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Abstract

This article reviews two books: Pedram Partovi's *Popular Iranian Cinema before the Revolution: Family and Nation in Filmfārsī*, and Golbar Rekabtalaei, *Iranian Cosmopolitanism: A Cinematic History*.

Keywords

Iran, Farsi, Cosmopolitanism, Cinema

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Author Notes

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Finding filmfarsi: Reevaluations of Pre-Revolutionary Iranian Cinema

Partovi, Pedram. *Popular Iranian Cinema before the Revolution: Family and Nation in Filmfarsi*. Routledge: Milton Park, 2016.

Rekabtalaei, Golbar. *Iranian Cosmopolitanism: A Cinematic History*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, UK, 2019.

In Jafar Panahi's recent film *Se Rokh (3 Faces)*, 2018), Panahi joins Behnaz Jafari in a journey to a western Iranian village in which a distressed teenage girl with a passion for acting sent Jafari a recording of her apparent suicide. The film unfolds as a mystery: did the young aspiring actor really commit suicide? By its end, however, the suspense of the mystery has given way to a reflection on the continuity of suffering and pain experienced by multiple generations of actors and filmmakers of Iran. In this village, Panahi and Jafari encounter both the celebrity and opprobrium that accompanies their work. They discover that the former actor Shahrzad lives in a small cottage at the edge of the village. Once famed for her role as the sensuous Suhaylā of 1969's *Qayṣar*, in *Se Rokh* she resides on the margins of "traditional" Iranianness. She is a beacon from another era and style of Iranian cinema almost forgotten and frequently derided—a style often referenced as *filmfarsi*. In *Se Rokh*, she remains unseen, but we hear her laughter, we see the light spilling from her warm abode, and we realize that, in Panahi's imagination, she offers refuge to later generations of female actors suffering to produce art in Iran.

I mention this scene from *Se Rokh* not as a means of exploring Panahi's statement on the challenges of cinema in Iran; rather, it is the continuity that Panahi sees—or uncovers—among pre-revolutionary and post-revolutionary actors and filmmakers that deserves our consideration. In this attention to *filmfarsi* and its importance in larger histories of cinema, Panahi is joined by two recent academic monographs that push the study of film and religion in Iran in compelling new directions. Pedram Partovi's *Popular Iranian Cinema before the Revolution* and Golbar

Rekabtalei's *Iranian Cosmopolitanism* add analytical and historical heft to Panahi's staging of three generations meeting face to face by finding the cinematic imaginations, temporalities, and social critiques of *filmfārsī*.

The common story of Iranian cinema is one of rupture. The 1979 revolution rendered the Iranian cinema of the 1980s a project from scratch, as popular cinemas were burned, popular films prohibited, and popular filmmakers of the 1970s blacklisted.¹ From amidst the constrictions of the Islamic Republic and inspired by global cinema and the fledging school of Iranian social realist films of the 1970s, a new generation of auteurs produced films that were met with international celebration—and so figures such as Abbas Kiarostami, Mohsen Makhmalbaf, and Asghar Farhadi became royalty of global cinema in later decades. Lost in a focus on the ruptures of revolution is *filmfārsī*: the popular cinema of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s that has been derided as crude and commercial, cheap and saccharine, and a poor imitation of Hollywood and Bollywood productions.²

This cinematic continuity across the revolution represents a new interpretation of the films of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. Whereas Panahi locates the decades-long continuities of Iranian cinema in the challenges and sacrifices of Iranian filmmakers, Partovi's *Popular Iranian Cinema* argues that the films of *filmfārsī* articulate an “unofficial civil religion” of Iranians that competed with the statist Pahlavi projects of modernization between World War II and the 1979 Revolution.³ This “unofficial civil religion” found is what binds *filmfārsī* titles to older, enduring Persianate cultural imaginations—and what binds *filmfārsī* to the post-revolutionary Iranian cinema. Rekabtalei's *Iranian Cosmopolitanism*, on the other hand, stitches together the Iranian cinematic projects from the 1920s to the 1970s by attending to the irreducibly cosmopolitan quality of Iranian cinema.⁴ Collectively, these works represent a substantial intervention in English-language

analyses of Iranian cinema by rejecting the 1979 scission that drives so many of the histories of Iranian cinema. The upshot is striking: we need not tether “cinematic temporality” to political timelines.⁵ The cosmopolitan and “civil religious” imaginations made possible through cinema do not merely rest upon the ostensibly “realer” political happenings of 20th century Iran. Rather, these two scholars suggest that films can constitute and shape the world, not merely chase after the wake in order to represent it.

