whether they held any interest in each other's languages or thought of their poetic tradition as transnational in the way Thompson conceptualizes it.

The case for a new map of literary modernism that places Mesopotamia at its center and Europe and North America at its periphery relates directly to a political stance from which Thompson does not shy away. As he states early in the book, his position of writing from "the decaying heart of US empire" motivates his efforts to think beyond national identities (p. 10). In this regard, *Reorienting Modernism* joins a growing body of scholarship that explicitly challenges the politics shaping studies of World Literature today. In Iranian Studies, two forthcoming books, Aria Fani's *Reading across Borders* and Sam Hodgson's *Persianate Verse and the Poetics of Eastern Internationalism*, promise to further demonstrate East-East literary connections in a conscious effort to problematize either nationalism or globalized, West-centered World Literature as our primary frames of reference for literary studies. *Reorienting Modernism in Arabic and Persian Poetry* should be essential reading for anyone interested in this new crop of politically provocative scholarship. Thompson's study demonstrates how careful, theoretically rigorous, aesthetically sensitive, and historically informed readings of the most well-known Persian and Arabic modernist poets can produce fresh insights into both the poetries themselves and the ideologies by which we make sense of the world.

doi:10.1017/irn.2024.1

Underground: The Secret Life of Videocassettes in Iran. Blake Atwood (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2021). 252 pp. ISBN 9780262542845

Reviewed by Mahsa Salamati, University of Sydney

(Received 21 January 2024; accepted 23 January 2024)

In the past decade or so, several Iranian movies have been produced that depict the domain of informal film circulation and the pivotal role that video dealers play. An example is Jafar Panahi's *Tehran Taxi* (2015), which offers a glimpse into this underground media infrastructure. In this film, Panahi assumes the role of a taxi driver, picking up passengers as he drives a yellow cab through the streets of Tehran. Along the way, he engages in conversations and records these interactions primarily using a dashboard-mounted camera. Early in the movie, a passenger adamantly insists that Panahi should recognize him. He later introduces himself as Omid "Filmi," the dealer who used to deliver movies to Panahi's home. We gain more insights into Omid's activities when he asks Panahi to take him to his customer's place to deliver some films. He claims that his job constitutes a form of "cultural activity" that is central to the Iranian movie culture, serving as the sole means of accessing films that have been restricted by the state.

For international critics who celebrated *Tehran Taxi* as a "subversive piece of underground filmmaking," Omid's labor might appear to be a frivolous endeavor, perhaps even deserving a chuckle.[1] For Iranian viewers, Omid and others like him "reawaken" memories of a long-established, intricately woven underground media network, a space that facilitates alternative film experiences, transcending the constraints imposed by the state. This

[1] Dana Stevens, "The Cab Ride as Artistic Rebellion," Slate, October 2, 2015, https://slate.com/culture/2015/10/jafar-panahis-film-taxi-reviewed.html.

underground media landscape represents an ordinary facet of everyday life in Iran, albeit one that has only recently received theoretical scrutiny and analysis.

Blake Atwood's book, *Underground: The Secret Life of Videocassettes in Iran*, therefore, makes a valuable contribution to an often-overlooked realm of Iranian media and cultural studies. The book delves into the history of video culture, particularly during the 1980s and 1990s, shedding light on the informal, illicit networks, and their impact on cinematic experiences and spectatorship in the country. The underground, as Atwood captures it, is inherently political, encompassing a wide range of spaces, activities, and beliefs that operate beyond the confines of the state's legal and ideological framework. It serves as a space for an array of activities, from the circulation of media to the distribution of alcohol and illicit substances, to oppositional movements, among others. By unraveling the intricacies of the underground that emerged in postrevolutionary Iran, this book holds relevance for scholars in the broader field of Iranian studies. It uses the video distribution networks as a case study, offering a unique opportunity to explore the dynamics of the expansive underground that took shape in Iran following the revolution.

