

**Unveiling:
A Video Critique of Western Misconceptions
about the Representation of Women in Iranian Film**

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of
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ABSTRACT

Unveiling:

A Video Critique of Western Misconceptions about the Representation of Women in
Iranian Film

Shaya Golparian

This thesis describes an arts-based research project that includes a visual analysis of my video installations and other video art that deals with social and political issues of women in Iran. For this research I looked at cinema as a medium with the power to create a national identity and a national image and I investigated the reasons behind the western misconceptions about the representation of women in Iranian films. I also focused on the value of metaphor as a tool for visual research and I did a visual analysis of metaphors that Shirin Neshat, an Iranian video artist, and I used in our videos. This project explores a theoretical basis for artistic practice, positions it within the discourse of research and exemplifies one way that visual arts practice can be theorized as research.

This thesis consists of an in depth literature review on the topics of representation of gender and politics of Islam in Iranian cinema, metaphors and visual research; art production (for this part of the research I made my two videos, *Unveiling* and *Dance*); and data analysis / art based research.

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اگر در کهنشانی دور
دلی یک لحظه در صید سال،
یاد من می کند بی شک،
دل من، در تمام لحظه های عمر،
بیادش می تپد پر شور،
من اینک در دل این کهنشانی نور
این منظومه های مهر
این خورشید های پوسه و بختند،
این رخسار های شاد،
شکوه لطف تان را، با کلام این عمر صدها ساله،
پاسخ می توانم داد؟
مرا این دست های گرم
این جانهای سرشار از صفا،
یک عمر پر درده است،
دل من، در نور و عطر این محبت های رنگین،
زندگی کرده است،
گاه مهرتان، جان بخش چون خورشید
بر روی لحظه های من درخشیده است
به جانم نیروی گفتار غنچه شده است
صفا مهرتان را، با سراپای وجودم
با تمام تار و پودم،
می پذیرم، می برم بانحویش،
مرا تا جاودان سر مست خواهد کرد، پیش از پیش
صفا مهرتان، همواره بر من می فشاند نور
اگر از جان من، یک ذره ماند در جهان،
در کهنشانی دور ...

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How do I use metaphor in my videos? And how do my videos compare to those made by other Iranian women?

“Metaphors permit an understanding of one kind of experience in terms of another, creating coherences by virtue of imposing gestalts that are structures by natural dimensions of experience... Metaphor is not merely a matter of language. It is a matter of conceptual structure. And conceptual structure is not merely a matter of the intellect - it involves all the natural dimensions of our experiences: color, shape, texture, sound, etc... Works of art provide new experiential gestalts and therefore new coherences.” (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980, p. 235)

INTRODUCTION

This is a studio based research project that includes a visual analysis of my own video and video art that deals with social and political issues of women in Iran.

I was first introduced to video art in Dr. Richard Lachapelle’s studio class which I took in winter 2003. During the three-month course I started working with the theme of reflections that I had used previously in my photographs. I found the new medium provided me with a variety of possibilities, the most important of which was the notion of movement. I started filming using my camcorder as I did my camera. Through computer software I was able to edit and combine my images much more easily than I could have done with photographs.

Two years ago, I viewed some of the photographs and videos made by Shirin Neshat. Through her videos, she addresses issues of identity and gender in Islamic societies. Neshat is an Iranian artist who immigrated to the United States before the Islamic revolution in 1979, while she was still a teenager, and returned a decade later to find that the country she went home to bore little resemblance to the one she left. Neshat did not

live the changes in the culture and the society and so she found herself a stranger in her homeland. As a result of this experience she made series of photographs and three split-screen video installations that were all sumptuously filmed meditations on the male/female dynamic in Islamic societies (Ravenal, 2002). Her work shows her rejection of the political system in Iran and her concerns about women's status in the Iranian society (Danto, 1999).

Shirin Neshat's videos are important part of my research and my self-discovery. Neshat and I have very different perspectives on the social and political issues in Iran. But it is in opposition and contradictions that we learn a lot about ourselves.

When I first saw Neshat's videos, I found them very appealing and visually effective. Later I realized that her simplistic, almost reductive iconography (Melkonian, 1998), and the use of black and white instead of color made her videos look like documentaries in spite of the fact that none of her videos was shot in Iran (Ravenal, 2002). Therefore many critics (Camhi, 2000; Spalding, 2001; and Barlow, 2004) who have written about her art take what she shows in her videos as the "true" image of Iran and Iranian women.

Seeing her work made me interested in researching interpretation, metaphors and their meanings as well as the notion of photographic truth in video. It also motivated me to investigate how I might address similar issues in my artwork. Consequently, I started filming women during my trips to Iran in the summer of 2005 and 2006 and edited my two videos, *Unveiling* and *Dance*, in video editing labs at Concordia University.

Through this qualitative research and through analyzing Neshat's videos and my own, I have learned more about my art, my identity; who I am and choose to be, where I stand,

why I make art the way I do and how my art defines me. I have been able to give a context to my artwork and my life and find new meanings in my art.

For this research I have focused on the value of metaphor as a tool for visual research. I did a visual analysis of metaphors that I and Neshat have used in our videos and investigated how her art compares to mine.

This analysis of visual data has helped me develop a deeper understanding of the interpretation of visual metaphors. In addition, this research exemplifies one way that visual arts practice can be theorized as research.

I agree with Sullivan (2005) in that,

A challenge for many teachers in art programs is to define their studio-based teaching and art-learning practices not only as a form of professional training, but as scholarly inquiry.... Studio-based inquiry in visual arts will have greater institutional credibility if it is built on sound theoretical principles that can be shown to satisfy basic criteria for research practice. (p. xiii)

This project explores a theoretical basis for artistic practice and positions it within the discourse of research.

Chapter 1



THEORETHICAL FOUNDATION

The literature that forms the theoretical foundation for my research consists of five sections: Video art, Interpretation, Metaphor, Narrative and Judgment.

Video Art

Since video art is an essential part of my research and is a new medium for me, I have looked into the history of video art in order to learn more about it. *Video Texts* (Peggy Gale, 1995) is a book that explores not only the history of video art in Canada but also introduces the themes of *narrative*, *codes* and *the truth* in recordings. This book was helpful in identifying the themes I worked on during my analysis.

Gale's explanation of these three themes is as follows: 1. "Narrative is a means to construct meaning and to confirm memory, spurred on by intimation and implication" (p. 1). "Narratives are verbal or written accounts. They may be acts of story telling, and may accompany and explain visual representation, including drawing, painting or slide sequences, film or television. But there are additional nonverbal narratives, harder to identify". Although Narrative requires duration, the end, the beginning and the middle might appear only partially or not appear at all. (p. 142); 2. Gale's definition of codes is the process of framing, construction, lighting, texture, editing, and the reflective placing of events. For the viewers of videos, codes provoke what she calls a perceptual research (learning to see); 3. "No recording is truth: selection, sequence, framing, editing shape all materials and, in so doing, affect the viewer's understanding or response. Thus truth is construction. [...] it's a variable constant, open for redefinition and investigation" (p. 36).

Interpretation

My visual analysis of the videos is mainly based on Terry Barrett's article (2003a) *Interpreting art: Building Communal and Individual Understandings* and his book (2003b) *Interpreting Art: Reflecting, Wondering and Responding*.

I have defined interpretation as Barrett (2003a):

To interpret is to respond in thoughts and feelings and actions to what we see and experience, and to make sense of our responses by putting them into words; To interpret is to make meaningful connections between what we see and experience in a work of art to what else we have seen and experienced. (Barrett, 2003a, pp. 291-292)

Barrett also suggests three guiding questions for interpretation of an artwork: what do you see? What does it mean? And how do you know?

He talks about personal and communal interpretations. A personal interpretation occurs when "the interpreter meaningfully appropriates the significance of the (art) work for his or her own life" (Barrett, 2003a, p. 294). "A communal interpretation is an understanding or explanation of a work of art that is meaningful to a group of interpreters with common interests" (Barrett, 2003a, p. 294) Barrett explains that an interpretation would be unreliable if it is too personal that it becomes irrelevant to the artwork or too communal that it loses the personal meaning it has for the interpreter.

According to Barrett (2003a) a good interpretation should: 1. Make sense in and of itself independently of the artwork being interpreted (coherence); 2. Account for what can be seen in the artwork, and fit the historical circumstance of the artwork (correspondence);

And 3. Account for the complexity of the artwork and not ignore or omit significant aspects of the work being interpreted (completeness or inclusiveness) (p. 298).

Practices of Looking (Sturken and Cartwright, 2001), is another book that provides an overview of a range of theories about how we understand visual media and how we use images to express ourselves, to communicate, to experience pleasure, and to learn. In this book, Sturken and Cartwright examine how images gain meaning in different cultural arenas, from art and commerce to science and the law. They also research how images travel globally and in distinct cultures, and how they are an integral and important aspect of our lives. They analyze images in relation to a range of cultural and representational issues (desire, power, the gaze, bodies, sexuality, and ethnicity) and methodologies (semiotics, Marxism, psychoanalysis, feminism, postcolonial theory). *Practices of Looking* provides an explanation of the fundamentals of these theories while presenting visual examples of how they function.

There are three chapters in this book that are especially pertinent to my research. In the first chapter of the book, Sturken and Cartwright discuss the ways we make meaning from and award value to images and they introduce the study of signs. In the second chapter they focus on the way that viewers produce meaning from images. These two chapters have helped me to interpret images.

According to Sturken and Cartwright, there are three positions that viewers can take when interpreting images. They can remain passive recipients of the dominant message of the image, they can negotiate an interpretation from the image and its dominant meanings, or they can take an oppositional position. In either case, any interpretation of

an image depends on the historical context and the cultural knowledge of the viewer and the interpreter. The viewers' response to visual metaphors depends on their education, experience, and expectations. This means that the meanings each viewer takes away from an image or a film varies and that there can be as many interpretations of a work of art as there are purposes for interpreting that work.

This is not to say that viewers wrongly interpret images. Because as Barrette (2003a) explains:

Interpretations are not so much right, certainly not absolutely and definitely right. Interpretations are more or less reasonable, convincing, informative, enlightening, persuasive, fresh, profound, well or not so well argued. Conversely, interpretations can be unpersuasive or redundant or irrelevant or boring, fragmented, obvious, trivial, inane, stained and far-fetched. (p. 215)

In the eighth chapter Sturken and Cartwright discuss the notion of photographic truth and the relationship of images to evidence:

The notion of photographic truth hinges on the idea that the camera is an objective device for the capturing of reality, and that it renders this objectivity despite the subjective vision of the person using the camera. Hence, the photographic image has often been seen as an entity stripped of intentionality, through which the truth can be told without mediation or subjective distortion. (Sturken and Cartwright, 2001, p. 280)

As stated in the article by Cruickshank and Mason (2003), photographs (as well as films, videos and any other kind of visual data) cannot provide an unbiased objective documentation of the particular social world being investigated but neither do field notes nor any of the other forms of empirical data commonly used in ethnographic research. As a form of data collection, photographs are not capable of talking for themselves; the information has to be teased out of them interpreted and decoded.

According to Melkonian (2003), “the effectiveness of Neshat’s work depends on the idea that a photograph represents the truth” (p. 3), and so the eighth chapter of Sturken and Cartwright’s book has helped me in the interpretation of Neshat’s videos as well as mine.

Metaphor

Metaphor is usually defined as “the presentation of one idea in terms of another, belonging to a different category, so that either our understanding of the first idea is transformed, or so that from the fusion of the two ideas a new one is created” (Whittock, 1990).

Metaphors can be verbal or visual. Cinematic or filmic metaphors can be both verbal and pictorial. The goal of my research is to identify and analyze mainly what is visual which means pictorial metaphors. However, films and motion pictures incorporate language and other arts such as music, dance, photography, etc. and they all contribute to the context of the images. Therefore to understand and decode the cinematic metaphors I have considered all relevant factors which include the language and music.

Metaphor consists of two distinctive terms. Whittock (1990) refer to them as the tenor and the vehicle while Forceville (1996) calls them the primary and secondary subjects. The primary subject (tenor) is the sound, written word, or image, and the secondary subject (vehicle) is the concept evoked by that word or image. According to Forceville, “The metaphorical utterance works by projecting upon the primary subject a set of associated implications, comprised in the implicative complex, that are predicable of the secondary subject” (p. 8).

The following readings have helped me build my framework for the analysis of metaphors.

