

ALLEGORY

IN

THE AESTHETICS OF POETRY
AND RESISTANCE

MICHELLE LANGFORD

IRANIAN

CINEMA



B L O O M S B U R Y

Allegory in Iranian Cinema

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The Aesthetics of Poetry and Resistance

Michelle Langford

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For my mother, in loving memory.

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Note on Transliteration

For Persian words used in the text, I have followed the simplified transliteration scheme recommended by the Association for Iranian Studies. Some names do not follow this transliteration scheme. I have not altered transliterations in quotations or bibliographic citations. My thanks to Setayesh Nooraninejad for her invaluable assistance.

Introduction

Allegory in Iranian Cinema: The Aesthetics of Poetry and Resistance

This book is the result of my long-term love affair with Iranian cinema. This love affair began in the late 1990s when Iranian art films began making their way to international film festivals and onto our local television channel, SBS, that broadcast various foreign language films. I remember being seduced and intrigued by just a handful of Iranian films, among them Mohsen Makhmalbaf's *Gabbeh* (1996), Amir Naderi's *The Runner* (*Davandeh*), Abbas Kiarostami's *Taste of Cherry* (*Ta'm-e Gilas*, 1997), Jafar Panahi's *The White Balloon* (*Badkonak-e Sefid*, 1995) and Majid Majidi's *Children of Heaven* (*Bacheha-ye Aseman*, 1997). At the time, I was completing my doctoral research on the allegorical films of the German film-maker Werner Schroeter. Underpinning my analysis of Schroeter's films was a deep interest in questions of cinematic allegory. I was interested less in what allegorical films say across their multiple levels of meaning and more in identifying and theorizing the cinematic techniques and processes that give rise to allegory in a specifically cinematic register. Watching these Iranian films, I couldn't help but feel that they were calling upon me to engage with them more deeply. At the time, I was poorly equipped to unpack their multiple layers of meaning, particularly those that emerged from the specificities of the Iranian social, cultural and political context; however, I felt that the films themselves were nudging me with their cinematic cues. Now, after many years of research, I hope to have adequately responded to that call.

In this book, I explore the allegorical aesthetics of Iranian cinema in order to better grasp the multiple dimensions and unique ways of seeing made possible by this mode of expression. In a series of selected case studies, I attempt to show how an allegorical aesthetics cues or prompts viewers to look for hidden meaning or to experience a film poetically beyond the literal level of story or

obvious, manifest meaning. Indeed, the enigmatic, allusive aspects of Iranian films have frequently been noted by critics and scholars alike: from Abbas Kiarostami's philosophically and poetically inflected 'open images'¹ to Jafar Panahi's critical self-reflexive cinema and Mohsen Makhmalbaf's gestures towards surrealism. Underpinning this is an aim to seek out correspondences between the medium of film and older forms of poetic allegorical expression in Iranian culture. By poetic, I mean not merely the citation of poems or the replication of literary poetic techniques in films, but rather, I attend to the capacity for cinema to engage in its own poetics: a cine-poetics. At times this poetics functions to support and at other times to resist dominant state ideology. By resistance, I mean not only resistance to political or ideological agendas, nor simply to evade censorship, but also aesthetic resistance, a playful or disruptive use of cinematic form that renders meaning ambiguous and calls upon viewers to actively engage in the process of interpretation. Throughout this book, allegory is considered both a mode of expression and a mode of interpretation.

The presence of allegory in Iranian cinema has long been acknowledged by scholars and critics and occasionally by film-makers themselves; however, in the scholarly literature, allegory is most often treated as a response to censorship. Indeed, throughout the course of Iranian film history, film-makers have been faced with sociopolitical conditions that have led to varying degrees of censorship. Because of its capacity to say one thing while meaning another, allegory has proven to be a powerful way of evading state censorship and expressing forbidden topics or issues. As Angus Fletcher has written, 'Allegory presumably thrives on political censorship'; it 'preserves freedom against tyranny'.² Ismail Xavier echoes this view when he writes that 'allegory has been a frequent weapon against authoritarian rules'.³ However, Negar Mottahedeh has offered a slightly different perspective in her theorization of 'displaced allegories'. Moving beyond censorship as a singular motivating force, Mottahedeh argues that many films of the post-revolutionary era function as 'displaced allegories' of their very conditions of production.⁴ In doing so, film-makers have reinvented film language, something that I refer to more broadly as 'film aesthetics'. It is important to recognize that for many Iranian film-makers, allegory is much more than a foil against haphazardly applied censorship rules, or an attempt to hide meaning under a veil of secrecy.

