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Crude oil and its false promises of modernization

Petroleum encounters in modern Iranian fiction

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Chapter 4

The Petroleum Encounter in Iranian Cinema: The Golestan Film Workshop

Oil is not only the key element in the “discovery” of Iran in the Hollywood movies of the 1950s and 1960s, it is the founding resource of the Iranian film industry. To make this claim is not to discount the first purchase of a Gaumont camera by the monarch Mozaffar al Din Shah during his European trip in 1900.²⁶⁵

As Negar Mottahedeh explains succinctly, oil is a central element in the development of the Iranian film industry. In her chapter “Crude Extractions: The Voice in Iranian Cinema,” she asserts that the purchase of a Gaumont camera became possible for the Qajar monarch after he gave William D’Arcy a concession to exploit, transport, and market Iranian oil in 1901. Similar to other critics of Iranian cinema, such as Dabashi and Naficy, Mottahedeh believes that while oil concessions provided the initial financial resources for the development of the Iranian cinema, but she also stresses that oil was the invisible hand behind the emergence of modern Iranian cinema during the 1950s and 1960s.

The Ebrahim Golestan Film Workshop was a key link in this development. The workshop was established in the 1950s (the exact date is unknown) and turned into a gathering point for many writers and intellectuals who were disappointed and hopeless after the defeat and repression of the oil nationalization movement. Besides profiting from the post-1953 influx of intellectuals, the Golestan Film Workshop benefited from being located in a city with a special connection to the art of cinema. Abadan, a company town in the most remote area of south-western Iran, introduced cinema as one of the most important leisure activities for its inhabitants from the early years of its establishment, in the 1920s and 1930s. The culture of going to the cinema and enjoying films was pervasive and highly appreciated among the inhabitants of the company houses. During the time of the NIOC consortium, according to

²⁶⁵ Negar Mottahedeh, “Crude Extractions: The Voice in Iranian Cinema,” in *Locating the Voice in Film: Critical Approaches and Global Practices*, edited by Tom Whittaker and Sarah Wright (Oxford University Press, 2017), 227.

Peyman Jafari, cinemas played an important role in the lives of the inhabitants of Abadan. He gives specific information about the number of cinemas available for employees:

In Abadan for instance, [NIOC] had built five cinemas for its employees: Taj, Naft, Golestan (200 seats, in Bawardaeh), Bahmanshir (1,500 seats in its summer open-air space and 700 seats in its regular building) and Pirouz (600-700 seats). The latter two were for blue collar workers and their families. The films in all of the cinemas except the Bahmanshir open-air cinema were shown in both their original (mostly English) and dubbed version on Mondays, Tuesdays and Thursdays.²⁶⁶

In addition to these cinemas for employees, there were ten company cinemas for the general public: Shirin, Khorshid, Tex, Metropol, Niagara, Shahnaz, Sahel, Iran, Keyhan, and Soheyla. Jafari adds that the latest Hollywood films were shown, as well as films from Britain. While, early on, only the European residents of the company houses could enjoy the cinemas, clubs, and restaurants of Abadan, the native part of the city gained access to these leisure facilities during the time of the consortium (1954-1979).

The cinemas played a crucial role in familiarizing local Abadanis with the English language. Besides the English-language films shown in the cinemas, there were also many British teachers working in Abadan schools. In fact, English was the second language of the town and the first language of the refinery. Cinema and the English language, together, were the mainstays of what is called “Abadanian culture.” This was a cosmopolitan culture that introduced Iranians to other parts of the world. Armenian, Jewish, and Indian communities in Abadan not only brought their religions to the city, but also their cuisine. The prevalence of the English language drove the careers of known translators such as Najaf Darya Bandari and Safdar Taqizadeh, and introduced international literary figures to Iran’s literary circles. Hollywood films and translations of foreign literature together led to the flourishing of the southern Iranian region discussed in the previous chapter. Many writers also directed films and many translators tried their hand at writing their own stories. Naser Taqvayi, who began as an author, ended up becoming a director, and Ebrahim Golestan went from being a journalist and translator to becoming a director and producer.

This chapter is not an exhaustive account of the encounter between Iranian cinema and petroleum modernity. Rather, it focuses on the close connection between the petroleum industry and Iranian cinema in Abadan as exemplified by the Golestan Film Workshop. I will focus on a selection of the Workshop’s productions containing explicit references to petroleum

²⁶⁶ Peyman Jafari, “Oil, Labour and Revolution in Iran: A Social History of Labour in the Iranian Oil Industry, 1973-1983,” PhD dissertation, Leiden University, 2018, 203.

modernity, paying attention predominantly to the films' narratives. These productions, much like the literary works discussed in the previous chapter, reveal the tensions caused by the encounter between the petroleum industry and the local people in the petroleum regions, and they do so in factual and fictional form. In the first section of this chapter, I will explore the Golestan Film Workshop's portrayal of what it meant to work in the oil industry in two early documentary films: *A Fire* (1958-61) and *The Wave, Coral and Rock* (1958-61). In the second section, I will analyze *The Secret of the Treasure at Ghost's Valley* (1974), a fictional representation of the petroleum boom during the 1970s directed by Ebrahim Golestan.

The Golestan Film Workshop and the First Petroleum Films

Born in 1922 in Shiraz, Ebrahim Golestan is an Iranian fiction writer, journalist, and literary figure, best known as the director of the first films made in the petroleum-producing regions of Iran. His father was the editor-in-chief of the Golestan newspaper in Shiraz. Golestan moved to Tehran in 1942 to attend law school, but he left without completing his degree and became involved in the political activities of the time. According to Parviz Jahed in *Writing with a Camera*, Golestan became a member of the Tudeh Party in the early 1940s. In 1945, Golestan was writing for the official publications of the party whilst also maintaining an interest in filmmaking and photography. According to Hamid Dabashi, in 1947, Golestan took part in a major group exhibition with other photographers at the Soviet embassy in Tehran.²⁶⁷ Around this time, he also published his first collection of short stories, called *Azar the Last Month of Autumn* (*Azar, Mah-e Akhar-e Paiz*). In 1948, Golestan left the Tudeh Party because of his growing disagreement with its political viewpoints. In an interview with Jahed, he also mentions that the party was riddled with corruption.²⁶⁸ During the years when Mossadeq was trying to nationalize the oil industry, Golestan was hired by the BBC and ABC television companies as photographer. He moved to Abadan during 1948-1949 to work for the publicrelations office of the AIOC. During these years, Jalal Al-e Ahmad visited him. Al-e Ahmad describes his fourth journey to Khuzestan, after the split of the Tudeh Party in 1948-1949, as follows:

When Ebrahim Golestan had taken refuge in Abadan, and in that deadly loneliness in search of friendship, we would even go to the Jabolqa and Abadan, which I was kind of familiar with and

²⁶⁷ Hamid Dabashi, *Masters & Masterpieces*, 75.

