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Visual Activism, Censorship, and Political Dissent: A Study of Jafar Panahi's Work in the Iranian Context

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Introduction

This thesis explores the relationship between visual activism, censorship, and political dissent by analysing the filmography of the Iranian director Jafar Panahi in the context of state censorship in Iran. These themes are particularly relevant in contemporary cinema, especially in repressive regimes such as Iran, where government restrictions significantly limit artistic expression. However, some filmmakers have emerged as influential figures, using their work to challenge established power dynamics and to advocate for social change. This study explores the complex interplay of visual activism, censorship, and political dissent, with a specific focus on Panahi's cinematic contributions within the Iranian socio-political context.

Central to this inquiry are the theoretical frameworks proposed by scholars in the areas of film and visual culture studies, such as Hito Steyerl and Elisa Adami whose seminal works offer invaluable insights into the intersections of visual culture, politics, and social change. For example, Hito Steyerl's exploration of the *poor image* as well as researches on social movements provide analytical tools to examine the revolutionary potential of visual narratives and their role in fostering resistance against censorship and oppression.

The first chapter explores the evolving field of visual culture studies, driven by the proliferation of images and digital technologies. It emphasizes the significance of distinguishing between high and low definition in understanding images' cultural resonance and societal impact. The chapter draws on McLuhan's theoretical framework to explore the dynamic relationships between media, technology, and society. Additionally, this chapter examines Hito Steyerl's concept of the *poor image* as a key category for interpreting contemporary images, challenging conventional perceptions and inviting a rethinking of visual representation in the digital age. Steyerl's idea intersects with McLuhan's framework, highlighting the political, economic, and technological changes that shape image production. Furthermore, the chapter considers *impure cinema* and the Third Cinema, highlighting their aesthetic strategies for resisting established norms and engaging in social critique. It also reflects on the reception and impact of Third Cinema, considering its success in achieving political and cultural goals in the face of commercial pressures and mainstream resistance. Finally, this section explores the cinema of dissent, highlighting its

profound ability to challenge established ideologies, foster critical dialogue and create space for alternative narratives.

The second chapter examines visual activism as a socio-political tool, particularly within the context of state censorship in Iran. It highlights the challenges faced by filmmakers when navigating censorship regimes and emphasizes the significance of visual activism in confronting authoritarian control. Moreover, this section examines the role of visual narratives in challenging established norms and amplifying marginalised voices. The chapter highlights the transformative potential of visual activism in shaping public discourse and influencing political outcomes by taking into consideration the Green Movement protests in Iran of 2009 and the Arab Spring. Additionally, it examines the changing nature of censorship in Iran, revealing the historical and institutional influences that shape censorship policies both within and beyond the film industry. The Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance's imposition of strict regulations and promotion of self-censorship are explored, highlighting the ongoing obstacles faced by Iranian filmmakers in navigating censorship constraints. Ultimately, it argues for a nuanced understanding of the diverse motivations and strategies employed by filmmakers within the Iranian film community, recognizing the complex interplay between artistic expression and censorship pressures. By situating Iranian cinema within the broader global conversation on artistic freedom and censorship, this chapter contributes to a deeper understanding of the multifaceted nature of visual activism and its implications for creative expression in repressive political contexts.

The third and last chapter examines the filmography of the Iranian director, Jafar Panahi, analysing his works as manifestations of visual activism and political dissent. In pursuit of the aims of the thesis, three specific films have been selected for analysis: *This is Not a Film* (*In film nist*, Jafar Panahi, Mojtaba Mirtahmasb, 2011) *Taxi Tehran* (*Taksojuht*, Jafar Panahi, 2015), and *Three Faces* (*Se rokh,* Jafar Panahi, 2018), since they shed light on Panahi's strategies in navigating censorship while amplifying marginalized voices. Despite being banned from filmmaking, Panahi defies censorship, prompting a reflection on artistic expression under political constraints. His films offer insights into visual activism, drawn from personal experiences and the political context surrounding his work, shedding light on the challenges of navigating

a politically restrictive environment by addressing critical social issues such as women's rights. Throughout his career, Panahi's films have disrupted power dynamics and questioned mechanisms of control, aligning with concepts from scholars such as Nicholas Mirzoeff and Michel Foucault. By empowering marginalized voices and challenging hegemonic narratives, Panahi redefines the boundaries of cinematic expression, emerging as a significant contribution to Iranian cinema and serving as a reflection on collective struggles and resilience within Iranian society. Additionally, the chapter focuses on the comparative analysis between the visual strategies used during the Arab Spring and the Green Movement, highlighting the universality of dissent and the potential for visual media to mobilise political change, contextualizing Panahi's work within broader social movements.

This thesis seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of the socio-political dimensions of visual storytelling and its potential to prompt social change. By shedding light on the transformative power of images and their role in shaping contemporary political discourse, the thesis underlines the resilience of art in the face of adversity and its capacity to provoke meaningful dialogue on issues of dissent, representation, and resistance. Through a process of critical reflection, this research provides valuable insights into the indispensable role of visual representation in fostering dissent, amplifying marginalised voices, and advocating for socio-political change. This research aims to extend beyond the specific context of Iran to encompass different political environments throughout Middle East, offering a broader perspective on the universal significance of visual activism and its potential to prompt meaningful societal change.

CHAPTER 1

Visual culture and the concept of poor images: Hito Steyerl's Framework

1.1 High and low definition

This research develops a reflection that takes inspiration from the work carried on within Visual Culture Studies, that is, a multidisciplinary field focussed on the production, circulation, and interpretation of images and their multisensory implications in contemporary society. Within the contemporary context, visual culture demands a critical analysis of how images significantly impact our comprehension of the world. This analysis surpasses mere aesthetic observation, delving into the implicit and intricate meanings conveyed by images. The exploration extends to the nuanced aspects of both image production and consumption, considering how images reflect and actively shape social, cultural, and political dynamics.

W.J.T. Mitchell emphasizes the significance of visual culture by stating that:

> Visual culture is the field of study that refuses to take vision for granted, that insists on problematizing, theorizing, critiquing, and historicizing the visual process as such. It is not merely the hitching of an unexamined concept of "the visual" onto an only slightly more reflective notion of culture—visual culture as the "spectacle" wing of cultural studies. A more important feature of visual culture has been the sense in which this topic requires an examination of resistances to purely culturalist explanations, to inquiries into the nature of visual nature—the sciences of optics, the intricacies of visual technology, the hardware and software of seeing[1].

In his view, then, visual culture involves an examination of resistances to purely culturalist explanations, delving into the sciences of optics, the intricacies of visual technology, and the hardware and software of seeing. In other words, Visual Culture, engages in the comprehensive analysis of images, situating its inquiry within the broader context of visualization. To study visual culture is to emphasize the cultural dimension of images and seeing, a dimension that goes well beyond sight alone. As

[1] Mitchell, W. J. T. "There Are No Visual Media." *Journal of Visual Culture* 4, no. 2, 2005. Pp. 257-266.

Mitchell underlines studying visual culture involves recognizing that images are not isolated visual stimuli but rather products and agents of cultural and technological processes, shaping and being shaped by society.[2]

Historically, however, the escalating proliferation of images, associated with the advent of visual representations, led to an increasing interest in the role of the visual and seeing within disciplines that traditionally did not prioritize images as a primary field of study.

The conceptual roots of visual culture can be traced back to the Twenties, particularly in the writings of Hungarian film critic Béla Balázs[3] and artist László Moholy-Nagy[4]. These figures introduced German terms such as *visuelle Kultur*, *optische Kultur*, and *Schaukultur*, corresponding to *visual culture*, *optical culture*, and *vision culture*, respectively. Their works elucidated how media, particularly photography and film, were reshaping the perceptual landscape and redefining relationships between language and image, vision and reading, and visual experience and conceptual knowledge.

In the Forties, the French director Jean Epstein[5] eventually utilized the term *visual culture* to expound on how cinema transforms our perception of reality. Thereafter, contributions by art historians Michael Baxandall and Svetlana Alpers in the Seventies expanded the study of art by introducing the use of the term *visual culture* within this field, indicating a paradigm shift in scholarly approaches. They investigated the correlation between the history of images and the ways of seeing them, and the relationship between artistic and non-artistic images within specific cultural contexts, such as the Italian 15th century and the Dutch 17th century [6]. Specifically, the concept of *visual culture* was used by Baxandall in the famous study *Painting and Experience*

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[2] Ibidem.

[3] Balázs, Béla. *L'uomo invisibile* (1924), a cura di Quaresima, Leonardo. Lindau, Torino, 2008.

[4] Moholy-Nagy, László. *Painting Photography Film* (1925 – 1927), trans. Janet Seligman. London: Lund Humphries, 1969.

[5] Epstein, Jean, and Christophe Wall-Romana. *The Intelligence of a Machine* (1946). University of Minnesota Press, 2014

[6] Pinotti, and Somaini. *Cultura Visuale Immagini, Sguardi, Media, Dispositivi*. Torino: Einaudi, 2016.pp,12.

in Fifteenth Century Italy a Primer in the Social History of Pictorial Style[7] while presenting the theory of the *Period Eye*, the eye of the pictorial period or *L'occhio del Quattrocento,* that refers to the distinctive way in which people in a particular historical and cultural period perceive and interpret visual stimuli, especially art. Baxandall[8] argues that people in different times and places have different perceptual frameworks, or *period eyes*, through which they view and understand visual images. In other words, the way people see and interpret art is shaped by the cultural norms, social practices, and visual expectations of their historical moment. Baxandall's research examines how people in the Fifteenth century in Italy would have approached and interpreted paintings. He claims that the *period eye* represents a cultural filter that influences what viewers perceive, how they understand spatial relationships, and what meanings they attach to visual elements within a work of art.

The concept of the *period eye* has had a significant impact in the field of art history and cultural studies. By investigating how visual skills, habits of perception and aesthetic preferences are formed by cultural norms, Baxandall challenges the assumption of a natural or objective way of seeing. By encouraging scholars to consider how visual experience is culturally constructed and dependent on historical context, Baxandall has contributed to academic discourse by framing vision as a culturally constructed phenomenon. This will be a key point in the analysis presented in this research at the following chapters, where the cultural element emerges as an essential aspect of a specific cinematography.

Following the same approach, the art historian Svetlana Alpers in her book *The art of Describing Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century* [9] investigates how the Italian Art Renaissance was different from the Dutch 17th century art since it is descriptive and not narrative: the realism is not aimed at the narration of significant actions, but rather aims at the most detailed, almost photographic description of the visible world. Alpers drew upon Baxandall's notion of visual culture to explain the specificity of

[7] Baxandall, Michael. *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy a Primer in the Social History of Pictorial Style*. London, Oxford UP, 1972.

[8] Ibidem.

[9] Alpers, Svetlana. *The art of Describing Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century*. London: Penguin, 1989.

Seventeenth-century Dutch painting and the importance of the cultural and social context in which the images were collocated. In this regard, the production, circulation and fruition of artistic and non-artistic images relates to a precise vision theory in which the creation and reception of visual representations depend on the specific historical conditions in which they originate.

In the Nineties, there has been a growing interest in contemporary forms of the image and the ways in which images are interpreted, consumed and constructed: with the growth of the Internet, the widespread diffusion of digital technologies, and the increasing availability of software and devices for creating, duplicating, manipulating, storing, transmitting and exchanging images, the proliferation of images has increased significantly, resulting in a continuous stream of visual content that has fundamentally changed the way we experience the world. Within the scenario of rapid affirmation of *visual culture studies,* the German field of study of *Bildwissenschaft*[10] gained increasing prominence within the Anglo-American academic landscape, gradually establishing itself as an autonomous discipline distinct from cultural studies and taking distance from art history, too.

It is important to underline that the concept of culture in the field of visual culture studies has significant anthropological value. Scholars have investigated how different lifestyles affect the interpretation and value placed on images. This highlights the interdisciplinary nature of visual culture studies, drawing on contributions from fields such as philosophy, sociology, psychoanalysis, and anthropology.

Moreover, the discipline acknowledges images as a powerful tool that is actively shaping our understanding of the world. Guy Debord, in *The Society of the Spectacle*[11], underlines the pervasive influence of images in contemporary society, emphasizing how the spectacle, already in the Sixties when he writes, serve as the visual representation of modern life and assumes a dominant role in the fabric of social existence. As Debord pointed out, images are not passive representations but rather pivotal agents in the construction of contemporary reality, mediating experiences, influencing desires, and operating as potent tools of persuasion and control.

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[10] Belting, Hans. *Bild-Anthropologie: Entwürfe für eine Bildwissenschaft*. Munich: Wilhelm, 2001.

[11] Debord, Guy. *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967). Translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith, Zone Books, 1995.

The development of Cultural Studies as an interdisciplinary field in the Fifties and Sixties marked a significant turning point, bringing with it a growing recognition of the central role of visual representations within the wider cultural landscape. Despite shared thematic resonances, the divergent trajectories that led to the establishment of cultural studies and visual culture studies as two separate areas of inquiry produced different epistemological foundations and objectives. Specifically, the field of Anglo-American visual culture studies has assimilated research frameworks capable of delineating the intricate nature of cultural processes, highlighting the historically situated nature of image production and reception in historical, social and political contexts. In particular, the perspective typical of feminist and postcolonial cultural studies has been influential in highlighting the political dimensions inherent in visual representations. These views emphasise the inherently situated and constructed nature of all visual representations, dismantling the illusion of objectivity and transparency, especially in those representations that claim to embody an allegedly naturalistic gaze. Within these fields, critical inquiry rejects any abstraction and historically unjustified notions of the spectatorial gaze. The integration of feminist studies and postcolonial studies in Anglo-American visual culture research has substantially contributed to an understanding of the cultural role of images as a dynamic and contested domain.

As explained above, the important role of cultural situatedness impact in assessing the status of the viewer as a variable entity subject to historical, cultural and political influences and without a univocal or universal gaze. In this light, scholars, such as Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, have argued that visual culture studies revolve around the notion of «polycentric vision[12]» suggesting that vision is not a monolithic, fixed entity but rather a polycentric phenomenon shaped by various historical, cultural, and political factors. This concept of polycentric vision challenges traditional notions of a singular, universal gaze by emphasizing the existence of multiple, diverse perspectives within visual culture. Furthermore, it aligns with a critical analysis of power dynamics, questioning dominant narratives and encouraging scholars and viewers to acknowledge the diversity of perspectives within the field of visual culture.

[12] Shohat, Ella and Stam, Robert, *Narrativizing visual culture. Towards a polycentric aesthetic*, in Mirzoeff, Nicholas. *The Visual Culture Reader*. 2.nd ed. London New York: Routledge, 2001. pp. 27-47

The evolution of Cultural Studies and Visual Culture Studies in the Seventies and Eighties marked a turning point, recognizing the importance of the image within the broader cultural milieu. The intellectual landscape was significantly influenced by the contributions of philosophers Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes, who played pivotal roles in shaping the trajectory of visual culture studies. Their work underlined the necessity of situating images within the broader cultural context that both produces and interprets them, marking a critical turning point in the understanding of visual phenomena.

French philosopher and social theorist Michel Foucault made substantial contributions to the analysis of power structures and discourses within society. His exploration of the relationship between power, knowledge, and institutions in work such as *Discipline and Punish*[13] had a profound impact on how scholars approached the study of visual culture. By emphasising on the ways in which visual representations contribute to the exercise of power and the construction of societal norms laid the groundwork for a critical examination of images within their cultural and institutional contexts. For example, in his work on the panopticon, a theoretical prison design, Foucault elucidates the ways in which surveillance and visibility are central to the functioning of power. This concept resonates with the analysis of images as mechanisms through which societal norms are both reinforced and contested. The engagement with the gaze, institutions, and regimes of visibility paved the way for scholars to consider how images operate as instruments of power and knowledge within specific cultural frameworks.

Similarly, a French literary theorist and semiotician, Roland Barthes, contributed significantly to the understanding of signs and symbols in cultural texts. In his influential work *Mythologies*[14]*,* Barthes examined the semiotics of everyday life, unpacking the hidden meanings embedded in cultural phenomena. His essay *The Rhetoric of the Image* [15]offered a semiotic analysis of advertisements, demonstrating how images convey cultural myths and ideologies. His analysis revealed the cultural

[13] Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1977.

[14] Barthes, Roland. *Mythologies: Roland Barthes*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1972.

[15] Barthes, Roland. *Rhetoric of the Image*. Translated by Stephen Heath. New York: Hill and Wang, 1977.

codes and narratives woven into seemingly mundane visuals, emphasizing the need to critically engage with the socio-cultural dimensions of images. The approach of Barthes to semiotics and the study of images provided scholars with a methodological framework to unravel the ideological foundations of visual representations.

The influence of Foucault and Barthes in visual culture studies lies in their shared commitment to unravelling the intricate relationship between images, power structures, and cultural discourses. These contributions offer theoretical frameworks for examining visual activism, political dissent and set the stage for exploring the work of the Iranian director, Jafar Panahi, in the following chapters. By integrating their works, the analysis gains depth in understanding how visual representations can challenge authority and shape social discourse.

By emphasizing the imperative of situating images within their cultural contexts, they paved the way for a more nuanced and politically engaged approach to the study of visual culture. Their ideas continue to resonate in contemporary visual culture studies, shaping ongoing discussions on the role of images in constructing and contesting cultural meanings.

Another author, John Berger, in his book, *Ways of Seeing*[16], further examine the transformative potential of images, highlighting the interconnectedness of our understanding of art, media, and culture with the act of visual perception. The exploration of the gaze proposed by Berger, particularly in the domain of art, exposes the dynamic interplay between image and viewer, revealing the inherent subjectivity and cultural bias embedded in our visual encounters. This contribution, which builds directly on reflections made by Walter Benjamin from the Twenties on the technical reproducibility of images and mass-produced iconography, has played a significant role in challenging the established norms of Western visual art and its associated cultural ideologies.

As visual culture studies continue to expand, driven by the proliferation of images and the transformative impact of digital technologies, it becomes imperative to consider the broader epistemological and cultural implications brought about by the distinction between high and low definition. In navigating the complex landscape of visual cultures, the exploration of high and low definition becomes a central passage

[16] Berger, John. *Ways of Seeing*. London: British Broadcasting Corporation and Penguin Books, 1972.

to understanding not only the technical aspects of images, but also their profound cultural resonance. This transdisciplinary approach emphasises the importance of viewing visual images as dynamic entities intertwined with broader cultural, social, and political contexts, underlining the ongoing interplay between the visual and the social construction of meaning.

The examination of the role of supports, media, and devices in configuring the presence of an image or series of images within a specific cultural context represents a fundamental aspect of visual culture studies. This aspect clearly distinguishes it from those approaches that study images as immaterial entities.

McLuhan, a Canadian media theorist and cultural critic, gained prominence in the Sixties for his ground-breaking perspectives on the effects of media on society. McLuhan define «the medium is the message[17]», capturing a shifting concept that challenges conventional notions about the role of media in shaping our perceptions.

> All media work us over completely. They are so pervasive in their personal, political, economic, aesthetic, psychological, moral, ethical, and social consequences that they leave no part of us untouched, unaffected, unaltered. The medium is the massage. Any understanding of social and cultural change is impossible without a knowledge of the way media work as environments.[18]

McLuhan underlines the universal nature of media, indicating that their influence extends across various dimensions of human experience. The author identifies several realms: « personal, political, economic, aesthetic, psychological, moral, ethical, and social »[19] in which media leave a permanent mark. To comprehend the intricate dynamics of social and cultural change, McLuhan argues that one must possess an understanding of how media function as environments. In this sense, the author suggests that media are not neutral conduits for information but rather active agents that shape thoughts, behaviours, and societal structures. The notion that media leave

[17] McLuhan, Marshall, Quentin Fiore, and Jerome Agel. *The Medium Is the Massage*. Hamburg, Gingko Press.1967. p. 26

[18] Ivi., pp. 26

[19] Ibidem.

no part of us untouched, unaffected, unaltered emphasizes the all-encompassing impact of media on the human experience. Whether on an individual level, influencing personal beliefs and values, or on a broader societal level, shaping cultural norms and structures, media play a fundamental role in shaping our understanding of the world. In other words, media are not just passive conduits for information, they create environments that shape our perceptions, behaviours, and interactions. The transformative power of media is such that it leaves no part of individuals or society untouched, affecting our thoughts, beliefs, and actions on a profound level. By acknowledging the multifaceted consequences of media, McLuhan defies to look beyond the content of messages and consider the broader implications of the mediums.

In the order to comprehend image representation, McLuhan offers an intriguing perspective on the definition of the image, delving into the dichotomy of high and low definition. High and low definition depend on the materiality of the media supports and devices that establish the conditions of visibility of the images. The quantitative distinction between high and low definition has significant implications regarding the way in which images represent, testify, communicate and search within a given cultural context. The study of image definition benefits from the problematization of hierarchical distinctions, both material and cultural (high and/or low), suggesting that the aesthetic, critical, or political value of an image is not inversely proportional to its definition.

McLuhan introduces in his work, *Understanding Media* [20], a taxonomy categorizing media into hot and cold based on their degree of definition. This foundational perspective beside classifying media, underlines the influential role of the degree of definition in shaping the nature of transmitted messages. This analysis offers a framework on how various media influence information transmission.

Media, distinguished by varying temperatures and undergoing continuous processes of heating and cooling, succeed one another in a sequence. This progression can be comprehended within the framework of a media meteorology [21], a metaphorical concept capable of discerning not only the diverse temperatures characterizing

[20] McLuhan, Marshall. *Understanding Media the Extensions of Man*. Cambridge Massachusetts; London: MIT, 1994.

[21] Ibidem.

individual media but also the intricate heating and cooling processes each medium may undergo throughout its development and continuity. Such processes are inherently complex and interconnected with other media within real media environments. This perspective emphasizes the dynamic and evolving nature of media, urging an academic analysis that considers the intricate interplay of temperature, development, and interaction within the broader context of media studies.

Marshall McLuhan analysis highlights the effect of different media on the message they convey. High-definition is associated to a *hot media*, such as photography that can transmit a large amount of information, whereas the *cold* media is associated to low-definition, such as television and the telephone that require a high degree of sensory involvement on the part of the receiver. In this sense, the degree of definition specific to each medium determines the nature of the message.

This exploration of media quality serves as a precursor to contemporary discussions on image definition and its broader cultural implications.

As contemporary media landscapes evolve, the work of McLuhan provide a theoretical framework for understanding the dynamic relationships between media, technology, and society. [22]

The study of image definition becomes intricately tied to the aesthetic, critical, and political value of an image. The following section will extend the investigation into the contemporary domain, shifting the focus to Hito Steyerl conceptualisation of the poor image. As articulated in *The Wretched of the Screen*[23], intersects with the theoretical framework proposed by McLuhan, since it challenges conventional perceptions and invites to a reconsideration of visual representation in our digitized and interconnected world, emphasizing the political, economic, and technological transformations that influence image production.

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[22] A variety of studies move from McLuhan's intuitions to eventually develop further research on the basis of his distinction between hot and cold media. Cfr. Casetti, Francesco and Somaini, Antonio. "The conflict between high definition and low definition in contemporary cinema." *Convergence* 19, no. 4, 2013, pp 415-422, Casetti, Francesco and Somaini, Antonio."Resolution: Digital materialities, thresholds of visibility". *NECSUS European Journal of Media Studies,* Spring 2018, pp. 81-103, and Casetti, Francesco and Somaini, Antonio. *Haute et basse définition*. Dijon: les presses du réel, 2019.

[23] Steyerl, Hito. *The Wretched of the Screen*. Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012.

