

## **Art and Music of the Middle East: Creativity, Oppression and Appropriation**

Since the publication of Said's (1978) seminal work, a discourse of Orientalism has been key to understandings of power and representation between East and West. Through this discourse that is heavily intertwined with notions of power, domination and hegemony, an unchallengeable Western consciousness brought the world of the Orient into being, a world that then had no right to reply or self-representation. Thus, the Occident was able to produce and subjugate the Orient, "politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically and imaginatively" (Said, 1978: 4). Equally important to Said's critique is the ways in which 'colonized peoples' are themselves implicated in the systems of their subjugation. As Stokes puts it, "the force of Orientalist discourse was such that the colonized were obliged to draw on these colonial representations to substantiate their own existence" (Stokes, 2002: 168).

Said's concept of Orientalism and the field of postcolonial studies have not, however, been immune to critique<sup>1</sup>. Much of this criticism has centred on the idea that, as Stokes (2002: 168) points out, Said offers a totalising and fatalistic vision in which neither 'we' nor 'they' can escape from the discursive systems that impel us to construct 'us' in contradistinction to 'them'. Heavily indebted to Foucault, Said builds a notion of power constructed entirely in terms of textuality, obscuring material conditions and practices through which power can be resisted or challenged (Born & Hesmondhalgh, 2000: 6) and undertheorising the capability of agents to act within power structures. As Hall (1996: 257) makes clear, this over-reliance on the discursive functions of power has also meant that postcolonialism has under-theorised the role of global capitalism in systems

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<sup>1</sup> For critiques of postcolonialism see Dirlik (1994); Shohat (1992); McClintock (1992).

of power and representation. A more variegated and nuanced approach to the experience of living in a postcolonial world is necessary. This means not only moving away from binary constructions of power and resistance but also recognising that, while Western domination takes both material and symbolic forms, people have the capacity to respond to these systems through their daily lives in a variety of complex ways.

Despite these internal struggles over the legacy of Orientalism, the postcolonial approach has successfully infiltrated music studies and its analyses applied to acts of musical communication in recent years. As Born and Hesmondhalgh (2000: 7) suggest, postcolonial analysis has tended to focus on official and high art examples of cultural production to the almost total exclusion of popular culture<sup>2</sup>. This neglect of the field of popular culture by key writers in the postcolonial tradition could be tied to tendencies within the field to overlook the importance both of agency and of global capitalism. Since popular music continues to be thought of as more ‘social’ by most music scholars, an analysis of it would undoubtedly require engaging with the ways in which agents creatively use it in their daily lives. Moreover, since popular culture is an inherently commercial enterprise, it would be impossible to consider the circulation of popular culture through a postcolonial paradigm without at least some engagement with the flows of global capitalism.

A field that is strongly associated with issues of postcolonialism, global capitalism and flows of popular culture is the phenomenon of ‘world music’ (see Feld, 2000; Frith, 2000; Garofalo, 1993; Guilbault, 1993). As Sharma (1996: 19) points out, the simultaneous “elevation and erasure” of non-Western musicians by the record industry is a feature of the genre of world music in which the crucial socio-religious contexts of

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<sup>2</sup> Notable exceptions include the work of Paul Gilroy (1993) and bell hooks (1991).

musical forms are erased. This process is closely tied to a project of ‘multiculturalism’ that found particular success in Western nations in the 1980s and through which a rhetoric of hybridity and liberal multiculturalism pervaded the record industry. As Stokes (2002: 174) points out, samples of music by Middle Eastern artists featured in the work of David Byrne and Brian Eno; Madonna; and in the films of Oliver Stone. This process of selection, de-contextualisation and then re-contextualisation means that a variety of heterogeneous musical traditions from the Middle East are considered freely interchangeable, reconstructing the notion of a unitary East possessing a homogeneous musical culture.

### **‘Underground Rock’ Music in Iran: *No One Knows About Persian Cats***

It is against this backdrop that the genre of ‘underground rock’ music in Iran is beginning to emerge. ‘Underground rock’ music refers specifically to a brand of music-making in Iran that began around the year 2000 (Nooshin, 2008: 70). Following the official re-legalization of pop music in 1997, a growing number of Iranian musicians (overwhelmingly male, young, urban and affluent) began forming bands and producing and distributing their music using the Internet as a key tool (Nooshin, 2008: 73). Artists of this new musical scene tend to refer to themselves as part of an ‘underground rock’ genre or ‘*rak-e z̄ir-e z̄amin*’. ‘Underground’ because, although their music is not illegal per se, very few bands have gained authorization from the Ministry of Culture and as such perform and rehearse in underground or other sound-proof spaces. ‘Rock’ here refers generally to artists who see themselves as working outside of the mainstream but who work in a wide variety of musical styles.