²⁶⁸ Parviz Jahed, *Neveshtan Ba Dourbin (Writing with the Camera)*, 5th ed. (Akhtaran, 2015) 101-2. All translations of quotes from this book are mine.

which had become a homeland in a very short duration of time.²⁶⁹ This time I got to know Abadan through the oil company publication office, enjoying the hospitality of Golestan in his house, of Pezeshknia²⁷⁰ and of the Boat Club,²⁷¹ as well as on the aluminum gable roofs of the houses in Three-Quarter Braim.²⁷²

After the 1953 coup d'état, Golestan began his work with the petroleum consortium as a photographer and filmmaker. This would result in the establishment of Golestan Film Workshop in the post 1953 coup era. As it did for the rest of the nation, 1953 changed Golestan's life. In the year of the CIA-backed coup, he was working as a photographer for a number of international news organizations, including the BBC and ABC, providing them with photographs of prime minister Mossadeq. After the nationalization of the coup d'état, while Abadan was in unrest, Golestan received a proposal to film the incidents presumably related to the dispossession of the British:

When oil was nationalized, I was in the oil company. And besides working in the company, I was doing other things. I am talking about an era in which television had not yet reached Iran. I was working for NBC and CBS and making news reports for them. It was very easy. At that time, I was in Abadan and one of my friends called Fenzy introduced me to INS (International News Service). They asked Fenzy to find someone who could film the incidents happening in Abadan. It was the time of the forcible dispossession of the British in Abadan. I told them I will do it for you.²⁷³

Soon after, Golestan left the NIOC and established his own studio, the Golestan Film Workshop (GFW).²⁷⁴ According to Naficy, Golestan furnished the studio with cutting-edge equipment: "by 1958, with the help of Arthur Elton, who headed the Shell Oil Company Film Unit, a list of the latest equipment was drawn up and purchased for the GFW."²⁷⁵ Golestan began to make his own documentaries as well as films for the NIOC, and "thus the first

²⁶⁹ Jabolqa is an imaginary city in the far east of Iran. In Persian literature, this city indicates a faraway place that is difficult to reach.

²⁷⁰ Al-e Ahmad is referring to Houshang Pezeshkina (1916-1971), a modernist painter who was recruited by the oil industry and who moved to Abadan in 1946. Pezeshknia was a close friend of Ebrahim Golestan and frequently painted petroleum workers.

²⁷¹ Abadan's Boat Club is known as the first Iranian club for sailing sports (See <http://www.petromuseum.ir/content/23/آبادان/باشگاه-قایقرانی-آبادان>/354/سفر-به-دیروز). There is an inconsistency in the dates provided by Al-e Ahmad, who writes that his visit was in 1948-1949, while the Boat Club was not established until 1951.

²⁷² Al-e Ahmad, Jalal. "Gozareshi Az Khuzestan (A Report from Khuzestan)." *Arash* 10 (1965). All translations of the quotes from this book are mine.

بار چهارم پس از انشعاب بود. سال ۲۷ یا ۲۸. وقتی ابراهیم گلستان به آبادان پناه برده بود. و در آن تنهایی دق آورنده به جستجوی دوستی حتی به جابلقا می‌شد رفت. چه رسد به آبادان که من حالا دیگر میشناختمش و بهمان زودی برایم نوعی وطن مانوس شده بود. و این بار آبادان را از دریچه‌ی اداره انتشارات نفت شناختم و بر سر سفره‌ی گلستان و با پزشکنیا و در بوت کلاب و در خانه‌های سه گوش بریم با... شیروانی‌های المینیوم

²⁷³ Jahed, *Writing with the Camera*, 115.

²⁷⁴ Hamid Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema, Volume 2: The Industrializing Years, 1941-1978* (Duke University Press, 2011), 78.

²⁷⁵ Naficy, 78.

independent nonfiction film studio was born, one that initially made documentaries but eventually added fiction films to its roster.”²⁷⁶ This was in many ways the beginning of a cultural revival in Abadan. As Naficy details, Golestan gathered together a creative group “most of whom lacked any film experience but would become prominent in cinema, literature, and journalism.”²⁷⁷ Jalal Ale Ahmad, Najaf Darya Bandari, Naser Taqvayi, Sadeq Chubak, Farokh Gaffary, Forough Farrokhzad, Rahnama, and Shahrokh Golestan all came and worked with Golestan at different times. Naficy describes how the Workshop became the intellectual hub of Abadan: “the GFW became a lively intellectual salon where employees and fellow intellectuals, such as Jalal Al-e Ahmad, Sadeq Chubak, and Farrokh Ghaffary would read and discuss poetry and other matters late into the night.”²⁷⁸ The GFW became the first modern Iranian film studio, but the nature and legitimacy of the assistance it received from the petroleum industry remained a point of contention. According to Dabashi:

This period of Golestan’s career as a photographer and moviemaker is the crust of much controversy in contemporary Iranian intellectual history. His detractors point out his rather lucrative, if not shady, business connections to the NIOC, the British and US news organizations, and above all to major oil companies, and thus implicate him in the propaganda machinery of the Pahlavi monarchy--all leading to discredit his progressive politics when he was a member of the Tudeh Party.²⁷⁹

Dabashi adds the following:

How could someone exhibit his pictures at the Soviet embassy, sell them to the British with the help of major oil companies, while at the service of major news organizations? Needless to say, Golestan was a very shrewd man who made a very good living from his profitable arrangements with the NIOC and other oil companies--all at a time when the overwhelming majority of Iranian public intellectuals lived in very dire circumstances. But, at the same time, Golestan was instrumental in helping an array of important public intellectuals. From very early in his creative career, Golestan was far more an institution unto himself than a mere literary or artistic figure.²⁸⁰

Dabashi clearly believes that, although Golestan could be seen as playing both sides, he ultimately used the support of the NIOC and foreign news organizations to advance his cultural and literary ambitions, as well as to promote his anti-monarchist ideas. Dabashi argues that Golestan’s focus was firmly on creating his films, and that, as a result, he paid little attention to criticisms of his work and its financing.

²⁷⁶ Naficy, 78.

²⁷⁷ Naficy, 78.

²⁷⁸ Naficy, 79.

²⁷⁹ Dabashi, *Masters & Masterpieces*, 75.

²⁸⁰ Dabashi, 76.

Golestan knew the national Iranian oil company and the consortium better than any other writer, having begun his career as the official film producer of the consortium.²⁸¹ His early films are first-hand representations of what was happening at petroleum extraction sites, which Iranians had not been able to witness before. However, these films were made and sent to the company and belonged to them completely. Although many critics, including Parviz Jahed and Masoud Behnoud, in different sources, describe the consortium films as “made on order,” Golestan insists that this did not influence the perspective on the oil industry that he presented in his films.²⁸² Although the oil company ordered his early films (one of them was even a direct commission by the Shah), this did not mean that he set aside his own (political) ideas about the oil industry. The most important way in which Golestan safeguarded the expression of these ideas in his films was through his imposition on the images of a voice-over narration, spoken by himself. Although Dabashi is right to note “the bizarre and amusing fact ... that Golestan made his financial fortune and produced some of the most brilliant artifacts of Iranian artistic modernity while fully at the service of oil companies that were robbing his homeland blind,”²⁸³ he argues in his book that Golestan’s work included a critical dimension of the colonial character of the oil industry as well, specifically through the voice-overs.

In Golestan’s early films, commissioned by NIOC, the voice-over narrations emphasize the transformative effect of the oil industry on the geography of southern Iran. These films were made specifically to reveal the work progress in the field and were made for internal NIOC use. Naficy describes Golestan’s language in the narrations as that of “poetic cinema.” This language constitutes a distinct way of conveying how the interplay of the oil industry, the Khuzestan landscape, the hard labor of the oil workers, and the cultural differences between the foreigners and locals produced a tense and volatile situation previously unfamiliar to people in the rest of Iran. Made in the late 1950s and early 1960s, when the literary representations of the oil company towns described in the previous chapter had not emerged yet, Golestan’s films are the first to explore the connections between the everyday life of the locals and the workings of the oil industry. The poetic cinematic language of Golestan’s films also inhabits the Southern

²⁸¹ As discussed in the first chapter, Iran’s oil was nationalized in 1951, but the 1953 coup d’état prevented Iran from gaining real control over its oil resources. In 1954, the Shah signed the Consortium Agreement that gave formal ownership of the oil resources to the newly established the National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC), but handed over control to the Consortium members, which became “contractors” to the NIOC. These Consortium members included BP, Gulf, Royal Dutch Shell, Compagnie Francaise des Petroles, Standard Oil of New Jersey, Standard Oil of California, Exxon, and Texaco.

