

56th Berlin Film Festival—Part 2

Crossing the “red line”: Iranian films and censorship

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This year’s Berlinale saw a selection of Iranian films taking up a wide range of issues and demonstrating some of the strengths and weaknesses of Iranian cinema. Along with *It’s Winter* by Rafi Pitts and *Offside* by Jafar Panahi in the competition selection, *Men At Work* by Mani Haghighi, *Another Morning* by Nasser Refaie and *Gradually* by Maziar Miri were also featured.

Panahi’s new film had its world premiere in Berlin. As was the case with his two previous films, *The Circle* and *Crimson Gold*, it is unlikely that *Offside* will be approved for distribution within Iran itself because of its subject matter.

The films from Iran were shown in Berlin against a background of intense international political controversy. The most predatory elements in the US, and Europe as well, are determined to use the issue of Iran’s nuclear program as a pretext for a military confrontation.

In the midst of this crisis the Association of Iranian-European Filmmakers addressed an open letter to the Berlin film festival, accusing it of supporting Iran’s “fascist regime” by showing Iranian films. Kia Kiarostami, a cousin of Iranian director Abbas Kiarostami, called for a boycott of the festival, arguing that Iranian directors showing their films at the Berlinale had buckled under to the regime in Tehran, which was merely using their work for propaganda purposes.

Iranian filmmakers are confronted with a great many challenges in making genuinely independent films under conditions of political and cultural repression in their homeland. To say what they want some filmmakers accept that their films are unlikely to be shown to a broad domestic public and will be consigned to a fringe international film festival existence. Directors determined to make films that can be shown in Iran face the challenge of how they can circumvent the official censorship and maintain their integrity. As one Iranian filmmaker in Berlin commented, it is difficult, what with changing governments and regulations, to identify the “red line” over which one cannot step.

Current Iranian law requires film scripts to be approved by the Ministry of Culture before shooting begins; then the final product is subject to further censorship. Additional factors also come into play. For example, there are ‘reform’ elements in the Iranian political elite who recognize that film can play a useful role as a safety valve for growing social tensions; they are prepared to allow in the cinema some of what is not permitted in the mosque. Filmmakers are also aware of this dynamic and ask themselves: what does it require to make a truly independent film?

In any event, based on the work shown in Berlin, the accusation made by the Association of Iranian-European Filmmakers against the directors is without serious merit and a number of the films shown were courageous and engaging efforts to deal with important aspects of Iranian society and culture—albeit of varying quality.

It’s Winter (Zemestan) by Rafi Pitts was one of the most successful

Iranian contributions at the festival. The film offers the bleakness of the Iranian winter as a parable for the harshness of life in modern Iran itself. In the opening scene we see a man, Mokhtar, unable to find work. He leaves his house and young family to find unemployment abroad. His wife, Khatoun, her mother and his young daughter wait months in vain for any news or money from the departed husband.

In the meantime another man comes into town looking for work. A trained mechanic, the itinerant Marhab is forced to make the rounds seeking any sort of worthwhile work. We follow his sojourn through the factories and garages, cheap workers’ shanties and markets on the city outskirts. The musical and rhythmic refrain to much of the film is a well-known and haunting Iranian poem, “Winter.”

A good deal of the action takes place along the railroad tracks that carried away the husband looking for work abroad. The same tracks lead to the house where Khatoun lives and works with her mother and daughter. Eventually Marhab makes a friend and finds employment in a rundown workshop. At the same time he becomes attracted to the abandoned woman and attempts to court her no easy matter in a society with strict rules for the conduct of married women. Marhab also has problems where he works, his employer expects him to work without payment. How can he woo Khatoun and finally strike permanent roots without money? Will Marhab be forced to follow the same iron logic of the railway tracks as his predecessor Mokhtar?

One of the most powerful scenes in the film consists of a close-up of Marhab while he explains what he wants from life. He does not want too much he is a trained worker and needs to work. What a waste to be trained in a profession that one cannot carry out! At the same time, work is not everything. He also wants a life apart from the work he does, to enjoy things, to test things out ... is that too much too ask? The blunt answer given by the film is: Yes, unhappily, this is too much! Iranian society and the world beyond it are too unyielding and exploitative to concede to such desires.

