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# Unveiling Estrangement: The Ambivalence of Iranian Cultural Identity in Documentary Films

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by

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## Dedication

I dedicate this study to my beloved family, friends, and the resilient people of Iran.

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**Abstract**

This paper examines estrangement within Iranian society as depicted in Iranian documentaries, which, I argue, regularly suppress the complexities of Iranian cultural identity. While Iranian narrative cinema has been studied in this context, documentaries have received less scholarly attention, despite their potential to illuminate the shortcomings of conceiving Iranian cultural identity. I examine three documentaries: *Tehran Today* (Ahmad Faroughi Ghajar, 1962), *Newcomers* (Kianoush Ayari, 1979) and *Tehran Without Permission* (Sepideh Farsi, 2009). Through this analysis, I uncover various forms of estrangement, including those induced by westernization, gender oppression, and the political control of what Hamid Naficy calls "mediawork." Drawing on theories of cultural identity from scholars such as Stuart Hall, as well as Bill Nichols's concept of documentary "voice," I investigate how state authority interacts with creative expression in Iranian documentaries across progressive and conservative regimes before and after the Islamic Revolution. Ultimately, I reveal how documentaries contribute to and challenge homogeneous understandings of Iranian cultural identity perpetuated by the state and the media.

## Introduction

Over the past century, Iran has witnessed significant political upheavals, including three revolutions and a lengthy war alongside frequent uprisings. Although Iranian cinema is predominantly known for its pre-revolutionary New Wave and post-revolutionary Poetic Realism, Iranian documentaries not only represent the profound estrangement of Iranian citizens, I argue, but also the consequences of this estrangement for Iranian cultural identity across progressive and repressive regimes. By estrangement, I refer to a related set of experiences that variously leave spectators feeling overlooked by, alienated from, or newly conceiving Iranian cultural identity in light of its depiction in documentary films. As numerous scholars have articulated, Iranian narrative cinema has the potential to index estrangement among the Iranian populace. This includes estrangement from processes of westernization and modernization, the estrangement of women after the 1979 revolution, and the estrangement experienced by children and youth as they encounter the ideals of the Islamic Republic. However, compared to Iranian narrative cinema, documentary films have received less scholarly attention and the concepts of estrangement and cultural identity within this genre have been significantly disregarded. Less adept, perhaps, than narrative at navigating codes of censorship, Iranian documentaries encountered greater challenges from the state due to their presumed adherence to reality. Even so, documentaries remain powerful sites for tracing the estrangement of Iranians under different political systems, whether pre-revolutionary modernization or post-revolutionary divisions of public and private. This estrangement reflects the shifting dynamics of Iranian political systems and their influence on the formation of more and less dynamic and heterogeneous individual and collective identities.

To understand the sense of estrangement pervasive within Iranian society and its implications for Iranian cultural identity, it is imperative to briefly review key moments in Iran's social and political history. The journey begins with the Constitutional Revolution of 1905, a pivotal moment in Iran's history characterized by the nation's quest for democracy and self-determination. The ascent of the Pahlavi dynasty in 1925 ushered in an era of westernization and industrialization. While Pahlavi's primary aim was modernization, these transformative processes played a pivotal role in shaping societal dynamics, which predominantly revolved around the gap between traditional society and those who sought change. As rapid modernization created a new cultural landscape, a significant portion of the Iranian population found it challenging to relinquish traditional ways of life and deeply held Islamic values. Another significant juncture occurred in 1953, when a meticulously orchestrated coup supported by the United States, toppled Iran's democracy. The coup reestablished the autocratic rule of the Shah, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. The White Revolution of 1963, a non-violent regeneration of Iranian society through economic and social reforms, led to significant positive changes, but also contributed to the increasing complexity of the societal landscape. Indeed, struggles between the government and the Iranian people persisted until the 1979 Islamic Revolution, a shift that dismantled the Pahlavi regime and ushered in a new Islamic government. This new regime introduced its form of radicalism by excluding the secular democratic segment of the Iranian population, further intensifying the estrangement experienced by the Iranian people. Throughout these tumultuous periods, modern and traditional forces pressured the Iranian populace to conform to specific ideals, whether those of westernization or the profound return to the religious conservatism. In what follows, I uncover and examine these instances of estrangement within three historical documentaries to reflect on the extent to which they contribute to or challenge the heterogeneity of Iranian cultural identity.

Many scholarly articles have examined how cinematic developments within Iranian narrative cinema reference diverse experiences of estrangement among the Iranian population. However, there is a relative scarcity of articles focusing on documentaries. Two works provide a comprehensive sociopolitical context for my project: One, *Iranian Cinema: A Political History* by film critic and writer Hamid Reza Sadr, posits that Iranian cinema's evolution closely paralleled the nation's political trajectory. Sadr highlights the dynamic interplay between Iranian cinema and political power structures, arguing that in the lead-up to the 1979 revolution, Iranian cinema exhibited a duality, whereby it alternated between challenging established power structures and aligning itself with them either explicitly or implicitly. The other, the monumental four-volume *A Social History of Iranian Cinema* by Hamid Naficy, provides readers with a more profound understanding of Iranian cinema across various political systems, even if it offers only a brief discussion of Iranian documentaries. Together, these works underscore the extent to which Iranian cinema corroborates and challenges state power structures, a dynamic evident, I argue, in both narrative and documentary filmmaking. Indeed, I utilize this interplay to examine the relationship between censorship and critique in pre- and post-revolutionary documentaries, which remains pivotal for comprehending the origins and intensifications of estrangement and cultural identity in divergent political contexts.

