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Rationalizing the Irrational: Reza Attaran’s Popularity, Stardom, and the Recent Cycle of Iranian Absurd Films

Reza Attaran is one of the most successful stars of the Iranian popular cinema. This article explores the social circumstances, performative components, and political consequences of Attaran’s popularity and stardom, and the evolution of comedy and satire in the Iranian media after the 1979 Revolution. Analyzing the contextual elements and media texts over the last twenty-five years, the article argues that Attaran actively reflects a complex interaction between the social, political, and artistic demands of each period, best represented through his contribution to the television sketch comedies in the 1990s, and the lowbrow comedies and highbrow absurd films in the 2010s. The trajectory of Attaran’s stardom demonstrates the mechanism by which he serves the maintenance of the status quo.

Keywords: Attaran; popularity; stardom; media; comedy; absurd

Introduction

Stars and celebrities have become increasingly important to many subfields of cultural studies. Their study offers an entry point into larger discussions of ideology and power.¹ The success of Iranian art films on international festival circuits, however, has largely overshadowed the study of movie stardom and other forms of contemporary popular media in Iran. Addressing this gap, this article examines the stardom of Reza Attaran and uncovers his historical role in the transformation of Iranian television comedies in the 1990s and his ability to cross the chasm between the popular and art cinema in recent years. As a “symbol of success” and an “idol of consumption,” Reza Attaran’s status as a star is undisputable.²

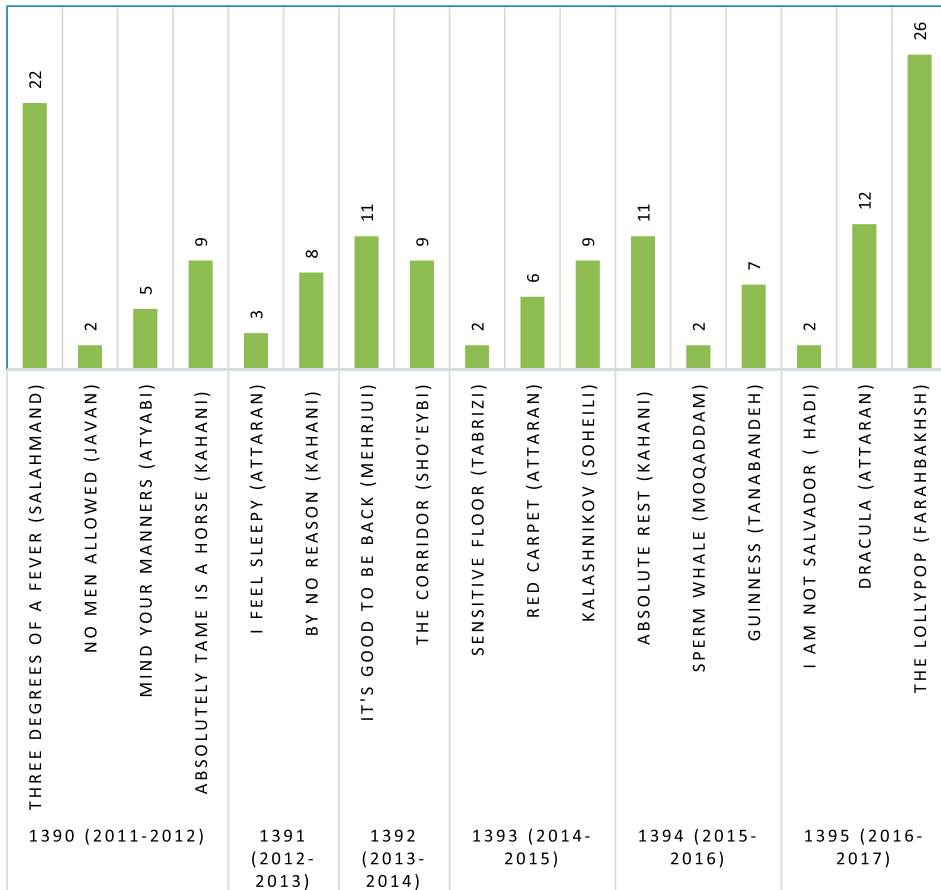
In just six years between 1390 to 1395 (21 March 2011–20 March 2017), Iranian moviegoers saw Attaran perform in seventeen theatrically released films, three of which he directed himself. As depicted in [Figure 1](#), twelve of these titles, or 70

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Figure 1. The box-office ranking of Reza Attaran's films released between Iranian years 1390 and 1395. The horizontal axis lists the films in the order of their release, and the vertical axis shows their final box-office ranking based on the overall ticket-sales of each year

BOX-OFFICE RANKING OF ATTARAN'S FILMS



Sources: *Ketāb-e Sāl-e 1390*, 297-8, 301-2, 350, 383-4; *Ketāb-e Sāl-e 1391*, 256-7, 274-5; *Ketāb-e Sāl-e 1392*, 270-71, 281-2; *Ketāb-e Sāl-e 1393*, 288-9, 270-71, 284-5; *Ketāb-e Sāl-e 1394*, 196-7, 240-41, 255-6; *Ketāb-e Sāl-e 1395*, 266, 214-15, 200-201; "Forush-e Koll-e 1390"; "Forush-e Koll-e 1391"; "Forush-e Koll-e 1392"; "Forush-e Koll-e 1393"; "Forush-e Koll-e 1394"; "Forush-e Koll-e 1395"; "Forush-e Ruzāneh-ye 1390"; "Forush-e Ruzāneh-ye 1391"; "Forush-e Ruzāneh-ye 1392"; "Forush-e Ruzāneh-ye 1393"; "Forush-e Ruzāneh-ye 1394"; "Forush-e Ruzāneh-ye 1395"; "Jadval-e Forush-e 1394"; "Jadval-e Forush-e 1395"; "Tamām-e Zir o Bam-e 92"; "10 Film-e PorForush-e 93."

percent, found a place among the annual top-ten lists of Iran's financially successful films.³ Most notably, he was the protagonist in the highest-grossing film in the history of Iranian cinema, *Nahang-e Anbar 2: Seleksben-e Roya* (*Sperm Whale 2:*