This book takes a much more complex view of the allegorical aesthetics of Iranian cinema.

While acknowledging the enormous impact that censorship has had on Iranian film-making, particularly since the 1979 revolution, this book aims to ask a series of questions about the very nature of allegory in Iranian cinema. What if we think of allegory not only as a reactive, secretive or protective strategy but also as an integral part of the poetics of Iranian cinema? What if we think of allegory as a series of techniques that invite viewers into a filmic text, to read, to interpret, to interact, to be hailed and to haggle, even perhaps to engage with a film on a bodily, haptic level? What are the cinematic techniques used by film-makers to prompt such responses and how can we understand the theoretical, contextual and practical implications of these? By theorizing allegory in this way, we can begin to understand not just what allegorical films *say* but how they *work*. As such, this book aims to examine what I call an allegorical aesthetics of poetry and resistance in a selection of films from the very early years of feature film production through the rise of the New Wave in the 1970s and into the post-revolutionary era.

It is beyond the scope of this book to provide a comprehensive account of allegory in Iranian cinema; rather my chapters provide extended close readings of specific films paying attention to the relationship between cinematic texts and contexts. Allegory is not a genre, and as such there are no common rules to which allegorical films conform, although there are a range of common characteristics. In approaching each film, I attend to the unique ways that the films teach us how to read them from the perspective of both style and content. Indeed, one of the more consistent characteristics of allegory is a close connection between form, content and context. In each example, the allegorical techniques employed vary considerably, and as a result, in responding to them I have been compelled to draw on a wide variety of film-theoretical approaches in order to explain how their allegorical processes work, but equally, I attend to the sociocultural, national, historical and political frames of reference through, or even against which the films may be read.

Each of the chapters may be read independently and also as a part of the whole. The chapters are arranged in roughly chronological order, but are primarily thematic, with one or more films being taken as case studies. These case studies span a wide time frame, from the earliest years of Iranian feature

film production in the 1930s through the New Wave of the 1960s and 1970s and into the first three decades after the revolution. In my opening chapter, 'Locating Allegory in Pre-Revolutionary Iranian Cinema,' I provide insight into the role of allegory in the pre-revolutionary period beginning with one of Iran's earliest feature films, Ovanes Ohanian's *Mr Haji the Movie Actor* (*Haji Aqa Aktor-e Sinema*, 1933). I argue that this self-reflexive silent feature film allegorizes the role that cinema played in the early twentieth century in the spread of modernity across Iran. The film emblemizes the clash between tradition and modernity through the transformation of the titular Mr Haji – a deeply pious man – from a film sceptic to a film lover. This is a good example of how popular entertainment cinema could employ allegory in a way that aligned closely with a broader sociopolitical agenda. If this early allegorical film seemed to promote the modernizing agenda led by Reza Shah in the early twentieth century, later in the century, the New Wave would deploy allegory as a means of critiquing this agenda, which was continued by Mohammad Reza Shah in the second half of the twentieth century, and in destabilizing some of the mythic formations upon which the Pahlavi dynasty was built. At the same time, these films allegorically figured tensions between tradition and modernity and treated the encroachment of the West with as much scepticism as they did the Shah's nation-building efforts. The chapter argues that the sociopolitical conditions of the late 1960s and 1970s provided fertile ground for a very vibrant and multifaceted allegorical cinema, and almost all films produced by Iranian New Wave film-makers may in some way be considered allegorical. These films offer a bleak and oblique foreshadowing of the political unrest that would come in the late 1970s and eventually lead to the revolution that would bring down the Shah and see the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979. In order to show the diversity of filmic styles and genres available to allegorical expression during this period, I take three very different films as my case studies. The first, Masoud Kimiai's *Qeysar* (1969), is a popular genre film that bears traces of the modernist aesthetic adopted by the New Wave film-makers. Through various cues, we are encouraged to read this film both against the grain of the national master narrative – Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* (*Book of Kings*)⁵ – and through the lens of the typical tough-guy genre films that were popular at that time. Ultimately, the film focuses on the theme of allegorical degradation to point simultaneously to the failure of the

