This seminar on contemporary Iran mixes two distinct but interrelated cultural genres. First, it examines some of the literature on the political and social conditions in Iran since the early twentieth century, and, at the same time, it analyzes some films of the Iranian “new wave,” in particular those produced since the 1980s, in the aftermath of the Iranian Revolution of 1978–79. We’ll meet once a week, each Tuesday afternoon, with one week devoted to the literature and another to film.

Iran is known to be the motherland of contemporary Shi’ism, but it should be noted that such a view of Islam, which has rivaled the orthodox Sunnis since early Islam (even though it was not labeled as such in its formative period), was only introduced in Iran by the Safavid dynasty in the early sixteenth century through mystical sufism. The blend of Shi’i literature, traditions, and corps of ulama (the scholars in religion and jurisprudence), which Shi’ism is known for today, only materialized as such in the sixteenth–seventeenth centuries with the early Safavids, and developed further under the Qajars and later with the Pahlavis, the last dynasty to rule Iran up to the 1978–79 revolution.

The combination of Shi’ism together with a dynastic monarchy has proved to be one of the key ingredients for understanding Iran’s modern history, in particular when it comes to the legitimacy of dynastic monarchical rule. In effect, Shi’ism draws its legitimacy from the persona and practices of Islam’s fourth caliph, imam ‘Ali, who was at the same time the cousin and son-in-law of the prophet Muhammad, having married his daughter Fatima (originally the Shi’is were referred to as the Alids). In the Shi’i tradition, therefore, Ali and his two sons from Fatima, Hasan and Husayn, are considered as the first three imams of the Shi’i traditions (I use tradition in plural, as there are more than one in Shi’ism). The majority of Shi‘is today, known as the Twelver Shi‘is, would
acknowledge their allegiance to the twelve imams, from Ali up to the ninth-century vanished imam (or the awaited imam).

With the bulk of the Shi’is devoted to their imams, considered as the carriers of the tradition and the genuine interpreters of God’s word in His holy texts, an undeniable historical tension arose between the imamate and dynastic rule as witnessed in the time of the Safavids (1501–1779), Qajars (1779–1925), and Pahlavis (1925–1979). If one subscribes to the view that the imams are the ones to hold the truth (textual, moral, and jurisprudential), then what is the role of a dynastic monarch in this regard? The real historical tension, however, was not simply about the imamate truth, whatever that may be, but mainly on the status and function of the ulama corps in Shi’i Islam, and Iranian society in particular. It is known that the Ottomans (a Sunni Turkic dynasty that adopted Hanafism as its main law school), the main Islamic rivals to the Iranian empires, had bureaucratized their ulama corps, while tightening on their economic resources, which were for the most part known as waqf mortmain properties. The Shi’i ulama, by contrast, did not mainly survive from their waqf properties, but mostly from the Islamic taxes that the mass of believers were subjected to, which gave the ulama an unprecedented autonomous base and made them uncontrollable by the state.

Another source of tension for the three successive dynasties that ruled Iran since the early sixteenth century is undeniably the multi-ethnic nature of the populations and their various tribal affiliations, which reduces the dominance of the Persian Farsi element to no more than 50 percent. As can be detected from this 2004 map, the situation is no different today.
The Persian element (in light green) is mostly present in the center, south, and east of Iran. Besides the capital Tehran (which became capital in 1786 under the Qajars), the other main centers of Shi‘ism are the city of Qom in the north (a main hub of learning for Shi‘ism, together with Najaf and Karbala in the south of neighboring Iraq), Esfahan, Shiraz and Mashhad. For its part, the north-east, alongside the border with Armenia and Azerbaijan, is dominated by the Azeri ethnicity, while the Kurds are for the most part located in the north-west, along the Iraqi and Turkish borders. There are two locations for the Arab minority: along the south-west border with Iraq, on the Khorramshahr–Abadan axis, and further south on the Persian Gulf, to which Bandar ‘Abbas serves as epicenter. Finally, last but not least, the Baloch are located in the south-east along the borders with Afghanistan and Pakistan, both of which host important Baloch minorities.

