

# Apocalypse and Shi'i Messianism in Post-Revolutionary Iranian Cinema

## Three Case Studies

### Abstract

This article examines the representation of themes related to Shi'i messianism (*mahdaviyat*) in post-revolutionary Iranian cinema. It presents Morteza Avini's theory of Illuminative Cinema (*cinema ishrāqi*) as an approach to the presentation of spiritual and religious themes in cinema in light of structural elements. Labov's model of narrative analysis is employed to explore three films, GHADAMGAH (FOOTHOLD, Mohammad-Mahdi Asgarpour, IR 2004), INJA CHERAQI ROSHAN AST (HERE, A SHINING LIGHT, Reza Mirkarimi, IR 2002), and MARMOULAK (LIZARD, Kamal Tabrizi, IR 2003). Analysis of these films is an opportunity to explore the doctrine of Waiting (*intizār*) in Twelver Shi'a, a concept that plays a pivotal role in Post-Revolutionary Iranian cinema. The three films criticize the present condition of society and describe the ideal society waiting for the Promised *Mahdi*. Apocalypse as it appears in these films does not conform to the science-fiction genre but is instead part of the philosophy of Waiting in the Shi'i worldview. The article shows that in comparison to Hollywood apocalyptic films, Iranian Shi'i cinema's depiction of apocalyptic themes, including Waiting, is less susceptible to secularizing influences.

### Keywords

Iranian Cinema, Apocalypse, Shi'i Messianism, Waiting, Illuminative Cinema, Narrative Analysis, GHADAMGAH (FOOTHOLD, Mohammad-Mahdi Asgarpour, IR 2004), INJA CHERAQI ROSHAN AST (HERE, A SHINING LIGHT, Reza Mirkarimi, IR 2002), MARMOULAK (LIZARD, Kamal Tabrizi, IR 2003)

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## Introduction

Throughout history, religious art has served as a means to express and disseminate divine messages. Religions have used artistic forms to describe their sacred thoughts and rituals and to represent spiritual and religious themes.<sup>1</sup> According to Mircea Eliade, art was essentially sacred in early times, as a product of efforts to represent religious ideas in aesthetic forms.<sup>2</sup> Sacred art uses visible forms to represent the invisible, shaping religious beliefs and directing awareness to the supernatural. One of the religions that has considered art as a tool for transmitting religious ideas is Islam. Islamic art issues forth from the Islamic revelation. It crystallizes the inner realities of Islam in the world of forms and leads the believer to the inner truth of the Divine Revelation.<sup>3</sup> Islamic art began with the mosque, but developments in Islamic community (*ummah*) and the elaboration of a more sophisticated worldview caused an evolution of art in the Islamic world.<sup>4</sup> Artistic forms that emerged in the Islamic world, such as calligraphy, painting, gilding, and poetry, served to promote the religious faith.

The encounter with non-Islamic cultures has played an important role in this evolutionary process within Islamic cultures. Today, in the Islamic Republic of Iran the use of new artistic forms to represent religious themes is seriously discussed. According to the Unitarian Islamic philosophy and worldview, cinema, like any other creation in the world, is a manifestation of the God (*allah*) and therefore can serve to express religious and spiritual ideas.

In this article, we first give an account of Morteza Avini's theory of Illuminative Cinema (*cinema ishrāqi*). We then deploy narrative analysis in the case of three Iranian religious films, GHADAMGAH (FOOTHOLD, Mohammad-Mahdi Asgarpour, IR 2004), INJA CHERAQI ROSHAN AST (HERE, A SHINING LIGHT, Reza Mirkarimi, IR 2002), and MARMOULAK (LIZARD, Kamal Tabrizi, IR 2003), particularly in light of Shi'i Messianism (*mahdaviyat*) and the concept of Waiting (*intizār*). Finally, we explore the contrast between Iranian and Hollywood cinematic representations of apocalyptic ideas.

