



Cinema Iranica
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“Tooba” in Rakhshan Banietemad’s Cinema

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Drawn out by Rakhshan Banietemad in 1985, the role of Tuba, the filmmaker’s most iconic character, was initially reserved for Golab Adineh to perform in *Under the Skin of the City* (2001). As a result of censorship, the film was stalled and only received approval sixteen years later.¹ Tuba, however, makes her first appearance in *The May Lady* (1999), mediated and framed through its main character’s lens, that of Forough Kia (Minoo Faraschi), the documentary filmmaker within the film. Where *The May Lady* offers a glimpse into the Tuba figure, the character takes center stage in *Under the Skin of the City*, upon its delayed approval. In 2014, Tuba appears once again in the filmmaker’s latest feature, *Tales*. Written before she even appears on screen, Tuba is inspired by a ‘real’ film subject from a documentary (1992), and at the same time a fictional construction, who despite years of delay, serves a central part of Banietemad’s cinema.

Tuba’s centrality functions at both the micro and macro level; the textual and the intertextual; the domestic and the public; the personal and the political. As this chapter will show, Tuba’s persistence and insistence on drawing on the cinematic form grants her a sense of duality, where she operates between Banietemad’s documentary and fictional world. In some ways, Tuba functions in these works as a mirror for the viewer and the director herself. These notions of duality embodied by Tuba extend to other themes and motifs too. Binaries, a generic convention of melodramas, are utilized in Banietemad’s films, but in such

a way that points our attention not to distinctions between the private and public, or documentary and the fictional, but rather, to how these forms, spaces, and characters intersect.

¹Kay Armatage and Zahra Khosroshahi, "An Interview with Rakhshan Banietamad," *Feminist Media Histories* 3, 1 (2017), 150.

A close reading of *Tuba* allows us to better understand the various aspects of Banietamad's filmmaking practice. *Tuba* manifests the filmmaker's investment in the meta-cinematic. Through her, we see traces of Banietamad's filmic styles, how she weaves documentary filmmaking with narrative cinema, and how she oscillates between realism and melodrama. *Tuba*, an illiterate, working-class mother, is who Banietamad relies on to explore the constraints and possibilities of her society. For over three decades, through her recurring question, "Who will watch these films anyway," *Tuba* demands that we pay close attention to the cinematic form. Through this line, both her and Banietamad question and reaffirm at the same time, the role of filmmaking in Iran. To illustrate the cinematic and political significance of *Tuba*, I begin by outlining her origins to explore her positionality within the director's filmic practice. Turning then to *Under the Skin of the City*, I employ a close reading of the film to demonstrate how *Tuba* connects the personal and the political.



Figure 1: Movieposters, from left to right: *The May Lady* (1999), *Under the Skin of the City* (2001), *Tales* (2014)

²Yonca Talu, "Interview: Rakhshan Bani-E'temad," Film Comment, 20 Feb. 2015, www.filmcomment.com/blog/interview-rakhshan-bani-etemad/.

³Maryam Ghorbankarimi, *A Colourful Presence: The Evolution of Women's Representation in Iranian Cinema* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015), 67.

⁴Ghorankarimi, *A Colourful Presence*, 68.

⁵Roxanne Varzi, "A Grave State: Rakhshan Bani-Etemad's Mainline," in *Iranian Cinema in a Global Context*, ed. Blake Atwood and Peter Decherney (London: Routledge, 2015), 97.

⁶Varzi, "A Grave State," 97.

⁷Maryam Ghorbankarimi, "Rakhshan Banietemad's Art of Social Realism: Bridging Realism and Fiction," in *Re-Focus: The Films of Rakhshan Banietemad*, ed. Maryam Ghorbankarimi (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021), 197.

