

Becoming the Beheld:

Iran's Media Ecology and the Question of Superficial Imitation

Abstract: What exactly is this televisual cultural identity that seems to be emerging among Iran's more cosmopolitan-minded youth – this culture founded on the emulation of Euro-American pop cultural values; and this culture where what is seen on screen is often taken for face value, and translated accordingly into actual lifestyle choices of the viewing audience? In fact, beyond the media from which these performances are imitated, the phenomenon itself is not altogether new. From the late nineteenth century through to the twenty-first century, terms such as *gharbzadegi* ('Occidentitis' or 'Weststruckness') and "cultural schizophrenia" have encompassed the civilizational discourse with respect to Iran and its purported superficial imitation of the western world. The present paper wishes to expand on these inquiries by applying to them a distinctly media ecological lens. Borrowing from the theories of Marshall McLuhan and Walter Ong, this work summarily investigates the effects that media, including print, photography, and radio have had on the Iranian milieu. This study hopes to introduce a new lens with which to study Iran's media environment.

Introduction: Mediated Dreams Made Real

What some consider hybridity, others continue to call imitation. Hybridity, after all, entails the translation and harmonious reconfiguration of an unfamiliar cultural attitude into a still-distinctive culture, while imitation suggests a more superficial, less rooted form of emulation, where an alien cultural attitude merely supplants an older one. Indeed, a fleeting glance at twenty-first century Tehran, as seen through its cosmopolitan youth, looks more like a collage pasted together from western pop cultural artifacts than anything slightly resembling an ordinary quotidian society. Beyond examining the onerous political and economic strife it continues to experience, the city itself can also be looked at through its yearning for all things “*lukcherry*” (luxury), its hyperbolized compulsions toward Euro-American vogues and fashions, its endless penchant for plastic surgery, as well as its denizens’ consequent emulation of western lifestyles as anchored by the commercial images of recreation or intellectualism reflected on western films and television series.

Are these televisual and cinematic images, easily accessible and popularly consumed, being considered as true and definitive examples of Euro-American life? Are those members of society living these hyperbolized lives merely to imitate what they see on screen? After all, at this point, even the mundane aspects of Iranian society barely resemble the mundanity experienced by everyday life. Rather, even a fleeting glance brings to light a mundane more televisual than just mundane, as though the city – and perhaps the country – itself is a product of western pop culture. In the case of Iran, the concept of hybridity does not quite hold.

From the late nineteenth century through to the twenty-first century, a civilizational discourse with respect to Iran’s superficial imitation of the western world has been at the center of domestic inquiries about the country. Originally concerned with the rapid pace of modernization within Iran in the twentieth century, these theories pinned the blame on modernity-obsessed Iranians that performed the modern without necessarily understanding what it entailed, and thus imitating a veneer of a phenomenon much deeper and more complex. These modes of imitation were then given myriad names: from Europeanism (*orupāgari*) to “Occidentiotis” (*gharbzadegi*), to “Americastruckness” (*Āmrikāzadegi*) to “cultural schizophrenia.” And indeed, through to the present day, such phraseologies have become part and parcel of the Iranian vernacular. Those thinkers that originally coined such terms – Ahmad Kasravi, Ahmad Fardid, Jalal Al-e Ahmad, Samad Behrangi, Ali Shari’ati and Dariush Shayegan among them – sought to understand this mimetic phenomenon through philosophical, historical, as well as postcolonial perspectives, probing into the reasons and the conditions under which Iran became so entangled with western technologies and commodities that it hardly knew how to utilize – so much so that it almost came to forget itself. Investigating the consequences of these events, these thinkers contended that Iran had transformed into a society that possessed only the façade of modernity, imitating only the surface of what it entailed.

By and large, this work seeks to propose a media ecological approach in examining Iran’s history of media use and consequent imitation of media content. Specifically, by briefly investigating the distinctive manners in which print, photography, radio, as well as television were utilized within the country, I wish to expand on the aforementioned discourse by contending that this mode of imitation stems largely from the transplantation of western media in a primarily oral society unpracticed in unpacking their forms.

The analysis will first turn to Iran’s two historical encounters with the Russian Empire in the early nineteenth century. This pivotal event, which triggered both cultural malaise and

powerlessness amongst the Iranian elite, inclined them to bring themselves and their country to speed with the western world through the appropriation of western technology. Indeed, the introduction of the printing press was central to these modernizing efforts. However, because popular media in Iran had long embraced more oral traditions of consumption – corresponding, in turn, with Iran’s largely oral cultural traditions – print media was both utilized and understood in a manner distinct from other print-saturated milieus. The printed word – for a lack of better phraseology – was read differently, and thus absorbed in a contrary manner as well.

Even still, print never found its footing in Iran. Illiteracy was widespread as late as in the second half of the twentieth century. Because of this, Iranian society seems to have bypassed the era of print and leaped directly from a period of orality into secondary-orality; from the spoken word to radio to television, with only a handful of elites versed in print literacy like the majority of the west’s post-Enlightenment populace. On account of having skipped the print literacy period, newer media forms were likewise absorbed in a manner characteristic of an oral society as opposed to a society that had fully experienced print.

What, then, does this consecutive sequence of events have to do with imitation? Imitation, I argue, has been largely rooted in Iran’s appropriation of media that were not necessarily read as the forms of said media intended. Rather, since the nineteenth century these media were utilized as means to lessen the gap between the west and Iran’s purported sense of inferiority. With the form of media not properly grasped, the content specific to these media forms was, in turn, taken for granted and taken for truth. Otherwise stated, the mimetic identities forged by the consumers of media even in today’s Iran appear to have stemmed not only from Iran’s sociohistorical predicament vis-a-viz the West as previously hypothesized by Iranian intellectuals, but also from the distinctive ways that the largely oral Iranian culture has interpreted both the form and the content of its appropriated media.

Iran and the Post-Televisual Collage

Thus far, the literature on the subject of identity construction in modern Iran is often limited to political, historical, or philosophical discourses. The role of media in constructing the modern Iranian sense of cultural identity is often relegated to perspectives associated with those particular discourses. Media, in and of itself, is overlooked as a result.

Among the few academic testimonials available with respect to contemporary Iran’s culturally distinct imitation of western lifestyles can be found in Pardis Mahdavi’s 2007 study of sexuality in post-revolutionary Iran as well as her 2008 book by the same name. By way of Mahdavi’s paper, one can gather the transplantation of what she calls “globalized media” into the lives of Iran’s present-day youth. These imitations, in turn, happen to seriously affect the way that this particular age-group seems to perform in both private and social settings, with the youths closely re-enacting what they see on screen. This mirroring of content witnessed from televisual media allows them to form an identity more in tune with Western pop culture. Touching on this occurrence, Mahdavi explains:

[Young] people’s image of the West is a product of the globalised media that they are exposed to and constructed by scrappy clips of MTV and satellite TV as well as TV programmes such as the newly translated ‘Sex and the City’. Thus, many urban young Iranians find that ‘changes in (their) understanding of and attitudes towards sexuality are both affected by and reflect(ive of) the larger changes in globalisation’ ... Many of my

informants equate sex and drugs with the West, due to the Western media to which they are exposed and thus they believe that engaging in certain sexual behaviours or using certain substances is more 'Western' and perhaps more in style. (Mahdavi, 2007, 452)

Mahdavi's work largely engages with the political aspects of this "tele-actual" (an unfortunately ostentatious term, which means to stand for "the televisual made actual") performance among the youth. Her intention is to shed light on the politically-charged fact that this "sexual revolution" is a mishmash of codes that has been conceived by the youth to speak "back to the regime, to the morality police who had made them suffer for so long and to other potential members of the revolution" (Mahdavi, 2007, 456).