The underground world of video and its significant role in Iranians' daily lives were common knowledge to those who experienced it. However, there is a scarcity of formal documentation that provides a concrete understanding of its actual manifestations. Traditional sources are inadequate for a media historian seeking comprehensive insights into this phenomenon. The informal nature of the practice renders it a subject of inquiry characterized more by hyperbole than rigorous investigation. Atwood addresses this challenge by using oral history as the primary research method. Within the book, readers will encounter captivating excerpts from interviews conducted with a diverse range of individuals, including ordinary users of video technology, video distributors, film critics, government officials, video store proprietors, and filmmakers. For a more meticulous mapping, Atwood complements the analysis by using other popular and official sources, including legal documents, policies, newspapers, trade publications, films, and essays. By incorporating official archival research, oral history interviews, and fictional representations, such as those found in films like *Tehran Taxi*, *Sperm Whale* (Saman Moghaddam, 2015), and *50 Kilos of Sour Cherries* (Mani Haghighi, 2015), *Underground* presents a nonlinear narrative that explores the intricate systems, pathways, and operations of video networks while also delving into how the memory of video is preserved. This focus on memory is particularly valuable as it enables the reader to perceive this infrastructure as an ongoing process (201); it evolves both materially, adapting to advancements in proliferation technologies, and as memories that evoke sensations and emotions for those who lived through it.

Underground's five chapters present distinct perspectives on the subject. In the initial chapter, Atwood probes the video ban and how an informal space emerged as a space for negotiation between society and the state, formality and informality, public and private, and law and ethics.[2] Going beyond the universal assumptions about media piracy, Atwood illustrates how, in Iran, the informality of the video infrastructure was intrinsically linked to the state's formal policies. The strict ban on video paradoxically created a fertile ground for underground practices since the stringent prohibition meant that the only access to videocassettes was through illicit channels. In this context, *Underground* draws upon a rich body of scholarly literature on media informality, including the works of Ramon Lobato, Brian Larkin, and Ravi Sundaram, as well as insights from Iranian film and media scholars like Hamid Naficy, Negar Mottahedeh, and Kaveh Askari, to offer a contextual examination of this phenomenon.

Chapters 2 and 3 delve into the underground domain, offering a nuanced examination of the informal networks and the individuals engaged in video distribution. The second chapter focuses on the conditions, processes, and labor that facilitated the circulation of

[2] Atwood underscores that the underground had a presence prior to videocassettes, but the technology played a role in shaping a more cohesive underground for those engaging in movie distribution (11).

videocassettes. Specifically, it explores the politics of infrastructural invisibility, revealing how the decision to conceal this media infrastructure resulted from negotiations among various public and private entities (64). *Filmi*s, much like "pirates" in different parts of the world, occupy a marginal yet persistent presence in the informal media space.[3] The third chapter elevates this figure to the center of analysis, challenging the conventional perception of video dealers as mere logistical intermediaries. Instead, *Underground* underscores that *filmi*s are, in fact, cultural laborers, driven by creativity in their pursuits (99). The closure of legal video stores created an opening for a new category of Iranians, mainly from the working classes, who were previously excluded from the formal industry, to participate in video distribution. Atwood argues that this was an opportunity for *filmi*s to engage in aspirational creative labor, imbuing videocassettes with enriched meaning and value as they circulated within the underground network.

In the final two chapters, *Underground* attends to discursive forms, encompassing not only oral history but also essays and films, as avenues for recollecting the role of video. It provides insights into how video itself has continued to be the subject of ongoing negotiation about meaning. Through these discourses, individuals can reengage with the enduring practices and discussions surrounding videocassettes in Iran. Within this context, we gain an understanding of how the values associated with videocassettes underwent a transformation as they traversed difference spaces. For instance, for students, these cassettes represented precious assets in social exchanges, while at home they became sources of secret pleasure. However, in public spaces, under the vigilant gaze of the state, they took on a different guise, perceived as embodiments of crime and decadence (140).

Underground's primary aim is not to provide a comprehensive history of video in Iran, but rather to offer some fresh insights into film and media scholarship. Atwood's bottom-up approach to media infrastructures sheds light on relatively uncharted aspects of active participation by the Iranian population in the proliferation, circulation, and consumption of media products. Importantly, this book opens the door to various areas of inquiry, encouraging further research into the dynamics of media informality and circulation practices in Iran. After all, I agree with Atwood that, in many respects, digital media and the internet serve to "reawaken" earlier concerns and memories associated with technologies like videocassettes (199).

doi:10.1017/irn.2024.8

[3] Kavita Philip, "Keep on Copyin' in the Free World? Genealogies of the Postcolonial Pirate Figure," in *Postcolonial Piracy: Media Distribution and Cultural Production in the Global South*, ed. Lars Eckstein and Anja Schwarz, 149–178 (Bloomsbury, 2014).