Roya's Selection; Saman Moqaddam, 2016) with ticket sales of more than \$5 million.⁴ Throughout his career, he has benefited from favorable critical reception and has had leading roles in films by internationally acclaimed directors like Dariush Mehrjui and AbdolReza Kahani. He has also won two Crystal Phoenixes at the Fajr Festival for directing *Khābām Miyād* (*I Feel Sleepy*; (2011) and playing in *Tabaqeh-ye Hassās* (*Sensitive Floor*; Kamal Tabrizi, 2014).⁵

Attaran is a comic hero. Not surprisingly, then, neither the type of roles he has played nor his own physical attributes conform to the usual qualities of movie stardom. He does not appear any more beautiful, glamorous, or skilled than an average person.⁶ His off-screen image and his on-screen persona suggest nothing close to what Richard Dyer has labeled a “heavenly body.”⁷ He also shares little with the established qualities of the traditional heroes in Iranian cinema, such as those of Mohammad Ali Fardin, a superstar in the popular films of the 1960s and 1970s, collectively known as *Filmfārsi*.⁸ Attaran’s characters are “happy-go-lucky and wisecracking,” but hardly “good-looking, debonair, physically and mentally agile,” and they never feature the portrayal of a “gung-ho leading man who was both romantic and tough.”⁹

Attaran’s status as a comedic star is thus comparable, yet distinct from, other comedians in Iranian and other international popular cinemas. His tendency to play in absurd roles that produce laughter for the sake of laughter and his transmedia background make him similar to American stars such as Jerry Lewis, Adam Sandler, or Jim Carrey. These professional comedians, however, have occasionally showcased their talents in artistically praised performances. Unlike them, even in his critically acclaimed films, Attaran has not played a variety of challenging personages that elevate his star status to the level of a skillful performer.¹⁰ On the other hand, his fame as a public celebrity and as a *bāzigar-e pulsāz* (moneymaking actor) is much more accentuated in the Iranian context. He is a safe investment for producers, and an unrivaled attraction for cinemagoers.¹¹

Attaran’s unprecedented popularity and his choice of roles distinguish him from other Iranian comedians, too. Iranian comedy has long been dominated by comic side-kicks, like the womanizing Taqi Zohuri, or figures like Nostratollah Vahdat and Akbar Abdi, whose brand of comedy centers on mocking and impersonating provincial or rural stereotypes.¹² Resisting these dominant tropes, Attaran’s contribution to Iranian comedy has mostly been in the realm of the absurd. In fact, the rumors about his astronomical salary align him more with the icons of the *Filmfārsi* star system.¹³

In *The Social History of Iranian Cinema*, Hamid Naficy shows how following the revolution, the new Islamic Republic of Iran not only banned the presence of the Pahlavi-era stars but also dismantled its star system as a whole.¹⁴ Within that context, we must question how an awkward, disagreeable, and unstylish comedian like Attaran contributed to a renaissance of stardom in Iran? How should we analyze the causes and consequences of his popularity? And, on a larger scale, what does this phenomenon tell us about contemporary Iranian popular culture?

Culling trade publications, drawing on stardom theories, and studying Attaran’s films and TV programs as media texts, I argue that Attaran’s television popularity and his rise to cinematic stardom in lowbrow comedies and highbrow absurd films

of the 2010s were the result of complex interactions between certain socio-political forces and his own public image and filmic persona. Mapping the trajectory of Attaran's career as the epitome of the evolution of satirical media in Iran, this article thus examines three interrelated areas: (1) the encouraging policies of the entertainment industry in the early-to-mid 1990s which paved the way for the popularity of a new generation of comedians, humorists, and satirists; (2) the lowbrow comedies and the highbrow cycle of absurd films that emerged following Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's re-election in 2009; and (3) Attaran's own unique qualities as a star, which distinguished him during both periods, turning him into a phenomenon worthy of examination.

Television Popularity

By the end of the Iran-Iraq war in 1988 and with the death of Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989, a new political era began in Iran. The idea of "reconstructing" the country became paramount in the political discourse of the time. Hashemi Rafsanjani's eight-year technocratic presidency (1989-97), under the leadership of Ali Khamenei, was a time of restoration and reconstruction, as politicians leaned heavily on expressions such as *javānān* (the youth), *omid* (hope), and *neshāt* (bliss).¹⁵ In the early 1990s, Mohammad Khatami's second term as the Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance began a reform in the Iranian cinema.¹⁶ Following the recognition of Iranian art films on international festival circuits and the domestic popularity of the so-called social films, and after the addition of a third television network (also known as the youth network) in 1993, entertainment became one of the main arenas of this era.¹⁷ More importantly, as Kim Murphy optimistically stated in a *Los Angeles Times* article on 28 April 1992, "Iran's revolution finally learned to laugh at itself."¹⁸

The wartime gloominess of the 1980s understandably left little room for investing in comedy, unless it was somehow a satire on the previous regime's relations.¹⁹ Film historian Qolam Heydari (Abbas Baharlu) lists only twenty-two titles as the Iranian comedies made between 1981 and 1991.²⁰ Heydari, however, has taken a very broad definition of comedy to accommodate horror and social films like *Zang-hā* (*The Rings*; MohammadReza Honarmand, 1985) and *Zard-e Qanāri* (*Canary Yellow*; Rakhshan Banietemad, 1988).²¹ Comedy or not, most of the films on his list are socially or politically charged and not specifically vehicles for comedic stars. The only comedians of this time who gradually reached stardom, Akbar Abdi and Alireza Khamseh, were either relying on their physical features (obesity, big nose, vocal impersonations, facial gestures) or depended on talented directors who made the final product as funny as a comedy, as in Dariush Mehrjui's *Ejāreneshin-hā* (*Tenants*, 1986).²² In short, there were no detectable movements, generic conventions, or central stars in the Iranian comedies of the 1980s; Heydari calls this a tragedy.²³

The shows of the only two national TV channels were similarly void of any systematic attempt to initiate comedy as a recognizable genre. Other than sporadic programs showcasing some old film dubbers and radio voice-actors' stunts, most of the

weekly series and shows were solemn pieces whose comic aspects were limited to joking about social problems such as inflation and wastefulness in order to model proper behavior during these hard times.²⁴ One main example of these programs was the comic sketches of an otherwise serious program called *Simā-ye Eqtesād-e Mā* (*The Image of Our Economy*), which began its broadcast in 1987. It was a combination of comedy, economic analysis, and social critique and epitomized the fact that comedy only existed within the frame of social and economic rhetoric.²⁵ In short, the Persian saying, “*khandeh bar har dard-e bi-darmān davāst*” (laughter is the remedy to all incurable diseases) was the main function of the very few, mostly social comedies of the 1980s.

