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Bahman Ghobadi's Hyphenated Cinema

An Analysis of Hybrid Authorial Strategies and Cinematic Aesthetics

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Bahman Ghobadi's Hyphenated Cinema

An Analysis of Hybrid Authorial Strategies and Cinematic Aesthetics

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Thesis

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Dedication

To Mom, Dad, and Denny. Thank you for always supporting me, believing in my abilities, and showing me how to work hard.

For my sister – Laura. Thank you for introducing me to obscure foreign movies, and for always sharing your interests with me. I could not have achieved any of this without you.

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Abstract

Bahman Ghobadi's Hyphenated Cinema

An Analysis of Hybrid Authorial Strategies and

Cinematic Aesthetics

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2012

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This thesis examines Iranian-Kurdish filmmaker, Bahman Ghobadi's authorial strategies and cinematic aesthetics through the theoretical and methodological lens of hybridity. According to Homi Bhabha, hybridity can be understood as a "third space," in which cultural meanings resist binary *either/or* logic, and are instead negotiated through a logic that is *neither one, nor the other*. Thus, Bhabha's concept of hybridity as a "third space" provides a fruitful framework to analyze Ghobadi's authorship and cinematic style.

By analyzing Ghobadi's neo-realist treatment of Kurdistan's cultural and physical landscape and hybrid cinematic aesthetics in his first two features, *A Time for Drunken Horses* (2000) and *Turtles Can Fly* (2004), this research calls attention to intercultural

processes that generate cultural meaning through indexical and material as opposed to symbolic registers. In addition, this thesis applies Hamid Naficy's concept of "shifters" to examine how Ghobadi's hybrid authorial strategies and narrative reflexivity garners international audiences in his two latest features, *Half Moon* (2006) and *No One Knows about Persian Cats* (2009). This project also examines how Ghobadi's use of a digital camera and employment of digital cinematic techniques to capture Iran's underground rock music culture in *No One Knows about Persian Cats,* testifies to the authenticity of this cultural space while simultaneously structuring the film as a global vehicle for these Iranian musicians' performances.

Ultimately, Ghobadi's hybrid authorial strategies and cinematic aesthetics function as a means to enunciate and globally circulate diverse Kurdish and Iranian cultural identities. In doing so, this thesis illuminates hybrid modes of cultural production and hybrid cultural subjectivities that have emerged in the contemporary globalized landscape.

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Introduction

> The forty million Kurds are not so much a tribe as a people. And for us, cinema is a new art of which we have been deprived for a long time. For this reason, I prefer not to have a personalized or individualistic view of it. I believe art is not for art's sake, art is for people's sake. That is why I want to be amongst people. I want to bring the subjects of my films out of people's hearts, so that I can make my films for the people.
>
> -Bahman Ghobadi (Koch, 2007)

In *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha explains that, "hybrid hyphenations emphasize the incommensurable elements -the stubborn chunks- as the basis of cultural identification" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 313). I aim to examine how Iranian-Kurdish filmmaker, Bahman Ghobadi's Iranian nationality and Kurdish ethnicity form incommensurable "chunks" that contribute to his hybrid authorial strategies and cinematic style. Because Kurdistan is a stateless nation in the world order, Ghobadi's Kurdish ethnicity and Iranian nationality positions him in a liminal space. In his above statement, Ghobadi calls attention to multiple ways in which his liminal positioning impacts his cinematic approach and motivations. For example, his emphasis on being "amongst people" signals his efforts to provide an outlet for diverse Kurdish and Iranian cultural performances. Moreover, by implying the physical presence of people, Ghobadi makes explicit his artistic emphasis on material localities and concrete collectives as opposed to imagined communities. Despite Ghobadi's emphasis on collective as opposed to individualistic modes of production, because of Ghobadi's Iranian nationality and close association with Iran's post-revolutionary cinema his films have been produced, distributed and exhibited

within an international, independent "auteur" framework. Thus, my thesis investigates how Ghobadi's mode of production and collective cinematic efforts constitute his films and authorial strategies as hybrid. To do so, I analyze four of Ghobadi's features, *A Time for Drunken Horses* (*Zamani barayé masti asbha*, 2000), *Turtles Can Fly* (*Lakposhtha parvaz mikonand*, 2004), *Half Moon* (*Niwemang*, 2006), and *No One Knows about Persian Cats* (*Kasi az gorbehaye irani khabar nadareh*, 2009) through the theoretical and methodological lens of hybridity.

Liminality, according to Victor Turner, is a period of destabilization that occurs with rapid social change. He argues that a society as a whole goes through a liminal phase at times of social crisis such as revolution or war. This phase occurs "betwixt and between" what was and what will be, which, Turner argues, provides an opportunity for a society to reflect on its everyday realities from a detached perspective (Turner, 1984, p. 21). One mode of reflection is cultural performance, or "modes of exhibition or presentation- such as ritual, carnival, theatre, and film- as commentaries, critiques on, or as celebrations of, different dimensions of human relatedness" (Turner, 1984, p. 19). Performances, according to Turner, are a means to "stabilize the destabilized cosmos" through distilling "meaning from the tangle of action," and thus are a "metacommentary, implicit or explicit, witting or unwitting, on the major social dramas of social context" (Turner, 1990, p. 16-17). Within this definition of cultural performance, the role of the creator reigns supreme because, as Turner explains, "the supreme honesty of the creative artist who, in his presentation…reserves to himself the privilege of seeing straight what all cultures build crooked" (Turner, 1984, p. 40).

Ghobadi's Iranian nationality and Kurdish ethnicity positions his productions within two fronts of this liminal phase. The 1978-79 Iranian Revolution quickly followed by the 1988-89 Iran-Iraq War initiated and continues to contribute to Iran's ongoing political and social instability. Within Turner's concept of cultural performance, post-revolutionary Iranian cinema embeds "commentary" upon the nation's precarious conditions following these events. Moreover, because of Kurdistan's ongoing status as a non-nation-state, its physical and cultural landscape can be understood as embodying the "betwixt and between" phase of liminality. My research seeks to interrogate how Ghobadi's Kurdish ethnicity and Iranian nationality impact his films' categorization as cultural performances.

In his ethnographic study of Iranian independent filmmakers, Saeed Zeydabadi-Nejad similarly interrogates how "filmmakers and audiences engage in the generation of meaning in relation to the politics of Iranian films" (Zeydabadi-Nejad, 2010, p. 12). He interviews multiple Iranian filmmakers working within the nation, and calls attention to how these filmmakers influence one another, and how the reception of political and social "commentary" both within and outside Iran impacts their status as sole creative artists. Similarly, I argue that Ghobadi's role as a sole creative artist mediating commentary is partially complicated by the influences of the previous generation of Iranian filmmakers. More importantly for my argument, however, is how the lack of a social and political structure in Kurdistan and Ghobadi's collective rather than individualistic motivations necessarily transforms his films' cinematic "commentary." I aim to examine how Ghoabdi's cinematic "commentary" emphasizes the material realities of Kurdish and

Iranian culture, and thus resists symbolic or representational closure. In doing so, Ghobadi's films interrogate the global forces that contribute to Kurdish and Iranian cultural hybridity.

Turner's concept of liminality is important for my argument because it demonstrates how Ghobadi's hyphenated identity and the geopolitical context of his productions cannot be divorced from his cinema. Thus, it is necessary to situate Ghobadi within the context of Iran's post-revolutionary cinema. In their book, *Small Media, Big Revolution*, Ali Mohammadi and Annabelle Sreberny-Mohammadi describe the 1979 Iranian Revolution as "a movement in negativism," because the strongly stated antipathies toward the Shah's regime and U.S. neocolonialism formed the movement's common ground while the politicization of Islamic rhetoric provided cultural glue (Mohammadi & Sreberny-Mohammadi, p. xvii). Because Iran was never directly colonized, the Islamic Revolution illustrates the nation-state's anxiety concerning its national identity in the face of Westernization and cultural dependency. Much of Iran's pre-revolutionary cinema was comprised of Indian, American, and European films, and many of Iran's domestic production mimicked these conventions. In 1979 pro-revolutionaries demonstrated their opposition to Western cultural dependency by demolishing 180 movie houses nationwide, enacting a puritanical cleansing of what radical Islamists dubbed the "cinema of *taqut* (idols)," which consisted of imported films (Tapper, p, 30). Iran's post-revolutionary government quickly sought to Islamicize cinema by implementing production regulations based on the "realist illusionist theory" of cinematic representation, which claims that a direct and unmediated connection exists

between reality and its onscreen representation (Naficy, 1994, p. 560). This representational theory undergirds models of cultural dependency by conflating the capacity of cinematic representation to enact a direct ideological interpellation of subjectivities. Although cinematic regulations have undergone slight changes since their implementation in 1979, these censorship policies have never been fully lifted.

The first generation of post-revolutionary Iranian filmmakers including global "auteurs" like Abbas Kiarostami and Moshen Makhmalbaf, are attributed to developing innovative cinematic techniques in the face of the Islamic regime's strict censorship policies. Iran's post-revolutionary filmmakers employed many neo-realist techniques such as the use of non-professional actors, real locations, and minimalist editing. Many of these techniques are associated with post-WWII Italian neo-realist cinema. Ghobadi, and other contemporary Iranian independent filmmakers like Samira Makhmalbaf, Majid Majidi, and Jafar Panahi, have come to be loosely referred to as the "new" generation of post-revolutionary Iranian filmmakers because they represent the first group to begin their careers after the 1979 Revolution (Tapper, p. 9). In contrast to their predecessors like Kiarostami and M. Makhmalbaf, this "new" generation of filmmakers is often characterized as more globally engaged. Hamid Sadr, for example, argues that the conclusion of the Iran-Iraq war in 1988 resulted in policies that emphasized national restoration and improved relations with the West, and explains that these political and social conditions contributed to this "new" generation of Iranian filmmakers' increased global awareness (Sadr, 2006, p. 209).

Moreover, Ghobadi and his generational contemporaries share progressive sentiments with the large population of young Iranians born after the Islamic Revolution, who comprise 70% of the nation's population. According to Laudin Nooshin's scholarship on Iran's music culture, this young, urban generation largely imagines and projects "new understandings of national identity which embrace modernity, plurality and cosmopolitanism" (Nooshin, 86). In addition, the international acclaim of Iranian cinema generated by Kiarostami and M. Makhmalbaf in the 1980s and early 1990s, predisposed filmmakers like Ghobadi to critical exposure on the international film festival circuit. For instance, Ghobadi won the distinguished Camera d'Or at the 2000 Cannes Film Festival for his first feature, *A Time for Drunken Horses*, and all of his later films have been accepted to prominent international film festivals, and have been granted global distribution by various international companies. Three of his features, *A Time for Drunken Horses, Turtles Can Fly*, and *No One Knows about Persian Cats* have received North American distribution rights from IFC (Independent Film Channel), which makes them widely available through digital media streaming platforms like Netflix. I call attention to Ghobadi's critical acclaim, and his films' distribution and exhibition context because these factors underpin his hybrid authorial strategies. For instance, as an independent Iranian filmmaker, Ghobadi mobilizes his affiliation with Iranian post-revolutionary cinema as a means to circulate his films along the International film festival circuit. As a result, his mode of authorship cannot be completely divorced from that of an auteur. However, as my analysis shows, Ghobadi's films also constitute a kind of

collective mode of performance that varies from the dominant paradigm of auteur cinema.

Ghobadi's affiliation with Iran's state-run national cinema, his motivation to make films for both Iranians and Kurds, and his status as a film author in the global community necessarily involves a negotiation of multiple local, national, and global forces. Because Ghobadi embeds a space for cultural and creative performances within his films, he occupies an interstitial position between auteur models and collective modes of cinematic authorship. It is crucial to call attention to Ghobadi's hybrid authorial strategies to tap the critical potential of his specific mode of cinematic production for rethinking the paradigmatic boundaries of auteur and national models of cinema.

Thus, I examine Ghobadi's authorial strategies and films through the lens of hybridity. Ghobadi's films are hybrid because they are in themselves cultural performances that simultaneously embed Kurdish and Iranian collective cultural and creative expressions. My approach to hybridity is underpinned by Homi Bhabha's postcolonial cultural theories. Bhabha states that:

> The importance of hybridity is that it bears the traces of those feelings and practices which inform it, just like a translation, so that hybridity puts together the traces of certain other meanings or discourses. It does not give them the authority of being prior in the sense of being original: they are prior only in the sense of being anterior. The process of cultural hybridity gives rise to something different, something new and unrecognizable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation (Bhabha, 1990, p. 211).

Bhabha argues that within this liminal third space of hybridity, cultural meanings resist binary *either/or* logic, and are instead negotiated through a logic that is *neither one, nor*

the other. I focus on how Ghobadi's use of neo-realist techniques, his inscription of self-reflexive "shifter" characters, and his employment of digital cinematic techniques keep open the tenuous space of cultural translation, and resist closure of meaning. I place my research in conversation with existing scholarship on hybrid cinema, Third Cinema, intercultural cinema, and exilic/diasporic cinema proposed by Robert Stam, Hamid Naficy, and Laura Marks in order to elaborate on the politics of hybridity, and call attention to the impact of geopolitical context in the articulation of cultural meaning.

Ghobadi's interstitial mode of production shares some characteristics with Third Cinema. However, Third Cinema is helpful not because of its prescriptive criteria that often situates films within this paradigm according to its anti-Hollywood sentiment or its nationalist or Third World agendas, but instead because of its relevance as a "third space." Krishna Sen calls attention to this crucial distinction in her article, "What's 'oppositional' in Indonesian cinema," and cites Bhabha to argue that Third Cinema should be conceptualized as a "third space" that, "displaces the histories that constitute it and sets up new structures of authority, new political initiatives, which are inadequately understood through received wisdom" (Bhabha, 1990, p. 211). Sen's argument concerning the critical potential of Third Cinema as a "third space" is applicable to Ghobadi's cinema because although Ghobadi's films do not directly engage with Iran's political and social issues, his films' emphasis on global culture and local appropriations of global culture becomes politicized within the context of Iran. With the exception of *No One Knows About Persian Cats,* which he filmed without approval from the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance in Tehran, Ghobadi filmed all of his features in Iranian,

Iraqi and Turkish Kurdistan. Thus, Ghobadi released *A Time for Drunken Horses*, *Turtles Can Fly*, *Marooned in Iraq*, and *Half Moon* through Iran's state-run cinema. Despite the fact that these films do not directly engage with Iran's national politics or social issues, his films become politicized by virtue of their engagement with global media culture. For instance, *Half Moon* has been banned from exhibition in Iran due to "separatist themes," and a censored version of *Turtles Can Fly* that differs from the globally distributed version of the film is screened in Iran (Koch, 2007).

Ghobadi's split subjectivity similarly contributes to his films' constitutive hybridity. In his article, "Theorizing 'Third World' Film Spectatorship," Hamid Naficy conceptualizes "a form of identification that problematizes the received notions of direct and hermetic cultural imperialism," which calls attention to the "splitting effect of both cinema and of exile on the subjectivities of the so-called Third World spectators" (Naficy, 2002, p. 185). Naficy points to the splitting effect of cinema and more implicitly, the splitting effect of transnational cinema created in the Third World and globally distributed to Third World subjectivities. When citing one of his first experiences screening Iranian films as an émigré in LA, Naficy states that, "what occurred in that screening room involved not only watching but also reading, hearing, translating, and writing a film – all of which are part of the spectorial activities and competencies needed for these new globalized Third World and diasporized cinemas" (Naficy, 2002, p.197). I argue that these new "competencies" compound cinema's "splitting effect" by placing filmmakers like Ghobadi who live and work in their place of origin but distribute their

films transnationally in a position that is less mired in national as opposed to global culture.

Theorists of exilic and diasporic cinema build upon the "splitting effect" of deterritorialization and other modes of physical and cultural displacement. Drawing on Gilles Deleuze's theory of minor literature, theorists like Naficy and Laura Marks conceptualize films that are "necessarily produced in a contentious relationship to dominant language: in this sense they are properly termed a *minority* form" (Marks, 1994, p. 245). They argue that new cinematic languages articulated by members of diasporic communities and other displaced peoples can be conceived as a distinct body of work with specific cultural, aesthetic and political characteristics. Naficy's book, *An Accented Cinema,* conceptualizes deterritorialized, exilic and diasporic filmmakers who are authorial in the sense that they work as writers, directors, producers, and sometimes even actors. In contrast to Third Cinema, the critical potential of "accented cinema" is not so much its historically conscious, politically engaged, and critically aware positioning, but its "situatedness" within the exilic/diasporic condition. Thus, the concept of "accented cinema" offers critical methods and concepts that I use to examine Ghobadi's cinematic strategies. Moreover, because Marks and Naficy articulate how these cinematic techniques emerge from experiences of deterritorialization and censorship, their scholarship provides a means to connect Ghobadi's authorial strategies with his films' specific geopolitical conditions.

