IRANIAN STUDIES

Popular Iranian Cinema before the Revolution

Family and Nation in *Fīlmfārsī*

Pedram Partovi

ROUTLEDGE

Popular Iranian Cinema before the Revolution

Critics and academics have generally dismissed the commercial productions of the late Pahlavi era, best known for their songs and melodramatic plots, as shallow, derivative 'entertainment'. Instead, they have concentrated on the more recent internationally acclaimed art films, claiming that these constitute Iranian 'national' cinema, despite few Iranians having seen them. Film discourse, and even fan talk, have long attempted to marginalize the mainstream releases of the 1960s and 1970s with the moniker *fīlmfārsī*, ironically asserting that such popular favorites were culturally inauthentic.

This book challenges the idea that *fīlmfārsī* is detached from the past and present of Iranians. Far from being escapist Hollywood fare merely translated into Persian, it claims that the better films of this supposed genre must be taken as both a subject of, and source for, modern Iranian history. It argues that they have an appeal that relies on their ability to rearticulate traditional courtly and religious ideas and forms to problematize in unexpectedly complex and sophisticated ways the modernist agenda that secular nationalist elites wished to impose on their viewers. Taken seriously, these films raise questions about standard treatments of Iran's modern history.

By writing popular films into Iranian history, this book advocates both a fresh approach to the study of Iranian cinema, as well as a rethinking of the modernity/tradition binary that has organized the historiography of the recent past. It will appeal to those interested in Iranian cinema, Iranian history and culture, and, more broadly, readers dissatisfied with a dichotomous approach to modernity.

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30 Iran and Russian Imperialism
The Ideal Anarchists, 1800–1914
Moritz Deutschmann

31 Iranian Music and Popular Entertainment
From *Motrebi* to *Losanjelesi* and Beyond
GJ Breyley and Sasan Fatemi

32 Gender and Dance in Iran
Biopolitics on the Twentieth-Century Stage
Ida Meftahi

33 Persian Authorship and Canonicity in Late Mughal Delhi
Building an Ark
Prashant Keshavmurthy

34 Iran and the Nuclear Question
History and the Evolutionary Trajectory
Mohammad Homayounvash

35 The True Dream
An English Translation with Facing Persian Text
Ali-Ashgar Seyed-Gohrab and Senn McGlinn

36 Popular Iranian Cinema before the Revolution
Family and Nation in *Fīlmfārsī*
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To my mother

Contents

Figures

Notes on transliteration

The Persian transliteration scheme followed here is based on the American Library Association-Library of Congress romanization system (*ALA-LC Romanization Tables: Transliteration Schemes for Non-Roman Scripts*, ed. Randall Barry (Washington, DC: Library of Congress, Cataloguing Distribution Service, 1997), 171–177).

On the rare occasions where Arabic or Urdu (Hindustani) words are encountered outside of a Persian context, transliteration will follow their respective ALA-LC romanization schemes (Ibid., 10–19, 226–233). The transcription of quotations and citations with transliterated Persian, Arabic, or Urdu will remain faithful to the schemes of their authors.

Foreign proper and common nouns that have formally entered the English language will be represented as they are found in *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 5th ed. (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 2016). However, variant romanizations of these words that are encountered in quotations and citations will not be changed.

Non-English generic terms, theoretical concepts, and ideas will be indicated with italics. Non-English proper nouns will not be italicized. Transliterated quotations will also remain unadorned.

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1 Introduction

Imagining Iran in popular film

This book seeks to treat the popular commercial cinema as both a subject of and source for modern Iranian history. I focus much of my attention on the 1960s and 1970s, the final turbulent decades of the Pahlavi era and a period in which the domestic film industry achieved levels of production and success that it had not experienced before nor has since experienced. During that time, nearly one thousand feature-length titles from Iranian studios reached cinema halls.[1] I do not attempt to provide a comprehensive accounting of *fīlmfārsī* or "Persian-film," the term that critics, fans, and industry people have used to refer to the Pahlavi-era commercial cinema. I leave that valuable work to more conventional film histories that still need writing.[2] Despite the impressive and growing body of literature in English on Iranian cinema, large gaps in our knowledge remain – especially about the films produced in the decades leading up to the Islamic Revolution of 1978–1979. I also do not attempt to write a straightforward historical narrative of modern Iranian society and politics as seen through the lens of cinema. This book does not follow a strict chronology with "important" films taken to be signposts for key events over the past century.[3] Instead, I shed light on the "imaginative universe" that filmmakers and audiences realized via popular cinema in order to make sense of social and political processes in Iran's modernization.

