

A Wanderer of the World—Lost and Rediscovered

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An Exile Portrays an Exile: Saless with Lotte H. Eisner in Paris

- ¶₁ Paris, June 1979. Iranian director Sohrab Shahid Saless is in the French capital to shoot a film. His project, a black-and-white documentary, is about the German-Jewish film historian Lotte H. Eisner (1896–1983). Eisner, a journalist known for monographs such as *L'Écran démoniaque* (*The Haunted Screen*, 1952), *F. W. Murnau* (1964) and *Fritz Lang* (1976) fled Berlin in 1933 for Paris, where she had been living ever since. Here, under Henri Langlois, she served as the chief curator of the Cinémathèque française from 1945 until 1975.
- ¶₂ Known for his swift shooting pace, Saless finished his 60-minute film *Die langen Ferien der Lotte H. Eisner* (*The Long Vacation of Lotte H. Eisner*) in a few weeks, with a crew whose members were German, French, and Iranian. The transnational character of the project is also evident in its reception. Co-produced by the Hamburg-based company Multimedia, and Westdeutscher Rundfunk in Cologne, and shot in Paris, the interview film premiered in October 1979 at the German Film Days in Los Angeles. At the time, Saless was in the United States at the invitation of the Goethe-Institut, together with other West German directors such as Herbert Achternbusch and Uwe Brandner, there to present films of the New German Cinema. They were accompanied by US journalist Ronald Hol-

loway (1933–2009).¹ Holloway was then living in West Berlin, and writing for *Variety*, among other journals. From autumn 1979 onwards, he and his wife, the German actress Dorothea Moritz, edited the English-language magazine *KINO – German Film*, originally published in collaboration with the Filmförderungsanstalt (German Federal Film Board, FFA) in order to present New German Cinema to the Anglo-American public. Holloway and Moritz prefaced the first issue of the magazine with the lines “the first issue of Kino / is respectfully dedicated to / Lotte Eisner,” followed by two quotes by Eisner from “Der Junge Deutsche Film” (Young German Cinema) and “Die Langen Ferien” (The Long Vacation), two sections of Saless’s film about her. The text is accompanied by a black-and-white photo of Saless and Eisner in her Paris apartment, probably taken during the course of filming.²

- ¶₃ Though Saless was a newcomer both to West Germany and its cinema, his own experience of exile made him an ideal interviewer of the “grande dame of German cinema.” In his film, Eisner talks

1— A digitised audio recording of a Q&A session with Sohrab Shahid Saless following the screening of his feature film *Diary of a Lover* on October 27, 1979 at the Pacific Film Archive in San Francisco can be found under the title “Ron Holloway presents Recent German Cinema,” archive.org, accessed March 20, 2026: https://archive.org/details/bampfa-audio_00096.

2— Ronald & Dorothea Holloway, “The Long Vacation of Lotte H. Eisner,” *KINO – German Film*, October 1979, 1–3.

at length about her life after her flight from Berlin in 1933. Much of what Eisner recounts resembles Saless's experiences as a young foreigner in Vienna in the early 1960s, when he left Tehran for Austria after passing his school exams. Eisner recounts her difficult beginnings in Paris, the hostility towards foreigners and the odd jobs she did to finance her life as an emigrant in Paris. While Eisner looks back on her life, Saless remains out of sight. We only see Eisner in her apartment, as the interviewer talks with her from a spot near the camera, invisible to the viewer. We see Eisner receiving guests such as film critic Gene Moskowitz and actor Howard Vernon, or sitting outside in the garden or going for walks with a young woman, possibly Iranian. Eisner appears small and frail, with a resolute character and a strong will to live and do her work—traits she shared with her interviewer, Saless.

¶4 Saless conducted his interview with Eisner against the backdrop of the revolution in Iran 1978/79, which, contrary to the hopes of many, had led to the installation of a new dictatorship, this time by Islamic fundamentalists. As a consequence, millions of Iranians left their homeland to seek freedom and security abroad. Saless's film was also made at a time when questions about responsibility and collaboration under National Socialism were surfacing in the Federal Republic of Germany in trials, books, feature films and documentaries. Saless's film about Eisner entered a discourse of reckoning with and confronting perpetrators. *Die langen Ferien der Lotte H. Eisner* commemorates a path-breaking film critic, who was not widely known in West Germany at the time, but had become a role model to a young generation of filmmakers such as Werner Herzog; he would in turn pay his own tribute to her in his book *Vom Gehen im Eis (Of Walking on Ice)*, published in 1978. Saless's film about Eisner offered a perspective on a person who had fled Nazi Ger-

many, as opposed to a confessional retrospective. In that sense, *Die langen Ferien der Lotte H. Eisner* can be read as a counterpoint to Hans-Jürgen Syberberg's 300-minute black-and-white epic *Winifred Wagner und die Geschichte des Hauses Wahnfried 1914–1975 (The Confessions of Winifred Wagner, 1975)*, in which the protagonist, the former director of the Bayreuth Festival and native Briton, makes no secret of her enthusiasm for Hitler.