1 Eliade 1985, 55–56.

2 Eliade 1985, 55.

3 Nasr 1987, 7.

4 Leaman 2004, 126.

## Cinema and the Representation of Religious Themes

Morteza Avini, an Iranian filmmaker and theorist, explored cinema's relationship with religion, philosophy, and mysticism in post-revolutionary Iran. His best-known documentary work is *RIVĀYAT FATHE* (NARRATIVE OF THE VICTORY, Morteza Avini, IR 1980), in which he portrays religious aspects of people's lives in post-revolutionary Iran. Beyond filmmaking, Avini developed "Illuminative Cinema" as a philosophical approach.

In the philosophical and mystical literature of Islamic philosophy, illumination (*ishrāq*) and illuminative philosophy (*hikmat al-ishrāq*) refer to the teachings of Šihabaddīn Suhrawardī.<sup>5</sup> Illuminative philosophy, rooted in Suhrawardī's concept of a hierarchical universe emanating from the "Light of lights" (God),<sup>6</sup> posits that human existence is distanced from its divine origin. Achieving peace necessitates a return and unification with this primordial light, which is possible only through faith (*imān*) and purification of the soul (*tazkiyah al-naḥs*). Suhrawardī's concept of "illumination" signifies spiritual purification, achieved through opening the heart to divine Light. This illumination is essential for a religious life. This ontological position has epistemological implications: it is only through the illuminative experience, or *ishrāq*, that the truth can be discovered.<sup>7</sup> Avini has been a pioneer in the application of the ontological and epistemological insights of illuminative philosophy to cinema.

According to Avini, cinema is distinguished from other modern arts by its "technical aspect".<sup>8</sup> Avini, who believed in the artistic expression of religious themes in cinema,<sup>9</sup> proposed that the filmmaker should not only master the technique of cinema but also go beyond the veil (*hijāb*) of technique to attain a kind of transcendence. Cinema must balance such artistic expression with technical and commercial demands, but how can religious cinema avoid compromising its spiritual integrity for mere technical or commercial appeal?<sup>10</sup>

Avini proposed that religious cinema must be simultaneously in the service of religious themes and appealing, but its appeal should lie in its commit-

5 Noorbakhsh 2012, 11.

6 Akbari 2008, 80.

7 Suhrawardī 1999, 86–87.

8 Avini 2011, vol. 3, 192.

9 Avini 2011, vol. 1, 20.

10 Avini 2011, vol. 3, 22–23.

ment to truth. Instead of feeding the audience's carnal desires, the filmmaker should seek to reveal to them the spiritual truth of the world. It is at this point that Illuminative Cinema comes into play. According to Avini, "illuminative experience" is the moment when a filmmaker gets so close to the truth that all sensual veils are removed; there is then no longer a veil between the audience and the divine truth of the world.<sup>11</sup> In Suhrawardī's illuminative philosophy, the term "veil" (*hijāb*) refers to human egoism and subjectivism, which distort the human's relationship with the divine truth of the world.<sup>12</sup> Religious cinema, according to this perspective, prioritizes the revelation of divine truth over subjective expression, which requires the filmmaker's heart to become a conduit for divine Light. Conversely, over-reliance on technical cinematic language risks obscuring divine truth through the imposition of the filmmaker's subjectivity. If a filmmaker is captured by the "veil of technique", that filmmaker will make a film based only on "technological imagination", while the mission of religious cinema is to draw out various dimensions of good life (*hayāt tayyebah*) and good morals (*akhlāq hasanah*).<sup>13</sup>

According to Avini, attractiveness should serve the spiritual truth of human life. Religious filmmakers will try to make their work attractive, but they must center the teaching of religious morality to help overcome evil. The world is the battlefield between good and evil, and illuminative filmmakers are aware that they must support the good and defeat the evil. Such a filmmaker would never produce an attractive film to fulfill the sensual passions or erotic desires of the audience. Rather, that filmmaker would consider aspects of human perfection that originate from human's divine nature.<sup>14</sup>

