Recovering forgotten history is one of the main themes in Bahram Beizai’s cinema. Through the use of mythological motifs and historical references in his films, Beizai invites the viewer to revisit formal history, that is, the generally accepted version of history as narrated by historians. In this chapter, I focus on two films, Perhaps Some Other Time (Shayad vaghti digar, 1988) and The Stranger and the Fog (Gharibeh va meh, 1974), in order to examine Beizai’s rehistoricizing of the past and the way it problematizes the status quo. I explore how Beizai deconstructs and reconstructs the conventions of Iranian visual and performing arts and reframes concepts such as “the past,” “the present,” and “identity” by dislocating formal history, focusing instead on private spaces and highlighting the culture of the past. As we will see, in Perhaps Some Other Time, the filmmaker relies on the alternative history found in family albums and personal memories to interrogate what is conventionally regarded as “documented history.” Through its themes and formal structure, The Stranger and the Fog further questions the aesthetic conventions of mainstream Iranian cinema, which, for over half a century,
has depicted and thus normalized a patriarchal and sometimes rather misogynistic world view.

Beizai’s films, especially those made after 1974, are charged with mythological references and highly allegorical meanings, prompting some critics to describe them as difficult to comprehend (Eshqi 288; Akrami 295). Nonetheless, they are popular among Iranian filmgoers. For instance, *While We Are Sleeping* (*Vaghti hameh khabim*, 2009) won the People’s Choice Award at the 27th International Fajr Film Festival, as did Beizai’s previous film, *Dog Eat Dog* (*Sag-koshi*, 2001, a film also known by the English title *Killing Mad Dogs*). Although Beizai has been the target of censorship—the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (Ershad-e Eslami) suspended a number of his film projects—one of his plays, *The Tragedy of Professor Makan and His Wife, Rokhshid Farzin: A Passion Play* (*Majles-e shabih: Dar zekr-e masa’eb-e Ostad Makan va hamsarash Rokhshid Farzin*, 2005), which has similar implications for standard views of the past, became the most profitable play in the history of Iranian theatre. Identifying with the past has been a formative element in the shaping of modern national identity in Iran, which could explain Beizai’s box office success.

The construction of the modern Iranian self is grounded in a conscious awareness of national identity in the sense that modern history and historiographical works have had a significant impact in shaping the understanding of individual self. Approaching film as history, Beizai raises questions about the modern sense of self-identity and reactivates Iranian collective memory, which makes his cinema yet more popular among Iranian spectators. Refashioning Iranian history in the modern era is not merely a twentieth-century phenomenon. It dates back to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when Persian texts such as *Shahnameh*, the first national epic in the modern Persian language, were reread and reviewed in order to shape new national identities. As Tavakoli-Targhi states:

> In the emerging Iran-time, the mythical tempos of *Dasatir, Dabistan-i Mazahib, Sharistan*, and *Shahnamih* increasingly displaced the sacred time of Islam. Reading and (re)citing these Iran-glorifying texts in a period of societal dislocation, military defeats, and foreign infiltration during the nineteenth century allowed for the rearticulation of Iranian identity and the construction of alternative forms of historical narrations and periodizations. The authorization and popular (re)citation of these narratives resulted in a process of cultural transference that intensified the desire for a recovery of the “forgotten history” of ancient Iran. (97)
Through the revival of Zoroastrian and Persian texts that replaced the established Islamic texts, the national identity in Iran was altered in the modern era. The globo-Islamic identity, created through a crucial and decisive scheme in the Islamic empire that pronounced all its citizens as a unified nation (ommat), was to be changed by a more regional and national (melli) discourse around Iranian identity.

However, the common trait in both the Islamic and nationalist accounts of identity construction is their construing of a coherent, homogeneous, and unified history. In both the Islamic and Iranian historical accounts, history is treated as a rigid and unchanging sequence of events. For instance, whether historical and artistic texts have portrayed the biblical Adam or the Zoroastrian Kiumarth as the first human being, in both cases, a monological cultural explanation, based on fixed propositions of a single culture and ideology, is sustained. This self-glorying approach to history still informs many current Iranian historiographical texts and art productions (in both government-funded and private sectors). Beizai’s refashioning of history, however, diverges from the nationalist and Islamist interpretations in the sense that it problematizes the “established” and institutionalized elements of Iranian culture and history.

In Beizai’s films, one hardly finds a coherent and homogeneous world based on a monological perspective.¹ For instance, the space in his films represents not only real places but imaginative and realist ambiances in the present or in historical times. On one hand, Tara in The Ballad of Tara (Cherike-ye Tara, 1979) and Ra’na in The Stranger and the Fog overcome challenges created by historical and supernatural creatures, respectively. On the other hand, Kyan, in Perhaps Some Other Time, deals with half-real, half-imaginative hallucinatory dreams that eventually help her to understand her childhood and find her lost family. In their search for identity, the figures portrayed in Beizai’s films are deterritorialized as they challenge established cultural and societal beliefs.

It is worth bearing in mind that Beizai’s reinterpretation of history—in opposition to both the Islamic-oriented accounts and the nationalist narratives—does not rely on formal texts. His films are based on mythology and history, yet they are not directly informed by canonical texts in Persian, like Shahnameh, or Islamic texts, such as the Quran. Similarly, his aesthetics owe more to popular artistic conventions such as those of Iranian theatrical traditions. Also, for Beizai, examining issues from subjective and personal perspectives takes precedence over probing social issues such as war or national history. The social issues stay as the background
while the individual’s journey of personal growth is highlighted. Beizai’s conscious exploring and highlighting of private stories overpowers the importance of socio-historical themes.