For the periods we are concerned with, it is important to note that the combination of ethnicity (considered as religion, Muslim or non-Muslim minority, language, culture, and
“imagined community,” which keeps working on the conditions of its imagined togetherness under the most salient conditions) with tribalism has invariably represented an obstacle to the emerging nascent nation-state, an issue that has become ever more troublesome under the present Islamic Republic. Consider, for instance, all the problems that have emerged as an outcome of Kurdish nationalism, not only in Iran itself, but also in neighboring Turkey, Iraq, and Syria; or the claims for an autonomous Baluchistan territory, which would be jointly shared with similar Baloch dominated areas in neighboring Afghanistan and Pakistan. In each instance the nation-state is struggling with quasi-separatist movements, in addition to secularist calls of all kinds that have serious grievances with the Islamic character of the Republic.

However, even though the ethnic grievances exacerbate even further the nascent nation-state, the weaknesses of the state should not be solely attributed to the multi-ethnic nature of Iranian society. One should rather look for the historical weaknesses of the nation-state in the region as a whole in respect to the fragmentation of the traditional élite groups within the now defunct empire formations (Ottoman, Safavid and Qajar). In effect, picking up on Barrington Moore’s thesis of “no bourgeoisie, no democracy,” it is possible to analyze the historical weaknesses of the Iranian state in conjunction with the weaknesses and fragmentation of its élite groups, understood as the agglomeration of landowners, rentiers, merchants (bazaaris), moneylenders, manufacturers, military personnel, bureaucrats, ulama, intellectuals and artists. When, for instance, landowners, with or without state protection, live mostly from rents extracted from their peasants surpluses, without much investment in other domains such as trade, manufacturing and industry, a class of reactionary rentiers would de facto become a burden to a dynastic monarchy or republic alike. Moreover, when landowners, merchants, moneylenders and manufacturers live as segregated groups with only occasional work in common, they would tend to clamp down all too easily on any representative public sphere. Overall, Iran lacked a centralized, articulate, ambitious, and productive élite groups that would have contributed towards the formation of a stable and prosperous nation-state. Besides an often bankrupt monarchy that intermittently lived under Russian and/or British protection, and intellectuals equally divided towards foreign loyalties, the weight of the traditional ulama should not be underestimated, considering that unlike their Ottoman Sunni counterparts, Shi‘i ulama always posed a threat to a dynastic power (whose legitimation was not constructed on ancestral links either to the prophet’s lineage or to that of the Twelver imami tradition), through their allegiance to an imamate tradition that looked suspiciously towards a secular political dynastic ideology.

More to the point, and unlike their Sunni counterparts of the Ottoman Empire, the Shi‘i ulama were not limited to their awqâf mortmain endowments (which were subject to confiscation by the ruling dynasty), surviving mostly from personal Islamic taxes like the khums, or the one-fifth income tax that would be handled directly to the imam, or the charitable zakât tax.

When it came to political legitimation, and while the Qajars have attempted to uphold the view that the sovereign has the right and power to interpret the law, the bulk of the ulama did not budge to share such views. Moreover, by the early nineteenth century, when the
Qajar view of government implied that the mujtahid ulama do not have the right to govern (hence at best be limited to the interpretation of the law), the notion of wilāyat al-faqīh, the governorship of the jurist (which was later to become Khomeini’s famous dictum), began to circulate among some ulama. In short, even on basic issues of the legitimacy of dynastic rule, the sovereign as lawgiver, the right of the state to enact religious and secular laws, the consensus was not there between rulers, ulama, secular intellectuals and minorities, and other élite groups.