My understanding of Iranian cultural identity primarily derives, meanwhile, from Stuart Hall's article "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," where he delineates a framework that distinguishes a unified, homogeneous identity from one that acknowledges differences shaped by history. I also rely throughout my study on documentary scholar Bill Nichols, who theorizes the "voice" of a documentary as not only spoken words, but also choices in composition, editing, music, and voice-over. According to Nichols, a documentary's voice asserts claims, proposes perspectives, and evokes meaning in complex and frequently

contradictory ways. By employing Nichols's ideas, I identify patterns within the "voices" of documentaries that index the level of state and authorial control in each film and clarify their relatively homogeneous or heterogeneous depictions of Iranian cultural identity.

This in mind, my project analyzes three documentaries, all filmed in Tehran, which provide a window onto pivotal moments in Iranian history: *Tehran Today* (Ahmad Faroughi Ghajar, 1962), *Newcomers* (Kianoush Ayari, 1979), and *Tehran Without Permission* (Sepideh Farsi, 2009). These documentaries exhibit the estrangement of Iranian citizens across various political regimes. They also have different levels of government authority over them, from a fully state-sponsored film to an unauthorized and self-funded project. As the degree of state control diminishes over the production of these films, representations of Iranian cultural identity undergo corresponding alterations. In the fully state-sponsored documentary, *Tehran Today*, Iranians are depicted as integrated with machinery, modern transportation, high-rise buildings, and western architectural influences. This portrayal occurs within Iran at the brink of modernization. Still, the use of voice-over narration and music within the modernized picture of the country contributes to a sense of estrangement, particularly in the film's denial of and disregard for traditional segments of society. The second documentary, *Newcomers*, depicts the immediate aftermath of the 1979 revolution, a period of uncertainty during Iran's transition from the Pahlavi dynasty to a new radical Islamic government. Sponsored by Iranian television but in an uncertain time, *Newcomers* captures scenes from public spaces such as the Tehran bazaar, streets, parks, restaurants, and Tehran University, offering insight into individual and collective lives amid this transformative period. Even so, the film's estrangement is evident through its focus on gender dynamics, particularly its emphasis on male-dominated gatherings, which alienate Iranian women. Lastly, *Tehran Without Permission* presents a perspective on Iran, freed from the constraints of official permission during the Islamic Republic era. Here, the director accesses both the public and private

spheres of Iranian society during the tumultuous period before the 2009 election and the subsequent emergence of the Green Movement in Iran. The result sheds light on how state control estranges domestic and international audiences from the lived realities of Iranian citizens. As this suggests, the state's influence lessens across the three documentaries, which progressively offer more nuanced representations of Iranian society that contest oversimplified depictions of Iranian cultural identity.

## Chapter 1: Literature Review

As I have suggested, there is a scarcity of scholarly articles on Iranian documentary cinema compared to its narrative counterpart. Nevertheless, the existing body of literature on Iranian narrative cinema serves as a valuable resource for this study. In addition to the contributions of Hamid Reza Sadr and Hamid Naficy referenced in my Introduction, I look to authors such as Ali M. Ansari, Robert Graham, and Nikki R. Keddie to provide relevant historical contexts for each of the films I study. I also incorporate other available documents on Iranian cinema to provide social and aesthetic contexts for my selected films. These include studies of movements such as the pre-revolutionary Iranian New Wave as well as "Poetic Realism," or "Spiritual Cinema," which emerged in Iranian narrative cinema after the revolution and gained particular prominence in the 1990s (Zeydabadi-Nejad). Finally, I rely on the relatively scarce accounts of Iranian documentary films, including *A Guide to Iranian Documentary Films: From the Beginning to 1997* by Massoud Mehrabi; Naficy's general works on western and Iranian state-sponsored documentaries; and Tara Najd Ahmadi's more specific commentary on *Newcomers*. The other two emphasize the limitations the state places on documentaries that fail to depict a "realistic picture of Iranian society" because they are western-made, state-sponsored, or "unfinished" thanks to censorship (Naficy, 236; Ahmadi, 21). While I draw upon their work, I shift my focus to Iranian-made and, in the case of *Tehran Without Permission*, unauthorized documentaries, that manifest the consequences of estrangement for Iranian cultural identity across progressive and regressive regimes.

Individual sections draw upon Paula Amad's reading of aerial photography and Mary Ann Doane's thoughts about voice-over, which along with William Guynn's analysis of *Song of Ceylon* (Basil Wright, 1934), emphasize the propagandistic homogeneity of Iranian

cultural identity in the expository documentary *Tehran Today*'s representation of a modernizing Iran. In the case of *Newcomers*, I utilize Bill Nichols's descriptions of observational and reflexive documentaries to clarify the intended and unintended consequences of the director's choices for gendered instances of estrangement inside and outside the public sphere. Finally, in *Tehran Without Permission*, I align Nichols's work with Trinh T. Minh-ha's concepts of "speaking nearby" as opposed to "speaking about" to examine how the filmmaker engages in dialogues with her subjects to exhibit the heterogeneity of Iranian cultural identity through what Naficy calls "mediawork."

Along the way, I juxtapose Iran's pre- and post-revolutionary public spheres, referring to Jürgen Habermas's definition of the public sphere and Nancy Fraser's critiques of its lack of inclusivity. These concepts are particularly relevant in discussing the transformation of the public sphere portrayed in *Newcomers* and, later, its heterogeneity in *Tehran Without Permission*. In this, they lay the groundwork for my engagement with the work of Ali Madanipour and Saeed Zeydabadi-Nejad who consider the public and private spheres of Iranian society in ways that shape conceptions of these spheres inside and outside the country.

