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Daniele Rugo

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Asghar Farhadi

Acknowledging Hybrid Traditions: Iran, Hollywood and Transnational Cinema

Daniele Rugo

GENEALOGY OF A DIFFERENCE

Post-revolutionary Iranian cinema has often been praised for its emotional immediacy, compositional simplicity and the deliberate poverty of its technological apparatus. Together with this encomium to transparency, films like Mohsen Makhmalbaf's *Salaam Cinema* (Hello Cinema, 1994) and *Nūn o goldūn* (A Moment of Innocence, 1996), Abbas Kiarostami's *Klūzāp, nemā-ye nazdīk* (Close Up, 1990), or Jafar Panahi's *In film nist* (This Is Not a Film, 2011) have garnered acclaim over the last two decades for their elegant reflections on cinematic devices. Writing on his country's cinematic masterpieces, Hamid Dabashi states that what is peculiar to Iranian cinema is that 'it is aesthetically ascetic, minimalist in its narrative construction, to the point of pictorial nominalism... at once avant-garde and simple to read'.¹ Dabashi traces a genealogy of Iranian cinema that goes from Kiarostami's actual, to Marziyeh Meshkini's parabolic and Makhmalbaf's virtual realisms. Dabashi contends that Iranian cinema today moves within these coordinates without being aware of them and 'the result is an undiluted visual realism... in which we can... watch visually – surpassing the long and illustrious history of our verbal memories'.² Khatereh Sheibani similarly insists on the deceptive simplicity of Kiarostami's film and on the links between their poetic reach and the tradition of Persian poetry.³ Simplicity and innocence figure also in the analyses of Hamid Reza Sadr, this time in relation to the insistence of many Iranian film-makers on presenting works rooted in the emotional framework of the child.⁴

1 Hamid Dabashi, *Masters and Masterpieces of Iranian Cinema*, Mage Publishers, Washington, DC, 2007, p 329

2 Ibid, p 394

3 Khatereh Sheibani, *The Poetics of Iranian Cinema: Aesthetics, Modernity and Film After the Revolution*, I B Tauris, London, 2011, p 9

4 Hamid Reza Sadr, *Iranian Cinema: A Political History*, I B Tauris, London, 2006, p 3

In a series of auto-ethnographic remarks published in 1994, Bill Nichols describes Iranian cinema as ‘austere’ and ‘restrained’ in its rendition of characters, and as presenting a narrative and aesthetic framework markedly different from the Hollywood paradigm, but closer to European directors such as Robert Bresson and Chantal Akerman.⁵ In particular, Nichols highlights the thematic absence of familial, social or class conflicts, and the formal lack of cinematic expressivity and ‘melodramatic intensities’.⁶ Instead, films such as Kiarostami’s *Khane-ye doust kodjast?* (Where Is the Friend’s Home?, 1987) and *Zendegi va digar hich* (*Life and Nothing More*, 1992) or Makhmalbaf’s *Dastforoush* (*The Peddler*, 1989) ‘unfold in a third-person, long-take, long-shot, minimally edited style’ with only ‘limited use of music and even dialogue’.⁷

This distance from the formal and narrative codes of American mainstream cinema, the frequent use of non-professional actors and of rural locations, have often brought scholars and critics to inscribe post-1979 Iranian cinema within the tradition of realism, broadly understood, and in particular of Italian Neo-Realism. Both Hamid Naficy and Richard Tapper acknowledge the link,⁸ whilst Bert Cardullo writes that Kiarostami’s Koker Trilogy, in its presentation of ‘a documentary-style look at mountain life in norther Iran’, confirms the neorealist legacy.⁹ Stephen Weinberger proposes a comparative reading of Kiarostami, Makhmalbaf and Majidi against the works of Roberto Rossellini and Vittorio De Sica, based on the shared commitment ‘to present life as it is actually lived by focusing not on the spectacular, but on the often unnoticed and unappreciated dramas of everyday life’, offering ‘in a direct and unglamorized fashion, the struggles and shabby conditions of working class life’.¹⁰ Shohini Chaudhuri and Howard Finn have articulated a response to post-Revolutionary Iranian films predicated on the concept of the ‘Open Image’ and on this cinema’s affinity with the poetic elements of Italian Neo-realism and the French New Wave.¹¹ Drawing on Pier Paolo Pasolini, Paul Schrader and Giles Deleuze, the essay attempts to ‘draw structural and aesthetic comparisons across different national cinemas, to show, among other things, how a repressed political dimension returns within the ostensibly apolitical aesthetic form of the open image’.¹² Among the features the analysis identifies as typical of Iranian cinema are: disconnected spaces, the child’s gaze, dedramatisation, the fixed long-shot/long-take and the freeze-frame. The argument concludes that ‘the appeal of New Iranian Cinema in the West may have less to do with “sympathy” for an exoticised “other” under conditions of repression than with self-recognition’.¹³