Avini's theory largely focuses on the "transcendence of the filmmaker". The filmmaker's religious and illuminative experience is of great importance to him, for he believes that only a work which is derived from the spirit of a unitarian (*movahhed*) and faithful (*mo'men*) filmmaker can represent religious ideas. Unitarian artists will consider the world as the sign of God, and their art should go beyond material life and refer to transcendental truth. Moreover, they will find the symbolic language of objects, for each object is a sign of God and reveals a specific aspect of the divine truth of the world.<sup>15</sup>

11 Madadpūr 2005, 53–55.

12 Noorbakhsh 2012, 132.

13 Avini 2011, vol. 3, 22–23.

14 Avini 2011, vol. 3, 14–15.

15 Avini 2011, vol. 1, 26.

## Methodology: Cinema and Narrative Analysis

Media representation, along with the audience's response, exists in relationship to the actions of message senders and their semiotic, cultural, and social circumstances. According to Peter Dahlgren, the concept of representation as it relates to media embraces what the media portrays, the way in which topics are presented, the modes of discourse at work, and the character of debates and discussions.<sup>16</sup> Representation refers to both the informational and extra-informational aspects of media products, including their symbolic and rhetoric dimensions. Representation is a response to fundamental questions about, for example, the content that will be selected for portrayal and how that content should be presented to the audience.

As Stuart Hall notes, representation is the application of language for producing a meaningful attitude about the world. Meaning does not exist *per se*; rather, it is the consequence of implicative procedures. Hall believes that representation is produced and distributed under the supervision of disciplinary powers; it is controlled by a dominant power that determines the legitimacy of the messages.<sup>17</sup> New methods have been proposed to identify the context of media and cultural phenomena. Narrative analysis and discourse analysis, which have emerged from advances in linguistics, semiotics, hermeneutics, and literary theory, are key methodologies. While quantitative content analysis has long been applied to news and reports in written media,<sup>18</sup> qualitative methods such as narrative analysis have been taken up by researchers in recent years. Unlike quantitative methods, such as content analysis that focuses primarily on the numerical frequency of words, qualitative methods consider the contextual elements that affect the mediated representation of ideas.<sup>19</sup>

Qualitative methods are particularly helpful in case studies, for they are more useful for identifying cultural, social, and historical contexts. Narrative analysis, as a qualitative method, was therefore selected for the case study this article explores, as a means to analyze contextual and ideologi-

16 Dahlgren 1995, 15.

17 Hall 2001, 509.

18 Riff/Lacy/Fico 2014, 16.

19 Stokes 2012, 67.

cal elements in the films that are its subject. By analyzing the narrative structure of films, it is possible to identify a variety of understandings of Shi'i messianism on the basis of the films' interrelations with their context.

As Boje has suggested, a story can have a variety of narratives.<sup>20</sup> The variety of experiences of a single reality create many narratives, each of which is indicative of the philosophy or worldview of its narrator. By studying the narrative structure a film, we can recognize its discursive formations: as Stokes has written, "Through narrative analysis, the 'context' will be subjected to analysis."<sup>21</sup> We interpret the world by narrating it. Narratives also convey the worldview of cultures and are thus effective means of cultural promotion, including the propagation of values and ideals. For this reason, narrative analysis is often used to explore the ideological orientation of media and works of art.<sup>22</sup>

## Narrative Analysis in Labov's Model

William Labov, an American linguist, has identified six elements in the structural organization of narratives: *abstract*, *orientation*, *complication*, *evaluation*, *result*, and *coda*. Each of these elements is a specific stage in the narrative sequence. Not all narratives necessarily follow this sequence, though this sequence is observable in most of them.<sup>23</sup> Labov's model is undoubtedly helpful for narrative analysis of films.