## Chapter 2: Altered Narratives: Documenting Modern Iran Under State Sponsorship

"He [the Shah] often grew impatient when American diplomats urged him to modernize at a pace faster than his careful crawl. 'I can start a revolution for you,' he apparently told an American diplomat, 'But you won't like the end result.'"--Andrew Roth, *The Spectator,* October 1958 (Ansari, 147)

"Tehran is not typical of Iran: nevertheless, it is modern Iran."—Robert Graham, 1977 (23)

Mohammadreza Shah Pahlavi's state authorized documentaries to project a modernized image of Iran, and *Tehran Today* is among numerous others striving for this goal. While information about the film is limited, Massoud Mehrabi's book *A Guide to Iranian Documentary Films: From the Beginning to 1997* notes that the film showcases Tehran's social, cultural, and tourist attractions, offering insights into its potential. Additionally, it was commissioned by the Cinematic Center of Fine Arts (128). Even so, the film's production and timing set it apart. Ahmad Faroughi Ghajar, a descendant of the Ghajar dynasty, directed the film in 1962, a year after the initiation of the White Revolution. Ali M. Ansari emphasizes the significant role played by the Shah in the White Revolution and notes, as the foregoing epigraph suggests, that it took time for the revolution to unfold. Ansari mentions that the revolution "was launched by decree (the six points were first articulated in November 1961)

and ratified by referendum in January 1963" (157). This context is essential as Faroughi Ghajar crafted *Tehran Today* amid an era of change.

*Tehran Today* presents a modernized perspective of Iran, where the residents of Tehran are overshadowed by the city's towering skyscrapers and advanced technology. As such, it exhibits the expository mode of documentary filmmaking, attempting to persuade viewers to believe in Iran as a modern state. As defined by Bill Nichols, the expository mode constructs its narratives by piecing together fragments of the historical world, using them as evidence and addressing viewers directly through titles or voice-overs that present a specific perspective or argument (167). Similarly, *Tehran Today* showcases fragments of Iran's modernized capital to construct a narrative that eliminates traditional society and, with it, the multiplicity of Iranian cultural identity. In his article "The Art of National Projection," William Guynn explores the film *Song of Ceylon,* produced by Great Britain's Empire Marketing Board, in similar terms. Guynn suggests that there is an "ideological dissonance that lies beneath the works' apparent coherence" (65). He further delves into the representation of Ceylonese culture in the film, questioning the ideological implications and the potential role in perpetuating Orientalist notions by which western desires are projected onto images from East. During the Pahlavi dynasty, the political climate facilitated opportunities for several western filmmakers such as Albert Lamorisse and Jost von Morr to visit Iran and produce documentaries. Hamid Naficy's classification of British and American nonfiction films about Iran as "exotic underdeveloped Iran (1900-1941)" and "strategic Modern Iran (1942-1979)" implies that films by western directors tended toward high levels of exoticism and estrangement (218). Although western productions often inadvertently perpetuate exoticism and estrangement in their portrayal of eastern nations, especially concerning themes of development and underdevelopment, *Tehran Today*, as an Iranian

production, consciously employs estrangement tactics, notably focusing on traditional segments within Iranian society.

The film opens with aerial shots of Tehran paired with voice-over, which scholars commonly regard as the "eye of God" and "voice of God," respectively. Referring to visual theory's longstanding connections between vision and control, Paula Amad highlights the association of aerial shots with the intertwined concepts of "vision and violence" (66). She also explores utopian and dystopian interpretations of aerial photography, adding a third term. While the dystopian viewpoint is linked to the aftermath of World War I, the utopianism inherent in aerial photography revolves around the positive contributions it made to the realms of science and art movements like cubism. Amad's "in-between" perspective emphasizes the fluidity encapsulated within aerial photographs, which signifies a more ambivalent context (73). The aerial shots capturing the streets and high-rise buildings of Tehran possess this quality of "in-betweenness." As the voice-over mentions the growth of Tehran's population, exceeding two million, these shots provide a visual representation of the city's rapid urbanization. While initially portraying a sense of progress and modernization, they also underscore the transformation of Tehran into a metropolis, where individual identities are subsumed within the collective mass of the urban landscape. Robert Graham delves into the dynamics of migration into Tehran, explicitly stating, "People were attracted both from other cities and from rural areas. Between 1900 and the first census in 1956, Tehran absorbed 60 percent of the total internal migration of 1.76 million" (24). This statistical revelation invites contemplation on the probable diversity characterizing Tehran's populace during that era. Nevertheless, these aerial perspectives contribute to the emergence of a homogenized portrayal of the city, eradicating the diversity of cultural identities within Iranian society, notably among Tehran's newly urban residents. They amplify a discernible

sense of authority, detachment, and perceptible distance between the observer and the observed.

The film's initial shots establish prevailing hierarchies and intertwine notions of homogeneity, which further results in the exclusion of individuals adhering to traditional lifestyles for the rest of the film. Two aspects of the voice-over are relevant in this context: the spoken language is English, and the film uses it as a literary tool for establishing a narrative. Within the film's first two minutes, while oscillating between the street and aerial shots of Tehran, the voice-over states, "With the advent of Reza Shah the Great, founder of the present Pahlavi dynasty, and the birth of the Persian industrial era, Tehran soon developed into a booming city, … the commercial, intellectual, and political axis of the nation." The voice-over implies that all contributors to Tehran's emergence as a booming city fall into specific categories, thereby limiting and homogenizing the diverse population residing in Tehran. In this, I agree with Mary Ann Doane's characterization of the voice-over, which embodies a masculine persona carrying power through "the possession of knowledge and the privileged, unquestioned activity of interpretation" (42). The voice-over suggests Tehran experienced minimal change during the 150 years of Ghajar rule but underwent significant transformation with the advent of the Pahlavis in a short span. Acknowledging the prolonged period of little change highlighted in the voice-over suggests there were likely challenges or difficulties contributing to the city's evolution, whether stemming from technological limitations or societal aspirations. However, while the voice-over narrates the historical context, the portrayal through these shots appears one-sided as it concentrates solely on the present outcome without illustrating the process. More specifically, while presenting a modernized image, it overlooks moments not only of individuals, but also of society as a whole, which purportedly endured minimal changes for many years before confronting the significant transition in Iran's history. Hamid Reza Sadr explores Iran's transformation

during the 1960s and observes the shift from an agrarian to a semi-industrial economy and the transition from a society focused on production to one emphasizing consumption. He suggests that Iran, existing as a complex network of self-contained group identities amid changing imperial boundaries, lacked a unified concept of a national state. Iran's absence of a cohesive national identity contributed to an underlying fear or apprehension about the prospect of national projections of homogeneity. He implies that the nation was deeply concerned about losing the diverse Iranian cultural identity in the midst of these changes. As he articulates, "the rural population, the urban working class, the unemployed migrant, the petty trader, and the slum-dweller remained a community set apart from those who had accepted city values" (95). Similarly, in *Tehran Today,* those groups that do not align with modernization/westernization policies or do not conform to the "axis of the nation" are rendered inconspicuous, removed, and eventually estranged.

