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ANIMATION AND CULTURAL RESISTANCE IN IRAN: AN ANALYSIS OF *PERSEPOLIS, WINDOW HORSES,* AND *TEHRAN TABOO*

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Abstract
Animation has long served as a powerful medium for cultural resistance, providing a platform for marginalized voices to challenge dominant narratives, critique oppressive systems, and express identity. However, despite a growing body of scholarship on cultural resistance in authoritarian contexts, few studies have investigated full-length animated films produced by or about Iranians as sites of ideological contestation. This article maps how animation, particularly works created in exile, functions as a potent medium of cultural resistance that subverts state censorship and challenges dominant narratives in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Drawing on qualitative visual and narrative data from *Persepolis* (2007), *Window Horses* (2016), and *Tehran Taboo* (2017), the study interprets these films through a framework of critical discourse and ideological analysis. Rather than merely documenting repression, the films collectively reveal how cultural resistance is enacted through female agency, poetic expression, and everyday defiance embedded in urban and diasporic spaces. These acts of dissent are often subtle yet deeply political, highlighting the resilience of Iranian identity in the face of surveillance, displacement, and moral control. Ultimately, the study underscores the strategic role of animation in circulating marginalized voices across national borders, offering valuable insights into the dynamics of resistance in tightly controlled media environments.

Keywords: animation, authoritarianism, cultural resistance, Iran

Introduction

Following the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iran experienced a radical transformation in its political, economic, and social structures, shifting from a pro-Western ally to an anti-Western, internationally isolated regime. This ideological and structural reorientation has had significant ramifications both globally and domestically, as the Islamic Republic has relied heavily on repressive and ideological state apparatuses to maintain power and assert legitimacy. Central to these efforts is the state-controlled media, which promotes a homogenized national identity grounded in Islamic, revolutionary, and anti-Western values. The Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance plays a key role in this process by regulating access to cultural content deemed incompatible with Iranian ethics, including controlling

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the import and export of films and other media to align with state-sanctioned norms (Eckerström, 2022).

In this view, the Islamic Republic of Iran offers a stark illustration of an authoritarian state, where state control severely limits freedom of speech and artistic expression. Even today, after more than four decades of systematic repression, Iranian artists, filmmakers, and writers continue to face censorship, imprisonment, or exile for challenging the state's rigid ideological boundaries and exposing the harsh realities of life under its rule (Matin, 2022; Khosravi, 2023; Tajeddin, 2024). The Iranian government enforces rigorous censorship and control over artistic endeavours, especially in matters of political dissent, gender, and religion (Mousavi, 2018; Matin, 2021, 2023). In this context, the artists have frequently used Persian poetry and literature as a form of resistance, with many contemporary poets drawing on the rich tradition of Persian literature to critique the regime subtly (Shafiee, 2016; Sonboldel, 2024). Among numerous poets, for instance, was the late Simin Behbahani, the Iranian poet who earned the nickname "the lioness of Iran" for eloquently challenging Iranian authorities and expressing her unwavering opposition to violence and oppression in more than 600 poems. Consequently, her works were banned, while she faced endless threats, censorship, and arrest, and in 2010, authorities confiscated her passport to prevent her from traveling abroad.

Similarly, the street art in Tehran provides a remarkable work of graffiti artists who have used walls as a canvas to express discontent with the regime, often blending traditional Persian art with modern political messages (Amar, 2020). Numerous lesser-known female artists actively contributed to the *Woman, Life, Freedom* movement that emerged in response to the death of Mahsa Amini while in the custody of Iran's morality police (Tolmie, 2025). Many of these artists (some of whom were later detained) employed creative visual/performative strategies to articulate dissent, including self-portraits with their faces obscured by protest slogans, bloodied bandages, or their unveiled hair. Others used their bodies as symbolic instruments to spotlight the everyday injustices of gendered street politics (Karimi, 2024).

In the realm of film and cinematic arts, by the same token, the Iranian movie directors such as Abbas Kiarostami and Jafar Panahi have frequently used motion pictures to reflect on important subject matters like liberty, identity, and repression. Some of these directors, such as Panahi, in spite of being barred from making films, still go on creating works that question oppression and inequality in Iran (Garcia & Piccinin, 2021). Adding to the artistic expressions of cultural nonconformity presented by these films is the emergence of several full-length animations created by Iranians in exile. While being released occasionally in the world's cinemas, these acclaimed animations offer a unique glimpse into the everyday lives and nonconformist practices of people in Iran, providing global viewers with a profound insight into their experiences. Some of these animations, in particular, feature cultural resistance in Iran through which they deal with the history, politics, and culture in the country.

