

BOOK REVIEWS

SHAHAB ESFANDIARY, *Iranian Cinema and Globalization: National, Transnational, and Islamic Dimensions* (Bristol, U.K.: Intellect Ltd., 2012). Pp. 252. \$40.00 paper.

NACIM PAK-SHIRAZ, *Shi'i Islam in Iranian Cinema: Religion and Spirituality in Film* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2011). Pp. 288. \$100.00 cloth.

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The proliferation of popular and scholarly representations of a globalizing or regionalizing world over the past two decades has involved and inspired critical perspectives on the concept of national cinema, including in the two works under review here: Shahab Esfandiary's *Iranian Cinema and Globalization: National, Transnational, and Islamic Dimensions* and Nacim Pak-Shiraz's *Shi'i Islam in Iranian Cinema: Religion and Spirituality in Film*. Esfandiary, invoking John Tomlinson, writes that our globalizing age has not necessarily led to the marginalization of the nation and gradual cultural homogenization. On the contrary, processes of globalization have highlighted cultural difference and promoted a multiplicity of national, subnational, and transnational identities (p. 15). In wrestling with the question of what constitutes "national cinema" in an Iranian context, the two works have their own peculiar focal points, though with some overlap. Their examinations of the "uniquely Iranian" experience of cinema also have peculiar blind spots, some of which they share.

Over the past five years, there has been an uptick in English-language scholarly publications on Iranian cinema, with at least a dozen book-length studies going to press. Their authors, mostly newly minted PhDs, have focused primarily on what Richard Tapper and others have labeled "New Iranian Cinema," the globally recognized art-house films produced in the decades since the end of the Iran-Iraq War. This relatively small number of films attributed to an equally small number of filmmakers has been subjected to a remarkable array of theoretical and methodological approaches in these works. Because the authors scarcely address or even acknowledge other film forms or eras, however, it often remains an open question whether their arguments about Iranian "national" cinema in a globalizing age are only of relevance to the films and filmmakers that they choose to study. The skewed approach of these studies may leave some readers wondering how the films that they ignore could perhaps complicate their claims.

This question of scope is particularly troublesome in Nacim Pak-Shiraz's book. Her research on Iranian cinema is itself part of a fascinating new turn in film studies that endeavors to examine more fully the religious aspects of the medium. This trend can be rather crudely divided into two broad and sometimes complementary directions. One, spearheaded by scholars like Conrad Martin and Joel Ostwalt, argues for the prominence of religious themes and imagery in many films, and not merely those that are explicitly religious in content. The other calls for an investigation of the religious function of film and film-related practices. This second approach is most clearly articulated in the work of John Lyden, who argues that films constitute a "secular religion" that, in place of or alongside conventional religions, can make sense of the world for viewers and clarify their moral and social obligations to it. Pak-Shiraz usefully summarizes these recent developments involving the convergence of film theory and religious studies in the introduction to her book, but she primarily follows Martin

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and Ostwalt lead by concerning herself with the presence of religious ideas and practices in the context of Iranian cinema, especially since the Islamic Revolution.

To be sure, the very connection of film with religious beliefs and experiences may be an irreconcilable notion for some. After all, film is supposedly a wholly “modern” institution cut off from the past to which religion is often claimed to belong. Moreover, one might argue that film is especially disassociated from the non-Western past (and from religions predominantly linked with non-Western societies and cultures, including Islam) given the medium’s Western origins. However, Pak-Shiraz argues that it is rather Iranian films’ engagement with “tradition”—that is, with religion and spirituality, and especially Shi’ism—that makes them uniquely Iranian. In fact, the first chapter stresses the productive role of Shi’ism in Iranian culture and identity. Her almost exclusive focus on cinema in the postrevolutionary era, during which radical Shi’i clerics actively imposed their interpretation of Islam on all aspects of social and cultural life (including film production), may be understood in this light. As Pak-Shiraz makes clear in Chapter 2, the relationship of clerical Shi’ism with cinema in Iran has been a complicated one, with heated debates about cinema’s permissibility and ability to communicate religious truths continuing down to the present day. The remainder of the book seeks to demonstrate the prominence of religion and spirituality in Iranian films in spite of, or because of, these controversies. To do so, Pak-Shiraz draws largely on examples of films from the post–Iraq War decades that are well known to Western readers. She examines the criticism and affirmation of the clergy’s role in society in the works of Kamal Tabrizi and Reza Mir-Karimi, investigates Majid Majidi’s cinematic representations of Iranian mystical experience, discusses Bahram Beyzai’s and Abbas Kiarostami’s filmization of Shi’i devotional practices, and finally turns to Kiarostami’s more ecumenical philosophical meditations on life, death, and spirit.

