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Silent Cinema: A Global and Local Hybrid

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To research silent cinema in Iran is to reconsider what aspects of cinema history, broadly conceived, are worth showcasing. Does one seek out firsts: the first inventions, initial contact with the moving image, the opening of a successful cinema, the first feature made locally or in one's language? Or does one highlight pathbreaking achievements alongside other forms of creative work? Longstanding habits of thinking of cinema in strictly national terms, when they privilege firsts to the exclusion of other approaches, can obscure cinema's dynamism. Celluloid is designed, after all, to roll up and change location. It comes to life when it moves from one place to another. If we focus too exclusively on national production centers we risk concealing the kinds of creative agency involved in sourcing films and engaging new audiences with them. Films travel and, despite their fragility, often last far longer than they were intended to—yielding creative asynchronies in film cultures around the world.

Many of the stories of silent cinema in Iran are well known, thanks to the work of historians and the documentation of archivists over the years. The challenge lies in framing the kinds of questions that do not reify these familiar stories, but rather open them up to the pressing questions of the broader field. One way to do this, which I pursue here, is to consider the ways in which silent cinema in Iran was itself a labor of compilation. It was a kind of compendium of early global cinema itself. Film reels, devices, and traditions came to life in Iran in this period not by way of a local film industry (that came later), but through sever-

al paths of exchange and creative reuse. This dynamic aspect of silent cinema, which was such an important part of Iran's silent film scene, can thus help the field of cinema studies to refocus its own questions about what to prioritize in cinema history. I address these questions here using cases from four phases of silent cinema in Iran: questions of origin, exhibition and import, local production, and silent cinephilia after the coming of sound.

Figure 1: Poster for Abi and Rabi (Abi-va- rabi), directed by Ovanes Ohanian, Iran's first comedy film, 1930

Questions of Origin and Media Convergence

The history of early cinema abounds with accounts of surprise and revelation at moments when the technology was first introduced to audiences. As rich as these stories of transformative

first contact with the cinema may be, they must be considered alongside the inauspicious and everyday uses of the motion picture. In the case of Iran, it would be misleading to refer to first interactions with cinema in 1900 as a sudden transformation in an environment that was somehow naïve to what moving images could do. For in fact, as is often the case with a new technology, the moving picture found a home among users who had clear ideas about what to do with it from the start. New technologies may turn out to be culturally transformative, but they usually first appear alongside the other arts. Media technologies emerge as guests within an established practice. A new apparatus can offer a technical enhancement of a practice that has been around for a while—just as a university lecture illustrated by 35mm slides is not unrecognizably different from one synchronized with a video projector.

The late Qajar rulers are known for their collections and sponsorship of optical devices, photography, and film—from the photographs of Nasir al-Din Shah to the earliest archive of moving images created by Muzaffar al-Din Shah's photographer. Throughout this period, new media technologies conjoined with and technically extended royal imaging and entertainment practices. Like a graft in an orchard, the new scion attaches to existing root stock, which both nourishes and determines its growth.[1] The films made under Muzaffar al-Din Shah's direction spanned the personal and the official. They grafted onto established practices of court photography and sovereign portraiture in painting. Alongside the documents of parades and official events the court photographer also staged scenes with the shah that borrow from traditions of royal portraiture, which include popular equestrian scenes and guns-and-scope pictures that date back centuries. Paintings of the later generation of Qajar royalty with poses comparable to those of the early films include Equestrian Portrait of 'Ali Quli Mirza, I'ti ẓad al Saltanih (1864) and Nasir al-Din Shah and a Cannon (c. 1865).

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[2]Filmed subjects as vaudeville "chasers" refers to a debate between Charles Musser and Robert Allen about the variety of uses of actuality films in early cinema. For a recent examination of this formative debate using digital tools, see Paul Moore, "A 'Distant Reading' of the 'Chaser Theory': Local Views and the Digital Generation of New Cinema History," in Hildago Santiago, ed. Technology and Film Scholarship: Experience, Study, Theory. (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018), 169-92.

