The Remix, Archive, and Memory in *Fifi Howls from Happiness*

BY NAZLI AKHTARI
University of Toronto

ABSTRACT

Inspired by archival remix in diasporic cultural productions that deal with cultural memory, this featurette demonstrates the potential of filmic remix as a technology of remembrance for challenging normative archives and historiographies. The featurette considers various remixed elements at work in a poetic documentary of Iranian cinema, *Fifi Howls from Happiness* (2014) directed by Mitra Farahani. With a background in visual arts, the France-based director positions her film as an act of writing the neglected visual artist Bahman Mohasses into a much needed historiography and moving image archive of Iranian contemporary art. This featurette envisions the filmic montage in *Fifi Howls from Happiness* as a technology of remembrance that recreates quasi-abstraction and queer compositions that were central to Mohasses' oeuvre with many pieces missing and lost.

IN THE POETIC documentary *Fifi Howls from Happiness* (2014), Mitra Farahani captures the last days of the visual artist Bahman Mohasses' life. By the time Farahani tracked down Mohasses, deliberately retreated to a private life in a hotel room in Rome, he had been absent long enough for the art world to suspect whether he was still alive. In an interview with a Farsi radio channel based in France, Farahani explained how she got in contact through an acquaintance with the secluded misanthrope (Rostami and Farahani). She travelled from France to Rome with a digital camera to meet him and ended up staying for two months to film. While Farahani succeeded in convincing Mohasses to be filmed, she soon realized that his fierce presence and brazen personality would be the driving force behind the direction the film would take. His insistent and sometimes humorously assertive input on how Farahani should proceed has been built into the film, transfiguring the film's initial genre of documentary into semi-autobiography. We hear his voice in different moments of the film, commanding Farahani what to do and how to juxtapose images with sounds. *Fifi Howls from Happiness*, in turn, is a potent contribution to documentary cinema and queer archives reminiscent of early New Wave and Iranian feminist cinema. The film technologically translates Mohasses' virtuosity in paper collage into filmic montage.

An artist belonging to pre-revolutionary generation of Iranians living in diaspora, Bahman Mohasses lived most of his life in Rome. He left Iran during the 1950s and died in 2010 during production of the film while Farahani's camera was rolling in his hotel room. Mohasses witnessed historical turmoil during his life that informed his visual oeuvre, often performing his rage at shameful legacies of human history. In this filmic ode, Farahani remixes the archival catalogues of the artist's figurative abstract paintings, paper collages, and sculptures that predominantly use expressionist representations. *Fifi Howls from Happiness* becomes essentially the technological reproduction of Mohasses' archives, remixed with the interviews between him and the director in the hotel room, set against shots of Italian seascapes, Rome's cityscapes, and old footage from a 16-minute black and white piece documentary, *The Eye that Hears*, showing young Mohasses directed by Ahmad Faroughi in 1967 (Fig. 2) as part of a documentary series for the Iranian National Television archives. Today, Mohasses is mostly recognized for his figurative paintings, sculptures, and paper collages, many of which he himself discarded, while some have been destroyed by the Iranian governments, and still others are missing, with few sitting in public and private collections.

Farahani carries through the film the negative affect of loss regarding Mohasses' unwritten place in history. With a background in painting and visual arts, the France-based director uses film to write Mohasses, in his own terms, into a much-needed historiography and moving image archive of Iranian contemporary art. As such, one can envision that filmic montage offers Farahani what elsewhere I have termed "a technology of remembrance"

Fig. 1 | Mohasses in his hotel room. The film's title painting, *Fifi Howls from Happiness*, is seen on the background wall, 00:10:38. Music Box Films, 2014.

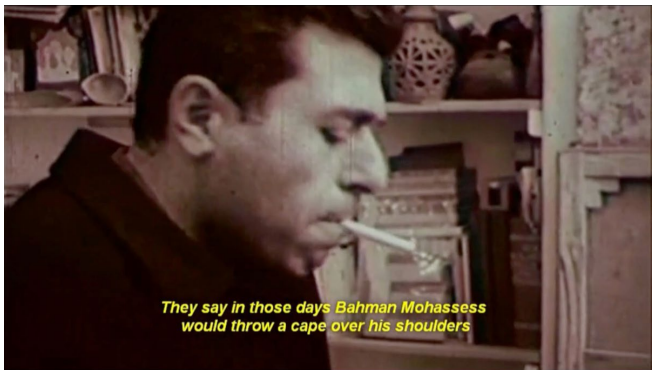

Fig. 2 | Old footage from a 16-minute black and white piece, *The Eye that Hears*, directed by Ahmad Faroughi in 1967 as part of a documentary series for the Iranian National Television archives, 00:04:49. Music Box Films, 2014.