One drawback to accented cinema's "situatedness" is its restraining definition, which as a categorical requirement must involve emigration from Third World and

postcolonial societies to Western cosmopolitan centers. Naficy's concept does not fully register the wide experiential spectrum of dislocation, deterritorialization and migration throughout the non-western world. Laura Marks' concept of "intercultural cinema" provides a fruitful extension to Naficy's territorially defined theory of accented cinema. In her book, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*, Marks employs the term intercultural to "suggest a movement between cultures," and imply "a dynamic relationship between dominant "host" culture and a minority culture" (Marks, 2000, p. 7). Marks distinguishes nationality and culture, explaining that culture "is something that travelers bring with them more consistently than 'nation'; it is the stuff that passes through national borders and transforms nations from within" (Marks, 2000, p. 9). This is applicable to Ghobadi because he aims to make films for Kurds and Iranians, appeal to a global audience, and provide a vehicle for cultural and creative performances. Marks employs the term, visual "haptics" to conceptualize how audiovisual media can appeal to viewers' sense of touch, and thus tap into bodily as opposed to symbolic or discursive knowledge. This concept is applicable to Ghobadi's cinematic performance of Kurdish cultural identity. Because of Kurdistan's lack of national or globally recognizable signifiers, this "haptic" quality of his films transmits and embodies the conditions of liminality.

In addition, Marks' nuanced analysis of the politics of hybrid cinema presents a phenomenological approach to the generation of cultural meaning in audiovisual media. She argues that "by pushing the limits of any genre, hybrid cinema forces each genre to explain itself, to forgo any transparent relationship to the reality it represents, and to

make evident the knowledge claims on which it is based," and states that "one cannot simply contemplate a hybrid (or a work of hybrid cinema): one cannot help but be implicated in the power relations upon which it reflects" (Marks, 2000, p. 8). By confronting the disjunction between official history and private memories, hybrid cinema holds an archaeological quality because it "digs between strata, using a mixture of filmic languages to tell the unofficial stories of exile, emigrant, or culturally-mixed people" (Marks, 1994, p. 261). Ghobadi's films can be considered hybrid because they are themselves cultural performances, they simultaneously embed other creative and cultural expressions. In doing so, Ghobadi's films "dig between strata," voicing new, unofficial stories of culturally mixed people and emergent subjectivities within the globalized era.

I draw upon Robert Stam's scholarship on hybridity to demonstrate how Ghobadi's films can be considered performances of Iranian and Kurdish cultural identities. In his essay, "Beyond Third Cinema: the aesthetics of hybridity," Stam frames hybridity as an aesthetic strategy used by postcolonial Latin American filmmakers to counter the consumerist ethos of First Cinema. Stam argues that hybridity is "power-laden and asymmetrical," explaining that as a "descriptive, catch-all term," it fails to discriminate "between diverse modalities, such as obligatory assimilation, political cooptation, cultural mimicry, commercial exploitation, top-down appropriation, or bottom-up subversion" (Stam, p. 33). Stam elucidates the political potential of hybridity by framing it as an aesthetic strategy, but the geopolitical context of the Latin American filmmakers differs from that of Ghobadi. Stam explains that these filmmakers use "existing discourses for their own ends," and utilize cinema as a "palimpsestic and

polyvalent medium" in order to "stage and perform a transgressive hybridity" (Stam, p. 32, 38). It is crucial to note that unlike these Latin American filmmakers, Iranian filmmakers must work within the state-run cinema in order to publicly exhibit or legitimately release their films. Filmmakers that fail to comply often risk arrest, fines, or exile. Thus, before Ghobadi's 2009 exile after making *No One Knows about Persian Cats,* he filtered his films through Iran's cinematic regulations. Ghobadi's active staging of hybridity in *Turtles Can Fly*, for example, spatially and temporally condenses Kurdistan's fragmented nation within the film's specific setting. This hybridity is transgressive because in doing so, Ghobadi cuts through Kurdistan's cultural and physical landscape, revealing the layers of struggle posited through centuries of local, national, and global conflict.

Ghobadi is often categorized in Iranian national cinematic discourses as an Iranian filmmaker and rather than disputing this categorization, he mobilizes it in order to enunciate Kurdish cultural identity (Tapper, p. 9). Marvin D'Lugo argues in his essay "The new identity of Latin American Cinema," that when framed discursively in both their production and exhibition by market imperatives, Latin American film authors "came to embody the dialectical play of the local and the global" (D'Lugo, p. 111). Ghobadi, like the authors D'Lugo refers to, is positioned in the interstitial space between the global and the local, and uses his association with Iranian cinema as a means to enunciate emergent cultural identities, which may or may not be considered Iranian. Nestor Garcia Canclini calls attention to how in the emergence of alternative media practices, "the artists and writers who contributed most to the independence and

professionalizing of the cultural field have made the critique of the state and of the market the axes of their argumentation" (Garcia Canclini, p. 67). In complying with rather than critiquing international commercial interests, and negotiating with rather than overtly countering the interests of the Iranian state, Ghobadi's cinema's critical potential is not registered in Iran's state politics or Western capitalism. Instead, I argue that the Ghobadi's films' political engagement occurs at the level of creative expression, and his personal and collective pursuit of cultural freedoms.

Moreover, Ghobadi's authorial strategies reflect the multifaceted construct of Iranian national cinema. For instance, Ghobadi's interstitial mode of film authorship share features with emergent modes of collective production, auteur models of internationally distributed art cinema, and exilic and diasporic modes of production. Ghobadi's authorial strategies reveal Iranian cinema to be far from homogenous, but the conditions of censorship interconnect these various heterogeneous nodes of production. Thus, Iranian cinema presents itself to be a salient site to examine emergent modes of film authorship whose critical potential cannot be adequately tapped through homogenous paradigms of national or auteur cinema. Instead, as my analysis of Ghobadi aims to show, the framework of hybridity has the capacity to examine the local, global, and national forces that contribute to emergent forms of collective cultural productions.

My first chapter examines how Ghobadi's employment of cinematic techniques associated with post-revolutionary Iranian cinema in *A Time for Drunken Horses* and *Turtles Can Fly* necessarily transforms their semiotic meanings, and by extension, cultural and political meanings. I argue that Ghobadi's use of non-professional Kurdish

children as actors, his use of real locations, and neo-realist cinematic techniques like minimal editing unearths the liminality embedded in Kurdistan's physical and cultural landscape. Additionally, I draw distinctions between Ghobadi's neo-realist treatment of Kurdish landscape and culture in *A Time for Drunken Horses* and his active staging of hybridity in *Turtles Can Fly*. In both films, however, Kurdistan's inherent liminality disarticulates meaning from symbolic signifiers, which subsequently promotes intercultural engagement and enunciates Kurdistan's hybrid cultural identity.

In my second chapter, I elaborate on Ghobadi's authorial strategies, and call attention to *Half Moon* and *No One Knows about Persian Cats'* reflexive narrative structures. I draw on Naficy's concept of "shifters," which are characters that display familiarity with "cultural and legal codes of interacting cultures", and "manipulate identity and the asymmetrical power situations in which they find themselves" (2002, p. 32). Naficy situates accented filmmakers' use of shifters as a common reflexive authorial strategy that inscribes the experiences of deterritorialition within narratives. Thus, this concept is especially apt for connecting Ghobadi's own experiences as a cultural producer working in repressive conditions with his films' narratives. In addition, it sheds light on Ghobadi's contingent relationship with Iran's state-run cinema, and calls attention to how Ghobadi's authorial and narrative strategies strive to globally circulate cultural and creative expressions that have emerged from these repressive conditions.

Finally, my third chapter examines Ghobadi's use of digital filmmaking technology, treatment of digital media culture, and employment of digital cinematic techniques in *No One Knows About Persian Cats.* I call attention to how Ghobadi's use

of an unsanctioned digital camera to capture Tehran's illegal underground rock culture in Tehran immediately problematizes simple categorizations of Iran's national cinema because he released the film without approval from Iran's Ministry of Islamic and Cultural Guidance and was subsequently exiled. The film captures a digital mash-up of global music, which is reflected in the material signifiers of multiple nationalities. Additionally, this digital music community is the onscreen embodiment of the outside digital filmmaking community in Iran, which is comprised of filmmakers like Ghobadi who have used illegal digital technology to capture aspects of Iranian society that could not be filmed using traditional equipment.

All three of my chapters analyze Ghobadi's films and authorial strategies through the theoretical and methodological framework of hybridity. I aim to examine how Ghobadi's films' constitutive hybridity reveal cultural identities to be, as what Stuart Hall describes as a "process of becoming" (Hall, 1989, p. 704). Moreover, Ghobadi's interstitial authorial strategies also call attention to the complex environment of transnational cinema in the contemporary globalized era. I employ textual analysis of Ghobadi's films, historical analysis of Iranian cinema and Kurdish culture, and discourse analysis of Ghobadi's critical reception and mode of production as a means to analyze Ghobadi's cinematic elements as well as the forces that contribute to his films' hybrid construction. Ultimately, this theoretical and methodological approach allows me to analyze how Ghobadi's films enunciate liminal Kurdish and Iranian cultural identities, while simultaneously circulating creative expressions that have been put under partial erasure by Iran's Islamic regime and Kurdish cultural repression. Doing so reveals the

emergence of hybrid modes of collective production in the globalized era that are concerned with the material conditions of specific locales and collectives, as well as their presence in the global imaginary. As a result, Ghobadi's hybrid productions raise questions about the extent to which cultural productions can concretely impact specific locales and collective communities.

Chapter 1: The Third Space of Neo-realism

> "I've always tried to stay true to my own vision and pave my own way, have my own style. I'm an Iranian Kurd. I owe a lot to Iranian cinema. But there are over forty million Kurds between Syria, Turkey, Iraq, and Iran and they only have eight or nine theaters and, until I started making films about the Kurds, they had no presence on screen. The Kurds take a lot of pride in the work that I've done and they have been so supportive. It makes me want to tell more of these stories. They are my people. Only one fourth of the Kurds live in Iran; the rest are scattered and, for me, there is no difference between Iranian Kurds, or Iraqi, Turkish, or Syrian Kurds. We are all the same, with the same language, culture, and history. My whole being is Iranian, but my heart is Kurdish."
>
> -Bahman Ghobadi (Hamid, 2005)

In the above statement, Bahman Ghobadi eloquently articulates his relationship with Kurdish culture and Iranian cinema. By claiming that his "whole being" is Iranian, but his heart is Kurdish, Ghobadi implies the complex and contingent relationship between Kurdistan and Iran. Moreover, Ghobadi's statement makes explicit his cinematic motivation to articulate Kurdish cultural identities that are liminal in nature. My chapter seeks to examine two of Ghobadi's features, *A Time for Drunken Horses* (*Zamani barayé masti asbha,* 2000) and *Turtles Can Fly* (*Lakposhtha parvaz mikonand,* 2004), through the lens of hybridity. Because as Homi Bhabha argues in *The Location of Culture* that, "the theoretical recognition of the split-space of enunciation may open the way to conceptualizing an international culture, based not on the exoticism of multiculturalism or the diversity of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture's hybridity," it becomes possible to examine the enunciation of Kurdish cultural identities by

emphasizing the constitutive hybridity of these two features (Bhabha, 1994, p. 56). By conducting a close textual analysis of *Drunken Horses* and *Turtles Can Fly,* and by framing this analysis with scholarship on hybrid, exilic, and diasporic cinema, I aim to demonstrate how Kurdistan's liminal culture and terrain disarticulates meaning from determined national signifiers. Instead, I argue that Ghobadi's employment of neo-realist cinematic techniques associated with Iranian cinema to capture Kurdistan's cultural and physical landscape necessarily shifts meanings from a symbolic to an indexical register. Thus, *Drunken Horses* and *Turtles Can Fly* suspend symbolic closure of meaning and prompt intercultural engagement.

My argument is underpinned by Homi Bhabha's postcolonial theories of hybridity, and Stuart Hall's theories concerning cultural identity and cinematic representation. Kurdish cultural identity is far from homogenous or unified, and as Stuart Hall describes, is "in a process of becoming" (Hall, p. 706). Kurdistan is a region without borders, but is positioned between Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey and maintains one of the largest populations (30 million) of stateless people in the world (Sadr, 283). Apart from their language and a national flag, Kurdistan lacks any consecrated national identity. In addition, the multiplicity of various Kurdish dialects and the region's vast and precarious terrain makes it difficult to retain cultural or national unification (Dadras, 163). Thus, Hall's theorization of cultural identities as "the unstable points of identification or suture, which are made, within the discourses of history and culture," is particularly fitting in context of Kurdistan. Moreover, because Hall's theory explicitly references cinematic representations, Ghobadi's neo-realist treatment of Kurdistan in *Drunken Horses* and

Turtles Can Fly is a particularly salient site to examine the enunciation of Kurdish cultural identities (Hall, p. 707).

Drunken Horses is Ghobadi's first feature film, and it is the first full-length feature film shot in Kurdistan using Kurdish dialogue. The film takes place in Ghobadi's hometown of Baneh during the Iran-Iraq war, and follows a young boy, Ayoub and his siblings as they struggle to earn money for their handicapped brother, Madi, to have life saving surgery across the border in Iraq. The children's mother died during childbirth, and their father is fatally shot while smuggling goods across the Iraq- Iran border. After his father's death, Ayoub is forced to protect his three sisters and older brother, Madi, whose handicap makes him resemble a small toddler despite the fact that he is fifteen years old. Ayoub begins smuggling to raise money for Madi's operation, but the owners of the mules Ayoub uses on his journeys refuses to pay him. Despite Ayoub's objections, his oldest sister, Rojin, decides to marry an Iraqi Kurd from the adjacent village so that her new family can take care of Madi. The groom's mother, however, refuses to take care of Madi and gives Ayoub a mule instead. Because his mule will sell for more money in Iraq, Ayoub decides to take Madi and go with a group of smugglers across the Iraq border so Madi can receive surgery. The film ends just after Ayoub and Madi step over a single barbed wire after refusing to retreat despite attacks from undisclosed regimes during the journey.

Ghobadi's 2004 film, *Turtles Can Fly* is set in the Kurdish refugee camp on the Iraqi-Turkish border on the eve of the US invasion of Iraq. The film follows a thirteen-year-old boy who is known as "Satellite," and is a dynamic leader of a group of orphaned

Kurdish children. Satellite organizes the labor of clearing out minefields and arranges trade-ins with a UN representative who is temporarily in the village. Satellite becomes infatuated with a fellow twelve-year-old girl named Agrin. Agrin arrives in the village with a small blind toddler, Riga, who she must carry on her back, and her armless brother, Hengov, who is known as a prophet amongst the other children. They are from Habelah, which is an Iraqi-Kurdish village that was completely destroyed by Saddam Hussein's 1988 Anfal campaign against the Kurds. As the film progresses, it becomes clear Agrin was raped and impregnated by an Iraqi soldier from Saddam Hussein's regime, and that Riga is actually her son. Although Satellite tries to court Agrin by giving her his bike and performing tasks for her, Agrin is completely ambivalent to Satellite's gestures. The film opens with Agrin jumping off a cliff, and is intercut with scenes of Riga's shoes floating in a pond. The film concludes when American troops descend upon the Iraqi-Kurdish village just after Satellite injures his leg by stepping on a live mine and finds out that Agrin committed suicide and Riga drowned.

Ghobadi's cinematic treatment of Kurdistan in *Drunken Horses* and *Turtles Can Fly* radiates tensions embedded in Kurdish culture and terrain by centuries of violence and struggle. Kurdistan has been subject to economic, political, and military exploitation throughout its history, and since the end of WWI, Kurdistan's terrain has become a site of ongoing warfare. Iraq's attempts at Kurdish genocide during the Anfal campaign, for example, proved especially traumatic and decades of warfare have littered the landscape with detritus such as landmines and bombshells. Moreover, modern infrastructure, healthcare, and education are very limited in Kurdistan and the natural reserves of oil in

the areas between Iraq and Iran make this border particularly open to global conflict (Dadras, 164).

The purpose of Ghobadi's production company, Mij Film, calls attention to his conscious effort to make films for Kurds. Mij Film's mission statement claims that it was established with the intention of supporting Kurdish nationalistic cinema. Mij Film's homepage reads, "Iran has always been a region that cradled a multitude of different ethnic groups, such as Turkmen, Kurds and Turks, yet the voices of those ethnic groups are rarely expressed in Iranian cinema. Mij Film produces two to three full-length feature films and some short films with ethnic themes each year in the hopes of giving those voices a space to be heard and understood" (mijfilm.com, 2011). According to this rhetoric, Ghobadi mobilizes his association with Iranian national cinema as means to enunciate to Kurdish nationalism. Thus Ghobadi's mode of authorship can be understood as a kind of hybrid auteurism. For instance, *Drunken Horses* won the Camera D'Or at the 2000 Cannes Film Festival, and *Turtles Can Fly* was also very well received on the international film festival circuit. Moreover, Ghobadi began his career as a photographer, and subsequently worked as Kiarostami's location scout and assistant director for his 1999 feature, *The Wind Will Carry Us.* Post-revolutionary Iranian filmmakers like Kiarostami first utilized neo-realist tropes to skirt censorship regulations, and my close textual analysis aims to demonstrate how Ghobadi's employment of neo-realist tropes and his contingent relationship with Iran's state-regulated cinema inscribe the actual conditions of Kurdish existence onto his films.

