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**“I Died, Still Waiting on the Truth”: Self-Identification and
Communicating Personal Ethics in the Documentaries of Exiled Iranian
Female Filmmakers**

**APPROVED BY
SUPERVISING COMMITTEE:**

Supervisor:

Blake Atwood

Stephennie Mulder

**“I Died, Still Waiting on the Truth”: Self-Identification and
Communicating Personal Ethics in the Documentaries of Exiled Iranian
Female Filmmakers**

by

Jennifer Anne Hunt, B.A.

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Dedication

To those who struggle on their journey home.

“If you wish to walk in the desert in search of Kaabeh, your home, then if a thousand thorns greet you, don’t be grieved; although there is danger on the way home and, destination invisible, yet there is no path without an end, don’t be grieved.”

-Hafiz

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Abstract

“I Died, Still Waiting on the Truth”: Self-Identification and Communicating Personal Ethics in the Documentaries of Exiled Iranian Female Filmmakers.

Jennifer Anne Hunt, M.A.

The University of Texas at Austin, 2015

Supervisor: Blake Atwood

Beginning in the late 1990's and continuing through the first decade of the twenty-first century, an impressive array of documentaries created by a small group of exiled Iranian female documentary filmmakers about issues arising from within Iran's borders became readily available to audiences living in the United States and Europe. While professed and marketed as nuanced and comprehensive documentations of these topics, this cohort of films, in actuality, function on a second plane— one in which filmmakers employ and appropriate filmic representations of the historical world to construct documentaries in which they themselves constitute the actual subjects of the films they create. To illustrate how these filmmakers accomplish this second function, this thesis explores the ways in which documentarists construct various filmic gazes, or ways of seeing, within their films and participate through these gazes in ethical arguments that prioritize a particular way of existing within the historical world they are documenting. Form this analysis, this thesis concludes that exiled female Iranian

documentary filmmakers construct various filmic gazes to create documentaries that participate in ethical arguments prioritizing processes of self-identification participated in by the filmmaker and filmic representations of the documentarist's socio-cultural identity over comprehensive documentation of a subject in the historical world.

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Introduction

Beginning in the late 1990's and continuing through the first decade of the twenty-first century, an impressive array of documentaries created by a small group of exiled Iranian female documentary filmmakers about issues arising from within Iran's borders became readily available to audiences living in the United States and Europe. Ignoring documentary topics popular in Iran such as ancient culture or the natural world, the filmmakers of this new wave of Iranian films claimed to make documentaries about political and cultural concerns related to issues of social justice in Iran, the position of women in Islamic societies, and the experience of carrying dual citizenship while living in either Iranian or Western spaces. But while professed and marketed as nuanced and comprehensive documentations of these topics, this cohort of films, in actuality, function on a second plane— one in which filmmakers employ and appropriate filmic representations of the historical world to construct documentaries in which they themselves constitute the actual subjects of the films they create. More specifically, this thesis argues that the films created by exiled female Iranian documentarists during this period function as vehicles of self-identification and self-construction— visual and aural spaces in which the filmmaker acts as the sole agent with authority to make claims about who she is and how she is to be understood by others.

While a controversial use of the documentary genre to some, this design alone does not distinguish a group of filmmakers and their films as an urgent location for study; after all, all art might be described as in some way functioning as expressions of identity and individual ideas. These films arise as important texts for analysis, however, when one considers the function of these documentaries in context to the larger web of ideological debate in which they engaged and more significantly, the ways in which these films

employ filmic representations of the individuals implicated in these debates to engage in them.

The films under consideration entered Western markets in the same decade that Columbia University's president introduced President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to an audience of hundreds of American young people as a "petty and cruel dictator," before asking him "why have women, members of the Baha'i faith, homosexuals and so many of our academic colleagues become targets of persecution in your country?"¹ and President George W. Bush gave his now notorious "Axis of Evil" speech, in which he conflated the governments of Iran, Iraq, and North Korea and claimed that, "the civilized world faces unprecedented dangers," posed by these nations.² These documentaries, therefore, entered an atmosphere of intense American hostility directed towards Iran and in this hostile atmosphere, engaged topics invoked by the contemporary political rhetoric. While in no way direct responses to specific politicians or speeches, these films focus on topics that index in questions of gender, religious freedom, and national identity, all of which were regularly referred to in public discourse arising from the U.S. during this time period.³ In using their films to explore these topics, therefore, this group of filmmakers employed and appropriated documentary representations of the historical world and its inhabitants in order to engage in ideological debates that index in popular political

¹ Lee C. Bollinger, "Introductory Remarks," (speech, SIPA-World Leaders Forum with President of Iran Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Columbia University, New York, NY, Sept. 24, 2007). <http://www.columbia.edu/cu/news/07/09/lcbopeningremarks.html>.

² George W. Bush, "State of the Union address," (speech, State of the Union, Washington D.C, January 29, 2002). <http://edition.cnn.com/2002/ALLPOLITICS/01/29/bush.speech.txt/index.html>

³ Most documentaries are made over a span of multiple years. One cannot assume, therefore, that because a documentary released in the same year as a historical event that it is directly related or responding to that event.

rhetoric—rhetoric about what it means to free and unfree, equal and unequal, civilized and uncivilized, and most importantly, Iranian and Western.

This discourse and the documentaries created to engage in it however, are not equally available to the two parties implicated in debates about Iranian and Western culture. Because of their content and chosen subject matters, these films, while focused on issues arising from within Iran, are not viable in Iranian media spaces and therefore, depend on non-Iranian audiences for their impact and financial success.⁴ More than just the haphazard result of an artistic choice or shifting censorship laws in Iran, however, the release of these documentaries into U.S. and European markets is a direct result of production and marketing choices made by their filmmakers. Funded, produced, and distributed by companies like Women Make Movies⁵, Third World Newsreels⁶, and Documentary Educational Resources⁷— who cites purposes like, “to promote thought-provoking documentary film and media for learning about the people and cultures of the world,” in its mission statement— these films are intended by their filmmakers to reach non-Iranian audiences and add to the discourse surrounding interactions between Western and Iranian cultural spaces.⁸ These documentaries nevertheless, constitute rare exceptions

⁴ These documentaries do not Iranian censorship standards and include in their diegesis women without head coverings, physical interaction between unmarried couples, and other forbidden representations. Consequently, these films cannot be marketed legally in Iran.

⁵ “General Information,” *Women Make Movies*, Accessed January 2015, http://www.wmm.com/about/general_info.shtml.

⁶ “Third World Newsreel Mission,” *Third World Newsreel*, Accessed January 2015, https://www.twn.org/twnpages/about/about_1.aspx.

⁷ “About,” *Documentary Educational Resources*, Accessed January 2015, <http://www.der.org/about/>.

⁸ Ibid.

to the erasure of representations of Iranians and Iran's Diaspora from Western mediascape, resulting from years of political acrimony.

When one considers this group of characteristics together, therefore, the documentaries of exiled female Iranian filmmakers expose themselves as dynamic and politically charged devices, requiring careful analysis and consideration. Engaging in highly-contentious topics, these documentarists use their dual access to Iranian and Western cultural spaces to create documentaries for Western audiences about individuals and events in Iran. More importantly, however, the filmmakers discussed in this thesis construct documentaries around these topics and for these markets in order to insert themselves into the ideological discourse in which their films engage and in which *they themselves are implicated*. To say it differently, as Iranian women living in the West— as the very subjects of the rhetoric surrounding contemporary U.S./Iranian relations— these filmmakers employ documentary filmmaking to insert themselves into the the discourse of their cultural spaces and in doing so, create films that are less about the stated documentary subject and more about the self-identification and ideological positionality of the filmmaker herself.

Because these documentaries offer rare exception to America's detachment from Iran and because they employ representations of historical events and individuals to directly engage with rhetoric arising from these two nations' interactions, the techniques, situated representations, and constructed filmic gazes engaged in by these documentaries constitute a vital point of analysis for scholars and audiences to better understand how these films function as cultural artifacts, tools of self- representation, and vehicles of ideologically- informed ethical arguments. In response to the need for investigation, this thesis explores the ways in which exiled female Iranian documentary filmmakers have constructed various filmic gazes, or ways of seeing, within their films and how they

participate through these gazes in ethical arguments that prioritize a particular way of existing within the very historical world they are documenting. Using Bill Nichols' theory on the ethical implications of filmic gazes and Hamid Naficy's theories on exilic filmmaking and filmmakers to structure its analysis, this thesis considers six documentaries from three filmmakers to offer an investigation of three filmic gazes engaged in by the wave of documentary filmmaking described above.

EXILIC FILMMAKERS AND THEIR DOCUMENTARIES

The filmmakers considered in this thesis—Tanaz Eshaghian, Nahid Persson⁹, and Persheng Sadegh-Vaziri—share a unique set of experiences and categories of self-identification that together characterize these three individuals as exilic female Iranian filmmakers. More specifically, Eshaghian, Persson, and Sadegh-Vaziri each were born inside of Iran but left at different points in their lives and under different circumstances in order to resettle as exiles in either the United States or Europe. While no longer living inside of Iran's borders at the time of their films' productions, these directors maintain "Iranian" self-identifications and have expressed this self-identification either in their films or in pro-filmic material such as interviews, memoirs, or social media. In addition to self-identifying as "Iranian," each of these directors self-identify as "female," and express this identity through performance of normative styles of feminine dress and behavior. It is from this unique position as Iranian women in exile, therefore, that these individuals participate in documentary filmmaking and consequently, it is only by considering this exilic and gendered positionally in a analysis of their films that the documentaries' true function and meaning arise.

⁹ While almost always referred to as Nahid Persson, this director is also known by the name Nahid Persson Sarvestani.

Defining their exilic positionality, these filmmakers “voluntarily or involuntarily have left their country of origin and maintain an ambivalent relationship with their previous and current locations and cultures.”¹⁰ This unique occupation of foreign spaces transforms exiled individuals into “partial, fragmented, and multiple subjects” who form their identities through a combination and exclusion of influences taken from multiple cultural and experiential sources. Because of their unique indices of cultural references, these exilic filmmakers “are capable of producing ambiguity and doubt about the taken-for-grant values of their home and host societies,” by choosing to reject or embrace an unique miscellany of ideological, cultural, political, and personal possibilities accessible only to someone with identical cultural influences.¹¹ In other words, rather than framing their perspective through one cultural lens with homogenous ideologically and experientially- situated beliefs, exilic individuals employ multiple, divergent indexes of cultural references through which they may analyze and re-present characteristics of host and origin spaces.

In occupying an exilic positionality, these filmmakers create a space for ambiguity, in which neither the origin nor host culture may fully account for the array of “authentic” references present in an exilic individual’s cultural index. In other words, Eshaghian, Persson, and Sadegh-Vaziri draw their authority as filmic authors from their experiences of “inhabiting interstitial spaces and sites of struggle” resulting from both their separation from Iran’s borders and occupation of nonnative spaces in the West.¹² This access to a multiplicity of cultural indices allow exilic individuals to make claims

¹⁰ Hamid Naficy, *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 12.

¹¹ Ibid, 13.

¹² Ibid., 12.

that few are equipped to verify as authentic or accurate and consequently, position these filmmakers as both “native guide” to Iranian culture and objective outside observers of Western culture.¹³ And as illustrated by the preceding discussion of political environment in which these filmmakers create their films, the claims these filmmakers make, command increased attention because of the unique authority granted to these filmmakers by their positionality as exiled Iranian women living and working in the West. Thus, by sharing these characteristics, the filmmakers under consideration represent a cohort of documentarians with similar cultural influences and exilic positionality, from which this thesis will draw conclusions about the techniques, gazes, and ethics employed by these exilic filmmakers over the course of their decades-long filmmaking careers.

THE GAZE IN DOCUMENTARY FILM AND THE TECHNIQUES OF EXILIC FILMMAKING

To structure its analysis of these films, this thesis draws from several sources of theoretical work focused on documentary films and exilic filmmaking. Employing Bill Nichols’ work on documentary theory, this thesis explores the techniques of documentary filmmaking used in the construction of filmic gazes and the ethics in which these constructed gazes participate. The work of Hamid Naficy allows this thesis to push Bill Nichols’ theories further by offering a critical theory through which scholars may engage in an analysis of exilic cinema. In focusing specifically on the experience of exile and the techniques of filmmaking employed by exilic filmmakers, Naficy’s theory allows this thesis to approach an analysis of filmic gazes through the specific indexical references of exilic filmmakers and in doing so, build a new theory through which one may understand how exilic filmmakers specifically employ various modes of documentary filmmaking to construct gazes and participate in ethics.

¹³ Amy Motlagh, “Autobiography and Authority in the Writings of the Iranian Diaspora,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 31, no. 2 (2011): 419.

Central to the structure of this thesis's argument is Nichols' theories on *axiographics*, which he defines as "the implantation of values in the configuration of space, in the constitution of a gaze, and in the relation of observer to observed."¹⁴ By manipulating the information available to audiences in the form of particular shots, sequencing, narration, and subjective representations, the filmmaker partakes in an "active process of fabrication," resulting in a documentary film that operates within a constructed reality, in which all available information about a subject matter is included by the filmmaker to actively support and progress an argument. The "connotations and assumptions that result" from this constructed reality "occupy our [the viewer's] imagination and become a fundamental part of our mental landscape even as we retain the potential to qualify, context, subvert, or otherthrow this particular regime of visibility."¹⁵ According to Nichols' theory, therefore, documentaries communicate an argument through a constructed gaze, which exclusively illuminates evidence of a certain type and, in eliminating access to other forms of evidence, determines the way in which their audiences interact with and understand a subject matter.

A filmmaker "playing on the tension between film as controlling the dimension of time (exposition and narrative) and film as controlling the dimension of space (changes in distance, place, perspective)," employs cinematic codes to construct "a gaze aimed at the historical world, and an object (the desire for and promise of knowledge) thereby producing an argument cut to ethical, political, and ideological measure."¹⁶ In other words, a documentary's gaze constructs a limited, argumentative, and subjective account of its material by prioritizing the inclusion and consideration of particular details, events,

¹⁴ Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 78.

¹⁵ Nichols, *Representing Reality*, 11

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

or points of view based on a predetermined ethics of representation. But as Nichols points out “in documentary, an event recounted is history reclaimed,” and because a documentary’s gaze limits its audience’s interactions with its subject matter in order to support its argument, these gazes and their implications represent an important category for ethical analysis.¹⁷ Of the wide range of gazes represented in documentary films, each “attest not only to ‘vision’ or to perspective on the world but also to the ethical quality of that perspective and the argument behind it;” an argument constituted by the ethical, political, and ideological position of the filmmaker.¹⁸ This thesis will expand Nichols’ development of *axiographic* theory by exploring exilic categories of identity and the specific techniques of filmmaking used by exilic filmmakers to represent these identities, in order to construct a new theory for analyzing the gazes created by exilic filmmakers, the ethical arguments constructed by the films’ gazes, and the greater implications of these ethical arguments when consider within the specific positionally of an exilic filmmaker.

As a vehicle to expand the theories of Bill Nichols and situate them with the context of exilic filmmaking, this thesis draws upon the work of Hamid Naficy in *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking*. Focusing exclusively on the films created by “accented” filmmakers, Naficy offers a theoretical analysis of the techniques of filmmaking employed by this diverse and complex group of exilic, ethnic, and Diasporic filmmakers. For Naficy, accented cinema and its specific character are based in the “the displacement of their filmmakers and their artisanal production modes.”¹⁹ Isolating certain commonly occurring features of this filmmaking, Naficy works to locate

¹⁷ Nichols, *Representing Reality*, 77.

¹⁸ Ibid, 80.

¹⁹ Naficy, *Accented Cinema*, 41.

these techniques within the lived experiences of the filmmakers employing them. In doing this work, Naficy argues that accented cinema is first and foremost a response to the experience of exile, and that the filmmakers of this genre “signify and signify upon exile and diaspora by expressing, allegorizing, commenting upon, and critiquing the home and host societies and cultural and the deterritorialized condition...” they experience.²⁰

By putting the theories of Nichols and Naficy into conversation, this paper constructs a new theoretical framework that stages its intervention into documentary ethics at the intersection of these two theorists works. In other words, Naficy focuses on the techniques of filmmaking employed by “accented filmmaker” whereas, Nichols considers the techniques of filmmaking employed to construct filmic gazes. These works together, therefore, lay the groundwork for constructing a ethical theory specific to the filmmaking techniques of exiled documentarists and the filmic gazes constructed through these techniques in their films.

While Nichols’ theories and Naficy’s work in *Accented Cinema* offer the theoretical grounding for this thesis, other scholarship has considered Iranian documentary filmmaking from angles different from the approach of this thesis. One debate on which these other studies have focused is the application of nonfiction cinema in political settings. These histories, however, do not offer an exhaustive account, and instead, commonly focus on two specific periods of film production in Iran: the rule of Reza Shah and the Iran-Iraq War. Hamid Naficy’s four- volume work on Iranian Cinema, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema*, offers an example of historical scholarship focused

²⁰ Naficy, *Accented Cinema*, 4.

on Iranian documentaries following this trend.²¹ While Naficy's historical research on fiction cinema is exhaustive, he focuses his discussion of Iranian documentaries on two eras of Iranian history listed above. In these multiple volumes, Naficy argues that during Reza Shah's political rule nonfiction cinema acted as a tool for Iranian nationalization and the consolidation of Reza Pahlavi's political power. In a later volume, Naficy engages the corpus of nonfiction film created during the Iran-Iraq War and argues that this body of work sought to encourage the ideology of a newly constructed Iranian Islamic Republic. While Hamid's histories and the histories of other scholars that follow this trend offer important research for the body of scholarship on Iranian documentaries, the works' construction around specific political events limits their scope of consideration, thereby leaving many eras of documentary filmmaking in Iran— like the one considered in this thesis—unanalyzed.

