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Master thesis

# Sex below the Iranian radar

Interpreting coded sex in Iranian Cinema

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*To Women. Life. Freedom*

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## **Preface**

Supervisor: Kim Wilkins (Spring 2019 – autumn 2022)

## **Abstract**

This dissertation considers the coded portrayal of sexual moments in contemporary Iranian cinema. In accordance with government censorship regulations, in post-revolutionary cinema actors and actresses cannot display sexual intimacy and women should wear the hijab. These regulations imply that sexual moments are not present in Iranian cinema, however, Iranian filmmakers have developed a series of codes that enable sexual moments to be depicted through alternative methods. These codes are known to Iranian audiences as “the conventional codes of sex” but remain largely unknown to foreign viewers. In this dissertation, I unpack these codes and their function in different contexts, from romantic couples, and unwanted sex, to dark comedy through a close analysis of domestically popular Iranian films. My dissertation is guided by three intersecting research questions: How does censorship and coding effect the depiction of sexual moments in Iranian cinema? In what ways have Iranian filmmakers managed to negotiate strict regulations and audience interest with regard to sex? How the governing bodies interpreted the guidelines?

I will show how Iranian filmmakers with cinematic techniques decode the forbidden moments and how the Iranian audience decodes them. Also, I will try to interpret visual images that represent sexuality in these three films and shed light on how the Iranian political and social context force filmmakers to represent these moments allegorically.

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## Introduction

In her book, *Allegory in Iranian Cinema* (2019) Michelle Langford writes about her first experience watching Iranian movies. She recalls: “At that time I was poorly equipped to unpack their multiple layers of meaning, particularly those that emerged from specificities of Iranian social, cultural and political context, however, I felt that the film themselves were nudging me with cinematic cue” (Langford, 2019, p.2). Langford’s experience is common among foreign audiences of Iranian films. Indeed, misunderstanding and misinterpretation can occur because they are not familiar with the Iranian context. When I am talking about Iranian cultural context here in my thesis, I am both cultural specificity (like for any national cinema) but in addition to this, I mean the coding the hidden meaning as a direct result of censorship. An audience of Iranian films needs to be equipped with Iranian social, political and cultural context, to understand the coding and decoding of this cinema. This is especially pertinent when Iranian artists depict forbidden acts, such as those of a sexual nature. However, despite the regulations against the explicit depiction of sex acts in Iranian public media, sex and sexuality remain a narrative and thematic component of many Iranian films.

In Islam, like other Abrahamic religions, any sexual relationship outside of marriage is considered illicit and carries severe punishment. Hijab and censorship are woven to the Iranian cultural context in ways that create both limitations and conflicts for artists. Hijab became mandatory for Iranian women after the Islamic Revolution in 1979. Since then, the state has demanded that women wear hijab in public. The women in society should cover their hair and their body should cover as well. As many Iranian women do not believe Islam and are not Muslim, they do not cover all parts of their hair and they wear scarf to just follow the rules and, in some way, show they do not agree with the concept of it and of course (Figure.1). Women who deeply believe in Islam should cover all parts of their hair. Iranian women never wear hijab at home. But because films are screened for the public, the regulations for appropriate dress are mandated within the film world. The result is that female characters on-screen are mandated to wear hijab regardless of a scene’s setting. As such, women are seen wearing hijab in domestic settings, and in moments of intimacy which is far removed from Iranian cultural practices. This, in turn, creates a situation in which the representation of Iranian culture on film matches with the regulations rather than reality;

for example, a wife may wear hijab in front of her husband, or women are shown to sleep in hijab. These unrealistic situations cause lots of questions for non-Iranian audience and show very non-realistic and even scary perspective of real Iran.



Figure 1 Iranian women on street of Tehran

Furthermore, actors of different sexes cannot touch each other because of Islamic regulations. As such, it may seem that kissing and sex are not present on Iranian cinema screens. However, both are present, we just need to know how to read it. Iranian filmmakers screen sexuality with an understanding of the perspective of the system and boundaries of censorship.

Censorship has been woven to Iranian cinema from its inception. For example, “Mirza Ebrahim Khan Sahaf Bashi was the first one who screened short films for people of Tehran in 1904. However, Sahaf Bashi’s cinema was closed within one month. He was arrested and the government forced him and his family into exile” (Sadar, 2006, p.9). This is not just a result of the Iranian revolution; we can see many of limitations to what could be screened through the history of Iranian cinema. Nick Deocampo in his book, *Early Cinema in Asia* called this act a first instance of censorship in history of Iranian cinema that traces of religion can be seen in this act.

Sahaf Bashi's cinema did not last for one month because of his political activities as nationalist and an individual who lobbying for a constitutional monarchy. Also, religious opposition provided the Shah's police with a sufficient excuse to arrest Sahaf Bashi, close down the cinema, and confiscate his projector and related equipment. (Decampo, 2017, p.257)

Mozaff ar al-Din Shah <sup>1</sup> was fan of cinema and photography, and despite all his interest in cinema and photography, ordered to closed Sahaf Bashi's cinema because he was afraid of religious opposition. One of the reasons of this restriction was that "Sahaf Bashi showed the pictures of nude foreign women in his cinema" (Parviz Jahed,2021). As long as public space belonged to men and women were restricted to domestic areas, revealing what happened at domestic was not acceptable in public. This included female nudity.

I wrote short history of censorship in Iran cinema because there is typical belief among people who are somewhat familiar with Iran that limitations and restrictions Iranian people (in this thesis Iranian filmmakers) face with are only the result of the Iranian revolution. But in reality, we have always had these limitations throughout our cinema history.

In this thesis, I examine the portrayal of sexuality through Iranian cinema after the 1979 revolution. It is important to note here, in this thesis I am looking at domestically popular films not only just those that make the international festival circuit and write about sexual moments in these movies. All of the films that I will analyses were released post-2000, primarily because Iranian artists experienced more freedom by the presidency of Mohammad Khatami, the leader of the reformist movement in Iran since 1997. He was a cultural minister before his presidency; therefore, he was familiar with restricted rules and tried to change them. Also, he knew about the importance and power of cinema in the society. Most of Iranian artists talked about his presidency as a best period of time for during the history of Islamic Republic. For example, Rakshan Bani Etemad Iranian director said; "Mr. Khatami's approach to art and cinema, and in general the atmosphere has been created, has actually been effective in breaking the barriers of suffocation" (Bani Etemad, 2000). Another reason that Iranian cinematographers trusted Khatami, was that the

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<sup>1</sup> Mozaff ar al-Din Shah bought a Lumière Cinématographe and assigned his court photographer to make films showing him and life in the royal circle.

deputy minister of guidance during Khatami's time was Seifollah Dad (An Iranian director and screenwriter). Farhad Towhidi Iranian screenwriter also believes:

With all the problems that Mr. Khatami faced during his presidency, he did his best. By having Saifullah Dad in his cabinet, the Iranian filmmaker trusted Khatami. Eliminating the approval of the scenario and reducing the tenure of the government from cinema was very important for Iranian cinema (Towhidi, 2005).

As Blake Atwood writes in his book *Reform Cinema in Iran* (2016); “This period also witnessed new thematic possibilities within film, including explicitly political subject matter, critiques of the Iran-Iraq war, and love stories. Also, films participated in defining terms like ‘civil society’ ‘democracy’ and ‘role of law’ within the context of Islamic Republic” (Atwood, 2016, p.20). This was a period in which Iranian cinema gained more international attention, both through events like festivals—as Donmez-Colin puts it; “Lauded at international festival and commercially released in the West, such as film focus on women’s plight in a period of transition when traditional values of Islam are challenged by modernity and contemporaneity” (Donmez-Colin, 2004, p.155). Donmez-Colin also expresses that through these years, Iranian filmmakers were testing the limits to see how far they could push the relatively relaxed censorship (Ibid). This new atmosphere gave them more freedom to talk about woman’s issues and romantic movies had more free space to show romance between male and female actors— something that was unimaginable before this period. Hamid Reza Sadr in his book *Iranian Cinema: a Political History* 2006 claimed;

Filmmakers were now able to play with taboos. They often referred to subjects associated with Islamic codes and rules pertaining to women after the Revolution. In an allegorical scene in Mohsen Makhmalbaf’s *Sokut (The Silence, 1999)* made in Tajikistan, a teenage girl dances unveiled to rhythmic music. Though this scene was still considered controversial, Makhmalbaf succeeded in his challenge to the authorities to release his film uncensored. (Sadr, 2006, p.241)

Iranian film scholars have written about the increased freedoms in Khatami’s presidency. But, from the previous paragraphs, we can see directors still faced problems and they used allegorical scenes to screen sexual moments. Although filmmakers had more freedom of expression, their depiction of sexuality was still largely allegorical. We need to keep in mind, the concept of freedom of expression

has very different meanings in the country to country. Here in this context, it does not mean include not wearing a hijab or giving freedom to actors to touch each other. Sexuality is still taboo, screened using coding and in allegorical ways.

Langford writes that after around a ten-year trial and error period, there was a considerable turn away from allegorical mode of expression to a new sub-genre of realistic drama in Iranian cinema since 2009. She believes there are several factors that have led to this turn. First, the international success of Asghar Farhadi's *Separation* (2011) has arguably led to the rise of a new sub-genre. What Langford sees as a sub-genre is about screening contemporary Iran and putting characters in realistic situations and showing their reactions and decisions in these kinds of situations. As Langford writes:

These are films that encourage viewer to reflect on social relations in contemporary Iran, they tend not to invite deeper, allegorical reading. They also display little in the way of the poetic expression so prominent in films made during the first two decades after the revolution. Indeed, there has been a decided shift away from the kind of art film pioneered by the likes of Abbas Kiarostami and Mohsen Makhmalbaf. In some way, this suggests that Iranian filmmakers are becoming more direct emboldened to confront social issues head-on, rather than relying on allegory and poetry (Langford, 2019, p.10).

*Final Whistle* (2011) directed by Niki Karimi, *Sadat Abad* (2011) directed by Mazyar Miri are good examples for the sub-genre that Langford describes. These are not arthouse film but mainstream. These movies depict social relations and conflicts between characters in realistic situations within contemporary Iran. Movies like these are seen to screen "somehow real Iran"; at least for cultural outsiders. I said for cultural outsiders because these movies have a chance to screen outside of Iran and therefore were not only seen by a domestic audience.

From my point of view, the advantages of the sub-genre Longford talks about is that foreign audiences can be familiar with Iranian social life in contemporary Iran. I remember when one of my Swedish friends after watching *A Separation* (2011) told me: "Wow it is unbelievable you have

a unique African sculpture as a decoration at your house and house is very modern!” She was surprised because before this movie she had only watched Kiarostami’s films that mostly take place in villages or on the streets of Iran. Movies like *A Separation* screens Iranian society in more realistic ways. Of course, these are good candidates for representing the Iranian cultural context in new ways for the non-Iranian audience, or maybe they simply reduce the stupid questions we are asked by foreigners. Here they can see we have cars in Iran and TVs in our homes. Even though these films provide foreign audience with the view of Iran that is more realistic than that of much arthouse cinema, there are unavailable to foreign audiences who do not understand the coding systems used to get around censorship.

Contrary to Langford’s claims, without a doubt, there is still no way for Iranian filmmakers to show sexual acts without allegorical expression. Directors still show sexuality metaphorically in these realist dramas, albeit through different coding. Maybe some governments can give filmmakers little bit of freedom of expression but they cannot change the Islamic rules that are woven to the constitution and some unwritten laws. So, hijab, nudity, and touching between male and female actors are still taboo as long as the Islamic Republic of Iran exists. As such, filmmakers do not have the freedom to screen them realistically, so they still rely on allegorical expression.

## Research questions and methodology

In this thesis, I consider the coded portrayal of sexual moments in contemporary Iranian cinema. My analysis of sexual moments attempts to unpack the relationship between the filmmaker and viewer as coders and decoders, in Stuart Hall's terms (1993), under the conditions of censorship. Through close analysis of three Iranian feature films, I attempt to answer the following questions:

- How does censorship and coding affect the depiction of sexuality in Iranian cinema?
- In what ways have Iranian filmmakers managed to negotiate strict regulations and audience interest with regard to forbidden themes such as sex and passion?
- How have the governing bodies interpreted the guidelines?

By focusing on the allegorical depiction of sexual moments in Iranian cinema my aim is to make understandable to a foreign readership how an Iranian audience can read the supposedly 'hidden' meaning of such moments overtly.

In a series of selected case studies, I unpack codes and their function in a different context of romantic couple *Subdued* (Nematolah, 2017), unwanted sex *Cold sweat* (Beiraghi, 2018) to dark comedy *Italy Italy* (Sabbaghzade, 2017). I employ close textual analysis informed by cultural studies as my methodology. With this methodology, I will try to interpret visual images that represent sexuality in these three films and shed light on how the Iranian political and social context force filmmakers to represent these moments allegorically. I will also comment on how Iranian audiences may read these moments. Gillian Rose in her book *Visual Methodologies* (2001) writes that researching using visual images, "in a process of interpreting visual images, discovering the truth of images is not something we are looking for in this methodology. But, justifying our interpretation is very important" (Rose, 2001, p.3). The interpretation of visual images as they appear in Iranian movies in a context of sexuality is something I try to show in my thesis. For example, in a movie *Pomegranate and Cane* (1988) directed by Saeed Ebrahimifar, there is a sequence that shows the wedding of a young teacher and his now wife. It also shows sex between bride and groom. Before the wedding sequence, there is close up that shows the groom (who is a calligraphy teacher) sharpening his reed pen and preparing it for writing (Figure 2).



Figure 2 *Pomegranate and Cane* (1988) directed by Saeed Ebrahimifar

Then, he puts his reed pen into some honey. We then see honey dripping from the reed pen. For interpreting the visual images of this sequence, if I try to discover the truth of the image as it appears, I would say; the calligrapher is preparing himself for writing and so he put his reed pen into the honey to make his pen softer. Calligraphers do this to have a softer pen and also, as Iranian saying, so they can write sweeter. But Ebrahimifar constructs this sequence to show something more than softening the pen, or preparing to write. This sequence represents the groom preparing himself for the first sex with his bride. In traditional families in Iran, the bride and groom experience their first sex on the wedding night. As such the reed pen represents the groom's penis, and dipping the reed pen into the honey shows intercourse between the bride and groom. After this sequence there is jump cut to the wedding party. Then we see the teacher's hand squeezing a pomegranate (Figure 3), and the pomegranate juice is poured into a water container (Figure 4). The pomegranate in the water resembles drops of blood in water, showing that sex has taken place with the breaking of the hymen. In the past and also now in a very traditional families, bride must show the napkin with blood to show her taken virginity to the women of family. Director uses a pomegranate as a conventional sign as a sexual relationship between this couple that cause the pregnancy. "In Persian culture, the pomegranate – a fruit, which is native to Iran and Afghanistan – commonly symbolizes fertility" (Lagford, 2019. p.158). At the end of this sequence, we can see the pregnant on the swing. I wrote this example to show how an interpretation of visual images beyond what is literally seen is important in Iranian cinema, especially, in the context of sexuality. As an audience you need to be careful and equipped to unpack the hidden meanings.



Figure 3 *Pomegranate and Cane* (1988) directed by Saeed Ebrahimifar



Figure 4 *Pomegranate and Cane* (1988) directed by Saeed Ebrahimifar

For analyzing the sequence like this and interpreting visual images Rose argues, viewers need to develop their critical approach. She guides us and tells us what is the necessary for it:

1. ***Takes images seriously.*** it is necessary to look very carefully at visual images, and it is necessary to do so because they are not entirely reducible to their context. Visual representations have their own effects.

2. *Thinks about the social conditions and effects of visual objects.* Cultural practices like visual representations both depend on and produce social inclusion and exclusions, and a critical account needs to address both those practices and their cultural meanings.
3. *Considers your own way of looking at images.* If ways of seeing are historically, geographically, culturally and socially specific, then how you or I look is not natural or innocent. So, it is necessary to reflect on how you as a critic of visual images are looking. (Ibid. p,15.16)

As a researcher of sexual moments in Iranian cinema, I must pay attention to images and take them seriously. Rose writes “Images are made and used in all sorts of ways by different people for different reasons, and these makings and uses are crucial to the meanings an image carries” (Ibid, p.14). Visual images in the context of sexuality in Iranian cinema do carry this meaning, just not overtly. So, it is very important to understand the reason behind making and using them. A reed pen can represent the penis when it appears on screen within social and political conditions of Iran because of the restricted morality rules. For representing the reed pen in sequence analyzed above, I have to clarify to my readers the role of censorship in Iran (as a political issue) and how Iranian filmmakers cope with it. Also, I have to explain the traditions and beliefs of the traditional families in Iran.

Rose also states that the meaning of the messages made at three sites: “the site(s) of the production of an image, the site of the image itself, and the site(s) where it is seen by various audiences” (Ibid, p16). Rose notes that distinguishing between these three sites is difficult. Following Rose, to guide my research, I have provided some questions that have helped in analyzing the selected films.

- When was it made?
- Where was it made?
- Who made it? Was it made for someone else?
- What technologies does its production depend on?
- Does the genre of the image address these identities and relations of its production?
- Does the form of the image reconstitute those identities and relations? (Ibid, 188)

These questions guide my writing on the general information about films, such as information about historical context and directors and the types of films they produce.