1.2 Understanding poor images and their transformative potential

Expanding on the previous consideration around high and low definition, the German artist Hito Steyerl offers an insightful reflection that develops the concept of resolution into a key category to interpret the contemporary visual cultures as they feed into the mediascape. Her research navigates the transformative landscape of visual culture, revealing the nuanced implications of the concept of the "poor image" which is presented in detail in what follows.

In 2009, Steyerl published the essay *In Defense of the Poor Image*[24], that proposed the concept of the poor image. This concept is deeply intertwined with the development of digital technology and its widespread accessibility, in fact the historical and cultural context of poor images reflects a significant shift in the way visuals are produced, distributed, and consumed in the digital age. The text critically reflects upon the evolving nature of images in the digital age, taking into consideration the dynamic interplay of technological advancements and cultural transformations. It engages in a rigorous interrogation of established notions of quality, value, and representation, thereby urging readers to reevaluate their preconceived notions.

The author introduces the discourse by presenting the notion of the poor image as follows:

> The poor image is a copy in motion. Its quality is bad, its resolution substandard. As it accelerates, it deteriorates. It is a ghost of an image, a preview, a thumbnail, an errant idea, an itinerant image distributed for free, squeezed through slow digital connections, compressed, reproduced, ripped, remixed, as well as copied and pasted into other channels of distribution. The poor image is a rag or a rip; an AVI or a JPEG, a lumpen proletariat in the class society of appearances, ranked and valued according to its resolution. The poor image has been uploaded, downloaded, shared, reformatted, and reedited.It transforms quality into accessibility, exhibition value into cult value, films into clips, contemplation into distraction. The image is liberated from the vaults of cinemas and archives and thrust into digital uncertainty, at the expense of its own substance. The poor image tends toward abstraction: it is a visual idea in its very becoming.[25]

[24] Steyerl, Hito. "In Defense of the Poor Image." *e-flux Journal*, no. 10, accessed November 11, 2023. https://www.e-flux.com/journal/10/61362/in-defense-of-the-poor-image/.

[25] Ibidem.

According to Steyerl, the poor image is characterized by three fundamental attributes, constituting a distinctive aesthetic pattern. Firstly, it is marked by visual degradation, implying a reduction in quality or fidelity. This degradation can result from factors such as repeated reproduction and compression, contributing to a distinct aesthetic that challenges traditional norms of visual perfection. Secondly, the poor image is intricately tied to its circulation, often characterized by a vast dissemination across digital platforms. This widespread circulation that characterizes poor images challenges traditional norms and places priority on content and accessibility rather than high resolution. This reduction in resolution, often caused by frequent reproduction and compression, challenges traditional standards of visual integrity. Thirdly, the poor image frequently manifests itself as copies and compressed files, a deliberate departure from traditional notions of originality. This intentional approach underlines the significance attributed to the content of the image and its communicative intent, transcending the confines of visual purity and emphasising the crucial, at time creative, role of image circulation.

Furthermore, the author considers the cultural and political implications of the poor image: Steyerl[26] argues that this is a democratic form of representation, as it allows for the widespread dissemination of visuals across different social and economic strata. By drawing insightful analogies between poor images and social groups, Steyerl emphasizes their role in fostering connections and shared experiences within broader societal contexts. This analogy is useful to understand the communal and connective potential inherent in the circulation and reception of poor images. This aspect will be relevant to the analysis of visual activism and Jafar Panahi's filmography, which will be examined in the following chapters of the thesis.

By adopting a Marxist perspective, the discussion gains depth, highlighting power dynamics, modes of production, and distribution as integral features of the socio-economic landscape dominating poor images. Therefore, Steyerl comprehensive exploration, embedded within a Marxist theoretical framework, contributes significantly to the nuanced understanding of the political dynamics inherent in poor images, shedding light on their multi-layered implications for contemporary visual culture.

[26] Ibidem.

Furthermore, the poor image is characterized by a series of processes, from the upload to the reediting, these actions result in a significant alteration in the nature and perception of the image. The shift from quality to accessibility implies that the importance of certain picture no longer depends exclusively on the high resolution or production values of the image. Instead, the poor image prioritizes its widespread availability and ease of access pushing towards its accessibility to a larger audience. In this sense, the democratization of image creation and distribution through digital means challenges the traditional notion that resolution determines the value of an image. In fact, the author critically examines the fetishization of resolution and its problematic implications, particularly in the preservation and distribution of old films, since the cost of preserving high-resolution movies adds to the marginalisation of independent cinema. Furthermore, the transformation of «contemplation into distraction[27]» typical of the current attention economy reflects a shift in the engagement of the viewer with the image. Rather than being contemplated or considered, the poor image tends to be a source of distraction in the digital landscape, where attention spans are often divided among multiple stimuli. Moreover, the statement about the poor image «tending toward abstraction [28]» suggests that, through its various transformations and adaptations, the poor image becomes more than a concrete visual representation, it evolves into a visual idea in the process of its own becoming, emphasizing its dynamic and malleable nature in the digital realm.

Therefore, resolution is a crucial aspect of the discourse, as Steyerl underlines: « Poor images are poor because they are not assigned any value within the class society of images—their status as illicit or degraded grants them exemption from its criteria. Their lack of resolution attests to their appropriation and displacement[29]». This statement suggests that the impoverished quality of poor images, is intrinsically correlated to their marginalization within the hierarchical structure of a societal classification of images. The term *class society of images* implies a stratified system wherein images are categorized based on perceived cultural, aesthetic, or social value. The designation of these images as *poor* arises from their deliberate divergence from

[27] Ibidem.

[28] Ibidem.

[29] Ibidem.

established norms or their perceived degradation. It is important to emphasize that the categorization of poor images as *illicit or degraded* confers them a peculiar status, exempting them from conventional standards, positioning these images as subversive and resistant to the established norms governing visual representation. In fact, the impoverished resolution of these images serves as tangible evidence of their appropriation and displacement. The term *appropriation* implies a recontextualization of these images from their original form or intended use, while *displacement* suggests a removal from the conventional spheres of cultural valuation. Therefore, low resolution serves as a visual indicator of societal marginalisation of these images within the broader landscape of visual culture. This concept is relevant to the following analysis of the work of Iranian director, Jafar Panahi. In his work, Panahi uses marginal and low-resolution images, poor images that are meant to circulate quickly and do not aspire to the high resolution of mainstream studios.

Furthermore, by drawing upon the manifesto *For an Imperfect Cinema*[30] written in 1969 by Julio García Espinosa, a Cuban filmmaker and theorist, Steyerl highlights the transformative potential of poor images as a means to challenge existing power structures within the realm of visual culture. The German artist engages with the Espinosa perspective on cinema, particularly his articulation of imperfect cinema as a response to the limitations and conventions of traditional filmmaking. Espinosa claims that perfect cinema is characterized by a polished and refined aesthetic, designed to elicit awe, and wonder in viewers. However, he observes that this perfection often creates a distance, a lack of connection between the audience and the creators.

> The imperfect cinema is one that strives to overcome the divisions of labor within class society. It merges art with life and science, blurring the distinction between consumer and producer, audience and author. It insists upon its own imperfection, is popular but not consumerist, committed without becoming bureaucratic.[31]

[30] García Espinosa, Julio. "For an Imperfect Cinema" (1969), translated by Julianne Burton. *Jump Cut* no. 20, 1979, pp. 24–26.

[31] Steyerl, Hito. "In Defense of the Poor Image." e-flux Journal, no. 10, accessed November 11, 2023. https://www.e-flux.com/journal/10/61362/in-defense-of-the-poor-image/.

As articulated by Espinosa, the imperfect cinema seeks to overcome the rigid divisions of labour within class society, combining art with life and science, breaking down the dichotomy between creators and viewers. The economy of poor images aligns with imperfect cinema, emphasizing values beyond resolution. Steyerl establishes a parallel between imperfect cinema and the dissolution of societal class distinctions, drawing a connection that elucidates how poor images can serve as a conduit for the widespread dissemination of personally created media. «While it enables the users' active participation in the creation and distribution of content, it also drafts them into production. Users become the editors, critics, translators, and (co)-authors of poor images [32].» The notion of imperfect cinema aims to establish a more direct connection between creators and viewers, thereby empowering the audience to participate actively in the cinematic experience.

Additionally, Steyerl connects the circulation of poor images to cultural commodification, referencing the global media industry's impact on independent filmmaking in Western countries: «The circulation of poor images creates a circuit, which fulfills the original ambitions of militant and (some) essayistic and experimental cinema—to create an alternative economy of images, an imperfect cinema existing inside as well as beyond and under commercial media streams[33].» In this sense, poor images, characterized by their low resolution or production quality, serve as a means to challenge dominant visual narratives and establish a counter-narrative that reflects alternative perspectives and marginalized voices. As it will be analysed further in thesis, poor images contribute to a more diverse and inclusive visual culture, allowing for the representation of stories and experiences typically overlooked or marginalized by commercial media streams. By stating that imperfect cinema exists inside as well as beyond and under commercial media streams, the discourse emphasizes the dual nature of its presence. In fact, the author explores the contradictory nature of poor images, representing both the collective authorship of the people and embodying positive and negative aspects. On the one hand, poor images become integral components of capitalist media assembly lines, where they contribute to the commodification and consumption-driven machinery of mainstream media. On the

[32] Ibidem.

[33] Ibidem

other hand, poor images operate within alternative audiovisual economies, functioning as catalysts for alternative forms of visual expression and dissemination. Their circulation spans across these dual realms, highlighting their adaptability and multifaceted role in shaping contemporary visual culture.

Therefore, the concept of the poor image embodies a dual nature, defined by their significant compression and rapid circulation. As they cross digital networks, poor images are subject to the process of dematerialisation, losing resolution while gaining speed. Steyler draws upon the semiotic turn of capital analysed by Felix Guattari[34], a French psychoanalyst and philosopher, who notably explored how modern economies increasingly derive value from the manipulation and exchange of symbolic or informational entities rather than traditional material goods. This shift enables the creation of condensed and flexible data packages, which, due to their adaptability, can be integrated into various combinations and sequences. This adaptability aligns with the dynamic nature of contemporary capitalism, where information and symbols play a crucial role in shaping economic processes and structures. This shift towards dematerialization is explored by Steyerl in the context of image circulation and rapid file sharing. The work of Guattari provide a theoretical framework for comprehending the transformation of images into abstract, digital forms as they circulate at unprecedented speeds. This dematerialization, characterising the rapid dissemination of images, challenges traditional modes of contemplation, prompting a quick response to a high volume of concepts.

In the final part of the essay, by introducing the concept of visual bonds, Steyerl highlights attributes within images resonating across diverse populations, elucidating why poor images maintain appreciation despite quality deficiencies. This connection emphasizes power relations within image circulation and commodification, aligning with Steyerl's critique about the interplay between capitalism, media, and societal structures. Moreover, Steyerl presents the significance of narrative in the era of file sharing, where alternative forms of image distribution create networks and alliances. This comprehensive analysis positions the work of Steyerl as a critical inquiry into the

[34] Guattari, Félix. "Capital as the Integral of Power Formations." In *Soft Subversions*, edited by Sylvère Lotringer, 202. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 1996.

multifaceted dynamics of contemporary visual culture, embedding images as integral components of power formations extending beyond their economic value.

1.3 Third Cinema

Within the contribution of Steyerl in mind, it is interesting to reflect upon the notion of imperfect cinema, as only mentioned quickly above. Such a concept, in effect, complements that of the poor image in ways that allow the development of a broader framework offering theoretical coordinates to understand the intricate relationship between visual activism, censorship, and socio-political change. Imperfect cinema embodies the raw essence of images, reflecting the struggles inherent in social movements and dissent, thereby challenging traditional cinematic norms and dominant narratives. The correlation between imperfect cinema and poor images lays a foundation for deeper analysis, highlighting the transformative potential of visual storytelling in effecting socio-political change. This interplay will be further explored in following chapters to provide a comprehensive understanding of visual activism's role in shaping socio-political landscapes. To this end, it is worth looking more into detail into Espinosa's idea of imperfect cinema, to see how this informed much experimental and bottom-up moving image practice.

The concept of imperfect cinema has been a provocative and influential notion in the realm of film theory, challenging the traditional emphasis on aesthetics and high production values. Coined by Julio García Espinosa in the manifesto *For an Imperfect Cinema* [35]in 1969, the Cuban theorist advocate for a cinematic approach that prioritizes accessibility, participation, and capable of dismantling of the consumer-producer distinction. As we delve into the theoretical foundations of Third Cinema, an avant-garde cinematic movement that emerged in Latin America during the late Sixties and early Seventies, the resonances of imperfect cinema become fundamental since the movement of Third Cinema embraced the theoretical work of García Espinosa.

[35]García Espinosa, Julio. "For an Imperfect Cinema" (1969), translated by Julianne Burton. *Jump Cut* no. 20, 1979, pp. 24–26.

This movement, encapsulated in the seminal manifesto *Hacia un Tercer Cinema* (*Towards a Third Cinema*), [36] co-authored by Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino, stands as a radical response to prevailing power structures and neocolonial realities. The document emerged within the context of significant social and political upheavals in Latin America and other post-colonial regions, in fact its appearance in October 1969 coincided with the global expansion of the Movement of Non-Aligned Countries and Third Worldism, marking an important step for different countries that suffered neocolonialism. Representing the collective vision of the *Cine Liberación* group, this manifesto outlines the principles of their proposal for three types of cinemas and introduces the concept of *cine-acción*, a cinema that was historical, testimonial, and embodied the concept of film as an act. Operating in a political climate where freedom of expression was restricted, the group aimed to contribute to societal debates and provide an open space for dialogue.

According to the authors, there are three types of cinemas, the first of which corresponds to the hegemonic industrial film model embodied by Hollywood and the various national studio systems inspired by that cinematography.

In the first formulation of the theory of the Third Cinema, the questionnaire entitled *La cultura nacional el cine y La hora de los hornos*, written in March 1969, Getino and Solanas define it succinctly as *old cinema*, *cinema a la americana*. In the manifesto give some further background information:

> The man of the *third cinema*, be it *guerrilla cinema* or a *film act*, with the infinite categories that they contain (film letter, film poem, film essay, film pamphlet, film report, etc.), above all counters the film industry of a cinema of characters with one of themes, that of individuals with that of masses, that of the author with that of the operative group, one of neocolonial misinformation with one of information, one of escape with one that recaptures the truth, that of passivity with that of aggressions. To an institutionalized cinema, he counterposes a guerrilla cinema; to movies as shows, he opposes a film act or action; to a cinema of destruction, one that is both destructive and constructive; to a

[36] Solanas, Fernando, and Octavio Getino. "TOWARD A THIRD CINEMA." *Cinéaste*, vol. 4, no. 3, 1970, pp. 1–10.

> cinema made for the old kind of human being, for them, he opposes *a cinema fit for a new kind of human being , for what each one of us has the possibility of becoming* [37].

This quotation articulates the principles and contradictions inherent in the concept of Third Cinema. It describes the characteristics that the Third Cinema filmmaker, referred to as "the man of third cinema" embodies in contrast to the conventional cinematic norm. The filmmaker participates in a variety of filmmaking genres, ranging from guerrilla cinema to film acts, and including various categories such as film letters, poems, essays, pamphlets, and reports. This highlights a rejection of a single cinematic style and emphasizes a multitude of creative approaches. This approach contrasts with the prevailing focus on characters in the film industry and represents a shift towards a more thematically driven approach. Third Cinema diverges from character-driven cinema in its emphasis on broader themes and collective experiences, prioritising thematic content over individual protagonists. Third Cinema challenges the notion of films as mere spectacles by introducing the concept of a film act or action. This emphasizes the potential of the cinema to engage in transformative action, framing it as a dynamic and politically charged event rather than passive entertainment. These ideas resonate with the principles of Third Cinema, which aims to empower marginalized communities and promote a collective awareness. Third Cinema rejects the notion of an individual auteur or director and instead celebrates the concept of a collaborative and community-oriented approach to filmmaking. This represents a collaborative and collective approach to filmmaking, which challenges the prevalent auteur-driven model in mainstream cinema. Third Cinema refrains neo-colonial propaganda with a commitment to providing authentic and informative narratives. This emphasises the political and educational aims of Third Cinema, confronting the distorted narratives often perpetuated by mainstream media. As opposed to cinema as a means of escapism, Third Cinema aims to reclaim the truth, refusing the notion of cinema as a mere form of entertainment and intends to present an uncensored portrayal of socio-political realities. This represents a shift from passive spectatorship to active political engagement, transforming the act of seeing into a participatory and

[37] Solanas, Fernando, and Octavio Getino. "TOWARD A THIRD CINEMA." *Cinéaste*, vol. 4, no. 3, 1970, pp. 1-10.

transformative experience. By emphasizing the potential for change, Third Cinema rejects a cinema focused solely on destruction and advocates for a cinema that is both destructive and constructive. The complex role of cinema is highlighted by its ability to critique established structures while creating diverse narratives and realities. Third Cinema advocates for a cinema suited to a new kind of human being, emphasising the transformative power of film to shape perspectives, challenge societal norms and contribute to the development of individual and collective identities.

Furthermore, this approach mirrors the essence of Third Cinema since it prioritises the narratives of those on the fringes of society and provide them with a platform to express their experiences, challenges, and aspirations. In delving into the historical and political context of Third Cinema, it becomes evident that the movement emerged as a response to neocolonial realities faced by countries in the Global South during the late Sixties and early Seventies.
As the authors affirm:

> The decolonization of the filmmaker and of films will be simultaneous acts to the extent that each contributes to collective decolonization. The battle begins without, against the enemy who attacks us, but also within, *against the ideas and models of the enemy to be found inside each one of us*. Destruction and construction. Decolonizing action rescues with its practice the purest and most vital impulses. It opposes to the colonialization of minds the revolution of consciousness. The world is scrutinized, unraveled, rediscovered.[38]

Grounded in the resistance against existing power structures, Third Cinema aimed to foster a collective consciousness among marginalized communities through the medium of film. This purpose emphasised the intertwined processes of personal and collective decolonisation, in which filmmakers and films that break free from colonial influences contribute to wider social liberation. This act of freeing oneself from colonial ideologies not only enables individuals to recognise these truths but also awakens a sense of indignation and rebellion against oppressive systems. This process fosters personal and collective transformation, enabling individuals to free themselves from oppressive systems and ideologies.

[38] Ibidem.

The notion of Third Cinema was conceived as a form of *cultural decolonization* for the Third World, positioned in opposition to the Hollywood cinematic dominance, and aiming to transcend the limitations associated with *cinema d'auteur*. Getino and Solanas identify the first cinema with a conception of *cinema d'auteur* inherited from French auteur politics: « The first alternative to this, which we could call first cinema, was born with the so-called *'cinema d'auteur'*, *'expression cinema'*, *'nouvelle vague', 'cinema novo'*, or conventionally, *second cinema* [39]». The criticism of this second category is less of a reaction to the first category than to the second cinema. The criticism of this second category is less drastic, since, by claiming the expressive freedom of the author, it can serve as an attempt to approach cultural decolonisation.

Furthermore, the author Mike Wayne underlines that:

> First, Second and Third Cinemas do not designate geographical areas, but institutional/structures working practises, associated aesthetics strategies and their attendant cultural politics. …. it follows that all three cinemas take up their own distinctive *positioning* in relation to a shared referent: i.e., historical, social world around them. Thus each cinema also has relations of dialogue interchange and transformation between them as each works over and on the same cultural/political material (e.g. anticolonial struggle), but pulls and shape the material into different, often radically different, meanings and possibilities.[40]

As articulated by Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino, by rejecting the auteur-driven model of mainstream cinema, Third Cinema advocates the concept of collective authorship, emphasizing the dismantling of traditional cinematic norms and the embrace of an authentic portrayal of reality, often described as *imperfect cinema*. Scholars like Mike Wayne contribute to understanding the political dimensions of Third Cinema, highlighting its role as a potent tool for social activism and political engagement. The movement, as explored by Wayne and others, becomes a lens through which filmmakers engage with real-world issues, amplify marginalized voices, and challenge hegemonic narratives.

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[39] Ibidem

[40] Wayne, Mike. *Political Film the Dialectics of Third Cinema*. London, Pluto, 2001. pp. 6 -7

The examination of Third Cinema necessitates consideration not only of its theoretical underpinnings but also its aesthetic strategies. Filmmakers within this movement employ innovative narrative structures and unconventional cinematography to create a distinct visual language aligning with their ideological goals. This departure from traditional norms serves as a deliberate choice to foster a more authentic representation of the socio-political realities faced by depicted communities.

In a broader cinematic context, the concept of impure cinema, as introduced by André Bazin, a French film critic and theorist, provides an intriguing parallel to the aesthetic strategies employed by Third Cinema filmmakers. The term *impure cinema* is associated with the film theory of André Bazin, who employed this concept of cinema in the context of his exploration of realism in cinema. The reference to *impure cinema* appeared the essay written by Bazin titled *In Defense of Mixed Cinema* (*Pour un cinéma impur*)[41], which is part of his influential collection of essays, *What Is Cinema? (Qu'est-ce que le cinéma?)*. In this essay, the author debates against rigid classifications of cinema into distinct genres or styles, advocating for an open and inclusive approach to filmmaking that embraces a mixture of different elements, styles, and genres. Bazin argues that the potential of cinema for realism and its ability to capture the essence of reality are not confined to a specific set of rules or artistic conventions. The term *impure cinema* captures the belief of Bazin that the richness and authenticity of cinema can be found in its ability to amalgamate diverse elements. He encourages filmmakers to explore hybrid forms that blend various cinematic techniques and styles rather than adhering strictly to predefined categories. The concept of impure cinema challenges the notion of a pure, rigidly defined cinema, suggesting that the true potential the medium lies in its openness to experimentation and diversity.

Film scholar, Lucia Nagib, has delved into the concept of André Bazin, notably the notion of *impure cinema*, within her research on film studies. Nagib embraces the idea that cinema's potential lies in its impurity, in its capacity to borrow from different traditions and forms to create a richer cinematic language. One way in which Nagib

[41] Bazin, André. "In Defense of Mixed Cinema" ("Pour un cinéma impur"). In *What Is Cinema?* ("*Qu'est-ce que le cinéma?*"), translated by Hugh Gray. University of California Press, 1967. pp.159–166.

has applied the concept of impure cinema is in her examination of contemporary Brazilian cinema. Brazilian cinema, with its diverse cultural influences and unique storytelling approaches, provides a fertile ground for exploring the notion of impurity in film. Nagib has explored how Brazilian filmmakers, such as those associated with the Cinema Novo movement, have embraced impurity by incorporating elements from documentary, fiction, and other genres to create a more dynamic and authentic representation of Brazilian society. This analysis enriches the understanding of how filmmakers across cultures navigate constraints to convey nuanced narratives and underscores the relevance of impure cinema as a tool for portraying diverse cultural spheres with authenticity.

In *Impure Cinema: Intermedial and Intercultural Approaches to Film* [42] the authors underline the idea that impure cinema is not a limitation but rather a source of creative freedom and innovation. By studying films that embody impurity, they contribute to a broader understanding of cinematic practices that challenge traditional boundaries and enrich the global cinematic landscape. The authors question the idea of cinema as a pure medium and instead argue for an appreciation of its impurity, in this context, this type of cinema suggests a richness and complexity that arises from the blending of different media and cultural elements.

