

Review

Iranian National Cinema: The Interaction of Policy, Genre, Funding, and Reception (Iranian Studies), Anne Démy-Geroe, Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2020, ISBN 978-0367219413 (hbk), 222 pp.

In an interview conducted as part of the 2019 symposium “The Iranian Revolution and Its Disciplinary Aftereffects,” media scholar Blake Atwood concludes with a compelling plea for more systemic, materialist analysis of Iranian cinema.¹ Atwood argues that research on the country’s robust film practice would benefit from “more knowledge about how cinema as a system operates in Iran.” For Atwood, this sort of knowledge could potentially have a number of focal points: it “could include more attention to technology, distribution and access, reception, and creative labor.” In *Iranian National Cinema: The Interaction of Policy, Genre, Funding, and Reception*, Anne Démy-Geroe offers detailed insights into these areas and more, providing a plethora of information useful for anyone attempting to gain a deeper understanding of production, distribution, and spectatorship of Iranian cinema. Throughout this engaging and deeply personal book, Démy-Geroe draws on a

¹Blake Atwood, “Iranian Cinema, Then and Now: An Interview with Blake Atwood and Pedram Partovi.” *Michigan Quarterly Review*, April 4, 2019. <https://sites.lsa.umich.edu/mqr/2019/04/iranian-cinema-then-and-now-an-interview-with-blake-atwood-and-pedram-partovi/> (accessed January 28, 2021).

number of valuable sources, including her own experience as artistic director of the Brisbane International Film Festival, annual trips to Tehran's Fajr International Film Festival (Fajr) as part of the role, interviews with a number of Iran's most established filmmakers and industry insiders (including both government officials and employees such as sales agents), and existing scholarship on Iranian cinema. Démy-Geroe's first-hand experience is especially useful given the "uncertainty" she finds in statistics for the country's film industry, emphasizing the value of knowledge she has gleaned informally (p. 11). Démy-Geroe wisely balances this knowledge with "cautious" protection of her sources, avoiding putting them at political risk (p. 11). Drawing on this mosaic of primary and secondary sources, Démy-Geroe makes a thoughtful contribution to the literature.

Iranian National Cinema has a number of points in common with the work of prior scholars—including Atwood, Hamid Naficy, Negar Mottahedeh, Michelle Langford, Saeed Zeydabadi-Nejad, among others—but also presents more than enough new insight to distinguish itself, starting with the uniqueness of Démy-Geroe's perspective. Like all of these scholars, Démy-Geroe combines close attention to individual films of note with discussion of the context necessary to understand both the labor that went into creating and distributing them and the significance of the results of that labor. This combination facilitates Démy-Geroe's exploration of "the transformations in production and the resultant history of exhibition, both domestic and international, of Iranian cinema between 2000 and 2013, as the result of or the response to government policy" (p. 11). This chronological scope allows Démy-Geroe to compare films released at the end of the first term of the presidency of Mohammad Khatami (1997–2005) with those released during the presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005–13). Démy-Geroe's unique professional and personal position during these years (she formed friendships with filmmakers and other members of Iran's film industry through her trips to Fajr) enables excellent insight into changes and continuities in Iranian cinema in relation to the different presidencies.

Iranian National Cinema is structured in six chapters, organized thematically in three primary clusters to track the transformations described in the previous quotation. The first two chapters examine different genres and categories recognized by the government, beginning with more nationalistic categories such as the "Sacred Defense" films of the Iran–Iraq war and moving into the "Social Issues" films encouraged by reformist politicians. The next two chapters discuss the international reception of Iranian cinema, centered around the crucial issue of festival distribution, and comparing other countries' attitudes towards Iranian films with responses to these attitudes from within the country. Démy-Geroe's final set of chapters looks at Iranian cinema post-2009, examining increases in government repression and attempts to inculcate ideology through film. These points of focus together offer a comprehensive look at the creation and reception of Iranian films during the years in question, putting insider knowledge into dialogue with extant scholarship.

Démy-Geroe's first pair of chapters compares more overtly patriotic categories of films with ones that focus more on societal critique, albeit in a manner still acceptable

to the government. The first of the pair examines the former. Démy-Geroe frames this discussion with an overview of the “ambiguous and arbitrary” process by which directors receive filmmaking permits (p. 18). The ambiguity results from the importance of “extra-filmic information” in a film’s approval, such as the political views and actions of the filmmaker (p. 18). This look at the approval process leads to an analysis of Sacred Defense films and others about war, followed by a discussion of religious and “spiritual films.” The latter is particularly noteworthy, as it encompasses both likely candidates from Iranian cinema, such as *The Willow Tree* (Majid Majidi, 2005), and more surprising choices from western cinema, such as *Carrie* (Brian De Palma, 1976). The range of films deemed “spiritual” resembles the variety found under the umbrella of social issues, which is the subject of chapter 2. This category, introduced by the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance in 2000 and broadly concerned with societal critique, resulted in part from “more things [becoming] permissible for practising filmmakers” during Khatami’s presidency (p. 41). The category encompasses a broad swath of directors and films, which Démy-Geroe demonstrates by comparing Jafar Panahi and Pouran Derakhshandeh, who “represent the opposite ends of the spectrum in terms of government approval” (p. 42). Whereas Panahi has been banned from making films, jailed, and exiled for his political activism, Derakhshandeh has continued to have official support in spite of making films with controversial subject matter, including child molestation (*Hush! Girls Don’t Scream*, 2013). The discussion of social issue films makes for a useful and thoughtful contrast with the Sacred Defense and spiritual films addressed in chapter 1.