In *The Power of Metaphor in Qualitative Research: Building Community in a Kindergarten around the Large Table*, Vasconcelos (1997) discusses the interpretive paradigm in research and, within it, the value of metaphor as a research tool. Vasconcelos maintains that metaphor can be used within research as a sophisticated conceptual structure, as the imaginative rationality which illuminates the experience, and as a way of creating new gestalts. The paper includes a model of interpretive research procedures and theoretical background. Within this model Vasconcelos emphasizes the importance of social and cultural contexts, human interaction, the role of the people involved in research, the places, the time and the events, and the ways information is collected and recorded.

In *Pictorial Metaphor in Advertising*, Charles Forceville (1996) explores the pictorial aspect of metaphor as well as its verbal and cognitive dimensions. He not only shows how metaphor can occur in pictures, but also provides a framework within which these pictorial metaphors can be analyzed. Forceville's framework is based on four criteria.

The first criterion is the intention of the maker of a pictorial metaphor. Forceville finds this criterion important in the interpretation of what he calls non-artistic metaphors, namely advertisements.

The second criterion is the identification of metaphors, while the third is the interpretation of metaphors.

According to Forceville (1996), Metaphor consists of two terms. The first term of the metaphor (the primary subject) is the sound, written word, or image. It is the term that is metaphorized. The metaphorical term (secondary subject) projects its certain predicable feature(s) on the primary subject.

Forceville proposes three questions that point out necessary conditions for the identification and interpretation of metaphors. These questions are: 1. which are the two terms of the metaphor? 2. Which is the primary subject and which is the secondary subject? 3. Which feature(s) of the secondary subject is/are projected upon the primary subject?

And as Vasconcelos, Forceville also points out the various contextual levels bearing on the identification and interpretation of pictorial metaphors as his fourth criterion for analyzing pictorial metaphors. He specifically points out the notion of time and place.

I have used Forceville's second, third and fourth criteria in my research project to identify and analyze pictorial metaphors. I have not used the first criterion because it is mostly to do with advertisements.

Narrative

According to Gale (1995), "narrative, actual and implied, is a term usually associated with story telling (...) and is natural, even inevitable for video" (pp.55-56). This made the investigation of narratives necessary for my research project.

In *The Narrative Approach in Art Education: A Case Study*, Esser-Hall, Rankin and Ndita (2004), question how a narrative approach in art education enables students to

transfer lived experiences into images. They also analyze visual metaphors as a part of their research.

Esser-Hall, Rankin and Ndita analyze the metaphors in the drawings of a fine arts graduate student, who pictures his difficulties during the time he was setting up a community art center in contemporary South Africa. This analysis is based on the student's presentation and group discussions.

The authors explain that the narrative approach is not only effective in challenging the role of artist in the cultural context but necessary to give artists back their long lost voice.

Judgment

Knowing that there exists no interpretation without a judgment (Barrett, 2003b; Sturken and Cartwright, 2001), I have used Edward Said's Orientalism theory to build my judgment of the videos I have analyzed.

In his book *Covering Islam* (1996) Edward Said accuses the West of having an Orientalist point of view about Islam:

From at least the end of the eighteenth century until our own day, modern Occidental reactions to Islam have been dominated by a radically simplified type of thinking that may still be called Orientalist. The general basis of Orientalist thought is an imaginative and yet drastically polarized geography dividing the world into two unequal parts, the larger, "different" one called the Orient. The other, also known as "our" world, called the Occident or the West. Such divisions always come about when one society or culture thinks about another one, different from it. (Said, 1996, p. 4)

In his two books, *Orientalism* (1978) and *Covering Islam* (1996), Said makes three major claims.

The first is that Orientalism, although purporting to be an objective, disinterested, and rather esoteric field, is in fact functioned to serve political ends. Orientalist scholarship provided the means through which Europeans could take over Oriental lands.

His second claim is that Orientalism helped define Europe's self-image. The construction of identity in every age and every society, Said maintains, involves establishing opposites and "Others." This happens because "the development and maintenance of every culture require the existence of another different and competing *alter ego*." Orientalism led the West to see Islamic culture as static in both time and place, as "eternal, and incapable of defining itself" (p. 72). This gave Europe a sense of its own cultural and intellectual superiority.

According to Said, the West consequently saw itself as a dynamic, innovative, expanding culture, as well as "the spectator, the judge and jury of every facet of Oriental behavior" (p. 109).

Thirdly, Said argues that Orientalism has produced a false description of Arabs and Islamic culture. This happened primarily because of the belief that it was possible to define the essential qualities of Arab peoples and Islamic culture. These qualities were seen in uniformly negative terms. The Orient was defined as a place isolated from the mainstream of human progress in the sciences, arts, and commerce.

Said's claims were useful in my research when I addressed the western interpretation of oriental art, identity, and the truth in interpretations.

Chapter 2



PROCEDURE AND METHODOLOGY

To interpret is to respond in thoughts and feelings and actions to what we see and experience, and to make sense of our responses by putting them into words; To interpret is to make meaningful connections between what we see and experience in a work of art to what else we have seen and experienced.

Barrett, 2003a, pp. 291-292

To interpret images is to examine the assumptions that we and others bring to them, and to decode the visual language that they speak.

Sturken & Cartwright, 2001, p. 41

The goal of this project is to identify, interpret and compare the metaphors and the visual codes that Neshat and I use in our videos.

This research consists of three main sections: 1. An in depth literature review; 2. Art production; And 3. Data analysis / art based research.

In order to build my methodology I did an in depth literature review on the topics of representation of women in Iranian films, metaphors and visual research.

I then made my two videos, *Unveiling* and *Dance*, on the topic of women in Iran. The filming took place during my four-month stay in Iran in the summers of 2005 and 2006. The footage consisted of 5 hours of film. The editing took place in Canada, using Final Cut Pro as a tool, in winter and fall 2006. I incorporated music with my images in order to leave a stronger impression on my audience. During the time I was editing my first video I assisted a professional musician in making a piece of music. Synchronizing the music with images was the final step in this part of the project.

Next step in this project was an in depth literature review on the gender and politics of Islam in Iranian cinema and the way it effected video art that is made and produced outside Iran.

The last part of the project was the data analysis and the comparison of my work to the three videos of Neshat: *Turbulent*, *Rapture* and *Fervor*. Parts of her videos were made available to me at the Museum of Contemporary Arts in Montreal where she exhibited her work in 2001. All three videos focus on the issue of gender in relation to the social structure of Islamic Iran, which is the theme I have addressed in my own videos.

In brief, *Turbulent* is about the existential tension of two singers, a man and a woman who have common passion for music. The main premise of this video installation is the absence of women in relation to music in the public space.

Rapture focuses on the subject of gender in relation to culture and nature in Islamic cultures. It's about the separation of genders and it addresses traditional gender roles in a fundamentalist Islamic society.

Fervor, on the other hand, is about the commonalities between genders. It addresses sexual taboos and how they have been so deeply internalized by both men and women, and conflicted by human nature versus social, cultural and religious codes.

In order to interpret the visual data, I followed my framework of interpretation (figure 1) that is based on the following three books: *Interpreting Art* (Barrett, 2003b), *Practices of Looking* (Sturken and Cartwright, 2001) and *Pictorial Metaphors* (Forceville, 1996)¹:

¹ The frameworks were explained in the literature review section.

I explored the three guiding questions suggested by Barrett about each one of the videos: What do I see? (Description) What does it mean? And how do I know? (Visual Analysis)

Answering these questions helped me identify the connotative and denotative meanings in the images. “The denotative meaning of the image refers to its literal, descriptive meaning.” (Sturken, Cartwright, 2001, p. 19). Identifying the denotative meanings in the images answered to Barrett’s first question: What do I see? “The connotative meanings are all the social, cultural, and historical meanings that are added to a sign’s literal meaning” (Sturken, Cartwright, 2001, p. 19). Finding the connotative meanings in the videos answered to Barrett’s second and third questions: what does it mean? And how do I know?

In order to find connotative meanings in the images, I identified and decoded metaphors (see figure 1) in the videos that I interpreted using Barrett’s three questions and Forceville’s criteria for identification and interpretation of metaphors.

In order to understand and interpret visual metaphors I first 1. Identified the two terms of the metaphor 2. Distinguished between the primary and secondary subjects and then 3. Identified the feature(s) of the secondary subjects that were projected upon the primary subjects.

As shown in figure 1, to start my analysis, I took the following factors into consideration: Context, time and place, the viewer and the notion of photographic truth.

As forms of representation, images and metaphors are subject to the influences of their social, cultural and historical context of production and consumption. The production of

visual metaphors is dependant on social, historical and cultural context. Forceville (1996) emphasizes that:

The interpretation of a pictorial metaphor requires not only an understanding of the pictorial context and the anchoring verbal context, but also the different kinds of knowledge invested in the image (practical, national, cultural, historical, aesthetic knowledge), as well as the conventions surrounding the genre to which the representation belongs. (p. 60)

My interpretation of the visual metaphors therefore includes the analysis of the historical and cultural context of the images.

Time and place are two other factors that must be considered in the analysis and interpretation of metaphors. Metaphors might either lose their meanings through time or their meanings can change dramatically. “What at one date may be felt to be obscure and unsuccessful, several decades later may be lucid and modish” (Whittock, 1990. p. 40). For an interpreter, this leaves two options: One is to seek to understand the meaning of those metaphors at the time they were made. And the second one is to try and build personal meanings about those metaphors and for our present life.

The context of place can refer to either where the work of art is produced or the place that is portrayed through a work of art. Despite the high international currency that motion pictures, as opposed to verbal texts, allegedly have, viewers often miss a great deal in a film made for or about another nation.

For many critics that have written about Neshat’s work, her videos portray a place that they have never visited and that is foreign to them. As Barrett (2003b) explains:

When we look at foreign art, we are faced with mystery that we can not comprehend when limited to our own senses, our own knowledge and experiences. [...] When looking at art that is foreign to us [...], we have interpretive options. We can seek to understand what the art means to those for whom it is native and natural, when it was made, throughout its history, and today. We can also seek to interpret it for what it might mean for our lives here and now, wherever our “here” may be. If we remain ignorant of what “foreign” objects mean to those for whom they are not foreign at all, we lose the opportunity to gain knowledge and appreciation of a culture different from our own, and we remain ignorant of beliefs that are different from our own. Instead of explaining through knowledge of others, we contract into what is familiar and comfortable. (pp. 129-138)

The viewers in my research project are the writers and critics who have written about Neshat’s videos. The positions they take and how they interpret her videos are important in my analysis.

For the next part of my research project, I investigated the notion of photographic truth in images as informed by Sturken and Cartwright (2001) (see figure 1).

My interpretation of the visual data is mainly based on my own perspective of the images and the codes Neshat and I have used in our videos. But I have also considered other written information, such as academic research, catalogues, and critiques on Neshat’s videos, to avoid being subjective or irrelevant. According to Barrett (2003a):

An interpretation that is too personal is one that is so subjective and idiosyncratic to the interpreter that the art object of interpretation cannot be recognized in the interpretation by those who hear the interpretation and see the work. Such an interpretation may reveal a lot about how and what the interpreter thinks and feels but fails to reveal anything about the art object being interpreted. (p. 296)

Barrett also explains that an interpretation that is wholly communal runs the risk of irrelevance to the individual interpreter.

In order for me to adopt an interpretation, I must have certain beliefs and attitudes; so I assume those beliefs and attitudes and by doing so partly determine who I am (As cited in Barrett, 2003b).

My goal for interpreting the visual data was [...] to construct interpretations that are insightful, original, interesting, provoke new thoughts, expend meaningful connections and so forth (Barrett, 2003a).