This merger of the moving image with traditions of royal portraiture should come as no surprise. It offers an alternative to historical narratives of cinema's emergence that are better known. Historians of cinema in the US and Europe have taken pains to outline the way in which the moving image ascended from its low status as a fairground entertainment or a "chaser" for clearing out spectators at the end of a vaudeville bill.[2] It soon appealed to the notions of cultural sophistication (and decorum and domestication). As a mass entertainment it could include professional or even genteel audiences. The technology, as it developed its medium identity, moved from the marginal penny entertainments and traveling shows into other social strata. In Iran, however, the devices of the cinema engage the top of the social hierarchy from the start. Motion picture technology found purchase around Gulistan Palace in the first years of the twentieth century. Meanwhile, in the West Midlands of England and the Midwest USA, it thrived under muddy fairground tents. Early cinema took divergent paths, and the case of its emergence in Iran highlights how the invention of a medium is not something that happens at a single point and then is introduced around the world in a series of surprising premieres. Cinema is invented laterally, at every stage of its movement, by those who devise ways to fold it into their existing media practices.

Figure 2: Portrait of ʻAli Quli Mirza, Iʻti ẓad al Saltanih (1864)

Figure 3: Naser al-Din Shah on a Hunt, Sa'dabad Palace Museum . source: https://sadmu.ir/detail/1358

Reshaping Silent Films in Commercial Theaters in Iran

Descriptions of actual screenings are somewhat rare in the his-

torical record, so the details of these screenings are worth reconstructing. Those who brought cinema onto screens in Iran were resourceful in the way they worked with constraints and created a screening experience built on a foundation of fandom and remix. Evidence of this reshaping exists in fragments. Business records of film distribution combined with newspaper advertisements can give us some sense of how this worked—especially for standout forms like the serial film and epic films that returned to Tehran theaters over the years.

The serial film, modern in both form and content, provides an important gauge for the global life of cinema in the silent era. It occupies a space between the short variety programming of early cinema and the feature films that became a global standard in the late silent era.[3] Serial film plots develop across multiple episodes. This thread of continuity distinguishes serial films from series films, which only feature recurring characters in unlinked situations. The narrative thread and frequent cliffhanger endings in serial films were designed to cultivate an audience's habit of regular attendance. The serial's frequent structuring around spectacular physical stunts along with its episodic format made it well suited for both attracting a large audience and regularizing its flows. Drawing from the success of serialized fiction, newspapers and magazines published stories of the episodes in advance of the screenings so that audiences could read the story and then see it on the screen that evening. These tie-in stories complemented the advertisements and had the benefit of generating publicity over a long-term run of a serial at a given cinema.

The serial drew modern audiences with sequences of female protagonists leaping from trains,[4] it synchronized film exhibitors' schedules with regular programming,[5] and it created opportunities to link with the serial press.[6] This combination of features allowed the serial to travel to become an important part of cinema culture around the world—especially in Iran. The experience of the modern film serial was indeed shared around the

[3]There were still many programs of shorts around the world (and certainly in Iran) in the late 1920s and early 1930s—especially when one considers the wide variety of film programming that occurred outside of major commercial cinemas.

[4]For discussions of the global modernity of the serial queen as a performer, see Weihong Bao, "From Pearl White to White Rose Woo: Tracing the Vernacular Body of Nüxia in Chinese Silent Cinema, 1927-1931," Camera Obscura 20.3 (2005): 193-231; Rosie Thomas, "Not Quite (Pearl) White: Fearless Nadia, Queen of the Stunts," in Bollyworld: Popular Indian Cinema through a Transnational Lens, ed. Raminder Kaur and Ajay Sinha (New Delhi: Sage, 2005), 35-69.

[5]On synchronization and time management for the 1920s serial, see Ruth Mayer, "In the Nick of Time? Detective Film Serials, Temporality, and Contingency Management, 1919-1926," The Velvet Light Trap 79 (Spring, 2017), 21-35.

[6]On serial tie-in culture see Ben Singer, Melodrama and Modernity: Early Sensational Cinema and its Contexts (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 271-82, and Shelly Stamp, Movie-Struck Girls: Women and Motion Picture Culture after the Nickelodeon (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 102-25.

world, but it would be misleading to assume that this sharing was homogeneous or transparent—especially when the serials available in a given market were of varying age and were missing several episodes. The life of the serial in Iran suggests that its influence might best be tracked as flexibility rather than homogeneity, as an adaptable rather than as a plug-and-play form.