The other upshot of these works by Rekabtalaei and Partovi is simpler but no less promising: *filmfārsī* titles are worth watching. Even in their exaggerations, excesses, and melodrama, these films—as analyzed and contextualized by Partovi and Rekabtalaei—are rich sources for understanding the complex desires, anxieties, and social negotiations of Iranians in the mid-century.

But why the derision of *filmfārsī*? If, as both Partovi and Rekabtalaei suggest, the films of *filmfārsī* are sources that think through and challenge the secular, statist modernization policies of the Pahlavi regime—and if these films articulate alternative visions of Iran and Iranian society—then why have these films been ignored by scholars except when they are offered as a foil to the artistry of later Iranian cinematic eras? Partovi suggests that the critical derision of *filmfārsī* from the 1960s and 1970s has persisted and continues to frame contemporary consideration of *filmfārsī*. According to Partovi, in the 1950s, the film critic Hushang Kavusi used the term *filmfārsī* to critique films that were “neither cinema nor part of the Persian literary-artistic tradition.”⁶ For Kasuvi, *filmfārsī* was derivative and imitative of cinematic productions from around the world, primarily those of Hollywood and Bollywood. This accusation of *filmfārsī* as derivative resonated with the interests of many Iranian intellectuals in throwing off the cultural and political domination of the “West.”

If *filmfārsī* was not Iranian enough for some critics, it was also not modern enough for many others. As Partovi explains, critics accused *filmfārsī* of appealing to an “atavistic rejection of modernity.”⁷ Such critics pointed to the consistent importance of family honor, the reliance upon premodern narrative models, the appeal to fate and destiny, and the insistence on using flashy song and dance sequences. At best, these films were escapist flights into melodrama; at worst, they actively obscured the challenges and promises of “modernity,” thereby corrupting Iranian audiences and denying the nation its own strength and agency.⁸

Such has been the reputation of *filmfārsī*, according to both Rekabtalaei and Partovi, that has condemned *filmfārsī* to academic obscurity. Both use their books to reject this vision of *filmfārsī*, but their approaches to challenging this reputation differ in intriguing ways. As will be discussed in further detail below, Rekabtalaei does not focus her history on the films alone. She adopts cinematic cultures and temporalities as the subjects of her history, thus folding theater workers, movie posters, camera operators, state tax plans, and, indeed, Kasuvi and other critics into her analysis of Iranian cinema and its enduring cosmopolitanism. Partovi suggests that this critical reputation of *filmfārsī* is, more or less, the state of the field against which he is writing. His work, therefore, takes a conventional approach by offering close analyses of individual films that demonstrate that they are far from “escapism” and “atavism.”⁹

The civil religion of *filmfārsī* finds its anchor in the family: it is the family as the foundational unit of society, and the preservation of the family is the ultimate defense of the nation.¹⁰ More specifically, Partovi uses his four substantial chapters—which follow an introduction and a brief history of Iranian cinema—to tease out the different thematic aspects of *filmfārsī* and *filmfārsī*'s articulation of this civil religion. Though the concept of “civil religion” is not fully fleshed in Partovi's work, this appeal to “civil religion” permits the book to accomplish

two analytical tasks. As a matter of civil religion, Partovi “politicizes” these films in their immanent context by contrasting them with statist visions of modernity: a modernity that combined state-led education initiatives, expanded enfranchisement, land reforms, a “modern” sartorial aesthetic influenced by Europe, and privatization that caused immense displacement and social disruption. Simultaneously, it is in the “civil religion” of these films that we find the connection between *filmfārsī* and centuries-long Persianate cultural imaginations.

