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Azadeh Fatehrad

Royal College of Art, London, United Kingdom

This paper would investigate the Moving Image Archive at the Cinema Museum in Tehran to highlight the importance of new media in Iran after the 1930s and the changes that were brought about by the birth of cinema in the existing geopolitical conditions. It would look very closely at the first silent film made in Iran titled *Haji Agha, the Cinema Actor* (1933) by Ovanes Ohanian. While reflecting on the socio-political relation of the film to its era, this paper would also bring to attention the process of filmmaking and screening in 1930s Iran—the production and restoration of footage, posters and publicity for the film, and the screening venue. The cinema in question used to be called *TamashaKhaneh* when it was simply a projection room in Tehran where people would keenly take their seats to view the same film over and over again in some cases. The author would investigate the advent of cinema as a foreign concept in Iranian life and try to reflect upon the way in which it has been gradually adopted as a national treasure over the years. *Haji Agha, the Cinema Actor* is one of the most important reflections of the social transition that has occurred in Iranian history. Here, through the hundred-minute black and white footage, Ohanian depicts the tense political climate following the coup of Mossadegh, as well as the ban on traditional clothing during the last monarchy of Iran; at the same time, the film represents tradition and modernity as two supposedly opposite stances that, in fact, complemented each other in this era. The title combines *Haji Agha*, a religious man who has visited mecca, with the English words *the Cinema Actor*, to further express the complementary relation between old and new. Ohanian very professionally depicts the role of family as a core part of the religious boundaries for men and women that unfold throughout the film due to their encounter with cinema and filmmaking. He uses issues like sex and taboo to push the boundaries and map a certain cultural modernity within Iranian society.

Keywords: gender representation, history of moving image, archive, Iran early 20th century

Introduction

The act of covering has been an interesting and noticeable feature in the history of Iran. Interestingly, the compulsory wearing of the veil to hide the hair and body of women has been introduced and repealed many times throughout Iran's history, beginning with Reza Shah's 1936 ban on the headscarf and chador as part of his secularising project (Razi, 1956, 659-664). This position is, of course, in stark contrast to what occurred some 40 years later when, following the 1979 Revolution, Ruhollah Khomeini reversed this decision and decreed that women should now cover their heads. During the twentieth century in Iran, the meaning of *hijab* went through several transformations. Unveiled women symbolised the secular and westernised regime of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi. 'Wrapped in a black chador', these women became icons of the Islamic Revolution and, two

decades later, their more relaxed, colourful and vibrant *hijabs* became the symbol of a new era of progress and reform in the Islamic Republic.

In both times, 1936 and 1979 there is a similar structure involve where an enforcement / violence action is been taken towards women. Each of these decision, whether the Act of Unveiling (1936) or the Act of Veiling (1979) has effected the appearance of women in Iran public spaces and ultimately has effectively changed the way women were represented in cinema/ on the screen.

The transformation of women during these era and the socio-cultural settings followed by each decisions has captured by films / cinema through various movies and documentary. For instance *Haji Agha, The Cinema Actor* by Ovanes Ohanian is one of the examples which shows unveiled women in the screen even before the decision of banning the hijab in 1936. This would shed a light on social history of Iran and the individual movements during this era who were encouraging unveiling before the support of the official power (Reza shah). On the other and there were many individual women donning their veil as protest against representation of women in commercial *Farsi films* during the second Pahlavi regime around 1978-9. This action was also prior to the decision of covering which was announced by state 1979.

Looking at the history of moving image in Iran and the representation of women on the screen one can notice the importance of such a 'device' (cinema and film industry) on study of feminist history of Iran. the image of women on the screen and its sociopolitical position in the society are strongly interconnected and reflected in each era through films and visual documentations.

Historical Description of The Era—Tense Political Climate

The 1930s are regarded as one of the most chaotic social and political times in Iran. The ruling autocratic monarchy under the reign of Reza Shah Pahlavi sought to modernise society in many ways, by building new roads, railways, and schools, for instance, all with the aim of catching up with Iran's European counterparts.

The Constitutional Revolution in 1906-11, as Hamid Naficy notes, was the first democratic revolution in the Middle East, with objectives of representative government, educational reform, and modernisation chief among the aims of the constitutionalists (Naficy, 2011, p. 27). It was a great time for women's awakening. Indeed, women's education was seen as a critical part of reforms that would pave the way for the creation and development of a modern Iran (Naficy, 2011, p. viii). It was also during this era when the middle and upper classes increasingly started to visit Europe. These visits had many benefits in shifting people's perspective and advancing the modern lifestyle in Iran.