Tooba's Origins

We encounter Tuba for the first time in *The May Lady*, but she has been under development in the screenplays of the director long before that. While Tuba is a fictional character, her construction is inspired by Banietemad's documentary *To Whom Do You Show These Films* (1992). It is this question, inspired by a woman called Mehri, that Tuba echoes for years to come. Banietemad speaks to the origins of this significant line:

The sentence which Touba says in the film, the first time I heard this exact sentence was 24 years ago. I was making a documentary and a character called Mehri asked me: 'Who do you show these films to anyway?' This sentence had so much meaning that it stuck with me. I used it time and time again in many films that I made since then. I think the reason I use it is as a reminder to authorities to know what people are feeling and be aware of their sentiments.²

Tuba's famous line highlights the significance of Banietemad's documentary filmmaking and its influence on her career. Prior to her narrative cinema, Banietemad was involved in documentary work, where she was "largely concerned with the lower and middle classes of Iranian society."³ Her fictional films are often informed by the research conducted for her documentary projects, "used as the foundation for the scripts for her films."⁴ As scholars such as Roxanne Varzi have noted, Banietemad's films offer an "ethnographic value."⁵ At a "time when documentary and most anthropological endeavors have become close to impossible in Iran,"⁶ this practice serves even greater significance. As Maryam Ghorbankarimi posits in her discussion of *To Whom Do You Show These Films*, Banietemad's documentary is a "demonstration of self-reflexivity, whilst ensuring that, from the onset, the spectator is also playing an active role."⁷

Tuba, who reiterates this question for over three decades also demands from her audience to pay close attention. Her repeat-



ed question, “To whom do you show these films?” connects Tuba to Mehri, and functions within Banietamad’s works as “a conduit between documentary and fictional modes of filmmaking.”⁸ Characters from previous films appear again, creating a sense of cultural and cinematic memory for the audience. In revisiting characters and storylines from previous films, Banietamad creates a strong sense of continuity and progression, which “provides a valuable temporal frame of reference for understanding social, political, and cinematic developments in Iran during a period of rapid and wide-ranging change.”⁹ This links Tuba’s cinematic journey to the social and political conditions of contemporary Iran, as well as its film industry.¹⁰ This method of interwoven storytelling also creates a sense of intimacy between the characters and the audience. We return in later films to familiar faces and engage with stories in a way that connects us back to these characters – we become as an audience then, invested in their journeys. Tuba’s depiction further illustrates this point, where her recurrences mark her relevance to the film but also function as a point of reference within the world of Banietamad’s films.

In addition to offering a sense of familiarity for the audience, Tuba, through self-reflexive filmmaking, sits between documentary traditions and narrative cinema. In a similar fashion, Banietamad’s modes of storytelling “bring together two cinematic stylistic traditions, social realism and melodrama.”¹¹ As Laura Mulvey argues, Banietamad “uses both [realism and melodrama] to tell a story about crises rooted in class and gender inequality in contemporary Iran.”¹² For Mulvey, *Under the Skin of the City* “encapsulates the way that realism and melodrama are, in different ways, stylistically important for dramas of social oppression and injustice.”¹³ Whereas “realism records the state of things, without stylistic intrusion into a representation of the norms of everyday life and its fragile survival strategies,” melodrama “takes on an expressive function that responds to both the intensity of the crisis and its protagonists’ desperation.”¹⁴ This crossover highlights the intersection of the

⁸Michelle Langford, “Tales and the Cinematic Divan of Rakhshan Banietamad,” in *ReFocus: The Films of Rakhshan Banietamad*, ed. Maryam Ghorbankarimi (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021), 67.

⁹Zahra Khosroshahi, “The Artistic and Political Implications of the Meta-Cinematic in Rakhshan Banietamad’s Films,” in *ReFocus: The Films of Rakhshan Banietamad*, ed. Maryam Ghorbankarimi (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021), 84.

¹⁰Khosroshahi, “The Artistic and Political Implications,” 85.

¹¹Laura Mulvey, “Between Melodrama and Realism: Under the Skin of the City (2001),” *Film Moments* (2010), 8.

¹²Mulvey, “Between Melodrama and Realism,” 8.

¹³Mulvey, “Between Melodrama and Realism,” 8.

¹⁴Mulvey, “Between Melodrama and Realism,” 8.

