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## Between Art, Politics, and Satire: History in Iranian Television Series

**Abstract** This article looks at Iranian television series and how their creators dealt with historical themes, especially those related to the Qajar dynasty and the Iranian Constitutional Movement. The study is focused on the works of three selected Iranian filmmakers—Ali Hatami, Mohammad Reza Varzi, and Mehran Modiri. Its main objective is to identify the dominant approach to history they have applied in their works. By analyzing their television activities, the paper discusses debates that accompanied serials broadcast, their reception among the critics, and seeks to reflect on the place and role historical productions play in the cultural, social, or political context in modern Iran.

**Keywords** Iran, Qajar dynasty, Constitutional Movement, television series, cinematography in Iran

### 1 Introduction

The development of serials as a genre has been conditioned by the growing importance and popularity of television. The first television station in Iran was established in 1958 as a commercial venture of a Baha'i, Habibollah Sabet, managed by Vance Hallack of the American NBC (Shahidi 2007: 95). The initiative was fully supported by Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, who was pleased with the establishment of the first commercial station in the Middle East. Initially, the station's output was filled mainly with foreign works, or



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local productions, although the latter were heavily influenced by American formats (Sreberny-Mohammadi and Mohammadi 1994: 62). As noted by Hamid Naficy, the commercial station launched by Sabet 'was a thoroughly Americanized operation, from hardware to staffing and from programming concept to individual programs' (2011: 65). After a few years, state institutions took over private television and established National Iranian Television (*Televiziun-e melli-ye irān*), which officially started operating in March 1967 under the management of Reza Qotbi, a cousin of Farah Diba, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's wife (Milani 2008: 165–166).

At first, however, radio and newspapers continued to be more popular as television coverage was limited, and '[t]elevision receivers were owned only by a small and upwardly mobile class' (Sreberny-Mohammadi and Mohammadi 1994: 63). With the passing of time, television became more popular, and while in the 1960s its reach covered just over 2 million people, a few years later it had grown significantly and reached over half of all households (Sreberny-Mohammadi and Mohammadi 1994: 66). In the pre-Revolutionary period, beyond usual news, television aired state-managed broadcasts that were designed to reinforce the narrative of the ruling dynasty, charted the progress of modernization, and also served to convey political content by broadcasting Iranian secret police, SAVAK-made materials (Sreberny-Mohammadi and Mohammadi 1994: 69).

Television was also employed for entertainment, although, as already mentioned, much of the content presented to Iranian viewers was either imported from the West or created in imitation of it. This often meant that viewers were exposed to cheap western-style productions (Chelkowski 2008: 799), and that much of the population experienced 'strong feelings of impropriety' (Tehrani 1980: 16).

With time, domestic production began to be produced, more in line with the mentality and interests of a large part of the population. Native leisure programs enjoyed great popularity; theatre shows and *ta'zieh* performances were broadcast as a response to the needs of those viewers who enjoyed more traditional forms of entertainment. The same was applied to Iranian-made films and serials. For example, the television series recounting the adventures of Samad, a naive but likable Iranian peasant played by a renowned Parviz Sayyad (Chelkowski 2008: 808), was very popular in this period.

The first domestic-made television series *Sanduqche-ye ashrafi*, directed by Parviz Kardan, was produced and broadcast in 1966 on Channel 1 of the newly launched NIT. Although in the following years only a few series were made annually, by the mid-70s the number of such productions had tripled. It was also at that time that the greatest pre-Revolutionary television works were produced, of which the best known and most appreciated

is probably the illustrious 18-episode series *Dāi Jān Nāpole'on*, made by Naser Taqvai, based on the same title novel written by Iraj Pezeshkzad.<sup>1</sup>

The Islamic Revolution has brought about huge changes in the media sector. The name of the main state-run station was changed to Voice and Vision of the Islamic Republic of Iran (*Sedā va simā-ye jomhuri-ye eslāmi-ye irān*). The institution began to function according to the rules laid down in the new constitution; however, its aims remained the same—informative, entertaining and propagandistic. The latter objective has been more efficiently implemented by the authorities of the newly born Republic than during the Pahlavi regime, whose narrative on modernization was often equated with westernization, which had many opponents. (Sreberny-Mohammadi, Mohammadi 2007: 50; Delap 2007: 13, 14).

