Exploring the Representation of Private Sphere in First-Person Documentaries by Iranian Women Filmmakers from 2011 to 2024: A Study on Amateurism and Home Movies

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Abstract

Exploring the Representation of Private Sphere in First-Person Documentaries by Iranian Women Filmmakers from 2011 to 2024: A Study on Amateurism and Home Movies

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This thesis traces the aesthetic and political trajectory of Iranian women's first-person documentary cinema, offering an alternative historiography of autobiographical filmmaking that highlights the intersection of private life and public discourse on the margins of Iranian cinema. These documentaries occupy a peripheral space—drawing on home movies and amateur aesthetics—to express what dominant cinema leaves unsaid, revealing its cracks and silences. The study argues that such marginal forms have evolved into powerful tools of cultural critique, challenging state narratives and reshaping gendered subjectivity in the post-digital era. The thesis begins by situating the emergence of first-person documentary within Iran's broader political and cinematic context, especially the reform era and digital media's impact. It then analyzes *21 Days and Me* (2011) and *Unwelcome in Tehran* (2011), which use modest means and domestic experience to disrupt dominant documentary practices. The next chapter focuses on *Profession: Documentarian* (2014), *Radiograph of a Family* (2020), and *The Silent House* (2022), showing how personal archives and home movies raise the political stakes by linking familial memory to national history. The final section explores amateurism, authorship, and access in the digital era, with *Impasse* (2024) exemplifying how amateur aesthetics connect interior spaces with collective experience, particularly during moments of social unrest. By focusing on six documentaries over a decade, the thesis maps a gradual shift from intimate self-expression toward direct political engagement. It foregrounds women's voices and evolving formal strategies, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of Iranian documentary cinema beyond official narratives.

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Introduction

Although Iranian autobiographical first-person documentaries by women have only emerged in the past decade, their quiet presence has steadily grown stronger and is now impossible to overlook. Considering the struggles Iranian women have faced in a patriarchal society, and the powerful actions they have taken in recent years to claim their rights, these films gain particular significance as they allow women to tell their own stories in their own voices. By revealing personal, emotional, and social realities often overlooked in mainstream cinema, they challenge traditional, male-dominated narratives and create an essential space where women's experiences are authentically seen and heard. These documentaries offer unique insights into women's lives at a time when their roles and rights are subjects of intense public debate and social transformation. Understanding these films helps us grasp how Iranian women negotiate identity, agency, and resistance amid evolving social conditions.

Iranian first-person documentaries belong to the digital age—when cheap, light, and portable cameras broke the monopoly of official media and gave ordinary people a new way to speak for themselves. Iranian women embraced this tool to address what had long been ignored or dismissed in Iranian documentaries. They brought the camera into their private sphere, not just to tell their own stories, but to expose experiences excluded from the public sphere for three decades— silenced by official discourse. Due to scarce professional resources, many of these films rely on amateur production methods or use personal materials like home movies to reflect the private sphere. Also, given their often sensitive and politically challenging subjects, they are usually shown in small, sometimes private venues to a limited, specific audience. This leaves them marginalized— not only in their themes but also in their modes of production and distribution.

Given the limited exposure and political sensitivities surrounding Iranian first-person documentaries, especially those made by women, finding detailed discussions about them in Persian-language media is challenging. In Iran, the quarterly magazine Cinema Haqirat [Cinéma-vérité], published under the supervision of the Documentary, Experimental & Animation Film Center (DEFC) of Iran—a government institution—is the only journal that specializes in documentary cinema. After reviewing all issues of this quarterly from the past decade, I found no articles specifically addressing female first-person documentaries. The most valuable Farsi-language source on this subject to date is issue No. 516 of Film Magazine, which is regarded as Iran`s oldest and most reputable cinema publication. This issue is entirely devoted to post-digital documentary cinema, making it highly relevant to my research. It features several articles focused on post-digital documentaries in Iran, covering topics such as innovative fundraising methods, the screening and distribution cycle, the shift away from government-controlled production, the rise of independent documentary voices, and the growing significance of micro-topics in Iranian documentary filmmaking.

Regarding English-language sources, when I statred writing this thesis I found a lack of academic texts directly addressing Iranian first-person documentary cinema. This absence can be viewed both negatively and positively. On the negative side, it might suggest that these works are not taken seriously within academic circles. On the positive side, this gap indicates an opportunity to explore and establish an emerging field. Surprisingly, on April 30, 2025, while I was writing the final chapter of my thesis, Najmeh Moradiyan-Rizi, Assistant Professor of Film Studies at Old Dominion University, published *Women and Documentary Film in Contemporary Iran: Reframing Reality*. I was able to read it before finishing my research and found that it highlights how technological changes since the late 1990s have transformed documentary production,

financing, distribution, and themes, showing how Iranian women filmmakers use the medium to express their agency, creativity, and advocate for women's issues. The third chapter of this research, *Discovering the Self in Autobiographical Documentaries: Sites of Self-Reflection*, notably overlaps with my work by discussing three films that are also my case studies. However, the purpose of my research is to explore the representation of the private sphere in autobiographical first-person documentaries by Iranian women filmmakers from 2011 to 2024, with a particular focus on amateurism and the use of home movies. My distinct approach— especially the focused analysis of the private sphere, amateurism, and home movies—along with the inclusion of additional films, makes my work distinctive and advances the conversation in important ways.

The limited attention could be attributed to the relative obscurity of these films and the novelty of the topic. Kiki Tianqi Yu and Alisa Lebow, explain, "the majority of studies have in large part focused on Western cultural expression." They note that research on Francophone North and West African first-person works, as well as films from India, Brazil, Argentina, Palestine, China, and Egypt, represents some notable exceptions. They emphasize the need to expand "the field of inquiry well beyond limited Western paradigms" and to explore articulations of the first person in film, specifically by women filmmakers, within "the contexts of cultural, socio-economic exchanges, and political or religious confrontations" (2). My work would therefore complement current scholarship on Iranian women in cinema, which primarily focuses on feature fiction films, but leaves this type of documentary production largely underexplored. In addition to a more thorough understanding of all the dimensions of Iranian national cinema, my research will enrich contemporary developments in the study of world cinemas.

The growing presence of first-person documentaries at prestigious international festivals such as IDFA or Canada's Hot Docs Film Festival, indicate a need for the proper contextualization of this increasingly important tendency in documentary filmmaking. I will address several questions: In what ways do Iranian women's first-person documentaries challenge traditional notions of public and private spheres? How have home movies and amateur aesthetics influenced their visual style and narrative approach? How does the interplay between personal and political narratives in these films reflect broader socio-political changes in Iranian society, particularly in the context of women's movements?

This thesis will adopt a multi-faceted methodological approach to explore the transformation of public and private spheres in Iranian documentary cinema. First, I will provide a comprehensive overview of Iran's socio-political landscape, emphasizing how the evolution of public and private spheres has shaped cinematic representations. Second, I will conduct a visual and narrative analysis of first-person documentaries, examining how home movies and amateur aesthetics influence the portrayal of individuality and femininity in a patriarchal context. Third, I will identify key themes that connect individual experiences to broader societal issues, contextualized within Iran's historical framework, with a focus on women's movements and significant political events. Additionally, I will engage with concepts of amateurism as a form of resistance and its connections to freedom and democracy. This will enable me to situate these films within a historical context that considers how significant political events have impacted women's roles in Iranian society.

Shirin Barghnavard's *21 Rooz va Man* [21 Days and Me] (2011) and Mina Keshavarz's *Nâkhândeh dar Tehrân* [Unwelcome in Tehran] (2011) marked turning points in Iranian documentary: the former portrays the director's personal struggle with her desire to become a

mother, while the latter follows a married woman who envies the freedom of single life. These candid self-representations opened the door for other filmmakers whose works gradually grew bolder in addressing women's issues. *Herfeh: Mostanadsâz* [Profession: Documentarist] (2014) captures the voices of seven female filmmakers during the post-2009 election protests; *Khâneh-ye Khâmoush* [The Silent House] (dir. Farnaz Jurabchian and Mohammadreza Jurabchian, 2022) reflects Iran's contemporary history through a family home; *Râdiography-ye yek khânevadeh* [Radiography of a Family] (dir Firouzeh Khosrovani, 2020) revisits the revolution through personal memory; and *Impasse* (dir. Rahmaneh Rabani and Bahman Kiarostami, 2024) links private family conflict to the broader women's 2022 movement.

These six films contribute to this sub-genre and provide a clear lens through which to trace the evolution of female first-person cinema in Iran over the past decade. By focusing on private spheres, they reflect broader socio-cultural changes through intimate and gendered perspectives. Studying these films chronologically—many of which, due to restrictions in Iran, were screened in private or underground spaces, with most reaching international festivals and some appearing on foreign platforms and TV channels— reveals how both Iranian society and this mode of filmmaking have evolved in parallel, becoming increasingly radical over time.

Chapter Overview

This thesis consists of four chapters. The first one provides the historical background for the emergence of autobiographical first-person documentaries. It opens with an overview of post-1979 Iran, focusing on the evolving relationship between public and private life in Iranian culture, and how this dynamic was reflected in the country's official cinema. The chapter then explores how political reforms and the digital revolution together opened new ways of expression, especially in documentary filmmaking, leading to the rise of first-person films. The

second chapter focuses on two documentaries—*21 Days and Me* and *Unwelcome in Tehran*—to show how, by centering on private spheres and everyday issues, and using limited resources and amateur methods, these films introduced a new way of portraying women on the margins of Iranian documentary cinema while also challenging the dominant narratives of their time.

The third chapter begins with *Profession: Documentarian*, showing how women's first-person films—at first centered on personal, seemingly non-political topics—gradually take on a political dimension and begin to engage with public concerns. The chapter then, through *Radiograph of a Family* and *The Silent House*, discusses the use of home movies, exploring their value as visual documents and examining how home archives revealing how a family's private life is shaped by, and reflects, the political life of society.

The fourth chapter explores the binary of professional versus amateur within a political context, focusing on power relations shaped by institutional authority, access to resources, and cultural legitimacy. It focuses on films made by ordinary citizens using simple tools to document what professional, state-sanctioned production often erases or conceals. The chapter then explores how Iranian women have developed new forms of expression in the post-digital era, with amateur cameras and social media playing a key role in reflecting—and shaping—cultural and political movements. Finally, *Impasse* is discussed as a first-person film that, through amateur techniques, creates strong links between home and street, private and public life, the artist and the amateur. The final section provides a summary of the aesthetic and thematic development of these films over time, tracing their evolution from personal, private narratives to more complex engagements with public and political realities.

Chapter 1. From Revolution to Digital Evolution: The Changing Landscape of Public and Private Spaces in Iran and the Rise of First-Person Documentaries

After the 1979 Revolution in Iran, the gap between the public and private spheres widened drastically. The public sphere became dominated by a patriarchal political ideology that regarded many previously routine aspects of daily life as sinful or taboo. Under this new moral framework, the Hijab was made mandatory. Bars, discos, and nightclubs were shut down, and activities such as dancing and alcohol consumption were driven underground, becoming confined to the private sphere. Meanwhile, the screening of foreign films in Iran was severely restricted and eventually paused, making it impossible to watch them except at home through smuggled Betamax and VHS. Shortly after the 1979 revolution, the 1980 outbreak of war with Iraq, along with the government's stricter enforcement of new rules—such as mandatory hijab, dress codes, and restrictions on interactions between men and women—gradually made life more difficult for citizens, pushing many to seek refuge in their homes. This gave the private sphere in post-revolutionary Iran an exceptional status and heightened importance. It inevitably became a space meant to compensate for many of the restrictions imposed on the public sphere. As Blake Atwood, a media scholar focusing on Iranian cinema and digital culture, explains, homes became central to people's lives, with private parties and home movie screenings replacing public venues. He explores Iran's underground culture through videocast, highlighting how video provided an escape from the state-controlled public spaces, dominated by war, surveillance, and regulation. The arrival of analog video in the late 1970s and early 1980s coincided with Iranian society's retreat into the home, where video culture became a communal activity, often involving family members. "video fostered a culture of closeness, as bodies and devices came together in the home" (*Underground* 172-181).

This chapter begins by reflecting on the social, cultural, and gendered consequences of the profound divide between the public and private spheres in post-revolutionary Iran. It then examines how revolutionary ideology defined and regulated this binary through specific norms and restrictions in Iranian cinema. The discussion then turns to the digital era, which enabled documentary filmmaking to move in directions that diverged from those promoted by the official discourse during the first two decades after the revolution. Finally, the chapter explores the political and cinematic contexts that gave rise to first-person documentaries—the central focus of this study.

Ideology, Gender and State-Controlled Cinema in Post-Revolutionary Iran

The post-1979 division of Iranian life into public and private spheres was deeply rooted in traditional gender hierarchies. As Nancy Fraser, feminist professor of philosophy and politics, notes, the term "public" has a gendered, masculine origin, with an etymological link to "pubic," highlighting the historical association of public spaces with masculinity (60). This insight resonates with traditional Iranian architecture, where affluent Persian households were divided into two distinct spheres: andarūnī (inner) and bīrūnī (outer). The andarūnī was reserved for women—mothers, "wives, nurses, nannies, female servants, and children" until puberty, after which boys were moved to the bīrūnī (E. *Sykes* 96). The bīrūnī functioned as the public or male domain, hosting business dealings, male religious ceremonies, and gatherings exclusively for men.

This arrangement continued during the Qajar dynasty, and as a result, women were mostly excluded from the public sphere. One example is cinema, which was introduced to Iran in the same era, in 1900, with the first public theater opening in 1904. As Hamid Naficy , a pioneering scholar of Iranian explains, from the beginning, the presence of Iranian women in cinema was

controversial, since their mere appearance in public spaces—parks, streets, or cinemas—was seen as inherently immoral (*Volume1* 134), and it took years for them to be accepted, eventually entering public cinema as spectators during the Qajar era. With the rise of the Pahlavi dynasty in 1925, Reza Shah reinforced modernization through a state-led project of westernization, most notably by banning the hijab. In 1936, forced unveiling was implemented as part of the state-sponsored "women's awakening movement," enforced through coercion, propaganda, and the promotion of European dress codes (147). While the policy aimed to elevate women's public status, it also excluded many traditional women from public life, as they avoided spaces where unveiling was required. During Mohammad Reza Shah's reign (1936–1979), the hijab was not banned, allowing women the choice to wear it. However, it was still viewed as backward and discouraged in public, while the Western lifestyle was promoted. While unveiling was a controversial symbol of modernity during the Pahlavi era, the 1979 revolutionaries later made re-veiling mandatory, positioning women "into the first line of the battle against the westernization and modernity" (*Nasehi* 543). This confrontation with modernity, culminating in a return to traditional values, revived the spirit of the andarūnī–bīrūnī duality in post-revolutionary gender dynamics. Society was effectively split along these lines. The revolution and the newly established republic drew on classical traditions that positioned femininity and publicness as inherently contradictory.

Nancy Fraser draws on Jürgen Habermas's concept of the public sphere, where Habermas examines the possibilities and limitations of democracy in advanced societies and the challenges encountered by progressive movements. While they both address contexts different from Iran, their analyses provide valuable insights that help illuminate the evolution of public and private spheres in Iran. Habermas`s concept of the public space is defined as a space where people gather to discuss matters of public concern or common interest. This concept emerged in early modern Europe as a

bourgeois public space, which served as counterweights to absolutist states. This space aimed to mediate between society and the state, allowing for the critical examination and influence of government actions, focusing on public issues while excluding private interests. According to Fraser, critics argue that Habermas`s view of the liberal public sphere is idealized, overlooking significant exclusions. Landes, for instance, points out that gender was a major axis of exclusion. The republican public sphere in France was constructed in opposition to the more woman-friendly salon culture, which was considered "aristocratic" and "effeminate." This led to the promotion of a new style of public speech and behavior deemed "rational" and "manly," embedding masculinist gender constructs into the public sphere and contributing to the formal exclusion of women from political life (59).

