

# *Book Review*

**Iranian Cosmopolitanism: A Cinematic History**, Golbarg Rekabtalaei, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019, ISBN 978-1-108-41851-5 (hbk), xv + 303 pp.

Moving between film studies and historiography, Golbarg Rekabtalaei's *Iranian Cosmopolitanism: A Cinematic History* is many things at once. It is a study of Iranian modernity through the lens of the local experiences of Tehran's residents; an account of cinema that resists standard political periodization; and an exploration of the cultural dimensions of Iranian cosmopolitanism. In less capable hands, a tripart history of Iranian urbanization, cinema, and cosmopolitanism might quickly unravel. Instead, Rekabtalaei's masterful prose, extensive archival research, and captivating storytelling have yielded one of the most exciting books on Iranian cinema in decades.

Tracing a history that stretches from the turn of the twentieth century to the 1979 Revolution, Rekabtalaei's book asks how cinema became Iranian. This is a deceptively simple question. Certainly, the international success of Iranian cinema over the last three decades has established it as a great *national* cinema. As a result, scholars, critics, and cinephiles often take for granted that something called "Iranian cinema" should exist in the first place. Rekabtalaei unsettles that assumption by examining why the technologies of cinema took root in Iran and how they developed there. Perhaps

unexpectedly, her analysis of Iranian cinema takes us not to the hardened borders of the nation state but rather to porous social and cultural practices, including multiethnic neighborhoods of Tehran, international production studios and dubbing workshops, popular Hollywood and Egyptian motifs and styles, and global film movements. As Rekabtalaei reveals, Iranian cinema developed through its connections to other places. Sometimes those connections played out in institutions, exhibition spaces, and trade routes; at other times they were facilitated by the imaginative possibilities that films provided their audiences.

As the author convincingly argues, “the distinctively ‘Iranian’ cinema of the pre-revolutionary era emerged through a process of cosmopolitanism” (p. 288). In contrast to straightforward, nationalistic accounts of Iranian modernity, Rekabtalaei contends that cosmopolitanism was a hallmark of modernizing Iran. Citing sociologist Gerard Delanty, she describes cosmopolitanism as an “openness to the world” (p. 8), an orientation that allowed Iranians to reflect on “the universal and the particular, the similar and dissimilar, the global and the local” (pp. 8–9). Cinema came to embody these cosmopolitan forces: film technology required foreign merchants and expertise; exhibition spaces brought together diverse groups of people; films allowed people to see the world beyond the borders of Iran; and a growing tradition of critical reception fostered debate about Iranian nationalism vis-à-vis the moving images on screen.

*Iranian Cosmopolitanism* advances its argument about cinema as a “cosmopolitan construct” (p. 9) over five chapters organized chronologically. Chapter 1, “Cinematic Imaginaries and Cosmopolitanism in the Early Twentieth Century,” demonstrates the cosmopolitan qualities of Tehran in the twentieth century’s first two decades. Rekabtalaei describes Tehran as a “diasporic” hub that attracted Armenian, Assyrian, Azerbaijani, French, Georgian, German, and Russian residents. These multiethnic, multilingual, and multireligious communities also hosted some of the first cinema spaces in the country, as their connections to global trade routes made importing films and film equipment possible. In the absence of many Iranian-produced films, cinematic activities in this period consisted primarily of foreign film screenings, including newsreels and actualities. Although these early forays into film exhibition were private ventures aimed at generating revenue, they were not entirely separate from the nationalistic rallying calls at the time. Building a theory of reception based on memoirs, trade publications, travelogues, and newspaper articles, Rekabtalaei shows how these foreign screenings—with their images of other places—presented an opportunity for cosmopolitan Tehran residents to ruminate on Iran’s future. At the same time, opinions about the precise nature of the country’s future varied considerably among the city’s diverse filmgoers.

Chapter 2, “Cinematic Education, Cinematic Sovereignty,” studies the 1920s and 1930s, specifically entanglements between cinema and the newly established Pahlavi state. During this period, cinematic activities included film exhibitions but also nascent efforts in filmmaking, including feature-length films. The author describes cinema culture at this time as “cosmo-national” (pp. 80–81). According to Rekabtalaei, the term “cosmo-national” attests to those moments in which cosmopolitanism

and nationalism developed coevally. The cosmo-national cinema of the 1920s and 1930s was conditioned by two concurrent forces: (1) the institutionalization of cinema as a state-building project at the hands of the Pahlavi government and (2) the dependence on international modes of production. As the author demonstrates, the state recognized the potential of film to effect social change and thus instituted regulations to oversee it, beginning with the “Code of Film Recording and Cinema Screening” in 1930 (p. 89). These regulatory efforts were not simply top-down policies implemented by the government; they also responded to calls from critics and film enthusiasts who aspired to “cinematic sovereignty” (p. 129).

