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## Avini's city: "Shahri Dar Aasemaan".

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AVINI'S CITY: *SHAHRI DAR AASEMAAN*

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of TV, Radio, Film and Theatre Department

San José State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Mehrzad Karimabadi

December 2009

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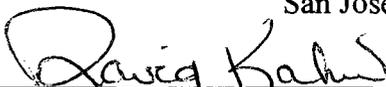
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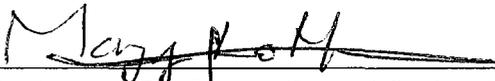
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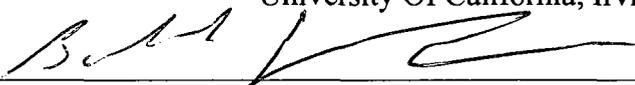
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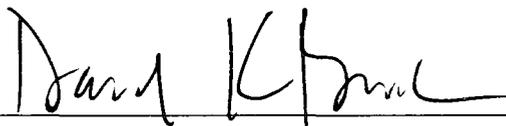
  
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## ABSTRACT

### AVINI'S CITY: *SHAHRI DAR AASEMAAN*

by Mehrzad Karimabadi

This thesis examines the documentary *Shahri dar Aasemaan* (i.e. A City in the Sky) by the late filmmaker Sayyed Morteza Avini's in order to establish its key elements and argue for Avini as an auteur with a unique cinematic style that includes strong personal and ideological ties. *Shahri dar Aasemaan*, which was Avini's last documentary, covers the initial forty-five-day battle leading to the Iraqi occupation of the Iranian city of Khorramshahr when the Iran-Iraq war broke out in October of 1980. In order to better comprehend Avini as an auteur and his work, this study begins with a brief introduction to Avini's biography and the history of the Iran-Iraq war. The following chapter is a comparison to *The War*, a documentary in seven episodes by American director Ken Burns in 2007 about the Second World War. The purpose of this comparison is to discuss *Shahri dar Aasemaan* in the context of another film that has documented a war at length rather than in isolation, a type of analysis that has not yet been conducted either inside or outside of Iranian borders about Avini's films. The focus of the thesis' remaining chapters is on *Shahri dar Aasemaan* as both artistic and cultural artifact.

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## Chapter 1- Introduction

### *Prelude*

The intent of this thesis is to examine the documentary *Shahri dar Aasemaan* (i.e., *A City in the Sky*) as an example of Avini's work in order to establish him as an auteur with a unique cinematic style interwoven with strong ideological ties. *Shahri dar Aasemaan*, Avini's last documentary, covers the initial forty-five-day battle leading to the Iraqi occupation of the Iranian city of Khorramshahr when the Iran-Iraq war broke out in October of 1980. In order to better comprehend Avini and his work, this thesis will begin with an introduction; it will then delve into the wide-ranging elements of *Shahri dar Aasemaan* such as concept, editing, photography, music, script, and the voiceover as well as the styles with which this documentary can be identified.

*Shahri dar Aasemaan* was produced in the fall of 1992 and broadcast the following winter for the first time on Iranian national television. This is the last documentary ever made by the nationally renowned Iranian director, Sayyed Morteza Avini, on the subject of the Iran-Iraq war. Among Avini's documentaries about the Iran-Iraq war, two series focus exclusively on this period covering the beginning of the war and the ensuing Iraqi occupation of the Iranian border cities. These two series are *Haghighat* (i.e., *The Truth*) and *Shahri Dar Aasemaan* (i.e., *A City in the Sky*). *Haghighat* was made after the initiation of the war while *Shahri Dar Aasemaan* was produced four years after the conclusion of the war. Based on the *Ravaayat-e Fath* Foundation's records, Avini made 25 documentary titles, of which 17 are documentary

series, bringing the total number of episodes to 167. From 1988 until July 1992, Avini was the chief editor for the first series of *Sureh* magazine. There are 16 posthumously published books based on his written works, articles and film narrations.

Twenty years after the conclusion of the Iran-Iraq war, damages from the war have turned from fresh wounds to old scars. This makes the subject available for more in depth analysis, noticeably less superficial than what existed in the past. Dilip Hiro's *Iranian Labyrinth* is used as the main resource to review the Iran-Iraq war from a historical perspective. This book provides references for the historical events in order to better understand Avini's documentary. To look back at this recent history, Iranian cinema has produced films on the subject of the war through fictions such as *Bashu, the little stranger, Sentry, Immigrant, The Glass Agency, Lovers' Domain* and documentary genres such as *Forty Witnesses: The Second Narrative*, and *Moharram in Moharram* (Naficy 182-187). Pursuing scholarly analysis of these works can be a step towards a better understanding of this period in the history of Iran, particularly as it is constructed cinematically.

In order to see where Avini and his documentary are positioned in an international context, *Companion Encyclopedia of Middle Eastern and North African Film* is a noteworthy place to start. Hamid Naficy, professor of cinema and television at Northwestern University, has briefly discussed Avini's work as a part of Iranian war cinema. He mentions that "Avini starting as the head of Jihad-e Sazandegi (i.e. Reconstruction Campaign) film unit and Channel One television was both technically and ideologically committed to documenting the war" (185). Naficy also refers to Avini's

work as the most prominent Iranian war documentary and recognizes Avini as the most prolific director on the subject of war with eight documentary series focused exclusively on the subject of the eight-year war between Iran and Iraq.

At the beginning of the twenty first century and fifteen years after Avini's death on a landmine, a small number of scholars in Europe and the United States have just started to tackle the subject of Avini and his documentary work on the war. Nevertheless, such research focuses on Avini, his ideology and the content of his documentaries from an anthropological point of view, focusing on the concept of martyrdom more than on the documentary or Avini's style of filmmaking. This thesis, however, will be concentrating on his last documentary series as an artifact, dissecting the elements and techniques used in the documentary, and Avini's signature style and his ideology aligned with the Islamic Republic government in Iran as a significant contributor to his style.

Research on scholarly literature within Farsi and English texts have revealed limited academic studies of Avini's works. However, combination of these limited academic resources, along with the films, interviews and critiques, mainly in Farsi, offers a fine pool of information for this research to draw upon. These sources offer information in anthropology, documentary genre, and other general information that is essential to analyzing *Shahri dar Aasemaan* and those which contributed most significant to this research are discussed below.

Patricia Aufderheide in her book *Documentary Film, A Very Short Introduction* explains: "a documentary is about real life, but it is not real life. It is the portrait of real

life using real life as its raw material” (2), and *Shahri dar Aasemaan* fits the description of a documentary accordingly. Avini describes his documentary: “since we were trying to reach the reality, the best way was to overcome the factors which were concealing this reality...the easiest factors to overcome were the technical factors and the hardest were our personal perceptions” (*Ayine-ye Jadou* 3:216). Despite the notion of removing one’s personal perception while making a documentary, the fact remains that the end result is very much a projection of one’s reality. Journalist Edward R. Murrow came to a significant explanation about this idea: “Anyone who believes that every individual must represent a ‘balanced’ picture knows nothing about either balance or picture” (Aufderheide 2). Murrow’s statement is equally true when it comes to Avini’s *Shahri dar Aasemaan*. Avini himself has mentioned that in portraying the war he did not portray issues such as war-time migration from the border cities or family’s disagreements regarding their sons’ joining the armed forces. Rather, his focus was on the braveries in the frontlines (*Ayine-ye Jadou* 3: 194). In his book *Representing Reality* Bill Nichols states that in documentary “historical reality is under siege. Imperfect utopias and diverse affinities propose themselves as alternative to the ordered lives constructed by the master narratives...” (*Representing Reality* 10), and Nichols’ remarks certainly apply to *Shahri dar Aasemaan*. The history of the Iran-Iraq war is reviewed not only through the eyes of the war participants, it is subject to Avini’s interpretations of those events and their participants.

In order to understand *Shahri dar Aasemaan*, this research uses Bill Nichols’ categorization of documentary films. Bill Nichols, in his books *Representing Reality* and

*Introduction to Documentary*, provides tools in order to conceptualize *Shahri dar Aasemaan*. Nichols categorizes documentary films in six sub-genres or modes: poetic, expository, participatory, observational, reflexive and performative (*Introduction to Documentary* 99). These sub-genres are based on different aspects of a documentary such as artistic and stylistic interventions, subject matter, ideology, ethics, and politics, all of which apply to *Shahri dar Aasemaan* to an extent. Based on Nichols' classification of documentary movies, *Shahri dar Aasemaan* is primarily a hybrid between expository and performative modes of documentary. Similar to expository documentaries, it is rhetorical, addresses the viewers directly and voices a clear perspective. It also has a voice-of-God narrative and evidentiary editing, as explained below. Furthermore, *Shahri dar Aasemaan* "advance[s] an argument" and "recount[s] the history" "addresses the viewer directly with titles or voices that propose a perspective, advance an argument or recount the history" (*Introduction to Documentary* 105). Its subjectivity, effectiveness, and expressive tone categorize *Shahri dar Aasemaan* as a performative documentary.

In discussions about documentary, its relationship to reality is often a focus, such as in Nichols' following remark about the bond between images and reality: "There is indeed a distinctive bond between photographic image and that of which it is a record." (*Representing Reality* 5). The argument shows that although there is a link between reality and its recorded image, there is always a distance as well. Avini not only merges the reality and the imagery, he introduces a third complicating element which he calls the "truth." Avini defines the "reality" and the "truth" in a secular world as follows: "The reality is the interpretation of humanistic nature, realism comes in the contrast with

idealism; the truth is the way things should be, and the reality is the way they are” (*Ayine-ye Jadou* 3:214). Avini strove to convey reality as he perceived it: “Our reality is the territory of God’s will as mystics say; it is where the physical and spiritual worlds collide; based on this definition of reality, truth and reality coincide” (*Ayine-ye Jadou* 3:214). Consequently, Avini’s claims that his documentary is a merger of the image, the reality and “the truth” can be argued based on the sources reviewed in this research.

Roxanne Varzi, assistant professor of anthropology at the University of California, Irvine, discusses Avini and his work as an anthropological study in her book *Warring Souls: Youth, Media, and Martyrdom in Post-Revolutionary Iran*. She studies the means by which Avini and his work fit in the culture of martyrdom. Varzi’s focus on Avini and his work is mainly from an anthropological perspective and is a pioneering effort on the subject of martyrdom in relation to the Iran-Iraq war. This is a valuable source of data which focuses on the ideology and the mindset of Avini.

One of the questions raised by Varzi in her analysis of Avini is the categorization of his documentaries as a Neorealist genre. The “creative construction of a yet-to-be reality” (88) leads her to pose the question of whether Avini’s work can be considered Neorealism. However, later in the book she quotes Avini on Neorealism in works by Mohsen Makhmalbaf and Amir Naderi. According to Avini, Neorealism shows the ugly truths of life and what is wrong with reality on earth; however, Avini believes in documenting the beauty of life (Varzi 88). This reflects the degree of subjectivity in Avini’s work. Avini argues that the misery of lives which are entangled with the problems caused by war cannot be the focus since the lives affected by the war are filled

with strong beliefs and true bravery which have innate goodness and beauty (*Ayine-ye Jadou* 3:193-195).

