



Cinema Iranica
A Research Compendium

Close Encounters of the Fifth Kind: An Analysis of Iranian Science Fiction

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May 21, 2025

<https://cinema.iranicaonline.org/scholar/babak-fozooni/>

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Introduction

Given the longstanding popularity of surrealism and magical realism amongst many Iranians, as well as the more recent embrace of horror movies, it is ironic that science fiction (SF) has failed to establish a firm foothold within Iranian culture. This is doubly perplexing since science fiction's ability to imagine utopian alternatives is ideally suited for challenging totalitarian regimes. The uncharitable reader may scoff that a text about Iranian SF ought to be more succinct than the present investigation. After all, its meagre offerings have thus far failed to win any meaningful critical acclaim or popular recognition. Iranian SF is derided and demeaned as an immature form of art, incapable of articulating anything of significance. Many cultured Iranians would agree with the famed Egyptian author, Naguib Mahfouz (1911-2006), who did not mince words when dismissing the entire genre as "empty talk" that "lacked depth."¹ This is in contrast to the rather impressive international credentials of the humanist branch of Iranian cinema, exemplified by auteurs such as 'Abbās Kiyārustamī and Bahrām Bayzā'ī. Why, then, has SF struggled to gain a foothold in Iranian culture? Why are so few Iranian writers and filmmakers drawn to the genre? Why has the mullah-bourgeoisie been so lackadaisical in building an SF legacy? And why is the SF output of neighboring countries like Russia and Turkey more advanced?

This article mounts a robust defense of SF as a genre uniquely

equipped to tackle complex social issues such as class, gender, race, statecraft and religiosity. It delves into the historical and socio-political factors behind the underdevelopment of Iranian SF, such as the problem of unresolved taboo subjects and the persistence of naive realism. I link this stagnation to the particularities of Iran’s capitalist development, where premodern, modern, and postmodern elements vie for dominance. The article then goes on to describe the work of a small but dedicated group of talented novelists, translators, animators and filmmakers who have tried to enmesh science fiction with Iranian themes and legends. Seminal Iranian SF movies and animations are reviewed. The next section evaluates the strengths and limitations of the genre. US, British, Turkish and Russian SF are briefly discussed as potential models of development. This article concludes by envisioning a post-Islamic Iran, where SF can mirror social ills, and imagine new ways of being and communicating.

¹Jörg Matthias Determann, *Islam, Science Fiction and Extraterrestrial life: The Culture of Astrobiology in the Muslim World* (London, New York, Oxford, New Delhi, Sydney: I. B. Tauris, 2023), 18. In addition Mina Talebi has argued that there are significant institutional constraints imposed on film students interested in science fiction and fantasy, “There are fewer Training Opportunities for aspiring SFF writers and filmmakers in Iran. Most film schools and creative writing programs focus on more traditional genres like drama, documentary, or realism, with little emphasis on speculative fiction.” Mina Talebi, email to the author, January 10, 2025.



Figure 1: Can SF shape the future? “Tehran, sans traffic jam, sans smog, sans mullah.”

In Defense of Science Fiction

The IMDb website lists a total of 99 Iranian science fiction movies and shorts, as well as 50 titles under the fantasy genre. From the sample I have inspected, it is obvious that many items have

²Arthur C. Clarke, *Greetings, Carbon-Based Biped!* Collected Essays, 1934-1998 (New York: St Martin's Press, 1999), 398.

³According to Coghlan and Brydon-Miller, "Bakhtinian dialogism refers to a philosophy of language and a social theory that was developed by Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin (1895-1975). Life is dialogic and a shared event; living is participating in dialogue. Meaning comes about through dialogue at whatever level that dialogue takes place." See "Bakhtinian Dialogism," in *The Sage Encyclopedia of Action Research*, ed. David Coghlan & Mary Brydon-Miller, <https://methods.sagepub.com/ency/edvol/encyclopedia-of-action-research/chpt/bakhtinian-dialogism>. For 'dialogic SF' see Robert Stam, *Subversive Pleasures: Bakhtin, Cultural Criticism, and Film* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 12-15. The Situationist International were a group of artists and radicals who developed a revolutionary critique of capitalism. See Stewart Home, *What is Situationism? A Reader* (Edinburgh: AK Press). For 'spectacularized SF' see Anthony Paul Hayes, "Science Fiction and the Situationist International," *New Readings* 19 (2023), 43-66. DOI: 10.18573/newreadings.139.

⁴Adam Roberts, "War of the worlds: who owns the political soul of science fiction?," *The Guardian*, April 8, 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/apr/08/adam-roberts-political-soul-sf>.

found their way onto these lists by accident, and some have only the most tenuous connection to SF and fantasy. Frankly, one or two seem to be included as an exercise in niche marketing.

Trying to come up with a bounded definition of SF is a fool's errand. Arthur C. Clarke has explained SF's boundary problems in his own unique style: "Attempting to define science fiction is an undertaking almost as difficult, though not so popular, as trying to define pornography ... In both pornography and SF, the problem lies in knowing exactly where to draw the line."² We will leave the debate about genres, definitions and authenticity to those critics obsessed with demarcation lines. I am not saying this conversation is unimportant, but it is time-consuming and ultimately perhaps a bit of a red herring. Instead, this article will adopt an open-minded approach to matters of conceptual definition and map out the tension between 'dialogic SF' and 'spectacularized SF.'³ The former is based on the thought provoking works of Bakhtin and exemplified by films such as *Blade Runner* (1982), *Dune* (1984) and *The Matrix* (1999), whilst the latter kind of SF promotes spectacularized and authoritarian forms of capitalism. *Atlas Shrugged* (2011) and perhaps *Starship Troopers* (1998) fall into this category.

I find myself in complete agreement with the British SF novelist Adam Roberts who claims, "at their worst, SF, fantasy and magic realist novels can be very bad; while at their best, they're by far the most exciting kinds of writing being published." According to Roberts, SF is left- or right-leaning like no other genre.⁴ Whilst the dialogic/spectacularized duality does not map exactly onto the left-right divide, there is a correlation of sorts. I would ask the reader to keep these tensions in mind as the story of Iranian SF unfolds.

But first, let us look at what thought-provoking SF can accomplish by looking at the popular British *Series Doctor Who*. A superficial reading of *Doctor Who* might only see a rather silly little Englishman on a galactic safari with companions who are



clearly age inappropriate. A little bit of saucy titillation for dad, a respite from housework chores for mom, and a bunch of amusing monsters with questionable production values for the kids. Yet, if a family-bonding exercise is all you see, then you have probably missed the central point. For Doctor Who is a serious project in nation-building (through family-bonding), promoted by the liberal wing of the British ruling elite. This project borrows cues from Michael Billig's notion of 'banal nationalism' to subtly reinforce these ever-evolving national identities.⁵

Doctor Who is neither dialogic nor completely monologic; it is a fake dialogue. The series is tasked with opening a limited, top-down debate about what it means to be British. Three distinct sets of values are implied throughout and merged into the pot of nationalism. These are the values of the British ruling class, middle class and working class. The first two are characteristics of the Doctor himself. He was raised as an aristocrat on Gallifrey and calls himself a Time Lord. By sensibility, however, he is the archetypal middle-class Victorian inventor. This explains his precious sonic screwdriver and the reason he is always surrounded by odd-looking mechanical gadgets. He may not possess many working-class qualities himself, but his companions usually do, and this then acts as a break on the Doctor's barely concealed elitist adventurism.

To understand Doctor Who, therefore, is to understand Britishness in its entirety. Doctor Who has become a site of culture wars between the likes of David Tennant (the 10th and 14th incarnations of the Doctor who promotes a liberal reading), and Kemi Badenoch (the leader of the Conservative Party who dismisses the series as 'woke').⁶ A 2018 episode, Kerblam! demonstrates this tension very well. Kerblam! is a powerful critique of Jeff Bezos's Amazon, its greed and shady workplace practices, and I would argue that it provides an analysis every bit as thorough as a scholarly book like Bit Tyrants by Rob Larson.⁷ A class analysis helps us make sense of the fierce contestation around Doctor Who between the bourgeois liberals who produce it, and

⁵Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism* (London: Sage Publications Ltd., 1995).

⁶Jacob Stolworthy, "David Tennant fans mock Kemi Badenoch for 'not afraid of Doctor Who' remark," *The Independent*, September 03, 2024, <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/tv/news/doctor-who-david-tennant-kemi-badenoch-b2606193.html>.

⁷Rob Larson, *Bit Tyrants: The Political Economy of Silicon Valley* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2020).

the right-wing authoritarians who detest it.

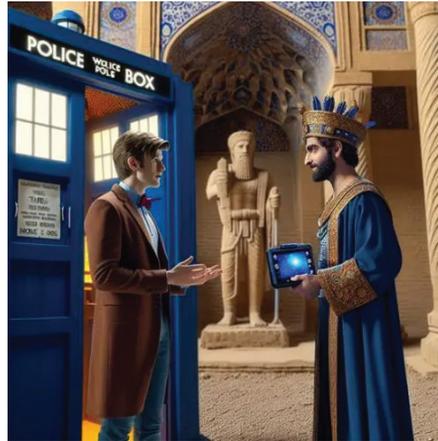


Figure 2: Dr. Who meets Cyrus the Great, with added Situationist-inspired détourned speech bubbles.

Another revered British SF comedy series, *Red Dwarf*, provides an even starker exposition of class antagonisms. The series begins by depicting an Earth ruled by corporate capitalism where the state has become the junior partner within the ruling elite. *Red Dwarf* is a mining ship running between Earth and the stars. As a result of an accident, humanity, as well as the 169 members of the crew, are annihilated, with the only survivors being a lowly technician aboard *Red Dwarf* called David Lister and a humanoid Cat. And all this in the first episode. In later episodes, a hologram (Rimmer) and a droid (Kryten) are added to the crew. Most viewers (and this also applies to critics) dismiss *Red Dwarf* as a teenage adventure of nerds and incels.

Such readings ignore the explicit references to social class sprinkled throughout *Red Dwarf*. The narrative arc of the series is very clear: at the start, all four crew members are objectively working class but only one of them (the curry-loving, beer guzzling Liverpudlian, David Lister) is also subjectively working class. He is comfortable in his skin. He knows who he is. The other three have no proletarian consciousness. The droid Kry-

ten is programmed to be a slave, not a waged-slave; Cat is as self-centered and selfish as any feline; and Rimmer thinks of himself as high-born and aspires to be an officer and lord it over the rest of the crew. During the unfolding of the arc, all three are gradually altered. The first to embrace his class status is the droid whose programming is broken by Lister. Once emancipated, Kryten begins to demand rights and privileges, such as less work and more leisure time. Next, the Cat is converted until he begins to see the advantages of solidarity and camaraderie. With his selfishness ameliorated, he even displays the occasional act of friendship. Finally, the bourgeoisified hologram Rimmer discovers his true working-class roots and ends up risking his life to save his crewmates. In one of the last episodes, Rimmer explicitly refers to himself as a “working-class hero.” The narrative arc is complete. All four are now both objectively and subjectively working class, only now they engage in labour because they want to and not because they need to sell their labour power to a capitalist master. The most subversive of messaging gets through precisely because *Red Dwarf* operates as SF comedy and is hence dismissed by critics as ‘low art.’



Figure 3: Low art or brilliant class analysis? From left to right: Cat, Rimmer, Kryten and Lister (Grant Naylor Productions).

The present article is not claiming that all SF is inherently pro-

⁸Raymond Williams, *Tenses of Imagination: Raymond Williams on Science Fiction, Utopia and Dystopia*, ed. Andrew Miller (Peter Lang, 2010), 37.

⁹China Miéville, introduction to *Utopia*, by Thomas More (London and New York: Verso, 2016), 5.