Influenced by new policies at the time, the 1990s witnessed a different application of comedy: a kind of entertainment that would attest a return to normal life after years of tension. The instructional, insipid sketches of the *Image of our Economy* were no longer congruent with the Rafsanjani’s so-called “period of construction.”²⁶ The new status quo required that people see things that did not remind them of their hardships, were safely distanced from both social criticism and political life, and would advertise stability, hopefulness, and happiness. In other words, another Persian saying, “*bekhand, tā donyā behet bekhandeh*” (laugh, so that the world laughs back) was the main function of comedy in this era.

Direct responses to this need came in 1993 and 1994. The vanguard was a Channel 2 special program for the two-week holiday of the Iranian New Year in late March 1993. This show, titled *Nowruz-e 72* (*The New Year of 1993*), was composed of about a dozen comic sketches of between one and five minutes featuring several actors, including Mehran Modiri, playing new characters in each of the segments. *The New Year of 1993* was still a socially conscious effort, and a *Film* critic praised it for its “intelligence, taste, and seriousness.”²⁷ But its distinctive format and the fact that it gave viewers permission to laugh despite its socially aware content offered new avenues for Iranian comedy.

Following the same formula, Modiri directed another TV show for the fifteenth anniversary of the Iranian revolution in February 1994, titled *Parvāz-e 57* (*The Flight of 1979*). Attaran was one of the few actors in the show’s sketches, and his presence was accompanied with a bigger change, specifically a transition from social commentaries to pure comedy or comedy for comedy’s sake.²⁸ This metamorphosis was completed in Modiri’s successive series in 1994 and 1995, when traces of socio-political critique and satire were gradually replaced with a kind of absurd comedy that drew on language games, irrational situations, and familiar social contrasts, in the same vein as what Freud has called “innocent jokes.”²⁹ *Sā’at-e Khosh* (*Happy Hour*), a weekly show of comic sketches aired in 1994), *Sāl-e Khosh* (*Happy Year*, aired in the two-week Nowruz season of March 1995), and *Labzeh-hā-ye Khosh* (*Happy Moments*, aired and banned in 1995) had little social criticism and almost no political awareness. Pure comedy replaced social commentaries, and in the final hours of this transition even the staunch, uncompromising critics of *Film* applauded the process.³⁰ The *Happy ...* series was hugely successful and made almost all its cast members popular, star comedians of both television and film within the next two decades.³¹

While it was the initial intention of the cultural policymakers to use comedy as proof of the nation's return to normality, the unprecedented popularity of the *Happy ...* series and its cast opened those policymakers up to the possibility of an unexpected threat: what if an unknown kind of stardom arose that opposed the Islamic Republic's values and norms? Out of this conservative prevision and within the pretext of miseducation and offense to some groups of people, television authorities stopped the *Happy ...* show suddenly in 1997 and unofficially banned its main stars from working over the next one to three years.³² Despite these efforts, however, the next few years proved that this transition process in Iranian comedy could not be reversed.³³

One of the reasons that Reza Attaran has remained popular over the last two decades, on both the small and large screen, is precisely because the public associate him with this first wave of change in comedy after the revolution. This was particularly evident in the case of Saman Moqaddam's *Nahang-e Anbar* (*Sperm Whale*, 2015), where the three-decade relationship between Attaran's character and his beloved girl fed the audiences' nostalgia for both the aesthetics of a time past, and a major star of that era.³⁴ This is an association that has stuck with Attaran. As another critic put it, whether he wants it or not, he always tends to turn every situation into an absurd one, quite similar to his roles in the *Happy ...* series.³⁵

Attaran's popularity, however, is not just a matter of association, and he has managed to distinguish himself, even from the beginning.³⁶ Unlike the previous generation of comedians, Attaran and his cohort did not have caricature-like physical features, nor did they have extraordinary acting talents. In many sketches of the *Happy ...* series, Attaran was depicted as somebody who was merely laughing hard for no reason. Ranging from voice impersonations to meaningless slapstick, the *Happy ...* series promoted happiness for the sake of happiness, and Attaran was the face of this style. In one of the episodes, for example, as a young man going to ask an older man's permission to marry his daughter, he undermines all the rituals and traditions of Iranian proposals by just laughing boisterously and wholeheartedly at simple and meaningless puns. This is reasonless laughter, laughter for the sake of laughter, which has remained with Attaran throughout his career.³⁷

The popularity of the *Happy ...* series paved the way for Attaran to continue his work as a writer, actor, and director in the 1990s and 2000s as the number of television stations increased considerably. Over the next two decades, he was prolific and his various TV serials only reaffirmed his status as a popular television figure. A rejuvenated entertainment industry was the by-product of stable political conditions in the country during the four governments of Rafsanjani and Khatami. During this time, comedy shows, in the form of nightly ninety-episode "routines" and Nowruz, Ramadhan, or Fajr "specials," became integral to all TV channels. Khatami's victory in the 1997 presidential elections brought unprecedented freedom for reformist publications. Satirical columns in newspapers were read widely and discussed often in this period.³⁸ The reformist movement also affected the course of Iranian cinema, generating new themes, tropes, and stars.³⁹ Given this proliferation of styles and ideas in various media industries, there was simply too much competition.⁴⁰ In fact, during

the thirteen years that Attaran transitioned from his early fame in 1995 to stardom in 2008, his name appeared only nine times in *Film* magazine as an interviewee or a subject for critical evaluation, compared to the fifty-nine mentions between March 2011 and March 2017. This critical attention and the box office success of his films were, once again, closely connected to the cultural policies of the time.

