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Farīdūn Gulah (Fereydun Goleh): An Enduring Mystery

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This project springs from his earlier work on popular Iranian cinema, which in its depictions of male heroism problematized the efforts of state agents to eliminate or coopt in the name of modern "progress" the often informal youth associations that had long organized urban public life.

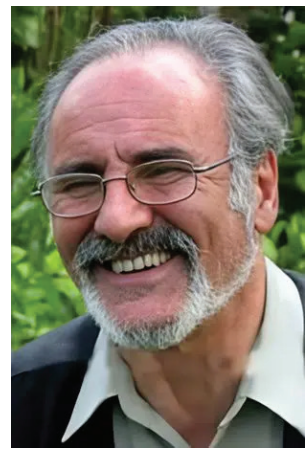

Figure 1: Portrait of Farīdūn Gulah, Iranian director.

Farīdūn Gulah was a writer and director whom historians have associated with an informal group of filmmakers (the "Third Front" or Jibhah-yi sivvum) that, during the 1970s, sought to transform the commercial studios' production environment by experimenting with new aesthetic and narrative formulas drawn from global art and youth-oriented cinemas.[1] No consensus has emerged about Gulah's impact on the industry and purported role in challenging then-dominant filmmaking conventions. For some critics, the uneasy marriage of film school techniques with commercial sensibilities in his work has fueled doubts about his professional motivations.[2] The seemingly out-of-character entries in his filmography have only added to his unsettled status

in Iranian film history, while retrospective statements about his life and career have raised as many questions as they have answered. Still, the writer-director's more personal projects from the 1970s have retained cult appeal even as other so-called Third Front features and filmmakers have faded into irrelevance. Like many of his contemporaries, he faced significant obstacles to continuing his filmmaking career after the Islamic Revolution of 1979. However, he was rediscovered in the 1990s by a new generation of audiences and critics. The resurgence of interest in his pre-revolutionary film catalog even prompted Gulah's brief return to cinema circles. His untimely death in 2005 brought an end to hopes of reviving his career, as well as the possibility of unlocking some of the mysteries surrounding it.

Gulah was born the eldest of five siblings in the Hasanābād neighborhood of Tehran in either 1940 or 1943. In official documents, his birth year was 1940, but in a 1999 interview he stated that his family had long told him that he was actually born in 1943.[3] He was intellectually advanced for his age, learning to read as early as four. It may well have been that his mother and father, a teacher and government bureaucrat respectively, had altered his birth certificate to enroll him in school early. As a young reader, he quickly developed an interest in popular folk tales and their (often ill-fated) heroes. His love of cinema was also cultivated at around the same time. Apparently, the five-year-old Gulah constructed a makeshift home projector from a shoebox, magnifying lenses, and thread spools. His father brought him fragments of old film reels that he would project on the wall.[4] While no one else in his family had a similar passion for film, Gulah nevertheless recalled their weekly trips to Tehran's Lālihzār cinema district during his early childhood. Upon entering primary school in Tehran's Qulhak neighborhood, Gulah also started going to the open-air Bahār Cinema on the city's northernmost fringes to catch the double feature on Fridays.[5] When at home, he entertained himself and others by reciting his favorite bits of film dialogue and recreating his favorite scenes. By the time he entered his teen years, the frequency of his cin-

[1] ʿAbbās Bahārlū, Sad chihrah-ʾi sīnimā-yi Īrān (Tehran: Nashr-i Qatrah, 2002), 115.

[2] See, Bihzād ʾIshqī, "Bāz-khvānī-i tārīkh," Fīlm 340 (November-December 2005): 106-8.

[3] "Guft-u-gū bā Farīdūn Gulah," in Sīnimā-yi Farīdūn Gulah, ed. Rizā Durustkār (Tehran: Nashr-i Khazzah, 2000), 72.

[4] "Guft-u-gū bā Farīdūn Gulah," in Sīnimā-yi Farīdūn Gulah, ed. Rizā Durustkār (Tehran: Nashr-i Khazzah, 2000), 66.

[5] "Guft-u-gū bā Farīdūn Gulah," in Sīnimā-yi Farīdūn Gulah, ed. Rizā Durustkār (Tehran: Nashr-i Khazzah, 2000), 68.

ema visits increased to nearly daily.[6] A 16 mm projector bought by his father also allowed a fifteen-year-old Gulah to obsessively watch some of his favorite films in the home's garden.[7]

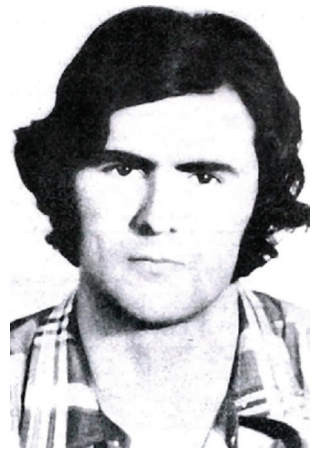

Figure 2: Portrait of Farīdūn Gulah, Iranian director.

His father's career as a customs officer required the family to move frequently, from Tehran to Bushehr to Tehran to Khurramshahr and finally to Mashhad where Gulah graduated high school in 1958 and then enrolled at Ferdowsi University to study literature.[8] In high school, he had already started publishing short stories in a local newspaper and writing pieces for the national weekly Ittilāʿāt-i haftigī.[9] In 1960, he left to continue his education in the United States, following in his father's footsteps, although in a markedly different field of study. The available biographical profiles include erroneous or unverifiable details about Gulah's foreign student years. His own dubious testimony, in which he alleged to have studied under and with some of the biggest names in Hollywood's past, present and future, adds little clarity to this obscure period in his life, but all sources agree that he went to New York to study acting, writing, and directing for the stage and screen. The historian ʿAbbās Bahārlū, among others, has written that he enrolled at New York University, perhaps due to Gulah's claim that he was a classmate of Martin Scorsese who studied English there from 1960

[6] "Guft-u-gū bā Farīdūn Gulah," in Sīnimā-yi Farīdūn Gulah, ed. Rizā Durustkār (Tehran: Nashr-i Khazzah, 2000), 73.

[7] "Guft-u-gū bā Farīdūn Gulah," in Sīnimā-yi Farīdūn Gulah, ed. Rizā Durustkār (Tehran: Nashr-i Khazzah, 2000), 71.

[8] "Guft-u-gū bā Farīdūn Gulah," in Sīnimā-yi Farīdūn Gulah, ed. Rizā Durustkār (Tehran: Nashr-i Khazzah, 2000), 75.

[9] "Guft-u-gū bā Farīdūn Gulah," in Sīnimā-yi Farīdūn Gulah, ed. Rizā Durustkār (Tehran: Nashr-i Khazzah, 2000), 76.

to 1964.[10] However, Gulah's own account of his student days makes no mention of New York University. Rather, he claimed to have attended the Dramatic Workshop in Carnegie Hall, then under the directorship of famed theatrical agent Saul Colin.[11] It is certainly possible that Scorsese sat in on some classes at the Dramatic Workshop or that Gulah did the same at New York University, but there is no ready evidence for such speculations. Some of Gulah's other supposed brushes with fame suffer from the same deficiency of evidence. One of the more believable claims about his New York years is that he spent them taking in as much theater and film as he could.[12] He also continued to write, including the outlines of a novel called Chashm-kāghazī-hā (The Paper-eyed) that he finished and published shortly after returning to Iran.[13]

Gulah moved to Tehran in 1967 and began teaching drama at the city's Youth Palace (Kākh-i Javānān), which had been recently established by government decree with other branches soon to be opened across the country.[14] The domestic film industry was experiencing a major expansion following the record-breaking success of Ganj-i Qārūn (Qārūn's Treasure, 1965), by Siyāmak Yāsimī, with dozens of new production companies registering for business.[15] However, Gulah lacked the connections needed to break into the industry. Through the intervention of his neighbor, the public intellectual Ahmad Surūsh, he instead took up a position writing for the national radio network.[16] In 1968, he managed to arrange a meeting with Ismāʿīl Kūshān, head of Pārs Fīlm studios. Kūshān provided Gulah with an opportunity to write and direct wrestling champion Imām-ʿAlī Habībī's biopic, entitled Khashm va ghurūr (Wrath and Pride), also starring Habībī.[17] On-set disagreements with the star contributed to Gulah's removal from the production and it morphed into an entirely different film, Babr-i Māzandarān (The Māzandarān Tiger, 1968), now directed by Sāmūʾil Khāchīkiyān.[18] This bitter first experience did not discourage Gulah, who then transitioned to collaborating with independent producers on screenplays. His contributions could be extensive, such as building

[10] ʿAbbās Bahārlū, Sad chihrah-ʾi sīnimā-yi Īrān (Tehran: Nashr-i Qatrah, 2002), 115.

[11] "Guft-u-gū bā Farīdūn Gulah," in Sīnimā-yi Farīdūn Gulah, ed. Rizā Durustkār (Tehran: Nashr-i Khazzah, 2000), 83-88.

[12] "Guft-u-gū bā Farīdūn Gulah," in Sīnimā-yi Farīdūn Gulah, ed. Rizā Durustkār (Tehran: Nashr-i Khazzah, 2000), 86-7.

