

TEHRAN NOIR

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Midnight Terror (1961)

Samuel Khachikian and the Rise and Fall of Iranian Genre Films

the films of Samuel Khachikian have, as the director's name suggests, a strange ambiguity. One of the father figures of Iranian cinema, Khachikian was for 40 years synonymous with popular genre films inspired by Hollywood and enjoyed by big audiences. His formal innovations and fluid handling of genres not only expanded the possibilities of cinema in Iran, but reflected the specific social and political tensions of a country building to revolution.

Hollywood style in modern Tehran

In the 1950s and '60s, the premieres of Khachikian's films would cause traffic jams. Newly built cinemas opened with the latest Khachikian, who was dubbed the "Iranian Hitchcock," a title he disliked.

Khachikian's films provide us with images of a bygone era in Iran: Cadillacs roaring through the streets, women in skirts parading to the next house party, bars open until the small hours of the morning, dancers grooving to the swing of a modernized, post-coup Tehran—all soon to collapse into revolution. The films are part documentary, part product of Khachikian's fantasy of an Iran that has successfully absorbed Hollywood style.

The films were unique in the way in which they could almost be passed off as foreign productions. His classic *Midnight Terror* (1961) was reportedly bought and dubbed by the Italians; with names changed, it's as if the story had been set in Milan. Fully aware of the deep contradictions of this encounter between cultures, however, the films manifest a sense of unease. Khachikian's attention to the fetishistic celebration of automobiles, fashion, and glamorous mansions were so many symbols through which he could reflect injustice, class conflict, and identity confusion in Iran.

The 37 films Khachikian made between the early 1950s and the late 1990s include melodramas, war films, crime films, musicals, comedies, and horror. He brought form and style to a formless national cinema. Empty-handed and under-funded, Khachikian was seen by some as a

Storm in Our City (1958)



While certain elements of Khachikian's films are specifically Iranian, his directing style made his movies easily transferable to foreign markets. Italians thought *Midnight Terror* (above) was made in Milan. Right: Farsi language poster for *Midnight Terror*

savior of Iranian cinema; others judged his work to be derivative. Imitator or innovator, he was certainly imitated by many lesser directors—and no one could deny that Samuel Khachikian was Iranian cinema's first “name above the title.”

An Armenian in Tehran

Khachikian's parents fled the Armenian genocide and settled in Tabriz, Iran, where he was born in 1923. The stories of the genocide told by his father would inform Khachikian's work wherever it required macabre and grotesque elements.

When the tumultuous political climate of Tabriz forced the family to move to Tehran, a new world was opened up to Khachikian. How he learned to make films only a short time after his arrival in the capital remains a mystery. He claimed that Youssef Chahine sent him film books, and that the Hollywood producer Dore Schary's book on film production, published in 1950, was a source of inspiration. Khachikian had never set foot on a film set or in a film school.

Khachikian was one of a group of Armenian-Iranians whose contributions to the Iranian arts are of great significance, notably in the cinema, where the director of the first fiction film was Ovanes Ohanian. Khachikian recognized the importance of the director's role by

comparing two Garbo films, concluding that under the direction of Rouben Mamoulian—another fellow Armenian—one of the films had been transformed into “something else,” something worth dying for.

In 1953, the influential producer Sanasar Khachaturian asked him to direct *The Return*. The film failed, but the success of a second film, *A Girl from Shiraz* (1954), allowed Khachikian to demand more freedom, taking on the responsibility of writing, editing, selecting the music, and even for the first time in Iranian cinema, making a trailer for his films.

