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Body Beautiful: Making the Figure of
Women in Film, Contemplation on the
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Decade

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Abstract

Three decades after the political revolution of 1978, the figure of the woman remains a pivotal point in the Iranian public discourse. Furthermore, with the persistent “fight for democracy” squeezing down on the geopolitical body of Iran (in Afghanistan and Iraq), “the war against terror” has once again put the condition of Iranian women firmly on the global agenda. Against this background, the emerging image of Iranian women in film has been particularly an important mediating tool for socialization of a diverse audience to contemporary gender issues, as well as creation of a spectacular model for limitations and articulations of the feminine body in Islamic Iran. This paper aims to offer an anthropological analysis of the figure of the woman as it appears in the contemporary Iranian cinema, with intended audiences both domestically and in the global market. As a critical exploration of the Iranian visual culture, this writing is enhanced by several core questions, including: How does the figure of Iranian woman resurface in cinematic productions, as a sign of social and epistemological change during the era of political reform? What idealized models of femininity and masculinity are constructed through these diverse film productions of the last decade? How does the new wave cinema in post-revolution Iran address the seemingly tenuous relationship between religiosity and piety with articulations of gender? What roles have the revitalization of women’s social movement of the past decade had on the representation of the image of Iranian women?

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Introduction

Today, visual media have become an inseparable part of our sense of reality. Images about body and beauty, for example, that take shape through television and film productions simultaneously confirm pre-conceived notions about societal standards of what is acceptable and not, as well as contribute to creative forms of imagination that challenges these norms. The power of the visual in connecting to mass audience, building and changing public imagination has long been known to politicians and those connected to the visual industries.

Perhaps nowhere is the visual culture more effective in disseminating public anxieties and articulations about the body than in Iran, where the moralist policies of the State mandates strict regulations on the content and is weary of the consequences of representation of women and sexuality in mass-media. By closely monitoring all that is printed and what which gets viewed, the State has given extreme potency to non-conformist independent cinema as well as illegal digital media such as satellite broadcasting and the internet. Yet, on January 14, 2009 the British Broadcasting Company (BBC International) began its groundbreaking television broadcast for Iran in Farsi/Persian language. Nigel Chapman, director of BBC World Service said television was "increasingly dominating the way that millions of Iranian people receive their news" and promised the Farsi channel would be "editorially independent of the UK government".¹ The independence from British government in perspectives offered through Persian BBC not only speaks to the concerns of the Islamic Republic, but also stands as a distinguishing feature of the company in its representational capacities to the world.

For the past three decades, the western media has painted a sensationalized picture of post-revolution Iran, one that is filled with narratives of sexual repression and images of extreme Islamic violence against women. While, the State's ideological stance on women and sexuality under the Islamic Republic of Iran continues to fuel the socio-political discourse of gender and sexuality, the more subtle technologies for construction and refusal of normative ideals of beauty for the Iranian women through systematic production of visual culture gets pushed to the margins. This paper, therefore, aims to bring to focus some of the effects of the processes by which the figure of the modern Iranian woman emerges through the cinematic production of beauty, however brief it may be.

At the heart of this exploration lie several theoretical and methodological pretenses: First, *gender* and *sexuality* as discussed in this work are viewed as products of complex and changing cultural norms. Second, the ideas about *body* and *beauty* in Iran are also heterogeneous and contestable. In other words, instead of claiming to offer a *singular* and *authentic* portrayal of women in Iran, this paper encourages us to ponder on the reinforced models of beauty and sexuality as it seeps through imagery of feminine subjects in contemporary Iranian film productions. Finally, this paper is written not as a film review, rather from the trajectory of anthropological inquiry that hovers around the margins to make sense of norms and forms in contrast to each other and the hegemonic model that rests at the center. Said differently, by looking at the image of the woman on the big screen, I hope to identify the contour of that subject – the ideal Iranian woman— somewhere between her opposite others who are at times the women in mainstream

¹ BBC Persian TV is to be broadcast from London every day from 1330 to 2130 GMT, and will be the broadcaster's second foreign-language TV channel, the British Broadcasting Corporation said. It launched BBC Arabic last year. The company has also run a Persian-language radio service since 1940, and it operates a Persian-language news site online. (Source: the International Herald Tribune, the Global Edition of the New York Times, published online Jan. 14, 2009)

Hollywood productions, and on the other end of the spectrum are the ideological exaggerations of the Islamic State about a woman's body, as seen on Iran's public television.

