

A SOCIAL HISTORY OF IRANIAN CINEMA VOLUME 3

The Islamicate Period, 1978–1984



HAMID NAFICY

A SOCIAL HISTORY OF IRANIAN CINEMA

Volume 1: The Artisanal Era, 1897–1941

Volume 2: The Industrializing Years, 1941–1978

Volume 3: The Islamicate Period, 1978–1984

Volume 4: The Globalizing Era, 1984–2010

PRAISE FOR *A Social History of Iranian Cinema*

“Hamid Naficy is already established as the doyen of historians and critics of Iranian cinema. Based on his deep understanding of modern Iranian political and social history, this detailed critical history of Iran’s cinema since its founding is his crowning achievement. To say that it is a must-read for virtually all concerned with modern Iranian history, and not just cinema and the arts, is to state the obvious.”

—HOMA KATOUZIAN, author of
The Persians: Ancient, Mediaeval and Modern Iran

“This magisterial four-volume study of Iranian cinema will be the defining work on the topic for a long time to come. Situating film within its sociopolitical context, Hamid Naficy covers the period leading up to the Constitutional Revolution and continues after the Islamic Revolution, examining questions about modernity, globalization, Islam, and feminism along the way. *A Social History of Iranian Cinema* is a guide for our thinking about cinema and society and the ways that the creative expression of film should be examined as part of a wider engagement with social issues.”

—ANNABELLE SREBERNY, co-author of
Blogistan: The Internet and Politics in Iran

“*A Social History of Iranian Cinema* is an extraordinary achievement, a scholarly, detailed work in which a massive amount of material is handled with the lightest touch. Yet it is Hamid Naficy’s personal experience and investment that give this project a particular distinction. Only a skilled historian, one who is on the inside of his story, could convey so vividly the symbolic significance of cinema for twentieth-century Iran and its deep intertwining with national culture and politics.”

—LAURA MULVEY, author of
Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image

“Hamid Naficy seamlessly brings together a century of Iran’s cinematic history, marking its technological advancements and varying genres and storytelling techniques, and perceptively addressing its sociopolitical impact on the formation of Iran’s national identity. *A Social History of Iranian Cinema* is essential reading not only for the cinephile interested in Iran’s unique and rich cinematic history but also for anyone wanting a deeper understanding of the cataclysmic events and metamorphoses that have shaped Iran, from the pivotal Constitutional Revolution that ushered in the twentieth century through the Islamic Revolution, and into the twenty-first century.”

—SHIRIN NESHAT, visual artist, filmmaker, and
director of the film *Women Without Men*

A Social History of Iranian Cinema

VOLUME 3

Hamid Naficy

A SOCIAL HISTORY
OF IRANIAN CINEMA

Volume 3

The Islamicate Period, 1978–1984

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*To my parents,
Batul Okhovat and Abutorab Naficy,
who instilled in me the love and
pleasure of knowledge and arts*

*To my country of birth, Iran,
and its extraordinary culture and history*

*To my adopted country, the United States,
and its cherished democratic ideals*

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This book has been with me for so long that it feels like a third child, older than my two biological children, Cameron and Shayda, both of whom are now thriving, idealistic young people close to the age at which I unknowingly began this project. My life partner Carol (Kelly) Edwards has been with me every step of the way, through thick and thin, in Iran, in the United States, and in many other places in between. All three have been unconditionally supportive of my life choices, my career and its demands, including this book project. I hope that I have, in the end, been deserving of their respect, love, and trust.

ORGANIZATION OF THE VOLUMES

The book is divided into four volumes, covering the social history of over a century of Iranian cinema, from around 1897 to about 2010. The history of Iranian society and the cinema it produced in this period is bookended by two revolutions: the 1905–11 Constitutional Revolution, which brought in a constitutional monarchy, and the 1978–79 Islamic Revolution, which installed a republican theocratic state. While the impact of the first revolution on cinema and film culture was apparently limited and inchoate, the latter revolution profoundly affected them, resulting in their unprecedented efflorescence.

As a work of social history and theory, these volumes deal not only with such chronological developments in society and in the film industry but also with the synchronic contexts, formations, dispositions, and maneuvers that overdetermined modernity in Iran and a dynamically evolving film industry and its unique products. I locate the film industry and its mode of production, narratives, aesthetics, and generic forms in the interplay of deeply rooted Iranian performative and visual arts and what was imported, adopted, adapted, translated, mistranslated, and hybridized from the West. The interplay between Iranian and Islamic philosophies and aesthetics complicated and channeled cinema, particularly that involving women, in ways unique to Iran, which are discussed throughout the volumes. Likewise, the contribution of Iranian ethnoreligious minorities, both widespread and profound, gave Iranian cinema additional specificity.