The parallels with the realist European tradition do not fully explain the character of the new national cinema that emerged in Iran following the 1979 revolution. It is important to consider the new set of values and degree of control introduced by the regime change. The vision of a new Shiite nation, set out in the writings of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, produced a different horizon for cinema. This partly explains the use of rural locations and the system of allegories deployed by the New Iranian cinema and the rejection of Hollywood melodramatic paradigms. The effort to establish a national cinema that responded to the new nation produced a refusal of representative systems based on absorption, narrative closure and identification. As Negar Mottahedeh explains:

5 Bill Nichols, ‘Discovering Form, Inferring Meaning: New Cinemas and the Film Festival Circuit’, *Film Quarterly*, vol 47, no 3, spring, 1994, p 20–21

6 Ibid, p 21

7 Ibid, p 21

8 Hamid Naficy, ‘Iranian Cinema’, in Oliver Leaman, ed, *Companion Encyclopedia of Middle Eastern and North African Film*, Routledge, London, 2001, p 180; Richard Tapper, ‘Introduction’, in *The New Iranian Cinema: Politics, Representation and Identity*, I B Tauris, London, 2002, p 18

9 Bert Cardullo, *André Bazin and Italian Neorealism*, Bloomsbury, London, 2011, p 28

10 Stephen Weinberger, ‘Neorealism, Iranian Style’, *Iranian Studies*, vol 40, no 1, 2007, p 7

11 Shohini Chaudhuri and Howard Finn ‘The open image: poetic realism and the New Iranian Cinema’, *Screen*, vol 44, no 1, 2003, p 38

12 Ibid, p 39

13 Ibid, p 57

- 14 Negar Mottahedeh, *Displaced Allegories: Post-Revolutionary Iranian Cinema*, Duke University Press, Durham North Carolina, 2008, p 3
- 15 Ibid, p 12
- 16 Quoted in Reza J Poudeh and M Reza Shirvani, 'Issues and Paradoxes in the Development of Iranian National Cinema: An Overview', *Iranian Studies*, vol 41, no 3, 2008, p 335
- 17 Nicholas Barber, 'About Elly' review, *The Independent*, 15 September 2012, <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/reviews/about-elly-asghar-farhadi-118-mins-12a-hope-springs-david-frankel-100-mins-12a-paranorman-chris-8142177.html>, accessed 15 May 2016
- 18 Shahab Esfandiary, *Iranian Cinema and Globalization: National, Transnational, and Islamic Dimensions*, Intellect, Bristol, 2011, p 103
- 19 Taraneh Dadar, 'Framing a Hybrid Tradition: Realism and Melodrama in *About Elly*', in Michael Stewart, ed, *Melodrama in Contemporary Film and Television*, Palgrave, London, 2014, p 224
- 20 In the same article, *Time* magazine's Richard Corliss stresses the similarities with Polanski's *Carnage*. Richard Corliss, 'A Separation: How about an Oscar for This Fascinating Iranian Drama?', *Time*, 30 December 2011, <http://entertainment.time.com/2011/12/30/a-separation-how-about-an-oscar-for-this-fascinating-iranian-drama/>, accessed 18 May 2016.
- 21 Godfrey Cheshire, 'Scenes from a Marriage. Iranian Cinema Breakout Asghar Farhadi's *A Separation* and its intricate emotional standoffs', *Film Comment*, January/February 2012 (<http://www.filmcomment.com/article/scenes-from-a-marriage/>), accessed 01 June 2016.

a new syntax of shot relations signaling 'nationalized' spatial (and hence temporal) relations in film would have to be constructed on the basis of the Islamic Republic's prohibitions on the desiring look.¹⁴

For Mottahedeh this new syntax amounts to a refusal of the scopophilic codes embedded in the Hollywood tradition, and results in the introduction of distancing elements that acknowledge the presence of the spectator. In this sense then, austerity, self-reflexivity, restraint, simplicity and lack of intensity can all be seen as determined by new Iranian cinema's 'grounding in the time and space of the new Shiite nation'.¹⁵ Sanctioning the official 'Iranian school', Ahmad Masjed-Jamei, Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance during the Khatami presidency, singled out the works of Abbas Kiarostami and Majid Majidi, who 'despite their stylistic differences, project something in common: an Iranian taste for mysticism and spirituality, a characteristic different from the western cinema'.¹⁶

Given the recurrence of this cinematic language in Iranian cinema after 1979, it is not surprising that Western critics received Asghar Farhadi's emergence onto the international scene – first with *Darbareye Elly* (*About Elly*, 2009) and then with Academy Award winner *Jodai-e Nadér az Simín* (*A Separation*, 2011) – as a clear break from tradition. Nicholas Barber, for instance, called *About Elly* a 'nail-biter' and praised Farhadi's shift away from the representation of Iranians as 'essentially medieval'.¹⁷

