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**Windows onto other Worlds. Musical Exoticism in Iranian Cinema: Between National Imaginary and Global Circulation**

**Keynote paper presented at the conference ‘Exoticism in Contemporary Transnational Cinema: Music and Spectacle’**

Humanities and Arts Research Institute, Royal Holloway, University of London,  
Friday, 16 June 2017, Senate House and 11 Bedford Square, London

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**1. Introduction. SLIDE 1**

- Film arrived in Iran following the first state visit to Europe of Muzaffar al-Din Shah (r.1896-1907) when, at the Paris Exposition of 1900, he encountered the cinematograph. Captivated by the moving images, he ordered his court photographer to purchase one to be taken back to Iran. Screenings initially provided entertainment for royalty and the aristocracy, at weddings and other celebrations, but film soon entered the wider public domain, where it faced opposition both on religious grounds and due to political sensitivities in the period leading up to the 1906 Constitutional Revolution and which forced the closure of Tehran’s first cinema hall soon after opening in 1905.
- In his superbe 4-volume *Social History of Iranian Cinema*, Hamid Naficy describes the early years of Iranian cinema and its ambivalences, including the tension between the opposition of religious authorities on moral grounds on the one hand, and film’s potential as a tool of moral education on the other; the new kinds of spectatorship that it engendered; and the contested public spaces it opened up, particularly for women. Despite objections, film gradually became established and by the early 1930s there were 15 cinemas in Tehran and 11 in the provinces. The significance of cinema at this time lay in its heralding a new modernity and offering a window onto other worlds and other subjectivities, something that marked it as somewhat transgressive (Dabashi 2001). Moreover,

not only was cinema in Iran thoroughly transnational from the outset, but many of the key players in early film production and screening were Others of various kinds: Russian and Arab émigrés, Catholic missionaries or members of internal religious minorities such as Armenians, Jews or Zoroastrians.

- From the very start, then, film in Iran was implicated in inscribing notions of difference; in particular, it generated anxieties over questions of representation, both in relation to the representation of Iran and Iranians outside the country, and local filmmakers' representations of internal and external Others. An important dimension of this was the modernising self-othering that has marked Iranian cultural production since at least the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and which can be characterised by what Stokes describes as 'East looks at West looking at East' (2000:213). Naficy describes Iranian reactions to representations of themselves in early films produced outside Iran - 'seen through the eyes of others' (2011:17), as it were - as socially backward, exotic and sexualized. In response, and with particular intensity from the 1930s with the modernising policies of Reza Shah Pahlavi, one finds a simultaneous appeal to the glories of the pre-Islamic Persian Empire *and* to contemporary Europe and North America, as forms of cultural validation and symbolic nation-building that often depended on marginalising Iran's internal Others.
- In this keynote, I explore the role of music in exoticising processes of constructing and representing otherness, focusing primarily on the earliest Persian-language sound film, but with some consideration of more recent film production. The forms of othering I will discuss are often quite subtle – rather than spectacularly exotic - but they are just as implicated in the exercise of power. I am also interested in the discourses and practices by which music itself has become othered in post-Revolutionary cinema.

## 2. 1930s: *The Lor Girl*

- So, I start in the 1930s. Before the arrival of sound cinema, imported films, as well as newsreels and documentaries were accompanied by gramophone recordings or by live musicians who would sometimes play outside the cinema before the film. In addition, screen translators were hired to provide a running commentary. As Naficy observes: ‘The movies were silent – but not the movie houses’. He quotes from an eye witness account from the early 1930s, who said:

**SLIDE 2** ‘When the pictures were showing, the spectators were very noisy. But when the intertitles came on and he [the translator] began reading them, everyone was absolutely quiet. As soon as he finished, the spectators returned to their loud clamour, talking to the characters on the screen, whistling, catcalling, belittling each other about the plot outcome, and sometimes even arguing and fighting with each other. Every film-goer brought with him a paper bag of nuts and seeds, which he broke noisily throughout the movie’ (Naficy 2005b) (in Naficy 2011:226)