A narrative starts with an optional *abstract*, which provides information about the beginning of a story. The *abstract* announces that the story is beginning and determines its type; it indicates what the story is about, says something of the story to come, and draws the audience's attention to that story.<sup>24</sup>

*Orientation* points to referential functions within the narrative, which are characteristic of most narratives and help the audience identify the time, location, characters, and social circumstances of the story. *Orientation*

20 Boje 2001, 62,

21 Stokes 2012, 68.

22 Stokes 2012, 70.

23 Labov/Waletzky 1967, 32–39.

24 Patterson 2008, 25.

consists of a group of independent clauses which precede the *abstract*.<sup>25</sup> It provides a setting for the events of the story.<sup>26</sup>

*Complication* creates and continues the story through a series of actions and events. It may appear suddenly and makes the audience eager to know what its impact will be. It generally leads to conflict, whether physical, mental, moral, or emotional. Without a *complication* there is no way to flesh out the story.<sup>27</sup> Patterson points out that the *complication* can be considered the “skeleton plot” or “spin” of the narrative.<sup>28</sup>

Without *evaluation* the narrative would have no significance. It consists of clauses that reveal the attitude of the narrator.<sup>29</sup> *Evaluation* can explain why a particular event is included in a narrative sequence and why it is important to the audience. It is an external stimulus that elicits personal interest and action.<sup>30</sup> In other words, *evaluation* justifies the story.

The *result* follows the *evaluation* in the narrative sequence and explains what happens.<sup>31</sup> It decodes earlier *complications* and engages with the final key event of a story.<sup>32</sup> Most narratives end with the *result*, but some will also have a *coda*.<sup>33</sup> The difference between *coda* and *result* is a matter of time. The *result* is part of a sequence of events in the past tense, while the *coda* links past events with the present world of the narrator.<sup>34</sup> It turns the verbal perspective toward the present moment.<sup>35</sup>

In Illuminative Cinema, the structural elements of the narrative should represent religious and spiritual themes. In Avini’s terms, these elements are a kind of technical veil. The filmmaker must subdue them through his/her “spiritual wayfaring” (*suluk ma’navi*) and employ them in such a way that they transmit divine and spiritual truth to the “present world”. Only by linking the events of the narrative with the current world of its audience can Illuminative Cinema fulfill its mission. Illuminative Cinema is not neu-

25 Labov/Waletzky 1967, 32.

26 Patterson 2008, 25.

27 Labov/Waletzky 1967, 32–33.

28 Patterson 2008, 26.

29 Labov/Waletzky 1967, 37.

30 Labov/Waletzky 1967, 34.

31 Labov/Waletzky 1967, 39.

32 Patterson 2008, 27.

33 Labov/Waletzky 1967, 39.

34 Patterson 2008, 27.

35 Labov/Waletzky 1967, 39.

tral; it seeks to foster spirituality and transcend apocalyptic evil. The *coda*, which connects other elements of the film to contemporary life is therefore a crucial aspect of the narrative analysis undertaken in this article.

## Narrative Analysis of Shi'ī Messianism in Iranian Cinema

Feature films made in Iran after the 1979 Islamic Revolution include a number that pay attention to Shi'ī messianism. Shi'ī messianism has an important role in the worldview of the Twelver Shi'ism. According to the doctrine of spiritual leadership (*imāmah*), Twelver Shi'ies believe in twelve spiritual leaders (*imāms*) that guide the people after the death of Prophet Muhammad.<sup>36</sup> They believe that the Twelfth *imām*, the Promised *Mahdi*, ascended to heaven and will return at the end of history to cleanse the earth of evil and oppression and to establish justice.<sup>37</sup> Accordingly, the Shi'ies must always wait for the return of the Promised *Mahdi*. This doctrine is called "Waiting".<sup>38</sup> The increased prominence of the doctrine of Waiting in post-revolution Iranian society is reflected in increased Shi'ī messianism themes within post-revolutionary cinema. As waiting for the *Mahdi* involves purification of the soul, messianic films accord with Illuminative Cinema's ethical goals.

