



Cinema Iranica
A Research Compendium

Internet Cinema: A Cinema of Embodied Protest

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This article is about an emergent form of cinema in whose production and propagation most of us have participated in one way or another. I will concentrate on its manifestation in Iran around the political turmoil of 2009.¹

Internet cinema is a third mechanism and process—after video and satellite—by which Iranians have challenged the state’s broadcasting monopoly and monologism inside the country. However, this cinema is a new legitimate, artistic, and expressive form regardless of its political uses. Iranian cosmopolitanism, the financial wealth of the country, the widespread penetration of the Internet and its various modalities of connectivity and interactivity, and the presence of a sophisticated media savvy population in the diaspora drove the emergence of this cinema. Live public websites are also growing, offering glimpses onto Iranian social landscapes, historical sites, and ordinary sights such as city traffic (for a while in the 2000s the Tehran Traffic Control and Surveillance Center hosted a site with several live cameras trained on major thoroughfares, refreshed every two minutes).

The increasing number of CCTV (closed-circuit television) cameras in public thoroughfares, transportation centers, and buildings has become an instrument of government surveillance and control, one that Parisa Bakhtavar’s feature comedy, *Tambourine* (Dayirah-i zangi, 2007), uses in its narrative to showcase the efficiency of the police. They have also become

sources of documentary films for filmmakers and of sousveillance (self-surveillance), by artists and the political opposition, to undermine the Islamist regime and to thwart its unwarranted charges on their arrest. The most prominent examples of the latter development were the myriad cellphone and other amateur and low-tech videos recorded during the widespread protests against Ahmadinejad's reelection in 2009, which were uploaded to Facebook, YouTube, and other social networking websites. These were in turn picked up by news and broadcast organizations and amplified and disseminated to the world. Mohsen Makhmalbaf from exile called these amateur videographers "the most honest filmmakers of Iran," contextualizing them within the history of Iranian cinema, with some exaggeration:

I think the thing they are doing is more important than all of the history of our cinema. For the past 30 years, we were trying to reach some kind of reality in art. We used our films like a mirror in front of society. But their images are full of reality; there is no artificiality. We were talking about democracy; they are in danger for democracy.²

These videos are constituent of what I have called an "Internet cinema," dealt with extensively below.

The State-Citizen Media Struggle (State-Owned Media)

With the success of the revolution in 1979, the Islamic Republic took over the broadcast media and placed it under direct control of the Supreme Leader. Having gotten rid of one authoritarian Pahlavi regime with a monopolistic state-run broadcast media consisting of vast national networks of radio and television, Iranians did not take this lying down.

¹This article is based on a virtual talk I gave on Zoom on "Iranian Internet Cinema—a Cinema of Embodied Protest," for The Elahé Omidyar Mir-Djalali Lecture Series, University of Toronto, Canada, 10 September 2021.

²Quoted in Bari Weiss, "Finding Missing Persians," Wall Street Journal, 17 February 2010, www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052748704804204575069323196402004

³I have documented this extensively in my four-volume book, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011-12).

⁴In 2008, a Harvard University study further showed that the Persian (or Farsi) blogosphere is “a large discussion space of approximately 60,000 routinely updated blogs featuring a rich and varied mix of bloggers,” that ranges from President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to lowly students. John Kelly and Bruce Etling, *Mapping Iran’s Online Public: Politics and Culture in the Persian Blogosphere* (Berkman Center for Internet and Society, Harvard Law School, 2008), <http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/publications/2008/>.



Figure 1: People capturing moments with their smartphones. Image is decorative.

The State-Citizen Media Struggle (People’s Media)

In the 1980s and 1990s Iranians engaged in a creative cat-and-mouse game with the state to create thriving black markets for alternative “peoples’ media,” particularly for video distribution and satellite television.³ But they did not stop there. In the 2000s, they added a third front in the struggle to create an alternative peoples’ medium. This was Internet cinema with which Iranians challenged the state’s media monopoly and monovocalism. However, this Internet cinema is a new and legitimate artistic and expressive form on its own, regardless of its political uses. Iranian cosmopolitanism, the financial richness of the country, its youthful and educated population, and the widespread penetration of the Internet and its various modalities of connectivity and interactivity drove the emergence of the Internet cinema.

For example, in 2005, CIA officers at the Open Source Center, a new division of the organization created to monitor public sources of information, discovered that Persian was among the top five languages in the blogosphere, offering valuable textual and audiovisual information and insight about Iranian people and their sentiments (Shane 2005).⁴ Still later studies showed that Iran has “the most internet users in the Middle East, approaching 30 million.”⁵ No matter how they are counted Iranian

bloggers formed a formidable presence in the blogosphere in particular and in cyberspace in general. Because of this presence and because of the strangling of other forms of journalism, the Internet became a vital source of information and activism in the 2000s for all sides and a highly contested public diplomacy sphere.⁶

The emergence of blogging and allied practices such as community reporting, social networking, and video sharing turned the Internet's virtual space into a vast online public sphere, which in turn encouraged discursive formations and political activism in the society. The Internet thus became social, not only in its virtuality but also in its actuality. The streets, in turn, became virtual, both in their powerful representations on the Internet and in their power to represent.

One of these discursive formations was the Internet cinema, and the social formation that it helped mobilize was the opposition Green Movement which emerged after the 2009 disputed election which reelected Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as president, a movement that demanded government accountability and democracy. This movement posed the biggest challenge in the lifespan of the Islamic Republic, not only to its legitimacy but also to its existence.

⁶Cameron J. Shahab and Reza Mousoli, "Cat and Mouse in Cyberspace: A Case Study of China vs. Iran," *Iranian.com*, 10 September 2010, www.iranian.com/main/print/120645. However, I must warn that these figures are ambiguous as it is not clear how the number of bloggers is calculated and what constitutes an 'Iranian blog.' If the physical location of bloggers is the criterion (counting only those inside Iran), the calculation would ignore the large number of bloggers in the diaspora; if the language of blogging is considered (Persian), then all those Iranians, dual national Iranian, and non-Iranians who write in other languages about Iran are ignored. Annabelle Sreberny and Gholam Khiabany, *Blogistan: The Internet and Politics in Iran* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2010), 35-6.

