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Film as organized resistance against biopower: *My Favourite Cake* and contemporary Iranian cinema

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My Favourite Cake, directed by Maryam Moghadam and Behtash Saneeha, tells the story of Mahin, a 70-year-old widow living alone in her apartment in Tehran, far from her daughter and grandchildren who reside abroad. She leads the typical, lonely life of a woman of her generation and social class in Iran. However, unlike how contemporary Iranian cinema portrays women of Mahin's age and class, as asexual detached from desire and disengaged from life's material and sensual dimensions, Mahin defies her solitude by actively seeking a partner. In her pursuit of love and companionship, she meets Farhad, a divorced taxi driver of her age. Over the brief few hours they spend together, the film unfolds as a tender portrayal of their growing affection and intimacy. Two strangers share stories of their lives, eat, drink homemade wine, dance, sing, touch, and prepare to embark on a shared journey of life together.

While the film engages with universal themes such as loneliness, love, and death, its most compelling critique is directed at a specific form of biopower. Biopower, which Foucault (1998) describes as *"a very profound transformation of [the] mechanisms of power"* (p. 136), refers to the mechanisms through which modern states regulate populations by managing bodies, health, reproduction, and everyday life (Fleming, 2014). This form of power is distinct from disciplinary power, which operates through surveillance, normalization, and training to shape individual behavior by enforcing rules and correcting deviations (Walker et al., 2021). However, in the unique socio-political context of contemporary Iran, biopower and disciplinary power are deeply intertwined. Regulations over bodies are codified into the state's legal framework, meaning that those who resist such constraints on bodies and practices of embodiment become subject to legal punishment (Najmabadi, 1993). As such, the film offers a powerful lens through which to examine how these structures constrain both individual and collective embodiment and emerges as a mode of organized resistance against biopower. This, in turn, invites us to ask: *What does it mean for cinema, as an institutional category, to function as a collective form of resistance under regimes of censorship and surveillance?*

In the past few decades, Iranian cinema, and in particular its *New Wave*, has been celebrated for artistic ingenuity, poetic storytelling, and profound engagement with social and philosophical

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themes (for a more comprehensive review, see Dabashi, 2001). This shift is often seen as a deliberate departure from the *Film Farsi* genre, the arguably dominant genre before the Revolution in 1978, which has been criticized for its superficial portrayal of women's bodies, reducing them to objects of visual pleasure through an over-emphasis on dance, alcohol consumption, and romanticized depictions of love, desire and intimacy. This contrast has positioned the New Wave of Iranian cinema as an alternative cinematic language, one that privileges introspection, realism, and sociopolitical critique over banal entertainment.

Renowned for its ability to convey deep meaning through minimalism and subtlety, contemporary Iranian cinema, both the *New Wave* and *Popular*, has consistently positioned itself as a drastically different genre in relation to the Western and Hollywood-centric cinematic canon. For instance, while Hollywood often relies on spectacle, grand narratives, and high-budget productions, in Iranian cinema quiet resistance, allegory, and everyday realism take center stage. Pioneering, award-winning directors such as Abbas Kiarostami, Asghar Farhadi, Dariush Mehrjui, Jafar Panahi, and Bahman Ghobadi show that powerful storytelling does not rely on excess but rather on a keen sensitivity to human experience. In their films, the depth and impact of the narrative emerge not from spectacle but from the intricate complexities of individual emotions as they navigate the socio-cultural, economic, and political landscapes of *very ordinary lives*. Shifting away from Hollywood's paradigms of heroism and individualism, as well as from Film Farsi's objectification of women, contemporary Iranian cinema underscores alternative ways of seeing, feeling, and narrating.

Such strong positioning, however, have also unfolded amidst strict state regulations that governed the Iranian cinema after the Revolution in 1978. These restrictions have erased, or significantly altered, some key aspects of *bodies as lived*, particularly female bodies, and any interactions of male bodies with them. For instance, Iranian films often depict women covering their bodies and wearing headscarf even within the privacy of their homes and avoid showing couples or family members of opposite sexes engaging in any physical contact, even as simple as shaking hands. Similarly, mixed gender embodied expressions such as dancing and singing are almost entirely absent from cinematic depictions.

Arguably, as a part of the rejection of Film Farsi, where embodied human experiences have been sidelined in favor of intellectualized narratives, such biopolitical control has deepened the gap between the lived realities of ordinary Iranians and their cinematic representations. By framing individuals as purely social beings, Iranian cinema, despite its international acclaim for crafting complex meanings and narratives, has often neglected the portrayal of biological practices (Behrouzi, 2023).

