

## The Impact of the Social Change on Criticism in Iranian Cinema (1979-2012)

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### Abstract

*Film criticism in Iranian cinema dates back to the advent of film making in the country. However, most audiences do not read the criticisms and only elites and limited number of members of the society, mostly elites, count as the audience. All in all, based on the historical documents, some criticisms have now and then had significant effects on some film makers and film making trends. Criticism has proved to be influential on film-makers in previous years. Moreover, social changes have had a similar influence on criticism and Iranian cinema. The present study is an attempt to investigate the impact of social changes on criticism and the effect of criticism on film making trends in Iranian cinema through historical and descriptive analysis of the data and documents on the issue from 1979 to 2012. The author believes that criticism and cinema can have a very influential relationship on one another and that this relationship can improve Iranian cinema.*

**Keywords:** Cinema; Iran; Criticism and Interpretation; Social Changes.

### Introduction

Criticism in Iranian cinema dates back to the advent of cinema in this country. Since then many different methods of criticism became popular in Iran, most of which were influenced from social conditions. These criticisms have sometimes led film makers to improve their works. For example, Masoud Kimiai changed the type of his movies under the influence of a criticism on the movie 'BiganeBia'<sup>1</sup> by Parviz Davai. In so doing, Kimiai gave up making semi-western movies to a movie such as *Gheysar* with a theme which was

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<sup>1</sup> Come, the stranger

completely Iranian and traditional. Also, blossoms of *Moje No<sup>2</sup>* Cinema and rise of film makers with novel thoughts at the end of 1950s was due to the support of Iranian critics on this trend. On the other hand, cinema in Iran and the related literature has been constantly influenced by political and social events. Regarding investigation of reciprocal effects the society and cinema have had on one another and those of cinema and criticisms, to the authors' knowledge, no comprehensive study has been so far carried out. Furthermore, with regard to the history of criticism in Iran, no comprehensive analysis has been made except for "history of film criticism in Iran: Kaghazi Cinema<sup>3</sup>" by Mohamad Salimju<sup>4</sup>, "history of film criticism in Iran" by Majid Roshani, "investigation of chapters in the history of film criticism in Iran" by Reza Dorostkar, and a case in Journal of Cinema Criticism, etc. So, to the authors' knowledge, no comprehensive article or investigation was found on the influence of social changes on criticism. Therefore, further research are required to investigate the issue.

### Methodology

The present study has adopted a historical, documentary and descriptive method. To this aim, it used analytic and library methods, interviews with film makers, critics, researchers and university professors to collect the necessary data.

### *Sociology and Cinema*

Social change occurs through a long period in the society for one or more generations; investigation of such a social change requires a comprehensive historical analysis (Roche, 2010). Social changes or social upheavals mean changes in infrastructures of basic organs or social conditions along a time period. Physical environment, political organization, religion and culture are factors that influence social changes. This term initially entered into sociology by Ogburn in 1922.

Twentieth century embodied the creation of fascinating human phenomena and cinema industry and television is not an exception to this. Moreover, attraction of cinema is obvious in the today's world. Further, it has had an undeniably significant role in educating, guiding, directing, and framing of the public. Therefore, cinema has always been deemed as one of main tools in affecting the public, which is mostly governed by the states or the private sector.

Critical theoreticians in the current world deem everyday life as the most important premise for the production of meaning and consider art as the most significant situation for the reflection of complexities and controversies in everyday life (Lajevardi, 2009; p. 44) and so they believe that cinema is very valuable as it reflects social conditions. Basically, the hypothesis of reciprocal relationship of art and society and the effects one has on another is an old and strong assumption. Even if artists keep away from everyday life concerns and feel separate from the society, some hidden traces of social environment would be found in their works.

Jinkz and De vinio (Rvedrad, 2004) believe that film needs to be treated as a social phenomenon in which either, in one hand, some traces of social influences are found and, on the other hand, thoughts and beliefs of the film maker are reflected. This is because the spirit of the society is reflected in the framework of the art piece through the artist' will. The influential relationship between cinema and society is among the very first issues in sociology which was incorporated into cinema. Undoubtedly, enhancement of the quality of cinema

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<sup>2</sup> New Trend

<sup>3</sup> Paper Cinema

<sup>4</sup> Etemad Newspaper, No. 3741

works would have significant effects on growth of intellectual, cultural, social and even commercial dimensions of the society.

