

Ebrahim Golestan Introduction
Stanford University
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Any fair description of Ebrahim Golestan courts the danger of hyperbole. Of Andre Malraux it has been said that he was the quintessential intellectual of his country. Golestan is truly the quintessential artist of his generation.

The contours of his luminous career, spanning over half a century, cover everything from cinema and fiction to Shakespeare and Shaw; it includes nearly every major intellectual, and artistic movement in twentieth century Iran, and nearly in every field he either reached the apex, or was one of the first to offer a radical critique of the movement. He was a little over twenty years old when he was named the editor of the Tudeh party's chief organ; and long before criticizing Stalin became an intellectual fad, Golestan was amongst the first Iranians to criticize the intellectual sclerosis, and the naked nationalism that defined Soviet Marxism. His short-stories, brilliant in their pith and parsimony, heart-wrenching in the depth of their perception of the human condition, and of the follies and failures, no less than the virtues and valor of the human kind, his internationally acclaimed documentaries no less than his two trail-blazing feature-films, and finally his essays on the aesthetics of modern painting and poetry will, I am convinced, go down in the annals of twentieth century Iranian history as an oeuvre unmatched in its variety and richness, its innovation and experimentalism. Decades before Iranian cinema became a darling of film critics, Golestan was winning prizes and praise in some of the most prestigious festivals around the world. He was responsible for introducing Mark Twain and Ernest Hemingway to Iranian readers. I

His pioneering work in fiction and cinema was accompanied by a remarkably prescient sense of history. Much has been rightly made of the failure of intellectuals and scholars, as well as governments and intelligent agencies in predicting the Islamic revolution in Iran. Yet, at the height of the shah's power, Golestan made easily not just the most daring political film of his generation, but predicted with eerie accuracy the advent of the Islamic revolution. Long before scholars began to talk about the oil curse and its power to deform politics and power in countries like Iran, Golestan's film, *Mysteries of the Ghost Valley* points out the perils of sudden subaltern wealth.

About the time he made the *Ghost Valley*, a good decade before the largest mass exodus of Iranian from their country, Golestan decided to opt for a life of exile. The conjunction of the personal and the political, of the grief of losing Forough Farukhzad, his beloved in easily the most poetically celebrated love affair in the last several centuries of Iranian canon, led to his decision to leave home for Diaspora.

Golestan has an unwavering ethos of speaking truth to power, of standing up to injustice or ignorance with fearless abandon. In a country given to *tagiyeh* and *ta'araf*—the first a Shiite concept similar to Jesuitical dissimulation and the second the Persian social habit of verbal and invariably exaggerated deference— where circumlocution in discourse and demeanor is synonymous with circumspection, Golestan's habit of frank talk, bereft of frills, as well as his aversion to dogma and to intellectual fads, have provided his foes some opportunity for a campaign of whispers. Surely in the long run of history, it is the mettle and measure of the work that determines an artist's place and

easily overshadows the petty politics of personal innuendo. And though predicting the contours of History is a folly of ideologues, let me nevertheless venture a guess: When the history of our age will be written in future, the works of Golestan will stand out as singularly creative and daring, erudite and innovative. And talking of his work, many of his fans have been worried that exile has meant silence. Let me break the good news that for some time now he has been working on two books that combine personal touch and taste of a memoir and the flair for prose and narrative that define his fiction.

Let me end by a word of gratitude and one on our program tonight. It has been decades since Ebrahim Golestan has agreed to appear on a similar stage, and it gives me particular honor and privilege that finally, after five years of trying, he finally agreed our invitation.

As to the program, I will begin by asking some questions, and then we will leave the second half of the program for audience questions. Please write your questions on one of the cards that are available and give them to one of our staff.