

Introduction

A Klee painting named *Angelus Novus* shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.

Walter Benjamin, *On the Concept of History*¹

The book at hand is a study of Iran's experience of modernity through cinema from its inception in Iran in the early 1900s to the Iranian Revolution of 1979. Iranian modernity in the early twentieth century was inadvertently tied to socio-cultural and political conditions that evoked cosmopolitan practices and experiences – conditions that cinema, as a modern technology and space that allowed for the interaction of cultures and transformation of identities, intensified and transfigured in the decades that followed. As a history of cinematic modernity, then, this book offers a promising way to link cosmopolitanism to the ethos of modernity in Iran. "Cinematic modernity" is a term that I use to denote the kind of modernity that was shaped by the technology of cinema, the space that it fostered and the visual content that it projected. It is also used to highlight the societal transformations that allowed for cinema's transfiguration (both in its filmic content and

¹ Thesis IX in Walter Benjamin's *On the Concept of History*, often referred to as *Theses on the Philosophy of History*. See Thesis IX in Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings: On the Concept of History*, vol. 4: 1938–1940 (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003).

spatial form), and the imaginations that cinema's morphogenesis conjured from the turn of the twentieth century to the late 1970s.

Similar to what has been argued for early cinema in the West, in early twentieth-century Iran, film and screening spaces were implicated in a temporality that – similar to Walter Benjamin's description of *Angelus Novus* – was propelled into the future, while its gaze was toward an ever-present past. This intrinsic cinematic temporality, like the illusion of a continuous image created through the fast-paced passing of celluloid frames, evokes Marx's description of modernity, "all that is solid melts into air."² The novelty of the technology of the cinematograph that not only embodied speed and depicted movement, but also portrayed images that had previously been inaccessible, the new spaces of sociability that it facilitated, as well as the new imaginaries that it prompted, all allude to the temporality, the "new time," that cinema engendered in its early years. It was through the sensation-ally felt everyday changes brought about by this phenomenon in the "new time" that urban Iranians further experienced modernity.

In the field of Iranian Studies, cinema's extrinsic temporality – that is, the periodicity of the activities and culture surrounding cinema – has been almost fully overlooked, and has instead been overdetermined by the country's political and economic periodicity. Iran's geopolitical significance in the region, the repeated intervention of international powers in its domestic and international policies, years of political turmoil, social movements and revolutions have all facilitated conventional historical narratives that explain social and cultural developments in terms of Iran's political history. Such a homogenous conception of historical time, therefore, does not differentiate between the temporality of the political from the temporality of the cultural. What is at stake in this "homogenous time" is the autonomy of cultural temporality. Following Nietzsche in writing against a "monumental narrative," that is, a history that forgets the visible burden of

² "All fixed, fast frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned." Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Communist Manifesto* (New York: New York Labor News Co., 1908), section 1, para. 18, accessed August 24, 2014, <http://web.b.ebscohost.com.myaccess.library.utoronto.ca/ehost/ebookviewer/ebook/bmxlYmtfXzEwODYxOTlfX0FO0?sid=6556af4e-22d3-45db-abc3-4ebc8160dbd3@sessionmgr113&vid=3&format=EK&lpid=np-1&rid=0>.

the past by selectively recollecting the past based on present circumstances, I contend that the conventional “history” of pre-revolutionary cinema has been altered not only by the politics of the present, but also by an overarching political history. John Orr argues for viewing modern artworks, including films, as “processes which come into being in a Nietzschean sense by coming *back* into being,” and “which move forward by echoing the past.”³ My attempt in this project has been to capture the echoes of the past by investigating ruptures and continuities in the history of pre-revolutionary cinema, independent from and yet connected to socio-political conditions that fashioned them. Upholding a heterogeneous conception of history that examines multiple layers of time, the book at hand studies cinema from the vantage point of cinematic temporality; in doing so, it unearths cinema’s autonomous history in terms of reception, propagation, institutionalisation and industrial transformations, and then explores this history in relation to the multiple layers of social and political events that, at times, shaped cinema’s morphogenesis.