Whether he tackles a national historical event, as in The Death of Yazd-gerd (Marg-e Yazd-gerd, 1983), or a very personal issue, as in The Crow (Kalahg, 1977), Beizai does not limit his cinematic gaze to representing “facts” from any particular viewpoint such as a national or a religious one. His films have a humanist approach in the sense that they are about people, but they also encompass universal themes: the challenges that his characters encounter could be applied to humanity in general. Beizai’s films therefore provide alternative interpretations of history; they historicize cinematically, the forgotten self in conventional, accepted histories.

HISTORIZING THE FORGOTTEN SUBJECT

The lead character in Perhaps Some Other Time, Kyan (Susan Taslimi), does not know who she is. Her real identity is lost in the past, and, in order to discover her self, she must recover a missing history. Historicizing the self thus plays a crucial role in Kyan’s reconstruction of her identity. Through her search, the viewer faces questions of remembering, forgetting, and alienation. The leading characters in most of Beizai’s films are women who, in their search for identity, must revisit their past. In the process of recovering memory and through the recurring themes of time and space, Perhaps Some Other Time invites the viewer to participate in remembering and reconsidering formal history. In its linking of personal identity with the process of reconstructing the past, the film also aptly illustrates Beizai’s ongoing exploration of the historical roots of Iranian culture and the relationship of this history to the definition of the modern Iranian self.

Kyan, pregnant and struggling with scattered, bitter childhood memories and a psychological illness, discovers that she is not her parents’ biological child. She begins searching orphanages and birth archives to locate her biological parents. When she does not find a satisfying answer, she ends up delving into her memories and family albums. Finally, she finds her answer but not in the documented files. Her true identity was ultimately found in Vida’s (Kyan’s sister) home and albums—domestic, private places that are far from the official documented history.

Kyan’s husband, Modaber (Dariush Farhang), is involved in making documentary films for Iranian National Television Broadcasting. Early in Beizai’s film, Modaber is shown in a studio, where he is working on dubbing a documentary
about pollution. This montage sequence contains highly metaphorical images and abrupt juxtapositions of shots. The camera initially focuses on a familiar scene of the streets of Tehran. When it zooms out, we realize that what we have just seen was a silent film projected on a screen in a studio. The camera cuts to a low-key lighting composition of the film crew and finally zooms in with a medium shot of an unflattering composition of Modaber’s face in a hard light. Then Modaber moves toward the screen to answer the phone. The projected documentary, at this point, provides a background for Modaber’s conversation scene in a shallow focus. The old Tehran images, initially in the background, move to the foreground in sharp focus; they present an old Tehran quite different from the contemporary capital. The documentary portrays an elegant and tranquil city adorned with nineteenth-century buildings, wide streets, trees, and a few old cars. Interestingly, though, the images of the old city inserted in the documentary are just paintings, not “real” photographs. The fragmented montage is complemented with parallel shots of Kyan in a phone booth in the midst of busy downtown Tehran. On Kyan’s side, we only hear the noise of the street. The montage continues to contrast the old elegant Tehran with the modern city depicted in present time (Kyan’s parallel shots) and the filmic version (Modaber’s documentary), with jammed traffic and unattractive condensed apartment complexes in medium to far shots. Traffic lights, exhaust pipes, a baby in a stroller, and the tire of the stroller are framed in close-up and extreme close-ups in the documentary. A few workers with masks are depicted in a very polluted setting. The images of the workers and the editing group in the studio are shown through the shot/reverse-angle shots. Modaber indicates that the smoke in the scene seems extremely “unreal” for a documentary. Paradoxically, his colleague confirms that this is the only real smoke they managed to shoot. The whole sequence problematizes what is portrayed as reality, whether in documentaries or other forms of documentation. Particularly, it depicts the manipulative practices exercised in the process of making “documentaries.”

In a shot that is shown on the screen in the studio, Modaber locates a woman who looks remarkably like Kyan and who is riding with a strange man in a red car. Modaber loses his concentration and fails to dub in the film. Since he cannot continue the work, the crew decides to postpone the job for the next day. Modaber, however, does not leave the studio. He is determined to recover the truth regarding the strange man whom he saw, in the film, with his wife. Modaber and his colleagues now discontinue dubbing in the film or, in other words, “adding” to the filmed “reality.” Instead, because of Modaber’s concern, he wants to find the “unedited” film
stock in order to see the whole sequence that was “elided” through editing. Thus, Beizai suggests the existence of another layer of reality, where the “facts” are not eliminated or added through editing and dubbing. In this way, the viewer is led to question the reliability both of a filmed event—documentary and fiction alike—and, in a broader sense, of the extant documented historical accounts.

The dubbing is suspended and most of the crew leaves for the day. Modaber returns to the room. He watches the same scene over and over to find the plate number of the red car, but to no avail. In a set of matching cuts, we see Kyan, who looks down the street through a window. The low-angle point-of-view shots illustrate a breezy, cloudy autumn day, with people on the street. The falling golden leaves and the dusky setting create a melancholic mood. Modaber is then shown calling his wife, but when Kyan answers the phone, he remains silent. The use of medium shots rather than a closeup shot to portray Modaber depicts the pictures of the old city in the background. Then the camera move to foreground—although still in a medium shot to highlight the picture of the picture of the old city. The sequence that started with images of old Tehran finishes with the same images. Thus, Beizai’s editing of the closing sequence parallels and repeats the beginning scene, but with the positions reversed. By employing this technique, the sequence that began with pictures of the old city on the screen ends with pictures of the old city on the wall. In the opening scene of the sequence, the pictures of old Tehran focus the documentary on the present situation, while in the closing scene, the same pictures of the past are highlighted to emphasize the ties of the people of today to their past. Modaber lives and works in the present; nevertheless, recovering the past opens a new chapter in his life. In this manner, *Perhaps Some Other Time*, which begins with an ordinary present-time situation, turns its cinematic focus on objects from the past.