This study of Iranian film and history, then, differs substantially in subject material and approach from much of the existing scholarship. Critics and academics writing about Iranian cinema have focused on the art film movement, which itself emerged in the crucial decades of the 1960s and 1970s. Historically composing only a tiny fraction of the nation's cinematic output and rarely appreciated at home, Iranian art films have nevertheless established a global following over the years to become festival and art-house staples. In most film histories, the internationally oriented art cinema has served as a metaphor for Iran's largely successful encounter with Western modernity and, especially since the Islamic Revolution, an important symbol of resistance to an oppressive and "backward" regime.[4] The prevailing opinion of scholars about *fīlmfārsī* as second-rate copies of Hollywood and popular Indian films lacking any social value or political relevance – an opinion linked to broader intellectual critiques of "entertainment," "mass culture," and the "popular" – has contributed to the relative absence of these audience favorites in the same histories. A few critics have gone beyond mere dismissals to describe

the gulf between the content of popular films and the realities of viewers' lives as "escapism." According to this line of analysis, domestic studios and their audiences, especially during the commercial boom of the 1960s and 1970s, had turned a blind eye to the transformations that national development programs were triggering in Iranian society and instead sought comfort in outmoded characters and ways of life.[5] While many popular filmmakers have engaged with the past and with "tradition," I contend that they have done so not to obscure modern institutions and processes but to re-define them with the interests of their predominantly middle class viewers in mind. In writing popular films into modern Iranian history, I advocate not only for a fresh approach to the study of Iranian cinema but a rethinking of the modernity/tradition binary that has organized the historiography of the recent past.

The *fīlmfārsī* titles discussed in these chapters turned to history and historical models to represent a world that disputed some of the stated goals of "Pahlavism." I argue that such films have related the past to the modern Iranian masses in the reconfiguration and democratization of "obsolescent" courtly entertainments and devotional practices belonging to what I designate as the "Persianate" world. These films, then, could through their formal components present a potential challenge to the new values and aspirations that national leaders intended for the exemplary classes of a modernizing Iran. Of particular relevance to my analysis are cinematic re-imaginings of performances of *ghazal* lyric, popular romances, epic literature, and their mystico-religious aspects and complements.

Equally, I engage in a contextual analysis of *fīlmfārsī* titles to investigate popular conceptions of the nation-building projects of political elites in Iran. Scholars have written extensively about the multi-modal efforts of politicians and intellectuals to modernize the state and society in twentieth-century Iran, especially during the two decades between 1921 and 1941 when Riẓā Khan (1878–1944), soon to be the first Shah of the Pahlavi dynasty, dominated the political affairs of the country.[6] Some have placed particular stress on the elaboration and promotion of an official national culture and identity in the making of modern Iran.[7] Historians who have studied the various challenges made to official ideas of the nation during the Pahlavi era have focused on political, rather than cultural, history. They have privileged the viewpoints of oppositional elites, especially religious clerics, on the modernization projects undertaken at that time. Very few writers have examined the character of mass mobilizations against the official Pahlavi vision for Iran's future, except as a consequence of elite outreach to the general public. Even fewer have considered mass culture as a venue for critiques of Pahlavism.[8] The general disregard for popular culture as a subject of study partly explains this scholarly blindspot.

I submit that a close "reading" of *fīlmfārsī* titles from the 1960s and 1970s can provide access to ideas of the nation that competed with (but did not always contradict) the secular nationalist project of Pahlavi elites. Critical analysis of these films uncovers an important but rarely examined complex of beliefs and practices that have at times challenged as well as accommodated official national culture and ideas of patriotism in Pahlavi Iran. Moreover, these beliefs and practices have

not entirely lined up with the agendas of political leaders under the Islamic Republic. In their representations of modern life, *fīlmfārsī* titles framed their characters' (and audiences') reality around a popular "civil religion" that took family prosperity to be the cosmological proof of the nation and the ontological imperative of its citizens. Other mass media forms such as songs, television serials, radio sermons, rally speeches, and even poster art also contributed to this popular understanding of national life. However, this study focuses on film as a vehicle for an unofficial civil religion. Dramatic action in many popular features was organized around a conflict between the protagonists' personal and family interests, with the "fate of the nation" working for the ultimate triumph of the family as institution. What often precipitated the characters' inner conflict was erotic love, whose portrayals drew inspiration from earlier courtly and religious performative traditions. Appropriately, melodrama was the most prominent "genre" in *fīlmfārsī*, which naturally fed into many critics' claims that the popular cinema lacked any political commentary or relevance. While modernization and the changing face of life could contribute to the difficulties that film protagonists faced, state programs and their representatives hardly figured in the melodrama or its resolution. Of course, most Iranian art films made in the Pahlavi era or later have also avoided direct commentary on economic and social conditions. Critics have praised art film directors who adopted this strategy by claiming the use of political allegory in their work. By contrast, popular Pahlavi-era features that stayed away from representations of national institutions and their agents were considered escapist. However, the absence of the state in many *fīlmfārsī* titles was perhaps at once a sign of official censorship as well as of popular disengagement with official economic and political agendas. That *fīlmfārsī* heroes were often characters living on the margins of law and society and not from the exemplary modern middle classes underlined the mutual ambivalence between the state and popular cinema. Such unlikely heroes of the street may not have had a place in the modernizing society that Pahlavi elites had envisioned, but they gladly suffered exile and martyrdom for the sake of the family as nation. Like past heroic models in the literature and history of the Persianate world, they sacrificed their erotic emotions and their opportunities for personal fulfillment to prove the righteousness of their cause. The difference between *fīlmfārsī* heroes and their historical precedents was that their on-screen sacrifices were primarily in defense of the family against the countervailing forces of modernist individualism.

