placed a light bulb, a reflector, and a roll of cartoon images, which I had cut out and pasted together from the children's magazine *Kayhan-e Bachehha* (*Children's Kayhan*), the subscription to which I had won in a contest. By cranking the handles on the outside of the box, I could view the cartoon strip as it passed in front of the window. I added a lens to the window and was able to project the cartoon images on the wall (ignoring the reversed writing), creating my first film show for my family. In an entrepreneurial move, I think I even charged them admission. I continued to improve the system. Since the children's magazine was a monthly, I soon ran out of cartoons, and my uncles and I had to draw by hand our own cartoon strips for the primitive projector. I still remember the exuberant comments and the ooohs and aaahs of the family audience during these shows. My uncles Reza and Hosain Nafisi, who also built a hand-cranked cartoon projector in the mid-1950s, solved the problem of the reversed projection of the alphabets by reading the dialogue aloud to the

spectators like curtain reciters and movie-house translators, discussed extensively here (Naficy 2007b).

The filmmaker Asadollah Niknejad, who emigrated to the United States, told me that he had been fascinated with the idea of building a projector in his youth and, indeed, had manufactured a 35mm model, which he said still works. He showed me a picture of himself as a young boy with it. My distant cousin, Alireza, who later became a physician and married my sister Nasrin, built a rather elaborate 35mm film projector with his friend Hodayun Shahriari when they were in high school (figure 13). As he told me in a telephone interview from Isfahan, building the projector was a summer project, which the two friends embarked on for several reasons germane to Iranian film history: going to the movies involved frustrating interruptions in the 1950s, as the screenings in commercial cinemas were frequently cut and even cancelled because of loss of electricity. The spectators could reenter the cinemas later when electricity was restored by showing their ticket stubs. “To see a movie in full,” said Alireza Naficy, “sometimes, we would have to return to the movie house several times, a very frustrating experience” (Naficy 2006c). In addition, moviegoing was a morally corrupting and physically dangerous experience, as sexual predators preyed on their young victims inside and outside these establishments. Seeing the movies at home, therefore, was an attractive and safe alternative; yet few people could afford the cost of purchasing portable projectors and renting movies. This made constructing homemade movie projectors both a viable and a challenging solution, particularly for scientific and modern-minded youths.



13 Building a 35mm film projector. My cousin, Alireza Naficy, eighteen years old (left), and his classmate, Hodayun Shahriari (right), with the 35mm projector they built in 1955 in the backyard of Shahriari's house in Isfahan. Still courtesy of Alireza Naficy

Electrical service stoppages were not the only source of movie interruption. Because of inferior projectors and old “junk” film prints, discussed in these pages, movies often broke during projection, causing projectionists to cut off strips of films when resplicing. The availability of these film strips, which the street vendors sold by the meter or frame on Chaharbagh Avenue in Isfahan and in other major cities, was an enticement to young modernists and inventors. Likewise, Point Four film projectionists of the United States Information Agency (USIA), who drove into schools and other public places in their mobile film units and showed films on their portable 16mm projectors, provided an up-close model of a projector for interested youths. Yet much creativity and perseverance was needed to build a homemade projector, given the limited technical knowledge, equipment, and resources. “To begin with,” Alireza Naficy told me, “to build our projector we copied the pictures of a film projector we had seen in a magazine, as well as the actual Point Four projectors we had seen. We had no real blueprint for it. It was all based on visual cognition.”

Like the pioneers of cinema, they built their equipment in an artisanal fashion with whatever was available or adaptable. The projector’s body was made with planks of wood obtained from crates. For the lens, they adapted an ordinary magnifier, which they installed inside a tube; for the claw mechanism that pulled the film using sprocket holes, they drove nails into a wooden spool they obtained from a textile mill; for the motor to drive the projector, they cannibalized an electric fan they had purchased for the purpose; and for the belt connecting the motor to the claw mechanism, they waxed some twine. After all this, they discovered their projector’s Achilles’ heel: they needed a shutter and an intermittent movement mechanism to hold each frame still for a fraction of a second in front of the lens. This proved an insurmountable ordeal and, anyway, by then the summer vacation had ended, and Shahriari’s parents wanted some results for their investment. Most early cinema pioneers in Iran suffered such constraints and impediments and invented their own artisanal, ad hoc solutions.

