

COUNTER-MEMORIES IN
IRANIAN CINEMA

Edited by
Matthias Wittmann and Ute Holl

EDINBURGH
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Edinburgh University Press Ltd
The Tun – Holyrood Road
12(2f) Jackson's Entry
Edinburgh EH8 8PJ

Typeset in 10/12.5 pt Sabon
by IDSUK (DataConnection) Ltd, and
printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd,
Croydon, CR0 4YY

A CIP record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 1 4744 7975 2 (hardback)
ISBN 978 1 4744 7977 6 (webready PDF)
ISBN 978 1 4744 7978 3 (epub)

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to thank the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF) for supporting our three-year project 'Afterimages of Revolution and War. Trauma and Memoryscapes in the Post-revolutionary Iranian Cinema' (Basel, Seminar for Media Studies, 2016–19), our graphic designers Caitlin Murphy and Ronny Hunger for the design of our book cover (and conference poster), *Iran Nameh* (especially Gholam Reza Afkhami) for permission to publish Bahram Beyzaie's text, Philip Farah (Beirut/Lisbon) for his critical and meticulous proofreading, Geraldine Lyons for copy-editing the manuscript, Anna Lord for creating the detailed index, and last but not least Gillian Leslie, Fiona Conn, Sam Johnson and Richard Strachan at Edinburgh University Press for their helpful advice, support, and generosity.

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INTRODUCTION

Matthias Wittmann and Ute Holl

In the year 2014, the *Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris* presented an extensive exhibition entitled 'Unedited History. Iran 1960–2014.' It was there that we came across Narmine Sadeg's installation 'Office of Investigation into Diverted Trajectories' (2014), a multimedia interpretation of Farīd ad-Dīn-e 'Attār's mystical Persian folk tale *The Conference of the Birds* (*Manteq al-tair*). 'Attār's allegorical tale on the difficult quest of hundreds of thousands of pilgrim birds for an ideal king – the mythical Persian bird called *Sīmorgh* – ends with the thirty remaining birds having to recognize that the longed-for king is nothing other than the reflection of their own existence: *sī-morgh* also means 'thirty birds' in Persian. Sadeg's installation presents those birds who managed to reach their ideal as dead, stuffed birds, set in a circle. Even if they reached their goal, they are dead by the time they achieved it. This seems to be the fate of mankind too. However, the installation also includes the paths and trajectories of those other birds that were not able to reach their destination. They are sketched on acrylic glass, lined up and suspended on shelves in the background, as if part of an (counter-)archive of lost, deviated, and unrealized paths indicating alternative histories of the present: 'a waiting room of history,'¹ as Dipesh Chakrabarty would say; and the socio-critical writer, teacher, and translator Samad Behrangī (1939–68) would maybe add: *Let's talk about a waiting room for little black fishes.*²

As in Narmine Sadeg's installation, and as in any serious historiography, the concern with Iranian history challenges its investigators to search for the

archive of the failed or forgotten. What is at stake then is the quest for the crushed and silenced individuals or collectives and the question of representation: how to turn the grand narratives of revolution and war into minor or singular stories and memories of revolt, uprising, refusal, and dissidence?

As the work of Narmin Sadeg demonstrates, the grand narratives themselves are strategies of eliminating the traces of defeated or deviant movements, forces, and projects. And so are historical caesuras, grand events, and the official days of their commemoration, which, in terms of the exhibition's title, 'edit' history. This is also true for the newer and more recent Iranian history. But how could one unedit the history of Iran between 1960 and 2014? Can we dispense with the term 'revolution' in describing the events of 1978/9? Why should we? And how else can we describe the procedures when, after a period of unyielding social movements and revolts against the injustice of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's regime, and after the regime had imposed martial law on central cities and the Shah eventually left the country in January 1979, the Ayatollah Khomeini returned from exile and an Islamic Republic was declared on 11 February? These events could be told in political terms, as the long due overthrow of a monarchy which had pompously celebrated its 2,500th anniversary in 1971 while the largest part of the population became increasingly impoverished, eventually demanding participation; or as an effect of economic megalomania, the Pahlavi family investing the fortunes of the oil boom – enabled and supported by the rapidly rising energy consumption of the Western industrial states – to build Tehran as a glittering megacity, investing in real estate speculation and (German and French) nuclear reactors, while few of Iran's towns and most of its villages still had no piped water; it could be told as a moral tale, a cultural resistance against the hegemony of US American cinema, or as a social utopian tale of the exploited, the suppressed working class raging against the arrogant display of capitalistic wealth, struggling for emancipation, with the oil workers as the *avant-garde*; it could be told as an episode of the Cold War – including the CIA-organized coup to topple Iran's democratically elected prime minister Mohammad Mossadegh in 1953 – and it could also be told in terms of a salvation history, a religious awakening, the departure from Western secularism towards a communal or even communist culture of a Shi'ite Imamate, a movement towards a 'postcolonial contramodernity,'³ etc.