[13] Muhammad Nāsir Ahadī, "Qalamhā-yi nigātīvī," Hamshahrī (23 November 2021): 16.

[14] "Guft-u-gū bā Farīdūn Gulah," in Sīnimā-yi Farīdūn Gulah, ed. Rizā Durustkār (Tehran: Nashr-i Khazzah, 2000), 94.

[15] Mamad Haghighat, and Frédéric Sabouraud, Histoire du cinéma iranien (Paris: BPI Centre Georges Pompidou, 1999), 60.

[16] Khudāyār Qāqānī, "Tasharruf bih maʿsūmiyat va tafakkur," in Sīnimā-yi Farīdūn Gulah, ed. Rizā Durustkār (Tehran: Nashr-i Khazzah, 2000), 236.

[17] "Guft-u-gū bā Farīdūn Gulah," in Sīnimā-yi Farīdūn Gulah, ed. Rizā Durustkār (Tehran: Nashr-i Khazzah, 2000), 98-99.

[18] Jamāl Umīd, Tarīkh-i sīnimā-yi Īrān: 1279-1357 (Tehran: Intishārāt-i Rawzanah, 1998), 414.

a script around a story idea that a producer had provided, or relatively superficial, such as punching up dialogue or fixing problematic scenes.[19] By his own telling, several writing credits were mistakenly attributed to him as a result of his work as a script consultant.[20] However, scripts that he had claimed to write were also attributed to other writers, which would suggest a lack of enforcement standards and protections for intellectual property during the period. In fact, a mushy indifference to intellectual property supports what scholars like Hamid Naficy have recognized as the industry's halting progress towards professionalization and labor specialization despite its rapid growth in the late Pahlavī era.[21]

The film critic Bihzād ʿIshqī has taken a contrarian view of Gulah's efforts to set the record straight about his career, positing that Gulah retrospectively disavowed his work on some features because they were commercial failures, critical failures, or both.[22] Specifically, his earlier contributions did not align with the reputation that Gulah had earned from some critics, after his more culturally and politically resonant releases of the 1970s, as the rare filmmaker who could correctly read society's pulse. ʿIshqī has drawn attention to Gulah's second directorial effort, Shab-i firishtigān (Night of Angels, 1968), as an example of his denial of responsibility for the more inconvenient lines in his resume.[23] In a 1972 interview, Gulah blamed his own fickle and indecisive nature as a young filmmaker for the film's narrative and technical flaws and subsequent box office failure.[24] Decades later, he claimed that he had ceded control of the project to its star and producer Rizā Fāzilī after shooting about twenty minutes of the running time. While he remained on set, the film was completed under Fāzilī's direction, even though Gulah received screen credit for it.[25] He did admit to writing the "rushed and weak" script and it was his poor opinion of it that triggered disagreements with Fāzilī, who presumably did not share those concerns or had other, more pressing ones (namely, financial) that trumped a substandard script.[26]

[19]"Guft-u-gū bā Farīdūn Gulah," in Sīnimā-yi Farīdūn Gulah, ed. Rizā Durustkār (Tehran: Nashr-i Khazzah, 2000), 99-107.

[20]"Guft-u-gū bā Farīdūn Gulah," in Sīnimā-yi Farīdūn Gulah, ed. Rizā Durustkār (Tehran: Nashr-i Khazzah, 2000), 108.

[21]See Hamid Naficy, A Social History of Iranian Cinema. Volume 2: The Industrializing Years, 1941-1978 (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 168-76.

[22]Bihzād ʿIshqī, "Bāzkhvānī-i tārīkh," Fīlm 340 (November-December 2005): 106.

[23]Bihzād ʿIshqī, "Bāzkhvānī-i tārīkh," Fīlm 340 (November-December 2005): 106.

[24]Jamāl Umīd, Tarīkh-i sīnimā-yi Īrān: 1279-1357 (Tehran: Intishārāt-i Rawzanah, 1998), 430.

[25]"Guft-u-gū bā Farīdūn Gulah," in Sīnimā-yi Farīdūn Gulah, ed. Rizā Durustkār (Tehran: Nashr-i Khazzah, 2000), 101.

[26]"Guft-u-gū bā Farīdūn Gulah," in Sīnimā-yi Farīdūn Gulah, ed. Rizā Durustkār (Tehran: Nashr-i Khazzah, 2000), 100. Interestingly, Gulah also denied an earlier collaboration with Fāzilī on the 1967 release Qahramān-i shahr-i mā (Our Town's Hero, Dāvūd Fāzilī), for which he received a writing credit. The film was mildly profitable, which Jamāl Umīd appropri-

To be sure, the film includes some hints of Gulah's later inventiveness, with the opening scenes incorporating jump cuts, jarring transitions, and brash, irreverent characters directly addressing the viewer—reminiscent of techniques popularized by French Nouvelle Vague filmmakers during the 1960s. Gulah spoke of his admiration for Jean-Pierre Melville, an early source of inspiration for the Nouvelle Vague.[27] Likewise, Night of Angels also incorporated original compositions and pop songs by then radio stars Gūgūsh, Īraj, and Rāmīn in its score. The original score was a relatively new industry practice after years of soundtracks produced for local productions that relied on what Kaveh Askari has called "collage sound" drawn from a whole host of sources including other (mainly Hollywood) film productions.[28] The film's composer, Vārūzh Hākhbandiyān (credited as Vārūzhān), had first crossed paths with Gulah working for the national radio network and would go on to collaborate with the director on three of his biggest hits of the 1970s.[29] However, the film's plot closely adhered to the well-worn clichés of contemporary romantic melodramas: class conflict and familial obligation separate the male protagonists from their love interests until a greater danger to the family is introduced and the heroes' inner virtues are revealed in defense of the family, ultimately redeeming their love. Night of Angels registered with neither audiences nor critics.

Figure 3: A still from the film Shab-i firishtigān (Night of Angels), directed by Farīdūn Gulah, 1968.

ately enough has attributed to its thrifty production and well-timed release. See Jamāl Umīd, Tarīkh-i sīnimā-yi Īrān: 1279-1357 (Tehran: Intishārāt-i Rawzanah, 1998), 410.

[27]"Guft-u-gū bā Farīdūn Gulah," in Sīnimā-yi Farīdūn Gulah, ed. Rizā Durustkār (Tehran: Nashr-i Khazzah, 2000), 135.

[28]Kaveh Askari, Relaying Cinema in Midcentury Iran: Material Cultures in Transit (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2022), 81-113.

[29]Khudāyār Qāqānī, "Tasharruf bih maʿsūmiyat va tafakkur," in Sīnimā-yi Farīdūn Gulah, ed. Rizā Durustkār (Tehran: Nashr-i Khazzah, 2000), 237-9.

Gulah had to wait nearly four years before receiving another opportunity to direct a film, a significant pause in an industry in which high-demand directors could have as many as four films released in a single year. In the interim, he continued to consult on and write scripts for others, including Dunyā-yi ābī (Blue World, Sābir Rahbar, 1969), which won for best screenplay at the industry-sponsored Sipās (Gratitude) Awards, and the box office hit Kūchah-mard-hā (Men of the Alley, Saʿīd Mutallibī, 1970).[30] Establishing a precise chronology of Gulah's screenwriting career is as challenging as determining his level of involvement in the screenplays attributed to him. Gulah has noted that some of his scripts were sidelined for extended periods of time before entering production.[31] Again, the film industry's expansion in the late 1960s and early 1970s was both rapid and disorderly; it certainly created space for achieving greater levels of professionalization, technical proficiency, and creative expression but also attracted unpracticed outsiders eager to sink money into dubious productions for fast (and often unattainable) returns. Increased competition and swollen production slates, combined with stagnating ticket prices, ultimately wreaked havoc on studio coffers and release timelines.[32] The potential delays between Gulah's submission of a script, its production, and release may help to explain the differences in subject and tone that viewers encounter between many of his 'hired gun' scripts and those that he wrote for himself to direct during the 1970s. His later interviews also acknowledged a mercenary attitude towards scriptwriting for others, admitting that his artistic and professional integrity could at times take a back seat to more immediate, pecuniary interests.[33] In fact Gulah was known to write multiple screenplays simultaneously, peddling them to different production companies. Occasionally, the features based on his writing would reach theaters at the same time, much to the shock of their competing producers.[34] However, once a script was optioned, Gulah admitted that he took little interest in either how or when his clients realized his words on screen.[35]

[30] Jamāl Umīd, Tarīkh-i sīnimā-yi Īrān: 1279-1357 (Tehran: Intishārāt-i Rawzanah, 1998), 524, 555.

[31] "Guft-u-gū bā Farīdūn Gulah," in Sīnimā-yi Farīdūn Gulah, ed. Rizā Durustkār (Tehran: Nashr-i Khazzah, 2000), 102.

[32] Masʿūd Mihrābī, Tarīkh-i sīnimā-yi Īrān: az āghāz tā sāl-i 1357 (Tehran: Nazar, 1983), 143.