¹⁵Rini Cobbey, "Under the Skin of the City (Rakhshan Bani-Etemad): Under the Surface Contrasts," in *Film in the Middle East and North Africa: Creative Dissidence*, ed. Josef Gugler (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011), 88.

¹⁶Rahul Hamid, "Under the Skin of the City," *Cinéaste* 28, 4 (2003), 50.

director's stylistic approaches, and Tuba through her rootedness in documentary filmmaking and through her melodramatic performance sits at the axis of these traditions.

The combined use of realist filmmaking with melodrama is not merely an artistic choice. For Banietemad, filmmaking is about addressing social issues and confronting gender and class politics. As Mulvey puts it, this "deeply political" perspective by way of two filmmaking styles also reflects social dynamics. The use of true-to-life locations as the film's setting (Tehran, shopping centres, alleys etc.), and handheld cameras that capture "real" social and political anxieties are paired with performances by professional and well-known actors. Both realism and melodrama are suited for societies that deal with oppression, and the way in which Banietemad combines the two styles frames the "individual and family-level conflict in the larger social and political structure."¹⁵ As Rahul Hamid adds, *Under the Skin of the City* "animates an essential question of political filmmaking: how to balance fidelity to social reality with the often more compelling and convincing dictates of dramatic fiction."¹⁶ Through the Tuba figure, Banietemad foregrounds a combination of filmic styles and modes, as well as social issues and realities of contemporary Iran without ever sacrificing the dramatic or artistic dimensions of her storytelling. A product of her time, Tuba is a character that has been revisited, rewritten, drafted, and crafted over time. It is not only her centrality within Banietemad's repertoire that marks her importance, but also how she operates within the filmic text itself. In *Under the Skin of the City*, Tuba's framing positions her as the nexus of the family, through which the connection between the personal and the political are drawn.





Figure 2: *The May Lady* (1999), Rakhshan Banietemad, Still from Banietemad's *The May Lady*, Accessed via <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N775FrzHCko> (00:58:16)

¹⁷Hamid Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema: Vol. 4: The Globalizing Era, 1984-2010* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 163-164.

Tuba's Centrality in Under the Skin of the City (2001)

Under the Skin of the City is bookended with its main character Tuba, cementing her centrality to the narrative arc of the film, as well as reaffirming her relationship to the cinematic medium. The film opens with a close-up shot of Tuba, framing her face as officials interview her about the role of women labor workers in the forthcoming election. The first image shown on the screen is of a small Sony television, through which we first encounter Tuba. At first, the image is blurry. As it becomes focused, the officials signal to Tuba to cover the hair poking out of her headscarf. Tuba fixes her hijab, pulling it forward, covering the exposed hair. In his discussion of *Under the Skin of the City*, Hamid Naficy writes that “veiling and unveiling are overdetermined. The movies’ title invites the peeling away of surfaces to understand hidden truths.”¹⁷ Banietemad’s engagement with veiling and unveiling is spatially charged, both through her commentary on the conventions of the hijab in this opening scene, but also in the way she dissects the city through its many layers. In addition to the double-screen, Tuba’s black hijab adds another visual frame to her face. The film’s very opening sequence, with the double framing and the veiling of Tuba, links

its main protagonist to the screen and the class politics of her society, establishing her cinematic and political importance early on.



Figure 3: Under the Skin of the City (2001), The image of Tuba on a small Sony TV. As it focuses, officials signal her to adjust her hijab, and she promptly covers her exposed hair. Rakhshan Banietmad, Accessed via <https://www.aparat.com/v/xtjc3> (00:00:27)

Under the Skin of the City tells the story of Tuba and her family, exploring the layers of Tehran. The opening scene sets up the film, framing and situating Tuba, but also commenting on the conditions endured by the working class. The next scene shows Tuba at work, and following her commute, we arrive at her home. This domestic space reveals the family life awaiting Tuba: a pregnant daughter who has taken refuge from her abusive husband (yet again), and her politically active teenage son who has just been bailed out of prison. We learn about the older son Abbas (Mohammad-Reza Foroutan), who longs for an escape from his dead-end situation, a direct comment on the socio-economic conditions in Iran. Central to the plot is one of his projects which goes wrong when his ‘friend’ takes off with the money, leaving him with nothing. Desperate to make up the loss, he agrees to deliver a package of heroin, but ends up losing it. Meanwhile, Tuba’s husband who is unable to work due to his disability, grants the title of the sole breadwinner to Tuba. To get under the skin of the city, of Tehran, then, means

to enter Tuba's home and find stories of economic hardship, drugs, disability, and gendered violence.