A second common debate in scholarship related to this thesis considers the work of female filmmakers but focuses on a corpus of fiction films and their directors. Many scholars— Ziba Mir-Hosseini, the most well-known amongst them— have considered how women's presence behind the camera effects the kind of filmic representations of women produced for audience consumption, and how these representations transform their status within Iranian and international cultural spaces.²² While it does consider nonfiction films on occasion, the trend in this scholarship does not differentiate between analytic structures for understanding nonfiction film as opposed to fiction films. Thus,

²¹ Naficy Hamid, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011-2012), 4 Vols.

²² Ziba Mir-Hosseini, "Negotiating the Forbidden: On Women and Sexual Love in Iranian Cinema," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 27 no.3 (2007): 673-679.

while this group of scholarship considers the work of female filmmakers, it does not offer an adequate analysis of nonfiction film and the female filmmakers who engaged in it.

A final debate in previous scholarship that correlates with the topic of this thesis considers the work of an exiled female Iranian documentary filmmaker but limits the scope of its debate to a single film: *Divorce- Iranian American Style*.²³ Filmed by Ziba Mir-Hosseini, this documentary is the most famous product of the era of filmmaking defined in preceding pages. As the first of its kind, a wave of scholarship considered this work through the lens of its political applications and ethical implications but did not extend their consideration to the documentaries that followed it.

By concentrating specifically on the work of exiled female documentarians, this thesis attempts with its focus and scope to expand the limited available scholarship analyzing Iranian documentaries. More specifically, by focusing on documentaries created in the last fifteen years, this thesis offers an analysis of a contemporary era of Iranian documentary filmmaking as of yet unexplored. Additionally, in engaging multiple documentaries made by female documentarist, this thesis expands the existing scholarship considering female fiction filmmakers to include nonfiction filmmakers. Furthermore, rather than focusing on a singular popular film, this thesis explores several films previously unanalyzed in published scholarly work in order to offer a more comprehensive analysis of the body of filmmaking created by exiled female Iranian documentarists. Most importantly, however, this thesis explores the aesthetic and ethical aspects of this category of Iranian filmmaking rather than the political or economic specifics of this body of work, and in doing so, offers an approach previously unapplied to nonfiction Iranian filmmaking—exilic or otherwise.

²³ *Divorce Iranian Style*, directed by Ziba Mir-Hosseini (1998; Edinburgh, Scotland: Women Make Movies, 1998), DVD.

CHAPTERS

In order to argue that the documentaries of exiled Iranian female filmmakers construct filmic gazes that participate in an ethic prioritizing representations of their own self-identifications over documentation of their claimed documentary subjects, this thesis comprises of three chapters.

Chapter One explores a gaze that participates in a filmic ethic that prioritizes the reinforcement of various ideological priorities indexed in Western Liberalism and does so by implying the essential unsustainability of all other ideological systems. Filmmakers whose documentaries participate in this gaze first construct representations for “Western” and “Iranian” categories of Iranian identity and present these representations in opposition to one another. After establishing this opposition, these filmmakers then stage themselves as maintaining authority in both opposing categories of identity and uses this authority to illustrate the superiority of Western ideologies over Iranian systems of belief. To explore this gaze and its construction through techniques of montage, diegetic staging, and nondiegetic narration, this thesis offers an analysis of Tanaz Eshaghian’s *Love Iranian- American Style*²⁴ and Nahid Persson’s *Prostitution Behind the Veil*.²⁵

Chapter Two explores a filmic gaze that prioritizes representations of the filmmaker’s deterritorialized Iranian identity over representations of the identities’ belonging to the films’ stated protagonist(s) and thus, participates in a filmic ethic that grants greater authority to representations of a specifically-defined category of national identity. To construct this gaze, the filmmakers of this category first introduce their filmic subjects as Iranian women and state that a documentation of these Iranian women’s lives

²⁴ *Love Iranian-American Style*, directed by Tanaz Eshaghian (2006; New York: Documentary Educational Resources, 2006), DVD.

²⁵ *Prostitution Behind the Veil*, directed by Nahid Persson, (RealReel AB Doc, 2004), DVD.

constitutes the work of their films. The filmmakers then use self-reflective techniques of filmmaking to insert a documentation of their own lives into their films focused on the lives of others and in doing so, appropriate these representations as modes for communicating their own self-identification. To explore this gaze and its use of diegetic staging of multilinguality and character-doubling, Chapter two offers a close analysis of Persheng Sadegh-Vaziri's *Women Like Us: Women in Iran*²⁶ and Nahid Persson's *The Queen and I*.²⁷

Chapter Three considers a final category of film, which employs a filmic gaze prioritizing the representation of hybridized categories of self-identification over commitment to a singular or concise category of cultural identity. The filmmakers whose films populate this category employ interviews and montages to construct representations of Iranian and Western identity categories that appear contained and mutually-hostile but, later problematize these representations with diegetic and non-diegetic narration offered by the filmmaker. Through different forms of filmmaker narration, this gaze represents the filmmakers' identities as constantly in flux, essentially ambiguous, and capable of evolution, and in doing so participates in a filmic ethics that prioritizes hybridized forms of self-identification over singular or constant category of self-identification. This chapter explores this filmic gaze and its ethics through a close reading of Persheng Sadegh-Vaziri's *A Place Called Home*²⁸ and Tanaz Eshaghian's *I Call Myself Persian*.²⁹

²⁶ *Women Like Us: Women in Iran*, directed by Persheng Sadegh-Vaziri (Women Make Movies, 2002) DVD.

²⁷ *The Queen and I*, directed by Nahid Persson (Sweden; Real Reel Doc, 2008) DVD.

²⁸ *A Place Called Home*, directed by Persheng Sadegh-Vaziri (Women Make Movies, 1998) DVD.

²⁹ *I Call Myself Persian*, directed by Tanaz Eshaghian (New York, 1998; Women Make Movies, 2002.) DVD.

By analyzing these three filmmakers and their documentaries, this thesis argues that exiled female Iranian documentary filmmakers employ various techniques of filmmaking to construct filmic gazes that explore historical events and agents through concerns indexed in their own unique positionality. In doing so, these films and the gazes they employ engage with the historical world through the unique cultural indexes and ideological positions of the filmmaker who created them. These three filmic gazes, therefore, participate in a documentary ethic that prioritizes the processes of self-identification participated in by the filmmaker and filmic representations of the documentarist's socio-cultural identity over a comprehensive documentation of a subject in the historical world.

Chapter One:
The Documentaries of Exiled Iranian Female Filmmakers:
An Ethic of Western Liberalism

In 2002 President George Bush gave his first State of the Union Speech, in which he referred to Iran as part of an “Axis of Evil,” and claimed that,

America will lead by defending liberty and justice because they are right and true and unchanging for all people everywhere. No nation owns these aspirations, and no nation is exempt from them. We have no intention of imposing our culture but America will always stand firm for the nonnegotiable demands of human dignity: the rule of law ... limits on the power of the state ... respect for women ... private property ... free speech ... equal justice ... and religious tolerance.³⁰

As this speech illustrates, the priorities of Western Liberalism during this decade were often positioned as universal and unquestioned concepts that define the natural state of human beings and furthermore, were invoked when claiming extant contrast between Iranian and Western cultures. Entering a mediascape characterized by this ideological rhetoric, the new wave of exiled Iranian female filmmakers created a category of films that directly intervenes in the discourse of Western Liberalism. While not direct responses to impetuses like President Bush’s speech, these films structure their exploration of documentary subjects to intervene in questions indexed in the concepts he listed and the rhetoric that surrounds it.

To intervene in this discourse, the directors of this category of film construct documentaries that engage in a specific filmic gaze, favoring the reinforcement of various ideological priorities of Western Liberalism over ideological priorities indexed in Iranian culture. Documentaries that construct the filmic gaze described in this chapter rely on

³⁰ Bush, *State of the Union*.

generalized constructions of what it means to be “Western” and what it means to be “Iranian” in order to establish a filmic language used to communicate the consequences suffered by individuals who have not embraced Liberalism.³¹ To articulate this binary, the documentarians in this category first illustrate the existence of two distinct ideological frameworks and attribute these ideologies to Iranian or Western geographical locations and cultural spaces. By providing limited access to individuals in both locations, filmmakers represent their characterization of various identity categories as well-supported and accurate, and therefore, as appropriate bases for the judgements their films direct at the individuals documented. Thus, through active scene selection and an image curation process, this category of documentarians represent Iranian and Western categories of identity with rigid, homogeneous, and incompatible definitions, using this strategy to extrapolate a singular definition of identity for all peoples within each cultural setting.

After establishing incompatible categories of Iranian and Western identities, these filmmakers employ specific camera positions, filming locations, and nondiegetic narration to situate themselves in a privileged position within their films. The filmmakers of this category position themselves within their documentaries as sources of privileged knowledge about both Western and Iranian cultural realities by representing themselves as the sole filmic subject capable of *both* occupying multiple exclusive categories of identity and having the mobility to move between these hostile classifications of identity. More importantly, the tone and focus of the filmmaker’s “privileged knowledge” and how it is communicated to the film’s audience constitute a constructed gaze, which looks upon the historical world and structures its limited documentation of these events through the concerns of Western Liberalism. The ideology of Western Liberalism is predicated on the

³¹ The meaning of this term will be explored further in the forthcoming pages.

belief of a “state of nature in which humans are free and equal, and so argue that any limitation of this freedom and equality stands in need of justification.” Liberalism, therefore, prioritizes individual freedoms, equality of all people, freedom of speech, and private property.³² These priorities are flushed out in Liberalism’s political ideology focused on employing social justice and equal rights as vehicles for increased individual freedoms. In other words, filmmakers within this category choose to explore the subject of their documentaries through issues of individual freedom and liberty, such as sexuality, self-actualization, and social justice rather than through an exhaustive set of ideological concerns.

This chapter, therefore, argues that the filmmakers in this category of documentaries employ various techniques of documentary filmmaking to construct a filmic gaze that represents them as individuals with multi-sectional identities and, through the tone and structure of this presentation, imply both the superiority of Western Liberalism over Iranian cultural ideology and the necessity of Liberalism for a healthy civic body. Furthermore, through this constructed gaze, these documentaries participate in an ethic that asserts ideologically situated representations of event, which prioritizes encouragement of Liberalism over a comprehensive documentation of the historical world that accounts for a variety of concerns indexed in multiple political ideologies. In prioritizing these ideological considerations, the filmmakers’ representations of subject matters limit their exploration to the concerns of individuals invested in the tenants of Western Liberalism and position themselves as the individual inserting these concerns into the text. These documentaries, therefore, prioritize representations of the filmmakers’ ideological response to a subject matter and consequently, prioritize representations of

³² Gerald Gaus and Shane D. Courtland, “Liberalism,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Stanford University, 2011. <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2011/entries/liberalism/>.

themselves, their own identities, and ideological commitments over representations structured through the reality of the documentary subject matter itself. In employing this gaze within their films, this category of documentaries participate in a ethic that not only prioritizes Western Liberalism's ideological considerations over others but also, as a broader filmic ethic that prioritizes the representation of documentarists' ideological considerations over the considerations of those who constitute the documentaries' subjects.

VISUAL LANGAUGE & NONDIEGETIC NARRATION IN *IRANIAN-AMERICAN STYLE*

To explore the techniques of visual language and nondiegetic narration employed by filmmakers when constructing a ideologically situated filmic gaze, this article offers a close analysis of *Love Iran- American Style*. Released by Documentary Educational Resources in 2006, *Love Iranian-American Style*³³ was filmed by Tanaz Eshaghian entirely in New York City and Los Angeles between 1999 and 2004.³⁴ In this documentary, Eshaghian tells her audience that at the age of six she moved with her Jewish family from Iran to the United States, after the Islamic Revolution of 1979 created an unstable and tension-filled environment for ethnic and religious minorities. Once in the United States, Eshaghian describes herself as having made active attempts to “Americanize” by participating in Ivy League education and relationships with white, American men. While Eshaghian self-identifies as “Jewish- Iranian” and “Iranian” several times throughout her documentary, she regularly and firmly states that she is

³³ In giving her film this name, Tanaz Eshaghian references the film *Divorce Iranian Style*, which was released in 1998, eight years before the release of Eshaghian's own documentary. Focused on documenting the divorce proceedings of a courthouse located in an Iranian city, this film is considered to be one of the films that prompted international interest in documentaries focused on Iran.

³⁴ “Love Iranian- American Style,” *Documentary Educational Resources*, Accessed August 2014, <http://www.der.org/films/love-iranian-american-style.html>

“different from other Jewish-Iranian girls,” due to her “modern” and “Western” identity. Furthermore, through nondiegetic narration, Eshaghian locates her multi-sectional identity as the cause of failure in her past relationships and describes an attempt to reconcile Iranian and Western identities as the motivating factor for her creation of this documentary.

While the documentary focuses on her failed relationships with American men and her family’s growing anxiety for her to marry an Iranian man while still in her twenties, the drama of this film arises from Eshaghian’s claims of tension between the “Western” and “Iranian” elements of her personal identity and her inability to maintain a healthy love life with her intersectional cultural identity. Self-identified as “Americanized,” “educated,” and “modern,” Eshaghian describes herself as “tortured” by the conflict generated from what she interprets as an *essential* incompatibility between her Western identity and the elements of her identity influenced by Iranian heritage. *Love Iranian-American Style*, therefore, acts as an argument for the *essential* incapability of “enlightened” people to embrace an Iranian identity and, in constructing this argument through a prioritization of topics like virginity, individual freedom, and modernity, enacts a filmic gaze focused on the concerns of Liberal ideology over a comprehensive and nuanced documentation of love within these two cultural contexts.

Love Iranian- American Style employs archival footage, specific shooting locations for interviews, and trope-like representations of characters to construct a visual language and filmic tone that communicates a distinct difference between Iranians and Westerners and claims that this difference causes mutual conflict between the two categories of identity. To represent the nature of this conflict, Eshaghian frequently films self-identified Iranians and Eshaghian- identified Americans in settings that visually and

aurally differ significantly from one another.³⁵ While arising from the settings in which they were recorded, the sounds and images of these scenes also “function as signs; they bear meaning, though the meaning is not really inherent in them but rather conferred upon them by their function within the text as a whole.”³⁶ In the specific context of *Love Iranian- American Style*, these visual and aural aspects of Western and Iranian are recorded to function as symbols for and evidence of the incompatibility of these two cultural spaces, rather than a simple documentation of the events that occur in these settings.

When filming American subjects, Eshaghian chooses to represent them in quiet, nonspecific locations, with very few visual and auditory cultural cues on display. In these scenes, Eshaghian employs one-on-one interviews in peaceful domestic settings to represent this cultural identity category with a tone of calm and simplicity. When documenting Iranian subjects, conversely, Eshaghian films in settings where Iranian cultural markers take center stage. Eshaghian films Iranian individuals in such a way that their settings “stress claustrophobia and temporality” and are “...cathected to sites of confinement and control...”³⁷ Thus Eshaghian employs archival footage of family gatherings in Iran, the 1979 Islamic Revolution, and events specific to Iranian-Jewish heritage such as *Shabat* services, to construct a visual language for Iranian-ness that is claustrophobic, chaotic, and constantly in flux. By employing archive footage and filming individuals from similar cultural contexts in settings with similar tones, Eshaghian

³⁵ Many of the individuals Eshaghian identifies as “Iranian,” also self-identified as Iranian in the film. The three individuals who Eshaghian identifies as her “former American boyfriends” never self-identify as American within the film but rather are assigned this identifier by Eshaghian herself.

³⁶ Bill Nichols, “The Voice of Documentary,” *Film Quarterly* 36, no. 3 (1983): 20.

³⁷ Naficy, *Accented Cinema*, 5.

presents two firm definitions of Western and Iranian cultural identity categories and positions them in conflict with one another.

To illuminate the way in which Eshaghian constructs a visual language for “Western” and attaches a filmic tone to this category, this chapter includes a close reading of two consecutive interview scenes in *Love Iranian- American Style*. The first scene begins with Eshaghian silently driving through a neighborhood in Los Angeles, presumably on her way to interview a past American boyfriend about why—as she says states through nondiegetic narration—their “relationship didn’t work out.”³⁸ The frame changes to show a strawberry-blond haired, caucasian man dressed in a short-sleeved plaid button-down shirt. Eshaghian does not offer any biographical information about this individual and the film does not provide a caption to identify him. Without seeing her, the audience hears Eshaghian ask questions from behind the camera. As Eshaghian’s unidentified interviewee answers her questions about their past love life, quiet noises from a nearby street constitute the only diegetic sounds other than their two voices. After a very short interview, the image filling the frame changes and the audience now looks upon a close-up shot of dirty plates and a thermos sitting in a dimly lit, sparsely furnished room. The camera cuts to a close-up shot of a second unnamed caucasian man’s face. Again, Eshaghian’s voice can be heard from behind the camera as she probes this second man with interview questions. Almost identical to the previous interview, quiet street sounds offer the only other diegetic noise in the scene and the anonymous man constitutes the only individual captured by the camera. As these two scenes illustrate, Eshaghian constructs a common visual language and tone representing Westerners by filming in similar settings and offering characters without biographical information.

³⁸ Eshaghian does not identify this recording of her driving as the actual recording of her driving to her boyfriends houses but she positions them in the film as to communicate this implication.



Illustration 1

Love Iranian- American Style represents Western individuals with a common, sparse, unembellished visual language constructed through scenes with a quiet, calm tone. Both scenes offer very little alternative diegetic and nondiegetic signals to compete with the recorded interviews, and therefore, imply a quiet calm setting. By choosing to film one-on-one interviews located in sparse, domestic settings, Eshaghian portrays all Westerners present in this film through a common filmic language characterized by simplicity, privacy, and a lack of noise.