Saless's Long Vacation

¶5 Like Eisner, Saless went into exile at a young age. But unlike her, he was unable to put down roots in one country permanently. A restless person and artist, he spent his life wandering and never finding peace—neither with himself, nor his surroundings. Born in Tehran in 1944 into a middle-class family, he graduated from high school there. Saless later gave conflicting accounts of his life from 1962–63. He claimed to have gone to Paris to study at the Institut des Hautes Études Cinématographiques (IDHEC). Due to the high cost of living, he then moved to Austria. Sources indicate that he first went to Graz, and then to Vienna. In the capital, he sought out his biological mother, who had left the family when Saless was one-and-a-half years old. His hope of reconciliation remained unfulfilled, presumably intensifying the earlier trauma, and influencing his filmmaking practice; Saless would later repeatedly address conflict-ridden relationships between parents and children in his films. Despite his mother's rejection of him, however, Saless remained in Vienna, learned German, and kept himself afloat with odd jobs while studying—although he never graduated. His activities were interrupted by bouts of illness; in Vienna, he contracted tuberculosis and had to be hospitalized for treatment. He moved to Paris in 1966 where he continued to study film, but was hospitalized again for a stomach ulcer. Loneliness and

poverty, feelings of alienation and experiences of illness shaped Saless's life at that time, and ultimately also his films. It was during this difficult phase of his life that he discovered the works of Anton Chekhov, an author who would have a profound influence on the content and style of his later films.³

Return to the Homeland: Saless in Iran

¶6 In 1968, Saless returned from Paris to Tehran. After some searching, and with the help of his uncle Ahmad Shahidi, who was editor-in-chief of the capital's newspaper *Kayhan*, he found a position at the Ministry of Culture and Art. Saless would go on to make twenty documentary films in his next two years with the Ministry, on a variety of subjects: an Asian trade exhibition in Tehran; folk dances of various ethnic groups in Iran; ancient sites such as Persepolis, and smaller towns such as Mahabad. Having studied Italian Neorealism, the French Nouvelle Vague and the work of directors such as Luis Buñuel, Robert Bresson and Jean-Pierre Melville in Europe, he was able to use his time at the Ministry of Culture to further train and experiment with documentary techniques. This time proved crucial for the development of his own style.

¶7 Saless did not operate in a vacuum. In the late 1960s, a group of young, progressive Iranian filmmakers who had mostly learned their craft in Europe started to counter foreign films and domestic popular genres, known as *filmfarsi*, with sophisticated and socially critical feature films and documentaries. Strongly influenced by Italian Neorealism and the French Nouvelle Vague, many of these films of the Iranian New Wave were shot outdoors rather than in studios. They dealt with contemporary societal tensions

and inequities, which were addressed in the everyday life and language of the characters. Handheld cameras were used frequently to convey liveliness and immediacy. Examples of this New Wave in Iranian cinema include *Gav* (1969) and *Postchi* (1972) by Dariush Mehrjui, *Qeysar* (1969) and *Gavaznha* (1974) by Masud Kimiai, and *Ragbar* (1972) by Bahram Bayzai. Saless harbored the ambition to create such works himself. He first made two short films, *Aya...? (If...?)*, 1971), which won the award for best documentary at the National Tehran Film Festival, and *Siah-o sefid (Black and White)*, 1972), which received the Golden Plaque at the Tehran International Children's Film Festival. The poster for *Black and White* was designed by Abbas Kiarostami (1940-2016), whom Saless knew through *Kanun-e Parvaresh*, a state-sponsored "association for the promotion of the intellectual abilities of children and young people" founded in Tehran in 1965. A few years later, the Ministry of Culture added a film department to sponsor educational films for children and young people by Abbas Kiarostami and other directors; these were also shown at children's film festivals abroad. An archive for children's films was also part of these educational efforts. In addition, the film department offered courses in screenwriting to aspiring filmmakers, and amateur and Super 8 filmmaking to children and young people.⁴

¶8 The year 1973 would prove a milestone in Saless's life. Aware that his way of making socially critical and stylistically innovative films rather than entertainment films would not be of interest to most Iranian producers, Saless agreed with the Ministry of Culture to make a new documentary short film and travelled to the Caspian Sea to shoot it. However, when he returned to Tehran, he

3— Ali Dehbashi, "Sohrab Shahid Saless and a Private Agony," *Film International. A Cross-Cultural Review*, Vol. 1, No. 4, Autumn 1993, 60–65.

4— Hamid Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema. The Industrializing Years 1941–1978* (Duke University Press, 2011), Vol. 2, 404–405.

brought with him a feature film of a good eighty minutes about the austere life of a small school-boy in this remote region of the country. The authorities expressed their displeasure, but Saless was in luck. Hajir Darioush (1938-1995), a director himself and an important advocate of the Iranian New Wave, proposed Saless's film called *Yek ettefaghe sadeh* (*A Simple Event*, 1973) as one of the domestic contributions to the Second Tehran International Film Festival, which took place in November and December 1973. The Minister of Culture Mehrdad Pahlbod (1917-2018), married to the Shah's older sister Shams Pahlavi, personally reviewed the film and congratulated Saless. The Minister is said to have praised the director with the following statement: "This film is truly excellent. It will make you famous, world famous. Everyone will know you."⁵ *Yek ettefaghe sadeh* was thus approved for entry to the festival, where it impressed the international jury, and won Saless the Golden Ibex for Best Director, a prize he received from Empress Farah Diba herself.

¶9 Saless's good luck reached an international scale when Swiss journalist and Dominican priest Ambros Eichenberger (1929-2006) saw the debut work, praised it in the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* and sent a postcard to Ulrich and Erika Gregor in West Berlin with the recommendation that Saless and *Yek ettefaghe sadeh* be invited to the International Forum of Young Film in the summer of 1974. This Forum was established in 1971 by Friends of the German Cinematheque, among whose founding members were the Gregors. The Forum was to provide a space for films that focused not on commercial success, but on innovative aesthetics and political engagement, and included countries then considered "Third World." The creation of this new section of the Berlin Film Festival was a

5— Hamid-Reza Sadr, "Interview with Sohrab Shahid Saless on video," in *Safar-e Sohrab* [Sohrab, a journey], dir. Omid Abdollahi (Iran, 2016), at 27:00, 76 minutes.

response to the controversy, and ultimately cancellation, of the competition at 1970 Berlin Film Festival, which was triggered by Michael Verhoeven's anti-war film *o.k.* about the rape and murder of a young Vietnamese girl by a U.S. fireteam. The International Forum of Young Film became a major platform for directors experimenting with a new film language as well as precise views of social reality.⁶ The screening of Saless's film in this context gave him international visibility and introduced him to fellow-filmmakers in Germany.