Modaber suspects Kyan, thereafter, of having an affair with another man. Kyan’s distrustful behaviour—because of the new findings regarding her true identity, a psychological illness, and her pregnancy, which she hides from her husband—merely stirs Modaber’s suspicion. From this moment on, Kyan and Modaber’s relationship moves into a stage where everything looks dubious. In order to know about his wife’s in/fidelity, Modaber has no other avenue but to search in the film stocks. It seems that these highly constructed documentaries are the closest he can get to reality.

Kyan’s nightmarish dreams are portrayed through Beizai’s masterful and accelerated blue-tinted montage. The excessive camera movements, the jump cuts, and
the lighting, which varies from gloomy and dark to extreme high-key lit scenes, have a disorienting effect and emphasize a state of severe instability. As Kyan learns more about her past, the dreams occur more frequently and with more details. Through the montage techniques—such as editing fragmented images, rapid travelling shots, and fading—the spectacle enters an expressionistic space in which Kyan duels with her nightmarish memories and a dual identity.

In a blue-lit scene, Kyan is shown on her bed sleeping, but apparently, she is struggling with bad dreams. A fast travelling shot shows Modaber in the same room searching through Kyan’s wardrobe to find the dress he saw in the documentary. The viewer realizes that the other side of the room, where Modaber stands, is not tinted blue but almost grey, barely lit with a lamp that Modaber holds. In this way, Beizai aesthetically makes a physical and spatial separation between Modaber and Kyan, who are virtually living in two separate worlds. Modaber ruthlessly throws one dress after another on the bed where Kyan is sleeping. The frenetic tracking shots move from right to left to show Modaber’s hysterical behaviour and Kyan’s suffering in her sleep. These rapid travelling shots are repeated several times, but in the last tracking shot from right to left, first we see Modaber. Then the camera moves rapidly and the viewer expects to see Kyan but, surprisingly, sees Modaber once again. It takes few seconds to realize that this is not his image but its reflection in the mirror. The camera travels another half circle to focus on him again. This seeming violation of the 180-degree rule would metaphorically suggest that Modaber is extremely absorbed in his thoughts. The sequence is shot with a wide-angle lens in medium to close-up shots, which results in the distortion of the image of Modaber, the shape of the room, and Kyan’s bed. The sequence illustrates the way in which Beizai engages in the interplay of images and memories and raises questions about the reliability of image and memory in recovering the past and reality. This idea recurs, albeit in different forms, throughout the film.

The close-up shots in which Kyan’s face fades away with a dazzling light suggest the change of time and space as she passes from the “real” present time to a surreal moment in the past. These scenes particularly focus on the inner life of a character and her personal pains, which is emphasized by the graphic account of her nightmares that Kyan relates to her therapist. The scenes with the therapist are clipped and the dialogues are elliptical and accompanied by an illustrated account of her surreal dreams. In illustrating the dreams, long takes are used frequently, showing Kyan running in an endless hallway. Kyan keeps on going through a long hallway but she arrives nowhere. In these scenes, Kyan is filmed in a far shot and
the ceiling of the hallway is highlighted through high angles—to emphasize her enframed powerlessness. Long takes also recur in the rainy scenes, accompanied by the sound of thunderstorms, where Kyan passes an alley or steps down never-ending stairs while Modaber is shown spying on her from his car.

The past, in general, is signified by black and white shots, including the scenes that visualize Kyan’s mother. Other instances are the old Tehran paintings and the pictures of the film crew, which show them in the process of filming the documentary. All of these black and white images—which are less clear than those in colour—are actually more explicit and even illuminating in terms of revealing Kyan’s past than the many images of Kyan in the present. For instance, when Modaber interrogates Kyan, who is tired and distressed, the reverse-angle shots that show Modaber from Kyan’s point of view are blurry and unclear. It is as if Kyan feels more at ease with her internal thoughts than with the external reality. External reality is merely an intrusion of her consciousness. The deliberately blemished editing of Perhaps Some Other Time matches Kyan’s deeply problematic identity.

Perhaps Some Other Time, like many of Beizai’s films, engages fast editing along with fast camera movements that involve occasional long takes. This incorporation of a montage-based filming, along with mobile camera movements, puts a brake on the realist effects of the narrative. In a similar way, the light contrasts in this film enhance a dramatic and emotional effect. The black and white scenes, while signifying the past, also connote a historical aura as these scenes resonate with the rhythm of ta’zieh, the Shi’ite Passion Play. In a ta’zieh, all of the players wear black and white or neutral-coloured outfits except for one character, Shemr, who is to murder Imam Hussein and who usually wears red. After the death of Imam, all characters are represented in black except for Imam’s murderers, Shemr and Yazid. Employing black and white scenes and light contrasts in the film is reminiscent of a ta’zieh scene, which in turn brings a historical connotation. All these effects enhance the viewer’s consciousness of the fact that a narrative, like a play, is a manipulated and constructed product.

Finally, Modaber locates Haqnegar, the man whom he suspects of having an affair with Kyan. He finds out that Haqnegar owns an antique shop and arranges to visit him personally. Surrounded by antique objects, Modaber enters a world that has little to do with the present time. By viewing these objects in a dark cellar that looks distant from the outside world, Modaber becomes somewhat conscious of (the significance of) the past. The antique shop is reminiscent of formal history and the objects and accounts that are—selectively—preserved from the past.
Paradoxically, in his quest to know his wife, he discovers a great deal about formal history and historically “significant” objects. For instance, he sees a watch given to Nasser al-din Shah by Queen Victoria, Shah Hassan’s armour, and Changiz Khan’s stamp. These objects, however, fail to attract Modaber’s attention. On the contrary, it is a “historically insignificant” picture, as Haqnegar calls it, that captures Modaber’s interest and increases his suspicion, since the woman in the picture noticeably resembles Kyan.

