Reviewed by Hatim El-Hibri

*Underground: The Secret Life of Videocassettes in Iran*

by Blake Atwood

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$35.00 paper; also available in e-book.

_*Underground: The Secret Life of Videocassettes in Iran*_ examines how videocassettes wove their way through everyday life in Iran, making a profound impact on the media landscape. The book shows how the official ban on the medium, enacted in 1983 during the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988) and unevenly enforced until it was lifted in 1994, led to the flourishing of informal video distribution. Author Blake Atwood presents a compelling account of the lived textures of video’s clandestine-yet-ubiquitous presence through oral history—interviews with former video dealers, filmmakers, former government employees, and people from many walks of life who fondly remember video’s heyday. *Underground* expands current debates in the study of media distribution, infrastructure studies, and the material culture of media by analyzing how this technological format negotiated, circumvented, and repurposed state policy and the affordances of the medium. Beyond the novelty of its topic—this is the first scholarly monograph on the subject in English—the book’s methodological approach and conceptual framing also result in an original contribution to the literature on Iranian and Middle Eastern media.

The book takes the reader into Iran’s underground network through five chapters that examine a facet of its operation. Rather than a chronological ordering, the first four chapters examine a different dimension of the long decade of 1983 to 1994 (when the ban was officially in place). While each
chapter reflects on the contemporary moment, the final chapter is more fully focused on how this period continues to inform the present. This structure allows for in-depth consideration of how state regulations (including the lead up to the 1983 ban) impacted existing media institutions and the nascent video industry (chapter 1), the material and human working of the distribution network (chapter 2), the labor and aspirations of video dealers (chapter 3), and the effect of evolving relations between public and private spaces on home viewing and the place of the VCR and videocassettes in mediating the relationship between them (chapter 4). This is followed by a sustained examination of how the memory of the underground manifests in the cultural afterlife of videocassettes in the 2010s and is directly thematized in contemporary culture (chapter 5). These chapters are bracketed by a teachable introduction and a coda, which ruminates on the role that a non-Iranian researcher can play in entering into a dialogue with people whose lives were and continue to be directly impacted by the videocassette ban.

*Underground*'s contribution rests in its weaving together of more than forty interviews with archival sources and extensive fieldwork, situating this research historically within a transnational framing of Iran's media landscape. Chapters 1 through 4 work in parallel, allowing the book to vividly convey the lived contradictions of this normal-but-informal, common-but-illegal media terrain. Atwood complicates received notions of the all-powerful post-revolutionary state in Iran through a self-reflexive oral history, which examines how interviewees utilize various narrative strategies to express their experiences. This allows for a more nuanced understanding of how formal media regulation created a space of informality that exceeded official objectives shaping even the workings of government agencies. Atwood stresses that an analytical framework centered on the question of piracy would be inadequate to account for the informal economy and culture that emerged. As explored in the first chapter, the 1983 ban was a response to the explosive popularity of an import-heavy video rental market seen to compete with state-sponsored film and television. Yet the underground network also became a way for one state employee to recirculate an archive of older Iranian films that might have otherwise passed out of general circulation. As the post-revolutionary state’s agenda to foster a new cultural citizenship turned more urgent with the Iran-Iraq War, underground video became a site where many renegotiated the relationship of public and private life.

Central to the book’s argument is that the infrastructure of the videocassette underground became core to everyday experience. This media infrastructure is theorized most explicitly in the second and third chapters. Atwood considers the role that people play in the working of technological systems and the at-times highly visible (or functionally invisible) nature of infrastructure and questions how technological affordances and technical formats shape socialities and imaginaries alike. Chapter 2 traces the movement of videocassettes and equipment from outside and into Iran, the embodied (typically male) mobilities that moved them into and back out of people’s homes, and the unpredictable stakes for anyone who got caught. From the so-called mother cassettes that proliferated imperfect copies to the culture of re-use that led to the persistence of Betamax into the 1990s
and the transnational smuggling networks that brought all manner of illegal material into the country, the reader is introduced to the human connective tissue that such a distribution infrastructure depends on to function. This chapter also launches the book’s examination of the layered formal and informal infrastructures that reached into people’s homes, a theme that plays out in subsequent chapters.