The State's compulsory imposition of gendered covering – the hejab – has been viewed by critics in a number of ways ranging from political repression of the government to absolute invisibility of the woman. Women in Iran, however, continue to make their presence known on a number of meaningful and tangible grounds, including professional and educational achievements, social activism, artistic expressions, financial independence, and more. Women's central roles in the cinematic productions of the last decade in particular, have propagated an alternative image of a docile and silenced femininity in Iran. Despite the growing international and domestic celebration of the cinematic portrayal of women in Iran as strong able bodies, the focal point of engagement with these films has remained on the realistic representation of the social life of women in Iran, leaving out the collective representations of the body in its relationship to the cultural space it inhabits.

From the perspective of cultural anthropology, body image is a rich source of social and cultural signification of the meaning of being human, always gendered always contested. In the words of Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Margaret Lock one needs to approach the body “as simultaneously a physical and symbolic artifact” (1987). From this stance, the imposition of compulsory hejab on the body of women speaks volumes to developmental and psychological processes of articulating the contour of the feminine body. In the pages that follow three cinematic moments have been selected to further illustrate these formulations as they pertain to the construction of body image and beautiful women.

The reduction of the body to the facial

One of the most noticeable physical features of people is their face. For women in Islamic Republic, the details of their facial anatomy and design have become a public obsession. Tehran, the mega-capital city of the country is reportedly the number one urban space in global statistics of cosmetic Rhinoplasty. Once prohibited by cultural norms – orf-today's young people in Tehran openly speak about their own cosmetic facial surgeries and proudly name their city as the number one capital of nose job². In cinema, finding an “un-adulterated” face, as it is often referred to by the filmmaker, is an increasingly difficult task.

Only in recent decade, the independent filmmakers with considerable social and intellectual clout such as Beyzai, Kiarostami, Panahi, and Hatami-Kia have made a concerted effort to casting the “natural” face. The usual explanation given by the

² While the documentary references to this phenomenon are increasing in numbers two sources in particular may provide detailed discussion of the growing trend of Rhinoplasty in Tehran: 2007 Documentary called *the Iranian Nose*, and the CBS special report on the topic: <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2005/05/02/eveningnews/main692495.shtml>

directors for their selectiveness is to overcome the futility of cosmetic trends in their pursuit for an authentic representation of life in Iran.

Bahram Beyzai, an outspoken pro-feminist filmmaker of close to forty years, whose theatrical professional repertoire is no less impressive than his extensive cinematic productions, often uses his real life wife, Mojdeh Shamsai to play the prime role³.

Kiarostami⁴, Panahi⁵, and Hatami-Kia⁶ who have also dedicated their professional work to include the representation of sexuality and women in the contemporary Iranian society have repeatedly expressed their awareness for casting a “believable” female face for their roles.

It is noteworthy perhaps that the majority of the prominent female directors such as Bani-Etemad, Milani, Neshat, and Makhmalbaf who also receive high regards from the International communities of film viewers and critics, have refrained from such selective approach to casting women in the primary roles.

Caught between two extreme models of beauty, the Iranian woman perceives her body to be first reduced to the shape and proportions of her face, and second is taught to choose either a Western ideal of beauty that deems her own facial characteristics as less than desirable, or to react by adopting a moralistic rhetoric to justify her non-participation in the trend. As such, she ceases to be impartial or confident about her body.

Frail grannies, fragile finches

In a societal setting that is obsessed with the feminine body, either in its governmental systematic effort to cover and control the female body, or the reactive indulgence in cosmetic alterations to the body by women (young and mature) the vast majority of women become invisible. What remains visible is an oppositional set of profiles built on the idea of the woman as an embodiment of the heterosexual man’s desire. In simpler words, women are either sexually available thus desirable by men (the girlfriend, the wife) or they remain outside the realm of sexuality (the familiar and the familial such as the mother, the sister, and the grandma).