The volumes also situate Iranian cinema at the intersection of state-driven authoritarian modernization, nationalist and Islamist politics, and geopolitics

during its tumultuous century, charting the manner in which local, national, regional, and international powers competed for ascendancy in Iran, affecting what Iranians saw on screens, what they produced, and the technologies they adopted.

The logic of dividing the work into four volumes is driven by both socio-political developments and the evolution of the film industry. While these volumes are autonomous, each contributes to the understanding and appreciation of the others, as certain theoretical, stylistic, industrial, commercial, cultural, religious, sociopolitical, biographical, authorial, and governmental elements form lines of inquiry pursued throughout, gathering momentum and weight. Each volume has a table of contents, a bibliography, an index, and when needed appendices.

Volume 1: The Artisanal Era, 1897–1941

This volume offers a theory linking Iranian modernity and national identity with the emergence of an inchoate artisanal cinema and with an othered cinematic subjectivity. Qajar-era cinema consisted of the exhibition of foreign actualities and narratives and the production of a limited number of domestic actualities and comic skits by pioneer exhibitors and producers, all of whom are featured. The image of women on the screens and the presence of women as spectators in movie houses proved controversial, resulting in the first act of film censorship. Borrowing from the curtain reciting tradition, live movie translators (*dilmaj*) helped increase narrative comprehension and the enjoyment of Western movies.

Reza Shah Pahlavi dissolved the Qajar dynasty in 1925 and ruled until 1941. During his rule, the first Pahlavi period, the state implemented an authoritarian syncretic Westernization program that attempted to modernize and secularize the multicultural, multilingual, and multiethnic Iranians into a homogeneous modern nation. Cinematic representations of a fast modernizing Iran in documentaries and fiction movies were encouraged, photography and movie production were tightly controlled, movie houses were regulated, and perceived affronts to Iran in Western documentaries were taken seriously. The veil was outlawed and dandies flourished. All these developments receive extensive coverage in this volume. Despite efforts to centralize and control cinema, film production proved marginal to state formation and remained artisanal. Only one silent feature film was produced domestically, while all sound features were produced by an Iranian expatriate in India. This

latter fact and others discussed in the volume show Iranian cinema's transnational nature from the start.

Volume 2: The Industrializing Years, 1941–1978

During the second Pahlavi period (Mohammad Reza Shah, 1941–79), cinema flourished and became industrialized, producing at its height over ninety films a year. The state was instrumental in building the infrastructures of the cinema and television industries, and it instituted a vast apparatus of censorship and patronage. During the Second World War and its aftermath, the three major Allied powers—the United Kingdom, the United States, and the USSR—competed with each other to control what Iranians saw on movie screens. One chapter examines this fascinating history.

In the subsequent decades, two major parallel cinemas emerged: the commercial filmfarsi movies, popular with average spectators, forming the bulk of the output, and a smaller but influential cinema of dissent, the new-wave cinema. The commercial filmfarsi movies, exemplified by the stewpot and tough-guy genres discussed extensively in two chapters, were for entertainment purposes and drew their power and charm from their stars and their rootedness in Iranian traditions, which were juxtaposed favorably and often comically or melodramatically with modern Western traditions. A dynamic nonfiction cinema evolved, which receives a chapter. Ironically, the state both funded and censored much of the new-wave cinema, which grew bolder in its criticism and impact as Pahlavi authoritarianism consolidated. The new-wave films, produced by the collaboration of Westernized filmmakers with modernist dissident writers, did well in international film festivals, starting the globalization of Iranian cinema. The impending revolution could retrospectively be read in the fear-driven narratives of the new-wave films and in the various cultural struggles around official culture and arts festivals, the censorship of films, religious sermons on audiocassettes, poetry reading nights, television trials and confessions, and underground filming, all of which I discuss at length.

Volume 3: The Islamicate Period, 1978–1984

Identified toward the end of the Shah's rule as one of the agents of moral corruption in the country, movies and movie houses became targets of a ris-

ing anti-Shah movement, resulting in the destruction of a third of all movie houses nationwide. This volume charts both such revolutionary destruction and the subsequent rebuilding and evolution of the film and media industries. Many above-the-line personnel in these industries found themselves sidelined, banned, arrested, deprived of property, or exiled. The star system, a major attraction of filmfarsi cinema, was thus dismantled. Movies were banned, cut, redubbed, and painted over to remove offending features.

