

Representation of Iran's Nuclear Program in the Cinema of the 2010s with an emphasis on the Political Discourse of the Rouhani Administration: A Case Study of The Bodyguard

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Abstract: Post-revolutionary Iranian cinema in the 2010s, notably *The Bodyguard* (2016) by Ebrahim Hatamikia, reflects the political and social concerns of the era, shaped by the Rouhani administration's "Government of Prudence and Hope" and nuclear negotiations. The film focuses on the 2008–2010 assassinations of Iranian nuclear scientists by Western powers, particularly Israel and the United States, portraying these events as symbols of resistance against external threats to Iran's nuclear program. It critiques the Rouhani administration's diplomacy-focused discourse of moderation, which some viewed as neglecting national assets and revolutionary ideals. Through characters like a nuclear scientist and a loyal bodyguard, the film underscores the importance of scientific independence and critiques the marginalization of revolutionary values. Using a structuralist semiotic approach and Fiske's codes, this study analyzes the film's semantic and ideological layers, revealing how it highlights national concerns, critiques diplomatic policies, and emphasizes the sacrifices of scientific elites. The *Bodyguard* portrays the tension between diplomacy and resistance, reflecting on political decision-making complexities and advocating for the preservation of revolutionary ideals and national priorities in the face of external pressures. As a cultural text, it underscores the role of Sacred Defense cinema in critiquing power and addressing Iran's political and social challenges.

Keywords: Nuclear Program, Moderation Discourse, Iranian Cinema, Scientist Assassinations, Revolutionary Values.

Introduction

Assassination, as a tool for political, intelligence, and military pressure, has a long history in contemporary Iran, targeting individuals ranging from political and religious figures to ordinary citizens. However, the series of targeted assassinations of Iranian nuclear scientists between 2008 and 2010, due to their strategic nature and profound impact on Iran's nuclear program, emerged as one of the most sensitive and controversial events of recent decades. These assassinations, primarily attributed to Western and Israeli intelligence services, particularly Mossad, were designed and executed to disrupt Iran's scientific and technological advancements in its nuclear program while exerting psychological and political pressure on Iranian society. These events not only represented a significant loss for Iran's scientific community but also became a symbol of the confrontation between Iran and Western powers over the nuclear issue.

Masoud Ali-Mohammadi, a professor of physics at the University of Tehran and a distinguished researcher in theoretical physics, was the first nuclear scientist targeted in this series of assassinations. On January 12, 2010, as he was leaving his home, he was killed by the explosion of a remotely detonated bomb concealed in a motorcycle, an event that sent shockwaves through Iran's scientific and political communities. Ali-Mohammadi was selected as a strategic target due to his involvement in scientific projects related to Iran's nuclear program. Majid Shahriari, a distinguished physicist and professor at Shahid Beheshti University, who specialized in nuclear reactor design, was the second victim of this series of assassinations. On November 29, 2010, in Tehran, a magnetic bomb was attached to his vehicle, and he was killed in the subsequent explosion. This meticulously planned assassination, executed with intelligence precision, underscored the depth of foreign services' infiltration in targeting Iran's key scientists. Shahriari was selected as a critical target due to his pivotal role in advancing Iran's nuclear program.

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On the same day as Shahriari's assassination, Fereydoun Abbasi, a nuclear physicist and university professor, was also targeted in an assassination attempt. Another magnetic bomb was attached to his vehicle, but Abbasi's quick thinking and swift action allowed him to survive the attack. This failed assassination attempt highlighted the intensity and coordination of the attacks against Iran's nuclear scientists. Abbasi later became the head of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran, playing a significant role in advancing the country's nuclear program. Dariush Rezaeinejad, a doctoral student in electrical engineering at Khajeh Nasir Toosi University of Technology and a researcher in technologies related to Iran's nuclear program, was targeted on July 23, 2011, in front of his home in Tehran. He was killed by five gunshots fired by unidentified assailants. This assassination, carried out directly with firearms, marked a shift in the tactics used for these attacks and once again brought the sensitivity of Iran's nuclear program into sharp focus. Mostafa Ahmadi Roshan, a chemical engineering graduate from Sharif University of Technology and the deputy commercial director of the Natanz nuclear facility, was another target in this series of assassinations. On January 11, 2012, after leaving his home in Tehran, he was killed by the explosion of a magnetic bomb attached to his vehicle. Ahmadi Roshan was considered a strategic target by adversaries of Iran's nuclear program due to his critical role in procuring equipment and managing commercial operations at the Natanz site.

These assassinations took place amid escalating tensions between Iran and Western powers, particularly the United States and Israel. Iran's nuclear program, which had become one of the most significant issues in the country's foreign policy since the early 2000s, faced intense international pressure, including economic sanctions, United Nations Security Council resolutions, and covert intelligence operations. Israel, which viewed Iran's nuclear program as a threat to its security, along with Western intelligence agencies, notably the CIA and Mossad, were widely regarded as the primary perpetrators of these assassinations. Numerous reports, including documents released by WikiLeaks and statements from Western officials, pointed to coordinated efforts to target Iranian nuclear scientists to halt or slow the progress of the program. Within Iran, these assassinations were perceived as part of a covert war against the country's scientific advancement and national independence. The public and official responses, including large-scale funeral ceremonies and the naming of streets and scientific institutions after the martyred nuclear scientists, underscored their significance as symbols of scientific and national resistance. These events also bolstered the discourse of resistance against external pressures and reinforced the emphasis on scientific self-reliance in Iran.