The film's introduction to the domestic space, Tuba's home, is worth examining. First, we have an establishing shot of the house, and the camera pans across the courtyard, and its tiny doors. The house is in disrepair and appears to be traditional, signifying the class status of its inhabitants. As the camera pans across, there is pop music playing. Over the music, we hear two young women speaking. One is teaching the other chemistry. The camera, then panning over the house and courtyard, pauses by the wall that connects the house to the building next door, attached wall-to-wall. There we see the two young women, using a ladder to climb up to the wall to talk over their chemistry homework. The camera pauses here, focused on them.

This scene with the house as its location, tells its own story about gender and familial relationships. As Tuba enters, we learn that this is her home, and it is her younger daughter Mahboubeh (Baran Kosari) and their neighbour Masoumeh (Mehraveh Sharifinia) who are reviewing chemistry. The two are friends, classmates, and neighbours. Tuba enters the house in a bad mood, and complains about the music being too loud, comparing it to the sound of the factory where she works. She also asks the girls to climb down. Then turning to Masoumeh, she asks, "Aren't you scared of your brother?" This early scene, without unpacking familial relationships yet, alludes to Masoumeh's abusive brother, foreshadowing what is to come.

¹⁸Mulvey, "Between Melodrama and Realism," 8.

¹⁹Mulvey, "Between Melodrama and Realism," 8.



Figure 4: Under the Skin of the City (2001), Rakhshan Banietemad, Tuba's daughter and the neighbor's daughter climbed up the ladder to the top of the wall and are studying chemistry together., Accessed via <https://www.aparat.com/v/xtjc3> (00:06:33)

Tuba's role here is instrumental. She functions as the glue of the family, binding all its members. Her home is telling of the complex social and political layers of Tehran. The film explores the lives of Tuba and her family members, both through the many challenges they face, but also through moments of tenderness and joy. Mulvey writes that for Tuba, "the house stands for her motherhood, her love for her children and their love for each other."¹⁸ On the other hand, "the house next door, identical in layout, is tyrannised by a brutal and conservative eldest son so that the high walls are more resonant of a prison than of maternal comfort."¹⁹

This juxtaposition is most clear in a scene where Tuba cuts her husband's hair in their courtyard. Their daughter Mahbubeh enters pretending she is returning from a tutorial. Tuba however knows that she and Masumeh had just been to a concert. While she hides this from her father, pretending she has come home late from a study session, the open space conveyed through the courtyard, and their banter and laughter, signal his leniency as he warns her to study. Moments later in the same scene, Mahbubeh runs around in the courtyard with Tuba's homework in hand (she is learning how to read). Tuba chases her asking her

to return the piece of paper. The scene conveys a sense of intimacy and closeness between the family members. The laughter however is interrupted by the cries of Masumeh next door, as her brother violently beats her. As Mulvey points, the contrast between the two houses is significant, and the symbolic value of the home for Tuba itself is important to the film's narrative and themes.

Far more than a setting, the home is crucial to the plot as a motif and theme. It serves as a space where the various issues of economic instability, gender and class politics, and male violence all clash. The dramatic tension rises when Tuba finds out that the documents for her property are missing, and that her home will be demolished. In this scene, the small courtyard yet again becomes the centre of action, and the subplots merge together to heighten the drama. We know in this scene that Mahbubeh is in prison and needs bailing out. She found herself in trouble with the authorities having aided Masumeh in running away from home to escape her abusive brother. The house too is gone, and with it, the centre of the family. The visuals of the scene, the dark night, and the consistent coughing of Tuba intensify the mood. The two brothers confront one another, fighting. The paternal figure sits quietly in the corner of a room, unable to intervene. The two homes mirroring one another are initially set up with stark differences, but soon this duality is distorted, where Tuba's loving home is also interrupted by dramatic tension and chaos. Like the walls of Tuba's home on the verge of collapse, these binaries also break down and crumble, and through what lies underneath *Banietemad* explores the harsh realities of her society.