Cultural resistance

Cultural resistance refers to the practice of using meanings and symbols, or in other words, culture, to challenge and contest a dominant power. This form of social behaviour often emerges in response to various forms of systematic injustice

such as oppression, discrimination, colonialism, and so on. Duncombe (2002, p. 5) defines it as a "culture that is used, consciously or unconsciously, effectively or not, to resist and/or change the dominant political, economic and/or social structure". Cultural resistance has sometimes been used by different people to mean different things. It also takes numerous forms like literature, rituals, music, art, and language, as means for marginalized groups to express dissent and proclaim their identity. As such, cultural resistance can be a powerful instrument for subjugated groups to challenge the status quo and to make their voices heard, eventually growing into a catalyst for political change and major social movements (DeLaure & Fink, 2017).

Cultural resistance, particularly in countries with a strict political system, emerges as a form of dissent in which the group members rely on cultural expression to critique and possibly destabilize the dominant power structure (Holliday, 2010). In such settings, where any opposition to the political system is repressed, cultural resistance often becomes a more subtle and inconspicuous way of expressing dissent, upholding alternative narratives, and mobilizing others.

Scott (1990) referred to the idea of "hidden transcripts" as the cultural practices through which the subjugated groups fight back against domineering powers, often in a rather indirect and benign way. His exploration in this regard is essential for realizing how cultural resistance functions in authoritarian countries. Following this concept, Rabinowitz (1994) demonstrated how documentary films have been used as a form of cultural resistance, particularly under authoritarian regimes. She discussed the role of cultural production in challenging and exposing oppressive systems. More recently, though, Steiner (2009) looked at how cultural resistance is mediated through the internet, with a focus on how it functions in contexts of authoritarianism and terrorism. She examined both the potentials and limitations of digital media as a tool for resistance in repressive regimes. These works, among others, provide a broad range of perspectives on how cultural resistance is conceptualized and enacted in different authoritarian contexts.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study is to map how animation is used as a tool for communicating the concept of cultural resistance in Iran; how Iranian people, as individuals or groups, oppose dominant cultural norms and values imposed by the state. In doing so, three full-length animations made by the Iranian diaspora are chosen for the analysis. This selection is mainly based on their international acclamations and, more importantly, on the relevance and richness of their contents. Through examining these works, the study attempts to reveal the underlying themes of cultural resistance in contemporary Iran, offering insights into how these representations reflect and respond to the socio-political landscape.

Persepolis (2007), directed by Marjane Satrapi and Vincent Paronnaud, is the first film to be analysed. Based on an autobiographical graphic novel by Marjane Satrapi, *Persepolis* recounts her childhood and adolescent story in Iran during and after the 1979 Islamic Revolution (Malek, 2006). Exploring themes of repression, identity crisis, and resistance, this film offers a poignant personal perspective on the living circumstances shaped by the country's political turmoil. As one of the most internationally acclaimed films about Iran, *Persepolis* is renowned for its powerful narrative and exceptional animation style (Bradshaw, 2008).

The second film to be analysed is a work by Ann Marie Fleming titled *Window Horses* (2016). This Canadian-Iranian animated film is the story of Rosie Ming, a young Canadian poet of mixed Iranian-Chinese heritage who travels to Iran for a poetry festival (Simon, 2016). The film explores themes of cultural identity, diaspora, and the power of art and poetry. While not solely focused on Iran, *Window Horses* provides a cross-cultural perspective on Iran and features Iranian animation styles and storytelling techniques.

Lastly, a film titled *Tehran Taboo* (2017) directed by Ali Soozandeh is investigated. This film is a rotoscope animation (a technique where animators trace over live-action footage frame by frame to create realistic movements in animated characters). It explores the lives of four young people in Tehran, dealing with issues like sexuality, drug use, and the challenges of living under a strict regime (Cheshire, 2018). The film portrays the contradictions and hypocrisies in Iranian society. *Tehran Taboo* is notable for its bold, unflinching look at taboo subjects in Iran, using animation to bypass the censorship that a live-action film might face.

Method

This study used critical film analysis, a qualitative method for in-depth examination of a film's elements, such as narrative, themes, cinematography, sound, and editing, to understand its artistic and cultural significance (Ryan & Lenos, 2020). This process requires analysing not just what the film is about, but how it conveys its messages, how it engages with its audience, and how it fits within broader social, historical, and cinematic contexts (Brennen, 2021). In this view, focusing on the investigation of the ideology and power requires exploring the ideological messages conveyed by media texts and how they reflect or challenge existing power structures (Gershon, 2010). This involves analysing how the media perpetuates or questions dominant cultural narratives and societal norms.