⁶The 25-minute film, *Iran: The Cyber-Dissidents* (2006), produced by Vivien Altman and reported by Mark Corcoran for Australian Broadcasting Corp., deals with this burgeoning phenomenon.



Figure 2: Sharing videos and information on social media. Image is decorative.

⁷The power of this new virtual and discursive space was lauded ad infinitum by mainstream Western media and exile media, which prematurely and erroneously dubbed the new protests a “Twitter Revolution,” ignoring the facts that technology and media by themselves do not make a revolution and that Twitter actually played a small role inside Iran. It played a larger role outside in publicizing the events, partly because of government censorship at home. While Twitter and Facebook were used admirably to exchange information, file news reports and images, and organize protests domestically and internationally, the social space and the physical place remained high on the agenda of the protesters, emblemized by a street placard carrying the following slogan, addressed to the regime: “We’ll give you back the web sites and mobile phones, but we won’t give you the country,” referring, on the one hand, to the power of government to shut down the Internet and mobile phones and, on the other hand, to the power of citizens to withhold support from it and to fight back for the country. See Jonathan M. Acuff, “Social Networking Media and the Revolution That Wasn’t,” in *Media, Power, and Politics in the Digital Age: The 2009 Presidential Election Uprising in Iran*, ed. Yahya Kamalipour (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2010), 221-34; Golnaz Esfandiari, “The Twitter Devolution,” *Foreign Policy*, 8 June 2010, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2010/06/08/the-twit->

The Components of Internet Cinema

What I am calling Internet cinema vastly differs from what we normally mean by cinema and by its product, movies. Internet films differ from motion picture films in their mode of production, the status of the filmmakers (who makes the film), the films’ textual system (the way the story is told), the way the films are distributed and exhibited, and finally the way they are received by spectators—on TV, on the Internet, on cell phones.⁷

The Disembodied Production Mode: Filming from Private Places

The negative consequences of the shift in the U.S. and Iranian public diplomacies from gathering secret information from enemy countries through espionage to collecting information from public sources in those countries, such as through the Internet, are that it politicizes, even militarizes, all public spheres, including the streets and the Internet. As a result, both people and government in Iran became camera shy in public places in major cities and a kind of disembodied filming emerged. If someone took out a camera to take a picture in the streets, both government agents and passersby would harass the person—one fearing that the image would be uploaded to social networking sites or to oppositional sites, feeding the gathering anti-regime dissent; the other fearing government surveillance and future arrests. As a result, some of the early protest videos were filmed almost clandestinely, from private and semi-private places like balconies and from inside apartments and offices. The government attempted to remove, impede, or block these public sources of information and to surveil, track down, imprison, and severely punish the Internet operators and users it considered aiding the dissidents. Ironically, the U.S. sanctions against the Islamic Republic, too, initially contributed to suppressing the digital uprising of Iranians.⁸





Figure 3: Recording scenes of police violence against citizens by people's mobile phones

The Embodied Production Mode: Filming in Public Places

The regime's impediments and censorship efforts did not deter the opposition; instead, it encouraged a creative but sometimes deadly and violent cat-and-mouse game, both on the Internet and in the streets, leading to an embodied styled of filming. Protesters found ever more ingenious alternatives to stay in touch, to coordinate, and to organize their protest, and they sought new strategies, internal and international, to create an alternative non-governmental mediascape to publicize their own activities and grievances, to document those protests, and to monitor police reaction and violence. Many resorted to proxies, which redirected them to banned sites, or used anonymizers, which concealed identities of senders and recipients.⁹

The Embodied Production Mode: Using Simple Equipment

This was the moment for the efflorescence of a new "little medium," the "Internet cinema." In contrast to the "big media" of movies and broadcast TV, this little medium with its simple equipment—a mobile phone or a consumer model digital camera/recorder—to not only replace those big media but also the

ter-devolution/; and Mahboub Hashem and Abeer Najjar, "The Role and Impact of New Information Technology (NIT) Applications in Disseminating News about the Recent Iran Presidential Election and Uprisings," in *Media, Power, and Politics in the Digital Age: The 2009 Presidential Election Uprising in Iran*, ed. Yahya Kamalipour (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2010), 125-42.

⁹The power of this new virtual and discursive space was lauded ad infinitum by mainstream Western media and exile media, which prematurely and erroneously dubbed the new protests a "Twitter Revolution," ignoring the facts that technology and media by themselves do not make a revolution and that Twitter actually played a small role inside Iran. It played a larger role outside in publicizing the events, partly because of government censorship at home. While Twitter and Facebook were used admirably to exchange information, file news reports and images, and organize protests domestically and internationally, the social space and the physical place remained high on the agenda of the protesters, emblemized by a street placard carrying the following slogan, addressed to the regime: "We'll give you back the web sites and mobile phones, but we won't give you the country," referring, on the one hand, to the power of government to shut down the Internet and mobile phones and, on the other hand, to the power of citizens to withhold support from it and to fight back for the country. See Jonathan M. Acuff, "Social Networking Media and the Revolution That Wasn't," in *Media, Power, and Politics in the Digital*

Age: The 2009 Presidential Election Uprising in Iran, ed. Yahya Kamalipour (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2010), 221-34; Golnaz Esfandiari, "The Twitter Devolution," *Foreign Policy*, 8 June 2010, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2010/06/08/the-twitter-devolution/>; and Mahboub Hashem and Abeer Najjar, "The Role and Impact of New Information Technology (NIT) Applications in Disseminating News about the Recent Iran Presidential Election and Uprisings," in *Media, Power, and Politics in the Digital Age: The 2009 Presidential Election Uprising in Iran*, ed. Yahya Kamalipour (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2010), 125-42.