- As elsewhere, the transition to sound film was not unproblematic (and some exhibitors of silent film tried to block it) but in Iran it took on additional significance, coinciding almost exactly with the period when Reza Shah Pahlavi – a former army general who had assumed power in a coup in 1921, supported by the British, and who later crowned himself king - was starting to implement his autocratic policies of westernization and modernization, by which he aimed to transform Iran into a modern, secular, capitalist nation state; not unlike what was happening in Turkey at this time under Attaturk. The first Persian-language sound film, which I will discuss in a moment, was screened just two years before the 1936 *kashf-e hejab*, the Shah’s decree banning all veiling – from headscarves to the all-enveloping chador, as well as many types of traditional male clothing, claiming that ‘Westerners now wouldn’t laugh at us’. Naficy has argued that ‘Movie houses were important sites of modernity and citizenship’ (2011:265) and that with the arrival of sound, the:

**SLIDE 3** ... disciplining and silencing of spectators was another step in their becoming modern, for it made them, as individuals with personal desires and fears, better subjects for the cinema’s diegetic address. This

had political repercussions, for as passive spectators in cinemas, they also became better passive national subjects in the political arena, becoming spectators to their own modernization and in the spectacle of power and authority that was Reza Shah's regime. (2011:230).

- And this brings me to my main case study, *The Lor Girl*, which nicely illustrates some of the processes of othering that marked Reza Shah's period of rule. I'll talk about the film's fascinating history, give a summary of the plot and then consider how music is deployed in the service of exoticist othering.
- It is not insignificant that the first Persian-language film, *The Lor Girl* (1933), was also a musical. And even more remarkable for the time that one of the first scenes features a singing and dancing female entertainer. The film was in fact made in Bombay by Ardeshir Irani, a Parsi businessman and Director of the Imperial Film Company, and Abolhossein Sepanta, an Iranian from an educated family who had attended French and Zoroastrian schools in Tehran and a British missionary school in Esfahan and who in 1927 travelled to India to undertake research into ancient Persian and Zoroastrian religion and culture. Bombay had a significant Parsi and Iranian community at that time; indeed, there was a great deal of interest in Iran and Zoroastrian history among Parsis, who were encouraged to visit or 'return' to Iran, and there were also links between Iranian nationalist intellectuals and Parsi communities in India. Alongside his research, Sepanta wrote for a radical periodical which, among other things, advocated for women's rights. He also visited the Imperial Film Company, founded in 1926 by Irani, which produced films in several different languages and very much 'asserted itself both as a global and local company' (Cooley 2016:3). Sepanta persuaded Irani 'to make a film in Persian on an Iranian topic for distribution in Iran' (Naficy 2011:232) for which he wrote the script and played the male protagonist; Irani produced and directed.
- The film tells the story of Golnar **SLIDE 4-1**, a young woman abducted as a child from a respectable home by the Lor tribal chief, Qoli Khan, and forced to work in the remote carevansarai roadside inn of one of his informers, Ramazan; and Jafar

**SLIDE 4-2**, an undercover government agent who has been sent to the tribal areas to subdue Qoli Khan and his gang of highway bandits, who have been attacking and robbing travellers. Golnar and Jafar fall in love and she eventually escapes with him. The narrative needs to be understood in the context of Reza Shah's attempts at this time to quell local tribal leaders – and the Lor tribe were notoriously one of the most difficult to control - in favour of centralised power, with an emphasis on nation-building and a particular vision of nation - *vatan* - as modern, industrialised, secular and crucially, Persian-centric; and this in the context of Iran's centuries-long history as a multi-ethnic, -linguistic and -religious country. Many of the discourses that were mobilized in the service of this particular vision of nation depended on a series of binaries which set the Pahlavi regime apart from its Others: its modernity vs the regressive traditionalism of the preceding Qajars; secular vs religious; urban vs rural; civilised vs uncivilised; tribe vs nation; and so on. In *The Lor Girl*, we see these binaries starkly portrayed in the chaos of the lawless tribal regions vs the order and civilisation of central control, represented by the figure of Jafar and later by images of colonial Bombay where he and Golnar seek refuge. The resulting discursive network is made quite explicit in the film's subtitle, *Yesterday's Iran and Today's Iran (Iran-e Diruz va Iran-e Emruz)*, which is often omitted, but the significance of which becomes apparent towards the end of the film, as I will discuss – and which, significantly, is marked musically. This is a pro-Pahlavi film, but wasn't funded by the regime. His promotion of a pre-Islamic Zoroastrian heritage earned Reza Shah much support among Parsi communities in India; and indeed, the original version of the film had an introduction praising the Shah.