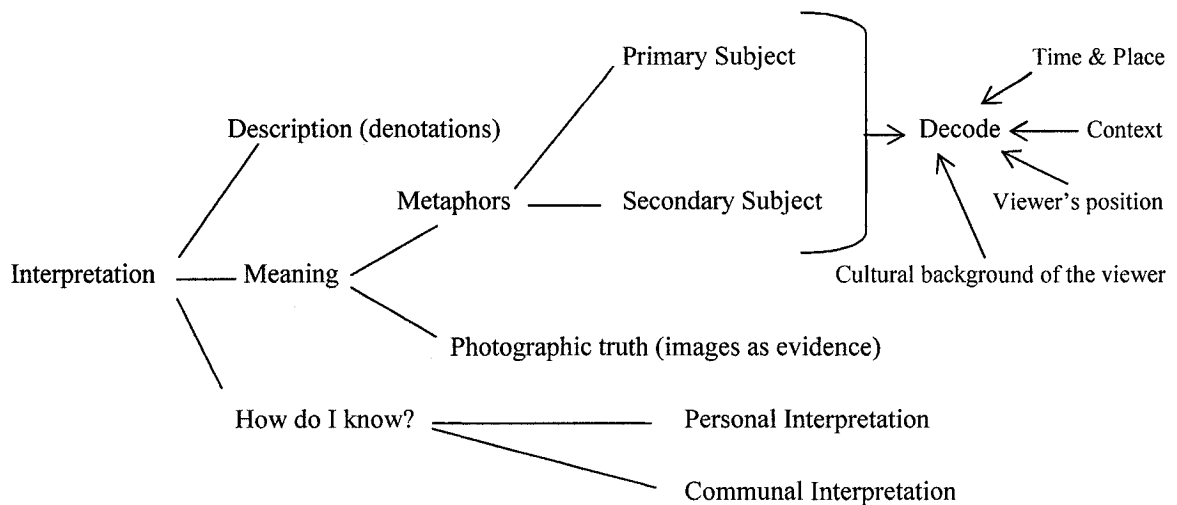


Figure 1
The conceptual map I created based on the literature

Chapter 3



GENDER AND THE POLITICS OF ISLAM IN IRANIAN CONTEMPORARY CINEMA

Since for so many reasons, mainly financial, video art is not favorable in Iran I will look at the closest media to video which is movies. In this chapter I will research how the politics of Islam affected the way movies are made in the Iranian society and how this has affected the ways movies and videos about Iran and Iranian people are made outside of Iran.

Islam is said by many to be a religion that has brought gender-based inequality. It is believed to be a religion that empowers men and represents women as inferior beings. Many Iranian women writers unanimously maintain that according to the Koran, men and women are equal. They believe that the inequality between men and women is not initiated by the Koran and Islam, but rather by the interpretations of religious authorities of the divine laws (Kian, 1997). In Iran, it is not the religion that brings inequality. It is the ruling government.

Muslim women have often been portrayed in arts, books and films as being either a sexual beings or as being oppressed. Often times, they are shown and perceived as passive victims instead of active participants in their societies. They are seen as oppressed, veiled and dependent. The veil itself has been used as a symbol of oppression and backwardness. Arts and media especially cinema has helped shape many people's perception of Iranian women. Local films have paved the way for the misrepresentations of women in the Islamic world.

The women in the Iranian movies do not necessarily represent the real Iranian women. They are imaginary characters of a story. In reality, women are not one monolithic block. There are many kinds of women with different kinds of beliefs, living different kinds of lives.

Cinema is a medium with the power to create a national identity and a national image. The characters in the movies are often thought to be representations of the whole society. However it is important to always remember that movies are fiction. They are the result of someone's imagination. They can be parallel to reality but are not the reality itself. In other words, when a movie is considered realistic it is not the exact representation of the reality. According to Jean Mitry (1997), cinema, "the art of reality" is not necessarily realistic. Realism is a representation of the appearances of the world. It is an aesthetic, subjective, reconstruction of the reality. For those who look at movies as representations of reality, movies can sometimes be a source of information and sometimes a source of misinformation.

Recently Iranian cinema has found a global audience. "An audience that does not seem to understand Iranian film makers, but definitely has its own concept of what they are talking about" (Dabashi, 2001, p. 149). One thing that affects foreigners' perception of Iranian women is the way Iranian films represent women within the Iranian society. "From its infancy, Iranian cinema has treated women with great injustice and has been responsible, more than any other medium, for distorting the image of the Iranian women" (Tapper, 2002, p. 16). There are several political and religious factors that affect the ways Iranian films are made. It is necessary to discuss and analyze those factors in order to understand and to interpret Iranian movies.

Uncovering the reasons for the misperceptions of women in Iran by shedding light on the various restrictions that exist in the Iranian cinema since the Islamic revolution, as well as the reasons behind the increasing demand for certain Iranian movies in the international market (especially in the west) will help me understand more about how women are represented in video art that is made outside of Iran.

Iranian Cinema after the Islamic Revolution

“The most significant movement in Middle Eastern cinema in recent years, both culturally and aesthetically, has been the emergence of the new Iranian cinema after the Islamic revolution in the late 1970s”. (Chapman, 2003, p. 395)

For centuries Iran was ruled by absolute monarchy. In 1979 Shah Muhammad Reza Pahlavi was forced to leave Iran and the Islamic republic was created by the followers of Ayatollah Khomeini. Although film production in Iran was severely curtailed following the revolution, it was not intended that cinema would be banned entirely as it was in Middle Eastern Islamic countries like Afghanistan. Instead, it was to be employed in support of the new Islamic Republic. And for this purpose, the Ayatollah's regime set out to ‘purify’ and ‘Islamize’ cinema. It became necessary for the post-revolutionary government to strengthen two existing discourses: “the ‘injection’ theory of cinematic power and the ‘realist illusionist’ theory of cinematic representation. The injection theory posited that the mere exposure to unveiled or immodest women would turn autonomous, centered, and moral individuals (particularly the men) into dependent, deceived, and corrupt subjects. The realist illusionist theory claimed a direct and unmediated correspondence between “reality” and its representation (or illusion) on the screen. For

the illusion to be Islamically modest, reality had to become (or to be made to appear) modest. This necessitated a total ‘purification’ to cleanse both the film industry and the movie screens of the offending vices and corruption” (Naficy, 2000, p. 559). The goal was to create a new national style: a purified cinema from which ‘immorality’ would be erased both in the making of films and in the films themselves. As a result of that, both the industry and the screens became open to women as long as women abided by very specific and binding Islamic codes of modesty. (Naficy, 2000)

Taboos and Censorship

Immediately after the Islamic revolution the government formed a committee that has been in charge of film censorship ever since, to make sure certain Islamic codes are respected.

Censorship affected filmmaking styles and strategies. People in the film industry were forced to work within very strict censorship codes. They were expected to respect these codes and avoid three kinds of taboos: political taboos, religious taboos, and sexual taboos.

A political taboo includes any image, conversation or discussion that criticizes or opposes to the ruling government. Religious taboos include drinking, saying anything against Islam or the Islamic leaders. Male-female relationship, sex, nudity and kissing in a public space are considered sexual taboos. However, since Islam is considered a political religion and a religion that teaches you “a way to a good life”, it becomes hard to categorize things that are thought of as taboo into only one of these categories. Political and sexual taboos are often religious taboos as well.

After these restrictions were set, the censorship committee demanded that all films be purified of political, religious and sexual taboos. As part of the purification process, “the existing films were reviewed, a majority of which were banned” (Naficy, 2000, p. 561). Films that criticized the ruling regime were banned and anything said or done that in any way contradicted the Islamic regime was censored. The scenes with images of women who were not wearing veils were cut from all existing Iranian movies and from the imported foreign movies. This sometimes caused serious narrative confusion. A few cinema theatres were burnt down in the name of morality and cultural independence. The chain of production was completely disrupted by the exile of numerous directors, actors and producers. “Creativity was jeopardized by the uncertainty of what would be allowed or forbidden” (Tapper, 2002, p.1).

Lahiji (2002) states that this situation led to the misrepresentation of Iranian women in the Iranian national movie industry: As a result of the strict censorship codes,

the Iranian national movie industry has had little success in a realistic portrayal of people, especially women. And what is offered is often far removed from the reality....This failure has damaged the place and status of women, both before and after the revolution, by presenting a distorted picture of them. (Participation, para. 3)

The Veil

Movies had to be made in support of the Islamic religion and women represented in movies had to respect strict religious codes. Milani (1992) explains that according to the

Islamic law:

Since women are a constitutive part of the male core self, they must be protected from the vision of unrelated males by following a set of rules of modesty that

apply to architecture, dress, behavior, voice, eye contact, and relations with men. Walls, words, and veils mark, mask, separate, and confine both women and men.

The Islamic law expects women to cover their hair, body parts, and body shape by wearing either a veil or chador or a head scarf, loose tunic, and long pants. However, they do not need to wear a veil in front of male members of their immediate family which consists of their husbands, sons, brothers, fathers, and uncles. All other men are considered unrelated and women must veil themselves in their presence. They must also avoid body contact of any kind.

For years, **the veil** has been used as a political symbol in Iran. It was taken away forcefully by Reza shah, the Iranian king in 1936, and it has been forced upon women in Iran ever since the Islamic Revolution in 1979.

Islamic law refers to the veil as hejab. Hejab has taken different forms since the Islamic revolution in Iran. Some women have chosen the traditional chador; the long, billowing, jet-black covering that envelops one's body from head to foot like a tent, which is what the word means in Persian. More common in larger cities has been a large, scarf-like headdress worn with an ankle-length, raincoat known by its French name, manteau.

However, women's dress has become freer over years. More hair now shows from under head scarves. Colorful fabrics and nail polish are seen everywhere. Underneath most women wear rich colors, jewelry, and flattering clothing, to be revealed at social gatherings in private homes. But they still dare not remove their scarves or coats in public (Burton, 2000).



Figure 2. Photograph by Shaya Golparian (2006).

The most recent form of hejab, worn by the majority of the women living in cities, is a loose small scarf and short tight jacket. Most women wear it because they have to not because they want to. Hejab is not a religious costume for most Iranian women. They consider it a social costume, a uniform and part of the fabric of daily life. They do not wear it in the privacy of their homes.



Figure 3. Photograph by Shaya Golparian (2006).

Iranian Women in Movies

Unfortunately due to strict censorship codes, film makers are not allowed to show this part of the reality on the screens. In movies these restrictions meant that filmmakers were forced to represent all spaces in the films, even bedroom scenes, as if they were public spaces. Censorship dictates that women can only be shown wearing the hejab. This resulted in unrealistic and distorted representation of women, since they were shown veiling themselves in all the spaces even in the privacy of their homes which is something they would not do in real life. This curious situation arose because female characters had to veil themselves not from their husbands but from the male audience members, who by definition were considered to be unrelated to them. Panahi, an Iranian film maker, has related how he had to film women only outdoors in one of his movies, *The Circle* (2000), because he did not want to film a lie about them wearing the headscarf in their own homes.

According to the Islamic law, unrelated men and women are not allowed to **touch** even to shake hands. This also caused major confusion for the audiences of Iranian movies. Husband and wives are never seen holding hands or hugging. Mothers are not allowed to hold their teenage sons or hold their hands and comfort them. There is no physical contact except between children. This is all because the actors and the actresses are not related in real life.

To add to this unrealistic representation, women are obliged not only to cover their bodies from unrelated men but also to some extent **their voices**. According to the Islamic law in Iran, veiling of the voice includes using formal language with unrelated males

public, and avoidance of singing, boisterous laughter, and generally any emotional outburst in public other than expression of grief and or anger.

What makes this situation even more unrealistic is that in real life, most Iranian women do not even cover their hair and body or veil their voices within their known community. This community includes unrelated men even strangers that are considered trustworthy by their friends and relatives. Women go to parties. They put on colorful fashionable dresses. They dance and sing, drink alcohol and shake hands with men. In fact if you see Iranian women in their known community, you will see little or no difference between them and a non-Muslim woman. However, in movies, this is something you will never see. Film makers have no choice but to observe all Islamic laws and codes of censorship or else they will never get permission to show their films in the local cinema theaters.

Initially it was unclear how far censorship went. Social commentary was self-censored and film makers who were confused about these new restrictions did not dare use women actors in the movies for several years. For a long while in the Iranian cinema, these restrictions resulted in an all-male cast. Women were practically absent from cinema screens for a number of years, and when they finally started appearing on the screen, they were given marginal roles in order to avoid confrontation with the members of the censorship committee. The censorship committee allowed women only domestic roles representing them as what Lahiji calls “chaste dolls” (Lahiji, 2002, p. 221), devoid of personal identity. As a result of that, they were mostly shown as neutral creatures who were wearing what was considered perfect hejab and were engaged only in household chores. The increasing number of women who were active members of the society were nowhere to be seen in these movies. No real women were depicted, working in offices or

factories, thinking, deciding or opposing their husband's will. The committee's excuse for these restrictions on women was to represent them as 'modest' and 'chaste', preventing them from becoming sexual objects.

However, Iranian film owes its distinctive look and feel, in part to censorship restrictions. Many filmmakers resorted to making war films and films about children, or adult films that involved children (i.e. *The Runner* 1985, *Bashu: The little stranger* 1986, *Where is the Friend's House?* 1987, *Homework* 1990, *The White Balloon* 1995, *The Father* 1996, *The Apple* 1998, *Dance of Dust* 1998, *The Color of Paradise* 1999, *The Girl in the Sneakers* 1999 and *Delbaran* 2001). This is partly because films with simple stories revolving around children are not scrutinized so closely by the censorship committee. A range of complex and profound meanings, however, can be arrived at through seemingly straightforward children's stories. The trials of children enable social criticisms to be made without making forbidden or direct criticism of the Islamic regime.

