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## From Imaginary Utopia to Real Dystopia in Iranian Cinema\*

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### Abstract

**Problem statement:** The history of cinema exhibits numerous examples of filmmakers striving to critique and transform their societies by making films in a variety of genres in an attempt to realize their personal vision of utopia. Most proved, however, to be precarious and inconsistent on this quest, thereby turning their utopia into a dystopia and depicting it as such. Iranian cinema, too, has trodden this path and produced similar works. Imagination, illusionism, fatalism, disbelief, and Irreligion are the main constituents of dystopias and Iran's globally renowned cinema has long been a showcase for subjects fundamentally shaped by these elements.

**Research objective:** This study examines the notion of idealism in Iranian cinema, with the applied objective of analyzing and explicating the manner and the processes in which Iranian filmmakers diverged from the path leading to their – and their audience's – aspired utopia and only created an unwanted dystopia through various historical periods.

**Research method:** The study was conducted using a qualitative research method with a historical-analytic approach. The data were collected through library resources, watching films, a historical comparison of Iranian cinema, and interviews.

**Conclusion:** The results indicate that, through all the historical periods since its inception, Iranian cinema has always tended toward dystopias.

**Keywords:** *Utopia, Dystopia, Iranian Cinema, Cynicism, Fatalism, Disbelief, Irreligion.*

### Introduction and Statement of the Problem

Five years after its birth, and much earlier than many other elements and achievements of the modern world, cinema was imported into Iran

by Qajar kings. *Dokhtar-e Lor* (Lor Girl - 1933), the first Iranian sound film, was made only a few years after *Lights of New York* (1928), the first 'all-talking' American film. This early entrance would represent a turning point in the history of the art in Iran, exhibiting more progressiveness in this regard in comparison with many Asian and European countries. Initially, cinema functioned as a source

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of entertainment for Qajar kings and courtiers, but it gradually made its way outside the royal palace and found a special place among the people. Politicians, artists and Iranians in general are well aware of the features and significance of film art, a fact that has given rise to a diverse set of domestic festivals and been regularly reaffirmed by the countless international awards and honors Iranian films have won. Still, over the course of the different historical periods, Iranian cinema may be said to have stopped trying to attract the attention of the domestic audience and policy-makers, and the filmmakers, consciously or otherwise, have deviated from the path leading to their original goal. Therefore, the chief objective of this study is to trace and analyze the way Iranian cinema, as a whole, relinquished the utopian themes it initially treasured and began to favor the depiction of dystopian worlds instead throughout its history.

### Research Questions

1. Has the deviation toward dystopian themes been solely the doing of independent filmmakers or does the state-backed cinema share the blame?
2. Have Iranian films from all genres tended toward dystopian themes, or is this deviation exclusive to a specific genre?

### Research Hypothesis

It seems that Iranian cinema, although by varying degrees of impressionability, has been influenced and informed by dystopian themes throughout all its periods.

### Research Background

Numerous books, studies and essays have been published on the history of Iranian cinema, with *The History of Iranian Cinema* by Masoud Mehrabi and *A Social History of Iranian Cinema* (in four volumes) by Hamid Nafisy (translated by Mohammad Shahba) being prime examples. However, to the best of this author's knowledge, the subject of this study has not been examined in any other work. Therefore, the present study may be considered a fresh and original work.

### Significance of the Study

It is common knowledge that Iranian films hold a special place in world cinema. However, Iranian cinema suffers from multiple shortcomings which this study, it is hoped, may serve to eliminate and help it progress even further. Apart from the criticisms and reviews written by journalists, film art in Iran has long been let down by a lack of sound academic research. By recognizing the significance of this problem and addressing it, this study aims to investigate and analyze the aforementioned deviation from an idealistic cinema and its deterioration into the ruin it currently is.

### Research Method

The research method in this study is qualitative with an analytical-descriptive approach. The documents used in the study included information and evidence-based studies as well as research works relevant to the subject of the present study, for which the author engaged in a source routing process and surveying the existing literature. Additionally, interviews were conducted to collect further data on the subject. It must be noted that interviews constitute one of the most fundamental data collection methods available. "Interview is a one-on-one conversation which is commenced by the interviewer with the purpose of acquiring information relevant to the research at hand where the interviewer focuses on the subjects that he needs to achieve the objectives of his research" (Delavar, 2005, 156).