Farhadi stands as an exception to the accepted canon of post-revolutionary Iranian cinema and seemingly escapes the critical categories just evoked. In his reading of Iranian cinema against theories of globalisation, Shahab Esfandiary notes Farhadi's change in subject matter, with films that focus on 'ethical dilemmas and cultural contradictions in Iranian urban life' and 'social stratifications'.¹⁸ In other words, Farhadi embraces precisely those themes that, according to Nichols, were absent from post-Revolutionary Iranian cinema: domestic and social conflicts. The characters in his films are marked by emotional complexity rather than immediacy, the narrative structures are intricate and, whilst the camera often operates with the agility more typical of documentaries, its constant agitation does not suggest directness, but functions as an invitation to keep up with unruly relationships. Furthermore, the reflection on the medium's possibilities is not delivered through an explicit revelation of the cinematic apparatus. Taraneh Dadar also notes how Farhadi uses a much faster pace – achieved through a more pronounced use of editing techniques – emotional identification, dramatic intensity and dialogue.¹⁹ Situating Farhadi's cinema in the context of the post-revolutionary Iranian tradition seems, then, to require the elaboration of a new set of critical approaches and directions. His work does not on the whole fit the criteria commonly used to describe contemporary Iranian cinema.

Given the difficulty in interpreting these films according to the lens of Iranian cinema, a number of critics have stressed their proximity to models outside the tradition of realism and, importantly, mainstream American cinema and literature. Richard Corliss, for instance, has declared *A Separation* 'ready-made for an American remake'.²⁰ Nicholas Barber has drawn parallels with Paul Greengrass or Kathryn Bigelow; Godfrey Cheshire evoked Robert Altman's *The Long Goodbye* (1973),²¹ but also



A Separation, Director: Asghar Farhadi (2011), still courtesy: Artificial Eye

Sidney Lumet and Elia Kazan,²² whilst Peter Bradshaw has insisted on the influence of Michael Haneke.²³ Most reviewers support these interpretations by emphasising Farhadi's predilection for urban settings, relational conflicts and moral questions. Massoud Hayoun also notes the presence of American culture in the apartment of the family in *A Separation*:

Christina's World, recently deceased painter Andrew Wyeth's piece of classic Americana, is prominently displayed in Simin and Nader's house. There is a foosball table. A drawing of a Native American in traditional dress. A Christmas nutcracker. Simin and Nader's daughter Termeh implants a cocktail umbrella on her school project diorama, in a country that is ostensibly without cocktails.²⁴

Given these premises the aim of this article is to analyse the extent of this proximity, by discussing a number of thematic parallels that Farhadi's work enjoys with classical Hollywood films, as conceptualised by American philosopher Stanley Cavell. The choice of Cavell is motivated in the first place by his insistence on the fragility of marriage as revelatory of preoccupations around modernity and scepticism. In addition, Cavell's analyses of classical Hollywood cinema lead to questions as to the validity of knowledge and the demand a work places on those who approach it, thus allowing further scrutiny of the significance of the alleged parallels between Hollywood and Farhadi. The question this article asks is twofold: how helpful are these thematic parallels in understanding Farha-

22 Geoffrey Cheshire, 'Fireworks Wednesday', <http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/fireworks-wednesday-2016>, accessed 1 June 2016

23 Peter Bradshaw, 'A Separation' review, *The Guardian*, 30 June 2011 (<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2011/jun/30/a-separation-review>), accessed 20 May 2016

24 Massoud Hayoun, 'Is There a Lesson for the U.S. in Iran's Oscar-Nominated "A Separation"?', *The Atlantic*, 15 February 2012, <http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2012/02/is-there-a-lesson-for-the-us-in-irans-oscar-nominated-a-separation/253018/>, accessed 21 May 2016

di's cinema? What does the insistence on this proximity overshadow? The article concludes by opening up the possibility of connecting Farhadi's work to pre-revolutionary Iranian cinema. This body of work has received relatively little attention, but can nonetheless provide significant insights that discussions of Farhadi's cinema centred on its debt to Hollywood and European traditions fail to convey.