¶10 What was it about the film that moved viewers as varied as Saless's colleagues, the jury members, the journalists and even the Minister of Culture? In long, calm shots, the film introduces us to the life of a ten-year-old Turkic-speaking boy, Mohammad. Mohammad lives with his mother, an ailing housewife, her face creased by labor, and his strong father, who feeds his family by catching fish illegally. At the end of the day's work, the father takes in successive rounds of alcohol at a café, returning home drunk and sleepy. Pale, pastel colors, especially blue and green, characterize the small-town atmosphere and rural landscape, where people lead a joyless life marked by work and deprivation.

¶11 Mohammad's life, like that of the adults around him, is also cheerless. As soon as he comes home from school, he must help his mother with the housework and go shopping. He must also fetch water, as there is no running water in the room where the family lives. Mohammad helps his father by collecting the fish caught directly from the coast of the Caspian Sea, hurriedly taking them to a grocery store and bringing the money to his father in the café, where the latter spends

6— Ulrich Gregor, "Die Geschichte des Internationalen Forum des Jungen Films," 27. *Internationales Forum des Jungen Films 1997*, February 1997, accessed March 25, 2026, <https://www.arsenal-berlin.de/forum-marchiv/forum97/forges-d.html>.

it on vodka. This leaves no time for schoolwork or friendships. Mohammad is not a good student. When his mother dies quietly and without complaint, father and son are at a loss for words to express their grief. However, their grief is evident in Mohammad's sad eyes and bowed head, and in his father's silent tears. On the surface, their lives continue as before, though signs of change are apparent.

¶12 *Yek ettefaqhe sadeh* is a brilliant cinematic work in many respects, especially for a debut feature film. In a boom period, when the government under Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlewi spent significant sums to promote and praise the rapid westernisation and modernisation of the state, economy and society in Iran, Saless showed the losers of this radical upheaval: people who lived, not in the vibrant metropolis, but on the distant periphery, where the wealth from oil and gas sales had not yet arrived. Their lives were shaped by poverty, disease, and scarce education.

¶13 Despite the stance taken by the Shah's government, it is unsurprising that *Yek ettefaqhe sadeh* was not only accepted at the film festival in Tehran, but also won an award. Apart from the quality of the film, which persuaded even the Minister of Culture at the screening, there was a political dimension to this recognition. A few years earlier, the Shah's government had realised that it could gain international recognition through socially critical films from Iran. The case of Dariush Mehrjui's black-and-white feature film *Gav* (*The Cow*, 1969) is exemplary. *Gav*, whose screenplay was by the left-wing Iranian writer Gholam-Hossein Saedi (1936-1985), of Azeri-Turkic origin, deals with the intimate relationship between Masht Hassan, a married but childless villager, and his cow, which is his most important possession and also the only cow in the village. One day, when Hassan leaves his village briefly, the pregnant animal is found dead in the barn. Fearing Hassan's reac-

tion, the others throw the cow into a hole, cover it up and tell him that the animal has run away. Upon hearing this news, Hassan breaks down. Unable to cope with the loss, he gradually loses his mind and believes himself to be the cow. The others cannot help him. They treat him like a cow themselves until he jumps to his death. Released in 1970, *Gav* won an award at the Sepas Film Festival in Tehran, but was still banned abroad. It was then smuggled out of the country and submitted to the Venice Film Festival in 1971, where it won the International Film Critics' Award. That same year, the actor who played Masht Hassan, Ezzatollah Entezami, was awarded the Silver Hugo for Best Actor at the Chicago Film Festival.

¶14 The Shah's government subsequently changed its approach: as long as it was culturally and politically beneficial abroad, and added value to the "Iran brand," it tolerated films by critical, mostly left-wing filmmakers. This was also the case with *Yek ettefaqhe sadeh*. It is a portrait of a repressive, frozen society in which state caprice has imposed a loud silence on life. Like his parents, Mohammad does not possess a language adequate to the task of expressing his emotions. The verbal communication of adults is limited almost exclusively to giving orders. Mohammad's communication is primarily non-verbal. This is where Saless's mastery comes into play. In this film, as in many of his later ones, he succeeds in telling his characters' stories of suffering through their glances, gestures, and movements. His films bear witness to the harsh conditions of life in modern times, and the damages they inflict on people with limited means in the face of a world dominated by money and speed, alienation and uprooting. Most of them are lonely, speechless, and incapable of reaching their fellow human beings. His characters are often prisoners in a cycle from which there is no escape.