This desire not only to exhibit films but also to create and control them at a national level foregrounded the importance of the Persian language. This period witnessed the arrival of Persian-language filmmaking. The tension between nationalism and cosmopolitanism is evident in the case of *The Lur Girl* (or its alternative title, *Iran of Yesterday, Iran of Today*). Although the film participates in state-building efforts in its use of the Persian language and its nationalistic narrative of progress, it was shot and produced entirely in India by the Imperial Film Company of Bombay, a collaboration between Parsi filmmaker Ardeshir Irani and Iranian expat Abdol-hossein Sepanta. While it would be easy to categorize the budding film industry of the 1930s as indicative of a “national cinema”—as many scholars have done—Rekabtalei cautions that doing so overlooks the inherent multinational, cosmopolitan qualities that *The Lur Girl* and many others embodied.

One might expect that the energy pushing for cinematic sovereignty in the 1920s and 1930s would give way to a full-fledged Iranian film industry in the 1940s. However, after just a handful of feature-film productions in the 1930s, filmmaking in the country came to a halt in the 1940s. It would not be until the end of the decade, after World War II, that film production would resume in the country. In Chapter 3, “Industrial Professionalisation: The Emergence of a ‘National’ Commercial Cinema,” Rekabtalei explores Iranian cinema culture of the 1940s. She demonstrates that, although film production was suspended during this period, cinematic activities persisted and laid the groundwork for the emergence of a successful commercial cinema in the following decades. During this time, screenings of wartime propaganda shorts and other international films, the proliferation of film trade publications, and the development of a dubbing industry extended Iranian cinema’s cosmo-national ethos. These activities depended on global circulation of goods, technical expertise, and cultural knowledge, while also encouraging Iranian audiences, journalists, and critics to reflect on the country’s future. This chapter represents an important development in the scholarly literature on Iranian cinema, since Iranian film historiography often overlooks or hurries through this period, given the absence of a robust filmmaking industry.

The professionalization of cinema through trade publications, dubbing studios, and regulatory practices cleared the way for a robust commercial film industry in the late 1940s and 1950s. This industry is the subject of Chapter 4, “‘Film-Farsi’: Everyday Constituencies of a Cosmopolitan Popular Cinema.” As the title suggests, at the heart of this chapter is the concept of “film-farsi,” a pejorative term coined by

Hushang Kavusi in 1953. Kavusi, a frequent critic and sometimes filmmaker, used the word to diminish the commercial cinema that began developing at the time. Rekabtalaei revives Kavusi's term in order to give meaning to the body of midcentury popular Iranian films that have been dismissed for too long by scholars and critics, both inside and outside of Iran. She takes seriously those commercial films that scholars and critics have historically considered as “merely entertaining,’ ‘inartistic,’ and ‘debased’” (p. 185). Significantly, Rekabtalaei demonstrates that the very debates about film-farsi—whether criticizing or advocating for this style of filmmaking—opened up a space for critics to contemplate what Iranian cinema “ought to be” (p. 21). Rekabtalaei argues that the films produced by the film-farsi industry were steeped in “Iranian vernacular traditions ... but drew from the esthetic and narrative vocabulary of international commercial films” (p. 185). In other words, rather than writing off these commercial films as derivative of Egyptian, Hollywood, and Indian cinema—or worse, vessels of western imperialism—Rekabtalaei sees them as artifacts of cosmopolitanism, as sites through which filmmakers, critics, and audiences made sense of the dizzying experience of modernity in Iran. In this respect, her argument joins Pedram Partovi's *Popular Iranian Cinema before the Revolution: Family and Nation in Filmfārsī* (2017) in viewing the film-farsi tradition as representative of Iranian modernity.

