



Shiva Rahbaran. Iranian Cinema Uncensored: Contemporary Film-Makers since the Islamic Revolution

Antony Wynn

To cite this article: Antony Wynn (2017) Shiva Rahbaran. Iranian Cinema Uncensored: Contemporary Film-Makers since the Islamic Revolution, Asian Affairs, 48:1, 137-138, DOI: 10.1080/03068374.2017.1268836

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03068374.2017.1268836>



Published online: 01 Feb 2017.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 3



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Shiva Rahbaran. *Iranian Cinema Uncensored: Contemporary Film-Makers since the Islamic Revolution.* I. B. Tauris, London, 2016. pp. xx + 268. Notes. Index. Hb. £69. ISBN 9 7817 8453 4172. Pb. £17.99. ISBN 9 7817 8453 4189

The recent deluge of obituaries in the world press for the late Iranian film director Abbas Kiarostami illustrates the success of Iranian cinema over the last 30 years. In the time of the Shah, Iranian cinema was heavily censored, and reduced to mediocrity. Only one film of acknowledged lasting note, *The Cow*, was made during that time.

After the death of Khomeini, cinema was encouraged, but with very strict constraints: no unveiled women, no politics, and no criticism of the ruling authorities. Directors had to submit their scripts to the Ministry of Islamic Culture and Guidance to obtain permits to begin filming. In spite of this, or perhaps because of it, a new wave of creative film-making broke upon the world, winning prizes all over Europe. Western film critics, surprised by the creativity of these new films, came up with the platitudinous theory that it was these very restrictions that had engendered such creativity.

Shiva Rahbaran has interviewed ten of the most famous contemporary Iranian film directors to ask them how they achieved what they did in the face of censorship and to pose the control/creativity question. Her first subject is Mohammad Beheshti, who is not a director, but the former head of the Farabi Cinema Foundation, which provided funding for film makers and tried to hold the ring between the more controlling elements of the Islamic government intent on banning cinema altogether, and the directors who wanted to make decent films. It was his highly skilled, subtle and tactful diplomatic tightrope-walking that ensured the survival of the new directors, even though they bridled at the restrictions that he insisted they had to accept. His justification for keeping women veiled at all times is illuminating. In the old cinema, he said, women were no more than sex objects being fought over by men, and they were depicted as no better than they should be. This was demeaning, he said: by keeping women respectably veiled, they had to be depicted as characters in their own right and with their own dignity. Many of them were shown to be very powerful women and this, he maintained, was a way to their liberation. The survival of Persian civilisation through centuries of invasion by Arabs, Turks, Mongols and Afghans depended on its poets and artists bending like willows in the wind.

There is no space here to discuss every interview, all of which are illuminating, but most of Rahbaran's subjects maintain that the New Wave of Iranian cinema had in fact started in the 1970s with *The Cow* and one or two other films. According to this argument, the Revolution, therefore, interrupted a new creativity. It was only the appreciation of the new films in the West that persuaded the authorities to allow them to be made. Ironically perhaps, this meant that censoring bureaucrats from the Ministry of Islamic Guidance found good reason to attend the Cannes film festivals with the Iranian directors and actors, where they could inform themselves more fully about the debauched culture from which it was their duty to protect their citizens.

ANTONY WYNN © 2017

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03068374.2017.1268836>

J. E. Peterson (ed). *The Emergence of the Gulf States: Studies in Modern History*. Bloomsbury Academic, London, 2016. pp. xv + 388. Maps. Tables. Graphs. Illust. Notes. Bibliog. Glossary. Chronology. Index. Hb. £120. ISBN 9 7814 7258 7602

This book has been a collective venture steered by four advisory editors – Bernard Haykel, Frauke Heard-Bey, Mohammed al-Muqadam and James Piscatori – and with support from the Altajir Trust. Each of the 11 essays is thorough and thought-provoking.

The contributors are looking at the Gulf as a whole – the Iranian littoral as well as the Arabian. (Incidentally it is noted that the rather tiresome issue as to whether it is the 'Persian' Gulf or the 'Arabian' Gulf only dates from the 1950s when President Abdul Nasser of Egypt challenged the received term of 'Persian Gulf'.) The essays cover political history, international relations, archaeology, social and economic history, linguistics, culture, dress and contemporary politics. It is a pioneering work and several general themes emerge.

Until the 20th century the Gulf was not a frontier between the Arab world and Iran. The two sides were intimately linked – culturally, socially and demographically. Indeed the Gulf was one inlet of the Indian Ocean which had its own distinctive cultural history. Kuwait, Aden, Mombasa and Karachi had more in common than each had with the landmasses behind them. People on the shores of the Gulf looked outward and