[33] Guft-u-gū bā Farīdūn Gulah," in Sīnimā-yi Farīdūn Gulah, ed. Rizā Durustkār (Tehran: Nashr-i Khazzah, 2000), 108-9. In his memoirs, Bihrūz Vusūqī has attested to Gulah's occasional indifference to professional scruples, recalling a meeting between himself, Gulah, and the actor and producer ʿAlī Amīnī in which Gulah made up a script on the spot that he pretended to read from an empty notebook in front of him. Yet, he still managed to sell it to Amīnī. Vusūqī added that Gulah then took that same improvised script and sold it a second time to another studio with some minor alterations. See, Nāsir Zirāʿatī, Bihrūz Vusūqī: Yak Zindigīnāmah (San Francisco, CA: Aran Press, 2004), 291-2.

[34] ʿAbbās Bahārlū, Sad chihrahʾi sīnimā-yi Īrān (Tehran: Nashr-i Qatrah, 2002), 115.

[35] ʿAbbās Bahārlū, Sad chihrahʾi sīnimā-yi Īrān (Tehran: Nashr-i Qatrah, 2002), 115.

Whatever regrets Gulah had about his screenwriting career were reserved for scripts that he directed or planned to direct himself. In fact, there were a few screenplays that he claimed to write for himself to realize, for which the Ministry of Culture and Art never granted or later rescinded production permits. These 'lost' scripts included an adaptation of Sādiq Hidāyat's Dāsh Akul that Ministry officials made an offer to finance and just as quickly reconsidered. Not long after, the writer and director Masʿūd Kīmiyāʾī brought his own version of the short story to the screen in 1971, one of a number of episodes in which Kīmiyāʾī's professional accomplishments paralleled (or overshadowed) Gulah's own.[36] Gulah attributed his leadership role in the Artists' Syndicate (Kānūn-i Hunarmandān), whose chief adversary during the 1970s was the Ministry, for creating obstacles to the production of some of his scripts.[37] Moreover, he alleged that two of his films were kept out of the competition for best picture at the court-sponsored Tehran International Film Festival because of his adversarial relationship with Ministry officials.[38]

Prominent failures such as his abortive screenplay of the modern folktale Dāsh Akūl nevertheless highlight a commonality in narrative and character development that can be discerned from Gulah's diverse screenwriting career: an overarching interest in depicting the lives of the urban poor and working classes. Since his childhood days in Hasanābād, he had spent many hours in quiet observation of the lives and habits of the most deprived segments of society.[39] Accordingly, his shooting locations were often the back alleys, markets, and cafés of older, poorer city neighborhoods. Once he returned to directing in the early 1970s, "dirty realism" became a stylistic hallmark that pervaded his features' mise-en-scène, casting, and even camera-work (including the use of hidden cameras to heighten the realism).[40] Hence, his inclusion among Third Front filmmakers seems appropriate—given their desire, according to critics and historians, to connect with younger audiences by appropriating the techniques and politics of post-war realist move-

[36] "Guft va gū bā Farīdūn Gulah," 105.

[37] "Guft-u-gū bā Farīdūn Gulah," in Sīnimā-yi Farīdūn Gulah, ed. Rizā Durustkār (Tehran: Nashr-i Khazzah, 2000), 117-8.

[38] "Guft-u-gū bā Farīdūn Gulah," in Sīnimā-yi Farīdūn Gulah, ed. Rizā Durustkār (Tehran: Nashr-i Khazzah, 2000), 115-6.

[39] "Guft-u-gū bā Farīdūn Gulah," in Sīnimā-yi Farīdūn Gulah, ed. Rizā Durustkār (Tehran: Nashr-i Khazzah, 2000), 127.

[40] ʿAbbās Bahārlū, Sad chihrah-ʾi sīnimā-yi Īrān (Tehran: Nashr-i Qatrah, 2002), 116.

ments in Europe while also working within locally established 'rules' of film entertainment.[41] In their narrative and stylistic aims (but also class and educational backgrounds), the Third Front resembled the contemporaneous "Movie Brats" working in Hollywood such as Francis Ford Coppola, George Lucas, and Martin Scorsese, and Steven Spielberg, who all brought a more worldly "film school" aesthetic to studio features aimed at a coming-of-age but also increasingly sophisticated audience. The Movie Brats' attempts to shake up a stagnant studio system were likewise met with an initial dose of skepticism from the critical community.[42] If there were indeed links between Gulah and Scorsese, they are more likely to be found in their spiritual and aesthetic connections rather than in the personal realm.

To be sure, Gulah's narrative focus on the socially marginalized was itself a common feature of the industry's output dating back to its post-war origins. [43] While some critics and fans have voiced appreciation and even astonishment at his detailed renderings of the language, personalities, sentiments, and domains of the rough-and-tumble men of the streets, especially given his own firmly middle-class status, it is worth remembering that the film industry's creative talent almost entirely came from middle class backgrounds, even if their on-screen protagonists had not. Again, in ʿIshqī's contrarian view, much of Gulah's oeuvre was not intrinsically different in terms of its characters, narrative themes, or settings from the most mundane and forgettable releases of his time.[44] The prominent critic Hazhīr Dāryūsh, in his capacity as the head of the awards committee for the Tehran International Film Festival, had likewise asserted the mediocrity of Gulah's work in excluding his 1974 submission Mihr-i giyāh (The Mandrake) from the prize competition.[45] Nevertheless, Gulah's fiercest defenders have also argued quite compellingly that while he did not necessarily break with established commercial formulas (unlike his contemporaries in the Iranian New Wave [Mawj-i naw]), his written-and-directed titles of the 1970s were significant efforts to reimagine or reinvigorate those formulas for a changing audience demographic—one

[41] ʿAbbās Bahārlū, Sad chihrah-ʾi sīnimā-yi Īrān (Tehran: Nashr-i Qatrah, 2002), 115; Umīd also includes Gulah among "Third Front" or "Third Wave" (Mawj-i sivvum) filmmakers like ʿAlī Hātamī, Masʿūd Kīmiyāʾī, and Dāryūsh Mihrjūʾī. See Jamāl Umīd, Tarīkh-i sīnimā-yi Īrān: 1279-1357 (Tehran: Intishārāt-i Rawzanah, 1998), 555).

[42] See, Michael Pye and Lynda Myles, The Movie Brats: How the Film Generation Took Over Hollywood (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1979).

[43] See, Hamid Naficy, A Social History of Iranian Cinema. Volume 2: The Industrializing Years, 1941-1978 (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 294-310.

[44] Bihzād ʿIshqī, "Bāzkhvānī-i tārīkh," Fīlm 340 (November-December 2005): 106.

[45] "Guft-u-gū bā Farīdūn Gulah," in Sīnimā-yi Farīdūn Gulah, ed. Rizā Durustkār (Tehran: Nashr-i Khazzah, 2000), 116.

that was now increasingly single, male, socially and politically disaffected, and raised on a steady diet of violent, profane movies from around the world that featured male protagonists of a similar temperament. Third Front cinema is perhaps too broad a category to accurately describe Gulah's work during the 1970s, which resembled what film scholars working in a different national context (India) but on a similar time period have called "angry young man" cinema.[46] Gulah, both as a film professional and movie buff, participated in what was in fact a global wave of angry young man filmmaking that contributed novel settings and camera angles, faster-paced editing, darker characterizations, bloody and highly choreographed violence, graphic sexuality and language, and pop music-inspired scores, among other things, to the stylistic and technical repertoire of their respective industries.

Gulah made his directorial return with Kāfar (Infidel, 1972). The self-penned script was likely inspired by Kīmiyāʾī's groundbreaking entry in Iran's angry young man cinema genre, Qaysar (1969), which transformed its star Bihrūz Vusūqī into the film icon of the 1970s. According to ʿIshqī, Infidel was merely another (and failed) attempt to capitalize on Qaysar's enormous success by shamelessly borrowing from its storylines, settings, dialogues, sound design and overall style.[47] Even Gulah's title is drawn from his film's anti-hero, Mahdī Kāfar, just like Vusūqī's eponymous character in Qaysar. Gulah selected relative newcomer Saʿīd Rād for what he presumed to be a star-making role. Rād did indeed have his break-out role that year but it was to be in fellow Third Front director Nāsir Taqvāʾī's Sādiq Kurdah (Sādiq the Kurd).[48]

[46]See, e.g., Ranjani Mazumdar, Bombay Cinema: An Archive of the City (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), esp. 1-40. Amīr Qādirī has made a similar argument about Gulah belonging to an era of "protest cinema." See Amīr Qādirī, "Lizzat-i shikastan-i shīshih-i tamīz-i khvush tarāsh," Fīlm 340 (November-December 2005): 109.

[47]Bihzād ʿIshqī, "Bāzkhvānī-i tārīkh," Fīlm 340 (November-December 2005): 107.

[48]Jamāl Umīd, Tarīkh-i sīnimā-yi Īrān: 1279-1357 (Tehran: Intishārāt-i Rawzanah, 1998), 620-1.

[49]"Guft-u-gū bā Farīdūn Gulah," in Sīnimā-yi Farīdūn Gulah, ed. Rizā Durustkār (Tehran: Nashr-i Khazzah, 2000), 122.

Figure 4: A Poster for the film Kāfar (Infidel), directed by Farīdūn Gulah, 1972.

