Between Official Propaganda and Street Art: The Representation of the Female Figure on the Iranian Walls

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1. Introduction

In the new Islamic space set up in Iran after the 1979 revolution, urban space has been used to build and rebuild collective identities and the state, in its various forms, is a huge producer of material and immaterial cultural contents (Honarbin-Holliday, 2013). This process involves multiple actors and social forces that intervene and interact from above and below, individually, and collectively.

Wall paintings in Iran can be divided into two groups: murals and graffiti. The main difference lies in the subject who holds the political legitimacy, that is the right to create or prohibit them (Del Lago and Giordano, 2016). Thus, while the former serves to highlight and support the government's ideology, the latter operates under an apparatus of censorship. Billboards sanctioned by the government typically have advertising or social and political functions and express the regime's view about the ideal society and social roles. On the other hand, graffiti of dissent is rare but exists as a form of underground street politics since any art expression contrary to the regime's ideology is forbidden.

On this basis, the paper debates the politics of image and the ways in which images invest power in specific tropes, signifiers and narratives (Shirazi 2010). While scientific literature has widely discussed Iran's propaganda culture (Chelkowski and Dabashi, 1999; Khosronejad, 2013; Varzi, 2006), mural images *per se* have not been analytically investigated until recently and even then, with few exceptions (Shirazi 2010, 2012), researches have focused mainly on the iconography of war and the representation of its main characters, the martyrs. That is, on the regime-sanctioned conceptualization and exposure of the male figure. Purpose of the article is to critically examine how women's figure has been theorized and represented within the post-revolutionary Iranian public sphere by two conflicting media: illicit graffiti drawn by street artists, on the one hand; official billboards and murals allowed by the Iranian authorities, on the other. The paper has two major goals: first, it aims to understand which models of femininity both media display and what targets each pursues. Secondly, it draws on the examination of woman-centered graffiti to deepen the theme of production and resistance from below (Bayat, 1997, 2010) - intended as "the way individuals and groups practice a strategy of appropriation in response to structures of domination" (Poster 1992, p.1). To do so, this work analyzes whether and how these acts of expression can be read as 'street politics'[1] (Bayat, 1997, 2010), hence a "rejection of various assaults on the body" (Winegar, 2018) rendered by the Iranian authorities.

Western media often presents Iran as a nation of "angry fists and of crazed martyrs rushing the frontlines of battle with the Iraqis –a place where for impermeable surface of images and imaginings and where, for years, the black and red colors of mourning and martyrdom shrouded the nation" (Varzi 2006, p. 150). This image corresponds only partially to reality. The main argument of this research article is that following the theorization of space as power, the representation of the female figure in public spaces takes the form of a site of contestation between the authorities and the civil society where both murals and graffiti are involved

1 - Bayat theorises street-politics as 'a set of conflicts and the attendant implications between a collective populace and the authorities, shaped and expressed episodically in the physical and social space of the streets' (Bayat, 1997, p.63).

in a dispute of contents, meanings, and political legitimacy. Far from being static and homogeneous, they express ambivalences and nuances that reflect the internal complexity and polyphony of the Iranian society. Such feature makes official wall paintings just as meaningful as the analysis of street artists' graffiti, as far as the role of women in the public discourse and space is concerned.

The paper is structured as follows: the first paragraph exposes the role of visual representations as social and political tools for the appropriation and use of public space in and by the Islamic Republic of Iran (hereafter IRI). The second one examines some concrete cases of murals figuring women and the debates they raised within the society. After an overview of the social history of graffiti in Iran in the third section, the last paragraph analyzes some counterproposals by the youth graffiti culture and investigates whether and how they re-conceptualizes the canonical image of the Iranian woman and what are the original alternatives conveyed by the current generation of street artists. The works of three Tehran based street artists will be examined, two of which have been interviewed by email as key informants: their comments on their work and the Iranian context allow a more in-depth look at this peculiar and still relatively unexplored reality.

2. Wall paintings and the public sphere in Iran

Public spaces represent ubiquitous public goods. By choice or necessity, they constitute arenas of conflicts, world views and interests that express themselves semiotically and aesthetically (Del Lago and Giordano, 2016). Visconti asserts that "the public nature of goods, such as public space, implies the emergence of contemporaneous, interactive, and convergent or divergent forms of agency - that is, imbricated agency - due to the multiple entitlements on the consumption of such goods" (Visconti et al., 2010, p.100).

The history of wall painting returns to the first attempts of human beings to trace their experiences and thoughts visually, to communicate and ornament their lives. Bringing art into the public sphere is a crucial characteristic of wall paintings. Urban murals are distinct from other forms of painting in that they bear the feature of 'publicity' - a painting that is created in public for the public. Walls are the privileged site for this type of communication as they allow the transformation of a public space, like an abandoned building or a residential block, into an arena where "something like public opinion can be formed" (Dartnell 2014, p.2). These spaces might become open-air galleries show-casing a wide range of issues, where those who hold the walls also hold the control of the message conveyed.

