

States and Western Europe. The function of a Western-style multiplex, of course, is not to enhance a medium-specific aesthetic but rather to accumulate box-office revenue more efficiently via cinematic franchising.

In her fifth chapter, Zhou seeks to include physical discomfort within her specific off-screen film ontology. Not only did “barefoot” projectionists suffer hardships; viewing audiences in open-air rural galleries had to suffer potential “cold, heat, wind, rain, snow, and mosquitoes” (139) as well as “precarious physical position[s]” (140). Zhou equates such hardships with a “happiness of struggle” (143) related to the “path-clearing” sharpening of mind associated with “torture” (151). Rather than reduce the pain of discomfort to a Lacanian sense of “*jouissance*,” Zhou posits that cinema culture in Maoist China emancipated “profound emotions” that were meaningful precisely because “active struggle, including the struggle of the body to overcome pain and discomfort, were seen as revolutionary, transcendent, and desirable” (144–46). While some may dismiss China’s entire cultural project in this period as totalitarian, Zhou posits in her final chapter that such “[e]mbodied spectatorship” (155) actually breaks the hold of cinematic propaganda concomitant with Western spectatorship.

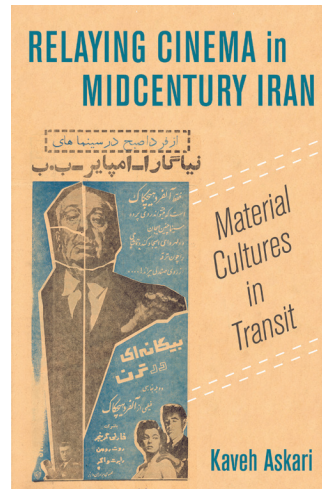
Zhou has written an impressive and impassioned tribute to moviegoing in socialist China. Nonetheless, it is clear that Zhou’s rhetorical strategy is to come to the defense of a political project discredited in the academic mainstream without admitting that the project’s most exhilarating achievements had anything to do with politics. This is a common strategy today in Western historiography that seeks to speak positively about Mao’s China. As scholarly consensus generally forbids direct reappraisal of Mao’s politics, it has become customary to suggest how the hard revolutionary goals of the Communist Party were achieved surreptitiously via the soft and inadvertent accidents of culture. Zhou seeks to analyze how lived experience is marked by the “*dispositif* of cinema—that is, where and how films were shown, [rather] than by political rhetoric and campaigns” (54). At best, her analysis succeeds in rehabilitating the noblest aspirations of socialist China; at worst, it remains a careful elision of revolutionary politics.

BOOK DATA Chenshu Zhou, *Cinema Off Screen: Moviegoing in Socialist China*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2021. \$85.00 cloth, \$34.95 paper, \$34.95 e-book. 282 pages.

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BABAK TABARRAEI

Relaying Cinema in Midcentury Iran: Material Cultures in Transit by Kaveh Askari



Until about a decade ago, Iranian film histories limited themselves to a double dichotomy. First, they represented Iranian cinema prior to the 1979 revolution as a constant battlefield between the highbrow art cinema—namely, the New Wave of the late sixties—and the lowbrow popular films collectively known as *Filmfārsi*. Second, they focused on the postrev-

olutionary Islamization of the cinema, which led to the emergence of an oppositional cinema in the form of both politically poignant films and a new mode of poetic realism in the works of several festival-favorite auteurs.

This dominant historiographic approach underwent a considerable change in the 2010s, led by Hamid Naficy’s four-volume *Social History of Iranian Cinema*, along with a few other valuable monographs and edited collections: Pedram Partovi’s *Popular Iranian Cinema before the Revolution*, Golbarg Rekabtalaei’s *Iranian Cosmopolitanism: A Cinematic History*, Blake Atwood’s *Underground: The Secret Life of Videocassettes in Iran*, and Matthias Wittmann and Ute Holl’s edited collection *Counter-Memories in Iranian Cinema*. This new generation of scholars has begun a move toward more sociocultural histories where concepts such as the popular, the forbidden, the technological, and the national are redefined and explored anew. Continuing this trajectory, Kaveh Askari’s new book opens the young field of Iranian film studies to alternative histories of film distribution and reception.

“It is a book on circulation written during a peripatetic twelve-year period,” writes Askari in his acknowledgment (xi). But rather than Iranian films, or cinema, the subject of the book is the national *and* transnational circulation of objects such as film prints, scores, and publicity materials in Iran during a time when the country’s policies were manifestly pro-Western. As a child of “circulation studies and media archeology” (8), Askari provides a fascinating history of nonfilmic objects, much in the same way as Eric Smoodin and others do as they document the trend of New Cinema

Histories. This historical approach requires extremely time-consuming dives into archival sources whose volume of data can be frustrating.