Although Varzi's *Warring Souls* is among the central works on the subject of war and martyrdom in Iran, it shows signs of challenges she encountered in bringing the book together. Dealing with resources in Farsi while trying to capture the nuances of meaning in translation at points created inaccurate uses of terminology. For example when she mentions the volunteer forces, she uses the term "Basiji" instead of "Basij" (80). The correct use would be "Basij" to designate the organization, rather than "Basiji," a person who volunteered as part of the organization. There is also an inaccurate claim that Avini's *Ravaayat-e Fath* series was aired every night on national television, which was not the case. Had she been living in Iran during the time of the war, she would have been aware that the series was aired weekly on primetime Thursday nights (Farsnews.com). Such challenges present themselves when the person conducting the research faces language barriers. Language might have presented itself as a barrier in Varzi's case, but there are nevertheless great benefits in looking at Avini's work from the kind of outside perspective she provides.

This study of Avini's *Shahri dar Aasemaan* includes a comparison to "*The War*," a 2007 documentary in seven episodes by American director Ken Burns in about the Second World War. The purpose of this comparison is to discuss Avini's documentary in the context of another film that has documented a war at length rather than focusing on the *Shahri dar Aasemaan* in isolation, a type of analysis which has not yet been conducted either inside or outside of Iranian borders about Avini's films. Another

purpose in comparing these films is to highlight different treatments of a story of war. *The War* looks at the Second World War from the perspective of the soldiers who served in the war as well as their close acquaintances, similar to Avini's approach toward the Iran-Iraq war in *Shahri dar Aasemaan*. As this thesis will discuss, there are areas of further overlap and dissimilarity that have to do with historical, cultural, and ideological circumstance as well.

Avini not only writes the narration of his documentaries, he also uses his own voice as the voice-over for them. In order to dissect the narration of the documentary, the script of *Shahri dar Aasemaan* published by Ravaayat-e Fath foundation is essential. In the preface of this resource by an unknown author, Avini's documentary is described as documenting 'unseen realities': "this documentary series is Martyr Sayyed Morteza Avini's travelogue from Khorramshahr, brief and to the point, narrator of the unseen realities" (*Shahri dar Aasemaan* 7). This is a reference to one of Avini's characteristic stylistic approaches of narrating his documentary, as this thesis will discuss.

Another source in the language of Avini is the *Ravaayat-e Raavi* (i.e. *Narration of the Narrator*) which is a documentary by Hossein Moazzezi Nia, Avini's son-in-law. This documentary includes a series of interviews with Avini's closest friends and family and will be discussed at length. *Honar-e Khaki* (i.e. *Earthly Art*) is another multi-media resource which includes graphic images taken during Avini's visits to the warfront before and after the war as well as images of Avini's body after he stepped on the landmine which caused his death.

*Hamsafar e Khorsheed* (i.e. *Along with the Sun*) is a printed source which provides biographical information. It is gathered partly from Avini's writings and autobiography, as well as from those of his friends and family. One chapter includes poems written for Avini after his death. Another main resource in this research is *Morteza va Maa* (i.e. *Morteza and Us*) by the Iranian director Kiumars Poorahmad. This documentary consists of a series of interviews with people who have worked with Avini in the past as well as footage from different examples of Avini's work. Among the Farsi resources are material focusing on Avini's essays, multimedia and books in addition to interviews with other directors, his past crew members, writers and family members.

In defining the parameters of the object to be studied, it should be noted that there are conflicting references to *Shahri dar Aasemaan* as either a stand-alone six-episode documentary, or as a continuation of the sixty-three episode long *Ravaayat-e Fath*. Based on three reliable sources however, this thesis takes the position that *Shahri dar Aasemaan* is indeed part of the *Ravaayat-e Fath Series*.

Avini has called his movie making style "Illuminationist Cinema" and based on his description, this style had been introduced to Iranian cinema. Madadpour, late professor of philosophy in Tehran University, has written a book on Avini in 2005: *Cinema ye Eshraghi* (i.e. *Illuminationist Cinema*). In his book he states that both the term and the category of "Illuminationist cinema" were first introduced by Avini. This was considered to be a kind of cinema that is cognizant of and closely tied with mysticism. In "Illuminationist Cinema," Dr. Mohammad Madadpour refers to *Shahri dar Aasemaan* as an *after-the-war* version of the *Ravaayat-e Fath*. Morteza Sha'bani, the

photographer of *Shahri dar Aasemaan*, also refers to it as “*Ravaayat-e Fath, the Second Series*”, and in “Morteza was my life’s mirror,” Sarhangi mentions it as the new series of *Ravaayat-e Fath*. (Madadpour 52; Sarhangi 34; Shabani 71)

In addition to *Sinema ye Eshraghi* (i.e. *Illuminationist Cinema*), *Ganjine-ye Aasemaani* (i.e. *Heavenly Treasure*), is a collection of all the narrations Avini wrote for his war documentary series and provides a vital resource for this thesis. Habibollah Habibi, *Ganjine-ye Aasemaani*’s editor writes in the preface: “since Avini’s handwritings were often unavailable, the text has been extracted from the tapes” (*Ganjine-ye Aasemaani* 1). This book is among the series of Avini’s writings which were published after his death.

This thesis also considers a number of magazines containing Avini’s own writings as well as the writings of other critics on Avini and his work. *Soureh* magazine, previously under Avini’s supervision as the chief editor, and *Shahed-e Yaran* from March 2008 published exclusively for Avini’s commemoration, have been useful resources for this project in addition to two major online sources on Avini and his work. Avini’s official website *avini.ir* is sponsored through Institute of *Ravaayat-e Fath* under the supervision of Avini’s younger brother, Mohammad Avini. Another website is *aviny.com* which is the website of the Cultural and Artistic institute of Martyr Avini and is maintained through the Hatef Cultural group in Iran.

Using the resources mentioned above, Chapter two examines Avini’s biography and the ideology behind the making of *Shahri dar Aasemaan*. Chapter three discusses Avini’s works as a documentarist and juxtaposes it with Ken Burns’ *The War* to highlight

some of the specific historical, cultural, and ideological characteristics of Avini's work.

The fourth chapter discusses Avini as an auteur. The final chapter suggests areas for further research and exploration of Avini and his work.

## **Chapter 2 - Why They Fought**

In order to understand Avini both as a filmmaker and an auteur director, it is helpful to examine the path he took to become so devoted to his ideals. His personal-spiritual biography formed the foundation of his character and led him to become an auteur director as an outgrowth of his spiritual quest. Further, *Shahri dar Aasemaan* may be understood not only as a manifestation of Avini's character and art, but also as a reflection of Iranian Shi'a identity. Thus an understanding of the Iran-Iraq War and the frontline culture that grew out of it is necessary as well.

### ***Avini's Biography***

Sayyed Morteza Avini was born in 1947, in the city of Ray adjacent to the capital city of Tehran, Iran in a house that was shared with multiple families. Due to his father's career as a mining engineer, his family moved from Tehran to Zanjan and Kerman. When he was in 11th grade, he returned to Tehran with his family and resided there for the rest of his life.

Avini graduated from Hadaf high school, one of the most prestigious high schools of Tehran, in 1965. He then attended Tehran University's school of fine arts and graduated with a Masters Degree in architecture. During his years at the university he began painting and reading philosophy and literature by writers such as Fyodor Dostoevsky, Friedrich Nietzsche and Albert Camus. Along the way, he became interested in Ayatollah Khomeini's ideology standing against the Shah of Iran. After his ideology shifted and he became devoted to the Islamic Revolution, he mentions that neither school

nor his experimental life as a so called intellectual added to his knowledge, and all the worthy knowledge he has ever gained was through his devotion to the Islamic ideology (Tajdini 7-9).

Avini met his wife, Maryam Amini, during her teenage years. Amini, who was ten years his junior, refers to Avini as her mentor, not only in her teenage years, but also throughout their married life. They were engaged in 1975 and married in 1978, the years when the Islamic revolution in Iran was gaining popular support (Zahmatkesh 8).

After the 1979 revolution, Avini became increasingly focused on his religion. Right after the revolution in 1979, Avini joined *Jahad-e Saazandegi* (i.e., The Reconstruction Campaign) and contributed by traveling to underprivileged villages and the countryside to accompany a group providing basic needs such as clean water and electricity for the villagers. Avini became a member of a television crew for the campaign. Hossein Hashemi, one of the Jihad's television crew members, visited the warfronts on the first day Iran-Iraq war broke out and was then taken as a prisoner by the Iraqi forces. Due to this incident, Avini and other crew members joined the frontline to cover the battlefield. Thus, it was almost incidental that he became a filmmaker (Tajdini 9).

Years later, in 1986, Avini was offered a position to teach film studies in *Mojtame' Daaneshgaahi Honar* (i.e. *Collegial Assembly of Art*) in Tehran. However, he disapproved of the curriculum, and he decided not to continue as a lecturer after the first semester of teaching. According to Avini, the history of cinema which was taught in the university followed the western philosophy of filmmaking based on western ideology and

culture rather than focusing on the chronological events of the history of film (*Ayine-ye Jadou* 3:111). He believed that there should be two courses designed to cover the cinematic analysis subject in the curriculum: one should be the history of cinema, focusing on the chronological events only, and the other should be philosophy of cinema, focusing on the topic of spiritual philosophy specifically which is aligned with the Iranian culture and society. According to Avini, offering a course in the spiritual doctrine of cinema would have allowed students to differentiate between the history and the nature of the cinematic medium, which should be a reflection of the culture it belongs to (*Ayine-ye Jadou* 3: 112).

Avini's travels outside of the Iranian borders were limited. Along with his wife he had visited his brothers in the United States just before the Islamic Revolution in Iran.

After the revolution in Iran, he travelled twice to Mecca for pilgrimage and visited Pakistan and Azerbaijan as well (Sarhangi 18). He spent much time with his family after work and still managed to write after midnight, as he was awake for midnight prayers.

During the years of the Iran-Iraq war at which time he was producing his *Ravaayat-e Fath* documentary series, he was mostly stationed on the front lines and was away from his family. When the war ended, Avini became the chief editor at *Soureh* art magazine. Through the years of writing articles for different publications, Avini wrote under several pennames: Sajjad Shakib, Morteza Elmolhoda, Morteza Haghgoo, and Mahdi Elmolhoda.

There were two other pennames specifically used for certain subjects. Farhad Golzar was used exclusively for cinematic articles and the penname Cactus for satire (Zahmatkesh 30).

In the years after the war, Avini returned to spending more time with his family.

He was an active partner in running his household and raising his three children. As his wife recalls in an interview, Avini was a very kind man and showed nothing but love to his family (Sarhangi 13). Director Kiumars Poorahamd, a friend of Avini and the director of the documentary *Morteza va Maa* (i.e. *Morteza and Us*), recalls Avini as selfless, dedicating himself to people, cinema, art, love and God (*Morteza va Maa*).

In his autobiography, Avini mentions that while attending university, he used to listen to Western classical music, visit art galleries, spend time in poetry readings and at times take part in deep discussions on philosophy, highlighting his desire to learn about new ideas. His appearance evolved as he grew from trying goatees, hippie-like hair style and Nietzsche-like mustache, to full facial hair, olive drab field jacket and Kaffiyeh which is a white scarf with black checkered worn originally by Palestinian militia. This look was a typical look for the members of the “Basij”: the militia forces which formed right after the Islamic Revolution in Iran in response to Ayatollah Khomeini who stated that "a country with 20 million youths must have 20 million riflemen or a military with 20 million soldiers; such a country will never be destroyed" (Encyclopedia of the Middle East).