In many societies, notably the highly politicized ones like post-revolutionary Iran, murals mainly express the ideological values of the state as they are almost invariably commissioned and sponsored by the government or its affiliated organs. Wall paintings may play a vital role in manifesting ideological, economic, social, and cultural changes because they are made in public space where everyday life intersects and mixes with art and advertising. IRI has a long experience in molding contemporary art for political purposes (Vanzan 2020). Within this frame, the management of public space has acquired a crucial and innovative role. As 'political bodies' (Harvey 1990, 2004), Iranian cities express the asymmetries of the Iranian society through the planning of urban spaces and the subsequent renegotiations operated by citizens. Harvey writes that "each social formation constructs objective conceptions of space and time sufficient unto his own needs and purpose of material and social reproduction and organizes his material practices in accordance with those conceptions" (Harvey, 1990, p.419). In Iran, there is a close link between the embodied performance of identity, the politics of appearance and dress code, and the gendered notions of citizenship: an investment in visual and visible modes of representation is crucial for issues of governmentality[2]. For the public spaces to be regulated, Al-Bayyari writes: "the individual bodies and their belongings are controlled, monitored and excluded throughout and from different spaces managed or affected by the power" (Al-Bayyari, 2014, p.12); similarly, Moallem (2005) claims that the regulation of citizenship through visual media has been critical for both the project of modernization and nation-state building, as well as for the establishment of the Islamic State.

2 - I refer to governmentality in its Foucauldian sense to talk about technologies of domination of others and those of the self.

Like any other similar event worldwide, 1979 revolution transformed most social ethics and values, and art was no exception. Revolutionary cultural policies in every sector of IRI, including visual media and figurative representations, are aimed at creating and projecting an Islamic identity on and to the public (Balasescu 2005). Symbolism plays a major role in the new construction of the post-revolutionary public space. In this social context, murals are rarely neutral or disengaged but rather advocate a particular worldview. The creation of Islamic identity is inextricably tied to the one of an Islamic social space, which represents a substantial part of the official policy. The Iranian government created a visual state that incentives and promotes ideology keeping to Lefebvre's axiom that what may be seen defines what is licit and obscene (Varzi 2006).

As in many other cases, in Iran too mural painting inescapably moved from a subversive role in the first phase of the revolution to a celebratory one with the stabilization of revolutionary institutions. During the 1978-79 turmoil, walls turned into a forum characterized by a plurality of expressions, while later they have been monopolized by the authorities, becoming state media (Khosravi 2013). Revolutionary mural paintings proliferated in a disorganized and unpredictable way, with Tehran receiving the lion's share, in step with the revolutionary zeal that characterized the first years after the monarchy's downfall. There was yet no formal authority for the commission and oversight of murals; the government did not dictate where murals ought to be drawn and self-proclaimed revolutionaries painted when and where inspiration struck. The main goals of mural painting were the remembrance, re-creation, and revival of revolutionary passions in the name of Ayatollah Khomeini, the founder of IRI.

Yet, the war against Iraq (1980-1988) has been the real trigger of the mural movement in Iran (Sreberny-Mohammadi and Massoumeh, 2013). Once the conflict arose, murals served as ideal vehicles for the state to gather admiration upon its heroes and victims and to unite the population in the name of a superior patriotic sentiment (Vanzan 2020). Murals allowed those who did not get to the front lines to connect to the 'heroes' on the battlefield and to band together on behalf of the values of the Iranian State. Famed martyrs would find themselves 'immortalized' on the walls of their cities of origin, encouraging a spirit of sacrifice and transcendence. Murals also provided a significant public outlet for the Islamic revolutionary leadership's denunciation of the West and 'Western disloyalty', who was held as implacably hostile to the revolution and all it signified. As suggested by Chelkowski and Dabashi (1999), the convincing effects of public myths and collective symbols meaningfully contributed to the achievement of IRI's wartime purposes.So far, hence, the décor of public space in Iran has been state-sanctioned, limited to what falls in line with the state's ideals: faces of leading *mullahs*, colourful and intense commemorations of martyrs from the war, and anti-West slogans.