⁹Foremost among these anti-censorship software tools were Tor, Psiphon, Mixminion, Incognito, Freegate, and the purportedly more ingenious program, Haystack, designed especially for Iran by American hacktivist, Austin Heap. William J. Dobson, "Computer Programmer Takes on the World's Despots," *Newsweek*, 6 August 2010, www.newsweek.com/computer-programmer-takes-worlds-despots-71587.

¹⁰See Hamid Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema*, vol. 2 (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 325-432.

¹¹Oppositional filmmaking against IRI took varied forms: documentaries, fiction films, agit-prop films, animated films, Internet films, and music videos. In this section the latter two are discussed.

formerly powerful little medium of the analogue audiocassette, which Ayatollah Khomeini had used so effectively to energize the Islamic Revolution in the late 1970s.¹⁰ This was a new era, necessitating a new medium, for a new cause. Each protester became a digital medium and a historiographer by taking to the streets, digital camera, cell phone, or a recorder in hand, defying the government's threats of force and terror and its monopoly on the big media.¹¹



Figure 4: Amateur videographers documenting protests with mobile phones.

The Embodies Production Mode: Filming from the Streets

They began to record their videos from the turmoil in the streets, at ground level, and from a close-up view, instead of from the safety of the high-rise buildings and from behind windows and curtains as before. With this shift from the private to the public space and from a distant view to a close-up view of the subjects, came other fundamental political and aesthetic changes in what was recorded. Production became democratized, as anyone with a cell phone camera was a potential filmmaker and broadcaster, not needing professional training. Social barriers and divisions, such as those separating genders, crumbled. That is why women were such a strong and defiant presence both in the streets

and on Internet cinema's community videos.¹²

The Embodied Production Mode: (Cinema Vérité)

Moreover, instead of recording from the point of view of an outsider observing events as before, community videographers began to record from the POV of insiders, engaged in action. Their recording mode, thus, shifted from direct cinema's fly-on-the-wall observation of outside events to cinema vérité's provocation-cum-recording of events.¹³

The Embodied Production Mode—Aesthetics (Amateur Aesthetics)

As such, theirs was not a simple recording of protests that someone else had organized, but an embodied form of protest in whose organization they themselves participated, with all the subjectivity, ambiguity, and hapticity—roughness, shakiness, and out of focus and chaotic aiming and muffled sounds—that they entailed—in short an embodied camera effect.

The result was unedited, raw footage of action and affect, not edited films of a polished presentation. These proved to be very powerful when uploaded onto the Internet video sharing and social networking sites, bypassing government control and censorship.

Slogans

The slogans that protesters carried testified to the changed mission of the filmers and that of this new little embodied filmic medium. "My [cell] phone, my medium," summarized the defiance of the protesters against the state and its centralized big media, the broadcast media. Amplifying that message, another said: "Every Iranian, a historiographer."¹⁴

¹²Hamed Yusefi's 25-minute film, *The Aesthetics of Political Protest in Iran* (Zibashinasi-yi I'tirazat-i Siyasi dar Iran), aired by BBC Persian on 22 July 2010, provides insightful analysis of these points. See: www.bbc.co.uk/persian/tv/2010/07/100721_green_art.shtml.

¹³Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 99-138.

¹⁴A cartoon echoed these sentiments by depicting an Iranian woman wearing a crown of light and posing like the U.S. statue of liberty, but instead of holding a lit torch she holds up a cell phone emanating waves. The original Persian slogans are: "Telefon-i man, risanah-yi man" and "Har Irani tarikhnegar."

Videographers

Who are these video historiographers filming these events? I make a distinction between filmers and videographers and filmmakers. The filmers and videographers are amateur filmers, not professional filmmakers. They work spontaneously in an unplanned, unscripted manner. They work alone and are often anonymous, which means they do not benefit from authorial recognition and financial gain. They work underground, without official authorization. They also work outside journalistic institutions that verify the authenticity of events, people, places and confer value on their result.

Production Phase 1

The production of Internet cinema film occurs in three distinct phases. In the first phase, community videos are filmed by people with digital cameras which are upload to Internet sites without editing.

Production Phase 2

In a growing practice, a second phase evolved, during which others, who were not necessarily involved in the first phase, blogged about them or shared, compiled, aggregated, repurposed, edited, and uploaded these Internet videos to create other fictional or nonfictional videos and music videos. These are what I call Internet films, and to which I will turn presently. In the case of the two videos of tearing up of Khamenei's picture, or that of Neda Agha-Soltan's death video, an anonymous person recorded the incident on a cell phone and uploaded them, starting their distribution process.





Figure 5: Pictures of a video recorded by an eyewitness of the Neda Agha-Soltan incident.

Distribution

Unlike most movie distribution, which requires professional distributors, the amateur filmer is also the primary distributor of Internet community videos. His distribution is not just individualized but also significantly globalized, because of the Internet. In this way, ordinary videographers become not only extraordinary producers but also extraordinary extraterritorial distributors, who bypass the traditional commercial and governmental distribution systems with their complicated monopolistic or competitive techno-political economies. In the case of the Agha-Soltan video, the anonymous filmer forwarded the video to the British newspaper *The Guardian*, *Voice of America*, and five other individuals. Significantly, according to the newspaper, one of these latter individuals uploaded the video onto Facebook, not the filmer himself or herself, showing the two-step production of Internet films. From that one posting “copies spread to YouTube and were broadcast within hours by CNN.”¹⁵ This video was then used in, or served to inspire, numerous types of Internet films—fiction, documentary, music video, and animated films. It is thus that this single video went viral and became simultaneously an icon, index, and symbol of the postelection protest and of the democratic aspirations of Iranians—the Green Movement—fulfilling all the three definitions of the sign in Charles Sanders Peirce’s semiology.

¹⁵See “Anonymous Video of Neda Agha-Soltan’s Death Wins Polk Award,” www.guardian.co.uk/media/pda/2010/feb/16/george-polk-awards. To see the video, visit “Neda Agha-Soltan Shot in Iran,” www.dailymotion.com/video/x9oltq_neda-agh-soltan-shot-in-iran_news.