Eye-opening as that may be, the most revealing aspect of Mahdavi's article, for the purposes of this paper, is the passing significance that it lays on western media, and the performances that it provokes among the youth. A similar approach has been employed in Shahram Khosravi's *Young and Defiant in Tehran*, which ventures to examine western influences among young Iranians, only to then primarily focus on the politics that override the phenomenon. Fleeting allusions of this ilk, which briefly mention the sway of media in Iran without deliberating over the issue, further advance this paper's appeal for a media-based approach to the Iranian milieu.

Little work has been done with respect to how imported mediums have actually operated in an Iranian setting, and, more importantly, the nuanced baggage they have naturally brought with them into this society. What media ecology principally attempts to do is to combine these historical, political, and philosophical discourses in order to clearly contextualize the bedrocks of a particular medium in a given area. To borrow from Neil Postman, the aim of media ecology is to unscramble precisely how "the interaction between media and human beings give a culture its character." (Postman, 2000) A medium, after all, is, simply, "a technology within which a culture grows" (Postman, 2000, 10). Hence, one can deduce that a medium naturally reflects the historical, political, and philosophical characteristics of the culture that it has helped cultivate. Rather than just examine the effects of media, media ecology endeavors to delve deep into the actual nature of a given medium in order to understand precisely mechanisms with which a medium can help foster or intensify certain characteristics of a given culture.

Building on Marshall McLuhan's ubiquitous aphorism that "the medium is the message" (McLuhan, 2001, 7) – which is to say that the form of a given medium already dictates the mode of discourse that it is most suited to disperse – we can also argue that "the medium is the culture." This latter adage is meant to suggest that a culture is similarly constructed based on the medium that helps develop or reinforce its norms and social structures. It bears mention that "culture" here stands for a community's distinctive mode of expression, its sensibilities, as well as its habitual style of thinking. To better understand a culture, therefore, one must delve into its contemporaneous media as well.

Media Forms as Dream Machines

While it is true that media is translated and cultivated in any given space based on the cultural idiosyncrasies of their host culture, we also learn from Neil Postman's definition that media is a technology within which a culture is constructed. An imported medium therefore still carries with it its previously constructed culture; a certain "baggage" one might say. This implies that whenever a medium is introduced elsewhere, it nevertheless carries with it the constructs of its original culture – or, at least, the culture from which it has been directly extracted. To fully grasp an

imported medium, therefore, it is crucial to also unravel the cultural constructs that come alongside it.

A glaring example of this phenomenon is also presented in Edmund Carpenter's *Oh, What a Blow That Phantom Gave Me!* as he recalls the experience of Prince Modupe, a West African anthropologist, who entered the Hollywood film industry in the 1940s. On account of some politically-charged guardedness, MGM, the Hollywood studio that Modupe worked for, was not allowed to depict actual African cultures or countries in their films. Thus, they hired Modupe so that he could concoct quasi-African rituals, which would at least appear to be African for the everyday film viewer. What transpired was staggering:

Modupe's task was purely creative: design buildings, songs, shields, dances, masks, even 'languages,' all of which Americans would accept as authentically African but which no African would recognize as his. Modupe was so successful in this that he convinced even Africans [and] they modified their art accordingly (Carpenter, 1976, 81).

And so, absolute fiction gave way to absolute actuality. Viewers not well-versed in how to unpack the culture within the given medium were thus unable to separate the truths and untruths presented to them on screen. In this instance, the content of the cinematic medium was taken for granted. This is perhaps owing to the fact that the culture exposed to these images could not yet distinguish between what was seen through cinema and what was seen through one's own eyes. After all, one must be properly trained or conditioned to differentiate between these two divergent ways of seeing. A medium cannot instantaneously do this on its own.

Making a similar example, this time regarding the people of New Guinea, Carpenter laments that "someday New Guineans will know their heritage through such films and Americans will know the rest of the world through such fantasies" (Carpenter, 1976, 102). The anthropologist goes on to claim that "We use media to destroy cultures, but we first use media to create a false record of what we are about to destroy" (Carpenter, 1976, 102).

It bears mention that media are also capable of providing false records of their own cultures; false records to be modelled after and media cultures to be emulated. This can be seen with the case of what Iranians consider to be Euro-American culture. Indeed, the media inside Iran were not established as autonomous entities, as something intended to be first properly understood and then developed indigenously from the ground up. Rather, each successive media, from print to photography to radio and television, was introduced to the country based on media cultures already envied, cultures deemed worthy of imitation. As we shall see later, for instance, print was introduced in Iran as a media with which Iran could achieve Enlightenment similar to Europe; Europe's print culture being the model after which Iranian print culture should likewise pattern itself. The same can be said for photography. Correspondingly, at the turn of the century, radio and television were similarly patterned after American models for the two media. How does a media culture, patterned after European or American models, subsist in an Iranian landscape? Does the imported medium itself acclimatize to the new environment? Or does the medium incline its users to acclimatize to the new conditions it has now brought on?

One can thus imagine how a viewer that sits and watches a far-away culture that he envies would react the same way to what is shown on screen, not quite able to distinguish between what is true and what is merely a manufactured dream. After all, those in the original culture might have been made inure to their own media, possessing the requisite media sophistication to sparse truth

from untruth, form from content. The host culture, however, views content under entirely different conditions. The world that the viewer is watching, after all, is a culture too disparate from his own, the content that he watches much more glamorized, the medium that he watches through not so deeply entrenched in his culture – either by dint of time or the gradual yet conditioning experience of successive media epochs. When this viewer, who is viewing content through media patterned after a more media savvy environment, contrasts the fantasies that he sees on screen with the reality lived in his home country, unlike and far away, these dreams manage to take on a more urgent meaning, especially if his home environment is lacking what he seeks. A poignant sentiment thus emerges: that “it’s better to be inside the TV than to be outside” (Wallace, 1993, 176). No doubt, a realization such as this could then lead our imaginary individual to begin idealizing the broadcast content. Gradually, he might assimilate the characteristics he admires about a particular character from his screen. And, soon enough, without the conditioning to fully distinguish form from content, our imaginary viewer might come to construct a televisual identity for himself, reifying the unreal, and making actual the stuff of mere dreams. To borrow from Carpenter again, they will “now rush on stage, costumed according to our whim” (Carpenter, 1976, 101).

Iran, Identity, and New Mediums: The Cases of Cultural Schizophrenia and Occidentosis

While colonized countries were often compelled into cultures of relatively unfamiliar media, Iran’s contemporary history tells the tale of a voluntary adoption of the novel media, brought on initially by secular, cosmopolitan-minded elites that sought to steer the narrative of their nation toward modernity. On account of this, it could be argued that the adoption of western media by Iran’s modernizing elite was idiosyncratic to their own yearnings and fantasies to espouse the western technological garb. The reasons behind this enthusiastic adoption of western technologies suggest a complex historical fixation with westernism that has clearly carried on to the present day.