The feature films *FOOTHOLD*, *HERE, A SHINING LIGHT*, and *LIZARD* all address Shi'ī messianic ideas. Their makers narrate their stories by showing the current state of society and its neglect of religious ideals. They do not refer directly to the Savior or Twelfth *imām* (*imām Mahdi*) but do provide indirect references to signs such as the mid-*sha'bān* ceremony (the anniversary of the birth of *imām Mahdi* according to the Shi'ī calendar) or *Sir (āqā)*, which is an allusion to the *imām Mahdi*. However, the sequence of their narratives is such that the viewer can recognize that the story of each film symbolically conveys the idea of a worthy society waiting for the Promised Savior.

36 Lāhiji 2022, 584.

37 Makārem Shirazi 2013, 162.

38 Makārem Shirazi 2013, 96.



## FOOTHOLD (IR 2004)

FOOTHOLD narrates the story of a young boy, Rahman (Babak Hamidian), who lives alone in a village. Rahman, an orphan raised communally, considers all village homes his own. Years earlier, he had vowed that for ten years he would seclude himself on the night and day of mid-*sha'bān* in a holy shrine outside the village. Now is the tenth and last year of his vow, but he returns to the village before mid-*sha'bān* and claims that Sir (i. e. *imām Mahdi*) ordered him to return to the village to receive his reward. His return and revelation displease the villagers. As the story proceeds, the cause of their unhappiness becomes clear: Rahman's mother, pregnant after his supposedly infertile father's death, was wrongly accused of adultery and stoned by the villagers. This happened in the mid-*sha'bān*! Burdened by guilt, the villagers raised Rahman to atone for their crime. They exiled him on mid-*sha'ban* to ease their guilt, which is why his return to the village has upset them. Rahman finds out the truth and recognizes that his mother was the victim of the villagers' crime. The villagers realize in turn that Rahman's mother was innocent and that they had punished her out of resentment and delusion. Although Rahman ultimately forgives the villagers, he suddenly departs from the village on the day after mid-*sha'bān*, leaving the villagers burdened by distress and regret.

The *abstract* of this film is the village location, which is, in fact, an allegory of Iranian society. The audience is confronted with an atmosphere created by the various characters, many of whom are either involved in everyday worldly business or trapped in ceremonial ritual (in this case the mid-*sha'bān* ceremony). There are, however, a few who truly adhere to the moral and inner virtues of religion. The filmmaker indicates the *orientation* of the narrative by reference to Rahman's vow, according to which he will perform as a servant at the holy shrine on the anniversary of the birth of the Promised Savior. However, the reason for his action is not obvious to either the audience or Rahman himself. His reason for being at the shrine on this anniversary and the truth of Rahman's birth and being orphaned form the *complication* of the narrative. This element creates suspense, in which the audience remains until the end of the story. The villagers' regretting of their crime can be identified as the *evaluation*, which is represented by the villagers' kindness toward Rahman. Then the *result* emerges. The reasons for such kindness were at first not clear to Rahman, but he learns the truth from revelations from the unseen world. The *coda* of the narrative is cre-

ated by the endless path along which Rahman advances, while the people of the village, who are an allegory of the Waiting community, remain in place where they are.

FOOTHOLD is a prominent example of Illuminative Cinema in Iran. The title of the film appears to refer to a religious phenomenon. The word “foothold” (*ghadamgah*) is common in the popular religious culture of the Iranian people. A foothold is a place that a spiritual leader (Prophet or *imām*) is said to have passed and has his footprints incised on a stone. The film uses the concept of foothold metaphorically, to point to the signs of the presence of the Twelfth *imām*. In addition, divine manifestations are felt in every moment of the film: from Rahman’s spiritual revelations to his forgiveness of the villagers’ crime to his departure from the village. The film is narrated such that the direct connection with Waiting is not immediately evident. However, the *coda* and conclusion make event to the audience that the filmmaker is criticizing the hypocrisy of the people, who pretend to be waiting for the Promised Savior but do not exhibit the good morals expected of a Waiter (*montazer*).