Figure 6: Examples of non-Iranian newspapers that published the image of Neda Agha-Soltan

Exhibition

The exhibition venue of the Internet cinema vastly differs from other forms of cinema. It shifts from the stationary brick and mortar movie houses where people watch movies collectively according to a schedule, to the small and mobile handheld devices, which could be viewed by any individual with Internet access at any time, and anywhere in the world. This means that Internet films' exhibition is freed from both physical location and physical structure, becoming global and virtual—even viral, potentially. In short, in all its phases of production, distribution, exhibition, and reception, Internet cinema moves from professional and formal to amateur and personal forms, marking the ultimate triumph of modernity's individuality in Iranian cinematic expression.

Reception

The rubber of the Internet films hits the road with the viewers, who are not passive receivers of pre-made films, but active interactants in creating new phase 3 films. They choose the order of the film clips they watch, sharing some, and blogging about them and others. Each viewer creates her own film by this process, which is different from the others' films, for they click on different videos. Because of this and because many of these

film postings are ephemeral, no single, unified, authorial film text exists. As a result, the real author of the Internet film, the filmmaker, is none other than the viewer who is also the film's secondary distributor, exhibitor, and critic. This is a radical shift in cinema, from professional to amateur and from filmmaker to the viewer, a triumph of modernity and individuality.

Internet cinema is more democratic than traditional cinema because of its spontaneous, amateur production mode, its non-hierarchical production, open textuality, and viewer interactivity.

The Diasporic Contribution

Finally, the Iranian diasporic population contributes to the Internet films in several ways. It helps to globalize the film by sharing the first phase clips on social networking or streaming sites, by blogging about it, and by forwarding it to Western news organizations. They also contribute by repurposing them to make other films—documentaries, fiction films, music videos. I offer one such example of a music video, *Another Brick in the Wall (Hey Ayatollah, Leave those Kids Alone)*,” directed by Babak Payami and performed by Blurred Vision.

This music video provides a great example of counter-interpellation. If you recall Louis Althusser's example of interpellation, or hailing, it is this: you are walking down the street and a policeman calls you from behind. By turning around to face the caller, you're interpellated, and have become the subject of the state. In the Islamic Republic the state hails and addresses the citizens by its monopolistic broadcast and other media, which propagate the dominant ideology. The state enforces that ideology by its control of the coercive forces as well: the police, armed forces, security, and intelligence services. The citizens can hail an authoritarian state by creating their own ideological apparatuses, such as black-market videos, installing clandestine satellite receivers, and creating Internet films, such as this music video, which are powerful in counterhailing the government,

¹⁶However, the affective power of these Internet films was often diluted when Western media broadcast them, for they often suppressed the soundtrack, replacing it with their own voice over narration or commentary. To be sure, the video of Neda Agha-Soltan's on-camera death as broadcast by Western news media was very powerful, but this power came from its tragic content, timing, brief length (40 seconds), the semiotics of Agha-Soltan's youth, beauty, fair skin, and her Westernized veil and attire. Its power also came from the video's visuality, the way it clearly witnessed the last eye contact of the dying young woman with the camera, as life departed from her body. However, if one listens to the voices of the bystanders—all male—who gathered around her to save her, the video becomes much more compelling in its emotional and visceral impact. Here's my translated transcription of the bystanders' utterances, some of which are not sufficiently audible: "Let's get someone to carry her away..." (to a hospital?); "Neda! Watch her eyes, watch her eyes"; "Her eyes are turning in"; Neda, don't be afraid, don't be afraid"; "Oh, oh, oh, OH" (voices rise to desperate shouts); "Press on her, press on her" (hands press on her chest, presumably the site of her gunshot wound); "Neda, stay, stay, stay, STAY" (man's voice rises to a frantic and horrifying shout); and "Open her mouth, open her mouth." See Setareh Sabety, "Graphic Content: The Semiotics of a YouTube Uprising," in *Media, Power,*

that is, talking back to and undermining the state. But these individual media makers are vulnerable to the state's coercive forces, as Shahin Najafi found out when he created *Naqi*, a video critiquing Ayatollah Khamenei. He received a death fatwa and went into hiding. Both the production of counterhailing videos and the reaction of the state can turn Internet filmmakers into heroic characters, pushing them into unwanted political leadership, and make them better targets for government action.

This sort of affective Internet film augured not only entirely new relations with its social subjects, as described so far, but also new relations of production, distribution, exhibition, and reception with its viewers.¹⁶ While its site of production in its initial phases was primarily public places—either in the streets or underground—, its sites of reception were chiefly private places—homes and other private or semi-private locations. Production was ad hoc, spontaneous, amateurish, and without official permission, bypassing the strict government approval and censorship apparatuses. As such, Internet cinema was inherently an unauthorized, underground cinema. Its technology of recording was no longer optical and chemical, involving celluloid film, but entirely electronic and digital. This technological shift facilitated the globalized production and distribution of Internet Cinema videos.

Because of their highly individualized production, their spontaneous, embodied, and amateur aesthetics, their small-scale, short length, and un-edited raw footage, and their mobility the first phase Internet videos cannot satisfactorily be labeled 'cinema.' However, I am applying that term to them because they are a new form of audiovisual expression on their own, and they spawn, in their second-phase iteration, other longer, more robust, and professional works, which are exhibited both on the Internet and in the movie houses. The Internet cinema, thus, added another type to the typology of cinemas that emerged in IRI. Whatever the most accurate terminology, the fact remains that instead of being dismissed by the world on grounds of their



amateur, improvised aesthetics, and brief burst of raw footage of affect, Internet videos gained an added value precisely because of those characteristics, which were reminiscent of the third cinema's aesthetics of imperfection and smallness that in the 1960s and 1970s had countered both the reigning oppressive political regimes in the world and the oppressive mainstream cinema's aesthetic regime of polish and perfection. In fact, the aesthetics of imperfection, smallness, and embodiment of these videos authenticated them fully, as intimate and defiant documents of their filmmakers having been there, documenting, provoking, and protesting against a seemingly hegemonic and intractable state and its media.