²⁸² This is noted in Parviz Jahed’s *Writing with the Camera* and BBC Persian, *Goftegu-Ye Masoud Behnoud va Ebrahim Golestan (Interview by Masoud Behnoud with Ebrahim Golestan)*, 2020.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ubAOFYmu_VM.

²⁸³ Dabashi, *Masters & Masterpieces*, 75.

School literature and the Iranian petrofiction that emerged later. This influence is clearly visible in the works of writers such as Ahmad Mahmoud, Nasim Khaksar, and Naser Taqvayi, as discussed in the previous chapter.

Az Qatre Ta Darya (From a Drop to the Sea) from 1957²⁸⁴ is the first documentary Golestan made for the consortium. In an interview with Jahed, Golestan admits that he no longer has a copy of this film as he gave it to the Shell Oil Company.²⁸⁵ After this, he made a series for the consortium called *Cheshmandaz (A View, 1958-1961)*, which comprises six films. In my analysis, I will focus on the two most famous of these, *Yek Atash (A Fire, 1961)* and *Moj, Marjan va Khara (Wave, Coral, and Rock, 1962)*, which, through their poetic narratives, demonstrate Golestan's ideas about petroleum as the national treasure.

A Fire shows how a fire that was burning on top of an oil well in the spring of 1958 near Ahwaz raged for a period of around seventy days before it was brought under control. Golestan's camera work stresses the difficult circumstances under which the workers fought the fire. The film also shows the influence of Forugh Farrokhzad in the editing and subtitling of the film. Mottahedeh believes that "what is inscribed on our senses by the editing of *A Fire* is Farrokhzad's 'keen sense of rhythm and her affinity for sound', and the poetic voice,"²⁸⁶ She adds:

In my own reading, the poetics of the opening of *A Fire* is crucially cinematic. Here each element of the filmic assumes a poetic function. The text, the image, the sound, the voice-over-each act independently, one could say, as unique musical notes or singular poetic elements, describing and deriving from the process of oil extraction.²⁸⁷

These elements mentioned by Mottahedeh makes the film more than commissioned propaganda and turn it into a piece of art.

The film begins with a written introduction shown on-screen in English: "In the spring of 1958, an oil well was being drilled at a place near Ahwaz in Iran. The drilling bit had passed through the gas-filled layers and was penetrating the oil-bearing rocks."²⁸⁸ After this, a sign with the text "Danger Well Drilling" in English and Persian is shown (Figure 4.1).

²⁸⁴ Ebrahim Golestan, *Cheshmandaz: Az Majmou'e Mostanad Cheshmandaz Sakht-e Ebrahim Golestan (Cheshmandaz: Documentary Made by Ebrahim Golestan, Part One)*, video (روابط عمومی وزارت نفت), accessed January 4, 2021, <https://tinyurl.com/2tdtccrd>.

²⁸⁵ Jahed, *Writing with the Camera*, 117.

²⁸⁶ Mottahedeh, "Crude Extractions," 233.

²⁸⁷ Mottahedeh, 233.

²⁸⁸ Ebrahim Golestan, *Yek Atash (A Fire)*, 1961, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m5dVjTZk8vk>. The voice-over narration of *A Fire* is in English.



Figure 4.4: Screenshot from A Fire

When the voice-over narrator (Golestan) notes how “suddenly a spark flew,” the camera shows the sparking of a huge fire that cannot be contained in its limited frame and that dwarfs the figures of the firefighters (Figure 4.2). This is followed by the narrator remarking: “soon after, the fire became part of the landscape.”



Figure 4.5: Screenshot from A Fire

A long shot (Figure 4.3) is then inserted to underline the size of the fire and the amount of smoke it generated.



Figure 4.6: Screenshot from *A Fire*

A Fire shows the dangers of the intense, day-and-night battle against this untamed flame, fed by an ocean of oil under the ground. In the following scenes, Golestan describes the reasons for the explosion of fire over the well and the ways in which the engineers and workers are trying to control it. “To kill the fire,” Golestan notes, water is taken from the Karoon river. The engineer leading the firefighting efforts is identified as Myron Kinely, an American expert in oil firefighting. When the fire is finally extinguished through the “magic power of an explosion,” the camera presents close-ups of the blackened faces of the men, emphasizing the exhausting difficulty of the work.

The importance of this film, from the petroleum-encounter point of view, is the juxtaposition of Golestan’s reverence for the “magical” technical prowess of Kinely with his humanization of the Iranian locals, whose hard work is highlighted and elevated by the poetic language used in the voice-over narration. In emphasizing the spectacular and magical aspects of the oil industry – in both causing the fire and extinguishing it – *A Fire* follows Bahar and Al-e Ahmad in portraying it as the imposing transformer of the region and as inducing a sense of awe. These aspects of the film underline its investment in the glorification of the oil industry. But this investment is paired with a careful, lingering attention, on the part of the camera and the voice-over, for the difficult labor conditions the industry imposes on the local workers and the subordinate, vulnerable position it assigns them.²⁸⁹

In a poetic vocabulary, the voice-over emphasizes the exhausting duration of the fight against the fire:

²⁸⁹ I discuss the magical aspects of the oil industry in more detail in Chapter 5 on petro-magic-realism.

Little was gained,
Nights passed,
Days dawned
And harvest time came to the neighboring fields.

Besides indicating that the fire-fighting efforts are taking so long that the harvest arrives before the fire is extinguished, the mentioning of the “neighboring fields” also makes clear that the fire is impacting more than just the oil workers. Several times in the film, the camera jumps from showing the flames to showing a green landscape and the nomads who are farming the land. The contrasting images are accompanied by contrasting soundtracks, as, in cutting from the fire to the nomads, the frightening sound of the flames is replaced by the joyful singing of the farmers. Putting these two contrasting images and sounds together signals the closeness of the oil industry to the life of these nomads, whose lives and livelihoods are also potentially threatened by it.



Figure 4.4: Screenshot from A Fire

The inescapability of the petroleum encounter for the nomads is powerfully captured in one of the film’s shots, which shows two local men harvesting grain with flames and smoke rising in the background (Figure 4.4). Concentrating on the harvest, the men are not looking at the fire, but they are clearly close enough to be affected by the smoke and fumes. The voice-over narrator emphasizes the closeness of the fire and its persistence by saying: “Sheep grow accustomed to it, men seek ways to kill it.” This highlights how the oil industry has become a part of the lives of the people in the region without them having any choice in it: they have simply had to get used to it, like the sheep have to get used to the fire raging near them. Not considered by the oil company as having an interest in the industry or in the fire, the farmers

cannot do anything else than continue harvesting, while the women cook and the children play. While some may argue that the film's portrayal of the lives of the locals as continuing at its usual calm pace despite the fire underplays the damage the fire, and the oil industry more broadly, might be doing to the people, animals, and land, I want to suggest that by capturing the locals harvesting and the fire in a single frame *A Fire* in fact configures the oil encounter as a threat to traditional nomadic life.

A Fire is known as a forerunner of Iran's New Wave Cinema produced by Golestan, the "first chief of a modern Iranian film studio."²⁹⁰ For the most part, the film is not critical of the oil industry; it mainly highlights the power of the oil industry and its success in quenching the fire by enlisting the help of a foreign expert, who comes up with a magical solution. Yet in some of its imagery and voice-over narration, it also makes clear the toll that the firefighting efforts take on the ordinary workers and the danger the fire poses to the nomads, their animals, and crops. In these moments, the film configures the oil industry as an all-consuming flame, an untamed energy that is radically transforming the landscape and the people in it.