Philosopher Dariush Shayegan was among the first to systematically investigate Iran’s culture of media-based distortions in 1992’s *Cultural Schizophrenia*. Though Shayegan was more concerned with the philosophical discourse of tradition-versus-modernity with respect to his argument, he nevertheless identified the phenomenon of an “ill-digested modernity” (Shayegan, 1997, 17) in contemporary Iran. Speaking in polemic in place of a more evidence-based academic discourse – and thinking largely in terms of the Clash of Civilizations-like binary of the Islamic East versus the Enlightened West – the Iranian philosopher claims that Iran and its surrounding Islamic cultures underwent what he dubs to have been “holiday from history.” (Shayegan, 1997, 12) In his estimation, this “holiday” occurred concurrent to the western world’s period of industrialization. Faced with this newly industrialized western world in the nineteenth century, these Islamic societies recognized that they had “fallen into a trap,” that they “no longer held the reins of [their] own identity, that railway lines divided up [their] land, telegraph poles crisscrossed [their] plains, steamships filled [their] harbors.” (Shayegan, 1997, 14) In short, they recognized that, sped up by its industrial technologies, the western world had left the Islamic world in the dust of its rearview.

According to Shayegan, the Islamic world’s realization that they had undergone a sudden regression prompted it to settle down “to consume ideas, objects, and methods, whose mechanisms [they] could barely decipher... [forming] the conviction that it would be possible to be selective with the nature of the things [they] were obtaining... to choose technology and firearms while heroically ruling out the subversive, laicizing ideas which lay behind them.” (Shayegan, 1997, 15) In time, Shayegan also claims it a “sheer illusion to imagine that a technique can be learned without

acquiring, or at least understanding, the metaphysical underpinnings which constitutes its armature” (Shayegan, 1997, 18).

Some examples are offered about the cultural distortions that Shayegan touches on, the most convincing being his disenchanted sentiments vis-à-vis the state of literary translation in the country. To the philosopher, these largely poor translations of western literature, “made by people with insufficient grasp of the material they contain” (Shayegan, 1997, 122) manage to give rise to “a whole generation of writers and intellectuals who, rummaging here and there for disconnected, unraveled snippets of information, use the results in eccentric ways to prop up their own ideas” (Shayegan, 1997, 122). What naturally emerges is a canon of translated knowledge charged with falsehoods, biases, and misrepresentations of the original material, which “grow and multiply, breeding in their turn others even more grotesque, until we are left in a world of distorting mirrors where all the essential ideas are vitiated at the outset.” (Shayegan, 1997, 123). The cultural terrain that evolves from this series of distortions emanating from the west and then being translated into the eastern idiom winds into a “doubly alienated” intellectual culture, one where ideas are acquired without any critical reflection, and one where only the “crass and unsubtle exterior” of the culture that inspired it holds (Shayegan, 1997, 134). For Shayegan, this experience is characterized as cultural limbo, a “no man’s land” with a “pseudo-culture which yells at the top of its voice but produces nothing solid,” which “cannot find a spot in which to take root” (Shayegan, 1997, 134).

Polemical though they may be, Shayegan’s observations provide a noteworthy insight into an alienated culture surrounded by simultaneously alienated and alienating technologies. If one could separate the examples he offers from the modernity-obsessed abstractions of his text, a relatively coherent image is revealed: of a culture that has assimilated technologies as a result of its encounter with the west and the urgent, consequent sprint to keep up with an ever-technologizing world. Most importantly, the image that is offered makes visible a culture that has misconstrued the underpinnings of the technologies put into immediate use.

Shayegan’s usage of the term “technology” is indeed harmonious with Marshall McLuhan’s understanding of media, which the latter considers to be “all human inventions and innovations,” including “the spoken word, roads, numbers, clothing, housing, money, clocks, the automobile, games, and weapons, in addition to the major mass media and communication technologies” (Strate, 2004, 7). Thus, even when Shayegan speaks of the ingress of “telegraph lines, railways, steam engines, gramophones, microscopes, and telescopes” (Shayegan, 1997, 152) into the east from the western world, he is indeed referring, in McLuhan-like terms, to the ingress of media that, though alien to Iranian culture, nonetheless led to their distorted implementation, and ultimately, the distortion of the culture’s sense of identity as a whole. The sequence of misread technologies as per Shayegan’s argument can thus be understood as the succession of misconstrued media.

Certainly, Shayegan was not the only thinker to have detected a westward-imitating phenomenon emerging within Iran. Decades before *Cultural Schizophrenia*, Jalal Al-e Ahmad also criticized this issue in 1962’s *Occidentitis: A Plague from the West*. For Al-e Ahmad, western culture’s penetration of the Iranian milieu was not so much a result of Iran’s native fixation with the west as it was a matter of cultural imperialism. Since “developing nations” such as Iran “are not fabricating the machines” (Al-e Ahmad, 1984, 30) that they are using, they are prone to the influence that the far more developed nations have over them by way of these technologies. As long as they are divested of the means with which to fabricate technologies on their own, Iranians are fated to gauche implement the machines given to them. For Al-e Ahmad, such unthinking acceptance of alien technologies begets an individual that “has no character... a thing without

authenticity. [whose] palpable characteristic... is fear... fear of anonymity, fear of discovery that the warehouse he has weighing down his head and tries to foist off as a brain is empty” (Al-e Ahmad, 1984, 96).

Whereas Shayegan dreads the establishment of distorted norms and values founded on misinterpreted information, Al-e Ahmad fears Iran’s absolute loss of identity in the face of the west’s technological “onslaught” (Al-e Ahmad, 1984, 31). Both thinkers, nonetheless, share a common insight regarding Iran’s implementation of these imported technologies. Both agree that not only are these machines improperly understood by the Iranians employing them in their daily lives, but that these haphazard utilizations are further distorted because Iranians do not quite yet “comprehend the real essence, basis, and philosophy of Western civilization.” As a result, Iranians begin “aping the West outwardly and formally... like the ass going about in a lion’s skin” (Al-e Ahmad, 1984, 31).

By way of these examples, one can see clearly that throughout different periods of Iran’s modern history, different intellectuals with myriad backgrounds also happened to discern a form of distorted, westward-gazing imitation occurring among the Iranian populace. Despite their distinctive discourses, these intellectuals agree on one particular fact: Without having fully grasped the technologies that they have acquired from elsewhere, and by dint of their impatience to let them take root within their own culture, the Iranian populace has now caught itself using these tools to mimic modernity as opposed to truly understanding it.

A Brief History of the Westward Gaze: The Cases of Print and Photography

Studies of modern Iran emphasize one singular turning point as Iran’s rude awakening to the west and modernity: In the nineteenth century, at the apex of Europe’s Industrial Revolution, the Qajar dynasty found itself confronted with the military might of the Russian Empire. Overwhelmed by two wars, the first spanning from 1804 to 1813, and the second, from 1826 to 1828, Iran’s ruling elite ultimately experienced two humiliating defeats at hands of the Russians. These defeats were codified in the sway- and territory-siphoning treaties of Gulistan (1813) and Turkomanchai (1828) (Abrahamian, 1982, 51). Prior to these encounters, even Iranian travelogues showed little interest toward the European world. The authors of those books hardly considered the far-off continent “to be a relevant source of inspiration for Iran” (Zia-Ebrahimi, 2016, 22). The “shock” of these successive defeats at the hands of the Russians, however, suddenly tipped off the Iranian elites of their plausible “weakness” in the face of these newly modernized states (Cronin, 2008, 198). Iran was now not only alienated by the defeat itself but was also struck by the might of its subjugators.

