

Borders

Itineraries on the Edges of Iran

edited by
Stefano Pellò

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Introduction

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Persian literary culture has made an extensive use of the ubiquitous metaphorical image of the *safīna*, the ‘ship’, or, perhaps better for what concerns us here, the ‘ark’, at least since the Ghaznavid times, when, for instance, the poet Manūchihri Dāmghānī (eleventh century) compared his horse «running in the night» to a «vessel (*safīna*) crossing the gulf».¹ An Arabic loanword with an illustrious history in the Qur’ān (for instance, to indicate Noah’s Ark in 29:15), the term, which in the Islamicate world identifies, among other things, the constellation known in Latin as Argo Navis, has been commonly employed in Persian to define a book containing a selected anthology (of poems, biographies, or other textual material). This collection of essays, which is presented here as the fifth issue of a recently reborn project significantly called *Eurasiatica*, was first imagined as a Venetian *safīna* (or better *safīné*), proudly invoking the truly cosmopolitan world of connections of a faded Adriatic *koine* extending to the Bosphorus. It now stands as the first volume of this new *Eurasiatica* entirely devoted to the vast territories of Iranian culture, which we aim at understanding in the widest sense possible – extending without interruption over the layered spaces of *Ērān ud Anērān*, to play with a sometimes abused Middle Persian expression² – and of course including what is now usually called in English the ‘Persianate’, in an open chronological perspective.

As a matter of fact, openness, inclusivity, and a clearly stated emphasis on deep and wide-ranging interactions were among the main characteristics of the first *Eurasiatica*: a series which saw its first volume published in 1986 (a book by Irina Semenko on Osip Mandel’shtam’s poetics) and the last one in 2011, after no less than eighty-four issues, which become more than one hundred if we include the twenty-three volumes of the precursor *Quaderni del seminario di iranistica, uralo-altaistica e caucasologia*

1 Manūchihri Dāmghānī, *Dīvān-i Manūchihri-yi Dāmghānī*. Ed. by Muḥammad Dabīrsiyāqī. Tīhrān: Zavvār, 1370 (1991-2), p. 83.

2 Interesting observations can be found in Dick Davis, «Iran and Aniran: The Shaping of a Legend». In: Amanat, Abbas; Vejdani, Farzin (eds.), *Iran Facing Others: Identity Boundaries in a Historical Perspective*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, pp. 37-48.

dell'Università degli studi di Venezia, begun in 1979.³ It was the expression of an academic department (the now suppressed *Dipartimento di Studi Eurasiatici* of the University Ca' Foscari of Venice), which, though small and local, was nonetheless rooted in a cultural project rather than in ministerial decrees. Its aim was not so much, in Dipesh Chakrabarty's fashionable terms, to provincialize Europe, but to philologically explore continuities, interdependences and connections between Palermo, Sarajevo, Kashghar and Agra, including of course the significant *place* of Venice, against any fetishization of particularism. To find an up-to-date parallel, the methodology was, perhaps, more reminiscent of that of an historian of connections such as Sanjay Subrahmanyam, especially if we look at the tendency to deconstruct the provincial *habitus* of producing irreducible antitheses – with no temptation whatsoever, of course, for the colonising mantras of liberal imperialist world-pedagogies and their oxymoronic rhetorics of democratisation.

Among the many relevant volumes included in that series, I should like to mention here, for the revealing geographies involved, *L'Italia nel Kitab-i bahriyye di Piri Reis* (1990), a posthumous masterwork by the main Italian forerunner of the studies on the Persianate and Islamicate cosmopolis, Alessandro Bausani, devoted to the representation of Italy by the well-known sixteenth century Ottoman admiral and world-cartographer Piri Re'is. But one can also refer, in terms of transregional interactions, to the volumes of *Eurasiatica* by some of the best Italian and international authorities on Hebrew studies (such as Giulio Busi), Russian studies (such as Sergio Molinari) and Armenian studies (such as Boghos Levon Zekiyan). Most of these works were written in Italian, before the official establishment of the curious hegemonic 'cosmopolis' of the present day, where, with the growing of an often formulaic enthusiasm for anything multilingual, we witness the paradoxical tendency to study it from the proliferating monolingual perspective of the Anglosphere.