Kāfar, shot in black and white like most commercial productions of the time, has a relatively straightforward plot about youthful rebellion against an unjust world and its predictable outcomes. Kāfar returns home from a short spell in prison after a robbery gone bad that his former accomplices pinned on him. He seeks revenge by challenging his old street boss, Hasan Talā (Ghulām Rizā Sarkūb) for supremacy in the neighborhood. Gulah chose locations in Isfahan's old quarter for filming, mirroring his seemingly anachronous characters.[49] Kāfar's quest for revenge is disrupted by the discovery of a diary belonging to a young woman Sūrī (Pūnah), who is being abused by her mother's landlord. In line with post-Qaysar industry conventions, the girl's sexual victimization is not merely hinted at through dialogue or body language but depicted explicitly by Gulah. Kāfar sets out to right the wrongs done to her according to the diary and in the process falls in love. Sūrī in turn falls in love with him, despite never having seen her mysterious savior. Kāfar vows to marry her and break with his violent and criminal past but only after one last robbery that will allow him to give her the kind of life that she dreams about in her diary. However,

his former crew mates and now rivals alert the police who, by shooting at him, cause him to fall eight stories to a grisly death.

Gulah's gory depictions of on-screen violence contributed to a larger trend in youth cinemas the world over, with Arthur Penn's Bonnie and Clyde (1967) perhaps the earliest example. This move towards greater realism included the staging of increasingly elaborate stunts and fight sequences, the use of hand-held cameras and zoom lenses, and faster-paced editing. Moreover, Gulah's protagonists often receive as many beatings as they hand out during their brawls, turning the page on industry clichés of the invincible hero and, in the process, endowing the characters with greater humanity and realism. Hong Kong cinema and its then-growing global profile may have inspired Gulah's characterizations, just as it had inspired his contemporaries in popular Indian cinema. Kāfar's use of a throwing star to subdue a rival during an early fight scene may well be considered as an explicit acknowledgment of the director's debt to Hong Kong cinema. More subtly, though, critics and fans have noted his penchant for fleshing out characters—big and small—via shifting perspectives, the manipulation of chronology, and other relatively unique narrative and stylistic devices as likely inspired by Hong Kong imports.[50]

While Infidel failed to attract audiences, the film's stylistic flourishes and his previous successes as a screenwriter had earned Gulah some industry credit. Veteran producer Mahdī Musayyibī offered to finance his next script, Dishnah (Dagger, 1972), and convinced established stars Bihrūz Vusūqī and Furūzān to headline. In Vusūqī's own telling, he became the de facto producer once Musayyibī fled the country to escape his creditors.[51] Musayyibī's debt and sudden absence from the production underlined the film industry's precarity in that moment, despite reaching its highest total of theatrical releases ever (90) in the same year.[52] The impossible demands that uncontrolled industry expansion had placed on producers reached a crisis point in 1972, with the number of annual domestic releases dramatically

[50]"Guft-u-gū bā Farīdūn Gulah," in Sīnimā-yi Farīdūn Gulah, ed. Rizā Durustkār (Tehran: Nashr-i Khazzah, 2000), 152-3.

[51]Nāsir Zirā'atī, Bihrūz Vusūqī: Yak Zindigīnāmah (San Francisco, CA: Aran Press, 2004), 218.

[52]M. Ali Issari, Cinema in Iran, 1900-1979 (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1989), 242.

declining in subsequent years. Fortunately, the film became an unqualified hit with audiences, finishing fifteenth in the annual box office rankings.[53] Gulah retained his previous narrative focus on the so-called dregs of society. Vusūqī plays two-bit gangster ʿAbbās Chākhān or ʿAbbās the Phony. To celebrate his recent release from jail, his cronies take him to a brothel where he meets Banafshah (Furūzān), held captive by her pimp Mamad Dishnah (Husayn Gīl). ʿAbbās eventually falls in love with her and seeks to save her from Dishnah's brutality, even if it means risking his own life.

The storyline mirrors Infidel in important aspects, with a wrongdoer attempting to do right in the name of love. Yet Gulah included some plot divergences, perhaps with the intention of correcting what he perceived to be his previous film's missteps. ʿAbbās's redemptive turn from unscrupulous goon to virtuous champion is slower than Kāfar's. His offer to save Banafshah from her brutal predicament and make a new life with her is at first a transparent ploy to exploit her affections. In fact, his wanton cynicism may have resonated more with contemporary audiences than Kāfar's seemingly chaste and self-abnegating love. ʿAbbās's manipulations of Banafshah bear fruit after he is re-arrested. She comes to his rescue with bail money and in the process deepens her debt to Dishnah. While he promises to pay her back, he has no intention of doing so until he sees a painting of a violet, Banafshah's namesake, in a café. Instead of relying on exaggerated acting for melodramatic effect, Gulah primarily used cinematography (quick cuts and zooms) to communicate the emotional impact of sequences where the changing nature of couple's relationship is depicted. He also relied on music to underline such narrative shifts but, again, in ways different than in many previous melodramas. Rather than a standard operatic score, his frequent collaborator Vārūzhān wrote one that was far more atmospheric in character. Pop star Dāryūsh's "Dast-hā-yi Tu" ("Your hands") recurs as a theme for ʿAbbās and Banafshah's erotic emotions. The pop song soundtrack had become a hallmark of 1970s youth cinemas, with its likely origins in Hol-

[53] Humā Jāvdānī, Sālshumār-i tārīkh-i sīnimā-yi Īrān: Tīr-i 1279-Shahrīvar-i 1379 (Tehran: Nashr-i Qatrah), 107.

lywood productions like The Graduate (Mike Nichols, 1967), Midnight Cowboy (John Schlesinger, 1969), and Easy Rider (Dennis Hopper, 1969). The haunting melody of Dāryūsh's song heralds ʿAbbās's emotional realization in the café. He then makes it his mission to clear Banafshah's debts and find a home for the two of them. Yet, the destructive and bloody path that the couple must tread in pursuit of this future underlines the difficulty that the socially marginalized face in escaping their life conditions. It recalls a line addressed to Banafshah from the film's initial scenes about the street thug and prostitute as kindred spirits who both live on the edge of a knife. The couple's final bloody struggle with Mamad Dishnah makes this sentiment a literal reality. Nevertheless, ʿAbbās, with Banafshah's help, ultimately subdues her longtime tormenter.

The film's coda is a jarring departure from the tense final showdown with Dishnah. ʿAbbās the jokester from the first reel makes a return appearance, back in prison and anxiously awaiting his release to be with Banafshah, who is pregnant with his child. Ironically, this ill-fitting resolution recalls some of the mediocre melodramas of the previous decade (including a few of Gulah's mercenary scripts), which Third Front filmmakers such as himself had strived to transcend. To his credit, Gulah claimed that the original script concluded with the couple dying alongside Dishnah but the new ending was added during post-production; he was unsure who was the responsible for the change but named Musayyibī's production team, Vusūqī, and cinematographer Niʿmat Haqīqī as likely possibilities.[54] Still, Gulah's next three productions, which critics have considered his best work, would more forcefully confirm his turn away from increasingly stale industry formulas.

[54]"Guft-u-gū bā Farīdūn Gulah," in Sīnimā-yi Farīdūn Gulah, ed. Rizā Durustkār (Tehran: Nashr-i Khazzah, 2000), 141-2.

[55]"Guft-u-gū bā Farīdūn Gulah," in Sīnimā-yi Farīdūn Gulah, ed. Rizā Durustkār (Tehran: Nashr-i Khazzah, 2000), 187.

[56]"Guft-u-gū bā Farīdūn Gulah," in Sīnimā-yi Farīdūn Gulah, ed. Rizā Durustkār (Tehran: Nashr-i Khazzah, 2000), 163.

Figure 5: ʿAbbās and Banafshah in the film Kāfar (Infidel), directed by Farīdūn Gulah, 1972.

In retrospective interviews, Gulah stressed that Zīr-i pūst-i shab (Under the Skin of the Night, 1974), The Mandrake (1975), and Kandū (Beehive, 1975) comprised a trilogy exploring man's spiritual journey from material attachment to physical annihilation and transcendence.[55] Under the Skin of the Night makes up the first leg of that journey. It depicts the travails of an idle and homeless young man, Qāsim Siyāh (Murtizā ʿAqīlī), in finding a place where he can have sex with an American tourist. From Gulah's viewpoint, Qāsim's predicament illustrates the seemingly unbridgeable gap between the Shah's self-aggrandizing vision of the country (epitomized by the recently-held 2500th anniversary of Iranian monarchy celebrations that fed into the aims and rhetoric of the "Great Civilization") and the urban poor's own miserable reality.[56] Qāsim lives hand-to-mouth, wandering Tehran's streets largely deprived of the material benefits that state-directed development plans had promised. Nonetheless, his acculturation in the consumerist paradise (and its sensual pleasures), available only to a privileged minority, is complete, which only manages to intensify his sense of deprivation. Shot in black and white in a hidden-camera documentary style, Under the Skin of the Night follows Qāsim over a roughly twenty-four-hour span in which he meets uninhibited backpacker Susan, played appropriately enough by a non-pro-

fessional actor (Susan Geller), and then unsuccessfully tries to bed her. The title credits sequence features a dung beetle engaged in a Herculean effort to hide its treasure, foreshadowing Qāsim's own futile struggle.

