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The Iran-Iraq War and the Sacred Defence Cinema.

A lecture given by Kaveh Abbasian on 16 February

During the 1979 Iranian Revolution, hundreds of cinemas were burnt down by the Islamist crowd. After the revolution, the new Islamic rulers called for purification and cleansing of the film industry. Many film professionals were banned from working and many fled the country. The aim of this campaign was not a complete annihilation of Iranian cinema but a dramatic transformation of it. The state aimed for what they called an Islamic cinema with educational content, in the service of what they called the Islamic Revolution. In order to make this “Islamic Cinema” possible many young Islamic revolutionaries, who had had no previous experience started getting involved in making films. As a result of this campaign a general tolerance towards cinema as an industry and an art form was created amongst the religious sections of the society. Religious people who in the past were completely against cinema gradually started to make peace with a cinema that was now considered to be on its way to become completely Islamic. The growing acceptance of cinema is evidenced in 1981 where in the holy city of Qom a new cinema venue called *Qiyam* (Uprising) started its work by screening *Sarbaz-e Eslam* (Soldier of Islam) (1981). A similar tolerance was created towards TV. People who once (due to their religious tendencies) refused to let TV enter their households, now gladly bought TV sets.

This campaign of Islamisation of Iranian cinema was largely a failure. The number of films produced each year was very low and the ones that were made did not live up to the ideals of the Islamic Cinema. However, the start of the Iran-Iraq War gave new enthusiasm and hopes to the Islamic faction of the revolution. The young Islamic filmmakers found new motivations and subjects for their cinema. The cinema of the Iran-Iraq War came to be known as the ‘Sacred Defence Cinema’.

Morteza Avini

Although war gave birth to a new movement in Islamic Cinema, the films that were made rarely managed to break the limitations of previous forms and content that were once considered corrupt, West-toxicated and non-Islamic. There is, however, one specific TV documentary series that is arguably the ideal example of what Islamic Cinema could have been like: *Chronicle of Triumph* (1986-1988). Morteza Avini, the director of the series, was one of the young Islamic revolutionaries who started making their own ideological state-funded documentary films. However, unlike many others, he managed to break away from the cinema of the past and develop his own cinematic language. Prior to becoming the director of this series, he had proven himself as a talented filmmaker with strong Islamic beliefs. As the director of the series, he oversaw several filming groups operating on the frontlines of the Iran-Iraq War and in Iranian cities. Their responsibility was to film enough material and send the footage back to Tehran where it was processed and quickly edited by Avini himself. The series included 63 episodes and each episode was broadcast on national TV every Friday night.

In these documentaries Avini managed to create an image of the Iranian fighters that had not been seen before. His characters were nothing like the heroic protagonists of what he called West-toxicated cinema. His fighters were more like Sufis longing for the beloved. They were ordinary people from every corner of the country who would hug each other and easily burst into tears.

He used his literary talent to write the mystic and ideological narration of the series and read them himself. In his narrations the war was depicted as the last battle of history, where the fate of the world was to be determined; Iranian fighters were declared soldiers of the Hidden Imam for whom history had been waiting for centuries; the journey of the volunteers from their ordinary life to the frontlines was considered a spiritual journey through which one lost one's ego and became united with one's surroundings; and in the end martyrdom was propagated as the ultimate sacrifice through which one reached the *ma'shouq* (the beloved) and *haq* (the truth).

Chronicle of Triumph was a TV series that not only was a unique example of Islamic Cinema but also carried with it three of the most important aspects of the Islamic Republic's national identity building project:

1. 'Apocalypticism,' which in Shi'a eschatology is strongly connected to the story of the Twelfth and last Imam of the Shia's, Imam Mahdi also known as the Hidden Imam or the Awaited Imam.
2. 'Martyrdom' which in Shi'a ideology is strongly connected to the story of the Third Imam, Imam Hussein, and to Karbala, the place of his martyrdom.
3. 'Vilayat-e faqih' (Guardianship of the Supreme Islamic Jurist) which existed as a concept in Shi'a terminology but was advanced as a political rule by Ruhollah Khomeini and became the centre point of the Islamic Republic's dominant ideology.