To conduct interviews for this study, first, a list of 80 practitioners in the fields of cinema and other media was prepared which included university professors, graduates, students, and professional film crew members with various academic degrees. The author visited the selected individuals in person, conducted the conversation-based interviews, and recorded the answers with the interviewees' consent. The provided answers contained knowledge and information acquired by experience and academic studies and the interviewer did not attempt to lead the interviewees toward a specific direction or influence the answers.

Next, based on the common themes among the answers and the features widely attributed to utopias and dystopias, a questionnaire was developed and sent to 60 of the interviewees who had seemed particularly enthusiastic about the project.

**Theoretical Framework**

The philosophical and anthropological achievements of the 19th century turned mankind’s search for utopia into a duopoly as a result of the emergence of Marxism and the dominance of Sigmund Freud’s theory of the precedence of desire gratification (Freud, 1954, 143-153). The supporters of the former, a generation influenced by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, shared the belief of their predecessors i.e. the social reformers following Jean-Jacque Rousseau, in giving great weight to the construction of a society purged from evils such as injustice and discrimination as a precursor to the attainment of their envisioned utopia. The required underlying conditions for such a utopia are: 1) the centrality of ideology, 2) inflexible social discipline and elimination of unambiguity, 3) establishing the rule of law and lawfulness, 4) structuration at any cost. It is obvious that such a mechanism prevents and suppresses fearless imaginations from coming into existence in the future (Marx & Engels, 1964, 43). Technology must, above everything else, be employed with the purpose of preserving the society’s stability and the bureaucracy’s efficiency in order to promote justice and implement a powerful social supervision model

which, in turn, guarantees the society’s security and eradication of difficulties.

The second group, mostly comprising individualists and humanists, rejected the intrinsic fatalism of socialist schools of thought and put the emphasis on honoring human freedoms and elimination of all inhibitions and constraining mechanisms. They posited the following as the pre-conditions of their version of utopia as these elements ensure the sustained growth of a society and propel it toward to a state of perfection: 1) Precedence of the individual man, 2) mental health of individuals, 3) promoting freedom, 4) intellectual and creative excellence, 5) paving every individual’s way toward the gratification of their desires (Jameson, 2005, 89-282).

Rothstein (2003) states that the principles and the collective inclination of a society toward perfection constitute the foundation of a utopia’s structure: “Utopia stands outside of history. It is the society’s dream image. But it can be reached only by breaking the continuity of history. Any attempt to really create a utopia is necessarily revolutionary. The manners, morals, and convictions of the past have to be cast aside. The realization of a utopia requires destruction” (Rothstein, 2003, 8).

Cinema is a double-edged sword that helps us see what we may not otherwise be able to; it does, on the other hand, also tell us what to see and how to see it (Stevens, 2000, 9). Sometimes, depicting science, technology, forecast, and foresight manifests this ulterior end on the silver screen. Cinema possesses various visual appeals and is able to get past the traditional institutions of a society such as family, school, church, and friends, and communicate with an individual directly. People have to deal with multiple economic and social problems throughout their lives, and often resort to film in the hope of escaping their difficulties for a few hours. Their anxiety and fears are alleviated through the catharsis provided by cinema (Jowett & Linton, 1980, 82-111). “It is... a truism to point out that film is the urban cultural form par excellence” (Fitzmaurice, 2001, 19). The audience of cinema considers even

Table 1. Interviewee characteristics

Occupation	Managers in the Field of Cinema or Other Media	Cinema Professors, Graduates and Students	Professional Members of Film Crews or Other Media
PhD	5	5	2
Master’s	6	5	3
Bachelor’s	7	5	5
Diploma	-----	2	5
Lower than Diploma	-----	-----	10

the most fictitious of films to be real. This is what has led to cinema's being dubbed as the most alive of all arts (Sheikh-Mehdi, 2003, 149). The increasing penetration of capitalist culture, social welfare and consumerism, the spread of globalism, and other obscure agendas subtly promoted by mass media, instill a set of preconditions that facilitate the ultimate materialization of a dystopia. These preconditions are as follows:

#### 1. Imagination and illusionism

According to Currie, there are two major types of illusions. The first, cognitive illusion, which, at its weakest, claims "that the film viewer comes to believe that what is represented onscreen is real" (Currie, 1995, 50). The second type is perceptual illusion, which "occurs when experience represents the world as being a certain way, when in fact it is not that way and the subject does not believe it to be that way" (ibid, 57). Both types of the illusions above are often found in dystopian cinema.