Figure 6: Qāsim and Susan in the film Zīr-i pūst-i shab (Under the Skin of the Night), directed by Farīdūn Gulah, 1974.

The protagonist's single-minded drive to satisfy his base instincts marks a sharp break with the family-centered melodramas of only a few years earlier, where superficially Westernized gigolos were presented as the main threats to female chastity while lumpen heroes from poor 'traditional' neighborhoods retained their moral composure. Typical of 1970s global youth cinema, Under the Skin of the Night does away with concepts of forbearance and restraint preached by the parental generation (and the political leadership as the "fathers" of the nation) to a new generation whose social status and civic role was increasingly limited. Qāsim's volatile relationship with his mother, a live-in maid in tony north Tehran, encapsulates his rejection of the once powerful but now empty shibboleths of so-called national progress. Instead of finding work, he indulges the fantasy of easy money and easy women by engaging in petty theft, window-shopping, watching sexually explicit films, and harassing female passers-by. However, reality constantly intrudes on

this world-making. His encounter with Susan and attempts to physically possess her land particularly devastating blows to his psyche. She first notices him stealing hubcaps and then they flirt with each other in the park. Despite the language gap, he manages to convince her to sleep with him before catching her flight home early the next morning. However, Qāsim cannot secure a place for their intimate relations. He predictably retreats to his fantasy world, imagining her naked on a bed while they are window-shopping. Out of options, he goes to his mother for help who, scandalized, throws him out. Her employer's son Farrokh, though, pretends to come to Qāsim's aid, giving him and Susan a ride to a friend's empty house where he and his friend proceed to sleep with Susan while a humiliated Qāsim sits by the pool.

Figure 7: A Poster for the film Zīr-i pūst-i shab (Under the Skin of the Night), directed by Farīdūn Gulah, 1974.

In a sharp rebuke to melodramatic conventions, the two Westernized gigolos emerge victorious in these scenes. Gulah effectively portrays not only the material gap between the well-to-do and poor in 1970s Iran but how this gap contributed to the deprived classes' exploitation and abasement. ʿAqīlī in turn pow-

erfully communicates his character's pent-up anger and frustration once he works up the courage to confront the two rich men for 'stealing' Susan and is violently ejected from the home. The sound of a ticking clock (or perhaps a time bomb?) accompanies his weeping while Susan looks on. Gulah's camera lingers on this scene for several minutes before she attempts to comfort him physically, leading to a furtive attempt at love-making in a parking lot that the police quickly disrupt. While Susan receives a police escort to the airport, the tilted scales of justice condemn Qāsim to a night in jail. The film ends with a montage of the modern city at daybreak intercut with Qasem sleeping on his cell floor.

Gulah's transgressive turn in narrative and style in Under the Skin of the Night may well explain why he self-produced the film.[57] He even shelved plans to incorporate a Dāryūsh pop song in the film, in line with his non-commercial approach in subject and presentation.[58] Surprisingly, Gulah also claimed that the film did not receive any undue attention from government censors, recalling only one specific instance when the lyrics to a song were banned.[59] While depictions of graphic sexuality on theater screens had lost their novelty by the time the film was released, ʿAqīlī's simulation of Qāsim masturbating in his jail cell still has a shock factor today (to say nothing of the film's general political critique). Despite serious technical flaws (e.g. murky and under-lit scenes) for which the 'guerilla' cinematography likely deserves some blame, it became a cult hit. The Kāprī Cinema was the film's lone venue in Tehran, but it played there for seven months.[60] It received unprecedented press attention, including reviews in weeklies that had generally ignored homegrown cinema.[61] The positive press, but also the film's box office performance, undoubtedly encouraged Gulah to continue his turn away from commercial filmmaking conventions.

Gulah began working on the script for The Mandrake immediately after Under the Skin of the Night.[62] If his previous film was a commentary on the fruitless chase for personal fulfillment

[57]"Guft-u-gū bā Farīdūn Gulah," in Sīnimā-yi Farīdūn Gulah, ed. Rizā Durustkār (Tehran: Nashr-i Khazzah, 2000), 137.

[58]It still won a prize for best music at the annual Sipās industry awards. See, "Guft-u-gū bā Farīdūn Gulah," in Sīnimā-yi Farīdūn Gulah, ed. Rizā Durustkār (Tehran: Nashr-i Khazzah, 2000), 165.

[59]"Guft-u-gū bā Farīdūn Gulah," in Sīnimā-yi Farīdūn Gulah, ed. Rizā Durustkār (Tehran: Nashr-i Khazzah, 2000), 121.

[60]"Guft-u-gū bā Farīdūn Gulah," in Sīnimā-yi Farīdūn Gulah, ed. Rizā Durustkār (Tehran: Nashr-i Khazzah, 2000), 165; Bihzād ʿIshqī, "Bāzkhvānī-i tārīkh," Fīlm 340 (November-December 2005): 107.

[61]"Guft-u-gū bā Farīdūn Gulah," in Sīnimā-yi Farīdūn Gulah, ed. Rizā Durustkār (Tehran: Nashr-i Khazzah, 2000), 164.

[62]"Guft-u-gū bā Farīdūn Gulah," in Sīnimā-yi Farīdūn Gulah, ed. Rizā Durustkār (Tehran: Nashr-i Khazzah, 2000), 189.

in this world, then The Mandrake revealed how a higher calling (here, erotic love) can sever one's attachment to the material. Gulah repeatedly claimed in interviews that The Mandrake was his best film.[63] Interestingly, Pārs Fīlm produced it despite the studio's reputation as an industry pillar and, thus, presumably more reluctant to accept the risky departure from industry conventions that Gulah's project represented. The studio played a central role in shaping the post-war commercial cinema and its products—a fact which had earned it far more scorn than praise from the critical community. Nevertheless, its founder, Ismāʿīl Kūshān, who personally approved the production, had also been responsible for many of the creative and technical advancements of that same era. Even the royal court had not long before commissioned his studio to produce an official documentary for the 2500 years of Iranian monarchy celebrations, despite many prominent Pahlavī insiders' longstanding and well-documented distaste for domestic studio fare.[64] Gulah claimed that Kūshān, along with the film's star ʿAlī Nasīriyān, had also collaborated with him on the final script for The Mandrake.[65]

[63]"Guft-u-gū bā Farīdūn Gulah," in Sīnimā-yi Farīdūn Gulah, ed. Rizā Durustkār (Tehran: Nashr-i Khazzah, 2000), 195.

[64]Mohammad Saeed Habashi, Final Sequence: Esmail Koushan through the Lens of Mahmoud Koushan, trans. Mahasti Afshar (Los Angeles: Kambiz Koushan, 2022), 148.

[65]"Guft-u-gū bā Farīdūn Gulah," in Sīnimā-yi Farīdūn Gulah, ed. Rizā Durustkār (Tehran: Nashr-i Khazzah, 2000), 188.

Figure 8: A Poster for the film The Mandrake (Mihr-i giyāh), directed by Farīdūn Gulah, 1975.

Shot in black and white, The Mandrake is a magical realist drama in the spirit of Parvīz Kīmiyāvī's New Wave classic Mughulhā (The Mongols, 1973). According to Thierry Zarcone, the mandrake plant has since antiquity represented the mystical connection between man and nature for people in both Europe and Asia. Texts from across this geographic area have noted the plant's magical character, springing "…chiefly from the shape of its root, which vaguely resembles the human body" with later developments in this line of thought even promoting a belief in the plant's ability to take human form.[66] Although understood to be poisonous and even fatal to humans, magicians and sorcerers also sought to harness the mandrake's power, and relied on it for "arousing love due to its aphrodisiac characteristics…"[67] In Persian, "mihr-i giyāh" literally means "love-plant" and the tales associated with it undoubtedly influenced Gulah's characterization of the aptly named Mihrī (Pūrī Banāʾī) and her ultimately deadly effect on the film's protagonist ʿAlī ʿIzzat Fākhir (ʿAlī Nasīriyān). Gulah included very few speaking roles in the film, with the narrative focused almost exclusively on the mysterious Mihrī and ill-fated ʿAlī.

ʿAlī, the son of a once-prominent family in decline, works for a florist in a city on the Caspian coast. According to Gulah, he wanted Nasīriyān for the role precisely because his looks and mannerisms allowed him to easily shift between characters from the privileged and lower classes.[68] The opening scene is set on a beachfront where, inside the delivery van that also serves as his home, ʿAlī writes a letter to government officials about a nearby property that he claims to have inherited but which is disputed by his aunt. ʿAlī is obsessed with this patch of land, set in the most verdant part of Iran, and, as viewers soon learn, he has made many petitions and written many letters to validate his claim to it. As he later tells Mihrī, he has plans to turn it into a nursery and open his own flower business. However, like Qāsim in Under the Skin of the Night, all of ʿAlī's desires remain tantalizingly out of reach, with forces worldly and otherworldly seemingly working against him. Drifting off

[66]Thierry Zarcone, "The Myth of the Mandrake, the 'Plant-Human'," Diogenes 207 (2005): 115-6.