modernizing project to deliver positive social transformation and the failure of age-old heroic stories to deliver redemption. Following my analysis of *Qeysar*, I turn to look at two very different New Wave films: Dariush Mehrjui's social-realist drama, *The Cycle* (*Dayereh-ye Mina*, 1978), and Ebrahim Golestan's black comedy, *The Secrets of the Treasure of the Jenni Valley* (*Asrar-e Ganj-e Darreh-ye Jenni*, 1972). *The Cycle* is read as a resistant national allegory that serves as a cynical indictment of Iranian modernity, endemic corruption and the proliferation of informal circuits of exchange in 1970s' Iran. Golestan's film performs a similarly resistant gesture. I demonstrate how the film's adoption of a carnivalesque aesthetic allows it to deploy a darkly comic form of satirical allegory to similarly critique the modernizing project and also to poke fun at the proliferation of ignorance, greed and corruption in contemporary Iran. Similar to *Qeysar*, *The Secrets of the Treasure of the Jenni Valley* makes reference to the *Shahnameh*, doing so in such a way that represents the heroic past in a state of decay, performing a destructive, allegorizing action upon its legacy. It does so in order to critique Mohammad Reza Shah's own tendencies to self-aggrandisement and invented imperial lineage. Ultimately, all three films use allegory to de-authorize myths, unmask corruption and blast open the mythic constructions of national ideology. As such, these films seem to dream of an uprising against authoritarian rule, a dream that would become a reality as the revolution took hold during 1978.

In Chapter 2, 'The Allegorical Children of Iranian Cinema', I consider the multiple ways that Iranian film-makers have invested children with allegorical value. My first case study, Kamran Shirdel's self-reflexive, satirical documentary *The Night It Rained ... or the Epic of the Gorgan Village Boy* (*Un Shab Keh Barun Umad ... ya Hamaseh-ye Rustazadeh-ye Gorgani*, 1967) forms an important bridge between the pre-revolution New Wave films and the cycle of child-centred films of the post-revolutionary period. Although the child, the Gorgan village boy, named in the title is absent for most of the film, Shirdel uses the figure of the child to critique the use of film, media and heroic legends in nation-building exercises. More specifically, I argue that Shirdel's film takes the form of an allegorical palimpsest to mount a poetic and cinematically bold resistance to the kind of mythic narration of the nation promoted during the Pahlavi era. Following my analysis of *The Night It Rained*, I move into the post-revolutionary period. I argue that the cycle of child-centred films made during

the first two decades after the revolution played an important role in the purification of the national cinema and in realigning the nation's sensorium with revolutionary values. I take as my point of departure Hamid Reza Sadr's discussion of the supposed reality effect of children on screen.⁶ I focus on Majidi Majidi's *Children of Heaven* as a film that beautifully exemplifies this tendency. Majidi uses a simple tale of two small children to promote certain key values such as patience, compassion and forbearance. I demonstrate how this film functions as a didactic allegory that is closely aligned with the national project, but rather than *telling* viewers what or how to think, it uses immersive strategies of focalization to produce a highly affective form of personification allegory. In this way, the film encourages the viewer to *experience* its lessons by seeing, hearing and feeling through the perspective of the children who emblemize desirable values. In direct contrast to the experiential reality effect of *Children of Heaven*, Jafar Panahi's *The Mirror* seeks to deconstruct this effect, questioning the ability for any Iranian film to truly reflect reality. I posit that *The Mirror* is a post-revolutionary counterpart to *The Night It Rained*, for it too is a self-reflexive film that attempts to disrupt the kind of unifying function performed by a film like *Children of Heaven*. *The Mirror*, which I argue consists of not one but two films, hinges on a disconnect between reality and representation. My close analysis of the film looks into several aspects of *The Mirror* that have yet to be considered in the existing literature on the film, including the way that little Mina's traversal of the streets and squares of Tehran reminds us constantly of the city's tumultuous history and how, like cinema, the streets have also been purified so that public space, much like cinema, may function as political allegory. I conclude that both *The Night It Rained* and *The Mirror* produce what Jean-Louis Baudry referred to as a 'knowledge effect'.⁷ In doing so, they both allegorize the role of cinema in state-driven projects of nation-building. In contrast, it is through the classical concealment of the technical base of cinema that a film like *Children of Heaven* achieves its ideological work of habituating viewers to revolutionary values and plays its part in the purification of the nation.