Iranian exhibitors display a few patterns of inventive adaptations to the material they were able to import. First, because they were programming this material at the time in which the feature film was well known to audiences, exhibitors in Iran sometimes featurized them by combining multiple episodes and billing these multi-episode programs in a similar fashion to multi-act feature films. Second, the printed tie-in prose stories were not as tightly synchronized with the film screenings as they were in other markets. When episodes were missing, which was usually the case, newspapers such as Ittila'at sometimes published tie-in stories to fill in the gaps of missing reels.[7] Finally, faced with the challenge of promoting serials that were sometimes a decade old, exhibitors often foregrounded the long journey of a film rather than trying to erase it. If an old print could no longer showcase global of-the-moment fashion, this could just mean (or be marketed to mean) that the films had passed muster with audiences in cities around the world and could function in a cosmopolitan imaginary. The scratches and missing reels could indicate a serial's status as an evergreen and as a modern classic.[8] Each of these examples highlights ways that exhibitors could construct cultural capital around a media artifact through intelligent design of programs and promotion. The serial was adaptable but not universal in its appeal.

The rhetoric of universal appeal and transparent communication was, however, an important part of the intellectual history of silent cinema.[9] The way these ideas of universal global communication through silent films unfolded in Iran reveals the ironies inherent in this modern story of Babel. The best-known example of the rhetoric of universal language in silent films is

[7]See the serialized print story of The Tiger's Trail, starring Ruth Roland, in Ittila'at. Ittila'at published translations of Guy de Téramond's Le Tigre Sacré, a prose adaptation of the serial film, in 1,000-2,000-word installments over a three week period toward the end of 1306/1927. The first episode can be found in Ittila'at, Azar 28 [December 20] 1306/1927.

[8]I make this argument in extended form and with greater documentation in Kaveh Askari, "An Afterlife for Junk Prints: Serials and other 'Classics' in 1920s Tehran," in Silent Cinema and the Politics of Space, eds. Jennifer M. Bean, Anupama Kapse, Laura Horak (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014), 99-120.

[9]Indeed, audiences and critics in Iran welcomed D.W. Griffith, who was one of the filmmakers from the silent period who was most committed to an idea of cinema as a universal language. More on this in the final section.

Intolerance (dir. D.W. Griffith, 1916). The epic film expressed Griffith's ideal in its most elaborate form, linking as it did four different periods and cultures throughout history through a parallel editing scheme. In Iran, however, the version of Intolerance that played was an excerpt of the film's Babylonian narrative that Griffith retitled The Fall of Babylon—only one thread of the four narratives that were originally interwoven. The film played for years in Tehran as Kurush-i Kabir—Fath-i Babil (Cyrus the Great—Victory over Babylon).[10] It was linked to the Iranian new year and was accompanied in advertisements by nationalist sentiments. This celebration of the Iranian characters in the film, originally portrayed as villains, completely refashioned the meaning of a film that was created with the ambition to eliminate such drift in communication. Much like the serial situation, the impressive travel and long life of the film did in some way fulfill the ambitions of its creators, but not as a universal transparent form of communication. The copy of the film was a media artifact. It was pliable, adaptable, and able to be reintegrated with intellectual traditions at work in the press at the time.

[10]Advertisement for "Kurush-i Kabir- Fath-i Babil" Ittila'at, 1307/1928.

Figure 4: Intolerance, (1916). D.W. Griffith, still from Griffith's Intolerance. Accessed via https://www.openculture.com/2013/07/dw-griffith-intolerance.html

A Compendium of Silent Film Performance, Made in Tehran

The film was a rough-edged experiment, a one-time project that tells us little about the industry standards that would stabilize after the 1950s. It does, however, reveal other historical patterns as a vector for film styles. The film is about performance, it was made by a director who founded a school for acting, and it was structured as a kind of variety show. A character chases another through the streets and encounters a series of situations. The narrative is thin, but like many chase films, it provides a simple framework on which to arrange modular scenes. The filmmakers use a series of gags to create a kind of compendium for the variety of performance traditions that coursed through cinema in its first thirty years.[11] The traces of global film traditions in Haji Aqa are numerous. The film cites a range of famous figures of silent cinema including Dizga Vertov, Lev Kuleshov, Richard Talmadge, Maciste, Georges Méliès, and Mack Sennett. This dense network of citation comes into view when we pull back from a view of this film as a "first."