## HERE, A SHINING LIGHT (IR 2002)

Despite its delayed release and box-office failure, HERE, A SHINING LIGHT is a thought-provoking film within the realm of Illuminative Cinema. The film narrates the life of Qodrat (Habib Rezaei), a young man with intellectual disabilities who lives with the custodian of a holy shrine in a remote village. The custodian laments the villagers’ indifference and questions their faith. The villagers’ belief that the shrine ignores their needs clashes with the custodian’s view, resulting in his temporary move to the city. Since nobody is willing to run the holy shrine in his absence, he asks Qodrat to take his place. Qodrat accepts responsibility for the administration of the holy shrine. He has extraordinary abilities: next to the holy shrine is an old cemetery, and Qodrat can see the spirits of the dead, hear their words, and understand what they mean. He has a gentle spirit that pays attention to the inner meanings of religion, instead of its outer shell. Gradually, he becomes acquainted with the sufferings and problems of the villagers and spends all the resources of the holy shrine on solving them. Soon the holy shrine has lost all its money and assets. It is no longer like the holy shrine the audience saw at the beginning of the film, but it has solved the problems

of many people. In this way, the high status of the holy shrine is revived among the people. At the end, Qodrat leaves for an unknown destination by train, which in his opinion is the residence of the Sir.

The *abstract* of the narrative begins with Qodrat's dialogue about Waiting, in which he states, "We must search for the Sir and if we sit around and do nothing, we will waste our lives." He is surprised to realize that nobody knows the Sir. We also see the reference to the Sir at the end of the film as the *coda*, in the sequence that depicts Qodrat on the train intending to go to the Sir. The references to the Sir and to waiting for him at the beginning and end of the film are reminiscent of the Promised Savior in Shi'i culture. Although at the beginning of the film the custodian of the holy shrine is an obstacle to Qodrat's departure, at the end of the film nobody can stop him, and he simply continues on his way to get to the Sir.

Like *FOOTHOLD*, the film *HERE, A SHINING LIGHT* also contains a village as allegory: here the villagers are extremely involved in their daily affairs and have lost faith in the holy shrine, which no longer responds to their demands and vows anymore; they are therefore unwilling to pilgrimage to it or financially assist it. Some villagers believe that neighboring holy shrines are better at helping them and meeting their needs. These are *evaluations* used by the filmmaker to convey the atmosphere of the narrative to the audience. Here, the village is a metaphor for Iran's modern society, whose people are trapped in a materialistic life and pay too little attention to spiritual affairs. The custodian of the holy shrine is hypocritical and insincere in collecting money, while the villagers are too busy with their own issues. This is the *complication* of the narrative. Mistrust is part of all aspects of their lives, and they are no longer a "waiting society". Here, the principal issue is why most people have lost their faith. The filmmaker raises this question everywhere in the narrative and seeks to answer it through Qodrat's practices in the absence of the custodian, including expressing affection for the villagers, assisting them, and gifting the holy shrine's property to them. The shrine is now a ruined enclosure, but their faith has increased. Finally, in the *result*, the narrator concludes that Qodrat, as a real Waiter, has the capacity to visit the Sir because of his good morals. In the *coda*, as noted, we see him on the train, travelling to visit the Sir, and nobody can stop him.

*HERE, A SHINING LIGHT* has a metaphoric language that refers intelligently to Iran's modern society. The filmmaker criticizes a society that claims to be Waiting for the Promised *Mahdi*, but does not have the good morals that a Waiter should demonstrate. Blame for the creation of such a hypocritical

society lies primarily with the rulers, whose misconduct has made people pessimistic about religion.