The author’s claims about the presence of religious themes in the works of the filmmakers mentioned above are certainly compelling, but she does not always provide convincing explanations for why she chose certain films for analysis (over other titles, film genres, and even production eras). She acknowledges, for example, the explorations of Shi’i belief and practice in the Sacred Defense (*difā’-i muqaddas*) cinema about the Iran–Iraq War, but argues that the existing body of literature on the subject would make her own study of the genre redundant (p. 198). (Interestingly, Esfandiary makes the opposite claim in his book, arguing for the relative lack of scholarship on the Sacred Defense films, due in part to the dismissive views of critics and academics who fail to see the diversity and sophistication of these productions [p. 79]. With due respect to the valuable work of scholars like Roxane Varzi, Agnès Devictor, and Pedram Khosronejad, Esfandiary’s description of the field hits closer to the mark than that of Pak-Shiraz.) She also rejects the study of what she calls “propagandist films” of the Islamic Republic, though the constituents of this cinematic category remain unclear since she does not define it for her readers. Of course, most of the titles covered in this book have figured far more prominently in the existing literature on Iranian cinema than those rejected for fear of redundancy. Discussions of the religious aspects of these films, or at least their adherence to or rejection of a clerical Shi’ism, can also be found in other scholarly works. It would appear that the general equation made by academics and intellectuals of New Iranian Cinema with Iranian national cinema serves to limit this study.

If Shi’ism, as Pak-Shiraz claims, is of central importance to Iranian cultural production and identity formation, then one might imagine that nearly all Iranian films address Shi’i themes at some level—even the “mindless” and “derivative” popular films from previous eras. In fact, one of the primary interlocutors in this study, Mir Ahmad Mir-Ehsan, argues for the spirituality of the prolific Pahlavi-era commercial cinema (better known to critics and fans alike as *filmfārsī*, or “Persian-film,” with the precise meaning of this term long a matter of debate), but this observation passes without further comment from Pak-Shiraz (pp. 57–58).

The only conclusion left to the reader is that the author views this observation to be unworthy of further comment. Of course, she would not be the only one in the field to hold this position.

Esfandiary, in contrast, readily acknowledges the prevailing tendency among critics and academics to equate art-house and festival features of New Iranian Cinema with Iranian national cinema. His book seeks not only to problematize but also to expand the field of Iranian film studies. In fact, he debates whether there can be such a thing as national cinema in a globalizing age that is supposedly characterized by unprecedented economic interdependence, cultural flattening, greater human mobility, and the concomitant weakening of national institutions. The first two chapters of the book are extended critical surveys of the theoretical literature on globalization and national cinema. Interestingly, in subsequent chapters Esfandiary concludes that the Iranian films perhaps most affected by globalizing processes are the internationally celebrated titles of the past two decades. From his perspective, the increasingly transnational status of art-house filmmakers has only promoted their growing alienation from Iranian audiences and from the shared motifs and mentalities that usually define national cinemas (p. 41). To exemplify this point, he looks at the transformation of Mohsen Makhmalbaf, whose early works promoted his image as a committed Islamist director but whose later films (and, perhaps more importantly, their reception abroad) gradually contributed to a reputation for “progressive,” “humanist” filmmaking of “universal” appeal. To be sure, if there is such a thing as Iranian “national” cinema, it is, in Esfandiary’s view, one that represents the unique concerns and preoccupations of Iranian audiences. In fact, the question of how audiences make sense of their lives and the world in which they live through film is of primary relevance to the author’s generic definition of national cinema (p. 50). In other words, there is for Esfandiary no national cinema without a local audience, a point that complicates the oft-repeated claim that the globally oriented art cinema constitutes Iranian national cinema.