It comes as no surprise that this situation forced the local elites of Iran to feel great unrest with respect to both their local identity as well as their identity in relation to Russia and Great Britain, the two mighty nations smothering them from both sides. Having overestimated their sense of superiority, these elites eventually came to question themselves, struggling “with issues in self-respect, in the shame of defeat and of technological inferiority” (Cole, 1996, 35). Such an occasion set in motion the Iranian elite’s perpetual preoccupation with the western world.

Though tinged with resentments over “the humiliation of [having] to mimic an enemy deemed culturally and religiously inferior” (Cronin, 2008, 201), those Iranians in power nevertheless rapidly took to a process of so-called modernization. Foreign methods and technologies were proliferated or imported during this time, taken up and embraced by the humiliated ruling class, now hungry to speed up the forced process of development. At this time, concurrent with the intellectuals’ attempts to “‘imagine’ an Iranian nation” (Cole, 1996, 35), those

with even a modicum of power, including “self-contended princes, courtiers, provincial overlords, intellectuals, clergymen, and Sufis who composed the Qajar elite” (Zia-Ebrahimi, 2016, 21,) began dwelling on the territory’s status with an international perspective in mind. Some of these questions were concerned with exactly where Iran stood in relation to the developments of the western world, best exemplified by crown prince Abbas Mirza Qajar’s (1788-1833) query to a French envoy in 1805, asking:

What is the power that gives [Europe] so great a superiority over us? What is the cause of your progress and of our constant weakness? You know the art of governing, the art of conquering, the art of putting into action all human faculties, whereas we seem condemned to vegetate in a shameful ignorance (Zia-Ebrahimi, 2016, 23).

Acting on his appeal, Abbas Mirza laid the foundations for Iran’s first “modernist movement” (Zia-Ebrahimi, 2016, 24). The crown prince’s program of reform was largely concerned with military modernization. In so doing, he was also the first ruler to send Iranian students to Europe so that they could learn subjects such as engineering, military science, medicine, typography, and language, among others (Abrahamian, 1982, 32). Among these students was Mirza Saleh Shirazi, who upon his return in 1819, opened the first printing press in Iran (Abrahamian, 1982, 32). In addition to this, Abbas Mirza attempted to further “his administration’s knowledge of the West” by instituting “a library containing the works of French, English, and Russians writers and to promote translation of books and articles into Persians” (Ekhtiar, 1996, 62).

These attempts to modernize in accordance with the west, however, did not always lead to a faithful form of adaptation. As we have learned, for an “alien media” (Carpenter, 1976, 183) to be implemented properly, the culture that the medium carries within itself must also be understood. Oftentimes, with regards to Qajar Iran, these western technologies were emulated without the context behind them fully uncovered or realized. Rather, they were implemented as mere wish-fulfillment, with the thought that modern technology, however hitherto inscrutable, will naturally bring with it modernity.

Abbas Mirza and the Written Word: A Case of Reform Through Fiction

A particularly striking example in this vein concerns the false impressions that stemmed from the print medium and print culture during Abbas Mirza’s reign as heir apparent. Among the books that the crown prince specifically commissioned to be translated was Voltaire’s *The History of Russia Under Peter the Great*. Voltaire’s work was notable for the praise it lay on the titular Russian monarch, extoling his reforms while also suggesting that “Russia did not exist until Peter discovered and transformed it with his genius” (Ekhtiar, 1996, 64).

Prior to the official translation, myriad manuscripts had already been written about Peter the Great inside Qajar Iran, their accounts often utilizing the same “Voltairian rhetoric” (Ekhtiar, 1996, 70). One Qajar writer, in praising Peter I’s modernizing efforts, wrote that “refinement and civilization” occurred only in consequence of Peter the Great’s reign and his efforts. Another claimed, hyperbolically, that “Peter made continuous efforts to build houses and public structures according to Western models, which resulted in the creation of a city greater than any other in Europe... He cleared the plain and laid the foundations for the city of St. Petersburg” (Ekhtiar, 1996, 65). These are but some of attributions made to the Russian king. More grandiose characteristics were also outlined, including the fact that Peter “built ships, navigated, created the

first Russian navy, reorganized the undisciplined feudal militia into an organized and centralized army at the same time that he founded academies, built cities, made maps” (Ekhtiar, 1996, 62).

Greatly inspired by Peter I’s fabled “personal dynamism and his role as a monarch-artisan” (Ekhtiar, 1996, 62) as well as his “Westernizing reforms” (Ekhtiar, 1996, 60) in eighteenth century Russia, Abbas Mirza began to emulate the characteristics attributed to the Russian monarch as implied by this common, “Voltarian rhetoric.” As a result, Abbas Mirza embarked on a study of mathematics and the sciences, reading and then disseminating the works of Copernicus and Newton throughout Iran. Most of his nights were said to be spent “reading and studying,” and his knowledge of “Western literature and science” was reported to have been unparalleled by the very same French envoy with whom the crown prince kept a correspondence (Ekhtiar, 1996, 62).

Abbas Mirza was said to be “ready to set aside all national and religious traditions for the advancement of his country... along Western lines (Ekhtiar, 1996, 62). Similarly informed by this rhetoric, the prince had also queried the envoy about whether he should, “travel to your lands like the Muscovite czar and learn from you?” referring, of course, to the travels said to have been made by Peter the Great (Ekhtiar, 1996, 63). These emulations of Voltairian characteristics had gone so far that Moritz von Kotzebue, a Russian officer stationed in the crown prince’s domain of Azerbaijan, referred to him as Iran’s “future Peter the Great” (Kotzebue, 1819, 162).

Little was known though about the actual context behind Voltaire’s writings on Peter I. It turned out that the philosopher had never been to Russia. His biography was merely written as a means to transfigure Peter the Great as a leader whose mannerisms were in line with Enlightenment principles. To a great extent, in writing the biography of a reformist Russian monarch, Voltaire’s intention was to “promote the paradigm of ‘enlightened absolutism,’ which was to guide the policies of numerous European monarchs for cultural change” (Ekhtiar, 1996, 68). The characterizations made with reference to Peter the Great were less actual fact, and more a consequence of an author’s imagination, let alone that it was thought up as per a specific ideology. What occurred, therefore, was that a French Enlightenment thinker’s selective harvesting of historical information, mixed in with the hyperbolic products of an active imagination, was carried over to a culture unaware of print culture’s like ability to parade ideological opining as history, only to be utilized as a definitive source of emulation in a country desperately in need of such fantastical modernizing efforts.

And indeed, in spite of its historical fallacies, the book and the subsequent emulation that its content spurred managed to bring genuine reform to the country. Students were sent abroad, translated works of science and history were commissioned, and a modern military of “13,000 infantry, cavalry, and artillery” (Cronin, 2008, 206) as trained by Europeans was also established. A “unique discourse” (Ekhtiar, 1996, 69) was thus fashioned from a distorted understanding of both the form and content of the print medium. Indeed, these reforms, emulated as they were from a fictitious book, ultimately proved to be more advantageous than anything that might have otherwise stemmed from a contextually-correct understanding of the work or the print culture that underpinned it.