Theory of reflection is an important theory by which the reciprocal relationship between cinema and the society might be investigated. The basic assumption in this theory is that themes of movies in every era are in fact reflections of social status in that era. According to theoreticians of reflection, nothing is more effective than investigation of and analysis of movies which are produced and shown in that society when one intends to thrust internal layers of that society (Javeri, 1998).

Cinema sociology is defined under art sociology. In cinema sociology, the reciprocal relationship between cinema and society is noticed; i.e., the social conditions that cinema pays attention to, reflects it and criticizes it. Paying attention to the reflection of production, distribution and releasing movies in the society is another aspect of issues in cinema sociology.

Method of criticism in Iranian cinema is formed under the influence of cultural, economic, political changes or some other factors, which overwhelm groups of critics for some time. According to basics and premises that formulate and develop them, such influences can be temporary or permanent. In the present study, attempts have been made to analyze the history of the trend of social changes in Iran and, consequently, to investigate the influence of these events on Iranian Cinema and entrepreneurship in the country. Finally, influence of social changes on characteristics of film criticism in each era would be explored, too.

## **Influence of Social Changes on Criticism**

### *1. Islamic Republic*

Since 1978 a set of social changes gradually took place in Iranian society after the Islamic revolution. As a result, many attitudes changed, social relation transformed, economic relations changed and generally new social and cultural formed in the society. Nevertheless, not all these happened suddenly took place since 1978. But, revolution was firstly initiated in elites' thoughts and points of view and referent groups of the society. Since 1970s, two opposite attitudes formed in the society: religious and left parties. Criticism was not an exception to these influences and a number of critics investigated cinema from a left point of view. As an example, BaharIrani 's criticism on the movie 'Safar-e-Sang'<sup>5</sup> is an indicative of the influence of left party on Iranian cinema:

“For the first time, Kimiai approached the concept of social basis in its closest meaning in Safar-e-Sang where he looks upon *social clashes* as nothing but possession. The glory of a social clash which is formed in light of a philosophical belief gives a movie an epic sense. It is only through removal of specific and isolated symbols and reaching general rules that one can come to a sublime and valuable art; Kimiai is the one who has figured the value of this aestheticism” (Ghukasian, 1995).

The late critics in Iranian press before 1978, published in Keyhan and Ayandegan newspapers, were mostly overwhelmed with social goals of the movies. However, positions were not harmonious: a number of controversies existed and a group of critics approached analysis of movies from the viewpoint of structuralism and values within the cinema.

In days of the republic, a constant question was whether a cinema is needed or not. That is because in this period, furious parties fired more than 124 cinema in standing against the cultural-social policies of the Pahlavi regime (Sadr, 2002). However, Ayatollah Komeini's speech in Behest-e-Zahra was a clear response to the situation when he expressed that we are not against cinema but we are against corruption (Imam Komeini, 1999). In this sense, power layers of the new political system start thinking about a novel role for cinema. A cinema which would serve for the values and ideals of the Islamic republic. Nevertheless, no one

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<sup>5</sup> A stone's trip

could offer a definition for Islamic cinema. In addition, majority of revolutionaries could not accept the current status of cinema in the country and still deemed it as a symbol of corruption. They desired closing the current cinema and establishment of a totally Islamic cinema. In such condition, Imam Komeini's speech in Behesht-e-Zahra in 1978 supported a healthy cinema and closed the way on the opponents.

The first cinematic criticisms in the press in the first months after the revolution was replete with political mottos, including phrases such as social commitment and art, etc. Often, critics analyzed the movies of the time from a political viewpoint; if a movie was in line with their points of view they approved it and if not they criticized it.

In 1979 when was no certain legal definition for cinema and management of the cinema did not have a stable status, the first film *Faryad-e-Mojahed*<sup>6</sup> (by Mehdi Madanian) started being produced and shown in public.

Iran's atmosphere was completely political in 1979 and 1980 and not a great number of people were interested in cinema and reading critics. In this period and up to early 1980s, most movie critics were concerned with technical points, summary of the movies, actor's plays, directors' backgrounds and issues such as reproduction of the plot, occupations, places of living, interests, religion, etc. Also, noting political and social points was the main topic in some cases while in others the directors' or actors' personal and occupational background were criticized. Political approach was the salient characteristic of criticism in this period. Hardly could critics separate their writings from political matters and intellectual puzzles.