The basic tenet of modernity as self-confrontation signals a transformative condition. Most scholars of modern Iran have located Iranian modernity in the encounter of Iranians with the Persian translation of works by Western philosophers such as Descartes in the latter half of the nineteenth century, or alternatively in the encounters of Iranians with their “others” through political strife.⁴ Some scholars argue for an importation of a wholesale “modernity” from the West or, alternatively, allude to the existence of an abstract form of modernity, to which

³ John Orr, *Cinema and Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993), 1 (emphasis in the original).

⁴ For example, Mehrzad Boroujerdi argues for a modernity that was shaped by Iranian intellectuals through their consultation of European texts toward the end of the nineteenth century. See Mehrzad Boroujerdi, *Iranian Intellectuals and the West: The Tormented Triumph of Nativism* (Syracuse University Press, 1996). Ramin Jahanbegloo contends Iranian modernity to have been shaped through the semi-colonisation of the country. See Ramin Jahanbegloo, “Introduction,” in Ramin Jahanbegloo (ed.), *Iran: Between Tradition and Modernity* (Toronto: Lexington Books, 2004). Farzin Vahdat contends for the shaping of Iranian modernity through the encounters of Iranian intellectuals with Western modernity in the mid nineteenth century through Russian and British imperialism. He considers the experience of Iranian modernity to have been in terms of a philosophical dilemma informed of the works of Kant and Hegel. See Farzin Vahdat, *God and Juggernaut: Iran’s Intellectual Encounter with Modernity* (Syracuse University Press, 2002).

Iranian intellectuals found access from the early nineteenth to the early twentieth centuries.⁵ In such scholarship, a concentration on philosophical and cultural notions of rationality, secularism and individualism compels understandings of modernity that situate its origins in the West, and theorises its “arrival” in Iran as a belated phenomenon. In this study, I investigate modernity in local material conditions of everyday life and posit it as part of a simultaneous “global process” that allowed for the “hybridisation of cultures” and refashioning of “national selves.”⁶

Considering modernity not as a well-defined period marked by conditions of Western modernity (i.e. industrialisation), but as a futural ethos that hinged upon various and wide-ranging societal transformations that began in nineteenth-century Iran, one comes to discover a close relationship between cinema and Iranian vernacular modernity. In the early twentieth century, Iran was already undergoing societal transformations that can be interpreted within the larger understandings of multiple alternative modernities – the idea that modernity unfolds within specific cultural contexts and that “different starting points for the transition to modernity lead to different outcomes.”⁷ The establishment of new public spaces, such as hotels, theatres, public squares and reading houses, as well as the paving of roads and the beautification of streets, exposed unprecedented sights, practices and cultural modes in urban centres. During this period of transformation, cinema’s novel site of sociability, its “self-transforming” character, its “inherent and ruthless dynamisms,”⁸ and its fascination with speed and movement, contributed significantly to the experience of novelty and change in urban centres such as Tehran.

An integral part of the experience of modernity in Tehran, as I demonstrate in the following chapters, was social cosmopolitanism. Following Gerrard Delanty, social cosmopolitanism refers to the social world shaped through cultural modes of mediation, created out of the

⁵ Hamid Dabashi, for instance, sees modernity as a project (involving the rise of the bourgeoisie, enlightenment, and Industrial Revolution) to which Iranians were exposed through the cinema screen. See Hamid Dabashi, *Close Up: Iranian Cinema, Past, Present, and Future* (London: Verso, 2001), 15.

⁶ Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi, *Refashioning Iran: Orientalism, Occidentalism, and Historiography* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), x.

⁷ Dilip Parameshwar Goankar, “On Alternative Modernities,” in Dilip Parameshwar Goankar (ed.), *Alternative Modernities* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 17.

⁸ Orr, *Cinema and Modernity*, 1.

