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THROUGH THE LENS OF THE POLITICAL THE STAGING OF IRANIAN CINEMA AT THE BERLINALE



A Dragon Arrives! (Ezhdehā Vāred Mi Shavad!), (Mani Haghighi), The Match Factory, 2016

Viktor Ullmann

After the premiere of his latest film *Pig* (Khūk, 2018) in the competition of the 68th *Berlinale*, director Mani Haghighi was questioned by journalists during the official press conference. What does his film say about current Iranian society? Why are there so many strong female characters in the film, defying common clichés about Iranian women? Will the film be screened in Iran, and if so, how on earth could it evade censorship? Tired of the questions, he finally laughed wittingly and countered: “How many times do we need to do this? Yes, there’s censorship in Iran. Yes, it’s difficult to deal with it, and yes, we deal with it in many different ways depending on the political climate. But there’s so much more to discuss. Let me ask you a question: Why do you think Iranian films are supposed to be some kind of a tour guide of Iran for you?”¹

Haghighi’s opulent films are indeed difficult to pin down and even harder to grasp. His previous work *A Dragon Arrives! (Ezhdehā Vāred Mi Shavad!)*, (2016) is perhaps the strongest example for this: The central plot line follows a film noir detective, a geologist and a hippiesque sound engineer who try to solve the mystery of recurring earthquakes

around graveyards on the island of Qeshm in the 1960s as well as the suicide of a prisoner on board a giant shipwreck in the middle of a canyon. Flashbacks recur to Tehran and the production of Ebrahim Golestan’s film *Brick and Mirror (Khesht va Āyeneh)*, (1965), in which the three men were involved. Next to being a surreal historical film, it is also a mockumentary: The narrative is framed and often interrupted by false documentary scenes in which director Mani Haghighi claims to have found deleted footage from Golestan’s seminal drama which supposedly uncovers the pseudo-historical mystery. The fact that Haghighi is Ebrahim Golestan’s real-life grandson further complicates this tongue-in-cheek play with truth and fiction. Overladen with gorgeous images and untrustworthy narration, the film opens an elaborate labyrinth that invites viewers to wander around and ultimately get lost in their attempts to make sense of it.

Yet, although *A Dragon Arrives!* is enigmatic by design, the journalists’ eager need to deconstruct and understand it along the lines of censorship in Iran or its politics in relation to the government and society in the Islamic Republic very much overpowered the possibility of an open reading of the film. Haghighi’s refusal to play a tour guide to his home country at inter-

national press conferences is the result of a longer tradition of staging Iranian cinema at European film festivals, in which the *Berlinale* played a particular role. The first wave of international acclaim for Iranian cinema had already peaked in the 1990s with countless awards at European festivals. The *Berlinale*, however, started to screen and award a growing number of Iranian films only in 2006, after the international hype had already passed. In Berlin, the films were presented with a decidedly different note: While Cannes, Venice and other festivals had been interested in the blend of ‘Iranian neorealism’² and poetically charged cinema that Abbas Kiarostami and others had made popular, the films screened at the *Berlinale* were far more outspokenly subversive and often dealt explicitly with social and political problems in the country.

Among other factors, a look into the city’s long-standing relationship with Iran helps explain this political focus: Since the summer of 1967, when supporters of the Shah violently scattered a crowd of protesting West Berlin students, gifting the German language with the term *Prügelperser* (pugnacious Persians), German media usually

¹ INTERNATIONALE FILMFESTSPIELE BERLIN (2018, FEBRUARY 21). PRESSE-KONFERENZ ZU “PIG” MIT MANI HAGHIGHI [VIDEO FILE]. RETRIEVED FROM [HTTPS://WWW.BERLINALE.DE/DE/ARCHIV/JAHRESARCHIVE/2018/06_STREAMING_2018/06_STREAMING_LONG_VERSIONS_2018_52861.HTML](https://www.berlinale.de/de/ARCHIV/JAHRESARCHIVE/2018/06_STREAMING_2018/06_STREAMING_LONG_VERSIONS_2018_52861.HTML)

² DABASHI, H. (2001). *CLOSE UP IRANIAN CINEMA: PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE*. LONDON: VERSO, 279.