¹⁰'Needs' are the essentials of life without which we could not survive. 'Wants' are not essential but can enhance our quality of life and exist within practical reach. 'Desires' are our wishes, dreams and ideals for a future world that may at present be out of reach. In the *Grundrisse* Marx discusses 'needs' more often than 'wants' and 'wants' more than 'desires.' See, for instance, a digital version of *Grundrisse* at the Internet Archive, available at <https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.505759/mode/2up?q=desire>. However, Marx's treatment of these terms is still raw. Perhaps a better formulation of these terms is presented by David Harvey in "Use Values: The Production of Wants, Needs and Desires, Fifth Lecture in the Series: Marx and Capital: The Concept, The Book, The History," davidharvey.org, November 28, 2016, accessed via <https://davidharvey.org/2016/12/david-harvey-marx-capital-lecture-5-use-values-production-wants-needs-desires/>. Market conditions in the Iranian SF industry "may inhibit the realization of value because the effective monetary demand—wants, needs, desires—may be lacking." See David Harvey,

gressive or imaginative. In fact, reactionary SF is an imminent and ever-increasing threat. I am suggesting, however, that SF is something of a ready-made for expanding the realms of freedom and creativity. The Welsh Marxist Raymond Williams, who excoriates George Orwell for being regressive, especially the latter's seminal 1984, is nonetheless in agreement "with Orwell that good prose is closely connected with liberty, and with the social possibility of truth."⁸

I am arguing that although the distinction between 'high art' (opera, Shakespearean theatre and existentialist cinema) and 'low art' (vaudeville, horror and SF) is largely bogus, there is a need to distinguish 'dialogic SF' from 'spectacularized SF.' By 'dialogic SF' I mean a type of science fiction that liberates the audience from tradition and sedimented beliefs, gives them license to rethink social ills and come up with imaginative solutions. Spectacularized SF, in contrast, is big special effects and mindless noise, a mechanical gloss on life, a kind of art whose shelf-life is predetermined by the time it takes to finish the obligatory box of popcorn that it was served up with.

Dialogic movies are characterized by carnivalesque, the ability to turn the world upside down, at least for a precious moment during which the audience can reflect on alternatives to the status quo. The spectacular portrays capitalist social relations as permanent and inevitable images. Dialogic SF shows how "every utopia contains a dystopia, every dystopia contains a utopia."⁹ Real utopia is not a ham speech by Barack Obama about hope and optimism; rather, it is what Marx discusses in the *Grundrisse*, the attainment of human 'needs,' 'wants' and 'desires.'¹⁰ Likewise, dystopia is not a series of hackneyed frights and jolts delivered through the marvels of the latest technology, but a depiction of how bad life is under capitalism and how it can always get worse. This explains why good accounts of utopia are always based on intelligent critiques of political economy. Thomas More's account in *Utopia*, for instance, is based on a cooperative subsistence economy, whilst Francis Bacon's



New Atlantis is founded on an emerging industrial economy.¹¹ Below, we will see how this conflict between dialogic and spectacularized SF is related to the contradictions of Iranian capitalism.

The willful underdevelopment of Iranian SF

Many of the topics that Western SF engages with pose a challenge to a puritanical ruling class. We know how themes related to the class struggle raise the ire of Islamic censors. The Islamic ummah (the imagined community of believers) has difficulty acknowledging class divisions, which is why Middle Eastern SF feels more at home discoursing on the ‘clash of civilizations.’ In this they imitate neoconservative forces in the USA.

An example of spectacularized SF which probes and reinforces the ‘clash of civilization’ thesis would be *Travelers* (Musāfirān). This was a seventy-episode TV series produced by Rāmbud Javān and released in 2009. The premise revolved around a group of Swedish tourists exploring Iran who turn out to be extraterrestrials. Their task is to gather information about the ethics and morality of earthlings and report back. Each episode focuses on one topic and there is a prescriptive feel to the writing.¹² The low production values do not help proceedings. Occasionally, the juxtaposition of alien and Iranian cultures allows for a mild bout of self-reflexivity. One episode pokes fun at the labyrinthine bureaucracy in the service industry, and another at rote school learning. But the humor is stale, and ultimately it feels like a whitewashing of Islamic culture. Right-wing Iranian directors with a superficial understanding of the outside world are mirror images of their neoconservative rivals in the USA.¹³ It is hardly surprising they end up producing the same moralizing tone in their science fiction.

“Value in Motion,” *New Left Review* 126 (2020): 113.

¹¹Raymond Williams, *Tenses of Imagination: Raymond Williams on Science Fiction, Utopia and Dystopia*, ed. Andrew Miller (Peter Lang, 2010), 99.

¹²See Kamiab Ghorbanpour, “A Brief History of Persian Sci-Fi,” *Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers Association*, December 06, 2022, <https://www.sfwaw.org/2022/12/06/a-brief-history-of-persian-sci-fi/>.

¹³See Adam Curtis, “The Power of Nightmares,” *BBC Documentary*, November 3, 2004, accessed via <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p088s5rv>.



Figure 4: Poster for Musāfirān TV Series, directed by Rāmbud Javān, 2009.

For those Iranians touched by xenophobia, the depiction of foreigners on TV screens is disconcerting enough, but the genre becomes even more threatening when it contains an element of sexuality. The appeal of SF/horror hybrids such as *Alien* (1979) or *The Thing* (1982) or *Videodrome* (1983) is that they deal with body transformation, burgeoning sexuality, and desire—all taboo subjects in Iran. Movies such as *V for Vendetta* (2005), in which an anarchist vigilante fights against a fascist British government, would be censored due to its politics and the depiction of brief nudity. In *Star Trek Beyond* (2016), Sulu, played by John Cho, is portrayed as having a husband and a daughter. This is a problem for a regime that executes homosexuals. *The Man Who Fell to Earth* (1976) and *A Clockwork Orange* (1971) would both fail to gain a distribution license in Iran, due to nudity. Even *Barbarella* (1968), considered merely risqué in the West when it was first screened, would be denounced as pornographic by the Islamic Republic.

Sometimes censorial methods of dealing with problem-scenes are more entertaining than the movie itself. In the aforementioned *Star Trek Beyond*, which has been dubbed into Farsi, one scene depicts Kirk and McCoy drinking alcohol. Our cunning Islamic censors have decided to ‘censor’ this scene not by

deleting it, but by leaving it undubbed. The rationale behind this move is unclear, but presumably, the censors are saying the faithful can be protected from the evil influence of Romulan Ale through linguistic incomprehension, whilst English-speaking Iranians are too corrupt to deserve saving.

Despite these petty restrictions, the enormous potential for SF can best be gauged by Iranian women's reaction to Margaret Atwood's seminal novel *The Handmaid's Tale*, a book translated into Farsi and reprinted 11 times, despite its fierce critique of patriarchy and religious fundamentalism.¹⁴ Naturally, its symbolisms have become a source of defiance for women.

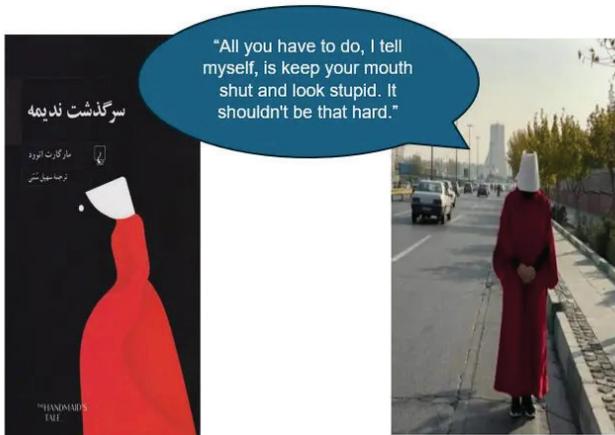


Figure 5: 'The Islamic Republic of Gilead' with a quote from Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*.

Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, the British-Iranian journalist who was imprisoned for six years by the theocracy, found solace in Atwood's novel. The parallels are too obvious to need reiteration.¹⁵

¹⁴A specialist in Iranian SFF, Mina Talebi, has argued that "When it comes to which group of Iranians are into science fiction, I believe those born in the 1980s, regardless of their gender, social class, or background, certainly belong on this list." Mina Talebi, email to the author, January 10, 2025. She also believes that "With the growing popularity of streaming platforms, people from a broader range of age groups are now exploring this genre in both cinema and television." Mina Talebi, email to the author, January 10, 2025.

¹⁵See Phyllis Chesler, "Gilead Resembles an Islamic Theocracy, not Trump's America," *Middle East Forum*, October 02, 2019, <https://www.meforum.org/gilead-resembles-islamic-theocracy-not-america>.

¹⁶Raymond Williams, *Tenses of Imagination: Raymond Williams on Science Fiction, Utopia and Dystopia* (Peter Lang, 2010), 48.

Figure 6: Dystopia as solace.

The problem of taboo subjects aside, we can note other obstacles in the path of Iranian SF. One factor is the strength of ‘naïve realism,’ which has left little room for alternative worldviews. In 1961, commenting on the decline of empiricism, naturalism and realism in the West, Raymond Williams argued: “The old, naïve realism is in any case dead, for it depended on a theory of natural seeing which is now impossible. When we thought that we only had to open our eyes to see a common world, we could suppose that realism was a simple recording process, from which any deviation was voluntary. We know now that we literally create the world we see ... the old static realism of the passive observer is merely hardened convention.”¹⁶ In Islamic Iran, empiricism and naturalism have not run their course, and remain the dominant paradigms of activity in both the sciences as well as the arts. Those of us living outside Iran do not always see this because our perception is filtered through museums, book and film festivals that privilege self-reflexive constructed art products. But most art products produced for domestic consumption are stamped with naïve realism, and since this naïve realism performs a valuable function for the regime, there is no need to outsource the task to science fiction.

Interestingly, both dystopian and utopian forms of SF provide



challenges for the Islamic Republic. Dystopias invite too close a scrutiny of the present state of affairs, as the above example of *The Handmaid's Tale* illustrates. A further example would be Yevgeny Zamyatin's novel *We*. How can Farsi translators circumvent this biting satire of totalitarian state capitalism in the former USSR? How can Iranians read *We*'s depiction of regulated 'sex days' and not be reminded of Khumaynī's *Tawzīh al-Masā'il*?¹⁷ Zamyatin's secretive Bureau of Guardians is a prescient description of contemporary Islamic morality police, and the 'odes to benefactor' are surely not just whimsy in praise of Stalin but also have Khumaynī and Khamaneī in mind. And yet there is a Farsi audiobook version of it available online.

¹⁷*Tawzīh al-Masā'il* (roughly translated as the "Clarification of Questions") is a book of Islamic jurisprudence by Ayatollah Khumaynī that was first published in full in 1999.



Figure 7: Was Yevgeny Zamyatin an Iranian? Was Shakespeare a Klingon?

Utopias provide additional political problems for Islamic regimes. In some of its episodes, *Star Trek* describes a Federation that has gone beyond the money system and impoverishment. For a religion founded upon mercantilism, this is too provocative. Likewise, Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* describes an anarchist planet Anarres that appears ideal on the surface, but gradually and through juxtaposition with the authoritarian planet of Urras, a more complicated picture emerges. Le Guin's ideal utopia has to be shaped imaginatively and fought for by all the people. Once proposed, such utopias begin to compete

¹⁸Jeffrey Herf, "Reactionary Modernism: Some Ideological Origins of the Primacy of Politics in the Third Reich," *Theory and Society* 10, no. 6 (November 1981): 805-832.

with the static and repetitious Quranic notions of paradise, in the same way that sport competes with Friday prayers. That this is not just a problem for Islam can be illustrated by reference to James Blish's novel *A Case of Conscience* (1958).

Earth sends a four-man scientific team to the planet Lithia, whose inhabitants are green sentient lizards. Life on Lithia is harmonious, and it seems to be devoid of the rivalries and petty jealousies that earthlings still suffer from. They live happily without sin, crime or any conception of God. Whilst this is exciting to some of the team members, one of them, Father Ramon Ruiz-Sanchez S.J. (who is both a Jesuit and a biologist) cannot bring himself to accept that a sinless community has been created by lizards and apart from God. He sets about destroying Lithia. I would argue that too much of contemporary SF reminds right-wing Muslims of the flaws of their earthly governance and otherworldly paradise. Some of the anomie they betray towards the rest of the world has its source in Father Ruiz-Sanchez's theological frustrations.