International recognition of the Iranian Internet cinema of protest was swift, not only in the reiteration and transmedial dissemination of its videos but also in the awards these received from film festivals and media and journalism associations—another reason to call them Internet cinema. For example, in 2009, Long Island University bestowed its prestigious journalism award, the George Polk Award for Videography, to the video of Neda Agha-Soltan in recognition of “the efforts of the people responsible for recording the death of 26-year-old Neda Agha-Soltan at a June protest in Tehran, Iran, and uploading the video to the Internet.”¹⁷

Internet films, like Agha-Soltan's video, soon became the contents of other protest films and videos made in different forms—fiction, documentary, animated, and music videos—and some were used, reused, remade, remixed, homaged, signified upon, and repurposed so many times and so transmedially and rhizomatically in a meandering global chain reaction that they became viral, even though virality has usually been associated with comedy.¹⁸ One of these is *The Green Wave* (2010), which received its international premiere at International Documentary Film Festival in Amsterdam in 2011. Directed by Iranian-born German filmmaker Ali Samadi Ahadi (b. 1972), according to its press book, the film is a “touching documentary-collage”

and Politics in the Digital Age: The 2009 Presidential Election Uprising in Iran, ed. Yahya Kamalipour (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2010), 111-25, and Sareh Afshar, “Are We Neda? The Iranian Women, the Election, and International Media,” in *Media, Power, and Politics in the Digital Age: The 2009 Presidential Election Uprising in Iran*, ed. Yahya Kamalipour (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2010), 235-49.

¹⁷See “Long Island University Announces Winners of 2009 George Polk Awards in Journalism,” www.liu.edu/About/News/Univ-Ctr-PR/2010/February/GP-Press-Release-Feb16-2010.aspx.

¹⁸Neda, an animated version, offers a historical background of the incident and is 4:30 minutes in length: www.youtube.com/watch?v=wXN_yCS-bUYk&feature=related. See David Gurney, “Infectious Culture: Virality, Comedy, and Transmediality in the Digital Age,” PhD diss., (School of Communication, Northwestern University, 2011).

¹⁹The Green Wave press book: www.thegreenwave-film.com/, 4.

²⁰See the following sites: www.idfa.nl/nl/webzine/nieuws/prijs-voor-the-silent-majority.aspx and “Jayizah-yi Sinimayi Baray-i ‘Filmsazan-i Nashinas-i’ Iran,” http://zamaaneh.com/news/2010/11/post_14948.html.

²¹David Batty, “Guardian Journalist Wins Award for Iranian Protest Coverage,” *The Guardian*, www.guardian.co.uk/culture/2010/nov/24/.

that illustrates the dramatic 2009 presidential election protests and expresses the feelings of the people involved in the Green Movement. “Facebook reports, Twitter messages and videos posted on the internet were included in the film composition, and hundreds of real blog entries served as reference for the experiences and thoughts of two young students, whose story is running through the film as the main thread. The film describes their initial hope and curiosity, their desperate fear, and the courage to yet continue to fight.”¹⁹ These fictional storylines were animated using the “motion comic” technique augmented by interviews with prominent human rights campaigners and exiled Iranians, such as Shirin Ebadi, Mohsen Kadivar, Payam Akhavan, Mehdi Mohseni, and Mitra Khalatbari.

These extended Internet cinema films, too, received international praise and prizes. For example, in November 2010, the International Documentary Film Festival in Amsterdam recognized the importance of such Internet films, when it gave its Unlimited Cinema Award to *The Silent Majority Speaks* (2010), a 93-minute film anthology consisting of 14 films made on cell phones and similar devices by anonymous Iranians about the post presidential election protests and the state violence against them. The 5,000-euro cash award given to the film was an initiative of the Hivos Cultural Fund, one of the NGOs that the Iranian intelligence ministry had identified as supporting a velvet revolution against the regime. The award was given to an Iranian women’s rights activist, Mahboubeh Abbasgholizade, who was condemned in absentia in Iran to two-and-a-half years of prison and thirty lashes, and who dedicated it to the anonymous citizen filmmakers.²⁰ In addition, in November 2010, the Foreign Press Association named Iranian journalist Saeed Kamali Dehghan, who regularly writes for *The Guardian*, as “journalist of the year,” for his coverage of the disputed presidential election, and gave the top award for best TV Feature/Documentary film to the HBO film, *For Neda*, which Anthony Thomas had co-directed with Kamali Dehghan.²¹



Music videos became one of the most powerful forms of the Internet cinema, driven by the global popularity of the music video form and by the continuing disenchantment of Iranians with their regime. Blurred Vision, a Toronto-based rock band formed in 2007 by brothers Sepp and Sohl, who fled Iran with their family in 1986 (and do not reveal their last name to safeguard family members' security in Iran), produced one of the more powerful music videos supporting the protesters of Ahmadinejad's reelection. This became very popular if not viral. On 30 January 2010, the band remade the famous Pink Floyd's song "Another Brick in the Wall," already very popular in Iran, into a clear-visioned new protest anthem, Another Brick in the Wall (Hey, Ayatollah, Leave Those Kids Alone!). In it they intercut footage of their purported clandestine performance of the song inside Iran, being filmed by a fan on a cell phone, with those of street clashes and an overbearing Ayatollah who orders the security police to shut down the performance (figure 73). By 1 November, the music video had been played an impressive number of 383,394 times on YouTube; however, the brothers were more impressed by the responses from inside Iran.²² Sepp explained:

We get a lot of e-mails, especially from the younger guys, and I remember we were in London for a film festival where we were there to receive an award for best video and Sohl was translating an e-mail into English. And as he was translating he started crying. The e-mail said, 'It is you guys out there that can keep this going for us, that can keep our voice alive. We're here sort of isolated from the rest of the world, we've been shut down and shut off from the rest of the world and all we can say is just keep our voice alive, keep going to allow us to reach this point of freedom.'²³

²²Blurred Vision's music video is available at www.dailymotion.com/video/xcp-5ua_blurred-vision-another-brick-in-the_music.