Censorship and codes have forced everybody in the film industry to look for new ways of presenting their ideas. Directors are obliged to find solutions when censorship constrains their means of expression. Makhmalbaf, a well known Iranian filmmaker, states in an interview that censorship prevents the film directors from telling the whole story. They can only say part of what is true. And so the way things are arranged must in the end represent what they are trying to say (Dabashi, 2001). Since the space for women on screen is regulated by strict censorship, in order to negotiate these restrictions, Iranian film makers had to develop a kind of **film grammar** that is quite distinctive, with **shot composition and point of view** used to position women. In *The May lady* (2000) Bani-Etemad, an Iranian film maker, uses overlapping voices of two lovers and close ups of

their faces to show their intimate relationship. Metaphors are used very often and male-female relationships are referred to very indirectly.

The International Market

Today, Iranian films have adopted a different approach in their attitude to women that is a bit more progressive. This new approach allows women to challenge representations of their place within the society. Several women filmmakers have emerged during the last decade who have objected to the unrealistic image of women in the Iranian society by making films that portray a more realistic image of women. Women now feature prominently in Iranian films and social issues relating to women and children have become a key theme in Iranian cinema. The gaze is no longer averted, but can be direct and even erotically charged. However, the number of these movies is minimal compared to the large number of movies that are being produced in Iran every year and unfortunately these movies do not attract the international market and are often only seen within the Iranian society. All films still have to get past the censorship committee but the restrictions have loosened up a little. Many Iranian films continue to be uncontroversial, conform to genre, and made for local distribution. A large number of Iranian films have been banned from home exhibition because of the censorship restrictions. At the same time, many films by Iran's top male directors are increasingly being made just for the international market. Although these films are not made under censorship restrictions, they do not represent a very different image from the films that are made to be seen only inside Iran.

Most films that are well received by the international market, especially in the west, are ones that address poverty and the oppression of women. “A generation of independent Iranian directors is emerging who form part of a wider social movement that seeks progressive reforms that include wider freedom of speech, greater equality for women, and a greater separation of religion and secular aspects of state” (Nottingham, 2002, para. 22). However there is almost no sign of these movies on the international screens.

It is certainly appealing to the Iranian filmmakers to be appreciated by a more global audience and to earn a more considerable income. “Many Iranian directors are losing connection with the people inside Iran while trying to reach those outside” (As quoted in Dabashi, 2001, p. 134). Dabashi, professor of Comparative Study of Culture and Iranian studies at Columbia University, accuses some Iranian film makers of being **ignorant of the global picture** and blind to the fact that the west is only interested in authenticating western civilization and consigning the orient and otherwise Third World to earlier stages of human development. This issue was first brought up by Edward Said in his well-known book *Orientalism* (1978). Said has also accused the west of seeing itself as a dynamic, innovative, expanding culture, as well as “the spectator, the judge and jury of every facet of Oriental behavior.”

Since the 11 September 2001 attacks in the USA, “Islamic religious fundamentalism has attracted international attention and has been the focus of political controversy. Debates often focus on the situation of women in the Muslim world. They are frequently assumed in the West to be the victims of religious dogma” (Bahramitash, 2004, p. 508). As a result of these debates, the international demand for the kind of movies that simplify the female characters to the extent that they have all become figures veiled in black chador from

head to toe has risen. This has encouraged several Iranian filmmakers to continue working within the censorship restrictions (although these restrictions have loosened up) and to represent women in Iran as passive and oppressed. Consequently, most well known and well received Iranian movies are primarily a reflection of Western prejudices. However until this moment, the Iranian film makers don't seem to show any concern about the fact that their movies are being used by the western to make their point about anti Iranian culture and politics.

The same can be said about film and video that is being made outside of Iran (i.e. Neshat's videos) or ones that are made to be seen only outside of Iran (i.e. *The Circle*, 2000; *Crimson Gold*, 2003). Although film makers outside of Iran do not have to work under the same censorship restrictions as the ones who live and work in Iran, many of them seem to make film and video that contains the same features as the films made and produced inside Iran.

Chapter 4



NESHAT'S VIDEOS

The mind is insatiable for meaning, drawn from, or projected into, the world of appearances, for unearthing hidden analogies which connect the unknown with the familiar, and show the familiar in an unexpected light. It weaves the raw material of experience into patterns, and connects them with other patterns; the fact that something reminds something else can itself become a potent source of emotion.

Arthur
Koester, 1964

Neshat is the most well-known Iranian video artist whose work focuses on gender and the politics of Islam in Iranian society. She was born in the city of Qazvin, Iran in 1959, and left Iran in 1974 to study art in the United States. “She completed a Masters degree in Fine Arts (Painting) at the University of California in Berkeley in 1982 and later moved to New York” (“Shirin Neshat: Women without,” 2005, para. 3).

Neshat was in the US at the time of the Islamic revolution in Iran. This political change prevented her from returning home and joining her family. In 1990, Neshat made her first return trip to Iran, where she was shocked by the changes that the new regime had imposed on the public, especially women. This visit led to the creation of her *Women of Allah* photographs and later on to the creation of her three videos: *Turbulent* (1998), *Rapture* (1999), and *Fervor* (2000).

“The video and photographic work of Shirin Neshat stands halfway between metaphor and narrative and is marked by its powerful and poetic emotional impact” (“The Contemporary Arts Museum,” 2003, para. 2). Neshat uses poetry and metaphors to communicate her ideas in both her photographs and videos. All of her three videos focus on the issue of gender in relation to the social structure of Islamic Iran, which is the

theme I have addressed in my own videos. This makes the analysis of her work pertinent to my research.

“Turbulent”

Description (denotations):

This ten-minute video installation consists of two black and white videos projected simultaneously on opposite walls. This video was shot in Istanbul. On the first screen the male singer appears on the stage and bows to an all male audience, dressed (like him) in black pants and white shirts. He then turns to us (the spectators) and stands with his back to the audience, facing the microphone and starts to lip-synch to a traditional Persian song. The song is a thirteenth-century Sufi poem by Jala ed-din Rumi about divine love, dubbed in the voice of the popular Kurdish-Iranian Classical singer Shahram Nazeri.



Figure 4. *Turbulent*, Production still. As produced in *Shirin Neshat: Two installations*. (2000, p. 18)

In the second screen a female singer stands with her back turned and motionless.

As the man's performance ends to a welcoming applause and he resumes a static position on the stage, our attention shifts, as does his, to the captivating voice of Deyhim, the woman performer, on the second screen. Her voice brings the male singer and his audience to a standstill. She is dressed in black and faces an empty auditorium. The camera circles around her to find her hidden figure in the dark background as we hear an impassioned wordless song composed of supernatural breaths and ecstatic cries.



Figure 5. *Turbulent*, Production still. As produced in *Shirin Neshat*. (2002, p. 100)

As the woman finishes her song, the man's image becomes frozen. The projected video image is stalled, and the freezing-frame on his face suddenly transports him into the

realm of the abstract and unreal. On the opposite screen the woman's "real time" image is allowed to linger. She breathes as if she is given life.

Analysis (meaning):

Turbulent focuses on the issue of gender in relation to the social structure of Islamic Iran. It is about the existential tension of two singers, a man and a woman who seem to have common passion for music and its main premise is the absence of women in relation to music in the public space.

In *Turbulent* the viewers are confronted with duality, a splitting of the self, or a sense of being from two worlds at once. This becomes apparent from the very beginning when the screen where the man is performing introduces the title and the director in English while the screen where the veiled woman is standing does the same in Persian. This is perhaps to imply that the veiled woman creates a sense of mystery and is more exotic for the western viewer therefore it is introduced with an unfamiliar script. Whereas the man would seem more familiar to the western viewer and so his part of the video is introduced in a familiar script.

As in most other titles of Neshat's work, the English "turbulent" does not quite parallel the Persian "bi-gharar," nor Persian the English, though Neshat insists on giving them both at once, a kind of "dialogue of civilization". "Restless," or "restive" would be a much better translation for "bi-gharar" than "turbulent", and if the reference is to the woman character, then she is better described as "restless" than "turbulent". The Persian title "bi-gharar" has a sense of erratic restlessness, the impossibility to sit or stand still, perturbed by some emotion or incident. It's a state of having no peace or stability.

Neshat is intrigued by the relation of the female body to the politics of Islam. She explains in an interview that “women’s body has been a type of battle ground for various types of rhetoric and political ideology” (Bertuccini, 1997, p. 84). She also explains that in Islamic societies,

men dominate the public space and women exist for the most part in private spaces, and as a woman crosses a public space she conforms by wearing a veil, hiding her body to remove all signs of sexuality and individuality from the public space. (As cited in Hassan, 2003, p. 5)

Turbulent is a visual exploration of male domination in the Iranian society. In this video the female is victimized while the male is empowered. He is praised by his audience while she deprived of being heard. Her only audience is the spectators of Neshat’s videos. They listen to her, they might even praise her but they do not occupy her same space. They see and hear her but she is not aware of their existence.

“The empty theater suggests a public's common adherence to the law that forbids women to perform solo under the rule of the Islamic Republic” (Mottahedeh, 2003, para. 5).

Turbulent is conceived around the notion of opposites through such contrasts as black/white, male/female, empty/full Theater, stationary/rotating camera, traditional/non-traditional music, communal/solitary, and rational/irrational.

This video was made in black and white which is a verbal metaphor for being completely right or wrong, good or bad, and it often reminds us of documentary rather than a film. The space in which Neshat’s two characters perform is also defined by black and white. The female is dressed in black and is standing in front of a dark background while the male is dressed in white and is performing in front of a much lighter background. A black

dress symbolizes mourning while a white one stands for celebration and peace. The woman's figure is partly lost in the dark color of the background while the man's is clearly separated.

The male figure sings with eloquence and conviction while the female sings with inarticulate passion. He is in full public view, she in the complete privacy of her solitude. He faces the camera while she hides from the camera and the camera has to circle around her to find and face her. He is evident. She is hidden.

The rotating camera gives the sense of having no stability and the emptiness of the room where the woman is performing can be a metaphor for isolation, loneliness and lack of approval.

The two characters could not be more different. The male singer is proud, aware of the fact that he has his peers behind him. He is even dressed like them. He is one of them. He represents tradition and sings the conventional words of love that have been sung for years without any change. She, on the other hand is alone and her music is alien; no words, no structure, just abstraction and free expression. This could represent a cry for freedom.

“Rapture”

Description (denotations):

Like *Turbulent*, this video installation also consists of two black and white videos projected simultaneously on two opposite walls. The videos each last 13 minutes and they were filmed in Morocco in 1999 (Ravenal, 2002; Danto, 1999).

As Mottahedeh (2003) explains:

Rapture is inspired by the novel *Ahl-i Ghargh* [Being brave enough to drown] (2004) by Moniru Ravanipur. The novel tells of a day when the sky turns black, when the seawater floods the town folk's homes, and men, hapless and panic-stricken, flee, leaving the town's women abandoned with their children. The women drum, dance, and pray to halt the onslaught of disaster. The novel celebrates women's mystical abandon and bravery. *Rapture* partially reproduces *Ahl-i Ghargh*. (para. 7)

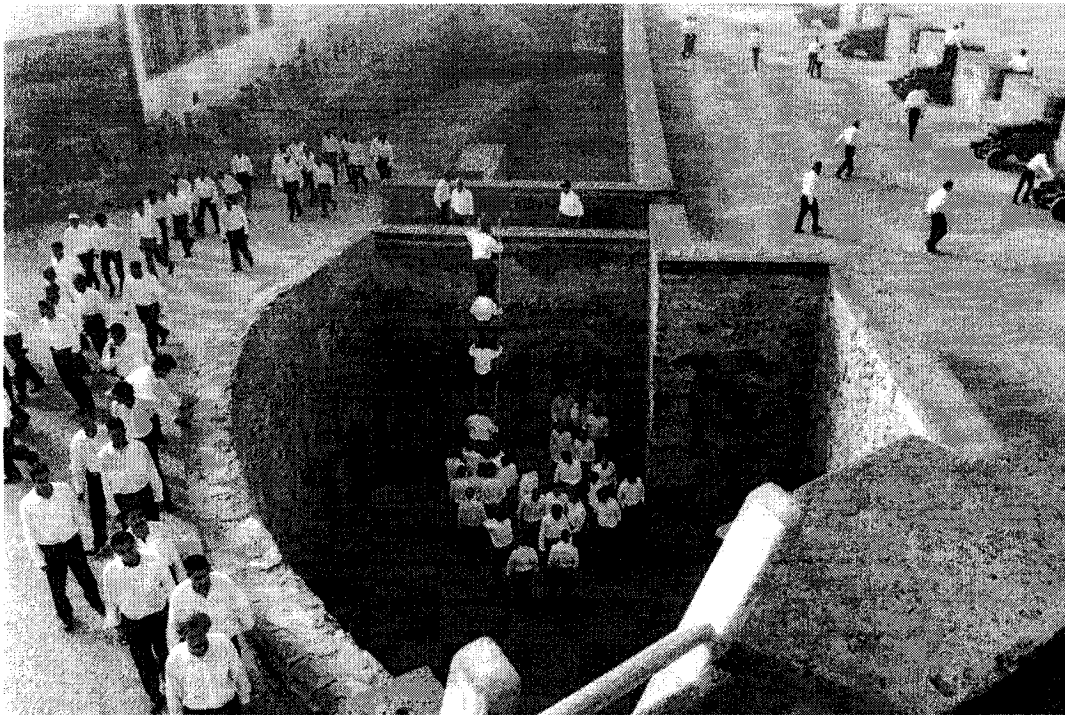


Figure 6. *Rapture*, production still, photo by Larry Barns Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York. As produced in *Shirin Neshat*. (2002, p. 109)

At the beginning of this video on one of the screens, some hundred men, dressed in uniforms of black pants and white shirts, march through the town streets and inhabit an ancient open-air fortress. They spend their time performing traditional ritualized drills of clapping, putting ladders against the walls, hand washing, and pushing against each other in rough sport.