Fraser's discussion is particularly relevant to this research, as a similar dynamic emerged in the early years following the Iranian Revolution. Just a few days after the revolution`s victory, mandatory veiling for women in the workplace was decreed on March 7, 1979. The next day, on International Women`s Day, women protested the compulsory hijab. Homa Nategh, a professor of history at Tehran University, participated in these protests. She "took compulsory hijab as a sign of fighting against American imperialism" (*Zarabadi* 761) Years later, Nategh reflected on her role during the protests, explaining how she urged women to stop protesting, believing that unity was essential. At that time, the discourse emphasized getting free of Imperialism and having a united voice as "rational" (and somehow "manly") public demands, while the call for optional hijab was dismissed as "aristocratic" and "effeminate," unworthy of public discussion. It is also important to note that, beyond its religious connotations, the hijab was embraced by some leftist groups who did not fundamentally adhere to religious beliefs. For these groups, the hijab symbolically served as a unifying factor that minimized individuality while promoting a non-

aristocratic appearance. The pressure to be united was so strong that many women felt compelled to suppress their personal desires. Fraser`s article, citing theorists like Jane Mansbridge, highlights how the transformation of "I" into "we" through political deliberation can mask subtle forms of control. "Subordinate groups sometimes cannot find the right voice or words to express their thoughts, and when they do, they discover they are not heard. They are silenced, encouraged to keep their wants inchoate, and heard to say yes when what they have said is no"(64). It seems that most Iranian women were compelled to say "yes" to the mandatory hijab, even when their true response was "no," forcing them to suppress their desires in the private sphere for 40 years before finally bringing these demands back into the public sphere during 2022 feminist movement.

This dynamic—where collective unity overrides individual expression—is not unique to Iran. Similar tensions between communal identity and personal agency can be observed in other societies, where the pursuit of national or ideological unity often comes at the cost of individual voices. Ravi S. Vasudevan, an Indian film scholar focused on the intersections of media, urban space, and political modernity, argues that, despite modernity's influence, Indian society has not fully transitioned to individualistic structures, with the community remaining the core unit of social analysis. He observes that "political society" in India is shaped by parties and movements based on group identities (58). Similarly, in Iran, the revolution, while opposing dictatorship and promoting democratic ideals, ultimately embraced traditional values. The Revolutionaries viewed unity as essential to their victory, a principle that was further emphasized during their subsequent war against Saddam Hussein's regime. By prioritizing unity, individual desires were dismissed as irrelevant and contrary to the public good, equating traditional values with societal interests and excluding opposing views from the public sphere.

But how did this ideological shift influence Iranian cinema, and in what ways did it reflect the new moral and political constraints of the time?

"Over 125 cinemas were burnt to the ground during the upheavals of the Revolution" (Sadr 169). This indicates that many revolutionaries saw cinema as a symbol of obscenity and Western moral corruption, closely tied to the secular values of the Shah's regime. The destruction of cinemas functioned as a form of cultural cleansing, aimed at eliminating institutions seen as spreading un-Islamic values and corrupt public morality. Ultimately, Ayatollah Khomeini, the leader of the Revolution, clarified the position on cinema, resulting in its redefinition. He remarked that "the Revolution was not opposed to cinema per se, only obscenity" (*Sadr* 169). This, after a period of uncertainty, gave rise to the concept of an 'Islamized cinema,' though it remained vaguely defined. To achieve this, the state intervened through moral control and economic support, ensuring that national film production aligned with Islamic values. It established key institutions like the Farabi Cinema Foundation (FCF) in 1983, which managed film production nationally, controlled imports and exports, and later co-produced state-approved films. Experimental Cinema Institute was created to train young revolutionary filmmakers, further shaping the industry under ideological supervision. Religious foundations, like the Foundation of the Oppressed (Bonyad-e Mostaz'afan), controlled confiscated movie theatres until the 1990s before transferring them to the Arts Centre of the Islamic Propaganda Organization, which focused on war and propaganda films. National Iranian TV (IRIB), through Sima Film, became a major producer of films and TV series, and Kanun remained the only pre-revolutionary public film institution still in operation. Rather than fully nationalizing the industry, the state controlled it through regulation and censorship. Until 1984, censorship was vague but centered on Islamic

norms regarding gender, behavior, and appearance. Men and women were also prohibited from any physical contact, even when portraying family members on screen (Devictor 69-70).

Madhava Prasad, a Professor of Cultural Studies in India, argues that the absence of privacy in Indian cinema, particularly "the informal prohibition" of kissing scenes, serves as a key marker of both individual privacy and conjugal intimacy, exemplifying "the power of traditional patriarchies." While conservative views regard this ban as a sign of "national virtue and purity," Prasad interprets it as a means of controlling personal relationships and family life, which are essential for the development of individualism and civil society. He suggests that this "implies the subordinating of the modern state to a decentred system of feudalised authority" (Vasudevan 60). This perspective can also be applied to Iranian cinema post-revolution. In Iranian cinema, the private sphere was largely erased and could only be depicted if it adhered to public sphere standards. All Iranian films have been subject to state and self-censorship, requiring approval at every stage from Farabi (FCF) and the Ministry of Culture while adhering to strict decorum codes. The enforcement of hijab laws shapes how public and private spheres containing women are depicted, with cinema altering these conventions through its representations. "In contemporary Iranian cinema, in which the appearance and conduct of all performers is regulated by strict codes of modesty, all space is treated as public, including supposedly private domestic spaces" (*Moruzzi* 52). Consequently, Iran's official cinema, shaped by ideological constraints, has long portrayed a distorted image of reality—a trend that persists today, as it continues to follow the strict regulations of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. The second chapter offers a brief overview of how women have been represented in Iranian narrative and documentary cinema, examining how they have responded over the decades to distorted portrayals that overlook many aspects of their lives and concerns. For now, the focus shifts to the

profound impact of the digital revolution on Iranian documentary filmmaking, which not only reshaped its aesthetics and production scale but also provided a new path of resistance against the strict surveillance system and its imposed narrative.

Digital Revolution and the Rise of Independent Documentary in Iran

The election of Seyyed Mohammad Khatami as president of Iran in May 1997 marked a pivotal shift in the country's political landscape. Seen as a moderate leader, Khatami gained significant support, especially from young people and women. His presidency ushered in a new era for Iranian cinema, with filmmakers and the broader artistic community actively backing him. Khatami introduced values like "transparency, civil society, and pluralism", which sharply differed from the dominant traditional values of previous administrations. His foreign policy, centered on the "dialogue of civilizations," and his economic focus on privatization further distanced his government from past ideologies. Notably, Khatami appointed two women to cabinet positions, a landmark move in Iranian politics (*Naficy Islamizing Film* 55). Under his leadership, censorship was relaxed, providing greater freedom for artistic expression (*Devictor* 70). This political reform unfolded alongside the digital revolution. Khatami's first four years had not yet ended when digital technology started to open new creative possibilities for Iranian cinema. The reform era and the rise of digital technology both introduced a sense of renewal and freedom. If Khatami's democratic discourse signaled the decline of monopolies, digital technology likewise democratized filmmaking through the introduction of lightweight, portable, and affordable cameras. Both carried a sense of optimism. This optimism is perhaps best captured in the words of Abbas Kiarostami, who, as the most renowned figure of Iranian cinema on the international stage, played a crucial role in embracing digital technology and bringing it closer to home. Kiarostami's *Ten* (2002), filmed with a dashboard-mounted digital camera, captures ten conversations between a female

driver and various passengers, exploring women's struggles in contemporary Iran. It was a simple film, seemingly shot with a hidden camera, aiming for the purest form by eliminating the director's presence and embracing emerging digital technology, as Kiarostami himself described. Two years later, Kiarostami echoes the same ideas in *10 on Ten* (2004), a documentary on the making of *Ten*. He praises the affordability and ease of digital cameras, highlighting how they overcome the constraints of capital and production. His discussion served as an insightful guide for aspiring filmmakers in Iran (*Behnam* 30).

In the early days of digital filmmaking, filmmaker and screenwriter, Samira Makhmalbaf, in her article *Digital Revolution: The Cinema of Tomorrow*, celebrated how technology and digital cameras have democratized filmmaking by removing political, financial, and technical obstacles, allowing more artists around the world to independently create and distribute films. She also highlights, "the observation of reality will become more direct, more intimate, to the point that the camera can now be literally considered as the very eye of the filmmaker" (*Makhmalbaf*). The concepts of "intimacy" and "reality" are key terms that make her statements more relevant to this study. The intimacy of digital technology has made it easier for people to bring it into their homes and use it in familiar, personal ways—unlike the more distant and institutional nature of professional cinema equipment. Filmmakers embraced its accessibility and flexibility, using it to explore everyday realities and, in doing so, contributed to a shift in documentary film.

In *10 on Ten*, Kiarostami states that it was "impossible to make that film [*Ten*] without a digital camera" and that the digital format "eliminates artificiality," a quality he has sought throughout his thirty-year career (*Behnam* 31). Of course, no camera can fully eliminate artificiality, but in the early days of digital filmmaking, there was a strong sense of optimism. Many, like Kiarostami,

believed that digital tools made it possible to capture reality in ways that had not been achievable before. The intimacy of the digital camera, its perceived closeness to everyday life, and its affordability collectively transformed Iranian documentary filmmaking. In particular, its low cost enabled a new wave of independent production across the country.

To define the concept of independent cinema in Iran, Mansoor Behnam, an interdisciplinary researcher and media artist, draws a comparison between Iranian and American independent cinema. The term "independent" typically refers to a production sector that operates without financial support from major institutions like studios or state agencies. For American independent filmmakers, the challenge is economic, not ideological. They are free to depict whatever they wish without worrying about restrictions on content. In contrast, independent filmmakers in Iran face not only economic constraints but also censorship and moral-political ones (9-10).

Digital technology, by enabling low-budget filmmaking, lowered economic barriers to production, leading to a sudden increase in documentary films. This rapid growth in the quantity of such works also meant that the surveillance system was effectively unable to control all these productions. Digital cameras freed documentary filmmaking from the control of the state, particularly the IRIB, which had previously dominated production in Iran. The democratic potential of digital technology led to a significant expansion in output, increasing from around 100 films per year before 1997 to nearly 1,000 by 2000 (*Rashtian* 75).

Additionally, it is important to note that, in Iran, documentary cinema gained broad exposure only through national television broadcasts. Public screenings in theaters were almost nonexistent until 2013, when limited showings were permitted under Hassan Rouhani's moderate government. Independent documentaries were typically screened at "universities, galleries, small cinema clubs,

and even coffee shops" (*Sanaei* 88). This limited visibility may have led the surveillance system to concentrate more on widely circulated content, allowing independent documentaries to face less scrutiny.

Digital cameras has also significantly transformed Iranian documentaries, not only in terms of quantity but also in their thematic and aesthetic approaches. While government funding agencies often avoided certain sociopolitical topics, this new generation of filmmakers used digital cameras to focus on subjects that had previously been overlooked. After years of focusing on grand political narratives and macro-level social issues, the documentary camera began turning toward the everyday world. It started following ordinary people, exploring micro-level themes and uncovering what might be called the "invisible Iran." Personal lives and family dynamics entered the frame. Daily life—particularly that of the urban middle class, which had long been marginalized by mainstream documentary cinema in favor of rural and working-class subjects aligned with revolutionary discourse—gradually became more visible within the documentary landscape (*Belaghati* 67)[1].

The democratization of filmmaking meant that production was no longer limited to professionals, but became accessible to individuals who lacked the resources to navigate bureaucratic hurdles and work with large teams and large, sophisticated equipment, sets, etc. Advances in technology enabled one person to handle every stage of production—from writing to shooting and editing—on their own. This shift made way for a new form of self-expression: films centered on personal

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[1] These documentaries can be cited as examples: *Dream of Silk* (Nahid Rezaei, 2003), *Flying Misters* (Reza Bahraminejad, 2003), *Scenes from a Divorce* (Shirin Barghnavard and Mohammadreza Jahanpanah, 2015), *My Sad Face* (Farahnaz Sharifi, 2008), *Red Card* (Mahnaz Afzali, 2006), *Beyond the Color* (Maryam Sepehri, 2015*), Seven Blind Women Filmmakers, Telescope* and *Iranian cookbook* (Mohammad Shirvani), Alone in Tehran (Pirooz Kalantari, 1999).

experiences, private thoughts, and topics often left unspoken. Eventually, a new genre emerged, often referred to as the "independent first-person documentary"[1] (*Tahami-Nejad* 8) a type of documentary defined by Laura Rascaroli, a distinguished scholar in first-person cinema, as those in which directors focus on their own lives, experiences, or bodies as the central subjects (*The Personal* 166-167).

In Iran, beyond political restrictions, portraying private life in documentaries is difficult due to the strong influence of public opinion. As Ahmad Mirehsan, an Iranian critic and documentary filmmaker, notes Traditional ideas about the self, honor, and rigid social roles discourage individuality and openness. These values prioritize social conformity over personal expression. In contrast, modern societies emphasize self, desire, and individuality, creating more space for bold self-expression and subversion. However, for women, especially in patriarchal cultures shaped by long-standing ideals of modesty, this remains difficult. "Treated as commodities whose flaws must stay hidden, women face stricter social and cultural censorship when expressing their private selves" (*Afsordegi*; my trans). But surprisingly, women played a significant role as directors in these documentaries, many of which explored themes of privacy and the hidden dimensions of feminine personal life.

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[1] Bahman Kiarostami's *Zaloo* (*Leech*, 2003) and Reza Bahraminejad's *Aghayan-e Parandeh* (*Flying Misters,* 2003) and *Aghaye Honar* (*Mr. Art*, 2005) are among the earliest examples of first-person documentary in Iran. However, due to the underground nature of many independent works and the lack of comprehensive records, tracing the origins of female first-person films remains difficult. *My Sad Face* by Farahnaz Sharifi (2008) may be an early attempt, but it had very limited screenings and no available copy. Earlier examples may yet surface. As noted in *Film Monthly* 516, a major turning point came with the 2010 first-person documentary workshop led by Pirooz Kalantari and Mehrdad Oskouei, which helped shape scattered individual efforts into a more coherent and sustained practice. From this point, first-person narratives became more focused and thematically bolder.

Since the advent of digital filmmaking in Iran, it took more than a decade for women to find the courage to bring the camera into their homes and explore their private lives. Did the political upheaval of 2009, a pivotal moment in Iranian history, play a role in sparking this shift in approach?