This theme, among others, was exploited by Ruhollah Khomeini and became an important factor in building opposition toward the Pahlavi regime. It was not an antipathy toward television or cinema as such, but rather its corrupting content and westernized character, that was criticized by the religious opposition (Atwood 2016: 2). Soon after the establishment of the Islamic Republic, 'Khomeini and his followers successfully seized control of the former regime's mass media thereby securing an invaluable tool for the propagation of their own philosophy' (Delap 2007: 15). It was under the Islamic Republic that television began to develop dynamically, which was also due to both the increasing availability of television, and the conviction of the Islamic Republic authorities of its broadcasting power as a tool of state propaganda. In the post-Revolutionary period, television continued to be used also as a tool for the construction of Iranian national identity (Abbasian 2021: 39–41).

Over time, more than a dozen channels (including thematic ones) have become part of Iranian national broadcaster. The first television series screened after 1979 was Ahmad Najibzadeh's production *Shāh dozd*, shown on Channel 1. Although this few-episode series was kept in an atmosphere of ongoing political change, as time went by, *Sedā va simā* began to produce and broadcast more Iranian-made serials of different genres—social dramas, religious stories, comedies, sitcoms, and finally historical productions as well. The works were aired throughout the year and more recently on the occasion of state holidays, during *Nou Ruz*, and the holy month of Moharram, when people had more free time to sit in front of their television sets. By the end of the 1980s, the production of domestic serials had risen to more than a dozen a year. In 1399 [2020/2021], in which production was affected by the pandemic, annual series production reached 25 titles (Fars 1399 [2021]).

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<sup>1</sup> Iraj Pezeshkzad, *Dāi Jān Nāpole'on* [*My Uncle Napoleon*], 1349 [1970/1971].

An indispensable element of television productions was censorship.<sup>2</sup> Shortly after the establishment of the Islamic Republic more or less specific rules for film activity were defined by the newly established Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. While cinema often gave filmmakers more room for maneuver, television, as directly subordinate to the institutions of power maintained rigid standards of what could and could not be shown on screen. Apart from questions of a moral nature, determined by Muslim morality, the main point of interest for the censors was whether the series violate the ideals of the Revolution and undermine the legitimacy of current policies.

For the portrayal of the Constitutional Movement, however, the position developed at the very beginning of the Revolution remained crucial, preferring to treat the period not from the perspective of the positive values of Iranian parliamentarism but focusing on the reasons for its failure. While portraying the tyranny of Qajar rulers and the involvement of the Shi'i clergy in Constitutional Movement was in the interests of the new regime, the defeat of the movement, the dissolution of Parliament, and the eventual seizure of power by Reza Khan over the following two decades became problematic. The main narrative imposed largely by Ruhollah Khomeini focused on drawing attention to the mistakes and pathologies committed. In one of his speeches, Khomeini referred to the marginalization of the role of the clergy, attempts to counter the establishment of clerical oversight in Parliament, or the spreading of lies about them as reasons for the weakening and ultimate defeat of the movement. He also blamed the growing press and public organizations, as well as the activities of Western-educated intellectuals (*roushanfekrān-e qarbzadeh*) such as Taqizadeh and Malkum Khan, who spoke out against religious ideas (Sufi Niaraki 1386 [2008]).

## 2 Iranian History on the Small Screen

Iranian history has been one of the frequent themes undertaken by filmmakers and television series makers since the popularization of this genre, although the most intensive development of historical productions took place after the Revolution. As mentioned above, the choice of top-

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<sup>2</sup> A certain threat to the developing state-run television, which has been subject to censorship, were satellite dishes that enabled Iranians to receive not only foreign stations, but above all Persian-language broadcasts from Europe and the United States. Despite a 1994 ban on satellite dishes, many families in Iran have retained access to out-of-state broadcasters over the years. With the spread of the Internet, the prevalence of satellite dishes has declined, and has been replaced by social media. For more see Alikhah (2018).