The concept of Lucia Nagib of *impure cinema* adds depth to the understanding of the aesthetic strategies of Third Cinema. Both impure cinema and Third Cinema share a common departure from established cinematic norms, emphasizing a raw and authentic representation of socio-political realities. By rejecting the Hollywood aesthetics, Third Cinema advocates a form of filmmaking that aligns with concept of impure cinema emphasizing imperfection, cultural specificity, and a departure from mainstream cinematic norms. Nagib argues that Third Cinema deliberately engages with impurity, disrupting conventional narrative and visual purity to better represent the complexities and contradictions of social reality. This aligns with objective of the movement to presenting a depiction of the struggles faced by marginalized communities. The rejection of the auteur-driven model prevalent in mainstream

[42] Nagib, Lúcia, Jerslev, Anne. *Impure Cinema: Intermedial and Intercultural Approaches to Film*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013.

cinema and the emphasis on collective authorship align with the transformative potential of impurity. Both concepts underscore the importance of disrupting established cinematic conventions to authentically capture the complexities of socio-political landscapes. The theoretical foundations of Third Cinema, as articulated by Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino, emphasize anti-imperialism, anti-colonialism, and cultural specificity. These principles resonate with the exploration made by the author Nagib, of impurity as a means of challenging dominant Western perspectives and embracing cinematic hybridity. The rejection of cultural hegemonies and the active engagement with impurity contribute to a shared code of resistance against dominant paradigms.

Furthermore, the dialectics between politics and aesthetics in Third Cinema, as explored by Wayne, find alignment with the claim of Nagib that impurity operates as a medium of dissent within cinematic narratives. Filmmakers within Third Cinema often navigate the tension between creating politically charged narratives and maintaining a distinct cinematic language, resonating with Nagib's notion that impurity contributes to dissenting narratives and challenges existing paradigms.

The transformative aesthetics of impure cinema and the dissenting nature of Third Cinema create a symbiotic relationship. Both concepts utilize aesthetic strategies, such as poor images, to resist, and challenge established norms, emphasizing formal and thematic innovations. This interconnectedness contributes to a deeper understanding of how cinema, at the intersection of impurity and dissent, serves as a powerful tool for social critique, political engagement, and the transformation of socio-political realities.

As with any cinematic movement, the reception and impact of Third Cinema are critical aspects of analysis. Examining the works of scholars like Mike Wayne helps evaluate success of the movement in achieving political and cultural objectives, shedding light on the challenges faced in the context of commercial pressures and mainstream resistance.

1.4 Exploring the cinema of dissent

Embedded within a more extensive discourse that traverses the evolution of resistance in the film domain, the cinema of dissent is firmly intertwined with several cinematic movements, as analysed in the previous section, that have questioned established conventions and norms. Unlike some cinematic movements or theories that can be attributed to a single theorist, the cinema of dissent has been shaped by the contributions of various scholars and filmmakers who have examined the intersection of cinema and political resistance.

At its core, the cinema of dissent embodies the profound ability of film to question, challenge and subvert prevailing ideologies. This cinematic phenomenon serves as a dynamic mechanism that not only critiques the status quo, but also creates a space for alternative narratives and perspectives to be expressed. It transcends geographical and cultural boundaries and provides a compelling opportunity for filmmakers from diverse backgrounds to express dissent and engage in critical dialogue.

The term cinema of dissent typically refers to a cinematic approach or movement that involves the expression of dissent or opposition to prevailing political, social, or cultural norms. Filmmakers within this category often use their works as a means of challenging established ideologies, questioning authority, and critiquing societal structures. The cinema of dissent can manifest in various forms and styles, ranging from explicitly political documentaries to more subtle, metaphorical narratives. Filmmakers associated with this movement use their work to explore issues such as human rights, political repression, social injustice, and other topics that challenge the status quo.

The term cinema of dissent has become a focal point in film studies and cultural analysis, indicating a cinematic approach characterized by the deliberate expression of dissenting perspectives. Scholars such as Hamid Naficy and Ella Shohat have significantly contributed to the academic discourse surrounding dissent cinema, providing insights into its historical context, cultural implications, and the role of filmmakers as agents of dissent across a number of different contexts.

Hamid Naficy, has made substantial contributions to the study of Iranian cinema, including works that delve into the complexities of dissent within the Iranian

context. His book *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking*[43] examines the experiences of exilic and diasporic filmmakers, shedding light on the challenges that they face in expressing dissent beyond the borders of their home countries. The book is a significant contribution to the field of film studies, the author focuses on how filmmakers from exilic and diasporic communities express their cultural identities, negotiate displacement, and engage with issues of identity and belonging through their cinematic works. Naficy coined the term *accented cinema* that refers to the unique qualities and characteristics that emerge when filmmakers work outside their home country, carrying the accents of their cultural background into their cinematic expressions. Naficy argues that exilic and diasporic filmmakers face distinctive challenges in conveying dissent, as their work is often shaped by their experiences of displacement, nostalgia, and negotiation with both the host and home cultures. In the case of Jafar Panahi, his work will be analysed in the third chapter against the framework offered by Naficy.

One key aspect that the author examine concerns the issue of identity and its complexities. By exploring how these directors use cinema as a medium to represent and negotiate their cultural, social, and political experiences in a new, often unfamiliar, context, Naficy illustrates how filmmakers deploy visual language to negotiate the complexities of dissent while navigating the challenges of cultural displacement. Moreover, the author examines the challenges faced by filmmakers living in exile, including issues of censorship, the need to address multiple audiences, and the complexities of negotiating between the culture of origin and the adopted culture, underling in this way the impact of globalization on diasporic cinema, and how these filmmakers engage with transnational audiences and address universal issues while maintaining a connection to their cultural roots.

Naficy employs a multidisciplinary approach, drawing on film theory, cultural studies, and postcolonial discourse to provide a comprehensive framework for understanding accented cinema. He engages with key concepts such as hybridity, transnationalism, and cultural memory to illustrate the ways in which filmmakers negotiate their exilic status and articulate dissent through their cinematic works. By

[43] Naficy, Hamid. *An accented Cinema Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2001.

exploring the role of film festivals, exile communities, and digital media in shaping the landscape of accented cinema, the author investigates how these platforms provide spaces for dissenting voices to reach global audiences and contribute to a transnational dialogue on issues of social and political significance.

Similarly, Ella Shohat, has also examined the intersection of cinema, politics, and identity, adopting a more culturalist perspective. Her work delves into how cinema can serve as a site of dissent, especially in contexts marked by political conflict and contested identities. The author analyse transcends traditional film criticism, providing a nuanced examination of how cinema serves as both a reflection and a contested site for the construction of national and cultural narratives. In her book *Israeli Cinema: East/West and the Politics of Representation*[44], Shohat critically engages with questions of cultural identity, scrutinizing the representation of diverse identities within Israeli cinema. She explores how the cinematic medium becomes a crucial site for negotiating and contesting the complex mosaic of Israeli society, encompassing diverse ethnic, religious, and cultural backgrounds. In the title of the book, the author employs the term *East/West* to allude to the dichotomy between Eastern and Western influences in Israeli cinema. Shohat unpacks the tensions arising from this dichotomy, shedding light on how it manifests in the portrayal of characters, narratives, and cultural symbols within Israeli films, creating in this sense a complex and hybrid cinematic language. The impurity arises from the negotiation and blending of diverse cultural elements, reflecting the multicultural and contested nature of Israeli identity. Therefore, the model proposed by Shohat can be applied to the study of other identities and cinematic representations of multiculturalism, such as in the case of Iranian cinema, where it can shed light on the complexities of cultural negotiation and identity formation within the realm of filmmaking.

Moreover, Shohat illustrates how Israeli cinema, rather than adhering to a pure nationalistic style, incorporates a multitude of influences, making it an impure and dynamic form of cinematic expression. Shohat, exploration extends to the political dimensions of representation. She scrutinizes how cinematic representations contribute to the political discourse surrounding issues such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, national identity, and the portrayal of minority communities. Although Shohat

[44] Shohat, Ella. *Israeli Cinema East/West and the Politics of Representation*. Austin: U of Texas, 1989.

engaged with these topics in the late Eighties, her research remains relevant today, particularly in the context of the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict and contributes to the understanding of contemporary phenomena and ongoing debates. Furthermore, the author explores how cinema becomes a contested site for negotiating political conflicts and contested identities, delving into how cinematic narratives can serve as a form of dissent by challenging dominant discourses.

An interesting example of the cinema of dissent is the Iranian New Wave that emerged within major socio-political transformations in Iran, notably the 1979 Islamic Revolution. This transformative phase brought considerable changes in the country, especially in the political and cultural milieu, which influenced the approach of filmmakers towards social concerns. In fact, the Iranian New Wave served as a platform for artistic expression, allowing filmmakers to respond to the authoritarian regime and censorship. Filmmakers associated with the Iranian New Wave, such as Abbas Kiarostami and Jafar Panahi, used innovative film techniques such as incorporated long shots, a stripped-down narrative, and the participation of non-professional actors, thus creating a distinctive visual style. The movement frequently featured metaphorical stories and figurative imagery to express alternative perspectives, by negotiating the constraints of censorship imposed by the Iranian government, these filmmakers employ metaphorical narratives and symbolic imagery to convey dissenting views, particularly critiquing governmental structures and societal norms. These films acted as a tool for examining the intricacies of Iranian society, addressing multiple societal problems, such as gender roles, political oppression, economic inequalities, and the conflict between tradition and modernity.

The Iranian New Wave has been at the centre of many studies, amongst which Hamid Dabashi's research[45]. He explored the evolution of Iranian cinema, providing valuable insights into how filmmakers like Abbas Kiarostami and Jafar Panahi navigate the constraints of censorship while employing cinematic techniques to subtly critique prevailing sociopolitical conditions. Dabashi places Iranian cinema within its historical context, particularly addressing the challenges and transformations it has undergone, including the Islamic Revolution of 1979. By introducing the historical

[45] Dabashi, Hamid. *Close Up: Iranian Cinema Past. Present Future*. London. Verso, 2001.

background, the author examines the complexities of censorship in Iran and how filmmakers employ various strategies to express dissent despite these limitations. Dabashi discusses the creative and often subversive ways in which Iranian directors navigate censorship to convey critical perspectives, by analysing Iranian films as a form of social and political critique and examining how filmmakers engage with issues such as human rights, political repression, gender dynamics, and societal norms. The cinema of dissent in Iran is intricately connected to the ways in which filmmakers use their filmography to challenge prevailing ideologies. Dabashi explores the global impact of Iranian cinema, emphasizing its role in shaping international perceptions and contributing to the global cinematic landscape. The ability of Iranian films to resonate with audiences worldwide speaks to the universality of dissent and the power of cinema to convey critical narratives. Dabashi, with his academic investigation contributes to a deeper understanding of the role of cinema as a tool for social critique and activism, shedding light on the complex interplay between art, politics, and dissent.

Moreover, the academic exploration of Alena Strohmaier [46], delves into the evolution of cinematic representations within the Iranian diaspora, examining the transition from diaspora to post-diaspora film. This investigation highlights three spatial dimensions: the evolving real space of the diaspora, the shifting, evolving narrative realms within films, and the dynamic nature of film as a medium.

In conclusion, by examining dissent, cinema has revealed the power of the cinematic medium to challenge established norms, question authority and act as a catalyst for social and political critique. From the resistance of the Iranian New Wave within the confines of censorship to global movements pushing the boundaries of visual expression, dissent cinema has proven to be a transformative force, inspiring critical thinking, and social change.

[46] Strohmaier, Alena. "On the Re-Configurations of Cinematic Media-Spaces: From Diaspora Film to Postdiaspora Film". In *Re-Configurations: Contextualising Transformation Processes and Lasting Crises in the Middle East and North Africa*, edited by Rachid Ouaissa, Friederike Pannewick, and Alena Strohmaier, Politik Und Gesellschaft Des Nahen Ostens. Wiesbaden: Springer Fachmedien, 2021.pp. 217-231.

In the next section, the focus will shift towards visual activism as a socio-political tool, delving into the concepts and contexts that highlight this form of expression. The upcoming sections will address the importance of visual activism in documenting sociopolitical turmoil, particularly within the Iranian context, where filmmakers must face the complex interplay of artistic expression and state censorship. An historical overview of state censorship in Iran will provide the conditions for understanding the challenges filmmakers encounter in their pursuit of visual activism. Furthermore, the chapter will focus on filmmakers as visual activists, exploring how they resist censorship and employ their filmography as a means of social critique and activism. By investigating the connection between visual activism and censorship, and the intricate strategies filmmakers employ to navigate restrictions will be unravel, emphasizing the resilience and agency of artists in the face of political constraints.

CHAPTER 2

Visual activism as a socio-political tool

2.1 Visual activism

In contemporary socio-political landscapes, activism has experienced a profound transformation, spreading beyond conventional practices. With the rise of visual activism as a powerful tool for socio-cultural critique and transformative change, a paradigm shift has been observed. Characterised by the use of visual media to both advocate and challenge societal norms, this phenomenon engages with art, media, and technology to redefine how individuals and groups claim their agency in the public sphere.

Within the dynamic realm of visual culture, the concept of visual activism has been established as an equally dynamic and influential process that transcends conventional boundaries, capable to empower individuals and communities to actively participate in the creation and transformation of narratives that shape identities and societies. Visual activism intersects art, politics, and social change and its roots can be traced back to the civil rights movements and anti-establishment protests of the Mid-Twentieth century.

Different scholars have analysed the complex phenomenon of visual activism, attempting to explore the evolving landscape where art, activism, and visuality intersect. In the field of visual culture, the visual theorist Nicholas Mirzoeff addressed the varied milieu of visual culture, exploring various forms of images and their impact on our perception of the world.[47] By covering a wide range of visual forms, from traditional self-portraits to contemporary selfies, maps, movies, and more, he examines how these different types of images shape and reflect our understanding of ourselves and the world around us, highlighting in this sense how visual culture has evolved and how it continues to influence our everyday lives.

[47] Mirzoeff, Nicholas. *How to See the World: An Introduction to Images, from Self-Portraits to Selfies, Maps to Movies, and More.* New York: Basic Books, 2016.

By adopting an interdisciplinary approach, the author draws upon art history, media studies, and cultural theory to provide a comprehensive understanding of the power and significance of images. Furthermore, Mirzoeff discusses the evolution of visual culture and its current form, which he refers to as *visual thinking*, suggesting that this practice is not just something to be studied academically, but rather something that individuals must actively engage with.

In his perspective, visual activism, is a way for artists, academics, and citizens to use visual culture as a means of creating forms of change. In other words, visual culture is not just about passive observation or analysis, but it has become a tool for those who identify as visual activists to bring about social or cultural transformation.

The author observes that the concept of visual culture, in 1990, served to criticize and challenge the prevailing representations of individuals in various forms of media such as art, film, and mass media. However, as articulated by Mirzoeff the nature of visual culture has since evolved and in the contemporary context, visual activism involves the active use of visual culture to construct new self-images, redefine modes of perception and visibility, and introduce novel perspectives on the world. In this sense, visual activism implies the possibility to «use visual culture to create self-images, new ways to see and be seen, and new ways to see the world » [48], this evolution signifies a broader agency within visual culture, where individuals and communities actively shape their identities and perspectives through the intentional deployment of visual elements.

This critical engagement allowed for a revaluation of representation. However, according to Nicholas Mirzoeff, in contemporary times, visual culture has evolved beyond mere critique, arguing that visual culture is not merely a tool for deconstructing existing images rather, it has become a proactive instrument for the creation of new self-images, novel perspectives on identity, and innovative ways of perceiving and understanding the world. This shift represents a departure from the passive critique of the past to an active engagement in shaping and reshaping visual narratives. The term *visual activism* captures this contemporary use of visual culture as a constructive force for generating change, both in terms of individual self-perception and broader societal

[48] Mirzoeff, Nicholas. *How to See the World: An Introduction to Images, from Self-Portraits to Selfies, Maps to Movies, and More.* New York: Basic Books, 2016. pp. 297

perspectives. The perspective of the author implies that visual culture, in its current form, is a tool for empowerment, enabling individuals to actively participate in the construction of new visual languages and meanings.

Moreover, the Mirzoeff underlines that:

> Visual activism is the interaction of pixels and actions to make change. Pixels are the visible result of everything produced by a computer, from words created by a word processor to all forms of image, sound and video. Actions, are things we do with those cultural forms to make changes, small or large, from a direct political action to a performance – whether in everyday life or in a theatre – a conversation or a work of art.[49]

The author delves into the concept of visual activism, describing it as the dynamic interplay between pixels and actions aimed at effecting change. Mirzoeff highlights the transformative potential of digital content and its active utilization in the pursuit of change. This perspective, as analysed below, aligns with Hito Steyerl's concept of the *poor image*[50], which emphasises the democratisation of image production and circulation, and suggests that even low-resolution, low-quality images can carry powerful messages and contribute to political activism.

Therefore, pixels, as the visual representation of digital information, become a medium through which activism can be expressed. The action refers to the intentional and purposeful use of these pixels, whether in the realm of politics, the arts, or everyday interactions, to contribute to societal shifts or challenges. This perspective underscores the notion that visual activism is not confined to one specific medium but is rather a versatile and evolving practice that involves both the creation of digital content and its strategic deployment to catalyse change.

Moreover, the theorist describes visual activism as: « collective and collaborative, containing archiving, networking, researching, and mapping among

[49] Ivi, pp. 297 - 298

[50] Steyerl, Hito. “In Defense of the Poor Image.” e-flux Journal, no. 10, accessed November 11, 2023. https://www.e-flux.com/journal/10/61362/in-defense-of-the-poor-image/.

other tools, all in the service of a vision of making change »[51] . In this sense, the term *collective* implies that visual activism involves the participation of multiple individuals or groups working collaboratively towards a common goal. It emphasises that the pursuit of change through visual means is not an isolated or individualistic action, rather a collaborative effort that relies on the contributions and insights of different participants. Moreover, this collective and collaborative nature of visual activism, with its display of tools and activities, emphasizes a strategic and comprehensive approach to effecting change. It suggests that the power of visual activism lies not only in the creation of visual content but also in the coordinated efforts of individuals using various tools to collectively advance a transformative vision.

Similarly, the concept of the poor image, elaborated in the article *In Defense of the Poor Image* [52] by Hito Steyerl, aligns with the theories of Mirzoeff about visual activism since both concepts prioritize accessibility, shared authorship, and widespread dissemination above established notions of image quality. This convergence highlights the idea that images, regardless of their resolution, can be powerful tools for social and cultural change.

Additionally, the collective and collaborative strategies inherent in visual activism are reflected in the proliferation of low-resolution images, as activists use these images in global campaigns through the Internet and social media. In this synergistic relationship, both visual activism and the poor images become integral components of different movements, empowering individuals to collectively contribute to social and political change.

W. J. T. Mitchell also contributed significantly to the discourse surrounding visual activism, within the realm of visual culture. In this article, *What Do Pictures 'Really' Want?* [53] the author delves into the concept of images having a life of their own, challenging conventional views that consider pictures as passive representations or reflections of reality. In fact, by posing the question of the title, the scholar suggests

[51] Mirzoeff, Nicholas. *How to See the World: An Introduction to Images, from Self-Portraits to Selfies, Maps to Movies, and More.* New York: Basic Books, 2016. pp. 297 - 298

[52] Steyerl, Hito. "In Defense of the Poor Image." e-flux Journal, no. 10, accessed November 11, 2023. https://www.e-flux.com/journal/10/61362/in-defense-of-the-poor-image/.

[53] Mitchell, W. J. T. "What Do Pictures 'Really' Want?" *October*, vol. 77, 1996, pp. 71–82.

that images should be considered as dynamic entities with their own agency and desires.

Additionally, Mitchell argues that images are not neutral carriers of meaning. They have *agency* and can influence the viewer, thus actively participating in shaping our perceptions and influencing culture. The author also explores how images can stimulate emotional responses, shape cultural narratives, and participate in the construction of social and political reality.

Furthermore, the article examines the relationship between words and images. Mitchell rejects the traditional hierarchy that places words above images in terms of conveying meaning, arguing that images and words operate in a more reciprocal correlation, each influencing the other in complex ways. The author refuses the conception that images are simply illustrations or extensions of verbal language, and by drawing on a wide range of examples from art, popular culture and the media, he examines how images have circulated in culture, how technology affects their production and dissemination, and how they shape the understanding of history and identity to support his thesis.

This analysis aligns with the interdisciplinary nature of visual activism, because in order to constructing and disseminating messages, visual activists often combine images with textual elements to amplify their impact.

2.1.1 Visual activism: visuality, visibility and counter-visibility

To understand the significant impact of visual activism, it is essential to explore the wider discussion on visuality and counter-visibility. Visuality refers to how images and visual culture shape our perception of the world and influence social norms and values. Identifying visuality requires examining how individuals and societies interact with and derive meaning from visual stimuli, and how are influenced by the complex interplay of cultural context, historical perspectives, and sociopolitical interactions. Counter-visibility, in contrast, involves the intention to challenge established visual narratives, resist dominant power structures, and offer alternative perspectives. This dichotomy forms the basis for understanding the transformative potential of visual activism in the field of visual culture.

Nicholas Mirzoeff employs the term *counterhistory*[54] to emphasize his departure from traditional narratives surrounding visuality. Addressing the complex relationship between power dynamics and the act of looking, the author argues that the right to look is not only a fundamental aspect of human experience, but also a point of political struggle as vision is not a neutral and passive process, but rather deeply entangled with issues of power, surveillance, and control. By investigating beyond the realm of art and aesthetics to a broader socio-political context, including issues of race, colonialism, and global activism and considering different historical moments and cultural phenomena, Mirzoeff demonstrates the ways in which visuality has been used as a tool of both domination and resistance.

In addition, the author examines various visual forms, including both traditional artworks and contemporary media, to explore their role in shaping social reality and by advocating a critical approach to images, he recognises them as active agents that shape perceptions and ideologies, aligning with the theory of image agency formulated by W.J.T. Mitchell.

In the context of visual activism, the concept of visuality is particularly significant as it highlights the crucial role that visual elements play in articulating and disseminating socio-political messages. Additionally, it is also important to acknowledge the emotional impact of visuals, that aligns with the scholar Teresa Brennan's [55] theories on the affective and emotional dimensions of communication, which provide insights into how emotions and affective states circulate and influence collective behaviour. Understanding how emotions are transmitted and shared is crucial for creating impactful visuals that resonate with audiences, evoke empathy, and mobilise action. Brennan highlights the importance of subconscious and embodied aspects of affect, providing a comprehensive framework useful for understanding the strategic use of emotional appeal by visual activists. Activists can effectively mobilise audiences by drawing upon the affective power of images, stimulating empathy and prompting action. This approach aligns with the notion of *affective publics*, where emotions play a central role in shaping public discourse.

[54] Mirzoeff, Nicholas. *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality*. Duke University Press, 2011.

[55] Brennan, Teresa. *The Transmission of Affect*. Cornell University Press, 2004

Visual activism involves a deliberate and strategic use of visual media to advocate for social change, challenge existing norms and promote collective awareness. The effectiveness of visual activism depends on a nuanced understanding of how visual elements function within a particular cultural and social context. These aspects underscore the role of visuality in creating a shared visual language that unifies diverse individuals under a common cause.

Moreover, Mirzoeff argues that visual activism acts as a democratizing force within society, challenging traditional power structures that controlled the dissemination of images by empowering individuals and marginalized communities to actively participate in the creation and dissemination of images, disrupting established hierarchies. According to the author, it serves as a means of challenging and subverting dominant visual narratives that perpetuate certain ideologies and reinforce social norms. In this way, visual activism becomes a tool for cultural critique and resistance, functioning as a potent instrument for raising awareness about social issues that might otherwise be marginalized or disregarded. The visual depiction of shared struggles serves to establish connections among diverse individuals and communities, contributing to the development of a cohesive social consciousness.