## 2. War

In 1981, movie release confronted increasing limitations and most foreign movies could not get a license. In addition, the same year movies displayed in the national movie channel reached its minimum. Censorship opened its way to the channels and Indian movies and most Iranian old movies were totally removed from the channel. Anyway, war and the conditions in the society had created a different atmosphere.

In early 1982, a magazine called 'magazine of cinema in video' was published, which was neither a monthly magazine nor a quarterly. However, its establishers then started a cinematic magazine 'film' which then became the first regular cinematic magazine after the revolution; in that, movie criticism was paid attention and criticisms showed up. The first criticisms were published in *film* (no. 5) which were written by Khosro Dehghan, Houshang Rezai and Masoud Bahrami.

In this period, critics played a crucial role in presence or absence of few film-makers before the revolution. In days of war and revolution, perhaps new administrators of cinema did not have a complete supervision of film-makers' works. As a result, criticisms had great influences on film making activities.

In 1980 and early 1981, Islamic Propagation Organization was established with the goal of training the young generation in fields such as visual arts, decorative arts, cinema and theatre. Subsequently, in 1981, a new section with the title of 'Islamic Art and Thought' was added to other sections of this organization. Mohsen Makhmalbaf was among the first generation of young film makers. His peers and he were the ones who developed political criticism. Perhaps, the most popular criticism of this period was a criticism on 'Barzakhiha'<sup>7</sup>. This criticism was issued in 1982 with the title of 'Duzakhe Ebtezaldar Barzakhiha'<sup>8</sup> in Keyhan Newspaper.

"Insulting the sanctity gradually lost its importance for the administrators and in-charge people; one instance which was issued by the Taqut (Shah) Regime caused the first sparkle of the Islamic Revolution.... Actors,

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<sup>6</sup> The warrior's cry

<sup>7</sup> People from the purgatory

<sup>8</sup> Hell of corruption in 'people from the purgatory'

whose job was defiling the society before, started playing Islamic and revolutionary roles or, in some cases, the role of Imam Komeini after the Islamic Revolution! Total Indecency!” (Omid, 2003).

The approach of such a criticism was ideological and made use of harsh words in condemning the film makers before the revolution. In so doing, it warned the administrators from return of such people to the cinema. This criticism was greatly influential and led to cancellation of the release of *Barzakhiha*. Also, this led to resignation of Hojjat-al-Islam Maadikhah in 1982 from Islamic propagation Organization.

### **2.1. Publication of Film Cinema Monthly Magazine and its influence on Criticism in Iran:**

As previously mentioned, Film Magazine was the only basis for the publication of criticisms. Young critics showed up who made attempts to avoid adopting a political view; they approached movies from a sociology or aesthetic point of view. Most critics of the magazine became interested in the newly formed art cinema and were less interested in surface melodramas and movies loved by the public. Critics of the magazine showed their tastes and their tastes influenced those interested in cinema. Indeed, readers of the magazine evaluated movies based on critics' ideas in Film Magazine. Some of the critics in Film Magazine even influenced cinema managers and paved the way for the return of experienced directors such as Dariush Mehrjui, Bahram Beizai, etc. In this period, critics of Film Magazine remonstrated the cinema before revolution and commercial cinema loved by the public, along with policies devised by Farabi Foundation. Moreover, they made the situation appropriate for the rise of new directors with new attitudes toward the cinema. Such film makers made movies which gave a new face to Iranian movies and made them known in global film festivals. On the other hand, new film makers such as Kianoush Ayari, Ali Zhekan, Mohsen Makhmalbaf, Ebrahim Hatamikia, etc. emerged who helped formation of a dignified cultural prestige in Iranian cinema. In realm of cinematic literature, Film Magazine was the only site of criticism where its critics played crucial roles in the formation of modern Iranian cinema.