The changes in Avini's thoughts and appearance pointed to a personal revolution that was taking place within him at the same time as Iran's Islamic Revolution. These fundamental personal changes resulted in Avini's burning of all his earlier writings

because he felt that his earlier literary writings and his artistic creations were nothing but signs of self-obsession. Avini came to believe that any art form is narcissistic, unless the artist can avoid self-involvement. Therefore, he wanted to overcome his self-involvement in order to become a “reflection of God” (Tajdini 9), an art form for the sake of God and not self-involvement.

At the time of the revolution, Avini was captivated by Ayatollah Khomeini and his ideals. Ayatollah Khomeini had exhorted Iranian artists to follow a divine path: “Our artists can only be sure they have accomplished their responsibility if they enable people to reach divine understanding within the framework of their own ideology with no help from outside influence” (*Tajdid Misagh* 20). In another address, Ayatollah Khomeini refers to art as “insight which is pure knowledge and inseparable from science, mysticism, philosophy and religion” (*Tajdid Misagh* 20). Avini was a devoted disciple of Ayatollah Khomeini and made eight series of *Ravaayat- Fath* based on the Ayatollah’s ideals. Avini himself urged all artists to dedicate themselves entirely to following Ayatollah’s commands: “Have we realized the essence of him [Ayatollah Khomeini] and his message? Have we been devoted to him and were able to deny our selfish selves?” (*Rastaakhiz-e Jaan* 136). Avini addressed his speech directly to artists mentioning that they should show their gratitude to Ayatollah Khomeini by adhering to his decrees while creating an artwork (*Rastaakhiz-e Jaan* 137).

Unlike earlier periods in his life in which he repeatedly shifted from certain

appearance and belief systems to others, this time Avini committed himself wholeheartedly to the Islamic Revolution's ideology. Ayatollah Khomeini's statements and edicts strongly influenced Avini and determined his choice to cover the war in its entirety. While the passing of Ayatollah Khomeini, whose influence caused Avini to undergo major ideological changes, had a strong impact on him (Tajdini 15), it did not keep him from revisiting the subject of the war and making the rest of *Ravaayat-e Fath* series. There was, however, a break between the last wartime *Ravaayat-e Fath* episode and the after-the-war series.

### ***Iran-Iraq War: A Brief History***

Dilip Hiro, scholar and political writer from Indian descent whose specialty is on both Iranian and Iraqi culture and politics, In his book *Labyrinth of Intolerance* has an objective yet eye-opening account of the Iran-Iraq war. On September 22, 1980 Iraq invaded the border cities of Iran and started a war that turned out to be "the longest conventional war of the twentieth century" (217). The war between Iran and Iraq lasted from September 1980 to August 1988 with about 600,000 Iranian and 240,000 Iraqi fatalities, although the number of casualties varies according to different sources.

After the Iranian revolution of 1979, the Iraqi president, Saddam Hussein, decided to invade Iran. Chief in his reasoning was his fear of the influences of the newly established Islamic Republic of Iran on Iraq's majority Shi'a population. Another reason was to prevent the enforcement of the Algiers treaty, which he considered a one-sided

victory for Iran, resolving a border conflict. This treaty, signed in 1975 by the two governments, was intended to “delimit their river boundaries according to the Thalweg line and to end all infiltrations of a subversive nature” (215).

Looking deeper at the progression of the war explains the formation and growth of volunteer forces and the ideological cause behind it which so preoccupied Avini and his films. After the Iraqi attack on Iranian territory, the international community responded: “UN Security Council Resolution 479, treating the invader and the victim as equals, urged a truce” (217). This resolution gave the Iraqi government confidence to add conditions to the UN ceasefire proposal. Iraq announced its readiness for a ceasefire if Iran agreed to give up its rights to the Arvand Roud river (i.e. Shatt al Arab) (217).

Despite the shortage in both Iranian military personnel and arms, Iran “rejected the resolution as unfair” (218). The Iranian supreme leader at the time, Ayatollah Khomeini, announced that “War can be as holy as prayer when it is fought for the sake of Islam” (218). This encouraged the formation of Basij volunteer forces which became a peripheral part of *Sepah-e Pasdaran-e Enghelab-e Eslami* (i.e. Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps). Iraqi forces took over Khorramshahr and Abadan, two large oil cities close to the border. Historically, this is starting point of the subject of Avini’s *Shahri dar Aasemaan* which covers the events of the initial forty five-day battle in which Iraqi forces took over the city of Khorramshahr.

At this point in history, Saddam Hussein had the false hope that the ethnic Arabs in these regions would welcome him as a liberator, which clearly was not the case (219).

On May 24, 1982 Iran recaptured both Khorramshahr and Abadan and drove Iraq back

to its borders. Saddam claimed to be unconditionally ready for the ceasefire and on June 20, 1982 declared a total withdrawal from Iranian territories. Nonetheless, Iran set its own condition for a ceasefire: removal of Saddam Hussein. Since this condition was not approved, the war continued and Iranians marched into Iraq. This time the mission was to “Liberate Karbala,” the shrine of the third Shi’a Imam, Prophet Mohammad’s grandson Imam Hossein, who was martyred along with his apostles. In all episodes of *Shahri dar Aasemaan* there are direct and indirect mentions of the historic events of Karbala. For the Iranian volunteer forces, the meaning of the battle was not only to defend the borders of Iran and nationalistic responsibility; it was also a religious duty against a transgressive secular regime (220-221).

Avini believed that only those who believed in the cause, both ideologically and practically, could be trusted with making a documentary about the Iran-Iraq war (*Ayine-ye Jadou* 3:187). Avini was also a promoter of the Islamic Republic’s ideology. His mission was to guide people to reach salvation following Ayatollah Khomeini’s commands as the supreme leader. The Iranian government drew a parallel between Imam Hossein’s apostles and the Iranian volunteer forces which resulted in a dramatic increase in volunteer recruits. The recruitment of Basij forces turned the tables and by 1984 Iran had reached its pre-revolutionary strength. In February 1984, Iran had captured Iraqi Majnoon Islands. Iraq regained the United States’s support and the Reagan administration removed Iraq from the list of nations supporting international terrorism and added Iran to the list. International support was provided to the Iraqi army while Iran was further isolated. Both parties were targeting oil industries and ships. The “war of the

cities” (i.e. attacks on civilians) in different cities in Iran including the capital started with Iraq targeting sixteen Iranian cities and Iran targeting the city of Basra in return. The war of the cities was periodically launched from 1985 to 1987 by Iraq; however, this tactic failed to expel Iran from Iraqi territory. By 1987, the war of the cities resulted in three thousand Iranian civilian casualties and three hundred Iraqi lives. There were several small-scale international attempts to stop the indiscriminate bombing of the cities.

However, civilian casualty counts continued to climb. Civilians in Tehran were especially more afraid to stay in their homes after Saddam’s use of chemical weapons on his own people in the Iraqi province of Halabcheh. The fear caused many to evacuate their homes and seek refuge in safe suburban areas. On July 20, 1987 the UN passed resolution 598 which eventually resulted in the final ceasefire. After a long period of rejection of conditions by both sides, Iran finally accepted the resolution unconditionally on July 18, 1988. With UN supervision, a truce was reached and the end of the eight year war was marked on August 20, 1988. In the final analysis, neither of the two countries could claim victory nor was any regime was changed on either side. However, the war “mobilized Iranians, religious or secular, on a patriotic platform” (234).

### ***Frontline Culture, Karbala, and Shahri dar Aasemaan***

In *Shahri dar Aasemaan* Avini documents the culture of “Jebhe” (i.e. the frontline), which has its roots in the Iranian culture and Shi’a ideology. The documentary was produced four years after the war’s conclusion and about twelve years after the beginning days of the war which is the focus of this documentary. *Shahri dar Aasemaan*

portrays this time period through Avini's own experiences and the personal accounts of the volunteer soldiers who were in their youth at the beginning of the war. These volunteer soldiers took part in the war between Iran and Iraq to follow the footsteps and values of the Shi'a and preserve the Islamic Republic of Iran which was newly formed at the time the war started. To better comprehend the ideology behind the soldiers' participation as well as Avini's documentation of the so-called "Sacred Defense," a more thorough understanding of the culture and Iranian Shi'a belief system is useful.

Roxanne Varzi establishes that Iranians' lives are intertwined with mysticism and poetry: "Sufi mysticism is undeniably ingrained in Iranian culture through a tradition of poetry that has infused metaphor at the heart of the Persian language and in the everyday experiences of Iranians" (Varzi 5). Avini's mind was entangled with mysticism which had a direct effect on how he perceived the war's "reality" and in his approach to portray it through his documentaries. "Reality is not what exists, but what has the possibility to exist" (Varzi 5). Looking at the world through mystic glasses, Iranians "traverse the geographies of *zaher* (outer self) and *baten* (inner self) while constructing and dismantling through self annihilation and *khod-sazi* or *khod-shenasi* (self construction or self awareness)" (Varzi 5).

A snapshot of the Iranian culture will show that "in Iran social is political" (Varzi 4). The political sphere is shaped by the Shi'a tradition to a large extent. Avini's *Shahri dar Aasemaan* portrays the volunteer forces in the frontlines, their commitment to defend

the borders and their fellow combatants as well as their belief in Shi'a values. Martyrs in Avini's eyes acquire an elevated stature. *Shahri dar Aasemaan* demonstrates this stature throughout; for instance in episode six there is a shot of a sign posted in Khorramshahr which reads: "The streets of this city are blessed with the blood of martyrs, enter after ablution". There are also scenes in which daily practices such as prayer are highlighted.

A scene in the third episode of the documentary shows footage from the forty-five-day battle in which soldiers stop fighting and run to a relatively safer place, to a room with fallen walls on its sides, and start a congregational prayer. In other scenes, the main participants of the documentary retell the story of the war over the footage of the ruins and old footage from the battlefield; what they concentrate on is the sacrifice of their fellow combatants as well as their religious duty for serving in the war. Such scenes demonstrate the soldiers' great loyalty to each other and to Shi'a values in the midst of the war. What accentuates their strong commitment to the religious values is the narration written and spoken by Avini. This narration is not only descriptive, but also an ideological voice-of-God narrative, as Bill Nichols would call it. Voice-of-God narrative is one of the main characteristics of the expository documentary based on Nichols' categorization of documentary films that was discussed at greater length in Chapter Two.

In writing and in conversation Avini describes the narration as a tool that highlights the history of seeking justice in order to keep the audience aware of history at all times.

Furthermore he notes the narration is to look at events from an ideological standpoint

since the target of these documentaries is to develop the divine nature of the audience and open up their eyes to the divinity (*Ayine-ye Jadou* 3:190). A descriptive example of this voice-of-God narrative occurs in episode five of *Shahri dar Aasemaan*: "...Those who are afraid of dying are dismissed from Karbala. When staying in Khorramshahr meant martyrdom and the task became difficult, it was time for a night like Aashoura for the apostles of Karbala to be but to the test..." (*Shahri dar Aasemaan* 5). Here Avini compares the soldiers to Imam Hossein's apostles in the seventh century. In the night before Aashoura (i.e. the day that the massacre of Imam Hossein and his family and apostles took place), Imam Hossein talked to the apostles to let them know that they could choose between staying and leaving; Imam Hossein told them that they would become martyrs. Avini draws a parallel between the historic event of Karbala and the battle of Khorramshahr in which most Iranian soldiers were killed. This suggests that what the soldiers were involved in was more than a fight, it was a religious duty.

Moreover, another reason for the soldiers to take part in the "Sacred Defense" was their devotion to Ayatollah Khomeini and his ideologies for the newly formed Islamic Republic. After the Islamic Revolution of 1979, Ayatollah Khomeini became the religious head of state and his words were more than the words of any secular leader.