Whereas the first couple of chapters discuss issues related to theatrical distribution of films within Iran, the second two examine the process of international export. Chapter 3 discusses the subject from the international perspective, and is, along with chapter 4, where the value of Démy-Geroe’s own experience becomes clearest. Démy-Geroe begins the chapter by addressing critiques of foreign festival distribution of Iranian cinema (pp. 73–7). In contrast to some of these criticisms, which have depicted festival programmers and distributors as cynics motivated purely by profit,² Démy-Geroe argues that the outcomes of international distribution depend on “a complex balance of factors” (p. 75). Although “profit margins for Western distributors on films from countries like Iran can be large,” there is also “a large number of films [that] make little profit and often losses for distributors” (p. 75). This reminder brings useful nuance to a debate that has often been quite charged, perhaps at the expense of widespread understanding of the sorts of details to which Démy-Geroe calls attention. Démy-Geroe also shares useful knowledge in chapter 4, which looks at international distribution from an Iranian perspective. In one of the book’s strongest passages, Démy-Geroe draws on her own experiences as a visitor and extensive research about the Iranian International Film Market (IFM), a sidebar of Fajr intended to promote the country’s cinema to foreigners

²The widely cited manifestation of this critique with which Démy-Geroe engages in detail is: Azadeh Farahmand, “Perspectives on Recent (International Acclaim for) Iranian Cinema.” In *New Iranian Cinema: Politics, Representation and Form*, ed. Richard Tapper, 86–108 (London: I. B. Tauris, 2002).

(pp. 104–7). Démy-Geroe notes the important duality of the IFM in aiming to provide not only “a direct introduction of films and directors to festivals” but also to give the governmental Farabi Cinema Foundation “guidance as to the international appeal of titles so they could focus on their promotion” (p. 105). This observation demonstrates government interest in the international reception of Iranian cinema, a key point for understanding ongoing processes undergirding the foreign distribution of the country’s films.

Démy-Geroe keeps her focus within the country in the final two chapters and conclusion, looking specifically at the government’s relationship to cinema during Ahmadinejad’s second term (2009–13) and beyond. Chapter 5 focuses on the “renewed emphasis on Muslim filmmaking” following his re-election (p. 127). This emphasis meant both the promotion of films “infused with Islamic values” and an aim of “positioning Iran at the centre of global Muslim filmmaking” (p. 123). A primary site for achieving that objective was Fajr, which became “a domestic showcase for Iranian cultural policy, a vehicle for cultural diplomacy, and a site for political struggle by the industry” (p. 135). Chapter 6 examines the “Magnificent Productions,” a government initiative between 2009 and 2013 revolving around films with unusually high production values for Iranian cinema and aimed at demonstrating the best of the country’s filmmaking (p. 157). The discussion of Ahmadinejad’s second term leads to the book’s conclusion, in which Démy-Geroe looks briefly at the film industry in the early years of the presidency of Rouhani. Démy-Geroe notes that Rouhani gave “apologies for the government’s past behaviour” and saw to it “that permits for new filmmaking projects were granted,” demonstrating some break with Ahmadinejad (p. 179). The discussion of Rouhani, though brief, gives *Iranian National Cinema* an apt coda, offering a point of comparison with the Iranian film industry under Khatami and Ahmadinejad.

While these contrasts provide revealing insights into changes in Iranian cinema in the twenty-first century, *Iranian National Cinema* would perhaps benefit from clearer and stronger argumentation. In the conclusion, Démy-Geroe points to changes in the film industry resulting from changes in political power as evidence of her “argument that an understanding of the whole requires a detailed analysis of the factors at play in the production of individual works” (p. 173). While this argument is difficult to dispute, and Iranian cinema does perhaps function as ideal proof, it is more a statement of basic tenets of materialist cultural criticism than a revelation about Iran’s film industry. Indeed, the best scholars of Iranian cinema have taken similar ideas as guiding principles rather than endpoints, and have used them to develop provocative and enlightening arguments about the country’s rich film history.

Nonetheless, *Iranian National Cinema* contributes a number of valuable insights to Iranian film scholarship. Démy-Geroe’s unique firsthand perspective and interviews with significant industry figures are fruitful sources of knowledge, a direct answer to Atwood’s call for more research into the systemic operation of film within the country. As such, I would recommend this book to graduate and undergraduate students in film studies and Middle East studies, as Démy-Geroe sheds light

on the inner workings and political ramifications of one of the most important and fascinating national film traditions in the region.

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