ics, particularly historical, was frequently dictated by propaganda needs and shaped by the current objectives of the Islamic Republic. During the last 40 years, Iranian television stations have aired a number of productions depicting the history of Shi'ī Islam (e.g., *Emām Ali*, *Mokhtār-nāme*, and *Salmān Fārsi*), Iranian past ages (e.g., *Sarbedarān*), and the lives of Iranian culture key figures (e.g., *Abu Ali Sinā*, *Nardebān-e āsemān*, and *Sheykh Bahāi*). Themes related to the period of the Pahlavi rule have also been very popular (e.g., *Kolāh-e pahlavi*, *Dar cheshm-e bād*, *Shab-e dahom*, *Mo'ama-ye shāh*, or very recent *Khātun*). The same applies to the period of Qajar reign and the Constitutional Movement, which were particularly appreciated by some of the filmmakers. The most famous historical productions set during the Qajar dynasty include the following: Homa-yun Shahnavaz's series devoted to Rais Ali Delvari, anticolonial fighter, broadcast in 1353 [1974/1975], under the title *Delirān-e tangestān*; Said Nikpur's production *Amir*, aired in 1363 [1984/1985]; *Kuchak Jangali*, a television series that portrays the life story of an Iranian revolutionary leader Mirza Kuchak Khan, directed and produced by Behruz Afkhami in 1366 [1987/1988]; *Hezār dastān* written and directed by Ali Hatami and screened in 1367 [1987/1988]; and *Pahlavānān nemimirand* by Hasan Fathi, presented to the Iranian audience in 1376 [1997/1998]. Many of those series were set in an atmosphere of romantic melodrama; some dealt with more serious political issues. Most were well received by the Iranian audience, who seemed to appreciate attempts to portray historical events and capture the atmosphere of past centuries (Ebrahimnezhad 1399 [2020]).

It is not possible to examine or even simply provide an overview of the vast body of historical works set in the Qajar realities in one article, even if we narrow the time frame to the post-Revolutionary period of Iranian television activity. The objective of this study has been, therefore, limited to the examination of three approaches to historical themes that Iranian filmmakers have adopted over the past years. For this reason, the current article focuses solely on selected filmmakers and their works. The choice made is intended to depict the diversity most clearly in a way in which the subject matter in question, that is, Qajar rule and the Constitutional Movement, has been treated and illustrated on a small screen. However, the subject of the study is not a substantive assessment of the historical accuracy of the events shown in the series, nor an analysis of their content, although some information in this regard will be offered to illustrate the nature of the works and the discussions that accompanied them. Considering television productions, this study looks at their character, examines directors' own statements, the discussions that accompanied the broadcast of their television works

and the reception of their series among the critics, in order to reflect on the place and role these productions played in the cultural, social, and political context.

### 3 Ali Hatami. The Painter

No discussion on the presence of historical motifs of the Qajar dynasty and the development of the Constitutional Movement in Iranian cinematography and among historical television series can be held without mentioning the work of Ali Hatami (d. 1996), a prominent Iranian filmmaker, screenwriter, and costume designer. Hatami's enormous commitment to incorporating past plots into his work deserves particular attention. His uniqueness as a filmmaker was, among other things, because he was an artist of two epochs. Hatami began his cinematographic work years before the Revolution and continued after the establishment of the Islamic Republic. In 1970, after graduating from the Iranian College of Dramatic Arts, he made his first movie under the title *Hasan Kachal*, which was also the first musical film made in Iran. Over the years, Hatami has written and directed several feature films and three television series. He died in the mid-90s, in his early 50s, while working on a film about Gholam Reza Takhti, a famous Iranian wrestler (Akrami 2012).

However, it was the Qajar period that fascinated Hatami the most, as this was, in his opinion, the key moment in the history of modern Iran, when the transition from tradition to modernity initiated a series of changes in Iranian identity. In 1971, the director made the biographical film *Sattār Khān*, telling the life story of an Iranian hero of the Constitutional Movement. Many critics and historians still regard this film as the best work on the Constitutional Revolution (Hamshahri online 1386 [2007]). After the Islamic Revolution, in 1984 Hatami directed another production set in the realities of Qajar Iran—the film *Kamālolmolk* about the life of a prominent Iranian royal court painter.

Nevertheless, Hatami has also explored historical themes in television productions. Before the Revolution, in 1974, he directed a television series entitled *Soltān Sāhebqarān*, centered on the reign of Shah Naseroddin. Four years later, in 1978, he began working on the next historical series, which lasted until 1987, that is, for another 9 years. Iranian television broadcast the production under the title *Hezār dastān*.

In many aspects, the *Hezār dastān* series was a unique production. Not only did it feature the best cinema of the time—Ezatollah Entezami (d. 2018) and Jamshid Moshayekhi (d. 2019)—but for the purposes of the production, Hatami engaged architects and craftsmen to build a film town that became the setting for the action. *Ghazāli Cinema Town* (*Shahrak-e*

*sinamāi-ye ghazāli*),<sup>3</sup> located near Tehran, is still used today as a backdrop for many historical scenes.<sup>4</sup> According to many cinema and television personalities at that time, this was a unique project in which Hatami was totally involved. One of his colleagues, Manuchehr Azari, recalls the care with which Hatami reproduced *Lālezār* street to its finest details (Bahardi 1397 [2018]).