A year after *A Fire*, in 1958, Golestan made *Wave, Coral, and Rock* about the piping of oil from the mountain city of Gachsaran via the ocean floor to Khark Island in the Persian Gulf, and then onto the oil tankers. Although the film was supposed to focus on the engineering marvels of the pipes and oil tankers, Golestan again adds his poetic point of view to the industrial scenes to voice a critique not so much of the oil industry as a whole as of the fact that the Iranian petroleum is transferred to the tankers in order to be taken abroad.

In tracking the journey of the petroleum with his camera and narrating it in voice-over, Golestan lends a poetic aura of legitimacy to the oil industry. The language is poetic and so are the images, which consist of smooth shots of the work processes rather than of harsh industrial footage. As Dabashi puts it: "If the digging of oilfields and the construction of pipelines can be so astonishingly aestheticized, then how could there be anything wrong, socially or politically, with them?"²⁹¹ Yet Dabashi goes on to add: "at the same time, there is no escaping the equally important fact that the visual vocabulary of Iranian cinema and the poetic disposition of Golestan's prose are blossoming like beautiful water lilies on the surface of this very dirty swamp. This paradoxical phenomenon is endemic to the politics of Iranian poetics."²⁹² Here, Dabashi is arguing that Golestan's documentaries – despite their sordid subject matter and suspect financing – yielded something beautiful at a formal artistic level. I

²⁹⁰ Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema, Volume 2*, 79.

²⁹¹ Dabashi, *Masters & Masterpieces*, 78.

²⁹² Dabashi, 78.

am trying to show something different here: instead of only validating Golestan's documentaries for what they have to offer in terms of transforming the cinematic and literary arts, I insist that they also articulate a critique of the "very dirty swamp" of the oil industry.

The Wave, Coral, and Rock, begins with a scene of an oil tanker coming into port at Khark Island. The camera follows the anchor of the oil tanker as it sinks into the water, and starts following a fish. The narrator asks the fish: "What are you looking for? A sea flowers? Color on a rock? A soft light? An ancient pearl? An ancient era? Or the roots of bygone days or the seeds of a life for building the future?"²⁹³ By "the roots of bygone days," it seems that Golestan is referring to the time before the petroleum pipes reached the island, and by referring to "the seeds of a life for building the future," he invokes a moment beyond the export of oil abroad, a moment when Iran will have control over its own resources and will be able to build its own future. The narrator continues to describe the fish, poetically imagining how they are experiencing the radical change to their world brought by the oil industry:

In the region of sea, they are far from the sorrows of thoughts,
Not searching for mysteries and not able to build,
They are devoted to the fate of their surroundings,
And are building their life based on their nature,
And a mud from another world is spreading on them all the time.
Come out of this hard, mobile shell.²⁹⁴

The fish become a metaphor for the local people in the oil regions who are seen to have lived a natural life without worry and full of care for their environment until the oil industry came along. It is this evocative vocabulary that produces a kind of poetic aura, romanticizing "an ancient era" when the locals lived in harmony with nature. However, Golestan also emphasizes how this idealized past has been disrupted by noting that, in the present, the oil industry spreads mud "from another world" on the fish, mud that comes from a "hard, mobile shell," evoking the emblem of the Shell oil company and the global mobility of the tankers leaving Khark Island. This suggests a critical stance towards the oil industry on Golestan's part, expressed not directly but indirectly through metaphor. At this point in the film, the camera rises to the surface again. It shows the ancient parts of Khark Island and the local people pasturing their sheep,

²⁹³ Ebrahim Golestan, *Moj, Marjan, Khara (Wave, Coral, and Rock)*, 1962, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LAOtFB_vPGw. The voice-over narration in this film is in Persian. The translations are mine.

چه مجوبی؟ گل دریا؟ رنگی بر سنگ؟ نوری نرم؟ دُری دیرین؟ دورانی دور؟ ریشه‌ی رازی از روزگاری رفته؟ یا بذر حیاتی برای آرامش فردا؟

²⁹⁴ Golestan

و گل و لای / سپرده به تقدیر محیطاند و زندگی در بند غریزه می‌سپارند / نه جویای رازند و نه می‌سازند / در دیار دریا دورند از غم اندیشه.
سر از این سخت سیار بیرون بی/از دنیایی دیگر در پنهان پیوسته میباشد تا آن را ببوشد

pulling water from the well, and living in harmony with their surroundings. These images underline that the text spoken by the voice-over narrator about the fish also applies to the local people.

The narrator proceeds to introduce Khark Island as “a coral sitting next to the sun,” and refers to its ancient origins:

And here is Khark,
A coral sitting next to the sun.
The ancient lover of the ceaseless wave of the era,
Has the memories of faraway times in his solid chest,
The time when the world was a lasting place,
And when people directed their prayers to Nahid²⁹⁵

In this narration, Khark is portrayed as a place where life has gone on unchanged since ancient times, when people offered their prayers to Nahid, one of the goddesses of the Zoroastrians. Nahid, who is the Iranian version of Aphrodite, is the goddess of water and purity, and the Iranian name for the planet Venus. Here, Golestan appears to be trying to say that the history and civilization of Khark Island go back to ancient times, rather than only to the arrival of the oil industry.

The camera moves back to the sea and shows the deserted boats of the fishermen. At this point, the narrator notes that “some people are gone, some people have come, the sun raised, and downed, and the place which one day was full of people, became lonely.”²⁹⁶ Then the camera very slowly moves through the empty ancient alleys of Khark Island, as if taking the viewer on a quiet walk. The calmness of this scene is abruptly broken by the sound of an airplane flying overhead, as the voice-over notes: “It was in the autumn of 1957 that the scout of the future visited this deserted coral island and its twin Kharkoo island. They lay in the southern part of the soil of Persia, 30 kilometers from the land.”²⁹⁷ During this narration, the camera shows a wall collapsing, a small explosion occurring, and children running away screaming. The images invest the neutral voice-over description of the arrival of the oil industry on the island with a critical undertone, conveying the message that what the oil industry brought the locals was not a prosperous future but one of destruction and distress.

²⁹⁵ Golestan

اینک خارک/ مرجانی پیش آفتاب نشسته/ شاهد دیرین موج مستمر زمانه/ یادی از اعصاری دور در سینه سنگش بسته/ دورانی که دنیا ملک باقی بود/ و عهدی که آدمی نماز بر محراب ناهید می‌نهاد.

²⁹⁶ Golestan

مردمی رفتند و مردمی آمدند و آفتاب بر آمد و آفتاب فرو رفت و دیاری که روزگاری پر از مخلوق بود منفرد نشست.

²⁹⁷ Golestan

پاییز ۱۳۳۶ بود که پیشاهنگ عهدی آینده از خارک دیدن کرد. از این مرجانی خاک و همزادش خارکو که در ۳۰ کیلومتری جنوب ساحل نشسته اند.

The following scenes show the process of establishing the port, laying pipes, and constructing reservoirs from Gachsaran to Khark. By ship and by airplane, workers and engineers, locals and foreigners, come to the island, rapidly turning it into an industrial center. First, temporary tents appear, but soon buildings and other permanent structures are raised to prepare the port for the oil tankers. The process is shown in exquisite detail. In three years, the island is radically changed, filling with workers and new constructions. The camera also shows the advancement of the machines which guide the oil from the pipes to the oil tankers, as the narrator asks: “But where is this oil coming from?”

The film then changes the scene to Gachsaran, where the petroleum reservoirs wait underground. Here, in the southern part of the Zagros Mountains, the film concentrates on the impact of the oil industry on the life of the local nomads. Scenes of the locals shepherding sheep and making bread are followed by scenes of their lives invaded by the oil industry, with the narrator commenting:

There was steam and pain and the smell of the hot stone,
The bitter smell of bitumen,
The smell of the work of a wheel,
The smell of the work wound,
The smell of the pain of the mountain,
The bitter smell of drought,
The smell of a hot noon.²⁹⁸

Similar to other writers of Iranian petroleum fiction such as Ahmad Mahmoud and Naser Taqvayi, Golestan describes the invasion of the oil industry through the all-pervasive smell it generates, which becomes mixed with the smells of the lives of the local people in Gachsaran. This combination of scents highlights the intermingling of different ways of lives, old and new, local and foreign. The association of the smells of the oil industry with pain, bitterness, and the “work wound” suggests that the oil industry, instead of improving the lives of the locals, has made their lives worse, especially for those working for the oil company.