In an increasingly homogenized world where the apparently contradictory – but obviously strategic – construction of violent identitarian boundaries has been steadily underpinning the neocolonial policies of the postfordist market – from the disintegration of Yugoslavia to the *inventio* of the Sunni-Shia rift in Syria and Iraq – devoting this volume to the liminal theme of (Iran on) the borders seemed an appropriate way to celebrate the thirty years of a programmatically borderless and anti-purist series such as the old (and, hopefully, the new) *Eurasiatica*. This collection of essays has not been conceived as an organic treatment on the borders and thresholds of the transforming 'idea of Iran' (the homonymous influential 1989 book by

3 A complete list of the volumes of the old *Eurasiatica* series can be found at http://www.unive.it/nqcontent.cfm?a_id=191341 (2016-07-13).

Gherardo Gnoli comes immediately to mind, as do some more recent contributions such as those by Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet, Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi, Carlo Cereti, Abbas Amanat, Farzin Vejdani, Kamran Scott Aghaie and Afshin Marashi, to mention only a few). It contains, instead, a series of itineraries exploring several heterogeneous borderlands (geographic and conceptual), starting from plural, competing and coexisting ideas of Iran. To bring up a key concept of Jean-Loup Amselle's anthropology, the attempt is to look for connections (*branchements*) in a context of frontier-identities which necessarily imply heterogeneity and difference.⁴ With an eye to the structuralism of the school of Tartu-Moscow – it has been Jurij Michajlovič Lotman, after all, to describe the border as the locus where cultural innovation is produced⁵ – one is even tempted to suggest, using the language of classical Persian poetics, that the 'border' (threshold, limit, boundary, etc.) plays here the role of a *radīf*, the refrain (a theme-word, or true *title*, indeed) at the end of every line of a poem. In Persian literary culture, after all, the 'threshold' is a metaphorical liminal place which marks the inaccessibility of a mobile horizon. A closed door, a house not to be found or an impassable stretch of road, the threshold flags, at the same time, the paradoxical necessity of the research itself, multiplied through obsessive acts of unveiling and the awareness of the existence of infinite other layers to be unveiled. The stereotypical image of the limit, the margin, the place of passage which becomes a place of stay (the lover living on the beloved threshold, for instance) is explored by the Persian poetical world through recursive processes of conceptual creativity. These are based on the author's ability to refer to the repertoire provided by tradition (by establishing unexpected new 'rhizomatic' connections, to use Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's well-known expression). Against this background, it is interesting to observe that the threshold (or the margin), a symbolic as much as pragmatic figure already explored in its porous and undetermined sense in the homonymous work by Gérard Genette, provides an array of different accesses to the circuits of meaning.

The fourteen essays of this Venetian *safiné* sailing through such multifaceted thresholds, organized in pairs, enjoy the honour of being preceded by an Italian preamble 'on the borders of poetry' (and of translation, Orientalism, and the preventive censorship of language control) by Gianroberto Scarcia, the founder of the Venetian school of Iranian studies and the promoter of the first *Eurasiatica* series. The chapters of the first section, penned by two of the most authoritative Italian scholars in the field of

4 See in particular Jean-Loup Amselle, *Branchements: Anthropologie de l'universalité des cultures*. Paris, Flammarion, 2001.

5 I think here especially of Jurij M. Lotman, «Ponjatje granicy». In: Lotman, Jurij M., *Semiosfera*, Sankt-Peterburg, Iskustvo-SPb, 2001, pp. 257-268.

