

CINEMA CONTEXT

Transcript of interview with Dr Lina Khatib

Persepolis is slightly different from the films that have been coming out from Iran from 1990. I think the most important distinction is that Persepolis did not come out from Iran itself. Persepolis is a French film that happens to have been written by an Iranian woman about her own life in Iran and, of course, later in Europe.

So, this is a film that has been made with 100% European money as opposed to any support by Iranian funders, and this is a film that has been completed outside Iran as well and that is actually banned in Iran and so it is slightly difficult to place Persepolis within a wider context of Iranian cinema from an industry perspective, but from a content perspective and, say, a gender perspective Persepolis fits in well with several films that have been coming out from Iran over the last fifteen years or so and these films tend to be art house films, so they are not mainstream films. They are not films that would, let's say, do very well in the commercial cinemas in Iran but they are very interesting films and they are addressing, or they address, social and kind of economic problems in Iran so, for example, a filmmaker called Jafar (Panahi) has made films like the *White Balloon* (Panahi: 1995) or *The Circle* (Panahi: 2001) that address the issues of women in Iran, the problems that many women face under the regime in Iran today. Again Jafar's film *The Circle* (Panahi: 2001), for example, was banned in Iran because it tackles a subject that's considered taboo. At the same time you have films like *Ten* (Kiarostami: 2002) by Abbas (Kirostami) which also addresses the problems of women in Iran and again the film was not shown in Iran because it was considered too brave in tackling these issues that are normally not talked about. So, Marjane Strapi's film *Persepolis* also tackles problems faced by women in Iran it actually, you know, highlights this issue quite well and in this sense it is part of this movement toward addressing issues that are normally considered unspeakable in Iranian society.

The second issue that *Persepolis* addresses is politics and again this is where *Persepolis* differs from films coming out of Iran itself because to discuss politics is considered unacceptable by the censors of cinema in Iran. When *Persepolis* talks about the effects of the Islamic Revolution in a critical way this is something very different from what is allowed to be represented on the screen in Iran itself. So, *Persepolis* is going a kind of step further in addressing these issues. In Iran itself, if you have a film that is going to address politics in anyway usually this is done in a very subtle way so that the messages are very subtle and not represented explicitly and usually a lot of filmmakers have used children in order to comment on these issues because when you represent a child on the screen you can say, as a filmmaker, that you are representing a child's point of view which is usually perceived to be an innocent point of view and a point of view that is not corrupted or biased towards any particular side. So, you have someone like Bahman Ghobadi in *A Time For Drunken Horses* (Ghobadi: 2001) use children to comment on the situation of Kurds in Iran who are a marginalised community. So, if you think about it *Persepolis* also represents certain issues from the perspective of a child when Marjane herself is actually young. So again, you know despite the differences content wise, *Persepolis* has also a number of similarities with other films coming out from Iran.

Film in Iran is subject to several restrictions. Generally the three main things that are considered controversial on the screen are sex, politics and religion, so films are not supposed to show anything that could be deemed sexual in any way. So, for example, you cannot portray romantic relationships where you have a man and a woman touching on the screen even if they are represented as being married. This is still considered unacceptable. The other issue is religion. So, films are not supposed to represent anything that is perceived to be critical of religious doctrines in anyway and politics, of course, refers to the Iranian regime and the Iranian state and the clerics who rule in Iran so films are not supposed to address critically any issue related to the Iranian state. And so, in general, Iranian filmmakers tend to shy away from representing these three issues and when they do represent issues such as women on the screen, which can be seen as related to the big umbrella of anything sexual in nature, even if their films are not about women's sexuality, they tend to basically risk having their films banned in the country and a lot of the films that people see in Europe that have come from Iran that have addressed any of those three issues are films that Iranian audiences have no knowledge about, because they cannot access them in Iran.

In Iran, the audience view films that are known as commercial Iranian cinema and these are different from what most people in Europe would think about when they think about Iranian cinema. Iranian cinema that you get in Europe tends to be the art house films which are, you know, very good and very interesting. However, because they tend to be, let's say, more intellectual in scope and non-accessible to, let's say, the person on the street they tend not to be so popular in Iran itself. In Iran itself melodrama is the biggest selling genre. A lot of people go and see melodramas about family issues. And, also, the Iranian state itself is a big funder of Iranian cinema, it even funds some of the art house films actually so it doesn't just fund commercial mainstream films, but, in terms of the mainstream films that are state funded a lot of them tend to be action films about the Iran/Iraq war. Believe it or not the Iran/Iraq war is still a very popular topic in Iran today and you can see representations of this topic in cinema on television and even in posters that are, you know, found on streets in different Iranian cities. So, the films that people see in Iran tend to be either action films about the war or melodramas about family issues, and also, there are a number of comedies, the most famous example is, perhaps, is a film called *The Lizard* (Tabrizi: 2004) that came out a few years ago and this was a film about someone who pretends to be a religious cleric and this film was very successful in Iran, although it talked about a religious person who was a cleric but did not portray him in such a way that the government thought it was unacceptable. So, the films deal with these, you know, issues that are considered safe, I suppose, and these are the films that the Iranian tend to see in large numbers.