Although *fīlmfārsī* representations of popular Iranian civil religion drew on aspects of Islam and tradition, I argue that these films were not just another sign of a "nativist" or "anti-modern" cultural reaction to the Pahlavi national project, which scholars have most commonly identified with radical reformist Shi'ism and the Islamic Revolution. In fact, the negative attitudes of intellectuals and politicians towards the commercial film industry and its products only intensified after the Islamic Revolution, with many prominent figures in the Pahlavi-era cinema receiving lifetime bans from making films. By contrast, many of the principals in the pre-revolutionary art film movement were not subject to similar bans. The longstanding interest of elites across the ideological spectrum to suppress or

eradicate *fīlmfārsī* problematizes claims about its irrelevance and points to the potential challenge that popular films could pose to the projects of national leaders, as well as to the organization of modern Iranian history around a monolithic struggle between secularism and Islam. This challenge continues, with some of the narrative concerns and cinematic techniques most closely associated with *fīlmfārsī* remaining at the heart of what constitutes popular cinema in the Islamic Republic.

1.1 *Fīlmfārsī*, entertainment, and the popular

1.1.1 Fīlmfārsī

Fīlmfārsī has been perhaps the most frequently employed and least understood epithet for the popular commercial cinema of the Pahlavi era. The term's precise meaning and application have varied according to the user but it has had an overwhelmingly negative connotation from its earliest references to the present. Most commentators have credited the French-trained filmmaker and critic Hūshang Kāvūsī with first popularizing the term during the latter half of the 1950s in unsparing reviews of the work of the budding domestic industry. However, there is evidence of its use going back to the late 1940s in the promotion of foreign features dubbed in Persian – then simply meaning "film in Persian."[9] Of course, many of the early Iranian studios had their start in dubbing, only later expanding into film production. This peculiar line of development undoubtedly fed into critiques of the industry and its products leveled by Kāvūsī and others less than a decade later. Writing for high-circulation weeklies as well as more specialized film magazines, Kāvūsī blasted the makers of *fīlmfārsī* for their total lack of understanding of cinematic conventions. These films, he claimed, did not have a coherent structure or story and were made with only commercial interests in mind.[10] In a more recent interview, Kāvūsī has explained that during his film review career he chose the term *fīlmfārsī* to highlight two things that he considered to be lacking in much of the Iranian cinema. Like many compound words, it took on a third meaning independent of or unrelated to the words composing it. Thus, while *fīlmfārsī* may have been of film and in the Persian language, in his opinion it was neither cinema nor part of the Persian literary-artistic tradition ["Fīlmfārsī ham fīlm būd va ham Fārsī, ammā dar 'ayn-i ḥāl nah fīlm būd va nah Fārsī"].[11]

In general usage, *fīlmfārsī* did not constitute a cinematic genre as understood in Western film discourse and fan talk. It was a term of reference for the entire output of the commercial industry in the same way that "Bollywood" has been employed to describe the Hindi-language cinema of Mumbai-based commercial studios. However, the vast majority of *fīlmfārsī* titles may be categorized as contemporary social melodrama: dramatic productions set in the present day about family and class conflict, punctuated by violence (represented through action sequences) or heightened emotion (often represented through musical "interludes") and occasionally relieved by comic moments. The association of *fīlmfārsī* with the "corrupt" culture of the now extinct Pahlavi regime has not kept critics since the

Islamic Revolution from invoking the term to disparage films and filmmakers that they believe have followed the example of *fīlmfārsī* productions in their composition and style. More than thirty-five years later, *fīlmfārsī* remains relevant as a cinematic category.

At the most basic level, intellectuals writing on Iranian film have employed the term *fīlmfārsī* to mark social difference and maintain cultural hierarchies in a mass(-mediated) society.[12] It has operated as a term of exclusion – to place the popular that is beholden to the market outside of high culture, which is synonymous with pure and autonomous art. In this schema, Iranian popular commercial cinema has either been bracketed off as "mindless entertainment," a diversion for the illiterate and semi-literate classes that purportedly made up its audience, or more insidiously claimed as an ideological obstacle to the cultural, social, and political advancement of that same audience.