- According to Naficy, audiences in Tehran were amazed when the film was first screened at the Mayak Cinema on 20<sup>th</sup> November 1933, **SLIDE 5** reportedly breaking into applause on hearing Persian spoken on screen for the first time, despite some complaints about the thick Indian accents. It was hard to find Persian-speaking actors in Bombay; and indeed, the role of Golnar was played by the Iranian wife of a studio employee, a woman with a strong Kermani accent – actually, from the wrong part of Iran – but which subsequently became popular and widely imitated.

- So, to return to my central question: how did the arrival of sound film impact on exoticising processes of constructing and representing otherness in ways that perhaps differed from the ‘silent’ era? Naficy has suggested that one of the most important dimensions of modernity that sound brought to cinema was ‘its complex and intense sensory experience’ (2011:234); and I’m particularly interested in how the arrival of sound allowed for an *affective* marking of difference which was quite new.
- I should be clear: few of the the examples I discuss are spectacular displays of in-your-face exoticism, but much more subtle, and therefore arguably more insidiously powerful in the messages that they convey. It’s useful at this point, I think, to return to the original call for papers for the conference which aimed, among other things, to explore how **SLIDE 6** ‘the collapsed distances of globalisation and the transnational flows of media and people have transformed exoticism, which is *no longer exclusively the projection of Orientalist fantasies of the Other from one centre, the West, but which emanates from multiple localities and is multi-directional in perspective*’. I would question whether exoticism has ever had just one centre, as opposed to being multi-perspectival and multi-directional. In *The Lor Girl*, exoticism depends on at least two centres and their peripheries, each related to the discursive binaries promoted by the Pahlavi regime: (1) between central government (represented by Jafar) and the tribal – and other ethnic – others, portrayed negatively and represented by the Qoli Khan, the Lor chief; Ramazan, the caravansarai owner; and the Arab Sheikh who is staying there; and (2) a self-othering binary, whereby Iran is presented as backward in relation to ... here, interestingly, the generic placeholder for progress is represented by Bombay (where the film was made, of course) to which city Golnar and Jafar flee after their escape from Qoli Khan and where they spend several years in exile. In other words, the first form of exoticism places the protagonists (Jafar and Golnar) in a relationship of alterity with Iran’s *internal* others; in the second, Iran – that is, the Iran of yesterday - becomes othered in relation to more ‘advanced’ nations. And each of these relationships is marked musically, both diegetically and non-diegetically, as I will now illustrate with reference to a number of selected ‘moments’ from the film.

- I start at the beginning: the opening credits are set to music, which transpires to be a diegetic band of traditional musicians playing for the carevansarai guests and accompanying Golnar's dancing. Indeed, the first image is of her gyrating hips, which would have been very provocative for the time, with clear implications for local viewers: the immortality of the dancing girl – and her perceived sexual availability - become symbolic of tribal backwardness. In the extract, you'll see the leering gaze of the Sheikh, who later attempts to rape her. Re sound quality  
**SLIDE 7 Example 1 (0:53 to 2:00)**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DvMm89lRcH8> (1 min)

- In contrast, by the end of the film, as I'll describe, Golnar has become a refined, educated and 'modern' woman – reading newspapers and playing the piano for her husband. As per the film's subtitle, yesterday's Iran – of uncivilised and culturally- and socially-regressive tribes - becomes the clear Other in relation to the order and civilisation of today's Iran. And it's significant, I think, that the *whole* film is framed by these two contrasting scenes of music-making and that it is women's music-making in particular that becomes symbolic of the changing society.
- But, as I've suggested, exoticism works in different directions. On the one hand, the film marks difference and thereby demonises Iran's internal tribal others and external others such as Arabs – and there was a great deal of anti-Arab sentiment at this time as Reza Shah sought to distance Iran from its Islamic neighbours and promote the nation's pre-Islamic and Aryan heritage; on the other, modernity – symbolised by and entangled with ideas about a generalised 'West' - becomes romanticised as an aspirational and positive exotic Other against which Iran is self-othered. There is *one* point in the original film where existing European music is used non-diegetically: this is early on, when Golnar reminisces to Jafar about her idyllic childhood within a loving and respected family. And the images of an ordered and safe urban civility - before its disruption by the forces of chaos and Golnar's abduction at the age of 12 by the Lor chief - are set to ... (wait for it) European classical music. Specifically, and very cleverly, the music used in an