Film Stardom

Suddenly, on 17 September 2008, the Supervisory Committee of the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB) advised the director general of IRIB to stop showing Attaran's TV series *Bezangāh* (*Crisis*) because of harsh public criticism and its reputation as taboo-breaking.⁴¹ Attaran himself played the role of a drug-addicted, divorced parent who, following his father's death, tries to get his share of the inheritance. Although the manager of Channel 3 ultimately did not halt the series, the pressure from the IRIB's Supervisory Committee resulted in the omission of many scenes and even some censorship. These changes flattened the show and it was no longer funny. Stripped of his comedic voice, Attaran was discouraged from working in television altogether.⁴²

Having already become a regular star for many lowbrow comedies in late 2000s cinema, after *Crisis* Attaran concentrated his efforts and focused solely on his film performances. Many of the repetitive themes and motifs of his television works were also present in what the critics called lowbrow comedies (*komedi-hā-ye nāzel*): characters trying to navigate red lines, mild toilet jokes, ridiculous beatings and physical encounters, issues specific to lower middle-class families, and a mix of nervous, tense characters and carefree, happy ones. Other characteristics of the films included a lack of causal connections between narrative events; flat and typical characterizations; the final reconciliation of all uncompromising elements; and a general mood of lightness that justified sacrificing the advancement of the narrative in the name of buffoonery.

In *Seh Darajeh Tab* (*Three Degrees of a Fever*; Hamidreza Salahmand, 2011), for example, Attaran plays a poor character whose name is accidentally printed in the marriage page of a woman's identification card, and the rest of the film is simply a pretext for various farcical accidents and funny one-liners. Despite doing fairly well at the box office, such comedies were mostly seen as unintentionally absurd and unconsciously irrational. One review of *Three Degrees of a Fever* criticized it as just another example of the "countless stream of lowbrow and failed comedies."⁴³ The abundance of disparaging Persian terms such as *sakhif* (cheap), *zā'if* (weak), *nāzel* (abject), and *mostahjan* (debased) in the reviews of these films show that their irrationality was not taken seriously by critics, and most likely not by audiences either.

Stardom theories have shown how the construction of stardom is tied to historical periods of crisis or transition.⁴⁴ For Attaran's stardom, this came during the second term of Ahmadinejad's presidency (2009-13) and extended into Hasan Rouhani's first tenure (2013-17), as he contributed to and helped shape a new cycle of absurd comedies. The disillusionment and despair following Mir Hossein Mousavi's failure

in the presidential election of 2009 were not just limited to protests in the street, described as *Fetneh* (sedition) by the government and *jonbesh-e sabz* (the green movement) by the opposition. These feelings also profoundly affected cinema. On the one hand, Ahmadinejad's government encouraged and supported some filmmakers to promote its vision of the post-election events by producing propaganda films like *Qal-lādeh-hā-ye Talā* (*The Golden Collars*; Abolqasem Talebi, 2012) and *Pāyān-Nāmeḥ* (*Thesis*; Hamed Kolahdari, 2011).⁴⁵ At the other end of the spectrum, oppositional filmmakers made indirect comments about the situation, mostly evidenced by the themes of social dissatisfaction and immigration in films like *Jodāyi-e Nāder az Simin* (*A Separation*; Asghar Farhadi, 2011) and *Boqz* (*Hatred*; Reza Dormishian, 2012).⁴⁶ There was also a third wave of cinematic reactions: a large number of comedies that either pushed the red lines of the system or completely denied any possibility of rationality during this period. This wave comprised intellectually charged and yet fairly popular absurd films.

The producers of these films had sensed that embittered Iranian society needed to laugh once again, but this time to an escapist end, a laughter to forget. Targeting all classes of audiences, these films did not refer to any of the socio-political problems and depicted a fictional world devoid of even the possibility of causality, rationality, and reason. Ultimately, what distinguished them from their lowbrow comedy predecessors was their self-conscious approach to social desperation. It was this self-awareness that gained the praise of film critics. As [Table 1](#) demonstrates, by playing the leading role in many of these highbrow absurd comedies and directing three such films himself, Reza Attaran renewed his previous popular image as “a happy man,” but this time it also became a symbol of social comic relief.

Most of these films followed an implausible plotline, such as a village that does not really exist (*Mabhub's Sky*), distributing a large amount of money among people for no reason (*Modest Reception*), friendship between a vampire and a drug addict (*Dracula*), and appearance of a dragon in a remote village (*A Dragon Arrives!*). In other cases, especially in Kahani's films starring Attaran, the plots just drag out the protagonists' central dilemma: a prisoner on leave pretends to be a police officer to force people to bribe him (*Absolutely Tame is a Horse*); two couples prepare a home for a wedding, but their lies to each other hinder the process (*By No Reason*); and a satellite installer and his friend's ex-wife try to sell 100 satellite dishes (*Absolute Rest*).

In both cases, the main narrative idea and the many accompanying storylines never develop or coalesce to make a meaningful structure or a cogent world. Unlike the absurd drama of Ionesco and Beckett, here the absurdity does not result from exploring a static situation in the search for an unknown, mystic, element.⁴⁷ Instead, the emphasis is on enjoying whatever is enjoyable in the moment, without trying to analyze the situation or predict the next stages in the narrative advancement. What replaces narrative progression in these films is crowding scenes with many minor characters; a range of comic dialogue unrelated to the main theme or plot; an abundance of rambling talk and non-sequiturs that distracts the audience at every step; verbal and physical humor; and seemingly postmodern fragments of the characters' individual stories without providing any reasonable closure. The philosophy behind these films

Table 1. Some of the absurd comedies of the 2010s.

