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## *The 2019 Iranian Film Festival*

Ever since 2014, I have made the case for Iranian films on CounterPunch (see links to the articles below).

At the risk of sounding like one of those reviewers addicted to superlatives for Hollywood films that appear in full-page ads in the NY Times, let me say that the five films I have seen in advance of the [Iranian Film Festival](#) that opens next week at the IFC Center in New York on January 10<sup>th</sup> beat the pants off of Roma, Widows, The Favourite, The Green Book or any other films that have the inside track for Academy Awards.

They incorporate the elements that have draw attention to Iranian films worldwide for the past forty years, including a swan song for Abbas Kiarostami, a director/screenwriter that Martin Scorsese describes as having “the highest level of artistry in the cinema.” It is a supreme irony that a state with a well-deserved reputation for censorship is capable of serving as an incubator for great art but then again the greatest music ever written catered to the tastes of both church and nobility.

Let’s be grateful that the batch of five films discussed below, which push the envelope of Iranian cultural norms, can still be made. To some extent this reflects a cultural thaw under Hassan Rouhani who is determined to open up the country’s economy to foreign investors, even if Donald Trump is just as determined to keep the doors closed. I was ecstatic to see that one of the five films was directed by Jafar Panahi who I consider one of the world’s greatest directors. Though under house arrest between 2010 until 2015, he was still defiant enough to make a film in 2011 on an iPhone inside his home titled “This is Not a Film”

that was up to his usual high standards. He still cannot leave Iran, even if in film circles he is considered to be on a par with Kiarostami.

At the risk of indulging in hyperbole, I advise seeing as many of these films as possible at the IFC. They will remind you of not only how films can reach the level of fine art but provide insights into a country that is as important geopolitically as any on earth.

**Hendi and Hormoz (Friday, January 11, 9:30pm):**

If neorealism has gone out of style in most countries, especially in the escapist lost worlds of Hollywood, it still soldiers on in Iran. Thank goodness that Iranian directors are not interested in being fashionable. Using a cast of non-professionals, director Abbas Amini was a volunteer for the Association for the Protection of Child Labourers in Iran before making this film, a background that certainly must have helped him develop the two main characters played by non-professionals. They are Hendi, a 13-year old girl bride, and the 16-year old groom Hormoz, who we meet at the wedding of an arranged marriage on the island of Hormuz that is in the Strait of Hormuz, a strategic waterway that precipitated the Iran-Iraq war.

Neither Hormoz nor Hendi is prepared for marriage but somehow get over their initial wariness toward each other, the consequence of being expected to have intimacies with a complete stranger. As is the case with the classic neorealist films, poverty creates the plot line just as it did in “The Bicycle Thief” and many others. Promised to have a job at a local salt mine if he got married, Hormoz learns that the job has been given to another youth.

To survive, he becomes a smuggler but not of drugs, cigarettes, booze or the usual marketable commodities. Instead, he transports soil from Hormuz Island to the mainland where it commands a high price, especially in the Arab Emirates that have plenty of oil but very little arable soil. When a police patrol boat advances toward him in the dead of night, he throws the bags of soil overboard to avoid arrest. His boss Kamak then demands that he pay for the soil, thus creating a terrible crisis for the two young newlyweds.

Amini has only made one film before this one. Titled “Valderrama”, it stars Hamed Alipour, the non-professional who played Hormoz, as a Tehran youth who has taken the name of a Colombian soccer player. After being caught up in a dilemma like Hormoz’s, he is forced to flee Tehran. Amini pledged all of the film’s receipts to go to the Association for the Protection of Child Labourers.

**Sly (Saturday, January 12, 9:00pm):**

This is a send-up of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad by Kamal Tabrizi, who also made the satire “The Lizard” in 2004 about a thief who escapes from prison disguised as a mullah and henceforth slyly plays at being a holy man after the fashion of Silone’s “Bread and Wine”. After breaking all box office records within three weeks, it was banned from being shown in theaters and only became available as a DVD.

The Ahmadinejad character is named Qodrat Allah Samadi and is played to the hilt by veteran actor Hamed Behdad as a pious country bumpkin and Islamist activist whose roommate shares his politics. In keeping with their general cultural level, the roommate has a pet chicken who wears trousers. It is a sight gag that never grows old.

Samadi is a “red” but not the kind of red most CounterPunch readers are familiar with. Instead, this is the color of the Islamist party that is vying for control of the government with the “blues”, a party that shares the reformist program of the current President. Is this a reference to red state/blue state distinctions in the USA? I wouldn’t be surprised because toward the end of the film, Trump makes a cameo appearance, at least a billboard of Trump.

One day, Samadi leads a goon squad of red activists into a concert hall in order to prevent blasphemous music from being performed. When the audience pays insufficient attention to their demands to leave, Samadi begins yelling out “Bomb!” This does the trick as people race out. Thirty seconds after the auditorium has cleared, a real bomb goes off and Samadi becomes Iran’s number one hero for saving their lives. The cynical reformist blue party calculates that he can be an ideal candidate since he is obviously ambitious but not too bright. They hope to mold him into an ideal blue candidate, not knowing what they are getting into. He agrees to run for a seat in the Iranian parliament but keeps reverting to his Islamic roots no matter how much they coach him. It is a little bit like Peter Sellers’s hand rising in a Nazi salute in “Doctor Strangelove” involuntarily.