Figure 5: Under the Skin of the City (2001), Rakhshan Banietamad, Tuba cuts her husband's hair in their courtyard, Accessed via <https://www.aparat.com/v/xtjc3> (00:38:34)

The politicization of the personal and private reaches its climax with the destruction of Tuba's home. The scene represents a sense of uprooting and the dismantling of her home (literally deconstructed brick by brick). The house represents the long years of Tuba's hard work, and its destruction (by two men: her husband and son) is symbolically significant. But the house means something different for Abbas. It is his escape from his lived reality, a potential path forward. The Iran he lives in is no longer a place for growth for people like him, and his desires to leave are tied to the conditions under which he lives. The house and its walls represent for him a system that continues to hurt him, and there are merely walls that need to be broken down to allow for his escape.

The imagery here connects the domestic space of a home with the social and political discontent of Iranian society. The function of Tuba's home, symbolically and narratively, becomes a political statement. The house is all-encompassing and spatially significant to the film. The relationship between the house and the state is alluded to here as well. This is especially the case when Tuba reiterates that this house is all she has from this 'place.' This sentiment is fully fleshed out in Banietamad's



Tales years later, where Tuba and her fellow workers travel on a tightly packed bus to protest labour conditions. In another meta-cinematic scene, and in characteristic style, Tuba addresses the viewer directly, saying: “Don’t I deserve something? A piece of land after so many years of hard work?” For Tuba, everything has failed her, the state, her family, and her employer. The space that once represented solitude and a home for Tuba and her family has become a space for drama and tension. The destruction of the home is also important. For example, when Tuba travels to find the man in charge, asking for the legal documents to be returned and the deed undone, the images of the bricks in the scene, piled in a corner of the construction site depict a sense of uprooting and destruction. What was once a home will no longer be. Regardless of what this home represents for Tuba, its fate had been foreshadowed throughout the film.

Functioning as a stage, the home is where we meet the family and witness their interactions. Through Tuba, Banietemad allows audiences into this often unseen and marginalized domestic space, that highlights the intersections of gender and class in Iranian society. Yet, Tuba’s home is not defined and visualized to reinforce gendered readings of domestic spaces. Quite the contrary; the home is torn down (literally, by the end of the film) to question and challenge the socio-political conditions of Iranian life. Through the home, Banietemad unveils many aspects of Iranian society and shows how embedded the private and public spaces are. Tuba’s role as a mother is significant to the narrative of the film, as well as her relationship with space. But Tuba is also the sole breadwinner, working in the textile factory to support her family. Her multi-faceted characterization grants Tuba the spatial mobility to take us from the home to the metropolis of Tehran.

²⁰Blake Atwood, *Reform Cinema in Iran: Film and Political Change in the Islamic Republic* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 73.

²¹Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema*, 163-164.

²²Atwood, *Reform Cinema in Iran*, 73.



Figure 6: *Under the Skin of the City* (2001), Rakhshan Banietamad, Still from Banietamad's *Under the Skin of the City*, Accessed via <https://www.aparat.com/v/xtje3> (01:11:54)

Blake Atwood argues that Banietamad's "films constitute a separate track in Iranian art-house cinema, one that interrogates urban spaces and experiences."²⁰ As set out in this chapter, *Under the Skin of the City* complicates binaries of domestic and public spheres to show how interconnected the private and the political are. The film's title alone alludes to the idea of unveiling,²¹ and accompanied by its meta-cinematic opening, *Under the Skin of the City* illustrates the on-screen spatial politics around film-making and the woman's body. Also significant to the reading of the film is its setting; as Atwood argues, "Tehran serves as a complicated and unstable character in all [of Banietamad's] films."²² The depiction of urban life, and the way in which the film locates itself within the city and its political and social issues, can be read as an act of resistance and a deliberate use of cinematic space to bring forth and comment on the country's social and gender dynamics. Significantly, it is through Tuba's positionality and gaze that the film begins to explore the urban.