The focus of this study, however, is to critically examine and interpret the underlying meanings, narrative structures, and messages conveyed through three selected films, with particular attention to the representational themes of cultural resistance in contemporary Iran. By doing so, the study tries to uncover how these three films articulate and challenge dominant socio-political discourses, offering insights into the complexities of cultural expression and dissent within the Iranian context. This is, indeed, the basis for a critical discourse and ideological framework through which media contents are qualitatively analysed (Lindberg, 2017).

As such, the initial step involved watching closely the under-investigation films, paying specific attention to the plot, characters, and overall narrative. The second step began by thematic identification; the films' major themes were determined only after searching for recurring ideas or motifs, such as visual patterns, metaphors, or symbols, which could communicate deeper meanings (Berger, 2018). Next, descriptive but concise labels were assigned to each theme, making them easy to understand and remember. Last step involved going beyond description and offering an interpretation of how the themes contribute to the film's overall meaning, message, or impact.

Findings and Discussion

Persepolis (2007)

Persepolis, as already noted, is a powerful exploration of cultural resistance within the context of post-revolutionary Iran (Figure 1). The film highlights the struggle of individuals and communities to maintain their identity, freedom, and dignity under an oppressive regime. The following key themes underscore this resistance.

State control and public repression

This theme focuses on the systemic and institutional forces exerted by the Islamic regime to regulate behaviour, appearance, and thought in post-revolutionary Iran. The film depicts the imposition of dress codes (e.g., compulsory hijab), surveillance of personal activities, and ideological indoctrination in schools. A clear example is when Marjane is reprimanded by the "Guardians of the Revolution" for wearing a denim jacket and listening to Iron Maiden, an act viewed as Western and corruptive. These moments reflect how state control extends into personal spheres and enforces conformity through fear.

Female subjectivity and gendered resistance

This theme explores the gender-specific challenges Iranian women face and how they resist them. Marjane's defiance is shaped by her gendered experience: she questions patriarchal expectations, resists the internalized shame imposed by religious doctrine, and expresses herself through fashion, language, and intellectual engagement. A key example is her outspoken behaviour in school, where she challenges the hypocrisy of teachers who praise the regime. Additionally, her mother and grandmother serve as strong female figures who navigate and subtly undermine gender oppression, offering intergenerational models of resistance.

Exile, displacement, and the fragmentation of identity

The theme of exile is central to *Persepolis*, manifesting in Marjane's time abroad in Austria. Her identity begins to fracture as she oscillates between cultural contexts, facing racism, romantic alienation, and a deepening disconnect from her roots. A pivotal moment is when she pretends not to be Iranian to avoid stigma, symbolizing her internal conflict. The emotional toll of cultural estrangement, guilt, and longing for home becomes a silent form of trauma. Her eventual return to Iran, followed by another exile, underscores the impossibility of belonging in either place.



Figure 1. *Persepolis* (2007): Marjane, being confronted by two members of the Guardians of the Revolution

Persepolis weaves these themes together to create a poignant narrative that captures the complexities of life in post-revolutionary Iran. The film offers profound insights into the personal and collective struggles of its people, portraying cultural resistance as a powerful force against authoritarianism and repression.

***Window Horses* (2016)**

Window Horses explores themes of cultural identity, heritage, and the power of art and poetry (Figure 2). While the film primarily focuses on personal growth and cross-cultural understanding, it also subtly touches on themes of cultural resistance within the Iranian context. Some of the key themes of Cultural Resistance in this film are as follows.

Cultural hybridity and identity negotiation

This theme focuses on the protagonist Rosie Ming's journey as a Canadian of mixed Iranian and Chinese descent who travels to Iran. Her cultural identity is fragmented, and the film follows her process of learning, unlearning, and reconciling the different aspects of her heritage. Her initial ignorance of Persian customs, including misunderstandings at the poetry festival, contrasts with her gradual embrace of Iranian history and art. Through engagement with other poets, she begins to reposition herself in relation to her Iranian roots, not as an outsider, but as someone seeking wholeness through understanding.

Art and poetry as vehicles of political memory

This theme centres on the power of poetry to memorialize personal and collective trauma. Through the voices of Iranian poets at the festival, stories of imprisonment, war, and censorship emerge subtly. Mehrnaz, the local poet, shares memories of political repression through verse, and Rosie learns how poetry in Iran is a historical tool for preserving truth under tyranny. The poetic form allows the film to express censored histories, such as the Iran-Iraq War and the impact of the 1979 revolution, without overt political messaging, demonstrating resistance through metaphor and allegory.

Female voice and emotional autonomy

This theme addresses how women in the film articulate autonomy through storytelling, especially in contrast to the silencing they experience in traditional roles. Rosie's discovery of her father's past, her mother's choices, and her own creative voice contribute to a narrative where female characters reclaim emotional and intellectual agency. The film challenges the marginalization of women by presenting them as storytellers and poets. The abstract animation style reinforces this by representing emotional states and interior landscapes that conventional realism might restrict, further emphasizing the freedom of female expression.