Ideologically, the Islamic Republic encompasses several perspectives. One faction, the technocrats, consistently pushes for a hard modernist science as a panacea for fixing problems of governance. Muslim technocrats wish to utilize SF to social engineer Iran from above in the same way NASA, Elon Musk or H. G. Wells' *The Shape of Things to Come* (1936) offer technology as the solution for Earth's problems.

The institutional embodiment of this 'reactionary modernism'¹⁸ is the Iranian Space Agency (ISA) (*Sazmān-i Fazā'ī-i Īrān*). Established in 2004, ISA is tasked with the application of science and technology in all peaceful space-related activities. The only problem is that we know from the history of NASA, or the European Space Agency or Roscosmos (The Russian State Corporation for Space Activities) that the separation between peaceful and military activities is an illusion.





Figure 8: Space, the final frontier. These are the voyages of the Starship Tas Kebab.

And why do I insist on calling ISA, an embodiment of reactionary modernism? Because it combines an almost childish enthusiasm for technological toys and scientific marvels with a fierce rejection of the sociocultural soil that enabled its achievements in Europe and the USA. Admittedly, for an agency under severe financial and trading restrictions, ISA has achieved a number of impressive milestones: the launch of sub-orbital satellites in 2008 aboard Kāvushgar-1; in 2009 Iran's first domestically built satellite, Umīd, was successfully launched; a year later the first Iranian animals made it into space, including a rodent, two turtles, and several worms; in 2012-13 the first Iranian monkeys flew into space (their fate became the subject of intense speculation); the latest satellites launched were Khayyām (2022) and Chamrān-1 (2024).

The establishment of a network of launch sites, including at Shāhrūd, Qum, Simnān, and Chāhbahār, speaks of a committed program of space exploration. I am not able to judge to what extent these space centers have succeeded in creating nodes of capital accumulation, or to judge the promised benefits to the local economy. However, I do know that a successful space program demands more than capital and technology; it needs the public's continuous support. And here is where spectacularized

¹⁹See Richard Barbrook, *Imaginary Futures: From Thinking Machines to the Global Village* (London: Pluto Press, 2007).

SF such as *Musāfirān* becomes indispensable.

Dialogic SF is reliant on three sources currently in short supply within Iran. The first is ‘imagination.’ By this I mean ‘creative imagination’ and not the mundane form of ‘mechanical imagination’ that finds expression in every reverse-engineered missile, drone and aircraft carrier. Creative imagination is a demand for the impossible. The second ingredient is genuine ‘dialogue,’ which is sadly discouraged in a society petrified of its own subjects. And finally, dialogic SF insists on a high level of ‘technological attainment’ in the film industry in order to build believable planets and galaxies. The dearth of creative imagination, dialogic interaction and advanced technology has played a role in undermining Iranian SF.

For the time being, Iranian SF remains decades behind Hollywood, Japanese and Chinese SF, and, as the discussion argues, even years behind neighboring countries such as Turkey and Russia. If Iranian SF can avoid being seduced by technological determinism, then, when it finally does burst onto the scene, its products will undoubtedly be more reflective than big, brash, noisy Hollywood spectacles. More akin to the existentialism of *La Jetée* (1962) and *Stalker* (1979), and less like *Starship Troopers* (1997) and *Star Wars* (1977). Closer to the political intrigues of *Dune* (2021) and *Zardoz* (1974), and as far from *Universal Soldier* (1992) and *Independence Day* (1996) as possible.

Iranian sci-fi novels

As Richard Barbrook has convincingly argued, we should all become more skeptical of imaginary futures.¹⁹ After all, imaginary futures are usually ideological constructs aimed at controlling humanity. One reason for our continued fascination is that at least some of them appear to be uncannily accurate.

Muhammad ‘Alī Furūghī (1877-1942) was a bourgeois modernizer, a prolific writer, and a futurologist. In a distinguished



career, he served as parliamentarian, government minister and under the Pahlavi regime, he rose to be Prime Minister. One of his novels, *Far-Fetched Ideas* (*Andīshah-yi dūr u dirāz*), was penned in 1927 when he was ambassador to Turkey. In it, Furūghī predicts electronic miniaturization, wireless telephones which will make print newspapers obsolete, distance education, and image transfer across vast distances. Some of his descriptions are harbingers of the internet and social networking platforms. Written in the form of a dialogue, *Far-Fetched Ideas* can be considered one of the earliest attempts to imagine a future Iran.

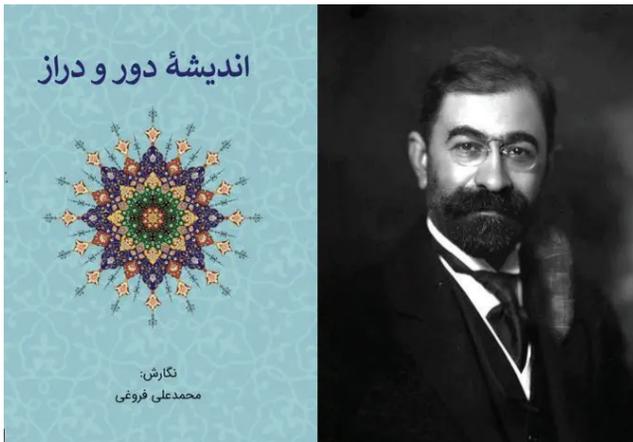


Figure 9: Muhammad 'Alī Furūghī, a pioneering bourgeois futurologist, and the book cover of his *Far-Fetched Ideas* (*Andīshah-yi dūr u dirāz*, 1927).

'Abdalhusayn San'atīzādah Kirmānī (b. 1895 Kerman – d. 1973 Paris) is a more conventional SF writer whose novels are once again available, after decades of being out of print. He specialized in historical novels but also wrote utopian novels and science fiction. Two of his books are worth mentioning here: *The Assembly of Lunatics* (*Majma' -i dīvānagān*, 1924) and *Rustam in the 22nd Century* (*Rustam dar qarn-i bīst-u duvvum*, 1934).

The Assembly of Lunatics is a work of futurology with a simple plot. A group of inmates organize a daring escape from a luna-

²⁰This is a quote attributed to Laing by Larry Change. See Larry Chang, *Wisdom for the Soul: Five Millennia of Prescriptions for Spiritual Healing* (Washington, DC: Gnosophilia Publishers, 2006), 412.

²¹Jeremy Bentham came up with the idea of a panopticon prison around 1787. Its architecture is circular so that all prisoners can be observed at all times by the guards. Gradually regulation becomes internalized, and the prisoners end up policing themselves. In *Punishment and Discipline: The Birth of the Prison* (1975), Foucault demonstrates how this can lead to a society of surveillance where people who feel they are being watched by authority turn into obedient subjects.

tic asylum. Once they break out, one of them, an old ‘mute,’ begins to address them. The narrator begins by denouncing society as insane in terms that prefigure R. D. Laing’s critique of psychiatry many years later: “Insanity — a perfectly rational adjustment to an insane world.”²⁰ The narrator reminds his fellow ‘insanes’ that Galileo too was called mad for being ahead of his times. He asks their permission to utilize his knowledge of mesmerism and hypnosis to take them on an imaginary journey. To complete this journey successfully they are required to suspend disbelief, tradition, and egocentricity and listen with an open mind. Once they accede, they enter a trance-like state and find themselves two thousand years into the future.

In this shiny utopia, crime is abolished since the city has been turned into what Bentham and Foucault would call a ‘panopticon.’²¹ Both genders wear the same clothes, and no one wears a hat or a veil. Perhaps influenced by eugenic ideas rampant at the time, the author describes all humans as physically healthy, although mental health issues still persist. Social ills such as petty jealousy and greed, however, are a thing of the past. Marriage ceremonies have been simplified and shorn of cumbersome religious rituals. All citizens contribute voluntarily to a productive society, and menial tasks are carried out by machines and robots. Solar and waterpower are harnessed for the benefit of all, and most significantly, there is no discernible hierarchy. Houses are constructed uniformly, and humankind has gained a measure of mastery over the weather. At some point, there is an unsuccessful attempt at flirtation with a beautiful woman. There is joyous dancing in the streets, and a great deal of public discoursing evocative of ancient Greece. The political crimes of previous regimes are now exhibited in museums for educational purposes.

The story engages with both time travel and interstellar space travel. Some planets in our solar system have been colonized but there have also been setbacks, due to either the distances traversed or unsuccessful attempts at terraforming. An ambi-



tious project plans to overcome these problems by turning whole cities into spaceships (this reminds me of an episode of Stargate Atlantis).

Admittedly, this is no Jules Verne. The drama is disjointed and uneven. There is repetitiveness, a hallmark of poor SF. There is also some self-reflexivity, but unlike Verne's stories, here the positivist aspects of utopia overwhelm its romantic elements. The Assembly of Lunatics paints a modernist utopia where mutual aid and justice reign and where 'needs' and 'wants' have been fulfilled. In places, it is close to the anarchist ideals of Tolstoy or Kropotkin, although I cannot be certain whether this is by chance or design.²²

Written ten years later, *Rustam in the 22nd Century* is an altogether more satisfying work. Rustam is a complex legendary paladin in Iranian culture and symbolizes chivalry and nationalism. He is the main character in the epic poem *Shāh'nāmah* (Book of Kings) by the prominent Persian poet, Firdawsī (940-1020). Rustam is a fusion of El Cid, Lancelot and Don Quixote.

²²There are a number of parallels with Tolstoy and Kropotkin. On page 20 vegetarianism is championed. The inhabitants have learned how to live in harmony with nature and control the weather. Society is characterized by equality (p. 21) and its achievements are credited to mutual aid (p. 24), and reason (p. 31). Joy is encouraged but in moderation, since too much of a good thing may disturb societal equilibrium (p. 33). The pursuit of happiness is intrinsically linked to ethical considerations (p. 42).

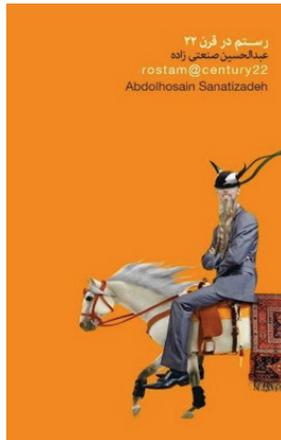


Figure 10: The imaginative Rustam in the 22nd Century (*Rustam dar qarn-i bīst-u duvvum*), by 'Abdalhusayn San'atizādah, 1934.

The story takes place in the province of Sīstān and Baluchistan

²³Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 121-127.

²⁴Zoroaster proclaimed that in the beginning "Ahura Mazda, the wholly wise, just and good, had been the one and only god." See Norman Cohen, *Cosmos, Chaos and the World to Come* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993), 81.

and centers mainly around Zāhidān city. In the twenty-second century, a scientist named Jancas invents a machine that brings back the body and soul of the dead. With his first experimental attempt, Jancas reanimates Rustam, his magical horse Rakhsh, and his sidekick Zangiano. The similarities with Don Quixote, his horse Rocinante and Sancho Panza are clear. Jancas's motivations seem to be part scientific curiosity, and part personal interest in spending time with an anointed knight from a bygone age. In both tales, much of the humor has its origins in the buffoonery of the valet, Zangiano and Sancho Panza, respectively.

The rest of the humor is generated through the clash of Rustam's archaic values and the hyper-modern environment of the 22nd century. What Raymond Williams would have called the clash of 'residual cultural artifacts' with 'dominant and emergent cultural artifacts.'²³ Rustam and Zangiano are petrified when they first see Jancas and his students, mistaking them for demon-monkeys. Fire-crackers, motorbikes, a taxiplane are all sources of amazement and fear for our naïve 'time travelers.' The sophisticated people of the 22nd century openly mock Rustam and his sidekick, who are a source of entertainment for most. The French movie, *Les Visiteurs* (*The Visitors*, 1993) uses the same plot device to generate its comic effect. In response, Rustam first utilizes brawn, and when that fails to superior technology, he attempts to outsmart Jancas in order to learn his demonic ways. The perfection that Rustam sees all around him becomes a source of irritation and anger. His secret plan is to defeat the 'demons' by the grace of Ahura Mazda.²⁴ In *A Case of Conscience* mentioned above, James Blish creates a similar scenario, only in Blish's book Father Ramon Ruiz-Sanchez finds the notion of an idyllic alien planet so contrary to his Catholic teachings that he sets about destroying the aliens.