Nowhere were such divisions more visible than in the most memorable event that would mark Iranian politics at the dawn of the twentieth century: the constitutional revolution in 1906. In Many ways, as Abrahamian’s major study sums it up, Iran’s twentieth century is marked by “two revolutions”: 1906 and 1978; the two mirroring one another in that they share some disturbing infrastructural similarities. Chief among them is the permanent uneasy tension between dynastic rule and the ulama, the bankruptcy of the state and the delegitimizing of the monarchy in the eyes of the general public, the investment of bazaaris in land ownership (due partly to the monarchy’s selloff of its own properties), all such heterogeneous elements within different social categories contributing towards “populist” attitudes in politics.

At a time when Russians and British were attempting to deepen their tutelage over the Qajars, the 1906 events, known as the “constitutional (or constitutionalist) revolution,” broke out when Iranian political life began to be dominated by landowners. In the 1860s, with the monarchy’s bankruptcy, the state began selling some of its holdings to private individuals, and even though many of the traditional landowners benefited from such large selloffs, adding to their already considerable estates, the bazaaris were probably the ones who benefited the most, entering the landowning scene with vengeance. Even though it remains unclear how much the ulama factions benefited from such selloffs, they should not be underestimated among landowners, ranking probably third after the traditional landowners and the bazaaris. This consortium of landowners, in the absence of a strong manufacturing and financial class, and in the new overlap of bazaaris with landownership, was to dominate Iran throughout the twentieth century, orienting agriculture towards the export of commodities with regional and international appeal, such as opium, cotton, tobacco, or mulberry plantations for silk production. Thus, besides locking agriculture into exports, there were only limited investments in manufacturing and industry, transforming the most thriving élite groups into self-satisfied rentiers.

Always a majority in post-parliamentary Iran, this consortium of landowners would block all attempts for agrarian reforms until the “white revolution” in the early 1960s. More importantly, such a consortium, combining economic and ideological power in the form of landowners, bazaaris, and ulama, would challenge dynastic rule (first the Qajars and later the Pahlavis) through broad populist movements that in all their confusing heterogeneity would consolidate reactionary politics rather than clear sightedness.

Such a conglomeration of heterogeneous groups was already visible in the constitutional revolution in 1906. On the positive side, the events led to Iran’s first constitution, modeled after the Belgian, and parliament, forcing a corrupt Qajar monarchy to have its power checked through parliamentary and legislative action. But, on the other hand, even
though some of the ulama strongly participated and became the star figures of the movement, their participation, and later hesitations towards the legitimacy of the monarchy, would later signal deep drifts in Iranian society regarding the status of the monarchy and the possibility of republicanism, the issues of secularism, laicism, the status of the ulama and the doctrines of the Twelver imamis, all of which would remain unsettled throughout the twentieth century until this day.

We will study such transformations in Iranian society and politics in conjunction with bi-monthly film screenings. Since the 1980s Iranian cinema has had a tremendous impact among cinephiles worldwide, as evidenced in the works of such masters as Abbas Kiarostami, Jafar Panahi, and Mohsen and Samira Makhmalbaf, and for very good reasons. (Let us note here, en passant, that even though Iran in the 1960s, like some parts of Europe, had witnessed its own “new wave” through a generation of filmmakers that were inspired by the likes of Rossellini, Antonioni, and Godard, it was only in post-revolutionary Iran of the 1980s and 1990s, and under the stringent constraints of the Islamic Republic, that Iranian cinema achieved worldwide attention, thanks to a generation of filmmakers who lived the transition between the Pahlavis and Khomeinism, and whose exposure to world cinema was extremely limited, in blight contrast to the earlier more educated generation.)

In the limited number of films that we will be viewing, we’ll give particular attention to the particular way narratives are constructed in contemporary Iranian cinema. Rather than the traditional unilinear narrative centered around fictional characters, Kiarostami and others have attempted “real-time situations.” By this is meant not so much that particular situations are shot in “real time,” but rather that in that endless stream of time that constitutes our daily routines, the camera zooms into and reconstructs specific moments, creating a thread of micro-narratives that would seem like endlessly open. On one hand, fiction does not take over reality as in traditional narratives, but an opened-ended narrative is created, with semblances or fictional real-time situations that focus on “small” but important matters. Hence it is not that that kind of cinema abolishes narrative altogether (a meaningless statement in its own right), rather it constructs new kinds of nonlinear narratives: what in the traditional populist cinema has been marginalized and neglected (if not abolished), regains in this instance center stage. On the other hand, the classical division between documentary versus fiction is in such instances totally blurred, as if one could not survive without the other.
**GENERAL**

There are weekly readings in conjunction with films that we’ll discuss collectively in class. Your participation is essential for the success of the course.