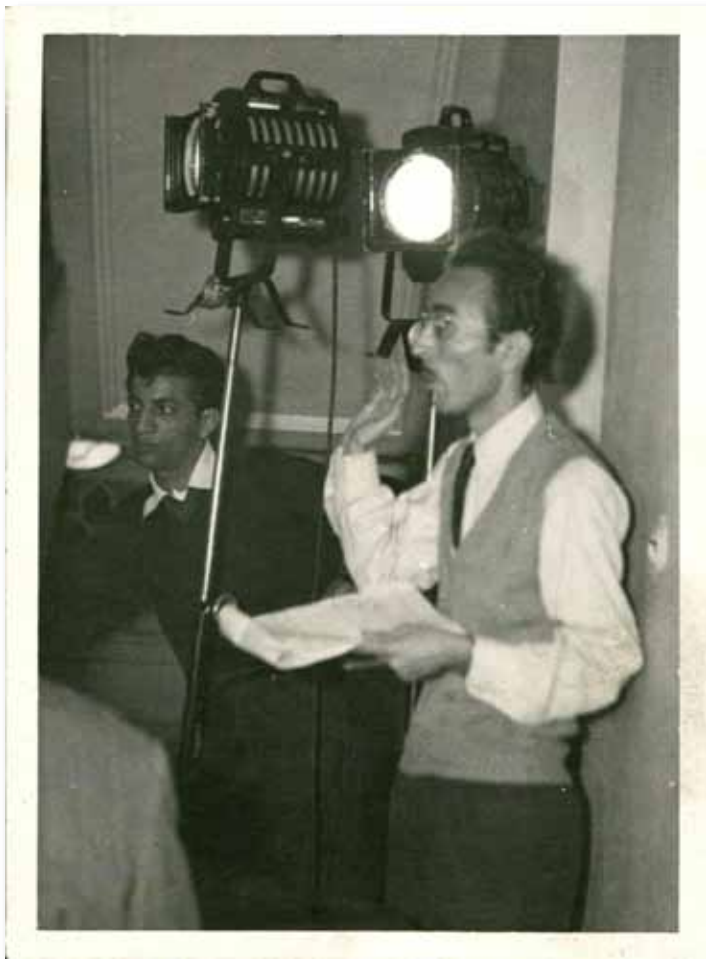
The Golden Years

Khachikian described the experience of making his first two films as “falling into the trap of *filmfarsi* [the Iranian commercial cinema of the time].” However, his third feature, *The Crossroads of Events* (1955), about a “nice young man” who becomes involved with criminals in order to satisfy the girl of his

dreams, proved a big hit.

The film is characteristic of the Iranian cinema of the '50s and has a charming, if uneven, quality. Khachikian moves between masterful sequences—including a jewelry heist—and somewhat irrelevant ones. He packs the film with details and cinematic innovations, aiming for a totally visual mode of storytelling. Handicapped by poor dialogue,

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Above: Khachikian at work on the set of *Storm in Our City*

Top right: the dramatic climax of *Storm in Our City*

Bottom right: Movie fans crowding a Tehran street for the film's 1958 premiere

melodramatic scenes, and outdated technical aspects, the film's success nevertheless established Khachikian as a master of thrillers.

By the late 1950s, Khachikian had perfected a language of his own, with an imaginative use of sound, low-key photography, fast cutting and unusual camera angles, typically used to depict a world of sin and crime. Yet, he had no fear of experimenting further, as in the immensely popular *A Party in Hell* (1956), a comedy-horror-fantasy-musical about a loan shark named Haji Agha, who spends a night in hell bumping into celebrities ranging from Tarzan to Hitler. The first Iranian film ever presented at an international film festival, being selected by the Berlinale, it takes obvious pleasure in creating a sense of madness and joy, but it carries within it a shrewd social commentary, with an allusion to Hell's fire burning with the oil exploited by the Americans.

The confident, flexible handling of genres is also a key element of *Storm in Our City* (1958), which sees the fates of a madman, a homeless woman, a print shop worker, and a playboy interweaving in the days leading up to Persian New Year. In this wild, sometimes incomprehensible film, one finds Khachikian's critique of the modernization of Iran as something both promising and disturbing. While the film's expressionist vision is akin to a Uni-

versal horror film, it is clear that the "monster" is for Khachikian the creation of an unjust society rather than a mad scientist.

The massive success of *Storm* also helped Khachikian to establish his own studio, Azhir Film, with Joseph Vaezian. Khachikian temporarily left the studio after a bitter disagreement with Vaezian and lent his talents to the infamous producer Mehdi Misaqiye, for whom he achieved success with *Midnight Terror* (a remake of *Gilda*). But Misaqiye's continual interference and his taking of undue credit left Khachikian disillusioned once again, and he returned to Azhir Film. He then made two films back to back, which became the studio's biggest hits: *Anxiety* and *The Strike*.

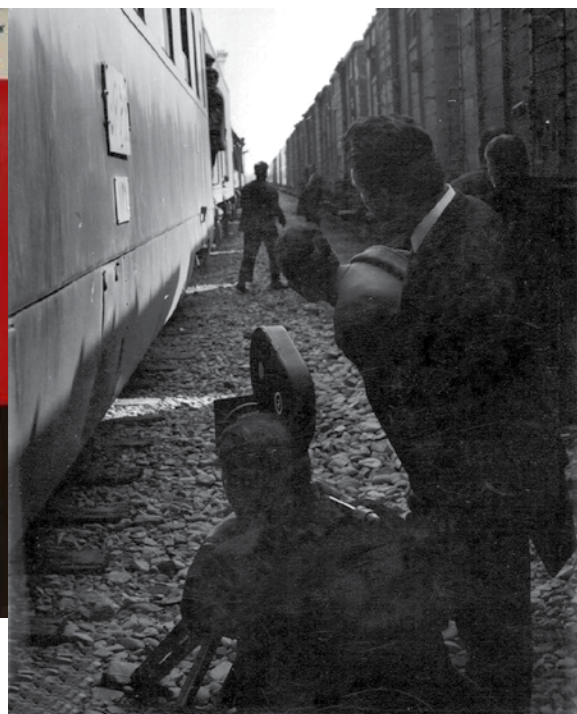
Anxiety (1962) is a tense story of deceit, blackmail, and murder (with a nod to Clouzot's 1955 film *Les diaboliques*) in which Khachikian maps the emergence of a new bourgeoisie class—with their modern homes, maids, American cars, and subscription magazines.