Figure 11: An Islamized Rostam fighting Alien as imagined by AI. But to whom does the speech bubble belong?

The news of Jancas's scientific breakthrough is inadvertently publicized, causing anxiety and anger amongst the inhabitants who question the ramifications of reanimating the dead. The elderly inhabitants are jubilant, as are hedonists with criminal intent. Some argue that if people can overcome death, anything becomes permissible. And some fear that humanity would lose its drive and become languid or that anomie might ensue. Others see this innovation as the overcoming of the final frontier. Rostam becomes the subject of obsession for a planet that watches his every move, using a more advanced form of contemporary CCTV. This recalls the treatment of Truman Burbank (played by Jim Carrey) in *The Truman Show* (1998). In this city of the future, fake news and gossiping become widespread, just like present-day internet communication.

The authorities (for in this 'utopia' there is a subtle power hierarchy) then panic and put Jancas, Rostam and Zangiano on trial. Twenty-second century judiciary is sketched in some detail. This can be explained by San'atizadah's pro-constitutional leanings. One novel aspect is that all sitting judges are anonymized in order to reduce undue pressure and corruption. It is clear that the arbitrary workings of the law under Rizā Shah's

reign (1925-41) are being mocked. Judges are chosen from orphans who owe their allegiances to the state, not ethnic, tribal or familial connections. There is also an insistence on avoiding jargon and legalese. Every discussion has to be conducted using everyday discourse. This hints at San'atīzādah's attempts at modernizing Farsi as a way of combatting superstitious beliefs and fundamentalist mindsets.

Rustam in the 22nd Century is an ode to capitalist industrialization and its technological marvels. It pits individualism against traditional notions of honor, birthright and hierarchy. It is laced with the bourgeois feminism of the 1930s. This may be due to the influence of San'atīzādah's first wife, who came from a prominent feminist family. *Rustam* is disgusted by the lack of sexual segregation but lusts after every woman he comes across. His toxic masculinity is exposed as a pose. He is even more out of place in the 22nd century than Sean Connery is among the Immortals of *Zardoz* (1974), directed by John Boorman. The book's nationalist discourse aims to undermine both leftist and Islamic discourses. Science fiction's simple and eloquent linguistic style is being utilized to modernize Farsi. Nīmā Yūshīj, the great modernizer of Persian poetry, points this out in a letter to San'atīzādah reproduced in the appendix. Perhaps Yūshīj saw parallels between what he was doing for poetry with what San'atīzādah was doing for science fiction.

There are also elements of the book that are quite frankly discomforting. One such problem is the antisemitic tropes that appear in the discussion of the 'Palestine Question.' The accompanying illustrations by 'Alī Akbar San'atī (1916-2006), depicting Jews with stereotypical physical features, exacerbate the problem. An economic boycott of the Jews (who, in the novel, have been exiled to Palestine) is proposed as the solution to the 'Jewish problem.' Iranians, so often victims of racism, sometimes develop a blind spot regarding their own deeply held prejudices.



Four years after *Rustam in the 22nd Century*, San'atīzādah wrote *The Eternal Universe* (‘Ālam-i abadī, 1938). It recounts the story of a wealthy elite who invest in a program aimed at rewarding them with eternal life. Immortality is a subject with deep fascination for Iranians. An interesting example of the real-life pursuit of immortality is the case of Farīdūn M. Isfandi-yārī.

²⁵Nick Bostrom, “Transhumanist Values,” *Review of Contemporary Philosophy* 4, nos. 1-2 (May 2005): 87-101.

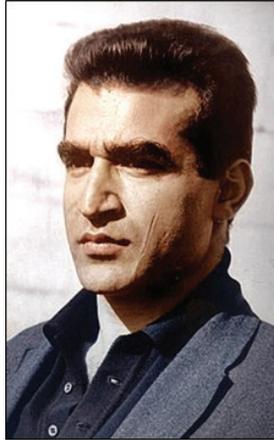


Figure 12: Farīdūn M. Isfandi-yārī, athlete, futurist and transhumanist.

Isfandi-yārī is/was (it is difficult to know which tense to use as it becomes clear below) a Belgian-born Iranian-American. He was an Olympic wrestler, basketball player, writer, futurist and eventually a transhumanist.

Transhumanism believes biologically enhanced humans are not only inevitable but desirable. Transhumanism aims to extend life, eradicate disease, go beyond human limitations, colonize space, and create superintelligent machines.²⁵ It claims not to fetishize technology and is fully cognizant of its pitfalls, including the possibility of technology widening social inequalities or being misused for nefarious purposes. Transhumanism also claims to oppose all forms of racism, sexism, speciesism and religious authoritarianism.

²⁶“Wikipedia, FM-2030,” Wikimedia Foundation, November 29, 2024, accessed May 1, 2025, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/FM-2030>.

²⁷Neil Chilson, “Trolling the Intelligentsia with Optimism: Marc Andreessen’s tech manifesto seeks to galvanize the Up Wing,” *City Journal*, November 3, 2023, retrieved from <https://www.city-journal.org/article/trolling-the-intelligentsia-with-optimism>.

As with San‘atīzādah above, Isfandiyārī advocated progress and opposed traditionalism, so much so that he changed his name to FM-2030. In his own words, “Conventional names define a person’s past: ancestry, ethnicity, nationality, religion. I am not who I was ten years ago and certainly not who I will be in twenty years [...] The name 2030 reflects my conviction that the years around 2030 will be a magical time. In 2030 we will be ageless, and everyone will have an excellent chance to live forever. 2030 is a dream and a goal.” As a staunch anti-nationalist, he believed “There are no illegal immigrants, only irrelevant borders.”²⁶ He ‘died’ of pancreatic cancer in 2000 but was cryo-preserved and is due to be re-animated in 2030. The indie 2030 (2018), directed by Johnny Boston, recounts his story, although its deliberate mix of fact and fiction makes analysis difficult. 2030 follows the director as he reflects on FM-2030’s decision to be cryonically preserved. Boston interviews FM-2030’s friends, colleagues and various experts. His story is somewhat similar to the novel *Looking Backward, From the Year 2000*, by the left-wing American writer, Mack Reynolds.

Should Isfandiyārī be successfully reanimated in the year 2030, he will be the first human to have successfully undergone the process. So far, the only success has been with Cleo, a cryo-preserved pig that was successfully brought back to life after six months. Bhalla and Robinson have warned against the dangers of techno-optimism. Most forms of transhumanism tend to be promoted by rich right-wing men with dreams of immortality—the kind of reactionary who proudly quotes from Filippo Tommaso Marinetti’s *The Futurist Manifesto*.²⁷

Nevertheless, FM-2030 seemed to have belonged to the sensibly cosmopolitan wing of the movement. I hope he is still alive, and I wish him good fortune. Regardless of the scientific and ethical merits of reanimation, one can only be impressed by his chutzpah in undertaking such a daring enterprise. 2030 ends with a quote from FM-2030: “I love free-falling into the future. It’s a wonderful trip.”



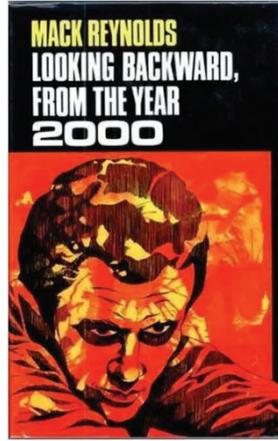


Figure 13 (left): Poster for the documentary 2030, directed by Johnny Boston, 2018.
 Figure 14 (right): Book cover of Mack Reynolds' novel Looking Backward, From the Year 2000.
 The book is about a sick man who is cryogenically preserved.

²⁸An audio discussion of *Shīvā* is available at <https://www.radiofarda.com/a/25506376.html>. See also “Dāstān-i dānish “Shīvā:” Shahrnūsh Pārsīpūr – 14,” Soundcloud, accessed May 1, 2025, <https://soundcloud.com/radiozamaneh/u0zjqec2anu>.

The writers and philosophers we have discussed thus far are mavericks. It is almost as if only daredevils manage to succeed in this challenging environment. The next figure I wish to look at is cut from the same cloth. Shahrnūsh Pārsīpūr was born in 1946 and is considered one of Iran's earliest female novelists. Imprisoned unjustly on four separate occasions by the Islamic regime, she is best known for her *Touba* and the *Meaning of Night* (*Tūbā va ma'nā-yi shab*, 1989), written in a realist style and *Women Without Men* (*Zanān-i bidūn-i mardān*, 1990), which veers toward magical realism. The latter was adapted as a movie by Shīrīn Nishāt in 2009. An interesting element of *Women Without Men* is the imaginary homosocial space created for its female characters. She also wrote *The Story of Science* (*Dāstān-i Dānish*), better known as *Shīvā* (1999). Part autobiographical and part mythological, the storyline jumps across different time zones. Pārsīpūr sees SF as a new form of mythology. The book deals with sensitive topics, including migration and sexual abuse. Even Marx makes an appearance in the book, courtesy of an angry psychic with powers to contact the dead.²⁸

In *Shīvā*, the banality of everyday culture is fused with the

mythical and metaphysical. In fact, this fusion of exterior and interior is one of Pārsīpūr's most impressive literary skills. For instance, hijab is discussed in historical and sociological terms, which has the benefit of moving the discussion out of religious orbits and into a secular environment where the author can poke at it and play around with its various significations. At one stage, the discussion of hijab is tied to fundamentalist Islam and this in turn is tied to the rentier nature of the economy and the semi-industrialized state of the country. The book accuses the clergy of being anti-industrialist. Where they do foster industrialization, it is usually based on the traditional business practices of the bazaar. Crucially, water-scarcity also plays a role in sabotaging agricultural surpluses which prevents rapid urbanization. Those peasants who do migrate to the cities are not integrated into the economy, which explains the persistence of residual cultural artifacts (Raymond Williams) such as patriarchy and rural superstitions.



Figure 15: Book cover of *Shivā* by Shahnūsh Pārsīpūr.

All this may seem digressionary, but it makes the book authentically Iranian and confirms the description of Iran given by Jeffrey Herf as a 'reactionary modernist' society. It is also reminiscent of some of the political discussions in Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Dispossessed*. At a time when wealth disparity is reaching

unprecedented levels, Pārsīpūr believes the task of literature is to address poverty and seek solutions for it. The relative failure of Shīvā she puts down to the lack of an SF heritage in Iranian culture. Nevertheless, her outlook swings from despair to optimism when she reminds us that nowadays there are some 400 female novelists inside Iran as well as those living abroad. Together they are creating a unique vernacular.²⁹ Her work has been unjustly criticized for being escapist.³⁰ For philistines, every move toward historical narratives, metaphysics and fantasy is considered suspicious. Science fiction, in particular, has had its share of naysayers who have dismissed it as a form of escapism.

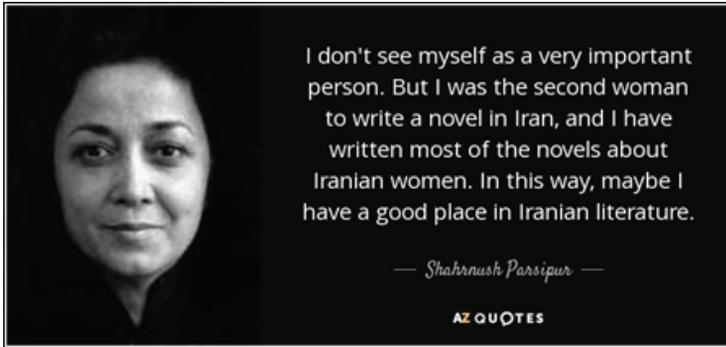


Figure 16: A typically self-effacing quote by Shahnush Pārsīpūr.

