

SPRING 2007

Middle East on Film

HISTORY 300--005

Th, 1:00-4:30, DU-236

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Crown 547: T, 3:00-4:15; Th, 12:00-1:00

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This course examines the cinematic cultures of three Middle Eastern countries within the last couple decades: Iran, Turkey, and Israel. Since the early 1990s Iran has come to the attention of many cinephiles around the world for its peculiar cinematic production, while a select group of Iranian filmmakers (Kiarostami, Panahi, and Makhmalbaf) have been awarded prizes at some of the top film festivals (Cannes, Venice, and Berlin). While the Turkish cinema is still in the process of slow evolution, the Israeli cinema for its part had since the 1980s developed a dynamic of its own that would primarily focus on the relation of the Israeli Jews to their past history and diaspora (Zionism, immigration, and the state of Israel), on the one, and their relation to the Palestinians on the other.

Let us begin with some general remarks that characterize Iranian cinema, or at least traits common to some of the feature films that we'll be viewing this semester. Here are some of the issues that would need an in-depth discussion.

Documentary vs. fiction. The Iranian films have blurred the classical distinction between "documentary" and "fiction." The post-Fascist era of Italian neorealism, beginning with Rossellini's *Rome Open City*, had famously introduced "documentary"-style shooting in scenes incorporated within larger fictional narratives. The so-called "documentary" style consisted in particular on a reliance on non-professional actors, genuine locations (e.g. street scenes), and long takes with fixed or hand-held cameras. It also implied, albeit very partially, on the non-existence of a fully developed narrative. Either narratives could be very sketchy, or else "action" per se and the chronology of events had a secondary role. But by the time neorealism had matured, it had anything into it but the "documentary" claim. Thus, both Antonioni's "existential" ennui style, and Pasolini's thematic abstractionism, had foregone much of the documentary aspect of neorealism. It is well known that Antonioni, who had in

the past filmed many documentaries, had repeatedly stated his sense of the inadequacy of this formal structure as well as of the neorealist vision, which in Italy had found in Rossellini its most inventive representative. The reason why I brought the dilemmas of Italian neorealism in relation to contemporary Iranian cinema is because of some similarities regarding the documentary versus fiction paradigm. On the one hand, Iranian cinema has introduced long shots (often with digital hand-held cameras) that look like mini-documentaries within broader fictional accounts. The street long-camera takes are in particular notoriously hard to complete, as they cannot be cut and edited, and they have to be repeated rather than edited (e.g. Panahi's *Circle*). Herein lies their force: because they cannot be the subject of a traditional cut-and-paste editing, they place the spectator in an uncomfortable position of different expectations, while they breathe a fresh air into the film medium. On the other hand, those mini-documentaries are not as "improvised" as it might first appear. As Kiarostami's *10* perfectly shows, they could be as well crafted as films with traditional narratives and could even require more off-stage lengthy preparations with actors and camera equipment. In the final analysis, the major breakthrough might not be the "documentary" versus "fiction" dilemma, as much as a new way to practice montage. As the French critic André Bazin had already noted, the failure of montage lies in its decision to pre-interpret, through the syntagmatic order it elaborates, every narrative fiction. In other words, the essence lies in changing the rules of montage, and providing a fresh alternative to classical editing, while forcing the viewer to look differently (e.g. a long uninterrupted take, or when two people talk, the camera does not frame them, but frames something else—*hors champs*).

Narratives and micro-histories. Based on what was stated above, the issue of "narratives" (or lack thereof) turns a crucial one in conjunction with the documentary/fiction issue: Do Iranian films, as pioneered for instance by the likes of Kiarostami and Panahi, have any "narratives," or are they constructed on other types of narratives? I think that the issue of narrative might be as misleading as that of the documentary-style montage. In effect, the strength of Iranian movies lies less in the structure of their narratives, or their presumed documentary style, than in the *montage* itself. It is, indeed, the montage that would permit a focus on particular scenes within a syntactic arrangement. For example, Jafar Panahi's *White Balloon* is entirely constructed from the time framework of a small girl who is completely focused on recovering the object that she had lost that same day. In this case, the novelty is that the time of the movie coincides with the action's *real* time—a couple of hours within the consciousness of a small girl. As everything is constructed from the eyes of a single protagonist, the spectator is left with no other perspective but that of the girl herself, which requires perhaps a different level of concentration and focus. Reliance on non-professional actors, in conjunction with a quasi-documentary style, improvisation and hand-held (digital) camera techniques, all give that whimsical impression that there is no constructed narrative. But that's, I think, an illusion of montage. Actually, as witnessed in Kiarostami's *And the Wind Will Carry Us*, and *10*, there's a great deal of formalisms deployed in the combination of narrative structure, acting, framing, and editing, which points to more premeditated than improvised techniques.