## LIZARD (IR 2003)

The controversial film LIZARD was the first to portray clerics in post-revolutionary Iran. It has been examined in light of its depiction of preaching methods and religious morality, but its narration of the Waiting, a significant aspect of the film, has received less attention. Perhaps most remarkably, its last sequence, which illustrates the mid-*sha'bān* ceremony, has been overlooked in analyses of the film.

The story tells of “Reza the lizard” (Parviz Parastui), a veteran thief who can skillfully climb walls, like a lizard. He reveals this ability in the first scenes of the film, when he climbs the high wall of prison to save a white dove trapped in barbed wire at the top, an action which he has bet with the head of the prison he can carry out. However, despite his success, it earns him nothing but solitary confinement. His imprisonment for life and frequent solitary confinement lead him to attempt to commit suicide, after which he is moved to a hospital. There he becomes familiar with his roommate, a cleric who is not wearing clerical dress as he lies on the bed reading Saint-Exupéry's *The Little Prince*. He preaches to Reza and invites him to trust and hope in God, saying that the ways towards God are as many as there are people. Yet Reza talks about suicide and despair. When the cleric is absent, Reza steals his clothes and manages to escape. It seems, however, that the clergyman has deliberately made it possible for him to flee and find hope in his life. With the help of one of his friends, Reza leaves for a border area to prepare to depart the country. At the railroad station, he is mistaken by the people for the cleric who is to be sent to them to try to reanimate their moribund mosque. He soon increases the health of the mosque through his tolerant and kind behavior and becomes one of the most successful clerics in the region. At the end of the film, he is arrested, but he is now a changed man. In the final sequence, the previously empty mosque is filled with a vast number of people at the beginning of the mid-*sha'bān* ceremony.

LIZARD begins its *abstract* with a prison in which individuals who have demonstrated major social depravity are detained. Reza's escape from the prison and his entering more positive social arenas decreases such immorality day after day and at the same time increases his moral virtue. Reza

becomes more mature and more aware. The *complication* is found by asking about the crimes committed by those in the prison, the indifference of the people, why neighbors have turned away from the mosque, and why they lack faith. The filmmaker employs *evaluation* by depicting corrupt prison authorities, flawed religious propagation, the manipulation of public sentiment, and political hypocrisy. Evil is not inherent in certain characters: it is the product of a corrupt and immoral society. These people will find the right path if they are guided and trained properly.

The result occurs when, because of Reza's actions, the mosque is crowded for the mid-*sha'bān* ceremony. Reza's success is a product of his kind, tolerant, and honest behavior with the people. However, this is not the end of the story. In the last sequence, when numerous people affected by Reza's programs come together in the mid-*sha'bān* ceremony, he is arrested by the police. However, even the head of the prison realizes that Reza has changed: he arrests Reza but does not place him in handcuffs, another sign that Reza's religious propagation has been effective and that he has raised people's hopes for the Promised *Mahdi*. The final *coda* stresses that standard religious propagation must be changed if it is to create the ideal society. LIZARD, like *HERE, A SHINING LIGHT*, also directs a shining light at the concept of Waiting.

## Conclusion

In Shi'i philosophy, the doctrine of Waiting has apocalyptic resonances.<sup>39</sup> In the Shi'i worldview, an apocalyptic society is a kind of dystopia mostly characterized by lack of spirituality and wisdom. According to Shi'i narratives, apocalypse is a period of history in which the earth is full of corruption, there is little wisdom and abundant ignorance, betrayal replaces trust, the wicked rulers reign over the people, lies and hypocrisy spread everywhere, wealth is preferred to faith, and people have human faces but their hearts are the hearts of devils.<sup>40</sup> The Promised Savior (*Mahdi*) is the one who puts an end to this situation and fills the world with justice, kindness, and good morals. A true Shi'i is one who does not give in to the apocalyptic status quo, but "waits" to end it with the help of the Savior (*monji*). The films dis-

39 Khandan 2013, 22.

40 Khandan 2013, 23.

cussed in this article illustrate the concept of Waiting through protagonists who despite societal rejection remain steadfast in their waiting for the Promised Savior.