The two entrepreneurs, Alireza and Hodayun, were forced to stage not a film performance but a slideshow, so to speak, as they projected each frame of the filmstrips they had bought, one frame at a time. They invited a large group of spectators, consisting of Shahriari’s extended family members from the small town of Najafabad nearby. “They loved what they saw. Most of them were villagers, and they seemed to be more fascinated by the technology of projection than by the images themselves—the projector’s turning reels, its noise, its light—as though the machine was magically materializing the images by itself.”

That building a film projector formed part of a larger techno-scientific modernization is borne out by the vials of chemicals on the table in front of their projector in figure 13, where the two budding scientists are pouring some chemical into a container with an eyedropper (Shahriari would later become an electronics engineer and Naficy a virologist). The map of Iran tacked to the wall indexes the national aspiration associated with modernity.

Around the same time, following the instructions and diagrams in *Kayhan-e Bachehha*, I built with great expectations a radio set that required an earphone for listening. I scoured Isfahan's electrical shops, but the more I sought the less I found. The only thing I came up with was an old headset from the Second World War, which did not work. Crushed, I gave up that project, still tasting the disappointment half a century later.

Taking photographs, building a projector for paper film rolls, and making an amateur radio were precursors to building a film projector, which seemed to be both a dream and a challenge for many enterprising and modernist young boys. The difficulties of these projects pointed to the underdevelopment of technical knowledge and infrastructure in Iran that dogged not only the amateur world but also the field of professional film, keeping it an artisanal cottage industry for decades.

Watching Literature-Based Movies

The relationship between modernist and Western literature and cinema was reciprocal, for viewing the adaptations validated both the original novel and the experience of the cinema. They both vividly represented the Western Other with whom I had to come to terms. I spent the summer of 1960 reading all the great novels that I could get my hands on. I read more than thirty of them and saw many film adaptations. Yul Brynner and Maria Schell brought to life the tumultuous but difficult text of Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* (1958) in Richard Brooks's screen adaptation. Impressed, after the film I noted in a letter to my uncle Reza, dated 28 Farvardin 1339 (17 April 1960), "The performances were magnificent."

On a warm May night, I took my Agfa camera to Mayak Cinema, which was showing Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (1956), directed by King Vidor. I wanted to take color slides of the film. Unsure of how the ushers and spectators would react, I hid the camera under my jacket. During close-ups of Pierre and Natasha (Henry Fonda and Audrey Hepburn), I discreetly took timed pictures, holding my breath to steady my hands. Captivated by the great novel, I

had spent weeks reading and annotating it—noting in my diary, with a combination of awe and arrogance, “the breadth and the style of the book is utterly amazing. I am trying to understand it as fully as possible because it is worth it” (22 Ordibehesht 1339 / 12 May 1960). Holding the color slides of Hepburn’s enchanting face to the light felt like holding a piece of a dream, a condensed image of Russia and America.

At night, I sometimes put myself to sleep by going over the scenes of recent movies. That night, after returning home from *War and Peace*, as I was falling asleep I recalled scenes from *Les Misérables* (1956), directed by Jean-Paul Le Chanois, based on Victor Hugo’s novel, and starring the great Jean Gabin. I wrote my uncle Reza about this film and collected newspaper accounts of it. Two summers earlier I had been with my family in Khunsar, a cool, mountainous region, reading *Les Misérables* during long afternoons. Everyone took a one- or two-hour nap. All was silent but for the quiet murmuring of the brook nearby. I would lie down on my back and voraciously consume the Hugo tale, often crying at the trials of Cozette, Marius, and Jean Valjean. I filled half a notebook with quotations from the book. The memories of reading the novels and watching their movie adaptations affected my dreaming. During waking hours, these filmic recollections enlivened my otherwise drab and lonely existence. I noted in my diary, “In my life these memories and dreams are all that I have to be satisfied with” (22 Ordibehesht 1339 / 12 May 1960). I was being hailed by the world the foreign dream factories were offering.