Iranian studies, explore some crucial linguistic issues on the theme of the border, somehow setting the tone for the following sections. The paper by Antonio Panaino, focused on the Avestan ecology of the key stem *həṇdu-/hiṇdu-* (O.P. *hiⁿdu*), revolves around the polysemic features of a name for ‘frontier’ which would later come to define the geographical notion of ‘India’. Moving from Paul Thieme’s well-known observations on the most probable etymology of Vedic *Síndhu-*, to be connected to **sindhú-* ‘warding off, keeping away’ and thus to be understood primarily as ‘natural frontier’, Panaino reconstructs a hitherto unexplored chronology for the semantic flowering of this loanword (or, as Thieme preferred to say, Iranian adaptation of an Indo-Aryan term) in Avestan literature. In particular, by re-examining a representative set of sources, the author shows how, in the oldest parts of the Avesta, the stem *həṇdu-/hiṇdu-* retains the original meaning of ‘natural frontier’, thus rejecting the teleological interpretation of late nineteenth and early twentieth century scholars such as Christian Bartholomae, who saw in *həṇdu-/hiṇdu-* an already given geographical idea of ‘India’. Equally noteworthy, as far as the ancient perception of the North-Western regions of the Indian Subcontinent and the connected notion of limit-frontier is concerned, is Panaino’s discussion of the *Hapta.həṇdu-* as the ‘Land of the Seven Rivers’. Moving from Gherardo Gnoli’s anti-essentialist remarks on the absence of any ‘reason to consider the correspondence between *Hapta.həṇdu* and *Saptá Síndhavas* as based on a common ancestral mythical geography’, Panaino not only shows the nuances of later Zoroastrian interpretations (among other sources, he masterly draws on al-Bīrūnī), but also hints to a possible fascinating connection of the astronomical topology of the Avestan constellation of the *haptōiriṅga* – ‘The seven signs’ (cf. New Persian *haft awrang*), with the geographical borderland of the *Hapta.həṇdu* – through the parallel with the ‘seven climates’ of the world.

Juxtaposed to Antonio Panaino’s investigation of such a symbolic linguistic threshold in the Old Iranian Avestan environment is the study by Ela Filippone, which deals with the grammaticalization of an Arabic loanword, *ḥadd*, in Iranian languages, providing a richly documented and indeed groundbreaking exploration of the rugged and multi-faceted territories of New Iranian dialectology. After having clarified the highly polysemic nature of *ḥadd* in Arabic (knife-edge, edge, border, limit, inhibition, restraint, ordinance, partition, etc.), Filippone underlines the geographical and political meaning (especially in the plural *ḥudūd*) of *ḥadd* as ‘the limit of anything’, and, most cogently for what concerns us here, as a ‘frontier zone enveloping a central core’ (quoting Ralph Brauer). This polysemy, as the author argues, is preserved beyond the borders of Arabic, in the languages of the Islamicate cultural sphere where it has found a place as a loanword, from Turkish to Malay. Particularly interesting is an observation that Filippone makes at the beginning of her paper: ‘The notion of limit conveyed by Ar.

ḥadd', she writes, 'favoured semantic bleaching and context generalization'. As a matter of fact, from her thorough analysis it appears clear that the range of use (chronological as well as geographical) of *ḥadd* along the porous contours of the Iranian languages is multifarious, far-reaching and continuous. As Filippone brilliantly – albeit cautiously – suggests in the conclusive remarks, one might even 'assume a sort of sound-induced blending of foreign and native words' in the case of the lexical set of OPrs. *hadiš*- 'dwelling place'. Among the several cases provided by the author (from Dashtestāni *had zadan* 'to reach the age of puberty' to Semnāni *hedār* 'boundary between two fields belonging to different landowners' to Sorani Kurdish *hed* 'power', 'authority'; 'weight' etc.), particularly noteworthy is the Western and Southern Balochi use of (*h*)ədda in relation to the set of spatial relationship which Filippone calls 'Control of the surrounding space'. After all, as the author writes while discussing the title of the famous tenth century Persian geographical text *Ḥudūd al-ālam*, «the cognitive association 'limit → (delimited) place' can be traced back to the contiguity relationship between these two concepts, and does not differ from that which produced Lat. *fīnēs* 'territory, land, country enclosed within boundaries' from (sing.) *fīnis* 'boundary, limit, border'».