At the political level, these assassinations intensified discursive conflicts among various domestic factions. Conservative factions, which emphasized preserving revolutionary ideals and resisting Western influence, viewed the assassinations as a consequence of diplomatic weakness and leniency toward adversaries. In contrast, moderate and reformist factions, which later gained prominence under the Rouhani administration's "Government of Prudence and Hope," advocated for de-escalation and diplomacy to mitigate international pressures. This discursive duality reached its peak during the Rouhani administration (2013–2017). The administration, with its discourse of moderation and focus on nuclear negotiations, sought to reduce tensions and lift sanctions. However, this approach was perceived by some critics, particularly conservative factions, as a sign of capitulation to the West and a neglect of protecting national assets, including nuclear scientists. This critique is vividly reflected in the film *The Bodyguard*, where director Ebrahim Hatamikia, through the character of "Engineer Meysam Zarrin" and the narrative of his assassination, portrays these threats and critiques the discourse of moderation. The series of assassinations of nuclear scientists between 2008 and 2010, one of the most critical events in contemporary Iranian history, not only dealt a blow to the country's nuclear program but also became a symbol of the confrontation between Iran and Western powers in the political and social spheres. These assassinations, by fostering a sense of national solidarity and reinforcing the discourse of resistance, emerged as a central theme in Iran's political discourse. The film *The Bodyguard*, through its depiction of these events via the character of Meysam Zarrin and his assassination, critiques the Rouhani administration's discourse of moderation and expresses concerns about the neglect of national assets and deviation from the ideals of the Islamic Revolution.

Literature Review

Research concerning the assassination of Iranian nuclear scientists and the associated political discourses, particularly in the realms of international and domestic law, has garnered significant attention. The article “An Analysis of the Rouhani Administration’s Policy and Performance on the Nuclear Issue with an Emphasis on the JCPOA” (Mirali and Navidinia, 2022) examines the nuclear policies of the Rouhani administration and the strategies related to the nuclear negotiations (JCPOA). This study explores Iran’s approach to global pressures, particularly in pursuit of a nuclear agreement, emphasizing the Rouhani administration’s “Government of Prudence and Hope” strategy of de-escalatory diplomacy and removing the nuclear issue from the realm of securitization. The research analyzes the evolution of Iran’s nuclear program during the Rouhani era, focusing on diplomatic strategies and their impact on international relations and Iran’s domestic landscape.

The article “The Impact of Anti-Western Discourse and the Return to Intellectual Self-Identity of the 1960s and 1970s on the Foreign Policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran” (Dokandar, Malekpour, and Radfar, 2022) traces the genealogy of political thought in Iran, analyzing the influence of anti-Western and intellectual discourses on Iran’s foreign policy, particularly regarding the nuclear issue. The study highlights the return to Iran’s cultural and religious identity and the resulting challenges in its relations with the West. The article “Legal Analysis of the Assassination of Iranian Nuclear Scientists from the Perspective of Domestic and International Law” (Salehi and Salmanifar, 2021) provides a legal examination of the assassinations related to Iran’s nuclear program. This study investigates the legal dimensions of these assassinations within the framework of Iran’s domestic laws and international regulations, addressing whether these acts constitute international crimes prosecutable under international law. It also explores issues of judicial jurisdiction and the potential for defensive justifications of such actions. The study “The Influence of Shia Culture and the Symbol of Ashura on the Stances of Iranian Authorities Regarding the Nuclear Issue” (Dehbane and Moradi Kelardeh, 2017) examines the impact of Shia culture on Iran’s nuclear policies, particularly how concepts such as justice, martyrdom, and resistance to oppression have shaped Iran’s political decisions in response to Western pressures and during nuclear negotiations. The article focuses on the profound influence of the Ashura symbol in shaping Iran’s discourse against the West.

The article “Iran’s Nuclear Diplomacy under the Khatami, Ahmadinejad, and Rouhani Administrations” (Abbasi, Salehi Mozaffar, and Hasanvand, 2015) provides a historical overview and analysis of Iran’s nuclear diplomacy from 1997 to 2015. This study examines the varying policies of different administrations toward Iran’s nuclear program and their evolution in the international context. It analyzes political discourse and Iran’s responses to international pressures and regional environmental variables, which are among the key topics addressed. The present article, which analyzes the representation of Iran’s nuclear issue in the cinema of the 2010s with an emphasis on the political discourse of the Rouhani administration, differs significantly from previous studies. While most existing research focuses on legal, diplomatic, and discursive aspects, this article uniquely examines the nuclear issue from a cinematic perspective during the Rouhani era. The film *The Bodyguard*, directed by Ebrahim Hatamikia, is analyzed in this study to explore how it critiques the political discourse of the Rouhani administration and addresses challenges related to the ideals of the Islamic Revolution, particularly through a structuralist semiotic approach. Methodologically and thematically, this article considers media and cinematic analysis alongside political discourse, an area underexplored in prior research. While previous studies primarily focus on the legal and political dimensions of the nuclear issue, this research investigates how these issues are reflected and represented in Iran’s cultural and cinematic landscape through artistic works.

Methodology

This study aims to conduct a semiotic analysis of the film *The Bodyguard* (2016), directed by Ebrahim Hatamikia, to examine the representation of the assassination of nuclear scientists and the critique of the discourse of moderation within the context of Iran’s Sacred Defense cinema. It employs a structuralist semiotic approach, drawing on John Fiske’s television codes. Semiotics, as an interpretive method in the social sciences, emphasizes the identification of complex and hidden meanings within texts. Rather

than relying on quantitative methods, such as word counting, semiotics focuses on the qualitative interpretation of documents and texts to derive semantically rich and profound insights into the mental world of text creators (Seyyedemami, 2007: 60).