orchestral version of the piano piece *Träumerei* ('daydreaming') by Robert Schumann from his 1838 collection *Kinderszenen* (*Scenes from Childhood*, op15). Whilst this piece – and its associations – may well have been familiar to educated audiences in Bombay - it was very popular in the 1930s, particularly as an encore piece - it's unlikely that viewers in Iran would have understood the references to childhood and to dreaming. In this passage, Golnar describes how a mendicant fortune teller predicted her abduction and when asked by her father whether they would *ever* be rid of the menace of the tribes, he also prophesied the rise of a star – who turns out to be Reza Shah – and all set against the backdrop of European classical music as an agent of civilisation. **Example 2 (22:13 to 25:15)**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DvMm89IRcH8> (play 1 min and then forward to 24:45 mins, 30 secs)

- The other point in the film where existing European music is used is a rather curious case which I will mention briefly, although it is slightly tangential to the main arguments. The main declaration of love between Golnar and Jafar comes after she saves his life following his wounding by Qoli Khan's men – he thanks her for risking her life for him and she replies, 'What risk? In the face of love, my life is nothing'. This is followed by a quasi-oratorical passage in which Jafar extolls the virtues and sanctity of true love. **Example 3 (50:03 to 51:27)**  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DvMm89IRcH8> (1.5 mins)
- As you can (just about) hear, this section is set to Lara's theme from *Gone with the Wind*, music by Max Steiner. The use of pre-existing film or other Euro-American orchestral music became quite usual from the 1950s, but what I have not yet been able to establish is how and when this music was added - given that *Gone with the Wind* was released in 1939 - and whether there was any music at this point in the original. There is only one person listed in the film credits in relation to music or sound - Bahman Irani - and it isn't clear who made the decisions in relation to pre-existing music, nor who composed the original music.

- Interestingly, unlike the post-1979 cinema which I'll come to in a moment, there is very little in this film that romanticises tribal and rural Others; Qoli Khan's men are more often presented in a somewhat comical and bumbling way. However, the passage that I have just played includes a moment of such romanticisation as Jafar states: 'We city people have forgotten the true meaning of love', all set to Max Steiner's music.
- I now move to the end of the film when, having escaped from Qoli Khan, Golnar and Jafar flee to Bombay. As they set sail, they sing about exile and invoke [song starts at 1:17:39] longing and nostalgia for the homeland - *vatan* – Jafar singing in quite a traditional style with melismatic vocalisation. This cuts to their arrival in Bombay (1:19:29) when the tone of the music changes abruptly to an up-beat march-like piece, representing military order and regularity and set to impressive visuals of the modern city, clearly intended to contrast with the rural mountain backwardness of the film so far, and the steam ship representing industrial progress – scenes which according to Naficy were met with applause in early screenings (2011:239) (passage ends 1:20:59). **Example 4 (1:18:30 to 1:20:30)** (2 mins) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DvMm89lRcH8>
- The reader is then informed through a series of intertitles that many years have passed, that there has been a regime change in Iran (through the 1921 coup d'état which brought Reza Pahlavi to power) and against the musical backdrop of a military-style march, the achievements of the new regime are listed: the provision of security, education, a stable economy, the promotion of women's rights, and so on. This then cuts to the penultimate scene of the film where we first hear and then see Golnar, in European clothing and cropped hair, playing the piano – the piano being a clear icon of European civilisation – under a portrait of Reza Shah. Jafar arrives, commends her on having learnt well and asks her to play the song that he 'taught her yesterday'; he then sings a patriotic song in praise of Reza Shah to her accompaniment (note his Pahlavi hat and western tie). The lyrics sing of a country that is strong and free, ancient but wrought anew ... **Example 5**

(1:23:19 to 1:25:09) (2 mins)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DvMm89IRcH8>