[67]Thierry Zarcone, "The Myth of the Mandrake, the 'Plant-Human'," Diogenes 207 (2005): 115.

[68]"Guft-u-gū bā Farīdūn Gulah," in Sīnimā-yi Farīdūn Gulah, ed. Rizā Durustkār (Tehran: Nashr-i Khazzah, 2000), 189.

to sleep, an ethereal vision of a white-veiled young woman running along the beach towards his van appears to him. The atmospheric sound design amplifies the action of the wind and waves in conjunction with this vision. Her on-screen presence is often signaled by amplified and looped ambient sounds. The next evening, while driving back from work, he sees the woman in white running along the road as if someone is chasing her and stops to pick her up. She does not tell him who was chasing her or where exactly her home is.

Her mystery charms ʿAlī, who proclaims that he has always been unlucky in love. At first she resists his advances but his growing affection for her appears to weaken her guard. She becomes his travel companion, which ʿAlī welcomes as he is eager to show her the land on which his future dreams are based. In fact, as his love for her deepens, he wishes to make it their shared dream. Gulah thus translates the spiritual journey, on which he has sent his protagonist, into a literal one. Mihrī, for her part, asks him to take her to her mother's grave, to which he agrees. On the way there, they finally make love, with Gulah far more restrained in his framing and depiction of sexual intimacy than in Under the Skin of the Night—perhaps to underline its emotional gravity. Not long afterwards, ʿAlī begins to exhibit fever-like symptoms as if he is suffering from an infection (love-sickness?) or, worse, poisoning. Strange events also occur when they arrive at her mother's grave. The gravestone is badly time-worn and the cottage nearby, which Mihrī also claims to remember, appears to have been abandoned for many years. Before they leave the cemetery, he tells her to enter a kiosk for prayers where he seemingly consecrates their relationship while repeating to her "You said you were single."

Figure 9: ʿAlī and Mihrī in the film The Mandrake (Mihr-i giyāh), directed by Farīdūn Gulah, 1975.

They arrive in the city where he buys her shoes. The next day, she takes him on a tour of the neighborhood where she claims to have grown up. They arrive at a home supposedly belonging to her grandmother and she asks him to wait outside. After some time passes without her returning, he goes to look for her but notices that the door which he believed that she entered is padlocked from the outside. Gulah again uses rapid camera action and quick cuts rather than the standard package of techniques in domestic melodramas to communicate and intensify character emotions—specifically ʿAlī's desperate bewilderment at Mihrī's disappearance. ʿAlī backtracks to the coastal road to find her, asking anyone he passes if they have seen her. Finally, his emotions get the better of him and he retreats to the rear of the van where the camera, stationed outside in the pouring rain, captures him tearing up his appeals and documents about the land claim. In doing so, he disavows his last link to the world. He spends a fitful night dreaming of an unknown assailant attacking Mihrī as he stands by powerlessly. When he returns behind the wheel, his visions continue but now of a physically and emotionally unburdened ʿAlī running through the paradisiacal property supposedly promised to him. However, this image is suddenly interrupted by the sound of his van veering off the road and crashing. The camera cuts to his van's mangled re-

mains at the bottom of a ravine, followed in quick succession by shots of his scattered personal effects. Panning up, the camera reveals a handful of figures looking down from the hilltop, accompanied by the disembodied children's voices that marked his lover's disappearance. Gulah then focuses the camera on what appears to be Mihrī in her new shoes at the cliff edge, followed by a quick cut to her emotionless face looking down at the destruction below.

ʿAlī's fatal passion for the seemingly callous Mihrī not only argues for the mandrake plant's well-known double nature (both seductive and dangerous) but may also suggest to viewers the ascetic's reckless yearning for God, presented metaphorically in the love poetry of Sufi masters. In fact, Bahārlū has claimed that Gulah's script took direct inspiration from the poet and mystic Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī.[69] Gulah thus represents ʿAlī as Mihrī's (unwitting) devotee. She is the ultimate cause of ʿAlī's physical detachment, and her true nature can only be known to him at the moment of spiritual transcendence. Yet, ʿAlī's death has no worldly effect beyond its testimony to love's devastating power. In his next film, Beehive, Gulah transforms self-abnegation into (potentially revolutionary) action in the world.

Gulah wrote Beehive, originally titled Gulgūn savār (The Bay Horse-rider), six months after filming The Mandrake.[70] It was his first and only color feature. Mahdī Musayyibī agreed to produce Beehive in conjunction with the Ministry of Culture and Art, which had been encouraged to collaborate with Gulah after visiting foreign critics' positive reception of The Mandrake. The Ministry provided equipment and access to their processing facilities but ceased cooperation about halfway through production after reviewing the rushes.[71] Fearing that officials would ultimately confiscate the footage that he had shot, Gulah shipped it to France for editing, music recording, and sound mixing.[72] Nevertheless, screening permits for Beehive were eventually granted, with its premiere held at the 4th Tehran International Film Festival in November 1975, where it was a major hit with

[69] ʿAbbās Bahārlū, Sad chihrah-ʾi sīnimā-yi Īrān (Tehran: Nashr-i Qatrah, 2002), 116. For a materialist interpretation of the film's ending, see Muhammad Tahāmī Nizhād, Sīnimā-yi ruʾyāpardāz-i Īrān (Tehran: ʿAks-i muʿāsir, 1986), 72.

[70] Muhammad Tahāmī Nizhād, Sīnimā-yi ruʾyāpardāz-i Īrān (Tehran: ʿAks-i muʿāsir, 1986), 194-6.

[71] Muhammad Tahāmī Nizhād, Sīnimā-yi ruʾyāpardāz-i Īrān (Tehran: ʿAks-i muʿāsir, 1986), 207-8.

[72] Khudāyār Qāqānī, "Tasharruf bih maʿsūmiyat va tafakkur," in Sīnimā-yi Farīdūn Gulah, ed. Rizā Durustkār (Tehran: Nashr-i Khazzah, 2000), 240.

audiences.[73] Critics were more mixed in their reactions and the film, which did not win any prizes except an honorable mention award for supporting actor Rizā Karam Rizāyī. Still, Gulah's bête noire, Hazhīr Dāryūsh, supposedly confided in its star, Bihrūz Vusūqī, that he should have won the best actor award, but he viewed an Iranian winning the prize in consecutive years as being in bad form.[74]

Gulah again assigned to Vusūqī the role of a petty criminal, Ibī, just released after spending seven months in jail. Another cellmate, Āq Husaynī (Dāvūd Rashīdī), is released on the same day after serving sixteen years for a murder whose circumstances remain unknown. Nevertheless, Gulah later confirmed that the sentence length was politically significant indicating Āq Husaynī's dissident past, as it roughly coincided with the length of time between the era of crackdowns following the 1953 coup d'état against Prime Minister Muhammad Musaddiq's government and the film's current setting.[75] Both have their own vague plans after jail; Ibī wants to reconnect with his gang for another heist while Āq Husaynī wants to go to Khorramshahr for work. The title credits sequence, employing crane shots across from Tehran's Bāgh-i Millī gate, gives viewers the initial impression that their pairing is incidental and temporary as they disappear separately into the passing crowd. A disillusioned Ibī soon takes refuge in a brothel, after realizing that he was better off in prison where he still had friends, a place to sleep, and no creditors to fend off. When he stiffs the bill and an argument breaks out, he hears Āq Husaynī's voice in the adjacent room offering to pay his due. He too had a change of heart about his plans. Despite the differences in their ages and life experiences, they appear to be inextricably linked, which Gulah also subtly signaled by having them wear the same bracelet.[76] Yet, Gulah also admitted that this shared fate was not necessarily written in the stars. Their outcomes may well have been different under a different economic and political situation.[77]

Gulah exhibits the economic and political order's marginal-

[73]Jamāl Umīd, Tarīkh-i sīnimā-yi Īrān: 1279-1357 (Tehran: Intishārāt-i Rawzanah, 1998), 688.

[74]Nāsir Zirā'atī, Bihrūz Vusūqī: Yak Zindigīnāmah (San Francisco, CA: Aran Press, 2004), 289.

[75]"Guft-u-gū bā Farīdūn Gulah," in Sīnimā-yi Farīdūn Gulah, ed. Rizā Durustkār (Tehran: Nashr-i Khazzah, 2000), 203-4.

[76]"Guft-u-gū bā Farīdūn Gulah," in Sīnimā-yi Farīdūn Gulah, ed. Rizā Durustkār (Tehran: Nashr-i Khazzah, 2000), 204.