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Mani Haghighi at the press conference of *Pig*, February 21st 2018. © Internationale Filmfestspiele Berlin

associated Iran with political unrest, a perspective that was further sharpened in the revolution of 1979 or the country-wide re-election protests in 2009, where images of chaos in the streets of Tehran dominated the news coverage of the country.

The *Berlinale's* practice of this is best exemplified through its relations with Jafar Panahi. In 2011, the festival invited the director, who had been prohibited from working and put under house arrest as punishment for making a documentary about the re-election protests, to the international jury panel. When, as anticipated, Panahi was not allowed to take his seat in the jury, the festival staged a whole week of protest in solidarity with the director with symbolic actions ranging from leaving his seat vacant in every jury screening to encouraging prominent guests to wear green clothes on the red carpet, recalling the green movement that carried the 2009 protests. In the following years, two films Panahi had shot despite his ban from working were screened in the festival's competition; one of them, *Taxi* (2015), even won the Golden Bear.

Thus, between 2006 and the end of Dieter Kosslick's tenure as festival director in early 2019, the *Berlinale's* staging of Iranian cinema showed many facets that went beyond curation. From the framing of the films in their program brochures to the performances on the red carpet to the speeches in the closing ceremonies, politics remained a strong selling point for Iranian cinema at the *Berlinale*, which in turn catered to the festival's branding as a politically engaged cultural institution. The brief synopsis of *A Dragon Arrives!* in the program brochure, for example, points out that the story begins on the day of the assassination of Iranian prime minister Hassan Ali Mansur and investigates the suicide of a 'banished political prisoner' with the help of old intelligence files.³ While these elements surely feature in the film's many side-stories, highlighting them paints a somewhat distorted picture of the enigmatic work. Like most films, *A Dragon Arrives!* is indeed a political film, as it would be difficult to make completely apolitical art, but reading it primarily along the lines of its politics robs it of its many other compelling layers. "What I'm concerned about is this limiting of the discussion to a very

obvious fact of Iranian politics", Haghighi concluded his remark at the press conference, "I encourage you to think of this film as a film, as a piece of art, and talk about what it means."

Given the preceding Western discourse on Iranian cinema and its staging at the *Berlinale*, it is thus no surprise that Mani Haghighi was mostly confronted with questions regarding the political metaphors of his film during press conferences. Time will tell if the *Berlinale's* new team of directors, Mariette Rissenbeek and Carlo Chatrian, who take over the reigns of Dieter Kosslick this year, will manage to shift the festival's focus on Iranian cinema more towards the perception of its artistic qualities - and if the German media will go along with such a shift and leave old viewing habits behind. It could be a difficult process: Haghighi's 2018 satire *Pig*, a colorful comedy about pride and vanity in the Iranian film business, completely irritated critics with its lack of a clear political message. One reviewer stated paradigmatically that the film was "somehow political and somehow weird, but in the end left the viewer clueless."⁴

4 GEISLER, C. (2018, FEBRUARY 21). "KHOOK" LÄSST DEN BETRACHTER RATLOS ZURÜCK. *BERLINER ZEITUNG*. RETRIEVED FROM [HTTPS://ARCHIV.BERLINER-ZEITUNG.DE/KULTUR/FILM/BERLINALE-WETTBEWERB-KHOOK-LAESST-DEN-BETRACHTER-RATLOS-ZURUECK-29740228](https://archiv.berliner-zeitung.de/kultur/film/berlinale-wettbewerb-khook-laesst-den-betrachter-ratlos-zurueck-29740228)

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3 INTERNATIONALE FILMFESTSPIELE BERLIN (N.D.). FILM FILE *EJHDEHA VARED MISHAVAD!* [WEBSITE]. RETRIEVED FROM [HTTPS://WWW.BERLINALE.DE/EN/ARCHIVE/JAHRESARCHIVE/2016/02_PROGRAMM_2016/02_FILM-DATENBLATT_2016_201614525.HTML#TAB=FILMSTILLS](https://www.berlinale.de/en/archive/jahresarchive/2016/02_programm_2016/02_film-datenblatt_2016_201614525.html#tab=filmstills)