In addition, Mirzoeff underlines the global impact of visual activism, emphasizing that images, videos, and visual campaigns possess the ability to transcend geographical boundaries, resonating with audiences across cultures and nations. In this sense, visual activism operates as a transnational force for change capable to address global challenges.

Furthermore, Mirzoeff emphasis on the importance of recognizing and addressing intersecting forms of oppression within visual activism. By underlying the need for activists to be attentive to how various social categories, such as race, gender, and class, intersect and impact individuals differently, in this case an intersectional approach to visual activism brings inclusivity and effectiveness in addressing the complexities of social justice issues.

Following this line, the advocacy for the democratization of the visual sphere aligns with broader discussions on media democratization and participatory culture. By exploring how digital technologies encourage ordinary individuals to contribute in the creation and distribution of media content, this democratisation allows

marginalised communities to actively participate in the construction and dissemination of images that truly reflect their experiences and perspectives that were previously excluded from shaping mainstream visual narratives. This analysis aligns with the broader framework of cultural studies, where theorists including Edward Said and Stuart Hall have provided significant contributions to the understanding of how meaning is constructed and contested within culture. Edward Said with his book *Orientalism*[56], which critiques Western representations of the East, has had a significant impact on the realm of visual culture, scholars used his study to analyse and deconstruct visual representations in art, film, and media since, his critique of orientalist visual practices has inspired a broader examination of how images contribute to the construction of cultural meaning and power dynamics.

Similarly, Stuart Hall has made important contributions to the fields of cultural studies and media studies becoming relevant to visual culture studies for several reasons, as he engaged with issues related to representation, identity, and power. His essay *Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse* [57]is particularly relevant to the field of visual culture as it highlights the subjective and dynamic nature of interpreting visual representations. The model presented by Hall propose that media messages are encoded with meaning by producers, but the interpretation and decoding of the massages is made by audiences. This framework can be extended to visual images, where the encoding and decoding processes influence how viewers comprehend visual representations. By drawing upon these significant studies, Mirzoeff emphasizes the role of visual representations in perpetuating colonial ideologies and shaping power dynamics. In the context of visual activism, understanding how visual messages are encoded and decoded helps activists strategically create visuals that resonate with diverse audiences, encouraging critical engagement and opposing dominant discourses.

Another important concept that Mirzoeff analyse is the *right to look* and its counterpoint, the *right to be hidden*. This dichotomy emphasises the complex dynamics of visibility; individuals and groups may assert their right to control how

[56] Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage, 1979.

[57] Hall, Stuart. *Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse.* Birmingham: Centre for Cultural Studies, University of Birmingham, 1973.

they are perceived, challenging external forces that attempt to make them either visible or invisible. In this context, visibility refers to the state or quality of being seen or observed, encompassing the broader notion of perceiving or noticing something.

Within the political sphere, visibility become a dynamic force that shape narratives, capable of influencing power dynamics and either empower or marginalise individuals and groups. This ability to control the means of representation turns into a powerful tool for dictating who or what becomes visible, reflecting prevailing power structures and determining priorities.

When discussing visibility, Foucault's reflection around power relations is an unavoidable reference. In *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison* [58], the French philosopher highlights how the gaze of authority, emanating from entities such as the state or other influential bodies, functions as a tool for shaping and controlling behaviour through persistent observation. The concept of the Panopticon is emblematic: this is, a prison architecture where a central observer possesses the capacity to observe all prisoners without their awareness of being monitored. This design soon became a metaphorical construct, symbolizing the panoptic gaze, that is, a modality of power that operates through continual surveillance and the internalization of this gaze by individuals, thereby prompting self-regulation of their conduct.

The intersection of power dynamics and surveillance elucidated by the Panopticon finds applicability in the discourse surrounding visual activism. Within a societal framework where individuals maintain a perpetual cognizance of potential observation, the authoritative ability to elaborate narratives and dictate visibility assumes a nuanced and pervasive role. Importantly, the panoptic model extends its influence beyond the confines of physical prisons, permeating diverse institutions and societal norms that govern behaviour through mechanisms of surveillance.

When examining visibility in the context of visual activism, the concept of the Panopticon, as outlined by Foucault, serves as a metaphorical illustration of the interplay between visibility and power, emphasizing how a central observer, such as the state or other influential institutions, can shape and control behaviour through

[58] Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1977.

constant surveillance. This concept extends therefore well beyond physical confinement, encompassing various institutions and societal norms, highlighting the omnipresent role of surveillance in controlling behaviour and shaping narratives.

In addition, the awareness of being observed plays a central role in shaping the actions and responses of individuals within a given socio-political milieu, thereby contributing to a comprehensive understanding of visibility as a potent tool of influence in the realm of visual activism. In this sense, the struggle for visibility becomes a valuable vehicle for drawing attention to issues, contesting dominant power structures, and encourage solidarity.

However, it is important to note that visibility does not always imply empowerment. For example, in the context of surveillance, visibility can be used as a mechanism of control. Indeed, the state and other entities may actively track and make visible certain individuals or groups, causing concerns about privacy and the right to control and define visibility in a political sphere. In the context of dissent, not being visible can serve as a tool of repression, as political regimes conspire to obscure oppositional voices in order to limit their influence and impact. Symbolic erasure also contributes to invisibility by deliberately omitting certain identities or issues from public record, reinforcing a limited and distorted understanding of reality within political discourse.

The concept of counter-visibility theorize by Nicolas Mirzoeff emerges as a response to conventional structures of visibility which reinforce dominant narratives and power hierarchies. As mentioned above the term[59] is used to describe the visual strategies and practices that challenge or subvert dominant modes of seeing and representation, underlining that traditional modes of visibility often reinforce existing power structures and contribute to the perpetuation of inequality. Counter-visibility involves efforts to resist or disrupt these dominant modes of seeing, encompassing a range of visual practices, from activism and alternative media to art and cultural expressions that challenge established norms. The objective of counter-visibility is to present alternative perspectives, amplify marginalized voices, and question the hegemonic power of mainstream visual culture. In this sense, counter-visibility

[59] Mirzoeff, Nicholas. *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality*. Duke University Press, 2011.

operates as a form of resistance against the mechanisms of power and surveillance described by Foucault, offering alternative ways of seeing and being seen.

Furthermore, the author argues that individuals and marginalized groups have the ability to actively engage with strategies of counter-visibility, bringing to light what has historically been rendered invisible or misrepresented. According to Mirzoeff, counter-visibility involves not only resisting oppressive images but also actively participating in the creation of new narratives that promote a more inclusive representation of diverse voices and experiences. In this perspective, he advocates for the democratization of the visual sphere, empowering individuals and communities to challenge, question, and redefine visibility. Talking when prevented to, while hiding, is in this sense an act of counter-visibility that responds to the hegemonic power and mines it. We will examine this concept further in the third chapter through an analysis of the work of Jafar Panahi, an Iranian director whose filmmaking serves as a significant example of resistance against censorship and surveillance, shedding light on the complexities of contemporary Iranian society and the struggle for freedom of expression.

Furthermore, the author emphasises the importance of visual activism in challenging dominant narratives and power structures. Visual activists engage in counter-visibility by strategically bringing to light issues and voices that have been obscured by mainstream representations. Therefore, visual activism becomes a crucial aspect of counter-visibility. Visual activists strategically employ counter-visibility to expose issues and voices that have been rendered invisible by dominant discourses, adopting various visual media such as art, photography or other interventions to disrupt existing power structures and contribute to the construction of alternative narratives.

Moreover, Mirzoeff encourages the recognition of and participation in visual practices that deviate from established norms and challenge the existing status quo. Counter-visibility aims to develop a more inclusive and diverse visual culture that reflects the complexity of the world and challenges systems of oppression.

In conclusion, scholars have significantly examined the intricate interplay between images, power, and politics to understand the visual discourse and reveal hidden narratives and power dynamics the surround visual representation. These theoretical frameworks illuminate the theoretical aspects of visibility also form the

foundation for analysing the phenomenon of visual activism in the contemporary socio-political spheres. The collaborative nature of visual activism, as described by Mirzoeff, emphasizes a comprehensive approach involving diverse tools and activities. These theoretical frameworks provide the basis for analysing the role of visual activism in documenting sociopolitical turmoil.

2.2 The importance of visual activism in documenting sociopolitical turmoil

Visual activism, as a powerful form of expression, plays a crucial role in documenting and shaping the understanding of socio-political turmoil. By exploring the impact of visual activism, with a particular focus on the Arab Spring and the Green Movement in Iran, the thesis will explore the impact of images and their narratives on the discourse surrounding political change. Particularly during these historical events, images served as powerful tools for communication, mobilization, and solidarity, shaping public discourse and influencing perceptions both domestically and internationally. Therefore, understanding the impact of images and their narratives is essential for comprehending the dynamics of political change and the role of visual activism within it.

In the realm of visual culture, The Arab Spring and the Green Movement are two significant events that attempt to challenge the invisibility imposed on public oppositional discourse by spreading protests and demonstrations in the Middle East and North Africa. Both affirmed the importance of the visual processes within political struggle in the Middle East, and reinforced the fact that the use of the visuals in this context is a way to contribute to the political expression, despite the fact that they occurred in different countries and had distinct causes, this two events shared some common features, including the use of visual media to convey messages, mobilize support, and document the events.

The Arab Spring refers to a series of pro-democracy uprisings, protests, and demonstrations that took place across several Arab countries, predominantly in the Middle East and North Africa, starting in late 2010 and continuing into 2011 and beyond. The uprisings were characterized by demands for political reform, economic justice, and an end to corruption. The movements were largely driven by

dissatisfaction with autocratic regimes, high unemployment, and political repression. The wave of protests quickly spread to other countries in the region, including Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Bahrain, and Syria. While some countries saw successful transitions to more democratic systems, others experienced prolonged violence and instability. The Arab Spring had significant geopolitical implications and reshaped the political landscape of the Middle East and North Africa. These revolutions were defined as an Islamic awakening, align with the Iranian model of the Green Movement in 2009 that served as guiding example.

This period saw a rise in citizen-driven movements, with visual media being instrumental in documenting, disseminating, and amplifying narratives of resistance. Photographs, videos, and other visual mediums became indispensable tools for capturing the lived experiences of individuals involved in the Arab Spring. It is important to underline the crucial role of social media platforms such Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, that result fundamental for organizing and mobilizing people, besides being a space where to share these visual contents that functioned as a document of the tumultuous events, providing a tangible record of the socio-political upheavals, and offering a counter-narrative to the prevailing official discourse. In this sense, visual activism functions as a historical archive capable of capturing the fluidity and dynamism of socio-political change. The images and videos of the Arab Spring provide a concrete record of the efforts, struggles, and sacrifices made by individuals striving for change.

An interesting analysis of the interplay between visuals and political discourse in the context of the Arab Spring and the Green Movement in Iran is provided by the scholar Lina Khatib in her book *Image politics in the Middle East: The role of visual in political struggle*[60], she provides a framework for understanding how visual representations can challenge dominant narratives by offering alternative viewpoints.

In this work, Khatib conducts a cross-country analysis that examines the ways in which the visual has been used during political struggles across the region, considering events such as the Cedar Revolution in Lebanon, the Green Movement in Iran, and the Arab Spring in Egypt, Syria, and Libya. The author explains how different

[60] Khatib, Lina. *Image Politics in the Middle East the Role of the Visual in Political Struggle*. London: Tauris, 2013.

actors, including states, activists, artists, and ordinary citizens, use various media, such as television, social media, mobile phones, as well as traditional forms including posters, cartoons, billboards, and graffiti to convey and negotiate political messages. Moreover, the scholar argues that visual narratives are not neutral, they actively contribute to shaping ideologies and perspectives, emphasizing on the role of images as markers of historical significance.

Furthermore, the book also delves into the politics of invisibility in Iran, with a focus on the Green Movement as a visual protest. In Iran, there is a dominant culture of censorship and repression in which public oppositional discourse is often obscured or silenced by the authorities. However, the Green Movement has emerged as a visible expression of dissent, challenging this imposed invisibility, and affirming the importance of visual processes in political struggle in the Middle East.

The Green Movement in Iran emerged in 2009 following the contested presidential election. As Khatib observes:

> The movement was a spontaneous, bottom-up protest against what many Iranians saw as the stealing of their votes by the regime, catalyzing the slogan "Where is my vote?" that became the most prevalent statement witnessed/heard in the anti-fraud protest that began on 13 June 2009.The Green Movement was a movement about presence, and it was striking in its focus on the visual and on symbolism.[61]

Many Iranians believed that the election results were manipulated in favour of the incumbent leader, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, resulting in the generation of widespread protests that gained strength as a form of popular resistance to the government. Among these protests, the Green Movement originated as a response to what many perceived as electoral frauds. In fact, the central slogan of the protest was *Where is my vote?* reflecting the widespread feeling among Iranians that their votes had been stolen or manipulated. In this sense, the movement was driven by a sense of frustration and discontent, particularly among supporters of the opposition candidate, Mir Hossein Mousavi and the main objective of the protesters was to contest the alleged electoral fraud and demand accountability from the government using peaceful protests and civil disobedience. By using various visual and symbolic elements to

[61] Ivi, pp. 106

convey their message, making it a striking feature of the movement, the protestors emphasized on the importance of being present highlighting the urgency of people coming together in a visible and symbolic manner to express their dissent.

However, the protests were not only focused on the electoral process but also regarding broader issues of governance, transparency, and democracy and as the author underlines, the visual dimension was significant to manifest the political intentions of the movement. One of the distinctive features that the protesters adopted was the colour green as their symbolic identity, which not only represented the campaign colour of the opposition candidate Mir-Hossein Mousavi, but also stood for a broader association with nature, renewal, and hope in the Iranian culture. Needless to say, the chromatic element also contributed to an immediate visual association of the colour green to the attempt to respond to discontent, to dissent and action.

As Khatib underlines: «it was a colour-branded movement, as it appropriated the colour green[62].», in this sense, the use of green served as a visual manifestation of the ideals and aspirations of the movement, becoming a powerful and recognizable

Figure 1 – Supporters of Iranian presidential candidate Mir-Hossein Mousavi, June 2009. Via Zamaneh Media.

[62] Ibidem

indicator of collective resistance, transcending linguistic barriers, and distinguishing its participants, and visually linking them to a shared cause.

Moreover, the Green Movement employed visual elements such as banners, posters, and slogans to articulate its demands and critique the political establishment. Protesters creatively used visual medias to convey messages of democracy, social justice, and the protection of civil liberties. The visual nature of these expressions allowed for a broader dissemination the objectives of the movement, reaching not only those directly participating in the protests but also garnering attention and support on a national and international scale. In this sense, the use of the colour green as visual symbol has facilitated the achievement of global visibility, while becoming a valuable source for showings as evidence the restriction employed by the Iranian government.

Furthermore, the deployment of visual elements such as photographs, videos, and artistic expressions, were crucial to narrate and make visible the unfolding events. Citizens documented the streets in protest, by using cameras and mobile phones they were able to capture poignant moments of demonstrations and encounters with security forces in real-time. As the author Hamid Naficy observes:

> The internet thus became social, not only in its virtuality but also in its actuality. The streets, in turn, became virtual, both in their powerful representations on the internet and in their power to represent.[63]

In this sense, the internet emerged as a dynamic social platform, while streets assumed a dual existence, manifesting both in the material and digital dimension. This transformation reflected a profound shift in societal engagement and representation, capturing the intricate interweaving of online and offline spheres. The online domain became a dynamic extension of the real world, influencing and reflecting the power dynamics inherent in physical spaces. In fact, activists utilized social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube to share their documented experiences, bypassing government censorship and resonating with an international audience. By

[63] Naficy, Hamid. "5. Iranian Internet Cinema, a Cinema of Embodied Protest: Imperfect, Amateur, Small, Unauthorized, Global". *Media and Mapping Practices in the Middle East and North Africa: Producing Space*, edited by Alena Strohmaier and Angela Krewani, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021, pp. 121

using hashtags such as #IranElection they were able to gain worldwide popularity, amplifying the global attention and support to the Green Movement. As a result, social media platforms emerged as instrumental channels for the global dissemination of these visuals contributed to documenting the struggle for democracy and human rights and fostering international solidarity.

The Iranian author Hamid Naficy underlines how Iranian bloggers established a significant and influential presence in the blogosphere, as well as in cyberspace overall.[64] This remarkable presence, coupled with restrictions on traditional journalism, turned the internet into a crucial platform for information and activism during the 2000s. It became a highly contested arena for public diplomacy, accommodating various perspectives and contributing to a dynamic exchange of ideas and opinions.

Moreover, it is important to underline how this circulation of visual content participated in the creation of an alternative narrative by adopting the concept of Mirzoeff of counter-visibility. This use of image contrasted the established visual technique use to of represent the Iranians, and mostly the protestors adopted the visual discourse that the Iranian government uses to legitimize itself, reclaiming in this way their depiction as a population that is capable to contest the regime by visually appropriate the state symbols as the case of the colour green. Therefore, the Green Movement in Iran exemplifies how visual activism, through its multifaceted use of visuals, transcended geographical boundaries and played a pivotal role in shaping the narrative of sociopolitical upheaval on a global scale.

Relevant to the discourse on visual protests is the essay of Elisa Adami[65] that offers a contemporary exploration of the challenges and complexities associated with observing revolutions in the digital age. Adami delves into the role of social media, citizen journalism, and the constant stream of images in shaping our understanding of

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[64] Naficy, Hamid. "5. Iranian Internet Cinema, a Cinema of Embodied Protest: Imperfect, Amateur, Small, Unauthorized, Global". *Media and Mapping Practices in the Middle East and North Africa: Producing Space*, edited by Alena Strohmaier and Angela Krewani, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021, pp. 119-138

[65] Adami, Elisa. 'How Do You Watch a Revolution? Notes from the 21st Century'. *Journal of Visual Culture* 15, no. 1 April 2016, pp. 69–84.

revolution by examining the Arab Spring protest, providing a deeper understanding of the evolving nature of visual activism and its impact on public perception. The visual language employed during the Arab Spring, situated within geopolitical landscapes marked by severe repression and the monopolization of information by the state, contributes to the understanding of how new technologies, such as mobile phones and social media platforms, were utilized as tools for generating and circulating counter-documentation. Within this framework, it is possible to analyse the regime of visibility and visuality inherent in the lexicon adopted by protestors and their intricate relationship with established power structures and understand the channels through which information is distributed. Furthermore, the study delves into the material conditions governing the production and reception of these visual expressions, and tracing their diverse trajectories, ranging from the unsanctioned and unregulated compilations on YouTube to their dissemination through international news broadcasts.

Moreover, Adami investigates the reform of visual language in light of citizen journalism, a new phenomenon that challenges the regime of visibility and visuality and creates new ways of seeing while establishing emancipated modes of spectatorship. As a result, mobile phones and social media are being used to create and circulate counter-documentation, echoing once again Mirzoeff's theories. In this way, as the author analyse, is possible to understand the problem of dualisms between well-created government-controlled production of images and low-quality images of that same event. Although lacking in technical quality, these poor images became powerful tools for documenting and disseminating information about the revolutionary events.

As a result, the complex nature of the visual information generated during the Arab Spring, serves as a vast archive with a dual purpose: historical documentation and resistance material. These poor images, initially created with activist and present-oriented intentions, take on a life of their own as they are disseminated online. They traverse various platforms, from social media and YouTube playlists to international channels of information and art galleries. As previously mentioned, the impact and agency of these images become multifaceted as they move through these diverse trajectories, sometimes becoming diluted or refracted, while at other times gaining heightened significance.

In the context of visual protests, the concept of the *emancipated spectator,* illustrated by Jacques Rancière[66], emerges as relevant since individuals actively engage with and interpret political visuals. This notion challenges traditional hierarchies between creators and consumers of images, equivalent to the blurred roles observed in visual protests between creators and spectators. In this case, the emancipated spectators contribute to the democratic expression of political dissent by actively interpreting protest visuals and participating in the creation of meaning by sharing the visual language of protests. Moreover, the emancipated spectators disrupt established norms through innovative visual strategies, contributing to the evolving discourse within the protest space, their participatory role extends to contest and reshaping the norms of political message communication. In visual protests, individuals engage in a participatory making of meaning, collectively adding diverse perspectives and narratives to the overall message conveyed by visuals. The concept highlights the significance of individuals as active contributors to the political and artistic dimensions of visual activism, emphasizing the potential for democratized and inclusive expressions of dissent.

In the context of visual activism, the Arab Spring and the Green Movement are significant examples that offer valuable perspectives on the transformative capacity of visual activism to shape public discourse and to encourage social and political change. These movements gained significant global attention, partly through a strategic use of social media platforms, which resulted in activists being able to effectively use visual content as an instrumental tool for protest, communication, and mobilisation, allowing them to directly engage with a global audience, while avoiding traditional media. This facilitated the rapid spread of narratives, influencing perceptions and gaining visibility across the world.

The strategic use of visual symbolism established consistent visual identities that served as gathering points for participants and facilitated external understanding and empathy. The intentional use of visual elements helped to create a shared visual language that transcended geographic and linguistic barriers, promoting a sense of unity among activists. Moreover, visual activism was significant in documenting events unfolding in real time across the Middle East, activists and citizen journalists

[66] Rancière, Jacques. *The Emancipated Spectator*. Translated by Gregory Elliot. New York: Verso, 2009

used cameras and smartphones to capture instances of police brutality, mass demonstrations, and other pivotal moments, providing evidence of the legitimacy of the movements while shaping the historical narrative surrounding these events. The dissemination of these visual contents brought individuals to engage with the cause on a personal level: hashtags, shared images, and user-generated content fostered a sense of connectivity among activists, facilitating the organization and coordination of actions. However, simultaneously, governments recognised the power of visuals and engaged in counter-visual strategies. Authorities attempted to manage the narrative by limiting access to social media, closing communication channels, and creating their own visual contents to offer an alternative perspective. This dynamic introduced an additional layer to the visual struggle between activists and governments.

The visual legacy of these movements extends beyond the culmination of the initial protests. The images, symbols, and visual narratives persist and continue to exercise influence in shaping discussions around democracy, human rights, and political change.

In conclusion, by drawing on the work of recent scholars on image politics and visual activism in contexts of collective protest and dissent, underscore the importance of visual narratives in challenging established norms, amplifying the voices of the marginalised, and comprehend the complex socio-political realities. On the one hand, by examining the Green Movement protests in Iran of 2009 it is possible to address the crucial role of visual activism in making visible the opposition, that normally is suppressed by the state, through the visual strategies and symbolism that result significant in documenting and disseminating awareness regarding sociopolitical turmoil. On the other hand, the Arab Spring underlined the performative nature of politics through visual expressions and demonstrate the transformative potential of visual activism in shaping public discourse, promotion global solidarity, and influencing political outcomes. In an era of visual saturation, it is essential to acknowledge and critically analyse the role of visual activism in understanding the intricate tapestry of revolutions and societal transformations.

2.3 The nexus of visual activism and censorship in Iran

When discussing visual activism and censorship in Iran, the philosopher Noam Chomsky's considerations on censorship, particularly in his book *Necessary Illusions: Thought Control in Democratic Societies*[67], provide a useful theoretical framework for understanding how propaganda and control of information exercised by political authorities can influence public opinion. The term *necessary illusions,* refers to the beliefs and narratives promoted by powerful actors who shape public perceptions in ways that can serve their interests. According to the author, the mass media, which are often perceived as independent and objective sources of information, are crucial in disseminating the *necessary illusions*, since the media, consciously or unconsciously, can serve as a tool for controlling and manipulating the public discourse. The analysis is based on a wider critique of power structures and their impact on democratic processes.