2009 and Beyond: From Street to Home

Under the reformist Khatami government, NGOs in Iran gained more freedom to operate. It was in this climate that the Iranian Documentary Film Association (IRDFA) was founded in 1997, coinciding with President Khatami's push for civil society. Established as both a trade union and an NGO for documentary directors, IRDFA aimed to secure job stability, support union rights, and enhance the professional capabilities of its members (*Sadegh-Vaziri* 174). Beyond these objectives, IRDFA played a crucial role in fostering a sense of community among documentary filmmakers. It provided a space for regular meetings, collaboration, and idea exchange, fostering a strong documentary movement in Iran that continued even after the end of the Khatami era and into the conservative Ahmadinejad administration. As Atwood has noted, "The relationship between cinema and the Reformist Movement has continued to evolve even after the benefits of Khatami's liberal cultural policies no longer existed for Iranian filmmakers." (*Re/Form* 48) One could argue that the aesthetic dimension of reform continued to develop independently of Khatami's presidency. While governments and political ideologies may shift—even regress—technology follows a different trajectory. It does not move backward, nor can it be easily restrained. As digital technology advanced, it continued to up new creative possibilities, allowing documentary filmmaking to expand. Nevertheless, tensions between documentary filmmakers and Ahmadinejad's conservative government escalated sharply following the 2009 uprising against the disputed presidential election that secured his second term. Many supporters of Mir-

Hossein Mousavi believed the election was unfair and took to the streets in protest. The Green movement, named after the color green, that symbolized resistance, was largely composed of young people, intellectuals, artists, and middle-class city residents. As protests erupted in the streets, demonstrators filmed clashes with security forces on their phones, turning the public sphere into a battleground for political expression. These videos were shared on YouTube and Twitter, and for the first time, Western media relied on this footage to report on the events. Persian-language media outside Iran, like Voice of America (VOA), the BBC, and Radio Farda, also covered the protests. The Iranian government had already been suspicious of BBC Persian since it started in 2005, but after the protests, conservatives officially declared it an enemy. Between 2005 and 2009, Iranian filmmakers could freely sell their work to foreign media, and BBC Persian invited them to contribute documentaries for its programs. In 2008, journalist and documentary filmmaker Mazyar Bahari, who had ties to "the BBC, helped organize a workshop alongside experienced Iranian documentarians. With support from the BBC, they trained young filmmakers" to create impactful "social and investigative documentaries" (*Sadegh-Vaziri* 170). However, during the 2009 uprisings, the situation changed as the government targeted and intimidated journalists and filmmakers with ties to the BBC, even imprisoning six individuals to sell their films to this channel.

Another key factor that increased tension between documentary filmmakers and the government was the conflict over the House of Cinema. The House of Cinema was created in 1993 after the Iranian parliament decided to organize the cinema sector. It is a cultural organization that connects the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (MCIG) with the film unions. It gets part of its funding from MCIG and the rest from membership fees. Since most benefits, like health insurance and production permits, come from MCIG, the House and its unions are dependent on the

government. One of the most important roles of the House of Cinema was to provide a place for filmmakers, including documentary filmmakers, to meet and discuss their work. For example, the House's screening room was often used by filmmakers to show their films to colleagues, sometimes without the official permits[1]. This room became a key place for documentary filmmakers, who had few other options to show their work. As Persheng Sadegh-Vaziri, an Iranian writer and filmmaker, pointed out, after the 2009 elections, conservative officials in the MCIG became suspicious of filmmakers, especially those connected to European and American media. At the same time, many filmmakers who supported the green movement stopped working with the government. They boycotted events like the Fajr Film Festival, Iran's premier annual cinema event, and rejected funding from places like the Documentary and Experimental Film Center (DEFC). The MCIG's cinema division, tried to give more power to filmmakers who shared their views and aimed to bring the House of Cinema under more control. This conflict led to the shutdown of the House of Cinema in December 2011. Many filmmakers believed the closure happened because of the House's independent position, especially its "support for six documentary filmmakers who were arrested". The House of Cinema stayed closed until September 2013, when a more moderate government took power and reopened it (178).

As a result of the conflict, the sense of unity and the drive for teamwork among documentary filmmakers were further strengthened. The House of Cinema recognized the IRDFA as its most active guild, and in 2010, the European Documentary Network (EDN)[2] awarded it for its

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[1] An official permit is a document issued by the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, which is required for any film that wishes to be shown, even for a single screening. These permits ensure that films comply with state regulations and censorship guidelines, and without them, screenings are considered unauthorized.

[2] The European Documentary Network (EDN) Award is a prestigious recognition presented by the European Documentary Network to individuals or organizations that have made significant contributions to the development and promotion of documentary filmmaking in Europe and beyond. Established in 2005, the award honors those who have demonstrated outstanding dedication to the documentary community, fostering innovation, collaboration, and the advancement of the documentary genre. https://edn.network/

significant contribution to documentary culture. This development demonstrated that even under a conservative administration, there was still space in the Iranian public sphere for political and cultural opposition. Despite restrictions from the decision to avoid government cooperation, limitations on partnerships with foreign TV stations and foundations, filmmakers' collective spirit and determination drove them to find innovative ways to remain active. They adapted by writing blogs, editing unfinished films, organizing film workshops, and engaging in union activities to protect their rights (164). According to reports in the *Film* journal, private screenings of their films began in 2009 at the home of a prominent documentary producer, with documentary filmmakers and union members regularly attending every other week on Monday evenings, highlighting how the home continued to fill the gaps left by the restricted public sphere (*Moluki* 10).

It appears all the paths of the green movement, which had begun in the streets and turned them into arenas of struggle, were ultimately destined to end at home. After months of unrest, the movement gradually subsided as people left the streets and returned to their homes. Moreover, after being arrested and jailed for several months on charges of "acting against national security", Iranian independent filmmaker Jafar Panahi was sentenced in 2010 to six years in prison and banned for twenty years from making or writing films, as well as giving interviews. Despite these restrictions, Panahi created *This Is Not a Film (2011)*, a first-person documentary made under strict government limitations, which he smuggled into foreign film festivals. The film, made in collaboration with documentary filmmaker Mojtaba Mirtahmasb, shows a day in Panahi's life under house arrest. Without access to professional filmmaking tools, he used digital technology— mainly a cellphone—to record his situation, while Mirtahmasb used a handheld camera to capture Panahi's thoughts, fears, and daily life. *This Is Not a Film* may seem like a homemade project, as

an experienced filmmaker is forced to use an iPhone and a simple camera to document his reality. In the final parts of the film, as Panahi switches between a handheld camera and a mobile phone, it clearly shows how the amateur, home-movie style aligns with the nature of some self-reflective documentaries. Here, amateurism is both the artist's only means of expression under restrictive conditions and a visual translation of marginalization. In fact, it becomes a way of resisting aesthetically—what could be called the very aesthetics of resistance.

In the same year that Panahi made his film, two experienced documentary filmmakers and active members of the IRDFA, Pirooz Kalantari and Mehrdad Oskouei, organized a first-person filmmaking workshop, resulting in the production of three first-person documentaries under their supervision: *Old Boy* (Mehdi Bagheri), *Unwelcome in Tehran* (Mina Keshavarz) and *21 Days and Me* (Shirin Barghnavard) (Bagheri 50). All three chose to turn their cameras inward, capturing their private lives at home. In a radical atmosphere where underground films with distinctly political messages were being made[1], the first-person documentaries—focused on personal, seemingly non-political matters at home—appeared more conservative, opting for a low-risk approach. Nevertheless, amid the widening gap between public and private spaces, the home was a strategic site where secrets were hidden, and once-routine matters transformed into underground narratives. Perhaps this is why, now, from a broader perspective, these seemingly apolitical first-person documentaries appear to explore issues more profoundly than those radical underground political films.

So far, we've outlined the context in which first-person cinema—the focus of our discussion—emerged and took root. In the next chapter, two documentaries created by women as part of the

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[1] Such as Bahman Ghobadi's *No One Knows About Persian Cats* (2009), Granaz Musavi's *My Tehran for Sale* (2009), and Zamani Esmati's *Orion* (2010), and etc.

mentioned workshop will be examined, and in subsequent chapters, the continuation of the path initiated by them will be traced, exploring its developments and increasing explicitness. By examining this path, it will be demonstrated how the 'I,' initially focused on its privacy, gradually unmasks itself over time; the private transcends the individual, becoming part of the public sphere—in other words, how the 'I' evolves into the 'we.' This analysis will explore how women's private issues, once deemed unworthy of discussion in the public sphere, not only enter the public space but also become central to broader discourse.

Chapter 2. Between Objectification and Subjectivity: Reclaiming Female Agency in Iranian First-Person Documentaries

To understand the distinctive role of first-person documentaries by women, it is necessary to situate them within the broader history of female representation in Iranian cinema. This chapter initially offers a brief overview of that trajectory—beginning with the objectified image of women in commercial cinema before the revolution, followed by the moralistic portrayal of women in the years after the revolution and war, then the gradual transformation toward more complex representations during the post-war and reform periods, and finally, the documentary portrayals of the digital era as a turning point in redefining women's image. This historical shift reveals the ideological constraints placed on female subjectivity, and the ways cinema has responded to or challenged them over time.

Afterwards, it is examined how first-person documentaries open a space for Iranian women to express personal experiences largely absent from mainstream cinema. Two early examples *21 Days and Me* and *Unwelcome in Tehran*—are analyzed for their engagement with themes often considered taboo, including the female body, premarital sex, and the desire to live outside traditional family structures. Particular attention is given to the way these films bring everyday feminine concerns into focus, shifting emphasis from public, collective narratives to private and individual.

Finally, the chapter discusses how First-person filmmaking redefines the boundaries of documentary by blurring the conventional line between subjectivity and objectivity, pushing beyond traditional notion that privileged objectivity. It demonstrates how Iranian documentaries,

traditionally state-controlled and objective, are now embracing self-expression and individual subjectivity.

Intimacy Outside the Industry: A Condensed Review of Women's Evolving Image in Iranian Cinema

With few exceptions, Iranian commercial cinema—both before and after the revolution—has generally moved in the opposite direction of real progress in women's issues. It often presents a distorted and unfair image of women, shaped more by its own ideological views than by the reality of women's lives. Shahla Lahiji, a writer, women's rights activist, and director of Roshangaran— a publishing house focused on women's issues—believes that Iranian cinema has, from the beginning, held the potential to shape public consciousness toward social change in favor of women. But instead, for many years, it showed women as if they only had one path to be saved— by acting like "second-class citizens", staying at home, raising children, and serving their husbands. If they stepped outside these limits, the films suggested they would harm society and fall into an "unchaste doll" (216). In her brief review of Iranian cinema history, she shows that before the revolution, popular commercial films (known as *film farsi*) and even many directors of intellectual cinema (the *new wave*) ignored women who wanted to pursue higher education, "enter the labor market", or access traditionally male domains like the army or "higher levels of political and administrative decision-making". Influenced by popular semi-musicals from Egypt and India, *film farsi* makers incorporated song-and-dance scenes to exploit the sex appeal of dancing women (218-220). In *film farsi*, a "voyeuristic, male-driven" gaze reduced women to fragmented fetish objects, isolating their legs, breasts, and faces (*Naficy Volume2* 208), and the dominant narrative portrayed the "perverted" woman—easily misled into cabaret dancing or prostitution— as

ultimately saved by a heroic man who "woke her from her sinful ways with a slap of the face" and guided her back to a so-called respectable life (*Nasehi* 546). This transformation marked her as a "good woman"—a passive, obedient housewife dressed in traditional clothes, devoted solely to serving her male master and maintaining the home. Lahiji calls this figure the "chaste doll," noting that she appears even in many New Wave films. *Qeysar* (dir. Masoud Kimiaei, 1969), often regarded as the starting point of the Iranian New Wave, is a clear example of this representation. After the 1979 revolution, this figure became an "all-too-common" presence on Iranian cinema and TV screens (*Lahiji* 221). From the early 1980s until today, although the image of women has evolved, their representation has remained a central point of contention, and depictions of women continue to be a major concern in all cinematic and visual arts. Before the 1990s, Iranian films continued to idealize women, pushing them to the margins of both frame and narrative. 'Unchaste' female figures disappeared, replaced by sacred images of mothers and wives. In the 1980s, the rise of war films—driven by the Iran-Iraq War—centered on male heroism, while women were reduced to passive, supportive roles, present only to show loyalty and await the soldier's return (*Ghorbankarimi* 48-49). After the Iran-Iraq War ended in 1988, Iran entered a period of reconstruction. The government allowed greater press freedom in the early 1990s, including the publication of women-focused magazines. Under Minister of Culture Mohammad Khatami, discussions on women's rights gained visibility, and new female activists with modern perspectives emerged. At the same time, economic hardship pushed more women into the workforce, leading to a significant rise in their labor market participation (*Kian* 81–83). During this period, the growing presence of female directors also began to reshape "135the representation of women in Iranian cinema" (*Ghorbankarimi* 96)—a shift that deepened in the late 1990s when Khatami became President. During Khatami`s Presidency, a new generation of Iranians came of age—one

that was less connected to the religious and political ideas of the Islamic Revolution. As society changed during reform era (1997-2005), especially in terms of gender and sexuality, and women filmmakers led this change by challenging traditional roles and raising issues like arranged marriage, male-dominated family structures, and gender identity. Their influence also shaped the work of male directors, who began to address similar themes in their films (*Moradiyan-Rizi Iranian Women* 9–11)—a movement that continues today in efforts to align the cinematic image of women with their social and psychological realities.

What has been discussed is somehow captured by Hamid Naficy in his classification of "the evolving image of women in post-revolutionary Iranian cinema": (1) "structured absence (early 1980s)", (2) "background presence (mid-1980s)", (3) "foreground presence (late 1980s)", and (4) "veiling as political critique (mid-1990s onward)" (*Volume 4* 111-135). His framework effectively illustrates how Iranian cinema mirrors broader social and cultural shifts and how women's roles have steadily advanced toward greater visibility and liberation. However, these changes have happened slowly over a long time. As will be discussed, Iranian first-person documentary cinema has, over the past decade, freed itself more from restrictive rules than feature film. It has advanced the image of women more quickly, focusing on the concerns any woman may have in ordinary circumstances—concerns that Official cinema has often denied them the opportunity to express— and highlighting the strong connection between women's lives and historical and political issues.

While first-person films are often labeled "documentaries" today, some critics argue that their focus on storytelling and emotional tone depart from traditional expectations. Michael Renov explains that documentary has long been valued for presenting verifiable facts and structured arguments and is expected to provide "visible evidence" and produce "knowledge". In contrast,

autobiography is viewed as subjective, fragmented, and consciously shaped helping explain why some scholars remain hesitant to fully accept autobiographical filmmaking within the documentary tradition (40). In many first-person films, as Catherine Russell notes, "documentary truth is freely mixed with storytelling and performances" (278). It was therefore important to view the image of women in first-person films within the broader landscape of narrative cinema. However, before opening the door to discussing first-person films, it is useful to briefly review the evolution of women's representation in Iranian documentary as well, which has followed a different path from that of feature films.

Before the revolution, while commercial narrative cinema largely overlooked the progress of women in the modernizing urban structure, documentary cinema aimed to portray their advancement more accurately. These films depicted women's economic and cultural activities, their participation in government institutions, sports, and even the military. However, as Ahmad Mirehsan observes, these documentaries were often rooted in the Shah's 1963 White Revolution land reforms and functioned as propaganda, focusing on the surface aspects of modernization and lacking a critical analysis of women's positions or individual agency. A few exceptions, such as Kamran Shirdel's *Nedamatgah* (aka *Women's Prison*, 1965) and *Qal'eh* (aka *Women's Quarter*, 1965), stand out for exploring the darker aspects of women's social lives, focusing on women's prisons and brothels. In the 1960s and 1970s, rural women were also frequently featured in documentaries, often in connection with local work such as cooking, handicrafts, and traditional occupations like mat and carpet weaving (*Moqaddame-i* 274-275). Nevertheless, women in these films are always, in a sense, depicted in long shots, embodying a generalized, ideological concept of womanhood, rather than as distinct individuals with unique identities, emotions, and lived experiences. To show how women's roles gained greater prominence in post-revolutionary

documentary cinema, Mirehsan proposes a typology of recurring themes. According to his classification, some films depict the everyday lives of nomadic women, or the hardships faced by rural women, focusing primarily on their cultural, economic, and social roles. On the other hand, documentaries centered on urban women tend to address broader societal issues and public concerns, such as homelessness, addiction, prostitution, and economic insecurity (*Moqaddame-i* 276-281). The trajectory of these works suggests that documentary cinema has gradually shifted from a "long shot" to a "medium shot"—moving closer to women's lives but still largely framing them within collective or societal roles. In the few films, among which *Mokarrameh, Memories and Dreams* (dir. Ebrahim Mokhtari , 1999) can be cited as an example, the filmmaker captures the inner world of a woman with notable intimacy. However, Mokarrameh's concerns, as a rural woman, remain grounded in a traditional context. It is only in first-person documentaries, that filmmakers have begun to explore the solitude and private needs of urban, modern women, emphasizing their individuality and concerns that challenge conventional norms.