Under the Skin of the City offers a thought-provoking visual treatment of the metropolitan city of Tehran. Banietamad relies on real life locations to tell her story. These locations are not fabrications of Tehran (though the narrative is fictional). In his

review of the film, A. O. Scott writes that Banietemad shoots “the courtyard and alleyways of Tehran, as well as its fashionable shopping and office districts, with efficient realism, but the cries that wrack Tuba’s family could be happening anywhere.”²³ Banietemad relies on her realist style that uses Tehran as its *mise-en-scène*, and, by centering Tuba and her family, provides cinematic and narrative space for the most marginalized of Iranian society. From its opening segment, the film already has characters oscillating between various spaces. Central to this is Tuba, who we follow from the initial interview in the film’s first scene.

The following scene is the same camera crew following Tuba working at the textile factory. There are no words exchanged and only the loud noise of the machines can be heard. The next shot, singling Tuba out, is of her coughing on the bus, alluding to the consequences she bears from the conditions that she works under. We see Tehran through Tuba’s window as she commutes home, a shot that creates a *frame-within-a-frame*. The frame of the window through which we see Tehran disappears and what remains on the screen is the vast metropolitan landscape. Through sound and the grey colour pallet of the scene, the urban city of Tehran is portrayed as a chaotic, polluted, and busy place. A particular shot that stands apart is when a fight breaks out. The encounter is never explored further in the plot, and the positioning of the camera makes the characters anonymous. The function of the scene is not to serve the narrative but rather to further characterise the city. At the same time, a voiceover of the campaign speech of former president Mohammad Khatami is heard. In this scene, with the city as its backdrop, Banietemad offers a deliberately political reading of the urban space, and all the while, from Tuba’s vantage point.

The voiceover is significant for what can be heard, but also for what is left out. It begins by producing the following words: “And we shall broaden democracy and progress toward a civil society. We will try to continually strengthen the dignity and

²³A. O. Scott, “Film Review; An Iranian Family, Facing Conflict Within and Beyond,” *The New York Times*, 14 March 2003, www.nytimes.com/2003/03/14/movies/film-review-an-iranian-family-facing-conflict-within-and-beyond.html.

²⁴Atwood, *Reform Cinema in Iran*, 73.

stability of this nation. Our developments were the product of a great revolution, and our problems...;” here on, the voice fades, obscured by the noise of the city. As the noise clears, the voiceover continues: “...the result was first and foremost a recovery of ourselves, and particularly of our youth.” The pause and interruption to Khatami’s voiceover are reflective of a political reality. This interrupted voiceover by the busy sounds of the city, and the follow-up story of Ali, Tuba’s younger son, are far too familiar for an Iranian audience, highlighting the reality of a city in decline set against the optimistic rhetoric of politicians. This juxtaposition is a savvy way to deal with the censorship codes of the country and Banietemad takes advantage of these lines to draw on the political reality and the current and continuous social struggles of the youth in Iran.

As Atwood argues, “urbanism allows Bani-Etemad to investigate the representation of reality and to consider the ways in which multiple urban realities coalesce.”²⁴ Incorporated in this political reading of Tehran is also the depiction of the daily life of Iranians. As the camera glosses over the city, it is important that the exploration of the urban space begins with Tuba. Through her gaze, as she looks out of the window of the bus, we too see the city. Also key in this scene is Banietemad’s documentary and realist approach to film that captures the essence of Tehran. The real location of the city, and the campaign that contextualizes Tehran, add to this notion.

