

I recommend this book to students and scholars of film studies, particularly those with interests in feminist and Middle Eastern cinema, who will benefit from its detailed and insightful examination of Banietemad's films.

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Allegory in Iranian Cinema: The Aesthetics of Poetry and Resistance. Michelle Langford (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019). Pp. xiv, 278 (hardcover). ISBN 9781780762982

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Writing in the early 1990s, Bill Nichols observed the ascent of Iranian cinema to the global stage in his landmark article, "Discovering Form, Inferring Meaning: New Cinemas and the Film Festival Circuit" (1994).¹ For a theorist like Nichols, the global rise of Iranian cinema was merely an excuse to reflect on the processes by which international audiences make sense of "new" cinemas, especially when they are discovered, venerated, and made accessible by systems of global distribution like film festivals. Nevertheless, the article has become important to the study of Iranian filmmaking by capturing the moment at which Iranian cinema joined the ranks of world cinema: the darling of international film festivals and a mainstay on university syllabi. At the core of the article are important questions about how Iranian filmmakers have embedded meanings into their films. Nichols proposes that certain universal forms, including allegorical and poetic styles, offer an entry point for global viewers as they wade through strange sights and sounds and seek out those deeper messages teeming beneath the plot.

Although Michelle Langford's *Allegory in Iranian Cinema: The Aesthetics of Poetry and Resistance* does not directly reference Nichols's article, in many respects it picks up where Nichols leaves off. Langford begins her book by explaining that she was "seduced" by Iranian art house films in the 1990s when they "began making their way to international film festivals." She writes, "I couldn't help but feel that they were calling me to engage with them more deeply" (1). Perhaps unknowingly, she replicates the central concerns of Nichols's article by asking how Iranian films attract and sustain global viewership through the promise of hidden meanings. In his article, Nichols suggests that festival audiences make sense of Iranian cinema by capitalizing on their knowledge of the formal strategies of filmmaking to recuperate "the strange as familiar."² This understanding of Iranian films is, according to Nichols, necessarily partial, like that of a "satisfied tourist." He writes that lurking "at the boundaries of the film festival experience . . . are those deep structures and thick descriptions that might restore a sense of the particular and local to what we have now recruited to the realm of the global."³

In what could be a direct response to Nichols's observation, Langford's eloquent and thoughtful book supplies expert knowledge as the author analyzes an allegorical tradition that has become synonymous with Iranian cinema since its explosion on the international scene. Combining fine-grained analyses of specific films with a wealth of historical and political context, *Allegory in Iranian Cinema* is a welcome addition to Iranian film studies—a field that has grown mightily since Nichols first observed the budding presence of Iranian movies at international film festivals nearly three decades ago.

¹ Bill Nichols, "Discovering Form, Inferring Meaning: New Cinemas and the Film Festival Circuit," *Film Quarterly* 47, no. 3 (1994): 16–30.

² Nichols, "Discovering Form, Inferring Meaning," 18.

³ *Ibid.*, 27.

Organized across six chapters, plus an introduction and a coda, *Allegory in Iranian Cinema* theorizes the allegorical aesthetics for which Iranian cinema has become reputed. By allegory, Langford refers to a cinematic strategy that “prompts viewers to look for hidden meaning or to experience a film poetically” (1). As she notes, scholars and critics often acknowledge the significance of allegories to Iranian filmmaking. In fact, uncovering the hidden meaning of filmic texts is a popular methodology in the study of Iranian cinema. Yet rarely have scholars of Iran ruminated on the aesthetic and poetic strategies that make allegorical cinema an attractive form in the first place. Seeking to redress this oversight, Langford offers a sustained and intricate discussion of allegories in Iranian cinema. She interrogates the aesthetic mechanisms that make allegory possible and asks what allegory affords a film industry fraught with regulatory policies.