According to Fiske, semiotics studies the process of meaning production in messages, whether generated by the encoder (the text's creator) or interpreted by the decoder (the audience) (Fiske, 2007: 72). This method, widely used in political science and cultural studies, enables the analysis of media texts, including films, political speeches, and even facial expressions and gestures. The foundations of modern semiotics trace back to the works of Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce. Saussure introduced the concept of "semiology," envisioning a science that studies the evolution of signs in social life and the laws governing them (Ahmadi, 2007: 8). Concurrently, Peirce developed the concept of "semiotics" in the United States, categorizing signs into iconic, indexical, and symbolic types, which contributed to the theoretical foundations of semiotics. Although Saussure's ideas initially received limited attention, by the mid-20th century, the application of structuralist linguistics in fields such as anthropology and literary criticism, notably by Claude Lévi-Strauss, established semiotics as a key discipline in the humanities (Sojoudi, 2004: 49).

Semiotics examines three main domains: the signs themselves, the codes through which signs are organized, and the cultures in which these signs and codes operate (Fiske, 2007: 64). Signs, as human constructs, are understood within cultural frameworks, while codes, as organized systems of signs, fulfill the needs of society and culture. Culture, in turn, relies on the use of these codes. A key concept in semiotic analysis is the opposition between syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations. Syntagmatic relations refer to the connections among elements within a text, while paradigmatic relations involve signifiers that are absent from the text but play a role in its interpretation (Sojoudi, 2004: 271). Syntagmatic relations, which may be temporal (e.g., narrative sequences in a film) or spatial (e.g., visual composition), significantly contribute to the formation of a text's meaning.

This study adopts a structuralist semiotic approach based on Fiske's codes. Fiske's approach, which shares similarities with Roland Barthes' perspective, emphasizes the role of signs in critiquing and analyzing power dynamics. In this framework, linguistic and semiotic events are not accepted as simple narratives but require deconstruction, as what appears natural is often deliberately encoded to elicit audience empathy with the text's creator (Fiske, 2001: 119). Fiske argues that social structures are shaped within the processes of power and struggle, and culture, as an ideological context, plays a role in the production and reproduction of meaning. Unlike Barthes, who views ideology as false consciousness, Fiske sees ideology as dynamic, resulting from cultural, social, and historical interactions constructed through institutions such as media, language, and political systems (Fiske, 2001: 119). Codes, as the intermediary link among the creator, text, and audience, maintain the text's internal coherence and form a network of cultural meanings (Fiske, 2001: 127–128).

Fiske's model analyzes codes at three levels:

1. **Reality Codes (Social):** This level includes signs encoded within culture, such as appearance, clothing, behavior, speech, and environment. For instance, in *The Bodyguard*, the use of the Atomic Energy Organization as a location or the portrayal of a nuclear scientist character serves as social signs referencing Iran's cultural and political realities (Fiske, 2007: 64).
2. **Representation Codes (Technical):** This level encompasses cinematic techniques, such as camera angles, lighting, editing, and music, that convey social signs. In *The Bodyguard*, tense shots and rapid editing in assassination scenes evoke a sense of danger and urgency for the audience (Fiske, 2011).
3. **Ideological Codes:** This level integrates social and technical codes into a framework of coherent and socially accepted meanings. In *The Bodyguard*, ideological signs, such as the sacrifice of Haydar Zabihi or the critique of the discourse of moderation, contribute to producing meanings aligned with revolutionary ideals and the critique of the Rouhani administration's policies (Fiske, 2011).

For the analysis of *The Bodyguard*, purposive sampling, a common method in qualitative research, was employed. Unlike random sampling, which relies on equal probability for selecting units, purposive sampling focuses on selecting samples based on the research objectives (Lindlof and Taylor, 2009: 173; Mohammadpour, 2009: 140). In this study, specific scenes were deliberately chosen to reflect the political, social, and discursive context of the film's production period. This approach enables an in-depth examination of social, technical, and ideological signs within the context of the assassination of nuclear scientists and the critique of the discourse of moderation.

Overall, the structuralist semiotic approach, relying on Fiske's codes and emphasizing qualitative and interpretive analysis, facilitates a deeper understanding of the semantic layers of **The Bodyguard**. By focusing on the signs and codes present in the film, this method examines the representation of the assassination of nuclear scientists and the critique of the political discourse of the 2010s.

Theoretical Framework and Concepts

The film *The Bodyguard* (2016) directly addresses the issue of the assassination of Iranian nuclear scientists, representing these events within the framework of a cinematic drama. The character "Engineer Meysam Zarrin," portrayed as an elite nuclear scientist, is clearly inspired by martyred scientists such as Mostafa Ahmadi Roshan and Majid Shahriari. The attempted assassination of Zarrin in the film, using methods such as bombings by motorcyclists, mirrors the real techniques employed in the assassinations between 2008 and 2010. This representation not only highlights the sensitivity of the nuclear issue in Iran but also serves as a tool to critique the prevailing political discourse during the Rouhani administration's "Government of Prudence and Hope."

The June 2013 presidential election, marking the eleventh presidential election in Iran, ushered in a new chapter in the emergence of political discourses within the Islamic Republic. The rise of the discourse of moderation occurred in a context where the dominant discourse was the justice-oriented conservative discourse, represented by Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. In the hegemonic rise of the discourse of moderation during the election, the political agency of Hassan Rouhani played a pivotal role. With extensive experience in high-ranking positions within the Islamic Republic—such as serving as a member and deputy speaker of the Islamic Consultative Assembly, secretary of the Supreme National Security Council, head of the Center for Strategic Research of the Expediency Discernment Council, and a member of the Assembly of Experts—and as the only candidate with the highest levels of education from both religious seminaries (ijtihad) and academia (PhD in law), Rouhani emerged as the most prominent political figure championing the discourse of moderation and rationality. Through the process of exclusion, articulation, and dissemination of this discourse, he played a crucial role in establishing its credibility. During the election campaign, particularly in televised debates, Rouhani introduced the key signifiers of the discourse of moderation and rationality, presenting a vision that promised solutions to societal problems stemming from mismanagement, sanctions, extremism, unethical behavior, lawlessness, and sloganeering (Majidi and Rahiminia, 2018: 145).