In her research on *The Evolution of Women's Representation in Iranian Cinema*, Maryam Ghorbankarimi explains that since the conservative government took power in 2005, the Iranian "film industry"— "directly affected by the ruling government's views"—has faced renewed censorship. She argues that many commercial films from this period resemble pre-revolutionary melodramas in their weak plots, shallow characters, and traditional portrayal of women, echoing the ideology of the *film farsi* era (198). This situation continues in Iranian commercial cinema today. To find a more progressive image of Iranian women, it may be necessary to look beyond the films produced by the "industry" that Ghorbankarimi refers to. Instead, attention should be given to films shaped by a different mechanism—not driven by market demands and, in some cases, even shared freely online to reach audiences. The following section examines two such

examples: *Unwelcome in Tehran* (dir. Shirin Barghnavard, 2011) and *21 Days and Me (*dir. Mina Keshavarz, 2011).

As noted in the previous chapter, these films emerged from Iran's first-ever first-person filmmaking workshop and can be considered student projects. They were not made for commercial release—no tickets were sold, and screenings were mostly limited to private or cinephile spaces. These films became a voice for the marginalized, offering a "history from below," and thus neither television nor any state institution was involved in their archiving or screening. They circulated among audiences in DVD and file formats and are now available online through free platforms like Telegram, on demand from the filmmakers. Consequently, in terms of distribution, these films were more suited to the dynamics of social networks and sharing than to traditional, formal broadcast channels—more about being shared online than being aired on television.

By analyzing these two documentaries, I show how personal narratives challenge official ideals of motherhood and wifehood. Through close reading of their storytelling and visual style, I reveal how they expose social and gender pressures absent from mainstream Iranian cinema. Drawing on Alisa Lebow's theory of first-person filmmaking, I argue these works blur documentary objectivity by centering private, feminine concerns that reflect broader social tensions. My method combines formal film analysis with socio-political context to demonstrate how intimate stories express quiet resistance and shifting female subjectivities in post-2009 Iran.

Beyond Motherhood and Marriage

Iranian documentaries have occasionally focused on well-known modern urban women, particularly famous figures like Forough Farrokhzad (poet and film director) or Gizella Varga Sinai (Painter), to explore their poetry and artistic worlds. *21 Days and Me* and *Unwelcome in*

Tehran also explore the lives of two artists, but with two key differences: first, these women were relatively unknown at the time and were new to the scene; second, the focus of these films is not on their work, but on their personal and feminine issues. Neither the main characters nor the main themes are overly specific; their concerns could easily reflect the experiences of many Iranian women. Perhaps the most significant thematic aspect of these two films is their challenge to two ideals that the Iranian government has long promoted and sanctified: motherhood and wifehood.

21 Days and Me tells the story of Shirin Baraghnavard, a 35-year-old documentary filmmaker who has been married for ten years. After discovering a fibroid in her uterus, she learns that surgery is necessary—and that the best time to become pregnant would be immediately after the operation. This urgent situation brings her long-standing uncertainty about motherhood to the surface. Over the 21 days leading up to her surgery, she begins a personal journey, speaking with women her age and with her husband, trying to understand what it means to become a mother. The film unfolds in a diary-like format with a linear structure. There is no voice-over, but the filmmaker frequently speaks directly to the camera in a conversational tone, which serves as a form of narration and self-reflection. She documents informal interviews with friends and peers, often during casual social gatherings, creating a spontaneous and intimate atmosphere. Shot with a handheld camera, the film maintains a raw, personal style that mirrors the emotional and bodily vulnerability at the heart of the narrative.

This may be the first time in Iranian cinema that a woman openly questions motherhood. Traditionally, motherhood has been portrayed as an unquestioned role. In many Iranian films that address infertility, the idea persists that "a wife who is not also a mother is a failure" (*Moruzzi* 53). However, in this film Barghnavard, by problematizing motherhood, presents it as a complex and

debatable issue. We encounter women who have chosen not to have children—and they do not appear to regret their decision. In the same year that Barghnavard's little-known film was released, Asghar Farhadi's famous *Separation* also came out, telling the story of a woman seeking a divorce and wanting to take her child out of Iran to escape "this situation"—as she says in court. Similarly, in *21 Days and Me*, a friend tells Shirin that, "given the current situation" he and his wife cannot think about having a child. Neither film explains what this "situation" is, but the phrases resonated deeply with Iranian audiences. Disillusioned after the 2009 election, they understood exactly what was meant—and why some no longer saw a future for themselves in Iran. Field studies also confirm that concerns about "children's problems and future are among the main reasons people choose not to have children" (*Bagi*, *Sadeghi*, and *Hatami* 17; my trans). The film carries a quiet political message, showing a sense of dissatisfaction with life in Iran. This becomes clearer in a scene where Shirin remembers her grandmother, who died alone because her children had all left the country. The film raises quiet but strong questions about immigration, the fear of having children, and the future. If her grandmother's children left, what would stop a future child of Shirin's from doing the same?

Another way the film breaks taboos is through its attention to the female body. It is rare to find a post-revolution Iranian film where a woman's body is discussed so openly. Shirin talks about her uterus and says her fibroid has grown so large that she can't even wear pants. While this may seem surprising, even hearing a woman mention something as simple as her pants is uncommon in Iranian cinema. By focusing on the female body, the film also brings the male body into the conversation. There's a discussion about vasectomy and how, unlike women, men can father children even at the age of eighty. These topics arise naturally during a casual house gathering—a common setting in everyday Iranian life. However, in official Iranian cinema, such discussions

are usually avoided, except in crude comedies that rely on cheap jokes for laughs. Similarly, small gestures between a husband and wife— like Shirin saying "I kiss you" on the phone or greeting her husband with a kiss on the cheek— are intimate moments never seen in mainstream Iranian films. Watching this film, an Iranian viewer might quietly reflect on how strange it is to become accustomed to a cinema where so many usual aspects of daily life are missing.

Unwelcome in Tehran follows filmmaker Mina Keshavarz as she questions her early marriage and explores what it means for a woman to live independently in Iran. Having never experienced single life herself, she begins documenting the lives of women who live alone in Tehran, many of whom have left more conservative towns to pursue autonomy. These interviews reveal both the challenges and motivations behind their choices—economic hardship, social judgment, and the desire for freedom. She also interviews her own family members—her parents and her husband— and gradually, through these personal dialogues, she and her husband decide to live apart for a while, while still remaining married. The film has a linear narrative and unfolds in an observational style. Except for a short voice-over in the opening sequence, there is no narrator. Instead, the director is constantly present, engaging in conversations that reveal her inner thoughts and questions, while a handheld camera captures her everyday interactions with intimacy.

Unwelcome in Tehran opens with a point-of-view shot from Mina Keshavarz, the director herself. She looks at her husband lying alone in their double bed, then walks out of the room. The voice-over that follows states: "I got married just to leave my family and move to Tehran. But now, seeing the lives of my friends and other single women my age, I wonder—why did I get married so early? Why didn't I have a chance to live a single life like them?" That empty space in the bed, where Mina should be, carries a connotation of emotional absence—and perhaps already hints at

the bitter end of a marriage. The couple`s final decision goes against the mainstream narrative in many Iranian melodramas and romantic comedies, where marriage is shown as the ultimate happiness, and single women are portrayed as longing to escape their loneliness through marriage. Mina, however, becomes disillusioned with the role of "wife" just six months into her marriage, and instead envies the freedom and independence she sees in the lives of single women.

Mina's concerns reflect broader social changes in Iran, where modern values have reshaped young people's views on marriage and raised the average marrying age (*Ghaffari* and *Habibpour* 30). In the past, girls were expected to stay with their families until marriage, but with social shifts and greater university access, many began leaving home to study in other cities (*Papinejad*, *Tajoddin* and *Mohaddesi* 62). Women's enrollment in secondary education rose from just 18 percent in the 1970s to 78 percent by 2005 (*Bahramitash* and *Salehi Esfahani* 100). While traditional norms discouraged women from living alone, education-related migration became a socially acceptable path to independence. The rate of permanent singleness has risen more sharply for women than for men; between 1996 and 2016, it doubled for men but tripled for women. As a result, many young women increasingly seek autonomy in how they live and relate to society. This shift introduced modern ideas such as individualism, gender equality, freedom, critical thinking and democratic values (*Kazemi*, *Fallah*, and *Torkaman* 270). Yet this growing independence often meets resistance. One of the main challenges single women faces is securing housing—many landlords, as the film shows, refuse to rent to them, effectively excluding them from private sphere[1].

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[1] Legal and institutional structures reinforce this exclusion; for example, reproductive healthcare remains largely limited to married women, sidelining the needs of singles entirely (Kohan, Mohammadi, Mostafavi, and Gholami 148). This makes it clear that premarital sexual activities among single women lie at the heart of traditional concerns. Based on the rise in divorce rates—381 cases daily in early 2012—and the increase in HIV transmission through unprotected sex from 12% (1979–2011) to over 33% in 2012, Moradiyan-Rizi concludes that changing sexual behaviors are reshaping both family norms and public health, despite all restrictions. "The rise of higher

The young women Mina interviews offer various reasons for choosing single life in Tehran: one sees it as a way to escape family surveillance, another cites the cultural limitations of smaller towns, and a third points to the city's educational opportunities. Yet, it remains clear that not every private matter can be made public. Open relationships with the opposite sex, continue to face significant barriers—especially in smaller cities, where social relations are tight and constant scrutiny is a norm. In Tehran, however, the relatively modern and more open environment makes such relationships more feasible. Though neither Mina nor her interviewees address this directly, the film reveals its psychological traces beneath the surface. When Mina and her friend scream on the train, and later on the drop tower ride, their physical reactions carry a deeper meaning— These moments suggest a bodily release—hinting a sense of sexual energy and freedom from repressive norms. In a culture where women's open expression of joy is often restrained, these moments quietly signal freedom from social constraints.

The issue of premarital sex for women, a taboo seldom addressed openly in Iranian cinema, is not explicitly stated in *Unwelcome in Tehran*. However, in *21 Days and Me*, a single woman, in an exceptionally norm-breaking moment, openly tells Shirin how many times she has had abortions. As Shirin listens with quiet curiosity, the scene seems to create an unexpected connection between the two films, as if they are speaking to each other. In such moments, the voice no longer speaks as an "I" but as a "we".

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education and single status among Iranian women has dramatically decreased the number of marriages and childbirths, while premarital sexual activities have increased" (*Iranian Women* 15–16).

The two films share much in common. Both indirectly address the hijab issue by drawing attention to the camera's presence. While Mina films herself through a mirror, Shirin adjusts her headscarf in front of the camera (in the opening shot) to prepare for filming, and her direct address to the camera makes wearing the hijab at home seem logical. Instead of interviewing experts like sociologists or gender scholars—a common practice in traditional documentaries—both filmmakers turn to friends and peers. They avoid treating the subject as a problem or framing it as a social illness within official discourse. Instead, they focus on sharing and validating diverse, tangible women's experiences, free from slogans or pretense, which help generalize the film's subject, showing that what we witness is not just an "effeminate" issue but a shared concern for many, gradually moving from the margins to the forefront, seeking to be discussed in the public sphere.

Both films embrace deliberate amateurism in style. Mina's reflection in the mirror as she films herself subtly signals that the film is made with minimal resources. Similarly, in *21 Days and Me*, the elevator scene—where Shirin's reflection appears in the mirror—subtly shows she's holding the camera herself, with no crew or external presence, emphasizing her solitude behind the lens. Both films include moments—reminiscent of Panahi's *This Is Not a Film* or Kiarostami's *Ten on Ten*—where it feels like the director has simply placed the camera and stepped in front of it: Shirin's solo scenes, her private conversation with her husband, the doctor's office visit (especially when Shirin asks to turn off the camera), and Mina's meeting with her parents. In scenes of informal gatherings with friends, the handheld camera, loose framing, unpolished shots and ambient lighting evoke the feel of home videos. In *21 Days and Me*, the camera even passes between people, reinforcing the idea that behind it stands not a professional cinematographer, but an ordinary person—so that the film's message emerges from everyday lives.

Another important point is that although the films often feel spontaneous and improvised—thanks to their amateur style and home-movie atmosphere—certain stylized elements and metaphorical ideas appear carefully arranged. For example, in *Unwelcome in Tehran*, the scenes where Mina's friend struggles to ride a bike among many cyclists seem to symbolically reflect her attempt to take control of her life independently. In the opening of *21 Days and Me*, the sound of children playing in the street, heard as Shirin speaks, adds to the film's realist ambiance and serves as an auditory reflection of her inner world. In the park scenes, the image of a child sliding into a tunnel slide—evocative of the womb—can be seen as a symbolic expression of Shirin's desire for pregnancy. When Mina and her husband decide to live apart, the camera is placed in the hallway so that each appears in a separate room, visually emphasizing their separation. Finally, the last shot of the film fully embodies Mina's break from routine: as cars move forward in the street, she walks alone in the opposite direction on the sidewalk. This duality not only reflects the ambiguity of a cinema situated on the border—or rather born from a synthesis—of documentary and fiction but also reveals the directors' refusal to remain mere observers. They aim to act, express their subjectivity, and interpret reality rather than simply record it. At the end of *21 Days and Me*, we don't know whether Shirin decides to have a child. The film deliberately leaves this unanswered, as its focus is not on this question but on challenging what has long been considered an unquestionable truth. Similarly, in *Unwelcome in Tehran*, the film leaves unanswered what Mina experiences after separating her living space from her husband—whether she feels regret or begins to move on. These are not the film's concerns. What matters is that Mina finally takes a step toward what she's longed to experience but never dared to. Both films highlight the emergence of female subjects who begin to doubt—and therefore, can begin to choose.

Subverting Objectivity: Subjectivity as Political Expression

Alisa Lebow explores how first-person filmmaking becomes a gateway to self-awareness, focusing on the central question of how the self is constructed and expressed through documentary: "Do we become ourselves and come to know ourselves in the process of self-representation?" (*The Cinema of* 22). She argues that when filmmakers use themselves as the subject of their films, they embody both the subject matter and the creator, playing dual roles. Lebow highlights that this interplay challenges the traditional divide between subjectivity and objectivity: "Subjectivity is by no means a new documentary modality, yet the traditional posture of the theatrical and television documentary around the world has been historically that of objectivity" (22). The emergence of the subjective voice in documentaries has long been hindered by the unrealistic ideal of disinterested objectivity. However, in first-person films, the filmmaker`s subjectivity disrupts the long-standing illusion of objectivity in documentary practice. "First-person film goes beyond simply debunking documentary claims to objectivity"; "it actually unsettles the dualism of the objective/subjective divide, rendering it inoperative" (23).

The dominant voice in Iranian documentaries—largely state-funded and supported by the national broadcaster IRIB—relied on a hegemonic, omniscient narrator that claimed objectivity, spoke with authority, and focused on public, macro-level issues. In contrast, student films like *21 Days and Me* and *Unwelcome in Tehran* marked a clear departure: they adopted a subjective first-person voice—modest and uncertain—driven by personal reflection, open-ended questions, and a focus on private life, the everyday, and the micro-level dimensions of experience (*Belaghati* 67).

In the context of today's digital age, "the foregrounding of the self and the prominence accorded to subjectivity are veritable markers of the contemporary globalized culture and society"

(*Rascaroli Working at* 229). From this perspective, the turn toward personal, subjective narratives in these two films cannot be separated from the broader rise of self-representation among ordinary Iranians on social media, facilitated by blogging and digital platforms like Facebook and, later, Instagram. As Moradiyan-Rizi notes, blogging—particularly for Iranian women—led to "unprecedented forms of self-expression." The option of anonymity gave many the freedom to speak openly, though some chose to reveal their identity. (We will return to this topic in Chapter 4) All these practices reflect a broader movement toward personal storytelling and self-representation in the digital era (*Women and Documentary*, 74).