The series was shot on a grand scale and with attention to detail, although Hatami did not avoid criticism over factual inaccuracies or his approach to Qajar reign. Several historians and public figures have reproached him of treating facts and historical realities too loosely. The subject of criticism aimed at the director was, above all, the image of the Qajar dynasty that he depicted in his productions. Some, as recalled by a scholar, Ramin Sadegh Khanjani, considered Hatami's vision too sweetened (2012: 22). Others, as mentioned by a film critic Arash Khoshkhu (especially those with leftist views), considered the director's work not only old-fashioned but also reactionary (Moradi 1399 [2020]).

However, his perhaps overly romantic and poetic approach to this period of Iranian past attracted viewers and contributed to the popularity of his productions. Also, due to the lyrical nature of the stories portrayed by Hatami, the director was called the 'Hafez of Iranian cinema' (Tehran Times 2020). According to Jamsheed Akrami, Hatami's work gave insight 'testimony to the passion and keen perception with which he created a romanticized vision of fading times, unmistakably tinged with soulful nostalgia' (2012).

The filmmaker did not see himself as a historian. His dream, he once said in an interview, was 'to write down the history of Iran, not the clichéd history, but the history of the Iranian people' (Dalfak 1394 [2015]). Hatami maintained that what interest him was the human dimension of the people behind the historical events (Akrami 2012). This approach also had its critics. It has been alleged that Hatami mixes the place of the hero and the anti-hero. The argument in support of this claim was *Sattār Khān* film, which raised voices accusing Hatami of distorting 'the golden pages of the history of Iranian constitutionalism' (Javan online 1399 [2020]). The objections were related, among others, to the fact that Hatami did not build classical, one-dimensional heroes, but focused on showing their human traits, processes, and phenomena that accompanied their actions

<sup>3</sup> In 2017, renamed to Iran Cinema and Television Town (*Shahrak-e sinamā va televiziun-e irān*) by its owner, the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting.

<sup>4</sup> Photographs of the *Ghazāli* Cinema Town by Sobhan Farajvan, Teheran Picture Agency. 2017. Accessed 3 January 2022. <http://www.tehranpicture.ir/en/album/2176/Ghazali-Cinema-Town>.

and decisions, including those that seemingly did not fit into the vision of a national hero. Sattar Khan was to be shown in the film as naive and Haydar Khan, an active member of the Constitutional Movement and later founder of the Communist Party, as shallow (Ruzname-ye Farhikhtegan 1397 [2018]). The director responded to various accusations made against him by critics methodologically. He emphasized that film production as a performing art (*kār-e namāyeshi*) is governed by its own rules. In one of the interviews, he stated that, in his opinion, a film should demonstrate ‘certain indications, states and peculiarities of a given period for a specific purpose’ (Nozari 2016).

Hatami pursued this approach to history with his own technique, a combination of cinema and the art of painting. As a filmmaker, he stepped between people, but as a painter, he portrayed their states, and he did this on the periphery of historical events (Dalfak 1394 [2015]). Khosrou Dehqan wrote that Hatami’s greatest achievement was precisely this ability to illustrate and visualize what Iranians read about in history books (Hamshahri online 1386 [2007]). This overly romanticized vision of the Qajar dynasty, criticized by some, appealed to others. Interestingly, the poeticism of Hatami’s productions, according to Khoshkhu, was precisely related to the way the frames were created, which resembled paintings. This gave rise to a sense of lyricism (Moradi 1399 [2020]).

Despite accusations against Ali Hatami of idealizing the Qajars or misrepresenting the facts, in many of his productions, including television series, the director has reflected on the situation of the country and the causes and effects of the development of the Constitutional Movement. He highlighted the contributions of rulers to culture and the arts but also depicted their despotism and the social climate at that time. He was particularly interested in the processes that took place in history and focused on the attempts to modernize the country, and the socio-cultural dimension of this project. Jamshid Akrami wrote that ‘[h]is films, intricately woven reconstructions of Iranian cultural identity, shed light on the turn-of-the-century ethos behind Iran’s unpaved road to modernization’ (2012).

Hatami himself believed that the clash between the past and modernity that initiated changes in the identity of Iranians occurred only on a very superficial level (Khanjani 2012: 21). This, in turn, led him to depict, as expressed by Ramin Sadegh Khanjani, ‘the confusion of values and cultures afflicting his own society over the course of its transition to a modern society’ (2012: 12–13).