#### 2. Cynicism

In the dystopia of these films, the threat of widespread unrest is real, and the inability of a liberal state in responding to it, or more importantly, the frustration of the middle class, may well sweep aside all the mechanisms in place to preserve the resiliency of a democracy. In such circumstances, the conditions for emergence of fascist attitudes become evident and the symptoms of this, such as displays of power on the streets to mobilize the public opinions and similar modes of retrograde movement back to hackneyed populist ploys.

#### 3. Fatalism

Fatalism, in its essence is "The wholehearted acceptance of all events and complete submission against their occurrence, inspired by a doctrine that considers destiny to be outside of man's control. It is often contrasted with libertarianism" (Sarokhani, 1996, 280). This notion maintains that the individual plays no active role in most of his affairs and, as a passive and indecisive entity, is merely a function of the external forces which shape his thoughts and guide his actions (Maghsoudi, 2006, 20).

#### 4. Disbelief

In the words of Berliner, "The constraints imposed by the fictional context leave us at the mercy of the narration. By drawing out situations that stimulate negative emotions, filmmakers exploit our inability to perform actions that would help us regulate our emotions" (Berliner, 2017, 143). The development and spread of science and technology, the fact that these elements are being exploited to cause destruction and mayhem, and the way the latter are reflected in film, rely "on the audience's willingness to suspend disbelief," which is achieved "by playing on our fears of science" (Hayward, 2000, 316).

#### 5. Irreligion

The constant conflicts, disagreements, and conversations on the boundaries of reality and fiction in addition to the distinction between physical and metaphysical perceptions have led to the gradual distancing of the people and prominent artists of the current era, such as architects and illustrators, from the realm of religion. Turning away from the 18th century realism and the 19th century Romanticism, and then going through the 20th century modernism and 21st century postmodernism, have all contributed to the widespread faithlessness in our time.

Iranian cinema, throughout various historical periods, has undergone a transformation and falling away from its original aspirations. Uncertainty through the passage of time has driven this art away from its ideal future and toward the preference of destructively dystopian themes.

### Key Definitions

#### • Utopia

The word utopia comes from the Greek *outopos*, where οὐ- or ou- means 'not' and τόπος or topos means 'place.' Therefore, utopia refers to an ideal but non-existent place. Durant in *The Pleasures of Philosophy*, Cabot in *The Voyage to Icaria*, Aristotle (1988) in *Politics*, Nasir al-Din al-Tusi in *Nasirean Ethics*, Campanella in *The City of the Sun*, Bacon in *Novum Organum*, and other philosophers such as

Kant, Hegel and Russel are some of the figures who attempted to describe their own vision of the utopia as the perfect dwelling place for mankind. The term utopia, furthermore, has a quite fluid meaning which, at times, connotes contradictory notions. It may refer to a society with an excellent set of social systems which, crucially, are attainable; while at other times, it may be interpreted as an imaginary, unattainable dream which casts its shadow on external reality. In various texts, many synonyms have been proposed for the utopia, such as fairyland, land of milk and honey and golden age. A number of far-off lands have also been mentioned in literature which are supposed to be, or have been, utopias, such as Swift's Laputa. But almost all these places are, as expected, imaginary (Ghahremaninejad, 2004, 5).

#### • Dystopia

The vision of a utopia originates in the innate human hope for an ideal society which, however, does not exist, and in its place, there is an inefficient sociopolitical system wherein the possibility of prosperity and redemption does not exist, and hence must be revolutionized. Contrastingly, some ideal visions come in the shape of negative utopias, anti-utopias, or as is better known, dystopias. The latter has been envisioned in many stories as an exceedingly unpleasant, unsafe, violent, and horrific fictional world for mankind which are often futuristic and reflect the intense distrust of 20th century man of political, social and technological developments. Notable examples of dystopian worlds have been written by the likes of Orwell, Huxley, and Schmidt. The word dystopia, used as the direct antonym to utopia, again comes from Greek, and is the combination of  $\delta\upsilon\sigma$ - 'bad,' and  $\tau\acute{o}\pi\omicron\varsigma$  'place,' which can roughly be translated as 'the worst place.' Alternatively, it is called cacotopia or more accurately, kakotopia in Latin, where kako means trivial, secondary, unpleasant, or the worst. In this imaginary place, instead of beauties, virtues and happiness, the earth is filled with ignobility, dread, suffering, and ugliness. In *The Brave New World* (1932), Huxley depicts a liberal state in the future where humans are mass-produced in laboratories, designed

in such a way as to perfectly fit the requirements of their occupation, be able to gratify their own and their ideal society's needs, and never shirk their duties and commitments. In Huxley's vision of dystopia, parents and blood relation, affection, love, and other human emotions have become irrelevant and perhaps even harmful—only causing suffering and enslavement. Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1945) features a large group of animals who unite to drive the cruel humans out of their living place to set up a communist state run by animals; however, soon pigs begin to take full control of the farm, gradually establish an authoritarian state, and implement the same oppressive and exploitative practices as the humans did on their fellow animals.