In his theorization of the relationship between time, narrative and the margins of the modern nation, Bhabha argues that it is “not adequate simply to become aware of the semiotic systems that produce the signs of culture and their dissemination. Much more significantly, we are faced with the challenge of reading, into the present of a specific cultural performance, the traces of all those diverse disciplinary discourses and institutions of knowledge that constitute the condition and contexts of culture” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 233). According to Bhabha, it is imperative to consider the specific contexts in which cultural producers appropriate existent symbolic systems in order to understand the logic of cultural difference and the meanings that emerge through performative reiterations. Ghobadi appropriates neo-realist tropes because of Iran’s cinematic censorship, and because of regulatory policies that have prevented the enunciation and performance of Kurdish culture. For instance, *Drunken Horses* is the first full length Iranian feature that uses Kurdish dialogue or depicts Kurdish culture. Additionally, Iranian filmmakers began using Kurdish locations to shoot their films, like Kiarostami for *The Wind Will Carry Us* (1999), and Samira Makhmalbaf for *Blackboards* (2000). Ghobadi’s use of real locations and non-professional actors is partially a means to evade Iran’s strict censorship codes, but it is also a means to capture the material aspects of Kurdistan’s physical and cultural landscape that, for centuries, has been put under erasure by the region’s host nations.

Despite the fact that Ghobadi uses Kurdish locations in both Iraq and Iran, he must filter both of the films through Iran’s Islamic framework of censorship. Thus, Ghobadi’s employment of Iranian cinematic styles as a means to enunciate Kurdish

cultural identity can be understood as performance of hybridity because it is a direct embodiment of Kurdistan's conditional relationship with one of its host nations, Iran. As a result, *Drunken Horses* and *Turtles Can Fly* can be understood as hybrid works. According to Laura Marks, hybrid films "pollute viewers' ideas of cultural distinction," and "challenge the separateness of cultures and make visible the colonial and racist power relations that seek to maintain this separation" (Marks, 2000, p. xii). Marks' concept of intercultural cinema accounts for the subjective deterritorialization that characterizes Ghobadi's and his films' liminal positioning. Marks argues that intercultural filmmakers, by virtue of their liminal positioning enact "a sort of dance between sedimented historical discourses and 'lines of flight', between containment and breaking free" (Marks, 1994, p. 264). Marks' geological metaphor aptly describes the capacity of hybrid films to reveal the enfolded landscape that would otherwise remain latent beneath surfaces. By generating meaning through material and indexical as opposed to symbolic signifiers, Ghobadi's neo-realist techniques in *Drunken Horses* and *Turtles Can Fly* appeal to viewers' bodily and affective as opposed to discursive knowledge, and in doing so, prompts intercultural engagement. Thus, by reflecting Kurdistan's preexisting hybridity and actively staging hybridity, these films constitute "lines of flight" that reveal and keep open the sedimented layers of Kurdish culture and history.

Post Revolutionary Iranian neorealist tropes have a historical lineage with post-WWII Italian cinema and European New Wave Cinemas, and are widely characterized by the use of non-professional actors, the use of real locations, and the use of children.

Because neo-realist techniques utilize people who identify with the geopolitical locations being filmed, semiotic meanings cannot be divorced from the specific context in which neorealist films are produced. The use of neo-realist techniques in post-Revolutionary Iranian cinema, for instance, is rooted in Iran's history, politics, and ideology. Scholarship on post-revolutionary Iranian cinema often interrogates how cinematic neo-realism is employed as a means to evade Islamic censorship, escape from or engage in political and social critique, exoticize Iranian landscape and culture, or mimic established aesthetics to garner international acclaim and distribution (Saheed-Vafa; Zeydabadi-Nejad, 2007; Tapper).

The use of non-professional children, for instance, was popularized after the Iranian Revolution because it skirted issues associated with the Iran-Iraq war, and more easily bypassed stringent censorship regulations (Sadr, 2002, p. 229). Non-professional Kurdish children are the central performers in both *Drunken Horses* and *Turtles Can Fly*, and this geopolitical transference shifts indexical and symbolic registers associated with this neo-realist technique into a liminal, hybrid space. According to Sadr, children in Iranian post-revolutionary cinema function empathetically, and by relating to individuals in a way that bypasses national and social belonging, children become a device to produce intercultural meanings. Sadr goes on to explain that children's "personal troubles tend not to remain personal," which implies their existence in the world anterior to a given film is more realistic (Sadr, 2002, p. 237). As a result, children allow for humanistic empathy despite the presence of national or cultural signifiers that could produce political or ideological readings if inscribed upon an adult.

For instance, Madi's severe handicap is central to *Drunken Horses*, and provokes tension within the narrative because objectively he is a burden to his siblings. However, he also gives his siblings' lives meaning by providing them with a collective goal. In addition, Madi's handicap ruptures the distinction between his existence within and anterior to the film, which forces viewers to consider Madi's existence within the uncertain space of Kurdistan. Moreover, many of the children in *Turtles Can Fly* have lost limbs smuggling commodities across Iranian, Iraqi, and Turkish borders, or clearing and selling landmines. The onscreen presence of these children testifies to the violent realities that are re-enacted in *Turtles Can Fly's* narrative. Madi's handicap in *Drunken Horses* poignantly forces an intercultural consideration of his existence in Kurdistan, and the orphans with amputated limbs in *Turtles Can Fly* produces a dialectical tension between globally disembodied weapons like landmines, and the literally embodied impact of landmines on the children's bodies.

Just as non-professional Kurdish children in *Turtles Can Fly* and *Drunken Horses* embody tension and uncertainty generated by centuries of struggle and violence, the cinematic configuration of actual Kurdish locations in these films refuses to offer symbolic closure of meaning. *Drunken Horses'* opening scene, for instance, radiates the tension embedded in Kurdistan's hybrid cultural economy. The scene opens in an undisclosed market place where Ayoub, and his sister, Amaneh and other Kurdish children work packing and circulating a diverse array of global commodities such as media technologies and produce between vendors, customers, and vehicles. This scene activates a dialogical tension between the locality of the children's labor culture and the

global nature of the commodities. For instance, a long, unedited take captures Kurdish children wrapping vast amounts of cargo in a burlap tarp, and carrying these loads on their backs to distribution trucks. This shot emphasizes the authenticity of the children's local labor practice, which prompts humanistic empathy for their harsh lifestyle. The following shot however captures these children playfully interacting with each other, which allows them to break from their roles as laborers both in the market place and as actors in the film. This improvisational, reflexive moment lacks narrative or aesthetic form, which undermines ideological readings of these children's conditions by emphasizing their actual material existence. Thus, this scene constitutes one such "line of flight," in which in which the film's hybrid structure produces a space which the material rather than ideological conditions of these children's actual existence. Because of the conditions of cultural repression and cinematic censorship, Kurdistan lacks visual evidence that indexes the material culture of its culture and people.

The following scene similarly testifies to these children's actual existence while simultaneously positioning them as performers in *Drunken Horses*' story. For instance, one child sings a traditional Kurdish song as the children ride away from the market in at truck. Like the improvisational moment, this embedded musical performance enables the film to enunciate Kurdish cultural lore that has been under erasure for centuries due to Kurdistan's host nations' repressive cultural regulations. Thus, this musical performance functions to signal cultural difference. However, in the same scene, Ghobadi tightly frames the children's individual faces in a series of close-ups, which produces an empathetic affective engagement. For instance, one close up meditates on a child with

particularly ruddy skin as he handles the money he earned that day in the market. This long take captures the ease with which this child handles money, signaling his real life experience working as a laborer. Moreover, the close up emphasizes the child's worn-looking face and physically testifies to the child's experiences working in this region's harsh landscape. Because of the child's obvious youth, the visual inscription of his actual experiences produces an uncanny affect. This uncanny moment signals a cultural difference that disrupts Western conventions concerning the visual representation of children, and social regulations that prohibit child labor. However, because the story focuses almost entirely on children, Ghobadi resists positioning them within victimization discourses. Ghobadi does this by emphasizing the children's ambivalence towards their harsh conditions within the story. In doing so, *Drunken Horses* produces a tension between the children's ambivalence and Western viewers' empathy, and this tension resists absolute ideological readings, and prompts intercultural engagement through the contemplation of cultural difference.

Laura Marks' theory of intercultural cinema offers one way to examine the implications of *Drunken Horses'* embodiment of ambivalence. Marks draws on Gilles Deleuze's concept of "optical images" in conjunction with Bergson's theory of "attentive recognition" to examine what she describes as the "haptic" quality of intercultural cinema. Bergson's phenomenological approach to visuality conceptualizes how individuals actively view and interpret images by tapping internal resources of memory and theorizes a way in which visual images are experienced within viewers' bodies. Bergson's concept of attentive recognition makes it possible to examine how affective

and visceral registers prompt intercultural engagement. In addition, Deleuze's concept of optical images grapples with photographic and filmic images that provide very little information and are so "unclichéd" that viewers must engage in attentive recognition more explicitly in order to contemplate the visual over the narrative (Marks, 2000, p. 162-163). As a result, these moments of suspended meaning often appeal to the spectrum of sensual and by extension cultural knowledge.

The lack of specific historical or political discourses in *Drunken Horses* refuses closure of symbolic meaning, which forces viewers to engage in attentive recognition. For instance, just after the children leave the market, border patrol impounds their truck, and the children are forced to walk home in the snowy landscape. There is no geopolitical orientation in this scene that would provide information for viewers about which side of the border is Iran and which side is Iraq. When the children begin to walk home, the film cuts to a completely white frame, which remains white for an extended duration. A few moments into the shot, children emerge from the folded landscape, and provide spatial orientation within the frame. A long shot captures the children running in a line across the landscape, and this excessive duration illustrates Ghobadi's efforts to testify to these children's existence in Kurdistan's harsh landscape, and produce humanistic empathy as a means to connect with intercultural audiences. For instance, because of the geopolitical significance of a border station, this scene would seem to prompt discursive political and symbolic readings. However, by refusing geopolitical information via national signifiers, this scene actively disorients viewers, which subsequently forces a process of attentive recognition. Thus, viewers are forced to translate the meaning of this situation by

contemplating how these borders actually affect these children. As a result, affective knowledge takes precedent over symbolic knowledge, which forces meaning to be discerned through a process of intercultural empathy.

Like the use of non-professional children, the use of real locations in Iranian post-revolutionary cinema often function allegorically or through social realism as a means escape or a means to engage with Iranian politics and social policies (Saeed-Vafa, p. 200). As my visual analysis of Ghobadi's neo-realist treatment of Kurdish terrain and culture in *Drunken Horses* and *Turtles Can Fly* aims to show, Kurdistan's non-nation-state status shifts registers of meaning from a symbolic to a more visceral and affective register, which prompts a process of attentive recognition and by extension, intercultural exchange.

Theorists of exilic and diasporic cinema argue that new cinematic languages articulated by members of diasporic communities and other displaced peoples can be conceived as a distinct body of work with specific cultural, aesthetic and political characteristics. Hamid Naficy explains in his introduction to *An Accented Cinema*, that "access to multiple channels and types of local and transnational media and the displacement of an unprecedented number of people have challenged our received notions of national culture and identity, national cinema and genre, authorial vision and style, and film reception and ethnography" (Naficy, 2001, p. 8). Because Ghobadi resides in and makes his films in his homeland (prior to his 2009 exile from Iran), *Drunken Horses* and *Turtles Can Fly* do not fall within the situated scope of accented cinema. However, because Kurdish culture has been subject to numerous cultural restrictions

including the public use of Kurdish language or public performance of Kurdish music (which are particularly harsh in Turkish Kurdistan but are also upheld in Iran and Iraq), Kurdish ethnicity is marginalized and deterritorialized much like exilic and diasporic identities.

Naficy employs Bakhtin's concept of the "chronotope," as a unit of analysis for studying diasporic and exilic cinematic texts in terms of their representations of temporal and spatial configurations, and as an "optic" for analyzing the forces in cultures that produce these configurations (Naficy, 2001, p. 152). Naficy proposes that "certain aspects of nature and culture, such as mountains, ancient monuments, and ruins, are used as such powerfully cathected collective chronotopes that they condense the entire idea of nation- particularly if the nation's status is in dispute, as with Palestinians, Kurds, and Armenians," and in this configuration, "the mountain stands not as a barrier but as a bridge that consolidates the national idea and heals the ruptures of exile" (Naficy, 2001, p. 160). As a result, many exilic films include chronotopes that idealize their homelands. However, Ghobadi's use of neo-realist techniques in the treatment of Kurdistan's harsh terrain in *Drunken Horses* prevents idealization, and by extension, any static closure of meaning.

Rather than "healing the wounds of exile," mountains in *Drunken Horses* function as a chronotope that reveal and keep open the wounds generated from centuries of cultural, political, and physical violence. The mountainous routes connecting small Kurdish villages and smuggling outposts in *Drunken Horses* can be understood as a chronotope. Much of *Drunken Horses* captures Kurds and their mules traveling through

the mountains, and these routes are cinematically figured as cultural and economic veins connecting small villages and smuggling outposts across the landscape. Ghobadi states on his website for Mij Film (meaning fog in Kurdish), "when I think of my homeland of Kurdistan, I think of the snow, the cold, and the fog. The fog is everywhere. I think that life there is also foggy—economically, politically and socially Kurdistan is kept hidden and blanketed under a layer of fog" (mijfilm.com). *Drunken Horses* emphasizes Kurdistan's political and geographical "fogginess" by denying viewers visual and discursive information of these mountainous routes. For instance, in the final scene, Ayoub takes Madi across the border with other smugglers, and they are barraged with gunfire from undisclosed regimes. The scene's tight framing denies any visual knowledge of where the attack originates, and because there is no establishing shot, there is no geographical orientation. As a result, the film text offers no discursive knowledge to draw upon for meaning. Instead, Ghobadi employs a hand-held camera, which is a technique that attempts to mimetically connect the image to the visceral experience of violence in this border region. Because the hand-held camera actually moves according to the physical contours of this terrain, this technique mimetically embodies Ayoub's visceral experience of this mountainous route, which, according to Bergson's idea of attentive recognition, appeals to bodily knowledge (Marks, 2000, p. 163). Thus, by employing this visceral cinematic technique and denying geo-political orientation, the film embodies the material experiences of these multiple struggles as a means to approximate Kurdistan's chaotic geographical, political and cultural landscape. In doing so, this scene taps into viewers' bodily experience, which subsequently shifts meaning to an affective register.

In addition, the mountainous routes in *Drunken Horses* can be understood as a nationalist allegory, but because of their lack of a consecrated national identity, such an allegory must necessarily be registered through Kurdistan's material conditions rather than signifiers within an imagined community. In the final scene, for instance, Ayoub's determination to cross the border and ambivalence towards the violence can be understood as an enunciation of Kurdish cultural identity. The unedited duration of this scene captures multiple sites of struggle. The uphill snow-covered slope in conjunction with the drunken mules carrying oversized tires and the disorienting attacks points to Ghobadi's hyperbolic staging of this border crossing. However, the film's visceral treatment of this mountainous route simultaneously appeals to sensual registers of meaning that testifies to the authenticity of each element of struggle. In condensing material elements of Kurdistan's historical, cultural and physical struggle within this scene, Ghobadi constructs an allegory of nationalism through indexical as opposed to symbolic signifiers.

Whereas *Drunken Horses'* visual composition is steeped in the discomfort of geographical and temporal uncertainty to prompt intercultural exchange, *Turtles Can Fly*'s mise en scene concentrates specific national, cultural, and cinematic signifiers from seemingly disparate spatio-temporalities within the locality of one Iraqi-Kurdish village. In his essay "Beyond Third Cinema: the Aesthetics of Hybridity," Robert Stam argues that alternative Brazilian filmmakers often stage a "transgressive hybridity," rather than just "reflecting a pre-existing cultural hybridity" to resist the hegemony of Western societies' capitalistic ethos (Stam, p. 39). Ghobadi actively stages hybridity by inscribing

Satellite with American signifiers. For instance, Satellite's blue jeans, horn-rimmed glasses, and polo shirt epitomize American style of dress, and when he tunes the TV to FOX News for the village elders, Ghobadi poignantly juxtaposes Satellite's western style with the village elders' traditional turbans and haram style pants. Because the shot is captured from the TV's point of view, Satellite is the framed in the foreground and the elders in the background. This frame can be understood as a palimpsest because signifiers from disparate cultures and temporalities are inscribed within the same visual space. This palimpsestic visual composition is significant because it echoes the film's overall hybrid structure. For instance, during this scene, the elders cringe when Satellite briefly stops on a "forbidden" TV channel that is showing a music video. Their reaction contrasts with Satellite's technical mastery as he sets up the satellite and finds the correct TV stations. Satellite's self-assured motions in this scene and non-professional status signal his authentic mastery over this media technology, makes him an identifiable for Western audiences. Thus, whereas Ghobadi employs long takes and haptic visuality to emphasize Kurdistan's uncertainty and struggle in *Drunken Horses*, in *Turtles Can Fly*, he stages a visual dialectic of disparate cultural signifiers within the cinematic frame in order to testify to Kurdistan's cultural hybridity.