The exclusion of citizen voices in *Tehran Today*, alongside the utilization of music to enhance its expository mode, fosters the film's homogenized portrayal of Iranian cultural identity. Expanding on Broderick Fox's elucidation of the expository mode, wherein he observes that it "masks the identity and positioning of the filmmakers," I delve into how this masking extends to the individuals showcased in *Tehran Today* (40). The scene of Tehran National Bank, highlighting Iranian national heritage and wealth, employs the sci-fi track "Unknown Danger" from the Valentino Production Music Library, an American company primarily recognized for its sound effects. The intricate details of the jewelry, whether gifted to Iran or crafted domestically, showcase patterns deeply rooted in Iranian history. However, the juxtaposition of suspenseful and ambiguous western music with these traditional elements from different periods of Iran's history estranges them. In the concluding shot, the music complements the visuals of the jewel-studded globe, emphasizing not only Iran's wealth but also accentuating the film's homogenizing efforts. This effect mirrors that of the aerial shots,

as the camera zooms out to reveal the entirety of the globe from a single detail. While the inclusion of classical and folkloric Iranian music provides an opportunity to showcase the diversity of Iranian cultural identity, the film's predominant use of western-style music, akin to Hollywood productions, tends to homogenize the Iranian population under a westernized label.

The representation of traditional segments in comparison to the film's abundant scenes depicting modernization, accompanied by western music, is notably limited. However, *Tehran Today* endeavors to integrate traditional elements by featuring a northern Iranian folklore dance performance in the film. Even so, there is an imbalance that contributes to the isolation of traditional Iranian society. The dancing shot begins with a camera panning from backstage at a television studio, moving from right to left to capture performers engaged in a dance. The visual focus extends beyond the dancers, encompassing the entirety of the production set. Consequently, the performers are not solely framed by the picture's edges but are also delimited by set elements, including trees and recording equipment, restricting their movement within defined boundaries. This layer of framing and limitation further compounds the sense of estrangement experienced by these individuals. The dance, originally rooted in a rural context, has been displaced to the capital for broadcast. An abrupt interruption occurs as the operators are revealed, suggesting the control exerted by the production team, which could symbolically extend to the control of authorities over the crew of the film and traditional segments of society. Subsequently, a second pan captures the performers exiting the frame from the backstage side, followed by a cut to a machine within an industrialized company. In contrast to the dancing scene, this image does not reveal the backstage or the TV crew, distancing itself from notions of observation and control. The return of western music accompanies this shift, resulting in a complete change in both the visuals and sounds of the industrial scenes.

Later in the film, Masjed Sepahsalar, a religious building dating to the late nineteenth century, is introduced as a theological school through voice-over narration. During this scene, the music undergoes another shift, transitioning from western woodwind sounds to the singular melody of the Ney, a traditional Iranian woodwind instrument. This musical transition parallels the visual change within the scene. Just as the shift in music moves from a multi-instrumental arrangement to the solitary Ney, the imagery mirrors this transformation. The figures depicted within the frames of this location appear profoundly isolated, starkly contrasting the bustling scenes of modern industry or populated classrooms found elsewhere in the film. Despite its expository narrative, moreover, which appears to value the long history of "ancient Persia," the scene reinforces the perception that these individuals are in the minority compared to the majority of Iranians who have embraced modernization. The aforementioned dancing scene and Masjed Sepahsalar are not the only instances showcasing Iranian traditions in the film. Yet they notably accentuate the disparities between traditional society and the intellectual elite who are presumably residing in Tehran's high-rise buildings, as depicted in the film's establishing shots.

In this section, I have scrutinized a few examples illustrating *Tehran Today*'s one-sided perspective concerning modernization, which noticeably deviates from portraying the heterogeneity of Iran in the 1960s. Throughout this analysis, I observed the estrangement of traditional segments within Iranian society. The film emphasizes a dichotomy between old and new, disregarding the nuanced in-betweenness that encapsulates the diversity of Iranian cultural identity. This omission of intermediary elements results in an incomplete representation, failing to capture the essence of Iranian society. Nichols frequently refers to "the filmmaker's engagement with the historical world" in his discussions of documentary's voice (69). Building on Nichols's argument, it becomes evident that *Tehran Today's* portrayal of typical Iranian society in the 1960s, shaped by the state and Faroughi Ghajar's

filmmaking choices, resulted in biased representations. While Iran was indeed transitioning into a modernized state, Stuart Hall's perspective on cultural identity as a process of "becoming as well as of being" offers valuable insight (225). The creative decisions in *Tehran Today* predominantly focus on the achievements of modernization, largely neglecting the diverse and dynamic everyday realities within Iranian society during the 1960s. This narrow focus leads to a singular representation of the nation's modernization, potentially eroding the rich heterogeneity of Iranian cultural identity.