Rebels such as Pārsīpūr paved the way for the next generation of non-conformist female authors, exemplified by Zuhā Kāzīmī, who is considered Iran’s most widely published SF writer. Kāzīmī grew up reading Arthur C. Clarke, Isaac Asimov, Ray Bradbury, Philip K. Dick, Jorge Luis Borges and the dark fantasy writer Bihzād Qadīmī. *Pine Dead* (Kāj-zadīgī, 2017,) was a foretelling of the Covid pandemic. Her path toward SF writing is a familiar one: starting with realistic novels such as *Beginning of the Cold Season* (Āghāz-i fasl-i sard, 2012) and moving to magical realist works like *Year of the Tree* (Sāl-i Dirakht,

²⁹Shahnūsh Pārsīpūr, interview by Nazila Kivi, August 2019, in connection with the Louisiana Literature Festival at the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art in Humlebæk, Denmark, “Shahnush Parsipur: Developing Literature in Iran is Difficult,” Louisiana Channel, August 2019, retrieved from <https://channel.louisiana.dk/video/shahnush-parsipur-developing-literature-in-iran-is-difficult>.

³⁰Sīrūs ‘Alīnizhād, “Farār az haqīqat, hamvarah farār az haqīqat,” BBC Persian, November 17, 2004, retrieved from https://www.bbc.com/persian/arts/story/2004/11/041117_la-cy-parssipur.

³¹Emad El-Din Aysha, "Zoha Kazemi on the Cybernetic Ties That Bind Iranian and Arab Science Fiction," *Liberum*, September 18, 2022, <https://theliberum.com/zoha-kazemi-on-the-cybernetic-ties-that-bind-iranian-and-arab-science-fiction/>.

³²Emad El-Din Aysha, "Zoha Kazemi on the Cybernetic Ties That Bind Iranian and Arab Science Fiction," *Liberum*, September 18, 2022, <https://theliberum.com/zoha-kazemi-on-the-cybernetic-ties-that-bind-iranian-and-arab-science-fiction/>.

³³"A Conversation with Speculative Fiction Writer Zoha Kazemi," *Baladi Magazine*, January 23, 2023, <https://baladimagazine.com/a-conversation-with-speculative-fiction-writer-zoha-kazemi/>

2020). Some of her work utilizes stream of consciousness as a method. This is a very popular style of writing amongst Iranians due to novelists such as Albert Camus, James Joyce and to a lesser extent William S. Burroughs. Kāzimī tries to construct her worldbuilding with Iranian settings, "for example, *The Juliet Syndrome* (Sandrum-i Zhūliyit, 2023) takes place in a future Tehran and it's about a dystopian society where people can't fall in love anymore and they have to 'buy love' from big companies that are ruling them."³¹

One of her central themes is modernity in conflict with tradition, which is extended in some novels into a discussion of the rift between secularism and religiosity. "I have seen many religious people change as they get older," says Kāzimī.³² These discussions are effectively interlaced in *Rain Born* (Bārānzād, 2023), a post-apocalyptic story of global warming, in a world drowning under massive floods where an ocean culture is slowly emerging. The story may not be completely original (think Kevin Costner's expensive *Waterworld*, 1995), but it is told with verve and imagination. What I admire in Kāzimī's work is the scientific and technological attention to detail in her worldbuilding. Coming from an engineering background helps her to construct solid structures upon which human relationships can flourish. For *The Juliet Syndrome* she claims to have read fifteen textbooks on biochemistry.³³

In addition, Kāzimī seems to have developed a knack for combining romantic encounters sometimes with tragedy and at other times with irony. Irony is a distanciation mechanism allowing the reader to read the text reflexively and experiment with various viewpoints. In a society established on the basis of absolutism, irony can be a powerful counterpunch and SF writers like Kāzimī ought to be commended for opening up alternative landscapes of imagination. She also plays a pivotal role in maintaining a viable Iranian SF community by holding Instagram live events and in-person interviews with writers and translators at her bookshop, Rama.





Figure 17: Book cover of Time Traveler (Zamān-savār), by Zuhā Kāzimī, 2021.

Iranian SF animations and films

In this section, I will highlight key contributions of the Iranian SF industry. Some are works produced with direct financial support from the government. Others are private ventures but greenlighted by censors due to their suitable moral content. Some were banned for long periods before being screened. I have largely ignored products aimed at the children's market or made in the style of old Chinese Kung Fu fantasies or sitcoms filmed in front of a non-demanding studio audience, although one or two exemplars have been mentioned by way of contrast. I have also decided to ignore video games for the sake of brevity. Ultimately, I am continuing with my general theme of distinguishing between creative, dialogic SF and the more common monologic, Islamic spectacles. The latter reinforce authoritarianism by monopolizing every interpretation of the past and the present. The Shia version of the spectacle also attempts to pre-determine future chronotopes with the story of the ultimate time travelling invisible man, the Hidden Imam.³⁴

The animation industry has pioneered many novel ideas and styles of expression. Early Iranian animators had plenty of space for experimentation during the 1970s. One example is Asso-

³⁴Chronotope (literally 'time-space') is a Bakhtinian concept which refers to the way time and space interact with each other in order to shape the narrative. Bakhtin borrowed this term from Albert Einstein's Theory of Relativity.

³⁵See ‘Alī Akbar Sādiqī, dir., *The Rook* (Iran, Kānūn, animation, short, 1974). <https://cinema.iranicaonline.org/film/رخ>.

³⁶Bahrām ‘Azīmī, dir., *Tehran 2121 AD* (Iran: Nās, animation, 2012). <https://www.aparat.com/v/j425dah>.

³⁷“Tehran 1500,” Wikipedia, October 31, 2024, accessed May 1, 2025, https://fa.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D8%AA%D9%87%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86_%DB%B1%D-B%B5%DB%B0%DB%B0

ciation of Ideas (*Tadā‘ī*, 1973), a 3-minute short by Nūraldīn Zarrīn Kilk. The visual style is Pythonesque, and it utilizes a combination of stream-of-consciousness and associationism to create an interesting juxtaposition of images. *The Rook* (Rukh, 1974), directed by ‘Alī Akbar Sādiqī, is a more ambitious short about chess, reminiscent of the iconic wizard chess in *Harry Potter and The Sorcerer’s Stone* (2001).³⁵ The graphics may look dated, but the humor is still very fresh after all these years. At the close only the two kings remain. Instead of dueling to the death, they decide to settle their differences through a game of chess, a game within a game, so to speak.

These early shorts laid the foundation for more contemporary works. The animation film *Tehran 2121 AD* (2012), directed by Bahrām ‘Azīmī, is an imagining of Tehran in the year 2121.³⁶ It has a lowly 4.6/10 IMDb rating. The story revolves around a rich old man who is approaching 160. In a nod to *Logan’s Run* (1972), the government has decreed that this is the maximum age to which citizens can live, and he is preparing for his final journey.

Given severe budgetary constraints, its production values are reasonably robust. The street scenes have a *Blade Runner* feel about them, only brighter. However, the dialogue, mannerisms and outfits of the characters do not seem to have evolved much. A century from now, discourse is still indirect, and meaning is hidden behind a fog of metaphors and decorum. Even mechanical female robots are veiled, although according to the director these were additions imposed on the filmmakers by censors.³⁷ Nevertheless, the film has its moments: in one scene a robot and a taxi driver argue over the appropriate amount of tipping; spaceships from outer colonies arrive with unacceptable delays; traffic in Tehran is as chock-a-block as ever; effeminate men salivate over macho men; there is heterosexual love across class divides with clumsy attempts at flirtation; robots demand bribes in order to provide crucial services; and there is an underground rave with a digital Elvis-impersonator and fawning teenage girls.





Figure 18: Poster for Tehran 2121, directed by Bahrām ‘Azīmī, 2012.

The story is stilted in places and, as if to acknowledge this shortcoming, an authoritative voice-over is used to clarify the plotline. In one dreadful scene, a female robot whose beauty has caused tension between two male robots is advised to cover up her metallic legs. The fact that the ‘moral guide’ is another woman makes the sexism harder to stomach. In future Tehran, even female robots will be taught to internalize Islamic shame. The dialogue throughout is incessant. There is no time to breathe or reflect. This and the disjointed editing make the plot difficult to follow. The imagination remains mechanical, and the narrative does not deviate from a traditional moral tale of good versus evil. The 4.6 IMDb rating seems entirely appropriate.

Inspired by Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451*, *The Sprayer* (Sampāsh, 2022), directed by Farnūsh ‘Abidī, by is a brilliant 8-minute animation that has garnered numerous awards worldwide. The stop-motion visuals are stunningly textured, with a 3D feel about them. It is the story of a dystopian Earth where sprayer armies seek out flowers and plants to poison them. The brutality of these assaults on nature (and those protecting it) forces one recruit to question his role, just like the awakening of the original Guy Montag character in Truffaut’s 1966 adaptation of *Fahrenheit 451*. The rebel becomes convinced of the need

³⁸Tehran Bureau, "Velayatnamah," YouTube video, 35:27, February 18, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0cyPkoCIE64>.

to change after reading Bradbury's novel. He begins by saving one plant and in the process comes to know an underground community of environmentalists. Soon, green shoots of recovery are sprouting up everywhere.



Figure 19: A still from *The Sprayer* (*Sampāsh*), directed by Farnūsh 'Abidī, 2022. The film offers a highly satisfying viewing experience.

Another interesting experimental film worth mentioning is *Vilāyatnāmah* (2022), directed by Farīd Shams-Dihkurdī and Brandon Fenning, a mix of computer graphics and real actors. The filmmakers are connected to the website Tehran Bureau (<https://tehranbureau.com>), which used to be hosted by The Guardian newspaper and is now receiving support from Frontline. Built on a shoestring budget, it comes in at around 35 minutes and consists of five segments, showcasing five future eras, each with a different presiding supreme leader.³⁸

Vilāyatnāmah is irreverent, with a dark sense of humor that Iranian viewers will find refreshing. The first tale is about corruption, with a deeply depressed supreme leader recording a confession about how he tried to save the Republic from corrupt Islamic corporations (e.g. *Bunyād*). Alas, he now realizes he has failed, and his conscience compels him to end it all. He then stops the recording and throws himself off a high-rise only

to wake up in a lab with a technician working on him. Gradually, we discover that the supreme leader is a malfunctioning cybernetic android. An error in his coding caused a pang of conscience that led to the attempted suicide. Despite his vociferous objections, the droid is unceremoniously switched off, the way Data on Star Trek can be turned off.



Figure 20: Supreme Leader or Borg Queen as malfunctioning cybernetic android.

The second tale relies on the tried and tested SF trope of the accidental mind swap. This time the supreme leader and a laboratory cat are switched by mistake. The cat escapes and the government then tries to capture it so as to return the Ayatollah to his own body. When the news breaks, many citizens claim their cat to be the real supreme leader. A twisted version of the Turing Test fails to discover the Leader.

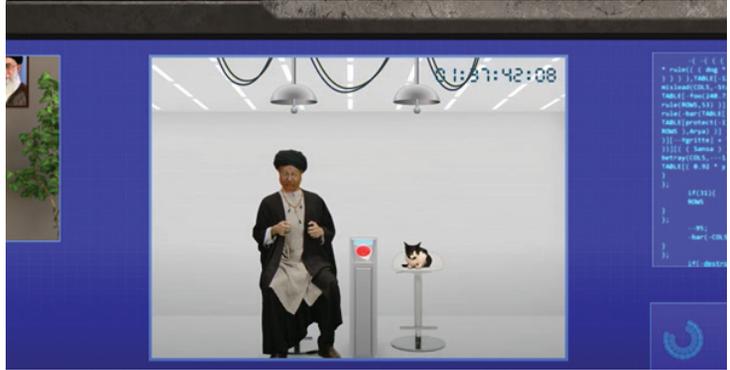


Figure 21: Don't press the red button you idiot. The Feline Ayatollah.

The third tale begins with “in the name of Allah, the gracious, the digital.” It has a devout Islamic robot named Ghulām who never misses his prayers and a frightened supreme leader who is planning to use a portal to escape to a parallel universe where the mullah-bourgeoisie never captured power. Ghulām is programmed not to harm humans, but as anyone familiar with Isaac Asimov’s robot series would know, dramatic license requires ways around the “Three Laws of Robotics.” Without spoiling the fun, let me just say that Ghulām finds a deliciously sadistic way of torturing the Supreme Leader.