The second site is the image itself. Of the image I ask:

- What is being shown?
- What are the components of the image?
- How has its technology affected the text?
- What is, or are, the genre(s) of the image? Is it documentary, soap opera, or melodrama, for example? (Ibid, p.189)

Here, I pay attention to technology how the form, content and style of image makes, reproduce and display. For example, in sequence of *Pomegranate and Cane* editing and close up shots helps us to understand allegorical meaning of sex between bride and groom. The edits place the different images close together with jump cuts to show the connection between them. Through editing the images of the bride, groom, reed pen and pomegranate and pomegranate juice, despite not being necessarily related, become closely related, and allow an allegorical reading of sexual intercourse.

And the last site(s) where it is seen by various audiences.

- Who were the original audience(s) for this image?
- Where and how would the text have been displayed originally?
- Is more than one interpretation of the image possible?
- How actively does a particular audience engage with the image?
- is there any evidence that a particular audience produced a meaning for an image that differed from the meanings? (Ibid)

This site is important for my thesis as I show how Iranian filmmakers have developed a series of codes that enable sexual moments to be depicted through alternative methods. By answering the above questions, I will show how these codes operate to an Iranian audience.

As I previously stated, censorship has not ceased the depiction of sexuality and sex acts in Iranian cinema but prompted filmmakers to find alternative ways to show such material indirectly. There

is an unwritten agreement between Iranian artists and Iranian audiences about encoding and decoding of forbidden acts under the shadow of censorship—indeed, a specific set of images and scenarios have emerged as a coded common visual language between filmmakers and audiences. A series of codes have emerged to show sexuality through alternative methods: for example, loosening a scarf, unlocking clothing, removing earrings and necklaces (Figure.5) preparing to bed, closing or opening a door of the bedroom, turning off lights and whispering in the dark. The Iranian audience decodes these actions, as Amini in his *article Love and sex in recent Iranian cinema* calls them, “conventional codes of sex” (Amini, 2013, p.3). The Iranian audience is, by now, so well trained in decoding this material that it is conceived as a natural part of cinema spectatorship. Rose argues “what is important about images is not simply the image itself, but how it is seen by particular spectators who look in particular ways” (Rose, 2001, p.11). The “conventional codes of sex” are known to Iranian audiences but they are largely unknown for foreign viewers. The Iranian audience are always looking for a hidden meaning in images because of the limitations and restrictions we have always been faced with throughout our history. I think our way of seeing is much more political and we are decoding the images through experience and knowledge. By knowledge, I mean when we look at images, we know that they have been passed under the censor blade. So, it should or may have represent another meaning.



Figure 5 *The Last Step* (2012) directed by Ali Mosafa

Also, in addition to my specific cultural and political knowledge, I take my analytic cues from Stuart Hall's model of encoding/decoding and Julian Petley's work on censorship. By showing the process of decoding to the reader I am laying bare the ways in which censorship generates allegorical meaning in Iranian cinema. For understanding the allegorical meaning, I look to Langford help me to analysis these moments.

## Theory and Approach

### Stuart Hall Encoding and Decoding

To better understand the coded sexual moments in Iranian cinema and process of communication between Iranian audience and filmmakers, I use Stuart Hall's encoding and decoding model. Hall argues the process of communication meaning and messages is systematically distorted. The message sent from producer does not directly convey to receivers. 'Encoding/decoding' is a model of communication in mass media. This model focuses on the interpretation of the audience from messages they received.

In this model, Hall refers to the circulation of meaning between the sender, message, and receiver. All of these items in Hall's model have their own roles. Hall called this process a complex structure in dominance "sustained through the articulation of connected practices, each of which, however, retains its distinctiveness and has its own specific modality, its own forms and conditions of existence" (Hall, 1999, p.508).

The producer who makes the message is the encoder and the audience who receives the message is the decoder. Encoders use different materials such as words, and symbols to send their message and receivers take the message and decode it. Hall states that the message between decoder and the encoder may not be the same because of that he named meaning structures 1 and meaning structures 2 in his diagram (Figure.6). The message encoded and decoded in the process of communicative exchange between the encoder and decoder. But the message in between is not the same because of the process of interpretation and justifying of the meaning as I mentioned previously. What the audience or encoder received is not necessarily the truth nor transparent. It is not certain the message has been encoded as intended by the minds of the encoder. This is the concept that Hall calls 'misunderstanding' or 'distortions'.

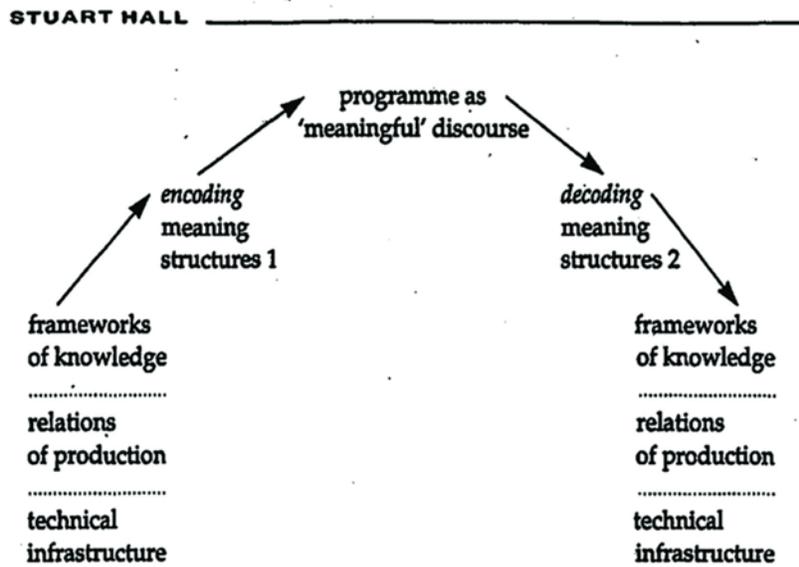


Figure 6 Hall's Encoding & Decoding model (Hall, p.511, 1999)

The reasons behind ‘distortions’ or ‘misunderstandings’ can be “the lack of fits between two codes and also the asymmetry between the codes of ‘source’ and ‘receiver’ at the moment of transformation into and out of the discursive form. What are called ‘distortions’ or ‘misunderstandings’ arise precisely from the lack of equivalence between the two sides in the communicative exchange” (Ibid. p.510). This misunderstanding happens because we are facing iconic signs and the representation of iconic signs is not straightforward. What we call iconic signs here from Hall’s explanation in the book *REPRESENTATION Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (1997) is; “Visual signs are what are called iconic signs. That is. they bear, in their form, a certain resemblance to the object, person or event to which they refer” (Hall, 1997, p.20). For representing the iconic signs, the audience are faced with something that we can refer to as different things. For example, the meaning of water tap is not usually read metaphorically. But if water is presented in a close up shot, a running tap screen can, as it does Iranian film, represent an orgasmed penis. Hall refers “the process of coding and decoding to the orders of social life, of economic and political power and of ideology” (Hall, 1999, p.513). An Iranian audience decode the tap water as an orgasmic penis because the prevailing political conditions do not let producers to screen the real penis. In this context, we can understand how production and reception

of the message are not identical, but they are related: “they are differentiated moments within the totality formed by the social relations of the communicative process as a whole”. (Ibid, p.509). Tap water on screen is only water but when it integrated to the social and political relations of one country like Iran can be decoded very far from the linguistic signs of it.

Hall identifies three hypothetical positions from which decoding might be made to show the importance of effective communication exchange between encoder and decoder.

1. ***Dominant-hegemonic reading***. When the viewer takes the connoted meaning from, (I say here films) and decodes the message in terms of the reference code in which it has been encoded, we might say that the viewer is operating inside the dominant code (Ibid,515).

This is an ideal-typical case of ‘perfectly transparent communication’ and decoder gets the message without questioning. In this position, we cannot see many differences between meaning structure 1 and meaning structure 2. For example, in an uncensored society, the artist can show sex between actors for encoding romantic moments and audience can easily decode this message as erotic. This is something that rarely happens in Iranian cinema in the context like sexuality.

2. ***Negotiated reading***. In this position, decoder get the message but because unequal relation to the discourse and logics of power, they do not completely accept it.

Hall identifies this position as a ‘failure in communications’ (Ibid, p.517) because of the misunderstanding occurs between encoder and decoder. This decoding can happen for foreigners watching Iranian films who are not familiar with Iranian context or cinema codes. An example is Beiraghi’s *Cold Sweat* which shows unwanted oral sex by having the actress brush her teeth angrily. I was watching this movie with my foreigner friend. My friend said, “why is she brushing her teeth like this?” He did not believe this sequence related to the previous sequence when the husband flirted with his wife. My friend was not equipped to decode the sexual moments in Iranian cinema. What he read from this sequence was an angry woman who hurt her teeth by brushing roughly rather than washing normally. So, this unevenness of knowledge between encoder and decoder enables this misunderstanding and faulty communication occurs.

3. ***Oppositional reading***. Finally, it is possible for a viewer perfectly to understand both the literal and the connotative inflection given by a discourse but to decode the message in a globally contrary way (Ibid,517).

In this position shows the importance of decoder in a process of communication and here decoder has an active role.

“One point also needs to be clarified here. Oppositional decoding is different from aberrant decoding. Oppositional decoding is the position where the audience or viewer perfectly understood both the literal and connotative information, but decoded the message contrarily or resisted. And aberrant decoding reflects the lack of “fit” between the producers and audiences, audiences were failing to understand the message and in the sense 196 that they were deviations from the intentions of the sender” (Xie,2021, p.195).

This is the way of reading that Iranian audiences use. For instance, preparing bedding and loosening a scarf are decoded as sexual moments. From my point of view, these conventional codes of sex fall into Hall’s category of oppositional reading, because untying a scarf is literally untying a scarf, and we can see it for what it is without being confused about what is happening on screen and the film will still make sense to us. However, if we want to grasp more than the plot, we need to be able to read beyond what we literally see and understand it as sex act taking place, which alters how we understand the overall story. Loosening a scarf is always a scarf but in the Iranian film context it also always sex—but the second reading is only available to specific audiences. Obviously social and political situation of Iran has a direct effect of this model. These codes have developed out of a need to tell these stories in the face of censorship.

In Iranian context, where there is the reading on the surface and the coded meaning operates in dialogue with this model but is not exactly the same thing. For example, in some sequences the filmmaker does not screen the sexual acts, but we had a dominant hegemonic reading. I mean, we decode the forbidden acts, however, they are not screened vividly. Then, I view the practice as ‘in dialogue with an oppositional reading’. This way of decoding is not the same thing but is related in some way. In chapter one, I will talk about this way of decoding. While I am analyzing the kissing between couples.

## Censorship Julian Petley

Julian Petley in the introduction of his book *Censorship A Beginner's Guide* (2009) mentions that freedom of expression is never absolute (Petley, 2009, p.11). In this book he explains about censorship in the modern world, how it works and how it develops and why film is a more sensitive and dangerous medium than other medium like theater for the government or the people who have power to censor artistic works. "This is not particularly surprising, as the cinema is a form of popular culture, and the more popular a cultural form, the more likely it is to attract the attention of the censorious" (Ibid, p.44). Cinema is a mass medium and as such its huge audiences come from different classes. Shiva Rahbaran in her book *Iranian Cinema Uncensored: Contemporary Film-makers since the Islamic Revolution* (2016) had an interview with the Tahmineh Milani Iranian director, Milani talked about difference between Cinema and other arts in Iran;

In cinema you face an audience of a million people. In Iran, a book sells about 2,000, 3,000, 5,000 copies – 30,000 if it is very popular. But a film can 'communicate' with one million people at the same time. For example, my film *Atash Bas* [*Cease Fire*, 2006] has been watched by millions to date. Thus, in my opinion, cinema is much more publicized and politicized than other artforms and this puts film-makers under a lot of pressure (Rahbran, 2016, p.181).

So, level of the censorship has a direct effect with the number of audiences, the wider the range of audiences, the higher the amount of censorship. Because of this sensitivity toward cinema, I decided mainly work on contemporary Iranian cinema because in comparison, to arthouse films, these films are more widely popular and have a bigger audience. Petley also claimed; "It is particularly important to regulate the cinema as a form of entertainment because 'no art has so quick and so widespread an appeal to the masses'" (Petley, 2009, p,51). The reasons cinema make quick connections with mass audiences are;

The audience for a film is brought closer to the story than the audience for a play through 'light, enlargement of character, presentation, scenic emphasis, etc.', but also, crucially, by 'the enthusiasm for and interest in the film actors and actresses', which 'makes the audience largely sympathetic toward the characters they portray and the stories in which they figure. Hence the audience is more ready to confuse actor and actress and the characters they

portray, and it is most receptive of the emotions and ideals presented by their favorite stars’  
(Ibid. p,51)

For example, in theatre we are present to the real actor in front of us, their bodies are life-size in comparison to those on the cinema screens. In the Iranian context, censorship in cinema is much more restricted than theatre. In Iranian theatre, actors and actresses can be in the same bed together, but this cannot happen in Iranian cinema. An example is the play *Afghan Oedipus* (2018) directed by Mojtaba Jodai. It was an adaptation of *Oedipus*, about a woman who has been having a recurring dream for three nights, when she tells her husband about this dream, they realize that it is her husband’s last dream. The play takes place during the night in their bedroom, when the dream is interpreted. As you can see in figure 7 and 8, actor and actress are very close to each other, and in figure 7, we can see the actor touching the actress although the bed sheet enables the touch to be indirect. In Iranian cinema, if an actor and actress are in a same bedroom the door of the bedroom must be open. Furthermore, they could be seen in the same bed, but they should keep some distance. The distance of the audience from the stage of the theatre and distance of the audience from the cinema screen is another reason makes films sensitive to censorship. Cinema directs the viewer to specific details in a way that theatre does not.

Or, in Petley’s terms, ‘the mobility, popularity, accessibility, emotional appeal, vividness, straightforward presentation of fact in the film makes far more contact with a larger audience and for greater emotional appeal. Hence the larger moral responsibilities of the motion pictures (ibid, p.51)

It seems, the perceived need for censorship is a result of perceived sympathies and engagement of audience with cinema. In efforts to reduce the impacts of this strong connection, artists face with different forms of censorship. The most effective one is a one that denies the production to be made. “This is a particular specialism of authoritarian societies, where the absence of democratic structures makes such a degree of control possible” (Ibid, p.12). In the Iranian context, working on subjects against Islam or the Iranian supreme leader will never receive permission. The artist isn’t allowed to talk about wanting to do these projects.



Figure 7 *Afghan Oedipus* (2018) directed by Mojtaba Jodai.



Figure 8 *Afghan Oedipus* (2018) directed by Mojtaba Jodai.

The next form that Petley discusses is less dramatic, it is the form of lists banned works that are forbidden to work on. “*The Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance Iran*” has formulated specific legislations for these conditions under its “Rules for the screening films and issuing licenses.” (Nemati, 2008, p.80). It is long list, and as such I have included only those with an impact on the depiction of sexuality or sex acts.

- No negation, distortion, or insult to the principles of the Islam
- No insult to political, social and religious leaders of the country.
- No display of excessive corruption or prostitution or other acts opposing public chastity.  
Note: The presence of women should be in a way that does not contradict the human dignity of women and does not encourage them to be against the hijab and Islamic regulations.
- No content that will aim to weaken national unity, interests, and national security and interests of the Islamic Republic of Iran.
- No promotion and propagate of the ideologies and groups that cause misguidance of the audience. For example, defending authoritarian and arrogant systems.
- Spreading acts of vice and corruption and immorality and acts contrary to public modesty.
- Presenting scenes of sexual relations, details, using expressions and terms and sounds insolent and obscene
- The presence of women should be in such a way that it does not conflict with the human dignity of women and does not cause women to remove their hijab (Nemati, 2018, p.80)

Iranian filmmakers must take this long list into account during the process of making their movies.

The other model and system are a licensing system “by which the authorities grant permission to certain bodies to operate in the marketplace, and is meant to ensure that only works which are produced and/or approved by these organizations are allowed into circulation” (Petley,2009, p.13). All of the Iranian artists in every field of art must obtain a license from “*The Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance Iran*”. Otherwise, they are not permitted to distribute their works in the marketplace or exhibit them in the cinema or galleries. The process of licensing in Iran is very complicated. To obtain the license, the film script must be sent to the Ministry. The General Director of Monitoring, with the approval of The Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance Iran, selects a committee of five religious and knowledgeable people in the field of film and cinema to decide whether or not each film will be granted the license. This group is called Member of Script Review Council. The *Booklet of Rules and regulations of the Cinema Organization* explains that these five people are comprised of

1. A professional filmmaking expert
2. An expert in film production and management

3. An expert familiar with cultural and artistic policies
4. Representative of the General Office of Monitoring and Evaluation
5. Director General of Monitoring and Evaluation (Ibid p.74).

These members read the script and decide whether or not the script adheres to the rules and regulations. After the script is approved for a license, the film may go into production. However, this is not the end of the censorship process. All films are then watched by another committee in order to be granted a separate license to be screened. The Ministry of Culture decides on the members of this committee. These members consist of;

1. Faith leader (Mola) familiar with art and cinema
2. Three people with political, social and Islamic insights and familiar with film and cinema
3. An expert in film and cinema (Ibid)

It is this committee that decides the destiny of made films. It is their task to observe whether or not each film obeys the law. Failure to obey these laws can lead to further censorship, or even a complete ban of the artistic work. On some occasions, films have been licensed only to be discontinued, or subjected to further censorship after some nights of screening simply because the “*Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance Iran*”, and the other groups not belonging to the government, holds the power to do so. This is often a frustrating and confusing situation for producers and filmmakers because even when they believe they have followed the rules clearly lots of unexpected restrictions can still occur to limit or curtail their work.

