

No country for filmmakers

Anahit Behrooz

2022

Things seem to happen in impossibly quick succession: an aftermath of the pandemic, perhaps, which warped our sense of a coherent temporality, or a reflection of the political climate, in which things spin out of control at the slightest provocation. July, and in Iran directors Mohammad Rasoulof and Mostafa Aleahmad are arrested for criticising the state's response to a fatal building collapse. Days later, fellow director Jafar Panahi is arrested too, for protesting their arrests. September, and I am at the Venice Film Festival, where Panahi's latest film *No Bears* has been screened. At the press conference, his chair sits empty, a plaque with his name stubbornly placed in front.

A week later, news of Jina Mahsa Amini's death at the hands of the Iranian state filters through. Things are on fire. I respond to it as I respond to all news that has come out of the Middle East since 9/11: sickening dread at

what has happened, a sense of unease at what might happen next, a dissociation borne out of my inability to do anything about it at all.

2024

Two years later, Rasoulof has been released from prison, and has escaped Iran. The video he posts of himself crossing the mountainous border is, in a long and storied career of dissident filmmaking, one of the most hardcore pieces of footage he has captured so far. His latest film *The Seed of the Sacred Fig* screens out of Cannes days later: it is the first mainstream narrative account of the Woman, Life, Freedom protests, told through the eyes of a family. Alongside this story – the father working for the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, his young daughters coming into radical political consciousness – the film contains multiple uses of real-life footage taken from the protests, filmed by the public enraged and agitating on the streets.

It is an Iran that has rarely been given cinematic representation. The two daughters in the film – played by Mahsa Rostami and Setareh Maleki – don't wear the mandatory hijab, they defy their father, they listen to pop music and sneak out of the house. But all around them, a bleed of violence slowly encroaches: a friend whose eye is shot out by rubber bullets during a protest, their father's gun always lurking in the

background. Female agency is, crucially, both possible and precarious; it is, as Rasoulof understands, an act both of manifest courage and of endangerment.

It is an uncanny experience, watching someone live a life that was almost yours. The women in *The Seed of the Sacred Fig* have no choice but to live and breathe and push back against the violence that impinges around them; I was half a world away, watching it through a phone. I didn't really know how to be in those months after Amini's death. Mostly, I felt insane. There was a constant clench of grief around me, and waves of panic at each new post that crossed my feed. People were dying. There was an uprising of some sort. Was it a revolution? What hope did that word even carry anymore? Would we, if it worked this time, be able to go home? My brother and I spoke, with a fantastic kind of optimism that I don't think either of us fully felt, about the prospect of return to a country we had never known. But I had, even at the age of 30, been alive too long, and lived through too many headlines, to really believe in it. I also felt horribly, ashamedly alienated from what was happening. I had never been to Iran, never worn the mandatory hijab, never had to navigate the morality police. What did I know of what was happening? What right did I have to all this grief?

2014

This question – of who has a right to grief – is part of a much broader inquiry that has long dogged Iranian feminist and dissident filmmaking, about who has a right to national identity, personhood, a public life. It is, at its heart, a question of how we belong to a place that is hostile towards us. I had long struggled with what it meant to be an Iranian woman in a place far away from the reaches of the Islamic Republic's patriarchal power; the position of Iranian women within the canon is marked by a similar kind of uncertainty, compounded by an official artistic tradition that has, for almost 50 years, been dictated by the will of the state. If everything you make is in resistance to the state, can you say you belong to it at all?

I first came across the work of Forough Farrokhzad over a decade ago. Primarily a poet, her work deals with ideas of desire, sexual embodiment and female subjectivity, themes that were incredibly controversial even in the Iran of the 1950s, which was undergoing sudden and extreme movements towards Western modernisation. Her poems are beautiful – both explicit and intimate – but it is her foray into directing with the 1962 short documentary *The House Is Black*, which struck me the most. Incorporating her poetry, as well as verses from religious texts, the documentary follows the lives of a community living in a leper colony, and

reflects Farrokhzad's ongoing preoccupation with states of desirability and undesirability, and the ability of art to articulate silenced subjectivities. There is one shot in particular I think about often. A woman, her face disfigured by illness and largely covered by a veil, stares into a mirror. In the mirror, her reflection stares right back. Here, the veil takes on different significance from the fraught object it has now become. A way to both conceal and reveal, to take back control over who is looked at and who is looking.

The House Is Black was the only film Farrokhzad ever made, although she starred in her partner Ebrahim Golestan's feature *Brick and Mirror* in 1966. Less than a year later, she died in a car accident at the age of 32. The Islamic Revolution took place twelve years later, and Farrokhzad's work was banned for over a decade, another instance of the by now familiar schism within the Iranian artistic tradition, between those accepted within official narratives and canons of nationhood, and those pushed out. It is perhaps not surprising, given this, that I was so drawn to her. It is a splintering that had defined my own life: the impossibility of being both from and not from a place; the impossibility of having a supposed home become unrecognisable. Farrokhzad was rejected by the only country she ever knew; everything in her only film says she would have rejected it right back.

2017

Venice. My mother and I are in St Mark's Square, and the crowds are unbearable. Yet one building feels different, away from the churning mechanism of history that props up the city's tourist infrastructure. It is filled with contemporary art: Iranian artist Shirin Neshat's numerous monochrome portraits of women alongside her short film *Roja*, a work that examines an Iranian woman's attempts to integrate within American culture, inspired by the artist's own move to the US and her complete exile from Iran between 1975 and 1990. Diaspora as a fundamental facet of contemporary Iranian identity has defined both the narrative and release of Neshat's feature films: *Women Without Men* (2009), following the lives of four women in Iran during the 1953 American-backed coup, was banned from Iran for its depictions of women's bodies and intimate lives; *Land of Dreams* (2022), a work of American and Iranian hybridity, examines the parallels of totalitarianism, surveillance, and nationalism that exist between the Islamic regime and contemporary America.

Co-directed with Shoja Azari, *Land of Dreams* is markedly the work of a visual artist. Neshat's past homeland surreally bleeds into her new one as her protagonist, played by Iranian-American actor Sheila Vand, visits an American military compound inhabited by Iranian revolutionaries trapped

in the 1970s, shows her ID card in which she inexplicably wears a chador, and travels through the New Mexico desert which is filled with images of revolutionary martyrs.

Is *Land of Dreams* about the failures of the American Dream, or about the failures of the Islamic Revolution, which began with the exhilarating hope of civic emancipation and ended with one of the most totalitarian regimes in history? Or is it really about both, and how the distinctions between these national identities increasingly means nothing in a world where the violence of both states has resounding effects on both their own people and others?

Whichever it is, there is an otherness that marks Neshat's work, that marked the work of Farrokhzad, and even Rasoulof and Panahi's fiercely feminist, underground films. To write about Iranian women's voice in cinema is to question not only the gendered structures that silence these voices, but also the very category of Iranian cinema in a tradition marked by patriarchal censorship and ostracism. What bonds all these filmmakers, and what I find myself increasingly drawn to, is a cinema of exile. After all, as Farrokhzad showed in *The House Is Black*, there is a kind of beauty in being an outsider. Our country may have become unrecognisable to us, but these filmmakers are also unrecognisable to

their country. It is, perhaps, the closest to a sense of national identity that I can get.

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A recording of this essay can be found at writersmosaic.org.uk

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