Relevant to this conceptual framework, is the book *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*[68] where the linguistic Noam Chomsky and theorist Edward S. Herman introduced the propaganda model. This model illustrates how media, frequently influenced, or controlled by powerful interests, can serve as a mechanism of censorship. Through ownership, funding, and selective reporting, media outlets may inadvertently or purposefully limit certain narratives or perspectives, contributing to a form of self-censorship. By examine the role of the state in controlling information, the authors argue that governments may employ various mechanisms, including legal restrictions, to suppress dissenting voices and control the visibility of certain issues. This ability to regulate media content and limit access to information can lead to censorship that results in shaping the dominant discourse by controlling what is visible and audible. In this sense, authorities frame political debates in ways that serve their interests and the politics of silence involve not only what is actively censored but also what is left unsaid or unreported.

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[67] Chomsky, Noam. *Necessary Illusions: Thought Control in Democratic Societies*. Boston: South End Press, 1989.

[68] Herman, Edward S., and Noam Chomsky. *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media.* London : Bodley Head, 2008.

This analysis provides a conceptual framework for understanding how media can be employed as a filter that distorts the representation of reality. Pertinent to this discourse is the case of Iranian censorship since the government control the majority of media outlets and emphasise on official sources and the avoidance of criticism. This case is part of a wider framework that implies complex dynamics of governance and control within modern societies, and in order to approach this topic the theoretical framework of biopolitics and biopower theorized by Michel Foucault becomes relevant to this examination.

Biopolitics, involves the management of populations at a collective level, emphasizing the regulation of life processes through institutions and policies.[69] Foucault scrutinizes the transition from sovereign power, which focused on individual bodies, to biopower, which targets populations and underlines that modern states use biopolitical strategies to regulate and optimize populations through institutions. This concept demonstrates the interdependence of political authority and the biological existence of individuals, which shapes the dynamics of contemporary governance.

Biopower, on the other hand, refers to the application of power over entire populations, transcending the traditional focus on individual bodies. Foucault observes[70] that biopower operates through normalization, shaping societal norms and standards that influence behaviour, extending beyond traditional disciplinary mechanisms, emphasizing the optimization and governance of life itself. Foucault contends that biopower is intrinsic to modern governance, manifesting in state interventions aimed at managing health, reproduction, and social dynamics.

By applying the concepts theorize by Foucault to the case of the Iranian censorship, in particular to the Iranian cultural censorship, it is possible to understand how the Iranian government operates, since through its censorship apparatus, the state exemplifies the operation of biopower by actively shaping cultural representations to support its ideological and political strategy. By observing the case of the film industry, the government use cinema as a strategic exercise in regulating societal norms and

[69] Foucault, Michel. *"Society Must Be Defended": Lectures at the Collège de France 1975–76.* trans. by David Macey, eds. Mauro Bertani and Alessandro Fontana, New York: Picador, 2003.

[70] Foucault, Michel*, The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-1979*, trans. Graham Burchell, ed. Arnold I. Davidson. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.

perceptions, demonstrating a broader application of power over the collective consciousness.

Furthermore, according to Foucault, biopolitics extends to the regulation of emotions and affective responses within a population. Films, as powerful media of emotional expression, are scrutinized for their potential impact on the emotional and psychological well-being of individuals. Censorship serves as a mechanism to control and guide emotional responses to cultural products in ways that align with the desired societal norms. In this sense, the Iranian film industry serves as a tangible manifestation of biopolitics, as the state intervenes in the cultural domain to control the narratives that shape societal understandings of existence. Therefore, the imposition of restrictions on filmmakers and on their creative expressions is beyond mere content control but embodies an overall effort to influence the way life is portrayed and understood by the Iranian population.

However, in this context cinema result also as a form of visual activism that respond to the biopolitical control exercised by the state. In this sense, filmmakers engage in visual activism as a form of resistance and dissent against political ideologies, presenting an alternative discourse to disrupt the normalized narratives imposed by biopower, offering diverse perspectives on life and society. The cinematic medium becomes a contested space where the negotiation of power, resistance, and the representation of life unfolds. Moreover, relevant to this analysis is the concept of counter-visibility since the filmmakers are seen as visual activists that engage in counter-visibility by employing creative strategies to make their messages visible despite the attempts to silence or restrict certain narratives. The tension between counter-visibility and censorship highlights the ongoing struggle for control over narratives and the right to be seen or heard. It underscores the importance of alternative platforms and independent media in resisting the constraints imposed by censorship and asserting the right to actively shape the visibility of diverse voices and perspectives in the public sphere. Both concepts contribute to the broader discourse on freedom of expression, representation, and the democratization of information in society.

Furthermore, in the already mentioned book *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*[71], Michel Foucault explores the evolution of power and the transformation of disciplinary mechanisms in modern societies. One central concept that the author introduces next to that of the panopticon is *disciplinary power*, which involves the organization and control of individuals through various institutional and societal structures. Foucault examines the shift from sovereign power, characterized by physical punishment and public displays of authority, to disciplinary power, which operates more subtly and effectively through different institutions as it employs surveillance, normalization, and the examination of individuals to regulate behaviour and manipulate subjectivities.

In the context of censorship in Iran, the concept of *disciplinary power* is crucial for comprehending the dynamics between state authority and cultural production since it is possible to observe how disciplinary power plays a role in shaping cultural narratives. In fact, the Iranian government, through its censorship practices, exercises a form of disciplinary power over filmmakers by setting norms, restricting content, and monitoring creative expressions. This control extends beyond the mere suppression of dissent, it involves the normalization of specific ideologies and representations within the cultural sphere. Therefore, the Iranian film industry operates within a disciplinary framework, where the state apparatus influences the production and dissemination of films to support the imposed societal norms. Filmmakers navigate these constraints, facing examination over content that challenges established narratives or political ideologies, engage with the phenomenon of visual activism since thy aim to disrupt normalized narratives, challenge societal norms, and offer alternative perspectives.

These conceptual frameworks present a perspective for analysing the intricate relationship between governance, censorship, and visual activism in the Iranian film industry. Biopolitics, as discussed by Foucault, refers to the techniques and strategies employed by governments to manage populations. In the case of Iran, the state views cultural consumption, including film, as a domain that influences the attitudes, behaviours and values of the population, therefore censorship becomes a tool through

[71] Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1977.

which the state attempts to regulate and control cultural expression to conform to its vision of societal norms.

Furthermore, the analysis of the interplay between visual activism and censorship from the perspective of biopolitics and biopower allows for a better understanding of the complex relationship between state control, cultural expression, and the contestation of societal norms in the Iranian context. This sheds light on the struggle that Iranian filmmakers face in achieving visibility for their cultural expressions.

2.4 An overview of state censorship in the Iranian film industry

Iran has a long and intricate history of state censorship that is deeply intertwined with political, religious, and cultural factors. The control of the government over information and expression has been significantly modified over the years, reflecting changes in leadership, geopolitical alterations, and the socio-cultural sphere of the country.

Within this framework, the state employs two distinct types of regulatory measures, defined by Babak Rahimi reactive and proactive.[72] On the one hand, the former are designed to regulate media content, and consequently limit the dissemination of information, possess a certain level of clarity. However, their application is intricate due to the involvement of legal and political institutions, cultural and educational organizations, and surveillance forces in managing information. On the other hand, proactive measures, originating from traditional reactive methods of audiovisual media control, involve the active promotion by the state of new technological development services. The aim is to generate new media content, thereby marginalising the expression of controversial or threatening content, as determined by the government. As Rahimi observes: «-the ultimate objective of the two measures is to configure the public sphere through practices of discipline and

[72] Rahimi, Babak. 'Censorship and the Islamic Republic: Two Modes of Regulatory Measures for Media in Iran'. *Middle East Journal* 69, no. 3 (2015): 358–78.

surveillance to ultimately affirm state domination.[73]» reinforcing, in this sense, the authority of the state over the narrative and discourse in the Iranian society.

Prior to the Islamic Revolution of 1979, Iran witnessed a period of modernisation under the rule of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, the last monarch of Persia. During this phase, the film industry experienced relative artistic freedom, with filmmakers exploring different themes and styles. The government of the Shah attempted to project an image of modernity and progress by promoting the production and public screening of documentaries showing the progress and achievements of the nation during the Pahlavi dynasty. However, this liberal atmosphere also generated discontent among conservative religious groups, who perceived the influence of Western values as a threat to Islamic traditions. This concern was mainly based on the depiction of women in Persian films, who often appeared singing and dancing.

The 1979 Islamic Revolution marked a turning point in the history of Iran and its approach to censorship. Ayatollah Khomeini, the leader of the revolution and the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic, affirmed that cinema, along with all forms of art, had a crucial role in educating the population and should have been dedicated to the service of Islam. This declaration very clearly indicated a shift in perspective, as cinema, previously viewed as a Westernizing medium and thus rejected by the clergy under the previous regime, gained legitimacy. The new Islamic Republic aimed to establish an Islamic state guided by strict interpretations of Islamic law, the Sharia. The government saw censorship as a means to preserve Islamic values, protect public morality, and maintain political stability. The 1979 revolution was, in part, a repudiation of Westernization during the reign of the monarchy. The leaders of the newly established Islamic regime have consistently emphasized the need to reject Western influences within the country, often describing such influences in ways sadly very used nowadays too, such as a: «cultural invasion.[74]»

[73] Ivi, pp. 360

[74] Zeydabadi-Nejad, Saeed. 'Iranian Intellectuals and Contact with the West: The Case of Iranian Cinema'. *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 34, no. 3 (2007): 375–98. Pp. 375

After the revolution, the Iranian government targeted various forms of expression, including literature, music, and cinema, to ensure conformity with Islamic principles. Following a period of uncertainty about acceptable cinematic content, the scenery changed significantly in 1982, when the Ministry of Culture and Art was transformed into the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (MCIG) and the Farabi Cinema Institute was established.

This change marked a new era of Iranian cinema, shaped by a group of religious intellectuals affiliated with what later became known as the reformist faction in Iranian politics. In contrast to the inclination of the conservative faction to restrict artistic and political expressions, the reformists demonstrated an interest in promotion an open cultural, social, and political environment.

The newly appointed cinema authorities, aligned with the reformist ideology, implemented a range of proactive measures to revitalise the film industry. These initiatives included financing the importation of filmmaking materials, reducing taxes on cinema tickets, offering low-interest loans for filmmaking endeavours, and introducing incentives for technical sophistication and innovation. In this sense, the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance became a key institution responsible for implementing censorship policies. This ministry, under the guidance of the Supreme Leader and the political leadership, oversees the approval process for scripts, scenes, and final cuts of films. The censorship criteria include adherence to Islamic principles, avoidance of content that could be deemed immoral or offensive to religious sensibilities, and compliance with the official state narrative.

Proceeding from the star-centric cinema paradigm that prevailed before the revolution, the reformist authorities placed significant emphasis on the role of the director as the primary creative force behind a film. Consequently, directors became the highest-paid members of the filmmaking crew, and their significance was underscored by the prominence of their names on movie posters.

Additionally, the Supreme Council of Cultural Revolution, founded in 1982 and under the leadership of the Supreme Leader, that had the ability to establish cultural policies and guidelines for the film industry, implemented measures to determine the acceptability or unacceptability of content in films. In this way, women and themes of love were absent from the screen since considered not aligned with the

Islamic values. As a result, narratives revolving around children became predominant, providing an alternative representation for conveying human emotions, which were anyway associated to a certain model of integrity deemed acceptable by the ruling hierarchical society.

In terms of accessibility and visibility, the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance holds control over film distribution licenses, ensuring that only sanctioned films are permitted to reach audiences. This reactive measures over distribution channels serves to strengthen the influence of the Iranian government on determining which films become accessible to the public contributing to a broader discourse on censorship. Following this line, the Press Law of the Islamic Republic, enacted in 1985, explicitly states that all publications, films, and other media must conform to Islamic principles and values, prohibiting in this way the dissemination of any material that is deemed to be against the principles of Islam or the security of the state. This obligation provides a legal justification for censorship, allowing authorities to restrict or ban films that are perceived as a violation of Islamic values or posing a threat to national security.

In this sense, under the guidance of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance filmmakers are required to obtain permits for script approval, and their productions are subject to scrutiny to ensure compliance with Islamic values and political ideology. There are different executive bureaus that are directly involved in the censorship process, among which the Cinematic Affairs Office, that reviews scripts, grants production licenses, and monitors the content of films. Filmmakers must obtain permits from this office to produce and screen their films. This process involves submitting the script for approval, and any deviation from the prescribed guidelines may result in rejection or demands for modifications. Since the permit is a legal prerequisite for initiating the production process, violations of censorship regulations can lead to various penalties, ranging from fines to the prohibition of future filmmaking activities. Non-compliance with censorship regulations carries severe consequences, including fines, bans on filmmaking, or imprisonment, particularly for works that are considered to violate Islamic principles or national security. This legal structure establishes an environment of self-censorship within the industry, compelling

filmmakers to carefully navigate the boundary between artistic expression and adherence to state-mandated guidelines.

During the Iran-Iraq war, from 1980 to 1988, there was an intention of suppressing more progressive and modern interpretations of Islam; after the war concluded in 1988 and Ayatollah Khomeini passed away in 1989, there was a shift in power dynamics within the Islamic Republic. Ayatollah Ali Khamene'i became the Supreme Leader, and Ali Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani became the president, marking a new phase of the Islamic Republic. This period was characterized by increased tensions between different interpretations of Islam, leading to the emergence of factions within the Islamic Republic, namely the rightists and leftists. The leftists, formerly influential under the leadership of Khomeini, experienced a decline in impact, facing setbacks in governmental roles, parliamentary representation, and judicial influence. Internal divisions intensified, particularly in matters of art and culture, as the initial concept of the cultural revolution was replaced by the notion of a cultural invasion. This transformation strategically served the rightists, allowing them to undermine and eliminate perceived opponents within the leftist faction, who were gradually adopting more moderate and liberal perspectives.

The roots of the reformist movement that emerged in 1997 can be traced back to this evolving leftist faction. The rightist faction aimed to assert an Islamic vision on cultural and artistic production, attacking primarily towards the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (MCIG). Under Mohammad Khatami, who served as the minister of MCIG since 1982, efforts were made to promote domestic cinema and an independent press, contributing to open cultural policies. The Farabi Cinema Foundation, a semi-governmental organization, initially aligned with Khatami, partially restricted the import of foreign films and provided financial support to filmmakers. However, as Rafsanjani withdrew support, Khatami resigned in 1992. The rightist faction, backed by the Supreme Leader, consolidated power, bringing an end to the open cultural policies at the end of 1980. This phase witnessed renewed efforts by the rightists, dominated by conservative clerics, to impose their Islamic vision on cultural and artistic production.

The dynamics of censorship have evolved over the years, reflecting shifts in political leadership and internal power struggles within the government. The

conservative nature of the Islamic Republic has consistently resulted in a cautious approach towards the film industry, with censorship measures aimed at preserving the Islamic identity and safeguarding against perceived threats to the regime. Within these frameworks it is possible to understand the complexities of the relationship between Iranian censorship and the film industry. The role of leadership, particularly the Supreme Leader, has been instrumental in shaping censorship policies, with a historical emphasis on aligning cinema with Islamic values. Furthermore, the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance results as a crucial institution that by controlling the cultural activities, impose strict regulations to ensure conformity with the ideologies of the Iranian State, and contributes to the creation of a climate of self-censorship within the industry. It is important to underline that this censorship extends beyond cinema, encompassing literature, media, and the internet, where the government seeks to control content challenging the state narrative or violating religious standards. As technology evolves, the Iranian government adapts its censorship strategies, posing an ongoing challenge to those advocating for freedom of expression in the country. The historical overview reflects a dynamic interplay of political, religious, and cultural forces, showcasing the enduring struggle between censorship and the pursuit of diverse voices within Iran.

2.5 Filmmakers as visual activists: resistance against censorship

Iranian filmmakers operate within a complex socio-political landscape characterized by an intricate system of censorship that scrutinizes content for adherence to ideological and moral standards set by the state. The process of producing films that challenge these censorship limits can be interpreted as a type of activism, a visual expression of dissent or a call for transformation.

In this sense, the examination of the case of Cinema-ye Azad, in the context of Iranian censorship and visual activism history is crucial due to its pioneering role in challenging the prevailing cinematic norms and confronting state-controlled narratives. In the Sixties, Iran witnessed a cinematic landscape dominated by commissioned films glorifying state achievements, with limited opportunities for independent productions caused by restricted access to professional equipment.

The researcher Hadi Alipanah in his article *Cinema-ye Azad: The Lost History of the Iranian Independent Cinema Collective*[75] underlines how the formation of Cinema-ye Azad in 1969 marked a significant moment when a group of young cultural enthusiasts and filmmakers asserted their independence from the state-controlled film industry. Their call for self-determined narratives and creative content aimed to experiment and escape from state dogmas through film works. The movement adopted the use of 8mm film, which would normally be rejected by professional filmmakers and was launched on the marked as an amateur, easy-to-use form of filmmaking, as a serious means of artistic expression, emphasising creativity over technique. The collective initially organized screenings at universities, gradually gaining attention and recognition. As Cinema-ye Azad evolved, it played a crucial role in cultural policy within the film sector. The group expanded its activities beyond film production and screening, establishing provincial offices, publishing the first film magazine on short films, organizing independently run film festivals, and even creating a television program dedicated to short films.

The impact of Cinema-ye Azad was extensive, influencing the cultural landscape by making cinematography on 8mm commonplace in universities, cinemas, and festivals. The activities of the group culminated in over 300 members producing about 1,000 short films and five full-length television films. By 1974, they secured financial and general support from Iranian National Television while maintaining their independence.

However, with the advent of the Islamic Revolution in 1979, the new regime restricted the freedom of the collective, leading to its eventual dissolution. Despite their efforts to continue under a different name, the momentum was lost, and the new leaders failed to capture the essence of the movement. The importance of examining this case, however, lies in the scarcity of reliable and accurate documentation of the activities of Cinema-ye Azad, with most of the biographies and works of the filmmakers remaining unarchived. The researcher, Hadi Alipanah, faced difficulties in obtaining support from institutions and preserving lost documents. Nonetheless, the

[75] Alipanah, Hadi. "Cinema-ye Azad: The Lost History of the Iranian Independent Cinema Collective." In *Accidental Archivism: Shaping Cinema's Futures with Remnants of the Past*, edited by Stefanie Schulte Strathaus and Vinzenz Hediger, Lüneburg, Germany: meson press, 2023. Pp 253-258

author has managed to recover around 300 films and engage with filmmakers to compile additional material. In this sense, Hadi Alipanah engages with Mirzoeff's concept of counter-visibility, contributing to the construction of a collective memory of the Iranian Cinema, in contrast with the dominant narratives. The exploration of this forgotten film movement becomes essential for understanding the broader history of Iranian cinema, shedding light on the resilience of independent voices in the face of censorship and political changes.

In this context, Iranian filmmakers have historically demonstrated a significant resilience and resourcefulness in eluding censorship. Through allegory, symbolism, the choice of specific genres such as magical realism, and the stylistic sensitivity subtle nuances, they manage to convey subversive messages that resonate with audiences standardized to the socio-political context. This subtextual layering in films can be construed as a deliberate strategy employed by filmmakers to engage in a form of visual activism, challenging prevailing norms while avoiding outright confrontation with the censors. Through metaphorical representations, filmmakers can subtly critique societal norms, challenge political ideologies, and offer alternative perspectives without explicitly violating the restrictions set by the censoring authorities. This veiled discourse creates a space for critical engagement that operates beyond the immediate view of censorship, allowing filmmakers to communicate alternative narratives while minimizing the risk of explicit confrontation. Symbolism, similarly, plays a pivotal role in this cinematic strategy, as filmmakers employ visual motifs and metaphors to convey implicit messages that resonate on a profound level. This symbolic language serves as a conduit for expressing dissent, negotiating the delicate balance between artistic expression and adherence to censorial guidelines.

A notable example on how to navigate around censorship occurs in the film of the Iranian director Abbas Kiarostami, *The Taste of Cherry* (*Ta'm-e gilās,* 1997)[76]. The story revolves around Mr. Badi'i looking for someone to bury him after his

[76] Cfr. Zeydabadi-Nejad, Saeed. 'Iranian Intellectuals and Contact with the West: The Case of Iranian Cinema'. *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 34, no. 3, 2007, pp. 375–98. Zeydabadi-Nejad's article, among others, offers valuable insights into the artistic and cultural significance of the film within the context of Iranian society.

contemplated suicide. Eventually, Baqeri agrees, sharing a personal anecdote of a life-altering encounter with the taste of a mulberry. Badi'i instructs Baqeri to verify his lifelessness before burial the next morning. The poignant night scene in the grave contrasts with the controversial handycam footage in the final sequence, critiqued by film critic Hamid Reza Sadr. Sadr contends that this behind-the-scenes glimpse lightens the sombre tone, suggesting a compromise to avoid a permanent ban due to the sensitive religious position on suicide in the state.

Another example is the film *Women Without Men* (*Zanan-e bedun-e mardan*, Shirin Neshat, Shoja Azari, 2009) which is based on the 1989 novel of the same name by Shahrnush Parsipur, that was considered controversial and therefore banned in Iran due to its criticism of the social and political conditions of the time. The film examines gender inequality and the suppression of women's voices in Iranian society through the experiences of four women from different social backgrounds navigating the restrictive cultural and political environment of the Fifties in Iran. It highlights the challenges faced by the characters and the limitations imposed upon them by a patriarchal society. Mahdokht seeks freedom from her loveless marriage, while Munis confronts her disillusionment with the Marxist movement. Faezeh dreams of escaping her life as a sex worker, and Zarin seeks refuge from social rejection. Their stories intertwine in unexpected ways, leading to moments of connection and sacrifice. The film explores themes of identity, agency, and resilience through rich symbolism and evocative imagery, offering a reflection on the complexities of life in Iran and the human spirit's ability to persevere in the face of adversity.

Neshat's work employs a visually evocative and politically charged language that combines art, symbolism, and aesthetics to effectively convey her message in a nuanced and subversive manner. By using poetic imagery, dream sequences, and symbolic motifs, the Iranian director create a visual narrative that challenges traditional norms and highlights the struggles of Iranian women. This approach is crucial in the context of Iranian censorship, where direct and explicit criticism of the regime may face severe repercussions. The film shows the experiences and aspirations of Iranian women, which are often overlooked or silenced by the dominant narrative. By presenting these stories, Neshat challenges the censorship apparatus that seeks to control and suppress dissenting voices in Iran. In doing so, she contributes to the

broader discourse on visual activism by using her art to raise awareness, provoke thought, and promote dialogue about the oppressive conditions faced by women in Iran. Shirin Neshat's creative storytelling navigates around censorship, using allegory and symbolism to address sensitive issues. *Women Without Men* invites viewers to reflect on the intersecting forces that shape women's lives in Iran and beyond, while also challenging stereotypes and offering a deeper understanding of the complexities of identity and agency.

The use of symbols allows filmmakers to foster a sense of shared understanding among viewers, who can decode the intended subtext and engage in a subtle form of dialogue that transcends the limitations imposed by censorship. Through careful selection of narrative elements, dialogue, and character dynamics, filmmakers construct narratives that invite viewers to discern underlying themes and perspectives. This strategic layering of nuances invites audiences to participate actively in the interpretation of the film, fostering a more profound engagement that extends beyond the immediate visual narrative.

