



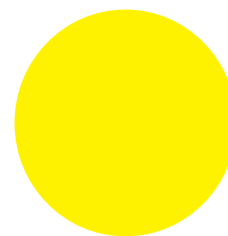
'Smart Kid'

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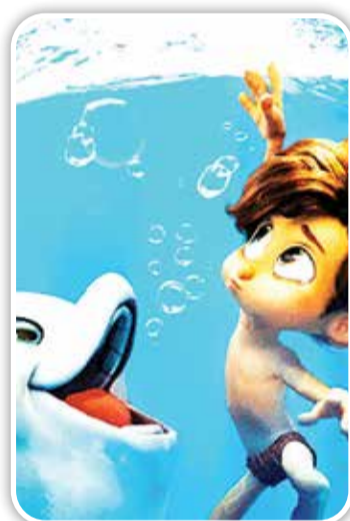
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## Iran's children's cinema: Overcoming technical peaks, struggling with storytelling challenges

### Arts & Culture Desk

The Iranian animation industry has come a long way since its beginnings, marked by collaborative studio-based efforts and technological advancements. With the recent release of 'Smart Kid', the industry showcases promising growth in domestic sales, indicating a potential contribution to global box office revenues. However, as technical skill reaches new heights, a critical challenge emerges, and that is the art of storytelling. An article recently published in Mashregh News examined the historical journey of Iranian animation and children's cinema, going through its roots, weaknesses, and strengths.



'Dolphin Boy'

### History

Although some believe that the roots of the concept of Iran's animation date back to thousands of years ago, according to Farheekhtegan newspaper, cinema, as we know it today, wasn't present then; animation emerged later as a cinema subdivision.

Contrary to the belief that cinema arrived in Iran with Mozaffaredin Shah of Qajar, he brought only film cameras, not the cinematic art. Iranian cinema faced many challenges until the late 1940s, gaining significant form in 1949, and maturing in the 1950s.

In the 1950s, Iranian animation started forming. Inspired by "motion" in film frames, Esfandiar Ahmadiyeh used a camera to transform his sketches into animated films, unknowingly parallel to Émile Cohl's French invention 50 years earlier. Nosratollah Karimi, a Prague graduate, and Ja'far Tejaratchi joined Ahmadiyeh, forming Iran's first animation studio, creating the first short animations.

It is said that during the 1950s, 60s and 70s, the dominance of two elements, Filmfarsi (low-quality films, mostly copied from Bollywood, with poor plots) and the screening of foreign films (especially American ones), almost monopolized the growth potential over other types and styles of cinema in the country. For this reason, during that period, Iranian animation couldn't seriously make it to public screens, and was short-lived.

### Golden age

During the 1980s and 1990s, children's cinema of Iran experienced significant growth. These works fell into two categories: The first group consisted of works with a children's theme and an artistic style, but were not intended for a child audience. The second group included films and series produced specifically for children, such as 'The School of Mice' and 'Thief of Dolls,' featuring various dolls. Despite the simplicity of the technical aspects in Iranian children's cinema during this period, the era was considered a golden age due to flourishing storytelling. The 2000s witnessed efforts to refresh Iran's animation industry. However, technical progress could not keep pace with the peak period of Iranian storytelling. The screening of 'Tehran 1500' in the 2000s marked a significant starting point for Iranian animation to enter into Iran's professional cinema. It was evident that this animation was not targeted at children.

### Success in visual technique

In 2023, the creators of 'Princess of Rome' and 'The Elephant King' have returned to the public screen with another feature-length animation 'Smart Kid'.

National themes, emphasizing indigenous heroism alongside religious elements, remain evident in the film.

Technically, 'Smart Kid' appeared as a success, compared to previous works. However, reaching one technical peak highlighted other shortcomings. Watching 'Smart Kid' has made it clear that Iran's cinema faces a major storytelling problem, both in animation and other fields. It is said that finding poor visual quality doesn't require much effort to prove. However, it is not easily accepted that the story is weak or unappealing.

Iranian animation faced several challenges to reach its current technical level, with the need to address its technical deficiencies apparent from the start. However, to address the weaknesses in storytelling, no official or investor prioritizes to work on the art of storytelling.

If Iran's commercial cinema can maintain box office rankings indefinitely through repetitive comedies and win international festival awards with a distinct tone in social works, the same is not true for animation. Animation always requires storytelling, whether for adults or children, for domestic or international audiences.