Political and social prohibitions. It is well known that since the 1978 revolution the Iranian cinema has operated within all sorts of constraints: women must wear a scarf or chador ("veil"), intimate/sexual scenes are forbidden, and the heritage of the Islamic revolution cannot be critiqued. Yet, in spite of all such political and social constraints, there is a great

deal of freedom and experimentation in Iranian movies. What is more paradoxical is that, by all accounts, the Iranian cinema seems to have improved in comparison to the 1960s and 1970s when Iran was under the “secular” régime of the Pahlavis. It seems therefore that Iranian cinema managed to operate better—if not more freely—within its more “natural” setting of Shii Islam. In other words, it is precisely the prohibitions coming from an authoritarian Islamic régime that transformed Iranian cinema into a critical apparatus, even far more trenchant in its observations than the more liberal Turkish or Israeli cinemas have produced since the 1980s.

GENERAL REQUIREMENTS

There are 12 films in conjunction with weekly readings that we’ll discuss collectively in class. Your participation is essential for the success of the course.

In addition to the two-draft free-topic paper (see below the section on papers), you’ll have to submit three interpretive essays based on our films and weekly readings: you’ll receive sets of questions for each. *Each paper counts as 20 percent of the total. **All interpretive essays are take-home and you’ll be given a week to submit them.** The purpose of the interpretive essays is to give you the opportunity to go “beyond” the literal meaning of a film/text and adopt interpretive and “textual” techniques. A failing grade in all interpretive essays means also a failing grade for the course, whatever your performance in the term-paper is. **All essays and papers must be submitted on time according to the set deadlines.***

First Interpretive Essay: hand out with questions on February 8	20%
Second Interpretive Essay: March 15	20%
Final Interpretive Essay: April 19	20%
Term-paper: 2 drafts 10% each	20%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • First draft due on March 29 • Second draft on April 30 	
Presentations, Blackboard postings, and class attendance and participation	20%

- It is essential that you complete all readings on time, and that you come to class well prepared. **Always come to class with the required book:** we’ll discuss all films and readings extensively.
- The first, second, and final interpretive essays are all based on our weekly films and readings. They all consist of a single essay for which you’ll receive the appropriate questions at the dates above, and you’ll submit them in class a week later.
- The question handouts will only be distributed in class—no email communication.
- For all five papers follow the procedures outlined below in the section on papers.
- Essays and papers are to be submitted only in class. Do not email or fax any material. Do not submit your papers outside the classroom.
- It’s your responsibility to submit all essays and papers *in class* on time at the deadlines below. Late papers will be graded accordingly, and papers submitted a week after the

deadline will be graded F.

- You must also submit, in addition to the printed hard copies, an equivalent electronic file of each paper in the digital dropbox on Blackboard.
- Each non-submitted paper will receive the grade of F, and your final grade will be averaged accordingly.
- The mid-term paper is a free-topic exercise based on a film(s) of your own choice.
- If you do not show up for an assigned presentation, you'll be graded F.

The course consists of a combination of 12 films that will be shown in class each Tuesday, and four books. In each session we'll discuss one film and the reading assignments. All dates, assignments, readings and films could be subject to change, pending on our progress throughout the semester. You'll be notified of any change on blackboard.

Required readings

- Hamid Dabashi, *Close Up*, Verso 1859843328.
- Jonathan Rosenbaum, *Abbas Kiarostami*, Illinois 0252071115.
- Hamid Reza Sadr, *Iranian Cinema*, I.B. Tauris 1845111478.
- Geoff Andrew, *10*, BFI Publishing 1-84457-069-X.

Films/DVD availability

All 12 films are available on the American market on DVD, zone 1, NTSC format. US copyright laws do not authorize making copies of privately owned DVDs to circulate around.

If you've missed a session, or if you would like to review a film privately on your own, you could either check for the DVD at the Cudahy library, or in other libraries in the Chicago area, or rent it from one of the popular stores (Blockbuster or Hollywood).