Iranian cinema, when received on the global stage, transcends its immediate role as entertainment and assumes the mantle of a vehicle for cultural understanding. The portrayal of Iranian societal intricacies in films becomes a means by which international audiences gain access to a layered and nuanced comprehension of the cultural, historical, and political dimensions of Iran. Filmmakers, by navigating the constraints of censorship and embedding subtle subtexts within their works, offer a rich tapestry of narratives that transcend simplistic stereotypes and reveal the diversity and depth of Iranian life. In this way, Iranian cinema serves as a cultural bridge, fostering cross-cultural understanding and challenging preconceived notions.

Moreover, the recognition of Iranian filmmakers as visual activists on the global stage amplifies the impact of their work beyond national borders. The acknowledgment of their deliberate negotiation of censorship and their strategic use of allegory and symbolism contributes to a broader discourse on artistic freedom and the pervasive consequences of censorship on creative expression. The global audience, through the lens of Iranian cinema, is prompted to reflect on the universal struggle for artistic autonomy and the resilience of human creativity in the face of restrictive sociopolitical environments. The cinematic narratives, despite censorship challenges,

manage to convey universal themes of human experience, thereby transcending cultural boundaries and fostering a shared discourse on the transformative potential of artistic expression.

Furthermore, it is crucial to recognize that not all Iranian filmmakers adopt a confrontational perspective against the status quo. While some actively engage in subverting societal norms and challenging the boundaries set by censorship, others may adopt a more conformist approach. This diversity of strategies is driven by a different of factors, including personal convictions, professional considerations, and the broader socio-political context where filmmakers operate.

Some filmmakers believe that challenging prevailing narratives and expressing dissent through their creative works can be a catalyst for meaningful change. By using their art as a medium for overt social critique, they purposefully engage in visual activism, directly addressing the constraints imposed by censorship. Their motivation comes from a conscious choice to play a role in societal change through the influential medium of cinematic storytelling, even if it entails potential repercussions from authorities that are often paid in first person. On the contrary, other filmmakers may adopt a more nuanced strategy, navigating the constraints imposed by censorship through subtler means. This approach involves a careful balancing method that conveys messages through allegory, symbolism, and subtle nuances to communicate dissent indirectly. The motivations behind this approach may derive from a pragmatic consideration of the potential repercussions associated with explicit confrontation, leading them to explore alternative, more hidden channels for expressing their perspectives. One way or another, the various approaches employed by Iranian filmmakers are influenced by personal motivations, artistic preferences, and the socio-political context in which they are engaged. It is important to recognise the complex interplay of individual motivations, strategies, and choices that shape the industry.

In conclusion, the realm of contemporary Iranian cinema emerges as a dynamic arena where filmmakers adeptly navigate a complex interplay of creative expression, societal expectations, and censorship constraints. The designation of Iranian filmmakers as visual activists, while valid for some, does not uniformly apply across the diverse landscape of the industry. Recognizing the multifaceted nature of

motivations and strategies employed by individual filmmakers is essential in appreciating the rich tapestry of perspectives within the Iranian film community. Some filmmakers actively challenge the status quo through their work, serving as cultural provocateurs, while others may adopt a more conformist approach to negotiate the limitations imposed by censorship.

Acknowledging this diversity within the Iranian film industry necessitates a nuanced understanding of the varied motivations and strategies employed by individual filmmakers. The spectrum of approaches underscores the complex interplay between artistic expression and the constraints of censorship, emphasizing that the landscape of visual activism is not monolithic. By embracing this complexity, one can appreciate the intricate dynamics at play within the Iranian cinematic landscape, transcending simplistic categorizations and fostering a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted nature of visual activism. Ultimately, the nuanced exploration of the response of Iranian Cinema to socio-political challenges contributes to a broader global conversation on the intrinsic value of artistic freedom and the implications of censorship on the diverse tapestry of creative expression.

The following section explores Jafar Panahi's significant contributions to visual activism and political dissent, examining key aspects of his filmography. Crucial works such as *This is Not a Film* (*In film nist*, Jafar Panahi, Mojtaba Mirtahmasb, 2011) *Taxi Tehran* (*Taksojuht*, Jafar Panahi, 2015), and *Three Faces* (*Se rokh,* Jafar Panahi, 2018), will be examined to demonstrate the multiple challenges of censorship and restriction that have shaped Panahi's career. Furthermore, the analysis will delve into the representations of dissent and political activism in Panahi's films and explore their socio-political repercussions within Iran. Panahi's filmmaking provides a vivid testimony of dissent against censorship and surveillance, shedding light on the complex dynamics of contemporary Iranian society and the ongoing quest for freedom of expression. His films, along with personal experiences, show how cinema becomes a tool for subverting dominant narratives, amplifying marginalised voices and confronting oppressive censorship. Moreover, a comparative analysis between Panahi's films, and the visual strategies deployed during the Arab Spring, will be explored, thereby highlighting both the convergences and divergences that emerge.

CHAPTER 3

Jafar Panahi's filmography: visual activism and political dissent

3.1 Introduction to Jafar Panahi

Jafar Panahi, an Iranian filmmaker, screenwriter and producer, is widely recognised for using cinema as a powerful medium for social and political discourse. His international recognition comes from his unique narrative style and his persistent commitment to challenging censorship and political oppression in Iran. Throughout his career, Panahi has faced a unique and complex artistic path, dealing with censorship while establishing himself as a significant filmmaker in the field of visual activism. His journey has been marked by a profound exploration of social issues and an ongoing commitment to challenging oppressive regimes through the medium of film.

Born on June 11, 1960, in Mianeh, a provincial area of Iran, Panahi grew up in a large family, before relocating to Tehran in 1972. His early affinity for storytelling manifested in his writing, with his first short story winning a prestigious writing competition at the age of twelve. He later entered the realm of filmmaking, developing an appreciation as a cinephile and working in various capacities such as an assistant and actor at the Kânun Institute (Institute for the Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults) in Tehran. His affiliation with the film industry allowed him to attend various film screenings, including *Bicycle Thieves* (*Ladri di biciclette*, 1948) by Vittorio De Sica, which had a profound impact on him. During his formative years, Panahi developed a keen interest in photography and produced several short films. In the Eighties, he was enlisted into the Iranian army to join the Iran-Iraq war, where he assumed the role of a military director of photography.

Following his military service, Panahi enrolled at the Tehran Film and Television College and began producing a series of modest documentaries. During his studies, Panahi developed a deep appreciation for the works of renowned directors including Alfred Hitchcock, Luis Buñuel, Howard Hawks, and Jean-Luc Godard. Additionally, he was introduced to the works of the Iranian director Abbas Kiarostami, who later became his mentor; in effect Panahi began his career in cinema as his assistant director before making his directorial debut with the acclaimed film *The*

White Balloon (*Badkonake Sefid,* Jafar Panahi, 1995). This film, which follows the adventures of a young girl in Tehran, won the Camera d'Or prize at the Cannes Film Festival, establishing Panahi as a notable talent in world cinema. His following works, including *The Mirror* (*Ayneh,* Jafar Panahi,1997) and *The Circle* (*Dayereh,* Jafar Panahi, 2000), continued to garner international recognition for their poignant portrayals of Iranian society, particularly the challenges faced by women.

Panahi distinguishes himself as a filmmaker through his innovative combination of fictional and documentary elements. His films often feature a naturalistic style, incorporating real locations and non-professional actors, creating a sense of authenticity that adds depth to his narratives. This approach allows him to explore societal issues with an amplified sense of realism, making his films not only aesthetically compelling but also socially impactful. However, Panahi's career has been marked by adversity due to his outspoken criticism of the Iranian government and its restrictions on artistic expression. In 2010, Panahi was arrested in Iran for his alleged involvement in creating anti-government propaganda by the Iranian government that sentenced him to a six-year prison term and imposed a twenty-year ban on directing, writing, and giving interviews. Despite these restrictions, Panahi continued to create films clandestinely, defying the authorities and producing works that further highlighted the struggles of artists in repressive environments, adopting in this way an approach typical of the cinema of dissent as seen in the first chapter of the thesis.

Some of his noteworthy films during this period include *This Is Not a Film* (*In film nist*, Jafar Panahi, 2011), shot in secret within his own apartment while under house arrest and co-directed by Mojtaba Mirtahmasb, *Closed Curtain* (*Pardeh,* Jafar Panahi, 2013), co-directed with Kambuzia Partovi, and *Taxi Tehran* (*Taksojuht*, Jafar Panahi, 2015). His films navigate Iran's socio-political sphere, addressing themes such as the human condition, identity complexities, and the impact of authoritarianism and censorship on personal freedoms. Through storytelling, Panahi explores the power of narrative in shaping reality and preserving memories, often blurring the lines between fiction and reality to provide intimate insights into the challenges faced by artists under government scrutiny.

His films authentically portray everyday life, often featuring non-professional actors for genuine performances and real locations to enhance authenticity. By employing observational camera work with long takes, Panahi captures human nuances, fostering audience immersion and emotional connection. Moreover, symbolism is prevalent in his narratives, allowing for layered commentary on societal issues and inviting viewer reflection. Panahi's ability to present persuasive narratives despite censorship underlines the potential of cinema as a tool for visual activism. His commitment to addressing social and political issues in Iran through film has established his status as an important voice in this context. Despite facing persecution, he continues to challenge societal norms and offer nuanced perspectives on various issues, including women's rights and gender, censorship. As a result, his filmography stands as a testament to the power of cinema as a tool for social commentary and individual expression, illustrating the resilience of an artist committed to navigating the intricate intersection of art and societal constraints.

In the forthcoming section, the focus will be on analysing the films *This Is Not a Film* (2011), *Taxi Tehran* (2015), and *Three Faces* (2018). Despite being banned from filmmaking by Iranian authorities, Panahi persisted in creating these works, prompting a reflection on the nature of artistic expression under censorship. Panahi's films provide valuable insights into visual activism drawn from his personal experiences, the political context surrounding his filmmaking, and the challenges of working in a politically restrictive environment. Each of Panahi's films is a testament to his defiance against censorship. The thematic coherence throughout the three films provides a unique perspective for understanding Panahi's cinematic approach to dissent and its alignment with visual activism.

3.1.1 This Is Not a Film

This Is Not a Film (*In Film Nist*, 2011) is a documentary co-directed by the Iranian filmmakers Jafar Panahi and Mojtaba Mirtahmasb. The film unfolds against the circumstances of Jafar Panahi's house arrest, a consequence of his suspected political activities.

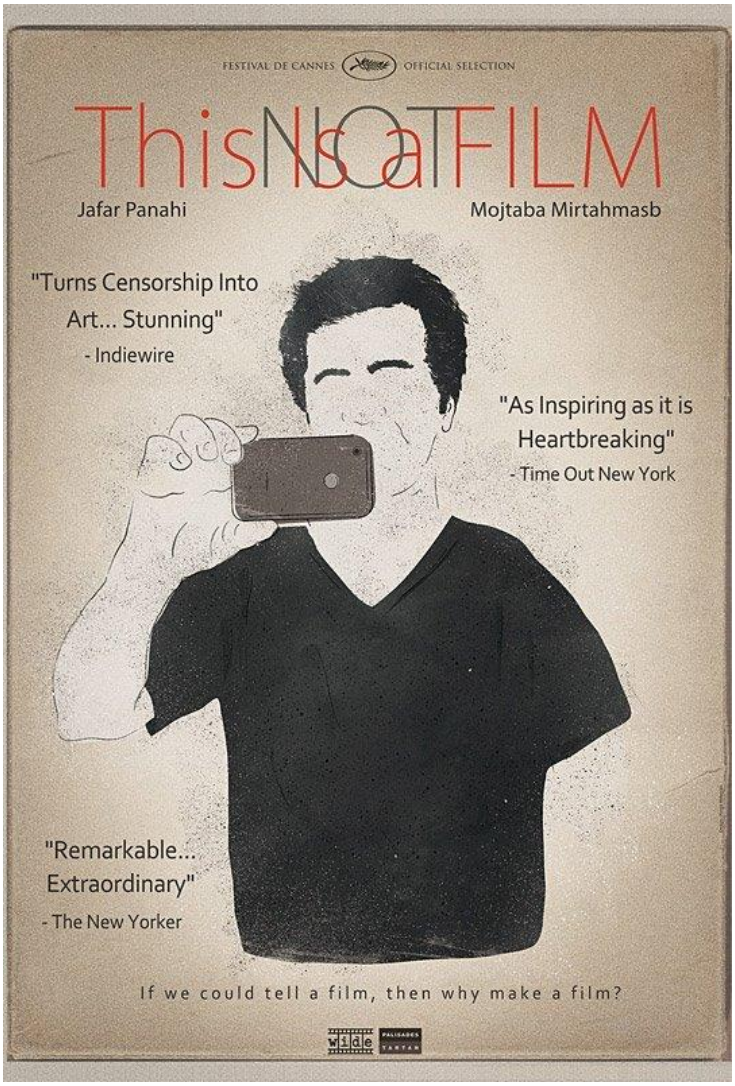

Figure 2 - Official poster of This Is Not a Film (In Film Nist, Jafar Panahi, co-directed Mojtaba Mirtahmasb, 2011)

The documentary, shot on a modest budget and within the confines of Panahi's apartment, transcends its physical limitations to explore profound themes of creativity, resilience, and the intersection of art and politics. Panahi, stripped of his ability to engage in traditional filmmaking, transforms the documentary medium into a platform

for self-expression and rebellion. The film unfolds as an intricate tapestry, composing the ordinary aspects of Panahi's daily life under house arrest with a deep reflection on the nature of cinema. The narrative unfolds with a deliberate sense of realism, capturing the banalities of Panahi's constrained existence. Nonetheless, within these constraints, the film acquires a reinforced sense of vulnerability, exposing the emotional and creative struggles faced by the filmmaker. Panahi's attempts to articulate and perform aspects of his intended, banned screenplay within the documentary exemplify the blurred lines between reality and fiction, underscoring the intrinsic power of storytelling to transcend physical boundaries. The documentary captures a day in Panahi's life as he reflects on his situation and his love for filmmaking. It was shot using a digital camera and an iPhone, and it features Panahi discussing his previous works and reading the screenplay of a film that he was prohibited from making by the government. The documentary functions not merely as a chronicle of Panahi's personal tribulations but as a larger commentary on the broader implications of political censorship on artistic expression.

The title itself, *This Is Not a Film* resonates as a deliberate act of defiance, a poignant assertion of artistic expression within the confinements of political oppression. The scholars, Mazyar Mahan[77] and Lúcia Nagib [78] underline in their research, that the title is a reference to the surrealist painter René Magritte, in particular to Magritte's provocative assertation *Ceci n'est pas une pipe* (*This is not a pipe*), adding an intriguing layer to the interpretation. While Magritte challenges the viewer's perception of reality versus representation, Panahi's title seems to reverse the effect, urging viewers to recognize that what they are witnessing is not a conventional film but an unadulterated glimpse of reality. This observation becomes particularly relevant when we consider the stringent censorship and limitations placed upon Iranian filmmakers, restricting their ability to depict reality authentically. Panahi's defiance in creating a work that blurs the line between documentary and fiction, between life and

[77] Mahan, Mazyar. 'The Subversive Effects of Defamiliarization in *This Is Not a Film*, Directed by Jafar Panahi', *Emergency and Emergence*, Spectator Issue 40.1, Spring 2020, pp. 8–13.

[78] Nagib, Lúcia. "Jafar Panahi's Forbidden Tetralogy: This Is Not a Film, Closed Curtain, Taxi Tehran, Three Faces." In *Realist Cinema as World Cinema: Non-Cinema, Intermedial Passages, Total Cinema*, Amsterdam University Press, 2020, pp. 63–86.

artifice, serves as a powerful commentary on the constraints imposed upon artistic expression in Iran.

Furthermore, the title plays with the traditional implications of the term *film*, highlighting the various ways in which Panahi's work deviates from conventional norms. Firstly, due to legal constraints, he is banned from creating what is legally recognized as a *film*. Additionally, the absence of traditional film equipment and techniques, such as shooting with no sophisticated digital cameras and lacking a scripted screenplay or professional actors, further distances the project from conventional filmmaking practices. Panahi's decision to describe a rejected screenplay instead of producing a traditional film reflects his innovative response to the limitations imposed upon him. By inviting his documentarist friend Mirtahmasb to record the process, Panahi subverts the constraints of his sentence while still engaging in storytelling and cinematic expression.

Furthermore, the camera captures Panahi's sincere self-reflection on his role as a filmmaker and the impact of censorship on his creative process. By documenting his daily life and sharing his thoughts on cinema, storytelling, and the political climate in Iran, Panahi invites viewers into his personal struggle, turning the camera into a tool for self-expression and activism. In this sense, *This Is Not a Film* serves as a meta-narrative on censorship since by blurring the lines between reality and fiction, it emphasizes the absurdity of the censorship laws, and the lengths artists must go to express themselves.

Throughout the documentary, Panahi employs symbolism and subtext to convey his frustration with the political situation in Iran. The presence of his pet iguana, Igi, and the sounds of fireworks in the background carry deeper meanings, allowing Panahi to communicate subtle messages that might not be explicitly stated but resonate with those familiar with the socio-political context.

Panahi uses his pet iguana, Igi, as a symbol of his constrained existence under government scrutiny. Iguanas are known for their adaptability and ability to blend in with their surroundings, mirroring Panahi's need to hide in a restrictive society. Igi's presence within the confined domestic space serves as a metaphor for Panahi's own restricted freedom, emphasizing themes of isolation and alienation. Through Igi, Panahi highlights the suffocating impact of government censorship and surveillance

on his artistic expression and connection to the world beyond. In addition, Igi's presence underscores the constant need for Panahi to remain cautious and vigilant, mirroring his reality of being under constant scrutiny. The symbolic significance of Igi enriches the subtext of the film, allowing Panahi to communicate his frustration and resilience with subtlety and depth.

Furthermore, the temporal setting of the narrative on Fireworks Wednesday, typically a day of celebration and unity in Iran, entirely contrasts with the themes of fear, separation, and insecurity characterising Panahi's self-representation. The festival, typically associated with joy and communal gatherings, becomes a metaphor for the societal turmoil and uncertainty experienced by Iranians under restrictive regimes. Panahi's deliberate omission of direct visual representation of the festival adds to the dissonance between expectation and reality. This is achieved by focusing the camera predominantly on indoor settings and intimate interpersonal interactions, rather than showing the festivities themselves. Although the festival is mentioned and its effects are felt through the background sounds of fireworks, Panahi strategically avoids providing direct visual representation of the celebrations. In other words, Panahi's decision to keep the fireworks off-screen creates a sense of detachment and disconnection, allowing the audience to experience the dissonance between the expected joy of the festival and the underlying tensions and conflicts faced by the characters. The dissociation from the visual spectacle of Fireworks Wednesday serves to emphasize the contrast between the external facade of celebration and the internal realities of fear, separation, and insecurity experienced by the characters.

As Mazyar Mahan[79] underlines in his account of the film, Panahi skilfully employs acousmatic sound to disorient and unsettle viewers, particularly during the depiction of the fireworks festival. This technique involves presenting sounds without their visual sources, creating a sense of ambiguity and mystery, and throughout the film, the sounds of the festival are heard, blurring the line between celebration and potential violence. The audience is left to interpret whether the sounds belong to the festivities or to more ominous events unfolding in the streets.

[79] Mahan, Mazyar. 'The Subversive Effects of Defamiliarization in *This Is Not a Film*, Directed by Jafar Panahi', *Emergency and Emergence*, Spectator Issue 40.1, Spring 2020, pp. 8–13.

Moreover, the absence of visual representation for many of the film's characters further enhances this sense of uncertainty. Panahi's wife, son, and other individuals, including his lawyer and fellow filmmaker, are only heard through their voices, their physical presence remaining unseen; this deliberate choice adds to the film's irregularity and reinforces the sense of ambiguity surrounding Panahi's circumstances. By denying visual cues, Panahi invites viewers to question the reality of the situations depicted and to engage more deeply with the auditory elements of the narrative.

Furthermore, the documentary was smuggled out of Iran on a USB drive hidden inside a cake to be submitted to the Cannes Film Festival in 2011, where it was screened to international acclaim.[80] The film serves both as a personal statement from Panahi about his love for cinema and as a powerful commentary on artistic freedom and censorship. The film's international acclaim underscores its resonance beyond national borders, serving as a rallying point for solidarity within the global artistic community. The deliberate act of sharing this *non-film* with the world emerges as an act of resistance, a bold assertion that the creative spirit can endure even in the face of oppressive political regimes.

In conclusion, *This Is Not a Film* challenges viewers to confront the complexities of reality, representation, and artistic expression within the context of political oppression and censorship. Through its innovative approach and thought-provoking content, the film prompts audiences to reconsider their perceptions of truth, authenticity, and the power of storytelling. Moreover, *This Is Not a Film* demonstrate the potential of visual storytelling to transcend physical and political constraints, becoming a source of inspiration for filmmakers and activists globally who are engaged in using the visual medium to speak out against injustice. As a result, this documentary becomes a powerful example of how filmmaking can be a tool for resistance and a means of advocating for artistic freedom. By sharing his story and creatively challenging censorship, Jafar Panahi transforms the act of filmmaking into a form of visual activism, contributing to a broader conversation about the intersection of art, politics, and human rights.

[80] Shoard, Catherine. "Jafar Panahi not in Cannes for This Is Not a Film premiere." *The Guardian*. 21 May 2011. https://www.theguardian.com/film/2011/may/21/jafar-panahi-cannes-not-film-premiere (Accessed 11/02/2024)

In other words, Panahi's work aligns with the theoretical frameworks proposed by Mirzoeff, Foucault and Steyerl, as analysed in the previous chapters of the thesis. Through the documentation of his experiences while under house arrest, Panahi confronts the dominant narrative imposed by the Iranian government, embracing Nicholas Mirzoeff's concept of counter-visuality as a means of resistance. Panahi's self-documentation during house arrest mirrors the surveillance mechanism of the Panopticon, as described by Michel Foucault. Furthermore, Panahi's deliberate choice of low-quality recording equipment, including filming parts of his work on a mobile phone, embraces the inherent imperfections of the medium, resonates with Hito Steyerl's concept of the *poor image* and effectively conveys powerful political messages. His creative dissent serves as a catalyst for broader discussions surrounding the significance of freedom of expression and the transformative role of artists as activists. Through his work, the director challenges viewers to reconsider their understanding of censorship and political oppression, exposing the absurdity of his circumstances while under house arrest, thereby transcending the limitations of his chosen medium and initiating a discourse on the complex power dynamics inherent in visual representation.

3.1.2 *Taxi Tehran*

Examining the filmography of Jafar Panahi, another film that is fundamental to understand once again the challenges faced by artists, particularly filmmakers, under censorship in Iran is *Taxi Tehran* (*Taksojuht*, Jafar Panahi, 2015).

This work result in a cinematic exploration that transcends traditional narrative structures. The film is remarkable for its distinctive choice of setting, completely within the confines of a taxi, and the filmmaker's intentional blurring of the lines between reality and fiction. In continuity with the work started with *This Is Not a Film*, the protagonist, played by Panahi himself, serves not merely as a character but as a symbolic representation of the challenges faced by artists under censorship, particularly in Iran. One of the most distinctive techniques used in the film is the single-setting approach, as the entire story unfolds inside a taxicab navigating the streets of Tehran. The decision to limit the film's spatial scope to the interior of a taxi is a deliberate artistic constraint that serves as a metaphorical device. Within this

constrained space, Panahi mirrors the restricted creative freedom imposed on him and other artists in Iran, in this sense, the taxi becomes a microcosm of societal limitations, encapsulating the broader theme of constrained mobility and expression as the condition of the artist in contemporary Iran. However, this restricted environment creates a sense of intimacy and immediacy, allowing the viewer to feel as if they are actually listening in on the conversations between the driver and passengers.