This essay represents a preliminary study of ‘underground rock’ music in Iran in preparation for DPhil research in this area. This essay does not attempt an analysis of Iranian ‘underground rock’ music and as a consequence, deliberately makes no attempt to engage directly with the sounds of this genre. Instead this essay endeavours to outline the cultural landscape on which this new musical genre is beginning to emerge. I consider preliminary reactions to Iranian ‘underground rock’ music by Western cultural commentators and examine how they are set against a backdrop of discourses of creativity, oppression and appropriation that can be broadly defined as Orientalist. I attempt to outline the landscape in which these discourses are constructed, showing their precedent in relation to other forms of art and music that emanate from the Middle East. By drawing links between the discursive constructions of Iranian ‘underground rock’ music and other forms of art and music, specifically Iranian art cinema and world music, I construct the notion of a general discursive framework that guides the consumption of Middle Eastern art and music in Western contexts.

Through a consideration of Iranian ‘underground rock’ music and its links with Iranian art cinema and world music I will endeavour to integrate notions of agency and global capitalism within a postcolonial paradigm. I consider how Orientalist discourses circulate in a global cultural economy in which Western cultural output and its concomitant means of valuation are raised above all else. Eastern-based cultural producers do not resort to the codes of Orientalism *only* because as ‘colonized’ peoples they have no other means of imagining their existence. Rather they react to the imagined Western eye and ear in their work because in many cases they stand to gain both economic and symbolic capital in a global market of cultural exchange dominated by Western actors and models. This approach counters a binary notion of oppressor/oppressed and suggests that a variety of Western and non-Western actors are implicated in processes of representation as they

seek to fulfil their own interests in a global market. Finally I consider the implications of this argument for future ethnographic fieldwork researching ‘underground rock’ music in Iran.

Of course, Iran was never directly colonized unlike neighbouring states in the region and therefore cannot be considered a ‘post-colonial’ state in the normal sense. Drawing on Herzfeld (2002: 915), however, I will consider Iran as an example of ‘crypto-colonialism’ in which countries that act as buffers between colonized lands suffer many of the economic and political effects of colonialism at the same time as experiencing forms of Orientalism. The Iranian case can also help redress the balance in Western scholarship wherein, as Herzfeld (2002: 902) points out, countries that did not directly endure colonial rule have been largely excluded from the theoretical canon and considered comparatively irrelevant in terms of the production of theory in the West.

I will examine the film *No One Knows About Persian Cats* (2009) by Bahman Ghobadi which follows a group of musicians within the ‘underground rock’ scene in Tehran. A consideration of this film can shed light on two key aspects of this genre. Firstly an analysis of the film’s reception by Western media outlets (reviews from newspapers *The Guardian*<sup>3</sup>, *The Independent*<sup>4</sup>, *The Times*<sup>5</sup> and *The Telegraph*<sup>6</sup> and websites rottentomatoes.com<sup>7</sup>, metacritic.com<sup>8</sup> and slantmagazine.com<sup>9</sup>) will elucidate how

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<sup>3</sup> [www.guardian.co.uk/film/2010/02/mar/25/no-one-knows-about-persian-cats](http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2010/02/mar/25/no-one-knows-about-persian-cats)

<sup>4</sup> [www.independent.co.uk/farts-entertainment/films/previews/no-one-knows-about-persian-cats-bahman-ghobadi-103-mins-12a-1929133.html](http://www.independent.co.uk/farts-entertainment/films/previews/no-one-knows-about-persian-cats-bahman-ghobadi-103-mins-12a-1929133.html)

<sup>5</sup> *The Times* online is now behind a pay wall. Please see appendix 1.

<sup>6</sup> [www.metacritic.com/movie/no-one-knows-about-persian-cats](http://www.metacritic.com/movie/no-one-knows-about-persian-cats)

<sup>7</sup> [www.rottentomatoes.com/fm/no\\_one\\_knows\\_about\\_persian\\_cats/](http://www.rottentomatoes.com/fm/no_one_knows_about_persian_cats/)

<sup>8</sup> [www.metacritic.com/movie/no-one-knows-about-persian-cats](http://www.metacritic.com/movie/no-one-knows-about-persian-cats)

<sup>9</sup> [www.slantmagazine.com/film/review/no-one-knows-about-persian-cats/4771](http://www.slantmagazine.com/film/review/no-one-knows-about-persian-cats/4771)

Western voices are beginning to react to this new musical movement. Secondly, consideration of the film itself will help unravel the complex ways in which cultural producers like Ghobadi react to Western cultural discourses of Middle Eastern art and music in producing and representing Iranian 'underground rock'.