A distinct historical approach qualifies the second couple of papers, where walls and bricks mark both very tangible and radically impalpable borders in space and time. Touraj Daryaee chooses to deal with the four frontier walls of the Sasanian empire, from the relatively well-known *Sadd-i Iskandar*, the Wall of Alexander in the North-East to the far less studied defensive system called *War ī Tāzīgān* (Wall of the Arabs) in Middle Persian Sources. The historical materiality of the wall-as-a-boundary and the obvious ideology, past and present, involved in any discourse about the building of architectural landmarks institutionalising an 'inside' and an 'outside', are the central themes of Daryaee's relatively short paper. As a matter of fact, as the author states at the very beginning of his essay, 'walls not only provided a physical protection against the others, but also suggested a mental projection of those within the civilized (inside/*ēr*) and the un-civilized (outside/*an-ēr*) realms, something that served to regulate the inevitable interaction between the two'. Without plunging into trivial presentist discussions, Daryaee's paper – significantly dedicated to the memory of a great philologist and elegant scholar of the 'idea of Iran' such as Gherardo Gnoli – is, nevertheless, not at all afraid of taking on, provocatively enough, the perception of the border walls *in the present*: Daryaee's treatment of the 'gated mentality' is an example of how a rigorous philological-historical approach may decide not to renounce to reclaim its role and commitment, beyond the fences of the academia.

On the other side – that of the nonmaterial 'borders' in time – Simone Cristoforetti's paper introduces, with a meticulous analysis which includes

mathematical reasoning as well as historical arguments revolving around the slippery notion of (Iranian) identity in the Ziyarid context (tenth-eleventh centuries), a new calendrical interpretation of a well-known landmark of North-East Iran such as the tower of Gunbad-i Kāvūs. This fascinating monument, built by Qābūs ibn Wushmgīr (the grandfather of Kay Kā'ūs ibn Iskandar, the author of the famous Persian *Fürstenspiegel* entitled *Qābūs-nāma*), becomes, in Cristoforetti's interpretation, an architectural representation of the cycles of solar time. All in all, the paper shows how the idea of a 'borderland' – ideological, political, identitarian – can be explored also by negotiating the manifold (and seldom systematically tackled *per se*) thresholds implied by the complex and symbolically meaningful systems adopted for the measurement of time, and their textualization in significant landscapes.

If the historical construction of limits in space and time, from the Sasanians to the Ghaznavids, is the core theme of the contributions by Daryaei and Cristoforetti, the two papers of the section entitled «Iconography on a threshold» deal with the thin line between life and death in a historical-artistic perspective, from Tang China to Bahmani Deccan. Both Matteo Compareti and Sara Mondini, however, cross several other 'lines of control' (I intentionally recall the title of a brilliant contemporary art exhibition and project on 'partition as a productive space' co-curated, among others, by Iftikhar Dadi), those of culturalism and essentialist exclusivity, showing the depth and density of a net of visual interactions extended from Shaanxi to Pompei, from Gulbarga to Kerman. Matteo Compareti's study of the representation of winged creatures in the funerary architecture of the Sino-Sogdian context is, indeed, a good example of how the entire Eurasian space, from inner China to the Mediterranean, can be explored with no prejudicial 'cultural' interruption, while remaining at the same time well aware of the weight, in terms of representational semantics, of any projectually boundaried 'subdivision of the world'; in this particular case, the one represented in the paintings of the seventh-century Hall of the Ambassadors at Afrasyab – ancient Samarkand – «where the northern wall was associated with China, the eastern one with India (and, possibly, the Turks), while the two remaining walls were devoted to Sogdiana itself». As a matter of fact, it is Compareti himself who declares not to be afraid of being «possibly affected by that 'revisionist' trend that is simply critic of prejudicial theories concerning adoption and adaptation». The issue of borders between iconographic traditions is, consequently, taken up by following an anti-purist approach, aimed at debating many an invention of (national) tradition: namely, those relating to the famed fantastic creature called *sīmurgh* in New Persian, which Compareti analyses in a comparative fashion with the so-called 'Western' (another presentism: one should say Graeco-Roman, as the author correctly underlines) phoenix and the Chinese *Fenghuang*, reminding us how it should be considered 'normal

to expect iconographic exchanges' in a space and time dominated by an intense trans-regional trade.