The case of Iran is especially challenging because media archives outside Iran rarely contain paracinematic materials tied to Iran, while the Persian sources are also mostly inaccessible. Askari, however, has dealt with these problems by gathering and analyzing an extensive list of midcentury Persian periodicals, the trade press, and pop magazines as well as visiting many archival institutions in the United States and Iran. As a result, while characterized by the utmost academic rigor, *Relaying Cinema in Midcentury Iran* reads like an engaging but sophisticated detective novel that aims to solve one big puzzle: how did Iranians experience cinema from the silent era through the 1960s, and what can the material and aesthetic forms of their experience reveal about the nature of transnational media movements?

To answer these big-picture questions, Askari uses the metaphor of “relay”—a concept that refers both to the amplifying moment of a signal in mediated communication and the moment of exchange or turn-taking in team sports. Askari uses this metaphor to expand on how cinema is conceptualized, (re)authorized, advertised, and consumed, reminding the reader that, far from a monolithic entity, cinema is a malleable construct that can mean different things to different people at different times and places. Film, then, is redefined in this book as constantly remediated sets of objects and concepts, with each chapter of the book narrating the story/history of one such set.

The first chapter focuses on the ways that silent films, especially serials, reached Iranian cinemas—mostly in Tehran—long after they were originally released. Disowned by their distributors, the overused, amortized, and decade(s)-old “junk prints” acquired traffic networks across relay points as varied as Moscow, Cairo, Istanbul, and Baghdad. By analyzing the Persian advertisements of serials such as *The Tiger’s Trail* (1919) or stand-alone re-edits of a D. W. Griffith film, Askari emphasizes that studying the afterlife of a film in its international reception is as crucial to understanding regional film cultures as the national policies governing various modes of film production and exhibition.

This filmic afterlife is further analyzed in the second chapter, where more attention is given to tracing how secondhand prints were reauthorized after World War II. Askari is meticulous in outlining how American distributors’ struggles to enforce profitable copyright regulations were met by Iranian technological innovations and creative forces, most saliently visible in the work of Tehran’s dubbing studios and voice actors. Building on what Askari

has proposed here, one can hope for other histories of the long-neglected Persian dub industry and its transnational travels.

Introducing relay as both recycling and reformatting helps Askari revisit the burgeoning Iranian film industry of the 1950s and 1960s from the viewpoint of appropriated media objects and concepts. In chapter 3, he delineates how Iranian sound studios incorporated and manipulated foreign film scores for the soundtrack of their domestic products. In a way, this chapter is the most representative aspect of Askari’s argument about relayed cinema. Using several examples, Askari demonstrates how the creative use of collaged sounds re-formed the soundscape of the Iranian film industry and gave new meanings to the original scores. A comparable phenomenon is detectable in the audiovisual strategies of many Turkish *Yeşilçam* products of a decade later, albeit with less-subtle craftsmanship. Nevertheless, these bold acts of intertextuality deserve to be studied in terms of both their material technology (and aesthetics) and local audiences’ engagement with them.

In the last two chapters, Askari shifts his focus to the ways Iranian cinema tried to appropriate foreign genres, worldviews, and images. In particular, he addresses the reconfiguration of film noir in the films of Iranian pop auteur Samuel Khachikian, and some forgotten and failed attempts at international collaborations and Western imitations. In chapter 4, Khachikian—the “Iranian Hitchcock” according to the Persian periodicals of the time—is reevaluated as an underappreciated filmmaker whose crime thrillers provide a visual trope for the cinematic exchange, translation, and creative agency in a “relayed” genre.

It should also be emphasized that Khachikian’s oeuvre serves as an excellent example for understanding the anxiety of urban transformation in midcentury Iran. Resulting mostly from the nation’s ambivalence toward the West, these anxieties reached their boiling point with the onset of the Islamic revolution. The dilemma of the West for the new urban population can also partly explain the cinematic failure of the case studies in the fifth chapter, including Jean Negulesco’s *The Invincible Six* (or *The Heroes*, as its Iranian production studio advertised) and the Western homages made by another Iranian pop auteur, Masud Kimiai.