However, in the last decades, a partial renegotiation of these representations occurred in conjunction with significative social, political, and economic transformations. From a chronological perspective, mural art development suggests that change in the thematic repertoire has been motivated by an effort to conform to the relevant directives of the times (Chehabi and Fotini, 2008; Lotfata and Lotfata, 2019). In the so-called 'Reconstruction Period' that followed the end of the war and that was characterized by a run towards neoliberal capitalism, Tehran's administration launched a project aimed at redecorating the urban space with colourful murals, such as natural landscapes, as part of the governmental strategy to de-revolutionize society, introducing a discourse that praised 'beauty' in opposition to cultural austerity and revolutionary rectitude (Rivetti, 2020). During Khatami (1997-2005) and Rouhani's (2013-2021) more liberal administrations, the religious banners and paintings of mullahs and martyrs have been gradually replaced by new, luxurious, and fashionable characters (figure 1). In recent years, billboards and advertising signs flanked by innovative narratives of trendy and expensive masculinities and femininities have become increasingly pervasive, in stark contrast with the Constitution's claim to emancipate women from "being an object or a tool in the service of disseminating consumerism and exploitation"[3]. This new shift mirrors an aggressive commercialization of the urban space, a turn towards a more cosmopolitan and

3 - Source: Iranian Constitution.

Figure 1. Advertising billboards in Tehran, 2018. Photographs by the author.

consumerist ideology and a distancing from the revolutionary de-sexualization of public spaces (Moruzzi and Sadeghi 2006).

Transformations in the public spaces reflect deeply mutated social relations as well. The transition from revolutionary to reconstructive discourse has also meant a gradual adumbration of war veterans and the related theme of martyrdom, redesigned from a political and religious category into a sort of civil religion. The political and cultural turning point under Rafsanjani and Khatami's administrations testifies to a change in the collective climate and the desire to leave the austerity and social closure of the previous decade behind. Wide cohorts of youths, grown up under the aegis of globalization without any experience of the revolution or the war against Iraq, led the renovation (Vanzan 2020).

3. Women in official murals

In the official pictures that occupy public spaces, women are not given as much space as men. Since the birth of IRI, all graphic representations of women have had to respect a strict regimentation established by the clerical elites. Given that body visibility is a delicate issue and spatial segregation of the sexes is an important moral concern in society, practices surrounding representations of bodies are predictably sensitive to these contexts. As a result, the depiction of gender roles is mostly limited to the male figure, particularly those of the martyrs and religious figures of national history. Indeed, apart from few exceptions, it can be said that murals and, more generally speaking, public spaces, are tributes to masculinities (Vanzan 2020). This is not surprising since IRI has established a gendered social construction of spatiality that counterposes public and private with masculinity and femininity respectively. These vi-

Figure 2. Mural in Vali Asr Square, Tehran, 2018. Photograph by the author.

sual narratives are meant to shape and reinforce a national collective identity "constituted from the very beginning as a gendered discourse and cannot be understood without a theory of gender power" (McClintock, 1995, p. 354), that "typically sprung from masculinized memory, masculinized humiliation and masculinized hope" (Enloe 1990, p.15).

Nonetheless, we should avoid supposing that Iranian image politics totally neglect women and their public representation. On the contrary, images of women continue to be used today to further the Islamic message of revolution and nationalism, taking the female body as target and medium at the same time (Shirazi 2010). Following 1979, one of the most common murals was the image of *chador*-cladded women to promote *hijab* and piousness. Murals with this sort of content constitute an extension of the state's authority as guardian of the public space and its 'moral probity'. Fatemeh Zahra and Zeynab al-Kubra (Prophet Mohammad's daughter and his grand-daughter, respectively), are among the few women portrayed publicly. Images of women during any crisis can be reshaped to project various identities (Shirazi 2010). Back to the Iran–Iraq war, posters representing a faceless Fatemeh usually delivered religious messages to Iranian women, urging them to be courageous and persistent while reminding them that their beloved men were engaged in *jihad* against the enemies. Meanwhile, Zeynab was portrayed as a combatant, ready and willing to fight for her homeland (Shirazi 2010). While posters depict facial images of Imam Ali, Hassan or Hoseyn, no specific facial features are provided for the holy women, according to the Shiite tradition.

Image 2 represents use of public space functional to the gender discourse conveyed by the Islamic government. The mural was exhibited in 2018 in one of Tehran's main squares: it portrayed a sleeping young girl who holds the photo of a martyr, among a series of individuals engaged in various activities. It appears that the characters follow specific gender patterns: while men are depicted as scientists, farmers, technical workers and fathers, women are

Figure 3. Billboard figuring Maryam Mirzakhan. Photograph by the author.

epitomized solely as wives, mothers, and grandmothers or in prayer, surrounded by other family members. Following the example of Fatemeh Zahra, thus, the ideal Iranian woman is portrayed as dedicating herself to domestic life and devoutness.