1.1.2 "Mass Culture" and the "Popular"

Questions of authenticity have nearly always been at the center of elite discussions of "mass culture." There is a remarkable consensus achieved on this point in modern cultural critique worldwide, despite emerging out of rather diverse social and political interests.[13] For some commentators, the products that emanated from large, faceless media concerns, including films, were not only considered illegitimate but even dangerous; they had no organic connection to the people, despite their claims to the contrary, and were instead an imposition representing antithetical interests. As commodities of a "culture industry," commercial studio films were standardized and mass-produced like the manufactures of any other industry.[14] Likewise, the ways in which people consumed them were also preprogrammed and standardized. A second perspective, while acknowledging the conditions of mass production in popular culture, viewed their forms as essentially arising from the tastes of the masses, however vulgar or banal they may be.[15] Dwight MacDonald, writing primarily about the mass-mediated culture of the United States after the Second World War, emphasized the common ground in these critiques. He claimed that the ready-made consumption of products emanating from Hollywood studios promoted a "built-in reaction" from their naïve and unrefined audiences. The films' narrative and aesthetic formulas precluded the possibility of true cognitive and emotional engagement. Consequently, the massification and democratization of culture did not warrant celebration. The forms responsible for it lacked the values and beliefs of stable, "traditional" elite or even folk culture and thus actively posed a threat to them.[16]

While those in the commercial film industry the world over may have objected to aspects of elite critiques leveled at mass culture, they have nevertheless been largely accepting of the standard terms of reference – often describing their work as "giving the people what they want."[17] Industry insiders have taken to heart that their job is to please the audience – to "entertain" them – and this assertion of populism recapitulates elite discourse in conceiving of the audience as an undifferentiated mass whose (lack of) taste dictates the product on the screen (or at

least its surface character). Such admissions in turn have become targets of satire worldwide, including in Iran (see Figure 1.1).

In recent decades, scholars have disputed earlier positions on mass culture and popular film outlined above, submitting that "the people" are neither passive consumers of cultural indoctrination nor are they unaffected by the power relations operating in the cultural field. In fact, those associated with or inspired by the Birmingham School of cultural studies have petitioned for a growing recognition of the dialogical relationship of audiences and media producers. This approach to the study of mass culture problematizes the uniformity of audiences' ideological constructions of popular forms (and, by extension, the uniformity of the audience itself) as well as uniformity in the ideological commitments of such mass-produced forms.[18]

Taking a page from the Birmingham School approach, I seek to upset the fixed certainties that have long characterized scholarly opinions of popular Iranian commercial cinema and largely suppressed serious inquiry of it, in either Persian

Figure 1.1 The *fīlmfārsī* director lures his audience with sex and music.

Source: Reprinted from *Iṭṭilā'āt* newspaper in Ḥamīd Shu'ā'ī, *Nāmāvarān-i sīnamā dar Īrān* (Tehran: Shirkat-i Hirminkū, 1976), 3: 34.

or English.[19] *Fīlmfārsī* titles were part of a complex formation of cinematic and extra-cinematic discourses and practices that may have been dominated by a specific group or set of interests but were also the result of interaction and negotiation between producers and consumers. As such, popular films in Iran were not simply exploitative of their audiences' poor tastes or simple minds; they could represent or problematize the aspirations of those who frequented them. In this way, I hope to move the discussion away from notions of passive reception and indoctrination and towards popular film as provocation, wherein the audiences' cognitive and emotional processing is taken seriously.

Perhaps the best evidence for Iranian audiences' active engagement with the popular commercial cinema is the long list of box office failures during the "golden age" of the 1960s and 1970s. Not all films that were considered to be popular or intended for the people were necessarily popular or well received. While the available box office data is spotty, there is nevertheless enough ancillary evidence to support the claim that there were more unprofitable than profitable releases, even during this hugely productive era.[20] Above all, the uneven box office track record of *fīlmfārsī* productions suggests a more discerning viewership than many observers have previously imagined. Critics have long derided the Pahlavi-era popular commercial cinema's "manipulation" of its audiences by supplementing their "second-hand" scenarios with sexual titillation, insipid musical numbers, gratuitous violence, and the glorification of the crude but honorable lives of those populating the old city quarters.[21] Yet, the formulaic elements of *fīlmfārsī* titles could not by themselves ensure success at the box office. Understanding what constituted a "good" film for the bulk of Iranian audiences in the decades following the Second World War, then, requires examining and historicizing the employment of these so-called narrative and stylistic formulas. Such an analysis not only problematizes long-held assumptions of intellectuals and politicians about the character of popular films but also about the character of their audiences.