encounters and dialogue of the local with the global in “moments of world openness.”⁹ An empire at the turn of the century, Iran was home to various ethnic groups such as (Azerbaijani) Turks, Kurds, Lurs, Baluchis and Arabs and different religious communities, such as Muslims, Jews, Zoroastrians and Christians, who lived under the sovereignty of the Persian Empire. Nevertheless, toward the end of the nineteenth century and in the early twentieth century, ever-increasing numbers of war-ridden neighbouring communities chose Iran as their new national home, while a large number of Iranian merchants, political figures, students, journalists and workers also travelled back and forth to the neighbouring regions and beyond. Many members of ethnic, religious and linguistic groups, such as Armenian, Azerbaijani, Georgian and Russian communities, along with Indian, American, French, German and British peoples, congregated in Tehran. The aforementioned groups conceived the growing urban centre as either a safe haven from socio-political pressures that had compelled them to migrate from the empires or newly founded states in which they previously resided, or as a suitable centre for cultural and commercial activities, or alternatively as a fertile locus for the actualisation of colonial and imperial aspirations. The increased assembly and interaction of these communities in Tehran turned the city into a diasporic hub of highly diverse national, ethnic, religious and linguistic communities. I call Tehran “diasporic” to highlight it as a “site for mixed and hybrid identities”; to bring to the foreground the conditions made possible for “mobility and mobilisation,” “trade and merchants,” “migrants and diasporas” and “travellers and communication,”¹⁰ conditions that allowed for novel encounters and practices. The social and cultural exchanges of diverse groups led to the formation of experiences that, following Stuart Hall, could only be defined “by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of ‘identity’ which lives through, not despite, difference; by *hybridity*.”¹¹ The diasporic communities who resided in Tehran had

⁹ Gerrard Delanty, “The Cosmopolitan Imagination: Critical Cosmopolitanism and Social Theory,” *British Journal of Sociology* 57(1) (2006): 27.

¹⁰ Michael Geyer and Charles Bright, “World History in a Global Age,” *American Historical Review* 100(4) (October 1995): 1040.

¹¹ Stuart Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” in Padmini Mongia (ed.), *Contemporary Postcolonial Theory: A Reader* (London: Arnold, 1996), 120 (emphasis in the original).

diverse, urban, middle-class cultural habits which included a vigorous engagement with newspapers, photography, theatre, music gatherings, conferences and charity events – societal conventions that further contributed to the city’s cultural assortment at the turn of the century. Such social and cultural heterogeneity, to borrow from Gerrard Delanty, was not reducible to “cultural diversity,” but was a “product of transnational movements” of people, cultures and ideas, and was marked by “hybridity.”¹²

I choose Tehran as the site of my social and cinematic analysis largely because it was arguably the Bombay of Bollywood or Hindi Cinema. It was the location of many of the sustained film productions that began in the late 1940s, as well as the hub for the publication of film journals, the organisation of film festivals and cinematic activities that shaped the “national” cinema of the country. Furthermore, as mentioned above, it hosted a large number of people from different ethno-religious and cultural groups, and facilitated “geographies of coexistence,”¹³ which all together conjured conditions of social cosmopolitanism in the city and beyond.

When considering its connection to early-twentieth-century societal changes in Tehran, cinema proves to be an ideal form to investigate cosmopolitanism. Early cinematograph owners and operators were members of diasporic communities and/or merchants, who by virtue of their trade and travels were informed of the latest technological devices and gadgets outside Iran. The early cinematographic screenings organised by these trendsetters in urban districts facilitated interactions between Tehran’s diverse communities. Moreover, the images projected by films provided opportunities to encounter and register difference. Cinema’s technology, moreover, allowed for the articulation of local experiences that could speak on a global level. As a cultural “site of tension,” a “space of new dynamics, interactive moments, and conflicting principles and orientations,”¹⁴ a site where traumas of

¹² Delanty, “The Cosmopolitan Imagination,” 16.

¹³ Asef Bayat, *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East* (Stanford University Press, 2010), 187.

¹⁴ In his book, Gerrard Delanty describes cosmopolitanism as a “site of tension” and “a space of new dynamics, interactive moments, and conflicting principles and orientations,” but his conception correlates with my arguments for cinema in Iran, and for that reason I used the same wording to theorise cinema as a cosmopolitan space in early-twentieth-century Iran. See Delanty, “The Cosmopolitan Imagination,” 15.

and negotiations with modernity could be recorded and staged, early cinema opened new avenues to perceive the world and understand the self. This quality of cinema is indicative of its “reflexive relation” with Iranian cosmopolitan modernity, especially in the context of early-twentieth-century Tehran.¹⁵