My decision to analyse a film about the 'underground rock' scene is based on three notions. Firstly, film is probably the most successful medium of cultural exchange between Iran and Western nations, far outweighing music in this regard. Thus, much of what Western audiences know about contemporary Iranian musicians emerges from the circles in which film operates. As a result, consideration of a film about Iranian 'underground rock' music will better enable me to construct a picture of the cultural landscape of exchange in which this musical genre is emerging. Secondly, the emergent genre of 'underground rock' is wide-ranging, heterogeneous and highly complex. Taking a film as my object of analysis will allow me to focus my discussion to a limited object in which many of the key discourses relating to this genre are condensed. Thirdly, in the absence of ethnographic evidence, I can consider the reception of 'underground rock' by Western audiences by looking at reviews of the film from a variety of sources. Although this method does not allow me to discuss issues of reception with audiences, it does take account of the important role of the art critic in articulating influential discourses of consumption.

The narrative of the film follows two Iranian musicians, Negar and Ashkan, who form part of the 'underground rock' scene. Fresh out of prison and having lost three members of their band, they are taken around Tehran by their friend Nader to recruit musicians for a concert in London. The film thus becomes a showcase for the wide variety of underground music-making occurring in Tehran, taking in artists from genres as diverse

as funk, heavy metal, jazz, blues and rap. *No One Knows About Persian Cats* presents itself as “based on real events, locations and people” and employs a semi-realist docudrama style. The film features only one professional actor and all the musicians featured in it live and work in Tehran. Moreover, the ‘behind the scenes’ footage included on the DVD suggests that, while the narrative arc of the film was scripted, most dialogue was improvised or developed by director and cast moments before filming began. The film therefore pertains to realism both in its aesthetic style and in its casting of ‘real’ Iranian musicians.

## *Creativity*

The reviews that I analysed considered Ghobadi’s film as detailing the suppression of music and creativity in contemporary Iran. The narrative, in which the two main characters struggle to assemble a band in order to perform in London, is therefore considered to be representative of the experience of all Iranian musicians: both are constructed as desperate to ‘escape’ Iran in order to achieve creative freedom.

They are certainly desperate to escape Iran and its stifling atmosphere of censorship – The Guardian (25/03/10).

Forbidden by the authorities to play in Iran, they plan to escape from their clandestine existence, and dream of performing in Europe – rottentomatoes.com (22/03/11).

The film is an indictment of cultural repression in Iran’s exciting underground music scene – metacritic.com (22/03/11).

This notion is reproduced within the film itself in references to Iran as having an atmosphere of stifled creativity:

We just want to make music...you can’t make music here (Ghobadi, 2009: 07:00).

Nader: (discussing Ashkan and Negar’s music) Do you know what you can do with this?

Negar: We tried knocking on every door. It’s impossible. It’s no use

Ashkan: You can’t do anything here, there’s no point trying (Ghobadi: 10:30).

Indeed, there is a long history of state involvement in music-making in Iran with successive regimes creatively restricting or encouraging the composition, performance and dissemination of music to suit their own political ends (see Nooshin, 2005; Youssefzadeh, 2000). Despite these various restrictions, an abundance of banned Iranian and Western music has been available for many years as part of a thriving black market (Youssefzadeh, 2000: 46). Equally, while state restriction on music-making is widespread, there is much evidence to suggest that musical creativity increased during periods of heavy government restriction through which playing and listening to music became processes for the simultaneous affirmation of national belonging and opposition to the regime (Nooshin, 2005: 241; Youssefzadeh, 2000: 38).

Both the reviews that I considered and some aspects of Ghobadi's film constructed a direct link between state laws of censorship and a stifled atmosphere of musical creativity in Iran. While neither condoning censorship laws nor suggesting that they should be viewed as creatively positive, I counter the assertion that life under the Islamic Republic is anathema to creativity and musical expression. In fact, a further analysis of the film and the real-life artists who take part in it suggests that Iranians can and do make creative use of their culture in their daily lives. In one scene, Nader encourages rapper *Hickhas* ('Nobody') to travel with the band to London. *Hickhas* eloquently explains why he will not leave the city that forms the backdrop to his life and music.