THEMATIC PARALLELS

Chaharshanbe Suri (Fireworks Wednesday, 2006), *About Elly* and *A Separation* present interesting thematic recurrences. *Fireworks Wednesday* follows Rouhi (Taraneh Alidoosti), a recently engaged young woman employed by a local housekeeping agency. She is assigned to the home of an affluent married couple about to leave on holiday and becomes embroiled in their spiralling nuptial conflict. The fireworks of the title are both metaphorical – referring to the explosiveness of domestic life – and literal, since the events in the film coincide with the Persian New Year of 21 March. *About Elly* tracks a group of friends – all Law school graduates – as they spend a weekend together in a house by the Caspian Sea. Sepideh (Golshifteh Farahani) has brought along Elly (Taraneh Alidoosti), her daughter's teacher, in the hope of setting her up with recently divorced Ahmad (Shahab Hosseini), who is visiting from Germany. Whilst the group enjoys a volleyball game, Elly suddenly disappears in the sea. Her alleged drowning leads to the arrival of her fiancé, who was not aware of Elly's trip with the group, and sets in motion a cycle of deceptions and revelations that unsettles the group. *A Separation* centres on the conflicts between Simin (Leila Hatami) and her husband Nader (Payman Moaadi), following Simin's decision to leave Iran and take their daughter Termeh (Sarina Farhadi) with her. Simin sues for divorce when Nader refuses to leave behind his Alzheimer's-suffering father, but her request is unsuccessful. Nader then hires Razieh (Sareh Bayat) to care for his father in his wife's absence, but when he discovers that the new carer has neglected her duties, he reacts angrily and pushes her out of the apartment. Following the incident, Razieh accuses Nader of having caused her miscarriage, leading her husband Hojjat (Shahab Hosseini) to take Nader to court.

These three films all deal with a series of relational conflicts that the individuals involved try to resolve mainly through conversation. These verbal exchanges are both poison and antidote, sometimes exacerbating the rift and sometimes bridging a gap. Marriage is always an issue, whether because it has to be overcome or because it cannot quite be realised. The main characters belong to the urban middle-class – what Farhang Rajaei has called 'Islamic Yuppies' – and confront working-class counterparts, who often display conflicting moral values.²⁵ In addition, *Fireworks Wednesday*, *About Elly* and *A Separation* all pose questions without providing answers, thus admitting the existence of more than one moral standing and the impossibility of taking sides. As Cheshire notes, in *A Separation* 'most viewers will be induced to sympathize deeply with both sides'.²⁶

Marriage and divorce, conversation and silence, the individual's relationship with the community and film's articulation of these problems figure prominently in Cavell's discussion of classical Hollywood cinema.²⁷

25 Farhang Rajaei, 'A Thermidor of "Islamic Yuppies"? Conflict and Compromise in Iran's Politics', *Middle East Journal*, vol 53, no 2, spring, 1999, p 217

26 Cheshire, 'Scenes from a Marriage', op cit

27 Stanley Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1981



Fireworks Wednesday, Director: Asghar Farhadi (2006), still courtesy: Axiom Films

28 These are: *It Happened One Night* (1934), Director: Frank Capra; *The Awful Truth* (1937), Director: Leo McCarey; *Bringing Up Baby* (1938), Director: Howard Hawks; *The Philadelphia Story* (1940), Director: George Cukor; *His Girl Friday* (1940), Director: Howard Hawks; *The Lady Eve* (1941), Director: Preston Sturges; *Adam's Rib* (1949), Director: George Cukor.

29 These are: *Stella Dallas* (1937), Director: King Vidor; *Now Voyager* (1942), Director: Irving Rapper; *Gaslight* (1944), Director: George Cukor; *Letter from an Unknown Woman* (1948), Director: Max Ophüls

30 Stephen Mulhall, *Stanley Cavell: Philosophy's Recounting of the Ordinary*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1994, p 239

For Cavell, the 1930s and 1940s Hollywood movies that he renamed ‘comedies of remarriage’ cannot be understood without acknowledging two facts: marriage is in need of validation but it is uncertain whom or what could provide it; divorce is morally and religiously acceptable.²⁸ In the comedies that Cavell discusses, marriage is renewed, its affirmation leading to and standing for a willingness to accept repetition, an embracing of the ordinary. On the other hand, in the melodramas of the unknown woman that Cavell derives by negation from the comedies,²⁹ personal change happens ‘without social exchange’.³⁰ In each one of Farhadi’s films these facts take on a different inflection. In *Fireworks Wednesday* a marriage is on the verge of collapse, whilst another is about to be celebrated. In *About Elly* a fiancé, the figure representing the promise of marriage, appears on the scene as the unexpected secret that deepens the outsidership of a mysterious character whom a divorced man has previously tried to seduce. In *A Separation* marriage is unable to validate the relationship between Nader and Simin, unable to keep the woman from leaving the marital home and her natal country, and is therefore under threat. In these films the two strategies described by Cavell, rather than splitting into two genres, come together in the same narrative. Marriage is both reaffirmed and transcended.