(Akhtari) to recreate quasi-abstraction and queer compositions that are also central to Mohasses' oeuvre. Farahani's filmic remix technologically reproduces the artist's ephemera within which queerness goes beyond his sexual identity and lived experience and instead becomes a poetic condition prevalent to his visual compositions and worldview. In the worlds Mohasses made for his audiences, and Farahani's film remakes in her film, queerness is evoked as what Lee Edelman contends would effectively constitute the limit of politics (75).

Farahani describes how the making of the film early in the process became for her, and arguably for Mohasses, an instrument of revenge, a stubborn gesture of disapproval at history. *Fifi Howls from Happiness* accomplishes the political task of writing the unwritten into the archive of moving image and remembering the forgotten. But more crucial is Farahani's strategic use of remix in queering the archive and inheritance. How else can things be inherited besides in the institutional preservation of their material remains? Can inheritance remain in filmic representations of its material disappearance and destruction? The film captures destruction both in its portrayal of now-destroyed pieces of artwork and as a re-occurring thematic element in Mohasses' compositions. As the frame zooms in on individual pieces, with the same eccentric laughter, Mohasses' voice repeats different phrasings, affirming the same action: "I burnt that," "that's gone," "no more," "tore apart," "that's dead," and so on (Farahani). All these verbs denoting destructive action re-enact self-mutilations, regenerating the often disfigured, headless, broken-limbed, and grotesque figures in Mohasses' paintings and collages one sees in the film.

The film technologically reproduces the artist's destroyed and missing pieces and, as such, extends the possibility of montage as a cinematic convention to archival remix. It assumes the audience's awareness of media specificity for archival images of pieces remixed together in the film. By constellating what has been mostly destroyed or lost, Farahani's archival remix, in turn, becomes a strategy expressing rage at politics that led to withholding materiality from pieces that now only live on in photographs. The film, thus, remixes archival images to reconstruct and to remember their aesthetic truth and to refuse the acceptance of their material loss. It brings to fore now lost material worlds of textile, wood, paper, bronze, and metal, but also the greater loss of life—that of the film's subject and his oeuvre.

Almost fifteen minutes into the film, in one of the interview episodes, as the two sit together and continue turning over the pages in his catalogue, Mohasses pauses on one painting. He tells Farahani, "Make sure you show this! Make it wide angle. Let me tell you the exact name . . . . This is about the occupation of Iraq. And this title cannot be translated into Farsi. You must say it exactly like this when you show it, the voiceover should say 'this is called "*un spectacle nommé honte* (*A Performance Called Shame*)'" (Farahani) (Figs. 3, 4 & 5). Mohasses' discontent with shameful legacies of human history is manifest in his other works portraying the My Lai Massacre in Vietnam, the student and worker movements of May 1968 in France, the 1969 political self-immolation of the Czech student Jan Palach, and years later the Chernobyl disaster (Fig. 6), 1990s Gulf Wars (Fig. 7), and the war in Halabcheh. The frequent presence of animal figures (particularly fish) in his paintings and collages are influences of the wilderness of his birth and childhood place in the coastal province of Gilan, Iran. But more prominently, these figures portray his attention to the more-than-human world facing ecological catastrophe. Farahani accounts for Mohasses' care for animals. For example, one of the earliest scenes in the film captures a fish market in Rasht, Iran, where the camera focuses on a man as he cuts and cleans a fish for sale (00:06:10).