A helpful way to appreciate the reach of Haji Aqa's many references to performance traditions is to consider the phases of silent film in which those traditions were prominent. From the early period, we see magic, dance, stunt, and strongman traditions of the 1890s to the 1910s. There is a magician performing tricks with substation splices in the manner popularized by Georges Méliès. A dancer (Asia Qustanian) performs what Ida Meftahi has analyzed as a kind of hybrid national dance while the camerawork and mise-en-scène take cues from turn-of-the century dance films.[12] Mack Sennet-style knockabout comedy can be seen in the automobile sequence of the film, and spectacular stunts appear throughout. Adventure serials featuring actors known for their stunts, such as Ruth Roland and Richard Talmadge were popular in Iran. Comparisons to these figures were readily at hand when the filmmakers staged Mir Ahmad Safavi's elaborate jump from a building.[13] It should not come

[11]This makes sense given that the film was an outgrowth of his school for film acting. in which various forms of acrobatic, comedic, and dramatic performance were a part of the curriculum. Discussion of this gymnastic training as a form of uplift are quoted in Jamal Omid, Uvanes Uganians: Zinidgi va Sinama, (Tehran, Faryab, 1362/1984), 55.

[12]For discussion of national dance in the scene, see Ida Meftahi, Gender and Dance in Modern Iran: Biopolitics on Stage (London: Routledge, 2016), 18-48. The serpentine dance, popularized by Loïe Fuller was an important act in early films. The canted angles used for shooting a performance can be seen in silent Soviet cinema as well as avant-garde traditions in France. The filmmakers would have known some of these examples through training in Russia or from screenings as these films circulated.

[13]"[…] un aqa (Safavī) varzishkar-i mashhar ast va dArad taqlid dar mi′avarad kih az u fīlmbardari kunand (Albattih lazim bih tuzih nist kih aqa-yi Safavi bih taqlīd az fīlm′ha-yi Rishard Talmaj yik sahni-yi pur zad'u'khurd-i pulisi ra bazi mi′kard." Jamal Omid, Uvanes Uganians, 61.

as a surprise that we would find a strongman in the dentist's office in Haji Aqa.[14] Audiences in Iran had the opportunity to see silent serials featuring strongman performers like Maciste and Luciano Albertini. Uganians's acting school even designated displays of strength as one of the specializations alongside the more common comedy and drama.[15] The film offers a kind of education in each of these aspects of early cinema technique.

Figure 5: Haji Agha, the Cinema Actor,(1933), Ovanes Ohanian, stil from Ohanian's Haji Agha

But Haji Aqa looks not only toward the early years of cinema, it also engages with modernist traditions of performance that emerged more than a decade after its earliest references. The 1920s Soviet schools of acting, which Uganians knew, tended to blend feats of physical agility with the eccentric display of emotion. This style turned away from the Stanislavsky-influenced methods that preferred psychological interiority.

Gymnastic training tuned the body like a machine, and it was prized in Soviet physical culture. In the arts, it served as a foundation of Soviet modernist acting styles. Likewise, Haji Aqa features a number of gymnastic performances. We even see actual gymnasts doing traditional gymnastics. Their performance of skill proceeds in reverse motion, which was a common technique used by the Dziga Vertov group in scenes where they

[14]His feat of strength involves turning a winch for the extraction of teeth. For a discussion of Maciste and the tradition of the strongman in Italian cinema, see Jacqueline Reich, The Maciste Films of Italian Silent Cinema (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015), 115-48. There are records of Albertini films in the advertisements in Ittila'at, including 27 Farvardin, 1309/ April 16, 1930. For a discussion of Maciste in Tehran, see Golbarg Rekabtalaei, Iranian Cosmopolitanism: A Cinematic History (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 41.