In addition to the two-draft free-topic paper (see below the section on papers), you’ll have to submit two interpretive essays based on our films and weekly readings: you’ll receive sets of questions for each. *Each paper counts as 25 percent of the total. All interpretive essays are take-home and you’ll be given a week to submit them.* The purpose of the interpretive essays is to give you the opportunity to go “beyond” the literal meaning of a film/text and adopt interpretive and “textual” techniques. A failing grade in all interpretive essays means also a failing grade for the course, whatever your performance in the term-paper is. *All essays and papers must be submitted on time according to the set deadlines.*

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<th>Assignment</th>
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<td>First Interpretive Essay: assignment on</td>
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<td>February 16, due March 2</td>
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<td>Final Interpretive Essay: April 13, due April 27</td>
<td>25%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Term-paper: 2 drafts 10–15% each</td>
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<td>• First draft due on March 30</td>
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<td>• Second draft on April 27</td>
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<td>Presentations, Blackboard postings, and class</td>
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- It is essential that you complete all readings on time, and that you come to class well prepared. *Always come to class with the required book:* we’ll discuss all films and readings extensively.
- The first and final interpretive essays are based on our weekly films and readings. They all consist of a single essay for which you’ll receive the appropriate questions at the dates above, and you’ll submit them in class a week or two later.
- The assignments will be only distributed in class—no email communication.
- All papers follow the procedures outlined below in the section on papers.
- Essays are to be submitted only in class. Do not email or fax any material. Do not submit your papers outside the classroom.
- It’s your responsibility to submit all essays *in class* on time at the deadlines below. Late papers will be graded accordingly, and papers submitted a week after the deadline will be graded F.
- You must also submit, in addition to the printed hard copies, an equivalent electronic file of each paper in the digital dropbox on Blackboard.
- Each non-submitted paper will receive the grade of F, and your final grade will be averaged accordingly.
- The mid-term paper is a free-topic exercise based on a topic of your own choice.
- If you do not show up for an assigned presentation, you’ll be graded F.
TENTATIVE SCHEDULE

All dates, readings and films are tentatively scheduled and could be subject to change pending on our progress throughout the semester. Any change will be posted beforehand on Blackboard. Additional readings might be posted on Blackboard.

• Week 1: January 19
  Introduction
  Film: *The House Is Black* (Forugh Farrokhzad, Iran, 1962)

• Week 2: January 26

• Week 3: February 2
  Film: *The Cow* (Daryush Mehrju’i, Iran, 1969)

• Week 4: February 9
  Reading: Abrahamian, Chapters 4–6

• Week 5: February 16
  Film: *The Cyclist* (Mohsen Makhmalbaf, Iran, 1989)
  *First essay: to be submitted March 2*

• Week 6: February 23
  Reading: Abrahamian, Chapters 7–9

• Week 7: March 2
  Film: *Close-Up* (Abbas Kiarostami, Iran, 1990)

• Week 8: March 16
  Reading: Abrahamian, Chapters 10–11–conclusion

• Week 9: March 30
  Film: *The Circle* (Jafar Panahi, Iran, 2000)
  *First term-paper draft*

• Week 10: April 6

• Week 11: April 13
  Film: *Blackboard* (Samira Makhmalbaf, Iran, 1999)
  *Final essay: to be submitted April 27*

• Week 12: April 27
  *Presentation of term-papers & submission of all essays*
Book studies on Iranian cinema

- Hamid Dabashi, Close Up, Verso 1859843328.
- Geoff Andrew, 10, BFI Publishing 1-84457-069-X.