Women's active participation in the 1979 upheaval earned them the nickname of 'soldiers of the revolution' (Rezai-Rashti 2012), leading Khamenei to condemn "the dominantly oriental delineation, [where] women are regarded as peripheral elements with no role in making history"[4]. Indeed, since then, their social, political and economic role has been influenced by a mix of tradition and modernity labelled 'marginalization-mobilization process', according to which they were simultaneously invited to take part in political life, fighting against monarchical usurpation and sustaining the rebuilding of the nation, and exhorted to recover the traditional female roles (Guolo 2016; MacCormack and Strathern, 1980). This paradox is well exemplified also by the Iranian Constitution, that praises "women who joined openly all the scenes of this great Holy War, ever more actively and extensively [than men]", emphasizing at the same time their "serious and precious duty of motherhood"[5].

In recent years, there has been several new initiatives in this respect: as part of a larger plan to mark 2018 National Women's Day, Tehran Municipality carpeted the city with portraits of prominent Iranian women who have played a role in the development of the nation. Figure 3 shows prize-winning mathematician Maryam Mirzakhani, renowned among Iranians for the prestige she conferred on Iran abroad by excelling in a traditionally male-dominated discipline. Welcomed by some as a step towards women's emancipation from previous stereotypical representations,

4 - Source: https://english.khamenei.ir/news/5794/Why-is-Islams-outlook-on-women-preferred-over-the-Capitalist.

5 - Source: Iranian Constitution.

Figure 4. Poster in Kashan, 2018. Photograph sent to the author by key informant. All rights reserved by the author.

the initiative raised numerous criticisms too: many branded it as mere propaganda for its own sake, followed by no concrete measures for the improvement of women status, in accordance with Kratochwil's remark that 'repopulating the shadowy Hobbesian public space with new members by suddenly admitting women to it, will not do' (Kratochwil 2007, p.36).

As mentioned before, this process of inner dialogue within the Iranian State is not exempt from contradictions. Figure 4 shows another popular advertisement in summer 2018. The billboard features two opposing female figures: a woman with the *chador* on the left, a woman that the official discourse labels '*bad hijab*' (inappropriately veiled) on the right. The writing on the top of the board addresses women asking which one they would prefer as their husbands' colleague. The message reechoes a famous statement by Ayatollah Motahari who wondered, "Where would a man be more productive, where he is studying in all-male institutions or where he is sitting next to a girl whose skirt reveals her thighs? Which man can do more work, he who is constantly exposed to arousing and exciting faces of made-up women?" (Moghadam 2006, p.54). The message is twofold: women who do not respect the Islamic dress code do not re-

Figure 5. Billboards in Vali Asr Square, Tehran, 2018. Photographs by the author.

spect its moral code and they threaten the integrity of family and society. Hence, for the Islamic propaganda, the obstinate provocation of the bad veiled women not to respect the dress code turns to *fitna*, a danger to familial values and social cohesion (Guolo 2016). The banner also incites women to ally against a treacherous and deviant model. In a society where women are placed one step below men since their birth, inviting them to attack each other establishes a survival game mechanism that makes women interiorize their presumed inferiority.

Another interesting and heated debate took place on social networks during the 2018 World Cup. The first billboard at the top of figure 5 was posted in Tehran's Valiasr Square at the beginning of the championship. The writing at the bottom right says: 'Together we are champions, one nation, one beat'. In few hours, social media had been filled with hashtags and comments outraged by the total absence of even one female figure, asking whether women are part of this 'one nation'.

The billboard appealed to the strong nationalist sentiment of unity that World Cup usually arises among populations, while erasing half of it and raising general indignation. The popular anger did not go unnoticed: a couple of days later, the billboard was replaced with the second one portrayed in figure 5. The same motto stood out under a row of people on a football field, among which a limited number of women could be spotted too. The tide of sarcasm and protest raised by the case did not settle that time either: people continued to reclaim a fairer representation of the civil society, and few days later a third version of the billboard appeared, with a significant share of women in it, dressed in different types of *hijab* (third image on the bottom on figure 5). World Cup billboards are a fascinating and peculiar instance of contestation of the use of public space and the representations of social identities between civil society and public administration. The widespread outrage for the misrepresentation of women is a fitting example of the new awareness on the use of public spaces gained by the public opinion, who now feels legitimized to express its own opinion on how these spaces are and should be used. As well, it shows the existence of a dialogue – albeit limited - amongst multiple actors who contend the social public representations' legitimacy.