Rouhani's discourse was more tangible compared to other candidates, encapsulated in the concepts of "prudence, hope, change, and moderation." He advocated for de-escalation and reducing hostilities with the international community, famously stating that just as nuclear energy is an inalienable right of the people, so too are life, employment, security, progress, and constructive engagement with the world. He emphasized that "centrifuges should spin, provided that people's lives spin as well" (Rouhani, televised debate: June 7, 2013). Like the administrations of Reconstruction and Reform, the Rouhani administration adopted a development-oriented discourse. Similar to the Reconstruction era, this discourse prioritized economic matters. It defined developmentalism within the framework of modernization theory, aiming to achieve economic development by improving relations with the outside world, particularly the West. A key feature of the Rouhani administration's discourse was an outward-looking economy. This perspective views the world as an interconnected and interdependent entity, advocating for opening the country's doors to global wealth holders through an interactive foreign policy to stabilize the economy. Consequently, the Rouhani administration prioritized resolving the most pressing foreign policy issue—the nuclear issue and the lifting of sanctions—as a prerequisite for

economic growth and development. The nuclear agreement (JCPOA) was thus placed at the forefront of its agenda. This discursive element stood in direct contrast to the foreign policy of the Ahmadinejad administration, which was based on confrontation with the West (Qoreishi et al., 2017: 172–173).

To gain public legitimacy, the discourse of moderation aligned itself with the aspirations and mindsets of the Iranian people regarding the nuclear issue. Accordingly, it constructed its signifiers based on the public's desire to preserve nuclear achievements while alleviating economic and international pressures. This alignment is evident in Rouhani's speeches and statements, which emphasized the simultaneous spinning of centrifuges and people's lives, constructive global engagement, lifting sanctions, adhering to red lines in the nuclear issue, and employing "heroic flexibility" in negotiations. This discourse resonated more closely with the desires and mindsets of the majority compared to other discourses, making it both accessible and credible (Dehghani Firouzabadi and Ataei, 2013: 117).

In the reformist nuclear discourse during the Rouhani era, the emphasis was primarily on engagement and diplomacy for de-escalation, with the JCPOA—negotiated between Iran and the P5+1—presented as the key to resolving issues. Thus, the cornerstone of the Rouhani administration's nuclear discourse can be described as engagement and de-escalation. The win-win strategy, lifting sanctions, national security, national interests, leadership support, and development and progress were other key elements of this discourse (Soltani Gardfaramarzi et al., 2019: 130).

The moderate foreign policy claimed to strike a balance between "realism" and "idealism." It aimed to maintain Iran's strong regional and global presence and uphold Islamic, national, and revolutionary interests while acknowledging the roles of other regional and international actors. Rather than being a predetermined construct, this discourse was shaped by the semantic system and mindset of its proponents. It advocated a form of centrism, aiming to reduce international tensions and conflicts while preserving the principles of the Islamic Republic's foreign policy, positioning Iran as an independent yet normalized state in international relations to pursue its economic objectives. Proponents of this discourse argued that idealism and the pursuit of the Islamic Revolution's values on the international stage, given Iran's weaknesses and the strengths of global powers, had become rhetorical and costly. Moderation, therefore, involved maintaining independence while accepting the realities of global power dynamics and adhering to the rules of the international system to pursue national interests (Ajili and Afsharian, 2016: 65–66).

The Rouhani administration, with its discourse of moderation and focus on de-escalation in foreign policy, particularly through nuclear negotiations, sought to reduce international pressures and sanctions. However, this discourse faced domestic criticism, particularly from groups who believed that engagement with the West undermined revolutionary ideals and national security. The film *The Bodyguard* reflects these criticisms to some extent.

Research Findings

Film Introduction

The film *The Bodyguard* revolves around Haydar Zabihi, a personal bodyguard assigned to protect the Vice President of Iran. While on duty in Sistan and Baluchestan, Haydar, pressured by an advisor to stay longer and remove his bulletproof vest, witnesses the Vice President's assassination in a suicide attack. This incident sparks doubts in Haydar, leading him to conclude that some political figures prioritize personal interests over the system's integrity. Consequently, Haydar requests to be relieved from protecting political figures and is reassigned to safeguard Engineer Meysam Zarrin, an elite nuclear scientist and the son of one of his former comrades-in-arms. Through the conflicts between Haydar and Meysam, the film conveys its ideological signs, emphasizing that the nation's true assets are its young scientific elites who elevate Iran's global standing, rather than political figures.

Produced during the mid-term of Hassan Rouhani's first presidency, the film references the nuclear issue and the negotiations of that period. From the director's perspective, these negotiations led to the disillusionment of intellectual elites and the loss of human resources. Furthermore, the director critiques

the prevailing political discourse of “moderation” under the Rouhani administration, viewing it as a deviation from the ideals of the Islamic Revolution and a factor in sidelining loyalists to the system. Through symbols and narrative, *The Bodyguard* portrays the director’s concerns about the country’s political and social state, underscoring the importance of preserving revolutionary values and supporting scientific elites.