The films of these years, made before and after the revolution, give diverse, heterogenous, but nevertheless precise accounts of the period. They give voices, bodies, and gestures to peasants and the poor, women and children, to villains, exhausted employees, rebellious students, rural migrant workers, and courageous prostitutes in a Brechtian tradition alike. They show the environments of bourgeois couples as well as of farmers surviving in wastelands or artisan cultures in Tehran's south. While all of these films, as noirs, melodramas, comedies, folk tales, or documentaries, help to understand the events

of 1978/9 – or of the later revolts – they defy simple explanation, they opt for ambiguity and paradoxes of history, for the grotesque and the miraculous of its powers, for the singularity of revolts. The films embody the thirty birds that make up the *sī-morgh* as well as the tattered corpses sketched on the sides. They call for the negotiation of historical terms such as revolution or revolt and reconsider the issue of remembering.

When Michel Foucault went to Tehran in the autumn of 1978 as a 'reporter of ideas' for the Italian newspaper *Corriere della Sera*, he rarely spoke of revolution but used the term of uprising (*soulèvement*) instead. His predilection for the term – a matter of constant controversy – was driven by a specific ethical attitude: 'to be respectful when a singularity revolts,' as he wrote in 1979 in his article 'Inutile de se soulever?' ('Useless to revolt?').⁴

Rather than denouncing, yet again, Foucault's enthusiastic endorsement for the Iranian Revolution, it might be more interesting to question the motives and reasons of his enthusiasm. In his book *Foucault and Iran: Islamic Revolution after the Enlightenment*, Behrooz-Ghamari Tabrizi emphasizes the fact that it was primarily the 'constitutive ambivalence' – a term borrowed from Edward Said – of the revolutionary movement which attracted Foucault, since the Western binary model of *secular vs. religious*, or *progressive vs. reactionary*, was no longer useful when speaking in terms of 'revolt' (*soulèvement*) in Iran.⁵ Thomas Bauer, Professor of Arabic and Islamic Studies at the University of Münster (Germany), studied the role of ambiguity in past Islamic societies.⁶ According to him, Islamic culture for centuries had been characterized by its extremely high degree of tolerance to ambiguity and pluralism while modern and also contemporary fundamentalists of all sides – sides that are mutually related – deny the possibility of coexisting truths and perspectives, conveying totalitarian claims to truth camouflaged as 'alternative truths' into the world. Only authoritarian regimes and ideologies try to make a *tabula rasa* of the past and to purify memory.

Accepting the gift of pluralism and ambiguity also means accepting the coexistence of many possible *histories of the present*, as Foucault termed it.⁷ The notion of counter-memory refers to these possibilities. It maintains that there are memories that are barred from hegemonic history, that have to struggle to enter it at all, but that are, nevertheless, present and produce effects. Such memories have no credibility and no official (technological, medial, social, public, etc.) frame of articulation. For these subjugated memories that have the potential to destabilize official success stories and normative orders of re-remembering, Foucault coined the term *counter-memories*, not to be confused with 'counter-revolutionary' memories. They may be understood to complement revolutionary trajectories, albeit with different means. Within the mainstream memories, these memories and their bodies remain invisible, marginalized, subjugated by power effects, epistemic oppression, and knowledge-producing techniques. In his essay, 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History' (1971), Foucault understood counter-memory as

'a transformation of history into a totally different form of time.'⁸ Counter-memories are not negations of memory; their 'counter' operates tactically on many fronts and junctions of power relations, disturbing final meanings, totalitarian conclusions, and the self-evident within the historical perspective. A genealogical perspective views memory – what could be remembered – as a product of power relations. It is not a matter of searching for the origin of remembered experiences, nor of narrating linear developments, but rather of *separating* 'from the contingency that has made us what we are, the possibility of no longer being, doing, or thinking what we are, do, or think,' hence giving a 'new impetus, as far and wide as possible, to the undefined work of freedom,'⁹ and one could add: *to the undefined, incomplete, restless work of memory*. Archaeology then, as opposed to hegemonic history, is the method to carve out the 'instances of discourse' and the lines of rupture which produce and shape what we think, say, do, and remember.¹⁰

A genealogical and archaeological perspective as proposed by Foucault remembers history against the grain, excavating and reactivating silenced experiences and buried struggles. Certainly, counter-memories as insurrections of subjugated knowledge are tactical interventions into the present. It is from the 'here and now' that they produce disruptions, epistemic frictions, tensions between the remembered time and the time of remembering, and make available a multiplicity of possible trajectories as alternative histories of the present. And most importantly, Foucault's claim for a transformation of history into counter-memory, his 'epistemology of resistance,'¹¹ does not (re)master the past from the sovereign position of a timeless subject or in the name of an established truth – e.g. the truth of an accomplished revolution – but instead renders the present vulnerable to forgotten pasts. If the archive is the 'law of that which can be said,' as Foucault claims in the *Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969),¹² we should then look for counter-memories that do not obey this law while appropriating at the same time the archive and the tools of power in a tactical manner: to re-member the archive. What is interesting for an archaeology of counter-memories, is the locus in which the plurality of resistances and the converging alternative pasts meet. In our case, this place is the material of the Iranian film, as its aesthetic forms are the result of particularly complex power relations, counter-memories, and artistic interventions. An analysis of the tensions underlying cinematic memoryscapes in Iran has to take into consideration the mechanisms of repressing, urging, and searching within the cinematic forms of remembering. For this purpose, we would like to extract and adapt the following questions on the methodology of archaeology from Foucault's book:

The description of the events of discourse poses this question: how is it that one particular statement (*énoncé*) appeared rather than another? [. . .]; we must grasp the statement in the exact specificity

of its occurrence; determine its conditions of existence, fix at least its limits, establish its correlations with other statements that may be connected with it, and show what other forms of statement it excludes [. . .] we must show why it could not be other than it was, in what respect it is exclusive of any other, how it assumes, in the midst of others and in relation to them, a place that no other could occupy [. . .] A statement (*énoncé*) is linked rather to a 'referential' that is made up not of 'things', 'facts', 'realities', or 'beings', but of laws of possibility, rules of existence for the objects that are named, designated, or described within it, and for the relations that are affirmed or denied in it [. . .] The referential of the statement forms the place, the condition, the field of emergence, the authority to differentiate between individuals or objects, states of things and relations that are brought into play by the statement itself; it defines the possibilities of appearance and delimitation [. . .].¹³

This implies that all approaches which hinge on origins, continuities, and causal relations must be criticized. By contrast, the archaeological approach considers cinematic memoryscapes as a non-linear compaction and layering of different times and competing interests. An archaeologist does not look for a homogeneous space of memory but for ruptures of transmission and gaps, for sudden redistributions and divisions in the field of memory, and thus for entirely new forms of positivity. In Foucault's view, even censorship is not only a power that prohibits and represses sexuality, but it is also a *positive technology* that prescribes, inscribes, and proliferates very specific discourses on sexuality – or meta-discourses on the power of censorship (over sexuality, film distribution, etc.). In other words, *if power always said 'no,' then no one would obey it.*¹⁴

The 'archive' – as the law of what can be said, as the body and system of rules of formation – also includes non-discursive elements, as Foucault will emphasize at the end of his book: the law of what can be shown and re-membered, the codes of perception, and the enunciative 'fields of memory.'¹⁵ Looking for counter-memories in the history of Iranian cinema does not simply mean to look for alternative memories that resist the main stream of memories and the officially fabricated success stories of revolution, war, and sacred defense. An archaeological perspective that re-members the memoryscapes of post-revolutionary Iranian cinema has to grasp the statements, forms, and procedures in the exact historical specificity of their occurrence, from revolution (1978/9) and wartime (1980–8) across different political periods: the so called 'reconstruction period' under the presidency of Rafsanjani; the Second Khatami reform movement after Khatami's election (1997–2005); the green movement after the re-election of president Ahmadinejad (2009), and Iran's recent 'No Future' movement (Hamid Mohseni) under President

Rohani. This perspective takes into account different generations and trans-generational ruptures, unfinished projects and hidden paths, transcultural exchanges and translations, material histories and cultural heritages, genre histories and transgressions, impure memories and shadows of invisible films, state violence and the insistence of erased memories through multiple layers of memory politics. Of course, public memories do not insist or emerge without specific frameworks and triggering encounters. Many Iranian films – officially approved as well as underground films – enable those encounters and provide frameworks through which people feel empowered or encouraged to participate in struggles of recognition and practices of – collective and individual – remembering. At the site of Iranian cinema, (counter-)memories and (counter-)histories intersect in intricate, ambiguous, and ‘multidirectional’ ways, as Michael Rothberg would say: ‘I suggest that we consider memory as *multidirectional*: as subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing; as productive and not privative.’¹⁶ We are talking about *screens* with many layerings which blur the boundaries between individual and collective memory and which refer to different pasts that are most inadequately structured with chronological ‘before/after’ dichotomies (before/after 1979 or 1953 or 1905 or . . .). Even though much of what Rothberg writes about multidirectional memories can also claim validity for Iranian memoryscapes, Rothberg underestimates the power of institutions and their contradictions over the structure of memoryscapes.¹⁷ ‘Even in the government there isn’t a single, fixed point of view; so existing censorship does not necessarily comply with the government’s own laws! . . . It is within the gaps between these different points of view, ideologies and “tastes” that we find the space to realize our films,’ Rakhshan Banietemad once said in an interview.¹⁸

What is crucial here is the fact that films not only document ideological trends in line with the interests of dominant institutions (state, church, party, etc.), they can also act as a counterforce, elaborating a counter-history or a counter-analysis of society, as Marc Ferro suggests in *Cinéma et Histoire* (1977). The films discussed in the following all offer access to ‘nonvisible zones in the past,’¹⁹ as Ferro would say, zones which are at the same time impossible to remember and impossible to forget. Within the bounds of the past as given by the *institutions of history* (Ferro/Foucault), those zones are not (re-)presentable, not appropriable, and their depiction must often take the form of an enigma for interpretation.

According to Ferro, who considers film as an ‘image-object’ and proposes a cinematographic reading of history, fiction and non-fiction films can intervene in ‘dominant ideological currents’ and ‘give back to society a history it has been deprived of by the institution of History.’²⁰ They can arouse a ‘new awareness’ of overlooked or repressed aspects. Thus, film may be considered as both ‘source’ and ‘agent’ of history, shaping ‘psycho-socio-historical zones’²¹

and sometimes even replacing history itself through imaginative recreation of the past.