Despite his high profile as a filmmaker and the affection of viewers, Hatami faced not only some criticism from the historians, but his works has not always been well received by the authorities. The film *Sattār Khān* was taken off the screens after only four days of screening. The suspension



of the film's screening was demanded by some members of Parliament, who considered that it presented a distorted view of history and was maintained in an anti-constitutional atmosphere (Davudi 1398 [2019]).

#### 4 Mohammad Reza Varzi. The Ideologue

In the mid-90s, another interesting, if rather controversial figure appeared on the Iranian historical television production scene—Mohammad Reza Varzi. Now, the just over 50-year old film director, screenwriter, and television producer is the author of seven historical series filmed between 1996 and 2019. The history of Qajar Iran and the Constitutional Movement, along with Pahlavi rule, is one of the main topics addressed by Mohammad Varzi in his television works. Well-known historical series directed by Varzi include: *Emārāt-e farangi*, produced in 1387 [2008/2009], *Sālhā-ye mashruteh*, made one year later, in 1388 [2009/2010], *Tabriz dar meh*, screened in 1389 [2010/2011], and *Sattār Khān*, filmed most recently in 1397 [2018/2019].

The television productions of Mohammad Reza Varzi have usually been made with the financial support of state cultural institutions and the state-run *Sedā va simā* and have been broadcast on the screens of the national television channels. However, curiously enough, so far none of them has received a fully positive reception from the film community and film critics. Nevertheless, the director appears to be a relatively distinct filmmaker in terms of his approach to history and the role that he believes historical productions should play. With tireless effort, despite setbacks over the years, he has pursued a firmly established mission.

Among the most popular historical series directed by Varzi and set during the nascent Constitutional Movement is *Sālhā-ye mashruteh*. The project, which was produced in 2009, takes the viewer through 70 years of Iranian history under the rule of several successive rulers of the Qajar dynasty. Despite the huge amount of money allocated for the production, the series failed to capture the interest of viewers and to attract positive reviews from critics and was repeatedly panned even in pro-regime media (Isna 1388 [2010]). Many cultural figures and intellectuals stressed the lack of historical preparation of the director and the flaws in the script. However, the lack of attention to factual accuracy, shallow characters, and ultimately the distortion and flattening of the variety of approaches to the Constitutional Movement was not the only element raised by critics. University lecturer and historian Musa Najafi pointed out that a major weakness of the series was its dialogue. The historical characters in Varzi's vision, Najafi wrote, use a completely contemporary language. These were phrases such as *tahājom-e farhangi*, which means 'cultural

invasion', which have become commonplace in public discourse only in recent years (Tabnak 1388 [2010]). Its use may indicate an intention to link past events with the present and to evoke a particular ideological message. One of the accusations levelled against Varzi was the creation of an on-screen vision of historical events, seen through the prism of the current political situation. Writer and history researcher Reza Mokhtari Esfahani believes that unlike other filmmakers, who offered stories based on historical events, Varzi tries to analyze history and offers viewers a misunderstanding of the facts (Isna 1388 [2010]). The vision of history that Varzi presents to Iranians, in his opinion, is a vision built on personal beliefs and, to some extent, contemporary realities, rather than reliable research and historical knowledge, which does not serve a society that has little historical knowledge. Shaping the historical narrative according to a certain personal vision or ideological objectives rather than facts was also pointed out to Varzi on the release of the series *Mo'āma-ye shāh*, made a few years later. The plot of this series of several dozen episodes, which aired between 2015 and 2017, focuses on the political and socio-economic aspects of Pahlavi rule and the nascent Revolution. The production of the series, despite considerable financial resources, was discontinued, and the broadcast of some episodes was met with a widespread wave of criticism. After the media failure of the series, several actors admitted that they regretted their involvement in the project. The reason was said to be the numerous factual errors found in the series (Tasnim 1395 [2016]).

Iranian intellectual Sadeq Zibakalam was one of those who expressed harsh disapproval of the production, accusing Iranian television of trying to present a particular vision of history. Such measures, he underlined,

turn the production of historical series into political projects created for a specific purpose. They do not show history in a true way [...] but want to evoke a particular point of view. (Nasim 1395 [2016])

Varzi's historical productions were defended by people in power, such as Ali Akbar Velayati, who considered the director's series a good step in retelling the recent history of the pre-Revolutionary period (Nasim 1395 [2016]). The director himself, likewise, in his response to the critics, stressed that his historical productions are indeed not meant to be mere entertainment but are an attempt to narrate those events of modern Iran, which are underrepresented in Iranian cinema in a form accessible to a wider public. The director has also repeatedly suggested how important it is for him to continually raise public awareness of Iran's troubled past (Tasnim 1399 [2020]).