Figure 2. *Window Horses* (2016): Rosie and Mehrnaz, a wise local poet

Window Horses uses its narrative and characters to present cultural resistance not as an overt rebellion but as a more subtle, enduring struggle to preserve identity, memory, and artistic freedom in the face of external pressures.

***Tehran Taboo* (2017)**

Tehran Taboo delves deeply into the underlying themes of political and cultural resistance within Iranian society (Figure 3). The film, through its portrayal of the intertwined lives of four characters in Tehran, challenges the strict social norms and repressive state policies in contemporary Iran. The key cultural resistance themes of this film are as follows.

Sexual politics and moral hypocrisy

This theme examines the dual moral standards that dominate public and private life in Iran. The film depicts a society in which sex work, extramarital affairs, and drug use occur in secrecy while the state aggressively promotes piety and moral discipline. A stark example is the character Pari, a sex worker navigating the legal system to retain custody of her son. She is condemned by society yet relies on a cleric to falsify marriage documents. This duality between private indulgence and public virtue functions as a direct critique of the system's inherent contradictions.

Everyday illegality and subversive survival

This theme focuses on how ordinary citizens resist systemic oppression by breaking rules as a means of survival. Characters in *Tehran Taboo* are constantly involved in illegal acts, not out of criminal intent but because legality is structured against their humanity. Babak, a young musician, is coerced into marriage after a one-night stand, while Donya undergoes an illegal hymenoplasty. These actions are not heroic in a conventional sense, but they are deeply political in their refusal to conform. The film shows how surviving in Tehran often requires defying the law in small, covert ways.

Urban entrapment and generational despair

The city of Tehran becomes a metaphor for entrapment, a concrete space of surveillance, restriction, and claustrophobia. The rotoscoped animation reinforces this with hype realistic yet stylized visuals that make the city feel both familiar and oppressive. Public spaces like cars, apartments, and alleyways are portrayed as

battlegrounds between public repression and private desire. The younger generation, particularly represented by Babak and Donya, is caught between the expectations of a conservative society and their longing for autonomy. This theme encapsulates a broader generational disillusionment with a system that denies them a future.



Figure 3. *Tehran Taboo* (2017): the car scene

These thematic assessments offer insights into *Tehran Taboo* as a powerful art form that explores the difficulties of living under the authoritarian rule of the Islamic regime, where cultural resistance can be detected in the day-to-day struggles and subtle defiance of its characters. Through its raw depiction of the Iranian capital city's underground, the film not only critiques the state's structured control over people but also celebrates the agency and resilience of those who circumvent and resist these constrictions.

Conclusion

One of the most compelling findings of this study is that animated films, often dismissed as peripheral or apolitical, serve as crucial vehicles for articulating cultural resistance in contemporary Iran. Through symbolic, visual, and narrative strategies, *Persepolis*, *Window Horses*, and *Tehran Taboo* reveal how resistance is not only possible under authoritarian constraint but can flourish in imaginative, transgressive, and indirect forms. Across all three films, the figure of the young Iranian, particularly the young woman, emerges as the most dynamic agent of cultural dissent. These characters embody a generational refusal to internalize state-imposed identities, instead asserting autonomy through art, memory, mobility, and intimate rebellion. Whether in exile, in hidden corners of Tehran, or in diasporic poetic forums, the youth generation resists not through overt protest but through subtle acts of meaning-making and self-expression that destabilize ideological authority.

This study contributes to broader debates in media and cultural studies, Middle Eastern studies, and political communication, offering a model for analysing how aesthetic forms such as animation can become platforms for ideological contestation, particularly when traditional media are censored or scrutinized. By integrating critical discourse analysis with visual and narrative interpretation, the research also extends methods for examining resistance in nontraditional, transnational media spaces. That said, the study has certain limitations. It focuses exclusively on three internationally acclaimed animations

produced outside of Iran, which may not fully represent resistance efforts within the country's borders or among other socio-economic groups. Moreover, the films selected emphasize gendered and urban experiences, potentially overlooking other axes of identity such as class, ethnicity, or rural resistance practices.

Future research could explore how domestically produced animations or underground visual media function within Iran's internal circuits of resistance. Additionally, comparative work with other authoritarian contexts could deepen our understanding of how cultural resistance is shaped by global flows of media, censorship, and diaspora politics. Ultimately, the resilience of Iranian youth and their imaginative strategies for reclaiming cultural agency invite continued scholarly attention, not only as a local phenomenon but as part of a larger global movement for expressive freedom under repression.

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