Detailed Analysis of Selected Scene 1

Scene Description: The scene begins with Haydar in the office of his superior, Ashrafi. Qavami (advisor to Dr. Solati) has sent a large bouquet of flowers to honor Haydar’s bravery. When Ashrafi insists that Haydar accept the bouquet, Haydar picks up the card attached to it and prepares to leave. However, Ashrafi asks him to stay and explain the report he submitted, in which Haydar blames himself for the incident. Ashrafi is upset by this, expressing his desire to hold a dignified ceremony for Haydar, who is nearing retirement, where he would receive an honor from the President. Haydar, however, opposes the idea, believing he made a mistake due to authorities turning protectors into “bodyguards” who act as mercenaries without conviction. Ashrafi counters that times have changed, and the modern era demands bodyguards, not protectors. Haydar responds that he joined to defend the “system’s integrity” and is willing to sacrifice his life for his beliefs, asserting that anything less renders his work unworthy of reward or recognition. The scene concludes with Haydar leaving the office as Ashrafi is left deep in thought.

Social Codes

- **Appearance:** Haydar appears distressed and disheartened, while Ashrafi seems angry and frustrated.
- **Clothing:** Haydar wears a black suit with a white shirt and a bandage on his hand, indicating injury. Ashrafi is dressed in a simple light-colored shirt, brown trousers, and holds prayer beads.
- **Makeup:** Haydar has a long, neatly trimmed beard and short hair turning gray, with visible injury marks on his face. Ashrafi has short black hair and a long beard also turning gray. Their appearances are designed to reflect their professional and social roles.
- **Setting:** The scene takes place in Ashrafi’s office, adorned with photos of political figures and their protectors throughout the history of the Islamic Revolution, signifying the office’s role in the Protection Agency, where both Haydar and Ashrafi work.
- **Behavior:** Despite their frustration, Haydar and Ashrafi’s interactions reflect a longstanding friendship.
- **Dialogue:** Haydar’s tone is pained, conveying deep sorrow. Ashrafi speaks with anger and confusion, unable to understand Haydar’s stance.
- **Gestures:** In one shot, Ashrafi picks up a framed photo of Martyr Beheshti with one hand and a photo of Hassan Rouhani with the other, symbolizing the passage of time and the shift in political figures from the 1980s to the 2010s.
- **Sound:** To emphasize the tense dialogue, sounds of objects being thrown or papers being torn are amplified to resonate with the audience.

Representation Codes

- **Camera:** The scene, a two-person dialogue, employs standard conversational shots such as medium shots, two-shots, over-the-shoulder shots, and close-ups.
- **Lighting:** No specific lighting techniques are used.
- **Editing:** The editing aligns with the dialogue and storyline, maintaining the focus on the two-person interaction in Ashrafi’s office.
- **Music and Sound Design:** As the discussion between Haydar and Ashrafi intensifies, melancholic music begins to play over Haydar’s dialogue, amplifying the emotional impact of his words.
- **Narrative:** The scene highlights the ideological conflict between Haydar and Ashrafi regarding their roles and duties, tracing the evolution of their responsibilities from the past to the present.
- **Conflict:** The central conflict lies between Haydar’s grievances about changing conditions and Ashrafi’s insistence that they must adapt to the new era.

- **Characters:** Ashrafi is Haydar's superior, while Haydar is portrayed as an experienced protector of political figures nearing retirement.
- **Dialogue:** The scene revolves around a two-person dialogue between Haydar and Ashrafi.
- **Time and Place:** The scene occurs during the day in Ashrafi's office at the Protection Agency.
- **Actors:** Parviz Parastui plays Haydar Zabihi, a Sacred Defense veteran and political figure protector, while Amir Aghaee portrays Ashrafi, a manager at the Protection Agency and Haydar's superior.

Ideological Codes

- **Syntagmatic Relations:** The scene portrays a clash between two perspectives: the ideals of the early years of the Islamic Revolution and the modern era. The conflict between Haydar and Ashrafi centers on the changing conditions across different historical periods. Haydar believes he entered the field driven by conviction, but in the modern era, the values he held dear have faded. Ashrafi, however, argues that each era has its own demands, and they must adapt accordingly. Haydar sees himself as a value-driven protector defending the "system's integrity" at the cost of his life, but in the current era, protectors have been reduced to "bodyguards" whose salaries no longer justify their sacrifices. In a pivotal moment, Ashrafi holds up a photo of Martyr Beheshti, declaring the 1980s are over, and then raises a photo of Hassan Rouhani, stating that it is now the 2010s. This symbolic juxtaposition, alongside Haydar's remarks about the past and present, underscores the director's sharp critique of contemporary times.
- **Paradigmatic Relations:** The Rouhani administration came to power aiming to position itself as a suitable option for a new era of transformation. A key strategy was to critique the performance of the previous administration, which sought to revive the values and ideals of the early Islamic Revolution. Rouhani openly enjoyed the support of former presidents Ayatollah Hashemi Rafsanjani and Mohammad Khatami, presenting himself as a continuation of their legacies. These administrations prioritized economic and political development, and Rouhani aimed to align his government with their approaches. Through the dialogue between Haydar and Ashrafi, Hatamikia highlights the shift in values and disregard for the Revolution's early ideals, which he finds undesirable. By juxtaposing images of Martyr Beheshti and Hassan Rouhani, the director points to the divergence in political approaches between the early years and the present, where protectors have become "bodyguards" whose work lacks the value it once held.