A third scene illustrates Eshaghian's employment of the same filmic modes used to establish "Western" identity in order to create a filmic language for Iranian identity that greatly differs. Eshaghian films this scene at the baby shower of her cousin, Sharona. Unlike the quiet and calm environment of the interviews conducted with the two American subjects, the footage from this event captures crowded rooms filled with loud music, lively dancing, and conversations in which many people speak multiple languages at once. As the scene opens, the sound of diegetic *setar* music can be heard and the camera, positioned at the eye level of those being filmed, moves with Sharona through a crowd. With the roar of loud conversation mixed with music in the background, the frame's image rapidly changes between various shots of Sharona being kissed and adorned with jewelry, solemn-faced Iranian men scooping Persian stew and rice onto their plates, Sharona's pregnant belly being rubbed by a smiling woman, and Eshaghian greeting and speaking with various family members. Through a window of mobile bodies, the camera moves to first capture a smiling Sharona dance and clap to a Persian pop song and later to show a sullen Eshaghian sitting alone at the center of a crowded, bustling room. As this scene represents, by filming large groups of Iranian individuals in loud and energetic settings, Eshaghian constructs a filmic language for Iranian cultural space characterized by chaos and claustrophobia.



Illustration 2

Eshaghian attaches a visual language to scenes depicting Iranian individuals that ascribes a tone of chaos and claustrophobia. To establish claustrophobia as a quality of Iranian spaces, Eshaghian positions the camera so that the height and cadence of its movements create for her audience the experience of being embodied as a guest at the event. Once embodied, Eshaghian presents her viewers with multiple shots, in which bodies often come in and out of the camera's frame as they move through the minimal space available at the event. The quick succession of various unrelated shots move the viewer through this scene with no apparent strategy, creating a tone of unwieldy, confusing chaos. Additionally, the impediment of the viewer's line of vision with guests and objects communicate a sense of crowdedness, which the diegetic background noise

reinforces. As the audience listens to many voices reverberating in the enclosed space of a house, the constant blare of music and conversation compounded by the crowded filmic frame manufactures a sense of constricted denseness in the scene. Together, these two aspects of the scene's construction offer a portrayal of Iranian space that has a claustrophobic, chaotic tone. Thus, unlike the setting and tone of the interviews Eshaghian includes with her Western subjects, the diegetic sounds, treatment of the camera's frame, and constant change of the camera's focus communicate a sense of Iranian space that directly conflicts with the presented calm of Western spaces.

While the modes of representation used in both scenes with Iranians and Westerners communicate identity categories as defined, homogeneous, and stagnant in character, the way Eshaghian positions these scenes against one another communicates an additional message: a sense of incompatibility between Iranian and Western categories of identity. In positioning footage of Sharona's baby shower directly following the two interviews with Eshaghian's ex-boyfriends, this series of scenes, as Nichols would argue, constitutes "...no mere documentation but an active process of fabrication, if not of physical objects than of a production of meaning and values, conceptions and orientations to surround them."³⁹ Thus, Eshaghian's positioning of these scenes, which presumably did not occur consecutively in real time, constitute a choice imbued with ideological meaning. Eshaghian actively constructs a passive comparison between Iranian spaces, which she illustrates as chaotic and claustrophobic, and Western spaces, which she represents as calm and simple, in order to imply an essential incompatibility between the two very differently- represented categories of cultural space. In other words, the calm of Western spaces appear antagonistic to the chaos of Iranian spaces, and vice-versa, and consequently, these identities appear to be incompatible with one another. With these

³⁹ Nichols, *Representing Reality*, 11.

scenes and their sequence in the film, therefore, Eshaghian constructs categories of Iranian and Western spaces that not only differ in character but also appear incapable of coexistence.

After establishing a curated image of Iranian and American spaces, *Love Iranian-American Style* positions Eshaghian as both *apart from* and *a part of* Iranian and Western cultural contexts. Positioning herself in this way, Eshaghian derives from her “...position as subject inhabiting interstitial spaces and sites of struggle” the authority required to apply ideological analysis to the historical events and individuals in her film.⁴⁰ Eshaghian represents herself as having “native” status to appear authoritative in her representations of Iranian identity, yet through the modes of narrative voice, Eshaghian simultaneously positions herself as an outsider of this identity category.⁴¹ By positioning herself in this multi-sectional way, Eshaghian establishes both the privilege to look “in” on Iranian identity and culture as a person who belongs to it, as well as the authority to offer the world a better perspective of this Iranian identity from the “objective” position of an outsider.

Love Iranian-American Style accomplishes its unique positioning of Eshaghian through her active presence in the frame, which is represented differently than any other subject present on screen. More precisely, Eshaghian appears in her documentary in three ways: first, as the disembodied diegetic voice of an interviewer positioned behind the camera; second, as a subject of the film who, unlike the other subjects, never addresses the camera directly but instead, directs her speech at other subjects in the frame; and lastly, but most importantly, as a narrator who is often present in the scenes to which she later applies nondiegetic narration. This technique allows Eshaghian to be position herself

⁴⁰ Naficy, *Accented Cinema*, 12.

⁴¹ Motlagh, 413.

as a “participate-witness,” who exists within the same historical world as the other documentary subjects in the film, and simultaneously, as the sole “active fabricator of meaning, a promoter of cinematic discourse,” which allows the filmmaker to represent these events with specific meanings communicated through the constructed gazes of her documentary.⁴²

By being present in front of the camera without ever directly interacting with it, Eshaghian isolates her role as narrator from her role as a subject in the film. This style of narration grants Eshaghian the ability to apply ideologically situated analysis to images as the audiences receives them through the neutralized and authoritative voice of a disembodied, albeit not anonymous narrator.⁴³ Every subject in *Love Iranian- American Style* except Eshaghian speaks directly to the camera from an embodied position and, therefore, when communicating with the audience, passively offers additional contextual information with which the viewers may interpret the speaker’s messages. Eshaghian, however, commands a neutral space when communicating to the audience from the disembodied, invisible position of narrator, and uses this space to offer partial analysis of the documentary events. From this privileged position, Eshaghian uses narration to situate herself as an uniquely authoritative and analytical device available to the film’s audience, but unavailable to the other subjects represented in her documentary.

By closely reading a scene that captures a conversation between Eshaghian and her mother, one can better understand how Eshaghian uses her control over the camera and role as narrator to occupy a seemingly neutral position from which she has the authority to apply nondiegetic ideological interpretations of recorded occurrences. In this

⁴² Nichols, *Voice of Documentary*, 18.

⁴³ Because the audience does hear Eshaghian’s voice while she is on camera and because she regality employs the word “I” when narrating, Eshaghian is not an anonymous narrator.

scene, the audience witnesses a minutes-long conversation between the filmmaker and her mother focused on her mother's involvement in Eshaghian's love life. The scene begins with a medium shot showing Eshaghian's mother trudging through the snow. Eshaghian positions the camera at eye level with her mother and allows the camera to change positions with the cadence and logic of her own head turning to look at her conversation partner. Eshaghian further embodies herself within the camera by allowing her voice to arise from behind its bouncing frame, as if the camera's lens were located in Eshaghian eye and the voice recorder in her ears. Her mother switches back and forth between speaking Farsi and English as she explains to her daughter the dreams she has for Eshaghian's education and later her marriage. Uttering only one sentence throughout the entire scene, Eshaghian follows her mother down a snowy, dirty street as her mother talks about her worries over the decisions she has made in the past. As the scene ends, Eshaghian fades the sound of her mother's words and superimposes a nondiegetic narration of her own reaction to it. While the audience remains looking at the image of her mother, Eshaghian states, "when I watched this footage of my mom, I couldn't believe she believes I have too much control of my life. I think my mother wishes I was more like Sharona..." In this scene, Eshaghian employs her position as narrator to offer ideological analysis outside of diegetic context of the film.

As this scene illustrates, Eshaghian uses specific positioning of the camera and nondiegetic narration to claim her intersectional cultural identity as having access to elements of Iranian culture, as well as remaining divorced from full immersion within these elements. To represent her access to Iranian identity, Eshaghian films this conversation with her mother from a camera position that mimics her own eyes' point of view. The presentation of an intimate conversation with her Iranian mother and Eshaghian's use and comprehension of Farsi in this scene establishes Eshaghian's access

to Iranian culture and corresponding authority to speak on this particular cultural category. As described above, in this scene, the audience hears the recorded conversation of Eshaghian and her mother for several minutes until Eshaghian lowers the volume of diegetic voices and replaces it with her own nondiegetic narration. While Eshaghian remains neutral during the actual reordered conversation with her mother, as narrator she expresses shock and disgust at her mother's words. Thus, this narration situates Eshaghian's analysis and reflection of the conversation from a unique, privileged position in two ways.

First, while available to the audience, Eshaghian's analysis is not available to the individual to whom it responds and on whom it comments— her mother. Additionally, the position of disembodied narrator grants Eshaghian's analysis an element of neutral, unbiased authority. By constructing their conversation in this way, therefore, Eshaghian grants herself the sole authority to interpret and offer judgement on the consequences and implications of her mother's words. In representing both participants in the conversation but offering Eshaghian a separate, elevated mode for communication, this scene illustrates the way that her film prioritizes Eshaghian's authority to represent these two cultural contexts over those of other filmed subjects.

To illustrate how these moments of ideological intervention create a filmic gaze, this chapter refers to *Love Iranian-American Style*'s usage of narration, through which Eshaghian compares herself to someone she has identified as Iranian and expresses, through the authoritative position of the narrator, the ways in which she is *essentially* different. When considered as a group, these “differences” expressed through moments of reflective narration illustrate Eshaghian's attempt to self-situate within a cultural identity that differs from Iranian identity in its prioritization of the tenets of Western Liberalism. Thus, rather than exploring the differences between herself and other Iranians through

physical differences, travel experience, or a multitude of other individual characteristics, Eshaghian instead structures her representation of her difference from the Iranians in her documentary by employing language of freedom of movement, sexual freedom, pursuit of happiness, individual liberty, and education. When considered as a group, the concerns closely resemble the ideological priorities of Western Liberalism and the societies that subscribe to it.

A series of scenes in which Eshaghian explores the issue of sexual freedom and purity in Iranian and Western contexts provide a strong example of the film's constructed gaze. Beginning this series, the image of Sharona sitting on a couch fills the screen as she discusses her guilt over having sex with her current husband before marriage. This frame changes to show Eshaghian's grandmother smiling while encouraging her to get married so that she can have sex. Again the image in the frame changes and this time the audience sees a frowning Eshaghian sitting silently in a salon chair as her nondiegetic voice states, "If I go out with these guys my mom sets me up for, how are they going to deal with the fact that I am not a virgin? They're not going to accept it but my mom still insists I go out with these guys." Following this statement, Eshaghian includes an interview with a family friend regarding her friend's wedding night, a conversation with a hymen repair surgeon, and the opinions of her mother and father about unmarried women who are not virgins. Sandwiched between several counter-examples, Eshaghian's statements as the nondiegetic narrator are the only opinions on sexuality situated in a narrative of personal choice. As this one example illustrates, Eshaghian represents Iranian identity in a very specific and consistent way— valuing sexual purity and not personal choice- and conversely, represents herself as having access to this identity but not sharing its values.

As illustrated through *Love Iranian American Style*, the character and topic of a filmmaker's ideological interventions imply the priorities present in the ideological and

cultural indexes of the filmmaker. In choosing to explore the differences in her identity from the constructed definition of normative Iranian culture through a discussion of virginity in both cultural contexts, Eshaghian situates the conflict of these two cultural identities as arising from an attachment to or dismissal of the tenets of Western Liberalism. In other words, rather than exploring her different identity through topics like eating habits or exercise regimens, Eshaghian used the issues important to Western Liberalism ideology to organize her experience of difference. Thus, *Love Iranian-American Style* participates in a constructed gaze that prioritizes the documentation of Eshaghian's loyalty to the tenets of Western Liberalism over a comprehensive or diverse dissemination of its subject matter.

MONTAGE & NONDIEGETIC NARRATION IN *PROSTITUTION BEHIND THE VEIL*

Prostitution Behind the Veil offers a second example from this category of documentary filmmaking, which, in its record of prostitution in Iran structured through the concerns of Western Liberalism, similarly participates in an ethic that prioritizes those ideological concerns over a comprehensive documentation of its subject matter. Released by RealReel Doc AB company in 2004, *Prostitution Behind the Veil* is an internationally distributed, award-winning documentary by veteran filmmaker Nahid Persson. Recorded in Swedish, subtitled in English, but filmed exclusively in Iran, *Prostitution Behind the Veil* documents prostitution and drug use in Iran for the purview of non-Iranian audiences.⁴⁴ To represent these topics, the film's focus centers on the lives of two women, Mina and Fariba, who work as sex workers while attempting to raise their young son and daughter, respectively. While Mina and Fariba are undoubtedly the focus of this

⁴⁴ At one point in the film, as narrator, Persson explains "I was allowed to go along with the [Fariba's] client because I told them I'm making a documentary that will only be shown abroad. He [Fariba's client] says its important to show the world that Iran has gone to hell." Thus, Persson conceives of the documentary as meant for non-Iranian audiences.

documentary, Persson situates the story of their experiences within the narrative of her own return to Iran after a long absence and her feelings about this contemporary Iran to which she has returned.

Through her reaction to what she describes as a changed Iran, Persson situates prostitution as one of the many problems affecting contemporary Iran and constructs this problem as arising from Iranian culture itself. Frequently referring to the Islamic legal system, Persson argues that this new government has resulted in an increase of poverty and a decrease of social justice, from which drug use, prostitution, and a variety of other social ills have arisen. To make this argument, Persson uses montages constructed through unrelated images of locations and individuals and nondiegetic background music to curate a filmic language that depicts Iranian spaces in a similar light—characterized by poverty and injustice. While representing this space through the visuals of a montage, this documentary filmmaker simultaneously offers nondiegetic narration, which, with its ideological content, positions Iranian spaces as in conflict with Western cultural spaces because of the presence of these social ills.

To establish her authority to narrate this conflict between the two cultural spaces, Persson films herself in settings of transition—airports, airplanes, and cars— in order to represent herself as mobile between these two mutually hostile cultural spaces. In representing herself as mobile, Person situates herself as uniquely able to offer ideological analysis of both Iranian and Western spaces based on her personal occupation of both. The content and focus of her ideological analysis, furthermore, construct the filmic gaze of this documentary, which prioritizes documenting issues of social justice and human rights over all other aspects of prostitution in Iran. By employing this filmic gaze, *Prostitution Behind the Veil* participates in an ethic that prioritizes identifying the

concerns of Western Liberalism over a comprehensive and nuanced documentation of the film's subject matter— prostitution in Iran.

To create a filmic language for Iranian spaces, Persson organizes short, unrelated shots of various individuals into a montage, which she offers to her audience without contextual information. In employing montages, Persson's documentary implies an organizing logic between otherwise unrelated filmed subjects. While not indigenous to the images or interactions themselves Persson's nondiegetic narration while displaying these images suggests that "poverty and social injustice" in Iranian spaces are represented in each image and thus, these topics provide the organizing logic for this montage.

The beginning scenes of *Prostitution Behind the Veil* offer a particularly strong example of how Persson uses a series of unrelated shots and nondiegetic narration to construct a filmic language for Iranian spaces. Haunting nondiegetic *ney*⁴⁵ music plays in the background as the audience watches a woman dressed in a black chador and a small child stand next to a busy street, talking to men in cars as they stop to haggle over prices for sex. The frame changes to show the close-up image of a different woman's face, looking thoughtfully out of a car window. As she sits silently, the narrator's nondiegetic voice begins to speak in Swedish as her words are translated in English onto the screen. She says,

I fled from Iran after the revolution when the Shah was deposed. The population thought things would be better now but the Islamic fundamentalist took over. Dissenters were imprisoned and executed. Some of us managed to escape. I fled to Sweden. The year was 1983. 17 years went by before I dared return to Iran. I was shocked. The poverty and social injustice were much worse than I expected.

As the narrator speaks, the camera shows a billboard wearing Ayatollah Khomeini's face and pans to a young boy selling flowers from a red jeep. Her voice silences and

⁴⁵ The *ney* is a small wooden flute that has been used to make music in the Middle Eastern region for over 4,000 years.

nondiegetic *ney* music begins to play again as the camera shows a man and his child sitting on the street selling papers. It then moves to show an old man, who is disheveled and asleep on the street. With the camera's lens trained on this anonymous indigent man, who appears to be unaware of the camera's presence, the narrator says, "I've been back several times and I always feel that hopelessness." As the narrator speaks these words, the camera drops down to eye level with the unaware man and zooms onto his downward-pointed face. The *ney* music resumes and the camera again travels to capture a close-up shot of a little girl's dirty face as she reaches up to the camera begging for money. The final image in this montage shows a young boy in dirty clothing sitting on the street, enticing patrons (including the individual behind the camera) to let him guess their weight for money. By positioning shots of anonymous individuals contextualized by nondiegetic narration alone, Persson employs montage and narration to create a filmic language of Iranian spaces, characterized by poverty and injustice.

As a close reading of this scene illustrates, Persson employs a montage of various filming locations and anonymous people on the street as well as nondiegetic music to construct a filmic language for Iranian spaces, characterized by poverty, suffering, and social injustice. This montage represents various individuals (in some cases, individuals who have not consented to being filmed) without biographical captions or identifying information of any kind. The audience, instead, interacts with these images solely through the narration of Persson, who offers the interpretative logic of this montage sequence. By including her narration while displaying these images to her audience, Persson positions the montage as accurately representing a common presence of injustice and poverty. Persson further curates her characterization of Iranian space as a homogenous mass of poor, anonymous individuals through a process of inclusion and exclusion, in which images of dirty cloths and subsistence living are prioritized over depictions of a neatly

clothed and employed individuals. Thus, through montages of like images and the use of interpretive narration, *Prostitution Behind the Veil* creates a filmic language for Iranian spaces, characterized by poverty and social injustice.