The pleasure Cavell assigns to the remarriage films derives from the endless responses elicited by the couples during their verbal interactions. In the comedies talking together is like being together. In the melodramas,

on the other hand, the silences signal the impossibility of being together. The couples' infrequent exchanges are bathed in irony. Whilst the comic duos are learning to speak again, their melodramatic counterparts are not speaking the same language anymore. In Farhadi's films the conversations seem to be of two types: in *A Separation* Nader and Simin share an intimacy that is difficult to dismantle. Simin at some point complains about her husband to the unresponsive father-in-law: 'After fourteen years of marriage he hasn't even asked me to stay.' For Cavell this attitude itself seems to provide a validation of marriage. In a passage on Howard Hawks' *Bringing up Baby* (1938) Cavell remarks: 'it is as though you know you are married... when you find that your lives simply will not disentangle'.³¹ At the same time the carer Razieh is constantly on the verge of tears, unable as it were to tune up to the language everybody else seems to share. Her husband Hojjat protests with the judge that he is not being listened to because, due to his social standing, he has never learnt to mount a convincing argument. His inexpressiveness often turns to rage when words seem to fail him; at this point he converts the unsaid excess into self-beating.

In *About Elly* the teacher's disappearance hyperbolically explodes her inability to express herself, whilst the friends insist on *finding her* (finding out who she is) by listing her attributes. Interestingly, during the first night at the house the group plays a game of charades, where the participants' physical expressivity replaces verbal language. *Fireworks Wednesday* finds its internal coherence in the counterpoint orchestrated between Roohi's momentous silences and the fiery altercations between a jealous wife and her philandering husband.

In his three major volumes devoted to comedies and melodramas Cavell stresses how these works elicit a series of moral questions: on the one hand, only self-conversion guarantees access to moral imagination; on the other, this kind of creation is always accompanied by acknowledgement of and by others. The women of the comedies remarry because the man has shown them his dexterity in pointing out their 'rejected thoughts' and 'further selves'. The man demonstrates 'that he is not attempting to command but that he is able to wish, and consequently to make a fool of himself'.³² The women of the melodramas run away from marriage because the man is incapable of moving beyond himself, despite their invitation to do so. Playful responsiveness becomes in the melodramas silent condescension. In Farhadi's films the lines blur: the moral question is still central to the film (what moral imagination is to be rewarded? What compromises is it worth accepting to be with others?) but both positions are at work within the same film. Ultimately, no character is represented as capable of providing a scene of instruction for the other, whilst every character manifests a taint of villainy. *A Separation*, whilst dealing mainly with a woman's desire for a different life, presents a number of moral issues structured around an escalating series of lies and deceptions. *Fireworks Wednesday* and *About Elly* both emphasise failures of acknowledgement that marriage cannot heal. The impossibility of detecting the correct moral position in these films produces a peculiar kind of inconclusiveness, which finds explicit visual treatment in at least two instances: *A Separation* ends with a freeze-frame of Termeh's face just before she voices a decisive choice; *About Elly* closes on the group's attempt to move a car stuck in the sand.

31 Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, op cit, p 127

32 Ibid, p 32



Fireworks Wednesday, Director: Asghar Farhadi (2006), still courtesy: Axiom Films

Having reviewed some of the resonances between Farhadi's insistence on questions of marriage, morality, acknowledgment and classical Hollywood cinema as analysed by Cavell, it is important, before accepting this proximity, to push the analysis of its significance a step further, to understand what else could be gained from a Cavellian framework.

Cavell motivates his writing about film as having begun under the pressure 'of recognizing a continuous response to scepticism'.³³ He adds that the philosophy he cares for is in existence in cinematic works of 'lasting public power'.³⁴ Therefore, Cavell's work on film should be read together with and against his wider philosophical investigations, marked by the attempt to confront the epistemologist's dogmatic doubt as a dominant form of Western modernity. Cavell recuperates the conclusion of scepticism – our relation to the world is not one of knowledge, when this means certainty – in order to shift the weight of its consequences: our relation to the world does not produce the failure or success of knowledge but rather that of acknowledgment.

On the other hand, Cavell's reading of individual films insists on creative faithfulness to the singularity of each instance, focusing on the singular film's reinvention of the medium. To read a film means to meet the responsibility placed by the work, assessing the appropriateness of one's response and acknowledgment. Criticism consists in letting 'the object or work of your interest teach you how to consider it'.³⁵

33 Stanley Cavell, *Contesting Tears. The Hollywood Melodrama of the Unknown Woman*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1997, p 42