Figure 22: Morning prayers to a digital God.

The fourth tale is inspired by Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *The Grand*

Inquisitor. Instead of Jesus coming back, it is the Shia's twelfth Imam who returns. Far from making the mullahs jubilant, this causes consternation amongst the ruling elite who arrest the Imam and throw him in jail. Just like Jesus, the Imam remains silent during the inquisitor's condemnatory speech. Having challenged the rule of the clergy, the Imam's ending is somewhat predictable.

The fifth tale opens on the 200th anniversary of the Islamic 'revolution' with food riots on the streets and water shortages at critical levels. As a last resort, the elite decide to initiate program Poisoned Chalice. A terminator is sent back in time to assassinate Ayatollah Khomeini in 1978 at Neauphle-le-Château, where he was holed up following exile from Iran. The idea is not novel, of course. Many historical figures, including Hitler and John F. Kennedy, have had to contend with time travelling assassins. The earliest relevant SF example that I am familiar with dates back to 1958 and is a story from *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction* by Alfred Bester, entitled "The Man Who Murdered Mohammad."



Figure 23: Will the Terminator pull the trigger?

The postscript works as a 'What if?' quandary. What if the Persians were not defeated by the Arabs in 636 AD at the Battle of

Qādisiyyah? What if instead of Persians converting to Islam, it was the Arabs who had converted to Zoroastrianism? An interesting premise. I would argue the ‘What if?’ question is a crucial moment of rupture with monologic cultures.

Beyond animations we have movies interlaced with SF themes. *All Alone* (Tanhā-i Tanhā-i Tanhā, 2013), directed by Ihsān ‘Abdīpūr, falls into this category. It is the story of a boy, Rangero, who lives near the Bushehr nuclear plant and ekes out a living through street-peddling. Despite language barriers, he becomes friendly with Oleg, a Russian boy whose father is an engineer at the plant. Rangero has an overactive imagination: one night he dreams of shooting down an enemy fighter jet, and the next evening he sees a UFO taking environmental samples from Earth and leaving behind an ET-like alien, which transforms into a turtle. Naturally, no one believes him, except for the Russian boy who has had his own encounter with a crystal-line flying saucer.

Rangero is warned not to hang around with ‘dirty leftists’ lest he becomes a ‘communist jerk’ himself, but he retorts that his friend’s father is a worker, and the working class has no country. Gradually, he becomes a Russophile which draws the ire of his teacher and, in the process, exposes provincial Persian chauvinism. Once Oleg’s family leaves Bushehr, Rangero becomes obsessed with travelling to the United Nations in order to convey to them a message of peace. The paradigm shift, from friendship built around chasing flying saucers to a child’s crusade to the UN, is handled inelegantly. I wish the filmmakers had come up with a more satisfying ending.





Figure 24: Poster for All Alone (Tanhā-i Tānhā-i Tānhā), directed by Ihsān ‘Abdīpūr 2013. The film starts brightly, then fades into moralism.

³⁹To watch the film, see Explore Scientific, “Sepideh Hooshyar – Still Reaching for the Stars – Explore Now – Explore Alliance,” YouTube video, 1:00:26, December 1, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EWS_PmON-sLo.

Continuing with the theme of children exploring space, the documentary *Sepideh: Reaching for the Stars* (2013), directed by Berit Madsen, charts a young girl’s obsession with becoming an astronaut. We follow her from the age of sixteen to twenty-one. Throughout, she keeps a diary written in the form of letters addressed to Albert Einstein. Even her more down-to-earth passion for studying astronomy runs against traditional norms and the financial realities of being dirt-poor. Lack of funding for bigger and better telescopes, for instance, hinders her stargazing. Sipīdah became interested in space after watching the first female Iranian astronaut, Anousheh Ansari, aboard a Soyuz spacecraft in 2006. One of the most poignant scenes of the film sees her receiving a long-distance phone call from Ansari. This scene and the support she receives from her physics teacher, Mr. Kabīrī, suggest that patriarchy is not monolithic.

A 2021 follow up interview entitled *Sepideh Hooshyar – Still Reaching for the Stars*, finds her married with a child.³⁹ She is studying at a local university and still dreaming of becoming an astronaut.

40 “Nishast-i film-i ‘Bāz ham sīb dārī?’ dar Mehr: Namī-tavān munkar-i ta’ābīrī siyāsī-i film-i ‘Bāz ham sīb dārī?’ shud,” Mehr News, October 23, 2015, <https://www.mehmews.com/news/2951340/> - نمی-توان-منکر-تعبیر-سیاسی-فیلم-باز-هم-سبیب-داری-شد.



Figures 25 and 26: Sipīdah (in the poster for *Sepideh: Reaching for the Stars*, directed by Berit Madsen, 2013) (left), and Anousheh Ansari (right). Two faces of feminism.

With *Have You Another Apple?* (*Bāz ham sīb dārī?*? 2006) directed by Bāyrām Fazlī, we enter the realm of political allegory. The opening scene hints at a cross between the desolation of *Mad Max* (1979) and the savagery of *Zardoz* (1974), but the mood quickly settles on something akin to Alejandro Jodorowsky’s *El Topo* (1970) and *The Holy Mountain* (1973). The film’s chronotope is universal and timeless, its landscape surreal. As its director has suggested, it should be read as a critique of all ‘third world’ societies.⁴⁰ A cunning and tyrannical tribe of ‘sickle bearers’ (*Dāsdārān*, perhaps a play on *Pāsdārān*, the military Guardians of the Islamic regime) has enslaved the people of a fictional land. Since time and space are both portrayed imaginatively, it is difficult to know whether we are witnessing an ancient or a distant land. In this harsh environment, the only inhabitants not buried alive are those who can pretend to be ‘sleepers,’ ‘beggars’ or ‘mourners.’ Fazlī sketches his philosophical ideas with a heavy brush, as, to be fair, did Jodorowsky.



Figure 27: Have You Another Apple? takes risks and is all the better for it.

The nameless central character is based on the legend of Hasan the Bald (Hasan Kachal, 1970), directed by 'Alī Hātāmī, and represents pure libidinal instinct. At the beginning, he may be nothing more than a country bumpkin, but he has a disruptive influence on everyone he meets. He refuses to let the sleepers doze off whilst his belly is empty. Then he falls in love with a woman and when she is arrested by the sickle bearers, he sets off to rescue her. In what amounts to a cerebral jump-cut, he suddenly becomes a rebel, urging people to fight back against their oppressors. Even more surprisingly, they heed his call and prepare to defend their village. The defensive battlements are built with the dedication of Mexican villagers being drilled by *The Magnificent Seven* (1960). All is set for a final showdown. Sadly, when push comes to shove, their courage deserts them and most are slaughtered by the sickle bearers. The rest are arrested, and the hero has to win a life and death bet to save them. The ending is ambiguous, suggesting that any act of rebelliousness will be either punished or recuperated.

⁴¹Sugul Niyāzmand, “Fīlmhāyī manand-i ‘Bāz ham sīb dārī’ ghanīmat ast,” *Asr-i Iran News Agency*, January 21, 2016, <https://www.asriran.com/fa/news/446745/منتقد-سینما-هایی-مانند-باز-هم-۸۰٪-۸۲٪-فیلم-سبب-دار-ی-غنیمت-است>.

⁴²Sugul Niyāzmand, “Fīlmhāyī manand-i ‘Bāz ham sīb dārī’ ghanīmat ast,” *Asr-i Iran News Agency*, January 21, 2016, <https://www.asriran.com/fa/news/446745/منتقد-سینما-هایی-مانند-باز-هم-۸۰٪-۸۲٪-فیلم-سبب-دار-ی-غنیمت-است>.



Figure 28: Have You Another Apple? (Bāz ham sīb dārī?), directed by Bāyrām Fazlī, 2006. The film contains some memorable visuals.

Have You Another Apple? is different. Its epistemology and ontology dare to skew the expected for the sake of something fresh. Its paradigm has been described as “intentional insanity.”⁴¹ The filmmakers are openly influenced by postmodernism, and I would venture that they adhere to the pessimistic wing of postmodernism. This viewpoint explains the comical ineptitude of the ‘resistance’ and its grotesque defeat by the sickle bearers.⁴² Banned for a decade, *Have You Another Apple?* is intelligent filmmaking, and precisely the type of dialogic SF Iranian filmmakers should be aiming for.



Figure 29: A still from *Have you Another Apple?* (Bāz ham sīb dārī?), directed by Bāyrām Fazlī, 2006. Desolate yet iconic scenery.

The discerning reader might have picked up on commonalities between *Have You Another Apple?* and *The Ballad of Tara* (Charīkah-yi Tārā, 1979), directed by Bahrām Bayzā’ī. Although, strictly speaking, *The Ballad of Tara* is a work of fantasy rather than science fiction, it has had a lingering influence on the Iranian SF community. Its surreal landscapes and mix of real and historical figures are a common motif of many SF imaginings.⁴³

⁴³See *Ballad of Tara* (Charīkah-yi Tārā), dir. Bahrām Bayzā’ī (Iran, 1979). <https://cinema.iranicaonline.org/film/چریکه-تارا/>.

⁴⁴“Mount Tabor,” in *Encyclopedia of the Bible*, <https://www.biblegateway.com/resources/encyclopedia-of-the-bible/Mount-Tabor>.

Taboor (Tābūr, 2012), directed by Vahīd Vakīlīfar, is another unusual movie that divides critics. The title may be a reference to Mount Tabor which is the site where, according to Christian mythology, the transfiguration of Christ took place.⁴⁴ In any case, I get the impression the utopian significance is meant to be taken ironically. The film’s minimalism can be experienced as sensory deprivation, and its heavy symbolism is at times opaque. The postmodern narrative places the onus of meaning-making squarely on the audience and allows for a multiplicity of viewpoints.



Figure 30: Poster for *Taboor* (Tābūr), directed by Vahīd Vakīlīfar, 2012. A tinfoil existence.

Set in a near future Tehran, this speculative SF has garnered more relevance since the Covid crisis. The central character is an indefatigable pest-controller who lives in an aluminum foiled

room which he hopes shields him from harmful electromagnetic waves. It does not, and soon we discover he is dying. He drives to work on an old motorcycle sidecar. There is very little dialogue which is pleasantly surprising for an Iranian movie. The few spoken words are as impactful as the only moving images in Chris Marker's *La Jetée* (1962). The city is almost empty of traffic and everyone, rich or poor, lives behind closed doors. Long takes, fixed camera positions and slow descriptions of the minutiae of everyday banality give the film an eerie quality, somewhat imitative of Tarkovsky and Kubrick.



Figure 31: A great deal of thought has been expended on the mise en scène.

The constant night sky suggests a global atmospheric catastrophe. Technology is constantly breaking down; cars and elevators prove unreliable. His only friend dies of smoking, or is it a poisoned atmosphere or just melancholy? He is taken away by ambulance workers silently, almost perfunctorily. This is pandemic capitalism on its last legs. Life has been suspended and made purposeless. It reminds me of Viktor Frankl's description of life in concentration camps in his classic *Man's Search for Meaning* (1946). One of his richer customers pays him for the pleasure of shooting at him with an air rifle. The customer then disinfects the pellet wounds. It feels as if they have performed the sadomasochistic ritual many times before.

His only form of entertainment seems to be playing immersive video games. The 5D simulator he plays in is one of few reminders that the plot is taking place in the future. In the 42nd minute of the film, we are treated to a philosophical discussion about cockroaches. An authoritative voice-over informs us that, despite their unhygienic environment, cockroaches are very clean. The exact opposite of humans. Five minutes later and the first background music is introduced. The last scene sees him sleeping in a fetal position on a bed in the open air, perched on a hill above Tehran. One assumes it is his long farewell to a city that both nurtured and ultimately killed him.

⁴⁵See Amber Wilkinson, "Taboor," *Eye for Film*, April 19, 2013, retrieved from <https://www.eyeforfilm.co.uk/review/taboor-2012-film-review-by-amber-wilkinson>.