4. Responses from below: the Iranian graffiti

Since ancient times, mural writing has been a form of active presence on the public scene that is opposed to a legitimate organization of social life and urban space (Del Lago and Giordano, 2016). In this sense, urban space is conceived as cultural fields and texts that affect the community (Warner, 2002). As the official murals, graffiti is located on the sides of buildings, houses, highway retaining walls and so on, becoming therefore a salient feature of visual public discourse. The fundamental difference between graffiti and official billboards lies in the absence of legitimacy in the use of public space. As Blume put it, "[graffiti is any] pictorial or written inscription for which no official provision is made, which is largely unwanted, and which are written on the most various publicly accessible surfaces, normally by anonymous individuals" (Blume, 1985, p.137). Dartnell (2014) adds that graffiti conveys a specifically local socio-political message in an evocative manner. Graffiti can be regarded as 'freedom of expression' (Tracy, 2005) and writers often use pseudonyms to hide their identities for personal inhibitions and social norms. Because of this, graffiti could be considered as a "second diary book" (Raymonda, 2008) which echoes the voice of people, in either public or private places, conveying their anger, instantaneous thought, love declaration, political proclamation or outcry. Accordingly, the analysis of graffiti could provide vital information for investigations of the breakdown of discipline and order (Reisner, 1974).

In Iran, the use of urban art and murals as a political tool is not new. Stencils representing Khomeini were widespread during the revolution, as well as his posters and photos on the walls and buildings throughout the country represented a small but crucial media in mobilization and propaganda (Farnia 2014; Khosravi 2017). However, they they were not part of an organic propagandistic effort and were not linked to a specific youth (sub)culture. Khosronejad (2013) claims that studies of the resistance and protest art created during the revolution are rare because visual artists at that time worked quite independently and were not affiliated with political groups or ideological factions. It is in the post-1979 era that revolutionary stencils and murals began to spread, changing their features and themes throughout the years. While some experts date the first examples of modern graffiti back to the 1990s (Kousari, 2010), it can be said that their dissemination began in the early 2000s (Khosravi 2013, 2017).

Due to the difficulty of finding scientific data on the social background of Iranian street artists, one can only suggest some primary hypothesis. Observers believe that there is no clear link between social class and graffiti in Iran but it appears that, at least in Tehran, graffiti is most popular

among the middle-class young men born after 1979 (Khosravi 2017). It is noteworthy that, following a global trend, women involved in street art are a narrow minority, albeit a few such as RUN and Salome have made their voices heard in the metropolis. Despite its countercultural status, street art remains male-dominated like many other artistic fields. Reasons for this are little freedom of movement for women in public, powerful cultural resistance, and alleged concerns around authors' safety - due to graffiti's illicit nature in urban spaces.

Kousari (2010) links this popular art with the youth protest culture and street art in metropolitan cities around the world. Indeed, youth cultures have been recognized as a form of youth resistive expressions (Skalli 2013). Graffiti is strategically used by those groups traditionally excluded by the official propaganda to express their political and cultural stands. In Iran, youths are indeed among the most vulnerable categories and those most affected by the growing disconnection between government and civil society. Youth unemployment represents one of the most urgent emergencies the Iranian State must deal with. Hence, international sanctions, failing economic reforms, mismanagement and widespread corruption constitute additional pressures that weaken the ability of institutions to provide large cohorts of youths with adequate job opportunities. These youths did not experience the revolutionary spirit that forged the generation of their parents; on the contrary, they were born and raised during or immediately after the conflict with Iraq, in a period of huge social changes, and currently live a profound socio-economic and political crisis marked by a growing loss of cultural and moral references and existential uncertainty. This generation comprises today about 60% of the nearly 80 million people of IRI and it has been the main target of the Islamization policies implemented by the post-revolutionary governments, which aimed to create the ideal Muslim citizens through the redefinition of the main institutions. However, many of them – including the large numbers of those who emigrate abroad – do not recognize those same institutions of IRI (Khosravi 2013). Labeled either radicalized or too apathetic for long, young Iranians have been articulating for years their own politics through cultural and artistic forms despite the narrow margins of autonomy given by the authorities. In this disheartening scenario, graffiti become a way to express ideas and ideals symbolically, but also a way to distinguish youth sub-culture from the official one. In accordance with the global youth culture, the underground Iranian one bears a critical stance towards the social, political, and economic status quo. Thus, most Iranian new graffiti creators are young people who do not act in line with the official principles, but sometimes fight against them and even find fun in such an experience.

Although street art and graffiti are not formally a crime, artistic expressions deemed contrary to the official ideology can be branded as satanic and the authors accused of promoting the spread of Western culture. The crackdown tightened after the 2009 demonstrations, when numerous official murals were damaged in protest or covered with insurrectionist graffiti and stencils. Despite this, in Tehran particularly, there has been a flourishing of artistic dissent in the last years. The phenomenon has numerous causes: on the one hand, the economic collapse that hit the country in the past years pushed more and more youths to adopt public spaces as new vehicles of social and political expression; on the other hand, the increasing contacts with the international artistic scene and the globalization process played their role in inspiring and encouraging new generations of artists. According to Dartnell (2014), since 2005, Tehran has seen new styles of street art, with new cohorts trying to reconquer the usage of public spaces, resist urban arrangements and construct alternative social and cultural models.

