

FILM AND CINEMA STUDIES IN REVIEW

ANNE DÉMY-GEROE. *Iranian National Cinema: The Interaction of Policy, Genre, Funding, and Reception* (New York: Routledge, 2020). Pp. 222; \$169.19 cloth. ISBN 9780367219413.

Anne Démy-Geroe's *Iranian National Cinema: The Interaction of Policy, Genre, Funding, and Reception* investigates the politics of Iranian fiction cinema from 2000 to 2013 through a close study of both cinematic context and text. Her book makes for a considerable addition to the discourses on the workings of film industries in the Middle East. Démy-Geroe unpacks the implications of different government policies during the reformist administration of Mohammad Khatami (1997–2005) and the subsequent conservative presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005–2013) for the production, funding, and domestic and international reception of Iranian fiction (feature-length) films. She also discusses major responses from filmmakers and industry insiders to these changing policies. The author provides nuanced discussions on the inconsistent practices of granting production and exhibition permits to the films, the uneven allocation of funding opportunities to the filmmakers, and the persistent censorship amid the ambiguity or changing of red lines as instances that reflect both the continuous flux in the policies and the unique complexities of cinematic practices in Iran that result in the production of a diverse set of films and themes. Correspondingly, the “national cinema” in the title of the book does not mean to convey a homogenous set of cinematic practices or output in Iran. Rather, the “national” refers to the “cultural specificity that emerged in Iran during the 2000s” (12), as well as the specific government policies during this time that affected various fiction filmmaking practices in the country.

The selection of the year 2000 – a few years into the first-term presidency of Khatami – as the beginning of the study allows the author to highlight the effects of the reformist government policies, that were initiated in 1997, on cinematic practices, and chiefly, the emergence of “a new official genre” known as “*sinema-ye moslehaneh*,” consisting of films with “social issues” themes (4). Also in 2000, the distinguished status of Iranian cinema on the international film stage strengthened as Iranian films won awards at

major international film festivals. However, Démy-Geroe demonstrates “the volatility in the intersection of government policy and filmmaker practice to accommodate (or circumvent) it even at the start of this [reformist] period” (174) through her discussion of the withdrawal of a domestic screening permit for the “social issues” film *The Circle*, directed by Jafar Panahi. Therefore, while during Khatami’s presidency the filmmakers managed to push thematic and critical boundaries by portraying political, gender, and social issues, different filmmakers experienced different implementations of the government’s policies, reflecting the inconsistencies in regulations and favoritism.

It is in this crucial context that “[b]etween 2000 and 2010 . . . Iranian filmmakers started to strategically target international festivals . . . [prompting] a division between the domestic and the foreign non-Muslim markets” (14). The “festival films,” screened at international festivals, constituted a small portion of Iranian filmic output during this period, and as Démy-Geroe argues in chapters 3 and 4, they usually garnered contradictory receptions internationally and at home. In its Western context, the term “festival film” is a referent to an arthouse film with unique and innovative thematic and formal approaches that often has “a relatively small audience in its own territory as well as internationally” (77). In Iran, however, regardless of ambivalences towards international festivals among some industry insiders, the “festival film” was mostly employed as “a derogatory appellation by much of the Iranian industry and general public” (108), referring to a film that supposedly seeks to satisfy a Western audience’s taste and perception regarding Iran rather than responding to Iran’s domestic market and audiences. Nevertheless, while conformity to Western taste is considered a downside of “festival films,” an issue that Iranian filmmakers are themselves well aware of, the cultural and economic capital obtained through the international film festival market and its funding opportunities could decrease “the pressure of political censorship” for Iranian filmmakers (119), and thus work as an incentive for such productions.

In 2005, the conservative government of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad came to power, aiming to enforce a much tighter control over cinema. Démy-Geroe postulates that during this period, filmmakers had a few options: “to work within the limits for a domestic audience; to work against the system . . . or . . . [to go] into exile” (5–6). However, in 2009 and a few months prior to the contested presidential election that reinstated Ahmadinejad as president for a second-term, the success of Asghar Farhadi’s *About Elly* (2009) both at major international film festivals and among Iranian

audiences at home introduced “[a]n ideologically sound middle way” during “this politically sensitive time,” offering filmmakers a “new way forward” (7). Yet, at this time an official re-emphasis on “Muslim filmmaking” also emerged. As Démy-Geroe explains in chapter 5, this re-emphasis was a way “to deal with the conservatives’ long perceived problems in relation to the film industry” (123). It also aimed to cement and promote Iran’s status as the center of “Muslim filmmaking” among Muslim nations and to encourage cultural exchanges with them via cinema.

“Magnificent Productions” (*Film-e Faakher*) were a “short-lived,” yet significant, part of this official “Muslim filmmaking” agenda (157), which Démy-Geroe highlights in chapter 6. These films often had big production budgets and a particular emphasis on “production values” resonated through their use of special effects, which at times entailed international collaborations in their productions (157). Some examples of “Magnificent Productions” include *The Kingdom of Solomon* (2010), *33 Days* (2011), and *Maritime Silk Road* (2011). The contents of these films also offer a crucial ground for understanding their workings. The films’ predominantly religious and/or historical themes aimed to bring a particular (Iranian) point of view to religion and history within a transnational context that targeted both Iranian and international audiences. *Maritime Silk Road*, for instance, centers on the story of Soleiman Siraf, an Iranian who, “according to historical documents, was the first West Asian trader to cross the Indian Ocean to China” (162).

In post-revolutionary Iranian cinema, an ideological emphasis within an Islamic context has been at the center of subsequent government policies regarding this medium. Yet this ideological project has been modified by different governments at different times to accommodate the changing sociopolitical context. Démy-Geroe’s book insightfully traces this ideological shift in policies and strategies regarding Iranian fiction cinema, demonstrating in depth the complex entanglement of official policies and ideology with cinema in Iran and the ways in which they affect the production, representation, and reception of Iranian films. ✦

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