

(the more imperceptible the better) would be both manageable and sustainable given the regime's propensity to severe reaction.

What is perhaps most ironic about the polarization of recent years is that reformism as originally envisaged was regarded as a means by which the state could manage change in a manner that would avoid the upheaval of revolution and the deleterious cycle conceptualized by Weber of further autocracy followed by more revolution, a cycle which Weber posited might be exceptionally broken by charismatic leadership of progressive qualities. Leading Reformists such as Hajarian, consciously or unconsciously seeking to avoid such risks, seemed to draw on a Burkean philosophy to argue that the state must adapt in order to preserve itself. Recognizing that the hardline elite would always be reluctant to change, Hajarian argued for a dual strategy in which pressure from below would induce legislative change from above. But there was never any doubt that the change had to be legal and institutional in order for it to be durable. This was after all reform not revolution. In resisting and suppressing that platform, hardliners had paradoxically made the possibility of revolutionary change more likely: even tectonic shifts will occasionally yield earthquakes.

BLAKE ATWOOD, *Reform Cinema in Iran: Film and Political Change in the Islamic Republic* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016). Pp. 255. \$30.00 paper. ISBN: 9780231178174

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In *Reform Cinema in Iran*, Blake Atwood seeks to complicate the seemingly monolithic category of “postrevolutionary Iranian cinema” in the existing scholarship. He does not reject the general consensus that the Islamic Revolution of 1978–79 and the subsequent establishment of the Islamic Republic effected a sea change in the domestic film industry, bringing it under unprecedented state control and scrutiny in order to promote (successfully) a film aesthetic that served the revolutionary leadership's ideological project. However, Atwood argues that as revolutionary fervor waned after the Iran–Iraq War and Ayatollah Khomeini's death, a reform cinema emerged in concert with a political movement that sought to emphasize stylistically, thematically, and technologically the pluralist, democratic, and republican aspects of the Islamic Republic.

In the introduction, the author searches for historical parallels to bolster his theory of reform cinema in Iran as a response to the instability of the revolutionary moment. He gives special attention to Soviet cinema in the decade following the Bolshevik Revolution. He claims that a postrevolutionary radical film aesthetic gave way in the 1920s to features addressing the more practical concerns of everyday life in a Soviet Union devastated by war and revolution. Atwood also connects the postwar, post-Khomeini cinema to the anti-imperialist Third Cinema movement and its subsequent theoretical reconceptualizations. He argues that reform cinema in Iran has similarly critiqued unequal class and power relations even if these critiques have taken place decades and miles apart from their origins in Latin America. However, the group of films that he designates as reformist was not necessarily a dissident cinema but very much a part of a mainstream political movement to remake the Islamic Republic.

Subsequent chapters are given over to case studies of films and their convergences with reformist politics, moving chronologically from the early 1990s to 2011. The first chapter examines the controversial infusions of mysticism in the postwar cinema. Atwood forcefully claims that directors such as Mohsen Makhmalbaf and Daryush Mehrjui, with the support of Mohammad Khatami as then minister of culture and Islamic guidance, turned to the “moral relativism” of the “mystic tradition” of Islam in their films to introduce previously taboo subject matters to the screen (e.g., male–female intimate relations) and invited a similar liberalization of the political sphere. Their cinematic appropriations of mysticism supposedly challenged then close-minded interpretations

of a single religious and political truth and aligned with the contemporaneous philosophical works of Abdolkarim Soroush, who also became a prominent figure in the reform movement. However, Atwood's attempt to describe the rising phenomenon of reformist cinema in the early 1990s here has the unfortunate effect of walling off the films under discussion from other "genres" and periods. It is somewhat surprising, for example, that the author does not reference the prominent place of mysticism-infused ideas and practices in the Cinema of Sacred Defense, about which Roxane Varzi has written extensively. One might imagine that the war cinema, in which Makhmalbaf was himself involved, served as a point of departure for postwar reformist films. Indeed, a lack of context is a chronic problem in the book. The author claims that reformist discourses lined up against the "status quo in the Iranian political system" and represented "a desire to escape the Islamic Republic's interpretation of Islam" (p. 59), but what exactly is that status quo? What is the Islamic Republic's interpretation of Islam? One can glean from the text that the author means a clerically dominated politics and legalistic interpretations of Islam, but without detailed discussion of these "conservative" positions the arguments presented can flatten out into an overly simplistic conflict between reform and reaction.

The second chapter jumps ahead to the political rise of a group of reform-minded regime insiders during the late 1990s and early 2000s. This reformist wave is sometimes referred to as the Second of Khordad movement, commemorating the date on which one of the movement's principle figures, Mohammad Khatami, won the office of the president in 1997. Rakhshan Bani-Etemad's documentary-style features *Zir-e Pust-e Shahr* (Under the Skin of the City, 2000) and *Ruzegar-e Ma* (Our Times . . . , 2002) comprise the chapter's case studies, which the author claims represented growing popular disillusionment with the reformist camp and its ability to deliver on its campaign promises of a more democratic, pluralistic, and egalitarian society. Atwood submits that Bani-Etemad uses the documentary form to disturb the reformists' high-minded campaign rhetoric by shining a light on the socially and economically marginalized residents of the capital. One might imagine that these criticisms somehow figure into reformulations of the reformist message if we are to take seriously the dialogical relationship between reformist cinema and politics that the author lays out in the introduction. However, this thread of the argument is not followed up here. Atwood does attempt to connect Bani-Etemad's work to earlier examples of documentary filmmaking as social and political critique dating back to the "New Wave" of the 1960s and 1970s. Yet he also contends that Bani-Etemad's cinematic critiques were themselves unprecedented in Iranian film history and very much a product of the liberalized filmmaking environment of the period.