### Children's animation

The religious-themed 'Princess of Rome' was finally released, which was more successful in engaging child audiences than 'Tehran 1500' because it, at least, told a story for children.

Animation production in Iran hadn't found economic viability yet. It seemed the only solution was for creators of a feature-length animation to work on specific subjects.

Supporters of such projects had no understanding of the long-term impact and cultural influence of artistic works. Therefore, they only supported projects that were completely religious. Simultaneously with the production of the religious-themed 'Princess of Rome,' in the opposite spectrum, they showed their approach in supporting 'Rostam and Sohrab,' intending to introduce nationalistic sentiments in the style of the 'Shahnameh' to children. Unlike 'Princess of Rome,' the visual quality of 'Rostam and Sohrab' was low, resembling computer games in some scenes. Just as 'Princess of Rome' paved the way for the production of other historical-religious works such as 'Elephant King,' and 'Benjamin,' 'Rostam and Sohrab' led to the produc-

tion of another animation called 'The Last Fiction,' set in the ancient Iranian context.

Some of Iran's most famous film stars, including Parviz Parastouei, Hamed Behdad, and Leila Hatami, voiced the characters in 'The Last Fiction'. However, it was not an idea that could attract a working-class audience.

The tone of this animation in some dialogues and speeches was similar to the tone of scholars; thus, expecting that adult audiences could communicate with it seemed unreasonable.

Therefore, it can be said that a part of Iran's animation cinema, produced with the religious support of the government, was somewhat more successful.

In the late 2010s, certain animations were released without clear national or religious labels. Ancient stories lacked effective storytelling, while national content, emphasizing native values over Western concepts, gained prominence. 'Dolphin Boy,' which was successfully screened in Russia, became the highest-grossing Iranian animation at the time. Another example is 'Loupetou,' released in 2022.



'The Last Fiction'



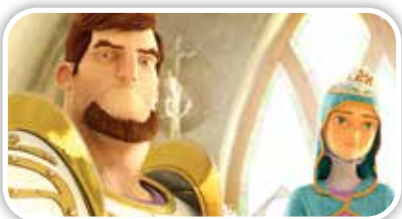
'The School of Mice'

### Post-1979 Islamic Revolution

After the 1979 Islamic Revolution, the Farsifilm mafia temporarily stepped aside, and foreign film screening became the Farabi Foundation's responsibility. Despite this, Iranian animation still struggled to find its way to public screenings.

Part of Iran's children's cinema, with creating films for children (not necessarily about them), performed better during

this period. This era unintentionally raised the notion that "children only want cheers," influenced the quality of the productions. However, feature-length animated films must appeal to both children and adults. Since a child doesn't go to the cinema alone, engaging both audiences is crucial, encouraging parents to accompany their children.



'Princess of Rome'



'Rostam and Sohrab'

### 'Smart Kid'

Animation distinguishes itself from other visual genres. In contrast to television shows, where the producer assumes the creator role, and theater, where the director serves as the creator, animations typically involve production by a company. This distinction arises because every stage of animation production follows a collaborative and studio-based process.

The studio aims to produce animations that entertain children and have educational functions.

'Smart Kid' is developed based on this approach. It addresses the priorities of today's children, such as superhero concepts, environmental conservation, etc., to contribute to social development.

The process of creating an animation involves specialized techniques, more than real cinema, as each aspect, even the creation of a character, requires diverse concepts and techniques. The design involves expertise in topology, anatomy, clothing, hair, color, facial expressions, and more.

The collaboration between Honar Pooya Studio and the Institute for the Intellectual Development of Children and Young

Adults is considered beneficial due to the latter's experience in producing for children.

Gathering experts for the 'Smart Kid' animation involves decision-making with company involvement. The producer is the first and last person to enter or exit the project. However, in company-based production, decisions involve the participation of various elements within the company structure, with the producer making the decisions.

Honar Pooya's main policy is to select and employ individuals who can coordinate well with collective work and the company-based production structure.

All in all, as the Iranian animation industry struggles with the need for interesting storytelling, it stands at a critical point. Technical skill alone cannot guarantee the industry's growth; a concerted effort to train creative storytellers is imperative. The journey from historical struggles to contemporary challenges highlights the flexibility of Iranian animation, pointing towards a future where interesting narratives complement technical quality and contribute to a successful global industry.