In the past decade or so, a popular slang term about the body of the desired woman has emerged in Iran’s oral culture, which is popular among men and women alike. Named after a very small-bodied bird that resembles a less mature embodiment yet with better

³ See for example his narrative and casting in *Killing the Rabid Dogs* (2001), *When We Are All Asleep* (2008)

⁴ See Abbas Kiarostami ‘s *Ten* (2002)

⁵ Jafar Panahi has a long list of well-known films with strong female central character, including *The Circle* (2000) and *Offside* (2006)

⁶ Ibrahim Hatami-Kia who began his filmmaking career in the war cinema, has frequently portrayed strong-minded and able women in his stories, including *the Red Ribbon* (1999), *Low Heights* (2002), *In the Name of the Father* (2005).

singing qualities and in a more colorful version of the otherwise common sparrow, *The Finch* became the term to identify feminine beauty. The ideal girlfriend is a Finch whose beauty rests in her petite (read fragile) body and colorful entertaining behavior.

The profiling of the female voice

Another subtle extension of our body image comes through the profiling of the female voice. The State Television and Radio programs have severely caricatured the voice of the woman into a handful of stereotypical categories. The women on these programs are profiled both in their physical appearances (their body shapes, size, clothes and make up) as well as their aural representations. The vocal expression of the woman on the radio—where the voice matters most—is primarily limited to one of the two profiles: that of a depleted pious auditory of a saintly grandmother or else the forcefully paced and overly enunciated voice of a religious poetess.

On television and popular cinema, however, the possibilities for the woman's voice expands to include even more exaggerated forms ranging from, faux infantile speech often with a fake lisp and high pitched tones, to the shrill and angry piercings of a nagging wife. These extreme models of feminine vocal articulations are frequently adopted by young women and are greatly accepted and strongly popular in Iran. Most notably is the popularization of these oral castings through cartoon characters that reach a considerable span of popularity on television before they are adopted into a full feature film. As a result, one will hear millions of young adults (boys and girls, although by far more females are expected to play this game) imitating the voice over for puppet characters such as the infamous Kolah Ghermezi, when relating to friends and or lovers.

While the practice of trend-seeking and oral and bodily imitation is neither unique nor new to Iranian women (e.g. Japanese hyper model of femininity, or the Hannah Montana effect in the USA) it does, however, set the foundation for heterosexual and overly exaggerated femininity that re-emphasizes misogynistic view of women.

The “real” beauty: weaving through theory and the concrete

In his re-reading of Freudian psychoanalysis, Jacques Lacan distinguishes between the “imaginary order” and the “symbolic”, so that the imaginary is chaotic and disorderly while the symbolic representation illustrates thought and careful organizational techniques at work (1968). Lacan offers this distinction in order to locate the way we experience reality. His conclusion is that “the real” sits somewhere in between the symbolic order (i.e. society) and the imaginary representation of it. Much of the International success of the Iranian new-wave cinema in the past decade, I believe, is due to achieving an alternative order of reality about life in Iran that oscillates between the symbolic, the imaginary, and the real representation of life. As such, this movement back and forth between poles of exaggerated imageries and contested sensibilities has

revolutionized cinematic productions in Iran. More relevant to the scope of this paper, however, it has expanded the range of possibilities for human existence, especially with respect to the woman's body in a politically heightened time. The body of the woman in Iran, on the one hand, is at the foreground of domestic gender moralities, and on the other hand, it provokes fierce International politics that projects Iran as the least rational and most violent tyrannical "other" to the whole of the Western civilization (e.g. American democracy, women's liberation, social justice, etc.).

Body tattoos, un-supervised extreme diet regimes, cosmetic surgeries, mass consumptions of un-regulated diet pills and thinning creams, are among a few widely available and dangerously popular practices that women subject themselves to in order to obtain the perfect body. The normative conception of beauty is far from being heterogeneous or at least free of overtly "racialized" imagining.

Just as the body of the western woman is irreducible to the stereotypes produced about the collective American, white, urban and middle-class subjectivities, the visual representations of Iranian feminine body cannot be complete in the cinematic manifestations of the recent decade. However, as the idealized image of the body and hetero-sexually normative figure of a beautiful woman stretches beyond geo-political and socio-economical boundaries, the role of visual production in its casting of female models and roles becomes more potent- symbolically and politically. In this light, the evolving cinematic body of work that has dominated the independent production in Iran and about Iran plays an important role in challenging hegemonic super-imposed standards of femininity and beauty. Iranian filmmakers who have tactfully surpassed sheer cuttings of the Islamic censorship programs in creative and multiple ways, are now mindful of the typologies offered to women through the work of the visual. This, in my view, is a significant and fortunate move with cultural ramifications that go beyond individual and artistic selections of any filmmaker.