

Introduction

Midcentury Film companies in Iran in the early 1960s did not always pay careful attention to their design elements, but Azhir Film had the ambition to bring its films, and especially its new release *Zarbat* (*The Strike*, Khachikian, 1964), into the world of midcentury cinema with a memorable design scheme. The film's creators did not realistically expect it to produce revenues outside of Iran, although they teased this possibility in the press as the project moved through various stages of its production.¹ The primary aim, rather, was to create a certain kind of cinematic experience when the film was released. The release called upon modern design's global ambitions at a time when packing movie houses in Tehran still typically meant securing a well-traveled film print.

A stubborn disagreement between filmmakers had left a lot riding on this particular crime thriller. Film studios in Iran tried to avoid competing releases, but this time, during a coveted release slot after the start of spring and the Iranian New Year, two producers refused to compromise. *The Strike*, produced by Josef Vaezian and directed by Samuel Khachikian, each of whom was coming off of a string of successful films, would be released the same week as the rival producer and former Khachikian collaborator Mehdi Missaghieh's *Ensan-ha* (*Human Beings*, Aghamaliyan). Industry professionals debated the ethics of this in the press, but neither producer would move aside.² *The Strike*'s distributor, Nureddin Ashtiany, pulled out all the stops with an extensive



FIGURE 1. Premiere of *Zarbat / The Strike* (Samuel Khachikian, 1964). Private collection.

publicity campaign and a premiere that drew a large street crowd and high-ranking special guests (figure 1).³ The spectacular premiere motivated by a business feud, while not an unfamiliar occupational hazard in any film industry, marks a point of orientation in the topography of Iranian popular cinema of the time. It opens onto a moment when films circulated with great momentum but without the later-established transparency that would allow any one producer to really understand where and how their images and sound recordings traveled. Given the difficulty in tracking the large-scale phenomena of film culture in transit during a period of limited transparency, it helps to begin small. Consider, to start, the ephemera of this premiere and the modest labors of a billboard painter.

The 3D billboard above the marquee, the posters, and the title sequence, all created by the graphic artist Abbas Mazaheri, follow the design principles of compressing the experience of a film into streamlined graphic forms. At the start of the first reel, the audience encountered a pretitle sequence, something of a rarity for local productions, and a modernist animated graphic in simple white shapes. Diagonal



FIGURES 2A–2D. Title sequence from *Zarbat / The Strike* (Samuel Khachikian, 1964).

solid and dotted lines cut across the screen, rectilinear shapes expand and contract, and clusters of white dots blink in random patterns as the credits feature the members of the cast and crew in bold fonts (figures 2a–2d). The titles make use of a graphic motif that ran through much of the film’s publicity material. A shattering blow (the “strike” of the film’s title) was an iconic form on the billboard, and an abstract graphic of this strike opens the animated title sequence alongside the sounds of shattering glass and heavy percussion. When the sequence concludes, a lightning strike accompanies the first establishing shot. Had it been possible for Saul Bass to see this marketing campaign (the industry at the time depended on this impossibility) he might have felt vindicated that the design principles he proposed were being put to work successfully in an industry with dramatically fewer resources than the one in which he worked. The nearly invisible labor of a freshman designer who employed modernist design elements brought a film into the commercial sphere for a highly visible premiere. Azhir Film

wanted to make films that announced, “This is cinema.” The company continued these kinds of title sequences with subsequent films, such as the thriller *Sarsam (Delirium)*, a product of the same director and title designer the following year. Part of the ambition of productions like these was to imagine the world orbit of the medium, even if their circulation was largely delimited by national borders. The design of these productions marks one of the sites of circulation in midcentury Iran.