The Russian film that affected me the most was Mikhail Kalatozov’s romantic war movie, *The Cranes Are Flying* (1957). The heroism of the Russian people and the lost romance of the protagonists moved me, infatuated as I was at the time with leftist politics and classic Russian novels. The film’s war scenes and the haunting face of the lead actress, Tatyana Samoilova, remained forever etched on my mind. Now, more than a half a century later, reading over the plot summary from my diary of that year, I am struck by the image of the cranes flying in the sky, cranes Tatyana watched to remember her lost love, Boris, killed in the war. When I remember that image now, I am reminded of my own loss—my country, lost to exile. Such is the power of symmetry, of cinematic memory.

Creating a Private Family Republic of Letters

Of course, I read more than just the literature that had been turned into movies. In fact, the literature that attracted me increasingly as I entered high



14 In a dandy move, the author wearing a “Duglasi mustache” and coiffed hair strikes a movie-star pose. Collection of the author

school was socially conscious novels and leftist social criticism, many of which were either officially or unofficially banned. Jack London’s *The Iron Heel*, John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*, Maxim Gorky’s *The Lower Depths*, all in Persian translation, and Jalal Al-e Ahmad’s *Gharbzadegi* (*Westernstruckness*) were among these, which I borrowed from a friend, Naser Motii, the Sa’di High School librarian (these banned books were not supposed to circulate), bought under the table from a sympathetic bookseller, or exchanged secretly with friends in alleys. These simple acts of reading turned us into criminals. We played *fâneur* on Chaharbagh Avenue or along the Zayandeh River’s breezy boulevards, visiting bookshops and hanging out at cafés, all the while discussing politics and literature. Some of us dressed as Westernized dandies (*fokoli*) and were photographed in movie star poses (figure 14). Having been raised in a devout but enlightened and open-minded Muslim family (followers of the progressive Sheikhi school of Shiism), we saw no contradiction between participating in Shiite sermons and passion plays (*taziye*) or between reading Russian and Soviet literature about peasants and workers and sporting Western fashions and going to Western movies. We were becoming modern through our personal syncretism, much as the nation was becoming modern through state-sanctioned syncretic Westernization.

A key source of intellectual nourishment was my Naficy/Okhovat paternal and maternal family culture and its institutions.² Although not explicitly oppositional politically, these men and women served to create an alternate universe, a familial republic of letters, for the children, which made us inde-

15 My contribution at age fourteen to the *Neda-ye Elm* family magazine (vol. 3, no. 63, 30 Shahrivar 1337/21 September 1958), is a curious article on “metaposcopy,” which analyzes the relationship of the placement of moles on a human face to the owner’s character and destiny. Collection of the author



pendent from both mainstream politics and Shiite religion and helped both nurture us intellectually and emotionally and protect us morally and politically from the society at large. And the family was large enough to be self-sufficient socially and culturally. The culture it produced consisted of a three-thousand-volume children’s lending library, handwritten magazines composed and illustrated by children, and plays and art exhibitions that children organized. We named the library Ibn Sina Library in honor of the great Persian physician and scientist Ali Abu Sina (980–1037), known in the West as Avicenna. One of our family magazines was *Neda-ye Elm* (*Call of Science*), to which I contributed (figure 15). This republic of letters was an inchoate civil society institution of the type considered necessary for ushering in modernity, one rooted both in traditional kinship and in modern individualist structures. Such informal familial institution building formed a mode of resistance in the face of oppression from both the state and the tradition. And it foreshadowed the “cinematic family mode of production” that emerged later, particularly during

the Islamic Republic period. This modernist republic also involved engaging in what Foucault called “technologies of the self,” a set of practices by which subjects monitor and constitute themselves discursively (1988). Most family members kept journals, composed poetry, wrote letters of which they kept copies, and penned short stories. By so doing they reflected on themselves and constructed their position in the world. Although these compositions were private, on many occasions the writers read excerpts or the full texts of these works to family members. In this manner modern subjectivity and individuality were shaped and regulated in the fields of power—vis-à-vis family, state, and society.