On the opposite screen, a similar-sized group of women, covered from head to toe in black veils, emerge over the horizon in a desert and move forward to the foreground, getting closer to the ancient fortress. They assemble as a group and spend much of the first half of the video staring silently at the camera, as if they are staring at the men on the opposite screen.



Figure 7. *Rapture*, production still, photo by Larry Barns Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York. As produced in *Shirin Neshat*. (2002, p. 107)

At one point, in the middle of the video, women let out a startling, high-pitched, ululating sound used in the Middle Eastern cultures as a sign for celebration, triumph or applause.

The men immediately stop and look across at the women, who hold up their palms, overwritten in Farsi script and kneel in prayer. They then turn away from the camera and begin their way back across the desert to the sea. When they get to the sea, they struggle to launch a heavy wooden boat and then six of them set out upon the waves without oars. The rest of the women watch quietly as the six women in the boat sail off.

At this moment, on the other screen, we see the men, waving goodbye from the ramparts.

Analysis (meaning):

Like *Turbulent*, *Rapture* also focuses on the subject of gender in relation to culture and nature in Islamic cultures.

In *Rapture* Neshat generalizes her statement by using groups of men and women. No individual stands out in either group: there are no heroes and there are no speeches.

Like in her previous video there is a discrepancy between the Persian title “Owj” and the English translation “Rapture”. Owj is more rising and ascension. It can refer both to the male figure’s climbing of ladders and the rising ululation of the women in the desert.

In *Rapture*, Neshat codes opposing spaces with distinctly different gender characteristics. Men inhabit the ancient fortress, the architectural space of authority and tradition. Women inhabit the exposed desert, the space of human vulnerability. Men control the center while women exist at the margin. The men seem like the masters of the fortress but

their ardent embrace of its boundaries ironically makes them appear to be its prisoners. Women, on the other hand, are free and wander. The space that the men occupy (the fortress) is vertical and stable while the space the women occupy (the sea, the desert) is horizontal, flat and endless. Men seem busy working and women are observant for the most part. The camera looks up to the men and down on women.

According to John B. Ravenal (2002),

the opposing behavior of the men and the women illustrate Neshat's contention that women in Iran although subject to great social restriction, or because of their greater hardships, perform actions of real consequence in contrast to the men's display of power and control. (p. 53)

As Neshat describes it:

This all ties back to what I believe is a type of feminism that comes from such cultures; on a daily basis the resistance you sense from the women is far higher than that of the men. Why? Because the women are the ones who are under extreme pressure; they are repressed and therefore they are more likely to resist and ultimately to break free. (Danto, 2001)

But do we really see any resistance on the part of the women in Neshat's *Rapture*?

The women do seem to be free of boundaries but they seem to give in to their unknown destiny, especially at the last scene when they get on the oar less boat and give in to the sea. The oar less boat makes their future doubtful. Are they liberating themselves or are they setting out to drown?



Figure 8. *Rapture*, production still, photo by Larry Barns. Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York. As produced in *Shirin Neshat*. (2002, p. 27)

As six of the women sail off we (the viewers) “are left wondering if this represents the sacrifice of the many for some or the martyrdom of a few for all” (Mottahedeh, 2003, para. 10).

“Fervor”

Description (denotations):

Fervor is a 10 minute video installation that consists of two pieces of black and white video projected on two side by side screens. The narrative begins with a brief encounter between a man and a woman passing each other in an isolated open landscape.

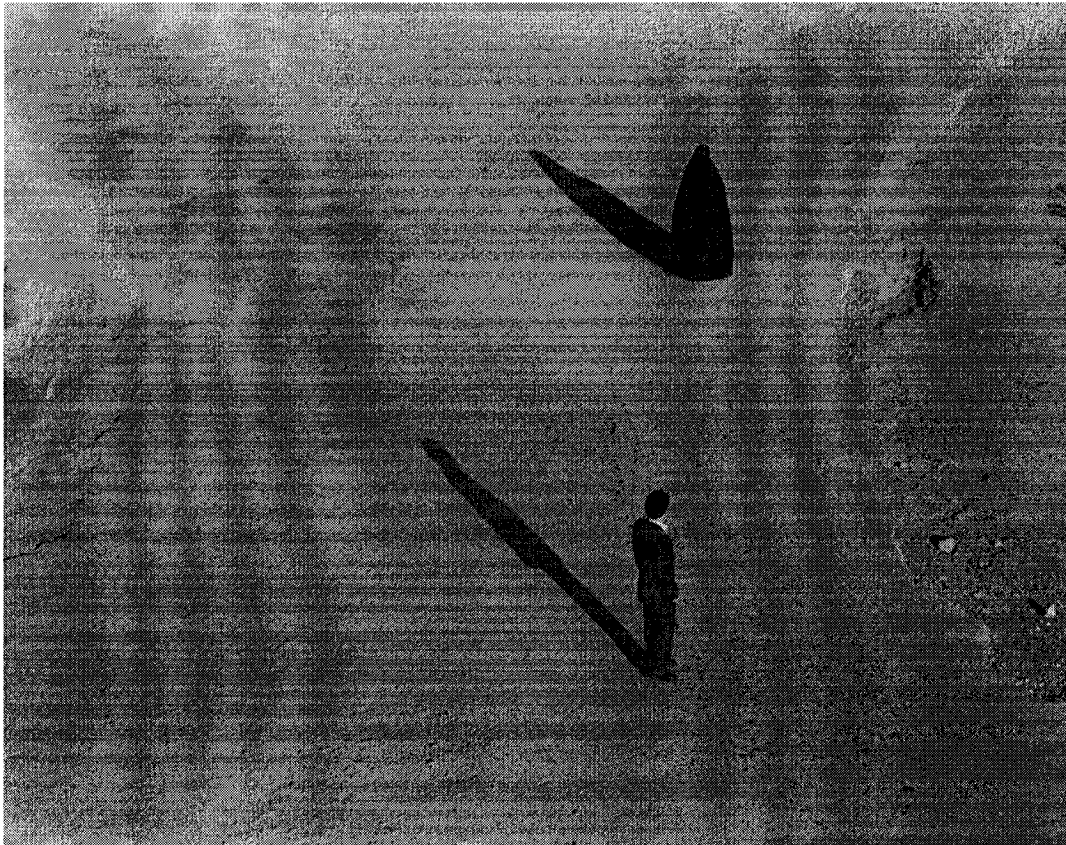


Figure 9. *Fervor*, production still, photo by Larry Barns. Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York. As produced in *Shirin Neshat*. (2002, p. 137)

As they pass each other, they pause and stare at one another momentarily and then continue their separate ways. At this point, on one screen we see the woman walking

away while on the other screen we see the man in the background turning around to look at her as she walks away.

Later these two encounter each other again by chance in a large public event where men and women are divided by a black curtain. In front of these two groups, there is a bearded man standing on a platform addressing the public and giving a speech on a moral lesson about the “sin” implied by “desires” in Persian language. As he speaks he refers to the picture that is hanging behind him. The picture illustrates the story of Youssef and Zoleikha from the Koran, in which Zoleikha is overcome by passion and tries to seduce a man named Youssef. The speaker exemplifies the narrative to insist on his message of Muslims’ resistance against such temptations.

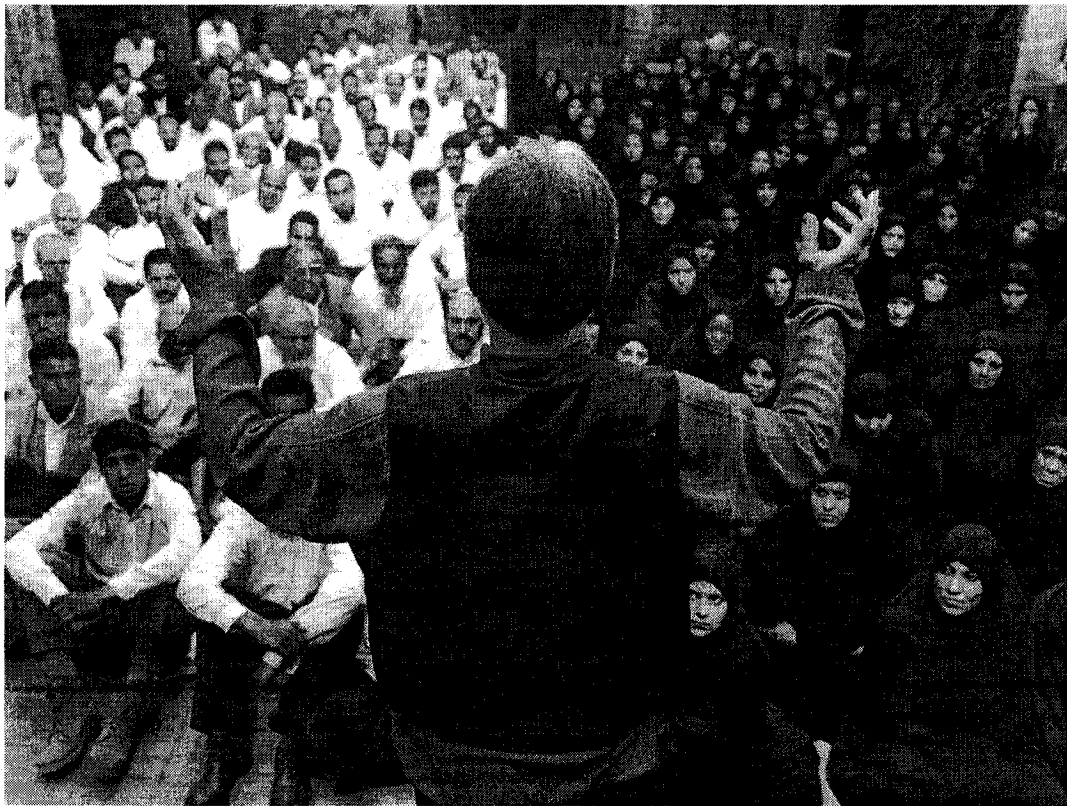


Figure 10. *Fervor*, production still, photo by Larry Barns. Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York. As produced in *Shirin Neshat*. (2002, p. 139)

During the speech, the man and the woman who are each placed on one of the side by side screens glance at each other. Although they cannot see each other, they seem more involved with each other's invisible presence than the speaker's speech. As the speech becomes more and more intense and aggressive in tone, the man and the woman's initial excitement, and modest flirtation, turn into a deep sense of anxiety and confusion, eventually leading to the woman's hurried exit. The narrative ends without any contact between the man and the woman. However, the two characters see each other again outside the building which leaves the viewer with a hopeful sense that they will meet again soon.

Analysis (meaning):

While *Turbulent* and *Rapture* address the male and female contrast in relation to Islamic social structure, *Fervor* focuses on the commonalities between the sexes, and how sexual taboos have been deeply internalized by both men and women, and conflicted by human nature versus social, cultural and religious codes. *Fervor* is the story of "a would-be love affair" (Dabashi, 2002, p. 55).

It "depicts the chance encounter of a man and woman and their attempts to connect despite social restrictions that disallow contact" (Willis, 2003, para. 5).