34 *Ibid*, p 220

35 Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, op cit, p 10

FARHADI'S PLACE IN A HYBRID TRADITION

The reading just offered, then, shows Farhadi as a cosmopolitan director, one whose work stands the scrutiny of the American cinematic tradition and the issues that inform the West's transition to modernity, exposed through questions of marriage, self-knowledge and publicness. Moreover, an argument inspired by Cavell's analysis of classical Hollywood films also illuminates the distance Farhadi's films mark with regard to post-revolutionary Iranian cinema by focusing on the urban middle class, its values and lifestyle. Finally, the parallel with Cavell offers the opportunity to highlight specific thematic affinities with classical Hollywood cinema and sets up a film-philosophical conversation on the work of Farhadi, based on the moral issues these films confront.³⁶ However, if we are to follow Cavell's suggestion to meet the responsibility placed by the work and earn the right to question it, then Farhadi's novelty in the panorama of post-Revolutionary Iranian cinema should be looked at in more detail. Rather than simply associating these films with Hollywood because of the mentioned thematic parallels, we should question this knowledge and discover the partiality that moves it. This partiality can be summarised as the need of Western critics to find interpretative frameworks within what we accept as our tradition, since Farhadi's work does not resonate with the Iranian models we know. Farhadi's films do not engage with the trauma of the transition into the Islamic Republic, a theme that is prominent in Makhmalbaf's early cinema and perhaps best exemplified by *A Moment of Innocence*. They also avoid the Iran–Iraq conflict, central to Makhmalbaf's *Arousī-ye Khouban* (Marriage of the Blessed, 1989), but also to Panahi's *Talaye Sorkh* (Crimson Gold, 2003). Formally, they also tend to escape the framework of Kiarostami's films and renounce his experimentalism. However, this does not mean that Farhadi operates in isolation from Iranian models, embracing instead American or European ones. Rather than aligning Farhadi to a sequence, one could look at what the work can say of our powers of reception by asking: what do these films know?

In other words, this reading should also follow Cavell in understanding the demand a work makes on us. One of these demands is that we interrogate the tradition within which Farhadi inscribes his films. To simply associate Farhadi's work with Hollywood repeats an oversight already common in analyses of Kiarostami, Makhmalbaf and Panahi. As Chris Gow notes, the cinematic explosion of Iranian cinema on the international scene was quickly aligned with European art cinema, and as a consequence of this alignment, 'the New Iranian Cinema has been gradually removed and cut off from the particular contests wherein it has developed, but also in which it presently resides'.³⁷ The Iranian cinema that precedes 1979 has been seen as irrelevant to post-Revolutionary works and the national tradition as a whole has been overlooked. As Gow writes:

many pre-revolutionary films which serve as precursors to the best examples of Contemporary Iranian film-making are excluded from consideration, simply because they fall out with the restrictive timeline artificially imposed upon the evolution of the New Iranian Cinema.³⁸

36 For an overview of Iranian intellectuals' relations with the West see, Saeed Zeydabadi-Nejad, 'Iranian Intellectuals and Contact with the West: The Case of Iranian Cinema', *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, vol 34, no 3, pp 375–398.

37 Chris Gow, *From Iran to Hollywood and Some Places In-Between: Reframing Post-Revolutionary Iranian Cinema*, I B Tauris, London, 2011, p 4

38 *Ibid*, p 3



About Elly, Director: Asghar Farhadi (2009), still courtesy: Axiom Films

Whilst, for instance, commentators often emphasise Farhadi's reference to the work of Ibsen,³⁹ Tennessee Williams and Harold Pinter, there is less emphasis on the explicit acknowledgement of the influence of Bahrem Beyzai, Manouchehr Radin, Mahmoud Dowlatabadi and Sadeq Chubak. Similarly, when it comes to cinematic references, Farhadi has admitted the importance of Beyzai and of Dariush Mehrjui,⁴⁰ alongside that of Ingmar Bergman, Federico Fellini and Akira Kurosawa. Little attention has also been paid to the fact that Farhadi's intention with *A Separation* was to make a more local film than *About Elly*. In an interview the director said:

I thought that I should make a more indigenous film which would better illustrate the local spaces which I knew, so that the film would go down better with local audiences.⁴¹

The film was successful in this respect and stood second among the box office returns of the year in Iran.

Dadar highlights how the sense of novelty, the perceived freshness of Farhadi's approach among Western critics, is also a symptom of the neglect for the tradition of social realist melodramas present in Iran.⁴² Popular forms and their conventions, such as the 'stew-pot film' typical of the commercial film industry of the 1950s, derogatorily known as Film-Farsi, can, for instance, offer a broader understanding of cultural and social contexts as well as testifying to the persistence of melodramatic codes and domestic conflicts in Iranian cinema. Whilst Film-Farsi is generally associated with low production values and repetitive formal and narrative strategies, these extremely popular productions relied on melodramatic intensities and projected social tensions of tradition versus modernity, urban life and familial conflicts, shaping socio-cultural concerns of their time. As Naficy writes, these films, for instance, 'represented the family as an enduring if threatened institution whose survival depended on the willingness of its members to sacrifice their own individual rights'.⁴³