Although Ghobadi stages these dialectic encounters through the film's mise en scene, he simultaneously reaffirms the plausibility of such scenarios. For example, in the beginning of the film, Ghobadi employs a long shot that captures multiple Kurdish villagers holding up antennas on top of a steep grassy hill that overlooks the village. The long shot captures the row of villagers dressed in traditional Kurdish clothes holding

bulky antennas that are connected to the houses with an absurd length of wire. Moreover, one of the village elders yells out in frustration that “they don’t let our TVs work to see when the war will start,” and claims “Saddam has deprived us of the sky.” Because the village is real and the villagers are non-professional actors, this scenario is plausible, but Ghobadi’s hyperbolic rendering emphasizes the uneven nature of global media flows and simultaneously functions as a comedic strategy.

Like Naficy, Stam draws on Bakhtin’s concept of the “chronotope” to examine the aesthetics of hybridity in Latin American cinema, which is helpful in analyzing Ghobadi’s stylistic treatment of actual Kurdish locations, people, and culture in *Turtles Can Fly*. Stam argues that because films are “produced in one constellation of times and spaces, they represent still another constellation of times and places, and are received in still another time and space,” cinema is an ideal medium to employ “chronotopic multiplicity” (Stam, p. 34). The short one-year lapse between the US invasion of Iraq and *Turtle’s Can Fly*’s international release makes cinema’s inherently disjunctive temporality explicit, and Ghobadi’s re-staging of this event in the narrative is a strategy to produce chronotopic multiplicity. *Turtles Can Fly’s* opening frame announces that it takes place in a Kurdish village on the Turkey-Iraq border days before the US invasion of Iraq. Because an Iraqi-Kurdish refugee camp is adjacent to this border village, and because of the temporal proximity of this global event, multiple nodes of Kurdish culture are spatially condensed within this setting. Thus, this border village functions as a chronotope, which enables the Ghobadi to reflect Kurdistan’s pre-existing hybridity and actively stage a global dialectical encounter.

The visual differences between Agrin and Satellite immediately reflect and actively stage Kurdish cultural hybridity. Unlike the orphans who wear a mixture of Western and traditional styles of clothes, women who wear *hijabs*, and village elders who wear overtly Kurdish garments, Agrin's dress is ambiguous. Agrin's dress has no overt national or symbolic signifiers, but its velvet texture, deep crimson color, and oversized angular sleeves communicates meanings through haptic as opposed to symbolic visuality. The texture and shape of Agrin's style mimics her bodily and facial movements, which all communicate a ghostly ambivalence. Like the close-ups of children in *Drunken Horses*, Agrin's ghostly appearance, yet her obvious youth produces an uncanny affect. This uncanniness is especially poignant when Agrin is framed with Satellite, whose hyperbolic signifiers contrast with Agin's haptic qualities.

Moreover, the Ghobadi's cinematic depiction of these various nodes within the chronotopic village reveals the violent implications of hybridity. Stam explains that "hybridity has never been a peaceful encounter, a tension-free theme park; it has always been deeply entangled with colonial violence," and Ghobadi's cinematic treatment of these various sites within this village reflects the power-laden politics of hybridity (Stam, p. 36). For instance, Satellite and his gang of orphans work clearing mines for various villages around this border region, and thus the film captures these children in minefields and among the global detritus of war. As a result, the film testifies to the violent realities of hybridity. Agrin, Hengov and Riga, reside in the refugee camp, which reveals a different dimension of cultural hybridity. Ghobadi tightly frames Agrin, Hengov, and Riga in their small tent, which contrasts with the open vistas in which he most often

frames Satellite and the other orphans. Moreover, the orphans often discuss global topics like weapons, Saddam Hussein, and American culture, whereas Hengov must constantly convince Agrin not to kill herself and to take care of Riga. As a result, Ghobadi juxtaposes these two faces of Kurdish culture, all of which are inscribed with the violence of hybridity.

For instance, the orphans with amputated limbs are the literal embodiment of the violence inherent to hybridity. In contrast, Satellite is inscribed with seemingly benign global commodities. However, the existence of such commodities testifies to the violence resulting from the circulation of their circulation across national borders. Agrin, however, signifies the most violent reality that exists along this border region. Because she must actually take care of the disembodied signifier of her traumatic experience, Riga, she cannot fully embody and transform her experience like the other children. Moreover, Riga's blindness and complete dependence on Agrin ruptures ethical groundings that characterize the logic of hybridity. For example, Ghobadi employs a long take when Agrin leaves Riga, who subsequently wanders into a minefield. The scene shows Riga lovingly touching Agrin's face and hair, as she tethers Riga to a rock to prevent him from following her. Riga cries when he can no longer reach out to touch her face, and Agrin quickly wipes away tears just before slipping away like a ghost into the fog. The empathetic identification with both Agrin and Riga is especially poignant in this scene, and in doing so it contrasts the universal registers of emotional affect with the dynamic and disjunctive nature of globalization.

Ghobadi's affective treatment of Riga, haptic treatment of Agrin, and hybrid treatment of Satellite position these characters along the spectrum of Kurdistan's political landscape. Riga's vulnerability makes him a universally lovable figure, which is visually and thematically communicated by his crossed eyes and complete dependence on Hengov and Agrin. The orphans fawn over Riga, and when he wanders into a minefield, they immediately work together to save him. Riga's vulnerability stands in contrast with Agrin's haptic uncanniness and Satellite's hybrid ingenuity. Whereas Satellite's industriousness enables him to transform his and the other orphans' harsh material conditions brought on by global conflict into a means to make money, but because Agrin was literally raped through the same global forces, she embodies an ethically irresolvable face of globalization.

In contrast to Satellite's initial ability to co-opt his hybrid global conditions into a means of transformation in the beginning of the film, the final shot of Satellite illustrates this other side of globalization. In the final scene, the physical presence of US soldiers in the Kurdish village immediately evokes a dialogical tension between global and local registers of meaning. For instance, when the US troops arrive, a long shot frames Satellite from behind as he leans on his crutch and fails to react to the helicopters flying overhead or the American soldiers running past him. The scene then cuts to a close-up of Satellite looking directly in the camera just before he turns and walks away from the camera. As Satellite walks away, a line of soldiers marches towards the camera. Thus the frame immediately constitutes what Mary Louise Pratt describes as a "contact zone," where "subjects previously separated…establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions

of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict" (Pratt, p. 7). Because the troops arrive just after Satellite finds out that Agrin and Riga are dead and just after he injures his leg on a mine, this global event has very little bearing on his localized perspective. By undermining political readings through empathetic responses to this tragedy, Ghobadi puts into dialogical tension the global nature of the US invasion of Iraq and the Kurdish children's local conditions. In doing so, Ghobadi enacts the same ambivalence as Satellite, and reveals the forces that have exercised hegemony over Kurdistan and locked it out of global memory.

Whereas Ghobadi employs neo-realist techniques to produce a visceral and affective treatment of Kurdistan's physical and cultural landscape in *Drunken Horses*, in *Turtles Can Fly* he transforms the same cinematic techniques to both reflect Kurdistan's preexisting cultural hybridity and actively stage tenuous encounters between global, local, and national forces that characterize Kurdistan's cultural and material realities. Moreover, because Ghobadi produces the films within the framework of Iran's state run cinema, these features inscribe Kurdistan's contingent relationship with Iran, which informs the region's liminal status. In doing so, *Drunken Horses* and *Turtles Can Fly* index the material realities of Kurdish culture while simultaneously constituting in themselves Kurdish cultural performances. Thus, by working within Iran's national cinematic framework and utilizing post-revolutionary neo-realist techniques, Ghobadi is able to index and globally circulate the materiality of Kurdistan's hybrid culture.

Chapter 2: The Third Space of "Shifters"

When articulating the nature of emergent cultural identities in the context of globalization, Stuart Hall states that the individuals "(who) belong to more than one world, speak more than one language, inhabit more than one identity, have more than one home; who have learned to negotiate and translate between cultures…speak from the 'in-between' of different cultures, always unsettling the assumptions of one culture from the perspective of another, and thus finding ways of being both the same as and at the same time different from the others amongst whom they live" (Hall, 1995, p. 181). As an Iranian-Kurd, Bahman Ghobadi speaks from this "in-between" space, and this chapter aims to examine how Ghobadi mobilizes his interstitial position as an authorial strategy in the transnational cinematic sphere. Moreover, I argue that Ghobadi reflexively inscribes his liminal subjectivity within his two most recent films, *Half Moon* (*Niwemang,* 2006), and *No One Knows About Persian Cats* (*Kasi az gorbehaye irani khabar nadareh*, 2009) as a means to identify with global audiences, and provide a narrative vehicle for creative and cultural performances.

Border consciousness is a rich topic among postcolonial scholars, and Hamid Naficy examines this phenomenon in the context of accented cinema, explaining that border consciousness "emerges from being situated at the border, where multiple determinants of race, class, gender, and membership in divergent, even antagonistic, historical and national identities intersect." Naficy goes on to argue that as a result, border consciousness "is for a third optic, which is multiperspectival and tolerant of

ambiguity, ambivalence and chaos" (Naficy, 2001, p. 31). Because Ghobadi is a Kurd and a Sunni Muslim, he is a minority in Iran, and because he grew up in a small Iranian-Kurdish village, Baneh, which is located just 20 km away from the Iraq-Iran border, he is very conscious of borders. In an interview, Ghobadi articulates his perspective on borders:

> My argument is that Kurds all share a common language, why not get rid of these borders between them? Why does there need to be a border between Iran and Iraq? Why can't everyone be connected? Why is the border so sacred that if one country invades ten meters of another country's land, you get an eight-year war between Iran and Iraq? Millions of people are killed, and there are millions of inflicted people in Iran right now, all because of this border. In my opinion, borders are the nemesis of people in the Middle East today. (*Marooned in Iraq*, DVD)

Just as the concept of a chronotope provides a useful optic to analyze Ghobadi's cinematic treatment of Kurdish culture and terrain in *A Time for Drunken Horses* and *Turtles Can Fly*, the concept of "shifters" similarly functions as a means to examine Ghobadi's border consciousness as a reflexive narrative strategy in *Half Moon* and *Persian Cats*. Naficy argues that many deterritorialized filmmakers can be understood as "shifters with multiple perspectives and conflicted or performed identities" (Naficy, 2001, p. 32). By maneuvering the asymmetrical power hierarchies of Iran's state-run cinematic institutions and mobilizing his positioning within Iran's national cinema in order to enunciate emergent Kurdish and Iranian cultural identities, Ghobadi can be understood as a "shifter." Moreover, according to Naficy, accented filmmakers often use "shifter" characters who are familiar with the "cultural and legal codes of interacting cultures", and are able "to manipulate identity and the asymmetrical power situations in

which they find themselves," and I argue that Ghobadi inscribes his own "shifter" status within his films (Naficy, 2001, p. 32). Ghobadi's two most recent films, *Half Moon* and *Persian Cats*, have reflexive narrative structures, and include shifter characters that mirror Ghobadi's roles as a cultural producer and as a spokesperson for Iranian and Kurdish collective cultural identities.

There has been a plethora of post-colonial scholarship examining the critical positioning of outsiders or "shifters," who live between cultures, and according to Gloria Anzaldua, this results in "seeing double." This duality enables shifters to see simultaneously from multiple perspectives, which "renders those cultures transparent" (Anzaldua, p. 11, 14). However, when examining border consciousness and cultural hybridity, it is crucial to resist rendering borders obsolete or promoting benign syncretism. For instance, Ella Shohat and Robert Stam explain that, "a celebration of syncretism and hybridity per se, if not articulated with questions of historical hegemonies, risks sanctifying the fait accompli of colonial violence" (Shohat & Stam, p. 43). In addition, because Naficy explains, "borders are open, and infected wounds and the subjectivity they engender cannot be post-national or post-al, but interstitial," and "unequal power relations and incompatible identities prevent the wound from healing," the universalization of such theories that render borders and national sovereignty irrelevant do not consider the very real and very dangerous realities that often characterize borderland existence (Naficy, 2001, p. 31-32). Thus, when examining how "shifter" filmmakers like Ghobadi render boundaries transparent and illuminate the

constitutive hybridity of culture, it is also critical to examine how his films explicitly reveal the violent and repressive realities of borders.

Half Moon and *Persian Cats* explicitly embody Ghobadi's project to enunciate Kurdish and Iranian cultural expressions that have been repressed by territorial and regulatory borders. *Half Moon* is fictional, but uses non-professional actors and real locations. The film follows Mamo (Ismail Ghaffari), an old renowned Kurdish musician, as he and his sons embark on a journey to perform a concert in Iraqi-Kurdistan after the fall of Saddam Hussein. Kako (Allah-Morad Rashtian), a middle-aged Iranian-Kurdish man and a huge fan of Mamo's music, enthusiastically escorts them in a decorated yellow school bus around the borders between Iran, Iraq and Turkey. Despite multiple obstacles, Mamo persists on performing in Iraq with a woman, and he intends on taking Hesho (Hedye Tehrani) who is an exiled female singer who lives in a village along with 1334 other exiled Iranian female musicians. Hesho's voice and self-confidence has dwindled in exile, and she is detained by border patrol before the concert. The film ends after another Kurdish woman singer, Niwemang (Golshifteh Farahani), which translates to "half moon" in English, attempts to smuggle the group into Iraq through an elaborate system that involves hiding people and instruments in caskets. However, the final scene shows Niwemang opening the casket to find Mamo dead, and thus unable to perform in Iraq.

Unlike *Half Moon*, which is a fictional story, *Persian Cats* applies a dramatic structure to Tehran's underground rock music scene. The film was co-written by Iranian-American, and Ghobadi's fiancée, Roxana Saberi, and its self-reflexive structure, and use of real locations and non-professional actors blurs distinctions between documentary and

fiction. Ghobadi shot the film over a period of 18 frenetic days just before the June 2009 election protests in Tehran. *Persian Cats* features real underground musicians who play everything from jazz and blues to heavy metal and hip-hop, and pursue their art in basements and bootleg studios in order to avoid arrest or the destruction of their instruments by police. The film focuses on two real musicians, Negar Shaghaghi, and Ashkan Koshanejad who play lightly fictionalized versions of themselves. They ask Tehran's most dedicated underground music fan, Nadar (Hamed Behdad), who is a fictional Iranian-Kurdish smuggler and music promoter, to help them find a drummer for their band, Take it Easy Hospital, obtain black market passports, and negotiate permits from Iran's Ministry of Culture for a public concert. However, just as Mamo is unable to perform in *Half Moon*, Nadar fails to obtain permits or travel documents for Take it Easy Hospital, and is unable to organize a public concert in Tehran. The film ends tragically after Negar commits suicide after finding out that Ashkan jumped out of a window to avoid arrest. Thus, both *Half Moon* and *Persian Cats* end tragically, yet the films' embedded cultural performances and creative expressions transform them into cultural objects, which retain significance beyond their narratives.

I argue that Kako in *Half Moon* and Nadar in *Persian Cats* can be understood as "shifters," who dramatize the experience of liminality in Iran's underground rock scene and Kurdistan's border region. Not only do these characters function as connectors within the narrative, but also, as my chapter aims to show, they connect with global audiences. In order to make my argument, I first examine Ghobadi's relationship with Iranian national cinema and his authorial position as a Kurdish and Iranian spokesperson and

relate this with existing scholarship on transnational cinematic authorship. Next, I provide context concerning *Half Moon* and *Persian Cats'* production in comparison with Ghobadi's previous features in order to determine how these shifters characters function as a means to connect with global audiences while dramatizing the realities of their local borders. Then I proceed to an analysis of *Half Moon* and *Persian Cats*' narrative and cinematic elements in terms of Ghobadi's inclusion of reflexive shifters.