Rakhshan Bani Etamad who mainly focuses on contemporary women’s issues in Iran. Bani Etamad claimed in an interview with Shiva Rahbaran:

We never had a law that defined censorship, as was the case in, say Nazi Germany or fascist Italy. We have always had various restrictions based on different circumstances and different tastes. Under one minister of culture, representing social issues might be more difficult than showing a close-up of a woman’s beautiful face, but under another minister, the opposite might be the case. In that sense, we had more leeway than filmmakers in another totalitarian regime. (Rahbaran, 2016, p.132)

There is a long list of films, however, that despite being granted a script license, and even a screen license, could not be screened. Bitā Moheṣeni, in her article *Screaming Culture Under The Red Tape Called Censorship* at Faraz Daily Magazine (2021) writes; “More than 230 Iranian films in the last 35 years have never been released in Iran due to various reasons” (Moheṣeni, 2021). On average, seven or eight movies a year. Bani Etemad states “We make our films in full awareness that the person in charge of censorship might change his mind, or be replaced by another soon after the film comes out, and that a film that has been granted screening permission may be pulled from cinemas without warning” (Rahbaran, 2016, p.135). For example, *Travellers* (1992) directed by Bahram Beyzai was nominated for 12 awards from the Fajr International Film Festival, the most important film festival in Iran, and won 6 Simorgh (the prize statuette of the Fajr Festival). However, despite these accolades, it was then first banned for one year and then several scenes were required to be cut in order to get a screening license from the Iranian Ministry of Culture. In response, the director sent his award back to the Ministry of Culture with a long letter which asked how they could give him an award for the best movie in the most important Iranian Film Festival and also disallow the film to be screened. Finally, after ten years, his film was granted a license again and screened without censorship because of the presidency of Mohammad Khatami (3 August 1997 to 3 August 2005). Khatami was a reformist and during his presidency provided licenses to many of the banned films and let them screen without censorship. However, Khatami although a reformist President supporting Iranian artists, he did not have enough power to control the entire censorship situation. In 2001, during his presidency, the feminist filmmaker Tahmineh Milani was arrested and sent to prison while her movie *The Half Hidden* (2001) was screened in Iranian cinemas. The plot is about the teenage life of Fereshteh who was interested in the fall of the Shah, so she joins a revolutionary, communist group. Milani wrote about this event at Baztab Website (2018): “The government has given a license to my film and I made this film with permission of “The Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance Iran”. But they arrested at my place and put me in prison and they were looking for my trial. But fortunately, I was spared.” (Milani, 2018). One of the biggest problems in Iranian government is that sometimes the president and cultural minister do not have power to protect artists and activists. For example, Milani mentioned; “...in this case Khatami, the current president of that time, did not know where Milani was. After a while Khatami helped to get Milani out of prison” (Ibid). There are some people in the Iranian government that are more powerful than the president. We called them “THEY” and we do not

know who are they. The only thing that is very clear for us is that they can do whatever they want. The way THEY follow is a model of censorship that Petley writes is the most effective way of censorship. “Undoubtedly, the most effective way of censoring someone whose views one does not wish to be heard is to kill them, or, failing that, to frighten them into silence” (Petley,2009, p.16). For example, Jafar Panahi is one of the famous Iranian directors with lots national and international prizes such as Venice and Berlin film festival, he is currently in prison. Zahra Mirzai Iranian journalist reporter of ISNA<sup>2</sup> writes what a spokesperson of the Judiciary Iranian government talked about the reasons for Jafar Panahi’s arrest in July19. 2022; “The reason he is in prison is an accusation of collusion against the security of the country. Based on this, he was sentenced to 5 years in Evin prison plus one year in prison for propagandizing against the regime” (Mirzai, 2022). Such events frighten artists against producing films, making them passive and prevent their work.

Alireza Davood Nejad is well-known Iranian director, screenwriter, and producer. In his interview with Bita Moheseni at Fazraz Magazine he talked about the crises of Iranian cinema:

Iranian cinema has always faced two historical problems that prevented its growth and, despite its great potential, did not allow it to reach the markets it deserves in the country, the region and the world. These two problems include the first one, "censorship", which has always been an obstacle in the way of Iranian cinema's approach to Iranian life, and the second one is "market insecurity" which has led Iranian cinema in various forms and directions to passivity, imitation, copying, repetition, stagnation and bankruptcy in every era. (Mohseni,2021)

I think, one of the important points in Davood Nejad description of Iranian cinema is that censorship is an obstacle for Iranian cinema to resemble Iranian life. What we watch on Iranian cinema is not Iranian life. Maybe screening the Iranian life is not the mission of Iranian cinema, but the distance between the society shown and contemporary reality is one of the biggest problems of Iranian cinema. Without doubt is a result of censorship.

Petley writes about iconoclasm as an extreme form of censorship (Petley,2009, p.20). While important, I do not focus on this form in this thesis because it not relevant to the context of code-

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<sup>2</sup> Iranian Students’ News Agency

reading at the core of this thesis. Nevertheless, iconoclasm is very serious in Iranian cinema and no one allow to screen the prophets and holy people in their film. We have lots of religious films in Iranian cinema after the Iranian revolution. The appearance of prophets and holy people is always hidden. But we can hear their voice, and disobeying these rules always causes problems. For the first time in Iranian cinema history, Ahmadreza Darvish Iranian writer and director broke this taboo in his movie *Hussein Who Said NO* (2013) by showing the face of Abulfazl Abbas<sup>3</sup> on his film. This movie was released to the public on July 2013 with the legal permission of the *Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance*, but hours after its release it was stopped. It was criticized by some religious scholars and protested by some religious people because of its content and showing the face of Abulfazl Abbas. Cinema Cinema newspaper in an article; *9 years after making the film; Online screening of "Hussein Who Said NO"* (2022) writes; “Darvish was suggested by the Minister of culture at that time to cover the face of the disputed character by shining light, but the director of the film considered this to be technically impossible for resurrection and also this solution caused the "illusion of the case" (2022) .Finally, after 9 years *Hussein Who Said NO* screened without by showing the face of Abulfazl. Figure 9 is picture of Bhador Zamini who portrayed Abulfazl Abbas.



Figure 9 *Hussein Who Said NO* (2013) directed by Ahmadreza Darvish

At the end, the Islamic Republic tries to remove and censored the sexual relations from Iranian cinema. But many Iranian filmmakers find their own way and have screened sex in allegorical

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<sup>3</sup> He was the was a son of the Imam Ali and Imam Hussain’s brother.

forms. However, some Iranian director like Milani does not like the sexual scenes on films, but they still do not believe the censorship;

Even without censorship I still might not have filmed any sex scenes. I dislike sex scenes as much as verbal abuse. But I could have made better films had it not been for censorship. Sometimes showing love scenes is important. Let's assume we want to show a woman's love somewhere in the film. It would be far more appealing if we were able to show how she caresses or kisses her beloved. But this is not possible under this regime, so we have to choose an alternative. (Rahbaran, 2016, p. 183).

I believe that the only result of these limitations is taking time and energy from artists to find allegorical solutions. And the result of their effort for screening the sexual scenes is often artificial and unrealistic.

## Allegory in Iranian Cinema Michelle Langford

Without doubt censorship has a direct effect in everyday life in Iran. As an Iranian citizen, we have to censor ourselves in public every day. Michelle Langford mentions how this self-censorship is having two lives; private and public spheres. I will write little bit about my own experience to make this situation clear. During my school time, we had a VHS player and we watched lots of Hollywood and forbidden Iranian films on VHS tapes. But based on rules of Islamic Republic having a VHS player was forbidden at that time. My parents always warned me; never ever talk about our VHS player and the movies we watched at school. So, I had to censor what we had at home and what we watched in public spheres. This is not the end of the story; we had censor in our house as well. I remember, we watched "*Gone with the Wind*" (1940) with my cousins at home. My oldest boy cousin had a remote control and he forwarded the kissing and romantic scenes and asked us to close our eyes and cover it with our hands. However, my curiosity never let me not watch and I never closed my eyes completely. He could watch those moments as a boy, but we did not have a right to watch as girls. Also, I understood I should not talk about our family gathering at school or in public because our family members drink alcohol, and drinking alcohol is forbidden in Iran. So, we always have to hide something and censor the story of our daily life because it may cause a trouble for us.

Despite all of the limitation and restriction in Iranian society people always find an alternative way to fly under limitation. Alcohol is forbidden, but people make it at home (Also, they import illegally). We do not have public bar; we have lots of underground parties.

This is particularly true of secular youth, who find ways of doing almost everything that is forbidden by Iran's Islamic authorities, from attending mixed gender parties, drinking alcohol, listening to Western music and watching Hollywood films. Like Iranian film-makers, who find clever ways of getting around the strict censorship guidelines, Iran's youth is highly adept at transgressing those red lines. (Langford, 2019, p,194)

As I mentioned above Iranian people, and especially Iranian women, are living with censorship every day and we are always hiding something to protect our life and security. For example, by wearing hijab in public we are hiding some part of our body. But some Iranian women who do not believed in hijab never cover all parts of their hair with scarf to show their disagreement with this

stupid rule. This way of wearing a scarf signal that they do not believe in hijab and disagree. Iranian women recently started a very powerful movement with the slogan “Woman Life Freedom” when a 22 years old girl Masha Amini was killed after being arrested in Tehran by morality police on 16 September 2022. Women at Mahsa’s funeral took off their hijab, burned their scarves and cut their hair to show their mourning, anger and frustration against morality police and government in Iran.

This action spread not only around all the cities of Iran, but all around the world, creating the biggest movement since the Iran revolution. I believe this is the first-time the world has taken Iranian women seriously and shared their voice. I mention this recent movement in Iran to show how censorship is woven into our everyday lives, and even our political movements and mourning represent that it plays in symbolic ways.

Within this context, allegory is a tool for Iranian filmmakers to fly under the radar of the Islamic Republic. Langford says allegory is; “A mode of hidden or veiled discourse, allegory carries with it an enormous critical, even subversive, potential” (Langford, 2019, p.107). Allegory gives filmmakers a power to say what they cannot say directly. Allegory takes its meaning from phenomena that have similarities between them, and therefore in the film, objects find a new meaning. Langford argues throughout her book; “Allegorical expression in cinema relies precisely on the capacity of the cinematic medium to shift the meaning of images, to set in motion the process of semantic slippage, to extract abstract meaning from a seemingly concrete signifier” (Ibid, p.137). For example, in the title sequence of *Mainline* (2006) directed by Rakhshan Bani Etemad. shows Arash dancing tango with a bride, but we cannot see the bride’s face. There are cuts between the cast members of the film and Arash’s dancing. After seconds, we recognize that Arash is dancing with a big doll and Sara’s photos (his fiancé) are on the wall of his room (Figure 10 and 11). By the end of the title sequence, it becomes clear that what the audience has seen is in fact a movie that Arash sent from Canada, that Sara and her mother are watching.



*Figure 10 Mainline (2006) directed by Rakhshan Bani*



*Figure 11 Mainline (2006) directed by Rakhshan Bani*

Then, Sara and her mother start to dance exactly the same as Arash and doll. The bride's dress (wedding dress of the doll) is on the table of Sara's room, and some part of dress is on Sara's shoulder. Sara dances with her mother (Figure 12), while she is gazing at the screen and look at Arash (Figure 13). She hugs her mother very tightly as though hugging her fiancé.



*Figure 12 Mainline (2006) directed by Rakhshan Bani*



*Figure 13 Mainline (2006) directed by Rakhshan Bani*

The director was successfully screened the sameness of the situation between Sara and the doll. Arash is dancing with a doll and Sara is dancing with her mother. Here the doll is not a doll as a toy, but it finds a new meaning. The director used it to represent the missing bride (Sara) who cannot dance with Arash because of Iranian Morality rules. Also, Sara's mother lost the objectivity of herself as a mother. Instead, she is represented as the missing groom (Arash). In this sequence, Bani Etemad found an alternative way to screen what she cannot.

Langford speaks about two different allegorical readings within Iranian films. First, directors like Bani Etemad by showing this sequence, make the limitation coming from censorship more visible. “Film may be read as an allegory of Iranian cinema, a critique of the very structural limitations placed on filmmakers by rigorous censorship rules” (Ibid, p.7). She called this reading a fairly straightforward allegorical reading. The second reading is more complicated and “that are roughly equivalent to narrative progression and poetic elaboration respectively” (Ibid). The second reading in the title sequence of *Mainline* may be that by paralleling Sara and the doll, Arash and Sara’s relationship can be read as a fake and false. Sara is addicted to heroin and Arash does not know about it because they have a long-distance relationship. Sara represents herself as clean and healthy. However, she is not. A doll in Arash’s arm can be read as a fake Sara.

Allegory in Iranian cinema from Langford point of view, it is something beyond a strategy to escape censorship. She believes many Iranian filmmakers do not use allegory just as an alternative way to escape and allegorical expression is an aesthetic part of Iranian films.

In doing so, film-makers have reinvented film language, something that I refer to more broadly as ‘film aesthetics’. It is important to recognize that for many Iranian film-makers, allegory is much more than a foil against haphazardly applied censorship rules, or an attempt to hide meaning under a veil of secrecy (Ibid, p.2).

Yet, despite the ubiquity of coding in Iranian cinema there is no consensus among filmmakers as to its impact on creativity: some, like Abbas Kiarostami believed that the limitations imposed by censorship make artists more creative while some others directors like disagree and believed filmmakers spend too much time, energy for encoding the forbidden acts and making movies in this situation is very difficult. For example, Naser Taghvai Iranian director in a documentary “*Saying with not saying; Cinema and censorship narrated by Nasser Taghvai*” directed by Aref Mohammadi (2021) talked about censorship in Iran. Taghvai believes in two arts; art in censored societies and art in uncensored societies. In uncensored societies, the most capable artists are those who show their ideas in their works as clear and distinctly as possible. But in censored societies, the opposite is true. Artists of these societies cannot express their words and ideas clearly. So, they have to find indirect ways. In other words, saying without saying and showing without showing. In this situation, the Iranian audience must make their final receipt at the end of the film and take home the decoding as it is not given to you on screen. So, this is a very difficult situation for Iranian

artists to work with. He mentions, spectators do not receive the real meaning of film by dialogues, words and pictures that they see on screen. Rather, it is the structure of the film that conveys the true meaning to the audience. In fact, as an Iranian audience, what is left in your mind or what you think after watching the movie is not what you saw on the screen. Without doubt censorship introduced a skill into Iranian cinema that became characteristic of Iranian cinema. Showing without showing or saying without saying. Some believe that these pressures made Iranians better filmmakers. But the missing part or tragic parts is that a huge number of Iranian artists never make the films they want to make or their films are left half-finished. They cannot always find an indirect way to screen what they want to say and sometimes, they cannot find allegorical structures that can be fit in censored societies. Censorship cannot be defended. Censorship means inhibition and this is an obstacle for the artist.

Notably, Langford selects arthouse films to represent her allegorical meanings in Iranian cinema. Unlike my focus on popular cinema and the usual ways Iranian filmmakers have been able to screen sexuality, Langford uses art cinema to analyze aesthetic expressions of allegory.

Langford, like Hall, believes there is a dynamic engagement between artists and viewers. “It is in the moments in which these ways of seeing intersect that the allegorical intention reveals itself” (Ibid, p.110). How does this dynamic engagement occur? Ahamad Jahromi in his article *Ways of Expression in Cinema* (2002) explains; “an image in the cinema becomes a code when the filmmaker deviates from the usual methods in order to put more emphasis on a subject” (Jahromi,p. 70,2002). In fact, by showing the image from an unusual angle, the filmmaker increases the curiosity and interest of the audience to decode the hidden meaning. In this way, the image finds another (new) character and its effect can be increased to the extent of an allegory. For example, when Arash is dancing with a doll. Our curiosity as an audience increased and we are trying to find another meaning for the doll. Why should a mature guy dance with a doll? In this way of expression, “artist imagines human characteristics for inanimate or soulless objects and attributes to them the traits and actions that are specific to humans and thereby gives them sense and movement” (Ibid).

Substitutes for characters is very common method for Iranian artists to screen what they cannot screen. This method affects us with its contrasts, because it relates two things or two phenomena that are conventionally unrelated, but by decoding you can relate. That is, a way of expression that

sometimes can hardly be considered as an allegory of object, phenomena and in this thesis sexual acts. Because, the first representation or first layers of meaning of the object, is related to the narrative. But, as an Iranian audience, we should find and decode the allegorical layer that is contain forbidden acts. Then, it should be related to the narrative. In this context, what filmmaker allegorically screen as sexual acts is usually deeper than the apparent narrative, to the audience.

## Chapter one: *Romantic Sexuality in Subdued (2017)*

In this chapter is about *Subdued*, a 2017 film directed by Hamid Nematolah. *Subdued* was a critical success, winning several awards including, the best film, director, actress and composer award from different international festivals. For example, it received the Best Narrative Award at Jounieh International Film Festival in Lebanon (2018).