In European and North American contexts where vigorous film industries existed, the year 1915 is considered as the boundary that terminates the period denoted by the term “early” in early cinema. Such periodisations have led to a disregard for cinematic practices outside those geographic borderlines. To account for these shortcomings, scholars have recently acknowledged the uneven development of cinema on a global level and have called for a re-evaluation and expansion of the period.¹⁶ The conditions of filmmaking and film exhibition in cities across Iran where early cinema spaces, presentation practices and distribution networks “constantly comingled past and present, challenging any singular timeline of film’s development,” beg us to consider early cinematic practices to have surpassed the year 1915.¹⁷ In this book, I consider early cinematic practices to have endured until the late 1930s.¹⁸

The cosmopolitan cinematic culture that was engendered through the dynamic activities of the early cinematograph operator-merchants came to bear a cosmo-national character upon the first Persian-language films that were produced and screened in Iranian theatres in the 1930s. The emergent cinema of the 1930s was shaped by cosmopolitan filmmakers who entertained nationalist sentiments in their visual offerings. The subsequent “national” cinema that emerged in the late 1940s, after World War II, and continued to the late 1970s was likewise informed by Iran’s heterogeneous culture, insofar as it engaged cosmopolitan filmmakers and conversed with international cinematic trends. By probing into the early cinema’s cultural practices, cosmo-national film industry of the 1930s and cinematic productions

¹⁵ Miriam Hansen, “The Mass Production of the Senses: Classical Cinema as Vernacular Modernism,” *Modernism/Modernity* 6, no. 2 (1999), 69.

¹⁶ See, e.g., Kaveh Askari, “Early Cinema in South Asia: The Problem of the Archive: Introduction,” *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media* 54(2) (2013): 130–135; and Neepa Majumdar, “What is ‘Early’ Cinema?” *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media* 54(2) (2013): 136–139.

¹⁷ Askari, “Early Cinema in South Asia,” 133.

¹⁸ Hamid Naficy suggests the year 1941 to be the end of Iranian cinema’s artisanal era. See Hamid Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema*, vol. 1: *The Artisanal Era, 1897–1941* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

that ensued in the decades prior to the 1979 revolution, this book shows that cinema is an advantageous form to investigate Iranian cosmopolitanism; on the other hand, cosmopolitanism is a valuable interpretive category through which one could interrogate Iranian modernity. Viewed through the prism of cinema, for much of the twentieth century, Iranian modernity was the sum of contentious viewpoints that negotiated and competed between local/global, traditional/modern, old/new, ideological/spiritual and national/international tendencies.

Although commonly and sometimes haphazardly used in academia and popular narratives, cosmopolitanism escapes easy definition.¹⁹ The cosmopolitanism of interest to this project cannot be seen in light of globalisation, especially since, in the context of Iran, cosmopolitanism was a socio-cultural agent in societal transformations before the processes of globalisation were at play. It is neither associated with political accounts nor with a Universalist culture as originally set out by the tradition of Kant in modern cosmopolitan thought. I am interested in a cosmopolitanism that “takes as its point of departure different kinds of modernity and processes of societal transformation” that do not “postulate a single world culture.”²⁰ Not defined in terms of a single notion of (European) modernity, this cosmopolitanism rejects theories of “Westernisation.” Upholding “the temporal assumption of the non-contemporaneity of European and non-European societies,”²¹ Eurocentric accounts associate modernity with a “European narrative of progress” that overlooks local experiences, “ideas, institutions, intellectuals, and processes which function as a bridge between the local and global, tradition and change.”²² On the other hand, when conceived as “an opening to the world,” a process in which the universal and the particular, the similar and dissimilar, the global

¹⁹ Zlatko Skrbis and Ian Woodward, *Cosmopolitanism: Uses of the Idea* (London: Sage Publications, 2013), 2.

²⁰ Delanty, “The Cosmopolitan Imagination,” 27.

²¹ Tavakoli-Targhi, *Refashioning Iran*, ix–x.