We grew up here, everything is here. Our work, our lives, our romances, our friendships is here...What do we do? Persian rap, right? That means it's for right here...abroad, on the other side of the water there's no way out. 'Cause what we have to say is for the heart of this city (Ghobadi, 2009: 1:16:32).

Following this scene *Hickhas* performs a rap about contemporary life in Tehran, discussing issues such as class struggle, poverty, capitalism, God, love and prostitution. His performance is accompanied by images of robed mullahs, veiled older women,



construction workers, teenage girls, praying men, children, traffic jams and other aspects of urban life in Tehran. Thus, for *Hichkas*, contemporary Tehran is both the source of his creative material and the target for his socially aware brand of rap. Not only does he not want to leave Iran, recognising that his music will lose its meaning when transported abroad, he relies on his experience of it for his lyrical content. In this scene, the chorus repeats:

God wake up and listen. Don't get mad at what I've done. What part? I've just begun. God wake up I'm trash (Ghobadi, 2009: 1:18:57).

*Hichkas* implores God to “wake up and listen” to his plight and that of other inhabitants of Tehran. His rap is thus creatively influenced by the Islamic Republic, drawing on the intertwining of religion and politics under a theocracy to produce a religiously-inflected social commentary of poverty and class struggle. Only a few of the reviews that I analysed mentioned *Hichkas*’ appearance in the film, and of them, none considered his appearance as demonstrating the potentially creative aspects of life in Iran.

In fact, all of the reviews I considered constructed Iranian society as *inherently opposed* to creative musical expression, overlooking aspects of the film that clearly problematise such a notion. Of course state policies of censorship on music are well-known and musicians do not enjoy freedom in Iran. However, it does not follow that Iranian society is anathema to creativity and this construction in fact draws on a long established Orientalist discourse which ties cultures of the Middle East to a totalizing Islam that is seen as opposed to artistic expression (Winegar, 2008: 5). The notion of an oppressive Islam that stifles creativity is a highly lucrative discourse in relation to Middle Eastern art and music, and one that circulates widely in the global market of cultural products. In order to understand the ways that different actors benefit from the propagation of such a discourse, it is instructive to turn to an analysis of Iranian art cinema as an example of

the broader context in which Iranian ‘underground rock’ music is emerging. Iranian art cinema refers specifically to arthouse films made after the revolution that engage in implicit social critique through the cinematic tools of allegory and symbolism. This genre has established Iranian film as one of the most pre-eminent national cinemas in the world.

### **Iranian Art Cinema: A First Parallel Case**

A discourse of Islam as anti-art is particularly prevalent in the output of Iranian art cinema and its origins can be largely found in the system of film censorship in Iran. Censorship laws mean that Iranian art cinema filmmakers are unable to directly acknowledge controversial issues. In their attempt to bypass sensitive political themes in a country where politics and Islam are inextricably intertwined, films tend to circumvent Islam and instead draw on the themes of mysticism and nontheistic humanism. As Naficy (2002: 263) points out, this practice is prevalent in the films of Majid Majidi, Mohsen Makhmalbaf, Jafar Panahi and Rakhshan Banietemad, the success of which reflects what Winegar (2008) refers to as a Western predilection for Middle Eastern art that circumvents contemporary Islam. The selective promotion and display of Middle Eastern art and music in the West favours work that either de-contextualises Islam, focusing instead on its ancient ‘golden age’<sup>10</sup>, or erases it, concentrating instead on notions of spiritualism and mysticism. Since arguably a discourse of art as humanism continues to underwrite the consumption of art and music in the West<sup>11</sup>, the implication

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<sup>10</sup> This reflects a key tenet of crypto-colonial discourse which, as Herzfeld (2002: 919) points out, constructs a “seamless unity” between ancient and modern contexts with the effect of marginalising living populations of crypto-colonial countries from scholarly discourse.

<sup>11</sup> See Kant (1951: 283), who asserted that the aesthetic appreciation of beauty allows for the “development of humanity.”

here is that contemporary Islam is anti-humanist since it is only works that overlook this element that are given 'art' status in the West.