### **2.2. Guidance, supervision and support policy and its effect on film criticism**

Before the end of the war, Islamic Propagation Organization added 'film quality grading' policy to 'guidance, supervision and support' policy. In this way, attention was paid to quality of the movies along with their quantities. This was done by grading the movies as A, B, C and D. This plan started in 1987 and the Propagation Organization became responsible for ordering the release of movies based on their grades and qualities. Movies of grades A, B and C took 5, 4 and 3 weeks, respectively, to be released in cinemas. Moreover, movies of grade D did not get the permission to be released or became released on only in small cities. Obviously, taste of the government and formal-like concepts affected such grading. Generally, the criterion was the state's taste and movies which better satisfied their tastes got a higher grade. For example, the movie 'An SouyeMah'<sup>9</sup> written by Seyed Mohammad Beheshti and directed by Manouchehr Asgarinasab got the grade A. The movie was forced to be displayed in cinemas for 5 weeks despite the notion that it was not welcomed by the audiences. But, 'Khastegari'<sup>10</sup> by Mehdi Fakhimzadeh, with a grade C, was forced to end its release despite high number of audience. This led to protests in the private sector and at the end of 1987 the first guild of producers was formed with the name of 'association of film production and distribution'. Taking advantage of the consistency between Film Magazine and policies of Islamic Propagation Organization, this guild aimed at expanding an audience-friendly cinema and making attempts to force publication of another magazine so as to neutralize the peculiar role of this magazine.

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<sup>9</sup>other side of the moon

<sup>10</sup>The proposal

### 3. Period of Construction and Post-war Era

After the end of the war, Iran breathed freely and started its period of construction. However, early steps of construction faced with anomalies and inconveniences emerged. The government of construction was established with the aim of moving toward welfare and investment. This movement firstly led to transformation of the shape of the society and people's lifestyles. In this sense, contentment and simple life in years 1981-1987 was replaced by luxury. Television sets, radios and luxurious goods increased. Tower builders change the face of the city. Gradually, music found its way to the society and movies changed their face and film makers gained more freedom when making movies. Furthermore, film makers of grade A were permitted to make movies without prior approval.

In 1990, a forgotten theme entered Iranian cinema: love. Love was the main basis of movies such as 'Arousva Nobate Asheqi'<sup>11</sup>, 'Dar Arezouye Ezdevaj'<sup>12</sup>, etc. Despite many controversies, this theme was then institutionalized in Iranian movies.

In addition, a critical viewpoint toward social and cultural inconveniences prevailed in the society during the period of construction. Subsequently, making critical-social movies became common in Iranian cinema. One of the most typical movies in this realm was 'Narges' by Rakhshan Bani-etemad which was acknowledged by many critics as a movie which represented elements of social and street cinema before the revolution.

In this period, the Film Report Magazine was added to the press with the goal of supporting Iranian movies. This magazine preceded a number of young critics. Cinema Criticism Magazine which was published by Hoze-ye-Honari<sup>13</sup> and Surah Andishe Magazine<sup>14</sup>, which was concerned with cinematic literature, both tried to offer diversity in criticism and separate criticism from the state of being exclusive to Film Magazine. As an example, editors of Surah Andishe Magazine believed that thematic criticism was not beneficial to cinema in Iran while they more frequently focused on structural and technical criticism.

Babak Ahmadi, writer, translator, art critic and researcher, published a book with the title of 'wing blows wherever it wills to blow: Robert Bresson's ideologies and works' in 1990. The book was admired by many critics, particularly those of Film Magazine. His next book in cinema was 'criticizing and introducing Andrei Tarkovski's movies' and was admired a lot, too. After publication of these books and criticism he wrote in Film Magazine, Ahmadi introduced the 'interpretive criticism' to criticism in Iran. After a while, such criticisms attracted a number of opponents in Iran. Nevertheless, his more important work was publication of another book with the title of 'text structure and interpretation'. In this book, a great number of new methods of modern criticism was introduced almost for the first time in Iran: structuralism, de-constructivism, intertextuality, formalistic criticism, modern hermeneutics, and post-modern criticism. Such styles were either not introduced in Iran at all or they were shadowed by literature of the left-party and ideological or content-based criticism. The book had great influences on critical speech in diverse realm of literary criticism and theatre and cinema criticism.