Figure 32: Final scene from Taboor (Täbür), directed by Vahid Vakilifar, 2012.

I liked this movie without necessarily enjoying it. It is creative and daring, and these are qualities that Iranian SF desperately needs. But, as Amber Wilkinson has argued, it is also somewhat of an ‘endurance test’ and contains a great deal of ‘extraneous padding.’⁴⁵ It is hard to argue with Wilkinson on this point, and yet there is also an endearing quality about the film’s iconic moments that stay with you long after the final curtain.

I would like to end this section with a movie that, strictly speaking, cannot be considered a work of science fiction, although it is promoted as such. Even the IMDb tags Critical Zone (Man-

⁴⁶Bābak Gafūrī Āzār, “Guft-u-gū bā Shīrīn ‘Ābidīnī-Rād, bāzīgār-i film-i ‘Mantaqah-yi Buhrānī,’” Radio Farda, July 23, 2023, retrieved from <https://www.radiofarda.com/a/32553889.html>.

taqah-yi Buhrānī, 2023), directed by ‘Alī Ahmadzādah, as both ‘drama’ and ‘sci-fi.’ Admittedly, it contains elements that, when generously interpreted, can pass for sci-fi, but overall, it is a dramatic work of horror and mystery. It reminds me of Adrian Lynn’s *Jacob’s Ladder* (1990), where Tim Robbins plays a Vietnam vet who begins to hallucinate. The waking dreams become more and more realistic until he begins to question his own sanity. Amīr, the central character of *Critical Zone* experiences the same dissociative feelings.



Figure 33: Is it SF, drama, or horror?

Critical Zone is a professionally made independent movie, and in Iran, to be independent is to be underground, although even its underground credentials have been challenged. The main female lead, Shīrīn ‘Ābidīnī-Rād, claims they began filming the movie the very evening she flew into Tehran.⁴⁶ Once the director became better acquainted with her and understood the inner strength of her lead character, he altered the script to reflect that. Kiyārustamī would use the same tactics to get the best performance out of his actors.

Although tightly scripted, the movie feels unstructured, perhaps even documentary style in certain places. We see Tehran mostly at night and from the perspective of Amīr, a drug seller

who roams the streets like a non-judgmental version of Travis Bickle in *Taxi Driver* (1976). Unlike Bickle, he does not deride but heals the souls he encounters, although his empathy has its limits, and he does get angry with his junkies from time to time. Amīr is safe within his car, reminding us of the strong bond between a man’s automobile and his individuality, especially in societies where one cannot express individuality any other way. One feels he does not just drive purposefully based on GPS instructions in search of buyers but also drifts psychogeographically, as the Situationists might have said. As he drifts, we are introduced to varying moods in the urban landscape of the capital. One government billboard advises, “Live adventurously,” not realizing that this is precisely the slogan motivating Amīr and the Tehran underground. There are also deliberate intertextual references to Tarantino’s *Jackie Brown* (1997) and Jeff Bridges in *The Big Lebowski* (1998) that would delight any cinephile and add to the movie’s many mood swings.

⁴⁷Bakhtin opposed absolutism. His concept of unfinalizability is yet another way of insisting that events, individuals and texts can never be fully understood or closed off. There is always room for another interpretation.



Figure 34: Poster for *Critical Zone* (*Mantaqah-yi Buhraani*), directed by ‘Ali Ahmadzadah, 2023. But is the ‘scream’ John Holloway’s?

The taboo-breaking aspect of the film (the presence of unveiled women; gender fluidity; prostitution, drug taking) is admirable, but the narrative thread is not always clear. The film is what Mikhail Bakhtin would have called “unfinalizable.”⁴⁷ The

cinema goer who needs a neat resolution or easy explanations would be disappointed.

He cooks his drugs less meticulously than Mr. White in *Breaking Bad* but gets the job done. There is no blue meth, but plenty of weed and hash. He uses enough stuff to not wake up when his horny bulldog (Mr. Fred) uses his leg for ‘companionship.’ He has a girlfriend of sorts but cannot satisfy her sexually. He even delivers to an old people’s care home where his hash brownies go down a treat. The sequence reminds us that the Islamic Republic does not merely destroy the aspirations of the youth but constantly undermines the dignity of the elderly. The junkies and sex workers he sells to kiss his hand in gratitude.



Figure 35: Pusher as messiah.

This investigation could have benefited from reviewing a number of other movies and animations, such as *A Time in Eternity* (*Zamānī dar Abadiyat*, 2022), directed by Mahdī Nawrūziyān, and *Killing the Eunuch Khan* (*Kushtan-i Khājah*, 2021), directed by ‘Abid Ābist, as well as animations by the talented graphic artist, ‘Alī Pūrahmad. I wish I had the time and resources to do them all justice. Sadly, I have to bring this section to a close. In the section below, I will wrap up my analysis of the Iranian SF landscape.

Discussion: Development, under-development and false-development

This article has demonstrated that SF has established long, albeit fragile, roots in Iranian soil. Its origins can be traced to upper-class futurologists such as Muhammad ‘Alī Furūghī in the 1920s, and middle-class authors such as ‘Abdalhusayn San‘atīzādah who produced hard SF throughout the 1930s and 1940s. Both sought to modernize Iranian culture and help it transcend tradition and superstition.

The trail then goes cold until the golden age of translators and film distributors in the 1960s-70s. During this period, the monarchy’s obsession with emulating the West opened up opportunities for SF. Translations of works by Isaac Asimov, Arthur C. Clarke and Ray Bradbury created new imaginings, while TV series such as Star Trek (TOS) and the Star Wars franchise gained fandoms.



Figure 36: Star Wars depicted as Ottoman miniature art by Turkish artist Murat Palta.

The defeat of the Iranian uprising in 1978-79 by the mullah-bourgeoisie brought with it a restrictive cultural life and a temporary end to the import of SF from the “Great Satan.” Ironically, these prohibitions allowed feminists such as Shahrnūsh Pārsīpūr to

⁴⁸Emad El-Din Aysha, "SF in Iran: An Interview," Samovar, February 09, 2019. <http://samovar.strangehorizons.com/2019/02/09/sf-in-iran-interview/>.

showcase their talents. While her most famous SF contribution, *Shīvā*, may not have been a great critical success, it paved the way for a younger generation of writers who brought new vim and vigor to the SF landscape.



Figure 37: The SF publishing business is gradually establishing itself with new names and novel topics.

Books written in Farsi and translations of J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series as well as J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* have created a steady pool of resources for the SF community to discuss and analyze. From time to time, this community organizes itself around a website (such as *The Fantasy Academy*) or a bookshop (such as the abovementioned *Rama bookshop*), which is then tasked with promoting SF.⁴⁸

All this SF enthusiasm must contend with a combination of 'cultural apathy' and 'entrenched institutional hostility.' I have suggested this cultural apathy is partly due to the continued hold of 'residual cultural artefacts' (Williams) such as patriarchy and hierarchy. Moreover, Iran is a society where the essential 'needs' of the populace are not always met, let alone their 'wants' and 'desires' (Marx). SF cannot flourish unless wants and desires are allowed to express themselves.

But what of ‘entrenched institutional hostility’ towards SF? Where does that come from? Why can’t the institutions of the Islamic Republic make their peace with SF the way they made their peace with football and humanistic cinema? I believe fear plays a part in this process, fear of a film genre that like the proverbial genie cannot be bottled, once its powers of imagination are unleashed. Fear of dialogic interaction superseding divine monologue. Fear of a popular film genre undermining society’s taboos. Fear of the working classes falling in love with SF. The Islamic Republic created a society, after all, where the protestant work ethic never took off and where Catholic guilt ethic is waning rapidly. In other words, the mullah-bourgeoisie can neither force people to work harder, nor make them feel guilty for desiring a better life. And SF is a constant reminder that there is something better out there, and all we have to do is reach out and embrace it. An example of not exactly a utopia, but a better life is depicted in the science fiction novel, *Life* (Zindagi, 2010), written by the Australian author Greg Egan, which depicts a near-future Iran on the cusp of democratization.



Figure 38: Mullah-bourgeoisie made its peace with football years ago. Why can’t it do the same with SF?

It stands to reason, therefore, that under the Islamic Republic only spectacularized SF will be encouraged. An example of this

⁴⁹“Persian Sci-Fi Monster Hunt on Capture of U.S. RQ-170 Spy Drone by Iran Published,” *Tehran Times*, May 31, 2020, retrieved from <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/448415/Persian-sci-fi-Monster-Hunt-on-capture-of-U-S-RQ-170-spy-drone>.

trend would be *Monster Hunter* (Shikār-i Hayūlā, 2020). Written by Muhammad Sarshār, this is propaganda aimed at young adults. It recounts the story of the capture of a US spy drone in 2011. The article in the pro-regime *Tehran Times* explicitly refers to this and similar books as attempts to counter “foreign books such as *The Lord of the Rings*.”⁴⁹

Spectacularized SF aims to cement the military-industrial complex with monologic divine discourse. Its goals are limited to the maintenance of reactionary modernism. However, as the section below argues, these attempts at stifling dialogic SF cannot hold out forever.

Is Iranian SF ready for liftoff?

When I look at the Iranian SF landscape (and I include the exiled community in this category), I am impressed by the talent on display. All the elements for a successful takeoff seem to be present. There are bloggers and film reviewers with a focus on sci-fi, such as Rama bookshop; there are impressive theoreticians including the likes of Mihrān ‘Alī Alhisābī and Nidā Shaykh, who utilize SF for improving urbanism; actresses like Gulshīftah Farahānī with memorable performances in *Invasion*, and Shohreh Aghdashloo who steals every scene in *The Expanse* (2015) and *Star Trek Beyond* (2016), and Nazanin Boniadi with a great turn in *The Lord of the Rings: The Rings of Power* (2022); there is the iconic cinematographer, Dāryūsh Khunjī (*Alien: Resurrection*); as well as the film composer Rāmīn Javādī (*Game of Thrones*). There are also independent filmmakers such as Naysān Subhānī, who had to travel all the way to China to make *Guidance*, and the Irish-Iranian SF experimental filmmaker Rūzbah Rashīdī.

Just as important as these experts, there are Iranians who are becoming healthily obsessed with space exploration. We have had an opportunity to briefly look at a few of them in this article: the little girl Sipīdah Hūshyār, who loved astronomy and grew



up without giving up on her dreams; her idol, Anousheh Ansari, who has already achieved the goal of travelling into space; and the researcher Shahrām Qandaharīzādah, who is working on something that will enhance the quality of all our lives, an immersive Star Trek holodeck technology. Let us not forget Farīdūn M. Isfandiyārī who may still surprise us all and come back from the other side with fascinating tales.

⁵⁰Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (Moscow, Progress Publishers, 1977, with some notes by R. Rojas), retrieved from <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1859/critique-pol-economy/preface.htm>.

Marx's dictum about forces and relations of production has never been more pertinent. As the man said:

At a certain stage of development, the material productive forces of society come into conflict with the existing relations of production or – this merely expresses the same thing in legal terms – with the property relations within the framework of which they have operated hitherto. From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins an era of social revolution. The changes in the economic foundation lead sooner or later to the transformation of the whole immense superstructure.⁵⁰

Science fiction, as the vanguard of subversive thought and imagination, feels the fetters restricting its development more than most. Its productive forces are bursting with energy, and sooner or later, they will overcome the cultural, political and economic relations of production. The question, therefore, becomes not if, not even when, but in which direction should development lead us, once the fetters are broken.

Which route to take: USA, Britain, Turkey or Russia?

The US science fiction industry seems a million light-years from its Iranian counterpart. I do not think the latter should even think of emulating mainstream, big budget, spectacles such as Star Wars or Dune. There is little point in that. But there is a great deal to be learned from independent and low budget US movies. I am thinking here of brilliant movies such as Sam

Rockwell's *Moon* (2009), which deals with clone technology and worker exploitation, or the unappreciated *Robot & Frank* (2012), starring Frank Langella, which is a highly intelligent treatment of AI and its potential for humanity. What makes these movies iconic is a combination of good scriptwriting and good acting, not mega-budgets and fancy special effects. In this regard, I would like to see more Iranian low-budget SF similar to *Katatonnia* (Hāmid Islāmī, 2015). This is a simple movie that punches above its weight. It deals with a young psychiatrist's discovery that some of his catatonic patients can talk to each other telepathically.