Yet it is not as if Esfandiary thinks that a truly national cinema is somehow immune to globalization processes. He notes that the mass circulation and consumption of foreign cultural products may inspire the official promotion and funding of more “culturally specific” and “national” films to combat the perceived threat from outside. However, even these national films can directly bear the imprint of globalization. Esfandiary presents the U.S.-trained Daryush Mehrjui as his national filmmaker case study and examines in depth two of his more popular films, made nearly twenty years apart: *Ijarahshinha* (The Tenants) (1986) and *Mihman-i Maman* (Mother’s Guests) (2004). The author traces the national character of both films to their commentary on contemporary social and political conditions, appealing in particular to then-repressed or transgressive aspects of local culture and society. However, the later film, perhaps in response to the current globalization “zeitgeist,” also displays greater openness and gives more value to foreign cultural references than does the earlier one. Esfandiary argues that even those films that critics claim to be of purely local significance and hostile to the perceived values of a globalizing world, like those associated with Sacred Defense Cinema, have also engaged with processes of globalization. Indeed, his final chapter examines the films of a Sacred Defense director with a negligible international profile, Ebrahim Hatami-kia, who also happened to direct the first foreign production of the postrevolutionary period in 1993: *Az Karkhah ta Rayn* (*From Karkheh to the Rhine*) (p. 155).

Esfandiary thus also conceives of an exemplary Iranian national cinema. From his perspective, the encounter of the global with the local in films is to be found primarily in Iranian cinema of the 1990s to the present. Yet, in his discussion of globalization and national cinema, he does not spell out for the reader why the processes of globalization are necessarily understood to be a postrevolutionary (or even post–Iran–Iraq war) phenomenon in Iran. The author is right to argue that the discourse of globalization first gained prominence in Iran and elsewhere in the 1990s. However, many of the globalization theorists that he cites in the book trace its processes back to earlier decades. While Esfandiary problematizes the extent

and effects of globalizing forces in national cultural production, he does not problematize the chronology of these forces. Is the prerevolutionary Iranian new wave film movement eligible for the kind of analysis that the author undertakes with regard to postwar cinema? Even further afield, what about the popular commercial cinema of the late Pahlavi era?

In fact, one might even make a case for the transnational origins of *filmfārsī*. The Indian productions of ‘Abd al-Husayn Sipanta and his Parsi partners in the 1930s were perhaps the only coherent attempt made during the first five decades of the country’s film history to create a uniquely Iranian cinema. Sipanta’s early productions were the first to sell young Iranians on the possibilities of the cinema, and some in this generation went on to play major roles in the creation of a domestic commercial film industry after World War II. Moreover, during the *filmfārsī* era, foreign coproductions, locations, actors, and directors were not unknown to this cinematic category. The headlining roles of the Turkish film star Cüneyt Arkın, also known as Fakhr al-Din, in a number of Pars Film studio productions of the 1960s and 1970s, is a prominent example of the transnational dimensions of popular cinema in the prerevolutionary period. Film exhibition in Iran was also far more cosmopolitan in character in the prerevolutionary period than it is today. In fact, the films screened then were more varied and “global” than anything to be found in U.S. cinemas during the same time period. As an example of how the local and global become blurred in the globalizing era, Esfandiari discusses a character in *Mihman-i Maman* (Mother’s Guests) by the name of Yadullah, who is obsessed with both Hollywood yesteryear and *filmfārsī*. Yet the author does not tell us from where Yadullah gained this extensive film knowledge. Could the character’s diverse film interests have sprouted from his film-going experiences during the Pahlavi era, when Hollywood features often battled home-grown *filmfārsī* titles for box office supremacy?

In their respective books, Pak-Shiraz and Esfandiari set out to define Iranian national cinema. Although they identify a remarkably similar body of films as relevant to ongoing intellectual debates about national cinema, they draw somewhat different conclusions about what exactly constitutes the “national” in Iranian film. Many of their colleagues in the field share this rather narrow vision of Iranian film history. That is not to say that the only legitimate approach to the study of Iranian national cinema is a holistic one. However, as noted above, their analyses involve not only the privileging of a small group of films and filmmakers from the past two decades, but also the blind dismissal of everything else from the same period and prior that does not conform or contribute to that cinematic category. There is a strange phenomenon at work here whereby films and filmmakers that many ordinary Iranians would consider to be occupying the margins of national cinema instead take center stage in the historical narratives, while the films and filmmakers with which most Iranians are far better acquainted rarely figure. One could argue that we learn more in such studies about what academics and intellectuals want the Iranian national cinema to be, rather than what it actually is.

EVE M. TROUTT POWELL, *Tell This in My Memory: Stories of Enslavement from Egypt, Sudan, and the Ottoman Empire* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2012). Pp. 264. \$40.00 cloth, \$24.95 paper, \$24.95 e-book.

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Eve Troutt Powell’s *Tell This in My Memory* is a wonderful addition to the growing literature on enslavement in Middle Eastern societies during the Ottoman and post-Ottoman periods.