The apocalyptic imagination in Iranian Illuminative Cinema is different from what we see in some apocalyptic Hollywood films. Conrad E. Ostwalt writes of a “secular apocalypse” in Hollywood,<sup>41</sup> where the traditional religious concept of the apocalypse has been secularized for a contemporary audience. Traditional religious expressions of apocalypse are becoming less frequent, and instead, the apocalypse is represented by themes such as world destruction, pandemics, global warming, nuclear disasters, and zombie invasions. Secularization has eliminated the religious implications of the concept of the apocalypse and has transformed it into a kind of entertaining science fiction. Special effects and technical appeal take precedence over religious meaning. By contrast, in Iranian Illuminative Cinema, the technical is secondary to the representation of spiritual truths, and filmmakers do not make films simply to please their audience or to earn a return on their investment. In Iranian apocalyptic cinema, the concept of Waiting plays a pivotal role; it also has social aspects and serves as a metaphor for denying the status quo.

Dozens of apocalyptic films have been made in the United States since the first, *DELUGE* (Felix E. Feist, US), in 1933. These films have significant differences but many also have common elements. Ākhundi has identified some such common elements in Hollywood’s apocalyptic cinema in his analysis of *BABYLON A. D.* (Mathieu Kassovitz, US 2008), *THE BOOK OF ELI* (Albert Hughes / Allen Hughes, US 2010), and *2012* (Roland Emmerich, US 2009). These films consistently depict an American savior and the survival of the United States. They portray a stark East-West dichotomy: the East is a symbol of decline and the West (specifically the United States) is the epitome of progress and salvation. The American savior combats “Eastern evil”, reinforcing a narrative of US global dominance. In these films, technology and technological wars play a pivotal role, evident in advanced weapons of mass destruction and death as well as modern tools for security and protection. Natural disasters also play an important role in the end of the world: in the film *2012* solar radiation heating the earth’s core causes earthquakes and tsunamis that threaten all life on earth. The role played by destructive technology and natural disasters, which make apocalyptic films resemble the

41 Ostwalt 2016, 2.

science fiction genre, provides a naturalized and secularized image of the apocalypse,<sup>42</sup> exactly the opposite of the representation of the apocalypse in Illuminative Cinema.

According to Shi'i philosophy, the apocalypse is not a secular phenomenon, and it therefore cannot be simply associated with the materiality of weapons of mass destruction or with natural disasters. In Illuminative Cinema, the filmmaker must strive to represent the divine truth of the apocalypse, in other words, human beings who are deprived of or neglect the spiritual and are alienated from their own divine identity. In Shi'i philosophy, the most significant feature of the apocalypse is that humans now struggle to understand esoteric and spiritual truths; they have become selfish and have no genuine relationship with the sacred.<sup>43</sup> In apocalyptic times, the presence of the sacred in daily life diminishes, and religion is abused by religious and political officials who care only about their own power and wealth. Someone who recognizes the apocalyptic character of such a situation will not follow the mainstream state of affairs but will wait for the Promised Savior, who will help in overcoming this evil situation. This kind of Waiting is not passive. It actively rejects the status quo, but it does not require war and the destruction of the world. The Iranian films discussed here tell of heroes who while exposing the apocalyptic nature of their society, also offer a way of spiritual salvation to their fellow human beings, a way repeatedly expressed by Reza in *LIZARD*: "The ways towards God are as many as the people." All people should try to find the light of the divine truth within themselves by removing the evil veils and should seek to end the neglect of the Light of the lights, to keep alive the Waiting for the Promised Savior and the love for him in their hearts. They may not necessarily be warriors; they may, like Rahman, Qudrat, and Reza, want to establish peace in themselves in order to overcome the apocalyptic conditions. Illuminative Cinema seeks to introduce and nurture such a subject.

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42 Ākhundi 2012, 155–156.

43 Khandan 2013, 22–23.

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