## Chapter 3: Evolving Narratives: Exploring Creative Deliberation's Influence on Cultural Identity in Transitioning Times

"During the period between February 1979 and mid-1981, many politicised school and college graduates, mainly supporters of the opposition political groups, took advantage of the chaotic freedom and began to set up stalls and kiosks along the sidewalks of the main streets of the capital city. They traded intellectual merchandise such as books, newspapers and cassettes. Political vending, however, represented only a transitory phenomenon. More important were the ordinary vendors, whose main concern was to make a living."—Hamid Reza Sadr (167)

The aftermath of the Islamic Republic revolution in Iran led to a reconfiguration of societal norms, documented in films such as Hossein Torabi's *For Liberty* (1979) and Kianoush Ayari's lesser-known film, *Newcomers*. These films vividly depict the emergence of the "new social order" outlined by Hamid Reza Sadr, characterized by the collapse of central authority and its consequences (168). While I recognize the significance of Ayari's film as a representation of the revolutionary era, I contend that a nuanced analysis reveals intricacies in the film's depiction of gender dynamics. Ayari's cinematic portrayal risks endangering the diverse nature of Iranian cultural identity, particularly the identity of Iranian women and their participation in the public sphere. Regardless of the chaotic freedom of the period, the film perpetuates a male-dominated landscape within the Iranian public, challenging the notion of inclusivity suggested by the era's turbulence. Utilizing Jürgen Habermas's concept of the public sphere, I endeavor to uncover the newly transformed public

observable within *Newcomers*. Furthermore, I analyze the film's gendered narrative by drawing upon Nancy Fraser's critiques of Habermas, especially her advocacy for a more inclusive, multicentered public sphere accommodating diverse voices.

I contend that Ayari's film serves as a real-world example that aligns with Fraser's critique of Habermas, highlighting the inadequacies of Habermas's idealized public sphere. Ayari's deliberate portrayal of Iranian women through his cinematic approach, likely intended to highlight future challenges, resulted in portraying them as politically inactive citizens. I stress the significance of directly addressing systemic social inequalities, as Fraser suggests, rather than merely overlooking, or "bracketing," them, as Habermas's theory of citizens who freely gather to express their needs initially implied, even if he acknowledged the concept's limitations. In defining Habermas's public sphere, Fraser highlights the importance of open access, participatory parity, and social equality, contending that these elements serve as vital resources for delineating the boundaries of late capitalist democracy (63). Nevertheless, her critique of his work underscores the inadequacy of bracketing social inequalities, which involves setting aside differences such as birth and fortune and engaging in dialogue as if all participants were social and economic equals. Fraser argues that this approach only temporarily removes inequalities, creating barriers to participatory parity. She continues to highlight Habermas's concept of the public sphere as a theater in modern societies where political participation unfolds through talk (57). Her emphasis on participation and talk underscores the crucial role of open dialogue and discussion as fundamental aspects of political engagement within the public sphere, a lens through which I specifically analyze the gendered dynamics portrayed in Ayari's film.

*Newcomers* opens by showcasing female figures, some with hijabs and others without, actively engaged in book sales on streets or sidewalks, whether seated or standing. However, male booksellers become more prominent as the camera moves through the crowd.

This is evident in scenes dominated by male figures, which dissolve one after the other and which have audible voices, unlike female figures. The voices promote works authored by men, such as the "Iranian General Hatred Towards Marx and Marxism," Motahari's "Reasons for Inclination Toward Materialism," and Mehdi Bazargan's "Teachings on the Quran." I underline the increased presence of male booksellers and their emphasis on books authored by men to assert that these cinematic choices, irrespective of director's intention, contribute to the marginalization of women within the film. I find support for this in Victor Francis Perkins's insight about the final sequence of *High School* (1959) by Frederick Wiseman, which emphasizes unintended yet significant separation of sound from image. He states, "[I]n a film prepared for presentation to an audience, 'unintended consequences' cannot be simply unintended. Collateral effects are effects nonetheless" (484). Perkins emphasizes the potential outcomes and consequences of the separation he examines, underlining the distinct perceptual activities of the eye and ear facilitated by different technological outputs.

I highlight the mismatch between the visuals and sound when male booksellers speak. The continuous sounds of the male voices advertising books by reciting titles align with the visual portrayal of bookselling activities. However, the frequent jump cuts in the visuals suggest that the sound is not necessarily synchronized with the images being shown. Instead, it implies that the sound has been added to the visuals in post-production, creating a disconnect between the auditory and visual components despite both representing the same theme of bookselling. This discrepancy, known as acousmatic sound, is described by Michel Chion as "sounds one hears without seeing their originating cause" (71). Although the prevailing circumstances of the period may have contributed to the apparently unintentional phasing out of female figures and the predominance of men in bookselling roles, the overlapping acousmatic sounds within these scenes indicate Ayari's intentional creative decisions, which as Perkins demonstrates, have expected and unexpected consequences.

Moreover, while censorship by conservatives might explain the documentary's partiality, I cast doubt on the comprehensive influence of censorship within *Newcomers*. Tara Najd Ahmadi posits that Ayari's film is "unfinished" due to Channel One's pressure, a claim that oversimplifies the complexities and consequences of the removed content (21). She asserts that the intervention of conservative sponsors resulted in the film's suspension and ultimate incompleteness. In response to inquiries about the extent of filming, however, Ayari mentions that they used nearly all recorded material, though he is uncertain if any censorship occurred at the time (Sarrafizadeh). He specifically mentions the inclusion of a scene featuring Zahra Khanom and confirms the incorporation of his 1979 edits. Surprisingly, he notes that the scene remained untouched when the film aired on television years later. Ayari also delves into his conflicting emotions, acknowledging both enthusiasm and concerns for the future among individuals involved. As mentioned by Ayari, he initially intended to include explanatory text in the film. However, he later realized that the film effectively conveyed the message without it. The decision to omit text, along with the absence of a voice-over, serves to underscore the defining modes of the documentary as observational and reflexive, as I suggest below. It is also particularly significant when demonstrating Ayari's authority over the film, a point I also reflect on in my analysis.