As I discuss in my previous chapter, Ghobadi has two agendas, the first of which is to enunciate Kurdish cultural identities within the global mediascape, and the other is to break the hermetic seal of Iran's locality and create a vehicle in the global arena for diverse expressions of Iranian culture. Thus, Ghobadi must negotiate Iran's Islamic cinematic regulations, and his reception among film scholars and critics reflects his contingent relationship with Iranian national cinema. For example, in his review for *A Time for Drunken Horses*, A.O. Scott describes the film as "the latest Iranian film to deal with children," and writes, "this approach will be familiar if you've seen other recent Iranian movies about childhood" (Scott, 2000). Additionally, in his introduction to *The New Iranian Cinema*, Richard Tapper categorizes Ghobadi alongside non-Kurdish Iranian filmmakers like Majid Majidi, Samira Makhmalbaf, and Jafar Panahi as "newcomers" who have recently contributed the "seemingly unstoppable international progress of Iranian Cinema" (Tapper, p. 9). Ghobadi never dissociates himself with Iranian cinema, stating that there are "many first-class filmmakers in Iran and I don't want to portray myself as separate from this construct, 'Iranian Cinema'. But within it, I

would like to be a Kurdish filmmaker. I am in and from Iranian cinema. But I am a Kurdish filmmaker making films for the Kurds" (Kutschera, p. 57).

Cinema, within the context of Iran, cannot be divorced from politics, which provides perspective on Ghobadi's positioning as a Kurdish and Iranian spokesperson within the global community. Ever since the establishment of the Islamic Republic, the state has closely regulated cinema, and any mishandling of films has severe political consequences. For instance, in 1991 the Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance, Mohajerani, was impeached for allowing a questionable film to be released. Additionally, Mo'adikah resigned and Khatami came under severe political attack for decisions concerning films during their tenures as Iranian ministers (Zeydabadi-Nejad, 2010, p. 1). As a result of the manifestation of politics in Iranian cinema, Zeydabadi-Nejad explains that it is understandable that many Iranian filmmakers "take it for granted that films could have a great political impact" (Zeydabadi-Nejad, 2010, p. 1). Thus, it is common for Iranian filmmakers to, often optimistically, assume cinema's power to humanize disparate cultures and people and counter their 'otherness' for Western audiences. However, Ghobadi's status as a minority within Iran affords him a liminal status that enables his films to go beyond countering "otherness." Ghobadi's motivation to make films for collective cultural identities that lack globally recognizable signifiers necessarily entails an active enunciation rather than static representation. Moreover, the conditions of censorship in Iran force Ghobadi to globally rather than just domestically distribute his films. As a result, Ghobadi must negotiate a way to produce a dialogical encounter between global audiences and emergent Kurdish and Iranian cultural identities.

Homi Bhabha's articulation of post-colonial agency offers a means to conceptualize how Ghobadi's position as a shifter contributes to his authorial strategy within the transnational cinematic marketplace. In his conceptualizations of hybridity, Bhabha argues that post-colonial subjectivity can be understood as a "a strategy of authorization and differentiation that produces an anteriority before the beginning, and a futurity beyond the end, where the present is the time of decision and choice at once deliberative and disjunctive, at once survival and sovereignty" (Bhabha, 2000, p. 240). Thus, a subject's multiple constitution displaces cultural identity and other sites of subjectivity in a state of suspension. Rather than assuming that this suspension necessitates inactivity, Bhabha explains that this dislocation allows the subject, however briefly, to negotiate its relocation (Leonard, p. 147). Because Ghobadi must negotiate the global media economy and Iran and Kurdistan's local conditions, his authorial strategy can be understood as "the time of decision and choice." For instance, Ghobadi explains in an interview, "if I am to serve humanity as an artist, the places where I must serve more, I must go and serve. When I look, I see Iran and the Kurds are more needy than other places. I don't want to separate myself from them. I want to make films for them" (Walsh, 2004). Thus, Ghobadi positions himself as a global spokesperson for Iranian and Kurdish cultural identities, and does so by mobilizing the shifting conditions of their localities and their topical presence in the global mediascape.

In his article, "Authorship, globalization, and the new identity of Latin American cinema," Marvin D'Lugo examines the emergence of new forms of Latin American film authorship in the context of globalization. D'Lugo's scholarship grapples with how

filmmakers negotiate domestic and global markets and focuses on Argentine filmmakers' individual creative styles that emerged in the 1980s, and argues that they "seek ways to co-produce new Latin American cultural identities through the collaborative practices that have as their ultimate goal not the erasure of the local but a meaningful relocation of it in the global community" (D'Lugo, p. 122). According to D'Lugo, these Latin American filmmakers actively produce the dialogical interplay of recognizable cultural and national stereotypes for established international audiences of Second Cinema. Ghobadi's status as a global spokesperson suggests that he similarly seeks a "meaningful relocation" of Kurdish and Iranian cultural identities within the global community. However, the conditions of cinematic censorship and cultural repression contribute to a lack of globally recognizable signifiers of diverse Kurdish and Iranian cultural identities. This necessarily transforms Ghobadi's authorial strategies for enacting this meaningful relocation of Kurdish and Iranian cultural identities.

One way Ghobadi effectively enunciates emergent cultural identities is by mobilizing global attention being paid towards specific localities in the Middle East. For example, Ghobadi made his 2003 film, *Turtles Can Fly* in Iraqi-Kurdistan just before the US-Iraq war. Moreover, he made *Persian Cats,* which is the first feature he made outside Kurdistan, during Iran's 2009 election and weeks before the Green Revolution in Tehran. Ghobadi's fluid subjectivity enables him to film localities that will benefit from cinematic enunciation, and this shifting also functions as a marketing strategy because it allows him to capitalize on global attention that will garner more international attention for his films. D'Lugo, for instance, argues that by the 1980s, the international film market had

inevitably "privileged the authorial as an expression of the national," and this mode of authorship can be understood more as a "marketing strategy" rather than a form of auteurism (D'Lugo, p. 110). Moreover, as I discuss in my previous chapter, Ghobadi explicitly evokes humanistic themes by capturing Kurdish children's harsh realities during the Iran-Iraq war and the US-Iraq war in *Drunken Horses* and *Turtles Can Fly*, which can be understood as a marketing strategy. However, he simultaneously enunciates Kurdish cultural identities through these techniques by undermining any static closure of meaning and keeping open a tenuous space of ambivalence, uncertainty, and hybridity.

In *Half Moon* and *Persian Cats*, Ghobadi uses reflexive narrative structures to reveal the repressive conditions that Kurdish and Iranian musicians and their communities face during the process of cultural production and performance. *Half Moon* and *Persian Cats* differ from Ghobadi's previous films because they are both banned in Iran. After gaining international acclaim from his previous three films, *Drunken Horses* (2000), *Marooned in Iraq* (2003), and *Turtles Can Fly* (2004), Ghobadi was granted funds to make *Half Moon* from the city of Vienna as part of a larger project that included five other international films. Thus, Ghobadi was provided with small international crews and his production received artistic guidance and funding (Scarlett, 2007). Ghobadi received permission from Iran's Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance to film *Half Moon* in the Iranian regions of Kurdistan, and one Iraqi-Kurdish village. Due to *Half Moon's* rural locations, Ghobadi was not in close proximity to Iranian state authorities, which allowed him to more easily evade regulatory policies. However, after completion, *Half Moon* was banned from exhibition in Iran due to what the MCIG deemed to be

"separatist themes" (Scarlett, 2007). *Persian Cats* is also banned in Iran, but in contrast to *Half Moon*, Ghobadi did not receive permission from the MCIG to commence the production in Tehran. Because Ghobadi decided to make a film in Tehran, and aimed to capture Iran's illegal rock subculture, he could less easily evade surveillance by MCIG and state authorities, and was actually arrested twice during the thirteen day shoot (Adams, 2010). After failing to receive filming permits, Ghobadi used an illegal, discreet digital camera to film Tehran's urban spaces. Thus both *Half Moon* and *Persian Cats* cannot be publically exhibited in Iran, and their status as illegal cultural objects mirrors their reflexive narratives.

Shifters in *Half Moon* and *Persian Cats* embody the experiences of censorship and cultural repression and prompt intercultural engagement by dramatizing these collective experiences. D'Lugo explains that within the scope of international cinema, genre can be used as a substitution for specific knowledge of local culture (D'Lugo, p. 113). Within his example of Argentine cinema, D'Lugo argues that because melodrama taps into humanist values, appeals to a broad audience, and is culturally specific to Latin American cinema, it is a prominent genre of globally distributed Argentine films and becomes a means to market these films internationally (D'Lugo, p. 113-114). Like melodrama in the context of Latin America, reflexivity in the context of Iranian cinema invokes universal humanistic themes. Because reflexivity opens up a space in which the real and the imaginary confront one another, it forces viewers to contemplate the conditions of cultural production and performance. Thus, reflexive narratives reveal the

boundaries of representation, and doing so in the context of Iranian cinema inscribes narratives with universalistic themes.

Because of Iran's cinematic regulations and because of the Kurds' ongoing nationalistic and cultural struggles, *Half Moon* and *Persian Cats'* reflexive narratives invoke humanistic themes by calling attention to the lack of creative and cultural freedom in these localities. Kako and Nadar, for instance, dramatically oscillate between feelings of elation and depression, which characterize the conditions of cultural and creative production in Iran and Kurdistan. In addition, Ghobadi inscribes himself onto these characters through reflexive devices, which is made clear by the fact that both *Half Moon* and *Persian Cats* are banned in Iran. Thus, Kako and Nadar's failures to organize these musical performances reflect Ghobadi's own inability to negotiate the exhibition of these films in Iran.

Kako and Nadar also mirror Ghobadi's role as a filmmaker because they initiate cultural performances through processes of negotiation. Music, for instance serves as the unifying cultural force among Kurds in *Half Moon*, and as the primary means of expression for young, progressive, cosmopolitan Iranians in *Persian Cats*, and Kako and Nadar are figured as the most dedicated musical fans in both films. For instance, Kako is Mamo's most enthusiastic fan, and he assumes the responsibility of driving Mamo, his sons, and their illegal Kurdish musical instruments from Iranian Kurdistan to Iraqi Kurdistan. One scene that explicitly shows how music activates the latent threads of Kurdish community occurs when the bus comes to an Iraqi border checkpoint and is inspected by border patrol. Two patrolmen come aboard the bus, the non-Kurdish Iraqi

guard is suspicious of the Kurdish group, and the other guard is Kurdish, and when he sees Mamo, he tells Kako that he will make sure they cross the border safely. Similarly, in *Persian Cats*, Nadar is depicted as knowing all 312 underground rock bands in Tehran. He navigates around the city's back alleys into clandestine black markets, goes to the tops of vacant buildings to visit illegal band practices, and travels on Tehran's populated highways as a means to organize a rock concert and obtain permits for Take it Easy Hospital. Thus Nadar's fandom, like Ghobadi's film, actively connects these clandestine musicians together and mediates their performances to global audiences within the narrative.

Kako's hyperbolic performance in *Half Moon* signals his role as mediating Kurds' collective experience of liminality for global audiences, and like Ghobadi, he negotiates for Mamo's performance. For instance, Kako begs a friend to loan his van so he can take Mamo and his instruments to Iraq, and he finally obtains his friend's permission by promising that he or Mamo will thank him on TV. Kako claims that Western media outlets like BBC and CNN will certainly broadcast this momentous concert, and he uses this same tactic to persuade an Iraqi-Kurdish border patrol officer to give him money for petrol. His dramatic performance and the officer's and bus owner's ambivalent reaction call attention to, and simultaneously undermine stereotypes of Kurdish naïveté towards global media. The comedic nature of Kako's fabrication functions not only as a means to identify with global audiences, but it also exemplifies what Robert Stam describes as "the jujitsu trait of turning strategic weakness into tactical strength" (Stam, p. 32). For instance, Kako manipulates this stereotype to signal amongst fellow Kurds the stakes of

Mamo's performance in order to receive their help. In addition, Kako's performance of this stereotype forces global audiences to recognize the uneven dynamic of the global media economy that exists outside the film.

Nadar similarly has a hyperbolic acting style, which is especially poignant when he negotiates with an MCIG official. Nadar is a smuggler who sells illegal DVDs, CDs, and other media technologies, and after he is caught, he must plea with an MCIG official not to imprison him or make him pay harsh fines. Because he is a fictional character this scene is obviously staged, which becomes more explicit when Nadar dramatically pleads with the MCIG officer. He states that he has "boycotted American films since the embargo," and begs the officer to "watch those movies from a different angle, from a creative, artistic angle," and insists on kissing the officer's feet when he lets him go with a minor fine. In an interview, Ghobadi explicitly states that Nadar's performance in this scene is "actually a comic version of those people to give the Western audience a better chance of following the film" (Adams, 2010). Like Kako, Nadar's performance can similarly be understood as a "jujitsu trait of turning strategic weakness into tactical strength," because his incessant pleas ultimately do overturn his charges within the narrative (Stam, p. 32). In addition, his performance overtly signals the repressive conditions that inhibit creative and cultural freedoms for global audiences.

When examining dramatized narratives of the "borderline conditions of cultures and disciplines," Bhabha explains that, "these subjects of study require the experience of anxiety to be incorporated into the analytic construction of the object of critical attention… For anxiety is the affective address of a world that reveals itself to be caught

up in the space between frames; a doubled frame or one that is split, the symbolic structure of psychic anxiety itself" (Bhabha, 2000, p. 306). Kako and Nadar's oscillation between various emotional registers can be understood as a mode of "affective address" that communicates the fractured and partial experiences of these repressive conditions in Iran and Kurdistan.

Laura Marks explains that the "indexical capacities of an image or object are very important for those who have few sources of evidence, few witnesses to their stories," and argues that experiences of deterritorialization contribute to intercultural cinema's fetishistic treatment of certain objects (Marks, 2000, p. 92). For example, Kako aims to videotape the entire journey, which mimics Ghobadi's goal in *Half Moon* to make a film about Kurdish music. He mounts a small digital camera atop his van's rearview mirror, and repeatedly asks people they meet along the journey if he can film them. However, Ghobadi undermines this reflexivity and emphasizes the staged nature of this scene when Kako realizes there is no videotape in his camera. The film cuts to an extended close-up of Kako's face as he makes this realization, and his emotive, deep-set wrinkles and clown-like nose and moustache poignantly morph into an expression of complete devastation. This affective shot, however, is quickly diffused when Mamo's son laughs at Kako's gullibility for believing the black market vendor who cunningly tricked him into thinking the camera could record 60 hours of footage. Thus, Kako mediates the fetishistic relationship that Kurds have with indexical evidence of cultural objects and performances, but his waning devastation reflects the narrative's oscillation between

multiple emotional registers, which communicates a partial rather than absolute erasure of Kurdish culture.

In *Persian Cats*, Nadar similarly oscillates between moments of elation and depression, which is dramatized within the narrative through his relationship with music and close connections with Tehran's underground rock musicians. Just after Nadar realizes he cannot help Take it Easy Hospital, he becomes depressed and goes to an illegal house rave. The scene in which Ashkan searches for Nadar at this house party is highly stylized, and it captures hoards of young Iranians in a small claustrophobic house listening to muffled electronic music amid disorienting strobe lights. In contrast to the frenetic energy of previous scenes that include diegetic musical performances, this scene shows a collective of listeners who reflect Nadar's depressed state. Moreover, Ashkan finds Nadar passed out on a mattress just before the cops raid the house, forcing Ashkan to jump from a window. In an interview, Ghobadi explains that he used this party as the film's climax because of his frustration with cops whom, "instead of focusing on corruption and everything important that is going on in society all they do is focus on these kids and ruin their parties" (Wissot, 2010). This scene is a dramatic stylization of real occurrences in Tehran, and conveys Ghobadi's inscription of his own frustration and anxiety in Nadar's character.

Moreover, Nadar mediates the partiality of cultural erasure by serving as the connector and promoter for the diversity of creative production in Tehran. For instance, Nadar travels to the top of a vacant building where his friends in a local "Persian rap" group are filming a music video, and he asks them to help Ashkan and Negar get permits.

The leader, Hichkas says he cannot help, and explains that he will continue to make music and live in Tehran. After Nadar leaves, the film cuts to Hichkas' music video, which signals Nadar's role as activating various performances from real bands in the city. This particular scene is significant because rather than fleeing for creative freedom, Hichkas wants to stay in Tehran. He states in the film that, "underground, your music cannot go through the floors," and the presence of their camera signals, at least within the narrative, that despite the repressive conditions in Tehran, it is possible to stay in the city and perform. Although the rap group's lack of instruments makes it easier for them to evade authorities and perform in open areas, their lyrics explicitly address Tehran's class disparity and economic struggles. As a result, this scene introduces a tenuous paradox because in comparison with Take it Easy Hospital who wants to exercise creative freedoms outside Tehran, Hichkas chooses to fight for the freedom of expression in his home city.

Persian Cats' direct mediation of the multifaceted nature of Tehran's underground music culture illustrates Marks' statement that, "cinema is not merely a transmitter of signs, it bears witness to an object and transfers the presence of that object to viewers" (Marks, 2000, p. 41). Because Ghobadi did not have permission to film *Persian Cats*, it more easily "transfers the presence" of Tehran's underground music culture to viewers. In contrast, Ghobadi's cooperation with Iran's cinematic regulations while making *Half Moon* signals the film's indirect transference of Kurdish culture. For instance, *Half Moon* includes only fictional characters, and as a result the film's expression of Kurdish culture is necessarily more fetishistic. Despite the fact that *Half*

Moon is banned from public exhibition in Iran, Ghobadi did abide MCIG censorship regulations while filming. Thus, Ghobadi must express Kurdish culture indirectly, which is inscribed in the Kako's concern for Kurdish musical instruments and Ghobadi's cinematic treatment of these cultural objects.