From a focus on children in Chapter 2, my attention shifts to consider a film that powerfully allegorizes the place of women in Iranian cinema and society: Marziyeh Meshkini's *The Day I Became a Woman* (*Ruzi Keh Zan Shodam*, 2000). In Chapter 3, 'Allegory and the Aesthetics of Becoming-Woman', I theorize

allegorical cinema very differently in response to a highly innovative film that calls upon its viewers to experience the film not only on a narrative level – as a simple collection of tales about three generations of Iranian women – but also through its various poetic dimensions that engage the viewer on an affective level. On one level, I argue that the film may be read as an allegory of Iranian cinema, a critique of the very structural limitations placed on film-makers by rigorous censorship rules. Through close analysis, I demonstrate how Meshkini negotiates censorship by pushing film form to its allowable limits, making these limits visible within the form of the film itself. Beyond this fairly straightforward allegorical reading, I demonstrate how the film also functions in an even more complex allegorical register, one that consists of two intersecting axes – horizontal and vertical – that are roughly equivalent to narrative progression and poetic elaboration respectively. I argue that through these two axes, the viewer is presented with two very different conceptions of becoming – one that proceeds in a series of stages or states and another through which becoming may be experienced more genuinely as a process. I demonstrate that by activating a processual becoming that takes place not so much on-screen, but between film and viewer, *The Day I Became a Woman* palpably resonates with a conception of becoming-woman similar to that theorized by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, a concept that has been taken up for debate within feminist theory. In this way, the film manages not so much to evade Iranian censorship requirements pertaining to the representation of women but rather to exceed such limitations in such a way that these affective becomings-woman may be exchanged directly between film and viewer.

In Chapter 4, 'Allegories of Love: The Cinematic *Ghazal*', I develop a very different understanding of the allegorical poetics of Iranian cinema. In this chapter, I coin the term 'cinematic *ghazal*' to refer to moments in certain films that may be considered cinematic analogues for the *ghazal*, a form of Persian lyrical love poetry. I argue that for some Iranian art film-makers, cinema and poetry are inseparable, and as such, we can discern in their work a quality that may be described as a 'cinema of poetry'. In my analysis of the poetic moments of Mohsen Makhmalbaf's *A Time for Love (Nobat-e Asheghi)* (1990) and Majid Majidi's *Baran* (1999), I bring Pier Paolo Pasolini's musings on the cinema of poetry together with Iran's long tradition of love poetry to identify a very particular kind of cine-poetics. I demonstrate how

the cinematic *ghazal* privileges the poetic over narrative modes of expression and makes use of what Pasolini referred to as the ‘free indirect point-of view’ that renders subjectivity ambiguous.⁸ I argue that *A Time for Love* is invested with an allegorical intention primarily through the film’s style and structure. As such, the film meditates on the creative possibilities afforded by a cinema of poetry. In the case of Majid Majidi’s *Baran*, I demonstrate how the cinematic *ghazal* is used to invest the image with a high degree of affective sensuality, combined with a kind of mystical lyricism that is also a prominent feature of many *ghazals*. Indeed, I argue that Majidi’s synthesis of the *ghazal* form into his cinematic practice works to engage the viewer in what Vivian Sobchack calls a ‘cinesthetic’ mode of embodied spectatorship.⁹ He does this, on one level, to evoke the physicality and emotionality of young love and, on another, to forge an allegorical connection between character, viewer and nation.