Ferro’s plea for the value of cinema as counter-history is not in favor of historical revisionism or relativism, nor is he indulging in the game of ‘post-truth,’ ‘anything goes,’ or ‘alternative truths,’ which always demands a superior throne from which a higher truth can be claimed and enforced. Nietzsche’s unconventional perspectivism (‘There are no facts, only interpretations’) is the exact opposite of alternative truths, it is about defending ‘true alternatives’²² as the condition for a more appropriate understanding of objectivity, since his approach has to include experience and the exchange of standpoints (akin to the Soviet montage theory and practice). Ferro’s confidence in the laboratory of cinema and the value of the intrinsic ‘counter’ of history, memory, and society is a plea for a sensitivity that allows us to see and to remember with multiple and different eyes.

An archaeology of counter-memories in Iranian cinema after 1979 is attentive to ‘impure,’ not ‘purified’ memoryscapes, to counter-memories that allow eccentric voices and perspectives to interact with mainstream ones, interrogating epistemic exclusions and hegemonies, producing frictions between memory claims and versions of history.

While the revolutionary years of 1978 and 1979 have long been regarded by film scholars as a radical caesura and rupture in transmission, new perspectives are currently emerging, laying the focus on resonances and recursions, reappropriations and refashionings, also across the revolutionary divide. In this respect, it could be useful to recall the ethnological meaning of *memoryscape* (as used by Clifford Geertz among others), a concept that ‘refers to a structure of supra-individual commemoration that is both diachronic and synchronic, i.e. consisting of practices and objects that are inherited and through which a connection between generations is established, as well as coexisting simultaneously and functioning as materializations and procedural objectivizations of memory.’²³ The cinematic memoryscapes and after-images studied in this volume are themselves composed of different layers of temporalities and tenses, of latent time forms and moments that insist, from the time before the Iranian Revolution into the period after 1979 and up to the present.

First of all, there is an effort shared by the chapters to bring into play a plurality of histories, theories, and cultures rather than one only, and, accordingly, to be attentive to various forms of remembering and memory. A second issue traversing the chapters is a heightened concern for the barred, the unheard, and the tacit, uncovering symptoms of a counter-memory in the form of aesthetic disturbances and fissures. It is here that, thirdly, the chapters converge in their approach by taking seriously the material side of audiovisual media and their structures of distribution as well as the different forms of official and unofficial media archives. The chapters are connected in the conviction that the ‘hidden

history' is always visible, audible, tangible, even if symptomatically so. *Screen memories* (Freud) show through hiding and hide through showing. The levels of complexity and stratification of Iranian screen memories call for specific studies. They are multidirectional in manifold, ambiguous ways, consisting of concrete, material fragments that resonate with resistant meanings and point to silenced wounds.

Even though the chapters develop their own, very context-specific notion of counter-memory, they are structured by axes, nodes, and questions that divide the book into four parts: (I) An Archaeology of Possible Futures; (II) Material Matters: Memory, Accessibility, Translation; (III) Interstices. Niches. Impure Memories, and (VI) Transgenerational Gaps and Transmissions.

PART I: AN ARCHAEOLOGY OF POSSIBLE FUTURES

In the first chapter, 'The Incomplete: Film, Politics, and Remembering the Past,' Tara Najd Ahmadi explores Kianoush Ayari's unfinished documentary *Tāzeh Nafas-hāl/The Newborns*, which he shot in the streets of Tehran with a handheld 16 mm camera during the summer of 1979 – shortly after the toppling of the Shah's monarchy. The film documents a unique transitional point, when everything still seemed possible and nothing was yet decided, and thus confronts us with the crucial question: 'What is to be done after the revolution?' Najd Ahmadi takes the open character of the film (which can be felt even today), its unfinished form, and the revolutionary fervor it documents as a starting point for a meticulous close reading that explores the aesthetic qualities of *The Newborns* and sheds light on the emancipatory and resistant potentials that can be found in unfinished projects. With Najd Ahmadi's reading, Ayari's film becomes accessible as a great counter-archive of 'erased history where we can look for the lost pieces of our collective memory' (p. 29)

The incomplete and buried history – mainly of the Marxist revolutionary discourse and left activism in Iran – is also the subject of Sara Saljoughi's contribution 'The Hidden Half, or the Temporal and Collective Politics of Counter-Memory,' which focuses on Tahmineh Milani's semi-epistolary film *Nīmah-yi Panhān/The Hidden Half* (2001) on the delicate situation of a former activist from the period immediately following the revolution. The protagonist's dissident past, which has been completely hidden from her husband, a prominent judge, 'allegorizes the repression of Marxist revolutionary discourse' (p. 33) before and after 1979. Saljoughi discovers in the film a network of multidirectional, transgenerational, and transtemporal counter-memories and carves out the thread of solidarity which the film forges between different times and generations of women as a basis for a new community. She shows how the film positions the counter-memories at the intersection of class and gender by presenting the intimate sphere of the upper-class couple as a protected space

where memories become possible, which in turn transforms the boundaries and possibilities of this very space; and by presenting the 'counter-memory of the revolutionary moment as a critique of the ways in which women's issues were overlooked or marginalized in leftist movements' (p. 41). Saljoughi also undertakes a rehabilitation of the film genre 'melodrama' as a production site of counter-memories, for it was also Milani's use of melodrama elements – a genre that 'has been deemed a "woman's genre" in terms of its aesthetics and mode of address, compared with Iranian art cinema' (p. 42) – that led to the film being marginalized also in the eyes of film scholarship: "'the hidden half" may also be put to work in thinking about the disciplinary practices of Iranian cinema studies' (p. 43).