Thus, in this example, the Orientalising discourse of Islam as anti-art is not merely due to the epistemological and textual operations of power but is also a result of material policies of the Iranian government and the ways in which Iranian art cinema filmmakers creatively respond to these restrictions in their work. This response has created a generic form that has achieved great success amongst the audiences of foreign film festivals since, as Farahmand (2002: 99) points out, the political escapism embraced by many Iranian art cinema directors "caters to the film festival taste for high art and restrained politics". As a result, international screenings of Iranian films rose from 35 in 1979 to 840 in 1999 (Farahmand, 2002: 93), by 2000 Iranian filmmakers had garnered three major awards at the Cannes Film Festival and in 2005 veteran Iranian filmmaker Abbas Kiarostami was named president of the Camera d'Or jury at the same festival (Naficy, 2002: 265). Such success not only benefits filmmakers who gain prestige and world-wide acclaim for the success of their films but also, as Farahmand (2002: 94) points out, foreign production companies who support Iranian filmmakers and benefit from the low production costs of producing films in Iran<sup>12</sup>. Thus, discourses of Islam as anti-art are reproduced not merely because 'colonized' cultural producers have no other way of representing themselves but because a variety of actors have a stake in this notion that has proved lucrative in terms of both economic and symbolic capital within a particular film genre. The extent to which prestige and financial gain are at stake for Iranian

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<sup>12</sup> There is a clear profit motive for foreign production companies. For the price of making a 15-min film in Europe they can make an internationally distributed feature film in Iran.

‘underground rock’ musicians remains to be seen but the existence of discourses of Iranian society as anti-creativity suggests a correlation in this regard.

## *Oppression*

The reviews of *No One Knows About Persian Cats* that I analysed also reproduced a notion of music-as-resistance, uniformly identifying the Iranian regime as the foremost source of hegemony:

The film is an indictment of cultural repression in Iran’s exciting underground music scene...a celebration of an entire generation of Iranians striving towards personal and creative freedom – metacritic.com (22/03/11).

The finale shows that no matter how noble the underground musicians’ efforts may be, they’re no match for the dictates of fate—a force here represented by Ahmadinejad’s government...Ghobadi’s film is at its strongest when establishing the culture of an underground driven by a near fanatical devotion to music and hemmed in by the constant threat of exposure and arrest – slantmagazine.com (28/04/10).

Moreover, the reviews I considered constructed the musicians in the film, and by extension all underground musicians in Iran, as brave artists struggling against oppression:

[It] seemed designed as a tribute to the defiance of these musicians. – slantmagazine.com (28/04/10).

[It is] an exhilarating, quietly powerful tribute to the courage of Iran’s underground musicians. – rottentomatoes.com (22/03/11).

*Persian Cats* trails a pair of Tehran indie kids...where the spirit of rebellion is channelled into squalling guitars and perky keyboard riffs. – The Times (26/03/10).

These Western voices largely reproduce discourses that construct artistic expression in the Middle East as a direct form of resistance. This forms part of an Orientalist programme that assigns to Iranians the romanticized role of ‘colonized resistor’. It is not just Western voices but also Ghobadi himself who on occasion has produced this discourse of oppression: for instance the front cover of the DVD proclaims *No One Knows About Persian Cats* as “the film that sings, howls and chants freedom!”

However, in other instances Ghobadi's film takes a much broader look at the sources of cultural hegemony in the lives of Iranian musicians. While Ghobadi indeed identifies the Iranian regime as one source of oppression, he also refers to the politics of globalization and oil. In one scene, Negar, Ashkan and Nader go to see 'Mash David' in order to obtain the passports and visas they need to travel to London. On asking how much they will cost, Mash David's friend reads out the prices:

Current passport prices...Regular Iranian passport, 4 million tomans (\$4000); Iraqi passport, 1 million tomans (\$1000); Afghani passport, 500,000 tomans (\$500); European passport, 11 million tomans (\$11,000); American passport, 26 millions tomans (\$26,000)...(Ghobadi, 2009: 23:25).

This scene acts as a powerful representation of the value of citizenship as Negar and Ashkan are offered the chance to buy a nationality of their choice. Clearly, not all nationalities are valued equally and the diverse range of prices reflects the differing levels of cultural currency afforded to the owner of a particular national identity. For the characters in the film it is fortunate that being Iranian is more valuable than being Afghani or Iraqi. However, Iranian citizenship is dwarfed by the power of a European or American passport, which will afford the bearer more rights than any citizen of the Middle East. The cost and also the illegality of obtaining passports and visas in this way is a clear obstacle for Negar and Ashkan. On asking what the prices are based on, Mash David explains:

If oil prices go up, the cost goes up. If oil comes down, the prices go down (Ghobadi, 2009: 24:19)

Here, Ghobadi illustrates how the mobility of citizens of Middle Eastern nations is directly affected by the global price of oil. Since the most dramatic rises in oil prices in the last decade have been as a result of US-led invasions in Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003) and oil prices continue to fluctuate as a result of perceived instability in this

region, it is suggested that citizenship of Middle Eastern nations is deemed more or less valuable according to Western political, financial and military interests in oil-producing countries. None of the reviews I considered identified any source of hegemony other than the Iranian regime, overlooking the additional role of Western-dominated globalization that prevents these musicians from moving freely.