²² In his book, Ali Mirsepassi has a comprehensive discussion on Orientalist intellectuals and historians of the Middle East, particularly Iran, who uphold the grand narrative of European progress and modernity when theorising modernity (or rather modernisation) in societies such as Iran, and therefore reproduce the binaries of East/West and traditional/modern. See Ali Mirsepassi, *Intellectual Discourse and the Politics of Modernization: Negotiating Modernity in Iran* (Cambridge University Press, 2000), 54.

and the local are to be conceived as interrelated and reciprocally interpenetrating principles, cosmopolitanism demands “the opening up of normative questions.”²³ Considering it not as an “orientation” that focuses on a specific social form, but as an imagination that can take the shape of “many different forms,” cosmopolitanism provides an avenue to analyze the interstitial spaces and practices that defined the contestatory and competing experiences of modernity in Iran.²⁴

An inquiry into conditions of cosmopolitanism underpinned by cinematic experiences also offers a stimulating foray into the shaping of nationalism and national imagination in Iran. No matter how “educationally, genetically, economically, juridicially, socially, militarily, cartographically, or otherwise imposed or inculcated” nationalism and national identity are, David Yaghoubian reminds us, it is the people from different classes, races, ethnicities, religious and linguistic backgrounds who are “the producers, bearers, and interpreters” of these concepts.²⁵ As the following chapters demonstrate, the experience of compound identities, their quotidian cultural practices and their ways of life become indispensable to the configuration of nationalism, especially in early-twentieth-century cosmopolitan Tehran. As cultural products, Iranian filmic offerings drew on global tropes, figures, icons, visual grammar and motifs in the creation of national, and at times, nationalist, films. In other words, Iran’s national cinema was arguably a cosmopolitan construct; by facilitating encounters with difference and interactions with global cinematic cultures, it opened up new outlooks on the world and new opportunities for understanding national selves. Cosmopolitanism, I demonstrate throughout this book, was arguably a style of national imagination.

Skrbiš and Woodward attribute four dimensions to a study of cosmopolitanism.²⁶ Cultural dimension indicates an epistemological disposition of openness to the world around us. The political dimension of cosmopolitanism suggests it to be a political commitment “which encourages us to appreciate and recognise difference, embed our politics in universal principles and commit ourselves to the

²³ Gerard Delanty, *The Cosmopolitan Imagination: The Renewal of Critical Social Theory* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 14.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ David Yaghoubian, *Ethnicity, Identity, and the Development of Nationalism in Iran* (Syracuse University Press, 2014), xxv.

²⁶ Skrbiš and Woodward, *Cosmopolitanism*, 2.

dethronement of one's unique cultural identity"; this dimension extends to political commitments that aim beyond the local and change into institutionally cosmopolitan principles, ambitions of supra-national state-building, such as regimes of global governance and legal-institutional frameworks.²⁷ The ethical dimension of cosmopolitanism refers to an inclusive ethical core that highlights "worldliness, hospitality and communitarianism."²⁸ The methodological dimension of cosmopolitanism points to its analytical framework, which does not necessarily reject the nation-state's importance, but rather embraces "a post-national and transnational perspective"; in other words, such a cosmopolitan social analysis opens up to "the relational processes which bind local and global, universal and particular, familiar and other."²⁹ Skrbish and Woodward believe that, in practice, the four dimensions are closely intertwined, interdependent and largely inseparable. My analysis of the Iranian cosmopolitan society of the early twentieth century will draw from the diverse dimensions of the processes of cosmopolitanism without isolating them, as they cannot be limited to distinguished categories.³⁰

In the context of the Middle East, Sami Zubaida postulates the conditions of social cosmopolitanism to entail "the weakening of communal boundaries, the creation of institutions, milieus and means of communication outside communal and religious authority, in which individuals from diverse backgrounds and cultures can participate."³¹ Arab and Muslim empires brought together different peoples and cultures, which allowed for the creation of cultural, literary and commercial diversity, which were confined to the higher echelons of imperial centres.³² Starting in the nineteenth century, the attempt of the Ottoman Empire at what Zubaida considers to be "catching up" with European technico-military and economic superiority, compelled the facilitation of European education and training, which then led to the formation of cosmopolitan elites, "who are deracinated from confident traditional perspectives on the world, yet unhappy with dominant

²⁷ *Ibid.* ²⁸ *Ibid.*, 3. ²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ It is undeniably challenging to distinguish where one dimension begins and another ends.

³¹ Sami Zubaida, "Cosmopolitanism and the Middle East," in Roel Meijer (ed.), *Cosmopolitanism, Identity, and Authenticity in the Middle East* (Richmond: Curzon Press, 1999), 19.

³² *Ibid.*, 21.