Internet and social media are gaining an innovative role in shaping and promoting youth's subculture. Literature has extensively analyzed the importance of social media among young generations worldwide (Antonelli 2017; Babran 2008; Moore 2012) and in Iran (Rahimi 2003, 2011). Social media are the groundbreaking devices these generations use to spread art and make a name, albeit incognito. Linking with the international stage becomes a requirement for "trying to connect with people, here or anywhere else in the world", asserts Nafir, one of the artists interviewed for this research. Instagram is among the favorite platforms where graffiti makers share their creations, often posting short videos that portray them at work. This social network is particularly popular in Iran as it has not been censored

Figure 6. Graffiti by RUN, RUN's Instagram profile. Al rights reserved by the author.

yet and it enables artists to connect with each other, locally and globally. This unprecedented mode of communication allows preserving the creations even if they are erased from the walls. Hence, street walls become linked to virtual walls (Khosravi 2017). Nafir, for example, defines its art a 'disappearing art', for the speed at which authorities remove it from its canvas made of concrete. His Instagram profile, however, counts over forty thousand followers and allows him to save his work and spread it beyond local boundaries.

Like what Peteet (1996) documented in Palestine, Iranian street art as form of cultural productions is not only a means of communication, but intervenes also in a relationship of power. It is placed in the eternal struggle for the appropriation and reuse of public spaces between government and public authority on the one hand, and the youth's subversive counterculture on the other. The reconfiguration of gender roles as structured by IRI is part of this phenomenon. The next paragraph discusses how Iranian graffiti deals with female representation, questioning whether and how such artistic expression succeeds in creating and spreading a counter-narration of women's role in the public sphere.

Figure 7. Graffiti by Black Hand. Black Hand's Instagram profile. All rights reserved by the author.

5. Women's representation in the Iranian graffiti

Khosravi (2013, 2017) declares that, although born as an artistic expression of a broader underground culture, graffiti in Iran rarely represents openly political motives, focusing mainly on social or artistic themes to avoid problems with the law. Yet the boundary between political and a-political is not so well defined and rigid. The number of graffiti containing explicit political messages on platforms like Instagram is increasing. Khosravi states: "social [graffiti] highlights the everyday anxieties and needs of youths. The issues at stake include a more liberal attitude toward relations between boys and girls" (Khosravi 2006, p.13). In IRI, gender does represent a political issue. Thereupon, it is not surprising that multiple graffiti deal with the female image, the body of women and the space they occupy within the society. Graffiti, like political demonstrations, is a way to express "one's *being there* […] Graffiti signifies the existence of a young generation that challenges the political authorities by their presence" (Khosravi 2013, p.14). They can "formulate beliefs about the nature of reality and values regarding desirable states of reality" (Hirschman, 1983, p.46).

As social actors neglected and discriminated by the official propaganda, women may feel more urgent the need to affirm their presence and their 'being there'. However, as mentioned above, the number of women street artists globally is still very low, if not almost zero. RUN, interviewed as a key informant, is the pseudonym of a Tehran-based