Ayari shared these insights with Hamed Sarrafizadeh in Episode 175 of the *Eternity and a Day* podcast, released on January 22, 2022. Another valuable reference is Massoud Mehrabi's book *A Guide to Iranian Documentary Films: From the Beginning to 1997*, which specifies the film's length, further reinforcing its status as complete. Ahmadi's statement clearly mentions that the sponsors on Channel One expressed dissatisfaction with the film's inclusion of street crowds, and Ayari refused to cut them. This refusal is evident in the film as there are crowds within public discussions across various locations; however, as I emphasize, they are male dominated. Throughout the discussions, men are exclusively interviewed,

providing them with a platform to address a range of challenges, including wage disparities, government involvement in wage fluctuations, their dedication to the revolution, and their entitlement to rights. This serves as compelling evidence that Ayari's film is complete in terms of the director's decisions, irrespective of the challenges he may have encountered during post-production.

Chief among these decisions is the increasing estrangement of women over the duration of *Newcomers,* which extends well beyond conventional discussions of the hijab or Black Chador. While acknowledging the undeniable marginalization of enforced dress codes in post-revolution Iran, my argument emphasizes more than this overt perspective. According to Hamid Naficy, "the Regulations Governing the Exhibition of Movies, Videos, and Slides of 1982 codified and instituted veiling and modesty for the first time" (111). He outlines four overlapping phases in the evolution of veiling and hijab on and off screen, demonstrating the state's control over women within the media from the early days in the post-revolutionary period. In the first phase, titled "Women's Structured Absence (early 1980s)," Naficy discusses Sadegh Ghotbzadeh's leadership at the Voice and Vision of the Islamic Republic (VVIR), highlighting the significant suppression of women on television. This involved their exclusion from news sources and program hosting roles, accompanied by the intentional removal of images of unveiled women from both domestic and imported films. In Ayari's film, women, whether veiled or not, are present in various public settings such as Tehran's sidewalks, parks, and theatrical performances—at least, at first. The focal point is their degree of activity and dominance within these environments. However, as the film continues, women are briefly glimpsed in passing scenes on Tehran's sidewalks; their depictions are restricted, concentrating solely on their lower bodies from knees to feet, offering only a fleeting acknowledgment of their presence in the streets.

For this reason, I contend that Ayari's finished film offers insights into the gendered dynamics of the Iranian public domain and the possible future trajectory of Iranian women. I acknowledge the existence of elements suggesting incompleteness, but in my analysis, they showcase an interplay between two forms of documentary, possessing qualities that align with its observational and reflexive modes. The absence of a voice-over classifies the film as observational, emphasizing "a direct engagement with the everyday life of subjects as observed by an unobtrusive camera" (Nichols, 31). Nonetheless, Ayari's audiovisual decisions in *Newcomers*, particularly a scene featuring Zahra Khanome at the entrance of Tehran University, categorizes the film within the reflexive mode. According to Bill Nichols, this mode "increases our awareness of the constructedness of the film's representation of reality" (32). The scene in which Khanom addresses a crowd of men is a rare instance in the film where a female character speaks. Although her speech is aligned with conservative party ideologies, it is abruptly cut short and muted, accompanied by music and an obvious beeping sound, likely due to her cursing. Regardless of the reason for such editing, the result is a testament to Ayari's control over the film, particularly his portrayal of Iranian women within public settings, which may deliberately signal the state's marginalization of women but also inadvertently participate in it.

Ayari's intended estrangement extends further by aligning the presence of Iranian women with poverty and domesticity. Scenes portraying women living in slums around Tehran, where they are depicted collecting water from public faucets, serve to reinforce these associations. The slum scene follows a display of masculine dominance, as men test their pain tolerance by wiping their hands, seemingly for entertainment rather than necessity. In contrast, women in the slum are portrayed as engaging in essential daily activities, such as household chores and washing in public spaces. On one hand the scene exudes feminine authority as women gracefully navigate through slum alleys. On the other hand, Ayari

underscores their domesticity through the scene's remoteness from Tehran's distant high-rise buildings. These further highlights how females are excluded from public spaces, where they could voice their struggles. To be sure, the film also includes moments when men struggle with addiction and substance abuse in public areas. Yet, they are not solely confined to the slum; they appear in various locations, including beside city statues. In contrast, the sporadic appearance of Iranian women in the film results in only a few scenes that attempt to define their identity. One such example is the depiction of the Lalehzar theaters, renowned as Tehran Broadway and pivotal in shaping the modern theater scene in Iran. Despite the probability that the plays were predominantly attended by men, Ayari's cinematic approach amplifies this aspect. One play is wholly dominated by male characters; another involves minimal participation of female actresses. In a third play, female characters initially wear veils, yet later discard them as the performance concludes amidst the applause of the audience. Ayari's decision to retain such an abrupt exposure of the actresses is notable. Nevertheless, his choice in framing the shots and reverse shots, juxtaposing the women with the male-dominated audience, ultimately serves to redirect the focus to the men, a recurring theme present throughout the film.

With this selective representations, Ayari's film intends to foreshadow the future threats faced by Iranian women after the revolution. Yet inadvertently jeopardizes the heterogeneity of Iranian cultural identity. Initially, Ayari emphasizes the active political involvement of women. However, as the film unfolds, his cinematic choices progressively confine their roles to promoting male-authored revolutionary ideas through book sales. The initial portrayal of women as active contributors to Iran's political landscape diminishes over time, shifting towards political inactivity, often depicted by their relegation to poverty and domestic roles. While domesticity and poverty do not inherently imply inactivity, in this context, the portrayal of women in poverty and domestic settings tends to depict them as

politically inactive. The film's conclusion, showcasing only a masculine hand casting a vote, underscores Ayari's final assertion. The gender inequality, as foreseen in Ayari's film, expanded in later years, dividing Iranian society into two poles, male and female, and eventually imposing limitations on both sides, which will be discussed in the third section of my essay.