#### Formation of the Idea and Goals of Utopia

In his seminal *The Soul of Man under Socialism*, Wilde notes: "A map of the world that does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at, for it leaves out the one country at which Humanity is always landing" (Wilde, 1954, 40). Although utopia, in its modern sense, was first used in the 16th century A.D., the core idea can be traced back to the theological, social, and political texts from thousands of years ago. Plato's Utopia or the Sumerian Epic of *Gilgamesh*<sup>1</sup> envision a heaven-on-earth sort of world where death and old age have disappeared and where the wolf and the sheep live in absolute peace alongside one another. In *Gilgamesh*, the king of Uruk<sup>2</sup> sets out on a journey and arrives in the paradisiac city of Dilmun, where there is lasting peace, evergreen nature, and eternal life; a symbol of the ideal living place for mankind. (Assil, 1992, 18). From Plato's *The Republic* to More's *Utopia*, Bacon's *The New Atlantis*<sup>3</sup> etc., numerous authors have done their best to describe their vision of what they consider as the perfect utopia. In Book 4 of *The City of God*, Augustine of Hippo puts peace and justice as the two central characteristics of his utopia. In this 5th century work, God's city is in the heavens and as a rule, the closer earthly cities come to realizing the two abovementioned characteristics, the more respectable they will be in the eye of God (Foster, 1941, 393). The creators of utopias tend to consider themselves

as knowledgeable and aware enough to be able to reproduce their model of an ideal extrasensory world in this phenomenal world, and are potentially diligent in enforcing, complementing and preserving their noble project. The process and the effort to achieve, no matter the goal, is invariably based on two contrasting modes of thought: 1- Materialist thought, and 2- Spiritual thought. Western philosophers and thinkers have in general proven to be more inclined toward materialism, while eastern philosophers and Islamist thinkers have long found spirituality to be the correct path toward accomplishing their religious teachings. Utopianism, therefore, refers to the creation, or the intention to create, an ideal social system (Ashuri, 2008, 19). The very plan for a utopia is an effort on the part of philosophers to 1) point out the defects of their current societies; 2) envision a perfect society in which no sign of the said defects may be found; and 3) confront the prevalent political theories of their time without actually getting entangled in the existing real-world politics. As a result, philosophers who have addressed the idea of utopia have been called social reformers (Ebrahimpour, 2009, 110)

#### • Features of Utopian Narratives

Science-fiction and fantasy narratives centering on utopias often share a number of features which will be elaborated upon below:

A) Utopias are atemporal (there is no passage, sense, or mention of time in them). When perfection has been attained, there is no need for temporal concepts such as development, ageing, etc.

B) Utopias are located in an unspecified location and disconnected from the rest of the world. It is as if the world, as we have come to know it, has ended and life only exists in this part of the universe.

C) Utopias are perfect; no more progress or changes in any aspect thereof is needed or possible.

D) There is no need to perform any work or other non-pleasurable activities. It is as if everything gets done automatically and/or there is no material need for which people must work.

E) There is no communicational difficulties or constraints, even though many of the renowned utopias

were produced prior to the invention of printing. Therefore, some imaginary patterns of communication are presented by the authors. It is worth remembering that the conventional mode of communication during large parts of these periods was face-to-face conversations (Mohammadi, 1998, 83).

Socialist utopian thinking was one of the most influential elements inspiring the science-fiction and fantasy works of literature toward the end of the 19th century. The legacy of science-fiction and fantasy narratives dealing with imaginary worlds and social interpretations start in earnest with Plato's Republic and develops into the minutely scientific world of American psychologist Skinner's *Walden Two* (1948) and Clarke's *Childhood's End* (1953).

#### • Features of Dystopian Narratives

Dystopian narratives depict a supremely catastrophic, dark worlds, typically in the future, where dehumanization is routinely practices and human beings are going through the most terrible of times. In this definition, an anti-utopian world is an inverted utopia. Some of the most popular features attributed to dystopias are as follows:

A) A society where there is absolutely no freedom.