Applying the sportive connotation of relay allows Askari to explore both the achievements and failures of media transfer in order to examine not only the agency of players but also the boundaries of the game. Whatever the consequences of transnational transformations may be, a cultural history of relayed media can amplify some of the much-overlooked aspects of regional engagements with

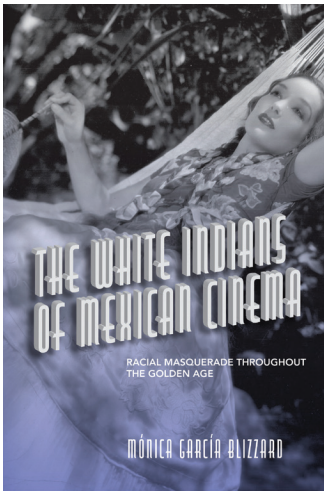
cinema—a goal that inherently undergirds Askari’s innovative investigation of cinema in Iran until the turbulent 1970s.

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ANA ALMEYDA-COHEN

***The White Indians of Mexican Cinema: Racial Masquerade throughout the Golden Age* by Mónica García Blizzard**



Mónica García Blizzard’s first book is a rich and revelatory project that contends with a question that US and European spectators often ask when first encountering mainstream Mexican films and telenovelas: “Why is everyone so White?” (1). Offering an in-depth analysis that examines a “pervasive racialized visual logic in Mexico” (38) that privileges white-

ness, *The White Indians of Mexican Cinema* answers this spectatorial question by unraveling how Mexico’s audiovisual landscape operates under the legacy of colonialism.

García Blizzard postulates that the coloniality of power, as suggested by Aníbal Quijano, pervades the films of the early, mid, and late periods of Mexico’s golden age of cinema, which glorify whiteness by casting white Mexicans as Indigenous leads, thus valorizing “whiteness-as-indigeneity” (5). With a decolonial perspective grounded in the theoretical tools of critical race theory, this study sheds light on Mexican cinema’s gendered and racialized implications of whiteness-as-indigeneity. García Blizzard’s book is a welcome addition to the existing scholarship on the racial politics of Mexican cinema during its golden age (the mid-1930s to the mid-1950s) by scholars such as Joanne Hershfield, Charles Ramírez-Berg, Andrea Noble, and Dolores Tierney. Here, García Blizzard intervenes in

ongoing debates on Latin American and Mexican film and visual culture, particularly regarding the function of race, gender, melodrama, and star texts in the postrevolutionary project of *indigenismo-mestizaje* of the twentieth century.

Organized by chapter into thematic analyses, the book first provides overviews of the terms “Whiteness” and “Indigeneity” within the Mexican racial formation. García Blizzard defines whiteness “contextual[ly]” (21–22), following Omi and Winant, as a racial formation governed by “Western discourses of modernity” and as a “historically and socially situated project” (21). Whiteness here is both *blanquitud*, a sense of socioeconomic ascension as defined by the philosopher Bolívar Echeverría, and *blancura*, the embodied white Mexican phenotype. Both Spanish terms date back to the Spanish conquest and continue to exist in residual forms.

García Blizzard succinctly summarizes how Indigeneity was opposed to whiteness as an “undesirable categorization” during the postrevolutionary twentieth-century nationalist project (13). Thus, to make Indigeneity desirable and “elevate” its place in the national narrative for Mexican spectators in the years following the Mexican Revolution, audiovisual production used whiteness to represent Indigenous people as “compassion-worthy” by privileging the white female body. As such, the trope of whiteness-as-indigeneity—working in the opposite direction of its “hemispheric cousin” blackface—“infus[es] the racialized subject with the dignity and desirability that coloniality confers upon Whiteness” (6).

García Blizzard’s argument about the trope of whiteness-as-indigeneity convinces in large part through the sheer force of accumulated evidence. The collected corpus of films under discussion—an interesting amalgamation of silent-era (*Zítari*), preindustrial (*Janitzio*), heavily studied (*María Candelaria*), *indigenista* (*La india bonita*, *El indio*, *Maclovía*, *La Zandunga*, *Tierra de pasiones*, *Tizoc*), revisionist *indigenista* (*La noche de los mayas*, *Deseada*), late golden age (*Tizoc*, the *María Isabel* duology, *El violetero*), and relatively understudied (*Chilam Balam* [1957]) films—impress with their racist engagement with indigeneity through a pervasive use of gendered and schematically white bodies on-screen.

The first chapter examines how films idealize pre-Columbian womanhood in this way. Analyzing *Zítari* (1931) and *Chilam Balam*, the author argues that the whiteness of their female protagonists functions as a “racialized semiotic device for underscoring the pathos and desirability of the characters,” and that the films portray the white (but passing for Indigenous) women as “glorious contributors of