*Subdued* makes for a rich case study for analyzing the coding of sexual moments in Iranian cinema. It is far more explicit than in most films and therefore appears fearless and reckless. Despite technically adhering to Iranian content regulations its depiction of sexual moments is far more explicit. Danial Hashemi Poor Iranian critics believed “Subdued is kind of exceptional film in Iranian cinema that screens romantic and sexual moments in detail, elegance, and precision” (Hashemi Poor, 2020). After watching this film for the first time, my friend and I were quite shocked that how this movie had gotten its license from the *Ministry of Culture*. Particularly with regard to the sexual moments it shows between characters. For example, Nematolah provides a close-up of a man and woman, their faces covered by sweat, and the sounds the actors make represent the sex between them, and at the end of this sequence, the face of the actors show their orgasm. Also, for decoding the kiss between couple, I decode in dialogue with Hall’s oppositional reading. The kissing moment was not screen vividly, but my reading was not precisely oppositional. I can say, it was more dominant. This is an attempt to impose a dominant hegemonic reading through the regulations, but it is subverted by the coding. I will deeply talk about these sequences in the rest of this chapter.

By analyzing this film, I will show how Nematolah by using cinema style such as narrative voice over, jump cut and also by using symbolic elements encodes romantic sex between his characters. By decoding these moments, we can see the shadow of censorship on this film and how the director shows sexuality without showing it. Also, I will show how voice-over pave the way for Iranian audience to have a ***Dominant-hegemonic reading*** while they are decoding the sexual moments.

## Decoding the sexual intimacy from title of subdued

Before I provide a close analysis of the sexual moments in *Subdued*, it is worth mentioning the meaning of the film's title, particularly as its translation into English loses some of its original meaning. The Persian title is *Rage Khab*. The translation *Rage Khab* to *Subdued* lost some part of the meaning. *Rage Khab* is an expression with the combination of two words. *Rage* means 'vein' or perhaps more accurately in this context, 'carotid artery' and *Khab* means 'sleep'. One translation of *Rage Khab* is 'to push someone's buttons' (with sexual connotations) or 'to know how to manipulate another' through familiarity with their weaknesses. While the English title "*Subdued*" may film describe Mina's situation with Kamran--how Kamran find Mina's buttons and starts to have a sexual relationship with her and then leaves her alone. On the other hand, Mina is subdued after meeting Kamran. *Subdued* describes Mina's journey during this film, how this relationship and break up change her. The English title does capture the film's plot but the Iranian title expresses the sexual nature of their relationship through the culturally specific connotations of language. The Iranian title cue the Iranian audience to receiving the film as a story that involves sexual intimacy. The reason, I used the English titles was that the readers of my thesis are mostly cultural outsiders. But, because of this lost meaning, I'll be retaining the original titles for the rest of my analysis.

## The importance of voice-over technique in Iranian cinema

*Rage Khab* is narrated in the first-person narration through Mina (main character)'s voice-over. This technique plays a very important role as an alternative way to fly under the radar of censorship in Iranian cinema. In the context of censorship-necessitated coding and decoding practices, I will explore how this first-person narration enables the depiction of forbidden acts. Sarah Kozloff writes in her book *Invisible Storytellers Voice-Over Narration in American Fiction Film* (1988) that 'voice-over narration has been used in so many films precisely in order to "naturalize" the strangeness of the image-maker, to link filmic narration to everyday, dinner-time storytelling' (Kozloff, 1988, p.49). Kozloff is really only talking about Anglophone cinema. This is how voice-over has been used in this context and how it is understood in much scholarship, but for Iranian

filmmakers it has a separate set of culturally specific affordances. Voice-over is a practical technique that Iranian filmmakers can use to push the boundaries of censorship. The voice-over facilitates an ability to directly or allegorically tell the stories that they cannot show on the image track. Shahla Haeri is her article *Sacred Canopy: Love and Sex under the Veil* 2019 believed;

“Through the voice-over technique, the director ingeniously conveys the impression of intimacy and closeness, allowing the lovers to address each other in the most intimate and loving terms, which they probably would have not able to do had they been actually present together in the same space” (Haeri, 2009, p.124).

As an example of this technique, I will provide two examples how Iranian filmmakers have used voice-over to fly under the radar of state in forced censorship: *Shirin* (2008) directed by Abbas Kiarostami as an alternative film and *My Lady (Bahu- ye Ordibehesht, 1997)* directed by Rkhashan Banietamad as a popular/mainstream cinema.

### *Shirin* an alternative voice over film (2008)

*Shirin* provides an example of the importance of voice-over in Iranian cinema. *Shirin* is considered a film in the alternative film tradition in Iranian cinema or maybe in the world. The film can be seem as alternative as it presents scenes that would otherwise be impossible to screen due to Iranian censorship. Mainak Misra in her article “*Shirin* Analysis and Review: Abbas Kiarostami’s “*Shirin*” Creates a New Language of Cinema” July 24, 2021 claimed,

“*Shirin* is a perfect example of experimental filmmaking The film is based on the epic poem Khosrow and Shirin by Nizami Ganjavi. However, Kiarostami is not interested in merely presenting the poem in the film. He has always experimented with different filmmaking styles and enriched films as one of the most important mediums of art. *Shirin* is not an exception. It is an experiment on image, sound, female spectatorship, reverse filmmaking, female self-sacrifice, and alternative way of storytelling” (Mirsa,2021).

Kiarostami is an auteurist director working within certain cinema cultures. The film like *Shirin* is not like the films that I am focusing on for my thesis. As I said before I am focusing on the more domestically popular/mainstream. The reason, I am providing this analysis here is that *Shirin* is alternative film tradition in Iranian cinema. I define this movie an alternative in relation to Iranian censorship as it presents scenes that would otherwise be impossible to screen due to Iranian censorship. *Shirin* is actually two movies with one ticket. We watch one movie, while hear another one. With all these facial reactions, we hear a brilliant love story poem from Iranian classical literature, something we cannot screen in Iranian cinema without censorship. The way Kiarostami used voice-over is different to the kind of doubling I am analysing in popular cinema.

Critic Ahmad Talebi Nejad believed “*Shirin* is the least censored film in the history of Iranian cinema” (Talebi Nejad,2019). The film is ostensibly a set of close-ups of one hundred thirteen of Iranian actresses and French actress Juliette Binoche as they view a film based on a mythological Persian romance, *Khosrow and Shirin* by Nezami Ganjavi. Although the audience for *Shirin* does not see Ganjavi’s film, we hear the story told and witness the actresses’ reactions to it. As such, *Shirin*, in a sense, is two films: one we watch and another we hear. The story narrated by Shirin. Shirin is the hero and the main character of the story.

It is an epic romance about the Persian king, Khosrow Parviz, and his love for Shirin, the Armenian princess. There is a love triangle with Farhad, a stone cutter who falls in love with Shirin but kills himself when Khosrow sends a messenger to (falsely) tell him that Shirin is dead. Khosrow and Shirin marry but he is killed by an enemy<sup>4</sup> while sleeping next to Shirin (Saljoughi, 2012, p.521).

*Shirin* narrates her story in flashback to her sisters, who are grieving the death of Khosrow. At the end, Shirin kills herself with a small dagger. Kiarostami turned the camera toward the audience and showed us the reactions of actress. Audiences just see the close up of Iranian actress who crying, laughing, getting shock and etc. Within this technique allow us to ‘see’ what is not shown. On the other hand, we hear what can not be screened. Here I will give some examples of these forbidden acts that Kiarostami screened it without showing.

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<sup>4</sup> Khosrow’s enemy was his younger son who was looking to be King.

- We can hear actress swimming on the river while they are drinking alcohol.
- Shirin is looking for a water to wash herself on her way to find Khosrow. We just hear she is changing her clothes and washing her body on fresh water.
- She is talking about Khosrow's body while she is touching it.
- We hear women's laughing while they are cheering the wine glasses in a party. Khosrow and his friend watch and talk about this moment;

*Khosrow: All this laughter, all that charm does it make people happy?*

*Khosrow's friend: Women and wine! A combination can't be match. If we add the night to it, it assures sensuality.*

Khosrow's friend's words describes sexuality and joy. There is no need to see what is he talking about. Because the doubled meaning of the words; women, wine and night, can help the audience to imagine the situation.

- Khosrow and his first wife (Maryam) are sleeping on the bed. Khosrow had dream about Shirin and called her in his dream. Maryam wakes him up and said;

*Maryam: You are lying with your spouse, but you had a dream of your lost love.*

- Finally, when Shirin and Khosrow get married. Shirin says she had waited for so many days to take the warm hands of Khosrow into her hands.

None of these scenes could get screening license and should be censored. But telling is treated differently to showing and so there is more to the coding-decoding than the visual allegory. It's all part of a wider context of allegory and metaphor—tactics that allow the filmmaker indirect expression—that pervade Iranian cinema culture. Kiarostami by the technique of voice-over screens forbidden acts without being censored. The audience of this movie, did not see anything on screen just the reaction of actress, but we can imagine what we hear and decode in our mind.

## *My Lady (1997)*

The next movie is *My Lady* (1997), a domestically popular film, directed by Rkhashan Bani Etemad. This movie connects to my case studies because Bani Etemas as Hamid Naficy mention in his article *Veiled Voice and Vision in Iranian Cinema* (2000): The Evolution of Rakhshan Banietamad's films; Bani Etemad is the first Iranian filmmaker who used this technique in her movie to screen sexuality without screening. With this section, I want to pay tribute to her and her film.

*My Lady* is the story of Foruq, a documentary filmmaker and single mother her relationship with her boyfriend. Foruq has a boyfriend but we never see him, his existence is proven entirely through aural techniques such as phone messages, and phone calls. Also, he reads poetry and letters. His voice is very calm, strong, and presented as highly erotic.

The lover's voices on the soundtrack reading letters and poems to each other and Foruq's autobiographical voice-over musing create a dense tapestry of free indirect discourse braided together by various voices and subjectivities. This is the first example of this discourse that I know of in Iranian feature films. These interweaving make and female voices symbolically substitute for the desired but dreaded—because outlawed—physical contact between unmarried couples. By means of the verbal epistolary communications, they are able to express their mutual lover one another and by means of voice fusion, they are able to become one vocally. None of this type of expression would have been possible if the characters were shown together (Nafisi, 2000, p.572).

Voice-over gives more freedom to filmmakers as they can create an erotic atmosphere within the bounds of regulation because they do not depict the physical touch. The voice-over in this movie helps us to naturalize the strangeness absence of Foruq's boyfriend and we imagine their sexual relationship without screening when we hear voice-over of Foruq and her boyfriend. We can not see him on screen, but we can hear him. The existence of this person becomes real for us with his voice.

What is specific about this instance is that Iranian audience has a dominant-hegemonic reading through the voice-over of *My Lady*. Of course, they can not see what happens on screen, but they

can vividly hear it. The dialogue of this film is not allegorical and just based on contemporary life. So, the decoder gets the message without question.

### *Rage Khab's plot*

*Rage Khab* is narrated in the first-person narration through Mina (main character) 's voice-over. *Subdued* centers on Mina, a woman recently divorced from her drug-addicted husband. She applies for a job so she can support herself financially following the divorce. She applies for a job at a restaurant. She did not have a job before. There she meets Kamran, the restaurant manager, who after a flirtatious interview and grants her the position. Unfortunately, Mina is not suited to the restaurant job because of her lack experience. She was not fast enough for working at fast food restaurant and made lots of mistakes.

Rather than fire her, Kamran offers her an easier job. At restaurant, they had huge number of takeaway boxes with the wrong address of the restaurant. Her new job (is covering the wrong address of restaurant on boxes and pasting the correct address that printed on the stickers) can be performed on her own from an old and messy apartment Kamran owns. Mina starts to clean the apartment and as long as she does not have a place to live, she stays there. Kamran comes to the apartment to visit her and collects the takeaway boxes. There she begins a physical and romantic relationship with Kamran. She starts having a sensational feeling she has never experienced. However, after a few months of romance Kamran begins to avoid her. Seeking an answer to his avoidance, Mina follows Kamran and learns that he is in another relationship with the owner of restaurant. Mina finds herself pregnant out of wedlock. She is very sick and out of money. In anger and determined to expose Kamran's misdeeds, Mina announces her pregnancy and Kamran's actions at the restaurant. Kamran responds with fury and violence. Having been beaten by Kamran, she leaves the restaurant and experiences a miscarriage. She ends up in hospital. After a couple of days, the hospital sends her to the homeless center. Finally, her sister finds her at homeless center and brings her to her house.

## Sexuality in *Rage Khab*

### Allegorical Touching

In this section I will analyze how Nematollah screens sexual encounters. In *Rage Khab* Mina tells her past stories of her life to her father. It seems this voice-over is a diary for her father. Mina's voice-over is very poetic and romantic especially when she is describing her romantic relationship with Kamran, and detailing his appearance and mannerisms. For example, the first allegorical touching scene screened in the film is a moment in which Mina is chatting via cellphone with Kamran.

Kamran: Which one do you like? Rain or snow?

Mina: None of them, I love sun. Everything is vivid....

Kamran: Are you ready to see something scary?

Then Kamran sends Mina his picture. Mina views Kamran's picture on her smartphone while lying on her bed (Figure 1.1). The Director used the extreme close up of Mina's face with the light of her smart phone on her face. In this sequence, Mina and Kamran sexual moment is mediated via a screen (the phone) at the same time that for us (the audience) that diegetic mediating device performs extra functions (suggests sexual intimacy and distances it) that interact with an overall coding strategy.

Mina calls Kamran and they make small talk. We can hear the Kamran's voice through Mina's phone. They are whispering while they discuss about an urgent trip that Kamran must go on. In addition, we hear Mina's voice-over as she admires Kamran's character;

Reliable, loves progress, every day a step forward, he is in a competition with the world every moment. The most handsome and graceful man I have ever seen...my supportive angel....



*Figure 1.1 Rage Khab 2017 directed by Hamid Nematolah*

She zooms in and zooms out on Kamran's picture, and then changes her position on the bed. Mina's face and Kamran's picture are face to face. Mina touches and rubs Kamran's picture. The impression given is that they are on the bed together and Mina's hand is on the face of Kamran.

In addition, the voice-over of Mina on top of this part can be decoded as a touch, and passionate embrace between them. The way they are talking together and their voice tunes through the phone are very slow, romantic and erotic. Also, facial expressions of Mina while she is gazing at Kamran's face. And yet, Kamran is never seen in the same location as Mina. Mina's voice-over is admiring Kamran (his character and his appearance) makes this part more romantic and erotic. Combination these facts plus the physical absence of Kamran in this sequence, it reminds us of the presence of censorship. Mina touches Kamran's picture on the screen of her smart phone instead of physically touching him (Figure 1.2).



Figure 1.2 *Rage Khab* 2017 directed by Hamid Nematolah

She does not touch him, but she touches him. Nematolah screens the physical touch without disobeying of rules. I can not read this sequence as an aesthetic allegorical make up between actors. As Langford mentions, this sequence reminds us of the powerful presence of censorship and the limitations faced by filmmakers. Otherwise, both of can be the same bed with or without Mina's voice-over. They we decode this sequence is oppositional reading because the absence of Kamran on the bed, reminds us that he could never been on same bed with Mina and Mina can never touch his face. Instead of reading this sequence as romantic telephone call between them. I read it as a romantic make out that I can never see on the screen of Iranian cinema.

### Obvious Kissing without Kissing

I think for decoding the kissing moments in *Rage Khab*, surprisingly we do not necessarily need to use the ***Oppositional reading*** for decoding the hidden meanings. The act of kissing decodes perfectly transparent withing the coding through the audience. The way director chooses to screen the forbidden acts is very straightforward. However, he did not show the kissing acts. I believe he was success to portray kissing between actors for the first time in Iranian cinema after the Iran revolution.

In this sequence, Mina narrates the first scene portraying sexual intimacy between her and Kamran:

The love had begun, but I was scared. How people so easily and recklessly can say: I love you. He was the most handsome man I have ever seen in my life. How could I not love him? How did I breathe before him?

By hearing to this voice-over, we get the message that we are facing with a romantic sequence. They are at Mina's place and Kamran tries to take off his t-shirt, but he cannot get it over his head (Figure 1.3) Mina gets close to help him. She puts her head under Kamran's T-shirt (Figure 1.4).

Mina: Let me see what happens here.

Kamran: Hey (They are laughing under the T-shirt)

After this dialogue, we see extreme close ups of Mina and Kamran under the Kamran's t-shirt. They are laughing, whispering, and playing with each other under the T-shirt. Then we have a medium close-up of Mina and her lover's face covered by the t-shirt (Figure 1.5). As an Iranian viewer, it is obvious they are kissing each other under the T-shirt. This is not hidden.

For decoding this sequence, I used *Dominant-hegemonic reading*. This scene is clearly flirtatious and for those familiar with Iranian coding contexts, this is not a precursor to a kissing act, but the act itself. The context of Mina's narration, the romantic music of background and body language of the actors especially in figure 1.5 represent kissing. Look at Mina's hand position in figure 17, it is not very close to Kamran's face but it is close. According to the limiting rules of Iranian cinema, her hand is as close as possible to Kamran's face. For me, Mina is touching Kamran's face and their lips touched each other. Of course, they are literally far from actually kissing, but their faces are extremely close to each other in Iranian cultural context and they are kissing each other.

In her book, *Displaced Allegories*, Negar Mottahedeh (2008) explains how Iranian audiences decode or grasp the hidden meanings of some metaphorical scenes. However, this sequence is not metaphorical. She quotes from director Mohsen Makhmalbaf;

Whenever we use montage or metaphor that denotes a single meaning, then the (Iranian) spectator is capable of grasping the meaning of the image....it is the effect of repetition

and pedagogy and the becoming cliché (of a technique) that (allows) the majority (of the audience) to understand it (Mottahedeh, 2008, p.155).