Film title (Persian)	Film title (English)	Director	Lead actor	Production year
<i>Āseman-e Mabbub</i>	<i>Mabbub's Sky</i>	Dariush Mehrjui	Ali Mosaffa	2009
<i>Khābam Miyād</i>	<i>I Feel Sleepy!</i>	Reza Attaran	Reza Attaran	2011
<i>Nārenji-Push</i>	<i>The Man in Orange</i>	Dariush Mehrjui	Hamed Behdad	2011
<i>Asb Heyvān-e Najibi Ast</i>	<i>Absolutely Tame is A Horse</i>	Abdolreza Kahani	Reza Attaran	2011
<i>Cheb Khubeh keh Bargashti</i>	<i>It's Good to be Back</i>	Dariush Mehrjui	Reza Attaran	2012
<i>Pazirāyi-e Sādeh</i>	<i>Modest Reception</i>	Mani Haghighi	Mani Haghighi	2012
<i>Bikhod va Bijahat</i>	<i>By No Reason</i>	Abdolreza Kahani	Reza Attaran	2012
<i>Red Carpet</i>	<i>Red Carpet</i>	Reza Attaran	Reza Attaran	2013
<i>Dracula</i>	<i>Dracula</i>	Reza Attaran	Reza Attaran	2015
<i>Esterāhat-e Motlaq</i>	<i>Absolute Rest</i>	Abdolreza Kahani	Reza Attaran	2015
<i>Ejdehā Vāred Mishavad!</i>	<i>A Dragon Arrives!</i>	Mani Haghighi	Amir Jadidi	2016

is often a kind of Stoicism or Epicureanism, best depicted in a Khayyam poem that appears in the last shot of *It's Good to be Back*: "Hell is but a flame from our futile suffering / Heaven is but a moment from our leisure time." In short, a moment's importance is punctuated by laughter.

The cinematic world in both lowbrow and absurd comedies has an unreflexive and disconnected relationship to the non-filmic, extra-textual world. On the one hand, the box-office success of these films depends on localized issues: the untranslatable Persian slang as the title of *Absolutely Tame is a Horse*, for example, which is a colloquialism that a drunk man uses to cover the sound of a belch; or hospitality conventions and male bonding in *It's Good to be Back*; or the social issues and problems such as infatuation with Instagram celebrities and narcotics addiction in *Dracula*. On the other hand, none of these references make up critical commentary, raise socially relevant questions, or invite viewers to consciously reflect about the importance of comparable issues in their lived, historical world. In other words, these films are mostly confined by and within their own frameworks.

Attaran has been a crucial part of the absurd cycle. By transferring the same type of comedy that distinguished his television and lowbrow comedy roles to these intellectual films, he has embodied a cinematic version of burlesque that brings together high

and low styles.⁴⁸ The three films that he directed himself further demonstrate how he operates between and within these two modes. They operate in a middle space, neither considered in the same vein as the films of Mehrjui and Kahani nor dismissed by critics and local festivals as specifically lowbrow comedies. Not only did he become a high grossing film star who “single-handedly carried all the weight of Iranian cinema’s financial problems,” but his fan-base also extended to include many *Film* critics.⁴⁹ For example, in 2011, the same year that *Film* critics selected Asghar Farhadi’s *A Separation* in almost every category of the best-film-of-the-year poll, Attaran’s performance in *Absolutely ...* and *Vorud-e Āqayān Mamnu’* (*No Men Allowed*; Rambod Javan, 2011) were respectively chosen as the second and third best performances by a male actor.⁵⁰ A year later, he was selected as the best actor for his role in *By No Reason*, followed by his performance in *I Feel Sleepy*.⁵¹ In 2013, he was again selected as the second best male actor of the year.⁵² Even in those cases in which critics did not necessarily like the film, they generally defended Attaran as “an actor who could perform well in any comic role.”⁵³ And when a film of his proved a total failure, it was considered “incongruous with the immanent abilities of this popular actor.”⁵⁴ During the absurd cycle, Attaran became the critics’ favorite popular star.

He was considered the main reason for the financial success of most of the films with which he was involved.⁵⁵ Calling a film an *Attaran film* does not necessarily mean that he is the writer or director, but rather that his stardom has elevated him to the level of an *auteur* whose presence is evident in all his works.⁵⁶ Besides the contextual elements, this commercial *auteurship* necessitates a study of Attaran’s own contribution to his star image and on-screen persona.

Acting Style and Performer Persona

In his two ground-breaking studies on movie stars, *Stars* (1979) and *Heavenly Bodies* (1986), Richard Dyer asserts that star images are extensive products of an intertextual nature that emerge from both the star’s films and the way they are promoted and marketed.⁵⁷ From a reception studies perspective, Janet Staiger further divides star images into four components: the persona, the star as performer, the laborer, and the private sphere of a star’s life. She introduces the star persona as “the intertextually constructed notion of the star through a series of films or television programs and which is known, perhaps, only through watching fictional texts.”⁵⁸ Analyzing these fictional texts and studying the way they are promoted reveal a significant correspondence between Attaran’s style of performance, his on-screen persona, and the political consequences of his popularity. These include the relationship between improvisation and frivolity without reason, juxtaposition of contrasts and vile and vulgar humor, and absurdity and political indifference.

As an actor, Attaran carefully guards his established popularity by choosing roles consistently and a personalizing a style of acting that reproduces the same image of him while allowing for some generic fluidity. This makes him different from other popular performers whose comedy experiences are varied and inconsistent. Parviz

Parastui, for example, who was praised for his performances in Kamal Tabrizi's comedies, did not maintain his persona of an impostor in his other non-comic roles, including in works directed by Majid Majidi and Ibrahim Hatamikia.

Like many American comedy stars who were trained in burlesque principles, Attaran also deploys improvisation in his acting style.⁵⁹ Even back when he was a writer for the *Happy ...* series, he believed that a text was only an idea for future improvisation.⁶⁰ In fact, his success as an actor has largely benefited from the openness of directors such as Kahani to his improvisations, whether in the pre-shoot rehearsals or throughout filming.⁶¹ This is a fact often referred to by Attaran himself.⁶²

Corresponding to this acting style is a general happy-go-lucky attitude, which is also one of the characteristics of the 2010s cycle of absurd films, and therefore easily detectable in these films. Reviewing *By No Reason*, for example, one critic saw the traits of one of the characters (Farhad, played by Ahmad Mehranfar) as the key to understanding the bittersweet tone of this absurd film, including his "looseness, insouciance, and absolute nonchalance" which were "in reality quite close to the individual personality of the other actor in the film." The critic, then, does not hesitate to add that he did not mean the character (Mohsen), but the "real Attaran."⁶³