Avini strongly believed that the previous forms and techniques of filmmaking carried with them their own non-Islamic content. He was particularly fascinated by Marshall McLuhan's theory of "the medium is the message". In his essays and articles, later published as a book under the title of *Magic Mirror*, Avini argued that to create a cinema capable of reflecting the reality of the revolution and the war, they needed to create a new form. He used techniques such as the use of multi-layered sound and religious music, special effects, freeze frames, handheld cameras, flashbacks, long take eye level shots and spontaneous interviews in order to give a very intimate experience to his audience. For him, his audience were not merely observers of the sacrifices which were captured on film but active participants in the reality of the war – and potential fighters. He declared that his crew, as filmmakers, were also actively involved in that historic event and ready to sacrifice their own lives. Seven members of his crew were killed during the making of the series and he made sure that each "martyred" member received a heroic recognition in the series itself. In this sense, Avini attempted to bridge the distinction between the subject, the filmmaker, and the audience which resulted in an intimate, touching image of the "sacrifices" made during the war. This intimacy, which was a result of Avini's experimental approach towards filmmaking, was the key to the success of the series in gaining public attention. Considering its popularity, the weekly

broadcast of *Chronicle of Triumph* offered a collective experience to its audience, who felt that they were part of the same struggle, for the same cause, against a common enemy. In this sense, *Chronicle of Triumph* played a crucial role in helping construct the Iranian national identity.

Despite Avini's promises of the last battle of history and eternal guardianship of light, the war ended in 1988. But this was not how Avini and many others wanted the war to end. Even Khomeini himself likened the acceptance of the truce to drinking from a chalice of poison. Khomeini's death not long after the end of the war marked the end of an era. However, this was not to be the end of the Sacred Defence cinema. *Chronicle of Triumph* in particular was so influential inside Iran that Ali Khamenei, the new Supreme Leader, praised Avini and ordered the establishment of a cultural institution to be named after the series itself, dedicated to making documentaries about the "Sacred Defence". The institution became a dominant authority in the production of war documentaries and continued its work even after Avini himself was killed by a landmine in 1993 while making a documentary about the "martyrs". After his death, the supreme leader declared him "the master of martyred literati"; the place of his death became a pilgrimage destination and the day of his death was named the day of "Islamic Revolution Art". Avini became what he had always glorified, a martyr, but before becoming so and in fact also by becoming so, he set the foundation for the Islamic Republic's propaganda language.

Ebrahim Hatamikia

Avini was critical of most Iranian filmmakers. In his articles published in the periodical, *Soureh*, he showed no mercy to Iranian filmmakers, old and young. There was however, one young filmmaker whom he praised dearly: Ebrahim Hatamikia. Avini had known Hatamikia when for a short period of time he was a member of his *Chronicle of Triumph* crew. But it was after watching Hatamikia's third film *Mohajer* (The Immigrant), that he truly believed in his potential: "I know no one else who makes films like Hatamikia... Hatamikia blows his whole existence into the frames, and each time he sets himself on fire so that his flames can shed a light, and each time, like a phoenix, he gains life from that fire".

Hatamikia made 18 films of which 13 are directly or indirectly about the Iran-Iraq War. Apart from his first four films that are about the war itself, all his other films except for one are about the aftermath of the war.

Although the war ended in 1988, Hatamikia continued to make wartime films until 1993. In 1993, he released *Az Karkheh ta Rhein* (From Karkheh to the Rhine) in which he dealt with post-war problems. Saeed, a former fighter, who has lost his sight due to Iraqi chemical attacks, is sent to Germany for treatment. He does regain his sight but doctors find out that chemical attacks have caused blood cancer. The film raises many questions about the war and its victims. Saeed goes through a spiritual journey and eventually dies in Germany. *Az Karkheh ta Rhein* is the first film in which Hatamikia faces the reality of the end of the war as the end of an era. The sequence when Saeed, after gaining back his sight, watches the funeral of Khomeini on a VHS tape, represents this reality.