In *Rage Khab*'s t-shirt scene, repetition of viewing or concentrating on the way the scene repeats certain things can help us to have a ***Dominant-hegemonic reading***. For example, first we see an extreme close-up of Mina's face, then extreme close up Kamran's face. Nematollah repeated the extreme close-up of both of them under the T-shirt in this sequence. Kamran eyes are close in the first close up. But when Mina come close to him, he opens his eyes and in a very naughty way he says; Hello. It can be translated as a welcome. Also, it can be read as permission to come closer to him. During these repetitions, their faces become redder and redder. Then, a medium close up of them under the T-shirt (Figure 1.5) as they have fun and laugh. Mina tries to take off Kamran's T-shirt, in this process, they show some struggle. Their body language can be read as though their lips touched each other and like the way, the body of the kisser moves roughly during the kissing acts.

Also, at the end of this part Mina takes out Kamran's T-shirt roughly like she wants to finish the lips touching in a sexual way. Kamran's face is red with untidy hair and Mina's hair and her scarf too. Both of them breathe very heavily like they had very enjoyable time and they are gazing at each other with satisfaction.

Kamran's T-shirt censors this act and covers whatever happens under the fabric. Kamran's T-shirt does not contravene censorship demands. Because not only do the actors not touch each other, but also potential kissing is covered by the T-shirt. As an audience the only thing we see on screen is two covered faces. However, it is an inevitable kiss that occurs for a few reasons. The first is the context of growing up in censored country. In this cultural context, you learn to read the hidden meanings. I do not remember any scenes or sequences in Iranian cinema after Iran revolution that represent kissing as obvious as *Raghe Khab*.



*Figure 1.3 Rage Khab 2017 directed by Hamid Nematolah*



*Figure 1.4 Rage Khab 2017 directed by Hamid Nematolah*



*Figure 1.5 Rage Khab 2017 directed by Hamid Nematolah*

## Allegorical sex

As I have explained, screening sex is very challenging in Iranian cinema, and so most of the time it occurs behind the screen for example in scenes where actors go to their bedroom and simply close the door. However, this is not the case in *Rage Khab*. Instead, I argue, Nematolah shows Mina and Kamran having sex on screen through allegorical imagery. This scene, again they are at Mina's place. Mina is sitting on a floor and Kamran is sitting on a chair while he is playing the Iranian traditional instrument Tombak. Like the t-shirt kiss-scene, is narrated by Mina;

Nights and days passed with an unbelievable speed. We were living in another world. I was dreaming; it was the end of my loneliness, relaxation, security, the dream of a lover, happiness. Please, don't wake me up...

In this sequence, Nematolah used three shots of medium close-ups of Mina and Kamran, while they sit across from each other and Kamran plays an instrument. Despite the unity of positioning and framing, the sequence is a montage that portrays different days and nights. Throughout the sequence, Mina sits on the floor and Kamran on the chair. He plays a Tombak for Mina (Figure 1.6) and tries to teach it to her. Kamran asks Mina to touch the instrument. Nematolah artfully used Tombak as a metaphoric element in this scene. This instrument is made by wood and covered by lamb or goat skin. Before you start to play this instrument, you need to warm the skin up by rubbing it. The way Kamran rubs the Tombak with his finger, while he is gazing at Mina

Although in this scene they are (literally) playing the Tombak, the sexual overtones are evident. Also, he asks Mina to play with the skin and Mina tells him to play the music she likes. It appears like she is guiding her partner in how to treat her in sex. Rubbing the skin of this instrument can be read as human skin and the beginning of sex. I believe, Nematolah visualizes a sense of the erotic by using the sexual movements of Kamran's finger on the Tombak (Figure 1.6). Tombak is a substitute for Mina's body or genitalia. Therefore, the literal meaning of it shifts to women's genitalia. As an Iranian audience, we have Oppositional reading to decode the message. Mina and Kamran literally are playing Tombak, but for decoding the message, I should read in a contrary way. This is undeniably sexual but oppositional reading helps me not to read this scene as merely 'erotic' but that it is the sex act itself.

After these shots, Nematolah uses the close up of Mina and Kamran's face (Figures 1.7 & 1.8). The scene moves back and forth between the closes- up of Mina and Kamran. Kamran's close up while he gets himself ready to play the instrument and then he starts with slow tempo and reaches to a climax while his eyes are close with little frown on his forehead. The frame shows Mina's close-up contain Kamran's fingers as well in the right side of the shot. Kamran's fingers touch the instrument very fast and Mina gazes at Kamran. Kamran's body is shaking and his face is cover by sweat and it shakes faster and faster until he reaches to the climax. After climax, the rest of the scenes happen in slow motion with sounds of Mina and Kamran's heavy breaths like they approach their orgasm. At the end, Kamran's slowly opens his eyes. Mina looks at Kamran's hand while her chest moves up and down. The elements help me to decode this part as a sexual part are repetition of actors close up with continuity editing, movements of their body especially Kamran's body, the climax of the Kamran's music can be read as a peak of their sexual excitement, sound of their heavy breath on the background of this sequence and metaphoric use of instrument as a genital organ. This sequence portrays sexual touching in the absence of touching. Screened by metaphor rather than the partition of a closed door, in this moment Nematolah has shown a couple having sex in a manner that follows Iran's Islamic cinema regulations.



Figure 1.6 *Subdued* 2017 directed by Hamid Nematolah



*Figure 1.7 Subdued 2017 directed by Hamid Nematolah*



*Figure 1.8 Subdued 2017 directed by Hamid Nematolah*

After their sexual acts, we see a sudden cut to morning light and an extreme close up of the boiling eggs and a kettle (Figure 1.9) and showing Mina preparing breakfast table with her voice-over;

The first pages of our love turned much earlier that I expected. It was like a lost book left under the storm. A strong storm comes and ended all the pages of our love story. One day a storm comes and sweeps away the rest of my life.

In addition, Kamran is in a bed after displaying the breakfast elements. When we see the breakfast elements and Kamran in a bed in the following morning, we suddenly decode these pictures as a couple had sex last night. Now, they are ready for good breakfast. Breakfast elements

are very typical metaphor of the day after sex in Iranian cinema. The guideline of the *Ministry of Culture* does not let couple be in bed at the same time. Directors shoot one of the couple in bed whenever they want to show sex. Thus, Nematolah provides another cue to his audience about Mina and Kamran slept together and had sex last night.



Figure 1.9 *Subdued* 2017 directed by Hamid Nematolah

I think, Nematolah successfully encoded the sexual moments in *Rage Khab* and using different cinematic tools such as vice-over, repetition, and using allegorical elements that actively engage the knowing audience in a process of decoding. The dynamic engagement between artists and audience that Langford and Hall describe has successfully occurred. By using metaphoric elements like Tomabk, the director increases the curiosity of his audience to decode the hidden meanings. In some sequences like the kiss sequence, he reinvented the language of screen kissing and helped his audience to have Dominant-hegemonic reading, I can say, for the first time in Iranian cinema after the revolution.

## Chapter Two: Homosexuality and penis on the screen of Iranian cinema *Cold Sweat* 2018

### Oppositional reading of denial

In this chapter, I will analyze sexual moments in *Cold Sweat* directed by Soheil Beiraghi (2018), particularly with regard to the depiction of genital organs and homosexuality, through Michelle Langford theory of allegory in Iranian cinema and Stuart Hall's theory of encoding and decoding. Allegory plays a very important role in this film because of the film deals with the topic of homosexuality, but also the film's expression, or encoding, of genital organs in an unhidden way. Langford writes; "Allegory is most often treated as responded to censorship... Because of its capacity to say one thing while meaning another, allegory has proven to be a powerful way of evading state censorship and expressing forbidden topics or issues. (Langford, 2019, p.2). In *Cold Sweat*, Beiraghi uses metaphoric elements and dialogue as vehicles to screen the erotic moments and genital organs throughout the narrative. I attempt to show how an allegorical expression of forbidden acts is encoded by Beirghi, and how the film's use of allegory cues or engages the audience to have **an oppositional reading** to decode the hidden meanings that lie beyond the literal level of plot. In addition, I demonstrate how allegorical images are set out in this movie to represent sexual moments and genital organs, and how the director establishes familiarity with them for the audience.

The movie starts with a sentence that audience can perfectly understand both the literal and the connotative inflection given by director. The sentence is;

*Any similarity between characters of this film and real people is denied.*

But we cannot accept the literal meaning of this sentence in the social and political situation of Iran. So, we will read the sentence in a different way. In Iran, this sentence is definitely decoded in an oppositional way. When the director denies similarity, as an audience, we try to find similarity. We wonder: who was in this situation before? The story of *Cold Sweat* is about Afrooz Ardestani, the captain of Iran's national women's futsal team. With Afrooz's goal, the national team qualified for the finals of the Asian Games for the first time in Malaysia. At the airport, Afrooz finds out that she has been banned from leaving the country by her husband, Yaser Shah Hosseini

(a famous TV showman). The story of this film is similar to a number of real events that have happened to Iranian female athletes due to the stupid limitations set by Iranian government. As such, this movie raised one of the biggest challenges Iranian female athletes faces: that several prominent figures have faced the problem of leaving the country due to the lack of permission from their husbands. But the story of this movie is particularly similar to the story of Niloufar Ardalan (the former captain of the Iranian women's national football team and futsal) and her husband Mohammad Totonchi is sport presenter on Sport Chanel in Iran;

Ardalan could not accompany with the Iranian women's national futsal team in the 2015 Asian Nations Cup due to the opposition of his husband, Mehdi Totonchi, the host of the Football Nights TV show. On the airport she recognized she could not leave the country and the police confiscated her passport. Ardalan's disqualification from attending the Asian Nations Cup by her husband caused a lot of controversy. She requested the authorities to solve her problem in a way that she can accompany the national futsal team in the upcoming games. Finally, with the permission of the prosecution, she was able to go to the 2015 Women's Futsal World Championship in Guatemala (Mostafa. 2019)

The director of *Cold Sweat* denied any similarity to Ardalan in several interviews. Baran Kosari, the actress who plays Afrooz, also denied similarities in her interview with *Footballi Magazine* (2018).

**Interviewer:** How do you feel, when you put yourself in shoes of Niloufar Ardalan and her problems...

**Baran Kosari:** Do not mention names. This movie is not based on the life of any particular athlete.

But people and critics could not be convinced, because the similarities between the movie and Ardalan's life was undeniable. An unknown journalist at *Jamejam Online News* had an interview with Niloufar Ardalan, and asked her about these similarities. Ardalan also denied them, and stated;

This film was made with the fantasy of the writer and director and has nothing to do with my life. I believe that the characters were completely unreal and far from reality. I was not consulted to make the film; this film is completely fictional. When I was banned to leave

the country, I fought to be and stay on the national team, but I could not do anything against the law. (2018)

One year after screening this film, she encountered some problems. Unknown reporter from *EtemadOnline* website writes;

Agreements were made by Nilofar Ardalan to be the head coach of Iran's under-16 girls' national team, but suddenly, for unknown reasons, the directors of the football federation terminated the contract with this veteran figure of women's football and gave the leadership of the team to another coach (2018).

In the end, Beirghi had an interview with Etemad and said;

I have stated many times that the movie "*Cold Sweat*" is not about any specific athlete and has nothing to do with Nilofar Ardalan. By the way, I have talked to Niloufer Ardalan many times and told her that I am ready to face whoever banned you because of this movie and explain that this movie has nothing to do with you. By the way, Niloufer Ardalan was supposed to inform me so that we could talk to the friends who made this decision, but no such appointment was made.

In this interview, Berighi calls government members who created problems for Ardalan "Friends". Here he is using an indirect expression for them as this is totally opposite to the reality for what he feels for these groups. All of these denials and problems guide us, giving us hints on how we should read *Cold Sweat* in an oppositional way.

## *Cold Sweat* an Erotic Film or a Feminist Film

*Cold Sweat* opening begins with an extreme close-up of Afrooz's bare feet with injured nails (Figure 2.1) because of futsal. She covers her injured nails, walks through her closet to cover her feet with her shoes. The camera cuts to an extreme close-up of Afrooz's hand and her tattoo, which she covers with a band-aid (Figure 2.2). After these extreme close-ups, the camera follows Afrooz as she enters to locker room. There the women are preparing themselves for a semi-final match. Nori (Leader of the team, she is not a coach. Every sport team in Iran has a leader like Nori who

has political power, and observes the team politically and religiously) enters and starts to warn them;

Nori: Cover your hair, cover you tattoo, be careful about your clothes... I do not to see any naked part of your body on screen ... Do not send any pictures on Instagram... I do not want to see any hair in any circumstances...be careful about your pants...it should not be lift.

Nori's dialogue is like the list *Ministry of culture* rules; she warns the team and talks about forbidden acts. To me, this is a nod from the director and a signal to the audience that they too should know that the certain scenes will be 'covering up' sex acts/forbidden sexuality. Beiraghi, like all of Iranian directors knows about regulation, but I think provides this sequence to put in bold the limitations and regulations not only in Iranian cinema but also in Iranian sport. I believe these kinds of limitations are difficult to observe in a sport like futsal, where the player should always think about her scarf and clothes while they are running and playing. These kinds of warnings just decrease their concentration. For the people like Nori, the result of the game is not important, says in the movie. What matters is religious values and morality.

*Cold Sweat* is a good case study for this thesis, because Beiraghi is very successful in his encoding the forbidden acts. I will demonstrate this by looking at some critiques from extremist reviewers and their strong responses to this movie. Their critiques show how overt these coded sexual moments are to Iranian audiences.



Figure 2.1 *Cold Sweat* 2018 directed by Soheil Beiraghi



Figure 2.2 *Cold Sweat* 2018 directed by Soheil Beiraghi

Extremist and hardliners critics wrote harshly about toward *Cold Sweat*, they bombarded Beiraghi's movie with their articles. Most of them agreed that *Cold Sweat* is an anti-Islamic movie and that all of the negative characters in the film are very religious, are identified by Islamic elements, like Yaser who has beard and turquoise ring and works for public television, and Nori (leader of team) who wears chador and prays most of time. Also, they were angry about showing what they suspected was homosexuality, as well as the clear symbolism of phallic objects, and overt suggestions of condom use.

Hamid Khorami, an Iranian extremist critic, wrote in his article "When *Cold Sweat* destroys a reputation of Ministry of culture/ A silly political statement to portray government in efficiency" (2018) that at the premier of *Cold Sweat* lots of critics and reports had cold sweat and embarrassed many times. They were embarrassed because they watched so much oral sex and homosexual behavioral on screen of one Islamic country. They were ashamed that cinematic work was invaded on the values of the Muslim country. He continued; Beiraghi insults hijab and prayer with his movie. Khorami was so believed that the first half of the movie can be a clear manifestation of pornography. He labelled the director as having a foot fetish, and as person who uses lots of facts and metaphors to show lesbianism. This is something we should not talk about, because from their point of view; in Iran concept of homosexuality and heterosexuality don't exist. He describes some scenes, such as when Yaser uses a long hookah that represents a penis, or the sequence in which Afrooz brushes her teeth for long time after having sex with Yaser to show it was unwanted sex.

Khoramin ends his article with a commentary on Baran Kowsari (the actress playing Afrooz). He believed that Kowsari must have despised herself for creating an erotic and unique sexuality on the screens of the Islamic Republic. He was shocked that the committee of the 36th Fajr Film Festival<sup>5</sup> in Tehran nominated her as best actor.

Mohammad Reza Bahrani from Javan Online Newspaper (2019) writes a critique with the title; “*The sludge of values with Cold Sweat*”. There he writes that *Cold Sweat* is a film that has visually crossed the red lines of Iranian cinema and this movie is an unforgivable dramatic mistake in Iranian cinema. The members of The *Ministry of Culture* either did not understand or authorized this eroticism (which is a disaster) or they understood and authorized this eroticism (which is a greater disaster). The last thing Ministry of culture should do was to release a film for 18+. At the end of his article, he asked some questions of Ministry of Culture; “Is this the cinema without sex and violence that we proud of? Is this the cinema we want to export to the world? What happened to the Islamic and Oriental identity of Iranian cinema? Have you ever thought about this complicated issue?” (Bahrani, 2019)

I started this chapter with reviews to introduce the atmosphere created by extremist critics around this movie, and how they labeled *Cold Sweat* as a porn movie. As no sex actually appears an analysis of sexual moments in the film is warranted to understand why there were such strong responses.

The beginning sequence can be read as a reflection of limitations placed on Iranian athletes at the international level. After all, both men and women are required to cover tattoos in competitions, and men cannot remove their clothes if they have a tattoo. Moreover, by focusing on Afrooz’s physical injuries the sequence depicts the pressure professional futsal players face with when they play at a high level. Yet, despite hands and feet being parts of a woman’s body deemed acceptable to be naked by Islamic regulations, the critic Khormai labelled the director a foot fetishist, citing this scene as evidence. Perhaps Khorami wanted to suggest a certain perversion. Foot fetishism is a well-known sexual kink, after all. It seems he decoded the movie differently to most, and after having seen the whole film, he read all shots of the body as sexual.

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<sup>5</sup> Fajr Festival is the most important festival in Iran.

Without a doubt this movie shows some sexual moments. But I can not decode the scenes of Afrooz bare foot and hands as erotic. For me a broken and pulled off nail represents pain and suffering. It also represents the importance of Afrooz's team to her and shows how she has worked hard for them. Covering the tattoo represents censorship, and not more than that. Although my focus is on sexual moments, the message of *Cold Sweat* is more than sexuality. Despite the denials by the director to any similarity in real world, this film is about the basic and lost rights of women in Iran. They do not have the right to divorce, nor can they leave their country without the permission of their husbands and fathers. As such, I read this movie as a feminist movie. Interestingly, none of these reviewers discuss this main message of this film and denied these problems. They decoded *Cold Sweat* as primarily an erotic film.