Both Kyan and Modaber find little evidence in the official, documented history in their separate but related quests. Neither the antiques that embody the official history, nor the birth archives, nor Modaber’s documentaries reveal the past. On the contrary, Kyan’s true identity is recovered through a reconstruction of Kyan’s personal memory, as well as through her search in more intimate spaces like pictures, family albums, and homes. In Haqnegar’s home, both Modaber and Kyan are surprised when they see Vida, who looks strikingly like Kyan. In fact, by portraying the resemblance between Kyan and Vida, many questions are answered for both the characters and the viewers. In succeeding shots taken with static cameras, we see the twin sisters, who both look troubled. Subsequently, the fragmented shots of Kyan represent her trauma. The subliminal flashbacks signify another expressionistic moment in Perhaps Some Other Time. They portray Kyan and her shadow on the wall, and yet the shadow/parallel shot does not match Kyan’s position in the room. In fact, the shadow resembles Kyan’s mother in her routine activities. This is a vital moment for both twins, Kyan and Vida, as it reveals the past.

Vida—who feels that her mother blames her for having had to give up her twin sister (since the mother could only take care of one of them)—tries to recreate the lost history. She presents a picture of herself and her lost twin sister, Kyan. The viewer is now fully informed that the time and space in the present are in fact anchored in the past and that history has intruded on the present through the old pictures of a family album. This recalls a passage in André Bazin’s “The Ontology of the Photographic Image” in which Bazin describes the “charm of family albums”:

Those gray or sepia shadows, phantomlike and almost undecipherable, are no longer traditional family portraits but rather the disturbing presence of lives halted at a set moment in their duration, freed from their destiny; not, however, by the prestige of art but by the power of an impassive mechanical process: for photography does not create eternity, as art does, it embalms time, rescuing it simply from its proper corruption. (14)
In a similar fashion, family albums turn into a significant space in the film, even more significant than the hegemonic and institutionalized written history. It is in this family album, or “embalmed time,” that Kyan finds her lost identity. She can finally see her childhood image “at a set moment,” in Bazin’s words, belonging to the past—a past she never saw in the family albums of her adopted parents. She is seemingly living in the present time, but as the pictures represent, her identity is fully attached to the past; it is “change mummified,” as Bazin says (14–15). Nevertheless, Kyan’s identity is not destined to be mummified in her past. Having been estranged from her self, she now moves to free the self from the photographs, as well as her past, in order to craft a new identity through reconciliation with the present moment. When Modaber says, “We should go and visit the lady and gentleman who raised you,” she replies, “mother and father.” The whole set of events in Vida’s house—from the moment the film crew sets up the filming equipment, to Kyan and Vida’s first sight of each other, and finally, to Modaber’s response to their invitation (“perhaps some other time, we will visit you”)—signifies a ritual through which Kyan transforms to embrace her adopted parents as her “real” parents. More importantly, in a ritualistic manner, Kyan, who has been so concerned about her past identity, transcends time and comes to terms with her own past.

As in many other films by Beizai with similar figures, Kyan metaphorically signifies the modern collective identity lost in the institutionalized history. She recovers her identity and refreshes and refashions her memory in less formal but cozier spaces forgotten in our collective memory. In these informal, domestic spaces, insignificant objects, such as pictures and paintings, become significant. The antiques and the picture of Kyan’s mother in Haqnegar’s store, Vida’s expressionistic paintings, Modaber’s film stocks and other film equipment, and Kyan’s family albums all attract the viewer through shots with limited movements, pans, and tilts. In Perhaps Some Other Time, antiques denote the characters’ ties with the past. This is reminiscent of Alain Renais’s Muriel ou le temps d’un retour (1963), in which objects define the clichéd lives of the characters in the film. In Muriel, as Crissa-Jean Chappell observes: “These middle-class people live in a world of objects. In a way, their banal existence has allowed them to become objects as well. Their hopeless lives revolve around objects instead of communication with others. They can’t free themselves from their rigid patterns of existence. The characters’ wasted lives resemble dusty antiques.” In contrast, the characters in Perhaps Some Other Time manage to leave history behind. In their journey of recovering and re-establishing their identities, they strive to know themselves and the past. Nevertheless,
the objects and their signification of the past do not imprison these people in history. Their examination of the past merely paves the way for the characters’ growth in the future. Therefore, while Renais employs antique objects to reveal the characters’ imprisonment in past memories, Beizai uses the same objects to liberate the characters from past. In *Perhaps Some Other Time*, although the portrayal of these objects emphasizes the significance of the past in a modern understanding of the notions of self and identity, the objects do not constrain the characters in their move toward the future.

It is important to note, however, that although Kyan transcends time and comes to terms with her past, knowing her past is crucial in her definition of the self. In other words, the “present self” in *Perhaps Some Other Time* is not separated from the “historical self.” What was missing in Kyan’s search for her identity was her mother, who recurs in her dreams. In fact, for Kyan, getting to know her mother, and thus a part of her historical self, becomes vital because it is the reconstruction of her past that reconstitutes the interactions of her present. In the closing sequences of the film, Kyan finally succeeds, through her newly found sister, in reconstructing her past. She learns about her mother and finds a meaningful answer to the question of her identity. Thus, it is the existence of her mother that adds contextual meaning to Kyan’s life. *Perhaps Some Other Time* interrogates the relevance of the modern social subject unaware of her past.