As mentioned in the previous chapter, after the 1979 revolution and further reinforced by the Iran-Iraq War, public discourse in Iran elevated unity to a sacred ideal, creating a one-size-fits-all narrative that focused on the collective rather than the individual. This attitude has remained a central feature of official narratives ever since. Through this lens, the widespread proliferation of self-representation in the digital age is inevitably a political issue, as it emphasizes individuality and brings a grounded, embodied perspective. Additionally, first-person films, despite being confined to the private realm of intimate relationships, offer significant insights into a range of political, social, and cultural issues due to their reliance on subjectivity. According to the philosophical concept of "subjection" referenced by Lebow, "one only becomes a subject (in the sense of an individual with rights, needs and desires) through the process of subjection to an order, social, political and, of course, symbolic." This implies that before we can even conceive of ourselves as independent beings, we are "already subject to another's will, to other powers and forces" (*The Cinema of Me* 22). In light of this, if we consider that "in modern Iran, any time that national identity is at stake, women, their social roles, and their representation on screens become central to the national debate" (*Naficy volume1* 133) then a woman's act of speaking about her

body—even when framed through something seemingly private and non-political, like illness or fibroids—can be seen as a form of resistance, whether intentional or not.

Given that the critical focus of both films is directed more toward family, generational divides, and societal issues—without directly confronting political power—it is more accurate to interpret them as expressing a reformist sensibility rather than a revolutionary one, reflecting the enduring spirit of the Khatami-era, even though they were made several years after his presidency. In *21 Days and Me*, Shirin says it is very difficult to explain to people why she does not want children. This shows how much society interferes in private life, trying to remind her of traditional values and push her to follow them. In *Unwelcome in Tehran*, Mina's friend (Azar) talks about her problems with a traditional family and the strict, judgmental atmosphere of her small hometown, where people say that an unmarried woman living alone is probably promiscuous. In both films, women who make different choices from tradition must explain themselves to others. There is no direct mention of political power, but it is clear which side it supports in this struggle between young women and traditional families and society. Power dynamics are visible in the more subtle layers of the marital relationships portrayed in both films. Both husbands appear to hold progressive views and respond to their wives' concerns in a seemingly democratic way. Shirin's husband, for instance, agrees with not having children—a stance that itself goes against traditional norms—and Mina's husband says he understands her and has no problem with her living alone for a while. Yet beneath this appearance of empathy, both men exercise power through passive forms of control. Shirin's husband says he doesn't want a child now, but he might change his mind in five years—by which time Shirin would be forty, a less ideal age for pregnancy. Similarly, Mina's husband agrees to her temporary independence but adds that there's no guarantee he'll accept her

back if she chooses to return. In both cases, power operates not through open resistance but through conditional support.

Both films are about choice. The two women are at a turning point—thinking about something new, questioning what seemed normal for the older generation. Watching these films today reveals that women's public challenges to official discourse are deeply rooted in the private space of the home, shaped by generational gaps. In the next chapter, we will see how later first-person filmmakers connect their personal lives to collective history and political events, moving from the small family to the larger national one.

Chapter3. The Politics of Privacy

Profession: Documentarist (2014) brings together the voices of seven Iranian women filmmakers—Shirin Barghnavard, Firouzeh Khosrovani, Farahnaz Sharifi, Mina Keshavarz, Sepideh Abtahi, Sahar Salehshour, and Nahid Rezaei—in a collaborative, self-reflective work. Through seven episodes, each filmmaker explores the personal and professional challenges she faces as a woman in the field of documentary cinema. The entire process of making the film— from the initial idea to post-production—was carried out collaboratively by all seven filmmakers. The film takes shape shortly after two earlier workshop-based documentaries by Mina Keshavarz and Shirin Barghnavard, and its global release[1] coincided with the rise of Rouhani's moderate administration. In Iran, however, it was screened only once—at the reopening of the House of Cinema in September 2015 —and has since had no official public showing. Each of the seven episodes adopts a diary-like form, focusing on the filmmakers' private lives. Yet this time, self-representation carries a distinctly political charge. The shadow of the 2009 election protests looms large, and the personal narratives unfold through a collective and social lens. Each filmmaker appears determined to show how deeply her personal life is entangled with Iran's political upheavals.

Shirin`s episode speaks about her fear of a looming war between Iran and the United States and Mina`s episode openly states that she attempted to document the 2009 street protests. In Firouzeh's episode, we see her during daily routines—packing belongings, drawing curtains, sorting through

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[1] The film was screened at numerous international festivals, including the Buenos Aires International Festival of Independent Cinema, the Zurich Film Festival, the Jihlava International Documentary Film Festival, the Mumbai International Women's Film Festival, and the Cairo International Women's Film Festival. It also received the Tim Hetherington Award at the Sheffield International Documentary Festival.

objects—while her voice-over recounts the experience of being interrogated upon returning from an international film festival. Farahnaz shows how music has vanished from public life since women were banned from singing after the 1979 Revolution. Sepideh's personal narrative intersects with the 1979 Revolution, while Sahar's story centers on her apartment window, which is overlooked by a prison watchtower. Nahid addresses the fragile livelihood of documentary filmmakers in the aftermath of 2009. In both her episode and Mina Keshavarz's, we see images of the shuttered House of Cinema. "Back then," Mina says, "we documentary filmmakers wanted to be together more than we wanted to make films." Nahid recalls the imprisonment of colleagues, the closing of House of Cinema, and the sense of professional abandonment— all of which are discussed in Chapter 1. In response, she decides to open a small café where she can show films— an effort to make space in a time of erasure, showing the filmmakers' determination to stay connected during years when they were pushed more to the margins. In one scene, Nahid visits a cramped shared office where Farahnaz, Sepideh, Shirin, and Mina work side by side. Over lunch, Mina casually asks, "What's up with the fund?" and they all burst into laughter. At one point, Nahid remarks, "Most of my films don't have producers." The simplicity of form, the collaborative structure, and the fact that each filmmaker took part in producing one another's segments reveal a project made through solidarity, and with limited means. During a discussion at the film's only public screening, Shirin Barghnavard remarked, "Sometimes we tell ourselves this film might stay in the archives for years. But what mattered was to record our present and future and leave it for those who come after." (my trans) That sentiment captures the spirit of the project: one of persistence, collectivity, and a deep commitment to bearing witness, even in the face of uncertainty and constraint.

As Moradiyan-Rizi mentions, this "close and intimate collaboration" functions as an important form of "solidarity and alliance," and this "collective mode of production" gives rise to a "first person plural" perspective (*Women and Documentary* 86). Although each of the seven episodes is made by a distinct "I," a shared pain runs through them all—each one mirroring the others, moving collectively toward a sense of "we." This shared sensitivity results in recurring themes, materials, and visual elements across films. Emigration emerges more vividly in Barghnavard and Keshavarz's episodes than in their earlier works. Both include scenes set in airports, where families have gathered to say goodbye to their loved ones[1]. Moreover, emigration inevitably places "homeland" at the center, and the decision to stay or leave prompts deep reflection on one's roots, attachments, and personal history. This story is often constructed through home movies. The episodes by Mina, Shirin, Farahnaz, and Sepideh are particularly rich in family photographs and archival footage. *Profession: Documentarist*, while connected to the previous films both aesthetically and thematically, also offers a foundational pattern—albeit in a raw and undeveloped form—that is continued, expanded, and refined in the subsequent first-person documentries *Radiograph of a Family* (2020) (Firouzeh Khosrovani) and *Silent House* (2022) (Farnaz Jurabchian, Mohammadreza Jurabchian). These two films deepen the connection between personal and politics, approach the macro through the lens of the micro, and trace how collective histories shape individual lives. Both rely heavily on family archives—photographs, home movies, and other intimate materials—to construct their narratives.

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[1] Of these seven filmmakers, Mina Keshavarz and Farahnaz Sharifi have, so far, emigrated from Iran to Europe.

The use of home movies in *Profession: Documentarist*—presented for the first time in such an unrestrained and bold manner—revealed aspects of Iranian private life that had never been reflected in post-revolutionary cinema, nor was there any expectation for them to be.

In the following, drawing on the work of Efrén Cuevas, Patricia Zimmerman, Diane Charleson, and Alisa Lebow, we examine the significance of home movies in relation to collective memory and historical narration. We explore how they serve as visual forms of microhistory, offering intimate perspectives that can, through narrative construction, be linked to broader historical frameworks. We then consider how mechanisms of power shape the recognition of home movies as part of visual heritage and emphasize the importance of their preservation and archiving. Finally, we reflect on their function through the lens of gender dynamics. Through the analysis *Radiograph of a Family* and *Silent House*, we further develop this understanding of home movies as positioned at the intersection of public and private space—revealing how, in first-person cinema, the political is reconfigured through the personal, and how amateur film, once confined to domesticity, reclaims its place in the public sphere.

Recording the Repressed: The Feminized Voice of Iranian Home Movies

In Farahnaz Sharifi's episode of *Profession: Documentarist*, the filmmaker (Farahnaz herself) speaks as the narrator. She starts by revisiting some iconic songs by famous female singers— voices that were banned after the 1979 revolution but were still played in cars and homes. She reflects that the city's soundscape became "masculine," as only revolutionary anthems were allowed in public. She then explains how, in private spaces, people secretly exchanged videos and films, and how her own family's archive slowly filled with dance footage: "People would gather for any reason and dance—and from the moment I held a camera, I recorded those dances." With

this, the filmmaker makes a bold and rare gesture: she brings back the voices and images that were removed from public life. At the same time, she shows how important home movies are for preserving some aspects of "real life," especially how families used them to document moments of joy and dancing. Shot with amateur cameras by ordinary people, home movies recorded the captured images of families that, if we consider the superficiality of the images, were more authentic than the distorted images of professional cinema. Shot with amateur cameras by ordinary people, home movies captured images of family life that, despite their apparent simplicity, often appear more authentic than the polished yet distorted representations offered by professional cinema.

Efrén Cuevas, scholar in film and media studies, argues that home movies are valuable for sociological research and represent a form of "history from below." When used in documentaries, they serve as the filmic equivalent of "microhistorical studies," which reject grand historical narratives in favor of focusing on individuals and the "small scale" of everyday life. Cuevas links the nature of home movies to Alf Lüdtke's concept of the "miniature," described as the basis of a history of everyday life, proposing a "collage or mosaic" of such miniatures to create "patchwork" views of society. Drawing on Francesca Trivellato, he also addresses the challenge of connecting micro-level insights to larger historical frameworks. According to her, biographical narratives can "bridge the gap between the different scales." However, since home movies usually "lack a narrative framework," Cuevas emphasizes the role of contemporary filmmakers in "recycling domestic footage" to create accessible filmic microhistories (139-141). Moreover, drawing on the socio-political context of Iran and its reflection in Iranian cinema, we can argue that while official cinema remains dominated by patriarchal ideology, home movies, conversely, occupy a space more aligned with the feminine. Since the home was traditionally considered the domain of

women, these personal films, which often repurpose elements rejected by the dominant discourse, reflect a more intimate, female-centered perspective.

Patricia Zimmerman, a pioneering scholar of home-movie and documentary cultures, argues that the term "amateur"—especially in relation to home movies—is inherently gendered and feminized, associated with marginalization and domesticity[1]. As she notes, early advertisements for Kodak and Bell & Howell cameras often featured women, suggesting the technology was simple and belonged in the home. This imagery associated women, nature, and amateur filmmaking, distancing it from the public sphere. Zimmerman contrasts this with professional filmmaking, coded as masculine—linked to order and authority—while amateur film represents chaos, emotion, and excess, reflecting psychoanalytic ideas of hysteria (*Mining* 277-278). While professional cinema is smooth and polished, amateur films are sloppy and filled with gaps— reflecting how capitalist systems value only films tied to power and money. Even though amateur film has been colonized by the mainstream, reduced to a toy, and confined to the nuclear family, it still documents everyday life in many communities and nations. For Zimmerman, this very exclusion from dominant film discourse is what makes amateur films worth preserving and studying. According to her, until the 1990s, amateur films were largely neglected by archives, which primarily focused on preserving feature films and national cinemas. However, a few public archives and private collectors began shifting attention toward amateur films, recognizing their

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[1] While the distinction between amateur films and home movies is well established, this discussion adopts Patricia Zimmermann's broader use of the term "amateur films" in her article *Morphing History into Histories*, where the term encompasses home movies. Nonetheless, it is important to note that amateur films are typically understood as a form of serious leisure, marked by aesthetic ambition, intentional construction, identifiable genres, and narrative coherence. In contrast, home movies are associated with casual leisure, often unedited, lacking genre or plot, produced within a domestic context, and frequently orphaned, without formal titles or clear authorship (*Czach* 30).

value in documenting everyday life. This effort was part of a broader movement to expand film history beyond commercial cinema (34). Nevertheless, "there are still structures of power in place that determine what is included or excluded from official archives, and these structures have important political, social, and historiographic ramifications for what is considered by most to be properly archival" (Baron 103). What complicates the category of home movies in Iran more than usual is that these films are rejected by official discourse for ideological reasons—especially because they depict a vision of life that the state does not tolerate. As a result, one cannot expect an official archive for such films. More importantly, in a context where many events captured in home movies were deemed unacceptable by official discourse, families took great care to keep these films confidential. Their concern went beyond the usual desire for privacy; the exposure of activities such as dancing and drinking could have serious legal consequences in the constraining social and political climate of the time. This added a significant layer of risk not only to screening these films, but also to preserving them as part of their personal archives. In this sense, home movies preserve part of the collective memory of Iranians and their shared participation in what was officially considered an "illegal act" in the decades following the revolution. This is especially evident in wedding videos: Although the law requires men and women to be separated during wedding ceremonies, many people held their celebrations in gardens or informal venues—one might even call them "underground"—where they gathered in secret to dance and celebrate together. These acts, though illegal in the eyes of official discourse, were made possible through the shared trust and cooperation of all the guests, who worked together to ensure everything went smoothly[1].

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[1] At the same time with making *Profession: Documentarist* Farahnaz Sharifi was editing *Wedding: A Film* (2015), directed by her ex-husband, Mohammad Reza Farzad. Initially focusing on their divorce, the film ultimately evolved

Underground life in Iran created a sense of empathy and unity, and since home movies preserve fragments of that hidden world and evoke those shared emotions, they can be seen as images of collective memory. By watching home movies or wedding celebration films from that era, even those not present at the events can feel a shared connection, as if a common spirit flows through these private spheres and transcends individual identities. In other words, it often doesn't matter who is dancing in a home movie—what matters is that the Iranian spectator recognizes a reflection of their own past. In Sepideh Abtahi's episode of *Profession: Documentarist*, this idea seems to be taken into account. Unlike Farahnaz Sharifi, who recorded the home movies herself, Abtahi is not necessarily behind the camera. Instead, she assumes the role of curator and collagist, gathering and assembling footage shot by anonymous individuals—because she sees in it something that resonates with her own memories. The final shots of her film, in this sense, break personal boundaries and transform the meaning of a specific image into something archetypal. Throughout the film, Sepideh recalls how her aunt, Maryam, died on the day of the revolution's victory (which could be seen as ironic): "I remember the revolution, and I don't remember Maryam; but someone must have captured her face on camera at some point." Then, we see Super 8 slow-motion footage of a woman running through a villa's yard, surrounded by greenery, her hair flowing, joyful dancing to "Roudkhaneh" (River), a famous song by a Marxist-Leninist urban guerrilla group. The use of Super 8 film in these final shots, in connection with the filmmaker's intended metaphor, creates a unique and lasting impact. Diane Charleson, a senior lecturer in Media and a documentary filmmaker who works with visual methods such as Super 8 found footage, drawing on Walter Benjamin's concept of aura, explains how the soft grain, saturated colors, flickering speed, and

into an essay on the nature of marriage. Built around Iranian wedding videos from the post-revolutionary period, Sharifi and Farzad should be recognized as pioneers in the bold use of home movies in Iranian documentaries.

luminous light of Super 8 film produce a texture that offers a distinct emotional and spatial experience. According to Benjamin, aura refers to "the associations that a specific object will bring to mind, a state of mind or feeling that a viewer experiences when looking at a work of art or nature". Charleson argues that Super 8 film carries this aura not only through its nostalgic subject matter but also through its material qualities, which evoke a sense of beauty, loss, and remembrance—qualities that resemble memories: fleeting, emotional, and unclear—and cannot be replicated by the "sharp world of digital video" (175-178).