The third chapter, entitled 'Counter-Investigations: On Matchboxes, Black Boxes, and other Forgotten Futures,' is a conversation between anthropologist and filmmaker Chowra Makaremi and philosopher and image theorist Emmanuel Alloa around *Hitch: An Iranian Story* (2019), Makaremi's internationally acclaimed first documentary feature. Based on a long-running work using auto-fiction and visual anthropology, the movie confronts state violence in post-revolution Iran, documenting a family history of political disappearances and executions in the 1980s, and its memorializing through different frames of denial within the country and in exile. Bodies disappeared, graves and mass graves were destroyed, silence still prevails. To retrieve the facts and the places, one must have access to the archives, but these are missing; one must go back to the places and shoot images, but the access into the country is denied; one must find witnesses ready to speak on their own behalf, but this exposes them to danger and prosecution. One is faced with the challenge of undertaking an archaeology of silenced voices, memory holes, and sealed crypts. What is it that is needed in order to break this silence? *Hitch* is permanently traversed by this ambivalence between a gaping lack and the almost obtrusive presence of certain material things, which allow to cling to an otherwise erased memory' (p. 52). What the movie 'counter-investigates' is not only 'denial' as a cognitive and emotional experience, but also the complicated and sensitive steps of recollecting a personal story that belongs to a collective history, of digging in films, pictures, and personal archives in order to find some images that help to trace missing memories, forgotten faces, unexplained absences. The conversation between Makaremi and Alloa continues the 'counter-investigations' of the film with other means and further questions circling around a set of crucial concerns: how could silence and symbolic violence be broken? How to loosen the grip of denial and the intimate scratches of power? How can facts be re-established and acts of repair be performed? How can memory holes be filled or at least shaped with appropriate words, images, gestures, concepts, and even mythological narrations from another culture, such as the story of *Antigone*?

PART II: MATERIAL MATTERS: MEMORY, ACCESSIBILITY, TRANSLATION

In 'An Archaeology of Access: Materiality, Historiography, and Iranian Cinema,' Blake Atwood expands the media archaeological approach by delving into the material and immaterial history of *Dukhtar-i Lur/The Lor Girl* (1933), one of the few films from this period that still exists, circulating in different digital resolutions, forms, versions, and rips. With the unprecedented level of digital accessibility of the film (e.g. on video-sharing platforms like YouTube), which contrasts with the decades of inaccessibility, when the National Film Archives carefully protected its original 35 mm format, Atwood's contribution takes the sonic and visual distortions as a starting point to excavate counter-histories of access, distribution, and circulation. In the course of his meticulous, archaeological digging into a profusion of digital and digitized glitches, blips and blurs, (water-)marks, spots, and scratches, and other 'effects of a worn-out videocassette [. . .] fossilized in digital form (p. 65),' Atwood redirects our attention towards a wider network of agents, connections, and coordinates, a network in which the stories of institutions and underground distributions intersect. In this dive through a palimpsest of 'poor images,'²⁴ as Hito Steyerl would call them, Atwood's chapter unsettles 'the teleological assumptions undergirding the narrative of modernity' and expands the implications of our concept *counter-memory*: 'Just as an individual memory might challenge the master narrative of modernity, so too can the digital version of a film – simultaneously frozen in multiple points of time – expose the shortcomings of an official history' (p. 66).

While Atwood carves out the counter-memories amidst material distortions fossilized in digital form, Negar Mottahedeh in her contribution 'Black Seals: Missive from Iran's National Music,' places the genealogy of counter-memories within a history of exchange between the East and the West. Focusing on *Delshodegān/Love Stricken* (1992), a highly popular Iranian post-revolution fiction film by director Ali Hatami, Mottahedeh's enunciation-oriented investigation tracks down the transcultural exchange nesting in the practices of inscriptive and reproductive technologies. In her chapter, Mottahedeh carves out the layers and levels of Hatami's ambiguous landscape of split enunciations, which undermines its own national statements, illustrating 'how undeniably the nation and its cinema is produced on the grounds of cultural confluences, wedged in the contradictions of a forked tongue' (p. 97). Set in turn-of-the-nineteenth-century Iran, *Love Stricken* 'traces the peregrinations of a group of early twentieth-century musicians to Paris to record traditional music on the newly invented gramophone' (p. 87). While on the surface the film presents characters who find their identity in national and traditional music, on a media-reflexive level it undermines precisely this claimed identity since the music turns out to be a product of cross-cultural influences, studio recordings, enunciative incommensurabilities, and synchronizations of the non-synchronous. Iran finds

itself in transit through reproductive technologies and the interplay between self-export and re-import. 'The film's self-reflexive return to the history of the technologies of reproducibility uncovers dormant counter-memories' (p. 97). The more the film explores the past in search of the authentic nation, for a pure and purified self, an auratic 'here and now,' the more ambiguities and hybrid elements become visible and audible, embedded within the film's technologies of representation and enunciative sources. National identity becomes a question of cross-cultural montage.