You can also check DVD availability at the following services:

- Netflix (mostly rental): Netflix.com
- Facets multimedia (Fullerton, Chicago): <http://www.facets.org/asticat>
- Amazon.com
- Tower records: <http://www.towerrecords.com/>

WEEKLY FILMS

1. January 18: *Lessons of Darkness* (Werner Herzog, Germany, 1995)

German director [Werner Herzog](#) went to Kuwait in 1992 to document the aftermath of the first 1990-91 Gulf War, focusing on the devastating oil fires set by retreating Iraqi soldiers that transformed the country's beautiful landscape. Herzog, who also made the films *Aguirre*, *The Wrath of God* and *Fitzcarraldo*, crafts a moving and mostly silent presentation accompanied by classical music and moments with Kuwaitis lamenting the devastation of the war.

2. January 25: *Crimson Gold* (Jafar Panahi, Iran, 2004)

When Hussein ([Hossain Emadeddin](#)) finds a receipt for a necklace in a stolen purse, he's flabbergasted by the large sum of money. He knows that his miniscule salary will never be enough to afford such luxury. What's more, he's sick of the hypocrisy of a social system that makes people like him (on the lower rungs) feel like an outcast. But all that is about to change -- at least for one night.

3. February 1: *Close-up* (Abbas Kiarostami, Iran, 1990)

With his use of non-actors and his loose use of documentary rules, Iranian director [Abbas Kiarostami](#)'s (*Taste of Cherry*) films can often be characterized by asking whether what the viewer is seeing is reality or fiction. The film which perhaps most exemplifies this is *Close-Up*, ostensibly a documentary about an impostor of another Iranian director, [Mohsen Makhmalbaf](#). Kiarostami tells the story by asking questions from off-screen to those involved in the legal case, then having the participants play themselves in a re-enactment.

4. February 8: *The Circle* (Jafar Panahi, Iran, 2000)

Director [Jafar Panahi](#)'s portrait of the status of women in fundamentalist Iran is, by any stretch of the imagination, depressing. But just getting the film made was a major political feat, given Iran's dogmatic view of women and unstable political climate. The fact that this film (made by a man) is sensitive to women's plight sheds a ray of hope that, given time, things may gradually change.

5. February 15: *And the wind will carry us* (Abbas Kiarostami, Iran, 2000)

This film's abstract, symbolic plot follows a man named Behzad and two of his colleagues as they travel from Tehran, Iran, to the tiny village of Siah Dareh, located on a dry, barren mountainside. There they observe the harsh life and everyday activities of the villagers. Technology -- or the lack thereof -- figures prominently in this film, which is considered director [Abbas Kiarostami](#)'s most socially critical work.

6. February 22: *Leila* (Dariush Mehrjui, Iran, 2000)

Reza and Leila, a young couple recently married, discover that Leila is unable to conceive. Invoking tradition, Reza's mother convinces her daughter-in-law that Reza must, out of necessity, take a second wife to produce an heir.

7. March 1: *Ten; Ten on Ten* (Abbas Kiarostami, Iran, 2002)

Iranian writer-director [Abbas Kiarostami](#) trains his lens on contemporary Iran as seen through the eyes of one woman. We witness the female driver as she motors through the streets of Tehran over the course of several days. During that time, she picks up 10 passengers (including her sister and young son, a prostitute and a jilted bride). What we begin to fathom is how complex -- and varied -- modern Iran has become.

8. March 15: *Distant* (Nuri Bilge Ceylan, Turkey, 2002)

Mahmut (Muzzafer Özdemir), a divorced, hermit-like photographer, lets his dopey cousin Yusuf (Mehmet [Emin Toprak](#)) live with him for a while in Istanbul while Yusuf looks for a job so he can support his family in their native Turkish village. The distance -- and silence -- between the two lonely, depressed men soon grows to intolerance, on Mahmut's part, of the chaos Yusuf has brought into his life. [Nuri Bilge Ceylan](#) directs this intimate drama.

9. March 29: *Head-on* (Fatih Akin, Germany-Turkey, 2004)

Cahit Tomruk ([Birol Unel](#)) and Sibel Guner ([Sibel Kekilli](#)) are immigrant Germans who live and work in the port town of Hamburg. In a bid to help Sibel break free of her family (which strictly adheres to Turkish customs, religious and otherwise), the couple decides to marry. But straitlaced families are just part of the problem; Cahit and Sibel must also counterbalance ancestral roots with their new life in a western democracy. [Fatih Akin](#) directs.

10. April 5: *Kippur* (Amos Gitai, Israel, 2000)

In October 1973, Egyptian and Syrian armies attacked Israel on the most important Jewish religious holiday: Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement). Director [Amos Gitai](#)'s agonizing account, which he co-wrote with Marie-Jose Sansalme, chronicles the life of a Weinraub ([Liron Levo](#)), a young member of a medical unit that rescued the wounded during the war.