There were several slogans used in and around the time of the revolution, among which are: *We are all your soldiers, Khomeini! Ready to act upon your command, Khomeini!*

This state of obedience was another key element in Avini's work:

One of the essential points to consider while editing the documentary is to consider that our target audience is not the entire population, since people have different tendencies and we cannot make a film that reaches all. We are not making a film for those who have doubts about the righteousness of the Islamic Republic and his holiness Imam (i.e. Ayatollah Khomeini), whom I sacrifice my life for (*Ayine-ye Jadou* 3:193).

Avini is trying to reach the audience who were devoted equally to the Islamic Republic and Ayatollah Khomeini as the supreme religious leader. Anthropologist Michael Fischer in his book *Iran: From the Religious Dispute to Revolution*, has described that “the interaction between religious leaders and the life cycle experiences of young people reveals an emotionally powerful dialectic between conformity to tradition and self reliant free thought” (Fischer 11). Avini only addresses the followers of Islamic Republic doctrine rather than contesting for an audience torn between devotion to a religious leader or otherwise. In addition to the political aspect of culture within the society, a very strong link between religion and the people was established by Avini’s film through allusion to one of history’s events of Karbala

Iranian culture has been intertwined with the historic battle of Karbala (Fischer 11). As a country with Shi’a majority, commemorating Imam Hossein has been a ritual observed by people in all walks of life throughout the history of Shi’ism. Imam Hossein was martyred in Karbala, a city in modern day Iraq, where each member of his small army was killed before the women and children who were then also taken and massacred. Despite the size of his army, Imam Hossein’s decision not to recognize Yazid as a

legitimate leader due to his lack of morality and misuse of power has become a symbol of resistance against oppression and unjust treatments of a biased government. Dated back to October 10<sup>th</sup> - 20<sup>th</sup>, 680 A.D, the massacre of Imam Hossein, his small army and family by Yazid from the Umayyad dynasty comes to life every year with the ten-day ceremonial events (Fischer 11). These ceremonies include *Ta'zieh* (i.e. Karbala's events dramatic reenactment), *Rowzeh* (i.e. preachment), *Azadari* (i.e. mourning ceremonies), and *Noheh* i.e. (religious laments). The tradition of glorifying and remembering Karbala is not merely in the Shi'a doctrine; it is deeply rooted in popular Iranian culture, and its importance as a religious and cultural touchstone is clearly reflected in *Shahri dar Aasemaan*.

In this six-episode documentary, similar to all episodes of the *Ravaayat-e Fath* documentary series, there are numerous references to the historic events of Karbala.

These references function to draw several parallels: one between Karbala and the city of Khorramshahr, another between Saddam and Yazid (the Umayyad ruler who ordered the massacre), yet another between the innocent civilians caught in both battles, and a fourth between the Iraqi army and Yazid's as well as Iranian armed forces and Imam Hossein's apostles. The following is an example of these parallels as drawn in the narration of *Shahri dar Aasemaan*: "the war broke out to open up a gate from Khorramshahr to Karbala, in order for Mohammad Jahan-Ara [a young Iranian head of operation] to join a caravan heading to Aashoura [the historic day of the massacre of Imam Hossein and his family and apostles]" (*Ganjine-ye Aaseamani* 359). This parallel creates a mirror image of what happened during the war: each group sent to the frontlines was called "caravan of

Karbala” or “marchers to Karbala” (Hiro 212). The soldiers marched to what was most likely their final battlefield as most soldiers did not return from Khorramshahr, where the war first broke out.

*Shahri dar Aasemaan* tells the story of forty-five day battle within the context of historic events of Karbala. At no point can the audience miss the parallels between the two events, since it is pronounced vividly throughout the voice-of-God narration. Fischer refers to the effect of Karbala on Iranian culture and life as Karbala Paradigm. He then predicts that at the time of the Islamic Revolution the Karbala Paradigm existed in different manifestations and might “continue to play an important role in the emotional life of many Iranians serving, for instance to model and channel expressions of grief or to instill an attitude of quiet determination and humility in the face of life’s tribulations” (Fischer 11). This prediction proves to come true among the volunteer forces when the war begins. Furthermore, it is reflected in *Shahri dar Aasemaan*, since the participants of the interviews are among the volunteer forces. Hence, what was important for the soldiers in the frontlines was not trying to become martyrs, but “being ready for martyrdom” and self sacrifice. This is what Avini emphasizes throughout the documentary with his voiceover narration in the fifth episode, the voiceover seeks help from the martyrs for eternal salvation: “Oh you martyr, who has an eternal prominence, give us a hand and release us from this muddy dungeon of worthless repetition”. The ending of the narration is the culmination of the parallel drawn between the military endeavor and martyrdom:

“The earthly city of Khorramshahr was captured by enemy, but the heavenly city stood under the Martyrs. From deep inside these destructions, there were passages to the skies which were invisible but to the Martyrs’ eyes. Khorramshahr was the symbol of enemy’s offensive just as it was the symbol of our strength...Beyond the destructions was a passage to the year 680 A.D. and leader of Love, i.e. Imam Hossein- the son of Ali, was present with his arms open.” (*Ganjine-ye Aaseemaani* 375)

It is not only at the level of voiceover narration that the events of Karbala haunt *Shahri dar Aasemaan*, however. In each episode the events of Karbala are present not only through the narration, but also through the parallel stories, laments, and musical references. Part of the signature style that causes Avini’s work to stand out among Iranian documentary filmmakers is his manner of editing, in conjunction with voiceover, to create a dramatic effect. He incorporates laments and famous revolutionary songs as part of the soundtrack to set a sorrowful atmosphere. It should be noted that Iranian laments are difficult to understand within similar western classical categories, as scholar David Thurfjell points out, it is helpful to understand the effects of laments from within the specific culture of the Iranian frontline:

Iranian culture has nourished the idea that the emotional state of sadness is an expression of personal depth (*‘Omāq*). With Hoseyn’s suffering at Karbala as the foremost example, the ideal personality is characterized by sensibility to the tragic aspects of life receptivity for the existential uncertainty that is part of being

human, and the internal calm (*Safa-ye baten*) in facing the harshness in the world.

(Thurfjell 106)

A lament (i.e. *Noheh*) usually has no (or little) background music; it is very similar to mourning chants (i.e. *Marsieh*) which were used historically in mourning ceremonies. The themes of these elegiac songs are martyrs and martyrdom. They refer to the concept of an imposed war, a sacred defense, and the historic massacre at Karbala.

Some of the most pronounced scenes that draw these parallel are the scenes in which Mohammad Jahan-Ara, the commander of Khorramshahr Revolutionary Guard; (i.e. Sepah-e Pasdaran) talks about the operations before the city was completely captured by the Iraqi forces. In these scenes Jahan-Ara compares the battle to the battle of Karbala in his own words. His words are reinforced with narration before and after in which Avini informs the viewer that Jahan-Ara was martyred before Iranians could take back the city of Khorramshahr. The story of the life and death of Jahan-Ara became one of the legacies of the eight-year war, especially after the following song was dedicated to him.

In the first episode of *Shahri dar Aasemaan* a part of this song is played right after Jahan-Ara's speech about the battle of Khorramshahr:

<i>Mammad Naboudi Bebini</i>	<i>“Mohammad you were not here to see</i>
<i>Shahr azad gashte</i>	<i>The city has been freed</i>
<i>Khoon-e yaaranat,</i>	<i>The blood of your comrades</i>
<i>Por samar gashte</i>	<i>has become worthwhile</i>
<i>Aah o Vaaveylaa</i>	<i>Oh pain and sorrow</i>
<i>Kou Jahan-Ara</i>	<i>Where is Jahan-Ara</i>

*Nour-e do cheshmaan-e tar-e maa    The light of our crying eyes*

*Mammad*

*Mohammad*”

The song begins before Jahan-Ara’s words come to an end. It continues over a slideshow of the soldiers from their teenage years to adulthood as well as scenes from Khorramshahr. Some of these scenes depict the destruction such as a picture of a demolished bridge. While the song plays in the background, Avini narrates: “One day the city was captured by enemy and the other day it was freed. Our illusion is that we stayed and the martyrs are gone, but the truth is that time has taken us and the martyrs have stayed” (*Shahri dar Aasemaan 1*). Then Jahan-Ara speaks and the lament restarts with the verse “Mohammad, you were not here to see ...” The narration then continues, focusing on the loss of lives and the martyrs. Layering the lament with the footage of the martyr himself talking to the camera as well as the narration, creates a peculiar combination for the viewer, reinforcing the concept of martyrdom. The original melody for the lament written for Jahan-Ara came from an existing lament from the city of Boushehr in southern Iran, by Jahanbakhsh Kordizadeh (i.e. Bakhshou) which was recited in the mourning ceremonies for Imam Hossein (Samani). The lyrics were written for the melody by Javad Azizi, one of the Basijis joining the first anniversary of Jahan-Ara’s martyrdom. Soon after, it was recited by famous lament singer Gholamreza Koveitipour (News IRIB).

Finally, another significant piece of background music in the film that reinforces the parallel between the contemporary situation of war and Karbala is from a famous song with lyrics by the poet Rumi:

Kojaayeed ey shahidaan-e khodaayee

“Where are you oh you martyrs of God”

Balaajoooyaan-e dasht-e karbalaayee

“The ones who are willing to take harm in desert of Karbala”

Kojaayeed ey sabok-rooahaan-e aashegh

“Where are you o you the lighthearted lovers”

Parande tar ze morghaan-e havaayee

“Who are flying higher than birds in sky....”

Although the background music plays without lyrics, the song has become a well-known, often-played song in Iran; its lyrics are common knowledge among Iranians and therefore almost unnecessary: audiences would have recalled them as the melody played.

In *Shahri dar Aasemaan* Avini portrays both the environment and the ideology of war while telling the story of the Iraqi attack on Iranian soil not only through the highly allegorical language full of similes, symbols and metaphors, but also by using songs and laments that are picked to maximize the effect of documentary. Avini had gone through transformations both ideologically and professionally before making documentary series about the Iran-Iraq war, one of the lengthier wars of twentieth century with approximately a million casualties. He ties his religious ideologies to the war, which makes him an auteur in turn. The next chapter not only will discuss him as auteur in detail, but also compares *Shahri dar Aasemaan* to *The War* by Ken Burns, the famous Western documentary film maker.

### Chapter 3 – Avini as Documentarist

Documentaries created in the West are generally analyzed according to Western analytic frameworks. Iran's *Shahri dar Aasemaan* has never been categorized as any genre other than documentary, and applying a categorical analysis to this work will be a revealing way to identify its unique characteristics. Moreover, this thesis considers it through a classical Western analytic paradigm, as suggested by Nichols, as well as frames it within culturally specific framework which is more ideological than structural. In order to provide a foil with which to understand Avini as a director and his style of filmmaking, this chapter compares Avini's *Shahri dar Aasemaan* and a western documentary, Ken Burns' *The War*. *The War* is a film about the four years of American involvement in the Second World War produced in 2007, more than sixty years after the war ended in 1945. *Shahri dar Aasemaan* however, was made in 1992, twelve years after the Iran-Iraq war started, but only four years after the war concluded.