Beizai’s film raises similar questions about imagistic authenticity in documentary, a genre engaged with realities of the world. As mentioned above, in the documentary about air pollution, the apparently natural smoke, we are told, is artificially made. In contrast, the heavy smoke that looks unnatural to Modaber is said to be natural. The woman in the documentary who is identified by Modaber as Kyan turns out to be Vida. The film’s conflation of fact and illusion is also evident in Beizai’s ironic choice of the surname Modaber, meaning “prudent” or “farsighted,” for Kyan’s husband, who is unaware of Kyan’s thoughts, fears, and real identity. Another question that arises is to what extent Haqnegar—literally, “the one who sees the truth”—is accurate about the history of the antiques he describes. Furthermore, in a broader perspective, viewers might wonder if Beizai, to convey his point, is manipulating them by confusing fact and fiction.

Beizai’s reflexive cinematic techniques problematize our understanding of facts on a different level of reality—the off-stage reality. Susan Taslimi’s performance as three different figures—Kyan, Vida, and the mother—provides a self-referential frame to the potential artificiality of so-called reality as the basis of history. Owing
to the deliberately similar makeovers for Taslimi in her three roles, the audience easily recognizes her as the same person and is encouraged to remain critically distant from the fictional layer in which she plays three different roles. This keeps the viewer conscious of the dramatized nature of a constructed historical account. Another self-conscious decision—a counter-cinematic practice that blends fact and fiction—relates to Kyan’s rediscovery of her sister being shot by Modaber’s film crew. Kyan’s new identity is to be “documented” in the same way in which the official history was recorded. In a text-oriented culture, people, accustomed to “documented” history, tend to accept it uncritically. The sequence with the presence of a film crew to document a historical moment, however, challenges our unconsciously uncritical acceptance of documents. This “performed” sequence of the film suggests the idea that history is “made” or “constructed.”

The thematic structure of Perhaps Some Other Time relies on the power of the image, as this is a cinematic production that challenges history by reimagining its neglected aspects. Moreover, the film is anchored in the concept of “imagination” in its portrayals of Kyan’s dreams, Modaber’s false speculations, and Kyan and Vida’s imagining and recovering of the past. For instance, Kyan observes, reproduces, and retains images in her memory. Remembering and recovering identity in Kyan’s life does not take her to the past. Kyan, as a modern person, was a stranger to her self because she did not know about her past identity. The power of the imagination, by the end, separates her from the past as well as from reality as she faces the future. As the title of the film suggests, she may return to her roots to reconsider the past “some other time.” In the present, though, she looks forward to embracing future possibilities.

The notion of constructing history is not only seen in Perhaps Some Other Time. In fact, much of Beizai’s filmmaking is deeply engaged with the (re)construction and deconstruction of modern history. In particular, the filmmaker has explored extensively the issue of reconstructing the image of women. No other Iranian director has considered gender issues and the remythification of women’s representation more thoroughly than Beizai.

CULTURAL AMNESIA AND THE REHISTORICIZING OF WOMEN LOST IN (FILMIC) HISTORY

The release of The Stranger and the Fog (1974), Beizai’s fourth feature, unleashed new possibilities in the Iranian film industry. The Stranger and the Fog was a landmark
film because of its mythic language and, more importantly, because it established a cinematic convention that was to historicize and remember women. In terms of form, as both Iranian filmgoers and film critics have noted, this film was an innovative and groundbreaking experience in Beizai’s filmmaking (Naficy 277; Mehrabi 167). Before the making of *The Stranger and the Fog*, Beizai was mostly engaged in directing realist films with explicit social concerns, as in *Uncle Moustache (Amu Sibilu, 1970)*, *Travel (Safar, 1971)*, and *Thunder Shower (Ragbar, 1971)*. In *The Stranger and the Fog*, however, Beizai employs an unprecedented mythological style in narrating the story of Ayat and Ra’na and their challenges with mysterious forces that they encounter both on land and in the sea. The people who are portrayed in this film do not seem to belong to any particular ethnic group; rather, they are mythical figures in an unknown time and location. The village in which the story is set is a mysterious coastal community, the narrative is allegorical, and the plot is unrealistic. The motivation behind the characters’ actions and fights seems very simple but unknowable. In narrating the story of the villagers and the sea inhabitants, Beizai uses a metaphorical language. This film was praised mostly for its complex and novel *mise en scène* and film grammar. As Naficy notes, Beizai spent two years and more than $300,000 to accomplish this project (277).

In my view, the importance of this film lies in its unparalleled focus on women and their exercising of power. In fact, *The Stranger and the Fog* initiated a different kind of cinema that disturbs gender conventions to historicize the portrayal of women, who have generally been depicted in Iranian cinema through a culturally normative lens. This approach is seen not only in explicitly commercial films—what is known as the *filmfarsi* genre—and popular movies but also in Iranian new wave films.

The 1960s was a defining moment in the history of Iranian cinema with the birth of the new wave movement, which enriched the national cinema and brought international gravity to Iranian films. Although these films were highly engaged with social problems and were momentous productions in terms of their original cinematic stylistics, they dealt primarily with male issues, with few exceptions. *Bita*, made by Hajir Dariush in 1972, was one of those rare films with a central theme of femininity. The fact that the film script was written by Goli Taraqqi, a prominent female writer of the time, may explain this unprecedented focus. Googoosh, the most popular pop singer in the pre-revolutionary period, played the role of Bita. Although Dariush had, both intellectually and aesthetically, invested in the film by hiring Taraqqi and Googoosh, *Bita* was not recognized as an important movie in
the 1970s. This film, along with its gendered focus, was soon forgotten and largely omitted from the history of Iranian cinema.