## Homosexuality

Homosexuality is a subject that never can get a film license in Iranian cinema. From the Islamic rules, homosexuality is a sin and the Iranian government denies the existence of this group in society. Hossein Ghazian in his article "The Crisis in the Iranian Film Industry and the Role of Government" in *THE NEW IRANIAN CINEMA Politics, Representation and Identity* speaks about the taboo subjects and consequences of screening them in Iranian cinema;

...such important taboo subjects as unveiled women, homosexuality and the celebration of tough-guy lifestyles – including drinking alcohol and singing – all of which are severely punished in Islamist Iran, where the boundaries segregating genders, inside and outside, self and other, and religiously lawful and unlawful are so strictly patrolled and enforced. (Ghazian, 2002, p.56)

So, the subjects like this must be screened in an allegorical way. The director of *Cold Sweat*, like other Iranian directors, uses an indirect and hidden meanings to show the homosexuality between Afrooz and her a fellow teammate Massi.

The audience does not have enough information about Yasser and Afroz's reason for their fight and one-year truce, although based on their dialogues in the court the film, it can be guessed that the problem of this couple is not financial, economic or cultural. Rather, we can guess it probably

has a sexual origin and is related to Afrooz's homosexual relationship with her football player friend.

On the advice of Afrooz's psychologist, she and Yaser have not lived together for one year. During that year, Afrooz lives Masi. Masi and Afrooz keep their living arrangements a secret. Their intimacy is so close that when Afrooz is unable to leave the country, Masi also does not go to Malaysia to help Afrooz to solve this problem. Beiraghi gives us some hidden elements to represent Afrooz and Masi relationship not just as close friends but as a lesbian couple. There is no issue for the *Ministry of Culture* when same gender kiss and touch each other on Iranian screens. But, the way Afrooz and Masi kiss each other (Figure 2.3) and they touch is very erotic. Their body language and the way they talk together is not "normal" and so we can decode as these actions as sexual feelings between this couple. For example, Masi changes the tone of her voice to be like a kid's when she talks with Afrooz. This way of talking is very common between Iranian couples, and so can be decoded as romantic and sexy.



Figure 2.3 *Cold Sweat* 2018 directed by Soheil Beiraghi

Another piece of evidence that Masi and Afrooz are in a romantic relationship is that they have a plan to immigrate to Spain. They want to leave Malaysia, and following the final, travel to Spain where they will seek asylum. Lots of homosexual couples in Iran will travel to Western countries

and seek asylum. Traveling to Spain is another indirect way to suggest homosexuality in their relationship.

Afroz also shows disgust and hatred for male partner (Yaser) in two sequences. First, when her lawyer (Pantea) tries to convince her and gives her some romantic tips, she acts like she is vomiting, showing how she is disgusted by the idea of sex and romance with Yaser. This becomes more obvious when she has to visit and have sex with Yaser. Second, she brushes her entire mouth with hatred and disgust to get rid of Yaser's taste from her mouth. I will write more about this sequence in the rest of this chapter and decode it as an unwanted sex. Afrooz's disgust and hatred for her male partner, her becoming a "roommate" with her same-sex partner, are clues to the hidden meaning that she does not have desire toward men.

## Sex as a problem solver

In the film, Afrooz has only four days to solve the problem and to travel to Malaysia for the final. After talking with her lawyer, Afrooz is convinced that the only way for her to leave is to start a fake romantic relationship with Yaser again, thereby freeing herself of this situation and enabling her to travel abroad.

After people understand about the ban on Afrooz leaving the country, they start to give her advice. From the head of the team (Nori), Afrooz's lawyer (Pantea), and even her romantic partner (Masi), the advice is the same (although indirect): Afrooz should have sex with Yaser.

Noori: He is a man, we know what he wants...Satisfy him...You are women, you know how to convince him...Solve this crisis....

Pantea: He wants you to talk to him, I know him...Go and talk to him calmly... go and flirt him...go and cuddle him... lets him think he has power...Just say yes to whatever he said... use some politic...

Masi: You know better than anyone else what he wants.... Go and solve it....

Although they do not talk about sex directly, it is clear that all of them agree about sex is the only solution of this problem. Elahe Dehnavi (2017) writes that Islamic societies focus on men's sexual needs. Women are thus used as a tool for satisfying their husbands' sexual needs. Sex has the power to convince Yaser to allow Afrooz to leave the country. They all suggesting that sex is a kind of power that can be used by women over men. Dehnavi writes:

Women's sexuality is one of the strongest cultural taboos in all Islamic societies Clerics and other religious public figures are almost the only group who have the right to address sexual issues; focusing on men's sexual needs, they remind women of their religious duty of 'tamkin' (obedience) and urge them to satisfy their husbands unconditionally (Dehnavi, 2017, p.106).

As we can see from the dialogue, everyone encourages Afrooz to back to Yaser and pretended to love him and have sex in order to be granted his permission. And from Afrooz's reactions, we can understand how it is difficult and disgusting for her. But there is no other solution for her. The certainty of this is clear when even her romantic partner urges her to have sex with Yaser as sex with Yaser (although clearly not what Afrooz and Masi want) may solve issues for Afrooz and Masi's relationship too.

## Decoding the Sexual moments of *Clod Sweat*

### Hegemonic reference codes for romantic moments

Afrooz takes people's advice reluctantly, and decides to spend a night with Yaser. Cued in by the advice of other characters, the audience may expect that the two will have sex in the upcoming sequences. However, as Nori's words in the film's opening sequence make clear, this act cannot be directly shown. How then does Beriaghi depict this forbidden act such that it has been read as an explicit, or even pornographic. In the following section I demonstrate how allegorically Beriaghi screens and encodes these moments. Then I will provide my oppositional reading about these moments.

In the sequence, Afrooz is at Yaser's place. Yaser is in their bedroom changing his clothes, with a big wedding picture of Afrooz hanging on the wall (Figure 2.4). He looks at himself on the mirror; sprays perfume all around his body and opens the closet. He takes a piece of Afrooz's clothing (a black silk bathrobe) and leaves the bedroom.

Spraying the perfume, changing clothes, and choosing the black silk bathrobe for Afrooz as well as Afrooz's happy picture in a wedding dress are all reference codes that can be decoded as a preparation for having a romantic, and sexual, moment. From Hall's point of view in a situation like this "we might say that the viewer is operating inside the dominant code" (Hall, 1999 p,516). So, these codes have been signified and decoded in a hegemonic manner. At least in this scene everything is clear for us as an audience.

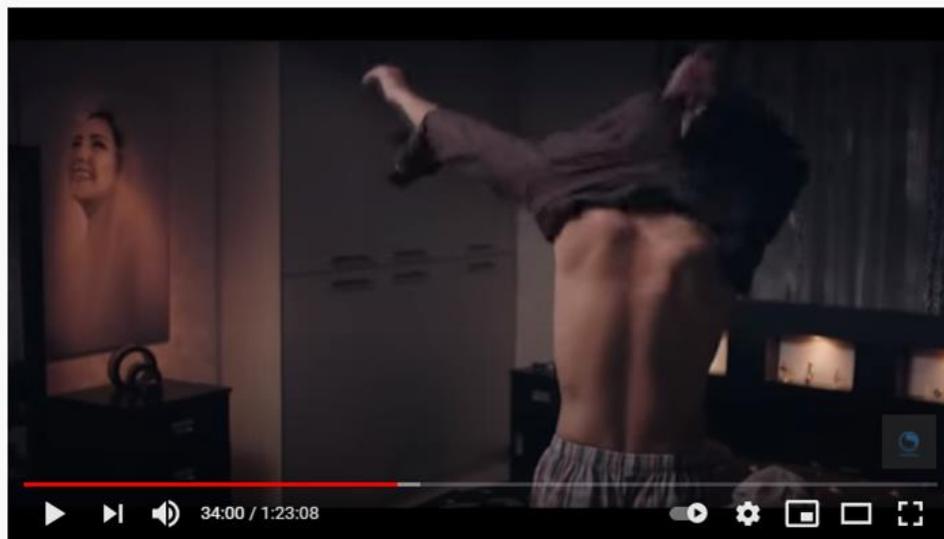


Figure 2.4 *Cold Sweat* 2018 directed by Soheil Beiraghi

## Allegorical Representation of Condom

In *Cold Sweat*, Beiraghi uses significant elements for encoding forbidden acts that, their place in the film, context of the story and narrative are literal or make obvious sense and audience will have an oppositional reading. What makes them have oppositional meanings is coming from different reasons such as censorship, the pieces of information they received from the previous sequence,

the dialogue and atmosphere created between characters. In the rest of this section, I will show how the chain that connects these elements guides us to have an oppositional reading.

After changing his clothes in the bedroom Yaser enters the living room with the black silk bathrobe. He asks Afrooz to wear it. Afrooz is not comfortable and refuses. Yaser tries to break the ice by flirting with Afrooz. But Afrooz still feels uncomfortable and answers him very coldly. He goes to the kitchen opens cupboard.

Yaser: Tell me which one do you want? Mint, orange, gum, cream, blueberry...

Afrooz: me no thanks

Yaser: What? What do you mean?

Afrooz: What

Yaser: You can make decision...

Afrooz: Of course, I can decide

Yaser: Tell what you want...then I can use that one

Afrooz: Whatever you like...

Yaser: Whatever you like...

Afrooz: there is no difference for me...

Yaser: It does not make sense... tell me what you want...

Afrooz: Yes, it makes sense... when I do not want, so, there is no difference for me. It is very obvious

Yaser (sad and uncomfortable): Why you do not like me?

Afrooz comes close to him we have close up of both of them while they are gazing at each other eyes (Figure 2.5).

Afrooz: Blubbery!

Yaser (come closer): Tell me once more...

Afrooz (with coquettishness): Blubbery...

Yaser (with erotic voice): Blubbery... my dear... you are my spoiled girl... go and change your clothes.

Afrooz: We have time, are you in a hurry?

Yaser: Say yes, when I asked for something...say yes...say it...say it...

Afroz (frustrated): Leave me Yaser

Yaser: Say yes... Say yes... Say it... Say it...

Afroz: Yes...

Yaser: I love it... when you say..Yes... I can die for this moment...



*Figure 2.5 Cold Sweat 2018 directed by Soheil Beiraghi*

In this sequence, for some seconds, we do not know exactly what Yaser offers to Afroz. He is searching in a cupboard and offers something with different tastes. The way they are talking together and the tones of their voice convey romance and sexuality. After Afroz says: Blubbery. There is shot-reverse-shot editing between the close ups of Yaser and Afroz. This shows that they come close to one another, face to face. From the process of decoding in the previous sequences, we are waiting for sex between them. As such, the object with different tastes that Yaser offers Afroz can be decoded as a condom. But we know, in Iranian cinema, screening condoms is forbidden. Suddenly, Afroz changes her voice tone, hits on the table, and says; “where is your coal?” Here we get the point, she wants coal for making shisha. Thus, although the object referred is likely condoms in the film Yaser literally refers to a tobacco with blueberry taste. In the process of decoding the tobacco box as a condom, we try to find the similarity between them. Not only does the tobacco have different tastes like a condom, but also the tobacco box (at least in Iran) looks like a condom box. Literally speaking, Yaser and Afroz are preparing shisha, and although we use shisha together at parties or gatherings, people in Iran mostly have one shisha at their place so we have to agree on one taste of tobacco when we want to smoke it. But, when tobacco is screened

in a sequence like this in Iranian cinema, it will integrate into the political and cultural situation of Iran. Then, the way we are looking at tobacco is oppositional. Politically we know, we cannot see a condom on screen. So, we do not decode tobacco as an American plant that contains nicotine, but as an alternative object. Culturally speaking, tobacco box is something Iranian people associated with having a similarity to condom boxes.

### Allegorical expression of penis

While they are in the kitchen, Afrooz turns on the oven and tries to warm the coal. Yaser starts to help her. He comes to be close to her.

Yaser: See, you are very good at this but...If you want... the problem... if you do not want...we do not have any problem. We are very good together...

While they are talking, Yaser brings out very big silver hookah Shisha and puts it on the kitchen table. Afrooz tries to help him. During preparing the shisha, they have these conversations:

Afrooz: Let me help you.

Yaser: I am sorry.

Afrooz (while trying to catch the top of shisha but failing as it is very long. She asks Yaser): Give it to me (Yaser looks at her, laughs and does not help her). I can do it myself (She could not catch and at the end Yaser gives it to her) (Figure, 2.6).

For preparing the shisha, you need to wash a part and put a new tobacco on top. When Afrooz wants to wash it, she says: So, disgusting, why it is very dirty? She puts the tobacco on top part of shisha and said: is it enough? Should I add more? Less? It burns your throat... They gaze at each other while Afrooz is preparing the shisha. Afrooz laughs – less – crazy - no...it is not very easy...it is not easy at all (Figure, 2.7). All these moments and dialogue can be decoded as either sex or preparation for sex.



Figure 2.6 *Cold Sweat* 2018 directed by Soheil Beiraghi



Figure 2.7 *Cold Sweat* 2018 directed by Soheil Beiraghi

A symbolic element in this sequence is big silver shisha. While people have shisha in their house in Iran, they do not usually have one in this size. Normally the silver part is made of wood. I decode this element as Yaser's penis. We have a slang word in Iran, Doodool Tala (du-dul-tala). It means golden penis. This slang characterizes penis as a golden part of male body that is very valuable. Something men should be proud of. We do not have an equivalent phrase for female genitalia. Honestly, we do not have any word for female genitalia, rather every family uses an allegorical name for this part of the women's body such as "Flower", "Rose" or simply "THERE". But, for men it is totally different. Not only it has a name, but also it has "Gold" as an adjective. The silver

shisha and the way Afrooz acts with it clearly represents Yaser's penis. In addition, Yaser talks about his penis as something unreachable. When he says "let me help you to take it" it is because this silver shisha is huge, too tall for Afrooz's height, it is taller than both Afrooz and Yaser. It seems Yaser's penis is more valuable than Yaser because it is longer than him. From Afrooz's dialogue we can understand that Yaser has not had sex for long time. Afrooz says, "this is very dirty, when was the last time you used it?" as she takes the top parts of shisha, empties the old tobacco and puts in fresh tobacco. She asks Yaser "how much do you want?" as she rubs and prepares the blueberry tobacco like rubbing and preparing the penis for sex. Another act of preparing the shisha is putting tobacco on top. We should cover this part with aluminum foil. I decode this part as wearing the condom. Afrooz is preparing every act while she changes her voice and talks very erotically; "how much do you want? Less? More? Tell me?" All of this dialogue can be decoded as flirting, foreplay and erection, Afrooz putting a condom on Yaser, and readying for hot sex. I use "hot sex" here because shisha works with hot coals on top of the tobacco. This is mentioned in the opening of this sequence, when Afrooz asks "where are the coals?" To this, Yaser answers, "at same place as always". It seems from this that Afrooz has forgotten, or does not want to remember, their past in their house. In contrast, Yaser can recall everything and wants to start with the hottest part.

In this sequence, the director puts a series of elements together in an allegorical way to encode the sexuality between Afrooz and Yaser. Then, he uses a soulless object (silver shisha) to express another meaning. In this sequence the silver Shisha has been used abstractly as a penis.

## Unwanted sex

If we decode Afroz as a lesbian, obviously having sex with male may be disgusting or unwanted for her. And this is how it is shown in *Cold Sweat*. After the shisha sequence, we have a jump cut to Yaser's toilet. There we get a close up of Afrooz in the mirror wearing a black silk dress, she is crying and harshly brushing her teeth for 30 seconds (figure, 2.8). I decode this sequence as the moments after sex, and especially oral sex. She forced to change her clothes because in the beginning of the pervious sequence Yaser asked her several times to change her clothes with black silk dress and she constantly refuses.

She feels disgusted by having sex with Yaser. She brushes her teeth and tries to get rid of the taste and smell of him, to the degree of gagging on the toothbrush. To put more emphasis on her feeling, she brushes her lips with the toothbrush as well.



*Figure 2.8 Cold Sweat 2018 directed by Soheil Beiraghi*

As this sequence demonstrates, allegorical expression or encoding makes it possible to look at images and their usages in a different way to the literal. Here Beiraghi has successfully screened forbidden moments without showing them. Not only did he achieve a cinematic and allegorical expression of sex and homosexuality in an Iranian film but he shows up the limitations and censorship in Iranian cinema as well.

## Chapter Three: Intertextual sexuality in *Italy Italy* 2017

In this chapter, I analyze the sexual moments in the film *Italy Italy* (2017), the first feature length film by director Kaveh Sabaghzade. *Italy Italy* is a film about the lack of sex between a husband and wife. It is also a heavily intertextual film, with references to many Iranian and international films and series, as well as literature and theatre. For example, the title of *Italy Italy* comes from a famous series from before the Iran revolution and. The plot of *Italy Italy* is in part an adaptation of the short story “*A Temporary Matter*” (1998) by Jompa Lahiri, as well as borrowing from *Hamoun* (1989) by Dariush Mehrjui (one of the most famous Iranian films among the cinema lovers), *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1958) by Richard Brooks and *Kill Bill* (2003) by Quentin Tarantino. Also, this film is full of music videos such as Italian version of *Bang Bang* (1982) by Rosanna Fratello and *Bianca Di* (2010) Luna Al Bano & Romina Power. I argue Sabaghzade uses intertextual techniques to show by reference what he cannot screen. In this chapter, I will demonstrate precisely how intertextuality defers the sexual moments to other sites, pointing beyond what is on screen.