- The brief final scene, which shows Jafar and Golnar reading newspapers under a tree and their decision to return to Iran is followed by an image of a rising star – that is, Reza Shah - as foretold previously by the fortune teller.
- These last two scenes complete Golnar’s transformation from a low class dancing girl to an educated, newspaper-reading and piano-playing modern woman – although her usefulness can arguably be measured in relation to the needs of the patriarchal system – as an accompaniment to her husband, for example, or in the service of the nation: the message is clearly about cultivating a new kind of urban citizen. Talking more generally about the arrival of sound film in Iran, Nacify argues that the soundtrack became **SLIDE 8-1** ‘the site of the national ... [it] inscribed not only the national language, Persian, but also national dances, music, rhythm, and poetry – all of them intimate means of constructing personal and national identities’ (2011:236). In the case of the *Lor Girl*, music is mobilised in the service of a particular vision of nation that is Persian-centric and Western-facing - the ‘Iran of today’ (as per the film’s subtitle) - and which is valorised over, and was presented as incompatible with, the country’s centuries-old ethnic, linguistic and religious diversity – ‘the Iran of yesterday’. The forging of this vision, and the attendant discourses and policies of Reza Shah, set in train processes that ultimately inscribed polarised social binaries that continue to have profound implications for Iranian society.
- Given its message, it’s interesting to remember that *The Lor Girl* was not made in Iran and indeed was popular with Parsi and Iranian audiences, and others, in Bombay and elsewhere in India and beyond. In Iran, however, promotional material presented it ‘as a local product ... made for Iranians by Iranian artists’ (Cooley 2016:4). Further, given the anxieties described earlier, Naficy notes how:

**SLIDE 8-2** Made defensive by Western movies' othering representations and by their own sense of inferiority toward the West and hungry for empowering self-representations, Iranians were satisfied, indeed, jubilant ... critic after critic commented on the importance not only of self-representation but also of a positivist national projection, even if – or particularly if – these representations and projections exceeded reality or were Orientalist. (2011:239)

- Music was clearly an important part of the arrival of sound film in Iran. Not only does *The Lor Girl* include a great deal of music, only some of which I've discussed here, but the film begins and ends with on-screen performances. Interestingly, the first sound film made in Iran – that wasn't until 1948 - a film called *Tufān-e Zendegi* (*The Storm of Life*, Ali Daryabeygi), also opens with a musical performance set in a concert hall. And the centrality of music continued for the next 3 decades until the 1979 Revolution, when it became marginalised, as I will discuss. So, I'll now move on to briefly discuss some relevant issues from the post-Revolutionary period.

### **3. Post-1979**

- The anxieties over cinematic representations of the relationship between self and others of various kinds continued through the decades of Pahlavi rule and after its demise following the 1979 Revolution, in which Reza Shah's son was overthrown. And there are two points that I would like to consider: first, how the success of Iranian films internationally perpetuated a particular cinematic style aimed at a global cosmopolitan audience that included a strong element of exoticism; and second, how music itself arguably became 'othered'.
- So, a little background: in the lead up to the 1979 Revolution and the subsequent establishment of an Islamic Republic, film - like music - was branded as anti-Islamic and faced government restrictions as well as opposition from religious groups; and indeed several cinemas were subject to arson attacks during the Revolution. However, the government soon realised that film could be co-opted for its own purposes – particularly for propaganda use at the time of the Iran-Iraq

war - and began to support film production and training. From this emerged a new generation of feature and documentary filmmakers, including a significant number of women. And much to the consternation of the government, which had not anticipated that its investment would produce a body of independent and liberal-minded filmmakers, Iranian cinema began to attract international attention from the late 1980s. This fledgling art house movement was influenced by the pre-revolutionary so-called 'new wave' cinema of the 1960s and 70s, which in turn had drawn influences from the French New Wave and Italian neo-realism; but it also evidenced a new aesthetic related to Iran's historically-rooted poetic and mystic traditions, as well as traditional theatre and story-telling. And many of these films were arguably exoticist in their representations of Iran, including the almost exclusive use of rural locations, as well as non-professional and child actors. As these films started to attract the attention of critics and festivals abroad, such aspects became exaggerated as film-makers responded to what they thought audiences outside were looking for - 'east looking at west looking at east'. This led to a local discursive bifurcation between what came to be known as 'festival films' - *filmhā-ye jashnvāreyi* – and those made for local audiences. Although in reality this was a rather blurred divide, there certainly were films clearly aimed at a global audience, some garnering critical acclaim abroad whilst having few viewers at home.