As the following shot takes us into a shopping centre, Banietemad’s *Under the Skin of the City* explores other aspects of the city too. There is a stark contrast drawn here between the empty and glossy shopping centre and the busy and polluted streets of Tehran. Functioning almost as an escape, the space is a visual contradiction to the Tehran we encounter earlier. But the calm and coolness of the mall is also interrupted by the events that follow: a young woman running to Abbas (Tuba’s older son) to deliver urgent news to him. Even during these slow and calm business hours, the events of the city create a sense of urgency



and tension about it. Abbas is told that his brother is in custody. The next shot is of the two, Abbas and Ali, on a motorcycle, riding in the city. The exchange between the brothers, and the way in which the scene is constructed comments directly on the socio-political nature of Iran—the city and the theme of urbanization adding to its message. As suggested by Atwood, *Under the Skin of the City* “represents one of Bani-Etemad’s most complex portrayals of Tehran. In this film, the director explores the political possibility of the metropolis, and she envisions the capital city and its many paradoxes.”²⁵

²⁵Atwood, *Reform Cinema in Iran*, 73-74.

²⁶Atwood, *Reform Cinema in Iran*, 82.

The city, like the home, becomes its own stage, responsible for aspects of the film’s narrative, functioning as a political landscape. The brief exchange between Abbas and Ali as they ride away from the prison on a motorcycle, along with the cinematic qualities of the scene, illustrate how the city of Tehran is linked to state politics. Sitting on the motorcycle, we only see the two men, the camera closely framing them, as they yell loudly over the sound of the engine and the noise of the city. “Get in any political trouble again, and I’ll show you,” Abbas warns Ali. Countering his brother, Ali insists that in order to change the situation, there needs to be resistance. Abbas, who is older and less optimistic, tells him to keep his “head down” and focus on his education. The two speed off towards the grey, foggy, and polluted Tehran horizon, an ominous foreshadowing for any political action. As Abbas states his final words and speeds off, his vehicle becomes smaller within the larger metropolitan setting, and the focus is now on the city, visually depicted through the concrete buildings. Hardly into the plot of the film, *Under the Skin of the City* has already linked the personal and the political, with the city’s landscape serving as its backdrop.

Utilising her documentary and realist filmmaking style, Bani-temad explores the layers of the city, showing us Tehran’s “ability to represent the various human experiences that exist on its concrete surfaces.”²⁶ The urban setting of Tehran obliquely conveys the film’s political position. Through its title, *Under*

the *Skin of the City* claims its self-reflexivity, and yet the film is more than just a simple depiction of an urbanized space. The gaze and journey through which we witnessed the city, on Tuba's route, has now transitioned to a more omniscient view, and yet, Tuba remains central within this plot, as it progresses and intensifies. After all, it is through her and her family that *Under the Skin of the City* engages with the complexities and layers of Tehran.



Figure 7: *Under the Skin of the City* (2001), Rakhshan Banietemad, Tuba in the presidential elections, Accessed via <https://www.aparat.com/v/xtjc3> (01:11:54) (01:29:47)

The links the opening of the film draws between the personal and the political, the domestic and the urban, reach a climax by the film's ending. *Under the Skin of the City* returns to Tuba. This time again, she is placed in front of the camera. In this final scene, she is shown participating in the presidential elections. When asked about her message, Tuba's response is deliberate and unapologetic. "Just forget about it. I lost my house, my son ran away, and people are filming all the time," Tuba says. "I wish someone would come and film what's happening here," she points to her heart. The film ends with Tuba's iconic question: "Who the hell do you show these films to anyway?" Tuba's cinematic development and visualization throughout Banietemad's films guide the viewer across the layers of the city,

commenting on its class and gender politics at every turn. From film to film, and from frame to frame, the character has served as a central figure in the director's body of work. For over three decades, a nation has watched Tuba appear and reappear on the Iranian screen; an embodiment of resistance and defiance. In this final scene, Tuba personifies Banietemad's commitments to the practice of making social films. Not only does the scene capture the personalisation and politicisation of Tuba's struggles, but also, through the reiteration of her iconic question, once again draws our attention to the importance of the camera and the meta-cinematic.