

The Victory Belongs To Love Subverting Censorship in Contemporary Iranian Cinema

When Mohammad Massoud, a Tebran-based advertising filmmaker, agreed to produce an ad for a tomato paste company, he didn't expect to face any particular problems. Unlike his last project, which had faced a lot of scrutiny by the authorities at the state-run television, marketing the new product of a tomato paste company seemed straightforward enough. All he envisioned would be needed would be to throw a whole chicken into a pot, add some vegetables and remind the viewer of the missing ingredient. But Massoud was wrong.

We showed a whole chicken inside the pot that we were going to cook and to which we were going to add tomato paste. There was a close-up that moved over the whole chicken. They found fault with this, saying that it was 'provocative.' ...We wanted to show that this chicken will find a whole new presentation with this tomato paste, but the gentlemen were distracted by something else.¹

¹ Dehghan, Saeed K. "The Provocative Chicken: Iran's Censors Pressure Advertisers, Novelists." Iran-Wire. N.p., 28 Aug. 2014. Web. 01 Sept. 2014.

History, Penalties and Schizophrenia

This was a country where all gestures, even the most private, were interpreted in political terms. The colors of my head scarf or my father's tie were symbols of Western decadence and imperialist tendencies. Not wearing a beard, shaking hands with members of the opposite sex, clapping or whistling in public meetings, were likewise considered Western and therefore decadent, part of the plot by imperialists to bring down our culture.²

In 1979, the monarchy was overthrown in what would later be called The Islamic Cultural Revolution. The revolution was fought by Islamists who felt their society was being poisoned by secular Western influences and therefore needed to be supplanted by Islamic values, and by short-sighted and Soviet-inspired Communists who felt the king was exploiting the people and prostituting resources to Western Imperialists. The Supreme Leader Ruhollah Khomeini was returned from exile in Paris, France to establish the Islamic Republic of Iran.³ Shortly afterward, universities were closed for two years, the veil was declared mandatory for all women, and countless people—including thousands of Communists who had risked their own lives to bring about the revolution—were imprisoned, tortured and executed. Both the king, Reza Pahlavi, and the ayatollah, Khomeini, had enforced strict and highly punishing systems of censorship. Both claimed to have been selected by God to rule the country, and both tortured and killed multitudes of their own citizens; in particular those who dared to question or criticize the standing government. In many cases, such as with those accused of being Communists, those who were arrested and tortured under the Shah's government were re-arrested, tortured and executed under the new Islamic government.

Now, 35 years later, what has changed? Given the adamant and enduring moral code of the Iranian government, in what ways is Iranian cinema regulated and censored? The same rules and limitations imposed on day-to-day life in Iran are imposed on the films created and distributed there:⁴

2 Nafisi, Azar. *Reading Lolita in Tehran*. New York: Random House, 2003. 25. Print.

3 "1979: Exiled Ayatollah Khomeini Returns to Iran." BBC News. BBC. Web. 28 Sept. 2014. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/february/1/newsid_2521000/2521003.stm>.

4 Fisher, Max. "Cropped Modesty: Iran's High-Tech Tricks for Censoring American Movies." *The Atlantic*. Atlantic Media Company, 08 Aug. 2012. Web. 08 Sept. 2014.

- Pre-revolutionary actors and actresses are banned from appearing in films.
- Depictions of or references to sex, singing and dancing are banned.
- Complete hejab that hides a woman's hair and body shape must be worn by women at all times. This includes wearing loose and long clothes, headscarves, chadors and pants in dark colors. The hair and neck must be completely covered. Only the face and the hands to the wrist can be visible.
- Men are not permitted to wear a necktie or bow tie (as this is a symbol of Western "decadence").
- Men and women are forbidden to touch one another on screen. (As you can imagine, this leads to a lot of scenes that are not only difficult but gratingly unnatural. So that for example a woman playing the role of a mother whose son has just returned from the war after a long absence can't embrace or kiss him.)
- Government permits are required for all scripts, for production and film screenings. (Which means that filmmakers must possess what Alice Walker refers to as "...the patience to endure the grinding malice of bureaucratic harassment," with the likelihood that ultimately permission will be denied.⁵)