Varzi perceives his productions as a response to the image of Iran created by the West, which, as he puts it, 'never wanted to show the truth, but instead shaped public opinion in a direction that serves their interests' (Tasnim 1399 [2020]). It is hard to deny that the director has a point here, given such productions as *Argo* and *300*. Varzi seems convinced that Iranians need to start telling their story before the Americans or the British do. In one of the interviews, he asked 'do we really have to wait for Hollywood to make a film about the life of Imam Khomeini?' (Andishe-ye Mo'aser 1400 [2021]).

In this sense, the director's activity should also be perceived as part of a narrative acknowledging the need to fight against the soft war waged by the West, which has been announced for some time by Iranian governmental circles via audiovisual tools, television, and cinema. Ali Asgari, the Head of Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB), argued in one of his interviews that, although Iranians live today in times of peace, the soft war is waged with the greatest force, precisely in the sphere of the entertainment industry (Irna 1400 [2021]).

The fight against soft war also has another dimension. Guardians of the Islamic Republic have long been aware that rejuvenating Iranian society is beginning to forget the stories of the Revolution and the ideas that led to it, not to mention earlier times, such as the Qajar dynasty and the ideas of the Constitutional Movement, with particular emphasis on the problem of interference by foreign powers in Iran's internal politics and sovereignty. A large part of the current population of Iran is represented by generations born after 1979, for whom the ideas, which the government of the Republic constantly strives to preserve and maintain, are particularly alien and distant. Therefore, it is important, as one of Varzi's colleagues and creators of the series *Mo'amā-ye shāh* said that these new generations of Iranians become familiar with the events of the period that led to the Islamic Revolution (Jahed 2015). Varzi himself admitted in one of his interviews that

I wanted to make the fourth generation aware of this, whether they look at it in a negative or positive way. That was the main goal of the series. (Parsine 1394 [2015])

A few years later, the director also stressed,

we remind ourselves of the events that have hurt us and initiated problems in historical times, in order to know what plan we should put on the agenda of managing the country today. (Tasnim 1399 [2020])

The narrative adopted by Mohammad Reza Varzi seems to match the policy adopted some time ago in the circles of cultural producers close to

the institutions of power. Narges Bajoghli, who has studied new forms of media activity conducted by pro-regime culture institutions in recent times, points out that many organizations associated with the governmental circles are well aware that, in order to prevent a deepening crisis of legitimacy of the regime (especially since the events of 2009), it is necessary to undertake large-scale cultural activity, which, while still serving the purpose of preserving and reminding of the ideals and values that underpinned the Islamic Republic, will also keep an entertainment function and reach younger and younger generations with greater ease (2019: 7). The change in the cultural narrative of television and cinema aimed at young viewers was also mentioned by a journalist Babak Mina from BBC Persian, who drew attention to the shift from what he called 'the ideological asceticism' of the 1980s, realized, for example, in the desire to remove morally unacceptable elements from film and television productions and the creation of heroes in accordance with the ideals of the Revolution, towards an 'ideology of pleasure', which would be the result of the alliance between power and entertainment (1395 [2016]). This shift has led to the situation in which Iran 'is developing a new kind of politics, located not at the barricades but in culture and ordinary life' (Milani 2015).

Although, when it comes to historical productions, this policy might seem more relevant in the context of Pahlavi rule, references to the history of the Constitutional Movement and the reign of the Qajar dynasty seen through the eyes of the Islamic Republic also seem to fit into this narrative.

Regardless of whether Mohammad Reza Varzi's television series are produced with the support or inspiration of the authorities or are the outcome of his own personal mission, they should be perceived as part of a political and cultural project aimed at creating a vision of the past that is consistent with the direction of the Islamic Republic's policy. Varzi, as he repeatedly argued himself, uses history as a tool to express other truths (Alipur Tehrani 1398 [2019]). That is perhaps why the director focuses on showing various examples of the interference of Western empires in Iran's internal affairs and the role of Shi'i scholars in the Constitutional Movement. Despite a wave of criticism, the director manages to find funding for his projects and continues his work, claiming that those who narrate history are always accused of distorting it (Tehrani 1398 [2019]: 5).