With a cast of amateurs, Rafi Pitts has created a film of subtle lyricism that throws a penetrating glance at the harshness of life in contemporary Iran and recalls some of the very best qualities in recent Iranian cinema.

Gradually (Be Ahestegi) ... is the second feature film by director Maziar Miri. The film was first shown at this year’s Fajr film festival in Iran and deals with an uneducated young man pressured by society into ostracizing his mentally ill wife when she leaves home in his absence.

Mahmoud is a railway welder working far from home who is informed that his wife, Pari, has left their small daughter with her parents and gone missing. We learn that Pari has an (undisclosed) mental illness and Mahmoud is anxious to return home to find her. In the opening scene he struggles to persuade his boss that his wife’s sickness is sufficient reason for his being permitted to leave. Back in his hometown Mahmoud takes up

the search for Pari.

We have a glimpse of the repressive forces at work in Iranian family and social life. Mahmoud's neighbor is convinced that Pari has run off with another man ... rumors are rife in the neighborhood. Mahmoud is torn between his genuine concern for his wife and pressure from his immediate environment and family that he should not bother to look anyway—Pari isn't worth it. Mahmoud loses out both ways: either he has lost his wife or he has been cuckolded—both sufficient grounds for shame and social exclusion. The gruesome discovery of the faceless corpse of a young woman seems to present a way out of Mahmoud's predicament. Pari dead is better than Pari vanished.

A visit to the morgue reveals the absurdities arising from the grip of the mullahs over Iranian society. Having bribed the police chief so that he can approach the corpse of the young woman, Mahmoud is informed by another official that, even as a husband, he has no right under Iran's Islamic law to inspect her dead body. This must be done by a female family member. Mahmoud also goes to the mosque to ask advice from the local mullah who merely responds with meaningless platitudes (and accepts his payment for services rendered).

Having effectively dealt with the dilemma and social stigma confronting Mahmoud, the film strays somewhat toward the end. Tormented by fears and speculations, Mahmoud eventually finds his wife, but the director chooses at this point to present a variety of alternatives. Does Mahmoud finally greet his wife with relief and affection, or does he give her a beating? Miri presents each as a possibility. Perhaps this is the director's strategy to circumvent the censor and satisfy all tastes—but the final scenes strike a disharmonious note.

Offside, directed by Jafar Panahi deals with another taboo in Iranian society—women and football. While there is no specific law forbidding women from attending football matches in Iran, the generally accepted rule is that women have no place at such contests.

The new film by director Jafar Panahi (*The White Balloon*, *The Mirror*, *The Circle*, *Crimson Gold*) is set around the World Cup qualifying match between Iran and Bahrain. With a real football match serving as the backdrop to the action, the director has favored a semi-documentary style using non-professional actors and the events take place by and large in real time. *Offside* begins with an elderly man stopping a bus full of football fans to search for his missing niece whom he suspects has run off to see the football match.

A young girl has made amateurish efforts to disguise herself as a man and sits reservedly in a bus full of raucous fans chanting war-cries and blood-curdling football cheers. Her disguise is spotted by one male fan who keeps silent until the bus arrives at the stadium. On the way another bus passes by with two girls wildly waving flags and chanting slogans—apparently they have learned how to blend in with the crowd.

Upon her arrival at the stadium, the girl has to surmount a number of obstacles. She cannot purchase a ticket at the official ticket office, but is eventually able to buy one on the black market from a poster salesman—for a hefty premium. Now, she has to get past soldiers controlling everybody entering the stadium. Losing her composure at the thought of being frisked, she turns to run away and is captured by the soldiers and imprisoned in a cage along with a handful of other girls who have committed the same “offence.”

Offside has a number of memorable comical scenes. The penned up girls are fanatical about their football. One of the young conscript guards watching over them is able to glimpse the match through a fence and relays the football action to the girls. The girls are scathing in their criticism of the young soldier who, in the course of his commentary, reveals his ignorance of the teams playing. One girl in particular hurls insults and swears at the young soldiers—although a frequent reason given for excluding females from football matches is that bad language should remain the preserve of the male sex.