New Eyes with Which to See: Photography for the Modernizing Elite

A comparable illustration can also be made with regards to Iran’s introduction to photography. In “the Powerful Art of Qajar Photography,” Ali Behdad provides a historical example regarding the Qajar monarchy’s implementation of the photographic medium. Unlike the advent of print, which was cultivated long before the medium’s introduction to Iran, “the beginning of the history of

photography in the Near East [coincided] with the general history of the medium.” This, however, did not change the fact that the daguerreotype, which was the earliest form of photographic production, was a European form. As a result, the medium, as per its use in the Near East, “was intertwined with Europe’s Orientalist vision of the Middle East and its colonial interest in the region” (Behdad, 2001, 143).

As Susan Sontag observes, the photograph is often regarded as a medium that could “furnish evidence” on account of its ostensibly “more innocent, and therefore more accurate relation to visible reality” (Sontag, 1979, 3). Because of this, a photograph of something is often accepted as an objective slice of reality, rather than as something that could also transmit its own subjective message or camouflaged “ideology” (Sontag, 1979, 14). It should come as no surprise that the earliest known photographs of the Middle East were hardly “natural” or “objective” (Behdad, 2001, 143). Instead, they managed to successfully underpin the European stereotypical perspective that the area was “backward” and “exotic,” reducing its inhabitants to caricatures (Sontag, 1979, 14).

The first photographic instruments to emerge in Iran were those gifted to Muhammad Shah by both Russia and England between the years of 1839 and 1842. No one inside the court, however, was familiar with how to put the apparatus to use. It was only following 1844, when the French educator and the first individual to take photographs of Iran, Jules Richard, entered into Iran that the art of photography was properly taught to the Qajar princes. Not long after, more European envoys and officers came to instruct the Qajar elite on how to use the photographic apparatus.

Largely employing the medium to report on areas that could be of colonial interest to their native countries, these European experts were already experienced in best utilizing the photographic medium in relation to Iran. Naturally, the manner in which they taught photography in Iran also fell in line with the colonial doctrine that had already been instilled in them. Among these photography experts was Antoin Sevruguin, who “maintained a direct connection with the Russian embassy where his father, a Georgian Orientalist worked.” Meant exclusively for European consumption, Sevruguin’s photographs of an “exotic, picturesque, and erotic” variation of Iran, included images of “dervishes, ethnic figures, bazaar scenes, shots of ‘primitive’ village life, women posed in traditional dress, [and] staged pictures of the harem’s lascivious world” (Behdad, 2001, 144). These images served to position Iran within the binary system of “exotic east in the face of a modernized west,” which was characteristic of European Enlightenment thinking. In this way, “from the very beginning, the art of photography in Iran was interpolated by Orientalist knowledge and aesthetics” (Behdad, 2001, 145).

Exotic photographs of Iran were also the first photographic images that the Qajar elites saw of their own country. After all, prior to the European introduction of the medium, no Iranian could have possibly had the tools or know-all to implement this apparatus in an individualized manner. The images taken of Iran by European experts – who were in turn also inspired to take photographs based on their own pictorial traditions in painting – came to inspire the Qajar elite that had access to the medium to take images in the same vein.

In view of this fact, a photograph of Iran taken by a European became indistinguishable from one taken by an Iranian. The latter’s training, after all, had only been done at the hands of a European, whose own use of the medium already followed specific patterns. This resulted in the Qajar elites taking photographs of their home territory with the particularly alien eye of the European. Thus, “whether the work of a European, such as Sevruguin, or that of an Iranian, such as Nasir al-Din Shah, the early photographs of Iran were intertextually linked to Europe’s

knowledge of the Middle East” (Behdad, 2001, 145-146). For instance, as highlighted by Behdad in an example concerning Nasir al-Din Shah’s photographs of his wives:

In Nasir al-Din Shah's photograph, for example, his wife's open-legged pose and exposed body imitate those of Ingres' *odalisque*. The shah's wife, like the women of Orientalist paintings, is both elaborately dressed and erotically exposed. Her bored gaze, suggestive of the monotony of harem life, invites the (male) viewer to fantasize about an erotic encounter with her. Similarly, in Sevruguin's image, the reclining posture and direct gaze of the Kurdish woman resemble those of the figure in Marchetti's "Siesta." Though the woman is dressed in her traditional Kurdish dress, both her seductive gaze and her position on the divan-shaped stage recall similar tropes in earlier European images of oriental femininity... [Thus] the large body of European images of the Middle East mediated the vision of the photographer, informed his aesthetic consciousness and artistic grammar, and inscribed him in a relation of colonial power vis-a-vis his oriental subject (Behdad, 2001, 146).

To put this observation into a more theoretical perspective, we can see that instead of providing the consumer of the new medium the space with which to craft his own perspective, the photographic apparatus already carried with it a European contextual baggage. This does not imply that the orientalist nuances introduced to the host culture were carried over deliberately. In fact, adhering to one of media’s essential characteristics, the imported medium merely reflected the European imagination regarding Iran at the time.

A European aesthetic was thus integrated into the medium. In time, as the tool was further acclimatized to its new setting, this specific aesthetic was gradually ingrained within the nature of the medium. Rather than progressively shed its previous characteristics, the new medium’s original culture merely sedimented into its host’s culture. By the time the photograph was no longer considered a new or alien medium, it had nevertheless successfully carried over its European cultural baggage. So deeply ingrained within the medium itself so as to be almost imperceptible, the final photographic product could not help but retain its European undercurrents.

This is not to say that the inherent European-ness of the medium was not welcomed by the Iranian consumer that admired these shows of modernity. As a matter of fact, a great part of the fascination with the medium came as a result of its western origins. That this was indeed a European medium loaded with a European context inspired the likes of Nasir al-Din Shah to experiment with their own identities in a photographic vein. For instance, just as he was to embark on yet another trip to Europe, the monarch willingly posed for a photograph that sought to depict him as some “Baudelairian dandy or an elegant boulevardier” (Diba, 2013, 88). The medium and its undertones, therefore, even played a personal role for the shah, allowing him to experiment with different identities.

The said shah also recognized the potential that photography had in projecting an image of modernity for the Qajar monarchy, both domestically and internationally. Imitating the European convention, in 1862, Nasir al-Din Shah employed photographers to compile images of daily life within the court in the form of photo albums. These images shared a stark resemblance with the photographic conventions of European monarchies, even “in the poses, costumes, and props of [the] sitters” (Diba, 2013, 89). The photographs were then accordingly “distributed to government departments and offices and disseminated among fellow monarchs abroad as symbols of [the shah’s] authority” (Diba, 2013, 91).

After all, as Sontag again observes, while “what is written about a person or an event is frankly an interpretation, photographs give their viewer the illusion that they are “miniatures of reality” (Sontag, 1979, 2). Thus, if something is photographed, the fiction is that it must clearly be an accurate representation of the thing. In this manner, photographs of a rational, systematic, and modernized state were used to give the impression that the country was indeed what the images claimed it to be. Whether it was indeed as it professed itself to be did not matter, for the reality merely lay in what was photographed. Nasir al-Din Shah understood photography’s effectiveness in projecting a hyperbolic stance of power. In his having done so, one could say that, unwittingly or not, the Qajar king possessed the apposite media sophistication with which to properly harness the tool. Rather than balk at the fact that the photograph was often used in Iran to project an exoticized image of the territory, the shah instead took advantage of it, reflecting back that exoticized image not just to Europeans, but also to the dynasty’s own people.