In 'Different Time, Different Space: Filmic Forms of Counter-Memory in Abbas Kiarostami's Koker Trilogy,' Ute Holl examines Kiarostami's Koker trilogy in terms of historiography, using genealogical procedures. Taking the cue from Nietzsche and Foucault, she argues that memory is a matter of constant translation, negotiating power relations as well as individual forms of resistance and resilience. It is a changing order whose content is shaped according to cultural techniques, discursive formations, and, above all, prevalent media systems. Memories are made of intrinsic connections between people, techniques, and practices; however, these can only be understood in reconstructing a discontinuous set of forces at work. In her contribution, Holl shows how Kiarostami is examining grand metaphors through very material aspects in confronting different cultural techniques of remembering. In negotiating the power inherent in things, such as the door and the pathway, or in the clash of different media, such as scripture and sounds, cinema and television, or in opposing particular spaces such as a stage and a filmset, Kiarostami's films bring out moments where memory as a collective or individual cultural technique falters and fails. In such moments of irritation and disturbances, Kiarostami is on the lookout for situations where memory becomes fuzzy or unreliable and, in collapsing, displays the boundaries of cultural grids at large. In the risky play of shifting identities, spaces, forms of authentication, and even language, a counter-memory makes its sudden appearance and affects what can be remembered, on screen and beyond.

PART III: INTERSTICES. NICHES. IMPURE MEMORIES

In 'Towards an Impure Memory: An Archaeology of Counter-Memories through Telescoping Lenses,' Matthias Wittmann undertakes a re-mapping and a re-examination of selected post-revolutionary Iranian films by using Walter Benjamin's concept of *télescopage* (telescoping) as briefly defined in his *Arcades Project* (1927–40). The '[t]elescoping of the past through the present' as understood by Benjamin locates the possibilities of re-remembering particularly in montage techniques, ruptures, and refractions, and not in continuity. Consequently, memories become a product of present constellations, forces, and spatiotemporal

overlaps. Departing from the observation that emergency rooms and editing rooms are a recurring motif in the history of Iranian cinema, Wittmann examines through telescoping lenses cinematic trauma- and memoryscapes that *change the law of what can be said, seen, and remembered* (Foucault). These lenses are at the same time intrinsic to the palimpsestic time structures of the examined films, producing ambiguities, collisions, and frictions, herein completely in line with the *principle of heterogeneity* (Foucault). Wittman shows how the post-revolutionary emergency rooms are transformed into editing rooms, from which new instances of enunciations and new grammars of post-traumatic remembering are established. The title 'Towards an Impure Memory' reacts to the attempted 'purification' of Iranian cinema after 1979. A cinema that puts into circulation impure (counter-)memories produces frictions between political promises and social realities, exposing the emptiness and abstractness of the revolutionary semiotics of continuity and purity as put forward by the ideological architects of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The atlas of counter-memories as elaborated in this chapter will also include counter-examples, i.e. purified memories from the 'Sacred Defense cinema,' thereby creating contrasts and demonstrating nuances between different forms of spatiotemporal constellations and tectonics. This archaeology of counter-memories will be undertaken through films from Mohsen Makhmalbaf, Morteza Avini, Ebrahim Hatamikia, Rakhshan Banietemad, Shahram Mokri, and Mohammad Hussein Mahdavian.

In her contribution, 'Seeking Love in the Interstices: Acousmatic Listening as Counter-Memory in Abbas Kiarostami's *Shirin* (2008),' Michelle Langford proposes a new close reading or, better, close listening of Kiarostami's film experiment. As is well known, Kiarostami's adaptation of the classical Persian tale of 'Khosrow and Shirin' – inspired by Nezami's epic poem and its retelling by contemporary Iranian writer Farideh Golbou – completely withholds the images of the story, allowing us instead to watch the faces of 114 actresses – all Iranian except one – as they themselves watch the film that we only experience acousmatically. While Kiarostami's self-reflexive attention to the act of watching has engendered a significant amount of scholarship that focuses largely on questions of vision, gender, and spectatorship, Langford focuses on the off-screen sounds, voices, and music, demonstrating how Kiarostami circumvents the hegemonic privilege of vision, which allows him to completely ignore the censorship guidelines. Langford argues that by rendering the love story acousmatically, Kiarostami makes audible a veritable 'blind spot' in Iranian cinema: romantic love, a figure that has been almost completely effaced in post-revolutionary cinema, returns as a counter-memory, 'one that reactivates the traces of an epic-poetic tradition and in doing so challenges the hegemony of censorship' (p. 147). The counter-memories nest in the 'richly allusive interstitial space between sound and image' (p. 163), encouraging affective listening and giving a sonic body to the woman's desires. Through this affective

listening, sonic *mise-en-scène*, and the art of *trompe l'oreille* the spectator is reoriented towards tantalizing taboos.