Bill Nichols, an internationally recognized authority on documentary and ethnographic films and a professor at San Francisco State University, states that all documentary films are social representations, a depiction of the world with recognizable familiarity, and they stand for a particular interest and interpretation (*Introduction to Documentary* 2-3). Patricia Aufderheide, a professor at American University in Washington D.C. and a judge of the Sundance Film Festival, provides a basic point of departure when she observes in her book *Documentary Film* that “documentary is not a movie” – by which she means that “documentary is a movie which is not fun, a serious movie (Aufderheide 1-2). *Shahri dar Aasemaan* fits both Nichols' and Aufderheide's

definitions.

Based on Nichols' definition of expository and performative modes of documentary, *Shahri dar Aasemaan* can be categorized as a hybrid of these two modes. The expository mode of documentary compiles pieces of history into an argumentative frame addressing the viewers directly (*Introduction to Documentary* 105). *Shahri dar Aasemaan*, like expository documentaries, is rhetorical, addresses the viewers directly and voices a particular perspective. The documentary's narrative is a conversation that Avini holds with the viewer and at several points; he even poses questions in the conversations such as: "...you tell me who is more alive? Martyr Sayyed Abdolreza Mousavi, or you and I...?" (*Shahri dar Aasemaan* 3). The perspective and the position of director are also clear. He regards events as guided by a heavenly phenomenon. This perspective is pronounced even in the title of the film which translates as "City in the Sky." Moreover, *Shahri dar Aasemaan* has a voice-of-God narration and evidentiary [or continuity] editing, which is the term Nichols uses for continuity editing. Voice-of-God narration is one of the signature characteristics of Avini's documentaries. In fact, he both writes and speaks the narration. Since the words are Avini's own, he has a high level of conviction which adds passion and persuasion to his work. Voice-of-God narration is a narration in which the narrator projects authority (*Introduction to Documentary* 105).

Underscored by "evidentiary [or continuity] editing" main participants in the war tell their stories from the time the war broke out until the city of Khorramshahr was occupied, and these conversations are edited according to principles of continuity editing in order for the viewer to be able to follow a coherent story. Although expository mode

documentaries claim to be objective, they are not and neither is *Shahri dar Aasemaan*.

At the same time *Shahri dar Aasemaan* shares a set of characteristics with the performative mode of documentary. The performative mode raises questions about knowledge and whether it is concrete or abstract; it questions facts and focuses on affective and subjective dimension of subjects (*Introduction to Documentary* 130-131).

*Shahri dar Aasemaan*, too, raises questions about the definition of knowledge; our understanding of the world based on factual information, and emphasizes subjective and affective dimensions of the subject. In the first episode Avini raises the following questions, asking himself and the viewer: "...What are you looking for in the middle of the burnt palms? A preserved tablet that has stored all that has happened here? This tablet exists, but you are blind to see it and deaf to hear it..." (*Shahri dar Aasemaan 1*).

There are many questions of this nature in every episode. Another example can be found in episode three: "...Could God pick a more beautiful way to select his chosen people than this (i.e. martyrdom)..." (*Shahri dar Aasemaan 3*), and in fifth episode when he asks "...isn't it true that children of Adam were sworn into loving Hossein (i.e. Imam Hossein) better than they love themselves..." (*Shahri dar Aasemaan 5*)? These existentialistic-religious questions establish the mindset and tone of these episodes, and they are all elements of Nichol's performative mode of documentary.

*Shahri dar Aasemaan* is a documentary not only by its director's claim but also by standard Western definitions of this genre. Nichols argues that even fiction provides evidence of the people who created it and the culture with which it belongs to (*Introduction to Documentary* 1):

First documentaries offer us a likeliness or depiction of the world that bears a recognizable familiarity [...] Second documentaries also stand for or represent the interest of the others [...] Third, documentaries may represent the world in the same way a lawyer represents a client's interest: they put the case for particular view or interpretation of evidence before us." ("Introduction to Documentary" 2-4)

In its depiction of a recognizable world that is nevertheless shaped by Avini's own values and interpretation, *Shahri dar Aasemaan* navigates a divide between objective documentary and subjective fiction.

*Shahri dar Aasemaan* provides the history of the Iran-Iraq war with footage from the time of the war as well as interviews with soldiers, which are edited together to bring the days of war back to life for the viewers. It also speaks for the interest of others as Avini claims that his documentaries promote a heavenly cause and serve the Islamic Republic's ideology. Hence his documentaries were representatives of the Iranian Government's interest at the time which was aligned with Avini's own interests. As discussed above, Nichols suggests documentaries represent the world as a lawyer represents his client's interests, and this is a point which Avini discusses in length in one of his interviews. He confesses that he deleted scenes which did not convey his version of "the truth:" which he defined as a state of complete fidelity and readiness for martyrdom with open arms. As an example, he mentions that if the mother of a soldier had commented disapprovingly about her son's participation in the war, he would have deleted that scene. He adds that "comments like this might be interesting to those who

study the war through the lens of anthropology...one thing we do while editing the scenes, we show the goodness and the beauty, and cut the decadence” (*Ayineh-ye Jadou* 3: 194).

As noted earlier, Patricia Aufderheide notes that “documentary is a movie which is not fun,” and “documentary tells the story of real life with a claim to truthfulness” (1-2). *Shahri dar Aasemaan* is anything but “fun,” and it tells a story about history that lays claim to truth. At the same time, however, one recognizes that the definition of the truth is very subjective, especially with a medium that relies upon editing for much of its construction of meaning. Moreover, Avini’s concepts of truth in the *Shahri dar Aasemaan* series are complicated, as mentioned in Chapter 1.

- “The truth is that we are gone with the time and the martyrs have stayed eternally” (*Shahri dar Aasemaan* 1).
- “The earth was the place for a heavenly truth, and the war started for this truth to manifest (*Shahri dar Aasemaan* 2).
- “When it comes the time for the prayer, you feel like you have reached the destination, and this feeling is the truth (*Shahri dar Aasemaan* 3).
- “The city is safeguarded by the martyrs and this truth is written on the water like a preserved tablet (*Shahri dar Aasemaan* 4).

Avini’s concept of truth and statements about it are integrally bound up in spiritual and divine notions of truth and are inextricably linked to what he believes *should* be true rather than exclusively tied to incidents that can be directly traced to historical incident.

In addition to the category of documentary which *Shahri dar Aasemaan* falls under, it can also be further subdivided. As Nichols views it, documentary films have six types or modes of representation: poetic, expository, participatory, observational, reflexive and performative. The first type is poetic in which continuity editing is sacrificed for rhythm, is not straight forward, and is influenced by modernism. The expository mode, which takes a rhetorical approach, addresses the viewer directly with a voice-of-God narration and evidentiary (continuity) editing. The observational mode is about observing people while they are attending to their affairs. A participatory documentary is a documentary in which the director becomes part of the documentary by participating in the story and partners with the participants, and the result is a representation of the subject and the subject's encounters with the director. A reflexive mode of documentary focuses on the audience instead of the participants, similar to the observational mode. The performative mode of documentary discusses what beside factual information shapes our understanding; it is subjective and similar to personal stories (*Introduction to Documentary* 99-137).

Among the modes of documentary which Nichols defines, *Shahri dar Aasemaan* is best described as a hybrid between expository and performative modes. Avini's documentary "assembles fragments of the historical world into a rhetorical frame" (*Introduction to Documentary* 105) as it weaves interviews and old footage with the allegorical references to the events of the massacre of Karbala in 600s AD. It also "addresses the viewer directly, with titles of voices that propose a perspective, advance an argument, and recount history" (*Introduction to Documentary* 105).

The narration for the first episode of the documentary starts in the following way: “I was thinking: what do you remember from the 12<sup>th</sup> of Month of Mehr, 1359 (October 4, 1980)? Nothing! The place you put your feet into was not Khorramshahr, it was not Khooninshahr [i.e., the nickname for Khorramshahr after Iraqi attack meaning the bloody city as oppose to the actual meaning of the Khorramshahr, the delightful city], either....” (*Shahri dar Aasemaan* 1). In his rhetorical question, Avini attracts the attention of the audience right from the start. Further, there are instances in which Avini talks to the viewer as if he is having a conversation with the audience: “Tell me if these pictures look more real than the days we are spending one after another while left out from the tribe of love” (*Shahri dar Aasemaan* 3)? These questions and phrases are as direct as eye contact between filmmaker and audience. In another instance Avini asks: “...and truth be told was there any more striking way than this [martyrdom], in order for God to select his best people?...” (*Shahri dar Aasemaan* 3). Such questions and observations offer a perspective on life, war, and specifically martyrdom, which is aligned with that of Iranian Shi’a ideology. Although life is sacred, one should fight oppression, and if he happens to be chosen by God while defending his country and people, he becomes a martyr and that is the ultimate achievement. This perspective is articulated throughout all six parts of the documentary.

Furthermore, what categorizes *Shahri dar Aasemaan* as belonging to the expository mode of documentary is the voice-of-God narration. Avini’s own voice reading the narration he had written for the documentary is a classic example of voice-of-God. A point to consider here is that Avini had a distinct voice not to be mistaken with

other narrators. His voice and tone of the narrations were part of his signature style in his war documentary. Although the editing is evidential - the term that Nichols uses for continuity editing- and maintains the continuity of the spoken word, it can be argued that, with the exception of the interviews in which the continuity in editing is observed, other parts could be rearranged without any confusion for the viewers. Over all the film has continuity editing because of the storyline that maintains chronological order.

In some areas, however, *Shahri dar Aasemaan* does not exactly follow the blueprints of an expository documentary. Avini neither tries to be objective nor does he make any attempts to align his doctrine with a shared cultural consensus. As he declares himself, his films are for those who believe in the Islamic Revolution and the supreme leader. These departures from expository mode of documentary align *Shahri dar Aasemaan* with the performative mode based on Nichols' descriptions.

*Shahri dar Aasemaan* can be categorized under is the performative mode because it shares several characteristics with it. The performative mode discusses knowledge and “what besides factual information goes into our understanding of the world” (*Introduction to Documentary* 130). This mode is subjective and suggests that there is more to a matter than meets the eye. It is more about memory and experiences than it is about history. These characteristics can be seen in the way *Shahri dar Aasemaan* approaches the subject of the Iran-Iraq war. The language of the narration is such that most sentences require a philosophic discussion. Sentences such as “We think that we have stayed and the martyrs have gone, but the truth is that time had taken us away and they had stayed” (*Shahri dar Aasemaan* 1) or “No one but the martyrs knows the secret

of blood, blood circulation in the veins of life is sweet, but sacrificing it for the beloved is much sweeter” (*Shahri dar Aasemaan* 5) demonstrate the subjective arguments that Avini makes throughout the six episodes of this documentary.

In addition to corresponding to certain Western categories of documentary, *Shahri dar Aasemaan* has been categorized as a particular kind of cinema by Avini himself.

Avini has categorized his works under a mode of representation which he calls *Sinemaaye Eshraghi* (i.e. illuminationist cinema). After Avini, Mohammad Madadpour wrote a book and named it after the term invented by Avini in order to discuss Avini’s style. In this book Madadpour defines illuminationist cinema as Avini’s invention and also explains the characteristics of it in detail. He explains that illuminationist cinema is a cinema in search of truth, spontaneous and simple, striving to show beauty. It avoids domineering special effects or music as well. An interesting point that Madadpour brings up is that illuminationist cinema is neither objective nor subjective; it is a third category: the way God intended existence and hence the film to be (Madadpour 61). This statement might be considered subjective by secular western standards. Although Avini himself wanted to abide by God’s rules, one can always argue that the way of God is subjective and can be interpreted in many different forms and from a variety of perspectives.