This allegorical connection between character, viewer and nation is explored through a very different thematic lens in Chapter 5, ‘Tending the Wounds of the Nation: Gender in Iranian War Cinema’. As the title suggests, the focus shifts from love to war. In this chapter, I consider three films that deal quite differently with the legacy of the eight-year Iran–Iraq war, known in Iran as the Sacred Defence. My focus is primarily on Rakhshan Bani-Etemad and Mohsen Abdolvahab’s *Gilaneh* (2005), a film that is unusual in the Iranian context, for it is concerned with the material and ideological effects of war from a maternal perspective. The film goes against the grain of most Iranian war-themed films because it refuses to idealize martyrdom in ways that have been commonly adopted by state-supported film and media and modelled on the Karbala paradigm. I contrast *Gilaneh*, which was made during a less conservative time in Iranian politics, with two Sacred Defence films made after the ascension of conservative president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to power in 2005: *The Third Day* (*Ruz-e Sevvom*, Mohammad Hossein Latifi, 2007) and *He Who Sails* (*Anke Darya Miravad*, Arash Moayerian, 2007). The three films evoke diverse variations on the Iranian concept of *vatan* (homeland) and the duty of all Iranians to protect the nation. All three films also establish a variety of gender roles in relation to the protection and preservation of *khak-e pak-e vatan* (the pure soil of homeland), forming distinct literal and allegorical clusters around soil, gender, territory and what might be described as the geo-body of the nation. In contrast with the other two films which are closely

aligned with the post-revolutionary agenda of fusing patriotism and *vatan* with Islamic identity, *Gilaneh* adopts a decidedly matriotic perspective and refuses the tendency of Sacred Defence cinema to beautify, spiritualize and idealize the concept of 'martyrdom'. Instead, *Gilaneh* is a melancholy allegory that mourns for a nation whose wounds have not been adequately tended.

In my final chapter, 'Between Laughter and Mourning: *About Elly* as *Trauerspiel* of a Generation', I explore this idea of mourning for the nation through my close analysis of Asghar Farhadi's *About Elly* (*Darbare-ye Elly*, 2009). I take this film to be a particular kind of allegory, a *Trauerspiel* (mourning play), as theorized by Walter Benjamin.¹⁰ I argue that Farhadi invests the film with an allegorical dimension through which the film's collective protagonist emblemizes a generation that was born around the time of the revolution and therefore have no memory of the revolution itself, but whose lives have been dominated by post-revolutionary discourse. Prominent among these discourses is the emphasis placed on sadness and mourning in Iranian culture and the coding of certain emotions as good or bad. Farhadi presents us with a sector of what Shahram Khosravi has called 'the third generation', an upwardly mobile group striving to express joy and freedom. The film's narrative, however, conspires to correct these aspirations and plunges them into a state of sadness and mourning. This leads them to adopt more tradition-based and conservative modes of thinking, being and doing. In their state of mourning, they are not drawn together in communal sadness but torn apart in a state of conflict. I argue that throughout the film, Farhadi utilizes dissimulation as a key allegorical procedure that corresponds closely with modes of indirect communication that we see performed by the characters in the film. I call this the 'dissimulating camera', and through this, Farhadi achieves a close correspondence between filmic style and content. Just as the characters make use of dissimulation to negotiate the strict rules that impinge on their everyday lives, Farhadi utilizes the dissimulating camera to cue viewers to look beyond the surface of the narrative to observe patterns that emblemize broader sociopolitical concerns. Farhadi's film was made prior to the mass protests and unrest that ensued in the wake of the 2009 presidential election, but like the New Wave films of the 1970s, *About Elly* seems to register the mood of the times and the sense of discontent and disillusionment felt by many of his own generation, a discontent that would soon spill out onto the streets.

In the decade since 2009, Iranian cinema has taken a considerable turn away from allegorical modes of expression, and it is largely for this reason that my study ends with *About Elly*. There are a number of factors that have led to this turn. For example, the international success of Asghar Farhadi's drama of ethical complexity *A Separation* (*Jodai-ye Nader az Simin*, 2011) has arguably led to the rise of a new sub-genre of realist drama. These films, which include Farhadi's own *The Salesman* (*Forushandeh*, 2016), as well as more recent acclaimed films such as Vahid Jalilvand's *Wednesday 9 May* (*Chaharshanbeh, 19 Ordibehesht*, 2015), *No Date, No Signature* (*Bedune Tarikh, Bedune Emza*, 2017) and Mostafa Taghizadeh's debut feature *Yellow* (*Zard*, 2017), use realist techniques to show characters caught in impossible situations that test their ability to think and to act ethically towards others. While these are films that encourage viewers to reflect on social relations in contemporary Iran, they tend not to invite deeper, allegorical readings. They also display little in the way of the poetic expression so prominent in films made during the first two decades after the revolution. Indeed, there has been a decided shift away from the kind of art film pioneered by the likes of Abbas Kiarostami and Mohsen Makhmalbaf. In some ways, this suggests that Iranian film-makers are becoming more direct, emboldened to confront social issues head on, rather than relying on allegory and poetry.