Scene Analysis: This scene is one of the film's most critical moments, where the director uses dialogue and symbols to articulate his stance. Produced during the mid-term of Hassan Rouhani's presidency, *The Bodyguard* reflects the director's position on the administration's performance and policies. During the election campaign, Rouhani sought to project a modern image, portraying himself as someone who understood the demands of the new era and could address the country's challenges. His campaign methods and approach to national issues distinguished him from other candidates, emphasizing a forward-looking perspective with less focus on past values and revolutionary ideals. Through the symbolic use of photos of early revolutionary figures and emphasis on their methods, the director critiques Rouhani's approach, viewing it as a departure from revolutionary ideals. In contrast, Hatamikia portrays the past as not only relevant but worthy of admiration, interpreting Rouhani's divergence from these ideals as a weakness. The dialogue reveals that the values of the past warranted a protector's sacrifice, whereas the current era's priorities lack such worth, diminishing the justification for risking one's life.

Detailed Analysis of Selected Scene 2

Scene Description: The scene begins with the entry of Meysam Zarrin and Haydar into Khalaj's office. Haydar is assigned to protect Meysam Zarrin, a nuclear genius, but Haydar is unaware that the person he is meeting is his protectee. The conversation starts with Meysam's sarcastic remarks toward Haydar, emphasizing that he does not want a bodyguard. Haydar reminds him that he only steps forward to protect those who are worth it—individuals whose absence would cripple the system. Meysam asserts that he sees himself as superior to such figures, and Haydar counters that he must prove it through

actions. Meysam insists he does not need to prove himself to anyone and leaves the room. As Haydar prepares to depart, Khalaj (the head of security at the Atomic Energy Organization) arrives. Haydar states that under these circumstances, he cannot protect Meysam. Khalaj asks if it is impossible or just challenging. Haydar responds that it is difficult but feasible, and accompanies Khalaj back into the room. Khalaj emphasizes that the key figures of the 2010s are not politicians but individuals like Meysam Zarrin, convincing Haydar to take on the protection duty. The scene ends with a focus on Haydar's thoughtful expression.

Social Codes

- **Appearance:** Haydar appears calm and attempts to inject some humor. Meysam Zarrin behaves formally and later seems slightly agitated. Khalaj exhibits a completely serious and diplomatic demeanor.
- **Clothing:** Haydar wears a simple shirt with open buttons over a T-shirt. Engineer Meysam Zarrin is dressed in a checkered jacket with a plain dark green shirt, presenting a youthful style suitable for a young university professor. Mr. Khalaj wears a formal dark suit.
- **Makeup:** Haydar's appearance continues from previous scenes. Engineer Meysam Zarrin is a young man of average height with somewhat disheveled hair. He wears round brown-tinted glasses, which portray him as a young elite and university professor. Mr. Khalaj is a middle-aged man with thinning hair and a very serious, stern face, fitting his role as the head of security at the Atomic Energy Organization.
- **Setting:** The scene takes place in Engineer Meysam Zarrin's office at the Atomic Energy Organization. Photos of martyred scientists from the organization adorn the walls, highlighting his status.
- **Behavior:** Haydar is calm and composed, viewing Meysam as an inexperienced youth. Meysam Zarrin strives to appear serious and somewhat displeased. Mr. Khalaj's behavior is entirely professional, focused solely on his duties without any distractions.
- **Dialogue:** The conversations in this scene lead to debates and exchanges of views. The dialogue between Haydar and Meysam ends with some tension, while the exchange between Haydar and Khalaj ultimately persuades Haydar.
- **Gestures:** In one shot, Mr. Khalaj blocks Haydar's path with his hand, intending to prevent him from leaving.
- **Sound:** The emphasis is on the dialogues, with no extraneous sounds audible.

Representation Codes

- **Camera:** Filmed in a confined indoor space, the scene uses standard conversational shots for two-person dialogues, such as medium shots, two-shots, and over-the-shoulder shots.
- **Lighting:** No specific lighting techniques are employed.
- **Editing:** The scene occurs in Meysam Zarrin's office and revolves around two-person dialogues, with editing aligned to the dialogues and storyline.
- **Music and Sound Design:** No specific techniques are used.
- **Narrative:** This scene narrates the introduction between Haydar and Meysam Zarrin. Haydar is to protect Meysam as a scientific figure, but Meysam has no interest in having a bodyguard.
- **Conflict:** The central conflict is between Haydar and Meysam Zarrin, involving explanations of the difference between a bodyguard and a protector, as well as Meysam's refusal to have personal protection.
- **Characters:** Haydar as a protector of political figures, Meysam Zarrin as a university professor and nuclear elite, and Mr. Khalaj as the head of security at the Atomic Energy Organization.
- **Dialogue:** The scene begins as a two-person dialogue between Haydar and Meysam Zarrin, transitioning to a conversation between Khalaj and Haydar after Meysam leaves and Khalaj enters.
- **Time and Place:** The scene occurs during daytime in Meysam Zarrin's office at the Atomic Energy Organization.

- **Actors:** Parviz Parastui plays Haydar Zabihi as a protector of political figures, Babak Hamidian portrays Engineer Meysam Zarrin as a young elite nuclear scientist, and Ehsan Amani plays Mr. Khalaj, the head of security at the Atomic Energy Organization.

Ideological Codes

- **Syntagmatic Relations:** The scene starts with a debate between Haydar and Meysam Zarrin in the latter's office. They discuss their respective concepts of a "key figure," with each articulating their definition. From Haydar's perspective, a key figure is "someone whose absence would cripple the system," clarifying his viewpoint. They then address the distinction between "bodyguard" and "protector." Meysam views both terms as synonymous, but Haydar argues there is a difference, directly tied to the individual being protected. Here, Haydar elevates the concept of protector as having greater value-driven dimensions than bodyguard. After the unresolved discussion, Meysam exits the room. Khalaj, the head of security, enters and engages Haydar in conversation. Khalaj refers to young elites like Engineer Zarrin as the true key figures of the nation in the 2010s who require protection. This attribution aligns with Haydar's definition of a key figure—someone whose absence would impair the system.
- **Paradigmatic Relations:** The nuclear issue was the foremost foreign policy concern for Iran at the outset of Hassan Rouhani's administration, receiving extensive international attention. By the time Rouhani took office, it had expanded significantly, including the assassinations of several Iranian nuclear scientists by foreign intelligence agents. Assassinations of figures have not been new in the history of the Islamic Revolution, but nearly all prior cases targeted political figures such as presidents, the head of the judiciary, prime ministers, parliament members, cabinet officials, and other politicians. The targeting of scientific figures represents a novel development in the Revolution's history. The plot of *The Bodyguard* hinges on this theme, with Hatamikia using it as the basis for the film. The direct reference to this issue and the portrayal of a university professor at risk of assassination, requiring protection, draws from such real events in contemporary times.