The grainy texture and warm light of the final shots of Sepideh`s episode do more than represent memory—they embody it. The scene takes on a dreamlike quality, not simply recalling the past but reimagining it. The image shifts between fact and fantasy, shaped by memory and desire. Is the woman in the footage Maryam? We cannot be sure—and it does not matter. What lingers is the impression of feminine beauty, freedom, and loss, forming a symbol of a vanished ideal that seems to be the missing link across all the films we are discussing.

Homes of Memory: Private Archives and Public Histories in Iranian Documentary

Radiograph of a Family and *The Silent House* share striking similarities. Both draw on personal archival materials and examine large-scale political and historical shifts through the intimate, small-scale world of the family. In both films, the notion of place—whether a house or a homeland—becomes central, revealing how profoundly the private sphere is intertwined with political life. Both filmmakers show and say things that are officially illegal in Iran—things that could bring serious consequences—yet they continue to live in the country. Neither of them follows the rules of compulsory hijab. In *Profession: Documentarist*, especially in the home movie parts by Sepideh and Farahnaz, we see images of unveiled women. Most of these women remain

anonymous, but in one short and powerful moment, we see Farahnaz Sharifi herself—without a headscarf—filming her own reflection with her phone. At that time, Iranian women had not yet started their public protests against hijab laws. This simple act was already a quiet form of resistance. In this way, *Radiograph of a Family* and *The Silenced House* go even further (Khosravani`s film even includes images of beach life in Iran before the revolution). Today, when we watch them, we recognize that their frankness holds signs of the protest movement that would later unfold on a large scale, led by a significant portion of Iranian women in the public sphere[1]. They also in line with *Profession: Documentarist*, offer a critical view of the revolution and the aftermath of the 2009 street protests, but they express this view more clearly and sharply.

In *Radiograph of a Family*, the director narrates the story of her family, torn between France and Iran. Her father, Hossein, a modern, fun-loving man with a deep appreciation for European culture, contrasts sharply with her mother, Tayi, who harbors strong religious convictions. After several years in Europe, the mother urges the family to return to Iran so that their child can be born in their homeland. There, influenced by Ali Shariati—an important Iranian sociologist of religion—Tayi joins the movement that leads to the Iranian Revolution. However, life takes a new turn when the Iranian Revolution and subsequent war unfold. The father wishes to leave, but the mother, now closely aligned with the government, insists on staying.

In *Radiograph of a Family*, Firouzeh's birth marks a turning point, splitting the narrative into two distinct worlds: the father's Europe, shaped by secular ideals, and the mother's Iran, driven by religious conviction. Jonathan Romney described the film as "detached," calling it a "pre-

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[1] The women's protest movement emerged in 2022 following the death of Mahsa Amini, a young woman detained for allegedly violating hijab regulations. Her death sparked widespread protests across Iran, with many women removing their headscarves in public under the slogan "Woman, Life, Freedom." Although the movement eventually lost some of its radical momentum, it continues today through ongoing acts of civil disobedience.

autobiography"—less a record of Khosrovani's own life than a portrait of her parents, though she remains at its center. However, the filmmaker's subjectivity—her interpretation of relationships and ultimate judgment—is too present for the film to be truly called "detached". In an interview with *Variety*, she said, "My mother wanted to instil her beliefs in me… but when I grew up, I chose my father's values instead. I am more of my father's daughter (*Balaga*)". Perhaps for this reason, unlike conventional documentaries, she did not interview her mother—who is still alive—nor did she let her speak for herself. Instead, she chose to explore her through scripted dialogues and monologues. No scene captures the filmmaker's approach—blending documentary and fiction—more clearly than the one in which young Firouzeh tries to reconstruct a torn photograph of her unveiled mother. It is one of many photographs destroyed by Tayi in an attempt to erase her pre-revolutionary self, and Firouzeh draws around the remaining scraps to bring it back to life. Imagination and facts interact throughout the film. Its documentary dimension is constructed from old letters, family photographs, Super 8 home movies, archival footage, audio recordings—including the director's childhood tapes—and a narrative woven from these elements. Complementing this factual foundation, the film's dramatic dimension is shaped by fully reconstructed dialogues between Tayi and Hossein, performed by professional voice actors, along with evocative music and sound design. Notably, the narration, though written in the first person from Firouzeh's perspective, is not voiced by Khosrovani herself but by Farahnaz Sharifi. Even much of the archival found footage lacks documentary authenticity; it does not depict actual events but is used to evoke atmosphere—especially scenes meant to suggest the mood of Swiss streets and cafés. In the same spirit, the only newly filmed material consists of scenes set in a large living room, designed like a stage set, presumably part of Firuzeh's paternal home. Shot with slow tracking movements and revisited throughout the film, this space functions as a recurring visual

motif. Through gradual changes in its objects and décor, it quietly marks the passage of time and reflects the evolving dynamics of the family's life.

The scene where Firouzeh draws around the torn remains of her mother's photograph carries a deeper resonance: the new generation is piecing together what the previous one tried to erase. This gesture reflects a broader struggle at the heart of many first-person autobiographical documentaries by women in the past decade—a confrontation with what the earlier generation suppressed, and a reclaiming of questions they left unasked: Do I want to be a mother? What if I choose not to be? Why not live alone? Why should I feel guilty or shame about how I dress?

Patricia Holland, a media scholar and former independent filmmaker, argues that domestic photography often casts women—especially mothers—as "guardians of memory," responsible for preserving the family album and history (Fung 31). But in *Radiograph of a Family*, Tayi does the opposite. By adopting the ideals of patriarchal ideology, Tayi gradually loses markers of femininity and takes on a more masculine role, a transformation further intensified by her enlistment during the Iran-Iraq War and her embrace of strict revolutionary dress. Khosrovani`s film challenges common assumptions by examining patriarchal dynamics in her mother`s life. In their aristocratic home in Iran, Tayi gradually becomes the ruler, imposing the rules of the public sphere within the private sphere of their home. Hossein is increasingly isolated, compelled to abandon many of his secular interests, as if even his privacy—his last refuge—had been occupied. Meanwhile, the mother transforms the house into a semi-public sphere, where other devout women gather for religious ceremonies.

As the film unfolds, private moments gradually recede, giving way to the intrusion of broader, macro-level concerns into everyday life. Later, in the recurring tracking shot, the shift from

intimacy to ideology becomes clear: the double bed disappears, and a long tablecloth is spread on the floor—a familiar image in Iranian culture—suggesting that Tayi's religious companions will soon gather there for rituals.

At the very beginning of the film, Firouzeh says, "Mother married Father's photograph." This is literally true: Hossein married his younger wife from a distance, unable to take time off from his medical studies in Switzerland. Yet the sentence carries an ironic weight, especially as we come to feel that, by flipping through the photo album of someone we never knew, the history of a country unfolds before our eyes. The mother's marriage to a photograph, her migration to Europe, the father's push for unveiling, her rejection of the West and return to Iran, and her eventual embrace of religious conservatism collectively mirror Iran's century-long identity crisis—a country that, under Reza Shah, once rushed toward Western modernity, only to sharply reverse course after the 1979 Revolution, redefining itself through a renewed embrace of tradition and resistance to the West.

In Farnaz and Mohammad Reza Jurabchian's autobiographical documentary, the story of a hundred-year-old house and its three generations of residents becomes a powerful lens for tracing how the major political turning points of the last century in Iran have left their mark on another family's everyday life. The grand, architect-designed villa once belonged to Esmat Dowlatshahi, the unofficial fourth wife of Reza Shah Pahlavi, and was later acquired by the grandfather of the family of the film directors, who were wealthy. It is rumored that Churchill, Stalin, and Roosevelt held a secret meeting there amid Iran's occupation in World War II. The house's historical link to the royal family likely led to its confiscation by revolutionary forces after 1979, despite Farnaz's mother being an active supporter and participant in the revolution. As a result, Farnaz's grandfather was compelled to buy back the property a second time—an act that drove him into bankruptcy

and, ultimately, to his death from grief. As the story unfolds, it becomes evident that Farnaz's mother does everything in her power to protect the home from the surrounding turmoil, striving to preserve its intimacy and autonomy amid external chaos. Yet neither the house nor its inhabitants can remain untouched by the force of history. Although much of the film takes place within the villa's walls—a seemingly sheltered space where the family cultivates a sense of freedom through parties, a pool, a tennis court, and even by renting the space as a film location—the outside world inevitably intrudes, leaving visible marks: The Iran-Iraq War soon follows, sending Farnaz's uncle Hossein to the front, from which he returns deeply traumatized, suffering from shell shock and PTSD. Simultaneously, the film captures the wave of emigration during the war, as many of Farnaz's friends and relatives leave the country. The narrative then moves into the reformist period and the 2009 street protests, marking a time when political unrest becomes an unavoidable presence inside the home. From this point on, BBC broadcasts provide a continuous audio backdrop, their commentary tracking a history of crises—from the ISIS attack on parliament to oil price fluctuations and nuclear negotiations. Yet the family remains motionless, as if suspended in time—frozen before the television, overwhelmed by a quiet, growing sense of helplessness and despair.

Silent House unfolds across three distinct layers: intimate interviews with the mother and grandmother, amateur home movies and Super 8 films shot by the siblings and their mother in the past, as well as more recent professionally filmed footage also created by the siblings. In addition, family photographs contribute to archival material. Although the film draws heavily on significant contemporary social and political events, none of the footage feels distant or impersonal. Both siblings serve as first-person narrators and the narrative is non-linear, moving fluidly between past and present through the interplay of interviews, home movies, and photographs.

Unlike Khosrovani's film, which follows a focused dramatic arc, *Silent House* unfolds as a mosaic of scattered memories, reflecting the fragmented history of a country's destiny. Through the house's silent gaze, we witness the lives of those who lived and died within its walls—or passed through as guests—and trace the lingering effects of their presence and absence. This quiet, watchful perspective is visually reinforced by recurring high-angle shots, which return throughout the film as if from the eye of the house itself. What makes this personal diary of the house possible is an extraordinary family archive of film and photographs spanning three generations. While *Radiograph of a Family* builds on a prewritten narrative—filling in its gaps at times with archival footage originally unrelated to the actual events—*Silent House* requires no such reconstruction. Here, the story emerges organically from the home movies and existing footage, stitched together by the subtle threads that link these fragmented moments. It begins with the grandfather, who, with his Lubitel camera, established a tradition of documenting family life; continues with his daughter's Super 8 films, including scenes from the 1979 revolution and the grandfather's mourning ceremony; and culminates in the third generation — siblings turned filmmakers — who have been recording their world since adolescence with a camera they regard as both toy and tool. A brief chronological glance at the archival material reveals a gradual transformation. The grandfather's photos focus almost entirely on men—relatives, businessmen, and traditional athletes—reflecting a time when women were largely absent from the frame. But over the decades, women become increasingly visible, and their voices more present. Though co-directed by siblings, Farnaz's voice clearly takes the lead, and present-day interviews of their mother and grandmother further amplify the film's feminine perspective. With the early deaths of the father and grandfather, the women take charge of the household—quietly shifting the film's center of gravity and giving it a subtle but powerful feminist dimension.

One is easily tempted to read this once-flourishing villa—gradually emptied of its vitality and inhabitants until the remaining residents are forced to sell it—as a symbol of Iran itself. The film follows a repeated rhythm of fear and hope. Sad events are often followed by small, sweet moments, and feelings of despair are softened by brief signs of optimism. This movement between emotions gives the film a sense of balance. The mother's decision to run for president shows her hope in the reform era, just like her effort to open a bookstore shows her wish to bring change—though both end quietly. A tennis court brings joy into the home, but it is soon closed by the authorities. Uncle Mohammad returns after nearly forty years and brings the family together, but not long after, he becomes depressed and dies. After every moment of loss or sadness, there is a celebration—Nowruz, a birthday, a wedding. These moments show private Iranian joys that have never been shown in official cinema during the past 47 years—for example, young people dancing to *Los Angelesi* music, made by Iranian singers who moved to Los Angeles after the 1979 revolution. And yet, the overall tone of the film leans toward despair. By the end, the house stands nearly empty and quiet, and its residents seem drained and depressed. The final shots — showing the house`s familiar rooms now devoid of people—carry a deep sense of abandonment, as if the soul of the house has faded away. This is the same house we once saw, in old photographs, living with gatherings of friends and family. Are we, perhaps, witnessing the slow unraveling of the world?

Radiograph of a Family and *Silent House* trace parallel paths that often intersect. The mother of the grandmother in *Silent House*—who kept her veil on during a trip to Europe and pulled her daughter out of ballet class to marry her off to a man she had never met—belongs to the same traditional world as Tayi, Firouzeh's mother in *Radiograph*. Uncle Mohammad, with his secular interests, love for bars, discos, and Western music, and deep longing for Europe, mirrors

Firouzeh's father Hossein—whose fate, tellingly, is not so different. When Farnaz's mother recalls secretly pouring her brother's bottle of alcohol down the toilet, it brings to mind the prohibitions Tayi imposed on Hossein. In both films, revolutionary mothers teach their young daughters—Farnaz and Firouzeh—to chant political slogans and sing revolutionary songs, introducing them to politics from an early age. Farnaz is photographed next to stacks of political newspapers; Firouzeh is taken to protest. What emerges in both stories is a powerful sense that the family was not separated from the revolution. Rather, the public and the private sector were deeply entangled.

From Leisure to Politics: Amateurism Reclaimed

Alisa Lebow raises the question of whether the turn to personal narratives in documentary is a symptom of broader political disillusionment—a shift that followed the decline of shared ideological projects in the 1970s, particularly those rooted in communism and socialism (*First Person* 257). She turns to thinkers like Ernesto Laclau and Stanley Aronowitz, who view the rise of identity politics not as a retreat from politics, but as a necessary shift. Aronowitz sees identity politics as a refreshing alternative to the "stifling environments of liberal and Marxist hegemonies." Similarly, Laclau argues that focusing on specific identities helps challenge Eurocentric notions of universality, while still relying on "an appeal to more general, and even at times universal, principles of identification." (258) Thus, even when political claims are rooted in particular identities, they remain connected to broader democratic values.

Extending this reconfiguration of the political within the personal, Catherine Russell observes that much of contemporary autobiographical filmmaking emerges from filmmakers whose personal narratives unfold within a distinctly public sphere. For many, especially those shaped by experiences of ethnicity, race, or displacement, individual stories become allegories for

broader collective histories that resist fixed or essentialist definitions. "Family histories and political histories unfold as difficult processes of remembering and struggle", shaped by themes such as immigration, exile, and transnationality—where the personal becomes a lens through which complex cultural and historical dynamics are expressed (278).