The generation of film-makers that reacted to the stagnant formulas of Film-Farsi between the 1950s and the 1970s sought to develop a type of film-making that had a pluralistic approach, thus creating a crisis between national models and international cinemas that shaped a new alternative Iranian cinema as both local and cosmopolitan. As Golbarg Rekabtalaei notes, young film-makers of the time had either studied abroad or had been exposed to the European and American masters, but also to Indian, Turkish, Russian and Egyptian films that were circulating in Teheran's cinemas at the time.⁴⁴ The intention of these film-makers was on the one hand that of updating and revising the formulas of mainstream cinema and on the other to project Iranian everyday life through cinematic forms that could put it on the same level as the best works of international cinema. Since the influences were so heterogeneous and the thematic concerns strongly rooted in the lived experiences of Iranians at the time, it is difficult to establish pure provenances and identify one specific source. Rather, what directors such as Ebrahim Golestan, Dariush Mehrjui, Naser Taghvai, Sohrab Shahid-Saless and Firaydūn Gulih were creating was a 'vernacular cosmopolitan cinema',⁴⁵ emphasising the transition towards urbanisation, everyday

39 In his review of *Fireworks Wednesday* for the *Cahiers du Cinéma* Axel Zeppenfeld explicitly traces the film back to Ibsen's *A Dolls House*. Axel Zeppenfeld, 'L'Education matrimoniale: "La Fête du feu" d'Asghar Farhadi', *Cahiers du Cinéma* 630, 2008, p 34

40 Cheshire, 'Scenes from a Marriage', op cit

41 Quoted in Esfandiary, *Iranian Cinema and Globalization*, op cit, p 103

42 Taraneh Dadar, 'Framing a hybrid tradition: Realism and Melodrama in *About Elly*', in Michael Stewart, ed, *Melodrama in Contemporary Film and Television*, Palgrave, London, 2014, p 224

43 Hamid Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema. Volume 2: The Industrializing Years 1941-1978*, Duke University Press, Durham, NC, 2011, p 231

44 Golbarg Rekabtalaei, 'Cinematic Revolution: Cosmopolitan Altercinema of Pre-revolutionary Iran', *Iranian Studies*, 2015, vol 48, no 4, p 576

45 Ibid, p 569



About Elly, Director: Asghar Farhadi (2009), still courtesy: Axiom Films

moral conundrums and questions of individual responsibility, but also clashing values and class conflicts.

As Rekabtalaei puts it, Iranian cinema between the 1950s and the 1970s was already shaped by ‘heterogeneity and hybrid transnational imaginaries’,⁴⁶ and ‘in the making of vernacular cosmopolitan directors and audiences, the alter-cinema of Iran disturbed Iranian national boundaries while presenting a new (trans)national sensorium’.⁴⁷

In other words, the interrogation of Farhadi’s works leads one to take note of a different tradition. The attention brought by Farhadi to a different kind of post-Revolutionary Iranian cinema, one that cannot be necessarily read in terms of austerity, simplicity and long-takes, can trigger a renewed attention to the pre-revolutionary cinematic tradition and, more generally, to films that escape the paradigms consistently applied to Iranian cinema. The resonance of Farhadi’s works around the world can provide an entrance into a different cinematic history, one where Hollywood and Europe (but also the break produced by the 1979

46 Ibid, p 575

47 Ibid, p 583

revolution) are factors among many different influences and strategies. Farhadi's cinema is one that could help bring to the fore the hybrid, heterogeneous tradition of Iranian cinema.

Reading Farhadi's work together with that of Golestan and Mehrjui, for instance, allows for the emergence of a different set of parallels and could provide new critical insights. Questions of class identity, focus on the educated urban middle-class, domestic conflicts and moral impasses emerge more explicitly once one engages with this body of work, where these issues already play an important role.

For instance, Golestan's film *Khesht va Ayeneh* (Brick and Mirror, 1964), defined by Naficy as 'the best example of existentialism in Pahlavi-era, coterminous with the height of existentialist philosophy in Iran',⁴⁸ can help structure a different understanding of Farhadi's novelty. The film focuses on Hashem, a taxi driver in Teheran, who, after he gives a ride to a young woman, discovers an abandoned baby in the back seat of his car. Following failed attempts to locate the mother, Hashem returns to his apartment and deliberates with his lover Taji over what to do. Whilst Taji becomes increasingly keen to keep the baby, Hashem turns more and more hesitant and is consumed by doubt. After various moments of failed intimacy, miscommunication and emotional distress Taji takes the baby to an orphanage, whilst the film closes on Hashem stuck in a traffic jam. This work shows an insistence on broken relationships, human responsibility and moral dilemmas that, at least thematically, places it as a precursor to Farhadi's films.