[77]"Guft-u-gū bā Farīdūn Gulah," in Sīnimā-yi Farīdūn Gulah, ed. Rizā Durustkār (Tehran: Nashr-i Khazzah, 2000), 204.

ization and derogation of the urban masses, or the effects of a "lumpenizing system," when the pair relocates to a teahouse that is seemingly full of society's detritus. He in fact attributed the film's title to this oppressive system: like a beehive's engineered structure with only one way in and one way out.[78] The teahouse customers spend their days chatting, conspiring, and gambling. At night, the establishment turns into a flophouse for the left behind, destitute, and drug-addled; it is also a convenient trap, the audience later learns, for police dragnets (with the owner's cooperation). Ibī recognizes one poor soul there who used to be his wrestling rival. He had once defeated Ibī in competition, which Gulah later depicts in a flashback sequence, but now lies dying uncared for in a corner. Āq Husaynī too seems to find his own teahouse rival, Āq Mustafā (Jalāl Pīshvāyān), with whom he plays games of chance. Their back-and-forth competition eventually reaches its climax with Āq Mustafā wagering that Ibī can drink booze at seven locales across Tehran without paying and Āq Husaynī betting against him. Ibī's challenge invited speculation that Gulah had adapted his script from Frank Perry's The Swimmer (1968), about a seemingly eccentric man (Burt Lancaster) who at a friend's party decides to swim back home by way of his neighbors' backyard pools, inviting a series of unsettling encounters along the way. Once he reaches his destination, though, it is revealed that the home has been long abandoned, and the film ends with its defeated hero slumped behind the padlocked front door. The absurdity (and danger) of Ibī's challenge bears resemblance to this earlier Hollywood release, but Gulah claimed to have never seen it.[79] Instead the Shāhnāmah or Book of Kings epic, and specifically the seven trials of the hero Rustam, as told in popular naqqalī or storyteller traditions familiar from his childhood, were supposedly a major source of inspiration.[80] While the teahouse elders seek to dissuade Ibī from carrying out the suicidal challenge that Āq Husaynī and Āq Mustafā have set for him, he eventually agrees to it but only after failing once more to contact his gang. Like a beehive, there is seemingly only one path for Ibī in this world and only one path out. Echoes of Vusūqī's character actions in

[78] "Guft-u-gū bā Farīdūn Gulah," in Sīnimā-yi Farīdūn Gulah, ed. Rizā Durustkār (Tehran: Nashr-i Khazzah, 2000), 194.

[79] "Guft-u-gū bā Farīdūn Gulah," in Sīnimā-yi Farīdūn Gulah, ed. Rizā Durustkār (Tehran: Nashr-i Khazzah, 2000), 207.

[80] "Guft-u-gū bā Farīdūn Gulah," in Sīnimā-yi Farīdūn Gulah, ed. Rizā Durustkār (Tehran: Nashr-i Khazzah, 2000), 207.

Qaysar are also apparent in the preparations that Ibī undertakes once he accepts his fate. Ibī purifies himself at the public baths and then wears the clothes of his now dead wrestling rival, who had given them to him before his passing, symbolizing his readiness for a similar end.

Figure 10: Āq Husaynī (Dāvūd Rashīdī) and Āq Mustafā (Jalāl Pīshvāyān), with Ibī (Bihrūz Vusūqī) in the center, in Kandū (Beehive), directed by Farīdūn Gulah, 1975.

Beehive clearly communicates the anger and hopelessness then common (or again reignited) among the urban poor. It bolsters the claim made by some critics and fans that Gulah was painfully aware of the coming revolution against the Pahlavī regime.[81] Presumably, like Āq Husaynī before him, Ibī too engages in violent protest against an unjust world, with martyrdom the ultimate testimony to his cause's righteousness. Interestingly, Vusūqī viewed Ibī's actions not as rebellion but surrender, presenting instead Masʿūd Kīmiyāʾī's Gavaznhā (The Deer, 1974) as a revolutionary film in which Vusūqī's character Rasūl stares down a police siege alongside his friend Qudrat (Farāmarz Qarībiyān), who even takes up arms against the state.[82] Gulah held a more ambivalent view, acknowledging that Ibī's efforts to buck the system involve a rudderless violence more fitting perhaps of an inchoate political movement than a mature, revolutionary one. Furthermore, he argued that it is impossible to be

[81]"Guft-u-gū bā Farīdūn Gulah," in Sīnimā-yi Farīdūn Gulah, ed. Rizā Durustkār (Tehran: Nashr-i Khazzah, 2000), 194.

[82]Nāsir Zirāʿatī, Bihrūz Vusūqī: Yak Zindigīnāmah (San Francisco, CA: Aran Press, 2004), 289.

a revolutionary without weapons, but the censorship regime at the time would have undoubtedly disallowed their inclusion.[83]

Ibī's gauntlet runs from what many previous domestic releases depicted as the rough-and-tumble streets of south Tehran to the affluent and orderly north. Yet, Gulah provocatively turns such industry clichés upside down. As Ibī's taxi driver warns him once they enter the northern reaches of the city, they don't take mercy on you there. In fact, he walks out on his bill in the first two southern bars without incident. When he confronts the witness accompanying him (Rizā Karam Rizāyī), he admits that Āq Mustafā has rigged the challenge to win the bet. Ibī then seeks to antagonize the bouncers at subsequent establishments, whose numbers and savagery multiply. Ibī, like ʿAbbās in Dagger, has his own theme, played without lyrics and at different speeds during the final reel. The song, also called "Kandū" or "Beehive," is then performed live by the pop star Ibī (Ibrāhīm Hāmidī) at the cabaret in a ritzy hotel, the seventh and final establishment. Gulah again turned to his longtime collaborator Vārūzhān, along with another veteran composer Rubīk Mansūrī, to score the film.[84] Ibī the character arrives drunk with his face covered in blood, an iconic image that Gulah featured in the film's promotional materials. An orgy of violence follows but he refuses to concede. To paraphrase Ibī from an earlier dialogue, he has tasted defeat often in his life and does not fear it. He escapes to a backroom bar where he gains the upper hand on the bouncers and in the process destroys its mirrored walls (a potential homage to the final fight scene in Robert Clouse's 1973 kung fu classic Enter the Dragon). He stumbles out of the hotel and lets out a guttural scream just as a shell shocked Āq Husaynī and Āq Mustafā arrive, their bet now long forgotten. When they return to the teahouse with the bruised and battered champion, the owner calls the police, who promptly arrest Ibī. Āq Husaynī then stabs the owner. Like in Under the Skin of the Night, a shot of the morning sun on the horizon closes the book on the night's tragic events. A mournful version of Ibī's theme plays as the doomed pair take comfort in each other's company

[83] "Guft-u-gū bā Farīdūn Gulah," in Sīnimā-yi Farīdūn Gulah, ed. Rizā Durustkār (Tehran: Nashr-i Khazzah, 2000), 203.

[84] "Guft-u-gū bā Farīdūn Gulah," in Sīnimā-yi Farīdūn Gulah, ed. Rizā Durustkār (Tehran: Nashr-i Khazzah, 2000), 201.

on their return to prison—proving there is no escape from this lumpenizing system.

[85]See, Jamāl Umīd, Tarīkh-i sīnimā-yi Īrān: 1279-1357 (Tehran: Intishārāt-i Rawzanah, 1998), 703.

Figure 11: A Poster for the film Kandū (Beehive), directed by Farīdūn Gulah, 1975.

If Beehive was an overtly political film that channeled the frustrations bubbling up from below in the years leading up to the Islamic Revolution, Gulah's next (and final) release, Māh-i ʿasal (Honeymoon, 1976) ignored the immediate and political for a revival of family-centered melodrama more typical of the mid-1960s than the mid-1970s. Only the inclusion of gratuitous nudity and profanity places the film in the increasingly unrestrained production climate of its times. Scholars and critics who have viewed Beehive as evidence of Gulah's continuing maturation as a filmmaker have rightly puzzled over his follow-up, which would also abandon his exploration of the metaphysical themes in the so-called trilogy of Under the Skin of the Night, The Mandrake, and Beehive.[85] Gulah reunited with Beehive producer Mahdī Musayyibī and star Bihrūz Vusūqī to make Honeymoon. Pop icon Gūgūsh, then married to Vusūqī, signed on as the female lead Nīnī, the daughter of a wealthy businessman, Khān Bābā (Jamshīd Mashāyīkhī). Vusūqī plays

Rizā, the son of the family's housekeeper. While her father has a soft spot for troublemaking Rizā, he wants to distance Nīnī from him for fear that they will fall in love, which they do. Again, pop songs, including multiple Gūgūsh singles, accompany and narrate the action, specifically the protagonists' developing love affair. Ultimately, Khān Bābā gives his blessing to this match but only when it is revealed that Rizā is not just the lowly housekeeper's son but family via Nīnī's maternal uncle, his biological father—employing a tried-and-true melodramatic plot convention.

Figure 12: Rizā and Nīnī in the film Māh-i ʿasal (Honeymoon), directed by Farīdūn Gulah, 1976.

Honeymoon recycles longstanding narrative themes of class, family honor, and the difficulties of balancing erotic love and family obligation, which can be traced back to the very beginnings of the commercial cinema after the Second World War.[86] Likewise, the cinematography and editing is closer to an earlier set of industry practices that Gulah had seemingly minimized in his recent work. Nevertheless, the film struck a note with audiences, with one of the highest box office takings that year.[87] Undoubtedly, the film's star power and soundtrack drove audiences to theaters, but its success may also speak to the enduring appeal of the commercial industry's narrative and stylistic conventions, despite Gulah's prior attempts to blaze a new trail.

[86]For an in-depth exploration of the dominant narrative themes in Pahlavī-era popular commercial cinema, see Pedram Partovi, Popular Iranian Cinema before the Revolution: Family and Nation in Fīlmfārsī (New York: Routledge, 2017).