Unlike Nadar who regulates his anxieties and frustrations within the narrative by listening to and participating in musical performances, Mamo and Kako cannot experience these cathartic moments. Instead, Kako's concern for the safety of the Kurdish musical instruments, and Ghobadi's cinematic treatment of these instruments both dramatizes and transmits the fetishistic inscription of repression and censorship upon these objects. Kako, for instance, gets into a casket with the instruments to ensure their safe crossing across the Turkey-Iraq border. Subsequently, Turkish border guards intercept Kako, shave his head, and smash the instruments. Kako dramatizes the fetishistic quality of these instruments, but Ghobadi's cinematic treatment of these instruments similarly instills this quality onto the objects. For instance, in the beginning of the film, Ghobadi employs a long take to capture the inside of the small, artisanal factory where Kurds produce these instruments. The fluid camera movement and stylized lighting in this scene, constructs a reverential atmosphere within this space. Ghobadi's reflexive dramatization of his own reverential relationship with Kurdish music through Kako serves as an acknowledgement of the mechanisms that contribute to this cultural fetish. As a result, Ghobadi calls attention to, but simultaneously diffuses this fetishistic relationship.

However, in both *Persian Cats* and *Half Moon*, Ghobadi refuses to diffuse the unjust conditions of repression that women performers face. For instance, Mamo and Nadar are both motivated to organize public performances with women singers. Ghobadi, for instance, explains that he chose Take it Easy Hospital because he wanted to call attention to the repression of women performers. Moreover, Ghobadi dramatizes his own yearn for increased freedom for women in *Half Moon* by including a fictional town in which thousands of exiled Iranian and Kurdish singers live. Although Mamo seeks to perform in Iraq because of the duration of repression within that location, he also insists on performing with a woman. Mamo's grave state of health is Ghobadi's means to dramatize his fetishistic drive to see and perform with a woman. Just as Mamo's death and the enforcement of borders prevent Mamo from performing with a woman onstage in Iraq, the conditions of censorship similarly prevent Ghobadi from explicitly showing a woman singing in *Half Moon.* Ghobadi explains in an interview that, "I included a beautiful musical sequence where women sang, but I had to cut it because I knew it would be a problem for the government to accept it… The irony of it is that, even though I censored myself so badly, last week in Iran my film (*Half Moon*) was banned" (Scarlett, 2007). As a result, the same conditions that prevent a woman from singing on stage in *Half Moon* prevent Ghobadi from including footage of any such performance.

Persian Cats includes multiple performances by women, but Ghobadi dramatizes this issue by including a band with a young female performer, Negar. Moreover, Ghobadi's cinematic treatment of Negar and Ashkan's relationship conforms to Iranian representational techniques used to circumvent censorship policies while alluding to

relationships between men and women. In addition, after Negar finds out that Ashkan jumped out of a window to avoid being arrested at the house party, the film cuts to a shot of Negar listening to one of her and Ashkan's song on an i-pod on the roof of a building. The final shot shows Negar falling backwards off the roof, which dramatizes the repressive conditions, that women performers face. Similarly, Mamo dramatizes the repression of women voices because he insists on performing with a woman in Iraq despite his declining health and despite his son's premonition of his inevitable death. Thus, women in *Persian Cats* and *Half Moon* dramatize the experience of suppression.

Ghobadi's reflexive inscription of shifter characters becomes a means to reflexively dramatize the liminal conditions that oscillate between liberation and repression within Kurdistan and Iran. Although *Half Moon* and *Persian Cats'* endings reflect a fatalistic portrait of repression, because they capture the spaces of negotiation that enable these films to exist and allow women musicians to liminally exist, the films resist positioning women as victims. These films' existence as cultural objects directs meanings into the narratives themselves. For instance, *Half Moon* enunciates Kurdish culture by capturing their collective community and their cultural and physical landscape. Similarly, *Persian Cats* successfully captures many underground performances that would otherwise likely remain hidden from the global stage. Thus both films' tragic endings prevent the closure of meaning, and instead dramatize repressive conditions that still exist as a means to prompt intercultural contemplation.

Shifters, in the context of Ghobadi's authorial strategies and reflexive self-inscription, enact what Deleuze and Guattari describe as the possibility of "becoming."

Ghobadi's fractured identity forces him to continuously negotiate the global, local, and national spaces of his cultural productions, which forces an active enunciation rather than stagnant representation of the liminal positioning of Iranian and Kurdish cultural identities. Kako's emotional oscillation is one embodiment of Kurdish culture's liminal positioning, and Nadar's activation of Tehran's diverse musical culture similarly enunciates Iran's heterogeneous cultural identities. According to Deleuze and Guattari, this process of becoming "is no longer a matter of imposing a form upon a matter but of elaborating an increasingly rich and consistent material, the better to tap increasingly intense forces. What makes a material increasingly rich is the same as what holds heterogeneities together without their ceasing to be heterogeneous" (Deleuze & Guattari, p. 329). Ghobadi's authorial strategies and reflexive self-inscription elaborate this rich material that "holds heterogeneities together without their easing to be heterogeneous." Both *Half Moon* and *Persian Cats* exist as cultural objects that circulate oppressed voices and index erased cultural images. However, their reflexive narratives constantly open them up to intercultural contemplation by signaling the partiality of these repressive conditions.

Chapter 3: The Third Space of Digital Technology

Following the victory of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in June of 2009, thousands of young progressive Iranian citizens protested in the streets of Tehran. This event has subsequently been dubbed the "Green Movement" after the campaign color of Ahmadinejad's more progressive presidential opponent, Mousavi, whom these young voters supported. Iranian film scholar, Hamid Dabashi, of Columbia University publically commented on the Green Movement stating, "these brave young men and women have picked up their hand-held cameras to shoot those shaky shots," and have voiced their "desires for a peaceful, nonviolent attainment of civil and women's rights. They are facing an army of firearms and fanaticism with chanting poetry and waving their green bandannas. I thought my generation had courage to take up arms against tyranny. Now I tremble with shame in the face of their bravery" (*New York Times,* 2009). I aim to examine emergent subjectivities associated with this movement by analyzing Iranian-Kurdish filmmaker, Bahman Ghobadi's 2009 production, *No One Knows About Persian Cats (Kasi az gorbehaye irani khabar nadareh).*

Dabashi's statement points to the Green Movement's utilization of digital technologies rather than weapons as a form of protest. Because of digital technologies' global communicative potentials, they are especially threatening to Iran's Islamic regime. *Persian Cats* embodies this same form of protest because of its use of digital filmmaking technologies, its onscreen treatment of Tehran's digital media culture, and its use of

digital cinematic techniques to capture Tehran's underground network of rock musicians. Ghobadi finished the production of *Persian Cats* just days prior to the June 2009 riots, and the film focuses on two musicians Ashkan and Negar who play lightly fictionalized versions of themselves as they journey around the underground Indie music scene in Tehran. Ashkan and Negar are in a band, Take it Easy Hospital, and ask an Iranian-Kurdish smuggler named Nadar to introduce them to other rock bands, obtain black market passports, and negotiate permits from Iran's Ministry of Culture. *Persian Cats*' self-reflexive structure, and its use of real locations and non-professional actors blur distinctions between documentary and fiction. Thus, *Persian Cats* can be considered a hybrid film, and the real ramifications of Ghobadi's and the musicians' subversion of Iran's cinematic regulations similarly blurs distinctions between reality and fiction. For instance, Ghobadi's digital camera follows the band and Nadar through the labyrinth of Tehran's underground music spaces, into the crevasses of the Ministry of Culture offices, and in the allies of Tehran's black market. Because Ghobadi breaks several regulatory policies in this film, including using a digital camera instead of government-issued 35mm filmmaking equipment, and refusing to edit *haram* (forbidden) scenes of Negar and another woman singing solos, he was exiled from Iran after he finished the production (Thrupkaew, p. 33). He stated in an interview:

> I want to stress the point that I was sure about not being able to go back, and I was aware of the risk that it involved. But I also want to say that I didn't leave because I wanted to leave. Me and all the musicians and artists who are in exile now left because we had to leave. We were made to leave. I knew if I didn't leave, I would be like Jafar Panahi (Iranian filmmaker), who would either literally be thrown in jail or be in some kind of prison for the last five years, like he was for not getting a permit to

> make his films—not getting a permit is actually being in jail (Adams, 2010).

As the above statement makes clear, Ghobadi and the musicians in *Persian Cats* did not want to leave Iran, but were forced to leave because of stringent Islamic regulations targeted towards cultural producers whose adoption of Western cultural styles and whose potential transnational distribution of cultural products politicizes their creative expression as oppositional to Iran's Islamic regime.

Because *Persian Cats* offers a non-government sanctioned cinematic treatment of an equally unsanctioned cultural space, Ghobadi and the musicians are less concerned with voicing Iran's social issues on the national platform than expressing their local culture on the global stage. However, Ghobadi's global engagement becomes politicized within the particularities of Iran's national space. Thomas Turino suggests in his study on globalist discourses and ethnomusicology that cosmopolitanism parallels immigrant communities and Diaspora populations as a type of "trans-state cultural formation" (Turino, p. 61). Turino explains that cosmopolitan identities "project universalism, a common humanity unfettered by localized identities and locations, as basic to who they are" and are "socialized within the cosmopolitan formation" (Turino, p. 62, 68). My discursive analysis of Iran's political economy of cultural production reveals that Ghobadi and the musicians are inherently restricted by their national identity, but through their local engagement with global media culture, are also "socialized within the cosmopolitan formation" (Turino, p. 68). Kurdistan's precarious geography is divided between Iraq, Iran, Turkey and Syria, and Ghobadi's previous films, *A Time for Drunken*

Horses (2000), *Turtles Can Fly* (2003), *Marooned in Iraq* (2004), and *Half Moon* (2006) have all been filmed and take place in Kurdistan's terrain. *Persian Cats* is Ghobadi's first feature that takes place outside of Kurdistan, and his fluid movement between Kurdish and Iranian identification contributes to *Persian Cats*' hybrid treatment of subjectivities and spaces.

Therefore, I underpin my argument with Homi Bhabha's postcolonial and poststructuralist theory of hybridity. I construct my paper by first providing a brief historical analysis of the Iranian Revolution, emphasizing its role in shaping Iran's contemporary music and cinematic regulations, and call attention to its impact on Iran's contemporary national and cultural space. Next, I provide a discursive analysis of digital media culture in Iran, connecting it to the emergent cultural space that is made explicit in the film. Moreover, I perform a literature review surrounding the subject of national and cultural identity in transnational cinema, and argue that Ghobadi's subjectivity and the musicians' hybrid subjectivities complicate cinematic paradigms that are hinged on national or cultural essentialism. Finally, I perform a close textual analysis of *Persian Cats*, focusing on Ghobadi's use of a digital camera, his use of digital cinematic techniques, and the film's treatment of Iran's digital media testifies to the diverse spectrum of cultural practices in Iran and embeds hybrid cultural performances as a means to globally circulate these musicians' creative expressions. Moreover, I argue that because of its hybrid cinematic structure and cultural functions, *Persian Cats* indicates the transformative potential of Ghobadi's and the musicians' creative performances despite the lack of political impact.

Because as Homi Bhabha argues in *The Location of Culture* that, "the theoretical recognition of the split-space of enunciation may open the way to conceptualizing an international culture, based not on the exoticism of multiculturalism or the diversity of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture's hybridity," it is possible to examine emergent cosmopolitan identities in Iran by emphasizing the constitutive hybridity of Tehran's music culture as well as *Persian Cats'* own hybrid treatment of this cultural space (Bhabha, 1994, p. 56). Furthermore, Bhabha offers a critical intervention into the colonial, modern, Euro-centric investment in national identity and cultural authenticity, stating that, "it is the 'inter' – the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the in-between space- that carries the burden of the meaning of culture. It makes it possible to begin envisaging national, anti-nationalist histories of the 'people'. And by exploring this Third Space, we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of our selves" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 56). He emphasizes the fissures that open up in articulations of cultural difference as a means to conceptualize forms of agency and subjectivity that exist in folded spaces within the globalized landscape that are often omitted from categorical paradigms.

Persian Cats is a particularly salient site to examine cultural hybridity because its explicit engagement with Tehran's underground music culture ruptures notions of cultural and national essentialism. I argue in my previous chapter that Ghobadi's inscription of his shifter subjectivity in *Persian Cats* functions as a means to connect this local culture with transnational audiences and express Iran's cultural realities that have been suppressed by censorship. In this chapter, I argue that *Persian Cats* is itself a

mimetic performance of this cultural space, and can be understood as an immanent embodiment as opposed to abstract representation of Tehran's underground musical scene. As a result, Ghobadi's and the musicians' cultural production is a form of agency that emerges through processes of cultural performance and reiteration rather than political revolution.

In 1979, Ayatollah Khomeini and his pro-Revolutionary regime enacted a takeover of the Iranian Pahlavi monarchy. In their book, *Small Media, Big Revolution*, Ali Mohammadi and Annabelle Sreberny-Mohammadi examine the roll small media such as leaflets and other electronically replicated papers played in organizing insurgencies during the Iranian Revolution. The Green Movement similarly utilized digital media and embodies this urban dynamic, which is very apparent in the global proliferation of images from this protest that Iranians circulated though Twitter and other social media networks. Unlike the Iranian Revolution, the individuals involved in the Green Movement promoted a political regime with increased global engagement. Just as Mohammadi and Sreberny-Mohammadi argue that the Iranian Revolution is a model of revolutionary process based on "small media," the global circulation of digital images and messages emanating from the June 2009 Green Movement signal a model of protest perpetuated through global media. I approach my analysis of *Persian Cats* through this newfound engagement with the global cultural economy, and argue that Ghobadi and the musicians in the film seek to unhinge themselves from the insularity of Iran's Islamic nationalism through global engagement.

Because Iran was never directly colonized, the Revolution illustrates the nation-state's anxiety concerning its national and cultural identity. Iran's post-revolutionary government quickly sought to Islamicize cinema by implementing production regulations based on the "realist illusionist theory" of cinematic representation, which claims that a direct and unmediated connection exists between reality and its onscreen representation (Naficy, 1994, p. 560). This representational theory undergirds models of cultural dependency because it conflates cinematic representations' capacity to enact a direct ideological interpellation of subjectivities. Although Iran's post-revolutionary regime claimed to implement insular media and cultural policies to prevent the proliferation of Western media within Iran, these regulations were enacted to prevent oppositional ideology from detracting from the regime's Islamic project. This is exemplified by the post-Revolutionary regime's use of Western technologies. For instance, the regime spread Islamic ideology largely through state-run production companies and also prevented the intrusion of non-Islamic media by implementing strict cinematic policies (Naficy, 1994, p. 560).

Like cinema, the government placed an Islamic filter on popular music, but unlike cinema's swift appropriation by Iran's Islamic regime it took the government 20 years to Islamicize popular music. Pop music (mostly from the U.S. and Europe) was banned in 1979 following the Revolution and remained so until President Mohammad Khatami gradually loosened restrictions in May of 1997 (Nooshin, p. 78). Cultural dependency models justified stringent policies concerning the content of music, video, and cinema. Because film, video, and music technologies, unlike alcohol, are not deemed inherently

haram (forbidden) according to Islamic law, regulations are not hinged on the technology itself but rather the misuse of this technology, which is indicative of the cultural dependency model of censorship (Shahabi, p. 117). As a result, Western technologies proliferated throughout Iran, which ultimately enabled the widespread distribution of cultural commodities that Islamic authorities sought to keep out. According to Hamid Naficy, the advent of satellite TV is a particularly transformative moment for Iran's regulatory policies. For instance, Naficy argues that Iranians, especially the post-Revolutionary generation of Iranians adopted satellite technology and their engagement with global media through such technologies characterizes ongoing difficulties that Iran's Islamic regime continue to face when attempting to filter the transmission of *haram* media (Naficy, 1987, p. 460). The popularity of "punk style" among a section of Iranian youths in 1983 exemplifies Iranians' explicit engagement with Western media, and the only way the Islamic regime could control this subculture was to launch a campaign through national media outlets, which described punk youths as "duped and victimized by Western culture" (Naficy, 1987, p. 462). Mamood Shahabi points out in his study on video regulations in Iran that despite an initial ban on videos and a subsequent Islamicization of their content, clandestine underground establishments, or "video clubs" prospered and provided a space for Iranians to view illegal videos smuggled into the country via the black market (Shahabi, p. 113). Just as Nooshin explains, "twenty years of prohibition did little to deter people from listening to pop music, and indeed served to encourage its illicit consumption," video clubs prospered regardless of media regulations (Nooshin, p. 70).

