***Allegory in Iranian Cinema: The Aesthetics and Poetry of Resistance*. Michelle Langford. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019. Pp. 296 (cloth).**

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At the beginning of Asghar Farhadi's *About Elly* (2009) we are faced with an aperture on the screen: an opening at the opening, a darkened surface broken only by a thin sliver of bright, dust-moted light. Given this abstract image as our entrée, we might instinctively reach around in the dark for answers, both to the material reality of the space and to the image's bid for some kind of autoreferentiality, a representation of the cinema space itself. The first intuitive association is probably a good one: we are in Plato's cave, looking not at the shadowy images projected on the wall, but rather at the light source that permits of their appearance.[1] But what of the space itself? And how to make sense of the strange series of hands that pass over this sunlit rift, depositing mysterious small packages within?

Faced with such images, lay viewers might well speculate as to the cinematic significance of light that punctuates the dark, leading to revelation or ecstasy for those who are now free to see the truth of the cloistered world they inhabit. (The following shots of the film's characters joyfully emerging from a tunnel offers some clues here.) And they may not find it too great a leap to connect this inaugurating image to the wider structure of feeling pervading Iran circa 2009, a time which saw the emergence of a generation of post-revolutionary youth faced with the undecidable battle between the archaisms of the political regime and the tempting pull of Western permissiveness and popular culture. This much is present throughout the film, to be sure, but what more can be said about that leading image?

In adding far more depth and nuance to the sort of analysis usually offered by Anglophone viewers, who might remain at this superficial level, Michelle Langford takes us much further, explaining that we have been looking out from

[1] Here the potentially ambiguous cave allegory unfailingly becomes for the film studies scholar a proto-cinematic space, ossifying into a symbol for the cinematic dispositive: "Of course, from the analytic perspective we have chosen, by asking cinema about the wish it expresses, we are aware of having distorted the allegory of the cave by making it reveal, from a considerable historic distance, the approximate construct of the cinematographic apparatus." Jean-Louis Baudry, "The Apparatus," trans. Jean Andrews and Bertrand Augst, *Camera Obscura* 1.1 (1976): 112.

within a *sadaqeh*, an alms box common to many street corners in Iranian cities, and designed to encourage philanthropic acts. Taking the social and political significance of the *sadaqeh* as her point of departure in this reading of *About Elly*, Langford demonstrates that even after leaving the dark of the tunnel and emerging into the light of day, the film's "collective protagonist"[2] is shadowed by the conservatism of a political apparatus that administrates even the emotions of the characters on screen. In this way the "veiling" of the image in the opening shot has a crucial relation to the acts of emotional dissimulation in which contemporary Iranian youth engage, and to the dissimulation of Farhadi's camera, too, which "does not always represent events truthfully" (197) and which "also encourages us to look beyond the frame, beyond what is *shown*" (198).

Inaugural shots are important for Langford throughout her wonderfully informative *Allegory in Iranian Cinema: The Aesthetics and Poetry of Resistance*. "Opening sequences," she argues, "often provide a key that can help us to decode the uniquely encoded allegorical language" (194) of such films. For Langford, allegorical films often teach us how to read their images from the outset, priming us to look for the ways that film narratives can "speak otherwise," saying more than what appears on the surface.[3] Whether or not one reads allegory as unfailingly originating with the filmmakers themselves (more on which, below), what seems most conspicuous in each of Langford's case studies is that the interpretive lessons being taught by the films featured in this monograph will not always be self-evident to the viewer. Meanings and references that "Iranian viewers might immediately recognize" (193) will stand every chance of falling by the wayside for audiences unfamiliar with the national cinematic *topoi*; Langford is thus tasked both with unpacking the allegorical, poetic dimensions of the films under discussion, and with explaining the significance of the surface, of the banal that would otherwise be rendered inscrutable.

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[2] Michelle Langford, *Allegory in Iranian Cinema: The Aesthetics and Poetry of Resistance* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2019). All further references to this book are included parenthetically in the text.

[3] For an interrogation of what we mean by "surface" in cinema, see James Macdowell, "Interpretation, Irony, and 'Surface Meanings' in Film," *Film-Philosophy* 22 no. 2 (2018): 261-280.