To explore how the new wave films dealt with gender issues, I re-viewed many of these films. Surprisingly, both locally and internationally acclaimed films like The Cow (1969), Gheisar (1969), Reza motori (Reza, the Cyclist, 1970), Aqa-ye Halu (Mr. Simpleton, 1970), Sadeq, the Kurdish (1971), Still Life (1974), The Secret of the Treasure of the Jinn Valley (1974), and The Deer (1974) either ignore women altogether or give them a secondary and conventional role.

During this period, even critically acclaimed films such as Still Life and The Cow that dealt with poetic representations of life from a philosophical standpoint did not offer a realistic depiction of women. Although the new wave films made at this time had a socialist political agenda, the themes are explored through the male gaze. Generally speaking, the dominant trend in those years was to focus on the representation of masculinity, which resulted in either ignoring women or in a shallow personification of female figures in subservient roles. Women in such films appear in one-dimensional roles like victims of sexual mistreatment (in Gheisar), sufferers of male harassment (in The Postman, 1972), and seductresses (The Secret of the Treasure of the Jinn Valley). In the absence of a real portrayal of women, films such as Gheisar and Sadeq, the Kurdish—impacted by the cultural currents of the time—typically emphasize the personification of male actors who embody the characteristics and representations of power or the frustrated masculine power that is suppressed. The main themes in these films relate to social class, social mobility, and injustice.

In the realm of popular cinema, the robust masculine physique of actors such as Mohammad Ali Fardin, Said Rad, and Behruz Vosuqi, complemented by the powerful, deep voices of actors like Nasser Malek-Moti‘i (because the voices were not synced in most of these films, the directors had the option of choosing the most pleasing voices for dubbing), established a male-dominated aesthetic in the Iranian film industry. The persona of these actors was characterized by energy, charm, and sexual vigour. In this era of Iranian film history, male authority is a given: it never meets with female resistance. Thus, the representation of femininity suggests a voiceless and static role for women to “sustain” the social control and the “normal” parameters of gender behaviour. The starlets—including Googoosh, Foruzan, and Puri Banaii—were chosen from the most beautiful actresses and singers of the time to meet the standards for portraying the objects of desire of the handsome actors. These female figures were “important” to the narrative because
of their supporting role to the male figures. Moreover, by employing these young starlets with their attractive physical attributes and expressive bodies, the directors and producers were responding to the market imperatives of the time. Minor actresses would usually perform in dance sequences to fulfill the masculine gaze by displaying the female body. Although new wave cinema was addressing social problems, it operated in this stylistic mode, to a certain extent, in films such as Hatami’s *Touqi* (1970) and Kimiai’s *Gheisar*. Most of these films were narrated in a realistic style; however, the gender representation was not based on the reality of Iranian society because the films erased the multi-layered and diverse identity of half of the Iranian population, being women.

Although Beizai chose a surreal *mise en scène* in *The Stranger and the Fog* and employed a highly allegorical language, the film’s concerns are realist since it reimagines both men and women who are confronting problems that could occur in everyday life. As already mentioned, this film portrays the relationship between Ra’na, a widow living on the seacoast, and Ayat, a stranger who mysteriously appears on the shore. Sea creatures persistently haunt Ayat, even following him from the sea to the village; they symbolize the mystical or “unknown” forces of life as we do not know who or what they are. At one point, when Ayat acquires new scars while stabbing a sea creature, the viewer may wonder whether these creatures actually do exist or whether they symbolically represent different aspects of Ayat’s personality. Similarly, Ra’na is troubled by her dead husband’s ancestors. The village council decides that if Ayat wishes to stay in the village, he should marry a local woman. Ayat, in return, asks for Ra’na’s hand. The villagers reject the suggestion, but Ra’na accepts his proposal. In deep focus shots—which Beizai employs very rarely—Ra’na is portrayed in the foreground against the villagers, who are shown in a foggy background. The deep focus shots and the foggy setting create a mysterious atmosphere. Moreover, as Naficy notes, this type of camera work represents Ra’na’s isolation and distance from the rest of the villagers (279). Ra’na and Ayat are both strangers to their surroundings. They are not at home either on the land or in the sea. Therefore, they start fighting with each other on both land and sea. As critics including Naficy (277) and Behzad Eshqi (293) indicate, Beizai has rehearsed Iranian and Japanese rituals in this film. In *The Stranger and the Fog*, Beizai’s meticulous gaze reconstructs these rituals. In fact, in this film, conventionalized and conventionalizing rituals of any kind are abandoned in favour of crafting new conventions. As a deviation from the hierarchy of power and privilege, the hegemony of male dominance—here represented by the village council and Ra’na’s in-laws—is problematized. Through
rejection of behavioural conventions in personifying Ra’na, traditional and patriar- 
chal codes of behaviour are being questioned.

This inclusion of the female perspective becomes increasingly visible in Beizai’s 
films. For instance, in his next film, *The Ballad of Tara*, made just before the 
Revolution, the leading female figure, Tara, rejects subordination as a rural widow. 
There is even a tendency toward adventure in her characterization as she finds out 
about a mysterious sword in her grandfather’s belongings and faces the Historical 
Man in the woods. Thus, refashioning conventionalized gender representations 
becomes more controversial in *The Ballad of Tara*. Unlike Ra’na, Tara has no match 
between men in her village and thus becomes a heroine without an equal hero.

As a cultural production, cinema is both a reflection of and a response to the 
society that it represents. It is therefore all but impossible to investigate films with-
out considering their social and historical implications. Although analyzing the 
formal elements of films is instructive, a purely formalist approach, one that stud-
ies film as a self-contained vessel of immanent meaning, would not represent the 
significance of, for instance, Beizai’s historicizing practices in *The Stranger and the 
Fog* and his subsequent films. It is only through exploring films in their histor-
ical and sociocultural contexts that we can fully appreciate their meaning. Iranian 
cinema, as a cultural and artistic discourse, interacts with other cultural discourses 
and with institutionalized and noninstitutionalized systems. Beizai’s different gaze 
and his attempts to reimagine women in urban, rural, historical, and modern set-
tings have been a response not only to the Iranian film productions of his time but 
also to the written, official history of modern Iran that excluded women from his-
toriographical accounts. In Beizai’s films, this reappearance of the female segment 
of society redefines the relations between men and women.