¶15 Saless's film style was inspired in part by his own traumatic experiences, but also his reading of authors such as Anton Chekhov, Albert Camus and Franz Kafka. His viewing of films by directors like Jean Vigo and François Truffaut, Elio Petri and Ermanno Olmi, Andrei Tarkovsky, and Pier Paolo Pasolini was also formative for his cinematic practice. One can detect intertextual allusions to several other films and stories in *Yek ettefaghe sadeh*. Chekhov's narrative style plays a crucial role, especially his story *At Home*, which was published in 1897. Like Saless's film, Chekhov's story is set in a peripheral space, where little to nothing happens, and there is mainly one connection to the outside world: the railway. In his story, Chekhov criticises conditions in Russia, and the way wealthy employers treated their employees and the poorer classes. Saless might have seen a resemblance between Iran under the Shah and Russia under the Tsars. Under both regimes, society was hierarchical and governance autocratic. People from the lower classes worked hard, but little changed for them, unable to benefit from all the work they were ordered to do. In addition to Chekhov's narrative style, Saless also drew inspiration from international directors who depicted squalid working conditions. Among these directors were Luchino Visconti in *La terra trema* (1948), Luis Buñuel in *Los olvidados* (1950), Robert Bresson in *Mouchette* (1966), and Maurice Pialat in *L'enfance nue* (1968). These films offer realistic portrayals of poverty and cramped living conditions, and hard working or bedridden adults. Children are shown turning to crime for their survival, or sometimes end up in foster care, where they are unable to cope with their situation and begin to exhibit problematic behavior. The documentary style of these films draws viewers into difficult living conditions around the world.

¶16 In Saless's debut we also see resonances with motifs from Iranian films that helped shape the

Iranian New Wave. *Khaneh siyah ast* (*The house is black*, 1963) by Feroz Farrokhzad is a poetic documentary about a leper colony near Tabriz in north-western Iran. Despite their leprosy, the quarantined people try to lead dignified lives, playing games, going to school, and getting married. *Khesht va Ayeneh* (*Brick and mirror*, 1964) by Ebrahim Golestan is a feature film set in Tehran. A taxi driver discovers a child in his car and goes from authority to authority to ask for assistance. But instead of receiving help, he is turned away or treated with suspicion. The film shows a city caught between modernity and tradition, between hard work, anonymity and paranoia. *Chehre 75* (*Face 75*, 1965) by Hajir Darioush is another documentary dealing with education and literacy in rural areas. It also features interviews with soldiers who complete the second part of their military service as teachers. Girls who attend school are also interviewed. The film paints a sober, realistic picture of conditions and efforts in the countryside with respect to education. It was within this context that Saless's own cinematic practice took shape.

Far from Home—in Germany

¶17 The year 1974 marks another turning point for Saless: he was the first filmmaker to be invited to the Berlin Film Festival with two feature films in the same year. While *Yek ettefaghe sadeh* was invited to the International Forum of Young Film, Saless's second feature film *Tabiate bijan* (*Still Life*) was screened in competition at the Berlin Film Festival. At the end of the festival, the director, who had just turned 30, received six awards for both films, the highest honor being the Silver Bear for *Tabiate bijan*. Helped by Ambros Eichenberger, with whom he became friends, Saless agreed for a film project to be realized in West Berlin with Provobis, a Catholic production company, and New Film Group, an association of progressive

Iranian filmmakers, cameramen and musicians, whose managing director was the Iranian producer and popular actor Parviz Sayyad (*1939).

¶18 The recognition of his cinematic work in Berlin and the contract for a new film project in Germany might have given Saless new confidence. His behaviour changed as a result. His newfound fame made him pay less heed to the risks of censorship: when he began shooting his third feature film, *Qarantineh* (*Quarantine*), set in an orphanage in southern Tehran, in the autumn of 1974, the state shut down production after only a few days. Perhaps he no longer felt vulnerable after his success in West Berlin. During filming, Saless ran into a disagreement with the director of the orphanage and made a rash comment. The director, who had contacts with the imperial family, informed the relevant authorities. Saless's brusque behaviour towards the director was then used as a reason to prevent the filmmaker from continuing his work. It is also possible that Saless deliberately provoked a conflict with those in power. His unhappy marriage with an Iranian woman might have been an additional reason for his desire to leave Iran again to live abroad. The film project in West Berlin offered Saless that chance. His decision to leave Tehran was made easier by a new relationship with Helga Houzer, a woman who had taken him into her home after the Berlin Film Festival. Nevertheless, the interruption of filming in autumn 1974 led Saless to a nervous breakdown. When one of the doctors informed him that there was a plot against him, presumably an imminent arrest by the Shah's secret service SAVAK, he decided to leave Iran immediately and returned to West Berlin. Thus began Saless's exile, which, as in the case of Lotte H. Eisner, extended into a "long vacation"—Eisner's ironic term for her exile in Paris.

¶19 On the one hand, the award-winning filmmaker had it relatively easy in West Berlin: he spoke Ger-

man, was well-connected, and enjoyed recognition as a serious auteur. On the other hand, like all those in exile, he too had to deal with bureaucracy: his residence permit was not permanent at first, but limited to short periods and subject to the condition that he may only work as a screenwriter and director. Saless found these conditions frustrating, as they made it difficult for him to plan projects, and prevented him from producing films himself, forcing him to rely on others. This first phase of his life in exile, marked by instability, is also reflected in Saless's first film outside his homeland, a German-Iranian co-production made in West Berlin: *In der Fremde* (*Dar Ghorbat, Far from home*, 1975). This film depicts the life of Turkish "guest worker" Hüseyin (played by Parviz Sayyad), who works on a metal cutting machine in a noisy factory near Voltastraße in Wedding, the north-west of the divided city, and commutes by U-Bahn to Moritzplatz in dreary Kreuzberg in the evenings, where he lives in an unrenovated flat with fellow countrymen—a family of three, a student and two workers. Hüseyin is an energetic and likeable character. He works hard and saves money to buy a house and get married in his homeland. He hardly speaks any German, is short, and fails in his attempts to meet German women. In the film, viewers watch as Hüseyin and his student flatmate try to make their way into a brothel. There, they are denied entrance: the film suggests it is because of their foreign appearance. Saless thus shows how racism is at play as a gatekeeper in even the most transactionally patriarchal spaces. Still, Hüseyin has a job and a goal that he is pursuing. Others are less fortunate: the father of the family, who lives with Hüseyin and the student, as well as another flatmate, are unemployed and spend their time at home playing backgammon. Another flatmate learns of his father's death and has to return to Turkey to take the patriarch's place at home. The life that the "guest workers" and their relatives lead in West Berlin, as depicted by

Saless in his film, is one of quiet suffering and sacrifice, sadness and uncertainty.