## **5 Mehran Modiri. The Juggler**

A radically different approach to historical themes has been presented over the years by the successful film and television director, producer, and satirist Mehran Modiri (b. 1967). According to scholar Cyrus Ali Zargar,

[h]is pioneering efforts in producing Iranian television comedies with interesting plots and effective jokes has changed the face of Iranian television; today, in part thanks to Modiri, comedic television programs in Iran are extremely popular, and their ability to influence perceptions is taken seriously. In fact, in interviews, actors and directors refer to him as a pioneer in satire (*tanz*), and he is generally acknowledged as the master of Iranian comedic directing. (Zargar 2014: 83)

Modiri is not one of those filmmakers who openly fights against censorship in the media or produces works that directly contest the realities of the Islamic Republic, although as stated by Zargar, in his works, Modiri often criticizes shortcomings within Iranian society and government (2014: 97). It would also be inaccurate to simply classify Modiri as a pro-regime artist, although the fact that many of his productions, programs, and television series have been broadcast by state-run television stations and the numerous awards he has received for them in Iran testify to his strong position in the television industry.

In recent years, Modiri has grown into a leading commentator on the social condition of Iranians, a critic of the vices and behavior of contemporary society and its elites. Modiri's television projects fit the genre of social satire, and this is precisely what makes them often controversial and publicly debatable. The director often places this criticism in historical realities. The broadcast of the highly successful and popular 2005 satirical series *Shabhā-ye barāreh*, set in a fictional village in the 1930s, whose inhabitants not only spoke a specific dialect but also had their own bizarre customs and rituals, was interrupted after accusations of being insulative of the villagers' lifestyle surfaced.

A series not so much strictly historical as shot in Qajar-like realities is *Qahve-ye talkh*, produced in 2009. When, during the production process, one of the Iranian state television stations withdrew from the contract and refused to broadcast the series, Modiri shifted distribution to the private sector. Every week, Iranian bazaars, shops, and stalls were flooded with DVDs of the next three episodes of the series. The success of this project contributed in the long run to the fact that more and more filmmakers started to bypass the official path of distribution and distributed their products in an alternative way.<sup>5</sup>

*Qahve-ye talkh* is set in Iran in the first half of the 19th century, at the time of the power struggle between the descendants of the Zands and the Qajars.

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<sup>5</sup> With time, there has been an increase in the use of fast-growing home television networks, such as *Filimo* and *Namāvā*, two largest Internet platforms offering films and series in VOD service (video on demand).

The main protagonist, Nima, a history scholar discouraged by his professional life, goes back to 1822, after drinking a bitter coffee served to him at the Niyavaran Palace. That is when his adventures at the court of 19th century Iran begin. The series' producers did not have an educational goal in mind. As they argued, their intention was not to reconstruct historical events or figures, or to serve as a substitute for history teachers, but to create a story about the atmosphere of the indefinite past and to show the timelessness of certain behaviors and human attitudes (Barseqian 1390 [2011]).

The series is a satirical production that focuses on the distorted mirror of the mentality, oppression, ignorance, pervasive superstition, persecutory manias, phobias, and incompetence of the Iranian elite. Through the use of dress (although some historians believe they correspond to a later period) and stylized language, the series is obviously a kind of caricature of the rule of the Qajar dynasty, although an important role in the story is also played by a historian from the future, who becomes Shah Jahangir's personal advisor. Knowing the outcome of the ruler's behavior, Nima experiences frustration in seeing the state of Iran's elite at the time (Barseqian 1390 [2011]). Zargar claims that '[t]he historian's attempts to advise and change the course of Iranian history turn out to be exercises in absurd futility' (2014: 94–95).

By pushing the boundaries of what can be joked about, Modiri creates an area for social criticism and self-irony. The comedic framing of serious topics contributes to expanding the space for social and political commentary, the rules of which are relatively rigid in other spaces. Modiri's narrative turns out to be, however, a bitter one. The serial's message is that Iran 'while rich in culture and worthy of improvement, must recognize the limits imposed upon it by its own history' (Zargar 2014: 95). Placing some of his satirical series in the historical space enables Modiri to smuggle in references to the contemporary political and social situation. While in *Shabhā-ye barāreh*, the director takes society as his subject, in *Qahve-ye talkh*, he shows the rulers in a distorted mirror. Although none of the jokes in the series directly hit the current political authorities, there were voices suggesting references to specific figures or more contemporary events during its broadcast, especially since the series was set in the unspecified past, which could suggest the universal character of the attitudes presented in the series, that is tyranny, injustice, violence, separation of power circles from society, etc.

While Modiri's filmmaking work clearly has artistic merit, what is most distinctive about this director is his desire to look at historical reality through the lens of humor, derision, and mockery. This fact, in addition to being in some way associated with pro-regime producers and therefore belonging to the insider (*khodi*) circle of filmmakers, provides him with relative freedom of action.