²³Quoted in Diane Macedo, "Iranian Rockers Tear Down 'The Wall,'" Fox News, www.foxnews.com/world/2010/08/11/iranian-rockers-break-wall/.

²⁴Macedo, “Iranian Rockers Tear Down ‘The Wall.’”

²⁵The “Hey Executioner, Get Lost” music video is at www.youtube.com/watch?v=wR77TN1_d8k&feature=player_embedded#at=60.

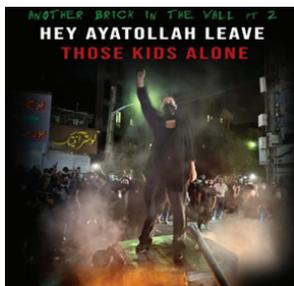


Figure 7: Music cover for Hey, Ayatollah, Leave Those Kids Alone! (2011)

That YouTube was often shut down by the government made such a response all the more significant, for users had to go through extra steps to get around censorship (without censorship the hits the video received would have been much higher). Not all the comments were positive, however, for some people accused the band of being involved in American public diplomacy projects, of being “backed by the CIA and the Pentagon and making a fortune off the U.S. government,” a charge the band denied, stating that it donates most of the song’s download proceeds to Amnesty International. “It’s an ethos of the band that awareness can change the world and music is our tool and platform to do that,” said Sepp, “and in my opinion it’s truly working because the dialogue has begun.”²⁴

Hey Executioner, Get Lost! (Hey Jallad, Gom Kon Gureto!, 2011) was another music video on the protest movement that tapped into the Pink Floyd’s “Another Brick in the Wall” song, except that this was more incendiary than Blurred Vision’s music video. For it identified President Ahmadinejad and Supreme Leader Khamenei as the executioners in its title, ordering them to leave the country that is no longer theirs. The videoclips of the street demonstrations that accompanied the lyrics included images of orderly protests which were disrupted by police violence, causing the angry demonstrators to turn on the uniformed and plain-clothes policemen, whom they beat up mercilessly and whose van they turn over. The video’s message was no longer protest but revolt.²⁵

Yet another effective counterhailing song, which spawned music videos on YouTube, was Thorn and Riffraff (Khas o Khashak), which Iranians produced to counter what Ahmadinejad had once called the thousands of demonstrators to his reelection, “a few thorns and riffraff.” The song turns Ahmadinejad’s own words against himself and his regime, addressing them in its refrain: “You are the thorn and riffraff/ you are lower than dirt/ I am the aching lover/ ablaze, bright, and full of fervor.”²⁶

²⁶For an example, see “Khas o Khashak” at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=zlz5isdLF-MA&NR=1.

Clearly, these music videos and many others like them were examples of the citizens withdrawing their support from the regime, the most effective peaceful means of combating intolerant and undemocratic rule. However, these videos took it one step further. All the videos reversed the interpellating process that Althusser describes in his famous illustration of a policeman calling a citizen: “Hey! You, there.” By turning to respond to the policeman, the passerby becomes a subject of the state. Instead of being hailed by the state and its agents (“Hey! You, there”), in these videos it is the protesters and their global sympathizers and collaborators who counterhail the state, not only in the video’s titles but also in their frequent shouted refrains addressed to the regime, “Hey, Ayatollah, Leave Those Kids Alone!,” “Hey Executioner, Get Lost!,” and “You are the thorn and riffraff/ you are lower than dirt.” It is in this power not only to withdraw consent but also to counterhail the state, of speaking truth to power, that the Internet cinema will find its political fulfillment.



Figure 8: Images from the music video for Hey, Ayatollah, Leave Those Kids Alone! (2011)

²⁷Hamid Tehrani, "Iran: A Long and Painful Story of Jailed Bloggers," *Global Voices*, 18 December 2008, <http://globalvoicesonline.org/2008/12/18/iran-a-long-and-painful-story-of-jailed-bloggers/>.

²⁸Ahmed El Gody, "New Media, New Audience, New Topics, and New Forms of Censorship in the Middle East," in *New Media and the Middle East*, ed. Philip Seib (New York: Palgrave, 2007), 223.

²⁹Shahab and Mousoli, "Cat and Mouse in Cyberspace."

³⁰Michael Theodoulou, "Iranian 'Blogfather' Hossein Derakhshan is Arrested on Charge of Spying for Israel," *The Sunday Times*, www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/middle_east/article5190462.ece.

³¹Robert Mackey, "Long Jail Term for Iran's 'Blogfather,'" *The New York Times*, 28 September 2010, <http://thelede.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/09/28/long-jail-term-foriranian-blogger/?ref=middleeast>.

The Iranian government moved to stifle this new form of cinema, both in its production and dissemination. It began arresting virtual and social activists and videographers. It arrested an increasing number of bloggers, whose labor complemented the Internet cinema, sentencing them to jail terms ranging from a few months to many years. In 2004 it arrested some 20 bloggers and Internet journalists,²⁷ and between 2000 and 2006 Iran became the top censor of the Internet in the Middle East,²⁸ thwarting the democratic potential of the Internet as well as of Iranians. Within a few years, Reporters Without Borders was able to label the Islamic Republic, along with 13 other countries, as "enemies of the Internet."²⁹ In September 2008, prominent Iranian-Canadian blogger, Hosain Derakhshan (nicknamed blogfather, aka Hoder.com), was arrested inside Iran on a variety of charges, among them, collaborating with hostile foreign powers, including Israel. Derakhshan had been the editor of the Internet and Film section of *Duniya-yi Tasvir* (World of Pictures) magazine in Tehran and after emigrating to Canada had introduced "a simple but groundbreaking" way to show Persian letters and characters on the Internet, which contributed to the prominence of Iranians in the blogosphere. This charge of spying was apparently due to a well-publicized trip of his in 2006 to Israel (on his Canadian passport) whose aims were to show "his 20,000 daily Iranian readers what Israel really looks like and how people live there," and to "humanise" Iranians for Israelis.³⁰ A controversial figure among the blogging community, he had toned down his anti-regime blogging in recent times and began supporting it, and he returned to Iran from his self-imposed exile, hoping to work inside the country. He was jailed for nearly two years before finally being sentenced to an incredible nineteen-and-a-half years of imprisonment on charges of "conspiring with hostile governments, spreading propaganda against the Islamic system, spreading propaganda in favor of counterrevolutionary groups, blasphemy, and creating and managing obscene Web sites."³¹