The stylistic influence of a well-known midcentury designer in smaller film industries has remained largely unseen despite the global orientation of the design theories of Bass and his colleagues.⁴ Later histories of film graphics in Iran are beginning to receive some consideration.⁵ Abbas Kiarostami, the best-known Iranian director in the world, began his career by putting his art-school training to work on title sequences for films such as *Qeyсар* (Kimiai, 1969).⁶ To track stylistic influences in earlier film graphics in Iran, we could compare Bass’s most recognizable work, like the swirl in *Vertigo*, with iterations elsewhere, including several Iranian movie posters, film magazine designs, and redesigned advertisements for imported films. The poster for *Tars va Tariki (Fear and Darkness)*, Motevasselani, 1963) makes use of a *Vertigo*-like orange swirl around a character’s head. Variants of this swirl appear in posters for local productions and imports alike. Midcentury film magazines make use of design schemes championed by Bass. We can see this in operation in a 1957 issue of *Film va Zendegi (Film and Life)*: a young Sadegh Barirani designed the cover in a way that recalls the titles of sequences like those in *The Man with the Golden Arm* (Preminger, 1955). Barirani would go on to a celebrated design career that included posters for the Tehran International Film Festival and an invitation by Milton Glazer to the International Design Conference in Aspen.⁷ Midcentury stylistic influence can offer some practical iterations of the global orientation of the design theories of Bass and his colleagues. It can also offer design-specific vectors of what Iain Robert Smith has termed “the Hollywood meme.”⁸ Parts of this book provide some resources for a discussion of stylistic influence in midcentury design.

My primary approach is slightly different, however, in its attention to circulating elements, modular components of cinema, including film scores and title design elements, as found *media objects*. The way distributors bundled publicity material with the films, and the way exhibitors and periodicals reassembled them, created a foundation for



FIGURE 3. Partial translation of William P. McGivern's serial *The Big Heat* (1952–1953, billed as *Zarbe-ye Bozorg / The Big Hit*) printed over an orange monochrome image from the poster, *Setare-ye Cinema*, December 8, 1957.

their stylistic currency. Browsing the layout in film magazines from this period, even relatively elaborate and well-funded ones such as *Setare-ye Cinema* (*Cinema Star*), one finds a particularly high concentration of design material reassembled from multiple sources of conspicuous provenance. A big film like *The Big Heat* warranted laying a translation of its original *Saturday Evening Post* story over a monochromatic orange reprint of the poster. The new title, *Zarbe-ye Bozorg* (*The Big Hit*), is printed in blue directly on top of the English title graphic from the poster (figure 3). Alongside discussions of Iranian actors imitating the styles of foreign stars, one finds thick eyebrows and almond-shaped eye makeup (popularized by Iranian stars) hand-painted over a colored



FIGURE 4. Detail of cover image of Lana Turner, *Setare-ye Cinema*, Nowruz Special Issue, 1959.

portrait of Lana Turner on the cover of the ۱۳۳۸ (1959) Iranian New Year special issue of the magazine (figure 4).⁹ The May 5, 1957, issue features *The Man with the Golden Arm* prominently. Its cover features a publicity portrait of Kim Novak, and the issue contains two articles about the film, one primarily from Preminger's perspective and the other from Novak's. The cover image, like the one of Lana Turner, is a color pinup of circuitous provenance. The half-tone images of Novak and Preminger inside are cut and pasted, with jagged edges still visible in the final layout. The film magazines that emerged in the 1950s, whether prominent or peripheral, have a collage quality to them. This quality, while not radically distinct from print operations elsewhere, is noticeable and significant to a history of circulation. The rough edges evident in layout highlight the publications' cut-and-paste practices of sourcing, editing, and translating found material.

If we look and listen closely, the title sequence for *The Strike* reveals something about the object lives of its found elements. It is perhaps closer to Len Lye than to Bass in its construction. Mazaheri, whose employment with Azhir Film began his fifty-year career, has described this period before the formalization of the profession as one dependent on found objects. Training in calligraphy helped, but he notes that design education in the early days of his industry came not through apprenticeships or formal programs but through imported print media that provided material templates.¹⁰ Khachikian, too, was known to borrow compositions, and even footage, in his films. Lightning strikes are frequent enough in Khachikian films to be a kind of signature motif,