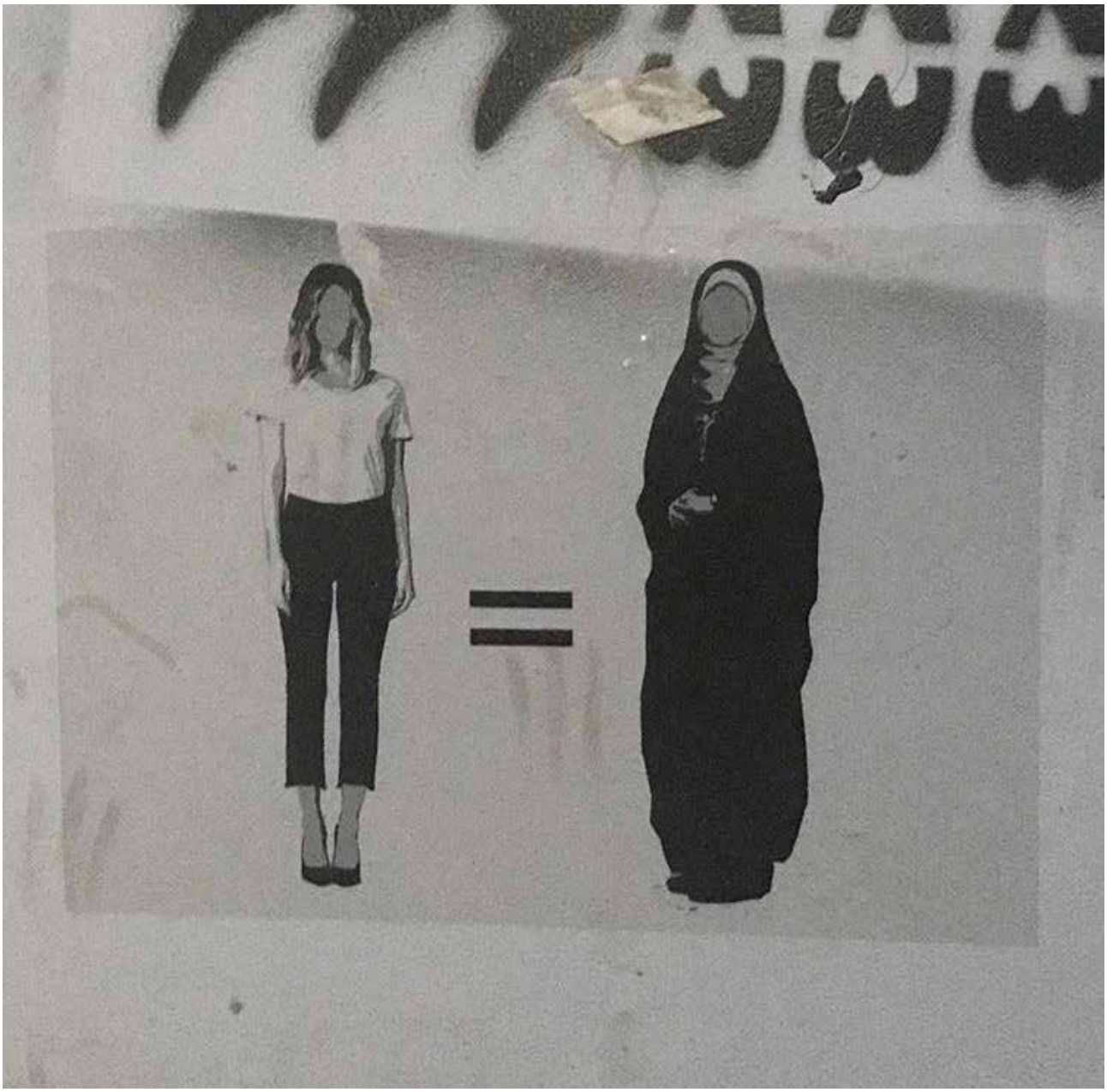

Figure 8. Graffiti by Nafir. Nafir's Instagram profile. All rights reserved by the author.

female artist who presented herself in the interview as a "skateboarder, rebel, and the only girl currently active and traceable on the Iranian street art scene". Her creations represent almost exclusively female characters and want to "translate my emotions and moods, free my mind from destructive thoughts and convey them in art. Therefore, I also protest our government that neglect women. I do not like that we do not have equal rights." RUN shared the graffiti on the left in figure 6 with the caption: "for all the girls and women in the country. Never underestimate a woman's power: we are beyond your imagination".

The image represents an unveiled young woman staring at the viewer directly in their eyes, with her head held high. Visual contact - or lack thereof - and spatial orientation in relation to the public are salient elements. In a culture where eye contact between men and women is deprecated and men are constantly reminded to control the gaze to avoid sinful thoughts, RUN's work seems to openly challenge the passerby to break the rules by responding to the proud look of the girl. The "on" symbol on her shirt may symbolize the strength and perseverance of women who attend the public sphere despite authorities' repeated attempts to switch them off. The image on the right, sent to the author by RUN herself and dating back to the economic crisis in 2018, portrays a woman crying on the national flag, whose colors are dissolving. For RUN, the work refers to 'the situation of the country, the prices and currency, with everything becoming increasingly expensive. I simply wanted to share my sadness!'.

Male street artists address women's figure as well. In 2014, the stencil in figure 7 became viral. The work, claimed by Black Hand, a Tehran-based street-artist, depicts a woman wearing the Iranian soccer team's uniform and holding a bottle of dish detergent called *Jaam*, which, in Persian, also means sports championship. The stencil may refer to the controversial stadium ban for women but also the increasingly sharp contrast between the traditional female role promoted by the state and women's flourishing affirmation in conventionally male dominated fields such as sport. The image may also refer more generally to Iranian sportswomen, who are obliged to compete with the *hijab* and whose merits often go unnoticed by the authorities.

It did not take too long to cover Black Hand's graffiti with red paint, and soon enough the whole wall was cleaned up, but as it happens often in Iran, the conversation continued on social media for long.

Nafir, the self-defined 'street vandal artist' quoted above, is the author of figure 8.