## Chapter 4: Engaging Narratives: Reimagining Iranian Cultural Identity Through Active Dialogue

"Iran since the revolution is a prime example of a country whose political and social policies had unforeseen consequences, some of them undesired by those who initiated the policies. The increase in public health and encouragement of births in the revolution's first decade brought a fall in the death rate and a population explosion of those now aged thirteen to twenty-three. This is the very group who are feeling most strongly restrictions on behavior, unemployment, and alienation from the regime and are protesting in various ways."—Nikki R. Keddie (315)

In the complex sociopolitical landscape following the Islamic revolution, Iranian society found itself grappling with internal fear, political repression, and international marginalization. I contend that Sepideh Farsi's unauthorized documentary, *Tehran Without Permission*, is enriched by her interactive dialogues, estranging homogenous understandings of post-revolutionary Iranian cultural identity inside and outside the country. In this sense, estrangement operates differently in Farsi's film compared to *Tehran Today* or *Newcomers*, which tend to overlook or alienate segments of Iranian society. Here, the term refers to challenges to common perceptions about Iranian culture within an arena where the state-media still holds power. Iranian cinema after the revolution served as an educational tool to promote Islamic values and culture within Iran, influenced by new domestic media control. Iranian directors were compelled to depict a positive image of the country, constrained by the necessity to navigate censorship and adhere to strict regulations. As a result, their productions

often deviated from presenting a balanced portrayal of Iran's intricate cultural tapestry to the viewers. Simultaneously, western productions, influenced by events such as the 1980s hostage crisis, 9/11, and President Bush's labeling of Iran as part of the "Axis of Evil," significantly shaped foreign perceptions of Iranian cultural identity in negative ways. They employed less visible methods rather than direct military actions to challenge the country and its Islamic values, as set by Iranian authorities. Consequently, the production of foreign films was perceived by the Islamic Republic as a form of cultural invasion that sought to undermine Iranian society.

Farsi's film is particularly significant at a time when alternative perspectives, such as those offered by social media, were scarce compared to mainstream media. By not obtaining permission for the production of *Tehran without Permission*, Farsi opens new possibilities for portraying the diversity of Iranian cultural identity despite state efforts at censorship. Zeydabadi-Nejad highlights the complexity surrounding the depiction of Iran in film due to the Iranian practice of maintaining clear distinctions between private and public, boundaries that also extend to divisions between inside and outside the country (376). By contrast, Ali Madanipour explores the dynamics of public and private spaces, suggesting that individuals actively shape a social environment by balancing concealment and exposure (205). My analysis of Farsi's dialogic approach challenges this rigid dichotomy, fostering an intimacy that redefines the understanding of Iranian identity through the perspectives shared during her discussions. Regardless of the setting, Farsi's candid and intimate conversations contribute to the documentary's heterogeneity and the reveal complexities within Iranian society.

*In Tehran Without Permission,* women navigate societal limits, including gender segregation, yet unlike the women in my analysis of *Newcomers,* the subjects of Farsi's documentary persist in the face of these challenges. Farsi engages in discussions with women in public settings such as mass transport, and semi-public spaces like women's hair salons.

The latter, in particular, are valuable for challenging rigid distinctions between public and private, since locations like hair salons are considered public, yet since the revolution, men typically cannot enter them. In the hair salon, a notable moment occurs when Farsi asks to see the tattoo on the back of a nail artist. This exposure of the female body in a documentary film is significant, facilitated by Farsi's intimately persistent questioning. Another discussion in the same place provides viewers with insights into the challenges women face due to dress codes and situations where they may be targeted by the so-called morality police. While Farsi did capture scenes with such officers, her dialogues are more informative. In this instance, it is through her dialogue with the pedicurist that the audience learns about how, when, and where Iranian women can avoid trouble with the morality police. Later, Farsi patiently listens to a young woman in a taxi who explains how, owing to the dress code, Iranian women are monitored, captured, and forced to sign a commitment form by the morality police. The discussion becomes more pointed when, in the next few minutes, Farsi's camera records the taxi driver conservatively discussing how girls behave improperly in public. Having two different sides talk about the issues portrays the deep-rooted problem of patriarchy within Iranian society. In either scenario, recording the male driver or the female passenger would have not been possible with official permission. Furthermore, their voices would have remained unheard if Farsi had not initiated a conversation with them. It is through Farsi's engagement in dialogues in public and private spaces that the issue of gender segregation as a form of marginalization is brought to the forefront.

Farsi continues this work in her dialogues with children, which challenge the long-standing depictions of children in Iranian cinema. Such images are particularly prevalent in Iranian Poetic Realism, a movement that garnered attention from western audiences after the revolution. Zeydabadi-Nejad notes how films in this category are often associated with humanism and neorealism, reminiscent of traditions in French and Italian cinema. He

explains that Iranian Poetic Realist films “are mainly made with non-professional actors, are filmed on location rather than in studios, contain a number of long takes, blur the boundary between documentary and fiction, and many of their narratives are open ended” (380). They also rely on representations of children. Hamid Reza Sadr offers insights into this phenomenon by implying that Iranian authorities utilized children to portray a humane image of Iran and gain recognition at western film festivals. More specifically, "[c]hildren have been cast in Iranian films as majestic statues of men and women, and sometimes as everyone’s alter egos” (228). Because *Tehran without Permission* operates independently from governmental authority, it remains comparatively free from political manipulation and thereby departs from traditional portrayals of Iranian children.

Farsi’s depictions of child labor are exemplative in this context. Unlike the stereotypical presentations in Iranian narrative cinema, they do not supply reasons for their labor. Instead, the only information viewers receive is through Farsi’s dialogues with the children engaged in actual labor, which aligns with Nikki R. Keddie’s statement in regard to the population explosion and intensifies the issues of child labor in Iran. We observe as much in scenes depicting a six-year-old child distributing political campaign advertisements in the streets of Tehran as well as those featuring children who work at a newspaper kiosk. Farsi encounters the first child on a crowded sidewalk. Upon receiving a campaign advertisement from the boy, she inquires about his age and whether or not he is being paid for his work. Additionally, Farsi interacts with the boys at the newspaper kiosk, who provide viewers with information about their education. Of the two boys, one manages to attend classes in summer, while the other has already left school. Further instances show kids selling perfume and street players performing accordions. Unlike the other children, Farsi does not engage in dialogue with the street players, as the viewers can already hear them singing a famous Iranian pop song banned in Iran. Such direct and indirect dialogues reject the substitution of children into

other roles, as often seen in post-revolution Iranian narrative cinema. Instead, Farsi's film focuses exclusively on the lived experiences of children.