B) Human beings are constantly watched and meticulously kept under control using technologically advanced equipment.

C) A society where everyone and everything ostensibly appear to be the same and expressing emotions, cultural production, practicing rituals etc. are strictly prohibited.

D) Human beings are regarded as feed either for a particular class of human beings or for other beings.

#### Timeline and Analysis of Iranian Cinema

##### 1. Primitive Cinema (1925-1936)

Occurring during the reign of Reza Shah, the primitive cinema of Iran was pioneered by Khan Baba Motazedi, who had just returned to Iran from Europe immediately after the 1921 Persian coup d'état. Motazedi initially practiced the craft by filming his family, and was then tasked to take his equipment to the National Consultative Assembly and film

the coronation ceremony of Reza Shah on April 25, 1926 (Mehrabani, 1992, 261). "Having undisputed political power, Reza Shah initiated a number of social reforms... His long-range goal was to rebuild Iran in the image of the West—or, at any rate, in his own image of the West. His means for attaining this final aim were secularism, antitribalism, nationalism, educational development, and state capitalism... It set up a Society of Public Guidance, modeled after propaganda machines in Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany, to instill national consciousness into the population through journals, pamphlets, newspapers, textbooks, and radio broadcasts" (Abrahamian, 1982, 140-143). "The political structure built by Reza Shah (...) [rested] on the three stone pillars of a standing army, a modern bureaucracy, and extensive court patronage" (ibid, 149). During this period, a documentary film titled *Alaf (Grass - 1924)* which portrayed the life of Bakhtiari people (a southwestern Iranian tribe) and was accused of celebrating their traditional, pre-modern way of life, infuriated the newly crowned king, whereas *The Iranian Railroad* (1930) garnered his approval and praise. Four important films made during this era include: *Abi and Rabi* (1929), *Haji Agha, the Cinema Actor* (1933), *Lor Girl* (1933) and *The Libertine* (Bolhavas - 1935) all contain traces of the mythologization trend in this first period (Mehrabani, 1992, 23). Regarded as a whole, these films were intended to serve the major agenda taken up by the new political structure.

## 2. Indifferent Cinema (1937-1953)

The presence of literary and musical giants of the time gradually waned, and Iranian cinema found itself dominated by dancing and folk songs, but the political structure founded by the Pahlavi dynasty grew in power and dictated the form and content of Iranian cinema. The late 1940s and early 1950s was immeasurably influenced by the post-WWII despair and humiliation, especially caused by the occupation of Iran during the final years of the war as well as the installation of young Mohammad Reza Pahlavi as Shah in place of his ousted father. Thus, Iranian cinema went through a peculiar period characterized

by fantasy and oblivion, as manifested by the conflicts and contradictions that somehow found their ways into screenplays. Esmail Kooshan's *The Spring Variety* (1948), *Amir's Prisoner* (1948), and *Ashamed* (1949), Ebrahim Moradi's *Backbreaker* (1951), Mahdi Raeis-Firooz's *The Tramp* (1952), Hossein Madani's *Challenging the Devil* (1952), Serge Azarian's *Golnesa* (1952) and the *Annoying Spouse* (1952), in addition to several other films, were clearly attempting to incorporate the elements of the period in which Iran was making the transition from traditionality to modernity. The most prominent of these elements were the contrast between rural and urban life, class differences in the big cities, and an ambivalent view of the traditionally-accepted or taboo roles women had in the society. Communicating the 'What Should Not Be Said' directive to filmmakers, devised by the Ministry of Culture, was indeed fairer than the provisions of Reza Shah's infamous Organization of Thought Education, but, in addition to banning filmmakers from opposing the faith of Islam (particularly the Jafari Twelver Shiism), insulting the customs and traditions, using vulgarism, depicting racial and ethnic frictions, depicting married 'women' committing adultery, depicting naked men and women in bed, etc., it also clearly prohibited the depiction of revolutions and revolutionary ideas, strikes, revolts and public defiance, sabotage of factories by unhappy workers, student and farmer protests, well-meaning theft, and any sort of image or word that remotely implied opposition against the constitutional monarchy, insulting the lofty royal throne or the immediate royal family (Mehrabani, 1992, 524).