Part of *Fifi Howls for Happiness*' allure is indebted to its charming and eccentric male subject. However, it is Farahani's (dis) embodied voice that really binds the filmic remix together, as she poetically essays throughout the film. Her presence in the film as such evokes the Iranian New Wave and feminist cinema. Scholars in Iranian cinema studies, such as Sara Saljoughi and Farshid Kazemi, have considered the experimental use of the disembodied female voice in Iranian New Cinema. In her discussions of "a collectivity that is yet to come" (2) in Forugh Farrokhzad's experimental poetic cinema, *The House Is Black* (*Khaneh siah ast*, Iran, 1962), Saljoughi considers Farokhzad's "female authorial voice" (19) as one of the formal strategies that defines Farokhzad's experimental cinema. Examining examples in proceeding decades and in post-revolution Iranian cinema in the 1990s, Kazemi, too,

considers the disembodied female voice as a pivotal element to Iranian New Cinema, which, in turn, he argues reverses the conventions of voice in classical Hollywood cinema wherein the narrator is often a male voice and female voice almost always is synched to a female body's visual representation (62).

Reminiscence of these acoustic experiments, Farahani's approach in using her voice to anchor the film arguably expands this experimental convention. She introduces the queer feminist discourse, accounting for an urgency facing broader Feminist Iranian Cinema. Farahani includes Mohasses' complex remarks on his disidentification with queerness and critique of homonormativity, as he paradoxically proclaims, "All its [homosexuality's] beauty was in the prohibition" (Farahani). It is rather Farahani's own feminist politics that, in search and rescue of a queer ancestor, her voice re-enacts opening new possibilities for a New Queer Feminist Iranian Cinema. In one of the most sensational moments, for instance, as the camera takes the viewer outside the hotel into the back alley, we hear Farahani's (dis) embodied voice reciting her observation of the paintings and collages: "Destruction. Devastation. Death. As he bore witness to the theatre of the world's destruction, he became the god who destroys his own creations. Undoubtedly, he sees modern man as so utterly condemned to devastation, he cannot bring himself to leave any work as a legacy" (Farahani) (Fig. 8). Farahani's essayist voice echoes her subject's queer futurity and particularly that of his disidentification with social reproduction and immortality. On more than one occasion in the film, we hear Mohasses telling of his lacking desire to leave anything behind. Many of his public sculptures have been frowned upon, burned, and scattered into pieces by the Iranian governments, both in the late Pahlavi era and after the Islamic revolution of 1978-79, mostly due to joyful depictions of dangling phalluses and displays of orgy (Figs. 9 & 10). Through the years, however, Mohasses himself has made more than a few visits to Iran when he willfully destroyed the pieces he had left in his private studio. He eloquently utters in the film, his lack of desire to leave anything for "scavengers" (Farahani).

In the second chapter of the film, entitled "The Commissioners," two Dubai-based young Iranian brothers, Ramin and Rokni Haerizadeh, following an invitation from Farahani, arrive in Rome to commission the now old Mohasses to paint an oversized oil-painting for their private collection. Mohasses suggests to the director that including scenes of his

Fig. 3, 4, & 5 | Mohasses directing Farahani how to juxtopose the painting titled *un spectacle nommé honte*, 00:16:40, 00:16: 50, and 00:17:07. Music Box Films, 2014.

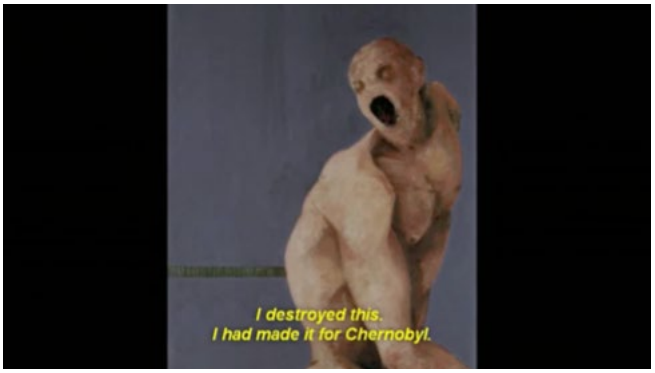

Fig. 6 & 7 | Mohasses' paintings inspired by the Chernobyl disaster the Gulf wars, 00:16:07 and 00:16:05. Music Box Films, 2014.

Fig. 8 | Shot of hotel room's back alley, 00:32:04. Music Box Films, 2014.