Reza Shah's numerous development projects were essentially aimed at transforming Iran into an industrial, urbanised country. Public education progressed rapidly, and new social classes—a professional middle class and an industrial working class—had emerged by the end of the 1930s.

Reza Shah's main political challenge was Iran's deep involvement with Britain and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR; formed from the Russian Empire in 1922). In fact, even though he attempted to reduce this involvement and establish a more independent society for Iran, Britain remained strongly involved in the economic and political progress of the country and, in fact, controlled all of Iran's oil resources through its ownership of the Anglo-Persian Oil Company.

By the mid-1930s, Reza Shah's dictatorial style of rule was causing significant dissatisfaction in Iran, particularly among the religious and intellectual elites. This era is also significant for the remarkable action that Reza Shah took in 1936, when he decreed, through the Act of Unveiling, that women would be forced to wear a

skirt and blouse in the street rather than the previous full covering. This is often referred to as the most violent moment in the history of Iran in terms of women. Following Reza Shah's decree, any woman found covered in public was to be forcibly uncovered. One must remember that for many years previously, women had been covered; this sudden change was perceived by some as an act of violence against women. Indeed, feminists like Badr-el-Molok Bamdad (1936) noted the verbal and physical harassment that veiled women were subjected to as Reza Shah's soldiers forcibly unveiled them. As a result, the Unveiling Act ultimately ensured that women who had spent their entire lives wearing the veil would remain in the private confines of their homes since, for them, walking the street unveiled was tantamount to walking the street naked (Bamdad, 1980). Nevertheless, despite the level of violence and aggression surrounding the Act of Unveiling, the dominant feminist response at the time was celebratory.

In this new highly vulnerable socio-political climate in Iran, cinema was, at first, viewed as deeply controversial, although it could, in fact, offer an accurate record of the geopolitical changes taking place during this time in Iranian history.

First Silent Fiction Film Made in Iran in 1933 Titled *Haji Agha, The Cinema Actor* by Ovanes Ohanian

The history of Iranian cinema dates back to the Great October Socialist Revolution in Russia in 1917 when many Russian people emigrated to Iran. Some of them happened to have a film background. Among them was Ovanes Ohanian, a young Armenian-Iranian, who had spent most of his life in Russia and had studied cinema at The Cinema Akademi of Moscow. From the very beginning, Ohanian realised that making films without a professional cast and crew was going to be next to impossible. As such, he established a film school called Parvareshgahe Artistiye Cinema (The Cinema Artist Educational Centre) to train young actors and actresses so that he could then use them in his films. Emily Jane O'Dell notes that, since the general attitude of the people was that cinema would never develop into a true artform and/or recognised profession. The Cinema Artist Educational Centre attracted only 16 students and two instructors, Said Naficy and Ohanian himself. Nevertheless, this marked the birth of cinema in Iran and Ohanian subsequently started to write scripts and collaborate with his students (actors) on films. As previously mentioned, cinema was somewhat controversial, particularly during the heightened political climate in Tehran at the time; Hamid Reza Sadr notes this reaction to Ohanian's actions in his book *Iranian Cinema: A Political History* (Sadr, 2006, p. 25).

Haji Agha, the Cinema Actor is probably Ohanian's best known work during the time. It was, in fact, the first Iranian fictional feature film (Naficy, 2011, p. 105) captured in 35mm. Through the hundred-minute black and white footage, Ohanian presents tradition and modernity as two supposedly opposite stances that, in fact, complemented each other in this era. The title combines *Haji Agha*, a religious man who has visited mecca, with the English words *the Cinema Actor*, to further express the complementary relation between old and new. Given that religious and cultural restrictions are strongly rooted in Iranian society, *Haji Agha* is represented as a deeply religious man who is against cinema and new technology and actually sees the two as negatively affecting society and religious affairs.

The comedy is narrated by a director, played by Ohanian himself, who is looking for a subject for his film when someone suggests that he secretly film *Haji Agha*, who is a wealthy religious man that frowns upon cinema. *Agha's* daughter, son-in-law, and servant all help the director (Ohanian) with his film (Jane O'Dell, 2013).