"Like journalists, bloggers have been treated for months as if



they are enemies of the regime,” Reporters Without Borders said. “But the authorities have now started to impose much harsher sentences on them. Bloggers involved in censorship circumvention are being particularly targeted as they help their fellow citizens to gain access to banned information.”³² Internet censorship took many forms, not only imprisonment but also more subtle and structural forms, such as passing of censorship laws and regulations, content filtering, tapping and surveillance, infrastructural control, telecom control, and self-censorship.³³ Imprisonment, however, remained a common form. The Committee to Protect Journalists reported that by February 2010 there were fifty-two journalists in Iranian jails, a record high which accounted for a third of all the journalists imprisoned in the world.³⁴ A month later, Reporters Without Borders noted that, “With some sixty journalists and bloggers behind bars and another fifty forced to seek asylum elsewhere, the Islamic Republic of Iran has become the largest prison in the Middle East—and one of the world’s largest prisons—for journalists and netizens.”³⁵

Undeterred, some Iranian activists came up with another tactic: they took legal action outside Iran. In August 2010, jailed and tortured prominent journalist Isa Saharkhiz and his son, Mehdi Saharkhiz, filed a lawsuit in the U.S. Federal Court in Alexandria, Virginia, against Nokia Siemens Networks and its parent companies, Siemens AG and Nokia Inc., alleging their complicity in the Iranian government’s human rights violations through the spying centers the companies had supplied. The journalist claimed that such centers had conducted surveillance, eavesdropping, and tracking of his cell phone and other communications after the 2009 elections, resulting in his incarceration and torture. The plaintiffs demanded that Nokia Siemens Networks cease its support of the Iranian intercepting centers and use its connections within Iranian regime to secure Saharkhiz’s freedom. They also called on the United States’ judicial system to hold accountable business practices such as the ones engaged in by Nokia Siemens Networks in Iran.³⁶

³²“Persecution of Bloggers Continues, Now With Harsher Sentences,” UNHCR, www.unhcr.org/refworld/publisher,RSF,,4cbd445512,0.html.

³³El Gody, “New Media, New Audience, New Topics, and New Forms of Censorship in the Middle East,” 231.

³⁴See <http://cpj.org/2010/03/with-52-journalists-in-jail-iran-hits-new-shamefu.php>.

³⁵See http://en.rsf.org/spip.php?page=article&id_article=36684.

³⁶See <http://onlymehdi.posterous.com/tortured-prominent-iranian-journalist-sues-no>.

³⁷Siamand, "Patak-i Narm-i Televizioni," Roozononline, 14 June 2010, www.roozonline.com/persian/opinion/opinion-article/article/2010/june/14/-5399ef79c5.html.

³⁸"Iranian State TV Acts as an Arm of the Intelligence Apparatus," 11 August 2010, www.iranhumanrights.org/2010/08/iranian-state-tv-acts-as-an-arm-of-the-intelligence-apparatus/print/.

³⁹One NGO purportedly receiving such help was the Center for Iranian Studies in Toronto. See "Is Toronto Cultural Centre Funded by Iran's Mullah Regime?" www.onlydemocracy4iran.com/2010/04/15/is-toronto-cultural-centre-funded-by-irans-mullah-regime/. National Iranian American Council (NIAC) has also been accused of promoting Islamic Republic causes by some exiles, even though it has received funding from the U.S. government and foundations, which would militate against such cross-funding. NIAC denies any affiliations with the Iranian regime. See "Voice of the Mullahs: Public Diplomacy takes a Pro-Islamist Tilt," *Washington Times*, 14 April 2010, www.washingtontimes.com/news/2010/apr/14/voice-of-the-mullahs/; <http://english.iranianlobby.com/page1.php?id=22&bakhsh=JOURNAL>; [http://www.niacouncil.org/site/PageServer?pagename=About_myths_facts](http://www.niacouncil.org/site/PageServer?pagename>About_myths_facts).

In another tactic, International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran called for the removal of Ezzatollah Zarghami, Director General of Voice and Vision of the Islamic Republic (national broadcast networks, VVIR), on the charge that in addition to its close cooperation with intelligence agents and interrogators, the broadcasting authority under him had "systematically produced and broadcast programs aimed to target well-known personalities through attributing undue, libelous, and untrue matters to them." This was a reference to the latest iteration of Identity and Armageddon shows, a new series, Sedition Documents, which purported to be documentaries about reformists, such as Ataollah Mohajerani, Abdolkarim Soroush, Akbar Ganji, Shirin Ebadi, Fatemeh Haqiqatju, and Mohsen Sazegara, many of them in diaspora, aired on the main VVIR channels during prime time. Having no access to them to interrogate and force them into incriminating show trials, such state-sanctioned "documentaries" smeared these individuals by digging up dirt on their private lives and by falsely presenting them as immoral and hostile to Islam and to religion.³⁷ The campaign further demanded that the Iranian parliament and judiciary launch an independent inquiry into VVIR violations of the constitution and citizens' rights on behalf of the defamed individuals who could not defend themselves in the court of public opinion because of the government monopoly on all broadcast media.³⁸ How successful these extraterritorial legal interventions will be in impeding the government's illegal attacks on its own citizens remains to be seen.