We have begun here at the end of book, and with its most elaborate and rewarding reading, so as to give some sense of Langford's wonderful capacity to juggle both Iranian cultural particulars and a number of other frameworks for reading allegorically in the cinema. (Here, as in her previous book,[4] Walter Benjamin's work on the *Trauerspiel* is invoked.) But Langford's survey begins almost eighty years earlier, with *Mr Haji the Movie Actor* (Ovanes Ohanian, 1933), Iran's first silent feature-length film, after which it jumps several decades ahead to the 1960s, while still remaining within the long epoch of "pre-revolutionary" Iranian cinema. Although the selection of films here is remarkable—Langford judiciously opts to avoid discussion of Kiarostami even in this moment of posthumous attention, a decision that allows the more obscure films room to breathe—readers will on occasion (as with the case of *Mr Haji*) find that access to the works is quite difficult.

Thankfully, however, Langford's descriptions of the films under discussion are evocative throughout, and the flexibility of her approach to allegory allows for the cohabitation of vastly different films in each chapter, as well as the capacity to adopt distinct approaches for reading films by the same director. Such is the case with the discussions in the first chapter of *The Cow* (1969) and *The Cycle* (1977), both by Dariush Mehrjui: in the former, the multiple significations of the eponymous animal seem to trouble a sustained allegorical reading, as the film's "connotative connection between the cow, its milk, the village and the nation's oil industry can only be made fleetingly" (33); in the latter, there is a more clear-cut intention linking the local "any-spaces-whatever" of the film's "veritable wasteland" to "Iran itself," whose modernising pretences are repeatedly exposed (37).

More in keeping with the sustained allegory of the second of these works by Mehrjui is another film analysed in this chapter: Ebrahim Golestan's *The Secrets of the Treasure of the Jenni Valley* (1974), with its tale of buried gold beneath arid land barely fit for farming, is well-chosen as a means for considering the connections between surface and depth, interior and exterior, and archaic and modern temporal planes. Langford picks up on such structural oppositions as ways

[4] See Langford, *Allegorical Images: Tableau, Time and Gesture in the Cinema of Werner Schroeter* (Bristol: Intellect, 2006).

of reading the work: another example is the apparently "traditional" Iranian dwelling that becomes an Emperor's New Clothes joke, with its single phallic minaret and two gonadal domes decorated on the inside with all of the hypermodernism attached to the geodesic inventions of Buckminster Fuller (namechecked in the film).

Where Golestan's film reveals itself quite clearly as a fable of uneven development, other contemporary examples do not disclose their allegorical possibilities so overtly. In the particular case of the national *film farsi*, genre filmmaking seems less conveniently predisposed to reach beyond the popular to something more meaningful. Here, Langford's case study is the exemplary gangster film *Qeysar* (Masoud Kimiai, 1969), which interrogates the foundational gestures of the genre by destabilising the heroic martyrdom that is customarily at the centre of such narratives. The film certainly flirts with the staples of *film farsi* while also unsettling tradition. Indeed, Langford suggests that the opening credits—designed by one Abbas Kiarostami—foreshadow this kind of double play: the muscular body parts of anonymous men ripple and bulge across the screen, causing their tattoos—of figures from Iranian myth—to fold in on themselves and making it impossible to view these engravings in their entirety. Such a critical treatment of Iranian cultural history, Langford argues, suggests to viewers the film's troubling of the waters elsewhere: the backdrops to the story's revenge killings—bathhouse, slaughterhouse, rusted railyard—all motion towards Iran's incomplete processes of modernization, which, contra the dominant messages from the government, were failing in this period.