Fig. 9 & 10 | Sculptures that exemplify Mohasses' depictions of phallus often frowned upon by Iranian national institutions, 00:19:38 and 00:28:17. Music Box Films, 2014.

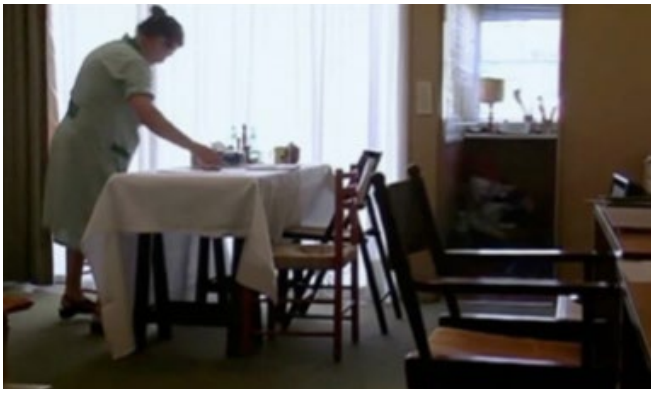

Fig. 11, 12, & 13 | Shots depicting the housekeeper cleaning Mohasses' room and movers packing his art works to ship to Dubai, 01:34:28, 01:35:23, and 01:36:10. Music Box Films, 2014.

painting in studio would complement the film. So Farahani invites the Haerizadehs because, in their own terms, it has been their long-life dream to "own a Mohasses" (Farahani). Their arrival adds to the intergenerational relations central to film's narration. The brothers leave after they commission the painting and purchase some of Mohasses' small pieces. The film then continues with brief shots taking Mohasses out of the hotel room as he purchases paint and supplies, and we hear from him about the studio space he had rented across the street from his hotel room. Shortly, though, we reach the end of the film that tragically overlaps with his death.

Before the ending sequence in which a housekeeper cleans the hotel room (Figs. 11, 12, & 13) that has been Mohasses' home for the past decades and movers pack his artworks, labelling the parcels with a shipping address in Dubai where the brothers live, we encounter the most sublime moment--that of dying--that documentary cinema can ever capture. The lens zooms in on one of Mohasses' sculptures in the room where most of the conversations between director and her subject have taken place. We hear an off-screen conversation between Mohasses and Farahani, whose presence remains in her (dis)embodied voice. We hear her in awe: "Wow! Wow! that's a lot [of blood], really a lot" (01:31:22, Farahani). Soon, as viewers, we discover we are witness to the off-screen death of the subject of the film. As his death unravels, we remember Mohasses' remarks about history, legacy, and inheritance. We remember that, among all his declarations, he said how he wants to die--a death that is aesthetic: "I want to die like an animal with integrity" (Farahani). ▪

WORKS CITED

Akhtari, Nazli. *Diasporic Constellations: Performing on the Preiphery of the Archives*. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, forthcoming.

Edelman, Lee. *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive.* Duke UP, 2004.

Farahani, Mitra. *Fifi Howls from Happiness.* Music Box Films, 2014.

Kazemi, Farshid. "The Object-Voice: The Acousmatic Voice in the New Iranian Cinema." *Camera Obscura*, vol. 33, no. 1, Duke UP, 2018, pp. 57–81, doi:10.1215/02705346-4336839.

Mercer, Benjamin. AV CLUB. 2014. film.avclub.com/fifi-howls-from-happiness-depicts-the-final-days-of-an-1798181077.

Rostami, Shahla and Farahani, Mitra. زا ی ف ی ف» و ص ص ح م ن م ه ب ی ن ا ه ر ف ار ت ی م اب و گ وت ف گ :: «د ش ک ی م ه ز و ز ی ل ا ح ش و خ. YouTube. 7 Dec. 2013. www.youtube.com/watch?v=arnVWCnhnN8&feature=share&fbclid=IwAR1J3wuvzI5fY8fmVzAS6-WrglZCn-mQf_wCULAKvTA1HFztD1O_Ch7uK9Y8.

Saljoughi, Sara. "A New Form for a New People: Forugh Farrokhzad's The House Is Black." *Camera Obscura*, vol. 32, no. 1, Duke UP, 2017, pp. 1–31, doi:10.1215/02705346-3661982.