The rules are rigorous and often creatively paralyzing; so why do people comply? What is the authority behind the censorship? What happens if you don't obey the rules? The punishment for not complying with the law is daunting—for enormously inflated accusations whose titles frequently involve language such as *waging war against God*, *spreading propaganda* and *undermining national security*, you can imagine the severity of the penalties—confiscating passports, house arrest, solitary confinement in prison, indefinite incarceration without charges or trial,

⁵ Walker, Alice. *Living by the Word: Selected Writings, 1973-1987*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1989. 182. Print.

physical abuse, torture, and death.⁶ My own mother, who was a Communist and participated in the revolution as a 17 and 18 year old, left Iran when she was 22. When she first returned 15 years later, her passport was confiscated upon her arrival at the airport, and she had to endure interrogations—alone, in a room with two aggressive and strange men—before she was lucky enough to have the opportunity and means to pay her way out of it. Jafar Panahi, an internationally acclaimed filmmaker who has won, among other honors, the *Caméra d’Or* at the Cannes Film Festival spent three months in prison for unspecified charges, was banned from making movies for 20 years, and was put under house arrest and later charged with propaganda against the government.⁷

The government systematically squashes those who oppose its oppression, not only by inflicting punishments that are grossly disproportionate to the alleged crimes, but also by making part or all of the punishment public (for example, hangings are held in the middle of town squares, televisions air coerced confessions, etc.). In addition to the official government forces that judge and dole out punishment, there are also vigilante groups like *Basij* and *Ansar-e Hezbollah*, unofficial groups of individuals sanctioned by the government, who enforce with public violence the “Islamic morality” of Iran’s citizens. These forces, these high stakes, are what every filmmaker—every man, woman and child—in Iran must face every day. The cost of disobeying orders, whether in film or day-to-day life, reveals the gravity, risk, courage, and value of resisting.

It is through a rubric of morality and immorality constructed from a subjective interpretation of the Koran that the Iranian government censors cinema and day-to-day life. This censorship limits expressions and portrayals of love, rendering them unnatural while making the natural profane and punishable by denying the elements the government considers impure. In particular, the government seeks to sanitize love, leaving an idealized, “Islamic” version.⁸ This version of love draws more attention to what it leaves out, empowering that which is *haram*, or Islamically forbidden, rather than eradicating it.

Simplifying love in this way is problematic in the same way that describing someone as just bad or good is problematic; it conceals the complexity of human beings and human behavior and, in turn, dehumanizes. It sets up unrealistic expectations, then judges and chastises those who cannot or will not sustain the

⁶ “Iranian Film Director ‘counter-revolutionary’” BBC News. BBC, 31 Aug. 2001. Web. 16 Aug. 2014.

⁷ Grey, Tobias. “Iranian Director Flouts Ban on Filming.” *The Wall Street Journal*. Dow Jones & Company, 26 June 2014. Web. 27 Aug. 2014.

⁸ I’m not interested in discussing what the Koran says about love, but rather what the government’s imposed interpretation of it is, as that is what dictates the day-to-day lives of Iranians.

performance of such an oversimplified behavior and desire. By forcing media to propagate and publish this lie, and by punishing those who don't comply with the fiction, the government inherently undermines its own commands. It tells people that they should be honest and pure, but by setting up impossible to satisfy requirements, compels them to lie, mask and scheme. The more oppressive and overbearing the censorship becomes, the more each censored act and desire becomes a coveted profanity, and an objective whose achievement requires increasing surreptitiousness, duality, and hypocrisy in the culture and society of Iran—leading to practices like faux virginities accomplished by re-attaching hymens for a fee as well as staggering rates of addiction to opium, heroin and crystal meth among Iranian youth, in order to cope with the unrealistic and violently punishing mandate of erasing un-erasable parts of their human identity and experience. As Alice Walker writes: “Love is *the* revolutionary emotion, partly because it cannot be limited, cannot be compartmentalized, cannot be controlled.”⁹

Cinema from the last fifteen years has helped to subvert the grip of censorship by showing a more honest and whole representation of love, thereby compromising its government-imposed fragmentation and sanitation. Cinema also employs depictions of the government's own mythology of pure “Islamic” love to poke holes in this very mythology by disclosing its contradictions. The unpredictability and unaccountability of the legal and justice systems in Iran cultivate a costly environment: what Azar Nafisi calls “the nightmarish quality of living in an atmosphere of perpetual dread.”¹⁰ By demanding that Iranians live in an unnatural and mediated fiction, the government fashions warped relationships based on fear, suppression and shame.