As discussed in the first chapter, the turn toward home and first-person filmmaking can be understood, above all, as a retreat from the unrest in the streets and the charged political climate of 2009 — a shift toward subjects that appeared personal and, therefore, apolitical. However, as shown, Firouzeh and Farnaz's personal journey unfolds within broader cultural and social dynamics that exceed purely individual or familial concerns. It is as if the carefully arranged image of the living room in Firouzeh's film — which changes each time based on what is happening in the outside world — is meant to show that even something as small as a painting being present or absent above the double bed, in the most private space of the home, can have a political reason.

Radiograph of a Family and *Silent House* crossed national borders and secured support from international producers. This gave them a more polished and professional form, in contrast to earlier first-person films with their modest, student-like style. Both films were also recognized on the international stage and screened at numerous festivals[1]. Nonetheless, despite their professional

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[1] *Radiograph of a Family* was produced with Antipode Films, Arte and ZDF, while *Silent House* was created alongside F&M Productions and the National Film Board of Canada, with additional support from Al Jazeera Documentary Channel, DMZ Industry, and Al Jazeera Balkans. Khosravani's film was screened at numerous international festivals and received several notable awards, including the Oxfam Global Justice Award at IDFA, the Audience Award at FICFUSA in Colombia, a Special Mention at the Sguardi Altrove Film Festival in Milan, and the Best International Documentary Award from the IDA in Vienna. *Silent House* premiered at IDFA, where it was nominated for the Best First Feature Award. It went on to win the Mitrani Award at FIPADOC in France, the Grand Prix at the EBS International Documentary Film Festival in South Korea, and the Don Quijote Award at the Melgaço International Documentary Film Festival in Portugal. It was also ranked among the top five audience favorites at Hot Docs.

craftsmanship, both films draw extensively on amateur archival materials. In fact, both fundamentally rely on materials—originally created with different intentions—that now function in a new context and acquire distinct meanings. In this context, it is important to note that amateur film has historically been shaped by power relations—not only positioned in ideological opposition to professional cinema, but also defined through its association with the public/private divide that this opposition reinforces. According to Zimmerman, while amateur film technologies—cheaper and more accessible than studio equipment—promised to democratize media production, this potential was largely undermined. As she puts it, the standards of mainstream cinema "colonized amateurism," and "social relations inserted amateur film into the bourgeois nuclear family, exiling it from the public sphere" (*Mining* 281). As a result of this ideological divide, Zimmerman argues that "professional" came to signify rationalized work, the public sphere, and economic exchange, while "amateurism" was confined to leisure, the private sphere, and hobbies. Until resistant practices emerged in the mid-1950s—such as "the 16mm experimental film movement"—amateur film took on a purely consumer role, largely confined to the bourgeois nuclear family. It collapsed into home movies, redefined as a private social practice rather than an artistic or political medium. Camera gear became as central to domestic life as "barbecue grills", marketed as tools for reinforcing "family togetherness" (280).

While most of the home movies in Khosravani's and Jurabchian's films were originally made to celebrate "family togetherness," their reuse in first-person cinema revives the very potential Zimmerman feared was lost—amateur film as a "history-making machine" for the political. *Silent House* is especially interesting because a significant part of its footage was filmed by the

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However, neither of the two films has received an official screening in Iran. *Radiograph of a Family* was pirated following its broadcast on Arte TV, while *Silent House* has only been shown in a handful of private cultural venues.

directors when they were teenagers, before they became professional filmmakers. At that time, the camera was mostly a form of leisure for them. As they grew into skilled documentarians, their filming improved with better cameras and more careful techniques. However, the mix of amateur and professional footage does not disturb the final movie. Even the newer scenes filmed with professional equipment maintain a visual connection to the older home videos. To keep this link, the film intentionally includes framing corrections and small mistakes. Sometimes, it is hard to tell whether a shot originated as a home video or was planned as part of the film from the beginning. In this way, the spirit of amateur home movies runs deeply throughout the movie. But beyond this, the filmmakers' shifting perception of amateur film—and their effort to return it to the public sphere—becomes especially clear in the scenes from the 2009 protests. Filming from inside a car, a space suspended between private and public, they attempt to capture what is prohibited, despite the risks. The camera's shakiness is not just a technical flaw—it registers fear, turning trembling images into a quiet testimony of danger. Here, amateur film crosses the threshold from leisure to political engagement, transforming a once passive act of consumption into an active form of production. What was once casual filming becomes active participation—an act of revealing and witnessing.

The study of female first-person films in Iran reveals a similar boundary-crossing dynamic. These films often exist at thresholds—between professional and amateur, private and public, staying and leaving, acceptance and challenge. This liminal quality enables them to blur and push these borders. In the next chapter, *Impasse* (2024) by Rahmaneh Rabani and Bahman Kiarostami exemplifies this shift. It boldly moves the camera from the home into the street, further dissolving the divide between private and public.

Chapter 4. Embodied Cameras, Amateur Vision, and Off-Screen Truths

In his reading of *Videograms of a Revolution* (dir. Harun Farocki, 1992) Constantin Parvulescu, a film scholar specializing in relationship between film, ideology, and social change, explores the 1989 Romanian political transformations through the aesthetic contrast between professional and amateur footage. He highlights Romanian President Nicolae Ceaușescu's use of the "official camera during the 21 December rally," which "shows not only an orderly crowd supporting the regime, but presents it in a specific way, from a vantage location that allows panoramic views of the event". Ceaușescu appears "in a canonic medium shot, at the appropriate appreciative low angle, as a dignified state official," speaking before a large crowd "with which the viewer is invited to identify." The broadcast's audiovisual style, Parvulescu notes, "encodes stability and order (360-361)." But beyond this professional image, slightly farther from the center of the crowd, amateur home video cameras are also present—filming secretly and anxiously "from a far distance," trying to reveal what lies behind the staged "scene." Held by ordinary people and hidden in corners, these cameras have a limited frame and offer only a narrow point of view. The shaky images they produce reflect both the fear of being arrested and the fact that the camera is held by a human body. In this sense, the trembling footage signals an embodied perspective. As Parvulescu writes "the embodied camera tells a personal story. It does not have the power, the invulnerability and the necessary technology to manipulate time and space to render invisible the limitations imposed on it by its corporeality and produce images that might be perceived as objective (hegemonic) (359)."

During the "rally, something happens"—but the viewer cannot see it, "because the real action always takes place off-screen." A vague, suspicious murmur is heard from beyond the frame, and then "the impulse of the incident impacts the broadcast, triggering one of the most famous camera

wobbles in visual history. The unseeable but effective frenzy of bodies off-screen affects the televised image and compromises the show of stability the rally aimed to convey." For a few seconds, "the gaze of the professional official camera has been amateurized (362)."

Could this visual tremor signal a disturbance in Ceaușescu's apparatus of power? Might it be that the god-like gaze has now revealed its human nature—and can be brought down?

Parvulescu's approach is inspiring in how it situates the amateur–professional film divides within the dynamics of political conflict and structures of power. In a different context, Zimmerman also engages with this binary, drawing on Habermas to offer a detailed account of how professionalism is tied to power and the formation of hierarchy. Drawing on Habermas, she argues that "the rise of experts precipitates the gradual destruction of the normative public sphere: technical rules replace equal access to participation in public discussion." This shift allows "scientific paradigms" to dominate public life—especially the economy—limiting access and reinforcing inequality. Professionalism, which "exemplifies a tendency toward monopolization of status and work in order to maintain social hierarchies," functions as a system that restricts economic participation to qualified and "privileged few (*Reel Families* 1-3)". While the professional works for pay, the amateur creates during leisure time. Open to anyone regardless of credentials, amateur work challenges systems of monopoly and hierarchy. It carries a democratic impulse that stands in contrast to the exclusivity of professionalism. Although the Latin root of *amateur* (*amare*) links it to love—suggesting something done for pleasure rather than profit—it may be more accurate to associate amateurism with freedom. Beyond its connection to free time, it is also free from the strict rules and rational control that define professionalism. The lightweight design of amateur cameras—from 16mm and 8mm to today's digital and mobile devices—reflects this freedom.

Their easy movement allows for spontaneous, flexible filming, and the images they produce express that same sense of liberated motion.

Building on Parvulescu's reading of Farocki's film and Zimmerman's reflections on the professional–amateur divide, the concept of amateurism emerges as deeply linked to democracy, freedom, marginality, unofficial status, and subordinate social positions. These qualities make amateurism a valuable analytical framework for examining post-digital protest movements, such as those in Iran, which this study will approach through an aesthetic lens.

Amateur Films as a Tool of Activism

The 2009 Iranian election protests represent an unprecedented occasion when formless, spontaneous images captured by amateur cameras in the hands of ordinary people confronted established media authority and exposed new possibilities within the digital age to resist official control. In that year, the Iranian government intensified its use of advanced surveillance technologies to restrict internet and mobile communication, block major platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube aimed at controlling Green Movement activists. At the time, Iran counted 30.2 million mobile phone users, with nearly half the population—approximately 48.5%—having internet access. While the internet functioned as a tool of state "surveillance", it simultaneously became a crucial site for "counter-surveillance". Consequently, passive citizens transformed into active participants: ordinary people employed mobile phones and social media to document protests, contest propaganda, and circulate images and videos globally through platforms such as YouTube and Facebook (*Kadivar*). Amateur tools and practices in the 2009 protests showed how ordinary people could raise a big political question: "Where is my vote?" But thirteen years later, during another major moment the main demand was something that had been ignored for more

than forty years as an unimportant or "effeminate" issue: rejecting the compulsory hijab. This time, the popular slogan was not about political rights in general, but about something closer to daily personal experience: "a normal life." More than anything, this change showed how the self became more visible and stronger, shaped by new ways of expressing oneself and sharing personal experiences through digital tools.

Masserat Amir-Ebrahimi explains that after the Iranian Revolution and during the Iran-Iraq war, women experienced a period of "invisibility," especially marked by the predominance of "black or somber shades of hijab in public," which restricted their personal expression. During the reform period (1997–2005), a meaningful but "sporadic and non-verbal" challenge to compulsory hijab emerged, mainly among "young, modern, urban, middle-class women" who sought "more presence, visibility, and recognition in the public sphere." Many women began to reject the "drab, unstylish version of hijab" in favor of "more colorful and fashionable styles," transforming the image of public spaces. The rise of satellite TV and global youth culture brought new influences which inspired women and youth to reshape their public identities (91-92). As mentioned earlier, the spread of Internet technology also transformed women's self-expression in Iran, as they became central figures in the blogosphere—known as "Weblogistan"—where, through bold narration, they unveiled the "hidden woman" and shared personal experiences publicly for the first time (*Amir-Ebrahimi* 93). The ability to remain anonymous in blogging allowed women to express themselves freely without revealing their identities. But as visual social media platforms expanded, and video sharing became widespread, more users began to appear under their real names, publicly sharing photos and videos that revealed how they looked in private spheres.

After the 2009 clashes, Iran's streets fell silent, but in 2017, during the first major wave of civil protests since then, one unconventional act marked a turning point in Iranian feminist activism: the appearance of the "Girl of Enghelab Street." Enghelab Street, since the 1979 revolution has always been a central artery of Tehran. Home to the University of Tehran, bookstores, and cultural venues, it has long been a symbolic site of political protest. On December 27, 2017, Vida Movahedi stood in a utility box near the University of Tehran. She removed her white headscarf, attached it to a stick, and silently held it up. Azadeh Ganjeh calls this act a "performance," showing how it challenges laws that control women's appearance, and divide public space by gender. According to Ganjeh, in this performance "not only is the phenomenal body made to appear differently, but the hijab as the object of its previous definition is itself presented as a flag in a new gesture of liberation" (110). Moreover, this performance invites a shift from "I" to "we": in performative protests, participants and spectators co-create meaning as co-subjects. Their shared presence forms a temporary social community where everyone is actively involved. By placing herself above the crowd and refusing dialogue, Movahedi may have aimed to protect her spectators while taking on physical risk herself. Although Movahedi's protest ended with her arrest, similar acts soon spread across the country, with spectators' images and videos of these performances going viral on social media. As Ganjeh argues, Movahedi's "gesture", "performative elements", and "mise-en-scène" (110) created a re-enactable text, and the 2022 women-led protests—more strongly linked to the arts of theater and film, albeit in amateur form—confirm Ganjeh`s strategy of using theatrical and cinematic language to understand political movements. During the 2022 protest movement, symbolic gestures grew more varied, including standing unveiled on high surfaces (like cars), burning headscarves, cutting hair with scissors, tracking shots of women walking without hijab, and women tying their hair from behind, as if preparing for decisive action. These gestures were

captured by ordinary people using amateur cameras. Though often shaky, fragmented, poorly framed, or shot from limited points of view, the footage went viral. By revealing what official television tried to suppress—what remained "off-screen" (as Parvulescu puts it)—these images quickly became templates for imitation and repetition. Notably, several prominent Iranian actresses—Katayoun Riahi, Taraneh Alidoosti, and Afsaneh Bayegan—joined the protests by publicly sharing videos without hijab, fully aware it could cost them their careers. Most strikingly, Hengameh Ghaziani appeared in the exact "mise-en-scène" of one of the viral amateur performances: tying her hair and walking in the street. Through such symbolic acts, they broke away from the professional film industry, as if believing that amateurs were closer to the truth.

The connection between media language and the re-use of signs in protest movements shows how digital media and activism influence each other. Online platforms do not just spread messages— they also help shape the way people understand and organize resistance. Through collaborative online engagement, audiences "willing to devote long hours to it for no pay" (*Ritzer* and *Jurgenson* 22)—are transformed into prosumers, a term combining "producers" and "consumers." In interacting with media content, "mostly amateurs upload and download videos and photographs," (19) participating not only as creators and consumers but also as active contributors to wider civic and cultural processes. Building on Zimmerman's observation, discussed in the previous chapter, that amateur film[1] was historically colonized by the standards of mainstream cinema and pushed

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[1] Amateur film has an inherent tendency to resist boundaries, making it difficult to define in fixed terms. Its meaning shifts from one context to another and continues to evolve alongside technological developments. Rather than adhering to a strict definition, this analysis follows the view that amateur cinema is "necessarily very broad, porous, and rich in its overlaps with other forms of filmmaking (as well as other media more generally)" (*Fibla-Gutiérrez* and *Salazkina* 3). This perspective allows for the inclusion of a wide range of non-professional films under the label of "amateur," particularly those that function as a form of resistance against dominant cinematic and cultural discourses.

out of the public sphere, it can now be argued that the rise of prosumers in the digital age is turning amateur film from a domestic pastime into a powerful tool of activism—while also reclaiming women's presence and voices in public life. A clear example of this shift appears in *Impasse*, a first-person documentary which reveals how the boundaries between private and public space, home and street, artists and amateurs are increasingly blurred.

Impasse: Turning the Reverse Shot

Impasse was filmed just a few days after the feminist uprising began in Iran in 2022, and the shooting continued for 52 days. During this period, Rahmaneh Rabani saw the unrest in the streets of Tehran as an opportunity to speak with members of her family, using the camera to ask them about their thoughts and beliefs. The film is structured around these interviews, with each section focusing on a different person, whose name appears as the title of the segment. Rahmaneh comes from a very religious family, and her father strongly supports the Iranian government, while her husband and his family hold completely different views. This clash of beliefs and the film's polyphonic texture are made possible through these intimate interviews.

The topics of the interviews are also quite diverse—covering subjects like hijab, migration, the role of art and the artist, the Iran-Iraq war, and street protests. However, what brings all these different conversations together is the film's effort to explore the generational gap and the deep disagreements between people about major political and cultural questions in today's Iran.

Rahmaneh herself used to be religious; she wore the full hijab and, as a film graduate, even made a short film promoting hijab with funding from the Ministry of Interior. But over time, her beliefs changed, and now she no longer wears a hijab and stands in clear ideological opposition to her father.