¶20 In this film, Saless drew on his own experiences, garnered in Vienna, when he worked as a window, stair cleaner and porter in a youth hostel. These experiences are refracted in his films: life in an environment with a foreign language and mentality; the experience of a “regime of gazes” that makes it clear to the foreigner that he is unwelcome; the difficulty of making contact with women, finding a partner, and living his sexuality. When the student brings a young German woman to the flat one day, his male Turkish flatmates can hardly believe their eyes. She is served tea. Turkish music is played in her honor. She is special because she shows interest in these outsiders. This exceptional moment of contact and hospitality serves as a utopian counterpoint to the isolation of these strangers in an inhospitable Berlin.

¶21 *In der Fremde* won the International Critics’ Prize at the Berlin Film Festival in the summer of 1975. Observers such as film critic Friedrich Luft (1911-1990) expressed their disappointment that the film did not receive the Golden Bear. However, the theme of Saless’s first film made in West Germany—a story dealing with “guest workers”—was a compromise for the director. Otto Erich Kress (1926-2015), the German co-producer, is said to have insisted on it because it would make it easier for Saless to enter the West German film market. And indeed, in the 1970s, many feature films and documentaries dealing with the lives of “guest workers” and foreigners in the Federal Republic of Germany were being produced. Examples include *Angst essen Seele auf* (*Ali: Fear eats the soul*, 1974) by Rainer Werner Fassbinder and *Shirins Hochzeit* (*Shirin’s Wedding*, 1976) by Helma Sanders-Brahms. Two works by Iranian directors were also produced alongside *In der Fremde*: *Zum Essen braucht man ein Besteck* (*You need cutlery to eat*, 1976), a feature film by Masud Rajai about the romantic and

marital relationship between an Iranian architect and a German employee, and *Wir wollen auch leben* (*We want to live too*, 1978), a documentary film by Mehrangis Montazami-Dabui about young people from immigrant families, whose everyday lives are marked by unemployment and boredom, crime and police custody.

The “Great Unknown” of New German Cinema

¶22 According to Saless, after his emigration to Germany, the Shah’s government attempted to lure him back to Iran as an advisor to the Ministry of Culture. His Iranian wife also travelled to Germany to persuade him to return to their shared home. But his mistrust was stronger. The escape must have been too traumatic for Saless, as he subsequently displayed paranoid tendencies. He was afraid of persecution by the Shah’s authorities, even though he refrained from making critical statements in public. After his initial, comparatively stable, years in West Berlin and also in Munich, his life was disrupted by constant moves from 1979 onwards. There were various reasons for these: one motivation may have been his paranoia and his attempt to avoid leaving traces; another that he always moved to live where his producers worked. Moreover, he avoided having a permanent address in order to evade official correspondence about tax payments.

¶23 Examining Saless’s attitude as a non-German filmmaker in the Federal Republic, his ambivalence is noticeable. He emphasized his critical distance from the local film scene, yet desired to be perceived as part of the New German Cinema. His next two films, *Reifezeit* (*Time of maturity*, 1976) and *Tagebuch eines Liebenden* (*Diary of a lover*, 1977), co-productions with public broadcasters in the Federal Republic, featured German protagonists. Like artists of German origin, such as Günther Grass and Uwe Johnson, Saless also traveled to New York at the invitation of the Goethe-Institut,

for the *Berlin Now* series of cultural events in 1977. On June 22, 1977, Ron Holloway published an extensive article in *Variety* entitled “Who’s Who in the West German film industry. A directory of directors and filmmakers over the period 1957–1977,” in which Saless is also mentioned: “Gifted Iranian helmer living in exile in West Berlin [...] His meditative, stylised pix, inspired by Chekhov’s stories, are intense, formalistic treatises on alienation and loneliness lensed over short stretches of time.”⁷

¶²⁴ Saless, who had been a secret member of the *Tudeh*, Iran’s pro-Moscow Communist Party, since around 1976/77, came to be the most internationally successful filmmaker of Iranian origin during the decade after his participation in the 1974 Berlin Film Festival. His films were shown in Locarno and London, Cannes and Chicago, Toronto and Montreal, New York and San Francisco, Vienna and—despite his emigration—until 1977 even in Tehran. Saless received West German and international awards, such as the British Film Institute’s Special Film Award in 1977 for *Tagebuch eines Liebenden*, the Silver Hugo at the Chicago International Film Festival in 1980 for *Ordnung (Order)*, a Grimme Prize for *Grabbes letzter Sommer (Grabbe’s Last Summer)* in 1981, and the Prix de l’Âge d’or from the Cinémathèque royale de Belgique and the Brussels Cinematheque for *Utopia* in 1984. In the same year, Saless became a member of the Film and Media Art section of the Akademie der Künste in West Berlin.