The visual domain, one is tempted to add, is made of itineraries along and across the edges of innumerable mobile horizons: as Sara Mondini writes referring to the rhizomatic nature of the cultural and religious interactions in fifteenth-century Deccan – but her unpretentious observations are indeed of a far-reaching significance – in a 'morass of gaps that are still waiting to be bridged, historians can sometimes find support in artistic and architectural evidence'. Instead of trying to identify a teleologically clear-cut 'Sunni' or 'Shi'i' 'identity' (three terms, needless to say, which must be handled with care especially when dealing with a pre-modern context) for the Bahmani ruler Aḥmad Shāh I, Mondini is interested in finding bridges to cross the manifold borders involved in a polysemic spatiality such as that analysed in her paper. The architectural threshold represented by Aḥmad Shāh's tomb, Mondini's essay suggests, establishes a programmatic conversation on an aesthetic and stylistic level with the overlapping projections of Iran, Central Asia, the *mulkīs*, the *āfāqīs*, the Ne'matollahi order, etc.: in the art historian's own words «the impression one gets when crossing the threshold of the ruler's monument is not of a positive statement of adherence to a given religious persuasion, but rather of an ability to merge the visual languages typically employed in Shi'i and Sufi (Sunni?) contexts: it is as though the sovereign had wished to address each of his subjects in a language he could understand».

Without leaving the Subcontinent, the essays by Sunil Sharma and the present writer focus on the Indo-Persian (the hyphen itself is, here, a problematic border-bridge) literary and linguistic realm, from Mughal Kashmir to Nawabi Awadh. The threshold explored by Sharma is represented by a region, Kashmir, which has been often referred to in Persian as *Irān-i ṣaghīr* 'little Iran', for a perceived close relationship with the Iranian world and the long-standing rooting of Persian literary culture, including the steady inflow of scholars from the Iranian plateau. In his paper, Sharma looks at the symbolic frontier of Kashmir through the lens of the literary genre of Mughal pastoral poetry, which he identifies as 'topographical' or more precisely, using Paul Losensky's expression, 'urban-topographical', showing how much the conversation between the local and the cosmopolitan, in truly geographical terms, is a dominating feature of the literary developments that were taking place within the 'seven climates' – the reference here is to a famous 'universal' *taḏkira* studied by Sharma himself – of the Persophone world from the sixteenth-century onwards. More specifically, the textual investigation offered by the author is an opportunity to reflect on the ways (and the limits) in which tropes, stylemes and literary codes can provide an array of meaningful paths to explore the edges of a semanticized space. As Sharma writes at the beginning of his study, focused on three different 'Iranian' and 'Indian' literary approaches

to Kashmir and not renouncing to a productive comparison with the coeval European pastoral fad: «The genre of Mughal pastoral poetry describing non-urban spaces commemorated the appropriation of places on the edges of the empire into the imperial domain [...]. From a cultural and historical point of view the appropriation of provincial rural spaces as part of the cosmopolitan capitals offers an alternate way of looking at the center-periphery and urban-rural binaries». From a certain perspective (I think here, for instance, of Jahangir's description of the valley as an 'ironclad bastion', and his insistence on 'walls' and 'gates'), Sharma's paper might be read in parallel, perhaps unexpectedly, with some of Touraj Daryaee's observations: the early modern literary reception of Kashmir to recreate a sort of Mughal Arcadia, in a context where the idea of Hindustan as the emperor's garden is common at least since Babur's time, shows how the idea of the garden-paradise can be reshaped and recast to formulate a propagandistic ideology built on aesthetic foundations.