- What we also see at this time is a marginalising of music, for a variety of reasons: aesthetic, social and political. A number of commentators have noted the sparse aesthetics of some post-1979 films, and this extends in many cases to a sparse sonic palette, compared with the musical richness of earlier films. But there were also other factors, including the problematic social position of music generally after the Revolution, which meant that it was easier for film-makers not to include music for which permission would need to be sought. Several film composers I've spoken to, however, suggest what they see as a more important factor in the paucity of music in post-Revolutionary cinema: that many film-makers simply don't know how to work with composers or how to use music effectively. There is a great deal of anxiety about music, although this is starting to change.

- One particularly interesting film, which displays many of the features of post-1979 cinema as described - the rural setting, child actors and minimal use of music - is *Bashu, The Little Stranger* (*Bashu, Gharibeh-ye Koochak*) **SLIDE 9** (Bahram Beyzai, 1985). The film is set in the early 1980s against the backdrop of the Iran-Iraq war and tells the story of a young boy, *Bashu*, who flees the war-torn south of Iran after his home is bombed and his entire family killed. He hides in the back of a truck which, unknown to him, is heading to the far north, to the green and peaceful province of Gilan, which is both physically and emotionally distant from the war zone. Here, he finds himself in a place which is entirely alien, both in its landscape and in the regional language (Gilaki) and culture of its people, to the extent that it doesn't occur to him that he may still be in Iran. He is taken in by Na'i, a mother-of-two whose husband has gone to the city to work, despite the hostile objections of her relatives and other villagers to the presence of this outsider. As an Arabic-speaking 'black' Iranian, *Bashu's* arrival forces an encounter with 'otherness' which lies outside their conceptualisation of what it means to be Iranian.
- *Bashu* was one of the first post-revolutionary Iranian films to attract attention outside Iran and offers an interesting counterpoint to *The Lor Girl*: where the earlier film used the new sound medium to construct the idea of a unified nation, particularly focused around the Persian language, *Bashu* was one of the first films to shatter that and to problematise the dominant Persian-centric discourses of nationhood in a country which has been multi-lingual/cultural for centuries. Like *the Lor Girl*, then, *Bashu* is about the ways in which nationhood is imagined, but it presents a very different vision of nation, portraying 'a country incapable of facing its fear of the other within' (Rahimieh 2002:251).
- One of the ways in which it does this is through language. In contrast to *The Lor Girl*, the significance of which lay in its centring of Persian, which was heard on screen for the first time, *Bashu* is multi-lingual, using Gilaki, Arabic and Persian and cleverly shifting the first two erstwhile *peripheral* languages to the centre, particularly Gilaki, thus marginalising the majority Persian-speaking audiences.

- Alongside language, music also plays an important role in marking Bashu's racial and ethnic difference. Although used selectively – and always diegetically – its positioning at strategic points in the narrative give it great symbolic potency. I'll just play a few examples.
- The first time we see Bashu making music follows a scene in which he watches Na'i and her children process around the fields warding off evil spirits with their pots and pans. He then sees a mirage of his dead mother and is reminded of home; this segues into him singing and performing southern-style body percussion.  
**Example 6:** <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mc0mbmPUGIo> 27:55 to 28:50 (1 min)
- Later, Bashu teaches the local village boys (who had earlier teased and taunted him) agricultural songs and dances from the south – to help the crops grow - songs closely related to agricultural work and therefore curiously relevant to Gilan, but from a very different part of Iran and entirely unfamiliar to the northerners (here's a short extract) **Example 7:** <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iS6efl70wKY> 24:10 to 25:10 (1 min)
- Towards the end of the film, Na'i becomes ill, and unable to procure medicine for her, Bashu drums and sings *zar* ritual healing songs from the south. This is the only scene where the two main protagonists are bound together by music: at last, their fraught and complicated attempts to communicate verbally are transcended by music. **Example 8:** <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iS6efl70wKY> 40:26 to 40:56 (30 secs)
- Soon after this, Bashu buys a flute from the local market and one of the final scenes shows him playing it as Na'i's husband returns. The musical style is now markedly northern in contrast with his earlier performances. During the exchange which follows, it transpires that the husband - who we see has lost his right arm -

used to play the flute. In this context, the instrument - *and* the music - become symbolic of Bashu's acceptance into the family, and the implication is that he will become the substitute for the husband's lost arm. **Example 9:** 46:10 to 47:10 (1 min) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iS6efl70wKY>