Counter-memories can also be tracked down where we least suspect or expect them to be, as Viktor Ullmann shows in his contribution 'Spiritual Counter-Memories of the War: Mohammad Ali Ahangar's Recent Contributions to the *Sīnemā-ye Defā'-ye Moqaddas*.' Although liberals are by far the most active group of filmmakers challenging the state's hermeneutical hegemony on the past, recent developments show a small niche of conservative religious films that intend to reinvent the 'Sacred Defense cinema' genre through a counter-reading of the Iran-Iraq War (and its aftermath). These films take their cue not from social criticism, as, for instance, Mohsen Makhmalbaf or even Ebrahim Hatamikia did in the 1980s and 1990s, but – and herein lies their subversive character – from a spiritual approach. The most prolific proponent of this niche is the Abadan-based director Mohammad Ali Ahangar. Starting with his first feature film, *Farzand-e Khāk/Child of Soil* (2008), all his popular works deal with war-induced traumas, re-interrogating the war and its spiritual ramifications for survivors. 'Ahangar paints a decidedly different picture of the war than the official state iconography' (p. 169). Ullmann explores in a sophisticated way the challenge posed by Ahangar's transgressions – especially in two of his later films, *Malakeh/The Queen* (2012) and *Sarv Zīr-e Āb/Cypress Under Water* (2018) – to the genre's discursive boundaries, and that precisely through the production of ghost- and counter-memories. Ullmann's case study is thus about counter-memories that operate from within the hegemonic symbolic order with its religious implications while breaking at the same time 'their mnemonic monopoly' from a spiritual perspective, which does not even shy away from the subject of suicide.

PART IV: TRANSGENERATIONAL GAPS AND TRANSMISSIONS

In his contribution '*Filmfarsi* as Counter-Memory,' Pedram Partovi also deals with the return, or rather the hidden afterlife and survival, of a supposedly disappeared cultural heritage: the passing of actor Nasir Malik Muti'i in May 2018 spurred a debate among Iranians about *filmfarsi* ('Persian-film'), the often-derogatory term that critics, industry people, and even fans have used in reference to the Pahlavi-era popular commercial cinema, and its place in 'national culture.' The passing in the year 2000 of another banned *filmfarsi* legend, Muhammad 'Ali Fardin, had invited similar public reactions and similar criticisms of the state media and judiciary for their shameful treatment of a national 'icon.' Partovi's contribution sheds new light on Iranians' 'faulty,' yet shifting, memories of the officially demonized *filmfarsi* since the Islamic Revolution. He argues in his chapter that *filmfarsi* has functioned as a counter-memory, an absent presence in the minds of millions, that decades of imposed

forgetting (or imposed memories) did not manage to extinguish, and as a counter-archive of images, sounds, icons, and motives 'that has problematized official ideas of Iranian cinema and national culture both before and after the Islamic Revolution of 1978–9' (p. 189). The afterlife of *filmfarsi* thus functions as an alternative account of the genealogy of the Islamic Revolution and is also a reminder of some sort of 'decadent past,' as Partovi shows in detail with films like Mas'ud Dihnamaki's *Ikbrajihah/The Outcasts* (2007), 'the rather transparent homage' (p. 199) to Iraj Qadiri's *Barzakhihah/The In-betweeners* (1982), whose attempt to pick up the conventions of *filmfarsi* led to the protagonist being banned from all state-run media.

In his chapter 'A Shadow for Invisible Films: A Way to Break the Monopoly of Image Production in Iran,' one of the most internationally acclaimed contemporary Iranian directors, Shahram Mokri, describes from his insider perspective the production conditions, the developments, and the socio-economic context that led to the emergence of a new generation of filmmakers in Iran, generally known as the sixth generation. As someone who studied film and started making films after the year 2000 (1379), at a time when more and more digital video cameras were coming into circulation, Mokri regards this digital revolution as a new opportunity for young filmmakers to challenge and outwit control mechanisms of the authorities who, for this reason, have tried up to the present day to discredit digital filmmaking. In order to show how the digital possibilities brought forth a new generation of filmmakers, Mokri gives novel and highly differentiated insights into the history of the dynamics between economics, technology, and aesthetics in Iran. A wide variety of phenomena is taken into account: from the bureaucratic claims of control over technical equipment (since 1979), the role of video recorders in keeping the visual memory alive, the divisions of the film system – 'cinematic vs. digital division' and what is called the 'Hitchcock/Tarkovsky dichotomy' – up to the generational gaps and conflicts that are also articulated in the use of different film techniques. One section also deals with the so-called 'Khosoulati industry' – a kind of oligarchic system of funding for allegedly independent films. Mokri portrays a nuanced picture of Iran's contemporary film scene and shows how digital film technology has become a tactical tool for shaping and circulating counter-memories. 'This generation has once successfully survived the old and useless rules that were imposed on it and created a new identity for itself despite the shapeless and ever-changing economy in place. This is what makes this generation hopeful that it can break the limitations once again' (p. 228).

In order to offer the reader the widest possible range of positions (and generational perspectives as well), we have decided to include a legendary paper by Bahram Beyzaie. Thanks to the precise translation of Amir Roshan, Beyzaie's article 'At the End of a Century' ('Pas az sad sāl') – written on the occasion of the 100-year anniversary of cinema and first published in Persian in *Iran Nameh*

(1996)²⁵ – is now accessible to a wider readership. The text is an attempt to give a first-hand account of the visual history of Iranian and Persian culture, from an Iranian filmmaker, dramatist, art historian, director, producer, and scriptwriter whose career stretched over forty-five years and who faced obstacles in filmmaking in both pre- and post-revolutionary Iran. There are various reasons why this article is still relevant, especially in the context of our book. Firstly, there are almost no publications and translations of Beyzaie's writings, neither in German nor in English. Hence, the translation is an attempt to introduce and celebrate one of the most remarkable filmmakers of pre- and post-revolutionary Iranian Cinema. Secondly, many issues raised by Beyzaie in this article are still relevant today, and especially relevant for this book's context. Beyzaie traces back the struggle with censorship and with what he calls 'absolutism' to the cultural history of Iran and Persia. Absolutism according to Beyzaie is not a political system as in the classic definition of political philosophy; it is a worldview which horizontally determines the relation between subjects, and between the subject and him- or herself, what Foucault would call *assujettissement* (*subjectivation*). Although cinema is a modern phenomenon, Iran's film industry, like the mural paintings of the medieval period before it, is a victim of the same absolutist control mechanisms and dominant traditional values. '[T]he traditional absolutism has now accepted the image, but more than anything else it has accepted the image of its own victory. [. . .] We have created such an elaborated system which, instead of being at the cinema's disposal, thinks that filmmakers have to be at its service' (p. 241). This is the core thesis of Beyzaie's rather pessimistic assessment.