Alongside the film-farsi industry, an alternative cinema also began to develop, which is the subject of Chapter 5, “Cinematic Revolution: Cosmopolitan Alter-Cinema of Pre-Revolutionary Iran.” Often referred to as the Iranian New Wave, this alter-cinema rejected the commercial imperatives of the film-farsi industry. A young cohort of mostly foreign-trained directors, including Dariush Mehrjui, Davud Mollapur, Arbi Ovanessian, Firaydun Rahnama, and Sohrab Shahid-Sales articulated a vision of this alternative cinema through their experiments with filmmaking and in their critical work in magazines and journals. According to the founders of this movement, cinema should be socially engaged and not simply at the service of entertainment. Rekabtalaei argues that this alternative cinematic movement constituted a “cinematic revolution” years before the political revolution of 1978–79. By calling this alternative cinema a revolution, the author highlights her intervention. While scholars have long viewed the revolution of 1978–79 as the most important rupture in the history of Iranian cinema, Rekabtalaei contends that the alternative cinema of the 1960s and 1970s represented a more significant shift in terms of integrating “revolutionary” themes into Iranian cinema.

*Iranian Cosmopolitanism* contributes significantly to the existing literature on Iranian cinema. Its primary strengths cover three areas. First, the author has conducted extensive archival research and analyzes a multitude of primary sources that have not yet figured into the historiography of Iranian cinema. In particular, Rekabtalaei examines an impressive number of film periodicals from the first half of the twentieth century, including *Cinema and Screenings* (*Sinemā va namāyeshāt*), *Cinema Star* (*Setāreh-ye sinemā*), *Cinema Dispatch* (*Peyk-e sinemā*), *Cinema* (*Sinemā*), *Film and Life* (*Film va zendegi*), *Film and Art* (*Film va honar*), and *Jewel* (*Negin*). Indeed, *Iranian Cosmopolitanism* presents one of the most complete

accounts of the development of film criticism in Iran. It is, therefore, an invaluable resource for scholars interested in the critical reception of cinema in the country. Second, the book takes a broad view of Iranian cinema to include not only filmmaking but also exhibition spaces and film publications. Thus, it joins a growing body of scholarship that examines the institutions and processes that have enabled cinema culture in Iran, rather than only offering analyses of specific films. Third and finally, the book positions Tehran as an important media capital. While cities like Bombay and Cairo have received more attention as important filmmaking centers, Rekabtalaei demonstrates that Tehran also has a long history of cinema activities worth investigating.

Ultimately, Rekabtalaei offers an innovative approach to studying the development of Iranian cinema in the twentieth century by directing readers' attention to global circuits of ideas, technologies, and labor. Such an expansive project inevitably comes with some shortcomings. *Iranian Cosmopolitanism* promises to offer a history of Iranian cinema that does not operate according to the country's political periodization but rather in rhythm with an intrinsic "cinematic temporality" (p. 3). Yet the book's temporal bounds—roughly between the Constitutional Revolution (1906–11) and the Revolution of 1979—are not only standard for histories of Iranian cinema but also distinctly political. This framing is hard to escape, even as the author develops cosmopolitanism as a compelling lens through which to evaluate Iranian cinema. In her conclusion, Rekabtalaei is careful to caution that "Whether or not the cinematic cosmopolitanism of pre-revolutionary Iran was extended into the post-revolutionary era" requires additional research. In a book aimed at detaching "the temporality of the political from the temporality of culture" (p. 2), why is a momentous political event like the Revolution of 1979 the logical endpoint to this analysis of cinema?

In a similar vein, some of the larger concepts that Rekabtalaei uses to structure her discussion of cosmopolitanism in Iranian cinema do not always sustain her argument. The concept of modernity is one example. In the introduction, Rekabtalaei describes modernity as "a futural ethos that hinged upon various and wide-ranging societal transformations that began in the nineteenth-century" (p. 4). Such a far-reaching definition loses currency in the book, as it becomes difficult to locate the subject of study. It also does not advance our knowledge of the field, since connections between the arrival of cinema and the experience of modernity in Iran are well documented. For example, in his four-volume book *A Social History of Iranian Cinema*, Hamid Naficy similarly argues that that "The medium served as both a metaphor and an embodiment of modernity."<sup>1</sup> Rekabtalaei might have situated her argument in relation to Naficy and other scholars who have described the relationship between Iranian cinema and modernity to highlight the significance of the book's framework.

Rather than claims about modernity, the book's strengths rest in its scrupulous research on the communities who fostered exhibition spaces; the institutions and

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<sup>1</sup>Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema*, 1.

practices that developed around film productions and screenings; the cultural policies that governed cinema; and the moving images made accessible to an increasing number of urban Iranians in the twentieth century. *Iranian Cosmopolitanism* is an important addition to the study of cinema in Iran, and it will appeal to scholars, students, and film enthusiasts alike.

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