Historical narratives and the collective national memory depend upon history 
as *construed* by historians. For the most part, these historians have been men, who 
have no stake in questioning the foundations of patriarchy. As a result, it has been 
the historians’ particular gaze that has constructed the history of gender relations 
and, to a certain extent, social gender arrangements. In a general sense, it could 
be argued that all historical accounts are ideological products. Ana Maria Alonso 
proposes this idea when she states:

> All histories, whether spoken or written, are produced in an encounter 
between a hermeneutics and a field of social action which is symbolically con-
stituted. . . . Much of this encounter takes place “after the fact”; histories are 
retrospectives because the contours of the past are finally delineated and fixed

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from the vantage point of the present. Thus, the contingency of history-as-action is always mitigated by the backward gaze of history-as-representation which orders and explains, which introduces teleology hardly evident at the time of the original events. (34)

Alonso’s contention holds true in terms of Iranian historical accounts. As Afsaneh Najmabadi points out, “what is considered in those narratives as unimportant and what is thus lost in those histories becomes productive of national forgetting” (174). The history of modern Iran was self-consciously a history of men. Najmabadi demonstrates that Mehdi Malikzadih, in his account of the Iranian Constitutional Revolution, presents a male-oriented history. This emphasis is conveyed through his use of the words man and men (mard and mardan), “which in Persian do not carry the potential meaning of ‘generic human being(s)” (Najmabadi 180), with reference to the main focus of events. In Malikzadih’s account of the Constitutional Revolution, the exclusion of women, except in brief digressions, is justified on the basis of his belief that women were socially excluded from the revolutionary activities. Other sources of history are not drastically different from Malikzadih’s text in this respect. As a result, women in general seem to be absent from the collective national memory.

In The Story of the Daughters of Quchan: Gender and National Memory in Iranian History, for example, Najmabadi revives a narrative that had disappeared from the cultural memory. She tells the story of women and girls who were sold by “needy peasants to pay their taxes in a bad harvest year—1905, the year preceding the Iranian constitutional revolution” or “taken as booty in a raid by Turkoman tribesmen against a village settlement” in northeastern Iran (1). For a few years after the event, ordinary people, Muslim preachers, and social democratic militants remembered this story in the form of poetry and prose, street songs and satire. However, the event vanished from subsequent narratives of that Revolution and was thus erased from the cultural memory (Najmabadi 1–9). Since the story of the daughters of Quchan was not categorized with “histories of grand ideas and great men,” such as the ones written by Fareydun Adamyyat and Malikzadih (Najmabadi 174), it became the victim of national amnesia. Ironically, the notion of gender was a central structuring category in the making of Iranian modernity in the beginning of the twentieth century. As Najmabadi states:

Concepts central to the imagination and construction of a modern Iran were envisaged in terms related to concepts of femininity and masculinity. Nation
(milat), for instance, was largely scripted as a brotherhood—at least until the first decade of the twentieth century, when women began to claim their space as sisters in the nation. The modern notion of vatan (homeland), on the other hand, was envisaged as female—as a beloved and as a mother. Closely linked to the maleness of milat and the femaleness of vatan was the multiple load of the concept of namus (honor), which shifted in this period between the idea of purity of woman (‘ismat) and integrity of the nation. (182–83)

By remembering the story of the daughters of Quchan, Najmabadi carries out “a recuperation of women into the national narrative and of gender into historiography” (8). In the process of writing a different account of Iranian history, scholars such as Najmabadi “rewrite” women into the history of Iranian modernity that previously excluded women. What made earlier Iranian historiographical texts women-free zones was the political culture of the society.

Cinema as a cultural form of expression was no exception to this cultural norm. As discussed earlier, in many popular and art movies, women were subject to dehistoricizing practices that excluded them from the national memory, an exclusion that was reinforced by the artistic media. More recently, women have been represented more realistically in films such as The Stranger and the Fog that take a different approach toward gender issues. Beizai’s reconstruction of national memory became even more significant in his post-revolutionary productions. His films depict the hidden layer of modern history ignored for decades. His filmic version of “history” of culture, however, does not rely on the official or canonical version of history. On the contrary, Beizai challenges the long-standing segregation of mythos (myth) and logos (truth) through the prominence of mythology and popular arts in his aesthetic sensibilities. Thus, the main emphasis in his films is on the recovery of a gender-oblivious history. In this recovery process, Beizai reimagines women not through factual narrative but through metaphorical language in fictional situations that are deeply rooted in the realities of Iranian society.

In a society where women are depersonalized and viewed collectively, Beizai’s filmmaking is an oasis for female personal expression. In his films, concepts such as revolution or explicit social concerns are set aside in favour of a more imaginative and private artistic vision that examines gendered issues in the light of questions related to modernity and identity. Beizai’s films highlight women’s issues of the sort that had, in the past, rarely been allowed to surface. In The Stranger and the Fog, notions of masculinity and femininity, which are absent both from previous Iranian films and from national memory, are interrogated and redefined. Unlike
the women in films such as *Gheisar* and *The Cow*, Ra’na is not relegated to a secondary role. On the contrary, she is a powerful figure who is able to decide her own destiny. When compared to Ayat, Ra’na has equal opportunities for domination and subjection. The representation of women in *The Stranger and the Fog* is somewhat different from Beizai’s previous films. Although *Thunder Shower* portrays a woman (Parvaneh Ma’sumi as Atefeh) as a central character in the film, she is depicted as a physically attractive but vulnerable woman who needs to be protected and loved. Atefeh’s ultimate fate depends on the psychological battle between her two lovers—a teacher who is a stranger to the community and a butcher who is considered an insider and a legitimate patriarchal power in the neighbourhood. In a radical move from the character of Atefeh, *The Stranger and the Fog* shows an independent woman who ignores the authoritative words of the village council, marries a stranger, and initiates a search for the truth in a misty maritime bay. The foggy setting of the film metaphorically suggests the complications in the journeys of women and men who strive to discover the meaning of life.