While Langford's interpretation of the signifiers of Iranian modernity here certainly give credence to the notion that *Qeysar* represents an allegory of a nation without martyrs, the argument seems to be that genre films (or at least those of the Iranian gangster variety) cannot in and of themselves be considered allegorical, or not without some of the art-cinematic window dressing provided by a well-renowned figure like Kiarostami. Indeed, the allegory all but disappears when the film returns to the more conservative safety of its generic roots in a voyeuristic eight-minute cabaret sequence, which "we can either read […] as merely a genre convention" or more allegorically "in the context of the film's critique of modernity and the encroachment of the West" (30). Perhaps that is overstating the case a little, but it is not completely clear why the "majority" of family

melodramas and "tough-guy" tales that comprise *film farsi* "could not be considered allegorical" except when placed "in the hands of a canny auteur" (18). The unanswered question is worth considering: what is the provenance of allegory in Iranian (and by extension, all) cinema, precisely? Must it originate with authorial intention (however we might discern this)? Is it wholly in the eye of the beholder, in the allegoresis of the critic (or censor) who spies it? Or does allegory exist at some point between these two poles, shifting one way or the other depending on the exigencies of genre or of historical circumstance?

Golestan's filmmaking is a case in point here: early in his career he worked in the service of the state, creating a series of institutional documentaries subsidized by Iran's oil wealth, but he remained nevertheless veritably independent and able to craft a number of works of lyrical beauty. As such, his *Yek Atash* (*A Fire*, 1961) is a commissioned account of an oil-well fire that burned for seventy days, but in the hands of its editor Forugh Farrokhzad it is also a wondrous and strange accomplishment of "poetic realism."[5] The first example from Langford's second chapter explores this tension further, here between the documented impressions of an event that might be viewed metonymically in connection with the national character, or as a more slippery allegory that can be read against the intended grain. *The Night it Rained… or the Epic of the Gorgan Village Boy* (Kamran Shirdel, 1967), which traces the historical details of a strange incident that may or may not have taken place in rural Iran, is a film whose very title is slung undecidedly between stylised, self-reflexive truth-telling and mythologising propaganda. In an act of what Langford calls "aesthetic resistance" (73), the filmmaker here refuses to disclose the Truth he was tasked to record, leaving viewers uncertain whether the village boy of the title did in fact prevent a disastrous train crash.

This chapter continues by focusing on the child as a key allegorical cipher in Iranian cinema, never simply itself but always overdetermined, often representing the unrepresentable (because censored) relationships between male and female adults. And yet such use of children does not result in a paint-by-numbers substitution of youth for adult, but does allegorical double-duty, maintaining

[5] Hamid Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema Volume 2: The Industrializing Years, 1941-1978* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2011), 76.

certain ways of seeing the world from the perspective of the child herself. In her analysis of Majid Majidi's *Children of Heaven*, Langford explains how external focalization—"both literal point-of-view shots and semi-subjective eye line matches" (78)—situates the viewer firmly with brother and sister Ali and Zahra in their search for the latter's missing shoes, even as it also reaches for greater heights. Through careful formal analysis, Langford shows how allegory here is not always as politically progressive as one might imagine it, with Majidi articulating a "didactic" vision of post-revolutionary Iran that "aligns closely with and validates dominant ideology" (83) in its exhortation to behave as nobly and altruistically as its child protagonists.

The most meticulous analysis in this chapter Langford reserves for Jafar Panahi's *The Mirror* (1997), which in a sense—given the film's apparently neat division between the fictional first third and the meta-documentary of the remainder—seems to wear its allegorical structure firmly on its sleeve. But even as the work appears almost to read itself in this way, Langford delves into minutiae that are otherwise lost, pulling on what appear to be mere loose threads until the stability of Panahi's structure comes apart before our eyes. There are elements that are present throughout the film, resting on its surface but seemingly unremarkable, yet through which Langford is able to mine a rich seam: specifically, a football match played between Iran and South Korea, of which we hear running commentary and reports throughout; and the names of streets that are exchanged between the diminutive protagonist Mina and those who offer her directions as she finds her way home. The first of these two details "not only draws attention to the disjuncture between screen time and profilmic time but also causes the very illusion of synchronicity between sound and image to unravel" (95), an allegorical inducement to viewers to read the film with a heightened sense of scepticism. The second suggests not merely the happenstance of filming locations in Tehran, but a series of strategic coordinates that "effectively trace the history" (100) of the Iranian revolution in the quotidian lives of the city's commuters.