Each chapter identifies a theme of *filmfārsī*'s civil religion that Partovi then locates in broad Persianate cultural patterns and in one or two *filmfārsī* movies that exemplify a particular theme. *Ganj-i Qārūn* (*The Treasure of Korah*, 1965), for instance, demonstrates the complexity of “heroism” as seen in the socially-marginal figures of the *lūṭī* and cabaret dancer. The *lūṭī* is a fascinating figure of masculinity in Iranian film; he is a figure that holds fast to a code of family honor and personal integrity that often dramatically violates the laws and norms of the Pahlavi state. Partovi suggests that the homosocial and liminal heroism of the *lūṭīs* continues a socio-cultural pattern dating back to medieval Iran and found in Sufi networks and *ayyār* groups (chivalrous brotherhoods of warriors and outlaws).¹¹ The fourth chapter turns to martyrdom and self-sacrifice, as will be explored below. Similar to martyrdom, Partovi’s fifth chapter presents “exile” as a recurrent theme in *filmfārsī*, and he links the film *Dālāhū* (1967) to poetic traditions of the ghazal in which love is most fully realized in moments of absence and exile from the beloved.¹² Finally, Partovi proposes that “fate” serves as a “meta-god” in this unofficial civil religion, and he analyzes *Charkh-i falak* (*The Wheel of the Universe*, 1967) to demonstrate the workings of fate in *filmfārsī*.¹³

The connections that Partovi draws between the films he analyzes and the deeper patterns of a Persianate cultural imagination are occasionally rushed. It would simply require more ample

discussion to demonstrate, for instance, that *Dālāhū*'s treatment of exile and love bears a meaningful resonance with the exiled lover (e.g., Majnūn) of the Persian poetic tradition.¹⁴ Despite the cursory establishment of these connections, however, Partovi is effective in communicating the more important point: the cultural imagination of *filmfārsī* was not beholden to the Pahlavi regime's statist, secularist, individualized vision of modernity. There were other and older cultural patterns, models, and grammars that could shape the worlds conjured by *filmfārsī* titles—and *filmfārsī* offered these worlds not as an “escape” from the transformations of modernity but as a means to process, critique, and guide these transformations.

Partovi's fourth chapter, “Martyrdom and self-sacrifice,” exemplifies his approach. After briefly describing the history of Persianate cultures of martyrdom as rooted in narratives of Shi'i *imāms* and the warriors of the *Shāh-Nāmah* (*Book of Kings*), Partovi argues that these thematic patterns of self-sacrifice persist in the films *Kūchah mardhā* (*Men of the Alley*, 1970) and *Qayṣar* (1969). In these two films, as Partovi convincingly demonstrates, self-sacrifice serves as the apotheosis of love and eroticism. Through denial and martyrdom, the characters of these movies substantiate their love for family and commitment to friendship (*dūstī*). Moreover, in these and other *filmfārsī* titles, it is often homosocial bonds that are “realized” through the sacrifice of one's amorous connections.¹⁵ This *filmfārsī* vision of martyrdom and love—centered as it is in family and homosociality, achieved as it is through self-denial, sacrifice, and death—challenges the “heterosocialization” and individualization of society that the Pahlavi regime sought as part of a “Pahlavi modernity.”¹⁶ Moreover, as Partovi explains, the Pahlavi state was unable (or unwilling) to manage the distribution of wealth in the post-war period—and so it fell upon families to share prosperity and ease the burdens of destitution. A film such as *Kūchah mardhā* “highlighted the irony of a Pahlavi development plan that wished to modernize the economy and society of Iran not

for but in spite of existing national institutions and actors—meaning the family...”¹⁷ Relatedly, *Qayṣar* serves as an examination of the transgressive, self-sacrificial, heroic masculinity deemed necessary to preserve family and friends, assaulted as they are by the uneven processes of statist urbanization and economic reform.¹⁸ As *Qayṣar* and other films demonstrate, however, this form of heroism in the name of homosocial friendship or family—and against Pahlavi visions of the modern—is a route available to men alone.¹⁹ This chapter includes one of Partovi’s most thorough discussions of the gendered cultural worlds of *filmfārsī*, and, unsurprisingly, this discussion adds texture and nuance to his analysis of martyrdom.

Rarely was *filmfārsī* outright “political,” but neither were these films as escapist and obscurantist as critics would suggest. They were popular and non-elite attempts to understand and name a changing world, and these films did not cede this responsibility to the Pahlavi government. Ultimately, for Partovi’s argument to land fully, it requires more historical depth given to the social and political world around these films. We are left with a rather flat impression of the Pahlavi government as incompetent and borderline villainous, and Partovi’s evocative analyses of *filmfārsī*’s “civil religion” would benefit from situating the worlds imagined by *filmfārsī* in worlds not only imagined in film narratives but materialized in the cinema halls, the film technologies of glass and metal, the lives of local auteurs and migrant engineers, and the ink and paper of published film reviews.