Scene Analysis: In this scene, a dialogue delivered by Mr. Khalaj, the head of security at the Atomic Energy Organization, states: "Over these thirty-odd years, we have produced enough political figures, and the enemy is not focused on eliminating them—we have plenty to replace them. The key figures of the 2010s are these genius scientists." This appears to reflect the director's analysis of the country's political situation. Based on this dialogue, which serves as a manifesto of the director's stance in *The Bodyguard*, enemies of the Islamic Republic have refrained from assassinating politicians for years, but in recent times, several university professors and scientific figures have been targeted. This underscores the importance of scientific advancements for national success and progress. *The Bodyguard* advances its narrative relying on this theme. Haj Haydar Zabihi, a veteran of the Sacred Defense and longtime protector of political figures, has become disillusioned with politicians and no longer wishes to protect them, preferring to safeguard a scientific figure. Haydar is willing to "sacrifice his life for his beliefs" and protect someone whose absence would "cripple the system." Accordingly, he shifts from protecting a political figure to a scientific one. From Hatamikia's perspective, political figures no longer contribute meaningfully to national interests, and reliance must shift to other strata, such as scientific figures, to advance revolutionary ideals. Even from the enemies' viewpoint, politicians are not seen as obstacles, whereas scientists and intellectuals pose a threat.

Detailed Analysis of Selected Scene 3

Scene Description: The scene begins with Haydar's wife preparing him for Dr. Solati's memorial ceremony. The narrative alternates between Haydar's attendance at the ceremony and a reenactment of the assassination scene for Qeisari in the presence of Ashrafi. In this scene, Qeisari delivers a suspension order to Haydar, accusing him of ideological deviation. The scene concludes with the delivery of Haydar's suspension order to Ashrafi.

Social Codes

- **Appearance:** In the reenactment of the assassination, Haydar appears distressed and helpless, while at the memorial ceremony, he seems calm and composed.
- **Clothing:** During the assassination reenactment, Haydar wears his usual work attire. At the memorial ceremony in the mosque, he is dressed in a black suit and shirt.
- **Makeup:** The makeup continues the style established in previous scenes.
- **Setting:** The assassination reenactment takes place in an old building under repair, while the memorial ceremony scenes are set inside and in the courtyard of a mosque.
- **Behavior:** Despite his distress, Haydar maintains a calm demeanor. Ashrafi is visibly upset and agitated by the treatment of Haydar, while Qeisari strives to display a serious and resolute attitude.
- **Dialogue:** Haydar's tone is deeply pained and laced with complaints, whereas Qeisari speaks decisively with minimal compassion.
- **Gestures:** No specific gestures are highlighted in this scene.
- **Sound:** The sound design emphasizes the dialogues, with efforts to eliminate extraneous noises.

Representation Codes

- **Camera:** Due to the scene's complexity, the camera employs a variety of shots from different angles to capture the diverse emotional states.
- **Lighting:** As Haydar enters the mosque, he moves from a narrow, dark corridor toward a brightly lit area, symbolizing the mosque's interior.
- **Editing:** This composite scene alternates non-linearly between the assassination reenactment and Haydar's presence at Dr. Solati's memorial ceremony.
- **Music and Sound Design:** Background music is used throughout to enhance emotional impact.
- **Narrative:** The scene narrates the assassination of Dr. Solati, its reenactment, the disagreement between Haydar and Qeisari, and Haydar's suspension from duty.
- **Conflict:** The primary conflict is between Haydar Zabihi and Qeisari, with Qeisari believing Haydar failed in his duties and accusing him of ideological deviation.
- **Characters:** Qeisari, as a special investigator for the Supreme National Security Council tasked with examining the assassination, plays a prominent role.
- **Dialogue:** The main dialogues occur between Haydar, Ashrafi, and Qeisari, with additional conversations involving Haydar, Razieh, Elyas, and Meysam Zarrin.
- **Time and Place:** The assassination reenactment is set in an old building under repair, while the memorial scenes occur in a mosque and its courtyard, all during daytime.
- **Actors:** In addition to previous actors, Farhad Ghaemian plays Qeisari, the special investigator for the Supreme National Security Council.

Ideological Codes

- **Syntagmatic Relations:** This scene interweaves the memorial ceremony for Dr. Solati with the reenactment of his assassination. Qeisari, as the Supreme National Security Council's investigator, is tasked with reviewing the circumstances of Dr. Solati's assassination. He ultimately holds Haydar Zabihi responsible, asserting that Haydar's performance during the incident was inadequate and accusing him of ideological deviation. Qeisari's appearance in a wheelchair may serve as a symbol, suggesting that the system's evaluation criteria are flawed and defective, leading to an erroneous judgment. From the director's perspective, Haydar is in the right, and Hatamikia overtly sympathizes with him. However, the system's performance is critiqued, as Haydar's doubts, which Hatamikia deems justified, are misjudged, resulting in Haydar being wrongly blamed.
- **Paradigmatic Relations:** Critics of President Rouhani often accused him of downplaying the values and ideals of the Islamic Republic. His questioning of past revolutionary achievements and his conduct toward election rivals with military or wartime backgrounds were points of contention. In an interview, Ebrahim Hatamikia expressed surprise at Rouhani referring to a rival candidate as "Colonel" due to his military and wartime service. Dialogues such as "sacrificing oneself for a sacred cause or sacrificing the sacred cause for oneself" reflect

accusations against experienced individuals, indicating a growing trend in the rhetoric and actions of modern politicians. Hatamikia uses this to critique such shifts.