Somehow responding to Sharma's analysis of the poetical walls encircling a fertile spatial idea such as Kashmir – a spatial ontology of the aesthetic being, if I may take the liberty to play on György Lukács' words – the contribution by the present writer is concerned with the construction of linguistic boundaries within the world of Persian at the end of the eighteenth-century. The author of the philological works analysed in the paper, Mīrzā Muḥammad Ḥasan Qatīl, is indeed a character positioned on, and traversed by, multiple thresholds: between the Mughal and the colonial world, between Iran and Hindustan, between his Khatri heritage and his conversion to Shia Islam. The 'borders' explored through the figure of Qatīl (not by chance, he is also the author of an interesting doxographic work on the traditions of the 'Hindus' and the 'Muslims') are, thus, the manifold fences encircling the space of speech and the superimposition of hegemonies, hierarchies and identifications, both private and public, with their holes and ruptures, on threshold of a quickly happening nationalization of the linguistic traditions all around Eurasia.

As Augusto Cacopardo underlines in the title of his essay, the two papers making up the fifth section are devoted to the untold borderland of 'a world in-between', the little-studied area of the Hindu Kush/Karakoram region formerly known as Kafiristan, sometimes curiously – and very tellingly – misunderstood as a fantastic place *invented* by Rudyard Kipling, who located there his well-known short novel *The Man Who Would Be King* (1888). As Edward Marx brilliantly noticed a few years ago in an acute and well-informed article this is the case, for instance, of the *New York Times* columnist Michael Specter who defined Kafiristan as a 'mythical' kingdom in a condescending 1995 piece on post-Soviet Central Asia, or of literary critics such as Mark Paffard, who thought it was Kipling himself to situ-

ate this place where it actually belongs.⁶ Beyond the blunders of careless journalists or historically uninformed theorists, it is worth underlining how this invisible frontier – partially extending over the area studied by Georg Morgenstierne in his 1920s survey *Indo-Iranian Frontier Languages* – has been playing a technically pre-textual function in many of the narratives relating to it, during, after and before the colonial world. Well before Kipling, in a literary milieu still relating to the Mughal protocols, one might consider the stories put forward by the local *Shahnama-yi Chitral*, who sees its inhabitants as Zoroastrians, and the Persian ethnography commissioned to a certain Hajji Ilahdad from Peshawar by the French general Claude Auguste Court, where the *Kāfirān* are described as Manichaeans.⁷ In this context, the papers by Augusto Cacopardo and Max Klimburg give a three-dimensional depth to the contours of such complexity, showing the multiple layers of interaction of this frontier region with the surrounding cultural spaces and, more in general, the wider Eurasian arena, in a *longue-durée* chronological perspective. In particular, Cacopardo's essay is among the first studies on the pre-Islamic and non-Islamic (the Kalasha milieu) cultural spaces of the area to show, in a systematic way, several possible paths for what the author calls a «comparative research» with «the Iranian world», hitherto neglected in favour of the interconnections and comparisons with the Indian sphere.

From the borderland between the Iranian plateau, Central Asia and the Indian world, the sixth section moves to the boundaries of the discourse on identity and otherness in Iran itself, with some recapitulatory notes by the historian Biancamaria Scarcia Amoretti and a brief case study by the anthropologist Christian Bromberger. According to Scarcia Amoretti, «Iran could be the best test case to try to define in a plausible and shared way a sort of persuasive inventory of the conceptual categories in which to place the question of the 'boundary' itself». To develop such a challenging statement, she articulates her *marginalia* in conversation with previous writings on the issue of 'Iranian identity', from the multiple authors entry in the *Encyclopaedia Iranica* to the collective volume *Iranian Identity in the Course of History* edited by Carlo Cereti and published in 2010. In her nuanced treatment of an issue at evident risk of essentialist teleologism, the author insists on how the processes of boundarization and identification at play in Iran since the Arab conquest and the Islamization of the former Sasanian domains can't be understood following a unitarian grand narration, nor by light-heartedly adopting heavily culturalized categories