During the filming, Agha's watch suddenly becomes lost, and he suspects his servant. Agha and his son-in-law start chasing the servant. After many adventures trying to find the watch, Agha is invited to the Pars Café in LalehZar and, at that moment, he sees his image on the screen. He is shocked by the quality of the film and becomes fascinated by the way in which the footage is presented. There is a slogan at the end of the film which reads that "*cinema is one of the most important tools for public education*" and here is when Agha gives his complete approval to cinema. In other words, tradition and modernity meet and, for the first time, the rigid religious culture of Iran gives a warm embrace to cinema.

The silent film *Haji Agha, the Cinema Actor* communicates with the viewer through filmed footage as well as text that serves to narrate the story. The text is provided in Farsi, French, and Russian, something which will be discussed further in this paper.

Haji Agha, the Cinema Actor unfolds through an interesting combination of scenes and events which touch upon many traditional beliefs of Iranians as well as their domestic life. For instance, in one scene (image above), Haji Agha's daughter, Parvin, played by Asia Qostanian, enters the frame, a loose veil over her head. Even though Agha is the girl's father and does not need to cover herself in front of him, she does so anyway as a deep sign of respect to him.

Parvin sits down next to Agha while he smokes a waterpipe and attends to some paperwork. Parvin starts to speak with her father and asks his permission to become a film actress. This is a shocking moment when the peaceful mood instantly changes and it is as if a sudden fire takes over Agha's body; he becomes visibly upset and starts to shout and throw things at his daughter. Parvin tries to escape as her father loses control.

Ohanian very successfully depicts the role of family as a core part of the religious boundaries for men and women in Iran that unfold throughout the film due to their encounter with cinema and filmmaking. Ohanian points to family and religion as the main core resistance to modernity, which is a real testament to transition in Iranian history.

Through *Haji Agha, the Cinema Actor*, Ohanian presents a taboo and an unbearable context of desire for the religious traditional culture of Iran. For instance, in one scene about half-way through the film at minute 55 (see Figure 1), Haji Agha is invited to view a performance piece by his daughter, Parvin. The performance is accompanied by jazz music and Parvin dances energetically and lavishly to it with her husband. The camera shows that Agha is uncomfortable witnessing this, as music and dancing were deemed unreligious.

However, Parvin is Agha's daughter and watching her is, therefore, not as great a sin as watching another unrelated woman might be. Thus, by transitioning smoothly into the dance scene, it is presented as something fairly acceptable, although Agha still feels some obvious discomfort. He is a traditional man who is seen wearing the *Reza Hat* (traditional hat), which was a symbol of allegiance to the monarchy under Reza Shah's reign. We can see that Ohanian uses sex and taboo to push the boundaries and map a certain cultural modernity within Iranian society.

It is interesting to note that, in August 1927, Iranian men were required by law to replace their Iranian-style hats and turbans with a new hat called Pahlavi, based on the French military Kepi. The images (see Figures 2 and 3) below show examples of the hats and their enforcement at a boy's school. Haji Agha wears the same hat to show his respect for the new law.

This clash of old and new, as one can see in this scene through the shocking presentation of sexuality, dance, and taboo, was a major theme in Iranian society under Reza Shah's rule. There was a harsh and forced transition from old to new, where modernity was essentially thrust upon the traditional society of Iran.



Figure 1. Performance and Jazz scene.



<p>گول نخورید اصل پاناما را فقط برادران محمد زاده (لاله زار) وارد نموده است.</p> <p>۱۳۰۶ - ۱۳۱۱</p>		
<p>کلاه زیبا لباس زیبا لازم دارد</p> <p>آقایانی که بخواهند از کلاه زیبای پهلوی کلاه استفاده نمایند مراجعه به نمایندگی آخوند لاله زار، سوره و لاله های لاله - پالتو های پارکی و شمی میزون Demi Saison عالی ساخته جدیداً وارد شده خریداری نمایند پس از بوییدن و بلافاصله قیمت تصدقی خواهند داد که چه قدرتی به آبان عظیم شده است. نشره اعلان ۱۳۲۱</p>	<p>آقایان محترم را بتاریت</p> <p>سری دوم کلاههای تمام له سانه تابوری ورود تا تمام نطقه منه فرماید. تابوری نشره اعلان-۱۳۲۳</p>	<p>کلاههای تمام له</p> <p>آخرین مد که انتشار داشته داشته است نایق فردی میسرده گل بهار ناصریه نشره اعلان ۱۳۲۴</p>
<p>(مغازة بن زور)</p> <p>برای لباس های سری گرانوار (پارسی) و متعلقات ساخته برای ویرایش به نظارت بن زور درجوع فرماید و نیز ششم بند و کمر بند و چوبزبانهای ابریشمی سیاه ساتنهای گرانوار و... نشره اعلان ۱۳۰۲</p>	<p>کلاه تمام له</p> <p>پنجاه ریال که از فرقی نشره اعلان ۱۳۱۱</p>	<p>شایو</p> <p>که فارسی آن کلاه تمام له است بطوریکه بسیار برای مشهور بوده و در دهه زنده ماند برود چنانکه فرانسوی و هم و قزاقان کلاه اینها (فرمانده کلاه) (Cumblygato) در دهه بسیار مناسب بود چنانکه آقایان میفرماید خواهد بود چنانکه آریه به تمام له کلاه تمام له چینی فرماید نشره اعلان ۱۳۱۶</p>