## 3. Fanciful Cinema (1955-1963)

Following the ousting of Mohammad Mosaddeq's government by the 1953 Iranian coup d'état, the political system enforced the 'What Should Not Be Said' directive with renewed vigor. During this period, in addition to hollow farce, banal foolery, or manipulative tear-jerking subjects, the filmmakers tried to incorporate salacious dance sequences featuring half-naked women, assisted by percussive music and suggestive songs, without caring as to whether these

scenes fit the theme of the film. Prime examples of such films would be Siamak Yasemi's *The Naughty Tyrant* (1957), Majid Hosseini's *The Noble Thug* (1958), and Samuel Khachikian's *The Messenger from Paradise* (1959) which was banned five times, twice of which due to displaying seaside nudity and using vulgar language (Mehrabi, 1992, 60-87).

#### 4. Dual Cinema (1964-1978)

In 1962, the King of Iran announced a 'White Revolution,' and within a year, the 1963 demonstrations of June 5 and 6 would take place. The uprising was suppressed, and the Iranian society fell deep into a state of calm-before-the-storm until the 1979 Revolution. Shah's political reforms backfired and led to aggravated class difference, and cinema, instead of guiding the people toward a true utopia, drew them into the cesspool of dystopia. Siamak Yasemi's *Ganj-e Qarun* (Korah's Treasure - 1965) pioneered this brand of fatalist cinema and became its undisputed quintessence, giving rise to a fever that devastated both the Iranian society and film industry. Boasting and sanctification of poverty and proposing unrealistic and absurd solutions for the discords stemming from the depths of the society were the most striking features of *Ganj-e Qarun*. The form of this cinematic genre created lasting expectations in the audience and imposed itself on the society by not only ignoring the realities of mid-1960s Iran, but also by downplaying, distorting, and reducing such deep-seated conflicts to routine moral conundrums, thereby effectively taking on the role of carrying, and normalizing, the ideological discourse of the ruling class (Ahmadi, 1996, 109). It is interesting that, even at the time of its release, renowned Iranian film critics did not have a positive opinion about the film and, labeling it a mere representative of the Iranian pulp film and were surprised with its unprecedented box office success. The first significant news for the film industry in 1963 was the lifting of the ban imposed on Farrokh Ghaffari's *Jonub Shahr* (Tough Neighborhoods - 1958) which displayed a face of Tehran that was different from its state-approved image. Two years later, Ghaffari would make *Shab-e Quzi* (The Hunchback's Night - 1965) based on a story

from *One Thousand and One Nights* (A.K.A. Arabian Nights)—the famous collection of Middle-Eastern folk tales. It presented an in-depth analysis of the real state of the Iranian society underneath its prettified surface, and from the point of view of intellectuals (Shahbazi, 2015:30). Ebrahim Golestan's *Khesht o Ayeneh* (Clay and Mirror - 1965), Fereydoun Rahnema's *Siavash in Persepolis* (1967), and Davoud Mollapoor's *Ahu's Husband* (1968) provided an opportunity for some of the most prominent Iranian authors of the time, such as Jalal Al-e Ahmad, Gholam-Hossein Sa'edi, Mahmoud Dowlatabadi, and Sadeq Chubak to contribute to Iranian Cinema and propel it toward another utopia. This time, fewer filmmakers deviated from the newly-paved path toward utopia and still fewer fell to dystopian tendencies. Two considerable films from two young directors, Dariush Mehrjuyi's *The Cow* (*Gāv* - 1969) and Masoud Kimiai's *Qeysar* (1969), attempted to ruthlessly criticize what they believed was a corrupt society in a state of hibernation and disguised by the Pahlavi regime as a happy, prosperous one. In 1973, a group of filmmakers voiced their protest to what they labeled a 'false cinema devoid of any distinctive ethnic or national culture.' However, despite going through an acute decline and resorting to the Shah's Rastakhiz Party for help, the corrupt Iranian cinema of 1970s firmly tread on, safe in the knowledge that as long as it carried out what the political system asked of it, it would command the full support of influential figures. It was at this very juncture that the Parviz Sayyad's *Dar Emtedad-e Shab* (Through the Night - 1977), starring Gogoosh and Saeid Kangarani, became the top-grossing Iranian film of all time (Mehrabi, 1992, 166-177).