Chapter 3, which examines the work of video dealers (or *filnis*), is particularly rich, and Atwood gives a nuanced account of the key role they played in making the underground possible. The chapter details the ingenious methods required to move videocassettes without getting caught and to negotiate with authorities if one was. The literature on video stores in the United States depicts a familiar scene—a video store with a rental clerk who offers expertise to help people choose a film. *Underground* examines a very different situation—that of a *filmi* with as many videocassettes as he (typically a man) could carry into people’s homes (often concealed in a briefcase or bulky trench coat), who would use his knowledge of what customers enjoyed in the past to recommend their next selections. An important component of this interaction was the handwritten labels affixed to well-worn videocassettes, including notes about the film’s genre. Atwood’s interviews bring to the surface the degree to which this curatorial work shaped how people evaluated the content they watched and defined how the format itself became meaningful. While some *filnis* had strictly financial motives, many took pride in guiding their customers, claiming cinephilia as their primary motive for adopting the profession, particularly when no other creative avenues were available to them. This work of curation was indeed creative; many would select additional content placed after the feature film. Sometimes this would be excerpts from other films, but often it would be music videos from around the world. Many interviewees said that this was how they learned dance moves for Michael Jackson songs. As with each chapter, chapter 3 brings the story up to the present. In this case, the reader learns how informal distribution broadened with the lifting of the videocassette ban in the 1990s and the adoption of digital technologies, when videocassettes fell out of favor. As access to contemporary streaming media is generally limited in Iran by costly data caps, the institutionalization of informal distribution over the decades has led to widespread availability of illegal content in otherwise legitimate stores as well as the emergence of street DVD dealers.

Chapters 4 and 5 shift focus to examine the sensibilities and memories that the underground made possible. Chapter 4 examines how interviewees narrate their experiences around two poles—the many pleasures of the videocassette on- and off-screen and the constant peril associated with being caught by the authorities. As more and more aspects of public life came under state scrutiny, and the intensification of war made theatergoing a risky proposition, social life for many retreated into the home, where they sought alternatives to officially sanctioned culture. Atwood shows how this negotiation of public and private identities, which played out in many arenas, informed and even accelerated the spread of videocassette-based home-viewing practices. The material trace of this infrastructure reappears here as the blurred audiovisuality of the cassettes themselves—imperfections
that informed rather than detracted from the types of enjoyment they made possible. Chapter 4 also explores the videocassette’s importance as a physical object of affection and attraction, an aspect that might be as or more important than the Iranian, US, Indian, European, or East Asian content that it carried. Chapter 5 examines how the underground is figured in contemporary memory cultures, particularly in film, personal memoirs, and social media. The broad resurgence of the underground in the early to mid-2010s occurred alongside a rearticulation of filmfārsi, the popular Iranian cinema of the 1960s and 1970s that had also recirculated on videocassette. Atwood considers how online cultures dedicated to sharing and remembering the underground express a longing to reconnect to this bygone collective experience—a sentiment reminiscent to that expressed by fans after a favorite music scene falls into decline or disappears.

These last two chapters, and the book as a whole, demonstrate an appreciation for the materiality of media without assuming that materiality tells the whole story. In this way, Underground contributes to the growing scholarship on the material culture and distribution of media. The book is in conversation with landmark studies of the material culture of video and spectatorship, such as that of Caetlin Benson-Allott and Lucas Hilderbrand, supplementing this scholarship by redressing the field’s tendency to focus on US media.¹ This clears ground for new locations for theorizing media, even though this book’s argument stops shy of moving to that level of abstraction. Underground also belongs to an emerging body of work on the transnational nature of distribution, such as that of Kaveh Askari and Samhita Sunya.² Just as importantly, Underground challenges scholars of Iranian and Middle Eastern cinema to take the oft-neglected format of the videocassette seriously, demonstrating the need to look beyond familiar questions of filmmaking as an intellectual formation, or of media production and reception, to the crucial matter of media circulation.

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