1.1.3 Audiences and class

Muḥammad Tahāmī Nizhād has claimed that the demise of the so-called escapist commercial cinema in the late 1970s was not just the result of revolutionary upheaval but of a loss of audience. In fact, the Islamic Revolution was itself a sign of the failure of Pahlavi-era popular films.[22] From Tahāmī Nizhād's perspective, it was the poor and uneducated masses in particular who had tipped the scales against the Shah's oppressive regime. Those "village migrants, children of petty traders, laborers, and clerks, and huge swarms of the uneducated who had flooded the cities" in the decades leading up to the Revolution and had once eagerly lined up for this new form of entertainment finally came to see through the on-screen fantasies as instruments of their political oppression.[23] Unfortunately, the author's profile of the *fīlmfārsī* audience is based more on inference than evidence. His conclusions take their cue from a decades-old line of mass cultural critique that highlighted popular cinema's special appeal to the supposedly less refined and easily manipulated lower classes.

Intellectual and political elites have often dealt with the "problem" of *fīlmfārsī* by relegating it to the cultural and social margins. Consequently, the Pahlavi-era popular commercial cinema has been described as a vulgar, derivative form that was of appeal to the equally vulgar and uneducated masses. For those concerned with cultural uplift and national development, *fīlmfārsī* was a symbol of Iran's backwardness – an unfortunate stage in, or worse a regression from, society's transition to modernity.

Parvīz Ijlālī has grounded these longstanding negative assertions about *fīlmfārsī* and its viewers in psychoanalytic and sociological theories in a 2004 book about popular film and social change in Pahlavi Iran.[24] After consulting plot summaries and selected social indicators, he has determined that despite the religious "taboo" of the cinema, the supposed political conservatism of *fīlmfārsī* attracted an audience marginalized in the modernizing nation and threatened by the newly educated middle classes. Such films were little more than a diversion from the insecurities of life for the disaffected and deprived, who were comforted by the filmmakers' appropriation of familiar religious, mythological, and historical iconography. While Ijlālī has admirably acknowledged the popular cinema's engagement with the Iranian past, he has not recognized these on-screen representations of older social and cultural tropes to be new and different ways in which to represent the nation and national life; from his perspective, they were simply a form of cultural atavism.

Ijlālī has devoted considerable attention in the book to popular film representations of the *javānmard* character, a man of honor and strength from the "bazaari" classes who first appeared on screen in the mid- to late-1950s and whose immediate historical precedents can be found among the free-wheeling neighborhood rowdies [*alvāṭ*, sing. *lūṭī*] who patrolled the popular quarters during the Qājār and early Pahlavi eras. According to Ijlālī, the modern city seemingly had no place for such public-spirited men and their fraternal code. Yet they, or more commonly their contemporary residues, appeared in many titles as guarantors of female chastity and, by extension, the family. The depictions of rough *lūṭī*-style justice, especially carried out against morally corrupt and superficially Westernized [*farangī ma'āb*] dandies who led virtuous women astray, validate for the author the old-line gender, class, and patriarchal ideals that their supposedly "tradition-bound" audiences were more likely to hold.[25] He has claimed that this low-brow cinema operated as a means of social control over less-educated and lower class audiences by championing established ways of life while encouraging suspicion towards the modern educated middle classes, from among whom came some of the loudest calls for social and political reform.[26]

Ijlālī's interpretation of *fīlmfārsī* audiences has drawn on widely used but questionable film theories of character identification. He has argued that the films invariably took their heroes and settings from the older, poorer, or more congested neighborhoods of the city in identification with their primary audience, which supposedly came from similar environments.[27] Yet, it is not self-evident that viewers need to resemble or identify with the characters on screen in order to understand and enjoy the performances. Even if Ijlālī were right to conclude

that audiences identified with *fīlmfārsī* heroes, he would still need to explain how conservative, religiously inclined middle and lower class viewers came to terms with the moral ambiguities that many of the films' loutish protagonists so fond of drinking, brawling, and gambling (among other vices) often raised.

Ijlālī's narrow reading of the *javānmard* film protagonist as a historical residue and class marker has obscured how the historical figure of the *lūṭī* could be appropriated and reconfigured in the cinema to problematize life in modern Iran. Perhaps the most important aspect of what increasingly came to characterize *fīlmfārsī*-style heroism in the 1960s and early 1970s was precisely the protagonist's depiction as living on the margins of law and society. Indeed, the *javānmard* hero's outsider status often explained and elevated his selfless actions on behalf of the family, actions which could be at odds with the official interests of the modernizing state. Likewise, the inclusion of the cabaret performer as popular cinema heroine in this period was in all probability not just for the sake of titillation but also drew on the example of female, often courtly entertainers of the past whose moral ambiguity and freedom of action was echoed in a number of film depictions.[28] Past heroic models and ideals, then, may be a better explanation for the character of *fīlmfārsī* heroism than filmmakers pandering to underclass audiences on the margins of a transitional society.