¶²⁵ Saless was an internationally respected auteur filmmaker who was proud to find his name in film encyclopaedias. But the invitations to festivals and the awards his films have received should not obscure the fact that he faced tremendous difficulty in getting his films made in the Federal

Republic of Germany. In 1977 and 1978, public broadcasters rejected all his screenplays, for which Saless blamed the governments in Bonn and Tehran. A project he had begun, entitled *Hochzeit in Exil (Wedding in Exile, 1977)*, partially self-financed with the help of Homayoun Farazi, a left-wing Iranian in Munich, failed to find a co-producer. It was only after the 1979 revolution in Iran, renewed attention thanks to a retrospective initiated by Dieter Reifarh in Frankfurt am Main, and further assistance from Lotte H. Eisner—who agreed to a film project dedicated to her and also campaigned for Saless in France—that the doors of West German television stations reopened to him. Seemingly anticipating that the doors could close again at any moment, Saless seized the opportunity. The years leading up to 1985 became his most productive ever. In quick succession, he shot *Die langen Ferien der Lotte H. Eisner (1979)* and *Ordnung (1980)*, *Utopia (1983)* and *Empfänger unbekannt (Addressee unknown, 1983)*. With *Grabbes letzter Sommer (1980)* and *Hans – Ein Junge in Deutschland (Hans – A Boy in Germany, 1985)*, *Wechselbalg (Changeling, 1987)* and *Rosen für Afrika (Roses for Africa, 1991)*, Saless also broke new ground and adapted prose works by West German writers Thomas Valentin, Hans Frick, Jürgen Breest and Ludwig Fels. Personal highlights included the biographical documentary *Anton P. Čechov – Ein Leben (Anton P. Čechov – A Life, 1981)*, for which he co-wrote the screenplay with Peter Urban (1941–2013), the most important translator of Chekhov into German, and *Der Weidenbaum (The Willow tree, 1984)*, based on the Russian writer’s story of the same name.

¶²⁶ In the early 1980s, Saless crossed further media boundaries. For his Chekhov film, he had excerpts from Chekhov’s play performed at the Schauspielhaus Hamburg and recorded them on camera. He was also able to shoot his documentary in 1981, not only in the Federal Republic

7— Ronald Holloway, “Who’s Who in West German Film Industry. A Directory of Directors and Filmmakers over the Period 1957–1977,” *Variety*, June 22, 1977, 54.

of Germany, but also in Austria and the Soviet Union—shortly after the invasion of Afghanistan by Soviet troops and the boycott of the Olympic Games in Moscow by Western countries. In 1982, Saless was back behind the Iron Curtain, this time in Czechoslovakia, to find locations suitable for his next film. Hessischer Rundfunk produced most of *Hans – Ein Junge in Deutschland* with Slovenská Filmová Tvorba, partly for budgetary reasons. The Chekhov adaptation *Der Weidenbaum* was then shot entirely in Czechoslovakia, exclusively with local actors, and in Slovak, which Saless had by then learned. He was accepted by the Czechoslovak authorities because he was both a convinced communist and a member of the Tudeh Party, and also because his films shot in the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic brought money into the state coffers.

¶27 During these years, Saless was at his zenith. He spoke several languages and frequently travelled both east and west. He made many films, attracted attention and won awards. He was aware of his importance for New German Cinema—not least because his constant changing of location allowed him to view events in the Federal Republic from a critical distance. *Ordnung und Empfänger unbekannt*, *Hans – Ein Junge in Deutschland* and *Wechselbalg* are merciless in their “examination” of the West German bourgeoisie, in their unsparing analysis of the consequences of the National Socialist past and the capitalist economic order on West German society. However, when Helmut Kohl became West German Chancellor in October 1982 and announced a “spiritual and moral turnaround,” Saless became fearful in the face of the more restrictive immigration and film policies of the new conservative-liberal government. The *Gesetz zur Förderung der Rückkehrbereitschaft von Ausländern* (Act on the Promotion of the Willingness of Foreigners to Return) from 1983 was intended to encourage workers, primarily

from non-EU countries, and especially Turkey, to leave Germany permanently, among other things by offering them one-time payments. In addition, the Federal Minister of the Interior, Friedrich Zimmermann, refused to continue providing financial support to critical filmmakers such as Saless’s friend Herbert Achternbusch (1938–2022) for his film *Das Gespenst* (*The Ghost*, 1982). Instead, the trend moved towards promotion of seemingly apolitical films such as *Piratensender Powerplay* (1982), *Die Supernasen* (1983) and *Zwei Nasen tanken Super* (1984). These kinds of films would be shown on private television, which was launched in 1984 with the permission of the Kohl government to compete with public broadcasters. Ratings became an increasingly important criterion for making television programs.

¶28 There are a number of reasons for which Saless moved to Czechoslovakia in 1984: the political shift to the right in the Federal Republic of Germany and the associated restrictive film and immigration policies; and Saless’s uncompromising nature, which closed many of the doors to public broadcasters which had been open to him again since 1979. Ultimately, though, it was personal reasons and the dissolution of a relationship that prompted him to move behind the Iron Curtain. Supported by Czechoslovakian and Iranian communist parties, he hoped to live and work there. But the experiences he had up till 1990, when the Eastern Bloc collapsed, were traumatic. He was diagnosed with cancer and therefore unable to film Ludwig Fels’ novel *Ein Unding der Liebe* (*An Absurdity of Love*, 1981) himself. On top of that, a documentary *List z Kábulu* (*Ein Brief aus Kabul, A Letter from Kabul*, 1987) that he shot in Afghanistan for Slovak television was cut by the censors in Bratislava. These experiences must have reminded Saless of his experiences back in Iran in 1974, when the completion of his third feature film, *Qarantineh*, was prevented by the Shah’ govern-

ment, a decision which had a lasting effect on his health, and triggered a paranoia that made him ever more distrustful.