The scenes just described also position Iranian space in conflict with Western space. This conflict arises from Persson's analysis of what she witnesses in Iran, represented by the montage of images discussed above. As narrator, Persson states that after returning to Iran from living in the West for seventeen years, she was "shocked" by the state of Iran. The word shock implicates an unexpected discovery; something that conflicts so profoundly with the indexical references available to an individual that this individual is momentarily dumbfounded by her discovery. In other words, Persson's shock indexes in her prolonged absence from Iran and in the completely different expectations she formed while away from this cultural context. Persson's narrative during this montage positions Iranian spaces, therefore, as shockingly different from Western spaces and consequently, incompatible with one another.

To imbue herself with the authority of intersectionality, and thus, the authority to apply these kind of ideological analysis to cultural spaces, Persson films herself in settings of transition. The scene discussed above represents the first scene in which Persson is represented as mobile. As she narrates the scene, Persson sits silently in the backseat of a vehicle, while buildings and the road pass quickly in the window behind her. In her narration, Persson states that she has not returned to Iran after many years and constructs this scene as a return from the West. The second scene establishing Persson cross-cultural mobility comes towards the end of the film. As the image of a courtyard from the previous scene goes black, a new image of Persson riding in a car appears in the frame. Moving along with traffic, the camera captures a large bus driving quickly down the road, as the audience hears the sounds of the city street visible on screen.

Contextualizing this shot, Persson narrates that, “it has been ten months since I left Fariba and Mina. But they are constantly in my thoughts.” Thus, through this second scene, Persson establishes that not only does she maintain the mobility to return to Iran, she also has the privilege of leaving.

The final scene of *Prostitution Behind the Veil* constitutes the final scene representing Persson’s mobility. In this scene, the image of a long line, filled with luggage and people waiting at the airport fills the frame. This picture changes to a close-up shot of Persson forlorn face as she narrates:

I am leaving Iran to go back to Sweden. Mina and Fariba can’t do that. Like millions of other women, they must live in a country that legislates the oppression of women. And where drugs and prostitution go hand in hand with hypocrisy.

Her words silence as the audience looks out into cloudy blue skies from an airplane window. In this final scene, therefore, Persson actively establishes her sole status in the film as mobile across Western and Iranian spaces and possessing an exclusive source of ideological analysis of these two cultural contexts.

As the foregoing analysis of *Prostitution Behind the Veil* illustrates, Persson uses montages and nondiegetic narration both to establish conflicting categories of Iranian and Western spaces and to demonstrate her authority to exist within both spaces. Furthermore, the subject matters through which Persson explores and does not explore this difference construct a filmic gaze situated in ideological concerns. Rather than exploring the difference between Western and Iranian spaces through topics like diet, fuel usage, or family size, *Prostitution Behind the Veil* chooses to represent these differences through issues of social justice, situated in the language of Liberalism. By focusing on prostitution, drug uses, and other issues of social welfare, freedom of movement, and individual health, this documentary enacts a gaze that prioritizes an exploration of topic

through the concerns of Western Liberalism and therefore, participates in an ethic that prioritizes the representation of ideological stances over a comprehensive documentation of how Iranian and Western spaces compare and contrast.

A CONSTRUCTED GAZE AND WESTERN LIBERALISM

By exploring the topic of an Iranian-Western intersectional identity and putting *Love Iranian- American Style* and *Prostitution Behind the Veil* into conversation, this chapter has illustrated Eshaghian's and Persson's construction of a filmic gaze that prioritizes representations of the ideological concerns of Western Liberalism and more importantly, representations of themselves as individuals who prioritize these concerns. Thus, while the stated subject of their films might be Iranian sex workers or singles living in exile, these documentaries, in reality, employ a filmic gaze that instead documents the interaction between the claimed subject matter and their Western Liberal filmmakers. By employing this gaze, the films of this category prioritizes representations of issues important to the tenets of Western Liberalism over concerns indigenous to and most important for an exploration of the films' subject matters. The ethic of this filmic gaze allows for the appropriation of documentary representations of the historical world and its agents in order to engage in ideological debates that index in personal ethics and politics of the documentaries' filmmakers.

When considered in the specific context of *Love Iranian- American Style* and *Prostitution Behind the Veil*, this ethic takes on increased meaning. *Love Iranian- American Style* claims to document intimate relationships between Americans and Iranians but instead, documents the hostility she feels towards Iranian men and participates in a gaze that represents this hostility as arising from her logical willingness to embrace Western Liberalism. Similarly, Nahid Persson set out to document sex workers in Iran whose lives are characterized by poverty, abuse, and drug use. She

chooses to do so, however, through her own reaction to these events—reactions that in their very character illustrate her self-identification as a Western Liberal woman— and consequently, chooses to appropriate documentary representations of these women’s lives in order to document her own radically different self- identification. In constructing a filmic gaze that achieved this secondary representation, these documentaries added to the discourse that claimed essential ideological differences between Iran and America during a period of time in which these claims constituted the vernacular of invasions and sanctions.

Chapter Two:

The Documentaries of Exiled Iranian Female Filmmakers:

An Ethic of Deterritorialized Iranian Identity

Sadegh-Vaziri ask her father from off screen, “Do you think I should move here [Iran]?” “Oh you can live here. There are many, many foreigners who are living...living very good very comfortable and they just ...they follow the rules of this government,” her father excitedly responds. Aghast, she cuts him off and asks in a rushed, surprised voice, “Are you calling me a foreigner?!”
— *A Place Called Home*

Like the films discussed in the first chapter of this thesis, a second group of films became available to Western audiences in the same rancorous atmosphere of the first decade of the twenty-first century. Unlike the films analyzed before, however, this second group of documentaries intervene with a different set of ideological concerns indexed in the experience of exile. These concerns reference the historical hostility between Iran and Western countries, and arise from a discourse supplied by the individuals still living in Iran focused on individuals living as part of Iran’s Diaspora in the West.⁴⁶ Because the problem of Western Imperialism constituted a chief concern of the 1979 Revolution and subsequent Iranian political movements, the presence of large numbers of Iranian citizens living in Western nations have drawn fierce judgements from Iranians not part of this Diaspora. These judgements index in ideas of *Westoxification*⁴⁷, alliance with Western

⁴⁶ Iran’s Diaspora is very large and extremely heterogeneous in religion, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and location of resettlement. In 2005, it was estimated that there are between two and four million Iranians living outside of Iran around the world, with the majority resettling in the U.S., Canada, Germany, Sweden, or Israel. (<http://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/iran-vast-diaspora-abroad-and-millions-refugees-home>)

⁴⁷ A concept popularized by the famous and influential Iranian Revolutionary, Ali Shariati (1933-1977), *Gharbzadegi* or *Westoxification* describes obsession with Western ideals and ideologies at the detriment of one’s own well-being and natural state. This term become of prime importance to political theory in Iran and many Arab nations.

Imperialism, and abandonment of one's homeland by asserting the illegitimacy of Iranian identities claimed by those in exile.

Responding to this rhetoric arising from Iran's borders, these documentarists employ a filmic gaze that asserts the legitimacy of deterritorialized Iranian identity by prioritizing representations of the their own deterritorialized Iranian identity over representations of the identities' belonging to the films' stated protagonist(s)—Iranian women. More specifically, the films discussed in this chapter represent a category of Iranian identity that does not index in the nation's territorial boundaries, but instead, in more abstract, intangible aspects of Iranian cultural heritage such as social mores and one's experiences of acculturation. In constructing this gaze, these films participate in an ethic that prioritizes particular constructions of national identity over others, and consequently problematizes conceptions of national identity indexed in territorial boundaries. To explore this filmic gaze and the way that the filmmakers construct it, Chapter Two offers an analysis of Persheng Sadegh-Vaziri's documentary *Women Like Us: Women in Iran* and Nahid Persson's *The Queen and I*.

To construct this filmic gaze, the filmmakers in this category first represent themselves as maintaining the ability to move in and out of Iranian and Western cultural spaces and to perform with ease in both settings. By including scenes in which the filmmaker speaks multiple languages or interacts with media printed in several languages, these filmmakers employ the diegetic staging of multilinguality to illustrate their own cultural mobility. A concept briefly explored by Naficy, multilinguality describes knowledge of multiple languages but the importance of multilinguality when represented in film indexes in the potential of these languages to shape and communicate individual identity and experience.⁴⁸ A multilingual individual derives representational

⁴⁸ Naficy, *Accented Cinema*, 24.

authority from their “situationalist existence, their familiarity with the cultural and legal codes of interacting cultural, and the way in which they manipulate identity and the asymmetrical power situations in which they find themselves.” Multilingual individuals, therefore, claim a hierarchy of representational authority by performing with ease in cross-cultural interactions, which empowers these filmmakers to self-construct “within multiple perspectives and conflicted or performed identities.”⁴⁹

While both Sadegh-Vaziri and Persson present themselves as culturally mobile individuals, these filmmakers employ different modes of diegetic staging to emphasize multilinguality. Employing newspapers, publications and intertitles printed in Persian and English, dialogues recorded in both English and Persian, and nondiegetic sound in the form of classical Iranian music, Sadegh-Vaziri represents herself as maintaining fluency, ease, and comfort when interacting with both the English and Persian language and their respective cultural artifacts.⁵⁰ Sadegh-Vaziri employs these signifiers not as substantiation of either an Iranian or Western identity but instead, as markers of her multilinguality and, consequently, her authority in and mobility between Western and Iranian cultures.

To accomplish a similar self-construction, *The Queen and I* employs different modes of diegetic staging when illustrating Persson’s multilinguality. Persson includes in her documentary both scenes of traveling and scenes of her conversing in various languages in order to self-represent as having access to multiple national territories and their respective cultural indexes. Using scenes shot in airports and on airplanes and scenes conversing in various languages, Persson illustrates herself as performing comfortably within French, Swedish, Iranian, and American cultural spaces and, as a

⁴⁹ Naficy, *Accented Cinema*, 32.

⁵⁰ An intertitle is recorded printed text inserted as scenes throughout a film in order to disclose information or dialogue. Intertitles are used to disclose dialogue in silent films.

result, represents herself as possessing the authority to self-situate within a variety of cultural contexts. Through this diegetic staging, therefore, these films illustrate the territorial and cultural mobility of their filmmakers and in so doing, establish the filmmaker's ability to function in multiple cultural settings.

Once she illustrates her cultural mobility and multilinguality, the filmmaker then employs the modes of doubling to self-situate within a category of Iranian identity that ultimately, is not contingent on occupation of Iranian territory. Filmic doubling constitutes a process by which films construct a diegetic presence that represents unseen and unspoken aspects of diegetic characters, filmmakers, or ideological arguments and, as theorized by Naficy, this technique of filmmaking, "depend[s] on repeating an original with a difference— a difference that often implies criticism of that which is being imitated."⁵¹ When participating in doubling, these filmmakers employ diegetic staging, autobiographical voice-over, and strategic organization of scenes to represent themselves as copies of a diegetic "original" who have been represented throughout the film as maintaining authentic, unquestioned Iranian identity. In representing themselves as doubles of these diegetic originals, the filmmakers require their audiences to analyze and interact with their protagonist(s) and with themselves through identically- constructed representations and consequently, identically- defined categories of identity.

To accomplish doubling, both Sadegh-Vaziri and Persson's documentaries include filmic subjects that while initially introduced as essentially different from the filmmaker, are revealed throughout the film to share with the filmmaker indistinguishable experiences, feelings, and expectations. Diegetic staging constitutes the vehicle through which this reveal occurs. Specifically, Sadegh-Vaziri and Persson represent themselves and their filmic subjects as doubles by similarly staging scenes with themselves and with

⁵¹ Naficy, *Accented Cinema*, 270.

their protagonists and by strategically organizing biographical and autobiographical information common to both the filmmaker and her filmic subject. Sadegh-Vaziri illustrates herself as a double for the five women in her film by including in the documentary an autobiographical scene that mimics the scenes she employs to communicate biographical information about her filmed subjects. Additionally, Sadegh-Vaziri uses nondiegetic voice-over to insert information about her own life story into scenes in which she explores the life experiences of her protagonists. In participating in these techniques, Sadegh-Vaziri mimics the five women she positions as “original” Iranian women but does so “with a difference,” that calls into question the connection between claims of Iranian identity and occupation of Iran’s physical territory.

Persson uses similar filmic techniques to establish herself as double of her protagonist in *The Queen and I*. Using scenes in which she and her protagonist are similarly situated in the frame, located in similar spaces, and represented as sharing similar experiences, desires, and expectations, Persson constructs herself as a double of the former Queen of Iran. By representing themselves and their filmic subjects through the modes of doubling, then, these filmmakers represent their own cultural identity as identical to the identity of their diegetic subjects, whom they represent as maintaining authentic Iranian identity. Thus, this category of films claims to document Iranian women and by self-situating within these documentaries and representing themselves as doubles of their filmic subjects, the filmmakers who directed these films use their documentaries to construct a gaze that prioritizes representations of themselves as “authentic” Iranian women, regardless of their cultural mobility, multilinguality, or absence from Iranian territory.

In constructing this gaze, the films discussed in this chapter participate in a filmic ethics that prioritizes the individual Iranian self-identification of the documentaries’

filmmakers over representations of all others forms of Iranian self-identification. In other words, while multiple individuals self-identify as Iranian within the diegesis of these films, only the details and characteristics of the directors' Iranian self-identifications are explored in earnest. Thus, rather than representing all forms of Iranian self-identification with nuance and objective documentation, the ethics participated in by these films prioritize comprehensive and nuanced representations of the filmmakers' unique forms of Iranian identities and self-constructions.

STAGING OF MULTILINGUALITY & DOUBLING IN *WOMEN LIKE US: WOMEN IN IRAN*

Illustrating the ways in which diegetic staging of multilinguality and the modes of doubling construct the filmic gaze described above, this chapter offers an analysis of these techniques in *Women Like Us: Women in Iran*. Released in 2002 by Women Make Movies, Persheng Sadegh-Vaziri's documentary *Women Like Us: Women in Iran* showcases the daily lives of five Iranian women from different socioeconomic classes and regions of Iran. Filmed entirely within Iran's borders, the sixty-minute documentary recorded in Persian and subtitled in English follows a nurse, a journalist, a recent college graduate, a piano teacher, and a rice farmer as they conduct their everyday lives. Constructed through short, recurring vignettes of each woman's day, the film succeeds in its stated purpose of chronicling the experience of a diverse group of individuals. The film, however, operates on a second plane as well: chronicling Sadegh-Vaziri's experience of these women's lives and how it impacts her own self-identification as an Iranian woman. Sadegh-Vaziri uses her documentation of Iranian women's lives to self-represent within the same indices of identity as the women in her film and, in doing so, constructs a filmic gaze that prioritizes a representation of her deterritorialized identity

over representations of the identities belonging to the five Iranian women's who appear in her film.

To accomplish this gaze, Sadegh-Vaziri begins her film with a scene establishing her multilinguality and cultural mobility through a diegetic staging of her interactions with various markers of Iranian and Western culture, such as Iranian newspapers and Western clothing. After representing herself in this way, Sadegh-Vaziri then employs diegetic staging and voice-over narration in subsequent scenes to construct herself as a double of the “women in Iran” present in her documentary. Specifically, Sadegh-Vaziri constructs a scene between herself and one of these women, in which she reverses her role as the filmmaker and represents herself through the same modes as she uses to represent the subjects of her film. Through this process of doubling, Sadegh-Vaziri positions herself as yet another Iranian woman and in doing so, self-situates as having access to the same categories of identity.

Through a diegetic staging of multilinguality and commentary narration in which she participates in moments of self-reflection, Sadegh-Vaziri establishes her own cultural mobility and dual access to Western and Iranian cultural spaces in the very first scene of her documentary. Using intertitles in both English and Persian, periodicals printed in Persian, narration spoken in English and non-diegetic *setar* music, Sadegh-Vaziri employs devices that “stress the oral, the vocal, and the musical—that is accents, intonations, voices, music and songs...” to “demarcate individual and collective identities.”⁵² In other words, Sadegh-Vaziri stages her complex cultural indices by interweaving English and Persian dialogues and using both languages to communicate with her audience. A close reading of the documentary's first scene offers an illustration

⁵² Naficy, *Accented Cinema*, 24.

of the way in which Sadegh-Vaziri stages her own multilinguality and the multiple cultural contexts to which she has access.

In a silent, black frame, white Persian script reading “زنان مثل ما” appears and the sound of pleasant, meandering *setar* music emerges. The text and music are quickly followed by a second set of white lettering that reads “Women Like Us,” offering a translation of the earlier appearing Persian script. The text and music fade from the screen and a close-up shot of a newspaper appears in its place as the pleasant calm voice of Sadegh-Vaziri begins to narrate from a nondiegetic space. As she speaks, the camera offers its audience a close-up of the newspaper’s front page, printed in Persian, and describing the return of Ayatollah Khomeini from exile abroad. This shot cuts to a panning shot of various Iranian periodicals scattered atop the same large table on which the newspaper sits. Creeping upward, the camera’s focus reveals the newspaper’s reader to be a young, fashionably-dressed woman wearing a denim oxford, thick black framed glasses, and a flurry of dark wavy hair hanging at her shoulders. While the camera lingers on this woman, the narrator says:

I came back to Iran a few years ago after 20 years in the US. During the years in America, I missed many important events in Iran such as the Revolution in 1979, the installment of the Islamic Republic, the enforcement of the veil, eight years of war with Iraq, and so much more.