[87]Humā Jāvdānī, Sālshumār-i tārīkh-i sīnimā-yi Īrān: Tīr-i 1279-Shahrīvar-i 1379 (Tehran: Nashr-i Qatrah), 130.

In later interviews, Gulah sought to downplay his involvement in the production, claiming that disagreements with Musayyibī caused him to walk off the set and that the producer completed the film in his stead.[88] Even Gulah's choice of title was overruled. The original title was Māh-i munʿakis (Upside-down Month).[89] Previous struggles over creative control with Musayyibī (dating back to Dagger) seemingly support his version of events, but Vusūqī's memoirs do not confirm this account.[90] Again, depending on one's opinions on the filmmaker, the flatness of the characters and narrative inconsistencies either suggest a messy collaborative process or bolster ʿIshqī's thesis about Gulah's mediocrity.

Figure 13: A Poster for the film Māh-i ʿasal (Honeymoon), directed by Farīdūn Gulah, 1976.

The following year, Gulah left for the United States. As with his student days during the 1960s, his personal account of his experiences there provides few verifiable details. He had left for Los Angeles to direct a script that he wrote called Sabz-i khuftah (Sleeping Green), which the Ministry of Culture and Arts had agreed to finance along with an American production company.[91] Gulah claimed that the Ministry never paid its share

[88]Khudāyār Qāqānī, "Tasharruf bih maʿsūmiyat va tafakkur," in Sīnimā-yi Farīdūn Gulah, ed. Rizā Durustkār (Tehran: Nashr-i Khazzah, 2000), 237-8.

[89]"Guft-u-gū bā Farīdūn Gulah," in Sīnimā-yi Farīdūn Gulah, ed. Rizā Durustkār (Tehran: Nashr-i Khazzah, 2000), 208.

[90]Nāsir Zirāʿatī, Bihrūz Vusūqī: Yak Zindigīnāmah (San Francisco, CA: Aran Press, 2004), 291-2.

[91]ʿAbbās Bahārlū, Sad chihrahʿi sīnimā-yi Īrān (Tehran: Nashr-i Qatrah, 2002), 116.

of the production costs and the film, with a mixed American and Iranian cast that included Pūrī Banāʾī and Mickey Rooney, was shelved after an hour of the running time had been shot. He filed a lawsuit against the producers and supposedly received a multi-million dollar out-of-court settlement.[92] Unfortunately, there is no publicly available evidence either of this production or Gulah's lawsuit, but there are numerous unfinished films in studio vaults and court files may be sealed. Gulah claimed to use the settlement money to establish a production and distribution company in 1980 called Future Pictures, which remained in business even after his return to Iran. During the same year, the company began producing another script of his called Dīrūzī (Yesterdayish), which he abandoned after his father fell ill. According to Gulah, his company also signed contracts with several soon-to-be Hollywood stars including Harrison Ford, Kevin Costner, and Morgan Freeman.[93] Again, none of these details can be verified.

Gulah returned to Iran in 1982 to tend to his father. Some officials in the post-revolutionary government had attempted to coax him back to filmmaking, but the conditions he laid out for his return were ultimately not accepted. After receiving a travel ban, he chose retirement on the Caspian coast where he lived alone and largely forgotten by the cinema world.[94] In the summer of 1999, the film critic Rizā Durustkār was vacationing in Salmānshahr when he came across a young boy who told him that Gulah was his neighbor.[95] Durustkār and some colleagues had already planned to write a reassessment of 1970s cinema by studying the life and work of ten "independent" filmmakers, including Gulah.[96] The late 1990s had inaugurated a period of intense scholarly interest and fandom for Pahlavī-era cinema among a younger generation of Iranians, just as the post-revolutionary art cinema was having its moment among critics and festival-goers abroad.[97] Durustkār struck up a friendship with Gulah and returned to the Caspian coast with his writing team to interview him at length. The following year, the interviews were published in a book along with several critical essays

[92] ʿAbbās Bahārlū, Sad chihrah-ʾi sīnimā-yi Īrān (Tehran: Nashr-i Qatrah, 2002), 116.

[93] "Guft-u-gū bā Farīdūn Gulah," in Sīnimā-yi Farīdūn Gulah, ed. Rizā Durustkār (Tehran: Nashr-i Khazzah, 2000), 214.

[94] ʿAbbās Bahārlū, Sad chihrah-ʾi sīnimā-yi Īrān (Tehran: Nashr-i Qatrah, 2002), 116.

[95] Rizā Durustkār, "Ahmaq-hā sitāyishat ni-mīkunand," in Sīnimā-yi Farīdūn Gulah, ed. Rizā Durustkār (Tehran: Nashr-i Khazzah, 2000), 246.

[96] Rizā Durustkār, "Ahmaq-hā sitāyishat ni-mīkunand," in Sīnimā-yi Farīdūn Gulah, ed. Rizā Durustkār (Tehran: Nashr-i Khazzah, 2000), 244.

[97] See, Husayn Muʿazzizī Niyā, ed. Fīlmfārsī chīst? (Tehran: Nashr-i Sāqī, 1999).

about Gulah's oeuvre. Other journalists began to reach out to Gulah for interviews.[98] Durustkār capitalized on the old director's newfound fame to arrange a series of meetings with producers about film scripts that he had written during his exile in Salmānshahr, including a sequel to Beehive.[99] After the revolution, a handful of his screenplays had been in the possession of the now-defunct Mīsāqiyah Studios and were transferred to the government-sponsored Fārābī Foundation, which undertook to sell them but obscured his authorship.[100] However, Gulah's negotiations with producers in the early 2000s was the first time in more than twenty years that he had actively tried to revive his career. Sadly, none of the discussed projects were completed, even though BBC Persian service's obituary of the filmmaker noted that producer and erstwhile collaborator Īraj Qādirī had Gulah ghost-write his 2005 box office hit Ākvāriyum (Aquarium).[101] Gulah eventually lost faith in a comeback and returned to Salmānshahr where he took solace in his writing. He died of a heart attack on October 22, 2005. Even after death, his fame continued to grow, with a consensus of critics in 2009 voting Beehive the tenth best Iranian film of all time (ahead of Kīmiyā'ī's Qaysar!) in the venerable journal Māhnāmah-yi Fīlm (Film Monthly).[102]

Many questions remain unanswered about Gulah's life and work. He was even a mystery to his close collaborators, one of whom described him quite candidly as "strange."[103] Likewise, a film scholar who tried to make sense of the inexplicable twists and turns of his career concluded that he was "not a stable person."[104] The lack of many close relationships in his life, by his own admission, further impedes any attempt to fill in the significant gaps in his biography or map his trajectory as a screenwriter and director.[105] Yet, his imprint on Iranian cinema-goers' collective memory cannot be questioned. Other more prolific or successful contemporaries have faded from view with the passing of time while he has seemingly grown in stature as a filmmaker. His enduring profile (and mystery) may well be related to his status as a cipher, in both senses of the word. While

[98]Rizā Durustkār, "Ahmaq-hā sitāyishat ni-mīkunand," in Sīnimā-yi Farīdūn Gulah, ed. Rizā Durustkār (Tehran: Nashr-i Khazzah, 2000), 248-9.

[99]Rizā Durustkār, "Ahmaq-hā sitāyishat ni-mīkunand," in Sīnimā-yi Farīdūn Gulah, ed. Rizā Durustkār (Tehran: Nashr-i Khazzah, 2000), 250.

[100]ʿAbbās Bahārlū, Sad chihrah-ʾi sīnimā-yi Īrān (Tehran: Nashr-i Qatrah, 2002), 116.

[101]"Farīdūn Gulah dar guzasht," BBC Persian, October 22, 2005, https://www.bbc.com/persian/arts/story/2005/10/051022_aa_fgoleh

[102]"Bihtarīn fīlmhā-yi zindigī-i mā," Māhnāmah-yi Fīlm 400 (September-October 2009): 10; Beehive did not appear in the previous "best of" polls taken in 1988 and 1999. The film also maintained its ranking in the 2019 Film Monthly decennial poll. See, "Nawbat-i ʿāshiqī: bihtarīn fīlmhā-yi zindigī-i mā," Māhnāmah-yi Fīlm 558 (May-June 2019): 10.

[103]Nāsir Zirāʿatī, Bihrūz Vusūqī: Yak Zindigīnāmah (San Francisco, CA: Aran Press, 2004), 291.

[104]Jamāl Umīd, Tarīkh-i sīnimā-yi Īrān: 1279-1357 (Tehran: Intishārāt-i Rawzanah, 1998), 703.

[105]"Guft-u-gū bā Farīdūn Gulah," in Sīnimā-yi Farīdūn Gulah, ed. Rizā Durustkār (Tehran: Nashr-i Khazzah, 2000), 178-9.

often insecure about his abilities, in more confident moments he conveyed esoteric truths to audiences of his time who were increasingly prepared to receive them and to audiences today who can better appreciate his vision of a revolutionary future in light of the past. He was also a self-described loner, and thus invisible to wider society, which gave him the power to observe the world unmolested and represent it back to the rest of us.