Figure 2. Promotion of the Pahlavi hat.

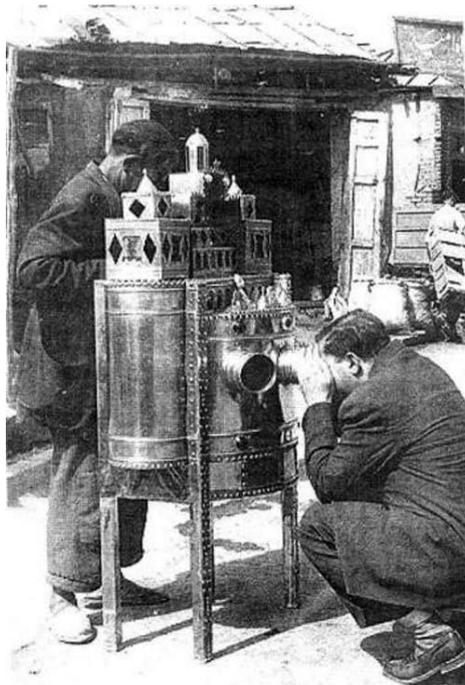


Figure 3. Pahlavi hat and dress code at an elementary school.¹

One of the incredible things that Ohanian has done with his film is show Iranian culture and society to Iranians themselves. Their beliefs, their understandings, their struggles, and their difficult transition into a new lifestyle, are all purposefully depicted.

In the film, family is presented as the main obstacle to progress and modernity. Islamic beliefs and traditional restrictions that had become deeply rooted in people's minds and were at the centre of family and societal life were briefly eroded after education increased and thinking became more progressive following the Constitutional Revolution in 1911.

The Birth of Cinema in Iran



Iranian Historical Photographs Gallery : www.foxman.com

Figure 4. ShahreFarang (European City).

¹ Retrieved from <http://shahrefarang.com/en>.

Cinema came to Iran as a foreign concept and was transformed into a national treasure over the years. The story of moving image in Iran started with *ShahreFarang (European City)*, which was a large brass bound travelling peep show box on legs. Looking through one of the three viewers with thick lenses would allow one to see western pictures of famous landmarks, such as the Eiffel Tower, or colourful and amusing ceremonies (Rubin, Soo, & Chaturvedi, 2001, p. 212). It was through *Shahre Farang* that people could thus enter the new world of modern Europeans.

The first state cinematographer was appointed by Reza Shah to capture his official visits, in the name of progress and modernity. The first Iranian professional cinematographer and third Iranian cameraman was Khanbabakhan Motazed² (1892-1977); he was an Iranian electromechanical engineering student and brought back from Paris a 35mm Gaumont camera, some raw stock, film processing chemicals and a projector. At first, he experimented with films for private viewing featuring his family members and friends, which is similar to the French silent film that predated this called *Roundhay Garden Scene* by Louis Le Prince (1888). Later, by order of the Minister of Defence, Motazedi became involved in filming the various ceremonies at the Court of Reza Shah (Sadr, 2006, p. 25).

There was also an Iranian silent documentary film produced during the same period called *Grass: A Nation's Battle for Life* (1925). Produced and directed by Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack and written by Richard Carver and Terry Ramsaye, it follows a branch of the Bakhtiari tribe of Persia (Iran today) as they and their herds make their seasonal journey to better pastures (Sadr, 2006, p. 25). This is one of the earliest ethnographic documentary films.



Figure 5. *TamashaKhaneh* restaged at the Museum Cinema in Tehran.

HajiAgha, the Cinema Actor was the second silent film by Ohanian that was narrated and captioned as a fictional feature film. The screening of this film took place in a small projector room called *TamashaKhaneh*.