In 1990, Seyed Mohamad Khatami resigned from the Islamic Propagation Organization and Ali Larijani took his position. With this, such replacement was conceived to lead to changes in policies of the organization and offer a strict attitude toward the cinema. But, in practice this did not take place and the same continued for cinema. From 1988 to 1992 the society gradually tended toward capitalism and luxury started to become prevalent for the middle- and high-class society. Such a tendency influenced the cinema and covered not only apparent issues of modern life. However, cultural and social representations of modernity started to be reflected in Iranian movies. Proponents of conservatism shifted all their attention to cinema and theatre so that to distance the visual arts from change. But, they could not manipulate the

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<sup>11</sup> The bride and a time for love

<sup>12</sup> Longing for marriage

<sup>13</sup> Art Association

<sup>14</sup> Surha of intellect magazine

changes of the society. Therefore, cinema had no other choice than showing what was happening in the society rather than displaying a fake image.

In 1993, Ali Larijani who was the head of the Organization of Islamic Propagation and Culture announced the termination of video sets forbiddance on behalf of Higher Council of Cultural Revolution. He expressed that: using visual and auditory equipment and free activity of video would initiate from the first days of 1993 in the form of video clubs. This news was the start of the termination of video forbiddance in the country. In this period, different cinematic magazines such as *Donyay-e-Tasvir*<sup>15</sup>, *Gozarash-e-Film*<sup>16</sup>, *Farhangva Cinema*<sup>17</sup>, *Film and Video*, *Hafta-name-ye-Cinema*<sup>18</sup> were published which caused the emergence of new critics and of a new atmosphere in Iranian cinema literature.

Investigation of political-social changes in the first half of 1990 make it obvious that such changes which had effects on economy influenced other fields such as social system and more importantly caused changes in the culture and value system of the country; changes which were sometimes inconsistent with norms and values of the political system in the country. So, the gap between the cultural system of the society and political system of the country constantly increased and reached its peak in 1997. First sparkles of development and rebuilding project in the country which were seen after the end of the war and formation of the new state gradually reduced the sentimental and moral atmosphere in the war era. Instead, it created a discourse of rehabilitation and materialistic values. It was in the heart of these immense cultural changes where Khoradad 2<sup>th</sup> arose in the election in 1997. In this sense, the era of reformation was initiated.

#### **4. Era of Reformation**

Many cultural changes occurred with the start of era of reformation. Journalism grew in a more open atmosphere and many newspapers got the license for publication. Most of these newspapers embodied a page for criticism where different critics included their criticisms in such pages; critics who had a socialistic and reforming attitudes and who looked upon movies from a political view. In other words, in such criticisms mostly theme was preferred over implementation, and 'what' should be said was preferred over 'how' it should be said. However, on the contrary of these critics, there were critics who had adopted a content-based attitude. From this viewpoint, Farid in Salam Newspaper can be named as the representative of reforming criticism while Gabrlou in Resalat Newspaper can be named as the representative of value-centered criticism.

Moreover, cinema in Iran underwent different changes. Many movies were made with social, critical or questioning points of view. Anyway, diversity and multiplicity were replaced with one-dimensional speeches. Meanwhile, themes which were impossible before started to emerge in Iranian movies. Film critics started to suggest their critical ideas more freely.

Since 2000s, criticism went through a descending process qualitatively, leading to lower value of criticism and critics due to diversity and multiplicity of the newspapers and journals. In the era of reformation, number of newspapers increased and majority of them had a page dedicated to cinema incorporating daily news and criticisms. At the same time, a group of young people with insufficient knowledge of cinema. So they caused many damages to the literature of cinema in Iran. In the following years, critics often had their own language, attitude and position. However, later on, quantity was replaced with quality due to increase in the number of newspapers. As a result of this, validity and credibility of criticism was greatly questioned. Apparently, number of critics and those writing for cinema increased. But, a style of criticism still lacked

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15 World of Vision

16 Film Reports

17 Culture and Cinema

18 Weekly of Cinema

which would be more efficient than technical and content-related dimensions so as to be used by film makers as the guidance.

Social changes in Iran had some influences on criticisms issued by the Iranian critics, but these changes were not continuous so as to be a trend in Iranian Cinema. As an example, during the era of reformation the critics freely investigated themes of the movies or criticized policy making in cinema. But, the approach adopted by these criticisms was gradually disappeared and forgotten because of the notion that they were often journalistic and less attention was paid to the structural and aesthetic aspects of the movies in them; or that they forgot to note deeper concepts in the movies in an interpretative way. On the other hand, film criticism was where our cinema was. In other words, movies having a daily view to social affairs did not provide the critics with a deeper criticism.