- *Bashu* is a film of great humanity and compassion. It was made at the height of the Iran-Iraq war in 1986 but did not receive screening permission until after the end of the war in 1989. Returning to the central questions and the points made earlier, the use of language and music in this film enable an affective and *sonic* marking of difference. But what music also allows is a transcendence of difference: as the film progresses and Bashu becomes integrated into Na'i's family, so the link between his character and music is reinforced, ultimately signifying his journey from stranger to guest to son; from outsider to insider; from 'other' to 'self'.
- To return to the 'othering' of music itself, as well as the marginalisation of musical sound in films, there have been a number of post-Revolutionary films in which music and musicians play a central narrative role and which often focus on music's marginal social position and the competing discourses over its religious permissibility. Examples include feature films such as **SLIDE 10-1** *Santoori* (Santoor Player, Dariush Mehrjui, 2007) and **SLIDE 10-2** *Do Fereshteh* (Two Angels, Mahmad Haghigat, 2003) (or *Half Moon*, mentioned earlier). *Do Fereshteh* is about two young people from very different social classes who find a bond in their shared love of music, but whose union is ultimately prevented through the religious objections of the male protagonists' family to his musical activities. One also finds commentary on music's contested position in other films, for example the comedy feature **SLIDE 10-3** *Marmoolak* (*The Lizard*, Kamal Tabrizi, 2005). Whilst I don't have time to discuss these further today, the central point is that post-1979 films evidence both music's marginalisation and the *discourses* around its marginalisation.



- One film that was both exoticist and addressed music's marginality was the 2009 docu-feature *No-one Knows about Persian Cats* (Bahman Ghobadi), which received positive acclaim outside Iran, but which was much criticised locally for its sensationalist portrayal of the underground rock music scene, and in particular a kind of fetishist exoticisation of resistance aimed at audiences abroad. One critic, for instance, noted the **SLIDE 11-1** 'over-dramatisation in the film as it exaggerates the troubled lives of underground musicians' (Golnaz Jamsheed quoted in Steward, 2013, p.128) and female rock singer Maral commented that the film potentially had:

**SLIDE 11-2** ... a big role in showing the world more about Iranian underground music scene. It was a very important step, but I wish it could be more real. I mean it's not like we are begging to get a passport or visa at all or having to practice in a cow farm. Most of the underground musicians I know in Iran are not really happy with the outcome of the movie. I wish it could focus on real life and the art that is coming out of this scene ... (online interview, 2010, June, as quoted in Steward 2013, p. 129)

- Rock music in Iran has a legally ambiguous status and the musicians that Maral refers to were apparently rehearsing on a farm because they couldn't find anywhere in the city where they could rehearse and not be overheard. One prominent rock musician that I interviewed commented on this scene in the film: **SLIDE 11-3** 'actually, the musician practising in a cowshed is quite wealthy – the farm belongs to his father. Sometimes I think our artists and filmmakers create something that those on the other side [*'oonvarihā'* i.e. those outside Iran] will like.' (2.9.15) **SLIDE 12 Image/PPT 13 Example 10.**

#### 4. Conclusion

- So, to conclude briefly: music has clearly played – and continues to play - an important role in constructing and representing otherness in Iranian cinema and it has also found itself 'othered' in various ways. As I hope to have shown, such exoticist othering has been mobilised in the promotion of or resistance to differing visions of nationhood; including the spectacle of power and authority that marked Reza Shah's autocratic modernisation. Exoticism in Iranian cinema

works on multiple levels and in different directions; its operations are at times highly subtle, at others overtly sensationalist. It will be interesting to see what the future brings as film-makers increasingly find themselves navigating a complex dynamic between local audience ‘imaginaries’ and the global circulation of their work. **SLIDE 14**

## **References**

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