In similar fashion, the preoccupation with providing a photographic “image” of a modernized state was to especially intensify during Reza Shah Pahlavi’s reign some decades later. Any measure was taken so as to offer the world an image of an Iran that was, indeed, not truly what it was photographed to be. For instance, after being questioned on his directive for all Iranian men to wear European chapeaus, the elder Pahlavi’s justification was purely image-based: “All I’m trying to do,” he had answered, “is for us to look like [the Europeans] so they would not laugh at us” (Katouzian, 2006, 336). This instance marks yet another example of an Iranian monarch’s media sophistication with regards to the photograph.

Owing to these instances, we can maintain that the seeds to Iran’s media-based idealization of an imagined west occurred long before the advent of media such as radio or television. What we can posit from these examples is that just as the calculated implementation of a fully-understood medium can produce a purposeful and deliberate message (as seen with Nasir al-Din Shah or Reza Shah), the culturally-specific utilization of a new medium will also result in a legitimate message in line with its consumer’s intentions (as illustrated with the case of Abbas Mirza). Even if the “baggage” of a particular medium is ignored or misinterpreted, the medium will nonetheless fashion the cultural norms, values, as well as the “false records” that it carries over – heedless to any prerequisite for truth.

The Age of Mass Media: Implanting an Old New World

Despite their popularity among an elite few, neither the printing press nor the photograph found their footing as mass mediums in Iran. After all, by 1941 “ninety per cent of Iranians, including virtually the whole of the rural community, were illiterate” (Katouzian, 2010, 217). Considering the mass illiteracy of Iran’s population until the second-half of Pahlavi rule, no form of mass media could have truly existed until the advent of radio. While print, for its almost century-long presence in Iran, never managed to garner a mass following, radio almost immediately did upon its arrival. By the outbreak of World War II, radio receivers had already been introduced to Iran. Following from this, with the development of transistors, radio soon became the country’s “primary medium of mass communication” (Banani, 1971, 327). The populace’s “entirely oral tradition... readily accepted” the medium (Chelkowski, 1991, 809), and by 1965, though the illiteracy had already been largely reduced, the audience for radio was nonetheless growing rapidly.

Radio, being the first medium that was purely oral and hence in harmony with the people’s primarily oral mode of learning and communication also happened to play a major role in cultivating particularly western tastes for the public. This is especially true in view of the fact that

Radio Iran was decisive in spreading a more Americanized idea of pop culture throughout the country in the late 1950s and '60s. Most of the entertainment programs broadcast on this particularly popular channel consisted of “translations of American radio detective series and ‘soap operas.’” Indeed, its “impetus” during its era of popularity was undeniably “toward the acceleration of westernization— and more specifically Americanization— of the more superficial aspects of the life style in urban society” (Banani, 1971, 328).

By the mid-1970s, television also became a convenience “which large numbers of people could now afford” (Katouzian, 2010, 309). As a result, it soon managed to trump radio’s status as a mass medium. As it happened, television disseminated the same “western values, standards and habits in its programs and shows” that radio had done previous to it (Katouzian, 2010, 309). One could only assume just how much television’s visual component contributed to the effectiveness of the western content that happened to have already proved effectual in a purely audio-based format.

Predictably, there was no particularly indigenous “Iranian way” to harness these two media. Rather, both were structured after American radio and television models. As Elihu Katz and George Weddel remark with respect to television in Iran, the medium was first harnessed in the country by Iradj Sabet in 1958, who then established “an American-model station, Television of Iran,” saturated with entertainment programs such as “MGM films and NBC series, with little local production.” These programs proved so popular even when the state-owned National Iranian Television was established in 1967, modelled more so on European broadcasting models and featuring “intellectual European programs... together with German, British, and Japanese imports as well as Iranian programs,” seventy-one percent of viewers surveyed by University of Tehran indicated a preference for Television of Iran as well as its predominantly American programming (Katz and Wedell, 2014, 96-97). Whether inspired by an American model or European model, television in Iran was therefore contingent on “the importation of models of television from the West.” As Katz and Weddel theorize further:

The quest for speedy modernization does not allow the new nations much time to create their own symbols or to translate their own identities into the language of the media. It is far easier to buy the symbols of modernization wholesale. This reinforces the demand for the same program patterns and the same programs as those shown everywhere else. (Katz and Wedell, 2014, 165-166)

Far from prompting an indigenous media culture, both the form and content for Iranian television was patterned after western models. In turn, Iranian television came to advertise to a gradually growing audience the same western world that decades prior only few modernizing elites were capable of accessing and imitating through print and photography. While then, that world could have only been experienced through words or photographs, now it could not only be heard, but also watched.

The Spoken Word in a Broadcast World: Iran as a Post-Literate Society

All media, and especially communications media, function as “translators” in Marshall McLuhan’s vernacular. They have a “power to translate experience into new forms.” According to him, “the spoken word was the first technology by which man was able to let go of his environment in order to grasp it in a new way... [employing words as] complex systems of metaphors and symbols that

translate experience into our uttered or outered senses” (McLuhan, 2001, 57). Neil Postman, too, complements this belief when remarking that “although culture is a creation of speech, it is recreated anew by every medium of communication—from painting to hieroglyphs to the alphabet to television” (Postman, 2005, 10). On these grounds, Postman equates the history of epistemology, that is the history relating to the theory of knowledge itself, to the “epistemology of a stage of media development.” Truth therefore shifts according to the medium that dictates it. “As a culture moves from orality to writing to printing to televising,” Postman maintains, “its ideas of truth move with it” (Postman, 2005, 24).

Indeed, McLuhan claims that print literacy, cultivated only when print became a mass medium, created “very much simpler kinds of people than those that develop in the complex web of ordinary tribal and oral societies.” The literate man was “fragmented man” in McLuhan’s postulation. The mass print culture constructed “the homogenized Western world, while oral societies were made up of people differentiated, not by their specialist skills or visible marks, but by their unique emotional mixes” (McLuhan, 2001, 50). Adding context to McLuhan’s generalizations, the literary theorist Ong traces the features of a primary oral culture and juxtaposes it with the print literate culture that evolved from it. He arrives at a similar conclusion. Both Ong and McLuhan accept that “the drift in human consciousness toward greater individualism” was edified by print culture, which “produced books smaller and more portable than those common in a manuscript culture, setting the stage psychologically for solo reading in a quiet corner, and eventually for completely silent reading” (Ong, 2002, 128). Before print became the mass medium in Europe during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth-century, Ong discovers that “reading had tended to be a social activity, one person reading to others in a group” (Ong, 2002, 128). As the medium evolved, therefore, so did the individuals who operated within the culture that it constructed.