6 See Edward Marx, «How we lost Kafiristan», *Representations*, Summer 1999, pp. 44-66.

7 I have dealt with these and other ethnographic imaginations on Kafiristan in Pellò S., «Massoni o manichei? Immaginario etnografico sui Kafiri dell'Hindukush», *Hiram*, 2, 2009, pp. 95-104.

such as those of mother tongue or homeland. Indeed, more than dealing with boundaries and the notion of identity as such, one has the impression that Scarcia Amoretti is actually suggesting a discussion of the polysemic territories of identity along the rugged borders, internal and external, of the Iranian space. The five paragraphs of her essay, devoted, namely, to key conceptual terms such as 'identifications', 'Islam', 'language', 'élite' and 'homeland', though obviously interconnected, can be read as separate itineraries on the edges of different strategies of semantization, in dialogue with several theoretical approaches, starting from Alessandro Bausani's articulate and still influential – at least in the Italian context – discourse on the religious history of Iran and the Islamic world.

Complementary to Scarcia Amoretti's broad reach discussion, the savoury anthropological paper by Christian Bromberger briefly delineates some social and linguistic modalities to define, institute and negotiate 'otherness' in the northern Iranian regions of Gilan and Talesh. In the first of the two cases presented in the paper, the author shows a typical example of how a discursive process of boundarization and differentiation between 'close Others' can structure itself over food and sexuality; in the second, which is particularly relevant to the present day situation well beyond the borders of the western Caspian region, he provides a vivid glimpse of the local ways to accommodate the 'Shia' and 'Sunni' milieux. Particularly noteworthy, as far as the case of lowland Gilan as opposed to the highlands of the Iranian plateau is concerned, is the ultimate connection that Bromberger establishes with some traditional subdivisions/oppositions of human geography, showing the persistence of conceptions going back to Abbasid geographical writing and, ultimately, to ancient Greece. More in general, Bromberger's pages can be read as a useful warning against the risks involved in any generalization: a celebration of the invaluable wealth of differences within a non-monolithic Iran and, at the same time, – I here especially have in mind his only apparently naive 'Taleshi solution' – a committed *pamphlet* against the global multiplication of abusive walls and cages.

As Franco La Cecla writes in a conceptually dense passage quoted by Marco Dalla Gassa, «Misunderstanding is boundary that takes form. It becomes a neutral zone, a *terrain-vague*, wherein identity, respective identities, can establish themselves, remaining separate by precisely a misunderstanding». The last two chapters of this book, which have been collected in a visual section called *Mirrors and beyond*, deal explicitly with the illusion of the borders and the misunderstandings conjured by the construction of fenced, crystallized prototypes. The following statement by Dalla Gassa is, in this sense, exemplary, and acquires, in the context of our discussion, a dimension which by far exceeds the narrow scope of an academic essay on cinema studies: 'Each original is original to the extent that it has its own temporality, more or less limited, more or less inclined

to being corrupted'. In particular, Dalla Gassa is concerned with the use that one of the greatest directors in film history, the recently deceased and much missed Abbas Kiarostami, makes of the instrument-metaphor of the mirror in a 2010 movie shot in Tuscany, *Certified Copy*, with Juliette Binoche and William Schimell. In a sophisticated analysis responding, among others, to the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, he shows how the mirror of Kiarostami becomes 'a liminal space, a border-land', overlapping with the circumscribed frame of the camera. And it is precisely around a liminal space of refractions that Riccardo Zipoli's words and images revolve, as a visual closure for this book. Through the prismatic surfaces of the verses of Mīrzā Bīdil (1644-1720) – the 'poet of the mirrors' as Muḥammad Shafīʿī-Kadkanī brilliantly defined him – and through the photographer's eye, Iran dissolves, in the end, in a multitude of reflections scattered all around the world, becoming a meaningful pretext to explore and expose the limits of the frames of identification and recognition.

Riomaggiore and Venice, Tīr 1395