The Strike (1964) concerns a destitute married man (played by Khachikian regular Arman) whose daughter is the center of attention for both a corrupt colleague and a doctor who is treating his terminally ill wife. It begins as a rather tedious, clichéd melodrama, but then Khachikian shifts into a meticulously designed spectacle of terror, as if taking revenge on the preceding drama. The setting of an ordinary house becomes a site of peril and a stage for perverse pleasures, the director playing with

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Anxiety aka Horror (1962) is a wildly entertaining suspenser that borrows liberally from Clouzot's *Les diaboliques* and Hitchcock's *Vertigo*, rendered in Khachikian's inimitable style
Right: the director at work shooting *Anxiety*



filmic elements to the point of abstraction. Khachikian explains this as his attempt to “revive the alphabet of film” in Iranian cinema: “I wanted to save Iranian cinema from *roohoz* [a popular and vulgar form of theatre]. From the first day onwards, it wasn’t the message or the content that I was concerned with. What I wanted was a precise cinema: action, correct editing, lighting and so on.”

His films moved fast, to the extent that he considered Persian too sluggish for his purposes. The dialogue scenes were, therefore, usually shot at 22fps to give them the pace they lacked! Lack of resources also had dynamic effects. At one point, the only camera available to Khachikian was so worn out that he couldn’t shoot for more than 25 seconds without the camera bursting into flames.

By this point in his career, the way in which Khachikian would develop his stories was clear: a dramatic, tightly edited opening; a documentary-style tour of Tehran, abruptly interrupted by a violent incident. Characters are derived, even in their appearance, from American films. But he introduced talented actors and future superstars such as Nasser Malek Motii, Iraj Ghaderi, and Reza Beik Imanverdi. His technical influence was no less significant. Some of the great names of the Iranian New Wave, such as Masoud Kimiai and Khosrow Haritash, were his assistants, while Amir Naderi served as his still photographer.

By 1965, Iranian cinema was divided: the staggering success of *The Treasure of Gharoun* (Siamak Yasemi) meant a return to “pre-alphabet cinema,” shattering the dreams of Khachikian. On the other hand, the commercially unsuccessful, yet highly influential release of *Brick and Mirror* (Ebrahim Golestan) marked the birth of a modern cinema made for arthouses. Khachikian belonged to neither group and in the following decade there was no space in between. With his usual humil-

ity, he said: “I wasn’t either progressive or regressive, but a bridge between the two.”

But progressive he was. He introduced strong-willed women characters to Iranian cinema. When he remade *Sabrina* as *Hengameh* (1968), instead of two brothers competing over a girl, two sisters compete over a man. This semi-feminist attitude is also evident in one of his last successful films, *Farewell to Tehran* (1966) in which a nurse fights bandits with a machine gun.

After 1965, however, his films showed clear signs of compromise and decline. After the emergence of the modernist directors in the 1970s and the rise of sex and violence in Iranian mainstream films, Khachikian quickly went out of fashion.