The work of Mehrjui, explicitly mentioned by Farhadi as an important influence, provides a bridge between pre- and post-revolutionary cinema. Whilst *Gav* (The Cow, 1969), *The Postchi* (Postman, 1972) and *Dayereh-ye Mina* (The Cycle, 1975) guaranteed his place among the best pre-1979 alternative film-makers, Mehrjui has also continued to work in a very distinctive way after the revolution, producing films that often focus on the urban middle class, conflicts that erupt at the heart of everyday life and the fragility of marriage. *Hamoun* (1990) and, even more poignantly, *Leila* (1996) present interesting thematic and formal parallels with Farhadi. The former, described by a reviewer as an untypical Iranian film at the time of its release, narrates the story of a middle-class couple struggling through a divorce.⁴⁹ Hamid Hamoun, an executive in an import-export business, is shocked to learn that his wife Mahsid, a budding artist, is asking for a divorce. The break-up of his marriage sets off a downward-spiralling midlife crisis that pushes Hamid to find a new meaning for his existence, mainly by seeking comfort from his grandmother and subsequently escaping into fantasies. Similarly to what happens with Farhadi, it is difficult here to side either with Hamid or Mahsid. They both elicit a degree of sympathy (Hamid is often victimised by those around him, whilst Mahsid complains to her psychiatrist of having been repeatedly bullied by her husband), but they are portrayed at the same time as extremely self-obsessed. Whilst the tone of the film is decidedly more oneiric and comical than Farhadi's work, there are similar stylistic choices. Mehrjui often deploys the hand-held camera, frequently uses jarring jump-cuts to move within a scene or between sequences, and the action is conducted at a rather brisk pace. In *Leila*, a middle-class couple sees their marriage coming under threat due to the titular character's infertility. Leila (played

48 Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema*, op cit, p 360

49 Philip Shenon, 'An Iranian Director Finds His Way Past a Double Censorship', *The New York Times*, 15 August 1990, <http://www.nytimes.com/1990/08/15/movies/an-iranian-director-finds-his-way-past-a-double-censorship.html?pagewanted=all>, accessed 22 May 2016



A Separation, Director: Asghar Farhadi (2011), still courtesy: Artificial Eye

by Leila Hatami, whom Farhadi will cast for the protagonist role in *A Separation*) and her husband Reza (Ali Mosaffa, who plays the main male role in Farhadi's *Le Passé* (The Past, 2013) have been married for a couple of months and seem to share a content complicity. Their warm intimacy is shown by the film mainly through conversations in the car and domestic life (watching David Lean's *Dr Zhivago* [1965] or going to a Japanese restaurant). However, the intervention of Reza's mother and her pressing desire that her son remarries to a woman who could give him a child, progressively complicates their relationship. Reza is against the idea of remarrying and agrees to meet the women his mother sources for him only in the conviction that his reluctance will force her to desist. Throughout the film we sympathise with Reza's alleged resistance to his mother's designs and yet this sympathy is unsettled during a conversation Reza has with the father, who reproaches the son for lending himself to the game, passively complying with his mother's plan. Ultimately, Leila, unable to cope with the presence of the new wife and overwhelmed by the pressure, runs away from the marital home. When Reza begs her to get back together with him, she responds with an unassailable silence. Whilst the film has self-reflexive moments in which actors address the audience directly, the set-up of the domestic and driving sequences are reminiscent of Farhadi's work. One finds then in this film a brief moment that mirrors the opening shot of Farhadi's *A Separation* in front of the judge. Leila and Reza are visiting an orphanage with a view to adopting a child. Here, the director

of the orphanage explains what the requirements are for a couple who want to adopt. As the camera turns, Leila and Reza are looking directly at it and it seems as if the audience is asked for a moment to judge the fitness of the two.

These two brief examples show how Farhadi's films presuppose a long hybrid tradition of works in Iran that have both local and cosmopolitan dimensions, a focus on the everyday moral and relational problems of the urban middle-class family and on questions of class identity. Moreover, these films already adopt a less austere and more expressive formal style that makes ample use of dialogue, editing and dramatic intensity. Whilst the parallel with European or American frameworks is a useful one, the complexity of Farhadi's films calls for the interrogation of wider contexts. Pre-revolutionary Iranian cinema and those directors whose work, like Mehrjui, grew out of that experience, already offer the kind of hybrid tensions typical of Farhadi's work.

One could ask again: what do Farhadi's films know? They know that in order to interpret, one has to offer oneself to interpretation, that a work makes a powerful claim upon our powers of reception. Farhadi's characters show the awkward courage of educating themselves in public. Through them the films seem to ask: are we ready to do the same, to take on this burden? If we are read by them, we may know what this education amounts to.

ORCID

Daniele Rugo  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8606-9524>