Many of the laughs in this film come from Samadi’s speeches that are filled with the kind of malapropisms Tony Soprano made famous and Shakespeare’s clowns before that. After he agrees to become the blue candidate, his red comrades break down in tears at a gathering of the faithful. Before making his case, he instructs his roommate to “Take the hen out of the men’s gathering.” When someone yells out, “Only friends backstab”, he justifies himself: “Now is the time for obligations and obtrusions”. When a puzzled comrade asks what “obligations and obtrusions” means, Samadi offers up a word salad: “Obligations and ontusions. Time to act! Profit and loss!” The meeting ends with him reassuring them that he will infiltrate the blues and turn them all into reds.

Clearly, Tabrizi views the two-party system in Iran as a joke. Maybe he can find the time to come over to the USA to make a film about our electoral circus.

**76 Minutes and 15 Seconds with Abbas Kiarostami (Sunday, January 13, 9:30pm)**

One might surmise that Kiarostami never went anywhere without a camera. The film begins with him and a friend driving along a country road in Iran after a heavy snowfall. He stops along the way and takes pictures of a dog in the snow, etc. It is equivalent to seeing someone like Jackson Pollock or Willem de Kooning on camera as they comment on the painting they are working on. To see the world the way one of the most visually oriented filmmakers of all time sees it is a priceless experience for any art or film major to take in but as well one for film lovers who have never held a paintbrush or a camera in their hands in their entire life.

Additionally, Kiarostami has a spell-binding personality, drawing you into his way of thinking. He is the consummate artist who worked in a variety of media, including a striking sculpture composed of industrial tubing made to look like trees.

Perhaps the most haunting moments of the film are when he recites lines from some of his favorite poets, including one totally unfamiliar to me: Nima Yooshij, a poet from the Azerbaijan nationality, the second largest in Iran. It suggests that Iranian poets are as neglected as the nation's filmmakers based on "Hey, People".

**3 Faces (Sunday, January 13, 7:15pm)**

This is the Jafar Panahi film referred to above and an unqualified masterpiece. The publicist requested that I hold off on a full review until March when the film opens in theaters so I will only offer what the IFC Center website has to say: "Well-known actress Behnaz Jafari is distraught by a provincial girl's video plea for help — oppressed by her family to not pursue her studies at the Tehran drama conservatory. Behnaz abandons her shoot and turns to filmmaker Jafar Panahi to help solve the mystery of the young girl's troubles. They travel by car to the rural northwest where they have amusing encounters with the charming folk of the girl's mountain village. But the city visitors soon discover that the protection of age-old traditions is as generous as local hospitality..."

**Sheeples (Tuesday, January 15, 7:00pm—closing night feature)**

Only 38 years old, director Houman Seyyedi has already made 10 films, none of which have gotten the kind of attention that Panahi, Kiarostami and Asghar Farhadi have received in the West. I am sure this will change with "Sheeples", a film whose title is derived from the observation that sheep will die unless a shepherd guides them. This is a metaphor for the family at the heart of this raw and brutal view of the Iranian drug

underworld reminiscent of films such as Scorsese's "Mean Streets" and Luis Buñuel's "Los Olvidados".

It tells the story of two brothers, one a methamphetamine dealer ruling over a slum neighborhood in southern Tehran and the other his younger and inept sibling who like Robert De Niro's Johnny Boy in "Mean Streets" can't stay out of trouble. Their sister is a hair stylist who is the family's black sheep because she had the audacity to have dyed her ponytail in a rainbow of colors. Even if it is hidden under a hijab, it is considered an insult to Islam by her brothers whose sense of ethics transcends normal understandings of hypocrisy. It is only their father who cuts her some slack. Despite his opium habit, he is less feral than his two sons.

This is a film that comes storming out of the gates like a turbocharged Maserati. The pacing is lightning-fast and the dialog is spoken at a rate of 30 words per second, most of it scabrous put-downs between people who would describe themselves as good friends.

"Sheeple" won the top award at the Fajr Film Festival in Tehran this year and deservedly so. It marks an openness to the nation's problems from the elite. It is an omen that better things are in store for a country with a great civilization going back thousands of years that could teach a Donald Trump a thing or two about who is the real barbarian.

Finally, in the interests of transparency, the Kiarostami, Panahi and Seyyedi films are sold out but I would urge you to keep your eyes out for their theatrical release this year. These are truly great films that people will be watching and admiring decades from now while most of the Oscar winners for 2018 will have been long forgotten.

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[Is Abbas Kiarostami the World's Most Talented Film-maker?](#)

[Scenes from the Class Struggle in Iran](#)

[Documenting Discontent: Talking With Jamsheed Akrami About Iranian Cinema](#)

[An Iranian Tragedy](#)