NOTE ON transliteration

Most of the contributors have applied the Ijmes Transliteration System for Persian. Some of the contributors used a more simplified version or a variant of the table. In themselves, however, the chapters remain coherent and consistently adhere to a system. For almost all the names of renowned authors, filmmakers, film characters, and famous literary works, the common and predominant spelling of the names has been used and the diacritical marks have been dropped.

NOTES

1. Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe. Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 2000), p. 9.
2. See his revolutionary childrens's book *The Little Black Fish* (*Māhī-ye Sīyāh-e Kūchūlū*) from 1974 which was banned in pre-revolutionary Iran.
3. Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London/New York: Routledge 2004), p. 252.

4. Michel Foucault, 'Useless to Revolt?' (French original in *Le Monde*), in *Essential Works of Foucault 1954–1984*, Vol. 3: Power (New York: The New Press 2000), pp. 449–53, p. 453.
5. Behrooz-Ghamari Tabrizi, *Foucault and Iran: Islamic Revolution after the Enlightenment* (London/Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 2016), p. 59.
6. Thomas Bauer, *Die Kultur der Ambiguität. Eine andere Geschichte des Islams* (Berlin: Insel 2011).
7. See Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish. The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Random House 1977), p. 31.
8. See Michel Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Interviews*, ed. Donald Bouchard, trans. Donald Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press 1977), pp. 139–64, p. 160.
9. Michel Foucault, 'What is Enlightenment?,' ed. Paul Rabinow, *The Foucault Reader* (New York: Pantheon Books 1984), pp. 32–50, p. 46.
10. *Ibid.*
11. José Medina, 'Toward a Foucaultian Epistemology of Resistance: Counter-Memory, Epistemic Friction, and Guerrilla Pluralism,' in *Foucault Studies*, No. 12 (2011), pp. 9–35.
12. Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (London/New York: Routledge Classics 1989), p. 145.
13. *Ibid.*, pp. 30f., 103.
14. See Michel Foucault, *Dispositive der Macht. Michel Foucault über Sexualität, Wissen und Wahrheit* (Berlin: Merve 1978), pp. 35, 106. (Translation by the authors.)
15. *Ibid.*, pp. 64ff.
16. Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory. Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press 2009), p. 3.
17. '[. . .] pursuing memory's multidirectionality encourages us to think of the public sphere as a malleable discursive space in which groups do not simply articulate established positions but actually come into being through their dialogical interactions with others' (*ibid.*, p. 5). It can be assumed that these framework conditions as described by Rothberg will be very difficult to find, and not only in Iran.
18. Rakshan Banietemdad, 'Cinema as a Mirror of the Urban Image,' in Shiva Rhbaran (ed.), *Iranian Cinema Uncensored. Contemporary Film-Makers since the Islamic Revolution* (London/New York: Tauris 2016), pp. 127–46, p. 132.
19. Marc Ferro, *Cinema and History* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press 1988), p. 20.
20. *Ibid.*, pp. 15, 20, 29.
21. *Ibid.*, pp. 12, 83.
22. See Emmanuel Alloa, 'Post-Truth Or: Why Nietzsche is Not Responsible for Trump' (August 2017), <https://thephilosophicalsalon.com/post-truth-or-why-nietzsche-is-not-responsible-for-donald-trump/>
23. Alexandra Schneider, 'Ta-Ta Ta-Ra Ta-Ta Ra-Ra. 1991 – Kompressionsformate und Memoryscapes,' in Ute Holl and Matthias Wittmann (eds.), *Memoryscapes. Filmformen der Erinnerung* (Zürich/Berlin: Diaphanes 2017), pp. 255–74, p. 258. See also David Middleton and Steven D. Brown, 'Issues in the Socio-Cultural Study of Memory: Making Memory Matter,' in Jan Valsiner and Alberto Rosa (ed.), *The Cambridge Handbook of Sociocultural Psychology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2007), pp. 661–77, p. 670.
24. 'The poor image is a copy in motion. Its quality is bad, its resolution substandard. As it accelerates, it deteriorates. It is a ghost of an image, a preview, a thumbnail, an errant idea, an itinerant image distributed for free, squeezed through slow digital connections, compressed, reproduced, ripped, remixed, as well as copied and pasted into other channels of distribution' (Hito Steyerl, 'In Defense of the Poor Image,' in *e-flux*, Vol. 10 (November 2009), <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/10/61362/in-defense-of-the-poor-image/>).
25. *Iran Nameh*, Vol. 14, No. 3: *Special Issue on Iranian Cinema*.

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