This recognition of the actor independent of his role is one of the main aspects of Attaran's stardom. The viewer always sees Attaran himself playing a character, rather than seeing the character played by him. In part, this is due to his impressive off-screen presence. In interviews, he is always ready to ridicule almost anything, including his own works, which he has called *maskbareh-bāzi* (buffoonery).⁶⁴ He even controversially announced his willingness to pull down his pants in order to make people laugh. Such a statement flew in the face of social codes in a country where lip-service to traditional and conventional norms is a necessity.⁶⁵ This brazen dissociation from the rules and norms is reflected in his many cinematic roles, which ridicule or de-sanctify traditional values. This list includes national pride (*Red Carpet*), religious identity (*I Am Not Salvador*), manhood (*I Feel Sleepy, No Men Allowed*), and familial values (Kahani's films). Reviewing *I Feel Sleepy*, another *Film* critic suggests that this unique quality may be the most important reason for Attaran's popularity:

In the text and extra-text of Reza Attaran there is a satirical anarchism that is risible, but also shows a kind of instability in both the external and internal worlds of his anti-heroes. In his situation comedies, he builds a glass wall all around himself, as if to reject the rules of the world. There is a kind of liberation in ridiculing the seriousness of life altogether that seems to be what many other people envy him for.⁶⁶

This rejection of seriousness could be construed as rebellious if only Attaran's image offered something else in its place. But Attaran's brand of absurdity maintains that absolutely nothing is serious. Even jokes and comedy are not serious. Everything is ultimately absurd, as if to say: we are too tired to think deeply about anything at all; let us accept everything as it is and just have fun. This is frivolity without reason, and it has

operated as a kind of sanguine remedy in the 1990s and an antidepressant in the 2010s.

A similar principle underlies his choice of roles. Similar to a handful of comic performances by the actor Parviz Parastui, Attaran's comic techniques often include juxtaposing the two faces of a hypocrite, such as the sanctimonious characters in *Sensitive Floor* and *I Am Not Salvador*, or contrasting a character's perception of himself with the truth about him. In many cases, these contrasts produce laughter. In *Red Carpet*, for example, he plays the role of a down-and-out, smooth-talking, low-class actor who "does not shy away from anything in order to change his unpleasant situation, and the contrast between his naivete and self-illusion with what happens in reality" makes us laugh.⁶⁷ The same personality features in *I Feel Sleepy*, where Attaran plays the role of a simple-minded, innocent man who is forced into a life of crime. This consistent acting style is even present in Attaran's serious films.⁶⁸ While Hollywood comic stars often use serious films to show the range in their acting style, Attaran's two non-comic performances in *Dehliz* (*The Corridor*; Behruz Shoeybi 2013) and *Ābnabāt Chubi* (*The Lollipop*; Mohammad Hossein Farahbakhsh, 2016) conform to the rules of his acting style. In the former, we sympathize with the deadly consequences of a seemingly gentle teacher's short fuse, and in the latter, we are surprised by the grotesque discrepancy between his compassionate image and his true murderous nature.

Just like his rejection of seriousness, Attaran's representation of hypocrisy and socially standardized contradictions do not assume an oppositional force or offer a critical perception. The only result of this technique, in both his comedies and dramas, is vile and vulgar humor. In a review of *Guinness*, one critic stated that this comedy relied on a formula of "banal and often cheap jokes" to produce laughter, such as "reprehensible sounds, debased phrases, physical distortion, etc."⁶⁹ To this list, we can easily add other commonalities in Attaran's performances: he curses under his breath, always has a toilet scene in his films, is rarely well-dressed or well-behaved, and generally conveys what Mehran Modiri calls an unclean appearance.⁷⁰

Central to these performances is a hideous image of the contemporary Iranian, a caricature that reflects back to the viewer. Attaran's characters long for women's attention but are unable to approach them, crave power but have a constant fear of authority, are obsessed with whatever is illegal or inappropriate, and magnify the duality between two historically separate spheres of Iranian life: *andaruni* (interior) and *biruni* (exterior). Obviously, one major reason for this schizophrenic look at how Iranians live is the contrast between a combination of authoritarian religiosity and traditional morals and the realities of their everyday, lived experiences. However, in Attaran's films we never see any criticism of either of those ends, or even the circumstances that created that schism in the first place. He merely exhumes ugliness and vice so that we see it and laugh at it. A main function of his performances, then, is catharsis: laughing at oneself in order to accept oneself.

This self-referencing laughter is reminiscent of Freud's relief theory. The laughter produced by obscene jokes is a response both to the social expectations of dealing with taboos and to their suppression without any visible expense.⁷¹ Attaran's rendition

of bad-mouthing, lying, corruption, abjection, seeking shortcuts to money and fame, and charlatanism is made visible so that we laugh at it, but not in a critical way. Thus the stigma of the vile is comfortably replaced with its acceptance as a national quality: nothing to be ashamed of, even something to be proud of. By turning lies and deceitfulness, ignorance and prejudice into laughable issues, Attaran sanitizes and justifies them for his audiences.

Attaran's screen presence also accompanies an overwhelmingly absurd mood alongside the contrasts and vile humor. As the veteran critic Hushang Golmakani has stated, "the bulk of Attaran's fame and reputation is a result of his acting, or, essentially, 'presence' in comic roles with an absurd mood."⁷² In those cases in which the film itself is intentionally absurd, Attaran's presence finds double force. In the lowbrow comedies, his performance causes a generic clash within the film and confuses the boundaries of established genres in Iranian comedy. For example, a critic sees *I Feel Sleepy* as "a situation comedy with a Neorealist spice of addressing the problems of the lower classes ... [that makes it a] black social comedy."⁷³ Another critic describes *Guinness* as a film "based on a grotesque situation, vacillating between a black comedy and slapstick."⁷⁴ Or, in a more recent case, a review of *Dracula* complains about the film's indecision over whether it is a comedy or a serious feature.⁷⁵ Attaran's authorial presence in all his films challenges the conventional boundaries of genre and allows him to "own every role that he plays and pours his spirit and taste into it."⁷⁶

The confusion of Attaran's absurdity helps him maintain his political neutrality and social detachment. He is a politically safe star. By remaining comically distant from the roles that he plays, Attaran utilizes an opposite version of Brechtian distancing: not only do we not judge his character or the world that he lives in, but by laughing at them, we accept them. This acceptance is different from our reaction to the ironic social comments and political allusions of Mehran Modiri's works.⁷⁷ Attaran has stressed that while he gets his inspiration from all the people around him, he does not like politics at all, and he does not even like to think in general.⁷⁸ Aligned with the politics of the absurd cycle, this view might well explain part of Attaran's persona: a seemingly apolitical man who wants to avoid thinking at all costs.