¶29 After his return to reunified Germany, Saleess was unable to regain his former momentum. Weakened by cancer and heavy alcohol consumption, he continued to write treatments and screenplays, but following his film *Roses for Africa* (1991), a number of producers and public broadcasters no longer believed he was capable of making further films. Equally important is the fact that, after German reunification, decision-makers and financiers supported entertainment films even more enthusiastically than before. Saleess's films, which were considered "long-winded," "exhausting" and "difficult," were no longer in demand by producers. On the other hand, there were offers made to Saleess that he turned down, or projects that did not progress for various reasons. His situation remained unchanged even when he was awarded two prizes during those years: the 1992 Telestar, a television award, for *Roses for Africa*, and the Grand Prize of the Frankfurt Authors' Foundation (*Autorenstiftung*) in 1994.

¶30 That year, disappointed and physically frail, without financial means and dependent on the help of others, he visited Canada, a country he considered for possible emigration and new projects. A year later, he moved to the United States, where his older brother had been living since 1979. His brother paid for Saleess's medical treatment in 1995. Film plans in California, where Saleess lived for some time, faltered. His health deteriorated rapidly. In the summer of 1998, shortly after his 54th birthday, he was found dead in his apartment in Chicago, his last place of residence. Mehrnaz Saeed-Vafa, a US-Iranian filmmaker, had been accompanying Saleess since 1997 for a documentary. After his death, she compiled the material into the short film *Saleess. Far from home* (1998). It shows a sad, thoughtful artist

who had aged considerably in the last year of his life. The form of the film, alternating between interviews with Saleess, and camera footage of his everyday life and surroundings, bears similarity to *Die langen Ferien der Lotte H. Eisner*.

Posthumous Evanescence and Rediscovery

¶31 After his death, the screenwriter and director was honored in obituaries worldwide: Jean-Michel Frodon published *Sohrab Shahid Saleess. Le „Tchekhov du cinéma iranien“* in *Le Monde*.⁸ The Tudeh Party honored the artist in its newspaper *Name-ye Mardom* making Saleess's membership public.⁹ In the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, Herbert Achternbusch paid tribute to his friend and colleague on the occasion of a retrospective in spring 1999 dedicated to Saleess at the Film Museum in Munich.¹⁰

¶32 In early 1999, an exhibition was held at the Akademie der Künste in Berlin on the occasion of the Berlin Film Festival. With *Sohrab Shahid Saleess. Bericht über ein abgekürztes Leben* (Sohrab Shahid Saleess. Report on an abridged life, 1999), Farschid Ali Zahedi, an Iranian living in Oldenburg, published an accompanying volume, which was intended to launch a book series to make Saleess's estate accessible to an interested public. However, only one volume emerged from these efforts. After that, Saleess faded into obscurity. His films were occasionally screened in Germany, and there was also a *Dokumentationsstelle Sohrab Shahid Saleess (Sohrab Shahid Saleess Documentation Centre)* run by Zahedi, which interested parties could contact. It has been closed since 2017.

8— Jean-Michel Frodon, "Sohrab Shahid Saleess. Le "Tchekhov du cinéma iranien," *Le Monde*, July 14, 1998, 9.

9— "Safar-e bi-bazgasht. Rafik Sohrab Shahid-e Saleess" [A Journey of no return. Comrade Sohrab Shahid Saleess], *Name-ye Mardom. Organ-e Merkeze-ye Hesb-e Tudeh-e Iran*, Tir 16, 1377 [July 4, 1998], Nr. 535, 1 & 5.

10— Herbert Achternbusch, "Verzweifelt all die Tage bis zum Grabe," *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, March 25, 1999, 18.

¶33 In 1999, Ali Dehbashi published *Yadnameh-ye Sohrab Shahid Saless* in Tehran, a nearly 600-page volume of memories from friends and companions. The book also contains letters from Saless, for example to his uncle Ahmad Shahidi, who was an important contact for the student when he was in hospital in Paris in 1967 and when he was in Tehran in 1968, looking for a job in the film industry.

¶34 There is no foundation or state institution in Germany, the USA or Iran dedicated to Saless's transnational film work. In Iran, this is certainly due to censorship and the limited opportunities resulting from the lack of interest on the part of the political leaders of the Islamic Republic in honoring the cinematic legacy of a communist artist. Nevertheless, the difference in perception and appreciation is striking. In Iran, Saless is valued and revered by the critics, film historians and cinephiles—both before and after his death—as an important catalyst of modern Iranian cinema with his feature films *Yek ettefaghe sadeh* and *Tabiate bijan*. In Germany, where he made a total of 13 feature films and documentaries, it took almost twenty years before his cinematic work was honored with a new retrospective in Berlin in 2016. Further retrospectives followed in Munich, Brussels and London, as well as other events in Germany focusing on Saless's little-known cinematic work. In autumn 2023, three of Saless's films—*Yek ettefaghe sadeh*, *Tabiate bijan* and *In der Fremde*—were shown at the Museum of Modern Art in New York as part of the retrospective *Iranian cinema before the revolution, 1925–1979*. In 2024, *In der Fremde* was screened in numerous cities by the distribution company Arbelos in the USA. More recently, the film has become available for streaming online at [kanopy.com](https://www.kanopy.com). In 2025, Saless was honored with new retrospectives in Frankfurt, Hanover and Cologne.