This is made explicit in *Persian Cats* through the Iranian-Kurdish smuggler, Nadar, who constantly quotes American and European films and alludes to *Gone With the Wind* by naming his birds “Scarlett and Rhett.” In addition, Nadar’s apartment is full of VHS tapes and DVDs, and Ghobadi’s camera captures Tehran’s actual black market when Nadar takes Ashkan and Negar to this liminal space to obtain forged passports. *Persian Cats* conveys Iranians’ illegal engagement with Western media as a means to exercise creative expression. This process is indicative of Deleuze and Guattari’s model of state reterritorialization and deterritorialization in *A Thousand Plateaus*. They explain that “the state’s reterritorializing impulse as one that can only fail in its attempts to conserve the same order or to restore the socius fully, since its response to decoding and deterritorialization is a neurotic and perverse reassertion that produces a different socius, one necessarily transformed by the madness it represses” (Deleuze & Guattari, p. 512). The young generation of Iranian underground musicians represents one such transformed “socius,” which is evident in *Persian Cats* through the musicians’ engagement with global media culture.

Although the Islamicization of Iranian culture was meant to curtail the engagement with non-Islamic media, Telieh Rohani explains in his analysis of Internet television in Iran that, “the vanishing of Iranian culture – that is, the one that existed prior to the Islamic Revolution of 1979 – and its replacement with Islamic culture created a cultural vacuum among the young generation in Iran. This emptiness in identity demanded cultural exchange” (Rohani, p.10). This demand for cultural exchange promoted the use of digital technologies in Iran, and as of 2009, there were twenty-five

million subscribers to Iran's Telecommunications Company (TCI), and Tehran had over 1,500 cyber cafes in operation (Rahimi, p. 38). As censorship increased in the name of the Islam, young Iranians increasingly relied on the Internet and new media to connect to the world, satisfying this cultural emptiness (Rohani, p. 10). Moreover, Ahmadinejad's 2005 presidential election increased the strength of conservative hegemony in post-revolutionary Iran, but reformist factions and political protestors continue to counter this hegemony through new media (Rahimi, p. 37). In his article on Tehran's rock music, Laudin Nooshin argues that Tehran's underground rock musicians imagine and project "new understandings of national identity which embrace modernity, plurality and cosmopolitanism" (Nooshin, p. 86). Ghobadi's fiancée and *Persian Cats'* co-writer, Roxana Saberi explains in an interview that Ashkan and Negar were actually arrested at a concert outside Tehran before *Persian Cats* commenced, and that the regime claimed that these kids were "Satan worshippers" (Adams, 2010). She goes on to state that the regime wanted to show these kids "as elements of cultural invasion," but as *Persian Cats* demonstrates, these musicians are talented and express a form of Iranian culture that by virtue of its integration of Western musical styles becomes a political act (Adams, 2010).

For instance, in her review of *Persian Cats*, Rene Garcia writes, "listening to the familiar-sounding indie-rock music will dramatically shrink the world and one will be hard-pressed not to imagine hearing the music played at their local coffee shop" (Garcia, 2010). Both Ghobadi and the musicians consciously attempt to connect to transnational audiences. For instance, the film includes a scene in which Ashkan and Negar practice singing in English in order to transcend the linguistic constraints of Farsi on the melodies

and overall sound of rock music. Because of the constraints on cultural expression in Iran, this transnational endeavor is not purely capitalistic but rather an expression of creative and by extension political freedom. The Islamic regime's control over Iran's cultural identity has conflated cultural producers' national subjectivities while relegating their identification with global cultures. For instance, Nooshin explains that because international audiences recognize Iranian music through an "exotic" cultural sound, the global reception of this music lies in the extent to which it "wears its national identity on its sleeve, preferably a pristine identity unsullied by modernity or Westernization" (Nooshin, p. 78).

Just as Iranian or other Middle Eastern music is often expected to wear its national and cultural identity on its sleeve, the critical analysis of internationally distributed Iranian films frequently hinge upon the extent to which filmmakers engage with national politics. Saeed Zebadabi-Nejad elaborates on this issue by providing a discursive analysis of debates surrounding Iranian cinema's political engagement, and explains that debates surrounding internationally distributed Iranian cinema is hinged upon filmmakers' limitation of creativity in the national space versus films that appeal to values of the cosmopolitan elite and drift way from politics at the national level (Zebadabi-Nejad, 2007, p. 395-96). Azadeh Farahmand similarly grapples with the impact of international distribution on the representation of politics in Iranian cinema, arguing that because Iranian filmmakers have been forced to compromise with authorities in order to facilitate their films' participation at international festivals, their films have become apolitical (Farahmand, p. 87). Although Farahmand articulates a critical

perspective in the national and international distribution of Iranian cinema, her argument locates politics only within the national space, which conflates Iranian filmmakers' national subjectivity and does not fully register alternative forms of agency that are located in global or local rather than national spaces.

Similarly, Dudley Andrew's examination of transnational cinema in the face of digital technology perceives cultural identity as an essence that is in threat of being contaminated by the digital cinema's decreased "time-lag," because of digital technologies' ability to rapidly transmit films globally. Like Farahmand, Andrew articulates an important critical perspective by calling attention to the increasingly integrated relationship between film festivals and filmmakers, and argues that, "such a feedback system can foster collaboration, in the worst sense of the term" (Andrew, p. 81). Although this relationship between filmmakers and festival producers may exist, Andrew frames this relationship as a semi-hegemonic feedback system that poses a threat to cultural expression. Andrew concludes by questioning, "how can we expect the unexpected, when the waning of the cultural atmosphere since 1990 has reduced differences within and among nations such that new (aesthetic cinematic) waves will no longer form, at least not with the power and frequency they once did" (Andrew, p. 82). By adopting a model of globalization as a uniform rather than, as Arjun Appadurai theorizes, a deeply disjunctive process, Andrew fails to recognize that the formation of the so-called native or traditional mode of culture is something that as Dabashi claims is itself "deeply colonial" (Dabashi, 2002, p. 122).

Moreover, Andrew's argument perceives digital technologies as homogenizing rather than transformative, and as my research on *Persian Cats* aims to show, digital media culture must be examined as a highly disjunctive rather than a uniform practice. For instance, he argues that digital technologies have inaugurated an "interlinked and accelerating economy of a world saturated with films that are available instantly from every place and every time- this world without waiting-describes the state of things in the global sublime" (Andrew, p. 86). This perception of digital technologies' as creating a "world without waiting" assumes a center-periphery model of globalization that takes for granted geo-political specificities like censorship policies that greatly impact the reception of media. Appadurai's "Difference and Disjuncture in the Global Cultural Economy," seeks to rupture discourses that perceive globalization as homogenization, and he argues that, "the new global order has to be seen as a complex, overlapping, disjunctive order that cannot any longer be understood in terms of existing center-periphery models" (Appadurai, p. 588). This dynamic understanding of globalization has prompted scholarship to turn a more critical eye to local differences in the face of cultural distribution and reception, and promotes consideration of the locality in which globally circulating media is received, re-appropriated and re-transmitted.

As a Sunni Muslim (Islamic minority in Iran), an Iranian-Kurd and a transnational filmmaker, Ghobadi's subjectivity is split between multiple regimes of cultural knowledge. Because of Ghobadi's liminal positioning in the intersections between global, local, and national spaces, his films can be understood within the rubric of intercultural cinema, which Laura Marks describes as "the emerging expression of a group of people

who share the political issues of displacement and hybridity, though their individual circumstances may vary widely" (Marks, 2000, p. 2). *Persian Cats*' constitutive hybridity is partially a result of Roxani Saberi, who co-wrote the film with Ghobadi. Saberi explains in an interview that her role was to "give my ideas as kind of an Iranian-slash-foreigner, to give my perspective," which indicates a self-conscious catering towards Western audiences (Adams, 2010). Thus, the concept of intercultural cinema is better suited to account for Ghobadi's and the musicians' subjective positioning between their homeland, their national identity, and their desire to engage with the global community.

Persian Cats' narrative is structured as a hybrid mash-up of different performance spaces in Tehran. For instance, Ashkan, Negar, and Nadar go to a cattle farm outside of Tehran to listen to a heavy metal band. The band explains that they practice in a barn because their music is so loud. In addition, when Nadar realizes he cannot get Ashkan and Negar passports, he goes to see his Persian rapper friends perform on a rooftop above the chaotic streets of Tehran. This heavy metal and rap music is juxtaposed with a traditional Persian concert that Nadar takes the duo to see in order to show Negar "how women make a living as musicians in Iran." At the traditional concert, two women musicians perform with Persian instruments and sing in antiquated, poetic language about virtue. The subdued atmosphere reflects the mellow sounds of the instruments and lyrics. Nadar tells Ashkan and Negar that one of the ladies in this group records illegal music in his friend, Ardalan's music studio. Thus, Ghobadi calls attention the fact that many artists in Iran negotiate boundaries between legality and illegality, and this cultural reality

cannot be discerned from discourses of regulatory policies and remains latent within government-sanctioned cultural spaces.

Ghobadi elaborates on the liminal status of official production spaces by reflexively filming the soundstage he used during *Persian Cats'* production. For example, the film opens in a legitimate recording studio in Tehran that is at once an illegal and a legal space. In the opening scene, the owner of this studio, Bahman Ardalan explains to a fellow musician that his friend Bahman Ghobadi is recording some music as "therapy" because "the Ministry of Culture has refused to let him make his movie." By allowing Ghobadi to film in the recording studio, this space automatically transgresses the boundaries of legality. In addition, because the sound stages' owner, Bahman Ardalan is also *Persian Cats*' actual sound mixer, he is implicated with this illegal production. Moreover, Ardalan explains how late at night he allows underground bands to record their music, and musicians and people involved in this underground network listen to these sessions. Nadar, for instance, visits the studio to listen to a woman, whose name is never revealed, singing a solo in this space. Ghobadi blurs the woman's face, and she sings about *haram* subjects like drinking and sex. As she sings, Ghobadi cuts to footage of women in Tehran that correspond with the song's sensuality and call attention to the Islamic regime's repression of women as well as the multi-faceted demographic of women in Tehran. For example, the film cuts to images of little girls without *hijabs* (head-scarves), old women in chadors (full-body dress), young women with colorful and fashionable *hijabs*, and young women with surgical gauze on her noses, implying a trend of plastic surgery. *Persian Cats*' tour of musical spaces, therefore, penetrates the surface

of Iran's regulatory discourses and offers a deeper glimpse into the realities of cultural practices, and in doing so reclaims the rhizomatic space of performance from the gridded territory of official national culture.

Deleuze's rhizome metaphor is a means to conceptualize the structure of this ephemeral cultural space. Deleuze claims that "states of things are neither unities nor totalities, but multiplicities… a set of lines or dimensions which are irreducible to one another…In a multiplicity what counts are not the terms or the elements, but what there is 'between,' the between, a set of relations which are not separable from each other. Every multiplicity grows from the middle, like the blade of grass or the rhizome…a line does not go from one point to another, but passes between the points ceaselessly bifurcating and diverging" (Deleuze & Guittari, p. vii-viii). By making explicit the virtual network that connects Tehran's underground rock community, Ghobadi signals the rhizomatic nature of this cultural space. Nadar, for example, goes onto the Internet to scroll through a website that has indexed the 312 rock groups in Tehran in order to find a band mate for Negar and Ashkan. Moreover, Ghobadi frames Ashkan and Negar multiple times looking at computer screens, and shows both of them listening to other bands and editing their own music through an electronic interface. In doing so, Ghobadi emphasizes the communal aspects of this cultural space and releases it from its material and traditional moorings to authenticity.

Herman Gray argues that digital technologies make it possible to store, access, and combine "infinite permutations of sound, time periods, titles, time, and performers," and goes on to explain how, "virtual listening rooms and file sharing made possible by

digital technologies join bedrooms, home basements and garages, and mixing studios, expanding the authenticating tools and spaces where these musics are produced, travel-transforming time and space, geography, and distance into soundtracks of identification and belonging throughout the world" (Gray, p. 151). As Gray's statement makes clear, the digital nature of music does not rupture notions of authenticity, but rather extends the terrain in which music is produced into the virtual sphere. Gray's transformative and collaborative understanding of digital music technologies is echoed in D.N. Rodowick analysis of digital as opposed to analog film technologies. For instance, Rodowick argues that "through computers, we are less inclined to make a thing that stands as a token for another thing, but rather, to continually gather up elements, to copy and transform them, to recontextualize and recycle them, and to copy and share them, to transmit our results, and then to start all over again," and argues that digital as opposed to analog filmmaking technologies allow for more creative transformation (Rodowick, p. 177). Both Rodowick and Gray call attention to digital technologies' ability to dismantle the gridded space of cultural authenticity and make the rhizomatic nature of transnational culture explicit. Ghobadi and the musicians use virtual space in their cultural productions to outmaneuver Tehran's highly regulated terrain. For instance, like the musicians who listen to illegal music and distribute their songs over the Internet, Ghobadi disseminated pirated DVDs of *Persian Cats* through Tehran's black market (Adams, 2010).

Because of digital technologies' inconspicuous materiality, regenerative capacity, and ease of global distribution it becomes an especially insidious site of contestation to Iran's regulatory policies. Robert Stam argues that "as a technology of representation, the

cinema mingles diverse times and spaces; it is produced in one constellation of times and spaces, it represents still another (diegetic) constellation of times and places, and is received in still another time and space. Film's conjunction of sound and image means that the audio-visual track not only presents two kinds of time, but also that they mutually inflect one another in a form of synchresis. The capacity for palimpsestic overlays of images and sounds facilitated by the new computer and video technologies further amplify possibilities for fracture, rupture and polyphony" (Stam, p. 37). Ghobadi's use of a digital camera, and his use of digital cinematic techniques to embody Iran's underground rock music makes *Persian Cats* makes it an especially poignant site of what Stam refers to as "trangressive hybridity" (Stam, p. 36). In his article, "Beyond Third Cinema, the aesthetics of hybridity," Stam explains that Latin American alternative filmmakers use "existing discourses for their own ends," and utilize cinema as a "palimpsestic and polyvalent medium" in order to "stage and perform a transgressive hybridity" (Stam, p. 32, 38). He examines the motif of trash in alternative Latin American films and argues that for underground filmmakers, the metaphor of garbage captured the "sense of marginality, of being condemned to survive within scarcity, of being the dumping ground for transnational capitalism, of being obliged to recycle the materials of the dominant culture" (Stam, p. 42). Unlike Latin American cultural producers who used alternative aesthetics to counter the neo-colonial dominance of Hollywood and Western media imperialism, Iranian filmmakers' creativity must be filtered through Iran's cinematic regulations, which shifts political expression to a different register. This shift is

made explicit in Ghobadi's use of digital cinematic technologies and *Persian Cats'* treatment of digital media culture.

For example, Ghobadi maneuvers the regulations that repress cultural creativity by using digital technology to film *Persian Cats*. Thus, this technology becomes a utilitarian and metaphorical site of opposition within Iran's specific geo-political context. Stam explains how the material presence of trash in Latin American alternative films "analogizes the process of revealing the hidden worth of the despised, devalued artist himself," and the onscreen materiality of digital media culture in *Persian Cats* similarly functions to reveal the creative practices that have been put under erasure by regulation policies informed by discourses of cultural dependency in Iran. In doing so, Ghobadi's camera captures the practices that have remained enfolded within cultural dependency and Westernization discourses. In *Persian Cats*, Nadar's apartment is cluttered with the accumulation of non-sanctioned cultural products like VHS tapes, DVDs, CDs, computer hardware, traditional Kurdish and Iranian musical instruments, and an electric guitar. This onscreen materiality of Western media practices shows the reality of cultural engagement in Iran. In addition, because the musical performances in *Persian Cats* have all been influenced by non-Iranian music, their distinction from each other and from other global musical groups ruptures notions of cultural dependency as unmediated replication.

Like Nadar's apartment, the walls of the subterranean crevasse in which Ashkan and Negar's band Take it Easy Hospital performs is a palimpsest in which multiple layers of disparate temporalities are spatially inscribed. A Persian rug, signifying local traditional culture is layered in front of a wall covered with graffiti, and overlapped with

miscellaneous artwork and flyers including a poster of The Beatles. This performance space provides an onscreen visual interaction between hip-hop culture, British popular culture, and Persian culture, which is reiterated in the music and bears witness to the "flow of the transnational economy and the censoring process of official history" (Marks, 2000, p. 78). Marks argues that because intercultural cinema "moves through space, gathering up histories and memories that are lost or covered over in the movement of displacement, and producing new knowledges out of the condition of being between cultures," it is particularly capable of discovering the value that inheres in objects as the "discursive layers of the material interactions that they encode" (Marks, p. 78, 80). Just as "old TV commercials, newspaper ads, health care manuals constitute a kind of visual throwaway garbage" in Stam's analysis of Brazilian filmmaker, Jorge Furtado's *Isle of Flowers* (1989), *Persian Cats*' visual inscription of temporally and spatially disparate elements of media culture within the insular locality of Tehran confronts viewers with the realities of subaltern cultural practices (Stam, p. 44). Stam notes that the worn texture of discarded stock footage in Furtado's *Isle of Flowers* functions mimetically to viscerally indict the uneven global distribution of food and wealth, and *Persian Cats'* digital aesthetic during musical performances functions to mimetically constitute the cosmopolitan subjectivity that has been put under erasure by censorship (Stam, p. 44).