The Iranian regime took a page from the U.S. government's public diplomacy rulebook and went global and began countering the U.S. government's funding of anti-Islamic Republic and pro-democracy NGOs inside and outside of Iran. This included supporting and funding NGOs in the West that engaged in cultural programming that favored the Islamic Republic.³⁹ It also began a wide-ranging "campaign of harassing and intimidating members of its diaspora world-wide—not just prominent dissidents—who criticize the regime." This unprecedented action consisted not only of slowing down the Internet speed,



blocking social networking sites (Facebook, Twitter), video sharing sites (YouTube), Internet telephone services (Skype), and cutting e-mail service inside Iran, but also of tracking the activities of Iranians on networking sites worldwide, creating fake sites for the protesters to rope in more victims, monitoring Iranian protesters in the diaspora (900 were tracked in Germany), videotaping their public demonstrations in order to harass them and their families at home, and sending them anonymous threatening e-mails to cease and desist from “spreading lies and insults.”⁴⁰ All these measures may have been facilitated and enhanced by IRGC’s takeover of the telecom infrastructure.



Figure 9: Social media filtering. Image is decorative.

In 2010, Ahmadinejad’s government attempted another tactic: it put on another charm offensive for the Iranians in diaspora who had previously been denigrated by the Islamic Republic leaders. It established the High Council of Iranians Abroad, which sought to attract thousands of professional Iranians and potential investors to visit, invest, and return to Iran. It sought to facilitate their travels by establishing a 24-hour hotline, establishing branch offices of the Council in Iranian provinces, supporting the creation of “Iran House” branches in foreign countries, and organizing in Tehran a massive Grand Conference of Iranians Living Abroad, offering to pay for the participants’ travel and accommodations.⁴¹ However, instead of “polishing Iran’s image,” the grand conference, “ended up showcasing many of the country’s bitter internal divisions”⁴², and the opposition was

⁴⁰Farnaz Fassihi, “Revolutionary Guards Extends Reach to Iran’s Media,” *The Wall Street Journal*, 4 November 2009, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB125730352972127145.html?KEYWORDS=farnaz+fassihi>.

⁴¹See <http://congress.iranianshouse.ir/> and <http://congress.iranianshouse.ir/>.

⁴²William Yong and Robert F. Worth, ‘Iran Expatriates Get Chilly Reception’, *The New York Times*, Online Resource: <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/08/world/middleeast/08iran.html> (accessed 18 November 2020).

⁴³“Barkhi shirkat konandigan-i dar hamayish-i buzurg-i Irani-an-i muqim-i kharij,” 5 August 2010, http://greenprotests.blogspot.com/2010/08/blog-post_05.html.

quick to post the participants’ names and pictures on the Internet in an effort to “expose the double crossers.”⁴³

Such politicization of the digital media and the Internet by a public diplomacy quartet—Western powers, Iranian regime, dissidents at home, and dissident in exile—had the unfortunate result of deeply and structurally politicizing the Iranian domestic and exile media and Internet cinema, whether their contents were political or not, degrading their professional impartiality and journalistic fairness, and undermining the media and civil society formations inside and outside the country, regardless of whether they had accepted American or Iranian governments’ funding or not, and feeding Iranians’ penchant for conspiracy thinking. It also made Iranian or bi-national Iranian intellectuals, academics, artists, bloggers, filmmakers, and community activists, whether they were beneficiaries of the public diplomacy funding or not, suspect to the Iranian and Western intelligence services or targets of their surveillance and recruitment, with serious consequences for their democratic aspirations and their lives.

Multiplicity is overdetermined in accented films. Multiplicity is manifested in the films’ multilingual dialogues, multicultural characters, and multisited diegeses, and it is driven by the many languages of the filmmakers and their crews and the stories about which they make films. Multiplicity feeds into and feeds off of the horizontality of our globalized world, where compatriot diaspora and transnational communities and individuals are in touch with each other laterally across the globe, instead of being focused on an exclusive, binary, and vertical exilic relation between a former home country and the current homeland. The metaphor is more one of rhizome than one of root.

With financial consolidation, media convergence, digitization, and the Internet, we have entered the multidevice, multiplatform, and multichannel media world to whose multiplex creations multiple users flung far and wide contribute. This is



clearly a vast, complex, and rapidly evolving topic, suffice it to say that it will give new meaning to the ideas of collective production and reception. It will also raise serious question about the nature of authorship, which has traditionally been tied to singularity and uniqueness. What would authorship in a multiauthored, user-generated, multiplatform, and multidevice environment consist of? Will it lead to the rise of egalitarian, democratic, amateurs and citizen or community journalists, self-taught filmmakers, dorm-room musicians, and unpublished writers, who, empowered by the Internet and artisanal do-it-yourself strategies, can crash through the traditional gatekeepers of ideas and cultural products; or will it lead, as Andrew Keen claims, to a cult of parasitic amateurs producing shallow, repetitious, mediocre art—a bunch of rumor-mongers, idea spinners, and intellectual property kleptomaniacs who copy and paste other peoples' works.⁴⁴ Will the considered opinions of the experts be replaced by the wisdom of the crowd?⁴⁵ The jury is out on this debate.

⁴⁴Andrew Keen, *The Cult of the Amateur* (New York: Doubleday, 2008).

⁴⁵James Surowiecki, *The Wisdom of Crowds* (New York: Anchor Books, 2005). There is also a verifiability problem with Internet cinema. For the issue of authentic video from inside Iran, and of doctored film by exiles, see "Violence and Protest in Iran as Currency Drops in Value," *New York Times*, 4 October 12, 2012, www.nytimes.com/2012/10/04/world/middleeast/clashes-reported-in-tehran-as-riot-police-target-money-changers.html?emc=tnt&tntemail0=y, and Art Keller, "The Great Persian Firewall," *Foreign Policy*, 28 September, 2012, www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/09/28/Iran_fire-wall_google.