A review of contemporary Iranian cinema's history reveals that it has operated as a technology of power, continually negotiating with or resisting the hegemony of Film Farsi, which, though officially halted in 1978, still shapes audience tastes and institutional practices, Western cinema, and, above all, state biopolitical controls. In this political terrain, each film becomes an artifact of power, with its cast, script, mise-en-scène, music, and direction collectively positioning the work in relation to these competing regimes of control. Many films across both New Wave and Popular genres have thus embedded resistance to state-imposed biopolitical restrictions into their artistic practice. This resistance, primarily aimed at finding innovative ways to depict bodies as lived, has often remained subtle, constrained by Iran's tightly regulated cinematic environment.

The cast of *My Favourite Cake* mobilized resistance against biopolitical restrictions to the next level. Through a simple and smooth narrative, the film portrays what female bodies, and male bodies in their interaction with them, experience, both in the privacy of the home and in broader social interactions. Notably, the power of this resistance lies in the fact that the film does not rely on a grand romantic, dramatic, or tragic storyline, nor does it showcase extraordinary bodies with

unique powers or attributes such as beauty or attractiveness. *My Favourite Cake* focuses on very ordinary individuals leading very ordinary lives, having ordinary bodies, embodiments, and desires, delivering a powerful message: the lives embedded in Iran's social fabric are filled with bodies experiencing a reality far removed from what has been publicly depicted over the past few decades. This message gains even greater impact because it is conveyed through a modest and simple form. In stark contrast to the exaggerated focus on the mind and its attributes, the film seeks to restore balance to the skewed relationship between mind and body that has dominated Iranian cinema. By bringing bodies as lived into the public eye, *My Favourite Cake* underscores the political weight of simply depicting ordinary bodies and their biological realities. This portrayal defies the boundaries imposed on the bodies as lived, highlighting the inseparability of embodiment from its biological existence.

Nevertheless, and despite achieving a significant victory by refusing to submit to the biopolitical forces that regulate Iranian cinema, a choice that has come at a high cost for the directors, including the confiscation of their passports and a ban on traveling abroad to participate in festivals where the movie is being screened and nominated for several awards (Bradshaw, 2024), *My Favourite Cake* takes an unexpected and arguably unnecessary turn. This turn is not only narratively unjustified within the context of the film's storyline but also undermines the resistance message the film seeks to convey. If, after years of biopolitical regulation over the portrayal of bodies, the film intended to assert the claim of embodiment and depict the real lives of Iranians, they might have allowed these moments to extend beyond a single evening. Rather than serving as a meaningful plot twist, the closing of the film feels like a defeat of its resistance and, perhaps inadvertently, perpetuates the very message that the repressive biopower has been promoting for decades: bodies that dare to live fully, and those who refuse to submit to an imposed reduction, must be subjected to punishment, are unworthy of existence, and must be erased.

By attending to the embodied realities and organized resistance encoded in the film, this review invites readers to reflect on the complex relationship between art as "critical project" (Riaz, 2023: 1224) and diverse forms of institutional power. How is each film, as an artifact of organized power, linked to the other collective of the cinematic world and thus, how, at the macro level, does this collective resistance continue to challenge, engage with, and shape the hegemonies that dominate the cinematic world? How might organizational scholarship better account for films as artifacts from the Global South and their potential to resist or support dominant epistemologies of representation, embodiment, and regimes of power? And crucially, how can we expand the boundaries of organization studies to take seriously the esthetic, affective, and political dimensions of cultural and artistic production that are often elided in conventional research?

Engaging with film as an organized endeavor and the cinematic world as an institution, particularly within the socio-political structures of the Global South, which often lie outside dominant theoretical and contextual reference points, offers a powerful lens to expand our understanding of how organizations function and how organizing unfolds across diverse socio-economic contexts. In this light, *My Favourite Cake* does more than tell a story; it opens a space for reimagining how resistance, embodiment, and organization intersect through cultural and artistic forms. As such, it challenges scholars to decenter dominant narratives and to engage more deeply with the political potential of art in contexts of constraint.

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Roya Derakhshan is a Lecturer at University College London. Her work explores how precarity, violence, and resistance unfold in and around diverse organizational settings. She works to highlight overlooked and understudied contexts by amplifying the voices of marginalized individuals and communities, and by critically examining the conditions that perpetuate inequality.