At the end of the film, the girls and their captors are on their way to the police station. Their minibus is caught up in a massive crowd of jubilant football fans. Unable to proceed they disembark and dissolve into the crowd.

In choosing to center the action of his film around a football match Panahi has selected an aspect of culture with an international appeal. After all, the nationalist rituals surrounding major football matches take virtually the same form—irrespective of the name of the football team or country playing. At the same time Panahi delineates his main characters with the extraordinary empathy he has shown in his previous films—for example, the delightful *The White Balloon*.

We learn that the girls have lives and problems beyond the world of football—problems that either have their source in, or are severely exacerbated by, the oppressive nature of modern Iranian society. Such problems can find an temporary outlet in identification with football—but not a solution.

Mani Haghighi's *Men at Work* was the least satisfying of the Iranian entries. Four apparently wealthy men in their fifties return from a day's skiing in the mountains in their Land Rover. Stopping to relieve themselves, they find a solitary pillar of rock jutting out at the side of the road and overlooking a precipice. Speculation amongst the four men about the nature of the rock leads quickly to the irresistible urge by at least three of them to topple it from its socket. They have some experts in their midst. One of them is a building worker—well versed in the properties of rocks. Another is a dentist (experienced with roots!).

The rock resists their initial crude efforts. They enlist the services of an old man passing by with his donkey. “Do you know about this rock?,” they ask him. “Of course,” the old man replies. “Have you tried to topple it?,” they ask. “Of course,” he says, “and my father, and my grandfather.”

The old man's replies only intensify their obsession and fire up the group of men to even more extravagant and arduous attempts to shift the rock—involving the donkey and their own Land Rover—all to no avail. The rock stays put. As the men stoically concentrate on their absurd mission a small cross-section of Iranian society passes them by driving up or down the mountain.

Director Mani Haghighi says he was given the idea for his film by veteran Iranian director Abbas Kiarostami, who requested Haghighi to work for him for a year in exchange for permission to make a film based on the theme. The film was generally well received in Berlin by critics, one of whom was moved to describe the film as a “humorous exercise in fearless absurdity.”

Men at Work does have some endearing features. There is certainly a comic element to the adventures undergone by solid ordinary citizens who feel called upon to demonstrate their expertise and muscle power—even if the task is meaningless. The more worthless effort they expend, the less capable are they of admitting their mistake, swallowing their pride and acknowledging defeat.

Naturally Haghighi is repeatedly asked about the symbolism of the rock in his film: Does it represent masculine stubbornness and egoism? Or perhaps ... the Iranian government? In fact, Haghighi a little too smugly rejects all attempts at interpretation. We, the audience, like the Iranian censor, are free to read into the rock whatever we like. Haghighi's film elevates some of the lyrical elements which reoccur in Iranian film to the status of myth and absurdity. Questions, mysteries, he ends up saying, are more important than answers and prescriptions. No one is in favor of simplistic answers or prescriptions, but art is a means of getting at the nature of things, not simply admiring their essential mystery.

The best of Iranian cinema in recent decades has been more profound. The work of the finest directors has combined a profound and sympathetic study of human nature with poetic lyricism and a keen eye for social reality. Such components were also evident in the best of the Iranian films at this year's Berlinale.

One is left with the overall impression of a deeply contradictory and volatile society, with many unresolved elements from its past being pressed up against modern realities. Traditional ways of working, family and hierarchical relationships are being challenged and pushed aside to make place for the new. A new generation of youth, bursting with energy, is eager to take up this challenge, but are thwarted and held back at every step by thoroughly backward looking social and religious layers in alliance with the propertied and privileged. At the same time there is a rich humanist and universalist seam in Iranian culture, which the artists can draw on for the purposes of organizing a resistance to social and cultural reaction.

However, for the extraordinary potential in this culture to emerge requires that artists undertake a conscious and deliberate consideration of history and social life. There are limits to the humanism which has characterized Iranian cinema for much of the past decade. In resisting censorship and repression, Iranian filmmakers also have to reflect upon the sources of such repression—how it can be beaten back once and for all, and what social force should play the leading role.



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