Throughout *Tehran without Permission,* Farsi showcases a diverse range of people, some of whom listen to banned songs sold on the streets of Tehran and others who purchase western soundtracks, like the one for Stanley Kubrick's *Eyes Wide Shut,* from local bookstores. Traditional segments of society are also depicted in places of worship such as Mosques, Imamzadehs, or Hosseiniyehs, yet unlike *Tehran Today,* Farsi's documentary does not estrange this part of society by depicting them as isolated. Rather, as Farsi enters into various holy places or ceremonies associated with Shiism, they are depicted as bustling with people engaged in prayer and religious observance. Farsi also juxtaposes the gender segregation observed in holy places and public settings with people dancing at underground parties, something strictly prohibited by the Islamic Republic. Other moments contrast individuals engaging in masculinized and conservative conversations with men and women who courageously delve into political discussions and advocate for freedom despite the constraints on freedom of speech in Iran. Time and again, Farsi's film moves fluidly between opposites, linking them all through the control and pressure exerted by the Islamic Republic.

Farsi's film stands, for this reason, as a valuable resource, estranging propagandist depictions that have shaped perceptions of Iranian cultural identity both domestically and internationally. Hamid Naficy calls this shaping "mediawork," which he elucidates through an examination of the intricate interplay between politics and cinema in Iran and its broader context (271). His exploration describes film and media as instruments for political agendas by a range of sponsors, encompassing the Islamic Republic, the United States, Iranian dissidents, and exiles. The potency of Farsi's film lies in this context, particularly her innovative use of her phone to circumvent official permissions, engage individuals in candid dialogues, and showcase the diversity of Iranian cultural identity. In this sense, Farsi does not

"speak about" the people in her film; she "speaks nearby" in Trinh T. Minh-ha's sense of this term, which highlights their shared characteristics and leverages closures toward new avenues of exploration. For Trinh, speaking nearby implies "a speaking that does not objectify, does not point to an object as if it is distant from the speaking subject or absent from the speaking place" (87). The result gives *Tehran without Permission* a distinctive "voice" in accordance with Bill Nichols's definition, which emphasizes the complexity of documentary filmmaking and encourages critical engagement. Farsi's documentary presents an Iranian society as a spectrum of traditional and western influences, coexisting within the same sociopolitical landscape, something notable for a film produced before the widespread use of phone-based social media. Naficy describes "internet cinema" as a global platform empowering Iranian dissidents, both domestically and abroad (271). Farsi suggests as much with her portrayal of Green Movement protests, which reveal an alternative image of Iranian society to the world years after the revolution.

As this suggests, the estrangement aroused by Farsi's film stems from her nuanced representations of a variety of Iranians, which makes cultural identity in *Tehran without Permission* more inclusive than the other documentaries I have discussed in this thesis. According to Stuart Hall, there exist at least two approaches to defining cultural identity: one revolves around the concept of "one people," emphasizing shared experiences and similarities, while the other encompasses both similarities and differences, often described by Hall as "since history has intervened - what we have become" (225). Like the latter, Farsi's film highlights diverse aspects of Iranian society by comprehensively capturing images of contrasting elements, such as public and private, men and women, and conservatives and reformists within the country. Despite their differences, these citizens are integral parts of Iranian society. While Iranian and western mainstream media often depict Iranian cultural identity with varying degrees of homogeneity, Farsi's film challenges uniform notions of an

ideal Islamic state or an unknown and unstable nation. By addressing societal issues such as child labor, gender segregation, unemployment, political repression, and more, *Tehran without Permission* discloses the multifaceted nature of Iranian cultural identity, which extends beyond the modernization and Islamization that Iran has undergone.

## Conclusion

In this thesis, I have analyzed instances of estrangement within Iranian society as depicted in three Iranian-made documentaries, each produced under different political circumstances. Throughout my analysis, I have aimed to defend a heterogeneous understanding of Iranian cultural identity by tracing the aesthetic and political work of documentary filmmakers under the state's direct or indirect authority.

In the case of *Tehran Today*, I demonstrated how a state-sponsored documentary utilized audiovisual editing, such as voice-over and aerial shots, to homogenize Iranian society, isolate traditional segments, and present Iran as a modern state. Moving on to an analysis of *Newcomers* (1979), I drew upon Nancy Fraser's critique of Jürgen Habermas's public sphere to explore the relative absence of women in immediate post-revolutionary depictions of the Iranian public sphere. By delving into the film's use of observational and reflexive documentary modes, I highlighted both the intentional and unintentional effects of the filmmaker's creative decisions, particularly regarding his approach to gender segregation, which inadvertently contributed to the estrangement of Iranian women within the narrative. Lastly, in *Tehran Without Permission* (2009), I explored the power of engaging in dialogues with individuals in the film despite the shadows of fear and repression in a more recent post-revolutionary moment. Through this work, I revealed how the filmmaker's act of "speaking nearby" people in the film uncovered aspects of Iranian society that diverge from media portrayals of Iranian cultural identity, whether Iranian or western.

Iran, as a nation, encompasses a diverse population. The true nature of its people is varied in terms of ethnicity, religion, and race. I believe that documentary films have the power to unveil this rich tapestry of Iranian society. I hope this research contributes to filling

the gap in the study of Iranian documentary films compared to the extensive analysis of its post-revolutionary narrative cinema.

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