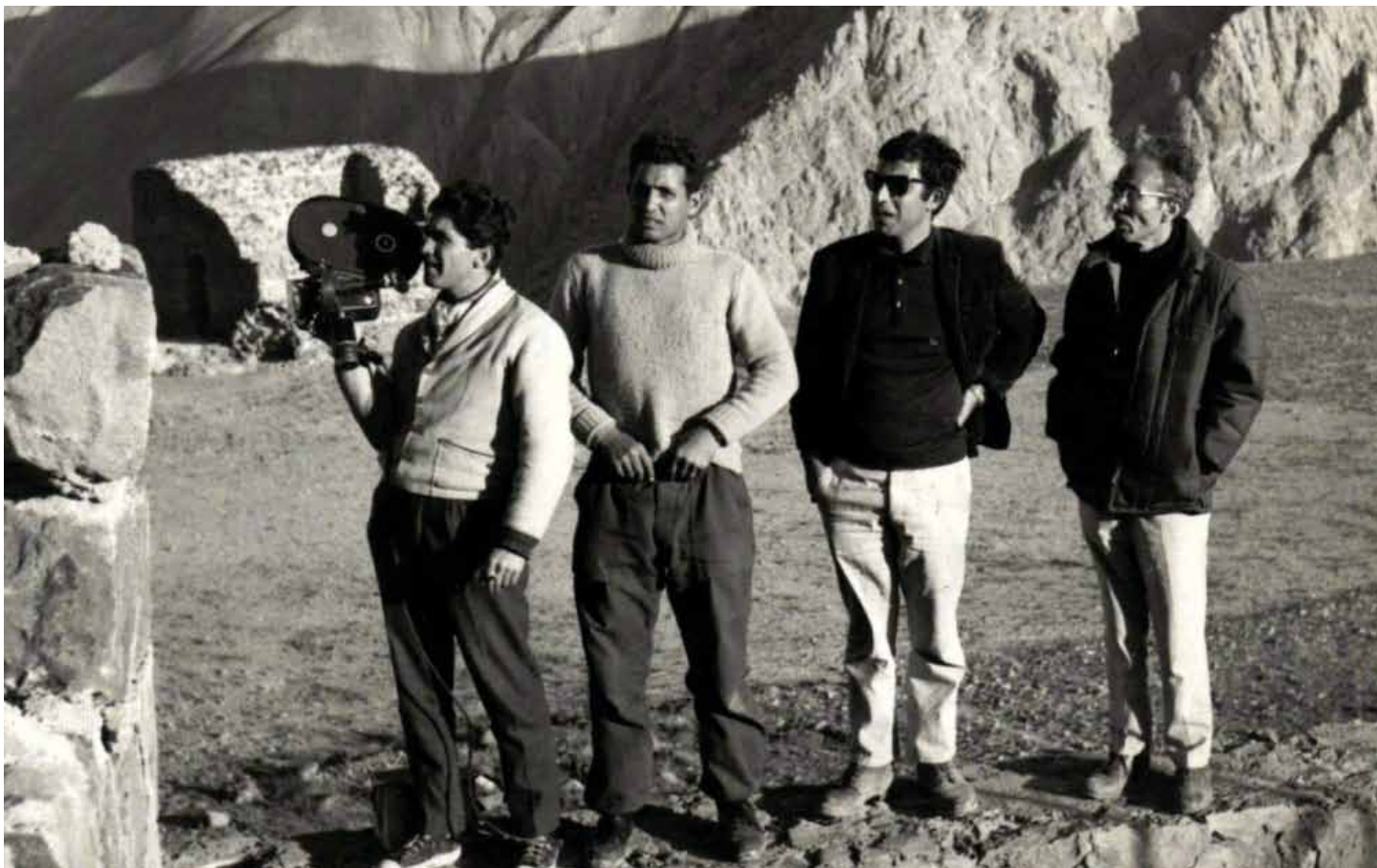
Following the revolution in 1979, Khachikian—despite his respectful treatment of Islam—was slowly and deliberately sidelined, than banned.

After the Revolution

Following the Islamic revolution in 1979, Khachikian, like many of his colleagues, found himself out of work. His treatment of Islam was respectful and optimistic in the cynical stories he depicted, but the Westernized vision of Iran which underlined his films—and the star system upon which they were made—were now vehemently rejected. Khachikian was slowly and deliberately sidelined and banned.

The official cinema authorities turned to him during the Iran-Iraq war to complete an action film about the air force called *The Eagles* (1984), which he did working mostly at the editing table. The film broke all box-office records, but this success didn’t much change his position. Out of step with the revolution, he was unable to obtain a director’s guild card and had to sell his belongings to pay rent. In his own words, from then on filmmaking became a means of stating, in a weak whisper, that he still existed.

“I was wasted. For forty years, I was wasted,” he kept saying



Khachikian (far right) and his crew shooting *Farewell to Tehran* (1966), one of the director's last successful films. Next to him is his assistant Masoud Kimiai who became one of the key directors of Iranian New Wave cinema



Samuel Khachikian

before he died, heartbroken in 2001, regretting that he couldn't make the films he wanted to make and not having visited Armenia. When he died, a handful of Armenian soil was thrown on his coffin.

A Lost Kiss

[Organizing a small retrospective around Khachikian's thrillers](#) has confirmed the tragic afterlife of his films, of which almost no camera negatives are left, and with most of the surviving elements in a disastrous condition.

The National Film Archive of Iran has put together the best elements they have of *Anxiety* and *The Strike* and *L'Immagine Ritrovata* in Bologna has scanned the copies. There are also new prints of *The Crossroads of Events* and *Storm in Our City*. None of these copies appear to be complete, but in them one can clearly see the beauty of imperfection and the bold mark of Iranian cinema's master storyteller.

Among many things Khachikian showed in an Iranian film for the first time was a kiss, in *The Crossroads of Events*, of which only a still photo exists. It caused a sensation—and disgrace for actress Vida Ghahremani, who was alienated from many friends and family members. Sadly, the most complete version of the film is missing the frames that contain the moment. Has it been lost forever? It's an apt metaphor for the cinema of Samuel Khachikian: a progressive, liberating moment of beauty lost to history. ■

A version of this essay first appeared in *Sight & Sound*; reprinted with permission of the author.