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wanted to analyze the movements of a trained athlete. Vertov's Kino Glaz (Kino Eye, 1924) shows the acrobatic movements of divers in order to illustrate the proper technique of a high dive. Uganians's scene in his acting school shows trained bodies appearing to fly onto the uneven bars. As in Vertov's films, reverse motion offers both spectacle and analysis. The skilled movement amazes and edifies at once.

One of the most influential film educators in Moscow during the silent era was Lev Kuleshov, whose teaching and filmmaking practices drew from a tradition of athletic, modernist acting known as Biomechanics. Actors in Kuleshov's Po Zakonu (By the Law, 1926) and Neobychainye priklyucheniya mistera vesta v strane bolshevikov (The Extraordinary Adventures of Mr. West in the Land of the Bolsheviks, 1924) perform sets of eccentric and concentric poses rhythmically. In ensemble scenes, their dynamic movements synchronize as if their bodies belonged to the same machine. Habibullah Murad's performance of Haji Aqa bears comparison to the dynamic, cyclical, and eccentric posturing that Kuleshov directed in his own actors. Traces of this biomechanical style intermingle with other comedic performance traditions with which the actor had been familiar. The performance most recognizable for those who know Kuleshov's work is Uganīans's own role as the director of the film-within-the-film. Following an intertitle that reads "A director in search of a scenario" Uganians as "the director" brainstorms potential scenes by running through a series of poses. He articulates gestures in a series punctuated by brief pauses. He makes eccentric facial expressions and positions his shoulders in unnatural alternating diagonals that would be at home in the films of the Kuleshov Collective. Uganians's strong resemblance and Moradi's partial resemblance to the style of the Collective are consistent with an actor-director imparting these principles of movement to another actor.

Each of these performances, which comprise the majority of the film, refers to a cinematic tradition. The framing story and the

chase structure allow the film to showcase a variety show that reanimates genres and attractions from the turn-of-the-century, the 1910s, and from the 1920s. The film is not territorial or chronologically narrow. Instead, it treats cinema as a vector of exchange. It provides a compendium of performance traditions from silent cinema in the world's orbit.

Silent Cinema as a Marker of Cinephilia

The silent cinema phased out of most commercial exhibition in Iran, as it did elsewhere, in the 1930s, but it maintained an important cultural position in the years to come. Silent comedians, serial stars, Soviet cinema of the 1920s, along with other silent film epics and dramas became an important archive for the formation of traditions of cinephilia or *Sinamadusti*.[16] It can be argued that the effort to reshape, reedit, and adapt cinema described in previous sections is already a practical cinephilia. It was a business, but it was also a creative labor of love. In the years that followed, silent films drew interest among modernist intellectuals and were prized at early retrospective screenings. The history of this curatorial afterlife of silent cinema in Iran marks an intellectual cinephilia.

Charlie Chaplin offers a standout example. The life of Chaplin's films in Iran highlights the continuities between practical cinephilia and intellectual cinephilia. Consider André Malraux's famous passage about a screening he saw in Iran.

In Persia, I once saw a film that does not exist. It was called The Life of Charlie. Persian cinemas show their films in the open air, while black cats look on from the walls surrounding the audience. The Armenian exhibitors had artfully compiled Chaplin's shorts into a single film. The resulting feature film was surprising: the myth of Chaplin appeared in its pure state.[17]

Malraux's passage provides a description of a phenomenon, which is valuable in itself. It also expresses an intellectual cu-

[16]On these formations of cinephilia, see Ehsan Khoshbakht, "Cinemadoosti: Film Folklore in Iran," Sight & Sound (March 9, 2018), www2.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/sight-sound-magazine/features/cinemadoosti-film-folklore-iran

[17]André Malraux, Esquisse d'une psychologie du cinéma (Paris: Gallimard, 1946), 34.

riosity about the kind of cinema experience made possible by the labors of compilation. The passage indicates the way films were manipulated as they moved across distances into Iran. It was an instance of craft labor. Malraux attributes agency in this passage, not to the filmmakers, but to the exhibitors who created a montage of Chaplin's shorts [tous les petits Charlots] into a full-length film. The compilation of Chaplin crystalized the modern mythology of the movie star for Malraux.