As I entered high school, the family circle proved insufficient. In the late 1950s, I branched out by joining the Saeb Literary Society in Isfahan, which in those days witnessed the rise of leftist and modernist intellectuals, like me, against the old-fashioned traditionalist members. Literary societies are important civil institutions with deep roots in modern Iranian history. Most were oppositional and spurred modernist literature and art. Saeb society members attended meetings in a room in the garden of the tomb of the famed poet Saeb Isfahani and went to the countryside to read and interpret modern poetry and literary works all day, with breaks for lunch, play, and literary gossip. Older members like Jalil Doostkhah and Hushang Golshiri took the lead and mentored the younger ones. Some of the Saeb members and their allies later created another literary circle, which published the *Jong-e Isfahan* literary magazine, whose members became well-known writers, novelists, poets, scholars, translators, and screen writers on the national scene and still later, in the diaspora, created influential literary, cultural, and cinematic societies, periodicals, and venues.³ In one of the society’s public night sessions, I read a polemical rant against a famous traditional town poet (I think it was Shakib-e Isfahani) all the while trembling with fear of being arrested by the Savak (secret police). Some members used the cover of the literary society for antigovernment political activities, meeting with friends in each others’ homes, which in 1961 led to the arrest of the Group of 92 Teachers (Goruh-e 92 Moallem), charged with being Communist or Tudeh Party members. The arrest of the group dissolved the Saeb Literary Society. Had I not gone abroad for higher education I might have been arrested as well.

As we entered the 1960s, the fear of secret police surveillance, even for harmless intellectual pursuits, became pervasive, making our social life oppressive, pushing us back into less public gatherings, trusted family circles, or exile. Our anxieties found wide currency in modernist poetry and were inscribed graphically in the dissident new-wave films of the 1960s and 1970s.

Going to the Movies and Religious Sermons in Isfahan

While engaged in these cultural and literary endeavors, I also attended the movies with a different set of friends and family members. My first recollection of watching films dates back to the early 1950s when I was younger than eight. I remember being extremely anxious watching a particular scene involving voyeurism through a high window, the specifics of which I do not now recall. All I remember is intense emotion, anxiety, and suspense. I clutched my father for safety. My uncle Reza, who is only a few years older than me, also remembers that at ten, while watching *Tarzan*, he felt extremely frightened of the possibility of the lions charging and devouring him (Naficy 1986).

As far as the movie house itself is concerned, my first recollection is of a long, narrow, place almost resembling a tunnel, with a high ceiling, filled with people, smoke, and noise. This was a modest commercial cinema that, I think, was called Metropole Cinema, located near our house on Lower Chahrbagh Avenue (it later became a shopping plaza). Before a film began and during intermissions, amid the clamor of the young male spectators (I do not remember any women), a voice could be heard above the general hubbub, calling: “Coca, Fanta, cigarettes, nuts, snacks.” It came from a young, disheveled boy carrying a wooden tray hung from his neck. On it he carried bottles of soft drinks (recently introduced in Iran), lemonade, cigarettes, and *ajil*—an assortment of lightly salted watermelon, melon, and pumpkin seeds and nuts. Spectators talked to the screen, commenting on the action or addressing the characters. As my uncle Reza recalled, when *Tarzan* was screened, every few minutes a Persian-language intertitle interrupted the film, and literate spectators read the titles out loud for the benefit of those who could not read (Naficy 2007b).

Despite the advent of sound, spectators continued to talk back. They would not hesitate to tell the actors what they should do next: “Oh, watch out, he is behind you,” “Yeah, punch him hard, in the stomach, hit him, hit him!” During the screening of Cecil B. DeMille’s *Samson and Delilah* (1949), when Victor Mature as Samson stood in the doorway to push the pillars apart and destroy the temple, the spectators urged him on and applauded him wildly. I still remember the outstretched arms waving in the eerie, blue light of the projector in the smoke-filled hall.

In the early decades, since most cinemas had only one film projector, a movie was never shown in its entirety without several intermissions, needed to change the reels. During the first intermission, spectators would noisily migrate from row to row to sit near their friends or in better seats. In the