



CINEJ CINEMA JOURNAL

ISSN 2159-2411 (PRINT) ISSN 2158-8724 (ONLINE)

Review of Allegory in Iranian Cinema: The Aesthetics of Poetry and Resistance

Negar Taymoorzadeh, New York University

negar.taymoorzadeh@nyu.edu

Volume 8.2 (2020) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2020.293 | <http://cinej.pitt.edu>

Book Review

Michelle Langford, *Allegory in Iranian Cinema: The Aesthetics of Poetry and Resistance*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019. xiii + 278 pp. ISBN 9781780762982



New articles in this journal are licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 United States License.



This journal is published by the [University Library System](#) of the [University of Pittsburgh](#) as part of its [D-Scribe Digital Publishing Program](#) and is cosponsored by the [University of Pittsburgh Press](#)



*Review of Allegory in Iranian Cinema:
The Aesthetics of Poetry and Resistance*
Negar Taymoorzadeh

Michelle Langford's compelling study provides a welcome and much needed addition to the existing scholarship on Iranian Cinema as well as on allegorical aesthetics beyond the Iranian case. Privileging extended close readings of chosen films over a comprehensive account of allegory in Iranian Cinema, Langford's monograph traces allegorical aesthetics chronologically throughout the history of Iran's cinema. Through a careful selection of films, Langford not only provides a fresh reading of a number of films but also employs these films as a ground on which to theorize cinematic allegory. Going beyond an understanding of allegory as an artistic strategy to evade censorship, Langford develops an understanding of allegorical aesthetics as both, a mode of expression and a mode of interpretation.

Throughout six chapters, beginning with the early silent days of Iranian Cinema and ending with Asghar Farhadi's *About Elly* (2009), Langford mobilizes theoretical concepts developed by a wide range of thinkers such as Walter Benjamin, Bertolt Brecht, Gilles Deleuze, Vivian Sobchack, and Pier Paolo Pasolini, while drawing on the rich tradition of allegorical aesthetics in Persian literature and poetry. Combining textual and contextual readings of films across genres and styles, each chapter takes one or more films as case studies and sheds light on the way in which allegory

simultaneously functions as an interpretative mode and an aesthetic strategy. Thread through all the chapters is the idea that allegory may be deployed to support as well as resist dominant state ideology.

The first chapter offers an insightful allegorical reading of Ovanes Ohanian's *Mr. Haji the Movie Actor* (1933) as a self-reflexive film that allegorizes the role of cinema within the larger modernization project thereby aligning with the sociopolitical agenda of the Pahlavi era. The chapter then moves on to several New Wave films of the 1960s and 1970s and persuasively demonstrates how these films through a multifaceted use of allegory break with dominant aesthetics and offer a scathing critique of the modernizing project. The following chapter investigates the allegorical value of children and ranges from the absent child in Kamran Shirdel's *The Night It Rained ... or the Epic of the Gorgan Village Boy* (1967) which forms part of an allegorical palimpsest, to the didactic post-revolutionary allegory employed in Majid Majidi's *Children of Heaven* (1997), and ends with Jafar Panahi's *The Mirror* (1997) in which a girl's traversal of Tehran becomes a political allegory pointing at the tumultuous history of a city in which public space has been purified according to state ideology. The third chapter, then, explores the way in which the place of women in Iranian cinema and society may be allegorized. Focusing solely on Marzieh Meshkini's *The Day I became a Woman* (2000), Langford offers a reading of this film as an allegory of Iranian cinema and its limitations by censorship rules. Here, Allegoric

aesthetics allow for affective exchanges between film and viewer resonating with a conception of becoming-woman put forward by feminist theory. Analyzing poetic moments of Mohsen Makhmalbaf's *A Time For Love* (1990) and Majd Majidi's *Baran* (1999), Langford, in her fourth chapter, explores love poetry as a cinematic form and coins the term 'cinematic ghazal', which she brings into a productive conversation with Pasolini's reflections on the cinema of poetry and Vivian Sobchak's cinesthetic mode of spectatorship. The fifth chapter further explores allegorical connections between character, viewer, and nation in the context of the Iran-Iraq war. Juxtaposing Rakhshan Bani-Etemad and Mohsen Abdelvahab's *Gilaneh* (2005) and two films belonging to the so-called Cinema of the Sacred Defense, the author offers an insightful analysis of allegories around soil, gender, and territory and shows that in *Gilaneh* these allegories establish a matriotic perspective that refuses the tendency of sacred defense films to employ allegory for the purpose of beautifying, spiritualizing, and idealizing 'martyrdom'. The final chapter presents a fresh allegorical reading of Asghar Farhadi's *About Elly* as a Trauerspiel (mourning play) as theorized by Walter Benjamin. Langford here persuasively contends that the film's collective protagonist emblemizes a generation born around the time of the revolution desiring joy and freedom but forced into a state of mourning by the narrative. The film, she contends, captures the discontent and disillusionment which soon after would spill out into the streets. Observing a shift towards

more direct modes of cinematic expression in the decade since 2009, Langford's study of allegory in Iranian cinema ends with *About Elly*.

Convincingly argued and beautifully written, each chapter forms a coherent unit by itself. As a whole, they provide a nuanced and rich engagement with allegorical aesthetics in Iranian Cinema and beyond, that will be of utmost importance to scholars and students in the field

Negar Taymoorzadeh, PhD Candidate
Department of Cinema Studies,
New York University
negar.taymoorzadeh@nyu.edu