¶35 *ReFocus: The Films of Sohrab Shahid-Saless. Exile, Displacement and the Stateless Moving Image*, edited by Azadeh Fatehrad, was the first academic anthology to be published in English as a result of a conference in London.¹¹ Shortly afterwards, in 2021, the Goethe-Institut co-initiated the creation of the *Shahid Saless Archive* in Germany. Together with partners such as Filmshift, it is involved in the gradual restoration and digitisation of the Iranian filmmaker's films, made since 1975, with funding from the Filmförderungsanstalt (German Federal Film Board, FFA). This project seeks to make the films accessible to audiences worldwide once again. However, not all rights to the films are held by the Shahid Saless Archive. His best-known feature film in Germany, *Utopia* (1984), has been available on DVD since 2020. Shortly before that, in 2019, the two-part television film *Ein Unding der Liebe* (1988) was also released on DVD. Saless was unable to realize this film himself due to his illness. He wrote the screenplay based on the novel of the same name by Ludwig Fels, and the exiled Romanian Radu Gabrea (1937–2017) took over the directing.

¶36 In 2023, I published *Die langen Ferien des Sohrab Shahid Saless. Annäherungen an ein Leben und Werk* (The long vacation of Sohrab Shahid Saless. Approaches to a life and work; Exil Verlag, Frankfurt/Main), which, following numerous journalistic publications, finally was the first comprehensive monograph on Saless in German, based on six years of research and archival work. The trilogy, rich in photos, consists of a biography (Volume 1), an analysis of his feature films and documentaries made between 1973 and 1991 and also a filmography (Volume 2) and, finally, two collections: 1. interviews about Saless with numerous German and Iranian partners and friends, publishing

11— *ReFocus: The Films of Sohrab Shahid-Saless: Exile, Displacement and the Stateless Moving Image*, edited by Azadeh Fatehrad, (Edinburgh University Press, 2020).

agents and actors, colleagues and journalists; 2. interviews and letters, journalistic articles, treatments and screenplays by Saless (Volume 3). The aim of *Die langen Ferien des Sohrab Shahid Saless* is to arouse interest in Saless as a difficult, uncompromising person and artist, and in his unique cinematic work—and to clarify why, unlike the German-born filmmakers of his generation, he was almost completely forgotten in the Federal Republic for almost two decades. At the same time, the trilogy aims to serve as a scholarly publication that fills the gap in German-language film, literature and cultural studies on one of the most important yet obscure filmmakers of the New German Cinema.

¶37 Another publication in German followed in 2024: filmmaker Bert Schmidt, who was the filmmaker's assistant director for several years, published *Sohrab Shahid Saless. Film im Kopf* (Sohrab Shahid Saless. Film in the mind).¹² It is a memoir by a former employee, who died in the spring of 2024, about their joint film shoots and their (technical) peculiarities. Accompanied by numerous photographs of his own, and quotes from other colleagues, the volume is a personal and helpful introduction to Saless. In 2024, documentary filmmaker Reza Haeri published *Nustalzhi-ye ja-ye digar. Sohrab Shahid Saless: Nagufte-ha, name-ha, yaddasht-ha* (Nostalgia for somewhere else. Sohrab Shahid Saless: sayings, letters, notes), a volume in Farsi also with photos intended to educate audiences in Iran about the life and work of the artist in exile.¹³

¶38 Along with the publications in English, German and Farsi on the Iranian auteur filmmaker pre-

sented above, the restoration and digitization of Saless's "German" films has also gained momentum. The academic reappraisal of the life of Sohrab Shahid Saless, a wanderer through worlds, lost and rediscovered, and his transnational cinematic legacy, continues. Precisely because this life and work was lived and created in different languages, cultures, political and economic systems, those who engage with Saless and his films stand to gain a great deal of insight. Saless provides a lens through which to explore the opportunities, limitations and changes of what was possible in film during the Shah's reign in Iran, in the Federal Republic of Germany before and after reunification, in socialist Czechoslovakia, and also in the United States in the 1990s.

¶39 It should also be emphasised that Saless was always an outsider, whether in his country of birth or, later, in his various countries of exile. He encountered and overcame numerous hurdles. He was patient and tireless, but also rarely willing to compromise, and often so direct that he lost partners. The reasons he and his work later disappeared in the Federal Republic of Germany is, ironically, linked to the medium which enabled him to make most of his films: television. In the analogue age, co-produced films were broadcast repeatedly and preserved in the television archives. They were not available for purchase in stores. Saless was restless, unsettled and always on the run, even from himself. He did not take care of his cinematic work in the sense of planning an archive of his own. His letters and scripts, but also his films and the rights to his films, were scattered across the countries and places where he lived, stayed with friends, and was close to his producers.

¶40 It is this contradiction in Saless that stands out and compels one to engage with him. On the one hand, filmmaking was an essential part of his life, a necessary outlet and an appropriate artistic form for depicting the lives of "ordinary" people.

12— Bert Schmidt, *Sohrab Shahid Saless. Film im Kopf*, (Belleville, 2023).

13— Reza Haeri, *Nustalzhi-ye ja-ye digar. Sohrab Shahid Saless: Nagufte-ha, name-ha, yaddasht-ha* (Nostalgia for somewhere else. Sohrab Shahid Saless: sayings, letters, notes), (Goman, 2024).

On the other hand, Saless's radical approach of refusing to accept compromises often prevented him from making films. The following statement underscores the importance of filmmaking for him. At the end of an interview conducted in Chicago in 1997 and published in the spring of 1998 in Tehran, Iranian journalist Hamid-Reza Sadr asked Saless to define cinema in a sentence. The answer was: "Cinema is a very beautiful lie. One can and should live without falsehood. But, well, without a beautiful lie life will be difficult and arduous."¹⁴

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