Moreover, Ijlālī's claims of audience identification with on-screen characters are complicated by the class backgrounds of the creative and technical staff responsible for the popular titles of the 1960s and 1970s. He has submitted that while such professionals may have been from the modern educated middle classes, they were nevertheless acutely aware of their audiences' "traditional sensibilities."[29] This awareness undoubtedly contributed to the films' assumed manipulative effects, to which more sophisticated viewers were apparently immune. However, he has not considered whether the concerns and preoccupations at the heart of many *fīlmfārsī* titles belonged solely or even primarily to the traditional classes increasingly marginalized in a modernizing Iran. If the family was the central focus of the films and the reasoning behind their association with traditionally minded viewers, he has presented little evidence that the family was any less important to the modern exemplary middle classes. He, and other critics before him, have merely assumed that to be the case as a natural outcome of the education, professions, and life experiences of this "new" social group. The "hostility" towards certain ideas and behaviors connected with the modern, educated members of society found in the late Pahlavi-era popular cinema could similarly represent the anxieties of the filmmakers towards the perceived adverse effects of modernization on this class rather than their potential threat to the more conservative and lower-income strata. Indeed, the dangers that plagued the family in many of the better-received films of the era (e.g., crass materialism, cultural rootlessness, and moral decadence) were more directly applicable to the upwardly mobile and educated classes than they were to the tradition-bound and poor.

The overwhelming desire on the part of some to view *fīlmfārsī* as a cinema largely appealing to the poor and uneducated in Pahlavi Iran has rested on the assumption that modern identities promoted by development experts and national

leaders were at least partially successful in resolving or suppressing internal contradictions to create a harmonious relationship between the individual private citizen and the professionalizing, bureaucratizing, and industrializing nation-state. Yet I argue that Ijlālī's evidence suggests instead that the educated middle classes at the center of this "campaign" were not convinced that the formation of modern identities necessitated a clear resolution and hierarchy between private and public selves. Hence, Pahlavi-era popular features may be viewed not as the obsolete entertainment of a world in eclipse but as venues in which national identity in Iran's transitional society were problematized.

To be sure, the draw of *fīlmfārsī* productions among the modern middle classes has received further validation since the Islamic Revolution. The big hits of the Pahlavi era very much remain a "guilty pleasure," with continued sales on video to the often highly educated and affluent diaspora community. Iranian satellite television based in offshore posts such as Los Angeles, London, and Dubai has also turned to screening *fīlmfārsī* features in recent years rather than internationally acclaimed art films. The continuing popularity of Pahlavi-era films on video and satellite in exile cannot merely be due to viewer nostalgia. As Hamid Naficy has written, what has stood for "new" entertainment on exile Iranian television, namely music videos and serialized programs, has continued to draw on some of the themes and preoccupations associated with this "defunct" cinema. Their producers have, for example, claimed that the relocation of *lūṭī* characters to the "mean streets" of Los Angeles in their work has been an attempt to save these entertainment icons from destruction under the Islamic Republic.[30] In reassessing the relationship between the Pahlavi-era popular commercial cinema and Iranian audiences, I not only call into question the marginality of *fīlmfārsī* but also its exclusion from "official" definitions of national cinema in scholarly and political discourse.

1.1.4 National cinema

Politicians and intellectuals in Iran and elsewhere have frequently exploited the "external threat" of mass culture to mobilize national interests, with the reinforcement of cultural hierarchies in mind. While high cultures have long had a "cosmopolitan" character, the movement of mass culture across borders has provoked suspicion and hostility among elites.[31] As I have already suggested, a homegrown mass culture has fared no better in such judgments. Appealing to the notion of commercial cinema as mass production, opponents of *fīlmfārsī* argued that its products were nothing more than poor copies of popular foreign titles. The commercial exploitation of *fīlmfārsī* was contrasted with artisanal, individual elite and sometimes folk culture.

The rapid expansion of *fīlmfārsī* studios and audiences for their products in the 1960s precipitated efforts on the part of political and intellectual elites to appropriate Iranian cinema for themselves, rechristening it as an art form (rather than as entertainment) and authentic cultural artifact (rather than as a vehicle of cultural imperialism). The Iranian "New Wave" of the 1960s and 1970s was intended as

