
The title of Saeed Zeydabadi-Nejad’s book ‘The Politics of Iranian Cinema’ in fact defines the book’s central thesis: the idea that ‘politics in Iran has been effectively inseparable from culture in its recent history’ (p1), and cinema is one of the most suitable forms of culture for exploring the strong link between politics and culture in the country. To expound upon his central thesis, Zeydabadi-Nejad explores several different ideas, namely the mechanisms through which the link between politics and cinema is reinforced in post-revolutionary Iran, the role of state ideology and state dictates in ‘Islamicizing’ cinema, and what it means for cinema to be Islamicized.

The author successfully outlines and defines the process of the politicization of cinema over a 30 year period, starting with the revolution (1978-79), followed by the period of Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988) and the growth and development of the reformist movement, which spanned Mohammad Khatami’s two terms as President between 1997 and 2005. In each of the chapters, the book concentrates on how Iranian cinema has been embroiled in politics and the state’s ruling ideology and cultural policies. The political situation in Iran has undergone considerable change since the election of the conservative Mahmood Ahmadinejad as President in 2005, in particular since his re-election in the disputed elections of 2009. The volatile changes in the political situation in the country have had considerable impact on culture and cinema in particular. As a result, one cannot help but notice the need for further exploration and explanation of the changes that have taken place in the field of state control over cinema since 2005.

This book consists of five clear chapters, a conclusion, bibliography and filmography. It is based on fieldwork the author carried out for his doctoral dissertation at the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London in 2003 and 2004. In the first chapter, the author offers an overview and expounds upon his theoretical framework. In the second, he explores the means and mechanisms used by the State to control Iranian cinema, focusing on how censorship is used by the authorities to control the political content of Iranian films, as well as the complex negotiations undertaken between the authorities and the filmmakers to get past the barriers imposed. Aside from being highly informative, this chapter sets the scene for the next three as it outlines and describes the political and cultural situation of each historical era highlighted in the book, as well as defining the specific situation regarding the various authorities in power and their different views and approaches to censorship during each of these eras.

In the third chapter, the author examines the politics of ‘social films’ in relation to the reformist movement, their involvement in raising political consciousness, and the methods used by film-makers and cinema-goers in Iran to resist the regime’s attempts at controlling the political contents of film; as such he investigates whether or not the fate of social films and the reform movement were directly related to one another. The author follows this discussion...
through analysis of four prominent and controversial ‘social films’ as nodes of media activity where the discourses of the producers, the controls exerted by the censors, and the discourses of the audiences intersect. He also backs up his discussion and analysis through interviews with the filmmakers in which they describe state regulatory processes, as well as through ‘interpretive’ discussions with informants (individuals or groups of people with whom the author watched/ discussed the films).

The fourth chapter is dedicated to ‘women’s films’. In this chapter, the author appraises the negotiation of gender around controversial ‘women’s films’. Some of the issues he examines regarding women’s films include the challenge the films pose to patriarchal values and institutions in society, whether women’s films help raise feminist consciousness, and if the characters in the films are regarded as role models or whether female views ‘try on’ the film characters’ identities. He also looks at the ‘performative’ role of gender as enunciated by Judith Butler in relation to Iranian cinema. In this chapter, as in the previous, the author offers analysis of two ‘women’s films’, and backs up his analysis through interviews with the filmmakers and through ‘interpretive’ discussions with informants with whom the author watches and discusses the films.

What is of particular interest regarding chapters three and four is that, unlike other books studying Iranian film in the post-revolutionary era, the author does not rely on ‘art’ and ‘intellectual’ films alone. Several of the films appraised are produced by individuals who are considered to be mainstream Iranian film-makers, such as Ebrahim Hatami-kia and Tahmine Milani. It is refreshing to see comment on mainstream film-makers who have largely been ignored or dismissed in studies on post-revolutionary Iranian film to date.

The book’s last chapter focuses on Iranian ‘art’ and ‘intellectual’ films by discussing the implications of the international prominence of Iranian cinema. Some of the issues discussed in this chapter include the implications of the global success of Iranian cinema on the question of political engagement and the discourse of Iranian identity inside the country as well as among the diaspora living abroad. As with previous chapters, the arguments presented are backed up and reinforced through interviews with critics and audiences.

Overall, the book is informative and interesting for all who are interested in Iranian films and ethnographic studies of politics and culture in Iran. It is a welcome addition to the foray books available on the subject of Iranian films, politics and the role of state ideology and censorship on cinema in Iran.

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