Mimesis, according to Laura Marks, "shifts the hierarchical relationship between subject and object, indeed dissolves the dichotomy between the two, and is an immanent way of being in the world, whereby the subject comes into being not through abstraction from the world but compassionate involvement in it" (Marks, 2000, p. 141). Herman

Gray also calls attention to the mimetic potential of music stating, "it constitutes its own subject(ive) experience within its own space and time, and as such is not just ancillary to or simply a product of prior discourses. Music is about making and remaking subjects, and, as such, making and remaking identities" (Gray, p. 153). Ghobadi's use of digital cinematic techniques to embody musical performances similarly becomes a mimetic form of cultural expression. For instance, the scene just before Ashkan and Negar listen to one of Tehran's indie rock bands, Ghobadi employs a shaky, hand-held technique that mimics the guerilla style of documentary-filmmaking, which implies an indexical relationship to the pro-filmic space. Ghobadi, however, immediately subverts this hand-held style, which calls into question the indexical relationship between his camera and the pro-filmic performance space. For instance, when the door closes behind Ashkan and Negar, the soundtrack becomes increasingly loud and Ghobadi uses jump cuts that align with the beat of the diegetic music reverberating in the room. It becomes apparent that the previous shakiness is not necessarily an indexical trace of Ghobadi's physical movement, but rather a stylistic decision. As the onscreen image pulsates with the musical beat, Ghobadi subverts *Persian Cats*' indexical authenticity, dissolving the dichotomy between the musical performance as a subject and the camera as an objective observer. Thus, the music "comes into being" by the camera's "compassionate involvement" in this cultural space. By compromising the camera's anthropological position as an objective recorder of this culture and by making this detachment explicit, Ghobadi retains *Persian Cats'* partial authenticity to the reality of this event while also mimetically embodying this cultural expression as a means to give these musicians a platform to engage more

intimately with transnational audiences. The excessive musical performances in *Persian Cats* also points to Ghobadi's motivation to provide a transnational, intercultural vehicle for these musicians. As reviewers point out, the sheer amount of performances becomes aesthetically taxing for viewers, which calls attention to Ghobadi's subversion of the film's narrative and emphasis on these musical performances (Garcia, 2010). Thus, *Persian Cats'* hybrid structure enables the film to function as a global platform, while simultaneously testifying to the clandestine spaces of Tehran's subaltern culture.

Hybrid films, according to Laura Marks "challenge the separateness of cultures and make visible the colonial and racist power relations that seek to maintain this separation," by "polluting viewers' ideas of cultural distinction, and implicating each of us in them" (Marks, 2000, p. xii). As an intimate intercultural vehicle for Iranian musicians who have re-appropriated Western musical styles within their specific localities, *Persian Cats* "challenges" cultural separation, and by capturing these non-sanctioned spaces, the film illuminates cultural realities that are put under erasure by processes of cultural and national essentialism on the global sphere, and state repression in the national sphere. This intercultural interaction is especially urgent within the political climate in which *Persian Cats* was produced. For instance, just before Ghobadi began filming in 2009, the president of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, Javed Shamaghdari orchestrated a "campaign to attack Western cultural influences and establish a new government office to oversee Iranian cinema," which has resulted in the imprisonment of prominent Iranian filmmakers like Mohammad Ali Shirzadi and Jafar Panahi (Thrupkaew, p. 31).

Persian Cats makes explicit the incommensurable tension between Iran's Islamic national space and the global, cosmopolitan space that has become even more inflamed because of a growing population of young Iranians who prolifically engage with global culture through digital technologies. Although as Ahmadinejad's 2009 re-election shows, the Green Movement did not enact a political revolution. In rethinking political agency, however, as a more complex hybrid process of cultural performance and examining texts like *Persian Cats* reveals the transformative potential of such intercultural expressions. *Persian Cats'* hybrid structure enables the film to position Tehran's underground musicians as a cultural collective whose eclectic performances rupture claims to national and cultural essentialism. Although Iran remains in political turmoil, the collective creative agency among filmmakers like Ghobadi and musicians in *Persian Cats* demonstrates Deleuze and Guattari's argument that even the most hegemonic state regime's mechanisms to reterritorialize spaces of contestation produces "a different socius, one that is necessarily transformed" (Deleuze & Guattari, p. 508). *Persian Cats* reveals how Iranian cultural producers constitute a collective agency that forces the Islamic regime to renegotiate its hegemony. This process continuously presents opportunities for political transformations that can potentially yield an increase of creative and cultural freedom in Iran.

Conclusion

> I'm not a filmmaker, I'm a window-maker. I want to open a portal into a corner of the world, [and] I want to invite you to see the world through that portal that I open up. That's the only function I see for cinema.
>
> -Bahman Ghobadi (Hornaday, 2010)

It has been my contention to show how Ghobadi's hyphenated identity affords him a liminal perspective, which positions his films in a suspended "third space." I have argued in all of my chapters that Ghobadi's films' critical potential lies in their hybrid construction, which opens up spaces for diverse Iranian and Kurdish cultural enunciations and creative performances. Doing so has shown Ghobadi's films to be like "portals," which resist binary, essentialist representations of Iranian and Kurdish culture. However, it is necessary to position Ghobadi within Iran's contemporary filmmaking culture in order to access the critical potential of moving beyond representation through cultural performance.

Recently, Iranian cinema has become increasingly visible in America's political and cultural spotlights. US media outlets, for example, reported the imprisonment of prominent filmmakers like, Mohammad Rasoulof, Mehdi Pourmoussa, and Jafar Panahi, for making films that criticize Iran's social and political conditions under Amadinejad and the Islamic regime (Block, 2011). Javad Shamaghdari of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance stated in December of 2009, "Today we see that the enemy is ambushing us culturally and increasing the intensity of its attacks… Our cinema must

find its place, and this is the responsibility of filmmakers to take on this role" (Thrupkaew, p. 31). Shamaghdari's statement reflects the increasingly incommensurable relationship Iranian filmmakers, musicians and other artists, and the Islamic regime. Moreover, by explicitly describing the global movement of culture as an "ambush," Shamaghdari implies the state's insular international policies that have recently become a topic of heated political debate in the US. Iranian cinema, however, has emerged as the corollary to these insular policies. For instance, at this year's Academy Awards in February 2012, Asghar Farhadi became the first Iranian director to accept an Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film for *A Separation* (2011). During the global broadcast of the Academy Awards, Farhadi read his acceptance speech as follows:

> At this time many Iranians all over the world are watching us and I imagine them to be very happy. They are happy not just because of an important award or a film or a filmmaker, but because at the time when talk of war, intimidation and aggression is exchanged between politicians, the name of their country, Iran, is spoken here through her glorious culture. A rich and ancient culture that has been under heavy dust of politics. I proudly offer this honor to the people of my country, a people who respect all cultures and civilizations and despise hostility and resentment. (Haglund, 2012)

The message of Farhadi's speech reaffirms the broad cosmopolitan sentiment amongst Iranian filmmakers, intellectuals, musicians, and other artists, who want to promote intercultural relationships. In addition, his eloquent diction corresponds with the poetic and optimistic tone in which Iranian filmmakers and exilic intellectuals and scholars often speak of Iranian cinema. For instance, in his article about Farhadi winning an Academy Award, Hamid Dabashi stated:

> Between Iranians and their cinema thrives a love affair: Every film that a gifted Iranian filmmaker makes is a love letter to their people, and they return it in kind, with the joy and ecstasy of sharing in their global celebrations. The world may love and celebrate these films for their plot and filming techniques, the virtuosity of acting or directorial ingenuity, their gifted camera work or mise-en-scène, or else for their clever editing and sound design, etc.
>
> But in each of these films, there is also a hidden (not so successfully) message between Iranian filmmakers and their people: We are here, we are watching you, we are with you, we will make it through this tyranny, the dawn is near - stay the course, life is good! (Dabashi, 2012)

Dabashi's choice of the term "love letter" explicitly illustrates the poetic discourse that is very often applied to Iranian films once they have achieved global circulation. Moreover, his reference to a "hidden message between Iranian filmmakers and their people," cites the perceived function of Iranian cinema as a platform for Iranians to generate, extend, and maintain their nation's imagined community. Whereas Farhadi's speech implies cinema's capacity to transmit Iranian national identity through "her glorious culture," and Dabashi's article cites cinema's role as a platform of communication within Iran's imagined national community, Ghobadi articulates cinema's function as a "portal" that "invites people to see the world." I call attention to this distinction because it reflects the multifaceted, yet interconnected construct of Iran's filmmaking culture.

Zeydabadi-Nejad explains in his scholarship on the politics of Iranian cinema that the "negotiation of oppositional readings of intended and unintended messages in film is one way for audiences to resist the impositions of the regime" (Zeydabadi-Nejad, 2010, p. 13). Iranian filmmaking culture, as a collective effort, is itself a form of opposition,

which in the context of Iran must necessarily be negotiated in the relationship between the filmmaker, the audience, and the film. Ghobadi's local motivations to make films for Kurds while simultaneously opening a "portal" into this region of the world for global audiences raises interesting questions about this collective. Rather than touting Ghobadi's humanitarian efforts, I call attention to some ways in which his films have initiated material changes for the individuals and the locales in his films to demonstrate differences between his collective efforts as opposed to Iranian cinema's perceived relationship with an imagined national community. For instance, many of the non-professional child actors in *Turtles Can Fly* and *Drunken Horses* received much needed surgeries and were given opportunities to attend school. Riga, the blind toddler in *Turtles Can Fly*, underwent an eye operation and is no longer blind, Agrin was hired by Kurdistan TV to be the host in a children's program, and Satellite (Soran Ebrahim), has worked as Ghobadi's assistant director during many of his productions, and is currently directing his own film (Valla, 2005). Moreover, Ghobadi released a soundtrack to No *One Knows About Persian Cats* through Milan Records, which was very well received in Europe. Since the film's release, Take it Easy Hospital has toured around Europe and gained notable visibility (Adams, 2010). However minor and localized, these results demonstrate Ghobadi's material motivations. Unlike many Iranian filmmakers whose motivations involve connecting with an imagined transnational Iranian community, Ghobadi's concrete motivations connect more closely with a cultural collective rather than imagined community. In addition, these material impacts call attention to Ghobadi's

interstitial positioning between auteur models of authorship and collective modes of production, which reveals the multifaceted nature of Iran's filmmaking culture.

Moreover, Abbas Kiarostami's response to Ghobadi's decision to make *Persian Cats* and therefore face exile calls attention to the diverse perspectives that comprise Iran's filmmaking community. Kiarostami stated to local media outlets, "If Bahman Ghobadi thinks there are better circumstances for creating movies outside of Iran, I congratulate him, but for me personally, I don't believe in leaving Iran, the place I can sleep comfortably is my home" (Thrupkaew, p. 31). Kiarostami's artistic motivation to make films that are conceptually and aesthetically innovative because of and despite of Iran's censorship regulations hinges on his Iranian residence. Moreover, his perception is made more problematic considering his latest feature, *Certified Copy* (2010), was filmed in Italy. Ghobadi replied to Kiarostami's criticisms stating,

> My dear and respected Master! I, and all film-lovers, respect your opinion on cinema, but that does not mean that we can allow you, in the manner of all dictators, to tell everybody in the art world what to do…How can you allow yourself, with nasty words, to mock filmmakers who try to support the oppressed people, and worse, to state, in the language of religious dictators, what is forbidden? (Thrupkaew, p. 31)

Ghobadi's response calls attention to the tensions that have become increasingly visible due to the Islamic regime's crackdown on filmmakers. Iranian filmmakers are faced with the complex decision of whether to rebel and leave Iran for freer lands, or to stay and try to change society from within. Ghobadi explains that he was uneasy about his decision to make *Persian Cats*; especially after his friend and fellow filmmaker, Jafar

Panahi urged him to stay in Iran. However, Ghobadi explains the positive impact his exile has had on the collective of Iranian filmmakers, stating:

> In retrospect when I look back I see that I really didn't make a mistake. I'm actually happy that I left. I feel like I'm a lot more beneficial now. People like myself or Ashkan and Negar – people who left – we're having free interviews like this. We're sitting down and getting the word out. But I would say it's only three to five percent of the artists who are leaving Iran. Which is good. It's enough. What you see is not everybody leaving. And people like me who do get out – and then assist these artists with production and western distribution – we are helping the ones who stay inside. (Wissot, 2010)

I draw attention to this dichotomy within the collective of Iranian filmmakers because it reveals the hybrid spectrum of production that extends beyond the confines of Iran's national borders. For instance, because Ghobadi alludes to Iranian filmmakers to produce films both within and outside national territory, his statement reflects the complex conditions of deterritorialization that call into question the paradigmatic boundaries of Iranian national cinema. Moreover, Iran's hybrid spectrum of media production can also be put into conversation with other global cinematic trends, and points to fruitful areas for further research. In his recent article, "Multiplicity and multiplexing in today's cinemas: Diasporic cinema, art cinema, and mainstream cinema," Hamid Naficy argues that collaborations among exilic and diasporic filmmakers have increased the ability for films to move transnationally, which has resulted in the global popularity of a "cinema of multiplicity." This concept refers to Hollywood and/or Bollywood movies that "involve multiplicity and fragmentation of all sorts within the filmic text and the filmic process, from inception to reception" (Naficy, 2010, p. 13). In addition, because of forces such as media convergence, digitization, economic

privatization, and the Internet, “artists and works could become globalized in situ, without having to physically cross national boundaries” (Naficy, 2010, p. 13). Thus, Naficy attends to the ways in which digital technologies have transformed the territoriality of filmmakers, and draws critical attention to the possibility of deterritorialized Iranian filmmakers to, as Ghobadi states above, “help the ones inside.”

Because I approach Ghobadi’s film as an “outsider,” my analysis of Kurdish and Iranian cultural signifiers is necessarily lacking. However, it has been my contention to examine how Ghobadi’s films enunciate liminal cultural identities and appeal to global audiences. Although I only touch upon reception theories, I believe this would be a productive lens to more deeply examine how elements of music and affective visuals in Ghobadi’s films prompt intercultural engagement and perform cultural differences. In addition, because of Ghobadi’s recent exile, one possible extension of my research could examine how Ghobadi’s transnational co-productions differ from his productions within Iran and Kurdistan. For instance, Ghobadi is currently filming his next feature, *Rhinos Season*, in Turkey, and the movie stars Italian transnational actress, Monica Bellucci, and the film has been described as “a political film spanning from before the Iranian Revolution to the present” (*Variety*, 2011). Thus, an analysis of his new film could certainly be put into conversation with Naficy’s recent scholarship on the phenomenon of “multiplexing” and transnational cinema. Moreover, further research on Iran’s underground filmmaking culture would benefit my arguments, especially an examination of the extent to which Iranian media producers use digital technologies and develop new ways to evade censorship and prompt intercultural engagement. Such a study would offer

some critical insight into the development of new aesthetic techniques within the context of globalization, deterritorialization, and multiplexing.

Throughout my thesis, I have attempted to examine how Ghobadi's contingent relationship with Iranian national cinema and his Kurdish ethnicity grants him a unique position within categorizations of national, transnational, accented, and hybrid cinema. Moreover, because of Ghobadi's liminal positioning, he must shift his authorial strategies according to contemporary geopolitical conditions. Thus, his cinema is a particularly salient site to examine shifts in concepts of national cinema as well as transnational cinema. In her article, "The time of hybridity," Simone Drichel calls attention to the ethical dimension of hybridity by examining the internal logic of temporality that underpins Homi Bhabha's theory of hybridity. She argues that hybridity, "does not belong to the past – its time is not the past. Neither, however, is it the present or – simply – the future. Instead, the time of hybridity is a radical futurity, a futurity which springs from the gap between repetitions" (Drichel, p. 608). Ghobadi films' resistance to symbolic closure of meaning and his shifting authorial strategies can be understood as performing a "radical futurity." By refusing cinematic closure, employing a hybrid mode of authorship, and resisting territorial rootedness, Ghobadi can be understood as a figure of radical futurity. As a result, his productions "allow for the possibility of the unforeseeable to happen," and ultimately disrupt boundaries of national cinema, modes of cinematic authorship, and cultural stereotypes. Doing so within the culturally and politically precarious region of Iran and Kurdistan makes understanding the implications of Ghobadi's cinema all the more important.

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