### **Iranian Art Cinema: A Second Parallel Case**

In order to consider the precedent for this discourse it is again instructive to turn to an analysis of Iranian art cinema. A notion of art-as-resistance is central to the reception of this genre also. The well-known system of censorship under the Islamic Republic produces the international film festival as a means of providing aid and support to Iranian filmmakers in their ongoing battle with the Iranian regime (Farahmand, 2002: 103). Here, a linking of art with freedom is in evidence, suggesting that Iranian art cinema is an act of resistance against a regime uniformly characterised as oppressive. This construction is particularly striking considering that Iranian art cinema is actually largely subsidised by the Iranian government. As Naficy (2002: 262) points out, the high quality output of Iranian art cinema can in part be attributed to the financial support its filmmakers have received from official institutions. Moreover, all international screenings of Iranian art cinema films must be sanctioned by the Ministry of Culture so those viewed by international film festival audiences have their ‘resistance capital’ somewhat in doubt. Despite this, a romanticized (Abu-Lughod, 1990) discourse of resistance is produced, constructing the Iranian filmmaker as a struggling artist who can only be supported by the film industry in the West.<sup>13</sup> A dramatic illustration of this came in the

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<sup>13</sup> This notion of the ‘culturally oppressed Iranian’ is similarly found in books such as *Not Without My Daughter* (Mahmoody, 1988) or *Reading Lolita in Tebran: A Memoir in Books* (Nafisi, 2004) that have achieved particular literary success as part of what Varzi (2008:

2010 Cannes Film Festival when actress Juliette Binoche protested against the imprisonment of Iranian filmmaker Jafar Panahi in Iran<sup>14</sup> and subsequent news coverage suggested that Panahi's eventual release was as a direct result of her campaign.

A discourse of Iranian art cinema-as-resistance benefits various actors operating in global cultural markets. It affords Iranian cultural producers high levels of symbolic capital in the liberal circles of international film festivals through constructing them as brave artists resisting an oppressive regime. This was evident in the case of Jafar Panahi who, following his release from prison in 2011, was awarded the 'Carrosse d'Or' prize at Cannes for his 'bravery and freedom of thought'<sup>15</sup>. In addition, this discourse benefits actors in the Iranian government who, as Farahmand (2002: 94) points out, are able to strategically co-opt Iranian art cinema's 'resistance capital' for political ends. For example, in 1997 Kiarostami's film *The Taste of Cherry* (1997) was banned in Iran and barred from entering the Cannes Film Festival. Despite missing the official deadline, the film was shipped to France at the last minute and eventually shown alongside other entries. As Farahmand (2002: 95) suggests, this sudden change in fortunes came when Iranian foreign minister Ali Akbar Velayati realized the film's presence at Cannes would "have a good impact outside Iran" and so manoeuvred its entry. This strategic move came at an important time in Iranian-Western diplomatic relations following the election of reformist President Mohammed Khatami, signalling the start of a period of greater cultural exchange. It also proved decisive for Kiarostami whose late entry shared the Palme d'Or with Shohei Imamura's *The Eel*, cementing his position as one of the most important directors of the Iranian art cinema genre. The extent to which government

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26) describes as "a trend in memoirs by Western women who have 'survived' the Middle East."

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/film/cannes-film-festival/7764883/Juliette-Binoche-Ive-never-thought-of-myself-as-beautiful.html>

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2011/apr/20/jafar-panahi-cannes-film-festival>

actors and musicians from the Iranian ‘underground rock’ scene will stand to benefit from a discourse of music-as-resistance is as yet unclear. But there are clear parallels between this discourse as observed in the emerging scene of ‘underground rock’ and in the more establishment locus of cultural exchange that is Iranian art cinema.

## *Appropriation*

Finally, the reviews of *No One Knows About Persian Cats* that I examined considered the musicians in the film entirely through the lens of Western culture. Thus their artistic practices, musical style and creative inspiration were assumed to be based on Western cultural models:

The Western-style rockers who may turn out to be the unacknowledged legislators for Iran’s pro-democracy movement – The Guardian (25/03/10).

Tehran’s music scene is populated by ardent Sigur Ros fans and slackers in Strokes T-shirts – The Independent (28/03/10).

The underground music scene in Teheran...turns out to be a hotbed of rappers, metal bands and indie rockers who sport Strokes T-shirts and line their rehearsal spaces with Joy Division posters – The Telegraph (14/05/09).