Films/DVD availability

All films are available on the American market on DVD, zone 1, NTSC format. US copyright laws do not authorize making copies of privately owned DVDs to circulate around.

If you’ve missed a session, or if you would like to review a film privately on your own, you could either check for the DVD at the Cudahy library, or in other libraries in the Chicago area, or rent it from one of the popular stores (Blockbuster or Hollywood).

You can also check DVD availability at the following services:

- Netflix (rental): Netflix.com
- Facets multimedia (Fullerton, Chicago): http://www.facets.org/asticat
- Amazon.com
- Tower records: http://www.towerrecords.com/

PAPERS

You are requested to write one major research paper to be submitted on April 27. You will have to submit, however, a first draft of this paper on March 30. The first draft should be as complete as possible and follow the same presentation and writing guidelines as your final draft, and it will count as 10% of your total grade unless the final draft is of superior quality. The purpose of the first draft is to let you assess your research and writing skills and improve the final version of your paper. It is advisable that you choose a research topic and start preparing a bibliography as soon as possible. I would strongly recommend that you consult with me before making any final commitment. It would be preferable to keep the same topic for both drafts. You will be allowed, however, after prior consultation, to change your topic if you wish to do so.

Papers must be related to Iran, the middle east, and/or film and film theory. Papers with broader topoi must first receive instructor’s approval. Papers should be analytical and conceptual. Avoid pure narratives and chronologies and construct your paper around a main thesis.

**April 27: FINAL DRAFT DEADLINE**

Keep in mind the following when preparing your preliminary and final drafts:

- once you’ve decided on a paper-topic and prepared a preliminary bibliography, post an abstract and bibliography of your topic on blackboard <blackboard.luc.edu> (see below). Your abstract should include: (i) title; (ii) description; (iii) sources; (iv) methodology (e.g. suggestions on how to read sources). **Your preliminary draft will not be accepted unless you’ve submitted an on-line abstract before March 25.**
- preliminary drafts should be submitted on time, March 30.
- preliminary drafts should be complete and include footnotes and an **annotated bibliography**. (The Turabian reference above is annotated: it briefly spells what the book is about and to whom it might be useful.)
- do not submit an outline as a first draft.
- incomplete and poorly written first drafts will not be accepted, and you’ll be advised to revise your first draft completely.
- if you submit a single draft, you’ll receive F for 10% of the total and your final grade will be averaged accordingly.
- **your final draft should take into consideration all the relevant comments provided on your earlier draft:**
  - all factual and grammatical mistakes should be corrected, in addition to other stylistic revisions.
  - passages indicated as “revise” or “unclear” or “awkward” should be totally revised.
  - when specific additional references have been suggested, you should do your best to incorporate them into your material.
  - there might be several additional suggestions in particular on your overall assumptions and methodology. It will be up to you to decide what to take into consideration.
- **Submit the final draft with your preliminary corrected one.**
- if you’re interested in comments on your final paper and interpretive essay, request an appointment by e-mail.

Please use the following guidelines regarding the format of your papers:

- use 8x10 white paper (the size and color of this paper). Do not use legal size or colored paper.
- use a typewriter, laser printer or a good inkjet printer and hand in the original.
- only type on one side of the paper.
- should be double spaced, with single spaced footnotes at the end of each page and an **annotated bibliography** at the end (see bibliography below).
• keep ample left and right margins for comments and corrections of at least 1.25 inches each.
• all pages should be numbered and stapled.
• a cover page should include the following: paper’s title, course number and section, your name, address, e-mail, and telephone.

ELECTRONIC FORUM

This course is listed on the Loyola Blackboard webpage to freely post messages and conduct discussions: login at <blackboard.luc.edu> and follow the instructions.

Besides a synopsis of all your presentations and term-paper, you must post each week a news item on the Middle Eastern and/or world art scenes. An Op-Ed or a reply to a posting are considered valid entries.

REFERENCES


Pearson, Lyle. "Four Years of African Film." Film Quarterly 26, no. 3 (1973): 42.