Bahman Kiarostami is credited as co-director, but based on his previous work and the way *Impasse* is made, it seems that his role was mostly in the editing phase, helping to shape the narrative and give the film a clear structure. Since the film has not been officially screened in Iran and no interviews have been given it is not clear how involved he was during the filming itself. Still, the film clearly centers on Rahmaneh's life and her family. Even though four cinematographers are listed in the credits, it's evident that much of the footage was shot by Rahmaneh herself—and in a distinctly amateur style.

The interviews happen in such a close and informal space that sometimes the film feels just like a home video. In some parts, Rahmaneh's little son, Rastin, suddenly interrupts the recording—he pulls her away in the middle of a conversation, and she has to stop talking and follow him. In one moment, while the family is discussing hijab, Rahmaneh turns to Rastin and his small playmate and says, "The room smells bad—who did this?" Rastin answers, "Me". The people in the room laugh, and the serious mood is broken. For a moment, the film becomes a home movie in the full sense. Once, while Rahmaneh is filming her father, the camera battery dies, and she continues recording with his mobile phone. Some scenes are clearly shot by phone—like the family gathering by the sea, where it's obvious that Aram, Rahmaneh's husband, is holding the phone and filming. The camera sometimes shakes, the angles are unusual or awkward, and a few times Ramaneh puts it down or sets it aside to do something else. These moments feel spontaneous and unplanned—or at least they are made to look that way.

The people in the film also appear very comfortable in front of the camera. It's clear that Rahmaneh didn't want to follow the usual formal style of documentary interviews. Her father is seen at home wearing only a sleeveless undershirt and pajama pants. Her sister's husband is eating during his

interview. And at the end of his part, Rahmaneh's brother even blows a kiss to her behind the camera. She clearly wanted to avoid the professional style of filmmaking.

Home movies influence this film not only through its intimate atmosphere and informal camera style but also by making up a large part of the archival material. Many scenes come from Rahmaneh's family footage, and some are from her husband's family. What is striking is how closely the private world of Rahmaneh's family resembles the domestic imagery seen in official Iranian cinema. Due to the presence of the camera, everyone appears in full hijab, as if aware that these intimate moments might one day be viewed by others. Unlike earlier examples, this family's private sphere does not contrast with the public sphere but rather mirrors and reinforces it, revealing how public norms have shaped their personal lives. In this family, dancing is not part of their joyful moments—and when it does appear, it is only permitted for little girls. Their happiness is mostly expressed during shared meals, sitting on the floor in the Iranian style, with everyone dressed in the typical modest clothes of religious families. However, the sense of unity reflected in the old home movies gradually diminishes over time. In the newer home movies, Rahmaneh appears differently dressed and without a hijab. Through the interviews, it becomes clear that an ideological divide between generations has emerged and is widening. Rahmaneh mentions a previous unsuccessful marriage before Aram—one that, we can guess, was more traditional and in line with her family's conservative values, unlike her current relationship. We also see that her brother Sadegh, once deeply religious, now holds different views. Another brother, Hossein, despite their father's opposition, plans to emigrate to the United States. Rahmaneh's nieces—the third generation—approach issues like the hijab more liberally: they either reject it or believe it should be a personal choice rather than mandatory. They also listen to music that starkly contrasts with traditional religious norms. This unfolding of contradictions in the home is not something

separate from the whole of society. Although its foundation is laid at home, *Impasse* transforms the domestic space into a site of political engagement, crossing the boundary between private and public spheres to reveal how deeply they reflect one another. It is therefore not surprising that she takes her camera to the streets to document aspects of the women's protest movement. In several scenes, the securitized environment of Tehran's streets is captured from inside her car. Here, the car functions as an intermediate space—between private and public—and the occupant is afforded greater security compared to the protesters who are openly present in the demonstrations. In another scene, passengers on a bus are shown traveling to the international airport to welcome Elnaz Rekabi—the Iranian climber who appeared without the compulsory hijab at the Asian Climbing Championships in South Korea—dancing along the way, with Rahmaneh among them. In some sequences, the camera is embedded within the protests, surrounded by people chanting slogans. In such moments, it is difficult to determine whether these images were filmed by Rahmaneh or her crew, or if some are amateur recordings made by the protesters themselves and incorporated by Rahmaneh in the final edit. This blurring of authorship suggests that the person filming could be anyone, and that these voices of protest might belong to either artists or amateurs. In other words, the focus is not on the "I," but on the "we." In one scene, Rahmaneh playfully engages with the idea of the individual dissolving into a collective. A female athlete with long, uncovered hair is shown climbing a rock wall, her back to the camera, while Rahmaneh's voiceover speaks about Elnaz Rekabi. As the athlete turns her face towards the camera—and it becomes clear that she is Rahmaneh herself—the narrator remarks, "albeit, this is not Elnaz—it is me." Yet behind this distinction lies a quiet suggestion of identification—"I am Elnaz."

The film takes a bold approach in many ways: it shows women without the compulsory hijab, uses informal and even vulgar language that is common among the younger generation (which is

typically banned in official cinema), and openly discusses political and religious topics that are usually considered taboo. Yet despite these radical aspects, the film's overall perspective—like the other films discussed—is reformist rather than revolutionary. This view seems to come from the filmmaker's deep love for her family, even though she has serious ideological differences with some of them. In the end, Rahmaneh decides not to go too far, because she wants to keep peace in the home she deeply cares for. This careful attitude goes beyond her family: in a conversation her husband Aram says that if the current system in the country collapses, it will lead to chaos and make everything worse.

The viewer is likely to accept the film's conclusion as well, since Rahmaneh—unlike what Firoozeh did with her mother in *Radiograph of a Family*—takes a more empathetic approach toward her father, Haj Akbar. She tries to understand his psychology and gives him space to defend his point of view. Interestingly, Haj Akbar appears most sympathetic when flipping through his personal photo album, showing Rahmaneh pictures of his comrades, many of whom were killed in the war with Iraq. Rahmaneh's mother explains that he used to collect the severed arms and legs of fellow soldiers from the battlefield—so it is not fair to expect someone who has witnessed such things to think differently. In this sense, the parent–child relationship—and the emotional and generational gap between them—is presented with greater complexity. And it is this complexity that invites the viewer not to judge, but to reflect and look more deeply.

It can be said that the father's stance is completely aligned with the government's point of view. He is often seen watching the official Iranian television (IRIB) and believes that satellite channels have misled someone like Rahmaneh. In the end, no real conversation takes place with Haj Akbar—perhaps because he fundamentally rejects dialogue, certain that the truth belongs solely

to him. He tells Rahmaneh, "Before filming, we need to talk so that you can become wise." Rahmaneh eventually realizes that arguing with her father leads nowhere. But this does not mean the film ends in despair. On the contrary, the film's reformist outlook seems to suggest that real change comes slowly—with patience and persistence. The interviews themselves reveal that the younger generations are less rigid than their parents—more open, more flexible. The final image is of Rastin playing with his toys. The soundtrack—a blend of jazz and the soft murmur of household voices—carries the quiet sense that the future belongs to him.

Impasse feels like the conclusion of a path followed by many first-person, woman-centered documentaries. In its reflection, we can see traces of earlier films that helped shape this direction: Rahmaneh's story—as a rebellious daughter in a religious family—reminds us of Mina's friend (Azar) from Sabzevar in *Unwelcome in Tehran*. She also had a serious conflict with her traditional family about living alone in Tehran. She said that in Sabzevar she wore the chador, but in Tehran she used the manteau[1]. It was a small step, but one that Rahmaneh, ten years later, takes further. The interview style—warm, simple, and amateur, done only with Close ones —has things in common with *21 Days and Me*. The film's attempt to connect a street protest movement with private life at home is like what started with *Profession: Documentarist*. Its review of political and historical events in Iran over the past fifty years, using home videos and family photos, is also close to *The Silent House*. In both films, the television is usually on—one on IRIB, the other on the BBC. The conflict between parent and child over ideology creates a clear link to *Radiograph of a Family*. At one moment, Rahmaneh's mother says she was influenced by Dr. Shariati's lectures—just like Firouzeh's mother. And Aram's mother, who lost her job after the revolution

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[1] The **chador** is a traditional full-body cloak linked to conservative values. The **manteau** is a modern, urban coat worn with a headscarf, reflecting a more flexible or less traditional approach to hijab.

because she did not accept compulsory hijab, could be the same woman in *Radiograph of a Family* who is fired for ideological reasons—then replaced by Firouzeh's mother.

Impasse was released internationally at least at three key venues: the Hot Docs Festival in Toronto, Anthology Film Archives in New York, and the Cinemark Theater in Washington. It may have also been shown in other locations that were not covered by the media, likely due to the producers' decision to present the film discreetly. Because of the sensitivity of its subject matter and the risks involved in openly addressing the 2022 feminist uprising within Iran, the film has not been screened in official venues inside the country. Instead, it has been shown a few times through underground clubs and informal gatherings.

Shirin Barghnavard, in *The Profession of Documentarist*, mentions that she wanted to document the 2009 street protests but was unable to do so. She observes that, at the time, ordinary people were ahead of documentary filmmakers in capturing such moments. This observation resonates with Alisa Lebow's exploration of the relationship between cameras and guns. She explains that historically, the camera has mimicked the gun in both design and function—featuring viewfinders, triggers, and aiming mechanisms. Lebow identifies two visual approaches in realist filmmaking within conflict zones: the Gunsight POV, which reflects the perspective of the gun's target, and the Barrel POV, which films from the gun's line of fire. The crucial distinction lies in the camera's role—either as an extension of state violence (Gunsight POV), often seen in military or police recordings, or as a civilian act of resistance (Barrel POV), typical of activist and journalistic footage. This dynamic mirrors a shot/reverse-shot structure: the "shot" represents institutional power—both literal and aesthetic—while the "reverse shot" offers a symbolic counterpoint (*Shooting with intent* 45). In this context, we can see how two types of filmic images engage with

both real and symbolic conflict. On one side, amateur footage recorded by citizen journalists using mobile phones documents street confrontations, often under direct threat. These images stand in stark contrast to the state-controlled, polished broadcasts of institutions like IRIB. Here, the citizen videos function as a kind of "reverse shot"—a symbolic reply to the dominant "shot" of official narratives. Can we conclude that all those first-person films—rooted in private spaces and concerned with micro-level issues—were, over the course of a decade, slowly tracing a winding path from the home toward the street? That what seemed intimate, domestic storytelling was, in fact, laying the groundwork for a broader political gesture? In this sense, the duality between the micro and the macro is not one of opposition, but of continuity. These films did not leave the house behind; rather, they carried its perspective with them, gradually building toward the reverse shot— a symbolic confrontation with dominant narratives and institutional power.

Rahmaneh's camera clearly unsettles her father. Eventually, he asks her to turn the lens toward herself—this time, he will ask the questions. She complies, and now he disappears from the frame; only his hands remain, firmly interrogating her, reasserting control[1]. At this moment, the father— perhaps unconsciously—understands the power of Rahmaneh's reverse shot and instinctively tries to reverse it. He senses what it means to lose the frame—and how subversive that gesture can be. Seen from this perspective, *Impasse* is not just a bold film—it is the visible outcome of a slow but determined transformation in Iranian documentary cinema. It marks the moment where personal

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[1] This scene from *Impasse* reminds Media Farzin of *Leech* (a short film by Bahman Kiarostami) because both portray intense, interrogation-like confrontations between a child and a parent trapped in their own anxieties. *Leech* documents recorded conversations where Abbas Kiarostami harshly criticizes his son Bahman, exposing a tense, claustrophobic dynamic of a child burdened by parental expectations. The film concludes with Abbas reflecting on how the boy he once knew has changed beyond his understanding.

filmmaking and political urgency converge, fulfilling what Barghnavard once believed was out of reach: the documentarist standing beside the citizen, the artist beside the amateur—turning the reverse shot into a collective act of resistance.

Conclusion

Reflecting on the development of Iranian women's first-person documentary cinema reveals several paradoxical situations. This mode of filmmaking emerged in 2011 — a time when documentary filmmakers in Iran faced growing restrictions. In response, some filmmakers turned to the private sphere, working with modest, low-risk materials. Yet over time, this intimate cinema inevitably returned to public space. It began with micro-level experiences and gradually engaged with broader, macro-level issues — or rather, it revealed the micro as inherently political. What had been dismissed by dominant discourse as "private" or "effeminate" was taken seriously, reflecting a society in which such concerns were emerging as matters of public significance. Individuality was placed at the center — a concept long sidelined in a system that emphasized collective unity. Yet this turn toward the self ultimately pointed to a renewed form of solidarity. It moved from "I" to "we." This shift is evident in the filmmakers' emphasis on collaboration, mutual support, and shared creative practices. Recurring themes and stylistic elements also run through the films as a unifying thread. What began as individual experience ultimately became deeply connected to broader social, cultural, and political issues — demonstrating that personal expression can also reveal collective pain and a shared identity. This cinema demonstrates that many concepts are far more interconnected and complex than ideological oppositions suggest. In Iran, the home holds much of what official discourse has excluded from public life. These silenced realities have accumulated within domestic spaces. Entering the home with a documentary camera means confronting these denied realities. When the private becomes public through documentaries, the silenced begin to speak — like the unseen mass of an iceberg rising to the surface.

A chronological review reveals that over time, the films grew more explicit, with filmmakers speaking more openly about themselves, confidently interrogating the private-public relationship,

and directly linking individuality to politics. This review also revealed that all of these films, in different ways, were shaped by a connection to amateurism. In some cases, this amateurism stemmed from minimal means — as seen, for example, in Jafar Panahi's *This Is Not a Film*, which showed how, under conditions of professional ban, without access to industry resources, and confined to the space of the home, it was still possible to create. Working with such constraints inevitably called for an amateur method. This approach was visible in the early works of Barghnavard and Keshavarz — produced in a workshop setting and considered student films — as well as in *Profession: Documentarist*, a collaborative project made with minimal resources and a determination to document a historical moment. As the films later moved toward more professional aesthetics, their relation to amateurism persisted through a strong reliance on personal archives, particularly home movies. In the context of first-person documentaries, amateur films — previously limited to private, domestic consumption — took on new significance, becoming a tool for producing meaning rather than merely preserving memory. Home movies, once hidden for documenting what was forbidden by official discourse, now stepped into visibility, reshaping history through their public presence. The inherent freedom and marginality of amateurism aligned with a cinema seeking to reclaim what dominant norms had excluded, while also striving to break free from the rigid frameworks and formal constraints of institutionalized filmmaking — making amateurism both a practical necessity and a political stance. In the evolution of women's first-person cinema, the artist has continuously negotiated a complex relationship with amateurism. At times, she was a newcomer adopting amateur methods, as in *21 Days and Me* and *Uninvited in Tehran*. At others, she used amateur materials as raw, creative resources, exemplified by *Radiography of a Family*. Sometimes, she engaged in a reflective dialogue with her younger, more amateur self, as in *Silent House*. At the same time, emerging filmmakers like Rahmaneh Rabbani

balanced collaboration with professionals — such as Bahman Kiarostami — while aligning their cameras with the amateur devices of ordinary people on the streets, as in *Impasse*. These first-person documentaries reveal how the margins moved toward the center: artists and amateurs converged, and the private sphere spilled into the public by exposing what was excluded from the streets and confined within the home. This entire shift was fueled by the digital revolution — a transformation that turned every desktop computer into a potential film-editing studio and opened new channels for alternative distribution.

Today, while the authenticity of official Iranian cinema is increasingly questioned due to its distorted portrayal of private life (and even public life, considering the evolving presence of women in public spaces), and as Iranian underground cinema experiences unprecedented growth and gains recognition at major international festivals (with one recent film winning the Palme d'Or at Cannes), it is crucial to acknowledge that women's first-person documentary cinema recognized the urgent need for authentic representation much earlier and took significant risks to lead this path.

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