From Gillian Rose’s description, intertextuality refers “to the way that the meanings of any one discursive image or text depend not only on that one text or image, but also on the meanings carried by other images and texts” (Rose, 2001, p.136). I argue that *Italy Italy* uses familiar references (for the Iranian audience) to convey forbidden concepts. In particular, Sabaghzadeh uses cinematic intertexts in sexual moments.

*Italy Italy* story is an adaption of the short story *A Temporary Matter* by the famous Indian writer Jompa Lahiri. A plot summary of the short story is this: a married couple, Shoba and Shukumar, receive a notice from their electrical company that their power will be disconnected for couple of days between 8:00-9:00 pm, which gives the couple a chance to disconnect from the modern world and focus on their interpersonal relationship. The plot of the film *Italy Italy* is similarly about a couple, Barfa and Nader who meet each other by accident, fall in love and get married. Barfa falls pregnant, but she loses the baby. After losing the baby, their relationship reaches a crisis. Barfa does not sleep in the bedroom with her husband, rather every night she takes her pillow and sleeps in living room. Nader becomes suspicious that Barfa is cheating on him. Their friends and family try to find a solution to their situation. Like in *A Temporary Matter*, they

receive a notice from their electrical company that the power will be disconnected for a couple of days between 8:00-9:00 pm. They resolve to eat their food between 8:00-9:00 pm in darkness, by candlelight, during which they retell secrets of their relationship. These moments of darkness help them to solve their problems and bring their sexual life back to normal.

This film portrays a couple whose relationship is on the verge of collapse and can be considered a social film that deals with marriage troubles between Brafa and Nader. However, the director of the film presents the bitter topic marriage troubles with a sweet and complex flavor of comedy. The film has some serious moments and some of the conflicts between these two couples, such as expressing their secrets under candlelight or the serious issue of betrayal. However, by depicting Nader's fantasy as different music videos, humor is also injected into the story.

### *Italy Italy* as an allegorical title for Iranian audience

For many Iranian audiences the title *Italy Italy* is linked to a TV show that ran before the Iranian revolution. This TV show was a comedy show about love and sexuality. However, the film's director said he never watched this series and he used this because Nader is an Italophile. Nader is fan of Italy; he is an Italian teacher, writer and translator. Traveling to Italy and studying there is one his biggest wishes.

In a conversation with a Cinemapress (2017) reporter, Sabaghzadeh was asked why he chose the title "*Italy Italy*" for his first film, and did he not think that this title would remind the audience of a series with the same name before the revolution and evoke the themes of that series for the audience?

Sabbaghzadeh answered;

Fortunately, I have never seen that series and I have no desire to watch it, because I believe that the less information I have about that series, the more it can help me, and from the feedback I got, I am sure that this movie has nothing to do with that series. (Sabaghzadeh .2017)

His answer to Cinemapress is similar to dialogue heard by characters within the film, where characters directly talk about this title because *Italy Italy* is a title of Barfa's first film. When she says to Nader the name of her movie is *Italy Italy*, he is shocked and tells her "You cannot get the licenses for your film because it was a name of series before the revolution". Like Sabaghzadeh in his interview, Barfa replies "there is no problem, I never watched it."

In another sequence, Nader talks with his father and tells him that he has written a book with title *Italy Italy* about Italy and he is waiting to get the licenses. His father starts to laugh and says "Oh, it was the name of a famous series before the revolution". This upsets Nader, who asks "What do you mean with this? You do not like it!?" The father answers, knowingly, "no, maybe, this title can help you to have more readers".

That the characters are talking about getting a license from *Ministry of Culture* that shows they are, in fact, familiar with this series (*Italy Italy*) and that they know getting a license while using this title is not easy.

Through these references, the characters in the film inform the audience of the problems of filmmaking and writing books in Iran, including censorship and getting licenses. These sequences could be just be film dialogue, drawing a link to the director's claim. However, I think denying familiarity with the series perhaps suggests an awareness of its sexual content at the same time as consciously denying that awareness. The characters and the director know, and probably watched, the show but because they know they can't say that they have done this directly they mention the show in order to claim to never have seen it. In the previous chapter, I was talking about how the Iranian audience deploy oppositional decoding when artists (not only artists, but anyone) deny something in the media. In one way this title, for many people who are familiar with *Italy Italy* series, can be decoded in a dominant hegemonic way. So, they immediately decode the film *Italy Italy* as a sexual movie because the TV show alluded to in the title was centered on sex and romance, this dominant reading could be encouraged. Also, the way Nader's father laughs and talks about this title indicates that he decodes the title like the Iranian audience who are familiar with the series and its reputation.

As *Italy Italy* does not feature very famous actors and the director is unknown, maybe the father's prediction is correct and the name of the movie, with its reference to the series, could

potentially spark curiosity about this film, and as such be good advertisement, encouraging audience to watch it for similar, but coded, sexual content.

## Decoding the title sequence

The title sequence of *Italy Italy* plays an important role for encoding the film's depictions of sexuality. As Georg Stanitzek in his article *Reading the Title Sequence (Vorspann, Générique)* (2009) writes about the task of the title sequence;

The title sequence has to lead into what follows, has to set the course in this respect, and capture the genre, and the specific "mood" of what is to come, so that one is initiated into the cinematic narrative the diegesis (Stanitzek, 2009, p.49).

*Italy Italy*'s title sequence gives audiences some conventional codes that appear in some images related to sex and sexuality.

## Pillow as a crucial element in *Italy Italy*

*Italy Italy* starts with a pillow on the sofa (Figure, 3.1), then the cast members, Sara Bahrami's (Barfa) and Hamed Komeili's (Nader) names appear on two sides of the pillow. As the sequence continues, there are different shots of Barfa's and Nader's pictures on the wall, their living room, and kitchen.

The images of the title sequence guide audiences to decode them in a sexual manner. Sabaghzadeh uses a pillow as the main prop in his movie to show the lack of sex between Barfa and Nader. The images of the title sequence guide audiences to decode them in a sexual manner. This allegorical representation makes sense when we know the film. But I can say most of the time, bedding items decode as sexual activities for Iranian audience.



Figure 3.1 *Italy Italy* 2017 directed by Kaveh Sabaghzad

After losing the baby, Barfa takes her pillow and blanket out of the bedroom and sleeps in the living room every night. There are several close-ups of Barfa's pillow in the living room in different sequences. Thus, the pillow signifies a lack of sex and not sleeping in the bed with Nader. Also, it shows where Barfa has slept or will sleep. The director shows us with this action that this couple does not have a sexual relationship and Barfa's refusal to sleep with Nader. Iranian audiences have a dominant-hegemonic reading to decode the pillow because the image of the pillow, in an unquestioning manner, relates to the bed and a sexual relationship. We associate going to bed with another person as sexual, in these contexts, the pillow becomes a symbol of sex. This is bound up with the language 'taking someone to bed' or 'to sleep together' etc., as well as the term 'pillow talk'.

### Decoding *James Bond* as sexuality

Another element is striking: when the screenwriter is credited, the vinyl cover of a James Bond soundtrack collection is presented (Figure, 3.2). "Sex, violence, and women are cornerstones of *James Bond* films" (Garland, 2009, p.179). Therefore, a *James Bond's* album cover, as a second important image in the title sequence, can be decoded sexually. The audience is cued in to decode the *James Bond* album's cover in line with the image of James Bond as sexually charged due to

the codes they received from the beginning of this film such as the title of the film, the pillow and the happy pictures of Barfa and Nader.

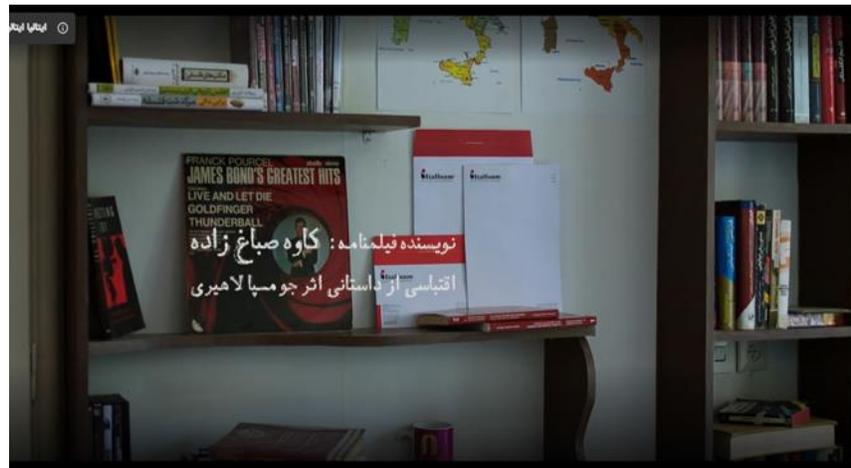


Figure 3.2 *Italy Italy* 2017 directed by Kaveh Sabaghzade

Langford writes “The opening title sequence is crucial in setting up the conceptual antinomies that run throughout the film and provoke ‘allegorical ways of seeing’ (Langford, 2019 p.184). I think, the images of the title sequence of the *Italy Italy* successfully represent the mood and the coming story for the audience. Also, it guides the audience to read this movie in an allegorical way.

### *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* as a sexual code

*Italy Italy* directly refers to *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* by characters’ dialogue during the film and poster of this film is on the wall of Barfa and Nader’s apartment. Also, the plot of the film can be in some way similar to this film. Nader and Barfa like Maggie and Brick have hit a dead end in their love and sex lives. In both of these films, one of the couples (Barfa and Brick) lost her/his sexual desire and they are reluctant to be in the same bed with their partner. Barfa’s reluctant to

sleep with Nader is because of abortion and depression. But Brick's reluctance from Edward Buscombe, in his article *Code Violations* (2011), is not something clear because of censorship;

...in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1958) Brick (Paul Newman) will not have sex with his wife Maggie (Elizabeth Taylor), thus preventing the production of the heir which Brick's father, wealthy Southern landowner Big Daddy (Burl Ives) so earnestly desires. In the play it is evident that Brick is gay, and still grieving for the death of the young man he loves. Homosexuality was another subject proscribed by the Code, with the result that Brick's reluctance to bed the patently desirable Maggie is something of a mystery in the film version. Nevertheless, the film spends a lot of time talking about sex one way and another, thus enabling Hollywood to market it as an exercise in sensationalism (Buscombe, 2011, p.87)

Lack of the child in their relationship is another same issue in these two films. Bedding items like bed and pillows used in both of these films as sexual codes.

One night when Nader's father comes to their place, Nader begs Barfa to sleep in the bedroom. He says "I will sleep on the floor" as he does not want his father to know of their problem, but Barfa refuses. She takes her pillow and goes to the living room to sleep. When Nader's father sees Barfa not wanting to sleep in the bedroom, he starts to talk with her, and refers her to the movie "*Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*". He asks her "do you have this movie? Have you seen it? Do you remember?"

Barfa: Yes, a lot...last time was just after our marriage... I love it!

Father: Do you remember all the scenes?

(Silence, they gaze at each other)

Barfa: Yes (then she cries)

After this sequence, we see Nader and his father sleeping on the bed of Nader and Barfa, they look at the ceiling.

Father (pats the bed and quote the movie): Paul Newman's<sup>6</sup> mother hits the bed like this, told to Elizabeth Taylor; all miseries in marriage starts from here.

Nader: Newman was alcoholic in that movie... You cannot compare him with me....

Father: No, I mean, you lost your self-confidence... I do not say; you are alcoholic...

Nader's father shows he understands their problem by referring Nader and Barfa to the movie *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. This film is very famous for Iranian audience. So, refereeing to this film can help audience to get message and understand about Barfa and Nader's problem. Nader's Father agrees with Paul Newman's mother (Big Mama) and indirectly says all of the miseries in a marriage do start in bed. The father tries to find the reason for his son's impotence, repeatedly suggesting both are desperate and have to work on their self-confidence. The father talks about their sexual problems and by repeating the words desperation and self-confidence, tries to discover the reasons to find a solution. If I want to decode this sequence from my cultural knowledge; a sexual problem is a disaster for Nader's father because if a man cannot have sexual intercourse with his wife, it seems that he does not have any power or masculinity. In the next part, I will try to analysis Nader's sexual impotence as represented in a dream sequence.

## Allegorical expression of Nader's sexual impotence

*Italy Italy* refers a lot to a film *Hamoun* (1989) directed by Dariush Mehrjui. *Hamoun* is about a person named Hamid Hamoun, whose relationship with his wife (Mahshid) is collapsing due to his mental and physical problems. Hamoun is writing his PhD thesis titled "*Love in Abrahamic Religions*", but it is long overdue. Mahshid asks for a divorce, but Hamoun still loves his wife and does not want to divorce her. The film is the story of 24 hours of his life in this situation, which passes between reality and fantasy, past and present, and dreams and nightmares.

Getting a divorce is one of the biggest problems for Iranian women as they need to provide lots of evidence to convince the Iranian court. Men's sexual impotence is one very strong piece of

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<sup>6</sup> Big Mama: ... You're childless and our son drinks... [she pats the bed for emphasis] When a marriage goes on the rocks, the rocks are there, right there! This is an original dialogue from a film. But Nader's father changes it to all miseries in marriage starts from here.

evidence that makes the divorce process easier for women. If they can prove, without a doubt, that their husband is impotent they can get a divorce. "Men's sexual impotence (Anin is an Arabic word used in the movie) is one of the cases that, if it is proven and the woman is dissatisfied, the marriage will be terminated" (Boroujerdi, 2008, p.361). Iranian men do not have these kinds of problems and can easily divorce their wife.

Mahshid asks for a divorce and Hamoun's sexual impotence is one of her reasons. As a whispered conversation with his lawyer in court reveals, Hamoun is on the border of sexual impotence. His lawyer says "you must agree to divorce. Otherwise, the court will send you to a forensic doctor to check your impotence". The lawyer uses "Anin" instead the Farsi word for impotence. I think, the reason behind this decision is that nobody would allow the use of any sexual Farsi words based on the Ministry of Culture's rules. It seems, however, that an Arabic word is not a problem for them. Hamoun does not deny his impotence, but starts to shout that "This woman is my right, my share and the love of my life. I will not divorce her under any circumstances". I think, Hamoun's emphasis in court that "this woman is my right, my share,..." is somehow indicative of this inability to perform complex. Here he understands, Mahshid's evidences are strong and he cannot defend himself and he is a loser in this court. With these words, he just wants to show off and says that women are parts of men's property.

In *Italy Italy* Nader refers to Hamoun. Both of them are writers, working on books and theses. Neither of them can make enough money and both of them have an artistic wife. Mahshid is a painter and Barfa is a director assistant and a director. And both of them are handsome. Hamid Reza Sader in his book *Iranian Cinema a political history* (2006) writes a description of Hamoun that could refer to Nader as well;

Externally, Hamoun is a man of great physical vitality and charm; internally, he is weak. He brings a raw, even brutal, masculinity to the screen, slapping his wife's face in one scene, an act which masks his own vulnerability. (Ironically, this slap was the first time since the Revolution that a man had touched a woman on screen.) But the association of sexuality with violence is challenged here. (Sadr, 2006, p.254).

I will try to describe how Nader's sexual impotence refers to Hamoun's sexual impotence. Like Hamoun has conversation with his lawyer about Hamoun's sexual impotence. In one sequence, Nader and his friend are talking together.

Nader's friend: what is your problem with Baraf?

Nader: Nothing.

Nader's friend: be honest with me. (He starts to laugh). Maybe, you are in menopause.

Nader: Come on... (both of them start to laugh loudly).

In this sequence, Nader's uses dirty words for expressing Nader sexual impotence. He does not use Anin (like Hamoun's lawyer). But he uses menopause that is not related to men. I think, this sequence and dialogue is very sexual humiliations toward women's body.

Also, after Nader's father talks to him about their sexual problem and gives him advice about working on his self-confidence, we cut to the morning. Nader wakes up and remembers his last night's dream. It seems that his father's advice had an impact on Nader's subconsciousness and it crystallized in his dream. We watch his last night's nightmare as a video clip. In his dream, he finds his self-confidence back. We see this from his body, the way he walks, and his outfit.

This sequence is full of sexual symbolic elements. For decoding them I will take an oppositional reading. We can read this music video literally and it will make sense: we can see two guys fighting over a woman, and the hero or stronger one wins. But, Sabaghzadeh uses some elements that, by oppositional reading, we are able to decode way beyond what we literally see on screen.

It is worth mentioning that in reality Nader and Barfa have an argument about cheating on each other. Nader gets angry when Barfa tells him that she went out with her friend Reza, and that she talks a lot about their problems with him. So, Nader has a sneaking suspicion that Barfa and Reza are having a secret affair. It is not acceptable for him that another man knows about their sexual problems. This situation can be decoded as a scandal for Iranian men; that other man knows about their sexual limitations. Also, he does not assume that sex is entirely absent, but absent from him.