Conclusion

Reza Attaran is one of the few filmmakers, both as an actor and director, who has been somewhat successful at pushing the censor's limitations, partly because of his history as a three-time Basij volunteer in the Iran-Iraq war.⁷⁹ However, he has never made use of this status to advocate for a specific political or religious view. In fact, in the culture war between the pro-ruling system group (*khodi-hā/us*) and everyone else (*nākhodi-hā/others*), he has acted as an intermediary joker (*nokhodi*), like a peace-maker who just wants us to have a good laugh at the expense of everyone. This is an image that Attaran himself advertises.⁸⁰ But in a politicized environment, no force can remain entirely above politics. And Iranian commercial culture and cinema have long been political.⁸¹

The case of Attaran provides two parallel readings of the political significance of a popular star, only one of which was presented here. On the one hand, the convivial, always humorous image of Attaran's 1990s sketch-based TV series, especially *The Happy Hour*, was proof that the bitter era of revolution, war, political purges, and economic hardship was over. By contributing to the fabrication of *status quo ante bellum*, he deliberately helped society both to recover and to accept the new demands of the time. Two decades later, following the bleak mood of Ahmadinejad's second presidential term, Attaran's cool, smiling, and contented image acted as a momentary comic relief. This time, the star's unintended role was to maintain the status quo by suspending critical thinking. In these two different forms, Attaran has acted in accordance with Richard Dyer's conceptualization of stars' conservative function.⁸² First, he reinforced aspects of the dominant ideology by concealing its contradictions and problems. Then, by reproducing them in a charming way, he convinced the viewer to acknowledge their presence.

On the other hand, the components of his public image and on-screen persona—specifically his predilection for irrationality and a happy-go-lucky attitude—evoke the complicated relation between the *Filmfārsi* of the 1960s and 1970s and the 1979 Revolution. Many scholars and film critics from different political standpoints have noted that these qualities of *Filmfārsi* were, deliberately or unintentionally, ideologically conservative and in the service of the shah's authoritarianism.⁸³ However, no comprehensive research has yet been done on the impact of the promoted irrationality of these films on the collective unconscious and behavior of the society. This requires extensive and detailed research, for it can further problematize our perception of the past and our vision of the future of Iran. The consequences of Attaran's stardom and the popularity of his films are similarly quite serious: not only because of their conservative reflection of a society's ambivalent values but, more so, because they indeed rationalize the irrational.

Notes

1. Meeuf and Raphael, *Transnational Stardom*, 1-2.
2. Dyer, *Stars*, 42.
3. There are neither standard statistics nor consistency among the different available data on the films' box offices in Iran. What is gathered here has been the author's conclusions and inferences based on the following sources: *Ketāb-e Sāl-e 1390*, 297-8, 301-2, 350, 383-4; *Ketāb-e Sāl-e 1391*, 256-7, 274-5; *Ketāb-e Sāl-e 1392*, 270-71, 281-2; *Ketāb-e Sāl-e 1393*, 288-9, 270-71, 284-5; *Ketāb-e Sāl-e 1394*, 196-7, 240-41, 255-6; *Ketāb-e Sāl-e 1395*, 266, 214-15, 200-201; "Forush-e Koll-e 1390"; "Forush-e Koll-e 1391"; "Forush-e Koll-e 1392"; "Forush-e Koll-e 1393"; "Forush-e Koll-e 1394"; "Forush-e Koll-e 1395"; "Forush-e Ruzāneh-ye 1390"; "Forush-e Ruzāneh-ye 1391"; "Forush-e Ruzāneh-ye 1392"; "Forush-e Ruzāneh-ye 1393"; "Forush-e Ruzāneh-ye 1394"; "Forush-e Ruzāneh-ye 1395"; "Jadval-e Forush-e 1394"; "Jadval-e Forush-e 1395"; "Tamām-e Zir o Bam-e 92"; "10 Film-e PorForush-e 93."
4. "Forush-e Koll-e 1396"; "Qāchāq."
5. "Gozāresh-e Isna"; "E'tā-ye Simorq-hā."
6. Meeuf and Raphael, *Transnational Stardom*, 4.
7. Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies*, 6.

8. Hamid Naficy's translation of an exact and succinct definition of *Filmfārsi* by the Iranian film critic Sabereh Mohammad Kashi is illuminating: "*Filmfārsi* movies are popular feature films made in Iran between 1948 and 1978. They are a mixture of melodrama and popular tales in which the clash of good and evil is based chiefly on class contrast (between rich and poor), a contrast of values (between chivalry and lack thereof), and social contrast (between city and village)." For the original Persian see Mohammad Kashi, "Khākestar va Almās," 140. For the English translation see Naficy, *Social History*, vol. 2, 149.
9. Naficy, *Social History*, vol. 2, 206.
10. Christine Geraghty makes a useful distinction between stars as celebrities, professionals, and performers. See Geraghty, "Re-Examining Stardom," 99-100.
11. "PulSāzarin."
12. Baharlu, *Sad Chehreh*, 31-2, 67-8.
13. Iranian websites estimate Attaran's salary for each film to be around 500 million tomans in 2016. See "Dastmozd-e Reza Attaran." Historian Masoud Mehrabi states that in 1970, Fardin was the most expensive actor of Iranian cinema with a salary of 300 thousand tomans per film. See Mehrabi, *Tārikh-e Cinemā-ye Iran*, 138.
14. Naficy, *Social History*, vol. 3, 43.
15. These were mostly in the service of Rafsanjani's liberal ideas for the economy. For a discussion of Rafsanjani's era see Bloomberg, *Reinventing Khomeini*, 153.
16. Atwood, *Reform Cinema in Iran*, 17.
17. "Mo'arrefi-e Shabakeh-ye Seh-ye Simā."
18. This was written with regard to the establishment and popularity of the satirical magazine *Gol Aghā*, which at the time enjoyed a weekly circulation of 131,000.
19. Danesh, "SadShekanān," 89.
20. Heydari, *Terājedi-e Cinemā-ye Komedi-e Iran*, 194.
21. *Ibid.*, 151-3, 167-9.
22. *Ibid.*, 156-8.
23. *Ibid.*, 9.
24. For a rather comprehensive list of these series and their major plotlines see "Farhang-e Seryāl-hā-ye Televizyoni," 79-128.
25. "Tanz-e Simā-ye Eqtesād-e Mā."
26. Atwood, *Reform Cinema in Iran*, 174.
27. Mohammadi, "Ettefāq-e Farkhondeh," 29.
28. Mohammad Kashi, "Parvāz az Mahdudiyat," 28.
29. Stott, *Comedy*, 132.
30. Puria, "Bāzār-e KhoshKhiyāli," 9; TalebiNejad, "Sāl-e Bad," 29.
31. "Sarvesht-e Bāzigarān."
32. Chapardar, "Mahbubiyat Mamnu'," 38; Golmakani and AmirFazli, "Āsibshenāsi-e Yek Tajrobeh," 38-9.
33. "Hameh-ye Seryāl-hā -ye PorHāshieh"; Mohammadi, "Sā'at-e Khosh-e Zendege-e Mā"; "Sarvesht-e Bāzigarān."
34. *Ketāb-e Sāl-e 1394*, 256.
35. TalebiNejad, "Terājedi-e Cinemā-ye Komedi-e Iran," 77.
36. Moaveni, "Az Parvāz-e 57."
37. In a filmed interview in 2013, Attaran stated that he still preferred comic sketches to cinematic features because of the actor's pleasures from this style of succinct acting. See Hekmat and Sartipi, *'Aqāyed-e Yek Actor-e Cinema*.
38. Sadr, *Bist Sāl bā Tanz*, 240.
39. Atwood, *Reform Cinema in Iran*, 4.
40. When *Film* critics voted for the best Iranian TV series after the revolution in 2011, none of Attaran's works, as a writer or actor or director, found their way into the thirty-two selected shows. See *Ketāb-e Sāl-e 1390*, 117.