Moreover, Panahi's choice to cast himself as the taxi driver adds a layer of self-reflexivity to the film, since his presence blurs the boundaries between the narrative and the filmmaker's own experiences, emphasizing the personal and political dimensions of the film. The character of the taxi driver, therefore, becomes a vessel through which Panahi can articulate his own struggles, making the film a deeply introspective and courageous work.

Furthermore, is important to underline that the dialogues present in Taxi Tehran are crucial since the interactions between Panahi and his passengers provide a platform for a multitude of perspectives on Iranian society. Through these conversations, the film explores a range of issues, including the impact of censorship on artistic expression, gender roles, economic challenges and the consequences of political decisions. The result is a nuanced social commentary, presenting a variety of perspectives that reflect the complex realities of contemporary Iran. In other words, through these interactions, the film subtly critiques the censorship and restrictions faced by artists while also providing insights into the daily lives and opinions of ordinary Iranians.

Furthermore, Panahi employs a combination of documentary-style filming and scripted elements to establish a sense of realism and authenticity throughout the movie. Panahi utilises a realistic approach to filmmaking that draw upon the cinema-verité, capturing spontaneous interactions and unscripted moments as they unfold. Several of the dialogues between the characters appear genuine and unprepared, providing the movie with a sense of immediacy and unpredictability. This approach in the film blurs the line between fiction and reality, immersing viewers in the world of the film.

Figure 3 - Jafar Panahi with the DVD dealer in his film Taxi Teheran (Taksojuht, Jafar Panahi, 2015)

This is evident, for example, in the scene where Panahi picks up a DVD dealer in his taxi, who recognises the director and talks excitedly about his films.

In this case, it is unclear whether the character is played by an actor or a real person. Additionally, the encounter sheds light on the underground market for banned films in Iran, where DVD dealers' risk legal consequences to provide access to forbidden cultural content. Panahi highlights the impact of censorship on media consumption and distribution in Iran through the character of a DVD dealer. Despite government restrictions, there is a demand for diverse and uncensored artistic expression, leading to the proliferation of underground markets and informal networks for accessing banned films. The dealer's enthusiasm for Panahi's work also highlights the power of cinema to transcend boundaries and connect people across societal divides.

Furthermore, the elucidation of the prerequisites for creating *distributable films* is conveyed through the perspective of Panahi's young niece, in his taxi, who is tasked with producing a film for her school assignment. She articulates, by reading aloud from her scholastic materials, the stipulated regulations, which align with those mandated for adult Iranian filmmakers. These regulations encompass adherence to the Islamic headscarf, avoidance of interpersonal contact between men and women, prohibition of violence, abstention from addressing political or economic subjects, and the necessity for self-censorship regarding potentially contentious issues. Notably, the stringent

prohibition poses a formidable challenge for the young filmmaker, as she struggles to identify suitable scenes in her immediate surroundings for her project.

This result in an element of self-reflexivity, in the specific example of Panahi's niece reading out the rules for making films, the film engages in a form of self-reflexivity by consciously bringing attention to its own constraints and the broader limitations imposed on filmmakers in Iran. Expanding on the girl, this condition which restricts the mode of working of Panahi himself, is illustrated by extent as the same condition shared by anybody in the country wishing to make films and having to face political preventions. By incorporating this scene where the character articulates the stringent guidelines governing filmmaking in the country, the narrative becomes self-aware, acknowledging the external factors that shape the creative process. In this sense, the act of Panahi's niece reading these rules aloud serves as a meta-commentary within the film, not only informs the audience about the specific restrictions that filmmakers have to face in Iran but also prompts reflection on the broader implications of such limitations on artistic expression. This moment invites viewers to consider the challenges inherent in navigating the complex socio-political landscape and censorship regulations that impact the creative choices of filmmakers.

Despite the fictional nature of the interactions, *Taxi Tehran* maintains a sense of realism. The above – mentioned use of non-professional actors contributes to the authenticity of the dialogues, reinforcing the film's connection to the everyday experiences of Iranians. This blending of fiction and reality elevates the film beyond a mere narrative, positioning it as a socio-political document that captures the pulse of Iranian society.

The taxi itself emerges as a potent symbol, its constant movement through the city streets, it mirrors the dynamic nature of the challenges faced by artists. In other words, the ever-present possibility of encountering obstacles or authorities on the journey becomes a metaphor for the unpredictable and often dangerous terrain of creative expression in a censored environment.

Internationally, *Taxi Tehran* received acclaim and recognition, notably winning the Golden Bear at the 65th Berlin International Film Festival in 2015. Its success underscores the universal appeal of its themes and the ability of art to transcend geographical and cultural boundaries. The film along the other analysed stands as a

testament to the resilience of artists in the face of censorship, demonstrating the transformative power of creative expression even within the most restrictive conditions.

3.1.3 *Three faces*

Three Faces (*Se rokh,* Jafar Panahi, 2018) delves into the lives of three women from different generations, offering an exploration of identity, tradition, and the role of women in Iranian society.

Figure 4 - Behnaz Jafari with the women and children of the village in Three Faces (Se rokh, Jafar Panahi, 2018)

The film begins with a distressing video message from a young girl, Marziyeh, who has attempted suicide after her conservative family forbids her from pursuing her dreams of becoming an actress. In this sense, the audience is engaging into the immediacy and intimacy of a distressing moment captured through a mobile-phone camera. The grainy, shaky footage serves as a severe contrast to the polished visuals typically associated with cinema, immediately drawing viewers into the raw emotions of the scene. Marziyeh's recorded farewell message to the actress Behnaz Jafari adds further depth to the narrative, revealing the power imbalance as she, a young aspirant actress, turns to an established personality for support. The persistence of the act reinforces the urgency and significance of Marziyeh's call for help.

This sets the stage for the exploration of societal constraints and the struggle for self-expression faced by women in Iran. If the political constraints described in the analysis of the previous two films apply across the whole of Iranian society, here the focus on women condition clearly shows that these constraints are possibly more stringent when it comes to women. To offer this reflection, Panahi introduces the character of Behnaz Jafari, a famous Iranian actress, and he plays a fictionalized version of himself in the scenes where he interacts with her. Behnaz is deeply moved by Marziyeh's video and embarks on a journey to the rural village where she lives in an attempt to find her and offer help. Along the way, she is accompanied by Panahi, who provides insight into the complexities of Iranian culture and serves as a mediator between Behnaz and the villagers. Through encounters with various characters, including Marziyeh's family and other women in the village, the film sheds light on the challenges faced by women in traditional societies and the importance of solidarity and support in overcoming adversity. As they drive through the rural landscapes of Iran, the film delves into the challenges faced by women in conservative communities, the clash between traditional values and modern aspirations, and the complexities of the filmmaking industry in the country. As in the previously discussed films, here as well, the narrative blurs the lines between fiction and reality, prompting viewers to question the authenticity of the characters and events. Through observational long takes, Panahi captures the nuances of Iranian society and human interactions, reflecting his commitment to social commentary despite censorship. Using handheld shots and documentary-style elements, Panahi creates immediacy and authenticity, which draws viewers into the characters' experiences and amplifies the film's impact and resonance.

Another notable technique employed in the film is the use of symbolism and metaphor. The rocky terrain and caves, for example, serve as metaphors for the characters' emotional and psychological struggles, while the hanging rope symbolizes Marziyeh's desperate bid for freedom and autonomy.

Three Faces by Jafar Panahi can be analyzed on several levels, encompassing themes of feminism, the clash between tradition and modernity, the role of art and artists, and the meta-cinematic elements that are characteristic of Panahi's work. Through the characters of Marziyeh and the older actress Shahrzad, the film sheds

light on the challenges faced by women who aspire to break free from traditional roles. Marziyeh, the young girl who dreams of becoming an actress, represents the aspirations of a new generation of Iranian women who seek more agency and freedom in their lives. Shahrzad, on the other hand, with her symbolic name hinting at the Thousand and One Nights, represents an older generation of actresses who might have faced different struggles but paved the way for the younger ones. Each of the three faces represents a different aspect of female identity and resilience, from Marziyeh's youthful defiance to Behnaz's determination to make a difference in the lives of others.

In conclusion, *Three Faces* emerges as a richly layered cinematic work, transcending mere storytelling to delve deep into the complexities of Iranian society, as an intertwined fabric where these threads, - the struggles of women, and the power dynamics inherent in artistic expression - are weaved together. Through its thought-provoking narrative and visually compelling imagery, the film serves as a profound exploration of the tensions between tradition and modernity, inviting audiences to reflect on the challenges faced by individuals striving for self-expression and autonomy. In the realm of visual activism, this film becomes a potent tool for social critique and advocacy, inspiring dialogue and action around pressing issues of gender equality, individual rights, and cultural representation. Its significance lies not only in its artistic merit but also in its ability to ignite meaningful conversations and provoke societal change.

3.2 Censorship and restrictions faced by Jafar Panahi

Throughout his career, Jafar Panahi has faced significant constraints imposed by the Iranian government. This is primarily due to his vocal critique of the regime and his active involvement in activities that are considered damaging to the interests of the Iranian State.

In a conversation with the film scholar Jamsheed Akrami[81], Jafar Panahi discussed the series of legal problems and controversies, reflective of the challenges faced by artists navigating a politically charged environment. His earlier encounters

[81] Panahi, Jafar, and Jamsheed Akrami. 'DISSIDENT CINEMA: A Conversation between Jafar Panahi and Jamsheed Akrami'. *World Policy Journal* 35, no. 1, 2018, pp. 56–69.

with the law include an incident in 2001 at JFK International Airport in New York, travelling from Hong Kong to Buenos Aires for a film festival, he was detained and faced coercive attempts by police officers to fingerprint and photograph him. Panahi, asserting his innocence, endured threats of imprisonment without an interpreter or a phone call. This incident set a precedent for the recurring legal challenges that would follow.

In 2003, he faced an interrogation by the Information Ministry in Iran, resulting in his release after being encouraged to leave the country. The year 2009 saw Panahi's arrest near the grave of Neda Agha-Soltan [82], an Iranian woman that was shot and killed during the 2009 Iranian election protests and became a symbol of the protests against the disputed presidential election results and of the struggle for democracy and human rights in Iran. International pressure from the film industry and media ultimately secured his release after an eight-hour detention, with the Iranian government attributing his arrest to a mistake.

Despite facing adversity, the Iranian director, persisted in his activism, demonstrating solidarity with the Green Movement by publicly wearing green scarves. This commitment to advocacy reached a significant moment in 2009 when he attended the Montreal World Film Festival [83]. During this visit, he mobilized the jury to wear green scarves in solidarity with the Green Movement in Iran, openly supporting and appearing with Iranian Green Movement protesters.

The crucial moment in Panahi's legal battles occurred in 2010 when he was arrested again, along with his family and friends, and taken to Evin Prison. As Lina Khatib[84] underlines, on the 1st of March 2010, the Iranian government claimed that Jafar Panahi was attempting to create a documentary about the Green Movement. On 20th December 2010, he was charged with gathering and conspiring with the intent to

[82] Tait, Robert, and Weaver, Matthew. "How Neda Agha-Soltan Became the Face of Iran's Struggle." *The Guardian,* June 22, 2009. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/jun/22/neda-soltani-death-iran (Accessed 22/01/2024)

[83] Mackey, Robert. "Film Director Pays for Supporting Iran Protests." *The New York Times*. April 2, 2010. https://archive.nytimes.com/thelede.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/04/02/film-director-pays-for-supporting-iran-protests/ (Accessed 30/01/2024)

[84] Khatib, Lina. *Image Politics in the Middle East the Role of the Visual in Political Struggle*. London: Tauris, 2013.

commit crimes against the national security of the country and propaganda against the Islamic Republic, resulting in a six-year prison sentence and a twenty-year ban on filmmaking, media activities, interviews and international travel, except for medical treatment and the Hajj pilgrimage. These legal prosecutions stand as a direct consequence of his stubborn commitment to addressing sensitive social and political issues in his work. In this sense, the government's attempts to silence Panahi through legal means highlight the extent to which his films have been perceived as a threat to the established order.

Moreover, the Iranian authorities extended their restrictions by imposing a travel ban on Panahi to isolating him from the international stage. This restriction not only jeopardise his professional opportunities but also represented the government's determination to suppress his global influence by preventing him from participating in international film festivals, receiving awards, or engaging in events outside Iran, in order to diminish his impact and limit his ability to garner support on a broader scale. Furthermore, in the conversation with Jamsheed Akrami[85], Panahi reveals the pressures he faced from Iranian authorities to leave the country illegally, explaining that officials deliberately confiscated his passport to prevent him from leaving legally and returning in the future. Even before the ban on his filmmaking activities, he was advised to work outside of Iran, but he remained committed to continue working within the country. Panahi asserts his right to stay and work in Iran, emphasizing that it is a fundamental right that cannot be taken away from him, highlighting his determination to defy censorship and continue to produce films despite the challenges and risks he must face.

Moreover, Panahi's mistreatment in prison, threats to his family, and a subsequent hunger strike drew international attention resulting in filmmakers, actors, film critics, and organizations globally calling for the release of the Iranian director. Despite the sustained pressure, Panahi's sentence was upheld in October 2011, placing him under house arrest, significantly affecting on his freedom of movement. Despite these restrictions, his resilience continued by clandestinely working on films under

[85] Panahi, Jafar, and Jamsheed Akrami. 'DISSIDENT CINEMA: A Conversation between Jafar Panahi and Jamsheed Akrami'. *World Policy Journal* 35, no. 1 (2018): 56–69.

challenging conditions underlining in this way his strong commitment to artistic expression.

Following this line, Panahi discuss with Jamsheed Akrami [86] about the contradiction between the constitutional guarantee of the right to protest in Iran and the reality of government suppression of dissent over the past four decades. He specifically mentions the recent arrest of 29 women who were peacefully protesting against the mandatory hijab law, illustrating the ongoing violation of citizens' rights to express their dissent.

In 2022, Jafar Panahi faced another arrest, marking a continuation of the persistent challenges he faces in expressing himself artistically within the restrictive environment of Iran. His arrest not only symbolizes the ongoing repression of dissenting voices but also highlights the specific targeting of artists who dare to challenge the status quo. Panahi's decision to embark on a hunger strike during his imprisonment serves as a poignant act of protest against the injustices he and others like him endure, underlining the ongoing struggle for creative freedom in environments hostile to dissenting voices.

In 2023, following his hunger strike and international pressure and advocacy, he was release. Panahi journey reflects the complex intersection of art, activism, and authoritarian regimes, highlighting the enduring resilience of individuals committed to their artistic principles despite relentless legal and political pressures.

3.3 Representation of dissent and political activism in Panahi's films

As it is clear from the above critical analysis, Jafar Panahi's films are notable for their subtle yet powerful representations of dissent and political activism. Despite facing censorship and restrictions in Iran, Panahi manages to address socio-political issues and express his dissent through various thematic elements and narrative choices in his works.

As discussed in the first chapter, all visual representations are inherently influenced by the context in which they are created and the perspectives of those who

[86] Panahi, Jafar, and Jamsheed Akrami. 'DISSIDENT CINEMA: A Conversation between Jafar Panahi and Jamsheed Akrami'. *World Policy Journal* 35, no. 1 (2018): 56–69.

create them. They challenge the notion of objectivity and transparency, particularly in visual representations that claim to present a supposedly naturalistic view of the world. Critical inquiry within the field of visual culture aims to dismantle any notion of an abstract or historically unjustified spectator gaze. This perspective acknowledges that visual representations are not neutral or objective reflections of reality but are instead shaped by various factors such as cultural, social, and political contexts, as well as the biases and intentions of the creator. In this context, there is an emphasis on the need to critically examine and question visual representations, recognizing that they are frequently influenced by power dynamics and ideologies. Jafar Panahi's work resonates with these perspectives through his deliberate deconstruction of traditional cinematic narratives and his exploration of the subjective nature of visual representation. Panahi's films often depict the everyday lives of ordinary Iranians, but they do so in a way that acknowledges the complexities and nuances of their experiences. He avoids simplistic portrayals and instead presents a multifaceted view of Iranian society, highlighting the diverse perspectives and voices within it. By doing so, Panahi dismantles the illusion of a monolithic or naturalistic gaze, recognizing that any representation of reality is inherently subjective and influenced by various factors. Moreover, Panahi's own experiences with censorship and persecution by the Iranian government further underscore the constructed nature of visual representations. His films are not only artistic creations but also political acts, challenging the dominant narratives imposed by authorities and offering alternative perspectives that disrupt the status quo. Furthermore, through films such as *This is Not a Film*, Panahi challenges the illusion of objectivity by blurring the lines between reality and fiction, highlighting the constructed nature of cinematic storytelling. He critiques the power dynamics within society and the film industry, particularly in the context of Iran's political landscape, where censorship and government control are prevalent. Panahi's films invite viewers to question their own assumptions and perspectives, rejecting the idea of a singular, authoritative gaze in favour of a more nuanced understanding of reality.

Following this line, when analysing Jafar Panahi's films, in this case, *This is Not a Film, Taxi Tehran*, and *Three Faces*, a strong alignment with the principles of Third Cinema and impure cinema can be discerned, particularly in their portrayal of dissent and political activism. As argued in the first chapter, Third Cinema, which was

pioneered by filmmakers from the Global South, advocates for a cinema of liberation that challenges dominant narratives and engages with socio-political realities. Impure cinema rejects conventional storytelling and embraces an experimental approach, often blurring the boundaries between fiction and reality.

Third Cinema diverges from character-driven cinema by prioritizing broader themes and collective experiences over individual protagonists, introducing the concept of a film act, emphasizing cinema's potential for transformative action rather than passive entertainment. In a similar way, Panahi departs from conventional character-driven narratives to explore social issues and collective struggles.

For instance, *This Is Not a Film* transcends the boundaries of traditional storytelling by portraying Panahi's house arrest experience and his defiance against censorship, serving as a cinematic act of resistance against oppressive regimes. The film serves as a powerful act of resistance against oppressive regimes, embodying the spirit of Third Cinema through its raw and unfiltered portrayal of Panahi's struggle for creative freedom. Similarly, *Taxi Tehran* employs a pseudo-documentary style, utilizing a taxi as a microcosm of Iranian society to delve into various social and political issues. Through encounters with passengers, Panahi constructs a narrative that reflects collective experiences and challenges prevalent norms and restrictions imposed by authorities. In other words, the Iranian filmmaker offers a nuanced exploration of Iranian society within the confines of a taxicab, challenging viewers to interrogate their assumptions about truth and representation through its blend of documentary and fiction elements.

Moreover, in *Three Faces*, Panahi continues his exploration of broader themes by focusing on the struggles and aspirations of women in Iranian society. Through interconnected narratives and character interactions, Panahi sheds light on the collective experiences of women facing societal constraints and challenges, thereby aligning with Third Cinema's emphasis on collective awareness and empowerment of marginalized communities.

Furthermore, Hito Steyerl’s concept of poor image thoroughly analysed in the previous chapters, can be applied to Jafar Panahi's stylistic decisions in his filmography, which reveal a conscious embrace of imperfection, low resolution and non-traditional aesthetics. Panahi's use of the *poor image* becomes a form of

resistance, challenging established norms of representation and democratizing the cinematic space. In this sense, Panahi's films align with Steyerl's vision of the poor image as a subversive and transformative force.

In *This Is Not a Film*, Panahi's use of a low-quality recording device, the film, shot in part on a mobile phone, embraces the imperfections of the medium, rejecting the polished aesthetics associated with mainstream cinema. Panahi's deliberate choice of using a poor image reflects a form of resistance, a defiance against the constraints imposed on his filmmaking. The use of low resolution becomes a symbolic act of asserting agency within limitations, challenging the conventional hierarchy of image quality.

Furthermore, the use of low-resolution footage and the reliance on a consumer-grade camera align with the characteristics of the poor image. The degraded visuals may be seen as a deliberate choice or an inherent limitation due to Panahi's constrained circumstances. This aesthetic resonates with Steyerl's concept, emphasizing the accessibility and immediacy of image-making, even in the face of restrictions. Panahi's act of recording, despite the limitations imposed upon him, underscores the power of the poor image as a form of resistance and self-expression. The film's raw and unpolished visual language becomes a form of political activism, challenging the conventional norms of cinematic representation and embracing the accessibility of the poor image to convey dissent. Similarly, *Taxi Tehran* continues this exploration of the poor image, both thematically and aesthetically. The film, shot with a dashboard-mounted camera, offers a realistic and raw portrayal of the city. The use of the taxi as a moving camera platform, and the inclusion of amateur footage from the passengers' smartphones, further amplifies the democratizing impact of the poor image. Panahi's film embraces the imperfect and accessible nature of these images, challenging traditional cinematic standards.

In *Three Faces*, the concept of the poor image takes on a different dimension, as it evolves within the narrative. The film introduces the idea of amateur videos [87] and

[87] Whilst delving thoroughly into the literature devote to amateur film exceeds the aims of this dissertation, it is worth referring to: Tepperman, Charles. *Amateur Cinema: The Rise of North American Moviemaking, 1923-1960*. 1st ed. University of California Press, 2015 and Ruchel-Stockmans, Katarzyna. "From Amateur Video to New Documentary Formats: Citizen Journalism and a

images capturing the struggles of the characters. In the context of Marzieh's recording, the grainy and out-of-focus footage produced by the mobile phone mounted on a stick embodies both the qualities of poor images and glitch aesthetics. Its low resolution and imperfect visual fidelity disrupt the seamless flow of the film's narrative, introducing an alternative, perhaps more urgent, perspective on the events depicted. The use of such footage within the narrative aligns with Steyerl's notion of the poor image as a tool for conveying authentic experiences and challenging established visual norms. Panahi integrates these images into his storytelling, blurring the boundaries between fiction and reality, and emphasizing the power of the poor image to convey genuine emotions and lived experiences.

Panahi's cinematic narratives intricately weave socio-political commentary, offering a profound exploration of the dynamic between visibility and invisibility within Iran's oppressive political landscape. Drawing upon the theories of Nicholas Mirzoeff [88], Panahi's films delve into the complexities of the right to look and the right to be hidden, confronting censorship and restrictions on artistic expression.

Furthermore, as discussed in the previous chapters, the model of the Panopticon by Foucault [89], this architecture of visibility and power relations, becomes a metaphor for the broader societal structures. The cinematic narratives become a canvas for exploring the dynamics of surveillance, power, and visibility in the face of societal constraints. Through the films previously analysed, Panahi engages with Foucault's critique, inviting the audience to reflect on the implications of constant observation and the negotiation of agency within the complex web of societal expectations.

In *This Is Not a Film*, Panahi's self-documentation under house arrest parallels the Panopticon's surveillance mechanism: despite not been confined to a physical structure, he is aware of the constant scrutiny and potential consequences of his actions exercised by Iranian government. The camera becomes a tool of self-surveillance, mirroring the Panopticon's gaze, as he navigates the boundaries between public and

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Reconfiguring of Historical Knowledge." *Media and Mapping Practices in the Middle East and North Africa: Producing Space*, edited by Alena Strohmaier and Angela Krewani, Amsterdam University Press, 2021, pp. 139–58.