The scene shifts back to Khark Island after the film has shown the extraction site in Gachsaran being completed and the pipes being laid underground from Gachsaran to Khark Island. According to Golestan, this took one million two hundred thousand collective working days. At this point, the film emphasizes the labor contributed by the locals to the creation of the port, as well as to the extraction of the oil from the earth: “And every day the oil tanker

²⁹⁸ Golestan

بوی داغ ظهر / بوی تلخ خشک / بوی درد / کوه بوی زخم خاک / بوی کار چرخ / بوی تلخ قبر / دود بود و درد بود و بوی سنگ داغ

ships are coming to the shores of Khark to carry a load which is the result of years of patience of the earth and intelligence and effort of human beings. This is a load which gives life to the labor of people and doesn't have life without the labor of people."²⁹⁹ Although the film lauds the knowledge and skill required to extract oil, and makes clear that petroleum has brought employment to the regions involved in its extraction and exportation, it also shows how there can be no oil industry without local labor.

At the end of the film, the camera shows the sea as the full tanker is leaving port, focusing on the foam bubbles rising to the surface of the water in the wake of the tanker.

Golestan's voice-over notes:

Nothing reached the sedate land of pearls,
And the land of the fish who are left to the fate
But this foamy trench³⁰⁰

Returning to the fish metaphor that opened the film, Golestan evokes the fact that nothing is gained by the Iranian people from the oil industry except for these empty bubbles, which, in being said to form a trench, gain a connotation of warfare. Thus, they come to represent the severe disruption to their lives that the Iranian people have had to endure as a result of the oil encounter, without having the power to stop it.

Notably, Golestan showed this film to Mohammad Reza Shah. In an interview with Masoud Behnoud for BBC Persian in 2012, after decades living in exile, he remarks that the "Shah was the only one who got the message of the film."³⁰¹ According to Golestan, they went for a walk after watching the film and the Shah told him that "as long as I am in this country, and people like you are here too, we don't let that foamy trench be our share."³⁰² By saying this, the Shah indicated that he intended to create a situation in which the Iranian people would get their share of the petroleum revenues and not just be left with the metaphorical foam on the surface of the sea. The Shah's promise to Golestan, however, would not be fulfilled and Golestan almost cries in the interview, expressing regret that such an intelligent man as the Shah should end up suffering the tragic fate that befell him after the Iranian Revolution. The emotional scene in the interview shows the changes that have occurred in Golestan's view of

²⁹⁹ Golestan

و هر روز نفتکش ها به خارک می آیند برای بردن باری که حاصل صبر سالیان زمین است و هوش و کوشش آدمی . باری که به کار آدمی جان میدهد و بی کار آدمی جان نمیگیرد.

³⁰⁰ Golestan

و ملک مروارید آرمیده و مرجان و ماهی سپرده به تقدیر را نسبیی نرسید جز این شیاری کف آلود

³⁰¹ BBC Persian, *Interview by Masoud Behnoud with Ebrahim Golestan*.

³⁰² BBC Persian.

the last Pahlavi king. While in the 1960s he was very critical of the actions and decisions of the Pahlavis (as discussed in the following section), after decades living in exile and witnessing the atrocities of the new government of Iran towards its people, Golestan became more sympathetic to the former ruler of Iran. In *The Wave, Coral, and Rock*, Golestan's criticism already appears to be aimed more at the oil industry as a foreign-run industry that is removing resources and profits from Iran than at the Shah.

With its loans paid off, the Golestan Film Workshop became independent from the oil company and consortium in 1961-1962. Golestan moved his office to Tehran and began to produce films by himself. Among the most famous films of his studio are *The House is Black* (1963), directed by Forough Farrokhzad, and *The Brick and Mirror* (1965), directed by Golestan himself. *The House is Black* is the only film directed by Farrokhzad and is about a sanatorium for leprosy patients in Tabriz. In the film, Farrokhzad and Golestan both recite from the Quran and the New Testament, and Farrokhzad's poems appear in the voice-over of the film. *The Brick and the Mirror* is the first feature film directed by Golestan. Both films are known as harbingers of Iran's New Wave Cinema. In 1967, Farrokhzad, who was the first Iranian woman modernist poet, died in a car accident in the north of Tehran. After this, Golestan, who had a wife and two children, emigrated to England. The nature of Golestan and Farrokhzad's relationship remained mysterious until 2012, when, in an interview with Masoud Behnoud, Golestan confessed it had been a romantic relationship.³⁰³ Golestan returned to Iran in 1974 to make one last film commenting on the oil industry, which I will discuss in the next section.

The Secret of the Treasure at Ghost Valley and the 1970s Petroleum Boom

In the foothills of a mountainous area, a poor farmer falls into a well while he is plowing his land with his skinny cow. When he climbs out of the well, he sees himself on top of the world. The small piece of land that he plows every year, where he plants a small number of seeds, and from which he harvests his meager crops, is now a tall watchtower. The poor farmer looks out over the valleys, and at the hills under his feet, and screams out of happiness.

This is the first scene of Golestan's 1974 film *The Secret of the Treasure at Ghost Valley*,³⁰⁴ after the making of which he left Iran forever. The film's protagonist, a man who has no name, keeps finding treasures under his farm and selling them to a jeweler in the city,

³⁰³ BBC Persian.

³⁰⁴ *Asrar Gang-e Darre Jenni* has also been translated into English as *Ghost Valley's Treasure Mystery*. I will use the translation suggested by Hamid Dabashi in *Masters & Masterpieces of Iranian Cinema*.

becoming richer and richer in the process. As Abbas Milani notes in his reading of the film, “suddenly, money and richness, fantastic in proportion, and apparently infinite in supply, are at his disposal.”³⁰⁵ The jeweler, however, seeks to take advantage of the protagonist and tries to find out the source of the treasures. Together with his wife, they introduce their servant to the protagonist. The latter decides to marry the servant, who is more sophisticated than his rural wife back in the village. At the suggestion of the jeweler’s wife, they decide to buy furniture and have a lavish wedding party in the village. The jeweler’s wife, still trying to find out where the treasures come from, convinces the protagonist to hire an art expert to enhance his artistic taste. Together, the jeweler’s wife and the art expert become the protagonist’s assistants, helping him to spend his money. They follow him everywhere but are not successful in finding the source of his wealth. Meanwhile, every now and then, the protagonist goes into his cave, smashes the golden treasures and breaks down the antiques, and sells them to the jeweler. He collects the treasures with a shovel and pours them into a gunnysack, all the while preserving his secret.

The Secret of the Treasure at Ghost Valley is best known for predicting the Iranian Revolution, which took place in February 1979. It ends by showing the protagonist running away from his village and his mansion lying in ruins, which is very similar to the destiny of the last king of Iran after the revolution. In *The Persian Sphinx: Amir Abbas Hoveyda and the Riddle of the Iranian Revolution*, which describes Iranian cultural productions during the time of prime minister Amir Abbas Hoveyda, Milani writes that the story of Golestan’s film “is ostensibly about the perils of sudden wealth but is actually a subversively clever account of Iran’s skewed path to modernity.”³⁰⁶ In an interview with Masoud Behnoud, Golestan himself says that the film is not a comedy, nor is it a satire. Rather, “it is farce ... it is about a dramatic situation represented in a supposed-to-be funny story. But it is not a story to laugh at. This is what I was seeing in Iran in those years. It is a farce.”³⁰⁷

To understand what Golestan considered so farcical at the time, we need to go back to the historical events of this period, which revolved around oil. The oil revenues of the 1970s made the Shah of Iran one of the richest and most influential figures of the world. Revenues were so high because of the newly established OAPPEC (Organization for Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries), which reduced petroleum sales to the United States and Israel in response

³⁰⁵ Abbas Milani, *The Persian Sphinx: Amir Abbas Hoveyda and the Riddle of the Iranian Revolution: A Biography* (I.B.Tauris, 2000), 259.