A comparison between Avini’s *Shahri dar Aasemaan* and a western documentary, Ken Burns’ *The War*, provides a juxtaposition that illuminates the specific techniques of Avini and his own documentary “*The War* is a film about the four years of American involvement in the Second World War; it was produced in 2007, more than sixty years

after the war ended in 1945. “*Shahri dar Aasemaan*”, however, was made in 1992, 12 years after the Iran-Iraq war started, but only four years after the war concluded. Because *The War* is a well-known western documentary and is a work of a famous documentary maker, comparing *Shahri dar Aasemaan* to *The War* clarifies the style, the content, and the mode of Avini’s work. These documentaries are both visual memoirs of war, telling stories of tragedy and triumph. Both films embrace the necessity of the war which they portray through the narration and interviews despite tragic events.

Avini and Burns are both from the post-World War II baby-boomer generation, born in 1947 and 1953 respectively. *Shahri dar Aasemaan* and *The War* are made fifteen years apart in 1992 and 2007. Avini directed *Shahri dar Aasemaan* when he was 45, while Burn made *The War* at the age of 54 (Tibbetts 117-133). Ken Burns is academically trained in filmmaking, holding a Bachelor of Arts in Film Studies and Design from Hampshire College in Amherst, Massachusetts (“Museum of Broadcast Communication”). Sayyed Morteza Avini, on the other hand, received his Master of Art in Architecture from the School of Fine Arts, Tehran University, Tehran (Avini.ir). Avini’s training in filmmaking was through experiences he earned after joining *Jahaad Saazandegi* (i.e. Reconstruction Campaign) at the time of the Iranian revolution in 1979. These experiences led him to pursue directing documentaries as his profession in the frontlines of the war and filming the war in a close and personal fashion. When Avini started the making of *Shahri dar Aasemaan*, he knew the people whom he interviewed for the film and had some footage of the time when the war broke out. Burns, however, had neither witnessed the Second World War nor knew any of the participants in the

documentary. There was an evident time and space gap between Burns and his subject in his documentary, but there was little distance between Avini, the Iran-Iraq war, and the participants in *Shahri dar Aasemaan* as Avini had experienced it firsthand.

Though differences in the films and filmmakers are evident, their subjective approach to the material is pronounced, albeit in different ways. While Avini's work is ideologically driven both in imagery and narration (Talebzadeh 52), Burns refers to himself as an "emotional archaeologist" (Breitbart 169). Burns' "emotional" approach is not based on a specific doctrine; however, Avini is following the ideology of the Islamic Revolution and Ayatollah Khomeini. Although one may argue that Burns' brand of democratic interventionist patriotism could be read as ideologically driven, but it is not following a certain religious- political alliance. Furthermore, similarities in their documentaries are not limited to their subjective approach to the subject matter; they also extend to certain choices of materials. For example, the two directors incorporate still images in their histories of the wars they address. Unlike his narration, which be discussed further in later chapters, Avini's use of still images is not unique. The use of still images in Ken Burns' documentaries, on the other hand, has been dubbed its own kind of effect: the Ken Burns' Effect (Breitbart 169). Burns adds the illusion of movement to the images by zooming in and out. Avini, on the other hand, mostly uses straight shots without changing focus. Avini's use of still images is intuitive (Shabani 70-74), while Ken Burns' is more calculated. In addition, Burns uses images that have a standard level of resolution or are enhanced to meet the standards In contrast, the quality and tonality of the pictures used by Avini in his documentaries vary from one still shot to

the next, and since there is no camera movement to capture the pictures, these parts of his documentary are little more than a slide show. However, they sometimes feature overlapping sound, which renders them more complex. As an example, in the first episode of *Shahri dar Aasemaan* when Mohammad Jahaan-Ara's speech about the bravery of the Iranian soldiers confronting Iraqis ends and the slideshow starts, there is a concurrent lament and voice-over narration.

The footage in Avini's documentary is often shaky and rough, shot with a handheld camera. Even in the interviews in which the subject is steady and there is no need for any camera movement, the camera is not on a tripod. In *Shahri dar Aasemaan*, because the war is over, Avini could have easily used a tripod to shoot the scenes but he clearly chose not to. At the beginning of the documentary, he experiments with using a tripod in some scenes; ultimately, however, he decides that using a tripod is not "the way" to do it (Shabani 70-74). This approach differs from the camera work and even the use of the old footage in Ken Burns' documentary. Although Ken Burns uses archival footage from World War II, he enhances the footage before incorporating it in the documentary, as discussed above. In order to mesh the new footage with the old, the new footage is both soft focus and wide screen (*The War*, special features). These differences between the two directors throw into relief the ways in which Avini's film evokes the war in immediate, personal terms, while Burns evokes World War II as a more distant memory from the past, recalled in a nostalgic way.

The historical footage in the two documentaries is quite different as well. The film previously shot in World War II was obviously not shot by Burns' crew, but in

*Shahri dar Aasemaan*, Avini uses his own old footage to weave the documentary together. This in turn makes Avini's film more specifically his own, since the material is all shot by him or his crew. Burns uses a variety of archival multimedia resources and seamlessly edits them to the body of his documentary. There are 871 pieces of multimedia sources such as archival films and audio, memoirs, newspapers, photographs, etc., used in the making of *The War*. (PBS.org). Avini's approach, by contrast, is quite simple. Beside the two sets of footage, one from the time of forty-five day battle and another set he shot specifically for *Shahri dar Aasemaan*, he sporadically uses still images such as photographs of soldiers and martyrs, the close-up snapshots of their library cards, and limited number of audio files and chants. This simpler approach, with all the technical imperfections contained in the footage and the still images, recreates the feeling of the time in which the war took place, while Burns' polished images clearly represent the period of time within which the documentary is produced rather than the historic time of the Second World War.

Both Avini and Burns improvise during the making of their documentaries. There are no pre-written scenarios nor a single fact to be proved on evidence presented in these documentaries. Based on Nichols' categorization of documentary genre, these two documentaries participate in neither an observational nor a participatory mode. Both directors started looking for the best candidates among the people who experienced the war up directly. Their intention was to document first-hand accounts of what was happening through the eyes of the people who lived through these wars, people whose lives had been changed forever. The individuals' stories are the focus of both films; they

clearly take over their setting: the war front. Both documentaries are filled with personal stories from the time of the war. It can be argued that Avini and Burns have chosen to approach the accounts of these wars from a worm's eye view. Both directors look at war from the inside, considering the immediate lives of the people who were involved in them, without focusing on the local or global circumstances involving the wars.

Although these stories could not be separated from history and what has happened in the battle fields, in these documentaries events are mirrored through the single lives of the people who lived through them.

Editing of *The War* was a difficult experience for Burns' crew: producer Sarah Botstein explains that the process of organizing this material was a daunting task. The producer narrowed down the material so when the editor sat down to edit a scene, he or she could begin to get the elements to sew a scene together (PBS.org). The editing of *The War* was a group effort, but the main editor was Paul Barnes. Ken Burns also adds that the editing of the war was "a huge distillation process" (*The War*, Special Features).

The crew sorted through hundreds of hours of old footage to find the parts that were related to selected personal stories as well as cull special sound effects for their silent footage.

The editing of *Shahri dar Aasemaan*, however, is performed by Avini himself, imprinting its grammar with his own vision and auteurist style. Avini's documentary is treated similarly to all other documentaries from the *Ravaayat-e Fath* series; both the narration and the editing are Avini's own work. However, although *Shahri dar Aasemaan* is a scaled-down project compared to *The War*, it is only the last title of the

63-episode *Ravaayat-e Fath* series which is entirely edited by Avini. He completed the editing of *Shahri dar Aasemaan* in fifteen days (Shabani 71-74).

The period which each documentary covers varies considerably. *The War* tells the story of four years of the Second World War in which the United States joined the allied forces and a total of twenty-five battles took place (*The War*, Special Features).

This documentary is comprised of seven episodes: “*A Necessary War*”, “*When Things Get Tough*”, “*A Deadly Calling*”, “*Pride of Our Nation*”, “*Fubar*”, “*The Ghost Front*”, and “*A World Without War*” for the total of fourteen hours equivalent to 900 minutes, approximately less than half a minute per day if a documentary was to cover every day during Burn’s choice of four years of World War II. In contrast, *Shahri dar Aasemaan* is the story of a 45-day battle, the very first battle after Iraqi attack in which Iraqi forces captured the City of Khorramshahr. It contains six episodes -- numbered one through six and untitled -- for the total of 156 minutes, approximately three and a half minute per day if Avini was to cover each day in the period of the 45-day battle.

Nevertheless, in both documentaries the beginnings of each episode are not complicated and do not use many cinematic effects. As the result, the start of each film announces the focus on the subject instead of showmanship. In *Shahri dar Aasemaan*, the title for each episode begins with the logo of *Ravaayat-e Fath* series and the sound of the wind along with the famous flute of the title on the footage from the war. This is followed by a lament from Aahangaraan, a famous Iranian singer of revolutionary chants, over still images and footage of the martyrs during the war. The titles wrap up with a tank dissolving to a cityscape of Khorramshahr with its beheaded palm trees. The name

of the series follows: *Shahri dar Aasemaan* with its episode number. In *The War* each episode starts with a disclaimer: “The Second World War was fought in thousands of places, too many for one accounting. This is the story of four American towns and how their citizens experienced that war” (*The War*, Special Features). In both films, the title dissolves into a narration which is then followed by a personal story from the participants. Both films and directors make clear that their emphasis is upon a personal story and experience of war.

Because there are no predetermined storylines for either of the documentaries, each director’s view of the essence of the war is captured to a great extent. Both directors approach the participants and invite them to share their stories with the viewers. They want the viewers to live through the eyes of their participants in order to bring back to life the events that had been buried in years past. Although these documentaries are about two wars with different magnitudes which are separated by about a half of a century and the directors come from completely different backgrounds and have distinct perspectives and philosophy in filmmaking, there are striking similarities. When Sam Hynes of Minnesota discusses the nature of war in Burns’ documentary he says: “I don’t think there is such a thing as a good war, there are sometimes necessary wars,...I never questioned the necessity of that war and the fact is that it was something that had to be done....” (*The War*); his immediate perception of war is in line with Avini’s. In an interview Avini states that “the war is not a virtuous deed in nature and if there were any other way to fight back with the enemy other than weapon, we [Iranian soldiers], would have used it instead of weapons” (*Ayine-ye Jadou* 3:193).

*Shahri dar Aasemaan*'s tone is more intimate than Burns' documentary because Avini and the participants not only know each other, but also have met at the beginning of the 45-day battle. Burns does not have that same relationship to his material, simply because of the time and space gap between the World War II and the time of documentary production. Participants in the two documentaries were selected with different approaches and criteria. *The War* follows the story of the Second World War after the Japanese invasion of the Pearl Harbor through the eyes of 50 American soldiers and civilians who lived through the war in four randomly selected cities: Sacramento, California; Luverne, Minnesota; Waterbury, Connecticut and Mobile, Alabama (Trosclair). Burns also shows the diversity among the different ethnic and social backgrounds who witnessed the war. In contrast, *Shahri dar Aasemaan* is the story of the first battle after the Iraqi invasion through the eyes of the soldiers who were originally from the city of Khorramshahr and from a single ethnic background. Both documentaries are made from firsthand accounts, not through the eyes of historians but through the eyes of those who fought these wars: the soldiers who would be forever affected by the magnitude of the events such as witnessing friends die beside them. In contrast, there were no casting sessions for *Shahri dar Aasemaan* and the selection process was different. The crew started interviewing random people who had witnessed the fall of Khorramshahr, but the civilians were unable to remember the events in as much detail as Avini wanted. At this point Avini decided to call on the people whom he knew from the frontlines. Many of the people he had filmed or had still images from were killed in the battle of Khorramshahr or during the war, but among them there were two soldiers who

had survived. Avini decided that they are the best people to tell the story.