[88] Mirzoeff, Nicholas. *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality*. Duke University Press, 2011.

[89] Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1977.

private spaces, challenging the oppressive forces restricting his creative expression. The filmmaker becomes both the observer and the observed, creating a self-imposed Panopticon within the confines of his home. The camera becomes a tool of self-discipline as Panahi records his daily life, articulating the internalized awareness of being watched. Through this act of defiance and self-exposure, Panahi challenges the oppressive nature of the Panopticon, questioning the authority that seeks to control visibility. In other words, the camera becomes both a tool of defiance and an act of reclaiming the right to look, as he documents his frustrations, restrictions, and the creative process he is denied.

Similarly, *Taxi Tehran* extends this exploration, transforming the taxi into a metaphorical Panopticon. As Panahi drives through the streets of Tehran, the camera captures the diverse array of passengers, each potentially subject to the gaze of others within the confined space. Through conversations with diverse passengers, Panahi delves into the intricacies of social dynamics, exposing the desire for both visibility and the right to be hidden. The taxi becomes a microcosm of societal surveillance, mirroring the ability of the Iranian government to monitor and discipline, through conversations with passengers, Panahi unveils the complexities of self-regulation and conformity within a society shaped by pervasive surveillance.

In *Three Faces*, the theories of Foucault take a different approach in its examination of the Panopticon. As explained above, the film explores the experiences of three women, each navigating societal expectations and norms: here, the Panopticon is not a physical structure but an abstract social construct that dictates and monitors individual behaviour. The women, aware of the societal gaze, deal with the implications of visibility and the consequences of deviating from established norms. The societal expectations and norms act as an invisible surveillant, influencing the actions and choices of the characters. The film examines how the gaze of society impacts individual agency and the negotiation of visibility within a cultural context. In other words, the film *Three Faces* further deepens the exploration of visibility and invisibility in Iranian society by capturing the struggles of these women as they negotiate their right to be seen or hidden within a cultural context that often dictates their visibility.

In conclusion, Jafar Panahi's filmography embodies a profound commitment to critical inquiry into visual representation, challenging the conventional notions of objectivity and transparency in cinema. Through his bold narratives and fearless exploration of provocative subjects, Panahi invites audiences to interrogate the subjective nature of truth and meaning in film, fostering a deeper engagement with the complexities of the human experience. Across films such as *This is Not a Film*, *Taxi Tehran*, and *Three Faces*, Panahi consistently confronts the notion of objectivity and transparency, particularly in his portrayal of Iranian society and its political realities. By aligning with the principles of Third Cinema and impure cinema, Panahi's works serve as potent tools for dissent and activism, challenging viewers to confront uncomfortable truths and reconsider the boundaries of cinematic expression.

Furthermore, Panahi's characters and narratives engage with the concepts and theories of Nicholas Mirzoeff and Michel Foucault, disrupting power dynamics embedded in constant observation and offering a platform for questioning mechanisms of control. Through interconnected narratives and formal experimentation, Panahi underscores the complexities of social reality, empowering marginalized voices and advocating for a more inclusive and nuanced understanding of the world.

These films not only challenge hegemonic narratives but also inspire audiences to reconsider their perceptions of visibility, agency, and societal norms. Through his unwavering dedication to dissent and activism, Panahi redefines the possibilities of cinematic expression, leaving a lasting impact on both the art form and the audience.

3.4 The socio-political role of Panahi's films in Iran

Jafar Panahi's films play a significant socio-political role in Iran by serving as a medium for reflection, critique, and dissent within a complex and restrictive societal and political context. As previously analysed, Panahi's films offer a subversive commentary on various socio-political issues in Iran, including censorship, gender inequality, political repression, and the impact of societal norms. Through his storytelling and character development, he subtly challenges the status quo and encourages viewers to question established norms and authorities.

Although this thesis does not focus on the film’s distribution, it is important to acknowledge that Jafar Panahi's films are only accessible through illegal means in Iran,

as the director himself mention in an interview [90], primarily through DVD dealers as it is possible to see in the film previously analysed *Taxi Tehran.*

As analysed in the second chapter, the term *collective* that the visual theorist Nicholas Mirzoeff [91] use to describe visual activism, underlines the collaborative nature of the pursuit of social change through visual means, highlighting the involvement of multiple individuals or groups working together towards a shared objective. This emphasis on collectivity implies that the impact of visual activism is not the result of isolated or individualistic actions but rather arises from a combined and collaborative effort. Applying this conceptual framework to the filmography of Jafar Panahi, reveals a nuanced exploration of collectivity in the realm of cinema as a tool for social and political commentary.

Panahi's works often depict a collective struggle against societal constraints and political oppression, demonstrating the collaborative efforts of characters within the narratives. One notable example is evident in Panahi's film *This Is Not a Film*, where he collaborates with the filmmaker Mojtaba Mirtahmasb. The documentary captures Panahi's life under house arrest and the collective endeavour to express artistic resistance in the face of censorship. The collaborative nature of the film extends beyond Panahi as an individual, involving the collective spirit of filmmakers striving to overcome limitations imposed on their creative expression.

Furthermore, Panahi's film *Taxi* represents the idea of collectivity through its narrative structure, featuring interactions between diverse characters within the confined space of a taxi. The film becomes a microcosm of Iranian society, highlighting the collective experiences and struggles of its people. Through this approach, Panahi employs visual storytelling as a means to collectively address broader social issues and advocate for change.

Moreover, Jafar Panahi's filmography can be considered as part of the Iranian cultural memory, since his films capture the experiences, struggles, and aspirations of the Iranian people. However, for these films to become an integral part of cultural

[90] Panahi, Jafar, and Jamsheed Akrami. 'DISSIDENT CINEMA: A Conversation between Jafar Panahi and Jamsheed Akrami'. *World Policy Journal* 35, no. 1, 2018, pp. 56–69.

[91] Mirzoeff, Nicholas. *How to See the World: An Introduction to Images, from Self-Portraits to Selfies, Maps to Movies, and More.* New York: Basic Books, 2016. pp. 297

memory, it depends on their ability to circulate within society, stimulate debate, challenge assumptions, and enrich collective narratives. If they continue to resonate with audiences and provoke critical reflection, they have the potential to become enduring cultural memories in Iran.

Through his storytelling and artistic choices, Panahi portrays and reflects the broader societal and cultural context, creating a body of work that resonates with the shared experiences of his audience. In the case of Panahi, the collective memory is built through the depiction of ordinary characters facing unusual circumstances, the exploration of societal constraints, and the symbolic use of visual elements that carry cultural significance. The audience, in engaging with Panahi's films, becomes part of a shared narrative that transcends individual experiences and contributes to a broader understanding of the collective identity and history of Iran.

The intertwining of collectivity and cultural memory in the context of visual activism, as exemplified in Jafar Panahi's filmography, reflects a profound connection between shared experiences, historical consciousness, and collaborative efforts for social change.

Collectivity, as emphasized in the concept of visual activism, underlines the collaborative nature of actions aimed at societal transformation. In Panahi's films, the characters collectively navigate and resist oppressive social and political spheres, emphasizing the strength derived from unified efforts. This collective spirit becomes a conduit for cultural memory, as the shared experiences depicted in the narratives contribute to a broader understanding of societal challenges and historical context.

Cultural memory, on the other hand, encompasses the collective recollection and preservation of shared experiences, traditions, and historical events within a specific cultural or social context. In the realm of visual activism, the depiction of collective struggles in Panahi's films contributes to the formation of cultural memory by capturing and representing the challenges faced by a community or society. The narratives become a reflection of shared history, allowing audiences to connect with and remember the collective experiences depicted on screen.

In this sense, films such as *This Is Not a Film*, *Taxi* and *Three faces,* serve as visual records of cultural memory, documenting the challenges, resilience, and collective responses of individuals within a particular cultural and political milieu. By

portraying characters who engage in collaborative efforts, Panahi effectively communicates the shared narratives that contribute to the cultural memory of a community and society facing adversity. Moreover, the collaborative nature of visual activism, as seen in Panahi's films, fosters a sense of collective responsibility for preserving and shaping cultural memory. Through the collective actions of characters striving for change, the films highlight the importance of remembering and learning from shared experiences to effect meaningful social transformation.

The discussion on collectivity, cultural memory, and their importance in Jafar Panahi's filmography directly aligns with the socio-political role that his films have in Iran, since his works transcend traditional cinematic boundaries, serving as powerful tools for social commentary and political critique. The emphasis on collectivity in Panahi's films mirrors the collective struggles and challenges faced by Iranian society during political constraints and societal pressures. Through collaborative efforts, both on and off-screen, Panahi symbolically addresses the importance of unity in the face of adversity. The socio-political role of his films lies in their ability to amplify collective voices, shedding light on shared experiences and fostering a sense of solidarity among viewers who recognize the depicted struggles.

Furthermore, the concept of cultural memory in Panahi's films aligns with their socio-political impact by documenting and preserving narratives that might otherwise be suppressed or overlooked. In the restrictive political climate of Iran, Panahi uses his films to capture the cultural memory of a nation, providing a nuanced portrayal of societal issues, historical context, and the resilience of individuals within the Iranian community. These cinematic narratives become a form of cultural resistance, challenging dominant narratives and contributing to a broader understanding of Iran's socio-political landscape.

Panahi's films, functioning as both artistic expressions and socio-political commentary, navigate the delicate balance between creativity and censorship in Iran. By constructing together collective narratives and cultural memory, Panahi's works become a testament to the socio-political role of cinema as a vehicle for dissent, reflection, and the preservation of the Iranian cultural identity.

Despite facing restrictions within Iran, Jafar Panahi's films have garnered international acclaim. His work provides global audiences with a nuanced

understanding of Iranian culture, challenging stereotypes and offering insights into the multifaceted nature of Iranian society. The global reception of Panahi's films contributes to shaping a more nuanced and informed global cultural memory of Iran. Panahi often blurs the lines between documentary and fiction, creating films that feel authentic and immediate. This interplay enhances the sense of cultural memory by presenting stories that resonate as both personal narratives and broader societal reflections. The authenticity of his films contributes to a more profound connection between the audience and the cultural context.

Panahi's distinct cinematic language and aesthetic choices contribute to the artistic and cultural legacy of Iranian cinema. The visual elements, storytelling techniques, and thematic motifs become part of the cinematic vocabulary that defines Iranian cultural memory. His influence extends beyond the narratives themselves, shaping the broader aesthetic identity of Iranian cinema. By continuing to make films despite government bans and restrictions, Jafar Panahi becomes a symbol of resilience against censorship. The challenges he faces and the risks he takes are documented in his films, becoming part of the narrative of artistic struggle and resilience against political oppression. This narrative, in turn, becomes ingrained in the cultural memory of Iranian cinema.

In conclusion, Jafar Panahi's body of work emerges as a significant and multifaceted contribution to Iranian cinema, transcending traditional artistic boundaries to embody powerful proof of the resilience of filmmakers facing political adversity. Furthermore, Panahi's filmography in the Iranian socio-political sphere serve as a reflection on collective struggles as well as a powerful contribution to the preservation of collective and cultural memory. Through his cinematic storytelling, Panahi emphasizes the importance of unity and collaboration in the face of societal challenges, aligning with the concept of visual activism. Panahi's films symbolize collaborative efforts to navigate the complexities of Iranian life under political constraints. In this sense, Panahi creates a cinematic archive that contributes to a broader understanding of Iranian history and culture by portraying the lived experiences, aspirations, and resilience of characters within Iranian society. His films provide an alternative perspective that resonates with audiences, fostering a shared

consciousness and contributing to a nuanced collective memory in a socio-political context where narratives are controlled.

Panahi's films have a socio-political role that goes beyond artistic expression. They serve as a form of cultural resistance that challenges dominant narratives and provides a platform for dialogue. Viewers who engage with these cinematic narratives actively participate in creating and perpetuating collective memory, strengthening the shared understanding of the struggles depicted. Jafar Panahi's films are important artistic products that not only document the socio-political dynamics of Iran, but also actively contribute to shaping the collective memory of a nation facing complex challenges and transformations.

3.5 Comparative analysis: Panahi's films and the visual strategies of the Arab Spring and the Green Movement in Iran

Drawing parallels between Panahi's films and the visual strategies employed during the Arab Spring and the Green Movement in Iran provides a comparative lens to understand the broader implications of visual activism. Analysing the shared visual language and narrative techniques offers insights into the universal nature of dissent and the potential for visual mediums to mobilize political change. Both Panahi's cinematic narratives and the imagery associated with the Arab Spring and the Green Movement capture a visual language that transcends geographical and cultural boundaries.

The Iranian director employs a nuanced and potent visual language in his films to articulate dissent and resistance. This approach is rooted in the proficient use of symbolism, metaphor, and allegory, evident in his works, where the Iranian director establishes a mode of expression that aligns with the intricacies of political activism. Panahi's films serve as poignant reflections of the socio-political climate in Iran through subtle storytelling and symbolic visuals. The use of handheld cameras, restricted settings, and non-professional actors enhances the authenticity of his narratives, creating an intimate connection between the audience and the unfolding events. In contrast, the visual strategies of the Arab Spring and the Green Movement are characterized by mass mobilization and the use of social media. Protesters utilized platforms like Twitter and YouTube to document and share real-time events, bypassing

traditional forms of media censorship. The protestors used visual strategies including specific colours, symbols, and images in graffiti and banners to communicate collective discontent and mobilise the masses. From the raised fist to specific colours and flags, these symbols served as a unified visual language that transcended linguistic and cultural barriers. In fact, the *Where is my vote?* slogan during the Green Movement encapsulate the power of visual symbols in stimulating a public sentiment.

The universality of dissent, as portrayed in both Panahi's films and the visuals of the Arab Spring, underline the shared human experience of seeking social and political change. As a result, the visual narratives serve as a mirror, reflecting the resilience of individuals against oppressive systems and fostering a sense of solidarity.

Moreover, relevant to this analysis is Hito Steyerl's concept of the poor image[92], as explored in the initial chapter. Examining Jafar Panahi's films, especially *This Is Not A Film*, *Taxi Tehran*, and *Three Faces*, it is possible to perceive the presence of poor images in the deliberately chosen raw, unrefined aesthetics by the filmmaker. The utilization of handheld cameras, amateur actors, and minimal production resources contributes to a visual language that aligns with the essence of poor images. Panahi intentionally diverges from traditional cinematic norms, aligning with the democratization of storytelling and nurturing a visual activism that is more accessible and relatable. Especially in films produced under the challenges of censorship and limited resources, Panahi's works, restricted by financial and political constraints, frequently adopt modest production values. However, the narrative depth, richness, and socio-political impact of his creations surpass these material limitations. The simplicity in visuals becomes a deliberate artistic choice, highlighting the authenticity and immediacy of the stories. Similarly, during the Arab Spring and the Green Movement, activists and citizens utilized low-quality, user-generated images and videos to document and share events. These images, often lacking professional production quality, encapsulated the urgency and authenticity of the movements, mirroring Steyerl's idea of the poor image as a carrier of political significance. Therefore, these images became a means of avoiding traditional media channels and providing an alternative perspective on the unfolding events.

[92] Steyerl, Hito. “In Defense of the Poor Image.” e-flux Journal, no. 10, accessed November 11, 2023. https://www.e-flux.com/journal/10/61362/in-defense-of-the-poor-image/.

Furthermore, the shared use of poor images in both Panahi's films and the sociopolitical movements reflects a common thread of accessibility and immediacy. The emphasis on immediacy, authenticity, and the democratization of image production aligns with Steyerl's concept, illustrating how the limitations of image quality can paradoxically enhance the power and impact of visual narratives. By opting for a visually raw approach, both Panahi and the activists of the Arab Spring and the Green Movement sought to break down barriers to entry, ensuring that their narratives reached a broader audience. This aligns with Steyerl's assertion that poor images have the potential to disrupt traditional power structures associated with high-quality, exclusive visual content.

Furthermore, the concept of *counter-visibility*, as proposed by Nicolas Mirzoeff[93], plays a central role in the analysis of visual activism as seen in the second chapter, especially in environments characterised by dissent and political activism. When considering this concept alongside the *right to look* and the *right to be hidden*, particularly in the context of Jafar Panahi's films, the Arab Spring, and the Green Movement in Iran, it is possible to understand the dynamic interplay between visibility, censorship, and its profound impact on the evolution of visual strategies.

In Jafar Panahi's films, the notion of counter-visibility becomes evident as he intentionally deviates from conventional visual storytelling. Through his filmography, Panahi challenges dominant narratives, presenting alternative perspectives that counteract established power structures. The deliberate use of unconventional storytelling techniques disrupts the mainstream visual discourse, inviting viewers to engage critically with the complex realities of Iranian society. The *right to look* is inherent in Panahi's films, where both the audience and the characters exercise the freedom to observe and interpret the visual narrative. In this sense, Panahi provides a lens through which viewers can witness the challenges faced by his characters, thereby encouraging the audience to exercise their right to look critically at the sociopolitical landscape depicted in his films.

The idea of counter-visibility is exemplified in sociopolitical movements as well, where activists challenged established narratives through public efforts and alternative visual representations. Through the use of social media and citizen

[93] Mirzoeff, Nicholas. *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality*. Duke University Press, 2011.

journalism, these movements allowed individuals to control their own narratives, presenting a counter-narrative to the hegemonic visual discourse perpetuated by official channels. In this sense, Mirzoeff's concept of the *right to be hidden* is relevant in the Arab Spring and the Green Movement, where activists strategically sought anonymity to protect themselves from potential repercussions. This act of hiding was not a denial of the *right to look* but rather a tactical decision to protect individuals from potentially compromising exposures, reflecting the nuanced negotiation between visibility and repression in the pursuit of social and political change.

While Panahi's films focus on the personal struggles of individuals within a repressive system, the visuals of the Arab Spring and the Green Movement emphasize collective action and the amplification of voices through technology. The juxtaposition of these approaches highlights the diverse ways in which visual storytelling can be employed to resist authoritarianism and demand societal change.

Moreover, the role of the filmmaker as an artist and activist becomes evident in Panahi's work, as he navigates the thin line between creative expression and political dissent. The Arab Spring and the Green Movement, on the other hand, witnessed the emergence of citizen journalists and amateur photographers as crucial contributors to the visual narrative, blurring the lines between professional and amateur documentation. Furthermore, despite facing censorship within Iran, Panahi's films have gained international recognition and reached audiences beyond geographical boundaries. Similarly, the imagery related to the Arab Spring circulated globally, bringing attention to the struggles for democracy and human rights in the Middle East. This emphasis on global interconnectedness highlights the power of visual media as agents of change that transcend geopolitical barriers.

In conclusion, the examination of Jafar Panahi's films and the visual strategies associated with the Arab Spring and the Green Movement elucidates a nuanced understanding of visual storytelling within politically charged contexts. Despite distinct geographical and political disparities, a comparative lens reveals thematic and visual parallels, emphasizing the shared use of filmmaking and visual expression as means of activism and dissent. Both Panahi's cinematic narratives and the imagery associated with the Arab Spring underscore the potency of visual mediums in conveying societal realities, documenting dissent, and catalysing political change.

The concept of the poor image, as explored by Hito Steyerl, emerges as a unifying thread, challenging conventional norms of image quality and distribution in both Panahi's films and the sociopolitical movements. This intentional use of less refined visuals serves as a subversive tool, democratizing narrative creation and providing a more inclusive representation of complex sociopolitical landscapes.

Moreover, the theoretical framework of Mirzoeff's counter-visibility, intertwined with the rights to look and be hidden, illuminates the intricate relationship between visibility, dissent, and justice. Through Panahi's films and the Middle Eastern movements, it is possible to witness the dynamic interplay of visibility and censorship in shaping sociopolitical landscapes.

In conclusion, the comparative analysis of Panahi's films and the visual strategies of the Arab Spring and the Green Movement reveals the multifaceted nature of visual storytelling in challenging political contexts. While Panahi employs artistic subtlety to convey individual narratives, the movements in the Arab world and Iran harnessed the immediacy of technology to create a collective visual voice demanding societal change. This analysis results useful in the understanding of the dynamic interplay between cinema, politics, and visual communication.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this thesis tries to offer an examination as much comprehensive as possible of the intricate interplay between visual activism, censorship, and political dissent, with a particular focus on the cinematic contributions of Jafar Panahi within the Iranian socio-political context. Through a multi-faceted exploration spanning theoretical frameworks, cinematic analysis, and socio-political inquiry, several key insights have emerged.

Firstly, the study has underscored the profound significance of visual activism as a socio-political tool in confronting authoritarian control and amplifying marginalized voices. By drawing on the examination of the Green Movement protests in Iran of 2009 and the Arab Spring, the transformative potential of visual narratives in shaping public discourse and influencing political outcomes has been vividly demonstrated. Furthermore, the theoretical frameworks of Nicholas Mirzoeff's counter-visibility and Michel Foucault's concept of the Panopticon have shed light on the dynamic interplay between visibility, censorship, and power relations within the realm of visual representation. Through Panahi's films and the imagery associated with the Arab Spring and the Green Movement, this thesis has demonstrated how individuals navigate the complexities of visibility and invisibility in the pursuit of social and political change, challenging established norms and reclaiming agency in the face of oppression.

Secondly, the examination of Panahi's cinematic repertoire has illuminated the resilience of art in the face of censorship and political adversity. Despite facing persecution and censorship, Panahi's films serve as powerful acts of defiance, challenging dominant power structures and advocating for social change. Through the employment of visual storytelling techniques such as observational camera work and symbolism, Panahi captures human nuances and societal issues, fostering audience immersion and inviting reflection.

Furthermore, this thesis has highlighted the theoretical frameworks proposed by scholars such as Hito Steyerl and Elisa Adami, offering invaluable insights into the intersections of visual culture, politics, and social change. Steyerl's exploration of the *poor image* and Adami's research on social movements have provided analytical tools

to examine the subversive potential of visual narratives and their role in fostering resistance against censorship and oppression.

Ultimately, the research has contributed to a deeper understanding of the socio-political dimensions of visual storytelling and its potential to prompt social change within repressive political contexts such as Iran. By shedding light on the transformative power of images and their role in shaping contemporary political discourse, this study has underscored the resilience of art in the face of adversity and its capacity to provoke meaningful dialogue on issues of dissent, representation, and resistance.

In conclusion, this thesis serves as a demonstration of the ongoing importance of visual activism as a catalyst for social change and cultural resistance. By exploring the multifaceted nature of visual storytelling in politically charged contexts, it offers valuable insights into the complexities of contemporary society and the role of the visual art in shaping collective memory, challenging hegemonic narratives, and advocating for social justice. As Jafar Panahi continues to defy censorship and persecution, his work stands as a powerful testament to the resilience of artists in the face of adversity, inspiring audiences to critically engage with the world around them and to envision a future based on principles of equality, freedom, and human dignity.

Filmography

Closed Curtain (*Pardeh*, Jafar Panahi, Kambuzia Partovi, 2013)

Taste of Cherry (*Ta'm-e gilās,* Abbas Kiarostami, 1997)

Taxi Teheran (*Taksojuht*, Jafar Panahi, 2015)

The Circle (*Dayereh,* Jafar Panahi, 2000)

The Mirror (*Ayneh,* Jafar Panahi,1997)

The White Balloon (*Badkonake Sefid,* Jafar Panahi, 1995)

This Is Not a Film (*In Film Nist*, Jafar Panahi, Mojtaba Mirtahmasb, 2011)

Three faces (*Se rokh*, Jafar Panahi, 2018)

Women without man (*Zanan-e bedun-e mardan,* Shirin Neshat, Shoja Azari, 2009)

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