Western cultural objects are littered throughout the film: posters of The Beatles and Joy Division, copies of the NME and mentions of Icelandic group Sigur Ros or American artist Madonna abound. Moreover, Ghobadi himself mines for comic effect the perceived gulf between traditional Iranian society and contemporary Western culture, particularly in one scene where a traditionally dressed, middle-aged, blind Iranian woman incongruously professes her love for American gangster rapper “50 cent” (Ghobadi, 2009: 20:56). However, there are also many artists in the film who sing in Farsi about Iranian issues and make no references to inspiration from or aspiration towards Western cultural models. And yet, these artists are either overlooked by Western reviewers or their actions re-interpreted.



*Hichkas*, the rapper who considers his life and music firmly rooted in the politics of Tehran is still considered a product of Western culture by some of the reviews I considered. *The Independent* referred to his rap as “the usual hard-times-in-da-hood material”, clearly overlooking the local specificity of his work and instead aligning him with other Western rappers. Moreover, in referring to him, the writer jokes:

rap artist (named Hichkas, but I wonder if his homies call him 50 dirhams?) – *The Independent* (28/03/10).

Here the writer attempts an amusing parallel between American rapper *50 cent* and Iranian rapper *Hichkas*, assigning him arbitrarily the currency of Morocco and naming him 50 dirhams. By referring to him in this way, *Hichkas* is musically aligned with an American rapper despite the considerable differences in their musical styles: while *50 cent*’s music is preoccupied with money, women and guns, *Hichkas*’s output is concerned with God, nationalism and poverty. Equally, by referring to *Hichkas* as “50 dirhams” rather than “50 tomans” (the currency of Iran) he is assigned the identity of a vague Eastern otherness. Thus by simultaneously appropriating him as Western and ‘othering’ him as vaguely exotic, *Hichkas*’ particular identity as an Iranian artist is erased.

### **World Music: A Third Parallel Case**

To consider the precedent for this discourse in Middle Eastern art and music more generally it is revealing to turn to a consideration of world music, which was first discussed at the beginning of this essay. The simultaneous elevation and erasure, appropriation and othering of local specificity is a key aspect of world music discourse. While there exist clear power differentials between Eastern music producers and Western artists and record labels who operate in world music fields, (see Feld, 2000) I would guard against the binary construction of oppressed Eastern producers/powerful Western

actors. As Nooshin (2008: 86) points out, “the West continues to hold immense prestige value for Iranian musicians who tend to look ‘Westward’ rather than to other peripheries for their musical ideas”. Thus the practice of aligning Iranian musicians with Western artists and cultural models could be part of a well-intentioned attempt to load acclaim onto them and their music. Moreover, there are material benefits for many Iranian musicians in being considered this way. Appropriation by Western cultural models affords them greater exposure and advances their music within important Western markets. For example the rapper *Hichkas* who so proclaimed the local specificity of his rap, has benefited from the exposure of working with UK-based artist *Reveal* on a song titled ‘Long Live Palestine’<sup>16</sup>. Moreover, as Nooshin (2008: 78) notes, many Iranian rock musicians who sing in English suggest that there are intensely practical reasons for appropriating Western models in this way since the melodic and extended rhythms of Farsi do not suit the short, detached rhythms of rock and metal. As such, there are musical benefits for Eastern cultural producers in reproducing a world music discourse that both appropriates and others their musical output. It is unclear as yet how artists from the newly emerging ‘underground rock’ scene in Iran will manage these discourses related to their music and this should be a key area of future research into this new genre.

## Ethnographic Implications

To conclude, an analysis of *No One Knows About Persian Cats*, suggests that the ‘underground rock’ scene in Iran is largely received by Western commentators in line with discourses that find a precedent in Iranian art cinema and world music. This correlation suggests the existence of a discursive framework guiding the Western

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<sup>16</sup> Link to Hichkas-Reveal track: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OsCe5JzNejw>

consumption of Middle Eastern art and music more generally. These discourses relate to: notions of contemporary Islam as anti-creativity; the work of art as an act of resistance; and the simultaneous appropriation/otherness of artists with the effect of erasing their local specificity. Both Western-based cultural commentators and Eastern-based producers such as Ghobadi are implicated in this process which occurs through a relationship of mutual reactivity. However, other aspects of Ghobadi's film which problematise such constructions are overlooked by Western commentators. Furthermore, there are material benefits of these discourses for a variety of actors involved in processes of global cultural exchange. Thus the reproduction of Orientalist discourses is not merely a result of abstract power relations but can be linked in some cases to the reaction of musicians, production companies, state actors, filmmakers and film festival bodies. Thus a variety of actors are implicated in the processes of representation where high levels of economic and symbolic capital are often at stake. These findings suggest many implications for future ethnographic work on the Iranian 'underground rock' scene which I will now consider.