Chapter 3 continues with this theme of the unprecedented in reform cinema, taking up the incorporation of more "democratic" video technologies as both a filmmaking tool and character in Abbas Kiarostami's *Ta'm-e Gilas* (Taste of Cherry, 1997) and *Dah* (Ten, 2002) and Bahman Farmanara's *Bu-ye Kafur*, *Atr-e Yas* (The Smell of Camphor, the Scent of Jasmine, 2000). The filmmakers introduce previously banned video formats in these titles to bring to light in new ways issues of contemporary social and political concern, such as women's rights or the "serial murders" of dissidents that Khatami's presidency both intentionally and unintentionally advanced.

In Chapter 4, Atwood examines the seeming heroization of the reformist intellectual in Masud Kimiai's *E'teraz* (Protest, 1999), an update of his popular prerevolutionary title *Qeysar* (1969). The author's efforts to interpret the political dimensions of the postrevolutionary popular cinema as well as to highlight its relationship with features from the much-maligned commercial industry of the prerevolutionary era make this chapter perhaps the most ambitious and original in the book. Atwood argues that *Qeysar*, like many popular films of the time, had promoted age-old notions of masculine virtue and family honor then threatened by Pahlavi modernizing reforms. In its celebration of violent street justice, the film supposedly captured the frustrations of youth increasingly marginalized in a transitional society—youth that would just a decade later rise up against the Pahlavi regime. By contrast, Atwood claims that *E'teraz* represented the worldviews

of a mature and “modern” youthful generation that has rejected those older values in favor of a presumably more progressive moral individualism. Putting aside the problematic categories of tradition and modernity that the author puts to use in the chapter, it is not entirely clear that a more “mature” social outlook has prevailed in this “sequel.” After all, the modernist hero of *E'teraz* initially forsakes his love for family considerations, just as one might expect the popular film heroes of the Pahlavi era to do. Likewise, the hero is only reunited with his love once his “traditionally minded” brother makes the ultimate sacrifice during another instance of street justice—again, just as one might expect in the prerevolutionary popular cinema. If the chapter’s purpose is to demonstrate the eclipse of the revolutionary moment, of earlier popular film tropes, and the reformist movement’s contribution to a transformation of society in line with what scholars have claimed to characterize the citizenry in Western liberal democracies, then this particular film case study would seem to fall short of that goal.

Atwood moves beyond the Khatami presidency in the final chapter to examine the persistence of reformist themes in film and video in the years since. He reasserts that, while many scholars have viewed the Islamic Revolution as a major catalyst for change in Iranian cinema, the reformist era has had a far longer and more profound effect on its aesthetics and politics. His conclusion in turn discusses the Cinema Museum in Tehran, which Atwood asserts has been a key institutional support for a reform cinema that advocates the individual autonomy of filmmakers and their work in the face of intense state pressure for ideological conformity. Its “defiant” placement of a poster for Ja’far Panahi’s *In film nist* (*This Is Not a Film*, 2011), despite the director’s official ban from filmmaking, is presented as evidence of the institution’s reformist credentials. Again, a clearer sense of the battle lines and the forces arrayed in opposition to reform cinema would have benefited the chapter. Indeed, at various points here and elsewhere, the author seemingly suggests that reform cinema has engaged more in a politics of radical dissent than in one of consent and reform within the institutional limits of the Islamic Republic. His discussion of Panahi’s recent oeuvre in particular stresses this revolutionary potential at the heart of what he calls reform cinema.

The book quite rightly points to a problem in the existing literature that far too neatly divides the history of Iranian cinema into a pre- and postrevolutionary phase, each supposedly characterized by a unique set of filmmaking conditions and concerns. Atwood seeks to question the uniform character of postrevolutionary film but what he has labeled a reform cinema or aesthetic is not always different from what others have labeled postrevolutionary. Ironically he is most successful in disrupting these divisions when he identifies thematic and structural links between the pre and postrevolutionary cinemas, despite some gaps in the analysis. He is certainly asking the right questions even if the answers are not always satisfying. Further aggravating these lapses in the arguments raised are a number of typographical errors, malapropisms, grammatical slip-ups, and mistakes in citations that should be addressed in any future revision. Despite these criticisms, this book is an important contribution and part of a welcome but tentative (sometimes painfully so) broadening to Iranian film studies.

FARZIN VAHDAT, *Islamic Ethos and the Specter of Modernity*, Anthem Middle East Studies (London: Anthem Press, 2016). Pp. 300. \$82.00 cloth. ISBN: 9781783084364

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As its title suggests, *Islamic Ethos and the Specter of Modernity* seeks to show that 20th-century Muslim thinkers have appropriated modernity’s “ethos,” defined as the expansion of human agency and subjectivity. Using a Hegelian analytical model, Farzin Vahdat argues that human “mediated