Following on from the thoroughly close reading of Panahi's film, Langford's next two chapters (coupled with the final chapter on *About Elly*) represent what are to my mind the most engrossing parts of the book, with varied and rich theoretical apparatuses bringing out heretofore unseen aspects of the works in focus. Chapter Three bears the Deleuzian title "Allegory and the Aesthetics of Becoming-

Woman," and stays with the similarly-named *The Day I Became a Woman* (Marziyeh Meshkini, 2001) for its duration. The concentration on a single film here (as we will see again in the closing chapter) is incredibly rewarding, as Langford treats us to an extensive reading of a work that is deceptively complex: while the film's tripartite structure—one tale of a girl, the next of a young woman, the final third featuring a woman in advanced age—offers itself immediately to an allegorical interpretation that would connect all three as attending to the same character at different stages of life, such a possibility is entertained only to be dramatically overturned in a refreshing volte-face in the chapter's second half. Now, instead of following the temptation of the film's horizontal structure, Langford adopts a vertical approach, considering all three tales not along a temporal continuum, but as taking place simultaneously, and congealing in the experience of viewing Meshkini's work. In this way, Langford argues, the film offers a different "allegorical encounter," which "becomes suggestive of a more processural and time-laden conception of becoming-woman, generated as an intimate and immanent encounter between two bodies: the body of the film, and the body of the film viewer" (127).

The next chapter gives us another bravura reading, this time of a pair of films—*A Time for Love* (Mohsen Makhmalbaf, 1990) and *Baran* (Majid Majidi, 1999)—that represent instances of Langford's own coinage, the cinematic *ghazal*. This concept refers to the transformation of the thematic materials and structural arrangement of the Persian *ghazal*—a genre of medieval lyrical love poetry—into a series of moving images. In the films of Makhmalbaf and Majidi, Langford argues, the formal possibilities of cinema are mobilised to offer an approximation of such poetry, which often concerns itself with unrequited romantic love or, in a similar vein, with "the ineffability of God, the divine Beloved" (142). Again, as with her complex reading of *About Elly*, the theoretical framework here remains sensitive to local cultural particularities. But Langford is also looking through a foreign lens—in this case, Pasolini's essay "The Cinema of Poetry"—which offers a fruitful semiological basis for segmenting the discrete grammatical units of *ghazal* and film image alike.

In her analysis of *Baran*, Langford points to the way that Majid Majidi again (as in his *Children of Heaven*) crafts a national allegory revolving around acts of charity and hospitality. Here, however, it is the deployment of cinematic *ghazals*

rather than the child focalization of Majidi's previous film that allows for the connection between the intimate level of the romance narrative and the social-historical level relating to the influx of Afghan migrants in Iran after the destabilisation of the region in the wake of the Gulf War. There is also a perceptive appraisal of how such poetic cinema might offer a unique strategy for evading the ire of the censor, especially given the prohibition on visible contact between bodies of the opposite sex. In this regard, Langford considers—via Vivian Sobchak—the synaesthetic properties of Majidi's film, where sight and touch cross paths in a "kind of cross-modal transfer" (161) akin to allegory. Here, the bodies of the protagonist Latif and the titular Baran (an Afghani migrant girl disguised for most of the film as a boy for the purposes of work) might never touch, but Majidi's cunning shots of material objects evince a haptic dimension that effectively substitutes for the unrequited relationship. But what's more, in Langford's clever argument, the viewer is also enlisted against the iconoclasm of the Iranian screen, in so far as "our bodies effectively fill the gap imposed by censorship between the characters' bodies" (161).

As with the first chapter's analysis of *Qeysar*, which emerges from the strictures of the *film farsi* tough-guy grouping to strive for something more, in Chapter Five we see how the legacy of war can be allegorised both to uphold the glory of the nation, as in the films associated with the so-called "Sacred Defence" genre, or to offer a more circumspect message about Iran's military performance. Comparing a pair of propagandistic films that reaffirm Iranian patriotic sentiment, especially as regards the figuring of martyrs in the historical reckoning, Langford here reads *Gilaneh* (2005) as a film that hijacks this allegorical tendency and turns it against the state ever so subtly. This work, co-directed by Rakhshan Bani-Etemad and Mohsen Abdolvahab, can be read productively by emphasising the key status of the title role. As Langford demonstrates, the film filters the effects of the Iran-Iraq war through the duty of care a mother provides to her ailing son, and thereby advances a "matriotic" counter-reading of the martyrdom central to the state-sanctioned national discourse.