This phase of coming to terms with the past and the fact that the war has ended continued with two other films. In *Booye Pirahan-e Yousef* (The Scent of Yousef's Shirt) Hatamikia reflected on the issue of Iranian prisoners of war and the missing in action from their families' point of view. His other film, *Borj-e Minoo* (Tower of Minoo) is the story of a former fighter who finally faces his past and comes to terms with his memories of his fallen comrade.

In 1999, the year Mohammad Khatami took office as the president of Iran, the year that has come to be known as the beginning of the reformist movement, Hatamikia's new phase also started. His next three films *Ajans-e Shishe-i* (The Glass Agency), *Rouban-e Qermez* (Red Ribbon), and *Mouj-e Mordeh* (Dead Wave) are centred around characters for whom the war had never ended. They are former fighters unable to fit into a post-war Iran. Released in 1999, *The Glass Agency* is about two war veterans, Abbas and his wartime commander Kazem. Despite financial difficulties, Kazem tries to help Abbas to go to London for an operation on a war injury. When they face problem in a travel agency, Kazem loses his temper and takes the whole travel agency hostage. The film ends with Abbas's death.

From *Dead Wave* in 2001 until 2014, Hatamikia made five films of which only one was about the war. *Be Nam-e Pedar* (In the Name of the Father), released in 2006, has a different tone to Hatamikia's

other films, especially in the main character's approach towards the war. Naser, a former wartime commander, has always tried to detach himself and his family from his past. His daughter Habibeh is a student of archaeology. During an excavation on an ancient hill, after finding an ancient arrowhead, she steps on a landmine and is injured. When Naser goes to the hill he recognises it. Years ago, during the war, he had planted the landmines himself. He always tried to keep his daughter away from that past, and in their conversations always insists that the war has definitely, completely, ended. Now his daughter has been injured by the very landmine planted by himself...

After this for years the Iranian Sacred Defence Cinema didn't produce many films. This phase however ended with the start of Iran's involvement in the war in the Middle East. After 23 years of not making a wartime film, in 2014 Hatamikia went back to his roots. He released *Che* about Mostafa Chamran in Paveh. He followed that with another film in 2016: *Bodyguard*. *Bodyguard* is again about a former fighter (Heidar) who has lost his faith in the system. Heidar is played by Parviz Parastoui, the actor who played the other misfit veterans in Hatamikia's previous films. At a certain point in the film he becomes responsible for the security of a young nuclear scientist. The scientist refuses to allow him to guard him. Heidar finds out that the young scientist is the son of his friend who died during the war. They had promised each other that should one of them die, the other would take care of his family. But Heidar had forgotten about this and was preoccupied with his doubts. In a key sequence of the film, when Heidar goes to his friend's grave, the young scientist and his mother also arrive, by accident. Heidar asks for forgiveness and they cry together. With that purifying crying, Heidar, in a way gets back on track. He has found new motivation. The film ends with a scene of assassination. Heidar saves his friend's son's life and - in a reference to Hatamikia's early films - dies himself and becomes a "martyr".

This film finds true importance when we understand it as part of the current policies of the Iranian establishment regarding the current political situation of the world. The whole discourse of the war has been brought back. In this discourse Iran is an island of stability in a turbulent Middle East. But this island of stability is under foreign threat and "Sufi" heroes such as Heidar are the saviours. This approach becomes more apparent when we realise that Heidar's

character and make-up is an immediate reference to Qasem Soleimani. Soleimani is the commander of the Qods Force, a division of the Army of the Guardians of the Islamic Revolution, which is primarily responsible for extra-territorial military and secret operations. He came under the international spotlight after the start of Iran's involvement in the war in the Middle East. While there were doubts and suspicions about Iran's involvement, low quality photos of Soleimani in Iraq and Syria started to surface. He appeared to be everywhere and nowhere. Soon he became a topic of memes and cartoons and appeared on many front covers.

But *Bodyguard* hasn't been the only film of its kind. These years the Sacred Defence Cinema is going through a transformation. Many young filmmakers have joined in and the number of war films has gone up dramatically. Iran's Fajr international film festival is also giving special attention to these films and awards have been redirected towards them. It is no surprise that this year one of the most talked about films of the festival was a biography of Morteza Avini.