That said, McLuhan believes that “electronic technology,” fully embodied by the televisual medium, happens to comprise the most accessible form of media. Rather than effecting only a “partial and fragmentary” aspect of human culture, this electronic technology is “total and inclusive.” This new media allows mankind to translate experience not just in one exclusive way, but to experience everything at once, “to translate more and more of ourselves into other forms of expression that exceed ourselves” (McLuhan, 2001, 57). With electronic technology, a mass mediated culture no longer experiences the world in one particular way. Rather, it experiences the world with every lens there is at once. In this electronic age, “literate, lineal, and Western man” is alienated, as the mass culture is no longer giving precedence to “specialist and fragmented civilization,” inspired by the Enlightenment movement (“modernity,” in other words), but “experiencing an instantaneous reassembling of all its mechanized bits into an organic whole” – retribalizing man, so to say (McLuhan, 2001, 93). This retribalization, where specialization is no longer favored and access is all-inclusive, is what McLuhan dubs “the global village” (McLuhan, 2001, 93).

In line with McLuhan’s theory of the “global village,” Ong considers this electronic period to have heralded the age of “secondary-orality” (Ong, 2002, 3). The period of secondary-orality succeeds the age of exclusive, print-based literacy. In this electronic era, “the orality of telephones, radio, and television, which [still] depends on writing and print for its existence” (Ong, 2002, 3) nevertheless “generates a sense for groups immeasurably larger than those of primary oral culture” (Ong, 2002, 134). Because it is a combination of both primary orality and print literacy, the age of secondary-orality happens to not only be more participatory, inclusive, but, as a result of its growth through writing and print, it also happens to be more “deliberate and self-conscious” (Ong, 2002,

134). Because the period of orality was often “group-minded,” Ong claims, it did not incorporate the “highly interiorized stages of consciousness in which the individual is not so immersed unconsciously in communal structures are stages which, it appears, consciousness would never reach without writing” (Ong, 2002, 175).

Secondary-orality’s main characteristic is that it comprises the advantages of both print culture and oral culture. This new period manages to temper the exclusive individualism harbored by print culture, while also embracing the communality that is characteristic of the oral. To this end, the electronic era that Ong and McLuhan associate with media such as television is both communal as well as self-conscious and programmatic.

An integral question, however, is raised here: Does this movement toward a post-literate media world stipulate that a given culture should have already advanced, in respective phases, from a period of orality to print literacy to secondary-orality? After all, since secondary-orality ideally contains both print and oral cultures within itself, is it not necessary for a culture established in secondary-orality to have previously experienced both orality and print literacy?

This is an especially pertinent question with respect to Iran’s media environment. It can perhaps also clue us in to the distinctive mimetic effects of media in Iran’s history as well. Because the orally-oriented mediums of radio and television emerged just as the country was en-route towards its print-literate maturation, one could argue that the populace never had the opportunity to fully transform into a print culture, thus being also dispossessed of the characteristic traits of a print-based society. Instead, to apply Ong’s theory of post-orality to Iran, it is likely that Iran transitioned directly from primary orality to secondary-orality.

This epochal leap might explain why the Iranian populace has been unable to “read” the context that underlay radio, television, as well as new media. After all, as Ong points out, among print culture’s most definitive characteristics is that concepts such as “abstract categorization, formally logical reasoning processes, definitions, or even comprehensive descriptions, or articulated self-analysis, all [derive]... from text-formed thought” (Ong, 2002, 55). In line with this, Ong also notes that oral cultures, instead, “tend to use concepts in situational, operational frames of reference that are minimally abstract in the sense that they remain close to the living human lifeworld” (Ong, 2002, 49). On this account, what is watched or heard in an oral culture is more likely to be accepted at face-value, rather be followed by abstract contextual analysis regarding the sources and baggage behind the perceived content.

Here, it is perhaps appropriate to refer once more to Edmund Carpenter, whose own experience of offering video-cameras to a number of host cultures unfamiliar with the medium resulted in a startling revelation:

Since around 1960, I've put cameras in a variety of hands. The results generally tell more about the medium employed than about the cultural background of the author or cameraman. In each case I had hoped the informant would present his own culture in a fresh way [and] perhaps even use the medium itself in a new way. I was wrong. What I saw was literacy [and] film. These media swallow culture. The old culture was there all right, but no more than residue at the bottom of a barrel (Carpenter, 1976, 186).

While these aforementioned cultures were also less than likely to have experienced the phase of print literacy, the medium in their hands was nonetheless entrenched in “literacy” and “film.” Carpenter then hypothesizes that “it requires enormous sophistication - media sophistication -

before anyone can use print or film to preserve and present one's cultural heritage, even one's cultural present.” (Carpenter, 1976, 186). Indeed, such media sophistication would require not only an understanding of the medium at hand, but all the media that it has similarly obsolesced in its wake.

How, then, could a host culture like Iran possibly unpack radio or television when it has already bypassed the age of print literacy? After all, as Ong has argued, “media in their succession do not cancel one another but build on one another” (Ong, 2000, 89). What remains, therefore, is a post-literate society unpracticed in print literacy, and therefore a society that is bound to treat the new medium in a manner wholly different, a manner more pertinent to its most immediate needs.

As Annabelle Sreberny notes, twentieth-century, Pahlavi Iran was shocked into “a form of advanced capitalism laid over a semi-feudal, still illiterate population.” At this point in time, Iran looked as though “a veneer of super-modernity” had been “pasted on top of a highly traditional society” (Sreberny-Mohammadi, 1991, 138). Moreover, as print began to gain ground in this era, media such as radio and television naturally impeded its thorough infusion into the already-oral society. Sreberny notes that “the grammar of television” was a comparatively easy one to learn, certainly easier than the grammar of print.” This, however, did not mean that “the meanings or satisfactions derived from television content” was similar to those of other cultures (Sreberny-Mohammadi, 1991, 44).

Indeed, the oral traditions of Iranian culture might have come into play when unpacking the meanings derived from the televisual medium. After all, the oral tradition has long been equated with “active mimesis,” whereby a tribal authority’s “knowledge is not only received and therefore indisputable, but it is also community-binding, a ‘tribal possession’ that carries authority and is of necessity authoritarian” (Sreberny-Mohammadi, 1991, 137). Could post-oral media, such as television, perhaps, also lay claim to such authority?

Concerned more with the political implications of orality, Sreberny nonetheless ponders whether print culture could have provided Iranians with “sustained, cool reflection unpressured by another’s presence.” Because of the medium’s limited influence, however, Iranians were divested of “observation, and objectivity that are the bases of political critique and rational action vis-a-vis the repressive powers of states, whether secular or theocratic” (Sreberny-Mohammadi, 1991, 145). The gap left open by the leap from print to secondarily-orality therefore had vast political implications as well.

In their 1994 book, Sreberny and Ali Mohammadi shed further light on the significance of orality to contemporary Iranian history, and particularly the 1979 Iranian Revolution. While print culture “helps to construct the literate public as individuals ready to recombine imaginatively into other kinds of collectivities... against the traditional clerical and aristocratic authorities” (Sreberny and Mohammadi, 1994, 111), Iran’s predominantly oral culture instead fostered “authoritarianism” not only prior to the Revolution in the Pahlavi era, but also during and subsequent to the country’s revolution in regimes. After all, as Sreberny and Mohammadi claim, “Oral culture is... essentially authoritarian, not interested in the new but desirous of preserving the old, the tradition, by saying it repeatedly.” (Sreberny and Mohammadi, 1994, 110). Moreover, since the oral modes of communication were “culturally favored” in Iran, they were suited, especially, to “the clerics’ style,” allowing for the full play of the emotional and dramatic power of... mourning symbols as well as recitative repetition of the failures of the Shah’s regime and the need for action.” (Sreberny and Mohammadi, 1994, 121). This culturally favored orality made Iran’s revolutionary movement particularly hospitable to oral formats such as cassette tapes, which were, in turn, easily copied and redistributed throughout the country to great effect.