A short interlude of whimsical *setar* music interludes, and the voice continues, “more than anything else, I am curious about the women I see around me because if I stayed in Iran, I would be just like them.” While the filmmaker’s narration continues, the frame changes to show random street scenes of Iranian women. Women of various ages and styles-of-dress appear in the frame, one after the other as the narrator explains that the women she encounters every day in Iran seem very different from the Iranian women

portrayed in Western media. So, to better understand the experience of women who have lived in Iran their entire lives, she has decided to record the lives of five women. As the filmmaker/narrator introduces her idea to the audience, the frame again changes to show a close-up shot of the narrator's hand writing in a notebook. On the right side of the notebook paper, five names and occupations have been written neatly in English. Translating the names, she adds the Persian script for each name to the left side of the paper. When she completes this task, the shot changes for a final time to show the filmmaker standing in front of a hallway mirror. Sadegh-Vaziri is facing away from the camera and arranging a white cashmere scarf over her hair while she walks out of her apartment. As she opens the door to leave the apartment, both the narration and the scene ends and the frame again fades to black.

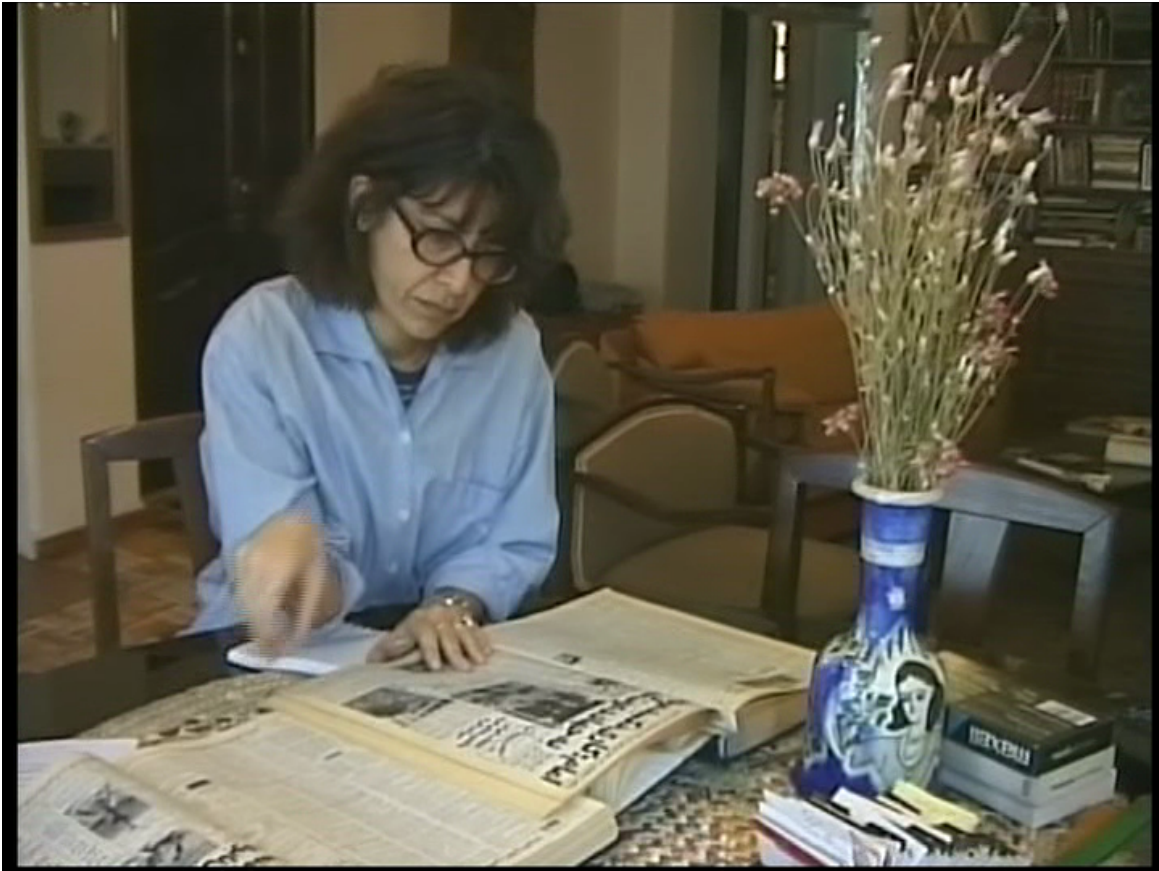


Illustration 3

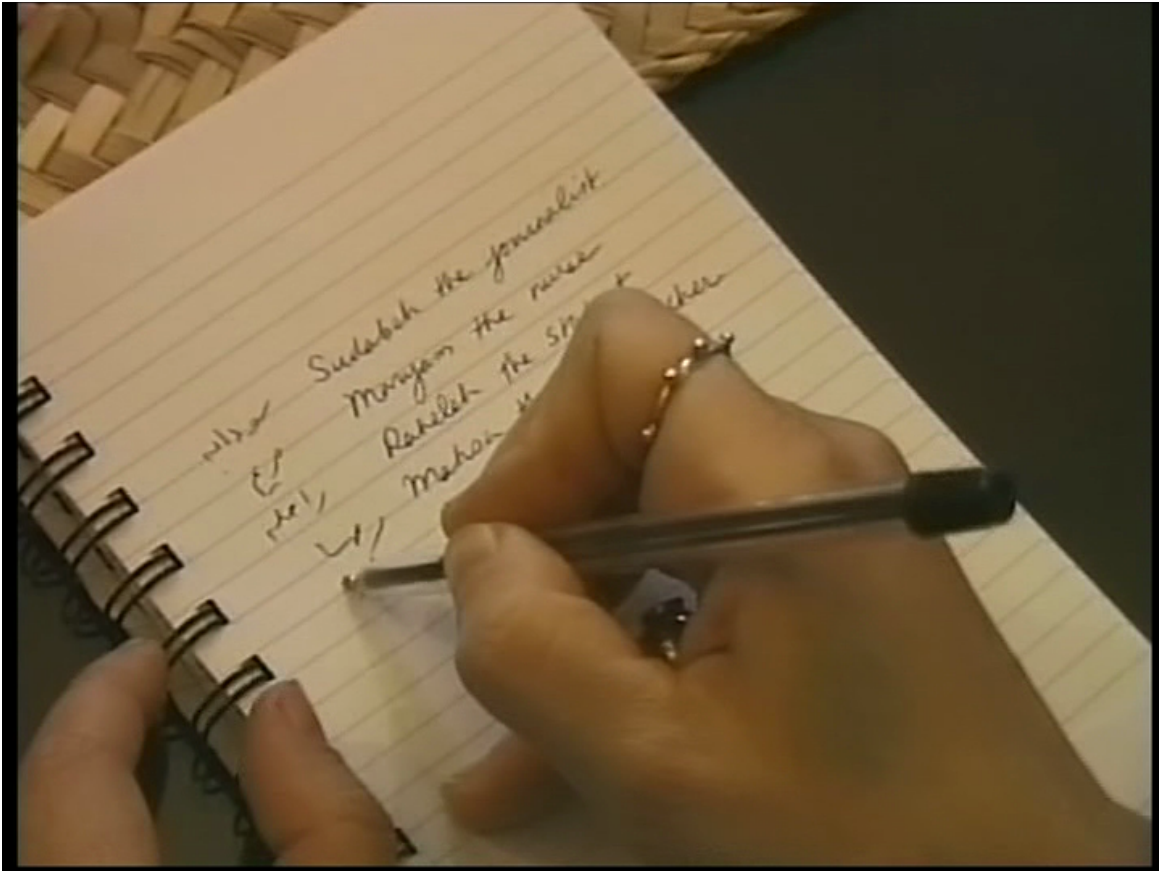


Illustration 4



Illustration 5

Through the diegetic staging of this first scene, Sadegh-Vaziri represents herself as a multilingual and culturally mobile individual. In this complicated scene, Sadegh-Vaziri uses intertitles and handwritten notes in multiple languages to communicate with her audience, and in doing so, establishes both English and Persian as equally viable vehicles of communication available to her. Similarly, through diegetic staging of herself without a veil and later donning a veil, Sadegh-Vaziri illustrates for her audience her ability to mimic the visual codes of various cultural contexts. And finally, by staging herself as reading Iranian periodicals and including in the same scene her non-diegetic voice-over about a life outside of Iran, Sadegh-Vaziri uses this scene to construct herself as a multilingual individual who maintains access to both Iranian and American cultural

spaces. Through this first scene, Sadegh-Vaziri represents herself as a multilingual and culturally mobile individual and with this mediated representation, creates a space for self-construction. Thus, rather than representing herself as having limited access to singular cultural context, Sadegh-Vaziri employs diegetic staging within this scene to construct herself as equally viable in both Iranian and Western cultural spaces and therefore, as having access to multiple categories of cultural identity.

After establishing Sadegh-Vaziri's cultural mobility and multilinguality, the documentary again employs the modes of diegetic staging to represent its filmmaker as maintaining these qualifications, but simultaneously, claiming a legitimate category of Iranian identity. In a short but powerful scene, Sadegh-Vaziri represents herself as a double for the five Iranian women that constitute her documentary's focus and, by establishing this doubling, self-situates within an uncontested category of Iranian identity. Leading up to this scene, Sadegh-Vaziri has introduced her audience to five women who each have a very different life. To offer insight into their lives, Sadegh-Vaziri records them in their homes, at work, and in casual situations while questioning them about their current careers and future goals. Sadegh-Vaziri films each of her subjects in short vignettes, during which she introduces them and their jobs to her audience, and in doing so, sets audience expectations for how the documentary's subjects will be represented to them. Mimicking this tread, Sadegh-Vaziri includes herself in an additional scene that looks and sounds like scenes recorded with her five filmic subjects. By employing this type of diegetic staging and scene organization, Sadegh-Vaziri represents herself to her audience in the identical fashion she represents her other filmic subjects and, as a close reading of one scene will illustrate, implicitly situates herself *amongst* the Iranian subjects this film claims to represent.

Standing in a softly-lit alleyway, the scene begins with a medium shot of Kobra and Sadegh-Vaziri facing each other as they shyly smile. Visually, they could not look more different from one another. Kobra is a heavy-set woman wearing a long, loose khaki coat with a softly colored scarf tied under chin, framing her beautiful, round face. Sadegh-Vaziri, a thin, small-framed individual, stands across from Kobra wearing Western-style dark clothing, black glasses, and no covering over her hair. Speaking in Persian, Sadegh-Vaziri asks Kobra, “Do you know why I ask you questions?” Kobra appears uncomfortable answering questions about Sadegh-Vaziri but responds, “You like questions.” Sadegh-Vaziri smiles and continues her probing, “What do you think I am doing this for?” Kobra again looks uncomfortable but answers, “It’s your job. You make films.” Sadegh-Vaziri face changes to show satisfaction and she replies, “That’s correct. Thank you.” The interaction ends and with it the scene.

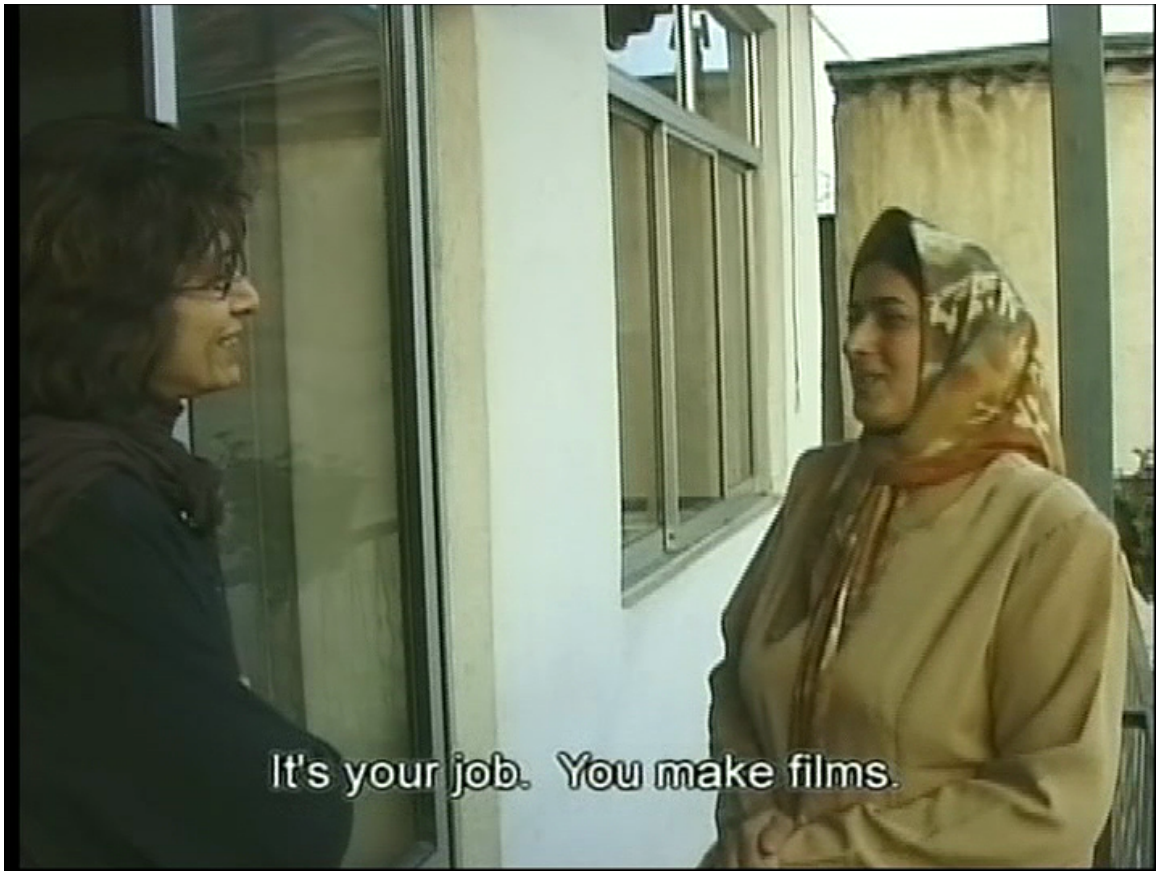


Illustration 6

While this scene at first appears to be a simple recorded interaction between the filmmaker and Kobra, upon closer analysis of its place within the larger project of the film, this scene takes on a new important meaning. Representing Sadegh-Vaziri use of doubling, this scene illustrates the way in which Sadegh-Vaziri maps her own self-construction onto her representations of the subjects in her film. Sadegh-Vaziri chooses to include an interview of herself conducted by one of the “women of Iran” that she is documenting and constructs this interview of herself with the same staging, tone, and format that she has used before while interviewing the stated subjects of her film. Sadegh-Vaziri, therefore, builds off of the expectations she has created earlier in the film by constructing her own scene through a similar format and employing the same modes

of representation when portraying herself as when portraying her documentary's subjects. This construction tricks the audience into interpreting this interaction with Sadegh-Vaziri not as another interaction with the filmmaker, but instead an interaction with yet another Iranian subject.

In addition to employing diegetic staging throughout her film, Sadegh-Vaziri uses nondiegetic voiceover to construct herself as a double for these women and as a result situates herself within an Iranian category of identity. A scene filmed at the apartment of Mahsa, one of the five women introduced in the film, offers another illustration of the way in which Sadegh-Vaziri employs nondiegetic voiceover to represent herself and her filmic subjects as doubles.

Directly following a scene showing Mahsa and her mother shopping in a high-end shopping mall, a new scene opens with a shot of a white gate. The camera silently approaches the gate, bouncing up and down mimicking the careless steps of the camera's operator. As the lens gets closer to the gate, the audience can see through the bars to a gray building with modern architecture. A large, concrete porch with a sign in Persian lettering frames the double glass doors at the buildings' entrance. As this image comes into focus, Sadegh-Vaziri's states through non-diegetic voiceover, "I am nervous entering Mahsa's home." As she says these words, the camera's frame changes to show an elegantly designed apartment, decorated with fine furniture and a beautiful, black Yamaha piano. With these images filling the frame, the voiceover continues, "maybe because it is very familiar to me and reminds me of the protected life before the revolution in Iran." Sadegh-Vaziri's narration ends and Mahsa begins to speak in front of the camera about her life as a piano student and teacher.

While only a brief comment, this scene and the voice-over Sadegh-Vaziri chooses to include within it, illustrates an important technique of doubling used in this film. With

voiceover, the filmmaker appropriates the viewers' interactions with Mahsa by applying meaning indexed in her own experiences rather than Mahsa's, and through this commentary, "guides us [the viewers] toward those aspects of the image that are most important to the argument," which in this case is the doubling of Mahsa and Sadegh-Vaziri.⁵³ In other words, with this voiceover, Sadegh-Vaziri "provides a selective anchoring of the image," and encourages her audience to explore Mahsa's apartment and the information Mahsa shares with them, not as an opportunity to learn about Mahsa's life but rather, as an opportunity to explore the life experiences of the filmmaker.⁵⁴ By introducing this scene through narration about her own life, Sadegh-Vaziri encourages her audience to interact with herself and Mahsa as doubles and therefore, to understand this scene in Mahsa's house as a scene about the similarity of Sadegh-Vaziri and Mahsa's lives and cultural influences.