³⁰⁶ Milani, *The Persian Sphinx*, 259.

³⁰⁷ Jahed, *Writing with a Camera*, 195.

لگد هست. پرده پاره کردن است. میگو مرتیکه گوش کن این زندگی شماسست، این بدبختی شماسست. این طنز نیست.

to 1973 Yom Kippur War, allowing Iran, as a non-OAPEC country, to sell more oil than ever before. According to Abrahamian, oil revenue in the year 1963-64 was \$555 million “and continued to climb, reaching \$958 million in 1968-1969, \$1.2 billion in 1970-1971, \$5 billion in 1973-1974, and, after the quadrupling of world petroleum prices, near \$20 billion in 1975-1976.”³⁰⁸ The flow of money into the country strengthened the position of the Pahlavis and allowed them to pursue their dreams of modernization in the economic and political realms. Towns expanded rapidly and people migrated in large numbers to the big cities. However, although the amount of money entering the country was high, inflation also rose during the 1970s. This meant that massive amounts of goods were imported without customers being able to buy them. The distribution of the country’s new wealth was staggeringly unequal and resulted in obvious and disturbing class differences within Iranian society.

The modernization reforms of the so-called White Revolution and the inequality they caused led to the emergence of resistance and, eventually, to the Islamic Revolution in 1979, which overthrew the Pahlavi dynasty and installed Ayatollah Khomeini as Iran’s supreme leader. There are many viewpoints on what exactly caused the Revolution. The two most important ones are presented by Abrahamian in *Iran Between Two Revolutions*:

One interpretation--accepted by supporters of the Pahlavi regime--claims that the revolution occurred because the Shah modernized too much and too quickly for his traditional-minded and backward-looking people. The other--favored by opponents of the regime--argues that the revolutions occurred because the Shah did not modernize fast enough and thoroughly enough to overcome his initial handicap of being a CIA-installed monarch in an age of nationalism, neutralism, and republicanism.³⁰⁹

Abrahamian concludes that neither of these interpretations is correct: “the revolution took place neither because of overdevelopment nor because of underdevelopment but because of uneven development.”³¹⁰

The story of the protagonist in *The Secret of the Treasure at Ghost Valley* parallels the story of Iran during the oil boom. Golestan aims to show viewers of the film how petroleum money shaped modern Iranian culture and emphasizes the fragility of this culture. The story of the protagonist, which ends in misery, conveys the idea that Iran has treasures in its soil but that its people do not deserve these treasures because they do not know what to do with them and because they will try to take the treasures from each other. Having moved away from the

³⁰⁸ Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions*, 427.

³⁰⁹ Abrahamian, 426.

³¹⁰ Abrahamian, 427.

poetic language of his earlier films, Golestan now resorts to the explicitly satirical language of the farce.

Because of its portrayal of the deteriorating modernity, the film was considered to predict the Revolution and was banned by SAVAK soon after it was released. Golestan was aware that the film would likely be banned and wrote a novel with the same title parallel to directing the film, in case he would not be able to release the film. In the preface of the novel, he explains: “I write this book based on the film with the same title. I wrote the dialogue of the book simultaneously with the film in summer and autumn 1971.”³¹¹ When the film was indeed banned, Golestan gave the novel to Mojtaba Minovi to publish it.³¹² It was printed twice before the Islamic Revolution. In what follows, I will elaborate on the story told in the film and the novel, and how it comments on the Iranian petroleum boom of the 1970s. I will discuss how Golestan, in the form of a satirical farce, attacks the Shah’s modernization programs and criticizes the Pahlavis’ lavish lifestyle. I will also show how Golestan predicts the escape of the Pahlavi family and their supporters during the chaotic time of the Revolution.

After getting married to the jeweler’s maid, the protagonist decides to take his new wife and furniture back to his hometown to show them off to his fellow villagers. The scene in which he is transporting the furniture to his home village evokes the sudden import of European modernization to Iran without the population being prepared for it. Golestan describes how city life has altered the protagonist’s habits in the novel version of *The Secret of the Treasure at Ghost Valley*:

He doesn’t wear traditional dress anymore. With the guidance of the jeweler’s wife, his fashion designer was sewing special clothes for him. There were also changes beneath the clothes! He had carried so many antiques to the bazaar that he was free from the ordinary expenses of life. Being in that stage was like a second birth. Although spending money was fun, actually it was a kind of revelation of his existence, it was adding to his existence. [With the money] he was buying power, dignity and identity. Power through wealth was freeing him from being worthy of suspicion in the eyes of others and was making him optimistic. Wealth was [coming] very fast and this fastness had made him conceited and distinct. Although this was compensation for the bitterness of the past, it also emphasized the miseries of the past life. The changes were also beneath his clothes, although they went no further than the skin.³¹³

References to the man’s outfit, the guidance he takes on how to become modernized, and his attempts to mimic as closely as possible the latest fashions can be read as reflections on the

³¹¹ Jahed, *Writing with a Camera*, 195.

³¹² BBC Persian, *Ebrahim Golestan*, accessed March 13, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NtE63syTCcs>.

³¹³ Ebrahim Golestan. *Asrar-e Ganj-e Darre Jenni (The Secret of the Treasure at Ghost Valley)* (Rozan, 1974), 77. All translations of quotes from this novel are mine.

habits of the Pahlavis. The protagonist buys modern household appliances for his new bride: a fridge, a water-heater, an oven, a washing machine, a television and a radio, but also a fruit juice maker, a toaster, a meat grinder, a coffee maker, an ice cream maker, a vacuum cleaner, an iron, and a slow cooker. These appliances had been introduced to Iran by the Pahlavis and presented as superior to traditional household tools. In the novel, the opulence of the protagonist's new furnishings is emphasized:

Golden furniture in the style that belonged to the different Louis', dining tables with Persepolis pillars for feet, a bed in the Spanish style, an original painting by Hossein Qollar Aqasi with plants, an eagle, a pigeon, a swan, a peacock, and lions sitting and sleeping and standing up, bare women, a swan fountain, and an eagle's eye that was red and lit with a battery. He also remembered that he had promised to buy a flute for his son. He thought that the flute was too small; he wanted to buy the biggest instrument for his son. The biggest wind instrument was a huge shiny saxophone. He bought that too. And because this was bigger than the child, he bought a jazz drum set with all its accessories.³¹⁴

In the film, *Golestan* shows the contrast between these furnishings and traditional Iranian village life by providing a long shot of the path along which the furniture is being carried on the backs of donkeys and horses (Figure 4.5).



Figure 4.5: Screenshot from *The Secret of the Treasure at Ghost Valley*

This scene is reminiscent of the way the Pahlavis were importing furniture and the other trappings of a modern European life to Iran. In his book *Shah of Shahs* (1982), the Polish journalist Ryszard Kapuscinski, who was a witness to this, wrote about the sudden wealth of Mohammad Reza Shah and how it was spent:

³¹⁴ *Golestan*, 81.