Like in Neshat's two other videos, all women in *Fervor* are dressed in black chador and almost all men are all dressed in white shirts. The images on the two screens are placed next to each other and are edited to mirror one another which enhances the visual effects of the images and also possibly suggests the fact that the pressure of social taboos on desire is equally problematic for both men and women.

The compelling, urgent music, sung and composed by Sussan Deyhim, the same composer/singer as in *Rapture* and *Turbulent*, intensifies the effect of the images on the viewer.

In addition to the black curtain that separates the men and women's space, the two screens creates a division that makes any contact between the man and the woman impossible.

As opposed to *Turbulent* and *Rapture*, in *Fervor* Neshat uses words to convey an important part of her message to her audience. Words spoken in her native language, Persian, which most of the viewers of her video do not understand. This leaves the non-Iranian viewers wondering and maybe even confused about what is really going on. It creates an uncertainty. A Persian speaker's interpretation of *Fervor* would certainly be very different from a westerner's interpretation. How would someone who does not understand the words know the reason for the uneasiness of the woman actress during the ceremony or the reason for her abrupt departure near the end of the video?

In an interview with Arthur Danto (2001), Neshat also expresses her regret about not putting the English translation of the speech on the wall of the exhibition. The absence of English words, however, does not take away from the strength of the images and perhaps even creates a kind of mystery by leaving it up to the viewers to make their own narrative.

In her three videos, *Turbulent*, *Rapture* and *Fervor*, Neshat shares her status of in-between-ness with her audience by activating the viewing space between her dual screens. In all three of Neshat's videos, especially in *Rapture* and *Fervor*, viewers must

shift their attention back and forth along with the men and women who take turns watching or looking to find each other. Those who watch these two videos experience being caught in the crossfire of gazes and so they are as much observed and being observers.

When I first saw Neshat's photographs and videos, I found them very appealing and visually effective. While researching more about her and analyzing her artwork I realized that outside Iran her art can be interpreted as making negative statements about Iran and Iranian women that could possibly be generalized in the western world. Neshat's images show Iran as a desert empty of buildings and any kind of modern technology. They constantly portray Iranian women as being veiled and oppressed and show Iranian men as being all disciplined and orderly.

Neshat is one of the rare Iranian video artists who has succeeded in attracting so much attention to her artwork in the western world. Her use of black and white images has made her work look more like documentary. However, none of her videos have been shot in Iran and the viewers of her videos would only know this if they read published articles about her art. So for many people, what she shows in her videos can be the only thought "true" image they have of Iran and Iranian women.

Across the board Neshat has been praised for her authenticity and subversiveness and , at the same time, criticized for reproducing stereotypes of Iranian women and invoking a new Orientalism as well as for creating art that is in support of the repressive Islamic regime and its warring tendencies ("Shirin Neshat: Women," 2005, para. 7; Mottahedeh, 2003, para. 3). However, Neshat sees her art very differently.

As Mottahedeh (2003) points out:

Neshat claims that her work is not a social critique of Iran, but rather her own inquiry into Iranian culture as it changed after the Islamic Revolution of 1979. Arguing that the artist's responsibility is neither to validate nor to critique social and political ideas, she sees her art as a way of constructing a relationship to her own country of birth from the outside. (para. 1)

Neshat mentions in an interview that when she returned to Iran she found that people of Iran had changed beyond recognition (Gagnon, 2001, p. 115). The Iranian society has changes a lot since 1990 when she made her first visit to Iran after 16 years. However, she has based the themes and ideas of her very recently made videos on her perception of the Iran she visited 15 years ago. This undermines the big changes the Iranian society has gone through over the last 10 years, especially in terms of women's clothing and their status in the society.

Karmel (1995) explains that when Neshat first returned to Iran in 1990,

She was appalled by the changed status of women, who (she believed) were restricted to the domestic sphere and compelled to cloak themselves in the chador. While skeptical of contentions by some Iranian women that the chador was actually a liberating garment because it freed them from being looked at as sex objects, Ms. Neshat found herself attracted to the revolutionary fervor of Iranian society and to the chador as a symbol of rebellion against imperialism. (para. 1)

Neshat simplifies the characters of her stories to the extent that women have all become figures veiled in black chador from head to toe who are trying to break free and men are all trapped within the boundaries of tradition.

As Edward Said (1996) writes in his book *Covering Islam*: "One should not reduce other people or societies to a simple and stereotypical core" (p. lxvii).

What, in my opinion, makes Neshat's work more problematic is that, it's not the "other" society she is talking about. It's the society she was born in and was brought up in for 15 years.

After reading all the articles that are written about her work by non-Iranians, I can't help but wonder if she knew or perhaps created her work based on issues (such as women and Islam) that would be appreciated in the western world as the exotic and the oriental often is. "We are seen if and only if we are exotic", says Reza Farokhfal (2003) in his article *The importance of being exotic* (p. 8). Being exotic is what makes us different and it is this difference that brings us appreciation from the Western world.

Neshat's videos and photographs, in my opinion, are mainly aimed at the western audience. They are made to fulfill the western expectation of the orient. Edward Said defines orientalism in his book *Covering Islam*:

From at least the end of the eighteenth century until our own day, modern Occidental reactions to Islam have been dominated by a radically simplified type of thinking that may still be called orientalist. The general basis of orientalist thought is an imaginative and yet drastically polarized geography dividing the world into two unequal parts, the larger, "different" one called the Orient. The other, also known as "our" world, called the Occident or the West. Such divisions always come about when one society or culture thinks about another one, different from it. (Said, 1996, p. 4)

But what makes Neshat's work more interesting is that she is both the object and the subject in her work. In other words she is both the viewer and the viewed. She is as much the story teller in her videos as the object of her stories. She is an Iranian woman talking about women in Iran which in addition to the use of black and white images makes her work look more like documentary. But as Mottahedeh also mentions in her review of

Neshat's videos: "To believe that what we see (in Neshat's videos) are documentary or ethnographic images to be taken at face value is to miss the point" (Mottahedeh, 2003, para. 19). Because what Neshat is putting in front of her viewers is a story, an interpretation of the reality, not the reality. And as Mitry (1997) points out, "an interpretation of the world is not the world" (p. 364).

Chapter 5



MY VIDEOS

I was born a couple of years before the Islamic revolution and lived most of my life in Iran. I earned a bachelors degree in Graphic Design and then decided to immigrate to Canada to pursue my studies in the field of Art Education. Since my immigration to Canada, I have returned to Iran every summer both to visit my family and to feel connected to the society in which I was born. Every year that I go back, I see major changes in terms of women's status in the society and their clothing. More women are actively involved in the society and the number of women in universities across Iran has increased dramatically. There are now more women accepted in the university level than men. Many women work in governmental offices. There are now women taxi drivers in Tehran.

Even more dramatic changes can be seen in terms of women's clothing. Never in my entire life have I seen a crowd of Iranian women all dressed in black chadors. I only see this image on TV and in newspapers. However the long and loose coats have become shorter and tighter and the colors have become more diverse. The head scarves have become looser to the extent that they only seem like an accessory. The make-up has become thicker and more extreme. You rarely see a woman without make-up in the streets unless she is a high school student. And if you do go out without make up you are criticized by your friends and family or you are confronted with questions like; "Are you feeling sick?!"

Every year that I arrive at the airport in Tehran I feel so out of fashion, so much so that it makes me feel like an outsider. I have come to believe that these sudden changes in

women's fashion and extreme make-up are Iranian women's way of showing resistance to the ruling government and, in fact, if you talk to people in Iran, many believe that the positive changes in the society have been brought about because of this resistance.

The inspiration to make my two video installations, "*Unveiling*" and "*Dance*", came when I first started reading about Shirin Neshat's artwork. The readings made me so concerned that her video installations have been used as documentary and a source of information about the Iranian society and the way women are treated in Iran. I then realized that the media in general are using the same image of women every time they mention Iran in their news reports.

My aim for making these two video installations was to provide a different image of Iranian women, an image that I myself am so familiar with. My first video, *Unveiling* is a direct criticism of the media and how they portray Iranian women. And the second video, *Dance* is about how Iranian women express themselves and how they celebrate their beauty and their inner freedom.

“Unveiling”

Description (denotations):

Unveiling is a 7 minute video installation that consists of three videos projected on three walls. The video that is projected on the left wall is black and white and the two other videos are in color. The black and white video is made of extracts of recent Iranian movies and photographs. In this video we can see women dressed in black chadors, some standing still, walking or running around aimlessly, or looking for places while others are busy with daily routines.



Figure 11. *Unveiling; Media*. Production still by Shaya Golparian (2006).

In the video that is projected on the middle wall we can see a woman dressed in a black chador standing motionless in the middle of the street with her back to the camera. I filmed this part of the video during winter 2006.



Figure 12. *Unveiling; unveiling*. Production still by Shaya Golparian (2006).

In the video on the right we see a young woman inside a house putting on make-up. The woman is wearing a t-shirt and a pair of jeans and her hair is tied in a pony tail. She stands in front of a big antique mirror and puts on make-up with care. At times the camera zooms in on her and her reflection in the mirror, which lets us see how much time she spends on putting on every piece of her make-up.



Figure 13. *Unveiling; Make-up*. Production still by Shaya Golparian (2006).

Near the end of the video we see her leave and return wearing a tight and short cream coat and holding a pink head scarf. As she looks at her reflection in the mirror, she puts the scarf on carefully and makes sure that it looks nice on her. At the same time that she is putting on a headscarf, the woman on the middle screen drops her chador, and the same coat and scarf appear. And a woman on the left screen carefully covers up her hair with a black chador. These shots repeat three times with the camera zoomed in and out on the woman wearing a chador while the images on the right and left wall repeat with slight differences. This gives the viewers the chance to see all the three images.

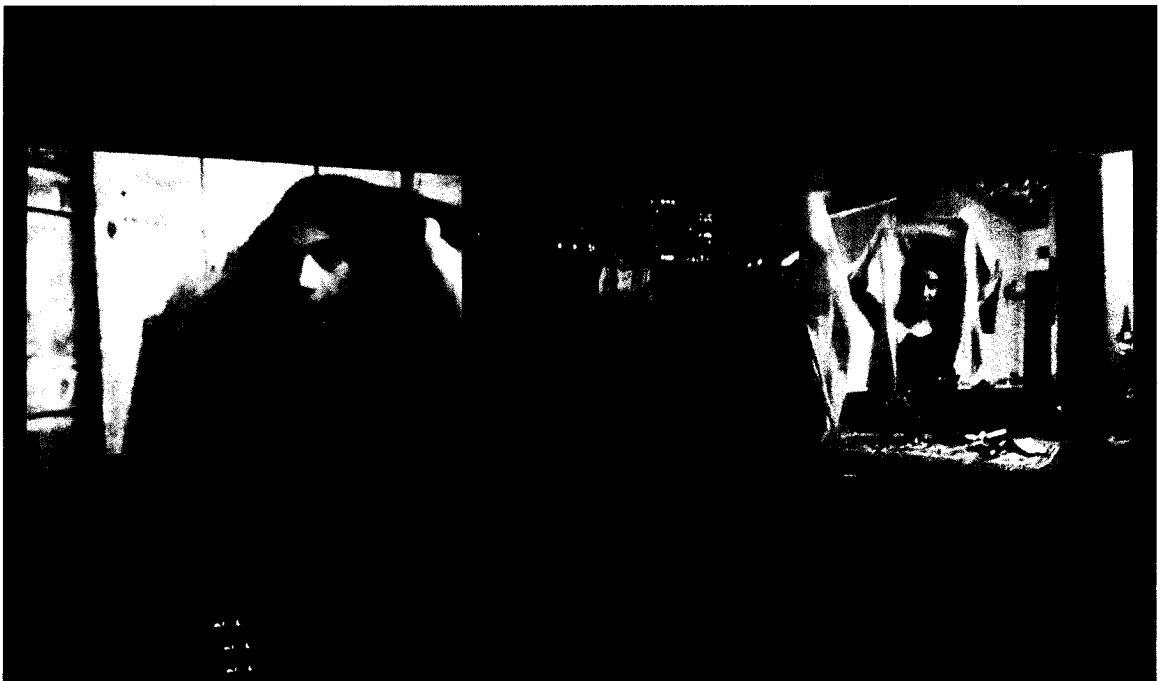


Figure 14. *Unveiling*. Installation photograph by Shaya Golparian (2006).

Then we see the reflection of the woman on the right screen in the mirror as she walks away and leaves the house at the same time that the woman on the middle screen walks away. This is when we see a woman on the left screen as she pulls her chador to cover her face from the man she is talking to.