and his first lightning strikes were made from footage cut from Hindi films found in the vaults of the Diana Film studio in Tehran (the company also exhibited and dubbed films).¹¹ The arrangement of music and effects in *The Strike*, credited to the director himself, is a collage of found sound. We first hear a police siren with the name of the production company (*azhir* means “siren”). Then a fragment of strings from a melodrama score accompany Khachikian’s personal message about the film’s social message, which is followed by the quivering organ of a mystery thriller. As the animated sequence begins, so does the modern pared percussion with the pulse of a proper midcentury thriller.¹² The film itself switches among codes of family melodrama, gothic horror, policier, and film noir. Its soundtrack, starting with the title sequence, is a collage of found material pulled directly from representative films in each of these genres. This was not an isolated experiment. The music for Mazaheri’s title sequence and Khachikian’s next title sequence for *Delirium* samples Henry Mancini’s opening credit music for *Touch of Evil* (Welles, 1958). Its animations include a disembodied hand—not as minimalist as Bass’s arm graphic for Preminger’s film, but the resemblance is clear. Twenty years before Orson Welles would make his final films with funding from Iran, or before he would work as a voice actor for *Foroogh-e Javidan* (*The Flame of Persia*, Golestan, 1971) and an Agatha Christie adaptation shot in Isfahan, a sonic fragment that had branded his classic noir accompanied Persian titles designed in affinity with, if not as a direct citation of, *The Man with the Golden Arm*.¹³ The soundtracks and print publicity, not to mention the films’ plots, announced that they were assemblages.

From the perspective of the history of stylistic influence of global design trends, the fragmented and palimpsestic quality of the design of sequences like the opening of *The Strike* create a form of aesthetic friction that might have worried design theorists interested in a seamless consumer experience.¹⁴ This strange combination of commercial practicality and experimental reassembly affirms the dream of global expansion of modern design while also calling attention to the frictions of its movement. It demonstrates enthusiasm for the commercial modernism of the international style while also calling attention to unexpected juxtapositions, to objects that bear the traces of their circulation, and to the labor involved in these objects’ transport and reuse. Media archaeology can help to account for these phenomena, which extend into multiple forms, from the Persian text of the story for *The Big Heat* printed over the original poster in a film magazine to the magnetic audio tracks that

were redubbed or sometimes manually glued over the original optical tracks of imported prints.

Relaying Cinema To give focused attention to the way we conceive of the history of cinema's geographic vectors, I have structured this book around a conception of relay. The metaphors embedded in the term's usage span two relevant domains: mediated communication and physical movement. In its modern form, *relay* comes to everyday usage from wired and wireless communication networks. A relay point extends the range of a signal that has become weak and amplifies it. Relay technologies can be found at the limits of a signal's range. The relay point is at once dependent on the received signal and semiautonomous in its retransmission. Such a conception of relay can foreground the movement of media while also accounting for decentralized forms of agency in this movement. This decentered agency is especially evident in relay networks where little practical hope for top-down management of the network exists. In its second common usage, as a term of physical movement, *relay* refers to a race (archaically, to a hunt) that requires multiple animals (human or otherwise) who each hasten to a point of exchange. In athletics, the carriers of a baton in the first segments of a relay race cannot act upon, or sometimes even see, the actions of the latter segments. An object crosses a long distance through a sequence of individual races. Obstructions in the sequence are not failures of organization; they are defining features of a relay's cooperative movement. *Relay* thus highlights two dimensions of cinema's movements that this history prioritizes. The first suggests amplification in sequence: it directs attention to the transformations that take place in networks. The second draws attention to objects in transit, to the potentially beneficial obfuscations and obstructions at each stage of a relay. *Relay* evokes circulation but with an emphasis on sequence, interruption, and incremental agency over top-down or seamless transparency. A study of relayed cinema presents film culture, in Bernhard Siegert's terms, as "a gift of intercession."¹⁵ It stresses the juncture of circulation studies and media archaeology.