#### 5. Transitional Cinema (1979-1990)

The cinema of the 1980s represents a transition from the darkness of an actually dystopian society toward a renewed interest in utopian themes rooted in religion and national culture. At the beginning of this era, Iranian cinema did not follow a clear pattern, however, from the mid-1980s onward, it reached its post-Revolution pinnacle. Women returned to cinema in the 1980s, but the myth of femininity was



no longer employed in its former role [as sexual object], but in new roles as Goddess, mother, and wife (Sadr, 2002, 279). The cinema of this era, apart from the war<sup>4</sup>, saw filmmakers focusing on themes such as criticizing the previous regime, paying attention to rural life, and anti-Zionism, which was carried on in the next eras as well (Ravadrad & Zandi, 2006, 215). The Second New Wave of Iranian cinema, which fully blossomed in the 1980s, remains the most widely recognized period of Iranian cinema on the international scene. Abbas Kiarostami, Mohsen Makhmalbaf and Jafar Panahi are the most prominent figures of this generation, each of whom working on different themes and atmospheres, and in their own signature styles. Abbas Kiarostami's *Where is the Friend's House?* (1987), *Life and Nothing More* (1992) *Through the Olive Trees* (1994) entered the intellectualist cinema of the West (Sadr, 2006, 234). "A child, living in the world of Persian literature, asks: 'Where is the friend's house?' The child and/or the adult, in a mixture of literature and cinema, show that life goes on in order that the poet could celebrate his victory through the olive trees" (Tavassoli, 2014, 416). Although films such as Ali Hatami's *Haji Washington* (1982), Mohsen Makhmalbaf's *Boycott* (1985), Kiarostami's *Where is the Friend's House?* (1987), Bahram Beyzai's *Bashu: The Little Stranger* (1986), and Dariush Mehrjui's *Tennants* (1986) do reflect dystopian thoughts and themes, they did not alter the agreeable direction of Iranian cinema, the undeniable social problems and the new post-war political landscape resulted in films such as Makhmalbaf's *Time of Love* (1990) and Kamran Qadachian's *Song of Tehran* (1991), which practically pushed the cinema of the era toward dystopianism again. The final important development of the fifth era is the emergence of women filmmakers in Iranian cinema.

#### 6. Realist and Urbanist Cinema (1991-2001)

"New discourses provided the opportunity to address social issues, including those of women. In 1998 alone, at least 30 films were released wherein the women were the protagonist or a character with

much the same importance as the protagonist" (Ravadrad, 2000, 73). Consumerism and celebration of luxurious lifestyles turned the attention away from rural and slum populations' issues once again. "It can be claimed, with a fair degree of certainty, that the 1990s Iranian cinema is totally urban-centric and representative of urban life" (Kazemi & Mahmoudi, 2008). The 1990s films have two striking characteristics: first, the simultaneous existence of the oppressor and the liberator in the majority of films, and second, the close interaction of everyday-life with the political system and the public sphere (Lajevardi, 2009, 86). "In the second half of the 1990s, men and women took on civil, occupational, and gender roles more frequently than familial ones" (Qasemi et al., 2008). Banietemad's *Under the Skin of the City* (2001), Milani's *Two Women* (1999), Dariush Mehrjui's *Sara* (1992), and Nāser Taghvāi's *Unruled Paper* (2002) are examples of films which exhibit the dystopia of urban life and the intricate social relations of citizens. "In 1999 and 2001, five of the ten highest-grossing films of the year were depictions of dark social realities" (Azad-Armaki & Amir, 2009, 125). This fatalism, clearly enough, drives the cinema of this era toward dystopian despair as well.

#### 7. Escapist Cinema (2002-Present)

The highest-grossing films of this era have featured escapist narratives, such as Iraj Tahmasb's *Kolah Ghermezi and Sarvenaz* (2002), Saeed Alamzadeh's *Tokyo Non-Stop* (2002), Arash Moayerian's *Coma* (2004), Saman Moghadam's *Maxx* (2005), and Masoud Dehnamaki's *The Outcasts Trilogy* (2007-2011) and a plethora of comedies released in the late-2000s. It can be said that "when hope begins to disappear from a society, cinema, like other instruments and media, helps anaesthetize and relieve the pains. In such circumstances, in an attempt to escape the harsh world of reality which they do not hope, and feel unable, to improve, the film viewer seeks haven in the dream world of cinema" (Azad-Armaki & Amir, 2009, 137). This hopelessness and resignation against a predetermined fate, along with

the suppression of personal and collective needs, are typical conditions which lead to wandering in a dystopian realm.

### Findings of the Study

The findings indicate that, across the seven periods in which it was divided by the researcher, Iranian cinema has been influenced and shaped by dystopian elements. However, it must be noted that the immediately post-Revolution era was characterized by political, strategic, and executive confusion, and could not freely employ actresses or experiment in different genres. Therefore, it is highly likely that the absence of dystopian elements and tendencies during this era was unintentional (Table 2).