## 6 Conclusions

The selection of three television series directors, featured in this article, who in their works incorporated historical themes related to the reign of the Qajar dynasty and the Constitutional Movement, is obviously a result of a subjective approach which cannot be treated as an attempt to introduce the phenomenon of Iranian historical television productions in a comprehensive manner.<sup>6</sup> What I hope to have demonstrated in this study is the diversity of approaches, indeed of philosophies behind each of the directors in question, but also of the ways in which they pursued their objectives and the public perception of their efforts. These approaches obviously cannot be treated as separate as they overlap each other. Each work carries a certain amount of artistic expression, and the Iranian context also makes them somewhat of a political commentary on historical and even contemporary reality. However, it is difficult not to notice that, while Ali Hatami had been guided mostly by artistic goals, Mohammad Reza Varzi has concentrated on political or ideological ones, Mehran Modiri employs history to construct a social satire narrative.

The approaches adopted by the directors can also be understood within the framework of historical circumstances. In Ali Hatami's time, television series production was still overshadowed by intensely developing cinema, Mohammad Reza Varzi's works come at a time when state cultural producers were looking to implement a new cultural policy more adopted to changing propagandic needs. The same is true of Mehran Modiri, whose potency as a social critique is conditioned, among other things, by the power that comedy and satirical works provide in a space of artistic activity that is not entirely free of censorship and state control.

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<sup>6</sup> There is no doubt that on the Iranian television production scene, those making efforts to depict history have been and still are numerous. A figure that has not been given any consideration above, although it deserves at least a mention, is Hasan Fathi. A filmmaker sometimes compared to Ali Hatami, who has been active in the television field since 1993. Fathi is the author of a few popular historical television series, of which the best known is probably the production *Shahrzād*, aired between 2014 and 2017. However, it is the action of Fathi's earlier series, *Pahlavānān nemimīrand*, produced in 1996, which was set in the reality of Qajar Tehran. Fathi's specialty are historical dramas with romantic plots. The beginning of 2022 was supposed to bring lovers of this type of production another work by the director (*Jeyrān*), but its broadcast was halted due to copyright allegations by the producers of another historical series (*Ahu-ye man Mārāl*). Series previews seem to promise viewers a new original perspective, as the action of the production revolves around the beloved wife of the Qajar Shah Naseroddin—Jeyrān 'gazelle', who had been known for her love of hunting, horse riding, and behavior that was less usual for harem women in those days.

What can be also observed is that the rule of the distant Qajar dynasty and the Constitutional Movement, which although may seemingly be uninteresting to a young viewer and bears no relation to the challenges that Iranian society faces today, regardless of the high costs of its production, continues to be a frequent theme of television series. This testifies both to a certain level of attractiveness of old stories for contemporary viewers, but also to the awareness of the media promoters who finance these productions, and of the propaganda possibilities which this form of communication might provide. The reason for this may be that times of the Qajar dynasty and Constitutional Revolution can still be used to illustrate many phenomena. Hatami in his productions, although aware of the weaknesses of the Qajar era, expressed a certain nostalgia for times gone by, Vaziri uses them to justify his political ideas, and Modiri employs them to express social and even political criticism. This however makes these historical topics socially and politically sensitive. Many productions concerning the Qajar reign still fall victim to censorship.<sup>7</sup> Despite some risks associated with the choice of historical theme, in recent months alone, the Iranian media have been reporting on the broadcasting of few new historical serials: *Jeyrān* by Hasan Fathi, *Ahu-ye man Mārāl* by Mehrdad Ghafarzadeh, and *Gildokht* by Majid Esmailieh, all three set in Qajar Iran.

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<sup>7</sup> Not long ago, the series *Qeble-ye ālam* directed by Hamed Mohammadi and screened on a private home video platform *Filimo* fell victim to the policy of censorship. The production of this satirical series, set during the reign of Shah Naseroddin, was interrupted after eight episodes due to the irrevocable and incomprehensible censorship of the state institutions (Filimo shot 1400 [2022]). This comedy production, even after censorship, was characterized by bold jokes, described by critics as almost vulgar, dialogues, and gestures referring to the erotic life of the court inhabitants. Despite the fact that the producer of the series was Manuchehr Mohammadi, a man closely associated with the ruling camp media production institutions, the work has been subject to censorship. It is hard to say what the authorities really did not like in a series, be it the overly sharp jokes or the references to the intimate relations of the members of the court. In either case, the creators of the series decided to end the production after a few episodes had aired.



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