Rekabtalaei’s book provides just such a material balance to Partovi’s thematic analysis. More thoroughly than Partovi’s work, Rekabtalaei’s book engages a “cinematic” that extends beyond the movies of *filmfārsī*—and beyond films as discrete works. She aims for a history of time and space as constituted by, reflected in, and experienced through cinema.²⁰ We find, according to Rekabtalaei, the possibility of “simultaneity” of social comparison in cinema: the

cinema allowed Iranians to see and know themselves through an understanding of contemporaneous others.²¹ This “simultaneity” made possible through cinema resulted in the enduring cosmopolitanism of local projects of self, community, and identity in Tehran and the rest of Iran. Stated differently, the advent of the cinema asked Iranians to know themselves through a vision of the other, and this self-knowledge became faster, “realer,” and more entangled with the world than ever before with the spread of cinematic technologies. If this all seems quite abstract, Rekabtalaei balances her work with a devotion to the quotidian. By sheer force of spectacular detail, Rekabtalaei is utterly convincing that there is no “purely” Iranian cinema. Even when commandeered for nationalist propaganda, Iranian cinema is a story of cosmopolitanism across class-lines. The lives of actors, engineers, story-tellers, dubbers, producers, and financiers of Iranian cinema were irreducibly transnational; interstitial titles were multilingual (Russian and French often joined Persian); international films were dubbed and screened in the “diasporic city” that was Tehran;²² technological training was found abroad; and models of storytelling were adopted and adapted from India, France, the USA, and elsewhere.

Rekabtalaei’s work walks us through different forms and nuances of Iranian cinematic experiences of space and time. As cinema was brought to divergent purposes from the 1920s to the 1970s, the shape and texture of cinematic temporality and cinematic cosmopolitanism differed—and each of her chapters introduces the reader to a different type of cinematic cosmopolitanism. After the book’s introduction, Rekabtalaei uses chapter one, “Cinematic Imaginaries and Cosmopolitanism in the Early Twentieth Century,” to describe the “heterotypic cinema” of the 1920s in which national and cosmopolitan identities were forged together in early theaters that offered “a space of possible futures,” a space for imagining an Iran alongside other nations and communities.²³ The second chapter, “Cinematic Education, Cinematic Sovereignty,”

turns to the “cosmo-national cinema” of the 1930s in which the Pahlavi regime attempted to forge an overtly nationalist cinema of “use”—a cinema that drew upon an “ancient Persian past” in order to intervene and instruct viewers in how to be “modern.”²⁴ Even this nationalist project, however, was “cosmo-national” as the films of the Pahlavi 1930s featured multi-lingual subtitles and deliberately drew upon “Orientalist” stereotypes of non-Iranian origin. While the 1940s are often presented as a decade of cinematic stalling and absence, Rekabtalaei’s third chapter insists that this decade was still “cinematic,” even if studio films were rarely made in Iran.²⁵ The 1940s witnessed a process professionalization within the cinema class (producers, actors, critics), international films were distributed, documentaries were made, and a global post-World War II “consumer image culture” began to take hold in Iran. In chapter four, “*Film-Farsi*,” Rekabtalaei analyzes the “cosmopolitan-vernacular cinema” of the 1950s, and here we find her discussion of *filmfārsī*.²⁶ Though Rekabtalaei acknowledges that *filmfārsī* “reflected the experiences” of everyday Iran, she locates the significance of *filmfārsī* primarily in the way it prepared the way for future cinematic cosmopolitans and temporalities. For many of the professionalized cinematic class such as the critics, *filmfārsī* was *too* cosmopolitan and too beholden to Hollywood and Bollywood. In her fifth chapter, “Cinematic Revolution,” Rekabtalaei then analyzes the “alter(native) cinema” of the 1960s and 1970s that responded to the ostensible excesses and inauthenticities of *filmfārsī*.²⁷ “Alter(native)” films such as *Sīyāvash dar Takht-i Jamshīd* (*Sīyāvash in Persepolis*, 1967) and *Shawhar-i Āhū Khānūm* (*Mrs. Abu's Husband*, 1968) were “socially-g geared” and “fostered a revolutionary cinematic imaginary.” This last chapter is especially important for it is here that Rekabtalaei argues that “cinematic temporality” is distinct from political temporality: “alter(native) cinema” reflected and constituted an imagined world that

did not revolve according to the rhythms of the political. In short, the cinematic revolution preceded (and perhaps prefigured) the Iranian Revolution of 1979.