The music for this video installation was made specifically for this piece by my father who is a professional musician. In order to have a piece of music that both matched my images and would synchronize with the changes in the videos, I had to choose the musical instruments and time every small change in my images. I then forwarded all my information along with still images of the videos to my father. He sent me the music along with certain sound effects. I then re-edited the images with the music and added the audio effects to enhance the effect of sound.

Analysis (meaning):



Figure 15. *Unveiling*. Installation photograph by Shaya Golparian (2006).

Unveiling is about how Iranian women are portrayed in the media. It's about the image of Iranian women in the west and how this image is different from the true image of Iranian women. In *Unveiling*, the two videos that are projected on the right and left wall show different perspectives of Iranian women and the video in the middle reveals the

differences between the two perspectives. The video in the middle is my link between the two videos on the left and right. It's a woman unveiling to show how women in Iran dress outside their homes. In this video I used the act of unveiling as a visual metaphor for revealing my version of the truth.

The video that is projected on the left wall is edited images from photographs and recent Iranian movies most of which (i.e. *A Moment of Innocence*, 1996; *The May Lady*, 2000; *Pari*, 2000) have been praised and awarded in international festivals. The images in this video show the stereotyped Iranian woman. The women are all veiled and the only visible body parts are their hands and faces. Almost all of them are wearing black chadors and none is shown as an active participant in the society. Most of the women seem aimless and run around from one place to another. We never see them reach a destination. Some of them even look lost. This is the image of Iranian women that is commonly seen in the western media: veiled, anonymous, voiceless and invisible and therefore oppressed. And when they are not seen as oppressed, they are referred to as being objectified because of the veil. It is believed by some people that the veiled is hidden and what's hidden can arouse curiosity or even desire. "The veiled woman represents a secret to be revealed, exposed and possessed" (Taieb Belghazi, 2006).

Like women in Neshat's videos, the women in on the left screen of *Unveiling* are dressed in black. In Iranian culture, black is the color that indicates sadness and mourning. This could imply that Iranian women who are always shown wearing black veils are sad or permanently mourning.

The images in this video are black and white, just like the images in Neshat's videos. Most of the images were either originally black and white or had very little color. Black and white or lacking color can be interpreted as being dull and lacking diversity.

In spite of the fact that these images are from recent movies, they are shot in deserts or narrow streets and houses that look very old. There is no sign of technology in these images of Iranian women. This can be interpreted as lack of progress which fits with the Orientalist point of view.

As Said Edward argues in his book *Covering Islam* (1996), Orientalism has produced a false description of Arabs and Islamic culture and this has happened primarily because of the belief that it was possible to define the essential qualities of Arab peoples and Islamic culture. These qualities were seen in uniformly negative terms. The Orient was defined as a place isolated from the mainstream of human progress in the sciences, arts, and commerce.

On the right wall the image of the woman putting on make up is in color. This puts the black and white images in the left video in contrast to the color images in the right one. My intent was to show that the life of an Iranian woman is not so dull. It has color and diversity. Iranian women have choices and are not all dressed in black. They choose their clothes and their colors. They are individuals with different personalities and their choice of clothes and make up and the choices they make in life reflect their personalities. In this video, putting on make up is a metaphor for the celebration of beauty and womanhood.

Another feature that puts the video on the right in contrast to the video on the left is that one is shot inside, while the other is outside. This is to say that for women in Iran, life

inside the houses is very different from life outside. Inside, they live and dress as any other woman anywhere else in the world but outside they have to follow a certain dress code. Although Iranian women are not all dressed in black chadors, the Islamic law requires women to put on a head scarf and a coat. However, there is no law saying what kind of head scarf and coat you should wear, what color they should be and how you should wear them. Therefore, women chose their clothing according to their personal taste. There is diversity in the color and in the style of their clothing. And this is what we see at the end of the video when the woman on the right wall puts on her choice of head scarf and coat before leaving home.

“Dance”

Description (denotations):

Dance is a 7 minute video installation that consists of three color videos projected on three walls. It starts with the video that is projected on the middle wall when a young woman begins a spiritual dance to a piece of music. She is wearing a long colored dress, loose pants and a green belt, and she is dancing in front of a big mirror where we can see her reflection. As the music advances she seems more and more in a state of ecstasy and starts to whirl. Her dance is an interpretation of Sama, the whirling dance of Dervishes. However, it is not very common for a woman to perform this kind of dance.

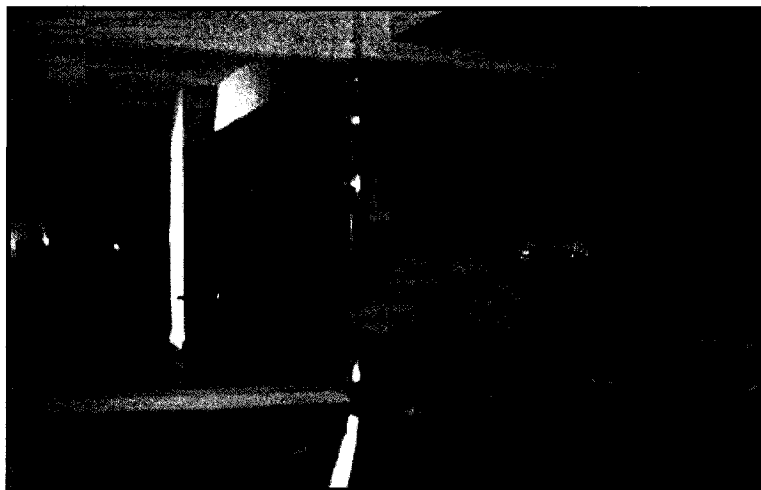


Figure 16. *Dance; Spiritual*. Production still by Shaya Golparian (2006).

About two minutes into the spiritual dance a still image fades in on the left wall. It is an image of a woman wearing a traditional turquoise blue Persian dress. As the image fades in completely, she begins a traditional Persian dance which includes delicate upper body and hand movements with extreme flexibility and grace and varied facial expressions. A

traditional Persian dance is more of a performance dance. It's often performed so others can watch and not for them to join in.



Figure 17. *Dance; Traditional*. Production still by Shaya Golparian (2006).

A few seconds later another still image appears on the right wall. It's an image of a young woman wearing a purple top and a long black skirt. She also begins to dance, only this dance is a more modern dance which is common at parties and celebrations and is often done in groups.



Figure 18. *Dance; Modern*. Production still by Shaya Golparian (2006).

At this point we can see all three dances on the screens; the traditional, the spiritual and the modern.



Figure 19. *Dance*. Installation photograph by Shaya Golparian (2006).

These three dances, although different, have certain similarities. They share the same hand and upper body movements and facial expressions.

Near the end of the video, images start to fade out on each wall. First the traditional dance on the left wall, then the modern dance on the right wall and finally the video ends with the woman in the middle finishing her spiritual dance.

Analysis (meaning):

Dance focuses on how women in Iran express their feelings, their beliefs, their beauty and their freedom. It portrays women in privacy of their homes, celebrating their beauty and self expression.

“For the ancient nation of Iran, dancing has been an important social phenomenon and a religious ritual” (Kiann, 2000, Introduction section, para. 2). The early Persian dance was performed in religious ceremonies. In the 13th century men performed a religious dance associated with mysticism and the faith of Sufism. Sufism recommends dancing as a spiritual instrument to “become one with God”, which is the final goal in this faith. The dance is a strong ecstatic ritual that includes continuous whirling and turning. This charismatic performance, called Sama, represents a spiritual rapprochement to the “Creator” and is still being practiced by men in Iran and Turkey (Kiann, 2000).

Dance starts with a woman’s interpretation of Sama. Unlike the original dance of Sama in which a group of men in white dresses whirl with open arms, the woman in this video uses hand and arm movements similar to the traditional and modern Persian dance. She is dancing alone and seems to be drifting in the world of ecstasy. Her only companion is her own reflection which harmoniously repeats her every move. Her dance, although similar in parts to Sama, the whirling dance of Dervishes, has a distinguishing uniqueness. It is full of emotional expression. Dervishes’ whirling dance has no diversity, no emotion. Their dance gives us the impression that they no longer exist and that they have lost themselves in their performances, which is in fact their very goal. This young woman’s spiritual dance is all about her, her emotions, her reactions, and her story.

Like the spiritual dancer, the traditional dancer uses her body to express herself. Her dance is a celebration of her beauty. She is dancing alone in her home. She has obviously dressed up in order to perform. Her dress is designed specifically for the kind of dance she performs. The beautiful design and the pleats of her skirt emphasize her turns and consequently her joy. The over lap of images which doubles the woman’s figure adds to

the effect of this joyful performance. She is enjoying her beauty and expressing her emotions. She is also telling her story using her body and facial expressions.

The third dancer performs another expressive dance. Her dance includes similar hand and upper body movements to the ones we see in the other two dances. Only she does not whirl and turn as often as the other two dancers. She is dressed up as any other woman, anywhere in the world. She performs a modern dance. A modern Persian dance is commonly performed in groups and in parties and celebrations. It is often performed inside because “dance as an art form has been banned since the (Islamic) revolution in Iran (in 1979). However, the character of dance as a human phenomenon has managed not to disappear completely. Despite the prohibition, it is still performed in private gatherings” (Kiann, 2000, Contemporary Era section, para. 9).

In Islamic law of Iran, dancing is referred to as being sexual and it has been banned for this very reason. In *Dance*, however, it is portrayed as a beautiful phenomenon and not a sexual one.

In spite of the restrictions brought about by the ruling government, Iranian women have found ways to celebrate their beauty, express their emotions and enjoy their lives through dance. Outside in public, dancing is prohibited but there is nothing that can stop people from doing what they want inside. And even though dancing is not allowed in public places, I remember some occasions when Iranian people including women danced in the streets to celebrate.

Dance is all about celebration and not deprivation. It's about the Iranian women's will to be who they are in spite of any restrictions. Dance is my metaphor for freedom of expression.

In *Dance*, all three dancers use dance as a language. And because of the expressiveness of facial features, eyes, eyebrows, lips, there is an intimacy created between the dancer and the observer. It's almost as if they are inviting the observer to take part in a conversation.

Music is another factor that makes Persian dance inviting. All three dancers dance to the same piece of music that the spiritual dancer originally danced to. It's a spiritual music that is made in the modern time. And the music piece is made using traditional musical instruments which I believe is relevant to all three dances.

The reason I started this video with the spiritual dance is that this dance is an interpretation of the Sufi dance of Sama. In Sufism you learn to find every answer from within yourself, and only when you can achieve this, are you transformed to the status in which your body becomes transparent and light. You can then whirl endlessly for a long time. Knowing that every expression comes from within and because Persian dance is an expression of one's inner feelings, the spiritual dance of Sama seemed like the most suitable dance to start this video.

The traditional dance starts about two minutes into the spiritual dance and the last dance to start is the modern because it is the culture and tradition that builds the modern. The three dances include body expressions specific to each dance but also have certain similarities. Although not as often and as ecstatically as the spiritual dancer, the

traditional dancer also whirls during her dance. And the modern dancer uses similar hand movements to the traditional dancer.

Dance ends with the traditional, modern and the spiritual dances fading out in turn. I kept the spiritual dance till the end of the video because it is a modern interpretation of the dance of Sama and includes the hand movements of the traditional Persian dance. And I chose to end the traditional dance first because the traditions are often modified to build the modern. In other words they still live in the modern.

Dance ends when the young woman on the middle screen finishes her spiritual dance on the floor.

Chapter 6



NESHAT AND I

My approach to making video art is very different from Neshat's. Shirin Neshat's videos are different from mine both in terms of content and ways we make them. In so many ways, Neshat's approach to making her videos is more similar to the way filmmakers' approach motion pictures rather than the way video artists approach video art. According to a video artist Mike Hoolboom (2006), film is like writing. You start from nothing. Video, on the other hand, is like sculpture. You have this mass in front of you, a block of stone or wood and from that block you take away and erase. Based on this definition, Neshat's art work has been made the same way the films are made. She writes scenarios and hires a whole crew of cameramen, editors, actors and actresses. She plans everything before she starts filming. My art work, on the other hand, is more similar to Hoolboom's definition of video. I film before I plan the content of my video. When I am filming, I do not have a clear picture of what my video will look like in the end. I do not write scenarios, I don't ask people to perform for me, and I film and edit my videos myself. I don't plan my videos before I start editing. Everything becomes clear during editing. Just like in sculpture I cut images until I am satisfied with what is remaining. And only then I focus on the details.