In the meantime, the Shah is making purchases costing billions, and ships full of merchandise are steaming toward Iran from all the continents. But when they reach the Gulf, it turns out that the small obsolete ports are unable to handle such a mass of cargo (the Shah hadn't realized this). Several hundred ships line up at sea and stay there for up to six months, for which delay Iran pays the shipping companies a billion dollars annually. Somehow the ships are gradually unloaded, but then it turns out that there are no warehouses (the Shah hadn't realized). In the open air, in the desert, in nightmarish tropical heat, lie millions of tons of all sorts of cargo. Half of it, consisting of perishable foodstuffs and chemicals, ends up being thrown away.³¹⁵

Kapuscinski adds that transferring the cargo to the center of Iran proved impossible:

The remaining cargo now has to be transported into the depths of the country, and at this moment it turns out that there is no transport (the Shah hadn't realized). Or rather, there are a few trucks and trailers, but only a crumb in comparison to the need. Two thousand tractor-trailers are thus ordered from Europe, but then it turns out there are no drivers (the Shah hadn't realized). After much consultation, an airliner flies off to bring South Korean truckers from Seoul. Now the tractor-trailers start rolling and begin to transport the cargo, but once the truck drivers pick up few words of Farsi, they discover they're making only half as much as native truckers. Outraged, they abandon their rigs and return to Korea. The trucks unused to this day, still sit, covered with sand, along the Bandar Abbas-Tehran highway.³¹⁶

Thus, a situation that looks like a comic invention in the film had unfolded as a farce in reality. The Pahlavi family was obsessed with modern art and furniture. Farah Pahlavi, the third and last wife of Mohammad Reza Shah, was famous for importing the most modern pieces of art from across the globe. For her wedding, she wore an Yves Saint Laurent dress and a two-kilogram Harry Winston tiara. She was famous for her excessive spending, especially on her lavish coronation in 1966 and on the celebrations of the 2,500-year anniversary of the Persian Empire in 1971.

In Golestan's film, the protagonist only buys furniture to display it to the people of the village so that they will envy him. The furniture gets bumped and scratched on the way as they cross over hills and rivers. And then, as they reach the man's house, it starts raining. As the rain soaks and ruins the furniture, the protagonist curses the rain and calls for the men of the village to come and see his wealth. The next problem is that the man's old, muddy house is not suitable for the modern furniture. As Golestan puts it in the novel: "Bathroom needs water, and Water-heater needs oil. Fridge needs oil or electricity. The kitchen needs gas."³¹⁷ The man is shocked that the salesman did not give him this information and complains to the local teacher,

³¹⁵ Ryszard Kapuscinski, *Shah of Shahs*, Reprint edition (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985), 53.

³¹⁶ Kapuscinski, 56.

³¹⁷ Golestan, *The Secret of the Treasure at Ghost Valley*, 106.

showing his illiteracy: “he said all of these are ‘Oftomatic.’”³¹⁸ The teacher replies that there is nothing to worry about, for “when these things come, the other things will come too. Oil, water, electricity and gas. When there is money, buying them is not a burden.”³¹⁹ He adds: “but this furniture is not compatible with this house.”³²⁰ And he adds that, “they need pipes, wastewater storage, water and tiles, etc.”³²¹

The teacher adds: “The house that we are going to build should be compatible with the soul of our time! With our national wealth. Inherited wealth of previous eras should be considered as much as possible. It should be the base of our work. We have to get inspired from what came before. As a noble foundation of our work.”³²² At this point, the protagonist interrupts him and asks what he means. The teacher continues: “a firm and sturdy base.”³²³ Here, the teacher represents the Iranian intellectuals of the time, who knew one or two foreign languages and were constantly inserting foreign words into their Persian sentences. At the same time, the protagonist takes the position of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, who is portrayed as ignorant and not able to understand what the teacher is saying.

Finally, at the instigation of the teacher, who is getting his orders from the jeweler’s wife, the man decides to renovate his house. Symbolizing the pretentiousness of the *nouveaux riche*, the man only wants to fix the exterior, as his only concern is with appearances. The teacher replies: “we have to renovate the inside of the house to be able to have a kitchen and a bathroom and these sorts of things.”³²⁴ He adds: “About the exterior! We can keep it. It is interesting. It is traditional.”³²⁵ The man becomes anxious: “Who the hell is Teraditsi? It is the appearance that counts, people come to see the appearance.”³²⁶ To this, the teacher gives a sarcastic reply: “yes, you are right. Instead of the inside you can change the appearance. It is more convenient. You are right. Because you are familiar with the inside of the house. But it is easier to change the exterior design.”³²⁷ It is quite clear that the protagonist does not pick up on the teacher’s sarcasm. The scene continues with the teacher asking about the materials the man wants to use for the exterior of the house. The latter replies: “It should be beautiful. Marble

³¹⁸ Golestan, 106.

³¹⁹ Golestan, 106.

³²⁰ Golestan, 107.

³²¹ Golestan, 107.

³²² Golestan, 114.

³²³ Golestan, 114.

³²⁴ Golestan, 115.

³²⁵ Golestan, 115.

³²⁶ Golestan, 115.

³²⁷ Golestan, 115.

stone or tiles?”³²⁸ The teacher suggests that they could use a material that is very fast to work with and looks like marble from a distance. Its name is Plastofoam. The man asks: “does it come from abroad?”³²⁹ The teacher replies: “it comes from the petroleum.”³³⁰ This is the only time in the film where Golestan refers to petroleum directly, as the constituent of plastof foam and also as the financial source for the changes occurring in the village. The scene ends by showing the workers who have begun to change the appearance of the house.

After the house has been prepared, it is time for the protagonist’s wedding to his second wife. In the wedding scenes, Golestan is mocking the 2,500-year celebration of the Persian Empire, marking its foundation by Cyrus the Great, which was held in and around the city of Shiraz in 1971. The planning for these celebrations took an entire year and six hundred guests were invited, including several heads of state. The costs of the lavish ceremony were unimaginably high and were paid from oil revenues. According to Robert Steele, in his book *The Shah’s Imperial Celebrations of 1971*, the commemoration was specifically organized for an international audience: “the event signaled the beginning of a new period prosperity and global influence for Iran. No longer was Iran to be the plaything of imperial powers; Iran was now a significant player on the international stage.”³³¹ He describes how the celebrations included:

a ceremony at the tomb of Cyrus at Pasargadae, an international congress of irenology, a parade and *son et Lumiere* at Persepolis, the inauguration of the Shahyad Tower and Aryamehr Stadium in Tehran, and a wreath-lying ceremony at the tomb of Reza Pahlavi.³³²

The celebrations took place in the ancient city of Persepolis, near Shiraz. The Shah stood in front of the tomb of Cyrus the Great in order to open the ceremony. The celebrations are mentioned in many studies of modern Iran as signifying the beginning of “the end of the long, languorous, and demented obscenity of monarchy as a political institution.”³³³ According to Steele, “the most controversial event, . . . , which provoked the disgust of the Pahlavi regime’s political opponents, was the gala dinner, held for guests at the banquet hall of the specially constructed tent city complex by the ancient ruins of Persepolis.”³³⁴

³²⁸ Golestan, 115.

³²⁹ Golestan, 116.

³³⁰ Golestan, 116.

³³¹ Robert Steele, *The Shah’s Imperial Celebrations of 1971: Nationalism, Culture and Politics in Late Pahlavi Iran* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020), 1.

³³² Steele, 2.

³³³ Dabashi, *Masters & Masterpieces*, 133.

³³⁴ Steele, *The Shah’s Imperial Celebrations of 1971*, 2.

