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Iranian film industry thrives amidst continuing censorship

By Sakina Shakil

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Photographer: [kamshots, on Flickr](#)

Pirated versions of Iranian films are sold on the streets of Tehran.

TEHRAN (The International) — With several Iranian issues under international scrutiny this year, Asia Society and the Global Film Initiative are highlighting the country's artistic accomplishments with a timely film series called Women of Iran in October and November at Asia Society's headquarters in New York, calling attention to the roles of Iranian women in film and society.

Following the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, the country's film industry has continued to thrive amidst the turbulent Iranian political scene and despite strict censorship laws. Ms Negar Mottahedah, an associate professor of Literature and Women's Studies at Duke University and author of *Displaced Allegories: Post-Revolutionary Iranian Cinema*, told CNN in March 2009 that creativity often feeds off prohibition, and "film cultures have flourished oftentimes when they have been under restrictions." Her sentiment seemed to ring true especially this year, when Iran's controversial elections in June coincided with burgeoning international recognition of the country's film industry. Many Iranian films competed in international film festivals and were awarded prestigious prizes: Mr Asghar Farhadi's film, *About Elly*, won the Tribeca Film Festival's best narrative feature award, and Ms Shirin Neshat won the Silver Lion award for best director at the Venice Film Festival for *Women Without Men*.

Moreover, many of the latest Iranian films discuss women's roles in Iran and how they have been developing in a country where politics, religion, and culture are deeply intertwined. Movies featured in the Women of Iran series include Ms Manijeh Hekmat's *Women's Prison*, which uses the physicality of imprisonment as a metaphor for the lives of Iranian women following the 1979 Islamic Revolution, and Mr Kambuzia Partovi's *Border Café*, which is the story of a young widow defiantly

running her late husband's restaurant against threats from men in her community. Furthermore, many of Iran's most prominent filmmakers are females, such as Ms Samira Makhmalbaf, who directed the award-winning films *At Five in the Afternoon* and *The Blackboard*.

The poetry of Iranian film

Post-revolutionary Iranian cinema has been praised, internationally and domestically, for bringing attention to critical issues the country has been dealing with in the past three decades. Iranian filmmakers are also repeatedly lauded for portraying such issues in a realistic yet poetic manner, evoking an emotional response to their films from the audience, as well as connecting people outside of Iran to Iranian culture and society.

Iranian film, by touching the hearts of the international community, has opened up the industry to a new audience. Iranian film series are being held in many places outside Iran, such as the Iranian film festival in San Francisco. Shannon Kelley, the head of public programs at University of California's Los Angeles campus, discussed with the Los Angeles Times why Iranian films have captured international attention: "It is a cinema that's very engaged first with its own cinema history and culture. It's also a very internationally informed cinema with techniques as sophisticated as what anybody else is doing in the world. The beauty of their work translates to other cultures."

Problems faced by the industry

But the Iranian film industry has unfortunate barriers to face within Iran. Strict censorship laws often prohibit the distribution of many of the Iran's internationally acclaimed films within the country itself. Mr Abbas Kiarostami's *Taste of Cherry*, which won the prestigious Palme d'Or at the 1997 Cannes Film Festival and the US National Society of Film Critic's award for best foreign language film in 1999, is banned in Iran allegedly because of it incorporates suicide as a theme. Mr Jafar Panahi's films *Offside* and *Circle*, the latter of which won the Venice Film Festival's Golden Lion prize in 2000, are also banned in Iran; both films deal with women's rights.

Censorship also creates problems when it comes to the production of films in Iran, such as with *Offside*, which depicts a group of women who dress up as men in order to attend football games in Iran. The film had to be shot in secret, and as Mr Panahi described to National Public Radio, it was no easy feat: "Everything is taking place in secret. Nobody knows about it. They were actually hiding in a car, sitting there and shooting, and the actress runs to the stadium to get in. She's arrested, and she's beaten up, and they arrest all of them and put them in a car. And I go and tell them that, 'If you do this, I will tell everyone about it,' so they finally let them go." Mr Panahi also said that his lead actress was momentarily traumatized by the experience.

Moreover, Iranians involved in the film industry live under close scrutiny, and participation in activities considered illicit by the government often lands them in trouble. BBC News reported in August 2001 that Ms Tamineh Milani, a filmmaker who often incorporates themes of liberalism and feminism in her work, was arrested. A statement from the public relations office of Tehran's Islamic Revolution Court said that Ms. Milani "showed support in her work for the counter-revolutionary groups which wage war against God" and that she "exploited art."

The months surrounding the elections this year in Iran were especially ripe with trouble for

filmmakers. In June 2009, the AP reported that Mr Bahman Ghobadi, whose film No One Knows About Persian Cats was featured in the Cannes Film Festival, had been arrested upon returning to Iran; he was accused of criticizing the Iranian government while at Cannes. Also, in July 2009, the AFP reported that Mr Panahi had been arrested along with his wife and daughter at a commemoration for protestors killed in Iran's post-election violence. Most recently, on 10 October 2009, Reuters reported that Iranian actress Ms Fatemeh Motamed Arya and movie producer Mr Mojtaba Mirtahmaseb were forbidden from leaving the country by Iranian authorities because of their activities after Iran's June elections.

— Sakina Shakil for The International

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