part of a new national culture that anchored the modernizing state, promoting and protecting its values from outside attack – for which ironically the electronic media, including film, were viewed as largely responsible. Interestingly enough, the native films that Iranian elites connected with this national cinema movement looked in particular to post-World War II Italian neo-realism for their inspiration, though sometimes indirectly through other Third World art cinemas, such as the "Parallel Cinema" movement of India.[32] Art filmmakers then frequently rejected native theatricality, professional storytelling, and musical performance as shallow and derivative. Their films instead incorporated a "slice of life" documentary realism, unscripted dialogue, simple camera work, and non-professional actors. Indeed, in following a "world cinema" model worked out on the festival circuit, Iranian art filmmakers and their patrons would reject an earlier Persianate cosmopolitan culture, which instead enriched the popular commercial cinema, for a modernist cosmopolitanism emanating from the West. The showcases for this "alternative" cinema were state television and government-sponsored events such as the annual Shiraz Festival of Arts [Jashn-i Hunar-i Shīrāz] (1967–1977) and Tehran International Film Festival [Jashnvārah-i Bayn al-Milalī-i Sīnamā-yi Tihrān] (1972–1977).[33] While New Wave artists received substantial governmental support in the late Pahlavi era, the commercial studios faced heavy taxes and their products were during much of the late Pahlavi era consigned to smaller and less lucrative second- and third-class theaters. New Wave films were largely commercial failures in spite of official help, including the patronage of the Queen, and international recognition.[34] Moreover, some of the products of this art cinema movement would eventually garner as much controversy from official circles as local and foreign studio features – highlighting in the process the problems of authorship that the film medium had posed.[35]

Since the Revolution, governmental and quasi-governmental organizations have played an even more prominent role in film production. Interestingly, this official interest has contributed to the growing profile of Iranian art cinema overseas, especially since the end of the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988). Gradual economic recovery and a shift to more pragmatic politics under presidents ʿAlī Akbar Rafsanjānī (1989–1997) and Muḥammad Khātamī (1997–2005) helped to fuel the production of dozens of titles destined for international screenings. Without a hint of irony, foreign critics praised this wave of festival entries from Iran for "lifting the veil" on a closed society and presenting starkly "individual" stories in a country where ideological conformity was seemingly demanded from all. The swift rise of Iranian films and filmmakers on the international film festival and art-house circuit also elicited a mini-boom in academic interest in Iranian cinema. An edited volume published in 2002, entitled *The New Iranian Cinema: Politics, Representation, and Identity*, arguably inaugurated this flurry of scholarship.[36] In the introduction to the volume, Richard Tapper has noted that the "innovative" and "exciting" films of the 1990s were a revival of the aforementioned culturally distinctive and politically engaged "New Iranian Cinema" that had taken form with the support of state organs during the final troubled years of Pahlavi rule. The fact that New Iranian Cinema returned in the 1990s under a "puritanical"

and "totalitarian" Islamic Republic was hailed as a testament to the uncompromising artists behind it and the durability of the "homegrown" artistic traditions that helped to inspire it.[37] Nearly all academic treatments of the Iranian cinema published since 2002 have chosen to work within the conceptual boundaries that Tapper has laid out. While significant differences have emerged in this literature in terms of theoretical and methodological approach, the subject of analysis has been remarkably uniform: the internationally recognized art cinema of the post-Iraq War era.[38]

This book problematizes the narrow reading of Iranian national cinema in much of the recent scholarship as largely composed of post-revolutionary art films. Those writing about the globally recognized art cinema have knowingly and unknowingly perpetuated longstanding elitist dismissals of much of the Iranian film catalog as cheap knock-offs of foreign films or political propaganda. In the process, they have also dismissed Iranian audiences at home, who have largely avoided titles connected with New Iranian Cinema when they have been permitted theatrical release in Iran. In fact, when critics and academics have made claims about this art film movement as a national cinema, they have invariably highlighted its appeal to the modernist sensibilities of Western art-house audiences. The success of Iranian art films abroad has, thus, operated as a symbol of Iranian national "progress" for some intellectuals and politicians. Likewise, the "auteur" directors whose personal vision has supposedly given life to these films have become the physical representatives of that progress. By de-marginalizing *fīlmfārsī* as mere entertainment or propaganda, this book asks whether its popularity was at least in part a challenge to such official ideas of national progress and national culture.

1.1.5 "Entertainment" and film analysis

At the heart of much of the critical discourse internationally on film has been a division between "art" and "entertainment." The work of art from this perspective is a creative break from the mundane. By contrast, entertainment is a potentially deleterious distraction from real life. The character of art and entertainment is in turn claimed to be universal. My interest in popular films and their reception in Iran is partly a challenge to this unquestioned diminution and suppression of popular features as entertainment [*sargarmī*] among some intellectuals. Richard Dyer has written that what is obscured in much of contemporary cultural critique is an understanding of the term "entertainment" in mass society.[39] Many have simply assumed its constituents and its effects. To be sure, much of what is referred to as entertainment today is a product of the electronic media and of the businesses, organizations, and professionals working in these technologies. Certainly, the prevailing definitions of entertainment owe more to industry ideas about the pleasures of their products and to whom those pleasures are directed rather than in what consumers take pleasure. Yet, Dyer has argued that this fact does not necessarily lead to the conclusion that entertainment is performing a purely ideological function in modern society. Rather, the very nature of modern entertainment forms as well as the

organization of their production (as a complex collaboration of skill, imagination, and financing) helps to work against their effective dissemination as ideology.[40] Moreover, the role of the consumer, though subordinate, cannot be ignored in the process of entertainment.