Both Golestan's film and novel mock this dinner in their portrayal of the protagonist's wedding. The novel emphasizes its excess by enumerating all the dishes served:

There are all kinds of food on the tables---from sheep's heads and feet to avocado. From cucumber and eggplant to caviar and blini. From local rice dishes to Foie Gras from Strasbourg, white cheese, Stilton cheese (the Fortnum and Mason brand). Big trays full of Tahchins; in the Tahchins there were partridges and hen-pheasants instead of chickens. Lots of fruits and bottles of wine. All the wines are Chianti because the straw basket was more attractive. There were so many fish dishes it was as if the tables were a sea: Souf, white and king fishes; grilled and full. Some with potato puree, which was designed like waves. And on top of all these, there was a complete cooked lamb every three to four feet along the tables. They were sitting on their four legs, which were ornamented with golden foil.³³⁵

Abbas Milani believes that the wedding party of the man in the film/novel is "not unlike Shah's extravagant 2,500 years of monarchy celebration."³³⁶ The wedding scene is depicted as chaotic. There is a huge visual contrast between the guests attending the party and the villagers – a contrast that resembles the contrast between the participants in the Shah's 2,500-year celebration and the locals of Shiraz Province in the center of Iran. In addition, in the film, the camera lingers on the food-laden tables and the local people, who have probably never encountered some of the foods before, and who marvel at them.

After the wedding, the protagonist proceeds to build a new house on top of the hills, ordering the construction of a tower. This new construction (Figure 4.6), which, comprised of two huge round buildings with a minaret in-between them, resembles a phallus, is covered with clay, has walls of plaster board, and is filled with furniture. In order to build the mansion, trees are cut down and new roads built. Everything is painted white, even the walls, the old wood, and the barbed wire. From a distance, Golestan shows the elders of the village participating in the painting work. To contemporary Iranian viewers, the pace of the transformation of the village would have looked very similar to the pace of transformation throughout Iran during the 1960s and 1970s, when new roads were laid, large buildings constructed, and the whole country transformed into a modern, developed country, without proper foundations having been laid for the new situation.

³³⁵ Golestan, *The Secret of the Treasure at Ghost Valley*, 130.

³³⁶ Milani, *The Persian Sphinx*, 259.



Figure 4.6: Screenshot from *The Secret of the Treasure at Ghost Valley*

At the wedding, the teacher gives a long and boring speech about the construction that preceded it, which nobody understands. He says: “If in the past our buildings consisted of one dome and two minarets, now we have one minaret and two domes. The domes, instead of being semicircular, are full balls now.”³³⁷ This explicit reference to the phallus-shaped mansion is one of the most audacious allusions in the history of Iranian cinema and was only possible because Golestan knew that this would be his last film in Iran. Abbas Milani, who writes about this film in his article “Zoroaster and the Ayatollahs,” refers to the tragicomic aspect of these blatant references to the Pahlavis and their forced modernization policies. He believes that “The Man, and his tragicomic effort to ‘modernize’ his house by simply buying the accoutrements of a contemporary life, was an unmistakable allusion to the shah’s inability to wisely manage the sudden surge of income.”³³⁸ In its supreme tastelessness, the mansion is a repudiation of all the ambitious but often unsuccessful modernization programs of the Pahlavis. Its resemblance to the Pahlavis’ palaces in the foothills of north Tehran makes clear that Golestan is mocking the lifestyle of the Shah and other Iranian aristocrats, made possible by petroleum money. He contrasts the ruthlessness and rootlessness of the imported modernization by the Shah and his allies with the simple surroundings of the protagonist’s village. The protagonist, who in the past has been humiliated by the other villagers because of his poverty, just like the Shah was humiliated by the 1953 coup d’état, is shown as having become obsessed with showing off his possessions.

³³⁷ Golestan, *The Secret of the Treasure at Ghost Valley*, 131.

³³⁸ Abbas Milani, “Zoroaster and the Ayatollahs,” *Text, The National Interest*, December 16, 2010, <https://nationalinterest.org/article/zoroaster-the-ayatollahs-4580>.

As the laborers are creating new roads to the village, the dynamite causes an earthquake that reduces everything to rubble, forcing the protagonist and the villagers to flee. A policeman, a shopkeeper, and the head of the village are buried alive in the man's treasure cave. As the villagers are escaping, the painter's attention is drawn to the blades of the bulldozer and he realizes that they are broken and dirty. In an interview with Parviz Jahed, Golestan notes that the blades are a metaphor for the devices of modernization.³³⁹ The scene, then, highlights the destructive and dirty side of forced modernization, as well as its fragility when it is without solid foundations: in the village, anything that was built or bought with the money made from selling the buried treasures is ruined in an instant. The film ends with the jeweler and his wife, the man's wives, the teacher, and other villagers leaving for Tehran. The man himself stays in the village. This last scene of the film predicts the Revolution by suggesting that the treasure, which stands for Iran's oil reserves, will be the cause of the country's breakdown. The departure of all of those who had been looking for the treasure from the village is very similar to the Pahlavis' emigration from Iran after the Revolution.

The Secret of the Treasure at Ghost Valley is not Golestan's most polished film, as it is clear that it was made in a hurry. However, it effectively communicated, to the small number of people able to see it before it was banned, the powerful message that petroleum modernity, because of its rootlessness, was fragile and would end up damaging Iran. The film did not circulate clandestinely in Iran after it was banned, and after the Revolution its subject matter was no longer of interest to the people, as the Shah had left. The film contrasts starkly with Golestan's early documentaries in its explicit criticism of the Shah and in its farcical dimensions, but what unites the documentaries and the film is Golestan's exposure of the dark underside of the oil industry and its negative effects on the workers, the nomads and, ultimately, the Iranian nation as a whole.

Conclusion

The encounter between cinema and petroleum in Abadan began with fire, and ended with fire. In the summer of 1978, while the censored version of the film *The Deer* (Gavazn-ha 1974), directed by Masoud Kimiai, was being screened for an audience of around 403 people, young and old, the doors of Cinema Rex in Abadan were locked after a fire had been started, leaving

³³⁹ Jahed, *Writing with a Camera*, 270.

the audience to burn alive. Naficy believes that Islamist arsonists were responsible.³⁴⁰ Similarly, Dabashi argues that the burning of cinemas was a form of “symbolic protest”³⁴¹ against the westernized Pahlavis on the part of Islamist revolutionaries. These protests foreshadowed the Iranian Revolution and the new Islamist regime’s determination to undo the modernizations effected by the Shah.

Although the main focus of this study is on literary rather than on cinematic portrayals of the oil encounter in Iran, it is vital to discuss the work of the Golestan Film Workshop. As I have shown in this chapter, the GFW played an important role in reflecting (on) the petroleum industry and the modernization processes accompanying it in the 1960s and 1970s: first, it made the daily operations of the oil industry and its impact on the lives of local people in petroleum-producing regions visible to Iranian audiences, including those located far away from these regions and those who were illiterate. Second, by providing a space for intellectuals to gather following the 1953 coup d’état, the GFW contributed to the survival and flourishing of modern Iranian literature. Golestan himself was also an author and the novel version of *The Secrets of Treasure at Ghost Valley* probably had a wider reach than the controversial film, which was quickly banned. Third and finally, despite initially relying on foreign and oil money to make his films, Golestan showed moral courage in incorporating a critical perspective on the oil industry even in documentaries commissioned by the industry, and especially in explicitly criticizing the Shah and the petroleum-driven modernity of the time in *The Secret of the Treasure at Ghost Valley*. As will be explained in the following chapter, forced modernization fueled Golestan’s and other intellectuals’ critiques of the oil industry and its miraculous but ultimately false promises of prosperity for all.

³⁴⁰ Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema, Volume 2*, 386; see also Karim Niku Nazar, *Cinema Jahannam: Shesh Gozaresh Darbare Adam Sooz dar Cinema Rex (Cinema Hell: Six Reports of Arson at the Cinema Rex)* (Nashr Cheshmeh, 2019).

³⁴¹ Dabashi, *Close Up*, 6.