Although Sreberny is primarily concerned with the sociopolitical reverberations of media forms, her work nonetheless touches on the ways that an Iranian culture, characterized by its orality, can employ its media in culturally distinctive, sometimes mimetic, manners. Divested of the cool, detached, and contextual modes of thinking attributed to print culture, Iranian society is perhaps less able to separate the wheat from the chaff in both print and post-oral media forms. This, in turn, could lead to more mimetic and less objective, responses to the media content.

Nearby Images, Far-Off Imitations, and The Ideological Threat to “Performing” Media

The insight concerning Iran’s status as a principally oral culture also sheds light as to why media such as radio and television and new media, which all embrace and cultivate secondary-orality, have left a large imprint on the culture as well as its sense of contemporary identity.

In *Being Modern in Iran*, Fariba Adelkhah alludes to American television’s potentially overwhelming influence in post-revolution Iran, particularly vis-à-vis its promulgation of “a world of dreams and fantasy about sex and money” (Adelkhah, 1999, 154). Adelkhah goes further in assessing the reasons behind the Islamic Republic’s choice to openly dub and broadcast certain East Asian melodramas while steering clear of American soap operas such as *Dallas*. The Japanese serial *Oshin*, for example, which had already “aroused the wrath of Imam Khomeyni” after a viewer had claimed to “she identified with Oshin rather than with the Prophet’s daughter Fatemeh,” (Adelkhah, 1999, 154) reflected far different values from *Dallas*. *Oshin*’s cultural context and its values were closer to that of Iran’s, while *Dallas* had the potential to disrupt the existing culture, coaxing viewers to aspire to different, more glamorous lifestyles:

Nobody doubts that [*Dallas*] too would have been a definite success there; but its message would have been very different from that of *Oshin*. It would have transmitted a world of dreams and fantasy about sex and money, and not the mirror effect which characterised the active response to the Japanese broadcast series and gave legitimacy, in a roundabout way, to the redefining of relations among family members (Adelkhah, 1999, 154).

Adelkhah’s observation might explain why the Iranian people’s deep affection for Turkish soap operas does not translate in the tele-actual performance that American pop cultural content does. Turkey’s cultural context, due both to shared cultural values as well as geographic proximity, is already accessible to the viewing audience. Its values are closer at hand, and the content of its drama hits much closer to home. Set side by side with American television, the content of Turkish television is not quite the stuff of dreams, and not quite a source for emulation.

Indeed, in his article, “Satellite, Television, and Iran: Prohibition, Imitation, and Reform,” Steven Barraclough ponders a similar question, inquiring into the reasons “why Iranian viewers of satellite television desire programming which is not easily comprehensible in terms of language and does not address the viewers’ own cultural and social experiences.” (Barraclough, 2001, 30) He arrives at an equally vital answer, reasoning that the popularity of foreign television shows “is in no small part due to a heightened public interest in that which is foreign and proscribed - a disposition brought about by the regime’s exhaustive efforts to inculcate a particular cultural milieu at the expense of all others” (Barraclough, 2001, 30).

Looking Onward with Media Ecology: What of New Media?

The studies done by both Adelkhah and Barraclough occurred before the prospect of social media in Iran. For this reason, Barraclough's focus remained solely on the physical object of the satellite dish, and its repercussions as an object within the Islamic Republic, and, similarly, Adelkhah's perspective was limited to broadcast television in Iran. The latest incarnation of television as something that is widely available online, with its content widely sold by vendors on street corners makes a less politically-inclined study of its effects essential.

Moreover, since new media such as the streaming and social networking cannot be operated as a mass medium on account of the choice that they offer, they go one step beyond the secondary-orality offered by video-based media. Because consumers are able to pick and choose their own content with new media, they are, therefore, able to construct their own distinctive reality from the infinite amount of options offered to them. As a result, unlike mass mediums like radio or television, the consumer of digital media no longer has to content himself with the content disseminated from one particular television station or film studio. With YouTube or Instagram, for example, anyone can be a broadcaster. As a result, "consumers are more in control of what they view, listen to, or interact with and when and where they do so. They also have more variety to choose from" (Logan, 2010, 38). With new media, the "gatekeeper" behind the medium and content, leaving the consumer with relative freedom to find their own preferred reality or fantasy (Logan, 2010, 43).

As one might expect, the construction of identity through media-based fantasies becomes particularly complex with the advent of new media. Unlike televisual content, which is produced based on the particular aims, values, and modes of thought of a principal "gatekeeper" industry, digital media offers assorted and manifold dishes of identity. And so, the arbitrary rule of television finds itself evolved into a more democratic form of mediatic interactivity.

In the age of new media, even the prospect of imitating a faraway world has changed. Imitation no longer adheres to one particular medium's disseminated culture, as it did with the televisual, the photographic, or even the purely oral or literal. Instead, the imitations spawned by these new media can be based on hand-picked content. In this manner, the digital medium is the only one that offers within itself a wide range of other, additional mediums, each with contents of their own. This is why Robert Logan refers to new media as "the medium of media" (Logan, 2010, 61). Therefore, as opposed to the televisual medium where one source stands tall as the primary source for mimesis, digital media offers a multiplicity of sources, and thus a wide range of resultant simulations. By this account, new media provides the space for democratization of difference in identity, without gatekeepers necessarily subscribing to western-ness as a requisite for glamour or up-to-dateness. An investigation with respect to the byproducts of new media, therefore, must also look into the different types of westward-gazing, or perhaps eastward-gazing, sub-groups that this medium has proliferated.

Conclusion: Media, Imitation, and New Horizons

The paper hopes to have shown that the development of a cultural identity in Iran can indeed be traced through its media use. The focal point of this work was to propose a media ecological method to examine imitation in the Iranian milieu. Superficial imitation in Iran, after all, is a phenomenon that has been studied through both historical and philosophical lenses. But it has never been examined with a media ecological perspective.

The main argument of this paper is that the mimetic tendencies prevalent among Iran's media-consuming populace is a byproduct of both the forms and content of each imported media as well as the viewers' culturally distinctive mode of interpreting them, an interpretation greatly tied to Iran's predominantly oral culture. Further fueling these imitative performances is not only Iran's historical fixation with west but its sociopolitical as well as geographical isolation from the world that they see on screen. As a result, the content watched is often taken as an unalloyed illustration of faraway Euro-American life. This occurrence, in turn, has led to a faithful imitation of glamorized contents that bear no resemblance to the original culture's actual reality.

The complicated, culture-building nature of media attests to the fact that not only is it necessary to have a basic understanding with regards to the content that a medium broadcast, but just as essential is an extensive grasp of what a medium, in and of itself, is capable of doing. A media ecological investigation can help make sense of a complex contemporary environment like Iran, where dreams are made real merely because the dreamers do not know that they are dreaming.

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