The common description of entertainment in elite discourse has been as a diversion, an escape for the mind from the realities and obligations of day-to-day life – and, as such, posing the risk of disengagement. By contrast, Dyer has contended that it is precisely the increasing mindlessness and drudgery of modern work and life that drive the forms that entertainment has taken over the past century and the purposes to which people have put them. Utopianism has been a central concern of such entertainments, with popular film especially important in this regard: imagining how life was or might be (better) and how such a life might be realized now.[41] It is worth emphasizing that these experiences of the world as it could be are not merely flights of fancy, but their opposite. Representations of utopias in mass entertainments are invariably rooted in and rely on our assumptions and attitudes about the world as it is, which vary across time and space. Entertainment is thus not a universal experience as it is often assumed but historically and culturally situated, "temporarily providing, but also in the process defining, happiness" for the cultural world within which it arises.[42]

Martin Barker has similarly asked about how films relate to their world in formulating his audience-centered approach to film analysis, which builds on the cognitivist models pioneered by David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson.[43] Barker's "pro-filmic" approach rejects the anti-empiricism of psychoanalysis and "effects" theory and instead rests on the assumption that audiences engage with, rather than are seduced by, films. At the center of that engagement is the film's creation of an imaginative universe, with its own rules and organizing principles. Barker has asserted that what audiences witness on the screen is not a literal reflection of reality. It is instead a representational form of which the viewer is quite aware. Consequently, "[a] film cannot be 'true' or 'false', or 'distorted', because it does not follow real-world rules. Nor can films produce direct behavioural effects on their audiences."[44] Film, and art more generally from Barker's perspective, has often functioned to defamiliarize the real world rather than deny it, to show aspects of it in ways that force viewers to consider them anew – sometimes to their dismay. In this respect, there is no difference between representations of the "real" and the fictional since both use the same symbols to recognize and (re-) create the world. This interaction with the imaginative universe of the film presupposes what Barker has called the "involved, motivated spectator," who has an understanding of the conventions employed by a particular film culture and of the social and historical context in which that film culture operates.[45] With these prior skills and knowledge, he or she can participate in the action on screen – including character behavior and emotions, scene and sequence transitions, camera angles, shifts in time and place, color patterns, and music – to interpret the film as a whole and in its various parts. Spectator interpretations can have both literal and metaphorical dimensions and can take place before, during, and after the viewing. Of course, Barker has rightly pointed out that the spectator may refuse or fail to

perform this presumed role in the viewing of a film. However, without such an engagement it also becomes difficult to imagine how the film could be entertaining. At the same time, not all film entertainment may necessarily be entertaining to all those who take up the role of the involved, motivated spectator. Before moving on to case studies, Barker has provided in summary three questions that he has intended to answer in his analysis: "What kind of imaginative universe is on offer in each case? How does it invite and structure our possible involvements? And therefore in what way does it offer itself to the rest of our lives?"[46] The analysis of *fīlmfārsī* titles offered in the following chapters will also seek answers to these questions in an effort to move beyond the commonplace descriptions of the films and their audiences as "mindless entertainment." But what composed the imaginative universe of the Pahlavi-era popular cinema? How did those screen projections and audiences' enjoyment of them engage with imaginative experiences from the past?

1.2 Remaking traditions for the modern Iranian nation

The approach outlined above for this study of *fīlmfārsī* features calls into question their decontextualization as mere entertainment or as knock-offs of Hollywood or popular Indian cinema inviting similar, superficial reactions from audiences. However, it also takes aim at a corresponding dehistoricization of popular cinema in Pahlavi Iran that is found in standard accounts of the form. By this, I mean that critics and academics by and large have either treated such films as obscure signs of the inevitable transition to a modern rational society, politics and economy in Iran or, more commonly, as a remnant of antiquated beliefs and practices in an increasingly rationalizing Iranian state and society. In both cases, the films and their audiences are denied any historical relevance or agency independent of this grand narrative of development. The unspoken subject of this non-history is, instead, the immaterial and changeless "substance" of human reason. A major argument presented here is that popular film practices in Iran belong to a tradition still active in the modern world. I submit that some *fīlmfārsī* titles and those responsible for them attempted to orient themselves in relation to the cultural and intellectual history of Iran and its periphery. Pahlavi-era filmed entertainments thus took up the icons and imagery of the past to represent and problematize official ideas of a modernizing, secularizing Iranian nation.

1.2.1 Transformative media

There has always been a sense among those in the film industry, wherever they may be, that the experience of film and filmmaking somehow transcends mundane existence. Likewise, the people who make up this film world have been viewed and have viewed themselves as special. The phenomenon of stardom has perhaps been the most powerful argument for and example of this broad recognition of film's unique attributes in comparison to other and earlier art forms.[47] From the beginnings of feature film production in Europe and the United States, there was a