Although in both documentaries participants had seen war and lived through it, Ken Burns' participants are removed from the subject because of more than half a century of time gap between the Second World War and the time the documentary was made in 2007. On the other hand, Avini's interviewees are not removed from the war neither by a time gap nor by the location. Avini takes the participants to the actual location and the filming takes place in the ruins of the city of Khorramshahr, a city which have not yet recovered from the damages it had undergone at the time.

In contrast to the war between Iran and Iraq, the physical offense to American soil ended right after its start with the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. After American soldiers joined the Allies, they did not have to concentrate on defending their home ground and their families and their own territory were not in immediate danger. In the war between Iran and Iraq, however, the offensive on the Iranian territories and civilians was ongoing through the 45-day battle at the beginning of the war which resulted in the Iraqi's capture of the city of Khorramshahr. Therefore, the participants in Avini's documentary are not only in the battle fields, but they are also defending their home and country which pushed them to another level of emotional involvement.

Another important consideration is a difference in representing genders in these two war documentaries; there are women who participate in *The War* and share their stories while there is a complete absence of female participants in *Shahri dar Aasemaan*.

Although women rarely faced direct combat in the Second World War, they have an equal presence in the interviews. They share their stories of their loved ones who joined

the military as well as the effects that the war had on the U.S. civilians. In *Shahri dar Aasemaan*, however, there is no female participation, neither on the part of female family members of the soldiers nor the female residents of the city of Khorramshahr at the time of Iraqi invasion. The absence of women in this documentary is not based on Avini's ideologically driven style. In his earlier movies, both the families of the soldiers and martyrs and the female residents of Khorramshahr and other border cities participated and were interviewed. The absence of women in *Shahri dar Aasemaan* may be due to the focus of the film. The documentary is retelling the story of the early battles and martyrdom in the frontlines in which women were not present. The focus is on the collective ideology of martyrdom and sacrifice that neither focused on individual soldiers and their families nor included women's perspective.

Avini's relationship with the interviewees in this documentary is unique, since he had filmed them thirteen years prior to making *Shahri dar Aasemaan* upon the Iraqi attack. His relationship to these participants is as close as his relationship to the subject matter. This close relationship is mirrored in the narration as well as filming and editing of *Shahri dar Aasemaan*. It produces a subjective depiction of the battle. However, although Burns has not lived through the Second World War, his depiction of this war is also subjective. As Lynn Novick, co-director of *The War* mentions in the DVD's special features, this documentary is made "to bear witness to these extraordinary brave young men and being able to say this is what happened." The narration for *The War* is written by Geoffrey Wards and is called an "intimate history" by the author. This narration combines American lives affected by the war and their personal histories with the historic

events of the Second World War to an extent that puts those stories in the context of the war but does not turn the focus away from their personal experience. The narration is performed by the main narrator Keith David accompanied by ten other narrators including Tom Hanks (*The War*, Special Features).

There is a more stylized as well as personal approach to the voice-over narration in *Shahri dar Aasemaan*, because it is written by Avini himself, while in *The War* the voiceover narration is a group work and not necessarily as Burns' own language. As noted earlier, the narration in *Shahri dar Aasemaan* is also performed by Avini (Shabani, 71-74). This narration consists of the personal stories of the soldiers combined with Avini's literary language, full of allusions, allegories and similes, as Chapter Three discusses. Because narration in *Shahri dar Aasemaan* is both written and narrated by Avini, it is a reminder of Avini's presence to the viewers while watching the film.

The music in the two documentaries has different functions and importance as well. *Shahri dar Aasemaan*'s music, with the exception of the title's simple tune, is not composed specifically for the film. The music of *The War* is written by Wynton Marsalis and is used in conjunction with twentieth-century music "either composed during or inspired by the war" (Burns, Music in the film). In *Shahri dar Aasemaan*, the theme songs are ones played during the war, but there is no original score written specifically for this documentary. Instead, Avini has incorporated music in a minimalistic manner.

He believes that film and music are two independent art forms which should stay independent; music should only be used in the background only if it is supporting the footage and not dominating it (Avini.ir). Hence the music in *Shahri dar Aasemaan* is

limited to the marches and symbolic revolutionary songs or rhymes.

Examining the definitions of documentary from a western perspective, analyzing it in terms of its specific modes, and juxtaposing Avini's war documentary to another work of this genre by a western director, unquestionably sheds initial light on some of the choices and techniques in Avini's film which will be explored further in later chapters.

## Chapter 4 – Avini as Auteur

“Being idealistic requires patience in suffering.  
Hence, my brother! In sacrificing for your ideals,  
learn to be the most patient of people in this  
planet of suffering.”

-Avini, April 4th, 1993

Although Avini has not been specifically called an “auteur” in the past (perhaps because auteur theory traditionally depends upon western notions of art and authorship), an examination of Avini’s works and his style confirms that he is indeed an example of an auteur director within Iranian cinema. The term “auteur” is simply a French translation of the word “author,” though critical debate regarding the idea director as the sole or even primary author of a film work is considerable, since film is usually a result of group collaboration (“Auteur Theory and Auteurship”). However, a strong argument can be made for Avini as the auteur of the *Ravaayat-e Fath* series because he was the only constant member of the crew in the series, while other crew members were replaced or martyred and yet the consistency in Avini’s work did not diminish. Although, ironically, Avini believed that Iranian cinema had followed the wrong path in shifting focus from subject matter to the writer-director (*Ayine-ye Jadou* 3: 102), Avini became an example of an auteurist director himself. Avini, the auteur, used a unique style of documentary making that was consistent in his documentaries. Avini’s signature style of filmmaking consisted of a creating a close relationship between the camera and the participants in his films, voiceover narration written and spoken by him, and an

incorporation of laments, which he also spoke as narrator. When combined, these elements form Avini's signature style, as discussed in the previous chapter.

Avini expressed his personal and religious ideology and his ideas about cinema not only through his documentary films but in his articles, interviews and public speeches in film festivals as well. His opinions on politics, religion, mysticism and the cinema were quite firm. According to Avini's ideals Iranian cinema should be an independent cinema that mirrors a culture that can resist *Gharbzadegi* (i.e. Westoxification)- a term first used by Jalal Al-e Ahmad as the title of his book published in Iran in 1962 which became a popular term expressing anti-Western sentiment in Iran leading to the revolution (Esposito). Avini believed that by learning the latest cinematic techniques, Iranian filmmakers would be able to have a distinct voice to portray their culture if trained properly (*Ayine-ye Jadou* 3: 103).

Avini detested clichés and did not want to be a creator of a mediocre piece in terms of technique and style. He has explained several clichés used in other works related to the Iran-Iraq war that he made sure not to have present in his works. One of Avini's examples of visual cliché was the soldiers showing V as the sign of victory and posing for the camera. Another clichéd image during the Iran-Iraq war was the use of the word *issaar* or sacrifice. Avini believed that at the very beginning of the war *issaar* was a meaningful term for the sacrifices that the soldiers made, but excessive use of the term during that time made it "like a pearl that is buried in sludge" (*Ayine-ye Jadou* 3: 220).

He also believed that using a microphone while interviewing soldiers in the frontlines was an act that made the documentary pretentious and nonrealistic. He believed that

when soldiers saw a microphone they would become confused and try to act their best in front of the camera and that the result would have been artificial (*Ayine-ye Jadou* 3: 221).

Instead he intended the cameraman to become one with the camera and with the crowd.

He wanted the camera to be among the soldiers long enough before shooting so that the presence of camera could be ignored while filming took place (*Ayine-ye Jadou* 3: 224).

Whenever a soldier shared his thoughts or the cameraman started a casual conversation, asking a question from a soldier, the camera would be rolling as an eyewitness. (Avini's approach to camera work in his documentaries is strikingly similar to western cinema verité. William Rothman, professor of motion pictures in University of Miami, writes: "Behind the camera, practitioners of the cinema-verité discipline forsake their ordinary lives to become observers who wait selflessly for the people they are filming to reveal themselves in their own good time and on their own terms" [81]).

An example of Avini's unobtrusive camera in *Shahri dar Aasemaan* occurs when the two main Basijis share their memories and the experiences; it is as if they are holding a conversation with Avini. At times Avini, who is standing right by the camera, raises questions for clarification in the middle of the conversation; the soldiers reply to Avini, who has become almost one with the camera. One of the factors which contributes to Avini's documentary style is that the cameramen themselves were part of the Basij and volunteer forces. As a result, the documentaries are a portrayal of the war and the Basij from the Basiji standpoint (*Ayine-ye Jadou* 3: 227).

Avini defined cinematic technique as the sum of technologic mastery in filming and the art of filmmaking itself. He explains that a poet does not think about his writing

style and the mastery in the rhythm to be separate from the subject he is writing about.

Avini thought that is exactly what a director should be. Using technology to enhance the concept is what a director should do and fine technique is a summation of superior technology and a worthy concept (*Ayine-ye Jadou* 3: 170).

Avini considered contemporary documentary filmmakers in the third world to be producing works with little artistic value at the time. In Avini's view there was an evident lack of technique in documentary filmmaking, and he rarely found it believable for the viewers. On the other hand, he did not approve of the western approach to documentary making, since he believed their approach to be the exact opposite.

According to Avini the western approach was using the best techniques to convey what necessarily might not have been true or even exist. Avini believed that technique is more important than content; however, relying on technique does not translate to ignoring the subject matter (*Ayine-ye Jadou* 3: 115-119). He mentions that the use of technology should be a priority, but it should not overpower the substance (*Ayine-ye Jadou* 3: 159).

Although Avini does not use any special effects or complex technological tools in *Shahri dar Aasemaan* similar to his other documentaries, he creates a simple work that flows from one scene to another, following the soldiers down the path of their memories while elevating the scenes to a level that conveys the intricate concept of martyrdom. In each scene he cuts archival footage with new footage of memories of the soldiers in a seamless manner, which shows the presence of advanced editing techniques.

Avini looked at his work process as part of a mystic experience. He referred to the years during the Iran-Iraq war as the time during which his group experienced “*Sokr*”

(i.e. being in tune with an elevated level of understanding of God's work on earth). After the war, however, the group experienced "*Sahv*" (i.e. the level of consciousness that keeps one away from relating to the higher level and therefore was denied access to a greater work experience)(Tajdini 26). This might be one of the reasons that *Shahri Dar Aasemaan* is such a nostalgic piece, recalling memories of the times when they had gained a higher level of consciousness.

Avini's definition of documentary cinema is a cinema that documents "reality;" he argues, however, that the portrayal of reality is subjective and that sometimes what one sees as a director is not necessarily factual. It is a personal interpretation of the past and present events which is documented. This interpretation of documentary actually agrees with Bill Nichols' and Patricia Aufderhride's description of documentary as reality as it is perceived by the director.

Avini's documentary crew during the war was devoted to the cause; however, some had little or no training in moviemaking prior to joining the crew. The cameramen did not have any scenarios prior to the shooting. They had to be quick and be able to decide independently on what to shoot and how to shoot it. As a result, the cameraman was essentially the acting director while filming (*Ayine-ye Jadou* 3: 186).