The last decade has also seen a number of prominent allegorical film-makers move into exile, leaving Iranian cinema bereft of their contributions. Among the exiles are Mohsen Makhmalbaf and his entire film-making family, including Samira, Hana and Marziyeh Meshkini as well as the Kurdish-Iranian film-maker Bahman Ghobadi, whose uncompromisingly poetic allegories of hardship *A Time for Drunken Horses* (*Zamani Bara-ye Masti-ye Asbha*, 2000) and *Turtles Can Fly* (*Lakposhtha Ham Parvaz Mikonand*, 2004) made a considerable impact on the international festival circuit and helped to draw attention to the plight of Kurds in the border regions of Iran, Turkey, Iraq and Syria. And then there are the internal exiles. In 2011, Jafar Panahi and Mohammad Rasoulof were both banned from making films for twenty years. In 2009 amid the post-election unrest, they had been arrested and charged with 'assembly and collusion and propagation against the regime'.¹¹ Of course, the two film-makers have continued to make films in spite of the ban, and while there is certainly a degree of allegory at work in those films, the new

conditions under which they work and the new aesthetics they have adopted require more attention than I can possibly give them in this already lengthy volume. Indeed, there are several other recent films that could easily find a home among these pages, if only there were time and space. Perhaps the film that I most regret leaving out is Shahram Mokri's stunningly poetic second feature *Fish and Cat* (*Mahi va Gorbah*, 2013). Like *About Elly*, Mokri's film paints a picture of a generation wishing to transcend a world tainted by the actions of an older generation, but instead being caught up in ever-repeating cycles that lead nowhere. It was filmed spectacularly by veteran Iranian cinematographer Mahmoud Kalari in a single long take, and structured so that the narrative loops back on itself several times, confounding our ability to make sense of space and time. Mokri constructs an elaborate cinematic moebius strip, which becomes a powerful emblem for contemporary Iranian society.

During the writing of this book, I was deeply saddened by the sudden passing of Abbas Kiarostami, in July 2016. He was Iranian cinema's poetic filmmaker par excellence, and it is unlikely that Iran will ever see an art film-maker of such unique importance again. My readers might wonder why his films, many of which exhibit exactly the kinds of allegorical aesthetics that I discuss here, do not feature among the case studies in this book. The simple reason is that his work is already the subject of so many excellent books, chapters and articles that I doubt my ability to add sufficiently new or original insight. That said, I should acknowledge that my understanding of allegory in Iranian cinema has nevertheless been deeply informed by watching and studying his films. In many ways, although our paths never crossed, he was one of my teachers, and my writing is infused with the numerous lessons I learned about Iranian film aesthetics from this master of Iranian cinema. I, therefore, offer this book in honour of his memory.