In this regard, *Allegory in Iranian Cinema* advances two important claims. First, Langford demonstrates that any examination of cinematic allegory must be situated within a larger historical and cultural ecosystem. For this reason, she begins her analysis not with Abbas Kiarostami—arguably Iran’s most famous allegorical filmmaker—but rather with Ovanes Ohanian, the director of the country’s first feature-length film, *Haji Aqa, the Cinema Actor* (1933). Throughout the book, she balances examples of allegorical cinema across time. In doing so, she shows that cinematic allegory is neither new nor reactive but rather embedded in the very fabric of Iranian filmmaking. Similarly, Langford ties allegorical cinema to a longer tradition of Persian poetics, tracing, for example, connections between Mohsen Makhmalbaf’s filmmaking and Hafez’s *ghazals* and between feminist allegory in Marziyeh Meshkini’s *The Day I Became a Woman* (2000) and the verse of Forugh Farrokhzad. Second, Langford argues that allegorical cinema is an inherently resistive mode in Iran. That resistance may be political—as a response to an act of censorship or a totalizing nationalistic discourse—but it also may be aesthetic, as allegories sometimes disrupt the very conventions of filmmaking. Often, these modes of resistance operate in tandem. For example, Iranian New Wave cinema of the 1960s and 1970s deployed allegories both to challenge the conventions of commercial cinema and also to remain politically engaged in critiques of the Shah’s monarchy.

Throughout *Allegory in Iranian Cinema*, Langford is careful to caution that she is not making sweeping claims about Iranian cinema as a whole but rather interrogating one strand of Iranian filmmaking, a strand that has been especially popular outside of the country. She constructs her arguments through carefully selected case studies that largely focus on a body of films produced after the 1979 revolution. With rigor and creativity, she examines instances of allegory in specific Iranian films to see how they operate and what they offer filmmakers and their audiences. As she writes, “allegory . . . is both a mode of expression and a mode of interpretation” (2). In both cases, allegory holds the potential for powerful social and political critique. The book’s individual chapters cover a wide range of topics, including historical precedents (chapter 1); children as sites of allegory (chapter 2); the relationship between gender and allegory (chapters 3 and 5); allegories of love (chapter 4); and the concerns of Iran’s so-called “third generation” (chapter 6). Through her close readings, Langford uncovers the deep ambivalence of allegorical cinema. She pushes back against the much-venerated idea that the Iranian government’s strict regulation of cinema has encouraged creativity by pitting filmmakers against the state. Instead, she reveals a much more nuanced system in which cinematic allegories might just as easily serve a dominant ideology as subvert it.

Allegory in Iranian Cinema joins a growing body of scholarship on Iranian cinema. The last five years, in particular, have witnessed the publication of a number of books and articles that have significantly shifted the trajectory of the field. Scholarship by Kaveh Askari, Pedram Partovi, Golbarg Rekabtalaei, and others has opened new questions about reception, the industry, archives, and historiography.⁴ Curiously, *Allegory in Iranian Cinema* does not cite

⁴ See, for example, Kaveh Askari, “Eastern Boys and Failed Heroes: Iranian Cinema in the World’s Orbit,” *Cinema Journal* 57, no. 3 (2018): 29–53; Blake Atwood, *Reform Cinema in Iran: Film and Political Change in the Islamic Republic* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016); Pedram Partovi, *Popular Iranian Cinema before the Revolution: Family*

these more recent works. Instead, the author grounds her discussions in foundational texts by Negar Mottahedeh and Hamid Naficy. Of course, as scholars of Iranian cinema, we are indebted to Mottahedeh's and Naficy's impeccable scholarship. Yet, by eliding references to more recent research, Langford's book seems more invested in scholarly debates and assumptions of the late 2000s and early 2010s than the latest transformations to the field. Relatedly, Langford does not include any Persian-language sources in her bibliography, including the critical reception of the films she analyzes and film scholarship from Iran. This is a serious omission in a book that claims to interrogate the relationship between text and context.

These reservations aside, *Allegory in Iranian Cinema* stands as a significant contribution to the study of Iranian cinema. Written in accessible prose and full of original insights, it is a book that scholars, students, and admirers of Iranian cinema will continue to read for many years to come.

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