

**The Politics of Iranian Cinema: Film and
Society in the Islamic Republic**

Saeed Zeydabadi-Nejad

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If there is one element of the politics of Iranian cinema that is understudied, it is that of the relationship between Iranian films and the Iranian film audience. Saeed Zeydabadi-Nejad's book, *The Politics of Iranian Cinema: Film and Society in the Islamic Republic*, fills this glaring gap by providing a unique insight into how Iranian films are received in Iran; what political and social debates they spark; and how they form part of a larger nexus of power negotiations between the state, artists, and film viewers. The book takes an expansive approach to "politics," not favoring hard politics over soft politics

or vice versa, but showing how the two go hand in hand in defining the film-making process in Iran.

The book's uniqueness lies in its reliance on participant observation, in addition to interviews, as one method of studying the Iranian film audience. Through this, the reader gets a sense of people's reactions to the films discussed. Zeydabadi-Nejad often reproduces sections of conversation among film viewers that bring to life his statements about the films' relationship with the political environment. The cynicism expressed by a group of young people after watching Bahman Farmanara's 2001 film *House on the Water* (p. 86), for example, serves as a sharp illustration of the disillusionment with state ideology among the urban middle class — an issue covered elsewhere in the literature on Iranian cinema, but usually presented in generalized terms rather than through the prism of individual reactions found here.

Zeydabadi-Nejad's book, moreover, offers a number of interesting insights about Iranian cinema that serve to dispel certain myths. One such myth is the existence of a clear divide between mainstream and art house cinema, with the former seen as reflective of "Iranian tastes" (p. 160) and the latter as that product of Iranian cinema that is more in tune with what international audiences enjoy. Not only does the book examine the reception of and filmmaking processes behind both kinds of films, it also presents the category of "social films" — post-revolutionary films dealing with sociopolitical issues — as a hybrid of mainstream and radical films. The height of the book's contribution in this respect is its attention to the reception and context of art house films in Iran, where viewers' reactions to certain "social films" such as Abbas Kiarostami's *10* (2002) are presented as evidence of the resonance of the social issues presented by those films to the Iranian audience.

Another myth that the book challenges is that the Reformists have taken a liberal attitude toward cinema, one that contrasts with that of the Conservatives. The author shows that the Reformists have also used film as a political tool and sometimes, in an ironic twist to the dominant discourse, "would not allow the screening of a film that they decided might be attacked by the conservatives" (p. 45). Such insights complicate the understanding of political actors and their involvement in the arts in general.

This call for complexity is also found in the book's discussion of censorship. It is well known that censorship in Iran is subject to political whim, but what the book offers, through interviews with censors and filmmakers alike, is an unearthing of the complex process of filmmaking in the country. In addition to overviews of censorship laws and procedures, the book offers another perspective on the results of this often haphazard approach: the opening up of a space for negotiating power. Zeydabadi-Nejad demonstrates

that the red lines of censorship are open to negotiation *because* of the lack of a uniform approach. He links this element of institutional infrastructure with case studies of filmmakers working within and against the system. Some methods of evading censorship, like submitting a script to the censors for approval and then shooting another one, are now known mechanisms; however, the book also draws attention to other, less documented mechanisms, such as direct political bargaining.

In light of the growing attention to the Reformists after the 2009 presidential election and the rise of the Green Movement, the book offers a glimpse into cinema's relationship with some of its public figures, namely, Mohsen Makhmalbaf and Mir-Hossein Musavi. Since 2009, Makhmalbaf has presented himself as a public backer of Musavi in the international arena, lending Musavi both credibility and exposure. It is instructive to learn that when Musavi was prime minister, he defended and facilitated the screening of Makhmalbaf's controversial *Marriage of the Blessed* (1989). The author argues that "[h]ad it not been for the influence of Musavi, Makhmalbaf would not have been able to make and/or distribute his film" (p. 68). Fast forward twenty years, and the formula is somewhat reversed.

Film is also shown to be a symptom of change in political dynamics. Zeydabadi-Nejad illustrates, through a chronological analysis of social films, that the fate of social films paralleled that of the Reformist movement. The Reformists supported social films, as they saw them as beneficial to their vision of society, but as support for the Reformists dwindled in 2003-04, so did the interest in such films.

A curious observation about the book is that it appears to be a largely unaltered reproduction of the author's Ph.D. thesis (that the book is based on the thesis is stated in the acknowledgements), making its structure less accessible for readers from outside academic circles. Nevertheless, it is a valuable addition to the growing literature on Iranian cinema, as it provides a fresh multidisciplinary perspective on the politics of this cinema and addresses it from often overlooked dimensions. It certainly lives up to its promise of providing "a significant insight into Iranian cultural politics for students of cultural studies and anthropology, Middle Eastern and Iranian studies" (back cover).

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