Locating Allegory in Pre-Revolutionary Iranian Cinema

It is often said that allegory arises most powerfully at times of sociopolitical unrest or upheaval. It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that Iran, given its own tumultuous history throughout the twentieth century, should offer up a wealth of examples of allegorical film. While this book will focus primarily on allegory in films of the period after the Iranian revolution of 1979, this chapter provides a discussion of key allegorical films from the pre-revolutionary period. My discussion opens with what was arguably the first allegorical film in Iranian history, Ovanes Ohanian's *Mr Haji the Movie Actor* (*Haji Aqa Aktor-e Sinema*, 1933). I argue that this is a self-reflexive film that plays on tensions between tradition and modernity and calls upon the viewing public to set aside their scepticism of the cinema and embrace the twentieth century's newest art form. From there, I move on to pay particular attention to the Iranian New Wave of the 1960s and 1970s, a period that saw sociopolitical tensions rising and was also rich in allegorical expression in both cinema and literature. I have selected three case studies beginning with Masoud Kimiai's *Qeysar* (1969), a tough-guy genre film infused with New Wave tendencies that reworks traditional concepts of heroism, recasting them for a modern age. This is followed by a close analysis of Dariush Mehrjui's *The Cycle* (*Dayereh-ye Mina*, 1978), a landmark New Wave film that allegorically critiques the proliferation of informal circuits of economic exchange and endemic corruption. This theme of corruption also features in Ebrahim Golestan's darkly satirical allegory, *The Secrets of the Treasure of the Jenni Valley* (*Asrar-e Ganj-e Darreh-ye Jenni*, 1972).¹ We can find in these films the aesthetic and conceptual antecedents of the cinematic allegory that emerged with great force in the years following the revolution. In the pre-revolutionary period we observe film-makers

consciously employing modernist film aesthetics in order to fashion what we might describe as national and political allegories, but simultaneously we see film-makers drawing on popular legends. In this sense, the films I will discuss in this chapter are both poetic and resistant. This brief survey of the history of allegorical film production in Iran will lay the groundwork for the remaining chapters in which I undertake a closer examination of key films from the post-revolutionary era, while also forwarding a more extensive theorization and analysis of the particular aesthetic strategies that give rise to cinematic allegory. Here my interest lies primarily in identifying some of the cinematic strategies that enable these films to operate allegorically and in elucidating some of the modes of allegory employed.

Self-reflexivity and the birth of Iranian film allegory

The emergence of allegory in Iranian cinema coincides with the very birth of feature film-making in Iran, which arrived slightly later than in some other countries.² Ovanes Ohanian's *Mr Haji the Movie Actor*, which was one of the first feature length fiction films to be produced inside Iran, was, despite its technical limitations, a complexly self-reflexive film that allegorized the uneasy intersection between tradition and modernity within the national context. The central character, Haji Aqa (Mr Haji), is a very pious man who objects to his daughter's desire to marry the film-maker Parviz (Figure 1.1). Parviz is struggling to come up with ideas for a new film and so hatches a plan to secretly film Mr Haji, hoping that he may prove himself a worthy suitor for Mr Haji's daughter. The film is largely structured as a chase film, which provides the opportunity for both Parviz (within the film) and Ohanian to string together a catalogue of 'attractions' typical of so-called primitive cinema.³ The film culminates in Haji Agha chasing one of Parviz's associates into a movie theatre where the film in which he has unwittingly played a starring role is being shown. When a boy in the audience recognizes Mr Haji as the star of the film, he is greeted with the applause of his adoring fans and is miraculously transformed from a sceptic of cinema into a film lover. During the film, he is also tricked into agreeing to the marriage between Parviz and his daughter via a stage performance involving a conjuror that makes him believe that Parviz is



Figure 1.1 Mr Haji is opposed to his daughter marrying a film-maker. *Mr Haji the Movie Actor* (Perse Film Studio, Ovanes Ohanian, 1933).

in two places at once. Thus the narrative drives towards a resolution that not only brings together the young lovers but also promotes a form of cinephilia, or love of cinema.

From this brief synopsis, the self-reflexive elements of the film are obvious since the audience of the film proper are made aware of the act of filming taking place within the film. In addition, we are alerted to cinema's means of construction via some early scenes of Parviz trying to write a screenplay. As he pores over his notes, he makes a series of histrionic gestures, but is satisfied with none of his ideas. Unlike other early self-reflexive films, such as Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* (*Chelovek s kino-apparatom*, 1929), Ohanian does not directly show the cinematic apparatus – camera and projector – although part of the chase sequence does take place atop the scaffolding of what appears to be a large outdoor screen under construction.⁴

The film shifts into the arena of allegory by codifying cinema's role in modernity and the tensions that emerged between tradition and modernity in Iran in the early twentieth century. Just as Haji Agha views cinema with scepticism, based on his world view that is rooted in religion and tradition, and struggles to accept the new sociocultural role of cinema, so too did many Iranians struggle to reconcile the modernizing project instigated by Reza Shah in the early twentieth century with deeply embedded religious and cultural