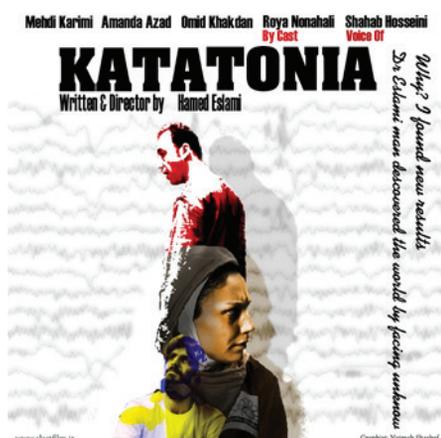


Figure 39: Poster for *Katatonnia*, directed by Hāmid Islāmī, 2015. Not bad on a \$50,000 budget (or so I am told).

We have already discussed the irresistible mix of criticality and self-deprecating humor that distinguishes British low budget SF. *Doctor Who* and *Red Dwarf* fulfill their task with a minimum of fuss and pretentiousness. Similar results are obtained through a more somber tone in *Children of Men* (2006), which deals with the threat of extinction and the rise of authoritarianism. As if this is not sufficient, there is also intelligent commentary on racism and migration. There are no outlandish ideas here, only the worst aspects of the present expanded onto a near-future dystopia. *Under the Skin* (2013) brought out layers of depth

to Scarlett Johansson's performance that I was not aware of. It deals with an alien gorging herself on unsuspecting young men in order to survive, and at the same time gazing upon the countless shortcomings of humanity. Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange* (1971) and John Hurt and Richard Burton's version of 1984 are concept movies built on intelligent takes on politics and history, not laser-fights in sterile, hyper-modern studios. All these movies have enriched us by initiating dialogues around tough subjects. It is this ability, and not cinematic trickery, that gives them longevity.

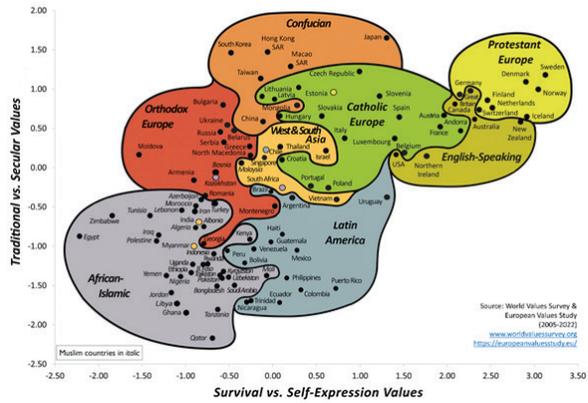
Some readers may object that such comparisons are unreasonable. After all, Britain and the USA are beneficiaries of the Renaissance and Enlightenment. Iran, by contrast, has experienced a halted renaissance and an aborted enlightenment. Maybe so, but this still does not explain why Iranian SF falls so short compared to the output of neighboring Turkey and Russia.

Turkey outshines Iran in most key economic and cultural indicators by just enough to incite the type of envy Freud had in mind when he talked of "narcissism in respect of minor differences."⁵¹ Turkey had a GDP of \$2.936 trillion in 2023 and was ranked 12th in the world. The corresponding figures for Iran are \$1.44 trillion which put the country in 22nd position. The Real GDP per capita (a better indicator of interest in SF) is around \$34,400 for Turkey, nearly twice as much as that of Iran (\$16,200).⁵² Most telling of all the number of open atheists in Turkey is slightly higher than in Iran. The diagram below shows the differences between the two countries in terms of 'tradition vs. secular values' and 'survival vs. self-expression.' The most secular societies display the highest levels of self-expression, with the most traditional societies usually being concerned with mere survival. This map chimes very well with our earlier discussion around needs, wants and desires.

⁵¹Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, trans. Joan Riviere (London: Leonard & Virginia Woolf, 1930), 90.

⁵²See "Turkey (Turkiye)," *The World Factbook*, accessed May 1, 2025, <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/turkey-turkiye/#economy>.

The Inglehart-Welzel World Cultural Map 2023



It stands to reason, therefore, that Turkey’s SF output should also outshine Iran’s, and this indeed is the case, both in terms of number of films produced and the quality of the finished product. Admittedly, some of these are spoofs of Western counterparts and rely on the audience’s familiarity with Superman, Frankenstein and Star Trek. However, there are honorable exceptions. One of the better contributions is the post-apocalyptic *Grain* (Buğday, 2017), the story of corporate greed, resistance and the conflict between city and countryside. *Grain* is marred by its didactic element and at times feels like a promotional for Sufi Islam, but nevertheless, it is worthy of attention. Another dystopian contribution is the short film *The Hut with the White Flag* (Beyaz Bayraklı Kulübe, 2017). An extremely successful science fiction TV mini-series is *Hot Skull* (Sıcak Kafa, 2022), which is export quality SF.

Finally, what of the Russian model of making SF? According to several reliable sources, the Iranian military-industrial complex has been shipping suicide drones and missiles to the Russians throughout the conflict with Ukraine. This is ironic since the Russian military-industrial complex and its appendage, the Russian space program, are a great deal more advanced. Yuri Gagarin became the first person to go into space in 1961. The mullah-bourgeoisie still seems incapable of sending the same

monkey to outer space and returning it to Earth.⁵³



Figure 40: Images Iran claims are of the same monkey: after the launch (right) and before (left) (Getty Images; AP).

The Soviet-era SF certainly has provided us with a number of gems. In Yakov Protazanov's *Aelita, Queen of Mars* (*Aelita – koroleva Marsa*, 1924) the hero (a Soviet radio engineer, of course) fantasizes about a revolt against the totalitarian Martian empire, and the freeing of the enslaved proletariat. This is three years after the Bolsheviks had drowned the Kronstadt rebellion in blood. The film's constructivist style was apparently an influence on Fritz Lang's subsequent *Metropolis* (1927). In the same way that Pavel Klushantsev's *Road to the Stars* (*Doroga k zvezdam*, 1957) predates Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) "in its realistic depictions of weightlessness, glowing planets and rotating model space stations."⁵⁴

From the 1960s to the 1980s the pessimistic and self-reflexive SF of Andrei Tarkovsky was more prominent. Gagarin's victory had given way to a mood of resignation after defeat in the race to the Moon, which the Americans decidedly won with their 1969 Apollo landing. Tarkovsky's *Solaris* (*Soliaris*, 1972) and *Stalker* (1979) are emblematic of this period of Soviet SF.

Konstantin Lopushansky's *Letters from a Dead Man* (*Pis'ma*

⁵³See Rob Williams, "The Mystery of the Iran Space Monkey Is Solved – the Pictures Showed the Wrong Animal, Say Iranian Officials," *The Independent*, February 04, 2013, retrieved from <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/the-mystery-of-the-iran-space-monkey-is-solved-the-pictures-showed-the-wrong-animal-say-iranian-officials-8479403.html>.

⁵⁴James Blackford, "Red Skies: Soviet Science Fiction," BFI, June 6, 2012, retrieved from <http://old.bfi.org.uk/sightand-sound/feature/49760>.

mërtvogo cheloveka, 1986) is an apocalyptic vision of life after a nuclear holocaust, depicting the despair of survivors confined within an underground shelter in a similar vein to the TV series *Silo*. Letters from a Dead Man came out in the same year as the Chernobyl nuclear disaster. In yet another moment of synchronicity, Karen Shakhnazarov's surrealist critique of bureaucracy, *Zero City* (*Gorod Zero*) was screened as the final curtain on the USSR was coming down (1989). The post-Soviet era has seen a flourishing of SF movies with *Hard to be a God* (*Trudno byt' bogom*, 2013) and *Sputnik* (2020) garnering international acclaim. The former, with its accomplished black and white cinematography and interesting moral dilemmas, is particularly satisfying.

To conclude this section, let me just say that Iranian SF can learn a great deal from the technical brilliance of American SF, the self-deprecating humor of British SF, the existentialist reflections of Russian SF, and the commercial acumen of Turkish SF. Ultimately, however, the main lodestar ought to be not any national model, but the kind of dialogic filmmaking I have attempted to expound in this article. To avoid spectacularized SF and aim for the dialogic: this ought to be our motto.

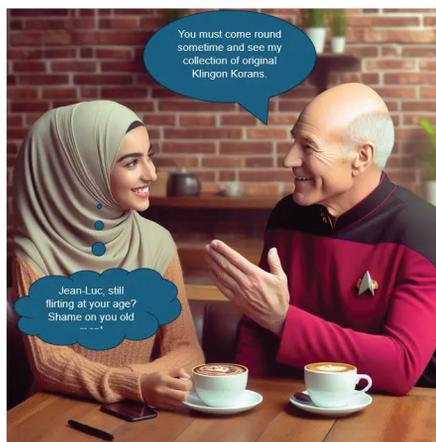


Figure 41: Envisioning a post-Islamic Iran. Picard and cadet on an encounter of the fifth kind.

Encounters of the fifth kind

We circle round to the title of the piece. Why encounters of the fifth kind? There is a classificatory system which is sometimes used to describe alien encounters. According to J. Alan Hynek, a US Air Force advisor, the First Kind refers to encountering something vague in the sky which leaves no trace. Encounters of the Second Kind involve a UFO that leaves some sort of evidence (burns on the ground or broken branches). In the Third Kind, you might come into contact with some alien pilot aboard a UFO. This is where Stephen Spielberg's E.T. comes in. A close encounter of the Fourth Kind is more prolonged and may involve abduction by aliens. And finally, the Fifth Kind of encounter involves regular conversations with aliens.⁵⁵

Most secular Iranians I know have had a relationship with the mullah-bourgeoisie akin to the classification offered above. We first became aware of a vague feeling that something other may be lurking in our midst in the 1970s. Soon, through evidence (speeches, tape recordings, attacks on cinemas, underground press, etc.), we became convinced that a mysterious force was making visitations. That was encounters of the Second Kind. The Third Kind of encounter saw us coming face-to-face with these strange creatures whose worldview was otherworldly. Whilst some of us possessed the self-confidence to retain our distance, many were seduced and allowed themselves to be abducted in the Fourth Kind of encounter. Their minds were probed, sometimes sucked out by aliens curious to know what makes secularists tick. Those who survived the encounters have now witnessed the aliens presiding over us, diminishing in power and stature. Soon, the aliens will fall, as rapidly as extra-terrestrials fell in H. G. Wells' War of the Worlds. But the question is, what comes next?

Well, I like to think science fiction will play a small role in what comes next. My analysis leads me to believe that SF is not just a genre but, at the same time, a radical future-forming activity.

⁵⁵Jim Loboy, "Close Encounters of the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd Kind," WYTV, October 7, 2021. <https://www.wytv.com/home/close-encounters-of-the-1st-2nd-and-3rd-kind/>.

Through expanding language and imagination, it allows us to envision alternative futures to the one predetermined for us. SF is also a siren against all future tyrants and schemers, since it provides the people with the knowledge to gain and retain freedoms.

There is one final service that SF can offer Iranians. SF can help us overcome the stupor and ennui of life under Islamic capitalism. If only for a chance at imagining utopia, Iranians desperately need a vibrant, subversive and superintelligent SF community. Who knows, after the successful overthrow of the Islamic Republic, SF may even help us communicate with our alien enemies through encounters of the Fifth Kind.



Figure 42: But what if the mullah ET refuses to go Qom!? Ay, there's the rub.

Acknowledgments

I wish to extend my thanks to Sophia Farokhi, Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi and Shabnam Rahimi Golkhandan who invited me to write an article for Cinema Iranica. Their open-mindedness has benefited the present work. Shaftolu Gulamadov carried out an outstanding editing job on the draft version of this article and I am extremely grateful for his patient explanation of the mysteries of The Chicago Manual of Style. Finally, I would like

to thank Mina Talebi for sharing her knowledge of the Iranian SF scene with me.