It is important to understand this familiar passage in the context of Malraux's curiosity for modernist ideas about a metaphysical purity that translates across cultures.[18] He mentions other stars in the section of the book, but for him Chaplin is "the perfect example."[19] Chaplin's tramp character influenced a range of vagabond characters in popular cinemas around the world, including Raj Kapoor in Awaara (1951) and velgard characters in Iran. He sparked inspiration among modern artists such as Fernand Léger, who animated a cubist Chaplin puppet as the presenter of Ballet Mécanique (1924). Malraux's quote directs us to the way these two elements could comingle: the interest in fan culture and remix on one hand and, on the other, the modernist intellectual engagement with silent film performance as mass culture. Here a French art theorist describes a modernist notion of aesthetic purity or essence created by an impure compilation. The statement contradicts any assumption by Chaplin purists that compiling and reediting these films would bowdlerize them. This paradox is why I highlight the curatorial labor of distributors, exhibitors, and fans alongside that of intellectuals.

Throughout the formative years of the film press in Iran, there were multiple instances of this merger of popular fandom and modernist fascination. There are more than seventy discussions of Chaplin in Sitarih-'i Sinama between 1953 and 1960. The discussions tend to follow the magazine's typical mix—sometimes contentious—of enthusiastic discussions for fans and serious film criticism. In a 1955 essay about the future of the film industry in Iran, an ambitious young director named Samuel

[18]André Malraux, Esquisse d'une psychologie du cinéma (Paris: Gallimard, 1946), 34.

[19]Malraux, Esquisse d'une psychologie du cinéma, 34.

Khachikian describes aspects of Chaplin's and Griffith's work in tandem with that of Soviet theorists including Vsevolod Pudovkin.[20] He participates in modernist reception of key figures from the silent era by mentioning those aspects of Chaplin's work that interested Soviet modernists. After a few years of experience making films, Khachikian brings his own work in comparison to theirs—mostly as a comparison of the working conditions of industries around the world.[21] Essays about Chaplin also appear in the film sections of intellectual magazines. An essay on Chaplin in Film va Zindagi, translated by Iraj Purbaqir makes similar connections. The magazine even includes, as an illustration, the cubist Chaplin puppet from Ballet mécanique. In each of these examples the life of Charlie appears in its privileged state. He seems to have been specifically important during this experimental decade when film intellectuals were establishing a canon.[22]

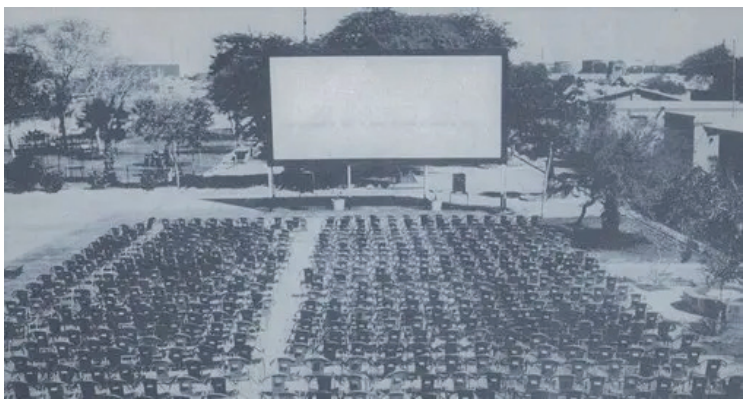

Figure 6: sample of an outdoor cinema in Abadan, Iran, 1960

[20]"Aya bih Ayandeh-'i ṣan'at-i Filmbardari-yi Iran Mitavan Umidvar Shud? (Is There Hope for the Future of the Iranian Cinema Industry?" Sitarih-'i Sinama 24 (22 Dey 1333/ Janurary 12, 1955), 14

[21]"Sharayiṭ-i Kar-i Ma Hatta Charli Chaplīn'ha va Disika'ha ra Ham Bizanu Dar Mi'avarad (Our Working Conditions Would Bring Charlie Chaplins and De Sicas to Their Knees)" Sitarih-'i Sinama 196 (5 Bahman, 1337/January 25, 1959), 8-9, 40.

[22]Discussion of Chaplin tapers off during the 1960s followed by another wave of publicity during the 1970s around the time when the Tehran film festival also sought to return to Chaplin as a way to consider the cultural work of a festival like this.