Scene Analysis: In this scene, Hatamikia appears to express discontent with the disregard for individuals with clear and distinguished records, whose contributions are overlooked. He views the criteria used for judgment as flawed and the system as defective. The director critiques the shift in officials' value-based perspectives, arguing that this trajectory is misguided. This serves as a critique of the Rouhani administration's policies, particularly the marginalization of individuals who are not aligned with its agenda. Some critics of the administration believed that dedicated individuals critical of its policies had no place in Rouhani's government and were sidelined.

Conclusion

The film *The Bodyguard* (2016), directed by Ebrahim Hatamikia, stands as a significant work within Iran's Sacred Defense cinema, focusing on the assassination of nuclear scientists and offering a critique of the discourse of moderation under the Rouhani administration's "Government of Prudence and Hope." It serves as a cultural-political document reflecting one of the most sensitive periods in contemporary Iranian history. The series of assassinations of nuclear scientists between 2008 and 2010, which claimed the lives of figures such as Masoud Ali-Mohammadi, Majid Shahriari, Dariush Rezaeinejad, and Mostafa Ahmadi Roshan, not only dealt a blow to Iran's nuclear program but also became a symbol of the confrontation between Iran and Western powers, particularly Israel and the United States. Attributed to Western intelligence agencies and Mossad, these assassinations were designed to disrupt scientific progress and exert psychological pressure on Iranian society, profoundly impacting the country's political and social landscape. Public responses, including grand funeral ceremonies and the naming of streets after the martyred scientists, underscored their significance as symbols of scientific and national resistance. These events also strengthened the discourse of resistance and scientific self-reliance in the face of external pressures.

The Bodyguard represents these assassinations through the fictional character "Engineer Meysam Zarrin," an elite nuclear scientist, and the narrative of an attempt on his life, reflecting this national crisis. A semiotic analysis based on Fiske's codes reveals the film's semantic and ideological layers across three levels: reality, representation, and ideology. At the reality level, social signs such as motorcyclists, bombings, and the Atomic Energy Organization setting allude to the real assassinations of nuclear scientists, evoking a sense of threat and urgency for Iranian audiences. Characters like Haydar Zabihi, a protector loyal to revolutionary ideals, and Meysam Zarrin, a symbol of scientific elites, highlight national values against external threats. At the representation level, cinematic techniques such as tense shots, rapid editing, and suspenseful music portray the assassinations as a national crisis, conveying a sense of danger to the audience. At the ideological level, the film critiques the Rouhani administration's discourse of moderation, which, with its emphasis on de-escalation and nuclear negotiations, is seen by Hatamikia as neglecting the protection of national assets and sidelining revolutionary forces. The final scene, with Haydar's sacrifice to save Meysam Zarrin, celebrates devotion and loyalty to revolutionary ideals.

The Rouhani administration, with its discourse of moderation and focus on diplomacy and the nuclear agreement (JCPOA), aimed to reduce international pressures. This discourse, rooted in an outward-looking economic development model and engagement with the West, stood in contrast to the discourse of resistance, which prioritized revolutionary ideals. Rouhani's slogans, such as "the simultaneous spinning of centrifuges and people's lives" and his emphasis on de-escalation, promoted a discourse that critics, including Hatamikia, believed weakened revolutionary values and neglected the protection of scientific elites. *The Bodyguard* reflects this critique through key scenes. In the dialogue between Haydar and Ashrafi, the contrast between the ideals of the 1980s (symbolized by a photo of Martyr Beheshti) and the discourse of the 2010s (symbolized by a photo of Rouhani) illustrates the director's concern about deviation from revolutionary values. Haydar, who sees himself as a "protector" of the system, resists being reduced to a "bodyguard," a term he associates with a mercenary, critiquing the shift in values under the discourse of moderation.

The dialogue between Haydar and Meysam Zarrin further emphasizes the importance of scientific elites. Khalaj, the head of security at the Atomic Energy Organization, underscores that “the key figures of the 2010s are scientists,” highlighting their value over politicians. This perspective contrasts with the discourse of moderation, which, in Hatamikia’s view, prioritizes passive diplomacy. The scene of Haydar’s suspension for “ideological deviation” critiques a bureaucratic system that sidelines loyal revolutionary figures, portraying it as flawed and incapable of prioritizing correctly.

Beyond a cinematic work, *The Bodyguard* serves as a mirror of the discursive tensions of the 2010s. By representing the assassination of nuclear scientists as a symbol of external threats and internal neglect, it raises questions about national identity, scientific independence, and loyalty to revolutionary ideals. The semiotic analysis demonstrates that Hatamikia uses social, technical, and ideological codes to express concerns about the deviation of the discourse of moderation from revolutionary values. By emphasizing Haydar’s sacrifice and the value of scientific elites, the film reminds audiences that national progress is only possible through preserving human capital and adhering to revolutionary ideals. Ultimately, *The Bodyguard*, as a cultural text, highlights the role of Sacred Defense cinema in critiquing power and reflecting national concerns, inviting reflection on national priorities amid internal and external challenges.

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