In his dream, Nader wears black clothes, a leather coat, Ray-Ban sunglasses and big gun enters the corridor (Figure, 3.3). He has a cat walking in the corridor with the music of *Bang Bang* playing in the background. Nader becomes a character from *Kill Bill* set to take revenge. He opens a door

and suddenly he enters the crowded restaurant where Barfa Reza are eating food, talking and laughing. We cannot hear any dialogue but from their gestures we can get that they are flirting. Barfa and Reza are shocked when they see Nader. Barfa hides herself under the table and Reza takes out his small gun (Figure 3.4). His gun is not comparable to Nader's gun. They start shooting at each other. Nader shoots at Reza, all of a sudden; a white pigeon comes into the frame. Nader shoots both Reza and pigeons. The restaurant is covered with white feathers. White feathers fall from the ceiling of the restaurant. In the end, Reza's dead body is covered with feathers and blood.

There is no dialogue in this sequence, and the director uses the Italian version of *Bang Bang* as background music. All of the actors sing along, especially to the words *Bang Bang*. They are shouting "Bang Bang" but silently. In his dream Nader represents a man with self-confidence. His father's advice works, he is not desperate at all and his masculinity is back. Claire Michelson in her article *Protectors of Hegemonic Masculinity: An Analysis of Gun Legislation and Masculinity* mentions;

Guns have long been a symbol of masculinity. Guns represent power, violence, domination, and lack of emotion. The symbolic representation even goes a step further by taking on the shape of a phallus. Guns are used for protection, dominance, hunting, target shooting, killing, and war--- all largely associated with masculinity (Michelson, 2017, p.1).

From Nader's dialogue with his father, we understand that he recently feels like he has had no accomplishments as a man. In this context Nader's accomplishments are mostly related to his penis and not having sexual intercourse with Barfa. The big gun in his hand can be decoded as his penis that won't work in his real life. But in his dream, it is big and active. He is rubbing his gun and makes it ready to shoot like preparing his manhood, making it hard and ready for sex and ejaculation.

Another phallic association with guns can be related to the social hierarchy. Jenna Bergman in her article "*Firearms and the Phallus: Using Guns to Reclaim Masculinity*" (2021) writes; "...men use guns as a phallic symbol to represent power and domination in order to reclaim their "lost" status in the social hierarchy" (Bergman, 2021). Another way for decoding the gun in Nader's hand can be represented as his "lost" status in the social hierarchy compared to Barfa's social status. Nader is an Italian teacher and writer; he works from home and does not have any social

activities. His books won't get licensed yet to be published. In contrast to Nader, Barfa is very active and successful with lots of men as her colleagues. Barfa is a director's assistant, she always works out and has a good social status. However, she does not get a license for directing her first film. In his dream, the background behind Barfa is covered with different kinds of shishas. As in the previous chapter, they can be symbolized and decoded as penises, particularly those of men surrounding Barfa in her social life. Smoking Shisha in restaurants is a kind of forbidden social activity because, from the government's rules, restaurants are not allowed to have shisha, but they secretly offer it to their customers. Therefore, we can also read the shishas around Barfa as her forbidden social activities that Nader comes in to kill. He shoots and breaks the shishas. In this dream, Nader brings his big gun to take revenge on every man around Barfa.

Another symbolic element in this sequence is the pigeons and their feathers all around Reza's dead body (Figure, 3.5). On the literal level, Reza and Barfa are dating secretly in a restaurant. On the allegorical level, the restaurant can be decoded as a bed that Reza and Barfa had sex on when Reza's body covers with feathers. White feathers all around the restaurant can be decoded as feathers inside pillows and feather quilts. As long as, the director can not show Reza and Barfa in the bedroom. He should use some allegorical elements instead. I think feather as a bold element of Bedding items is a very good alliterative object that can help the audience to decode the restaurant to bedroom.



Figure 3.3 *Italy Italy* 2017 directed by Kaveh Sabaghzade



Figure 3.4 *Italy Italy* 2017 directed by Kaveh Sabaghzade



Figure 3.5 *Italy Italy* 2017 directed by Kaveh Sabaghzade

## Encoded successful sex and ejaculation

Sabaghzadeh uses different elements and objects to screen forbidden acts such as making love, sex, and male orgasm. The tactic of the “substitute for characters” is used a lot in this film. One such example is tap water. There are two close-ups of tap water in *Italy Italy*. By paying an attention to the narrative of these two sequences and having oppositional decoding, we can decode the allegorical meaning of this object as Nader’s penis. In the first sequence, Nader makes Italian

food and sets a romantic table, and waits for Barfa to come from work. But she arrives in a very bad mood and ignores Nader's efforts. Nader gets upset and throws the food in the garbage, washing his hands very angrily. We see a close-up of tap water, while he is washing his hands and turns it off harshly. (Figure, 3.6).

And at the end of movie, when Barfa and Nader solve their problem, camera follows their happy pictures on the wall, while we hear an Italian music on background. Cut to the 30<sup>th</sup> birthday cake of Barfa. Cut to a close up of their cat (Barfa birthday gift) and we hear the sound of broken dishes, when the opera comes to the climax. Cat is moving toward the sound to the kitchen. Camera follows her, we see the broken dishes on the kitchen floor, camera move upward and screen the open tap water. On top of we can see happy picture of Barfa and Nader while water is pouring from the tap water (Figure.3.7). Here, I did a surface observational reading, now I will follow by an analysis of the allegorical meaning of these scenes.

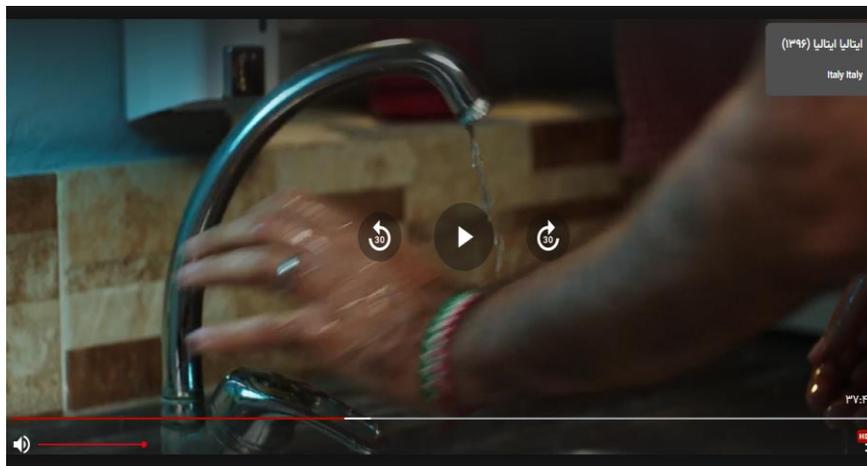


Figure 3.6 Italy Italy 2017 directed by Kaveh Sabaghzade



Figure 3.7 Italy Italy 2017 directed by Kaveh Sabaghzade

I think, editing play an important role for decoding allegorical representation of this sequence. Director screens a series of objects one after the other that each has an independent meaning, but the combination of them represents and decode as a successful sex between Barfa and Nader. Sergei Mikhailovich Eisenstein in his book, *Film Form ESSAYS IN FILM THEORY* (1977) wrote; “the picture for water and the picture of an eye signifies "to weep";....It is exactly what we do in the cinema, combining shots that are depictive, single in meaning, neutral in content-into intellectual contexts and series” (Eisenstein, 1977, p.30). For decoding the last sequence, we need to find the connection between, birthday cake, broken dishes, happy pictures of Barfa and Nader and tap water. In fact, filmmaker screen these images from an unusual angle that lead us to have an oppositional reading.

The tap water signifies Nader’s penis. To turn on and turn off tap water is decoded as either having or not having sex. The oppositional reading of the tap water is Nader’s penis and the sink is Barfa’s vagina. The water coming from the tap is decoded as Nader’s ejaculation, orgasm, and beginning of sex between them. In the last sequence, the merging the climax of the music with the sound of broken dishes can be decoded as foreplay. It seems they are hugging and kissing without caring about what happen to surround them. Then, they start to have sex. We can not see them on screen but we can imagine what is going on behind the screen. The birthday cake and happy picture can be decoded as a happy ending of this relationship.

As my analysis of the film's title and references to national and international cinema shows, intertextuality is a practical strategy for screening forbidden acts. The director intentionally chooses famous movies which have the same themes as those he wishes to present, drawing on them rather than showing the themes directly in *Italy Italy*. For decoding the sexual moments, and lack of sex within a marriage, I used a mixture of dominant hegemonic objects, like the pillow, and oppositional codes, like tap water, that can be decoded as an erected penis. He uses allegorical expression like other Iranian directors because he does not have any choice to show these moments directly under the Iranian censorship. And getting past censorship was important as the director said in his interview with CinemaPress (2017); "He wanted to make a 'popular' movie. His goal was to create an enjoyable viewing experience, and he wanted all of society to be able to enjoy and watch, not like arthouse movies that only attract small, niche audience" (Sabaghzadeh, 2017). Therefore, the director screened sexuality with the combination music and symbolic elements, showing without showing them.

## Conclusion

In 2019 when I decided to write about this topic, I could not imagine, what would happen to Iran in the Autumn of 2022. Right now, in November 2022, many Iranian women are walking on the streets without headscarves; we can see each other's hair. It is very scary, but it gives us a power that cannot be put into words. This is a moment; we can see and represent our real life and real self without being veiled. Furthermore, lots of Iranian actresses are posting their unveiled pictures on their Instagram pages to support the Women-Life-Freedom movement. Film-news (The daily source for Iranian Cinema, Tv and Theatre Instagram page) writes (2022); "Five Iranian actresses have been summoned to the prosecutor's office. For posting undocumented and provocative content" (Film-news, 2022). The Iranian actresses, Hengameh Ghaziyani and Katayoon Riyahi, were arrested by the government because they removed their headscarves in Instagram posts. Seeing these pictures is a unique and unusual experience for me as a cinema lover who has never seen their faces without a hijab on screen. The Iranian director Karim Lakzade posted on his Instagram; "I swear I will not make any film with compulsory hijab again" (Lakzade, November,20,2022). After the government arrested two actresses and killed lots of Iranian people, *Khaneh Cinema* (The Iranian alliance of motion picture guilds) made an official statement on November 23th:

In protest against the continued violence against the people of Iran and due to the consecutive summons and arrests of its members, *Khaneh Cinema* warns that if the threats and arrests do not end and the arrested cinematographers are not released, it will ask its members to go on strike, refuse to cooperate with film and television projects and sit in front of the film organization (2022).

It is not documented information, but people on Twitter write that in some film projects, the directors are shooting sequences twice: one with hijab and one without hijab. This means that, after about 40 years, Iranian cinema is preparing itself to screen films without hijab and censorship.

On the other hand, Nima Hasani Nasab Iranian critics write about an interesting issue for conservative filmmakers on his Instagram page;

The spread of unveiling women and the significant change in women's clothing in the city has created a big problem for filmmakers who have some sequences in the streets and open

spaces. They should pay attention to the background of the frames and spaces for not having unveiled women in their background. Because they are worried about their license and getting permission from the Ministry of Guidance in future (Hasani Nasab,2022).

In the end, he writes the conservatives are the loser in this situation. Imagining Iranian cinema without censorship and without a hijab makes me very emotional. I hope for a day when Iranian filmmakers never have taken on the challenge of “showing without showing” as a strategy against censorship, and when using allegory can be used method for creating aesthetic strategies.

In her book, Langford discusses censorship as a limitation on expression. She explains: “censorship has severely limited the treatment of love and relationships on screen. In a bid to combat these restrictions, film-makers resorted to ‘metaphors, symbols, and poetry for expressing love” (Langford, 2019, p. 135). Langford writes that allegory and symbolism are part of the Iranian art, and she compares this Iranian cinema and poetry. She states that allegory is not only a product of censorship but something intrinsic to Iranian art. For example, she claimed; “However, poetry, symbolism and allegory have not always been used merely as a foil against censorship, especially in matters of love. For some Iranian art film-makers, cinema and poetry are inseparable”. (Langford, 2019, p.135). If we look at Iran’s history, we can see artists have long not had any way to express themselves directly and were always faced with censorship even with so-called Liberal governments. So, using allegory and symbolism became part of the nature of Iranian art especially when the artist wants to talk about subjects like love and sex. But Langford mostly writes about Iranian art house films, for example, *Taste of Cherry* (Abbas Kiarostami, 1997), *Children of Heaven* (Majid Majidi, 1997), *The Circle* (*Dayereh*, Jafar Panahi, 2000) and *About Elly* (Asghar Farhadi, 2009). Most of the directors of these films have a poetic approach toward the censorship and use censorship as an advantage to make their movies. In contrast with Langford, I looked to popular cinema to analyze the allegorical expression of Iranian filmmakers, not as an aesthetic choice, but as a tool and strategy to fly under the radar of censorship. Yet, in this thesis I answered the below questions to show how censorship has never been completely able to stand against the expression of the artist's worldview.

My main research questions were: how does censorship and coding affect the depiction of sexuality in Iranian cinema? In what ways have Iranian filmmakers managed to negotiate strict

regulations and audience interest with regard to forbidden themes such as sex? How have the governing bodies interpreted the censorship guidelines?

In my first chapter, I analyzed “Subdued” and showed how cinematic techniques like voice-over became a substitute for showing forbidden sexual moments. In this film, the voice over allowed the audience to imagine and decode what they hear as sexual. Through the voice-over the “missing” moments became real.

The filmmaker's expressive use of the voice, turns characters' voices into acoustic mirrors in whose grains the spectators recognize not only the lovers' love and longing for each other but also our own desire as spectators for such intimacy the taboo-ridden Islamic Republic's cinema (Naficiy, 2000, p.573).

As long as there are no images of sex on screen, the Ministry of Culture cannot censor it. If there is nothing on screen, what can they worry about? I think that voice-over is a stronger technique than the “conventional codes of sex”, because, in this situation, audience can hear what happens and are not faced with allegorical expression. With voice-over there is no need to find a comparison between objects, and for the audience to oppositionally decode them.

Nematolah creates potent moments of eroticism and sexuality in allegorical ways in *Raghe Khab* (*Subdue*). For example, when he is screens kissing and sex between his central couple Kamran and Mina that were very obvious compared to other Iranian movies. I think, Naficiy has very good explanation about this comparison. He states that “These gestures of physical expression may seem innocent and small, but they are potent and transgressive in the context of modesty rules and prevailing practices that prohibit public heterosexual physical contact” (Naficiy, 2000, p.573). I believe that every step against the modesty rules counts as big achievement for Iranian filmmakers and audiences, even if they look innocent and small to a cultural outsider.

In the second chapter, I wrote about *Cold Sweat* as a movie that the hardliners and extremist critics attacked. The reason behind this attack was the film's treatment of a taboo subject: homosexuality. Soheil Beirghi as a director screen homosexuality between Afroz and Massi way by giving us some clues. For example, they live together secretly, the way they kiss and touch each other and planning for leaving Iran to be an asylum in Spain. Homosexuality is still an issue and

taboo for Iranian people. Not only for religious and traditional people, but also for lots of Iranian people. I can say only small group of people accept and respect them.

But in the current moment, Iranian people are consciously or unconsciously breaking this taboo as the rainbow has become one of the Women. Life. Freedom movement's symbols. "... 9-year-old Kian Pirfalak, whose family says he was killed by state security forces on Wednesday" (Dehghanpisheh, 2022). After the killing of Kian Pirfalak, by Iranian Security Forces in Izeh on November 16, a film of him went viral. He started his video presentation, while he was making a boat craft for his school, with this phrase: "In the name of God of the Rainbow". After this tragedy, some of the hashtag's trends are to use the rainbow and Kian's phrase. For example; #God\_of\_the\_Rainbow and #Kian\_Pirfalk. Also, lots of Iranian artists have made works based on God of the Rainbow. The Iranian actor Mohamad Sadeghi posted a picture of himself on his Instagram page wearing lipstick (Figure 4.1) with this caption; "We do not want censorship" (November 2022). As far as I remember, this is the first time that an Iranian actor talks about LGBT without censorship and open his personal life to public. All of these actions are big achievements for Iranian society. However, Sadeghi deleted this picture after days.

This chapter also explained how oppositional decoding functions in Iran when the audience is faced with public denial from filmmakers. I explain that whenever people deny something, especially in a medium like cinema or TV, the Iranian audience decodes the statement in an oppositional way because of the prevailing propaganda in these media. This situation occurs a lot in the current situation in Iran. The government killed and arrested lots of people and we are facing lots of confessions from families of victims and arrested people. For example, a poor family member came to TV and said their beloved had an underlying disease and was not killed by the government. So, this means the audience understands the opposite- their family was definitely murdered by the government.



Figure 4.1 Mohmad Sadeghi Instagram post with the caption; We do not want censorship.

In my final chapter, I showed how intertextuality helped Sabaghzade to screen forbidden acts by referring to famous films as substitutes for actions and characters. These references helped him show sexuality without screening it.

All of these filmmakers use an allegorical expression for encoding the sexual movements necessary because of the censorship and morality rules of the Islamic Republic. I cannot read these allegorical expressions as aesthetic expressions that are the result of censorship, but I call them strategies. The reason I decided to work on these movies was that their filmmakers successfully screen sexual attraction and erotic desire without explicitly showing them with the help of strategies, which makes the limitations that come from the Iranian government more visible.

For decoding these allegorical moments, the Iranian audiences actively use their knowledge, based on their cultural, sociological, and political situation. I believe that these cultural and political contexts give a structure to the audience to decode meaning in a dominant hegemonic way and also help them to break down the walls of censorship by oppositional reading.

In conclusion, I argue that censorship means inhibition and this is an obstacle for the artist. The sequences I analyzed are decoded as sexual moments and to an Iranian audience they are obviously sexual. But they rely on this decoding to be read this way. They are not and cannot be literal sex scenes. Censorship Iranian artist face with under no certain circumstances cannot be defended.

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