11. April 12: *Berlin-Jerusalem* (Amos Gitai, Israel, 1989)

This thought-provoking film by [Amos Gitai](#) chronicles the lives of two very different women emigrating from Germany to Palestine. Else ([Lisa Kreuzer](#)), a creative soul named after a poet, sadly leaves Berlin when the Nazis begin their terrifying assault on the Jews; Tania (Rivka Neumann) is an advocate for a new Jewish state, unsentimental about her departure. In the end, they both discover that finding a new home is far from easy.

12. April 19: *Wall* (Simone Bitton, Israel, 2004)

By asking simple questions of those affected by the construction of a concrete wall between Israelis and Palestinians, filmmaker [Simone Bitton](#) allows the people to speak for themselves. The result is a portrait of the Palestinian inhabitants, the Israeli settlers and the officials who

are fencing them in -- a thoughtful documentary that explores the sweeping emotions behind one of the most enduring struggles of the 20th and 21st centuries.

PAPERS

You are requested to write one major research paper to be submitted on April 30. You will have to submit, however, a first draft of this paper on March 29. The first draft should be as complete as possible and follow the same presentation and writing guidelines as your final draft, and it will count as 10% of your total grade unless the final draft is of superior quality. The purpose of the first draft is to let you assess your research and writing skills and improve the final version of your paper. It is advisable that you choose a research topic and start preparing a bibliography as soon as possible. I would strongly recommend that you consult with me before making any final commitment. It would be preferable to keep the same topic for both drafts. You will be allowed, however, after prior consultation, to change your topic if you wish to do so.

Papers must be related to film and film theory in the Middle East, and must include the analysis of at least one film of your own choice. Papers with broader topoi must first receive instructor's approval. *Papers should be analytical and conceptual.* Avoid pure narratives and chronologies and construct your paper around a main thesis.

Kate L. Turabian, *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*, 5th ed., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987. Intended for students and other writers of papers not written for publication. Useful material on notes and bibliographies.

April 30: FINAL DRAFT DEADLINE

Keep in mind the following when preparing your preliminary and final drafts:

- once you've decided on a paper-topic and prepared a preliminary bibliography, post an abstract and bibliography of your topic on blackboard <blackboard.luc.edu> (see below). Your abstract should include: (i) title; (ii) description; (iii) sources; (iv) methodology (e.g. suggestions on how to read sources). **Your preliminary draft will not be accepted unless you've submitted an on-line abstract before March 27.**
- preliminary drafts should be submitted on time, March 29.
- preliminary drafts should be complete and include footnotes and an **annotated bibliography**. (The Turabian reference above is annotated: it briefly spells what the book is about and to whom it might be useful.)
- do not submit an outline as a first draft.
- incomplete and poorly written first drafts will not be accepted, and you'll be advised to revise your first draft completely.
- if you submit a single draft throughout the semester, you'll receive F for 10% of the total and your final grade will be averaged accordingly.
- **your final draft should take into consideration all the relevant comments provided on your earlier draft:**
 - all factual and grammatical mistakes should be corrected, in addition to other stylistic

revisions.

- passages indicated as “revise” or “unclear” or “awkward” should be totally revised.
- when specific additional references have been suggested, you should do your best to incorporate them into your material.
- there might be several additional suggestions in particular on your overall assumptions and methodology. It will be up to you to decide what to take into consideration.
- **Submit the final draft with your preliminary corrected one.**
- if you’re interested in comments on your final paper and interpretive essay, request an appointment by e-mail.

Please use the following guidelines regarding the format of your papers:

- use 8x10 white paper (the size and color of this paper). Do not use legal size or colored paper.
- use a typewriter, laser printer or a good inkjet printer and hand in the original.
- only type on one side of the paper.
- should be double spaced, with single spaced footnotes at the end of each page and an *annotated bibliography* at the end (see bibliography below).
- keep ample left and right margins for comments and corrections of at least 1.25 inches each.
- all pages should be numbered and stapled.
- **a cover page should include the following: paper’s title, course number and section, your name, address, e-mail, and telephone.**

Electronic forum

This course is listed on the Loyola Blackboard webpage to freely post messages and conduct discussions: login at <blackboard.luc.edu> and follow the instructions.

Besides a synopsis of all your presentations and term-paper, you must post each week a news item on the Middle Easter and/or world art scenes. An Op-Ed or a reply to a posting are considered valid entries.

References

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