The coincidence of Partovi and Rekabtalaei's reclamations of the cultural import of pre-revolutionary film—along with Panahi's recent visit to Shahrzad in *Se Rukh*—poses an interesting question in its own right: why now? What about our current intellectual moment produces such complementary works? To speculate, I offer the following two considerations.

Collectively, these works both model and emerge from a willingness to delimit the “secular political modernity” of the Pahlavi state as possessing its own temporality, its own spatial imagination, its own presumptions of the “self,” and even its own metaphysics. In other words, the scholarship of Partovi and Rekabtalaei do not grant the world of “politics” a firmer, more enduring and more natural ontological weight than the worlds constituted by the cinema. Due to the immense potential of this approach, both of these works could find greater theoretical precision by offering a more rigorous engagement with the study of secularism. Saba Mahmood and Anand Vivek Taneja, for instance, have both published works in recent years that engage temporality and secularism in non-European settings.²⁸ The theoretical lexicons developed by Mahmood and Taneja (among many others) could sharpen Rekabtalaei's analysis of temporality and Partovi's notion of Iranian “civil religion”—a notion which relies on Robert Bellah's dated work and occasionally operates as a cypher in Partovi's work.²⁹

Relatedly, both Partovi and Rekabtalaei are willing to think cinema as *constitutive* and to think technology as *metaphysical*. Films do not merely reflect and represent the world; they shape and drive the world by creating new possibilities of experiencing time and space, of finding the self and the past. The merits of *filmfārsī* according to the aesthetics of global film consumption is beside the point, for Partovi and Rekabtalaei are arguing on behalf of *filmfārsī*'s importance in

engendering and manifesting post-war Iranian notions of sociality, civil religion, temporality, and cosmopolitanism. Whether or not readers are interested in the particular topics of Partovi and Rekabtalaei's examinations of pre-revolutionary Iranian cinema, their books attest to the rich, analytical potential of expansive notions of cinema.

¹ Pedram Partovi, *Popular Iranian Cinema before the Revolution: Family and Nation in Filmfārsī* (Routledge: Milton Park, 2016), 4-14.

² Consider also Ehsan Khoshbakht's article on *filmfārsī* that emphasizes the importance of the Iranian Revolution as a moment of rupture: Ehsan Khoshbakht, "How Iran's 'filmfarsi' remains the biggest secret in cinema," *The Guardian*, 11 July 2019, <<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2019/jul/11/iran-filmfarsi-remains-biggest-secret-in-cinema-history>>, accessed 29 July 2019.

³ Partovi, 2-3.

⁴ Golbar Rekabtalaei, *Iranian Cosmopolitanism: A Cinematic History* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, UK, 2019), 8-9, 14-15.

⁵ Rekabtalaei, *Iranian Cosmopolitanism*, p. 3.

⁶ In Kavusi memorable phrasing, "Fīlmfārsī ham film būd va ham Fārsī, ammā dar 'ayn-i ḥāl nah film būd va nah Fārsī." Quoted in Partovi, 4.

⁷ Partovi, 8-9.

⁸ Partovi, 13-14.

⁹ Partovi, 8-13.

¹⁰ Partovi, 19-24.

¹¹ Partovi, 50-84.

¹² Partovi, 139-172.

¹³ Partovi, 183-198.

¹⁴ Partovi, 139-145.

¹⁵ Partovi, 108-113.

¹⁶ Partovi, 111.

¹⁷ Partovi, 118.

¹⁸ Partovi, 125.

¹⁹ Partovi, 109-111.

²⁰ Rekabtalaei, 1-7.

²¹ Rekabtalaei, 2-4.

²² On Tehran as diaspora, see Rekabtalaei, 5-6.

²³ Rekabtalaei, 24-79.

²⁴ Rekabtalaei, 80-132.

²⁵ Rekabtalaei, 133-183.

²⁶ Rekabtalaei, 184-233.

²⁷ Rekabtalaei, 234-290.

²⁸ Saba Mahmood, *Religious Difference in a Secular Age: A Minority Report* (Princeton University Press, 2015); Anand Vivek Taneja, *Jinnealogy: Time, Islam, and Ecological Thought in the Medieval Ruins of Delhi* (Stanford University Press, 2017).

²⁹ Robert N. Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," *Daedalus*, 1967, 1-21.