² Hamid Naficy notes that the first Iranian cameraman was Mirza Ebrahim Khan Akkasbashi Sani al-Saltaneh (1874-1915), who was hired by the Court of Naser-al-Din Shah Qajar. Footage of those films can be viewed at the Mehrdad Zahedian "Lost Reels", produced in 2004 (Naficy, 2011, p. 44).

The words *TamashaKhaneh*, indeed, refer to a kind of screening room, which could be indoors or outdoors. In this case, it was a small room containing a few rows of seats where visitors could sit and watch a film. The technician operating the projector was called an *Aparatchi*. Since only one film was shown at a time and very infrequently changed, people would watch the same one over and over again. *TamashaKhaneh* has been reconstructed at the Museum of Cinema in Tehran, as can be seen in the image below, to serve as a historical reference or record of the beginning of cinema in Iran. Promotion of films during this era (1930s) was limited to printed posters, mainly 21 × 29 cm black and white. In the images below (see Figure 6), one can see examples of advertising for two of Ohanian's films; the first is for *Haji Agha, the Cinema Actor*, and the second for *Abi and Rabi*. The text is presented in the Farsi language accompanied by a single image depicting the upcoming event. A few years later, there were posters presented in three languages: Farsi, French, and Russian.



Figure 6. Text and image in *Haji Agha, The Cinema Actor*.

One of the most interesting elements in *Haji Agha* is the use of text. In films during this era, *intertitle* (titles) was always used to narrate story points, present key dialogue and sometimes comment on the action for the cinema audience. In *Haji Agha*, however, *intertitle* goes further than this and is even used to introduce characters; for instance, when we see Parvin for the first time, the text reads, “*Parvin, Haji Agha's Daughter*”. Significantly, the text is displayed in three languages: Farsi, French, and Russian. The black screen would present the white handwritten text in one language after another.

The ground-breaking film was an attempt to establish a connection between new media and conservative Iranian culture. Even though it was not successful commercially, it did much to familiarise Iranian culture with cinema. The intriguing text at the end of the film reinforces this purpose, reading “*cinema is one of the most important tools for public education*”. Ohanian here tries to win over the traditional Iranian mind by presenting cinema as a new tool to facilitate learning. His approach worked because, eventually, cinema became a national treasure and continues to be an important part of society today.

People gradually came to consider cinemas as a representation of a new modern state, a public space unregulated by government. For this reason, about 40 years later, shortly before the 1979 Iranian Revolution, people actually set fire to cinemas, as well as banks and pubs/bars, in an attempt to fight against the state and stop the spread of western culture in Iran. Cinema thus became an important symbol for modernity and progress under Reza Shah's reign.

Haji Agha, the Cinema Actor is filmed in 35mm and the only still image/photograph that appears in the production is that of Haji Agha's lover, who is actually the young daughter of a neighbour. This is interesting to me as I am focused on the history of image making in Iran and how it differs from that of the West. For Iranians, visual depiction and imagination started from the illustration of poems. The poetic text was the base of the narration and the accompanying illustrations were additional ways of depicting or reinforcing the meaning of the poem; in this way, the images set the scenery while the words told the story. Poetry and the poetic depiction of a scene thus complemented the birth of image making in Iranian cinema and created a region-specific context. This is because the cinema of the West, say French cinema, for instance, started from the art of photography, where an image was later developed into a film to tell a narrative or story. This different cultural-historical context, where image making entered the two cultures through poetry and photography respectively, set the development of cinema in the two regions along a different path. Even though Iranian cinema has learnt a lot and taken a great deal of inspiration from French cinema, the two had vastly different beginnings and vary greatly to this day.

In one of Iranian filmmaker Abbas Kiarostami's works called *Shirin* (2008), the historical background of the Iranian imagination is vividly depicted. The film is an epic and nostalgic history of Iranian poetry dating back to the 12th century. The story revolves around two lovers who have difficulty reaching one another and depicts their passionate attempts to reunite and be together. The audience's imagination plays a key role in the film, as the story of the two lovers is never actually shown. Instead, the viewer sees the faces of women sitting in a cinema; the women are watching the film about the two lovers. The viewer can hear the voices of the actors in the film and sound effects such as the galloping of horses. The screen is at no point visible, but one gets a good sense of the action from these sounds and from the expressions on the women's faces. This kind of minimalist viewing experience refers to the beginnings of image making where poetry and accompanying illustrations provided a narrative or story.

Here the next stage of my research would take me to further study by raising the question, how was such an avant-garde work followed or developed in Iranian filmmaking? Further, is there any example of a current film which portrays a collective social concern by combining image and language?

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