The ideas under discussion in this chapter—especially around the figure of the martyr—also bear on recent hostilities that have flared up in the Middle East. On 3 January of this year, a US drone strike on the Baghdad International Airport resulted in the assassination of the Iranian major general Qasem Soleimani and

nine others. While the attack was justified by the aggressors and condemned by others as a violation of international law, the response was swift, for several days later Iran responded in kind, launching missile strikes on the US airbase in Iraq that was responsible. Notably, the name of that counterstrike and the official state discourse around the events suggest the continued acceptance of the notion of noble sacrifice: Operation Martyr Soleimani. Amidst mounting tensions and a seemingly imminent hot war between the US and Iran, a 2005 quote from the graphic novelist and filmmaker Marjane Satrapi began circulating on Twitter: "The world is not divided between East and West. You are American, I am Iranian, we don't know each other, but we talk together and we understand each other perfectly. The difference between you and your government is much bigger than the difference between you and me. And the difference between me and my government is much bigger than the difference between me and you. And our governments are very much the same."[6]

This sentiment—deployed allegorically on social media in early 2020 so as to read the brief contemporary conflict through a more enduring critical lens—also speaks to the shared transnational experiences that often shine through the veneer of cultural difference on screen. (And for which Satrapi's black-and-white animated film *Persepolis* [2007] is a case in point). A whole host of diasporic artists, such as Shirin Neshat, Sepideh Farsi, and Mania Akbari, have for some time worked outside of their home country, and in some cases—for instance in Satrapi's recent *Radioactive* (2019), a Marie Curie biopic—clear divisions between West and East, American and Iranian are eclipsed by more recognisable "universal" affinities. At the same time, recalcitrant cultural differences remain both in less "festival-friendly" Iranian films such as *The Graveless* (Mostafa Sayari, 2017) and in works by seemingly more accessible filmmakers like Farhadi. These tensions are worth thinking about with respect to Langford's allegorical readings of Iranian films: non-native viewers are routinely required to interpret their images through a "Western" frame—and so to look for the ways that "we understand each other perfectly"—but there is almost always an excess of specific cultural meaning that is helped immensely by the revealing "translations" that Langford provides.

[6] Michelle Goldberg, "Sexual Revolutionaries," *Salon* (24 April 2005): https://www.salon.com/2005/04/24/satrapi_2/.

But to return to Satrapi's point again, perhaps such problems of cultural translation become less pronounced (or more simply translated) when compared with the intractable gulfs between the people and their governments. This problem is also worth exploring in light of recent issues around the censorship of Iranian filmmakers: consider the restrictions placed on Jafar Panahi, ensuring that he cannot make a film; the uncertain status of Mohsen Makhmalbaf, Marziyeh Meshkini, and Samira Makhmalbaf, who live as political exiles in London; and the inability of Mohammad Rasoulof to attend this year's Berlinale in order to claim his Golden Bear prize for *There is No Evil* (2020), because he had been sentenced to a year in prison for the critical stance his work takes against the state. Such cases have seen a unity of voices from all corners of global cinema raised against the repressive actions of the Iranian government.

In her introduction, Langford speculates about the current direction of Iranian cinema toward more forthright political commentary, where directors—à la Rasoulof—have been increasingly "emboldened to confront social issues head on, rather than relying on allegory and poetry" (10). In her thoughtful coda to the book, Langford wonders again about the fate of this cinema today, and considers the ambiguity surrounding the youthful characters in *About Elly*: might Farhadi's collective protagonist represent an Iranian youth "not yet ready for or capable of collective action? Or, might we think of the film as a provocation, an allegorical parable that shows what can happen when a community closes rank, fostering division rather than unity" (236)? What prognosis will the next crop of films provide for the people of Iran? And in what ways will they offer themselves to "us" for interpretation?