The discourses on offer to Iranian artists and musicians are severely limited, rarely allowing them to break out of a rhetoric of Islam, oppression, resistance, appropriation and otherness and excluding them from discourses that may offer alternative explanations of their work. For example, Western commentators are generally preoccupied with Iranian 'underground rock' as an example of resistance against an oppressive regime, yet few have noted the potential benefits of this construction for Iranian musicians. As Nooshin notes (2008: 72) many musicians, "capitalize on their enforced underground status to enhance their 'outsider capital', always useful to a rock musician's street credibility." The 'anti-hegemonic' status of rock has long been a feature of Western musics and could therefore be a potentially vital component of the Iranian

underground scene. Moreover, although the Islamic Republic represses performances of popular musics, they actually work to promote those of classical and folk styles (Shay, 2000: 76). Thus restrictions on music should not be viewed solely through the lens of 'Islamic repression' (Otterbeck, 2004) since they are also tied up in distinctions between high/low, serious/frivolous, native/colonised art forms. Ethnographic fieldwork should endeavour to understand the discourses produced by Iranian musicians themselves. While some discourses may interact with, make use of, or oppose those associated with the West, it is important not to view all Iranian cultural production through the lens of Western cultural models and thus condemn artists and musicians to the role of oppressed resisters once more.

Well-intentioned commentators in the West regularly pile prestige on popular artists and musicians based in the East by likening them to Western artists or musical styles. Although this may open up Western audiences to their music, it strips these artists of their local identities and shores up the assumption that popular culture is essentially a Western phenomenon. Ethnographic fieldwork should consider Iranian musicians not merely in relation Western artists or cultural forms but as consumers/producers in a global cultural economy. However, the unequal power relations between cultural producers in Iran and in the West should be noted. This means firstly taking account of Iranian musicians' reduced capacity to travel, perform and disseminate their music to a global audience and secondly attending to the fact that Iranian cultural objects are often consumed in line with discourses that promote Western cultural models. Thus while ethnographic research should avoid considering Iranian artists through the lens of Western ones, it is important not to fall into the trap of assuming they are 'different but equal' members of the cultural economy.

Finally, a key issue is the difficulty with which Western voices and many Eastern cultural producers account for contemporary Islam in Middle Eastern art and music. Ethnographic fieldwork should strive to consider music practices in Iran outside of a secular/sacred dichotomization. This would enable the uncoupling of the secular-resistance/sacred-conformism binary, while bringing to light those music practices that fall outside of these categorizations and thus tend to disappear from sight. This final issue is of relevance to many countries of the Middle East whose art and music is considered in line with discourses of Islam. A consideration of Iran, as a 'crypto-colonial' country that is often deemed irrelevant in the formation of Western scholarly discourse, could here prove particularly enlightening in bringing new insights to the field of postcolonial studies.

## Appendix 1

# THE SUNDAY TIMES

### Archive Article

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From The Times

MY PROFILE

March 26, 2010

## No One Knows About Persian Cats

A spirited docudrama set in Tehran's underground music scene by a film-maker who is not afraid of tackling issues head on

Wendy Ide



FILM >>

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Largely thanks to the censorship imposed on the work, Iranian cinema often tends to be archly allegorical rather than genuinely controversial and confrontational. One film-maker who is not afraid of tackling issues head on however is the Iranian Kurd Bahman Ghobadi, whose latest film, *No One Knows About Persian Cats*, is a spirited docudrama set in Tehran's thriving underground music scene.

In some ways it's a companion piece to his last film, *Half Moon*. Both pictures follow the progress of musicians attempting to assemble a band to play at a concert that may or may not be permitted by the authorities. Both films become a kind of odyssey through Iran's cultural landscape. But while *Half Moon* follows an ageing Kurdish folk musician through the desert, *Persian Cats* trails a pair of Tehran indie kids through the illicit basement rehearsal spaces and covert rooftop jam sessions where the spirit of rebellion is channelled into squalling guitars and perky keyboard riffs.

It's not entirely successful — there's probably an ad-hoc band showcase or two too many, the humour is a trifle broad and, having ambled along for about 90 minutes, the film takes a clumsily melodramatic turn. Still, it's an inventive way of giving a voice to the music-crazed kids that the current regime would rather silence.

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