The three of Neshat's videos, *Turbulent*, *Rapture* and *Fervor*, are made in black and white and therefore look like documentary, in spite of the fact that they were all performances based on a written scenario. My two videos, *Unveiling* and *Dance* were made in color. They are not made to look like documentary. And they are made to show diversity.

In *Turbulent* and *Fervor*, Neshat uses the Persian language which is foreign to the majority of her viewers. I use the universal body language.

Although Neshat and I are both Iranians who have emigrated from our countries, Neshat prefers to show in her videos what she rejects about the Iranian society and I prefer to show what I like and miss. My videos are about the celebration of womanhood and women's freedom of expression, while hers are about women's deprivation and oppression. With my videos, I do not confirm the image of Iranian women that is shown in the western media. Neshat's portrayal of Iranian women is in support of the western media.

In *Covering Islam* (1996), Edward Said shows how the modern western media controls and manipulates our perception of Islam and the Muslim world in order to define a self-image for the western countries. According to Said, the construction of identity in every age and every society involves establishing opposites and "Others". This happens because "the development and maintenance of every culture requires the existence of another different and competing *alter ego*". Orientalism has the West to see Islamic culture as static in both time and place, as "eternal, and incapable of defining itself" (p. 72). This has given the west a sense of its own cultural and intellectual superiority.

As Khan (1998) explains in his review of Said's *Covering Islam* (1996), the western media determine what we should and what we should not know about Islam and the Muslim world. They want us to see Islam as oppressive because it requires women to wear a veil and cover their body parts from unrelated men. They want us to see Islam as restrictive because it bans physical contact between unrelated men and women and

because it bans drinking alcohol and gambling. They want us to see Islam as backward because of the unequal status of men and women in the Muslim societies and dangerous because it is considered a threat to the western world.

Khan (1998) also explains that,

Although the western media claims to be impartial, liberal, free and objective in reality it is biased, subjective, illiberal, insensitive and intolerant. It does not want you to think because it wants to do the thinking for you. It does not want you to question because it wants you to accept it as the truth. It does not want you to know because it wants to control you. This enables it to determine how you perceive yourself and others. In the end, the media's perception of the world becomes your own perception because you no longer have a perception of your own. From then on you do not see things as they are in reality. You only see the media's interpretation of reality without questioning it! (para. 4)

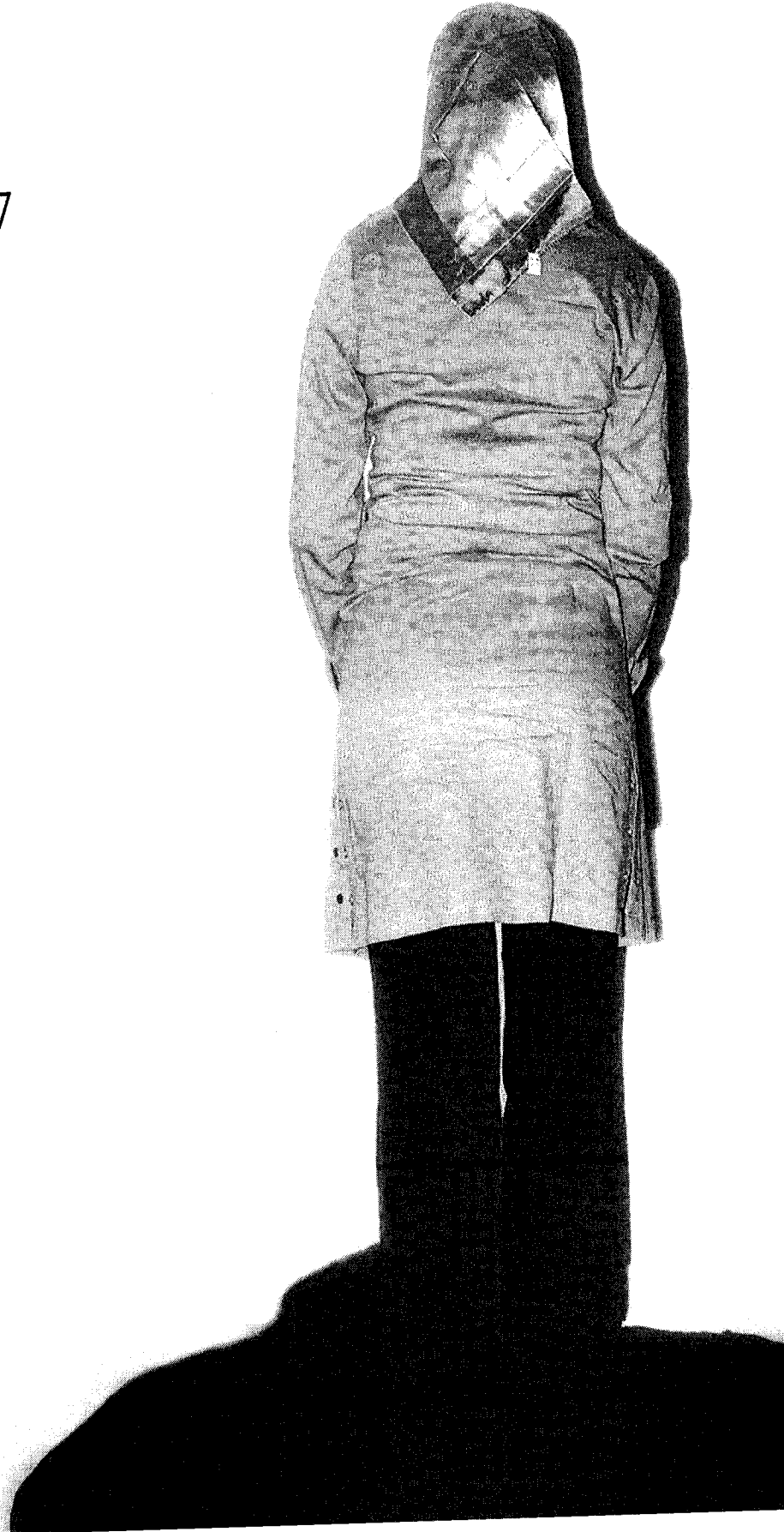
This I believe is what has happened regarding the image of Iranian women in the western world. The Western media has portrayed Iranian women as being veiled, oppressed, having no will or freedom and not being able to express their feelings for such a long time that this image has become accepted as "The True" image of Iranian women in the west.

And the tragedy, in my opinion, is not only that the restrictions and censorship regarding cinema inside Iran has forced many Iranian film makers to unwillingly confirm this image but also that some Iranian filmmakers who do not have to work within these restrictions choose to portray the same image of women in Iran.

In my videos, I have tried to portray an image of Iranian women that is missing in the western media and in films (i.e.: Sara, 1993; A moment of innocence, 1996; Pari, 2000)

and video (i.e.: Neshat's videos) made for the international market by Iranians inside and outside Iran.

Chapter 7



CONNECTION TO ART EDUCATION

Art practice, in its most elemental form, is an educational act, for the intent is to provoke dialogue and to initiate change.

Sullivan, 2006, p. 33

This project was an attempt to explore a theoretical basis for artistic practice and to position it within the discourse of research. In this thesis I have used interpretation as a means to conduct art-based research and I have focused on the value of metaphor as a tool for visual research.

As Garoian (2006) explains, while there is little disagreement about the importance of visual arts education among the general public, when push comes to shove within the political economy of schooling, art is the first area of content to be questioned, reduced, if not eliminated, from the curriculum. Visual arts have never been considered required for children's basic education. The importance of math and sciences in education have never been questioned but research regarding the importance of arts education goes back only to the mid- 1960s with the focus on the importance creativity in children's education. However, "Creativity has not been central to a pragmatic understanding of art's intellectual value in knowledge acquisition" (Garoian, 2006, p. 108).

Both Terry Barrett (2003a; 2003b) and Graeme Sullivan (2005; 2006) bring more understanding and appreciation for visual arts in the academic settings by introducing new ways that visual arts can play a significant role in education.

In his article, *Interpreting art: Building Communal and Individual Understandings* (2003a), Barrett discusses that "by carefully responding to works of art through inquiring,

telling and listening, people build nurturing communities engaged in active learning about art and life” (p. 291). In this article Barrett introduces visual interpretation as a tool for acquiring knowledge.

During my thesis project I read many critiques and interpretations of the visual data that I was analyzing and through reading those interpretations and through building my own interpretation of the images I learned a lot about the power of images in the media and how they can persuade the viewers to hold certain values. The analysis of visual data has helped me develop a deeper understanding of the interpretation of visual metaphors. It has consequently helped me learn more about my own art and how it can be interpreted by different viewers.

Sullivan argues in his book, *Art Practice as Research: Inquiry in the visual arts* (2005) that the visual arts can constitute significant research and contribute in significant ways to children’s creative and intellectual inquiry and to developing the practitioner-researcher who is capable of imaginative and insightful enquiry. Sullivan (2006) explains that various terms are used to describe this kind of research and each of the terms focus on different constituencies. **Arts-based researchers** “are generally interested in improving our understanding of schooling and how the arts can reveal important insights about learning and teaching” (p. 20).

My thesis project emphasizes on the importance of interpreting images in the media. And I agree with Sturken and Cartwright (2001) in that,

The world we inhabit is filled with visual images. They are central to how we represent, make meaning, and communicate in the world around us.... Over the

course of the last two centuries western culture has come to be dominated by visual rather than oral or textual media. (p. 1)

Images are constantly created and manipulated to advertise certain products and views. If the young population is not conscious of the manipulative strategies of the media, and does not learn how to interpret the messages carried by images in the media, they will be unwittingly promoting, and otherwise consuming opinions with which we may or may not agree. This makes it essential to include studies of media arts in the school curriculum with the intent to enlarge students' understanding of the personal, social and civic consequences of these forms of artistic expression.

Arts-informed researchers and **Artographers**² “have a similar interest in schools, community and culture, but their focus is on developing the practitioner-researcher who is capable of imaginative and insightful inquiry” (Sullivan, 2006, p. 20).

As an artist and researcher this thesis project has made me more conscious of how my artwork can be interpreted by different viewers. It has made me more aware of the messages behind images in other artists' artworks as well as my own. And therefore I have become more considerate of the fact that art is as much personal as it is public. As Sullivan (2006) explains:

Interpretative research is an acknowledgement that art practice is not only a personal pursuit but also a public process that can change the way we understand things. Consequently, the ideas expressed and communicated have an interpretive utility that assumes different textual forms as other make sense of what it is artists have to say through what it is they see. (pp. 31-32)

² A/r/tography “references the multiple roles of Artist, Researcher and Teacher as the frame of reference through which art practice is explored as a site for inquiry” (Sullivan, 2006, p. 25).

This research has also helped me improve both as an artist and as a researcher. As a result I have come to believe that if art making and research go together they can produce better results.

Practice-based researchers focus on defining studio based teaching and art learning practices in higher education as scholarly inquiry (Sullivan, 2006). According to Sullivan (2005):

A challenge for many teachers in art programs is to define their studio-based teaching and art-learning practices not only as a form of professional training, but as scholarly inquiry.... Studio-based inquiry in visual arts will have greater institutional credibility if it is built on sound theoretical principles that can be shown to satisfy basic criteria for research practice. (p. xiii)

My thesis project exemplifies one way that visual arts practice can be theorized as research.

Seeing Shirin Neshat's work made me interested in researching images and hidden meanings behind them as well as the notion of photographic truth in video. It also motivated me to investigate how I might address the issues of women in Iran, in my artwork. Consequently, I made my two videos, *Unveiling* and *Dance*.

My goal for this art project was to present a different view of women in Iran. Neshat and many well known Iranian film makers have created the image of Iranian women that many people have become accustomed to, ever since the Islamic revolution in Iran. Iranian women have continuously been portrayed as veiled, having no choice, oppressed and deprived of freedom. By making my two videos, *Dance* and *Unveiling*, I have tried to

challenge this image and present a reality that I, as an Iranian woman who has lived most of her life in Iran, am in the position to show.

My intent for this project was not to claim to have captured “the truth”, but to put my representation of the reality next to other’s and give the viewers a chance to analyze, compare and interpret.

For my analysis I have focused on the value of metaphor as a tool for interpretive visual research. I have done a visual analysis of metaphors that Shirin Neshat and I have used in our videos and investigated how her art compares to mine. The analysis of visual data helped me develop a deeper understanding of the interpretation of visual metaphors.

Through this qualitative research and through analyzing Neshat’s videos and my own, I have learned more about my art, my identity; who I am and choose to be, where I stand, why I make art the way I do and how my art defines me. I have been able to give a new level of context to my artwork and my life and find new meanings in my art. And consequently I have learned about how I would approach teaching art and what I would include in my teaching.

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