The stencil precedes chronologically the poster of figure 4, but it can be read as an indirect reply to it. While the government labels badly veiled women as a threat to public modesty and morality, this stencil supports the equality of all women, be they religious, with *chadors*, or western-fashioned and without the veil. The two women are faceless and Nafir leaves the viewer free to decide their own reading, giving them the right to choose whether the work expresses a condemnation of the State's attempts to control and cancel women's identity through the mandatory *hijab*, or an affirmation of absolute equality of all women regardless of their clothing. During the interview, Nafir held that drawing graffiti is a doubly dangerous practice, as it smears public surfaces and tries to make people think about social and political problems, such as discrimination towards women.

In the cases discussed here – which inevitably constitute only a limited selection -, graffiti become a tool to communicate with the public without any filter or intermediary, to vehiculate political and social messages the authors feel urgent to debate and to assert their own presence and identity. Unlike Bayat's (1997) disenfranchised groups, these examples of street art represent conscious political acts. In a context where public or private political debates are often labelled subversive and dangerous, walls become places for public discussions and provocations, where the sensory norms governing the movements of and between bodies in public space are disrupted (Winegar, 2018).

6. Conclusions

Lefebvre (1991) theorized the conflict over the appropriation of spaces as an engine of urban development where the exclusion of inhabitants from the control of their cities represents an expression of contemporary urban power. Following Foucault's (1991) observation of space as power,

it results that the use of public spaces becomes a political activity due to its participative nature, and takes the form of a site of contestation between the population and the authorities.

The Islamic project implemented after 1979 employs public spaces to formulate new narratives and identities where the female figure has been explored and exploited to serve the official political agenda and to share its standpoint. The spasmodic reiteration of the symbolism of IRI gives the impression of a ubiquitous panoptic gaze over the urban scapes (Khosravi, 2017), whose main aim is to educate and unite the population under a single ideal - while silencing a significant part of it through its segregation in public space at once. Female bodies particularly have always been one of the major targets of the Iranian state's ideology and politics. The official posters discussed in this paper show how the official rhetoric seeks to stem the role of women in the public sphere, confining it to the private one and portraying them in a reassuring fashion, like mothers and wives or, on the contrary, as heroines ready to defend their nation against enemies. In an increasingly cosmopolitan, globalized and consumerist society where women and youths are the main target of sanctions and control, the state's appropriation of public space is intended to reaffirm traditional social roles, and carries powerful pedagogical and dialogical functions (Zeiny 2018).

However, the paper proved these images are not immune to change. The public debate on the World Cup's billboards, along with other initiatives like the installation of a special wing of the Museum of Martyrs dedicate solely to female martyrs[6], reflect IRI's new strategy to project innovative public images of modernization and gender equality, and a continuous back-and-forth dialogue within its different apparatuses. It testifies the growing struggles of the regime's cultural producers to keep their educational projects up with the times (Bajoghli, 2019) as well as the ability of collective grassroots power to partially influence the ready-made reality presented by the authorities.

On the other hand, street art stylistically and symbolically opposes the government's mural propaganda: to images of blood, martyrs, and bombs, which echo a rhetoric of death and violence, graffiti replies with colourful messages of equality, social justice, externalization of identity and emotions kept hidden and unexpressed. These creations are part of a counterculture that offers a different interpretation of social reality and a dissimilar worldview. Furthermore, they are also involved in a battle of contents, meanings, and political legitimacy in accordance with Poster's (1992) definition of resistance as the way individuals practice a strategy of appropriation in response to structures of domination.

Both the government billboards and the graffiti examined in this article propose their version of the female identity and image. Each of them narrates diametrically opposed social roles. Following Gehl's thesis, by which works of art and places that become their casual *milieu* share the same agency as their authors (Dartnell 2014), the paper showed how woman-centered graffiti confronts institutional power and official representations of gender and social roles. Women occupy a central position in several graffiti, as they become symbols and agents of change and disruption. Multiple political and social matters, like the stadium ban on women or their right to choose their own clothing, found expression through graffiti.

These forms of resistance have been long ignored by both elites and social scientists whose attention is largely concentrated on those acts that pose a declared threat to powerholders, such as social movements or violent dissident and revolutionary groups. Nevertheless, as Scott (1986) remarks, there is no requirement that resistance takes the form of collective action. Street-art allows young authors to stage their individual and collective self; to protest an enforced institutionalized silence that is particularly visible for women; to reshape and self-manifest themselves against a deficiency of representation, and to enact thus new practices of urban citizenship (Khosravi 2017). Although these works may lack the revolutionary fervour that animated the 1979 graffiti and murals, they succeed in undermining the gendered social construction of spatiality established by the State by forcefully dragging the female body into a public space where the law wants it to be covered and hidden, in obedience to the Islamic role models.

6 - See Shirazi, 2012, and Vanzan, 2020.

Conflict of Interests
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