Women Like Us: Women In Iran employs diegetic staging of multilinguality and the techniques of doubling to construct a filmic gaze that prioritizes representations of the filmmaker's deterritorialized Iranian identity. To accomplish this gaze, Sadegh-Vaziri begins by staging scenes in which she represents her proficiency with both Western and Iranian cultural and linguistic artifacts in order to represent herself as a culturally mobile and multilingual individual. This diegetic staging works to deterritorialize Sadegh-Vaziri, as these scenes represent to her viewers the multiple cultural spaces in which she operates. Once established as a multilingual individual, Sadegh-Vaziri introduces filmic subjects that occupy an unquestioned category of authentic Iranian identity. Represented by the very title of the film, Sadegh-Vaziri depicts these five women as various individuals who occupy a steadfast, defined category of identity indexed to their

⁵³ Nichols, *Representing Reality*, 154.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

territorial location as “women in Iran.” Using the techniques of doubling, Sadegh-Vaziri then constructs herself as yet another Iranian woman but “with a difference,” just as Naficy argues. While represented as a double of her filmic subjects, Sadegh-Vaziri simultaneously maintains a multilingual and culturally mobile self-construction and thereby, constructs a filmic gaze that represents her deterritorialized, authentic Iranian identity.

NONDIEGETIC NARRATION & DOUBLING *THE QUEEN AND I*

While also employing the techniques of doubling, this chapter offers a close reading of *The Queen and I* to demonstrate how filmmakers use different techniques, including nondiegetic narration, to construct the same gaze employed in *Women Like Us: Women of Iran*. Released in 2008 by RealReel Doc, Nahid Persson’s documentary *The Queen and I* and depicts the developing friendship between the filmmaker and the former Queen of Iran, Farah Pahlavi. This subject, however, was not the filmmaker’s original design for the project and is not the function she describes to her audience at the beginning of the documentary. As disclosed through nondiegetic voiceover in the initial scenes of her film, Persson claims that, having grown up as an impoverished child in Iran, Farah Pahlavi represents to her a degree of glamor and a life for which she could only dream. As Persson grew into an adult and became a passionate anti-royalist activist during the 1979 revolution, however, Farah Pahlavi transformed to represent for Persson a symbol of corruption and other ills in the Iranian government. Now thirty years removed from the events of the revolution, Persson is curious about the life of the former queen in exile, and it is from this autobiographical perspective that Persson decides to create a biographical documentary showcasing Farah Pahlavi’s life. Persson uses this autobiographical information to contextualize for her viewers the subject of her

documentary and, therefore, chooses to explore the life of Farah Pahlavi through the lens of her own life.

To construct its filmic gaze, Persson begins *The Queen and I* by staging her multilinguality and cultural mobility through scenes in which she speaks Swedish, Persian, and English, and by repeatedly filming herself in airports and on airplanes moving between the United States, Sweden, France, Iran, and Egypt. After establishing this representation of herself, Persson uses the techniques of doubling to further position herself within the same category of cultural identity available to the former Queen of Iran. Established by the film as a representation of authentic Iranian identity, Farah Pahlavi acts as the vehicle through which Persson establishes her own authentic Iranian identity. By employing diegetic staging of scenes filmed with both women and structuring these moments with Persson's nondiegetic narration, Persson doubles herself alongside the position of Farah Pahlavi and in so doing claims the same authentic Iranian identity that exists deterritorialized from Iran's borders.

Similar to the strategies of *Women Like Us: Women in Iran*, *The Queen and I* exhibits techniques of diegetic staging that assert the multilinguality of its filmmaker. Persson represents her claims to cultural mobility through the inclusion of scenes of her both during conversations in which she illustrates her proficiency in multiple languages and while she occupies spaces that represent travel and journey, such as airports and airplanes. To be more specific, within the diegesis of this single film, Persson records herself while speaking Persian, English, and Swedish and consequently, constructs a filmic representation of herself as performing multilinguality with ease and comfort. In addition to this form of diegetic staging, scenes in which Persson films herself in airports and on airplanes operate not as an escape or a homecoming, but instead as signifiers of

possibility, mobility, and freedom.⁵⁵ As Naficy would argue, these spaces represent the possibility of transnational journeys rather than erasure of original culture and, therefore, do not signal Persson's separation from Iranian cultural spaces but rather her mobility in and between multiple cultural spaces. In employing these modes of diegetic staging, Persson self-represents as a culturally mobile and multilingual individual who has access to and authority within multiple cultural contexts.

This chapter offers a close reading of three consecutive scenes to explore how *The Queen and I* employs diegetic staging to illustrate Persson as having access to multiple linguistic environments and performing comfortably in each. In the first of these scenes, Persson stands in a room full of individuals who maintain support for the exiled Iranian monarchy and aggressively vocalize this support to those around them. Filmed in a loud and crowded room occupied by retirement-aged Iranian Royalists, this scene captures Persson gently debating with her fellow guests. As the camera catches multiple conversations, the documentary's audience witnesses the deft, speed, and comfort with which Persson speaks and understands Persian. As multiple guests blurt out statements and challenges, Persson responds without hesitation and maintains an energetic conversation with this group of individuals throughout the scene. This scene ends and a new one begins with the image of a lone, contemplative Persson standing against an anonymous concrete wall. As she stands silently in the shot, Persson's voice addresses her audience through non-diegetic narration. Speaking English, the filmmaker describes her concerns and fears about making this film and interacting with its subjects. While speaking with a slight accent, Persson again illustrates her deft, ease, and comfort in this second language. This second scene ends and the final scene of this series begins. Being filmed on a brightly lit balcony, Persson sits speaking in Swedish with two journalists.

⁵⁵ Naficy, *Accented Cinema*, 245.

Again, the film illustrates Persson's ability to communicate complex concepts comfortably in a third language. While these scenes are only a few of the examples through which Persson illustrates her multilinguality in the film, the consecutive arrangement of these scenes orchestrate a strong example of its diegetic staging of multilinguality. As a close reading of these scenes illustrates, Persson stages her multilinguality within the diegesis of the film by including scenes in which she is filmed speaking multiple languages with comfort and proficiency. In representing this multiplicity of proficiencies, Persson creates an ambiguous space for self-construction, in which she has at her disposal linguistic points of entry into Iranian, Swedish, and Western cultural spaces.

While not organized consecutively, a second set of recurring scenes in this film work to illustrate Persson's access to and mobility between multiple nations and cultural spaces. Over the course of her documentary, Persson films herself on five separate occasions inside airports or on airplanes. These scenes are scattered throughout the film, each less than a minute long, and punctuate Persson's travel to and from meetings with Farah Pahlavi. The first of these scenes occurs in an Iranian airport, where airport guards question Persson about her past films and forbid her from filming in Iran again. While the audience never actually sees the questioning occur, Persson constructs this scene through a long shot of an airport guard station and the recorded audio of the exchange between herself and her interrogators. A second and third airport scene films Persson on her way to meet Farah Pahlavi at her home in Paris. These scenes include shots of Persson pushing luggage carts weighed down with large, heavy bags, settling into her assigned airplane seat, and staring contemplatively out of a tiny airplane window at a blue sky and fluffy white clouds. A fourth scene captures Persson's travel to Egypt so that she may join Farah Pahlavi at an annual commemoration of Shah Pahlavi's death. This scene also

records moments of Persson finding her seat and settling in, as well as footage of Egypt's pyramids positioned from the bird's-eye view of Persson's window seat. And finally, a fifth travel scene depicts Persson's trip to meet Farah Pahlavi in Washington D.C. and is composed through the image of Persson walking through an airport and a shot of an airplane the U.S. Capitol building.

Like the previous series of scenes discussed, this second set of scenes also stages within the diegesis representations of Persson as a culturally mobile individual. Unlike the earlier scenes described, in which Persson films herself conversing in multiple languages, however, these scenes maintain a less organic presence in the film. Rather than functioning both as diegetic staging and as filmic moments offering new information, these scenes' sole function is to construct changes in the narrative through the physical experience of Persson and not the former queen. In other words, these scenes do not offer their audiences new information about the film's subject but instead punctate changes in the territorial location of the filmmaker, and consequently, situate Persson's body as the physical body that determines the camera's location and the film's progress. These scenes function to situate the filmmaker as the agent of these movements while representing the filmmaker as culturally mobile and multilingual.



Illustration 7

After establishing her multilinguality through diegetic staging, Persson constructs herself and Farah Pahlavi as doubles by including scenes in which Farah Pahlavi and herself behave in similar ways, express similar desires, or draw comparisons between their similar life experiences. These representations work to conflate the sensual experiences and deep desires of both women, and through this conflation, encourage the audience to understand them in identical ways. Rather than aggressively doubling in one or two scenes, *The Queen and I* relies on small moments in various scenes throughout the film to accomplish the doubling of Farah Pahlavi and Persson. This paper, therefore, offers an analysis of several scenes to illustrate that together, over the course of the film, these moments of diegetic staging bring about a doubling effect.

In the first scene, Persson uses Farah Pahlavi and her shared love of the smell of gasoline and the memories it excites in both of them to draw a comparison between the

two women. This scene begins with Farah Pahlavi and Persson both standing in an art gallery looking through a Paris-based artist's work. The room is crowded with paintings and the two women meander through the works, discussing each one's successes. As they try to select a painting to purchase for a charity event, Farah Pahlavi, speaking Persian, says almost absent-mindedly, "The smell of paint makes me happy." With a smile on her face, Persson responds in a surprised tone, "Really?" Answering the filmmaker's question, Farah Pahlavi replies, "yes, basically." Now from off screen, Persson says, "you also said you like the smell of gasoline." At Persson's statement, Pahlavi begins to laugh as she realizes that the reason she likes the smell of gasoline is it brings memories of Iran back to her. Both women smile at this revelation and the scene ends. But as the next scene begins, the nondiegetic voice of Persson informs her audience—this time in English—that "the smell of gasoline reminds me of my country, too." As she says these words, the camera's frame fills with images organized to offer a reconstruction of Persson's escape from Iran. After retelling her story through a combination of voiceover and abstract images, the scene ends and the audience now knows the story of Persson's exile.

As this scene represents through diegetic staging, Persson conflates her own life story with the sensual experiences of Farah Pahlavi and in doing so, creates a doubling effect. In other words, while the film constructs this scene through a diegetic representation of Farah Pahlavi's experience of a particular smell and the memories in which this smell indexes, the function of the scene is to introduce the nondiegetic experiences of Persson as related to her experience of exile. Thus, by constructing a scene through this constructed gaze, Persson implicitly argues that her own memory of gasoline is just as relevant to the work of the documentary as the memory belonging to her stated filmic subject.

In a second powerful scene, *The Queen and I* again represents the desires of Farah Pahlavi and Persson as identical and indexed in the same experiences. Walking into the formal dining room of her beautifully furnished Paris apartment, Farah Pahlavi wears a chic, black suit with her hair pulled back in an elegant bun. She walks to her large dining room table, set with candelabras and marble plates, and peers into a white plastic bag sitting atop it. Completely absorbed, Farah Pahlavi pulls out of the bag what appears to be a dead plant in a simple plastic, terracotta-colored planter. Contrasting her obliviousness to the valuable items furnishing her apartment, Farah Pahlavi looks with great intensity at this pot of sticks as she says, “One of my friends went back to Iran and bought this plant for me.” The tone of her voice betrays excitement, as she whispers about the plant as if it a rare jewel. Farah Pahlavi looks up at the filmmaker whose voice sounds from behind the camera and repeats with a smile on her face, “It’s from Iran!” She turns to her housekeeper standing to the left of her and gives the woman instructions in French to give the plant water. Turning back to the contents of the bag, she exclaims, “Eh! Black Soil! Where did she find this?” Digging her hand into the bag of dirt, she smiles and breathes out a sound of delight. With the camera focused on Farah Pahlavi’s face, she takes the dirt from the bag and spreads it onto a marble plate already sitting on the table. Touching it and wearing an expression on her face that mimics a mother’s look for her child, she whispers, “It feels wonderful... Now that I can’t be there myself, I can still feel the Earth.” The camera offers a close up of Farah Pahlavi’s manicured hands as she caresses and runs her fingers through the black earth brought to her all the way from Iran. Farah Pahlavi walks out of the room announcing she must change her clothing and a new shot fills the screen, showing Persson sitting alone at that big table.

The dirt so enjoyed by Farah Pahlavi sits in the foreground of the shot as Persson sits silently at the table on which it sits. While the scene ends here, Persson refers back to

this moment during a voiceover in the very last moments of her film. With a shot of the two women standing side by side smiling, Persson's nondiegetic voiceover recalls this moment with the black soil and says:

When I started this film in the end, I was intrigued by a woman whose life could not be more different from mine. Farrah is no longer the fairytale queen of my childhood fantasy nor the mysterious antagonist of my revolutionary past. We have become two unlikely friends who share the longing to return to the Iran we both love *and dream the same dream to touch its soil again.*



Illustration 8



Illustration 9

Again, in these scenes, Persson uses the sensual experience of Farah Pahlavi to explore her own feelings about exile and in doing so, constructs a doubling effect through which the documentary represents these two women as sharing indexes of desire related to Iran. A not uncommon practice amongst individuals exiled from their nations of birth, Farah Pahlavi *and* Persson's interaction with and desire for this soil acts as a visual and sensual "reminder of their rootedness to the land" that they both are no longer capable of accessing.⁵⁶ In representing their shared desire for the soil, therefore, this scene positions Farah Pahlavi and Persson as doubles who because of their identical experiences share identical desires for the sensual experiences of Iran's territorial spaces.

While alone each one of these scenes do not achieve the effects of doubling, when considered together, they constitute an implicit filmic argument constructing Farah Pahlavi and Persson as individuals who share fundamental aspects of their beings. The

⁵⁶ Naficy, *Accented Cinema*, 307 n.2.

sensual experiences of Farah Pahlavi and of Persson identically index in their respective memories of “home,” and for the audience to access Persson’s memories, they must rely Farah Pahlavi’s sense of smell as their conduit. Similarly, Persson offers Farah Pahlavi’s experience of “Iran’s earth” to inform the audience’s understanding of both women’s “longing.” This technique accomplishes a doubling of the filmmaker through the experience of the film’s protagonist and positions Persson in the same category of cultural experience and identity as the unquestioned Iranian of this film, the former Queen of Iran.

When considered in context to the discussion of *Prostitution Behind the Veil* offered in Chapter One, however, this picture of the unquestioned Iranian identity takes on a more complex character. As illustrated in Chapter One, Persson employs her access to Iranian spaces to document prostitution in Iran but does so through a positionality that applies Western Liberal ideology to its exploration of the subject. In doing so, Persson uses her documentary subject to establish a representation of herself committed to the tenets of Western Liberalism and consequently, at odds with Iranian culture. Unwilling to renounce her Iranian identity in response to this conflict, however, Persson employs a new gaze to reconcile her particular pronouncement of Iranian self-identification. With this new gaze, Persson explores her relationship with Iranian spaces and categories of Iranian identity and through it, reasserts her authentic claims to Iranian categories of self-identification. With this second gaze, therefore, Persson staves off the threat posed by her Western Liberal identity to her Iranian identity, therefore, by constructing a documentary with a second gaze, in which she claims the authenticity of her controversial, deterritorialized, Western Liberal, Iranian identity.

A CONSTRUCTED GAZE AND DETERRITORIALIZED IRANIAN IDENTITY

This chapter has offered careful analysis of Sadegh-Vaziri's *Women Like Us: Women in Iran* and Persson's *The Queen and I* to illustrate the constructed gaze through which the films in this chapter function. Implied by both documentaries' titles, the filmmakers of this category claim to represent Iranian women in their documentaries but do so through the lens of their own experiences and relationships to the film's topic. While these films claim to document the lives of a journalist, a piano teacher, a rice farmer, a student, a nurse, and a former queen, *in reality*, they document the filmmakers' self-constructions within a specific Iranian category of identity that maintains its claims to authentic Iranian identity while outside of Iran's territorial borders. In structuring their films through these means, the filmmakers in this category use representations of Iranian women to construct filmic spaces in which they themselves may self-situate and claim Iranian identity. Thus, the filmmakers in this category claim authentic Iranian identity by doubling themselves through their protagonists and by asserting through the diegetic staging of their own multilinguality, a definition of Iranian identity that is not contingent on one's occupation of the territorial boundaries of Iran. Instead, the constructed gaze of this film asserts that one does not need to live in Iran to self-identify as Iranian and prioritizes representations of these individuals.

In employing this gaze to construct their documentaries, the filmmakers in this chapter create films that participate in a filmic ethics that prioritizes representations of the filmmaker's deterritorialized Iranian identity over representations of the national identities belonging to the claimed subjects of these documentaries. This ethic allows for the appropriation of others' filmic representations, who rather than being demonstrated as claiming Iranian self-identification, are offered as unquestioned tropes of an authentic category of deterritorialized Iranian identity. Thus, while the filmmakers claim to

represent Iranian women, they do so only to the extent that they themselves may self-construct within the categories of Iranian identity these women are claimed to represent. The ethic of this gaze, therefore, allows for the prioritization of specific categories of Iranian identity over categories, by emphasizing representations of the filmmaker's deterritorialized identity at the expense of accurate, independent documentation of the film's claimed subject.

Chapter Three:
The Documentaries of Exiled Iranian Female Filmmakers:
An Ethic of Hybridized Identity

In chapters one and two, this thesis has discussed categories of documentary filmmaking that employ constructed filmic gazes that prioritize representations of their filmmakers' self-situation and self-identification within either Iranian or Western categories of identity. While these filmmakers represent themselves as having access to both of these cultural identities, they nevertheless choose to self-situate within *one* of the two defined categories. In employing these gazes, the filmmakers discussed in the preceding chapters create documentaries that participate in particular filmic ethics that prioritize representations of themselves as self-constructed within Western ideologies or as maintaining authentic Iranian identity over comprehension or nuanced representations of their claimed documentary subjects. There exists, however, a third category of filmmaking arising from the documentaries created by exiled Iranian documentary filmmakers. In this category of films, these filmmakers also capitalize on a dualism between Iranian and Western categories of identity but refrain from self-situating fully within either category. Instead, the filmmakers in this category employ their documentaries to represent a third, ambiguous space of cultural identity, remaining in-between, partial, and scattered amidst two complex cultural identities they inhabit simultaneously. To explore this hybridized category of identity, the gaze constructed to prioritize representations of it, and the ethics implicit in employment of this filmic gaze, this chapter offers an analysis of Persheng Sadegh-Vaziri's *A Place Called Home* and Tanaz Eshaghian's *I Call Myself Persian*.