But, during the history of film criticism in Iran the only dynamic criticism was the author's criticism. Seemingly, this type of criticism was more appealing to Iranian critics.

### Auteur<sup>19</sup> Theory

"Auteur Theory" was firstly introduced by Alexandre Astruc in an article with the title of "camera-pen" in 1948. The theory holds that camera is considered as a camera in hands of the film maker for the creation of film, not for the visual presentation of the author's pre-established thoughts. Then in 1954, François Truffaut introduced the main idea of auteur theory in form of "the authors' ideology" in *Cahiers du cinema Magazine*. This criticism which was derived from the ideas of the critics of French Cinema, including François Truffaut, Claude Charbol, Eric Rohmer, Jean-Luc Goudard, etc. all of whom wrote in *Cahiers du Cinéma Magazine*, was then taken to the USA by Andrew Sarris, the famous American critic, in 1962. Sarris introduced the theory as a theory of his own. Authors of *Cahiers du Cinéma Magazine* gathered together and started to find works of 'personal style' in Hollywood movies. They (Sarris, in particular) believed that a strong director imposes his character on film (Bordwell & Thompson, 2009). For instance, based on this approach Hitchcock Cinema or Orson Welles Cinema were considered as auteur cinemas.

Since early 1960s, this method started becoming popular in Iran by critics such as Parviz Davai. In this method of criticism, usually film makers who were in Association of Authors were immune from any criticism. This was because from this view those film makers who made a masterpiece could not make a bad work. As a result, the critic of these film makers must merely explore and define the interior world of the works, instead of looking for deficiencies. Since 1970s, after politicization of the society, expansion of such a criticism was diminished to some extent. It was replaced with ideological criticism or social criticism. But, since the second half of 1981, auteur criticism and film-making character was rehabilitated by critics such as Javad Tabarsi.

### Conclusion

In every society, social changes can be influential and Iran was not an exception. Method of criticism in after-revolution cinema has been partly influenced by the political-social conditions of the day. However, less often we have dealt with a specific method which would be constant and influential and which could be directly extracted from these changes.

In first days of the Islamic revolution, most criticisms had a political color and critics analyzed movies from an ideological viewpoint. Traces of specific political and social views were evident in many criticisms. In principle, many criticism were in fact political and social writings where the author chose such a framework as the best site for the expression of his ideas. Further, in some cases, it seemed that the criticism of the text was not important and mostly the author himself was the point. In such a case, criticisms tended to be

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<sup>19</sup> The French word for 'author'



descriptive which meant description of events in the movie and decoding it according to technical, cultural and aesthetical issues: the author dedicated a bunch of his writings to what he had seen in the movie. Many stylistic in Iran criticized in this way and partly transformed criticism into criticism of the society or the current conditions. In this sense, they preferred hyper-textual elements which were unrelated to the movie to the text itself. In parts of their articles, Iranian critics might have had a philosophical, psychiatric, epic view in their works, but their criticism have been mostly descriptive. Investigation of the content of the film often concerned criticisms of early 1990s. With the advent of the state of reformations, again the society faced a different form of criticism. This era imposed the greatest damage on criticism. Large amount of press and cinematic pages also caused the removal of sensitivity on the part of the editors. Another factor which also had a significant effect on diminishing of the quality of the criticisms was the Internet and the cyber space. In these years, criticism had a significant quantitative growth while this growth was vice versa in terms of the quality.

In most cases, criticism in Iran did not have a significant effect on film making and how people welcomed movies. There were movies which attracted critics' ignorance but were doomed to failure and vice versa. But, there were exceptions in the field, too. There were a number of critics who had effects on a number of cinematic trends. However, one of the most important things that the critics did in early years after the revolution was supporting a group of old potent film makers which caused the continuity of their artistic works. Moreover, critics in 1980s caused the establishment of artistic cinema in Iran and support of film makers such as Abbas Kiarostami. Perhaps, it can be said that there are a number of efficient critics in all types of criticism in Iran who can contribute an audience in conceptualizing a specific movie or a film maker.

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