The findings of the study indicate that in the mid-1980s, when cultural policies begin to develop and take effect, Iranian cinema reaches the pinnacle of its utopia. This booming era of utopian themes continues until the late 1990s. From the early 2000s, however, dystopian elements begin to take over again and still dominate Iranian cinema to this day. The findings of this study in order of the historical periods of Iranian cinema are reflected in the table 3.

### Conclusion

Cinema in Iran has always been subject to the intense attention of politicians, intellectuals, and people from

different classes of society. Iranian Cinema has also made efforts to base its stories on the beliefs of the people and depict their lives on the screen, however, these efforts have been temporary and never quite found much consistency. A survey through the historical eras this cinema has experienced and the outcome of the interviews conducted by this author support the conclusion that Iranian filmmakers, irrespective of their being independent or affiliated with state institutions, have often deviated from, or experienced a form of stasis, on the path toward their visions of utopia and, intentionally or otherwise, tended toward the depiction of dystopias. Films focusing on socially-conscious themes have often ended up selling poverty to their audiences and been plagued by vague endings. Comedic and poetic themes, on the other hand, have mostly resulted in banality and bland sexual innuendo. Philosophical and ideologically-charged themes which have indeed managed to produce worthy films free from the usual didactic tendencies, have been few and far-between: either completely ignored or simply unable to start a sufficiently powerful wave which could help materialize their creators' visions of utopia. Iran's universally acclaimed cinema is struggling to break free of a dystopia of its own making and, as it stands, remains distant from the utopia it dreams of realizing.

Table 2. Dystopian elements in Iranian Cinema. Source: Authors.

Time Period	Key Features	Imagination and illusionism	Cynicism	Fatalism	Disbelief	Irreligion
Primitive Cinema (1915-1926)				-----		
Indifferent Cinema (1927-1954)				-----	-----	
Fanciful Cinema (1955-1963)						
Dual Cinema (1964-1978)						
Transitional Cinema (1979-1990)		-----	-----	-----	-----	-----
Realist and Urbanist Cinema (1991-2001)		-----				-----
Escapist Cinema (2002-Present)						-----

Table3. The periodical process of transition from utopianism toward dystopianism

The period	Course title and date	Description of the period
1	Primitive Cinema (1915-1926)	Cynicism, irreligion, lack of belief in duty to preserve (or return to) the pinnacle of Iranian culture, seeking to attain the utopia defined by the modern West.
2	Indifferent Cinema (1927-1954)	Began with a spiritual and poetic perspective, but was derailed toward illusion, fancy, irreligion, and banality.
3	Fanciful Cinema (1955-1963)	In contrast with the first generation of filmmakers who sought their utopias in a real but Western culture, and second generation whose utopia was imaginary, the utopia of the third period consisted of elements that would later form the 'Film Farsi' style, which put the emphasis on sexual allure and themes.
4	Dual Cinema (1964-1978)	The influential cult film <i>Croesus' Treasure</i> (Ganj-e Qarun - 1965) in combination with the fragile mentality of intellectual filmmakers, whose films had a bitter and cynical mood, did not let the promising new wave of Iranian filmmakers to create and exhibit their original utopia which would have offered a fresh vision and had its roots in the rich national culture of the country. Thus, the pre-1979 Revolution cinema remained entrapped in the cesspool of dystopia.
5	Transitional Cinema (1979-1990)	Saw the pinnacle of Iranian cinema's determined movement toward utopian themes.
6	Realist and Urbanist Cinema (1991-2001)	Consumerism, celebration of luxurious lifestyles, loss of interest in rural and slum populations and themes and submitting to a pre-determined and unalterable fate, drove the cinema of this era toward a dystopian despair.
7	Escapist Cinema (2002-Present)	An unprecedented era of financial success for escapist films. Having accepted despair and a pre-determined fate, along with the suppression of personal and collective needs, the filmmakers seem to be wandering aimlessly in a dystopian realm.

## Endnote

1. The fifth king of Uruk and the son of Lugalbanda. He is thought to have ruled Sumer about 2700 B.C. According to the legend, Gilgamesh's body was two-thirds divine and one-third mortal throughout his life.
2. Unug in Sumerian, Orkh in the Bible, Orkhoē in Greek, Vorka or Urak in Arabic. An ancient city in Sumer and later Babylon, located in Mesopotamia, 250 kilometers from present day Baghdad in the south of Iraq.
3. The story of a city where the people and members of state institutions engage in scientific research on Nature.
4. The Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988)

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