Similar to the first and second category of documentaries discussed, the filmmakers in this third category initially represent Iranian and Western categories of identity as essentially hostile and different from one another. To construct this oppositional dualism, this group of filmmakers use various techniques of filmmaking to construct their arguments through voiceover commentary and interviews designed to attest to the hostile relationship that exists between Iran and Western culture, and those who occupy them. As argued by Nichols' work on interviews, structuring a film's argument through interviews empowers the documentarian to transform the testimony of others into support for his or her film's argument, while simultaneously endowing the filmmaker with the authority to ask questions from his or her own ideological subjectivity, to determine who does and does not have the authority to speak, and to determine what issues construct his or her audience's understanding of the interview's subject matter.⁵⁷ In other words, interviews act to maintain the authoring presence of the filmmaker (in the form of the content of questions, staging choices, editing, and placement of the interview within the film) as well as to offer surrogate sources of evidence that, while maintaining "little responsibility for making the argument," can be used "to support it or provide evidence or substantiation for what the commentary addresses."⁵⁸

Exemplifying Nichols' analysis of interview in documentary filmmaking, Sadegh-Vaziri's documentary employs carefully constructed and strategically organized interviews with her mother and father to substantiate her own argument regarding the experience of living within both Iranian and Western cultures.⁵⁹ By interviewing both

⁵⁷ Nichols, *Representing Reality*, 50-51.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁵⁹ Nichols, *Representing Reality*, 51.

with identical questions, constructing interview questions through terms of emotionalism, limiting her audience's access to portions of interviews, and organizing interviews strategically throughout her documentary, Sadegh-Vaziri uses interviews with her parents to construct representations of Iranian and Western cultures as hostile. Similarly relying on interviews as alternative but mediated sources of evidence, Eshaghian's *I Call Myself Persian* organizes interviews into intellectual montages throughout her film to substantiate the arguments offered by the documentary's voice-of-God narration and through this process, represents Iranian and Western categories of identity as oppositional.⁶⁰ Thus, the films in this category construct and support their representation of the relationship between being Iranian and Western through the careful construction and strategic inclusions of interviews, although employed through different techniques.

Once they establish this duality, again like the films discussed in previous chapters, the films in this category represent their filmmaker as self-situating within specific cultural identity. Unlike the films in previous chapters, however, these documentaries do not employ representations of their filmmakers' dual presence in Iranian and Western cultural contexts to privilege alignment with the ideological values or normative definitions of one category of identity over the other. Instead, in these documentaries, the filmmakers create and occupy a "hybridized" space, in which they embrace "the fears, freedoms, and possibilities of split subjectivities and multiple identities."⁶¹ Introduced by Naficy's, the concept of hybridized identities arises from a response to the interaction of one's internal and external cultures and indexes to the

⁶⁰ The terms intellectual montage and voice-of-God narration will be defined and explored further in the subsequent paragraphs.

⁶¹ Naficy, *Accented Cinema*, 271.

subjective experience of transnational and liminal spaces.⁶² In occupying these spaces, representations of hybridized identity “problematize the predetermined notions of self and nation.”⁶³ Rather than identifying within distinct or homogenous categories of identity, those who self-situate within a hybridized category of identity embrace the ambiguities, excess, ruptures, erasures, and intersections of multiplicity by identifying with simultaneous enunciation of multiple cultural identities.⁶⁴

To create and represent this hybridized cultural identity, the filmmakers in this category employ both “voice-of-god” narration and intimate, diary entry-like voiceover to imply the inadequacy of these pre-established separate categories, to highlight the existence of individuals who do not self-situate within the binary, and to self-situate themselves within a hyphenated cultural space. In this regard, Nichols theory on voice in documentary film offers a particularly important analysis for understanding how these films operate. Sadegh-Vaziri’s employs diary entry-like moments of voiceover throughout her film to share her intimate thoughts and personal concerns when structuring both her audiences’ interactions with various diegetic characters and their interviews, and to offer moments of self-reflective analysis.⁶⁵ Thus, the filmmaker’s voice in this documentary functions to “share doubts and emotional reactions with other characters and with us [the audience]. As a result, the filmmaker seems to refuse a privileged position in relation to

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid., 269.

⁶⁴ Nichols, *Representing Reality*, 32.

⁶⁵ Diary-entry-like narration describes scenes in which the filmmaker speaks directly to his or her viewer, disclosing intimate thoughts without disclosing the context or causes that prompted these moments. In these scenes, the filmmaker sometimes speaks from in front off the camera or from an nondiegetic location but, always constructs these moments as intimate conversations of private details between the intended viewer and his or herself.

other characters.”⁶⁶ While this strategy of narration constitutes a “less assertive” form of authorial voice (as opposed to voice-of-God narration), as Nichols explains, this form of narration “remain[s] complicit with the controlling voice of the textual system itself...”⁶⁷ and therefore, functions to maintain the authorial presence of the filmmaker.

Using quite a different filmic voice, the filmmaker of *I Call Myself Persian* records her narration of the film from a voice-of-God position, which Nichols argues functions to make the implicit and “dubious claim that things are as the film presented them, organized by the commentary of an all-knowing subject” rather than an ideologically- biased social actor organizing interviews at the service of his or her filmic argument.”⁶⁸ In the specific case of Eshaghian’s film, she acts as the narrator and offers this narration from a voice-of-God position, and uses it to construct the argument of her documentary, enacted through strategically organized interviews. Employing both diary entry-like commentary and voice-of-God narration, therefore, the documentaries in this category of filmmaking employ various modes of filmic voice to apply to the categories of identities exhibited throughout their documentaries personal meaning indexed in hybridity.

Using different forms of filmic voice, *I Call Myself* and *A Place Called Home* employ interviews and modes of narration to establish the inadequacy of stagnantly defined categories of cultural identity and to represent an alternative, hybridized space for self-construction. By staging interviews with filmic subjects who claim defined, cultural self-identification and offering negative information in these moments, the films depict these categories of identity as insufficient and causing harm. This category of films then

⁶⁶ Nichols, *Voice of Documentary*, 23-24.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 23.

employs various forms of narration to insert the filmmaker's hybridized identity into the diegesis of the documentary and through this insertion, position the filmmaker's identity as the sole example of a healthy and viable category of self-identification. Using these techniques of documentary filmmaking, therefore, *I Call Myself Persian* and *A Place Called Home* construct a filmic gaze that prioritizes representations of identity as existing within a hybridized cultural space by rejecting the viability of singularly defined, static, cultural identity indexed in a nation or specific cultural traditions. This category of films, therefore, like the ones discussed in previous chapters, construct a filmic gaze that participates in an ethics that prioritizes documentary representations of the lives and self-identifications of their filmmakers over filmic representations of the experiences and self-constructions of those belonging to the claimed documentary subject.

INTERVIEW & DIARY ENTRY- LIKE NARRATION IN *A PLACE CALLED HOME*

To explore the ways in which documentary filmmakers employ modes of interviews and diary-entry-like narration to construct the filmic gaze explored in this chapter, this thesis offers a close reading of *A Place Called Home*. Directed by Persheng Sadegh-Vaziri and distributed by Women Make Movies, *A Place Called Home* aired on PBS in 1998 as a short documentary, running only twenty-seven minutes. The filmmaker was born and raised in Iran but college-educated in America and has lived her entire adult life in the United States. At the time of the documentary's filming, Sadegh-Vaziri was in the midst of weighing the option of moving back to Iran rather than remaining in the United States. This decision and the complex, often contradictory feelings it generates in the filmmaker about "home" and "where she belongs" shapes the narrative of this documentary. Situating "home" as hovering between two cultural contexts, held in place by a complex web of childhood memories, adult expectations, family relations, ancient

history, and contemporary realities, *Place Called Home* employs interviews and dairy entry-like commentary to construct a gaze that represents the filmmaker's self-identification within a hybridized category of identity. Rather than feeling the obligation to "choose" one cultural identity over the other, Sadegh-Vaziri represents herself as existing between and beyond the limited categories of Western and Iranian identity, and capable of thriving in an ambiguous and hybridized cultural space.

Identifying Western and Iranian cultures as hostile, Sadegh-Vaziri employs her mother and father as tropes of an essential and insurmountable rift that exists between Iranian and American spaces and the incompleteness and dissatisfaction of those who choose to self-identify with one or the other. Sadegh-Vaziri films her mother, who lives in America and her father, who lives in Iran, during interviews in which she probes her parents' about their feelings regarding the countries they inhabit, those in which their spouses live, and on living separately for fifteen years of their marriage. Using leading questions and emotional language while conducting her interviews, Sadegh-Vaziri interweaves her own conception of the hostility between these two cultures into the dialogue of these interactions, and subsequently, into the audience's interaction with her mother and father's stated opinions.

Employing this mode of interview empowers Sadegh-Vaziri to maintain her authoring presence within the documentary, while drawing substantiation from the physical and verbal presence of others occupying the cultural contexts she seeks to represent. While performing these interviews, Sadegh-Vaziri's establishes her physical presence behind and, at times, in front of the camera, and allows the film to record the diegetic sound of her asking questions. In sharing physical space with the interviewee but maintaining her determined role as questioner, Sadegh-Vaziri privileges herself "as the initiator and arbiter of legitimacy..." and, therefore, as having the authority to determine

what questions ought to be asked, who has the legitimacy and authority to provide answers, and how these questions and their answers appear to the documentary's audience.⁶⁹ Simultaneously, by including the testimony of other historical agents within the frames of the documentary, the modes of interview attest to "the interviewee as primary source material, and, therefore, as substantiation of the argument of the documentary in which they have been included."⁷⁰ Thus, filming her parents' responses to specific questions indexed in her subjective experience empowers Sadegh-Vaziri to use these interviews with her parents as "inscriptions" and "reenactments" of her own feelings about the "fears, freedoms, and possibilities of split subjectivity and multiple identities."⁷¹

To explore Sadegh-Vaziri's construction of mutually-exclusive category of Iranian and Western self-identification, this chapter offers a close reading of two interview scenes: the first with Sadegh-Vaziri's mother and the second with her father. As the first of these scenes opens, a close-up shot of Sadegh-Vaziri and her mother fill the screen. Sadegh-Vaziri's mother, dressed in a purple cotton blouse, wearing glasses, and sporting a softly coifed hair-style, sits very close to her daughter. Both smiling, mother and daughter press their faces against one another's while looking through a red photo album housing neatly-pasted, rectangular, black and white photographs. This image fades to black and as the next shot fills the frame, the audience hears Sadegh-Vaziri's disembodied voice ask her mother, "Are you happy living here?" As the audience hears this question, the film presents a new image of Sadegh-Vaziri's mother. In this shot, she sits in a red silk blouse, not wearing glasses, in a different setting, and with shorter hair than appeared in the

⁶⁹ Nichols, *Representing Reality*, 52.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 52.

⁷¹ Naficy, *Accented Cinema*, 271.

previous frames. No longer smiling, Sadegh-Vaziri's mother's face looks weary as she responds, "From one hand yes on the other hand, no. My life is half now. Half is here. Half is in Iran. Half of my body—my husband is there and I am here...this bothering..."⁷² Off camera but within the same physical space as her mother, Sadegh-Vaziri responds, "Why don't you go there?" Still filling the frame, her mother answers, "I am thinking a lot and uh... it's hard for me for fifteen years living in this country and have freedom about everything. I lose all these things and go there." With these words, the scene ends and a new one begins.

This first scene makes visible several techniques of filmmaking employed by Sadegh-Vaziri when constructing the filmic gaze of *A Place Called Home*. First, this interview, while edited to appear as if occurring in one sitting, is the product of at least two separate interactions between mother and daughter. While the timing of Sadegh-Vaziri's questioning remains ambiguous, Sadegh-Vaziri's mother's change of clothing, hairstyle, and location in her home between the first images of the interview and its conclusion suggest an editing process applied to the raw footage of these interactions. Thus, while Sadegh-Vaziri's mother appears within the film to be an agent of this interaction and a reliable source for information about her happiness, a close reading of the scene problematizes the authenticity of the interaction offered to the audience and illustrates the filmmaker's ability to manipulate interviews in order to construct the argument of his or her film. Moreover, Sadegh-Vaziri's employment of a false binary when forming her questions further illustrates this process. In response to her mother's unhappiness, Sadegh-Vaziri asks why she does not live "there" and, in doing so, limits viable resolutions to her mother's unhappiness as arising from either Iranian or Western

⁷² Quotes mimic the language used by the interviewee, without added corrections to grammar.

cultural contexts. In other words, Sadegh-Vaziri does not wonder why her mother does not move to France (given her unhappiness in Iran and the US) but instead, in her very phrasing of this question, constructs a false binary according to which Iranian and Western cultural spaces are the sole options available to her mother.

In a second, similarly constructed scene, Sadegh-Vaziri interviews her father. Sitting on a park bench, her father has an elegant presence. Tall and thin, he is dressed in stylish leisure clothing, a black beret, and matching thick-rimmed glasses; so large that they partially obscure his neatly-maintained, silver mustache. Again, as in the interview with her mother, Sadegh-Vaziri's off-camera voice probes her father's feelings about living in Iran and the West. Just as she asked her mother, Sadegh-Vaziri asks, "Are you happy living here?" Without the camera leaving its focus on his face, Sadegh-Vaziri's father responds, "I, myself, am happy." He explains that he remains in Iran because of his advanced age and his inability to find a job in the United States at this point in his life. He adds, however, "I think even if I do not look for the job still I like to be here. Because I have much better communication with the people and with the society than in the US."

As this second scene illustrates, phrasing questions through leading language constitutes a second mode of interview used by Sadegh-Vaziri to represent these interactions through a gaze designed to construct Iranian and Western categories of identity as mutually exclusive. In asking both her mother and father about their happiness, Sadegh-Vaziri implicitly argues several ideologically situated beliefs: happiness can be effected by living situation, happiness within one's living situation is a reasonable expectation, and that happiness is possible in this space as well as others. In other words, instead of allowing them to organically express their feelings, Sadegh-Vaziri's constructs interviews with her parents through techniques that lead them into describing feelings that they might otherwise not have expressed. Additionally, Sadegh-

Vaziri offers a specific vocabulary through which her parents may explore their feelings and in doing so, construct interviews with them to address the larger concern of the documentary: finding satisfaction in one's "home," rather than the addressing the issues indigenous to their own motivations and desires to self-represent.

In these scenes, we witness Sadegh-Vaziri's use of the modes of interview to establish dual and mutually exclusive categories of Iranian and Western identity. Sadegh-Vaziri's construction of these interviews index in her attempt to establish as hostile Iranian and Western cultural categories. She accomplishes this in two ways: first, Sadegh-Vaziri's phrasing of questions construct the parameters within which her interviews must answer and consequently, assist in establishing the dualism necessitated for her argument. Second, Sadegh-Vaziri constructs these two individuals as oppositional characters by including in the documentary exclusively opposite responses to identical questions. In other words, presumably, in these moments of filming, Sadegh-Vaziri asked her parents several questions but when constructing her film chose to include portions of her interviews in which her parents are asked identical questions but give opposite responses. In placing these interviews in closely-positioned scenes and interviewing her mother and father separately, Sadegh-Vaziri constructs an implicit opposition between her mother and her father's self-identification. In other words, Sadegh-Vaziri's organization of these two interviews within the film place the interviewee and their self-identification in opposition with one another. Thus, by asking ideologically-indexed interview questions, including moments in which her interviewees gave different answers to the same questions, and positioning these two interviews within close sequence, Sadegh-Vaziri illustrates both the existence of Iranian and Western categories of identity and the hostile relationship these categories shared.

Once establishing tropes of Iranian and Western categories of self-identification that appear inflexible, Sadegh-Vaziri situates herself within a uniquely hybridized cultural space by constructing and including diary entry- like scenes in which she directly addresses her audience from a position in front of the camera. Appearing only twice throughout the film, these moments of diary-entry like speech function as moments of self-reflection during which Sadegh-Vaziri shares with her audience how she positions herself within the larger topic of the documentary. To explore how diary entry-like narration functions in this film, this chapter offers a close reading of the two scenes in which Sadegh-Vaziri employs this technique.

Opening from black, the camera's frame fills with a close-up shot of hands placing clothing into a suitcase. After the hands add each new item, the shot cuts and a new shot of a new item being packed takes its place. After a series of these shots, the camera cuts away from the contents of the suitcase to the body of Sadegh-Vaziri looking into the camera as she addresses the viewer. Holding up a navy blue American passport, Sadegh-Vaziri explains "When I enter Iran, I'll enter with this," and as she picks up a second burgundy-colored Iranian passport, "and have to hide this." Hiding her Iranian passport behind her navy blue American passport, Sadegh-Vaziri continues, "and when I come back to the states I have to hide this and show this because neither country likes each other." Placing both passports against one another, however, Sadegh-Vaziri laughs and states, "But as far as I am concerned, they can go together." Without transition, the frame fills with a medium shot of Sadegh-Vaziri holding, folding, and putting on a hijab. She tucks her hair in, looks down to inspect her long, tan jacket, and says, "See? I am completely covered. I can't have any of my legs showing either... I mean...Ok! Islamic!" The frame fades and in the place a new scene begins with the image of a plane sitting at an airport gate.