After such iconoclastic destructions and purification the new Islamic regime undertook a wide-ranging effort to institutionalize a new film industry whose values would be commensurate with the newly formulated Islamicate values. The first rules and regulations governing film production and exhibition were adopted in 1982. Like the second Pahlavi regime, the ayatollahs' regime put into place a strong, centralized, and draconian system of state regulation and patronage to encourage politically correct movies. The import of foreign movies oscillated but was eventually banned, leaving the field open for a new domestic cinema. The long war with Iraq, the gendered segregation of space, and the imposition of the veil on women encouraged certain ideological and aesthetic trends. Foremost was the reconceptualization of cinema from a despised agent of corruption and othering to an agent of nation building and selfing. However, the resulting Islamicate cinema and culture were neither homogeneous nor static. They evolved with considerable personal, institutional, and ideological struggles.

Volume 4: The Globalizing Era, 1984–2010

The revolutionary experience, the bloody eight-year war with Iraq, and the perceived Western cultural invasion of Iran all encouraged soul searching, national epistemophilia, and a desire for self-representation, resulting in an array of documentary films and film forms about the revolution, war, and the various social ills and inequalities that accumulated under the Islamist regime. The state-run television and fiction film industries, too, funded and supported filmmakers committed to Islam who made powerful “imposed war” movies in which sacred subjectivity replaced modernist subjectivity. Women’s presence both on camera and behind the camera increased significantly in all genres and types of films, in both the television and movie industries, leading to a veritable “women’s cinema.” The veil evolved from a repressive social institution to a dynamic social practice and critical aesthetics.

A deepening sociopolitical and cultural struggle over cinema, media, and

culture, and ultimately the legitimacy of the Islamic Republic, emerged in the country. This was reflected in, and shaped by, a new form of public diplomacy, chiefly between Iran and the United States, during Mohammad Khatami's presidency, which intensified under his successor, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. In a new "cultural turn" the antagonistic governments began to recruit all sorts of mutual domestic, diasporic, and international film, television, radio, and Internet media and formations to serve this diplomacy, sometimes with dire consequences for the participants. Foreign and exile videos and satellite televisions were officially banned, but enforcement was chaotic, encouraging a thriving culture of resistance that continues to date. With the rise of opposition to the Islamic Republic regime a dissident Internet cinema emerged.

The postrevolution era bred its own dissident art-house parallel cinema, involving some of the best Pahlavi-era new-wave directors and a new crop of innovative postrevolution directors, placing Iranian cinema on the map of the vital world cinemas. They brought self-respect and prestige for Iranians at home and abroad. The displacement, dispersion, and exile of a massive number of Iranians, many in the visual and performing arts and cinema and television, resulted in new formations in Iran's social history and cinematic history—a diasporic formation of people with a complex subjectivity and an "accented cinema," made by first-generation émigrés and their second- and third-generation descendants. Both the wide circulation of Iran-made films and those Iranians made in the diaspora, as well as the vast diasporic dispersion of Iranians helped globalize Iranian cinema. One chapter deals with each of these developments.

A WORD ABOUT ILLUSTRATIONS

I have used several types of illustration here, each providing supplementary or complementary material to the text. Production stills show something of the behind-the-scenes process. Frame enlargements, taken directly from films or videos, offer visuals for textual analyses of the films' aesthetic and generic systems. Posters offer not only an encapsulated rendition of the film by artists other than filmmakers but also showcase the art of poster design and production, which form important components of the movies' publicity, exhibition, and reception. Like the movies themselves, this art also evolved over time, an evolution discernible in the posters included in the present volumes. Cartoons and other material objects about cinema demonstrate the wider circulation of things filmic among Iranians. The flyers announcing film screenings and cultural and political events featuring screenings served as important vehicles in exile for advertising, political agitprop, and film exhibition immediately after the 1978–79 revolution. They provide a good sense of the films, of the political culture of the time, and of the sponsoring groups. Finally, the many tables in the book offer other forms of data for the analysis of the films' cultural contexts, such as audience demography, production output, film export and import, organizations involved in production, and the regulations concerning censorship and banning of movies. Because of the diversity of sources and the deterioration of some films and videos, the quality of the pictorial illustrations varies.