Censorship is its Own Seeds of Subversion

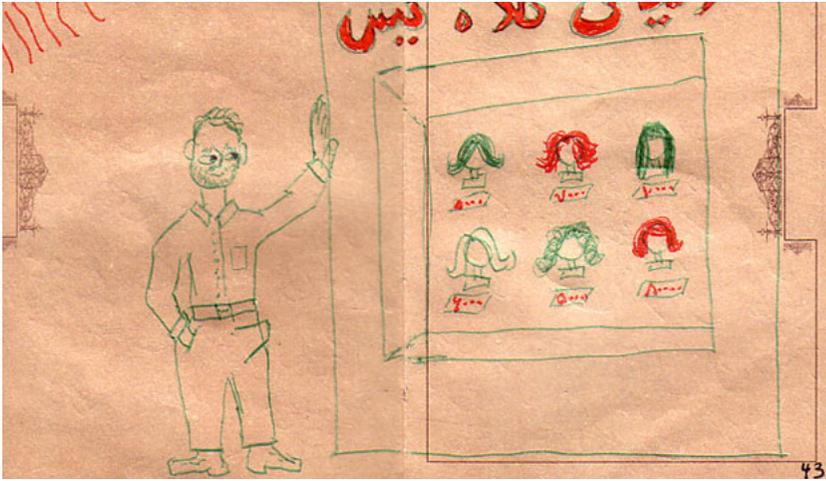
*A passion of which the outlets are sealed, begets a tension of nerve, in which the sensible world comes to one with a reinforced brilliancy and relief—all redness is turned into blood, all water into tears.*¹¹

9 Walker, Alice. *Anything We Love Can Be Saved: A Writer's Activism*. New York: Ballantine, 1998. 161. Print.

10 Nafisi, Azar. *Reading Lolita in Tehran*. New York: Random House, 2003. 23. Print.

11 Pater, Walter Horatio. “Aesthetic Poetry.” Web. 19 Aug. 2014. <http://www.laits.utexas.edu/farrell/documents/Pater_Aesthetic%20Poetry.pdf>.

Censorship sows the seeds of its own subversion. This doesn't mean censorship eradicates itself; it means the outcome of censoring is in direct opposition to its stated intent. Censorship magnifies the viewer's sensitivity to that which is forbidden, leading to a hypersensitive society with extreme restrictions—forming an even wider and more unnatural gap between desire and freedom. This cartoon from Buna Alkhas' book *Bunanameh* sums up this point well¹²:



Here we have an Iranian man in proper Islamic attire—bearded, buttoned-up shirt with no tie—who has an erection as a result of gazing at a window display of women's wigs. Censorship breaks up and partitions the thing being censored and thereby changes the meaning of that thing, hyperbolically heightening its magnitude and isolating it from its integral places in life. The government's censorship strives to sanitize/detach/erase from public view this fundamental aspect of instinct and reality.

In Iran, the prohibition and concealment of expressions of love has the opposite of (what is declared to be) the intended effect; rather than diminishing these kinds of desires and actions, censorship exaggerates their seduction and appeal. So that—in the context of a woman's hair being banned from public view—a shot of a single strand of a woman's hair caught in a hairpin can convey intensely loaded ideas of body and womanhood in Majid Majidi's film *Baran*, as seen below:

¹² Alkha, Buna. *Būnā nāmāh*. 2012. Print.



If it were not for the ban on showing a woman's hair, this scene would not convey all its extended implications, i.e. the other hidden and forbidden parts of the woman's body and femininity. Similarly, the censorship of love bestows un-surveilled, unconstrained love with a menacing power; one that threatens to take down the entire Islamic Iranian society, and the (ongoing) Revolution with it. The censorship of love in cinema and day-to-day life involves an unnatural compartmentalization that severs and disfigures love; it aims to separate something that is complexly integrated throughout day-to-day life and human interaction.