Despite his belief that the footage in the documentaries had to be self explanatory and should not require a voiceover to explain it, Avini used voice-over in all his war documentaries including *Shahri dar Aasemaan*. He wrote these narrations after editing the footage. To Avini, the voiceover not only clearly defined the eight-year war epic and its depth, but also made up for shortcomings of the footage because the cameramen

filmed during combat under extreme circumstances. Despite his belief that the footage needed to stand alone with no need for accompanying voiceover, Avini explains that he used it not only to describe the scenes, but also to reduce the emotional overload and at times to help the viewer bridge the gap between the images and the more abstract concepts such as martyrdom (*Ayine-ye Jadou* 3: 189-191). In *Shahri dar Aasemaan* the voiceover interrupts the participants in the middle of their talks whenever the emotional tension heightens and also at moments in which a parallel is drawn between the historic events of Imam Hossein's martyrdom in Karbala and the events in the frontlines of the war. For example, Avini alludes to Majid Khayyatzadeh's martyrdom while Majid was only fourteen years old. The voiceover begins in the middle of a scene with Sayyed Saaleh Mousavi, one of the main participants in the documentary:

“Life is beautiful, but ask Majid Khayyatzadeh of what life is. If the cemeteries are the places to bury the dead, then what do we -the residents buried in the cemeteries of our repetitive dead routines- know about the meaning of life? If the destination is to fly high up, it is better for the cage to be destroyed {pointing out to the soul as bird and the body as cage}. Then swallows which know their destination do not fear the destruction of their nests. Sayyed Saaleh Mousavi could not have tolerated witnessing Majid's martyrdom, and he did not. The news of his martyrdom was given to him at the Persian Hotel in Abadan...But you know that all the attachments, however immense, is minimal in comparison with the attachment of a soul to his creator. Majid's brother Reza rinsed Majid's

body and later on joined the caravan of Martyrs of Karbala himself (*Shahri dar Aasemaan- Episode 5*).

Avini edited his documentary based on a storyline or the subject that he wanted his intended viewer (i.e., those who believed in the cause or might be potential recruits to the war) to explore, focus on, or follow. His choice of a simple tune for his film had three reasons: not to compromise the footage, to provide an epic tone to the scenes, and to create an atmosphere to take the viewer back in history every time that tune is played. He believed that the footage itself, the voiceover, and the music should complement each other, and provide a balanced product, and that none of the elements should overpower the film (*Ayine-ye Jadou 3: 196*).

As the most comprehensive documentary that has focused on the war from an insider's perspective, Avini's film became an epic series that functioned as a public repository for the memories of the eight-year war. As Shahrokh Touyserkani, editor-in-chief of the *Sokhan* monthly magazine, describes, "Avini depicted the resistance of the defenseless people in their eight-year struggle. So *Ravaayat-e Fath*, Avini's legacy, is in fact a contemporary illuminationist version of the *Shahnaameh* (i.e. the Book of Kings)" (Morteza va Maa, Touyserkani) Because of his distinct work and his effect in a national level, there have been several symposiums as well as events in which his writings have been discussed. These events have offered exchange of ideas, publications and films about Avini, his ideology and Eshraghi (i.e. illuminationist style of filmmaking) and documentary films in general.

Avini himself believed that the distinction between his war documentaries and the

work of others was in his connection with the subject matter. Avini wanted the film to be authentic in the sense that subjects abstain from trying to become actors in front of his camera (*Ayine-ye Jadou* 3:219). He wanted them to be as comfortable as they are in their environment even when he was holding a conversation with them while filming. As an example, while filming in the village, he set up the camera long before the actual filming started. As a result, people were comfortable to continue as they lived and not be mere actors in the documentary. In his early documentaries, the interview and filming were performed by two individuals from the crew. This order changed in later documentaries by Avini in which the interviewer was the cameraman himself. This approach is similar to the approach in direct cinema or the observational documentary mode as Nichols categorizes it: “the camera observes what is happening with minimal editing after recording (*Introduction to Documentary* 109-110). However, unlike observational mode directors, in *Shahri dar Aasemaan* Avini is not only observing, he's also engaging in a dialogue with the participants. Based on Avini's observations, this approach required the interviewee to have a dialogue with the camera, and he believed it resulted in a more realistic documentary by better conveying the information and the emotion. Avini guided the cameramen in his crew to consider the camera as their eye, to see and feel their surroundings in the combat area through the camera lens. He believed that in producing a documentary, sound-recording should take place simultaneously on the location (Tajdini 29-31).

Avini notes that his documentaries are only valuable if accepted in the eyes of God; otherwise they are worthless (Tajdini 10). This explains his later innovation of

Sinemaay-e Eshraghi (i.e. Illuminationist Cinema) which is more focused on the ideology than the technique.

Avini developed his own style of documentary-making during his experimental phase in Jahad Sazandegi (i.e. Reconstruction Campaign). His documentaries are filmed with handheld cameras which become one with the cameraman for a more natural setting.

Avini then wrote the narrations and recited them himself. In addition he personally edited all the footage. The use of laments in these documentaries is another specific characteristic of Avini's work. Avini's last documentary, *Shahri dar Aasemaan*, carries his fully developed signature style.

## Chapter 5 - Conclusion

At the beginning of the twenty-first century and fifteen years after Avini's death on a landmine, a small number of scholars in Europe and the United States have started to tackle the subject of Avini and his work on the war genre. While that research has focused on Avini, from an anthropological point of view, the focus of this thesis has been to explore his last documentary series as a tool to describe both the nature of that series and to investigate Avini as an auteur.

This thesis has examined *Shahri dar Aasemaan* within the western frame of documentary modes based on Bill Nichols' categorization of documentary films as well as Avini's self-defined genre called 'illuminationist cinema'. It has described *Shahri dar Aasemaan* in detail, providing historical and cultural understanding of it. Based on accepted western definitions of the documentary genre, *Shahri dar Aasemaan* indeed corresponds to definitions offered by both Patricia Aufderheide and Bill Nichols. It is not real life, but it is *about* real life; it is a depiction of the world with recognizable familiarity, and it stands for a particular interest and interpretation (*Introduction to Documentary* 2-3). Furthermore, *Shahri dar Aasemaan* as a war documentary is a movie which is not fun; it is a serious movie (Aufderheide 1-2). Although Avini insists that his intention is to show "the reality" by removing the hurdles from the way - the hurdles being his personal perceptions and technical factors - the reality he articulates in *Shahri dar Aasemaan* is indeed his own reality. Avini defines the "reality" and the "truth" in a secular world as such: "The reality is the interpretation of humanistic nature, realism comes in the contrast with idealism; the truth is the way things should be, and the reality

is the way they are (*Ayine-ye Jadou* 3:214). He strives to convey the reality as he perceived it: “Our reality is the territory of God’s will as mystics say”; it is where the physical and spiritual worlds collide; based on this definition of reality, truth and reality coincide (*Ayine-ye Jadou* 3:214). Journalist Edward R. Murrow believes that “anyone who believes that every individual must represent a ‘balanced’ picture knows nothing about either balance or picture” (Aufderheide 2), which provides more insight when looking at Avini’s documentaries. From the first episode to the last, Avini’s *Shahri dar Aasemaan* offers several ‘truths’. These truths are based on his ideology which is one aligned with Islamic revolutionary ideas in Iran and not necessarily perceived the same by the society as a whole. The interesting point is that he is aware of other realities in society. Therefore, he insists on explaining that his documentaries are made for a certain audience, those who already believe in his value system.

In addition to a western classical analysis of Avini’s work, it is equally significant to consider a western documentary on war. A comparison between *Shahri dar Aasemaan* and *The War*, by American director Ken Burns, offers a better understanding for Avini’s viewers. This comparison provides the tool to explore Avini’s territories by comparing his work to an established and known work of a director whose style has been explored and his language is easy to follow according to western norm. Both Ken Burns and Sayyed Morteza Avini are baby boomers who have pioneered in their field as documentary filmmakers. Although the two documentaries are from differently scaled projects, there are significant points of comparison between the two. Both movies are about the memories of soldiers who have had a firsthand experience in the war; both look

at the war from a very personal angle and not from the bigger global picture. They are in multiple episodes and are intended to reveal part of the history that did not make it to the history books. At the same time *Shahri dar Aasemaan* and *The War* have obvious points of distinction in their editing, narration (or lack thereof), and image manipulation and quality, as discussed earlier.

*Shahri dar Aasemaan* was produced in the fall of 1992 and was broadcast the following winter for the first time on Iranian national television. This was the last documentary Avini ever made on the subject of the Iran-Iraq war. Among his other work on the same subject, two series focus exclusively on the period covering the beginning of the war and the ensuing Iraqi occupation of the Iranian border cities. These two series are *Haghighat* (i.e. *The Truth*), and *Shahri Dar Aasemaan* (i.e. *A City in the Sky*).

*Haghighat* was made after the initiation of the war while *Shahri dar Aasemaan* was produced four years after the conclusion of the war.

*Shahri dar Aasemaan* is a distinct work in the Iranian war documentary genre. Through Avini's lens in *Ravaayat e Fath* series and more specifically *Shahri dar Aasemaan*, viewers are able to experience some of the reality of war in its earliest days which led to the eight-year battle that has shaped many people's lives to this day. As the last documentary made by Avini and with the characteristics specific to Avini's style of documentary, it is unique in the history of Iranian documentary making.

The results gained through this research will provide future academics with a detailed exploration of Avini's style and a thorough analysis of his last work. This will help narrow the gap between the Iranian language and culture in which *Shahri dar*

*Aasemaan* was created and a western framework of film and cultural analysis. Exploring Avini's work remains challenging in terms of available resources and the different modes of cultural, philosophical and academic discourse in which they are written, and this thesis represents an initial response to that challenge.

There are several areas that merit further discussion, most obviously the subject of Avini and his work from a political perspective. It is a discussion for political scientists who can tackle the subject best while dissecting the Islamic Revolution of Iran as a political party and comparing it to the other regimes under which documentaries were made specifically to promote the doctrines of their governments. Avini's first series of *Ravaayat-e Fath* (which was not discussed in this research) would be more appropriate for such a purpose. In the first series Avini not only records what was happening in the frontlines and brings it to people to witness during the war on a weekly basis, but also promotes joining the voluntary forces. It might be fruitfully compared to other wartime documentaries which also intended to recruit for the wars, such as Frank Capra's *Why We Fight* series.

Another subject worth exploring is the two documentaries made by Avini himself on the same subject: the time that Iran-Iraq war broke out. The first documentary *Haghighat* (i.e. *The Truth*), is a documentary made right before *Ravaayat-e Fath* series. It has eleven episodes and explores the beginning of the war at the time it occurred in 1980. Comparing this documentary to *Shahri dar Aasemaan*, which was made with the same subject and through the lens of memory after the conclusion of the war, could possibly shed additional light on the similarities and differences in Avini's own

perspective toward the beginning and after the end of the war. However, based on documentation at the *Ravaayat-e Fath* Foundation there is no complete copy of *Haghighat* available in the archives.

My aim was to see through Avini's eyes at times and at other times to move myself away from the subject and look at it from outside. My familiarity with Iranian culture and practices offered me the challenge of explaining cultural histories and tenets which were deeply ingrained within me and revisiting historical and cinematic works with fresh eyes. It is my hope that I have met this challenge and paved the way for future endeavors.

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