41. "PorDardesartarin Seryāl-hā-ye Televizyon."
42. Adibi, "Sakht Migirad Jahān," 113.
43. *Ketāb-e Sāl-e 1390*, 350.
44. Meeuf and Raphael, *Transnational Stardom*, 6.
45. "Shamaqdari: Yek Millyārd"; "Neshast-e Porsesh o Pasokh"; *Ketāb-e Sāl-e 1390*, 313-14; *Ketāb-e Sāl-e 1391*, 300-301.
46. For more cinematic reflections on the 2009 elections, including an excellent case study of Jafar Panahi's *This is Not a Film* (2011), see Atwood, *Reform Cinema in Iran*, 202-5.
47. Esslin, *Theatre of the Absurd*, 42, 165.
48. Davis, "Burlesque," 95.
49. *Ketāb-e Sāl-e 1395*, 215.
50. *Ketāb-e Sāl-e 1390*, 19.
51. *Ketāb-e Sāl-e 1391*, 18.
52. *Ketāb-e Sāl-e 1392*, 18.
53. *Ibid.*, 271.
54. *Ketāb-e Sāl-e 1395*, 266.
55. For example, *Film* critics believed that even the films without television-broadcast trailers, such as *Sensitive Floor* and *Dracula*, did well in the box office only because of Reza Attaran. See *Ketāb-e Sāl-e 1393*, 285; *Ketāb-e Sāl-e 1395*, 215.
56. Even at the beginning of this prosperous period, Attaran was regarded as a star who saved many films from being ignored, including the lowbrow comedy *Akhlāqeto Khub Kon* (*Mind Your Manners*). See *Ketāb-e Sāl-e 1390*, 297.
57. Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies*, 2-3.
58. Staiger, *Media Reception Studies*, 116.
59. The repetitive cinematic types that W. C. Fields, Eddie Cantor, and Abbott and Costello presented, for example, were all derived from their burlesque show routines. See Davis, "Burlesque," 98.
60. Puria et al., "Bozorgān Siah-Mohreh Bāzi Konand," 28.
61. For more on the role of Attaran in Kahani's films, see Azimi, "Mājerā-ye QamAngiz," 89; Etemadi and Kahani, "Jāme'eh be Revāyat-e Fard," 93.
62. For example, see his interview with the *Film* magazine's editor in May 2014: Golmakani and Attaran, "Komedi-e Khatarnāk," 74. In another interview, he mentions that only in one non-comedy, *The Corridor*, he did not perform any improvisations. See Yari et al., "Rāz-e Obur," 92.
63. Puria, "Lezzat-hā va Zellat-hā," 86.
64. Hekmat and Sartipi, *Aqāyed-e Yek Actor-e Cinema*.
65. For seeing some of the reactions, see "Shalvār-e Reza Attaran."
66. Jalali Fakhri, "Dar Hāli ke," 85.
67. Mosafer, "Yek Cinemāgar-e Khordehpā," 47.
68. This has been a deliberate choice. In an interview about his television characters, Attaran admits that he could be "two different persons at this very moment. Characters [in my works] can change color at every moment." See Qaderi and Attaran, "Yeki az Rofaqāyam," 42-4.
69. Eshqi, "Rishkhand-e Zeshti-hā," 79. In another review of *Guinness*, almost the same critical words are used. See Jafari Rad, "Ahmaq va Ahmaqar," 81.
70. "Enteqād-e Mehran Modiri."
71. Stott, *Comedy*, 132-3.
72. Golmakani and Attaran, "Komedi-e Khatarnāk," 74.
73. *Ketāb-e Sāl-e 1391*, 275.
74. QaziNejad, "Sharh-e Hāl-e Seh Kudak," 80.
75. *Ketāb-e Sāl-e 1395*, 215.
76. Golmakani and Attaran, "Komedi-e Khatarnāk," 74.
77. Zargar, "Satiric Traversals," 79.
78. Hekmat and Sartipi, *Aqāyed-e Yek Actor-e Cinema*.
79. *Ibid.*

80. Ibid.
81. Naficy, *Social History*, vol. 2, 325.
82. Dyer, *Stars*, 27.
83. Farajpur, *Cinemā-ye Siyāsi dar Iran*, 75-6; Jeyrani, "Dahe-ye Chehel," 118; Naficy, *Social History*, vol. 2, 150-51.

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