Why is the artificial extraction and isolation of love from cinema and day-to-day life so dangerous for the government? It focuses attention on the very thing the government demands you turn away from. Its absence creates this need to seek it out everywhere. It has nowhere else to adhere to, so viewers adhere it everywhere. Censorship grows and spawns further censorship. Because censorship doesn't only operate around the explicit. It targets the implicit as well. It targets the thought process, the tacit relationships between ideas, the inner workings of the mind—and by doing so, it widens not only the net of what is to be prohibited and banned, but also what is profane and worthy of desire. This process is precisely what leads to the image of a plucked chicken in a tomato sauce commercial feeling like pornography. If you want to constrain and conceal all that is suggestive, suddenly everything becomes suggestive.

Uncovering the Illusion of Purity

Good and bad are only the products of an active and temporary selection, which must be renewed.¹³

One of the tools the government employs to censor cinema is the unrealistic notion of what love is/should be. This “pure love” that the government promotes does not account for the complex spectrum of human experience including greed, jealousy, lust, mystery, doubt, vanity, etc. The conflict between the purity of the rhetoric and the griminess of the reality can be seen in the society itself. For example, throughout Iran there are Imam Khomeini Relief Foundation charity boxes where one can anonymously donate to the poor—anonymous charity to the needy being a tenet of Islamic practice; but many believe these are collected corruptly, frequently filling the pockets of government officials rather than those in need.¹⁴ There is also the example of the enormous commemorative murals of dead soldiers from the Iran-Iraq war, whose faces are used as embellished symbols of martyrdom that must be honored in the fight to preserve Islamic love and life; all while, on those same streets, countless of their surviving fellow soldiers—abandoned by the government—beg passersby for change.

Majidi’s film *Baran*, about a young Turkish-Iranian man who falls in love with an Afghan woman, depicts onscreen the type of Islamic love that the Iranian government repeatedly touts in its propaganda (a love that is “pure”, charitable, selfless) to highlight the disparity between what the government extols and what exists in the society. *Baran* uses the government’s own hypocrisy to subvert it. Repeatedly, the male protagonist Lateef acts with a selfless love and compassion, but it is a compassion hidden in anonymity, making it all the more virtuous—and “Islamic.” But ultimately, the love between Lateef and Baran can’t be validated and cultivated through union; their love has no future because of the way Afghan refugees are treated in the country (as cheap, illegal labor who have no legal rights to an education in Iran).¹⁵ In this way, *Baran* draws attention to the corrupt, unspiritual and ungenerous love that actually exists on behalf of the government—one that repeatedly judges and punishes those it claims to love.

¹³ Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 1987. 10. Print.

¹⁴ Molavi, Afshin. *The Soul of Iran: A Nation’s Journey to Freedom*. New York: W. W. Norton, 2005. 330. Print.

¹⁵ “Unwelcome Guests: III. Abuses Against Afghans Living in Iran.” Human Rights Watch. 20 Nov. 2013. Web. 30 Sept. 2014.

The Whole, Ambiguous Self

...a world where the censor was the poet's rival...¹⁶

A true expression of love does not imply a pristine and painless caricature of happiness. The love that is most subversive, humanizing and hopeful in contemporary Iranian cinema is, like the Islamic Republic's purported vision of love, spiritual and not absent of sacrifice. But the subversiveness of love in Iranian cinema lies in that it is also realistic—whether by depicting this nuanced reality, as in Asghar Farhadi's *A Separation*, or by showing the limitations and hypocrisy of the ideal, as in Majid Majidi's *Baran* and Bahman Ghobadi's *Turtles Can Fly*. Love in contemporary Iranian cinema is subversive when it reflects the complexity and texture of human interaction and experience, including but not limited to uncertainty, temptation, dissatisfaction, opportunism, meanness, laziness, naiveté, and desire. What cinema subverts is the authority of Iranian censorship by undermining the moral superiority and purity it purports to possess by disclosing the chasm between its rhetoric and its reality. As one blogger writes about Farhadi's film:

"A Separation is blatant about the desire of many Iranians to leave the country, and looks unflinchingly at gender and class inequality, the cost of religious fundamentalism on every day life and the limitations of the Iranian legal system. It is a film full of shades of grey, and complexity has always been the enemy of the propagandist who prefers the world to be portrayed in black and white simplicity, good and bad, us vs. them."¹⁷

Farhadi's film challenges the forced moral rubric of the government by compromising its portrayal of an absolute and uncomplicated morality. In a society whose social, political and judicial infrastructure are derived from a group of men's interpretations of what is Right and Wrong—a set of interpretations that restrains and deforms its citizens' expression—*A Separation* blurs these categories by portraying the ambiguities inherent to real life and real love. In this way, the film puts to question not only the process by which individuals are judged in Iran, but also how they are punished as a result of those judgments. As Alec Nevala-Lee writes about the film:

¹⁶ Nafisi, Azar. *Reading Lolita in Tehran*. New York: Random House, 2003. 25. Print.

¹⁷ C, Michael. "Burning Questions: What's Controversial About 'A Separation'?" *The Film Experience*.

13 Mar. 2012. Web. 01 Sept. 2014.

“It’s one of the hardest kinds of stories to tell in any language: one in which there are no villains, and in which everyone’s motives are basically sound, but which nonetheless leads to tragedy.”¹⁸

The film extends its depiction of ambiguity from those who are judged to the entities who do the judging. In one scene, Razieh, the woman who has come to Nader’s house to clean and care for his elderly father, faces a dilemma. Nader’s father has peed on himself, and cannot change out of his own clothes. Razieh, a devout Muslim, calls a telephone number in her phonebook to ask whether or not it would be a sin for her to help the old man change out of his soiled clothes and into clean ones. The human on the other end of the line—likely a representative of a government sponsored religious hotline—proceeds to ask her questions about the situation (whether anyone else is at home, the old man’s age, how “urgent” the situation is) before finally giving Razieh permission to proceed. She does so, reluctantly, before which Razieh’s daughter promises not to tell her father (Razieh’s husband). The fact that the human on the other end of the line made an individual, human determination of what was Right or Wrong in that moment, and that Razieh proceeded with the action *while* feeling discomfort and doubt regarding the possible sinfulness of her actions, reveals the ambiguity of *all* morality—even that which the government publicly delineates with certainty.

The Islamic government does not say to the people, *Here is the Koran, use it as a guide to find your own path of spiritual and personal growth*. No—they say, *This is what we have decided the Koran says, and this is how each of you will have to live your day-to-day lives; and those who disobey or stray from the rules we have set will be severely punished*. They design a political and legal system from a poetic, divine text, eradicating the ambiguity and complexity of even its source. Films like *A Separation* reintroduce an essential vagueness to the depiction of human relationships and decision-making, thereby disarming the singular and unrealistic version disseminated by the government.

¹⁸ Nevala-Lee, Alec. “Radical Ambiguity: A Separation and Certified Copy.” 12 Feb. 2012. Web. 02 Sept. 2014. <<https://nevalalee.wordpress.com/2012/02/20/radical-ambiguity-a-separation-and-certified-copy/>>.

Who's Left Out

...we simultaneously invented ourselves and were figments of someone else's imagination...¹⁹

Ghobadi's *Turtles Can Fly* is more fluid in its national identity than most other Iranian films. It was filmed as a joint effort of Iran and Iraq, focusing on Kurds who are geographically spread across Iran, Iraq and Turkey. Ghobadi himself was born in Baneh, a Kurdish town on the border of Iran and Iraq whose boundary is disputed with both countries claiming the region as their own.