Studies of recycled global cinema and informal circulation in the Middle East and beyond have expanded in recent years. Amplification and transformation are threads that run through this work, and their insights about cinema's creative recontextualizations across borders and national cinema cultures have informed much of *Relaying Cinema in Midcentury Iran*. My interest lies in the celluloid prehistory of

the contemporary states of circulation. Whereas many of these studies, including recent books by Ramon Lobato and Brian Edwards, tend to focus on the accelerated circulation of recent digital media environments, this book traces repurposed cinema back to the technologies of scissors, contact printers, and mag-stripe sound.¹⁶ Compared with the small-scale affordability of digital storage and transmission formats, of the informal trade of VCDs and flash memory or lateral exchange of streams and torrents, heavy and expensive celluloid intended for theatrical runs might seem to leave far less significant opportunities to escape top-down control of the relayed item. But the obstructions inherent in relaying these bulky and costly objects invite one to consider comparable patterns of recontextualization. There is a kindred history of possibility, of long before digitization enabled audiovisual appropriation, in flat-fee sales of junk prints, unlicensed printing, and partial reproductions of film components. The ongoing scholarship on digital appropriations, such as the amateur dubbing of *Shrek* or small-scale VCD trading, can help to sharpen not only our understanding of global media environments looking forward but also the historiography of global media environments nearly a century in the past.¹⁷

Writing a history of celluloid and imaging machines as a history of relay foregrounds types of exchange that have stubbornly escaped notice. As chapters 1 and 2 reveal, in the late silent era and the early postwar era, markets in the Middle East were frequently seen as too difficult and as failed opportunities by US distributors. Studies of these periods in the history of film distribution carry scant references to the Middle East, and for good reason.¹⁸ The distributors themselves understood these channels for prints as dead ends. Many understood that they were passing along objects that could continue to run through projectors for years, but without a reliable way to capture those screenings, their record-keeping system ended at these relay points. They were the final mark in the accountant's ledger. For more than a decade after WWII, exporters from United Artists could scarcely see Iran. They could see Baghdad, which supplied prints to Iran, but they could not see how the larger network of cinemas in Iran used the prints sourced from the smaller market in Baghdad. With the last profitable relay point, except for occasional clues, the archives of Hollywood exporters go dark. And despite laments about the lack of access to these markets, this darkness also provided benefits. It externalized risk and offloaded fragile prints as their maintenance and storage costs crept above their declining exhibition value. The inability of distributors to see and account for Iran,

partly due to their own choices about acceptable burdens of risk and maintenance, has also meant that this history has gone unnoticed.

The gaps in studio archives mark dead ends in parts of the Middle East, but those gaps paired with archival material from the films' destinations reveal animated segments in the relay of cinema. To consider global cinema history only through the visible official screenings of exported films is like trying to imagine the unfolding of a relay race from only its first leg. Tracking at the material level these earlier forms of relay, from small-scale informal circulation of celluloid to ambitious collaborations with foreign filmmakers, means developing methods to work with archives that are dispersed, incomplete, and sometimes inaccessible. Researching local film exhibition, production, and the structure of intellectual cinema in locations like Iran requires a historiography that attends to their continued variability (a more durable form of what Rick Altman has described as crisis historiography), to the interarchival investigations they demand, and to the asynchronous and overlapping chronologies they produced. For these challenges and others, a disciplinary commitment to cinema history can offer useful tools.

To address this history of fortuitous obstruction, I have conducted archival research with collections in Iran and North America. Such comparative archival work makes it possible to track the amortization and provenance of actual prints, posters, sound recordings, and devices as they moved, say, from New York, through Rome and Cairo, to Tehran. Because structures of prestige were inevitably reframed in transit, with genre films recast as classic or art cinema, these relay networks can help film studies to challenge assumptions about the distinctions between classics and ephemeral films in the region. They indicate how enmeshed the Tehran film scene was with key distributors in Baghdad and Baku. They provide much-needed context for the interpretation of midcentury films made in Iran, which have been neglected (or dismissed as unserious) in part because their collages of found soundtracks and visual references that span adventure serials, film noir, and 1960s art cinema have made them difficult to classify within existing scholarly frameworks. The films' collages have trouble holding still. These challenges speak not only to scholarship on local reception but also to the way we form the canons of the well-known films (those that circulated into as well as from the Middle East) that have shaped the discipline of film studies.

While this is not a book on early cinema, its methods are informed by my training in the field. Early cinema studies might seem like an odd place to look for insight into traditions that move from the 1920s to