*The Stranger and the Fog* established a new gendered discourse in Iranian cinema, but it is in *The Ballad of Tara* that gender identity and power truly come to the fore. Here, Iranian film culture is completely transformed in the portrayal of Tara as a mythic woman who faces the battle of life completely on her own. The powerful performance of Susan Taslimi, as Tara, in a primitive setting evokes the power of nature, love, fertility, and pleasure. Nevertheless, Tara represents more than a force of nature: she also embodies a multi-dimensional human being who is capable of working, thinking, and making choices on her own terms. In one scene, Tara says, “I work for every single bite that I grab, each breath that I take. My life is all about working hard and doing it all by myself. So why shouldn’t I laugh my head off or act silly when I wish?” In this film, the exercising of power, a male commodity in the national memory, is delegated to Tara. The dependent femininity of Atefeh in *Thunder Shower* is now replaced by a sober independence in the representation of Tara. In contrast, the male figures in *The Ballad of Tara* are either immature (such as the boy who falls in love with Tara) or insignificant (such as Qilich, her brother-in-law). The most important male figure in the film is the Historical Man. The inverted gender depiction in *The Ballad of Tara*, however, results in an unexpected softness in the personification of the Historical Man, despite his ironically ferocious physical appearance in his war outfit.

This deconventionalizing of gender representation, which began with *Thunder Shower*, is further developed in Beizai’s subsequent films. As opposed to Kimiai or
Taghvai, both of whom employ expressive actors with obvious physical presence, Beizai’s leading actors are not physically powerful figures. For instance, Parviz Fanni-zadeh, a short, slim man with thick spectacles, who was cast as the leading figure in Thunder Shower (the teacher), does not represent the conventional masculine attributes of vigour and sexual energy. Other examples of Beizai’s deconstructing of gender representation include his casting of ordinary-looking men (e.g., Hussein Parvaresh in The Crow and Parviz Pur-Husseini in Bashu, the Little Stranger [1989]) next to dazzling and powerful actresses such as Ma’sumi and Taslimi.

Male figures in Beizai’s films, including Bashu, the Little Stranger and Dog Eat Dog, are generally more vulnerable and less sophisticated than the female figures. In a number of post-revolutionary films, such as Ibrahim Hatami-kia’s The Glass Agency (1998) and Kimiai’s Snake’s Fang (1990) and Protest (2000), the emphasis is on masculine energy and power in combat in the absence of female agency or even a female presence during the Iran-Iraq war and the post-revolutionary social chaos. Beizai’s aesthetics does not follow this patriarchal model. The male figures are not portrayed as morally or physically superior to their female counterparts. The male dominance that is illustrated in films such as The Glass Agency is, in some cases, replaced with a kind of male weakness in Beizai’s films made after the Revolution. This weakness is represented in Bashu when Na’ii’s husband, a farmer, is shown as a disabled man, returning from (apparently) the war front. In Dog Eat Dog, the moral weakness of Mu’asir, in contrast to Golrokh’s honesty and strength, depicts a problematic masculinility. In his post-revolutionary films, Beizai tends to depict men as lacking maturity and/or morality; at times, they are shown as having childish sensitivities. This immaturity is portrayed in the personification of the Historical Man and Qilich in The Ballad of Tara.

Through a “recuperative practice,” Beizai’s cinema portrays women with a rule-breaking dignity and boldness. From Tara to Golrokh, women are not camouflaged within a culturally approved rhetoric of home, marriage, and motherhood. Tara, for instance, a widow who shows a reluctant tenderness toward her two children, is not depicted as a conventionally nurturing and concerned mother. Similarly, Asieh in The Crow does not embody a self-sacrificing wife absorbed in the household affairs but rather a woman involved in her career as a teacher of the deaf and in her growing plants in a greenhouse of which her husband is not aware. Na’i’s striving in the rice paddies and at home is more in harmony with nature than culture; she is a single mother with two children who has to work hard to survive.
The moral power of these women is not based on their sexuality but is grounded in their work and their mystical and psychological journey of self-discovery and self-exploration: this makes them groundbreaking strangers in their surroundings. Although Tara is at times portrayed as eager and sensitive in relation to men (especially in the romantic incident with Qilich in the woods), on other occasions, she is capable of acting without feeling in her encounters with men.

In general, gender identity in Beizai’s films is not embedded in cultural practices or social reality. Furthermore, Beizai’s gender representation does not rely on the collective Iranian memory or on established cinematic conventions. His films map out different relations of power and gender in the Iranian cultural system in terms of masculinity and femininity, gender dominance, subordination, and resistance. The filmic treatment of women in Beizai’s films rehistoricizes and remythologizes relations between men and women by representing a more liberated gender identity that does not match the gendered behaviour in the official Iranian history and mainstream cinema.

NOTES

1 For more on a similar movement in other artistic media, see Shayegan.
2 Malikzadih’s study is regarded as one of the canonical texts of Iranian history, along with works by two other early-twentieth-century historians, Ahmad Kasravi and Firiydun Adamiyat.

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