Turtles Can Fly emphasizes the inevitable exclusion and victimization of individuals when explicit descriptions of Good and Bad have been determined and imposed on a whole society. The female protagonist of the film, Agrin, is caught between the government's idealized version of love, mercy and compassion, and her own despairing hopelessness in regard to love, marriage and acceptance. Through flashbacks the film reveals that Agrin, who appears to be eleven or twelve years old, was gang-raped by Iraqi soldiers, which left her pregnant with a blind son who everyone in the village thinks is her younger brother. In one scene, we see Satellite, the male protagonist, courting Agrin. In this scene the disparity between his hopefulness and her hopelessness is stark—and it is rooted in a very real and deeply entrenched disparity in their life possibilities. Through their interaction, the film draws attention to the unsustainability of the government's faultless and chaste version of love. When Satellite tells Agrin he's been looking for a girl like her for years, the possibility of a "pure" future courtship and marriage is marred by her rape—an incident entirely out of her control and yet entirely determining her fate. Satellite assumes, of course, that Agrin is a virgin. Now, if he were to discover what in fact had happened to her, how would he react? Even if we are to believe that he would adopt the culturally uncommon response of accepting and supporting her, how might he be compelled to react as a result of social and cultural pressure? As Maria Garcia writes

"Kurdish society...views the victims of rape as unworthy of marriage; while the villagers think the blind toddler is a sibling, and Agrin and Hengoa [her older brother] move frequently to protect this fiction, Agrin

¹⁹ Nafisi, Azar. *Reading Lolita in Tehran*. New York: Random House, 2003. 25. Print.

lives in fear that someone will eventually find out the truth and she will be shamed.”²⁰

And so this film begs the question, where in Iranian society and where in the government’s depiction of Islamic love and courtship does this girl fall? Where is the place for her victimization to be acknowledged? Where is the space for mercy and charity toward her? Where is the space for her future, for her healing, for her being romantically loved and valued? The film’s portrayal of Agrin invites the viewer to confront the limitations of inclusion in the Iranian government’s nonrepresentational idea of love. With this illusory version of love being delivered as the dominant and correct narrative, girls like Agrin have no place in society. They are simultaneously blamed and rendered invisible, which further amplifies their violation.

This, of course, is not just a product of censorship in media—this is a larger historical and social problem in Iran, and around the world, including in the United States. This is a cultural practice that condones physical and sexual abuse of women and girls; that validates and makes exceptions for the lust and desires of men while blaming women and girls for arousing that desire. In Iran, this is part of the same cultural attitude that punishes a man with thirty lashes while tying a noose around the throat of the woman with whom he has had intercourse. The same cultural belief that demands a woman’s virginity before marriage while simultaneously enacting laws, such as *sigheh*, that allow men to be “Islamically blessed” in their adultery and involvement with prostitution.²¹ By drawing the viewers’ attention to those who, like the homeless Iran-Iraq war veterans, are excluded from a discourse that claims to assert that which is right and wrong for all, cinema undermines the “supreme” authority of the Islamic Regime.

Why Does This Matter?

Societies never know it, but the war of an artist with his society is a lover’s war, and he does, at his best, what lovers do, which is to reveal the beloved to himself and, with that revelation, to make freedom real.²²

20 Garcia, Maria. “TURTLES CAN FLY.” *Film Journal International*. Web. 29 Aug. 2014.

21 Labi, Nadya. “Married for a Minute.” *Mother Jones* Mar.-Apr. 2010. Web. 02 Sept. 2014.

22 Baldwin, James. *The Price of the Ticket: Collected Nonfiction, 1948-1985*. New York: Macmillan, 1985. 318. Print.

The government censors love in cinema, and yet love is the very thing that subverts that censorship. Love is the target of, and the weapon against, censorship in Iran. Perhaps one of the greatest lessons here is that love—true, complete in its own natural incompleteness—is tenacious. It can't be tortured away or sanitized inside an individual or a society. It can be punished, it can be ignored, but it cannot be eradicated. And love is a vital weapon against painful limitations. Each time the art in Iran reflects the romantic, carnal, profane, ugly, and mysterious, when the nuanced and messy reality of human identity and relationships is portrayed realistically, Iranians regain some freedom. By recognizing the crucial ambiguity of morality, emotion, and behavior, these films undermine the fiction Iranians are forced to inhabit in their personal, public and creative lives. There are parts of ourselves we cannot make disappear. And it is by insisting on them, especially in the face of the direst consequences, that Iranian filmmakers, actors and actresses help to unfetter one another and reclaim their true selves.

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