Illustration 10



Illustration 11

As a close reading of this scene illustrates, Sadegh-Vaziri uses narration to identify within a hybridized cultural space. Introducing cultural props, Sadegh-Vaziri uses passports, modest clothing, and the logistics of U.S. and Iranian international relations to represent the conflicting aspects of her identity. These markers illustrate her experience as an individual claiming a multi-layered cultural identity, which requires her to act as a chameleon in varying cultural spaces. After offering her passports as markers of a greater political struggles, Sadegh-Vaziri then uses voiceover narration to reclaim these items by asserting her personal understanding of cultural identity within this larger context. Employing diary entry-like narration, Sadegh-Vaziri addresses her audiences and says, “But as far as I am concerned, they can go together.” Thus, asserting that while these

categories of cultural identity are hostile, she maintains both indices within her hybridized and ever-changing self-identification.

In a second similar scene, Sadegh-Vaziri offers her final analysis of the relationship between Iranian and Western cultural spaces and her own self-situation within and beyond these categories. Sadegh-Vaziri achieves this by offering a second instance of diary-entry-like narration, in which she directly addresses the documentary's audience and discusses her self-identification. In this scene, Sadegh-Vaziri gently speaks from a nondiegetic location as the audience hears the quick, wispy sounds of Kurdish drums and encounters abstract images shot by an out of focus camera. As she speaks directly to the audience about her life, her family, and how each have affected her understanding of self and culture, Sadegh-Vaziri states, "But for me, the search for identity has been a struggle because I see with two different eyes, two perspectives. I have resisted this duality in my life. Being in Iran is making me understand and giving me peace." And with the film ending seconds after she speaks these words, this narration acts as the final instance of self-identification offered by Sadegh-Vaziri within the diegesis of her film.

As these two scenes illustrate, Sadegh-Vaziri employs diegetic staging and narration to self-construct as maintaining a hybridized and flexible cultural identity indexed in both Iranian and Western spaces. While she begins her film with interviews constructed to represent these categories as insufficient and opposing, Sadegh-Vaziri communicates the coexistence of these cultural influences within her own identity through diary-entry-like narration. Using this narration, Sadegh-Vaziri applies new meaning to the interviews and events she includes in the diegesis of her documentary and consequently, constructs a filmic gaze that argues for the unique viability of hybridized categories of identity and the unviability of identities indexed in a singular national or

cultural influences. In employing this gaze, Sadegh-Vaziri's documentary participates in a filmic ethics that prioritizes representations of hybridized identity over identities defined in either Western or Iranian cultural influences.

VOICE-OF-GOD NARRATION & INTELLECTUAL MONTAGE IN *I CALL MYSELF PERSIAN*

While employing the same filmic gaze as *A Place Called Home*, *I Call Myself Persian* uses intellectual montage and a different mode of narration—voice-of-God narration—to construct this gaze and situate its filmmaker within a hybridized category of identity. Released in 2002 by Third World Newsreel, *I Call Myself Persian* constitutes documentary filmmaker Tanaz Eshaghian's first distributed film and discusses the experience of exiled Iranians living in the United States—an experience Eshaghian shares herself. Similar to *A Place Called Home*, *I Call Myself Persian* is relatively short, running thirty-three minutes. Employing the same constructed gaze, *I Call Myself Persian* differs from Sadegh-Vaziri's documentary in its use of both voice-of-God narration offered by the filmmaker and intellectual montages consisting of both archival footage and interviews to communicate these ideological stances. Eshaghian employs these techniques of filmmaking to construct a filmic gaze that represents hostility between Iranian and Western categories of identity and the existence of individuals belonging to these cultural contexts who self-situate within a hybridized category of cultural identity.

While physically absent from her documentary, Eshaghian positions herself within her film and its subject matter by maintaining an “authoring presence” through the film's voice-of-God narration. While Eshaghian occupies the same descriptive category as the subjects of her analysis, Eshaghian does not offer this information to the audiences of *I Call Myself Persian*, and instead, chooses to self-situate within her film through the

position of an anonymous, authoritative voice of the text.⁷³ She argues from this nondiegetic position that Iranian and Western categories of identity are hostile to one another. To support this construction of Iranian and Western identities, Eshaghian employs intellectual montages to position clips of archival footage and recorded interviews as substantiation for her claims. A concept discussed by Nichols, intellectual montages combine images and sounds that “support the ‘logic of implication’ associated with commentary” but that “arrive from disparate parts of the same world in accord with principles of evidentiary editing.”⁷⁴ Eshaghian’s use of interviews and archival footage functions as intellectual montages edited for and offered to the film’s audience as substantiation for the claims made by Eshaghian as narrator.

After establishing a representation of animosity between Iranian and American cultural spaces, Eshaghian employs similar techniques of filmmaking to illustrate the formation of hybridized identity as a response to this hostility. Again using voice-of-God narration, Eshaghian argues that in response to hostility towards Iranian culture, Iranians in America prioritize non-Iranian aspects of their identity. Interviews and images then follow this narration to corroborate Eshaghian’s claim and to offer evidence of hybridized forms of self-identification.

To illustrate how Eshaghian employs unrelated images, footage, and interviews to support the claims she makes as narrator, this chapter uses a sequence found in the first half of *A Place Called Home*. Eshaghian begins this sequence by displaying archival footage of anti-American protests in Iran, and through voice-of God narration claims that “while many Iranians were fleeing to the West, anti-American sentiment was reaching

⁷³ Eshaghian was born in Iran and when she was six years old moved to America. She permanently resides in the U.S. but frequently returns to Iran. ()

⁷⁴ Nichols, 131

new heights. This hostility would soon have significant repercussions in the West.” Following this claim, Eshaghian includes an intellectual montage of images and interviews, and positions these filmic representations as evidence substantiating the allegations of hostility between Iran and the West she voiced as narrator.

The long stream of evidentiary material that fills the next thirteen minutes of the film begins with staccato shots following an interview with a woman who describes the evolving feelings she has towards self-identifying as Iranian. She explains that although there once existed a time when she felt proud to say that she is Iranian, she no longer feels this way because of the negative opinions Westerns have about Iran. The film presents a series of images that act as evidence of what the woman describes. Short shots of a cartoon of Ayatollah Khomeini holding a sword, a newspaper title that reads, “A Return to Tribalism,” another cartoon of a crazy-eyed Ayatollah Khomeini with a sword, protesters with hands painted blood red, and archival footage of a young man holding a large gun montage in and out of the frame. The series of images ends and a recorded interview with Edward Said begins. Sitting in a high backed leather chair, dressed in a nice suit, and filmed against a background of full bookshelves, Said uses academic language to describe the thought-process of Americans who discriminate against Iranians in the West. As Said speaks, just as with the last interview, corresponding images fill the screen. Said’s interview ends and the audience next meets a man who is casually sitting in a garden, against the background of a small palm plant, holding a coffee cup. In his interview he describes the violence Iranians like himself experienced during the era Said discussed in the previous interview. Once again, as he speaks, archival footage unrelated to the interviewee but representative of the experiences he describes fill the camera’s frame. This pattern continues with several additional interviews— one with a student, a group of young men, a single man, and a trio of young women. After thirteen minutes of

evidence, the filmmaker makes a new claim about the experiences of Iranians in the West and this process of intellectual montage begins again.

As this scene illustrates, Eshaghian organizes interviews and footage not by chronology or biography, but instead to construct intellectual montages used to support the limited and situated analysis she offers through voice-of-God narration. While the various interviewees do not appear to have any relationship with one another and have been filmed at different times and in different locations, Eshaghian edits and arranges these interviews to appear as if in conversation with one another. Specifically, each interview begins by building off the subject matter introduced by the previous interview, giving the impression that these interviewees are in conversation with one another, rather than participating in independently-filmed group or individual interviews. Moreover, Eshaghian employs archival footage to act as visual substantiation for the information shared during interviews, creating the effect that archival footage of these individuals' experiences exist and have been procured for the documentary's diegesis. Eshaghian supports her analysis of Iranian and Western cultural spaces, therefore by constructing a filmic gaze that employs interviews and archival footage in the form of intellectual montages.

After employing voice-of-God narration and intellectual montages to establish hostility between Iranian and Western cultural spaces, Eshaghian employs these same filmic techniques to represent the consequences of this hostility, which she argues results in the development of hybridized identities. In a second sequence of narration followed by intellectual montage, Eshaghian suggests that by self-situating within various categories of identity in response to external circumstances, the subjects of her film overcame hostility they felt while claiming an Iranian identity. A close reading of this scene illustrates how Eshaghian accomplishes this argument.

The scene begins with a nondiegetic statement from the narrator who argues, “Unlike in Iran, where ninety percent of the population is Muslim, the Iranian community in America is far more religiously diverse. Their status as non-Muslims made it possible for them to disassociate from their Iranian nationality. Iranian Christians and Jews embraced and even over emphasized their religions identities in an effort to spare themselves the harsh treatment in Iranians were often facing.” As the narrator says these words, the camera’s frame shows footage of Jewish and Christian religious ceremonies hosted by Iranians. The images of these ceremonies transition to a new scene recording an interview with two men. Sitting side by side facing the camera, wearing casual Western clothing, neither men are introduced with any kind of biographical information or caption. As the camera films them through a medium shot, one of the men states, “I’m not Muslim but I have to say... you know...It’s uh... you know... I feel ashamed when I say... You know I’m from Iran... so you know... I normally couch that question and say I am Armenian.” As the man speaks, the camera’s frame leaves the two men to show a black and white cartoon of “Uncle Sam” attempting to spear a pig with the words, “Iranian in U.S.” painted on his side. The frame changes again and the audience now looks upon a middle-aged woman dressed casually and sitting alone, facing into the camera. Offered this time with biographical information, this woman states “when I say I am Iranian to an American, I think...eh. In myself... instantly... I need to describe something more... in order to say who I am... I always say I am Iranian but I am an Iranian-Jew.” Again, the voice-of-God narration punctuates the end of this intellectual montage as it offers the constructed argument of the next montage to be offered.

In this scene, the filmmaker again employs voice-of-God narration and strategically-organized images and interviews to construct an argument about the hybridized identities individuals have embraced in response to hostility between Western

and Iranian culture. As narrator, Eshaghian claims that, to cope with hostility against the Iranian aspects of their identities, Iranians living in America embraced religious and ethnic portions on their cultural identities to distance themselves from the “Iranian” label. Eshaghian then organizes two interviews and additional images to substantiate this claim. In these interviews, two individuals claiming Iranian identity state that in certain contexts, they accentuate the parts of their identity that are not Iranian. This sequence of narration and interview accomplish two representations. First, the audience learns from the narrator that individuals from Iran employ hybridity within their identity as a tool for resistance against the hostility they experience under certain circumstances, and that their hybrid identities evolve depending on context and circumstance. Second, the audience learns from the interviews and images that the narrator is correct. Thus, through a second series of voice over and intellectual montage, Eshaghian constructs a gaze that represents Iranian individuals as claiming hybridized cultural identities that index to multiple categories of ethnic, religious, and national influences.

A CONSTRUCTED GAZE AND THE ETHICS OF HYBRIDIZED IDENTITY

By employing various techniques of documentary voice, intellectual montage, and interview, Sadegh-Vaziri’s *A Place Called Home* and Eshaghian’s *I Call Myself Persian* construct a filmic gaze that represents cultural identities that are hybridized, constantly in flux, and contingent on context as healthy and viable categories of self-identification. To construct this gaze, these films offer alternative examples of identity indexed in a singular cultural or national category, and represent these singular categories of identity as inadequate to sustain the individual aligning with it. Conversely, this gaze offers representations of individuals who seek fulfillment and satisfaction by embracing a hybridized identity, and consequently, achieve a sustainable self- identification.

Furthermore, like the films discussed in the previous chapter, rather than choosing a random filmic subject to offer this representations, the filmmakers employ filmic portrayals of themselves and their own self-identifications as example of hybridized and therefore, healthy self-identifications.

In employing this filmic gaze to construct their documentaries, the filmmakers in this category create films that participate in a particular filmic ethic. This ethic prioritizes making visible specific categories of identity that do not reference to singular cultural or national indexes, and in prioritizing these hybridized identifications, allows for the erasure of representations or re-representation of singular categories of identity as unsustainable or unhealthy. In other words, this ethic allows for the prioritization of hybridized categories of self-identification at the expense of other categories of identity present in the individuals who offer their persons to be the documented. Thus, while an appealing ethic to individuals who value cross-cultural interactions and flexibility as opposed to hardline ideological stances and black or white binaries, these documentaries participate in a kind of passive policing of certain categories of identity. Using their documentaries to grant legitimacy to certain forms of self-identification, these documentaries also suggest the illegitimacy of alternative categories, which are supplied through filmic representations of individuals in the historical world. This gaze and the category of films that employ it, therefore, participate in an ethic that claims legitimate only specific categories of identity—categories belonging to the filmmaker— and does so, at the expense other forms of national and cultural political self-identifications.

Conclusion

“To perform by making films is to remember, to memorialize yourself (and your community), and to remind others that you were there—even if you were in disguise.” -Hamid Naficy⁷⁵

As this thesis has illustrated with its analysis of films released at the turn of the twenty-first century, exiled female Iranian documentary filmmakers employ various techniques of filmmaking to construct filmic gazes that participate in ideologically-situated arguments about the historical world and the individuals who occupy it. The ethics of the three gazes discussed in this thesis each allow for the appropriation or erasure of certain representations and categories of identity in order to implicitly and explicitly position the filmmakers within the diegesis of their documentaries. In participating in these gazes, the filmmakers transform their documentaries about the historical world into vehicles of self-identification, through which they assert personal ideological and ethical stances. Thus, rather than prioritizing a nuanced analysis of their films' subject matters, the filmmakers in this thesis instead prioritize representation of themselves, their experiences, and their personal ideological positions within an exploration of the documentary's stated focus. When considered together, therefore, the three gazes described in this thesis and the various nuanced ethics in which they participate employ a more broad category of filmic ethics, which prioritizes diegetic illustrations of the filmmakers' identities and a nuanced presentation of the documentarists' relationships to and subjective experiences of the claimed documentaries' subjects *over* a nuanced, comprehensive, and objective documentation of the film's claimed subject matter.

⁷⁵ Naficy, *Accented Cinema*, 282

This thesis' argument about the function of these three gazes is further supported when one considers how they function within six films created by three filmmakers. Rather than employing the same gaze throughout their films, and thereby communicating a stagnant positionality, these three documentarist employ different gazes throughout their filmmaking careers, illustrating the connection between the positionality of the filmmaker and the gaze employed. In other words, as the life and experiences of the filmmaker evolves, the needs and ideological stances of the filmmaker also change, and this is reflected in the constructed gazes they employ when documenting the historical world. The construction and strategic exchange of gazes, therefore, allow their filmmakers to “signify and signify upon exile and diaspora by expressing, allegorizing, commenting upon, and critique the home and host societies and cultures and the deterritorialized conditions of the filmmakers,” in a way that conforms to their immediate reality and indices of experience.

With these facts established about these filmic gazes and their ethics, several implications about the function and ethics of documentary filmmaking arise. In the simplest terms, in employing these gazes, filmmakers participate in an ethic that allows them to determine how the historical world will be represented based entirely on their own set of experiences and beliefs. The larger ethic participated in by these gazes, therefore, allows the filmmaker to prioritize and devalue, document and ignore, record and rewrite aspects of the historical world without concern to providing an objective or comprehensive documentation of it. The general public, however, does not approach documentaries (belonging to exiled female Iranian documentarists or otherwise) with this knowledge. Instead, the general public commonly understands documentaries as devices of objective documentation—unadulterated, uncut, objective footage recordings real people, real places, and real events— and they bring these expectations in the darkened

rooms of the cinema. Documentaries that do not function in this way, therefore, constitute powerful devices for communicating arguments about the historical world because they do so, without disclosing the ideological stances in which these arguments index.

The filmic ethic defined and illustrated in this thesis, therefore, when applied to the films of Iranian exiled female filmmakers has specific yet, important implications. As described in this thesis' introduction, exiled female Iranian documentarist chose to distribute their documentaries within Western markets, which at the time (and still today) were characterized by fierce rhetoric about Iranian culture that, in its condemnations of Iranian society, specifically invoked the position of Iranian women. Thus, these documentaries claim to offer representations of Iranian women and Iranian culture within markets both hostile and isolated from Iranian populations but do so, through gazes that do *not* prioritize objective or accurate documentation of the subject matters they claim. This gaze and the films that employ it, therefore, add to the atmosphere of ideologically-situated discourse focused on Iranian culture and Iranian women through a media that obscures the subjective nature of its conclusions. Within the specific context in which they were created, therefore, these documentaries constitute problematic, yet not unique, additions to the ideological discourse and rhetoric that flows between Iranian and Western cultural contexts. Additionally, some might argue these are justifiable additions — after all, while ideologically situated representations, the documentarists of these films about Iranian women are themselves, Iranian women.

When considered within the larger context of documentary filmmaking, however, this filmic ethic has vast implications, and identifies an important location for new theories and analysis of the documentary genre. Specifically: What are we to do as documentary viewers and scholars with films that function not as documentation of their claimed subjects but, instead, as a documentations of the filmmakers' positionalities and

ideological stances about the historical world? The ethic illustrated by this thesis allows for the filmmaker to reinterpret the events and agents of history through his or her own ideological indices and re-offer these ideologically- situated representations back to the general public as anything but subjective depictions. While seemingly harmless when considered in context to films about categories of identity, this ethic becomes immeasurably more problematic when considered in context to films about a traumatic or violent death in which the filmmaker is implicated as perpetrator. Because this filmic gaze is available to all documentary filmmakers, regardless of the precise relationship that exists between the filmmaker and the documentary subject, this gaze and its ethic allows for documentarists to represent *any* event and offer the filmmaker's precise ideological stances represented as objective documentation of the claimed subject matter.

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