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Illness as Political Metaphor in Modernist Arts in Iran

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Abstract

This article explores a political reading of Iranian modernism and analyses art works through the lens of illness as metaphor. This metaphor first emerged in the discourse of *gharbzadegi* (westoxification) in the 1960s, when the intellectual Jalal al-e Ahmad likened Iran's adaptation of Western modernity to being infected with a highly contagious disease. This article investigates the visual traces of illness as political metaphor in the works of Jalil Ziapour, Bahman Mohassess, Forough Farrokhzad, and Vincenzo Bianchini, while highlighting how these artists reflected one of the most substantial political discourses of their time.

Résumé

این مقاله یک خوانش سیاسی از تجددگرایی ایرانی اراعه میدهد و آثار هنری را از دریچه‌ی بیماری، همچون یک استعاره تحلیل می‌کند. این استعاره اول بار در گفت‌وگوهای غربزدگی دهه‌ی چهل ظاهر شد. هنگامی که جلال آل احمد یک روشنفکر ایرانی اقتباس از تجددگرای غربی را به یک بیماری بسیار واگیری تشبیه کرد. مقاله‌ی حاضر نشانه‌های بصری این بیماری را به عنوان یک استعاره‌ی سیاسی در آثار هنرمندانی نظیر جلیل ضیاپور، بهمن محمص، فروغ فرخزاد و وینچنزو بیانچینی بررسی می‌کند و بر چگونگی بازتاب یکی از اساسی‌ترین گفتمانهای سیاسی عصر در آثار این هنرمندان تاکید می‌کند.

** Katrin Nahidi is a PhD candidate at the Free University of Berlin. In her dissertation Iranian Modernism Revisited: Exhibitions and art historiography of modern art in Iran Nahidi revisits Iran's modernist arts and examines the sites of knowledge production about Iranian modernism, while critically reflecting the art-historical canon.*

The study of Iranian modernism is still a newly emerging research field. A closer look at the existing art historiography reveals that the common narrative of modernist art production in Iran has been predominately based on the terminology and categorization of European modernist art history. Starting with the foundation of the Art Academy at Tehran University in 1941, various art-historiographical accounts often describe the emerging activity as adopting European artistic movements such as Impressionism, Cubism, Fauvism, and abstract art, which later formed a local modernism that merged European artistic discourses with Iranian visual elements. The strong focus on a stylistic division of Iranian modernist art production led to the general assumption that the adaptation of modernist European artistic discourses occurred only on a formal-aesthetic level as an experiment with the visuality of Western modernity. This view of Iranian modernist art as mere experiments of form was also highly welcomed by official state politics. During the rule of Mohammad Reza Shah (1941-1979), modernist art often functioned as signifier for Iran's successful modernization and secularization. As a close ally of Western powers in the Cold War, when European and North American modernist art was often deployed as cultural means to stage the West's superiority over socialist ideologies, Iran's cultural politics used modernist art production in order to demonstrate that Iran was on its way to becoming a westernized country. The crucial link between formalism and modernism's instrumentalization as political sign of Iran's modernity decisively shaped the reception of this art production until today and locates it into a political vacuum.

To alter the prevailing perception of Iranian modernist art and move it beyond mere formalism, this article will explore a political reading of modernism. In doing so, it analyses artistic works through the lens of illness as metaphor. This metaphor first emerged in Iran in the 1960s, when illness became an important political trope in the discourse of *gharbzadegi* (westoxification). This

was an immensely powerful political slogan for critique of the modernization programs and their implementation by the Pahlavi government. Westoxification reached new heights as an expression of an anti-colonial critique in the aftermath of the coup d'état in 1953 that overthrew the democratic government of Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadeq and led to the reinstatement of Mohammad Reza Shah. The term came into full swing, after the intellectual Jalal al-e Ahmad published his eponymous essay in 1962. From that point on, *gharbzadegi* decisively shaped the political discourse in Iran, which eventually led to the Islamic Revolution in 1978/79. In his essay, al-e Ahmad likened westernization as he saw it in Iran's adaptation of Western modernity to being infected with a highly contagious disease. The metaphor of illness became very influential and also left visual traces in the works of modernist artists in Iran. This context illustrates that modernist art did not evolve in a political vacuum, but rather served as a critical tool to examine social conditions. This article investigates the representation of illness as political metaphor in the works of Jalil Ziapour, Bahman Mohassess, Forough Farrokhzad, and Vincenzo Bianchini, while highlighting how these artists reflected one of the most substantial political discourses of their time.

An outline of Iranian art historiography

Published in Tehran in 1967 by the Ministry of Fine Arts and Culture, the book *L'art moderne en Iran* by the painter and art critic Akbar Tajvidi provides one of the earliest scholarly overviews about the historical evolution of modern art production in Iran. Starting with painter Kamal ol Molk's study trip to Paris in 1898, Tajvidi describes the advent of modernism in Iran as a period of imitation and adaptation of European styles, which later culminated in an Iranian version of modernist arts, as when he states:

Si au début nos artistes subissaient passivement les influences venues d'occident ou par la suite s'inspiraient plus ou moins directement de l'art

traditionnel du pays sans être en mesure de lui donner un renouveau, ces périodes n'ont été que très courtes et l'art moderne de notre pays s'est acheminé rapidement vers son avenir.¹

Another important attempt to outline the evolution of modernist art in Iran came with the publication of the artist and art historian Roueen Pakbaz 1974 book in English *Contemporary Iranian Painting And Sculpture*.² He dates the beginnings of modernism in Iran to the foundation of the Faculty of Fine Arts of Tehran University in the 1940s, when students became familiar with European artistic discourses through the school's new curriculum and graduates often received scholarships to deepen their knowledge of new modernist forms of expression at European art academies. Thus for Pakbaz, the development of Iranian modernist art is closely connected to Western modernism. As he suggests:

This calls up the analogy of modern Western art, a large, solid tree and contemporary Iranian art as only a fragile sapling in comparison. The undeniable role Western art has played in shaping our own contemporary art explains in form, if not in content, this has led our artists temporarily toward a choice of certain style and techniques.³

Based on the assumption that Iranian modernism started with the adaptation of Western artistic styles, Pakbaz classifies Iranian modernist arts into different tendencies, such as Impressionist and Post-Impressionistic, Cubistic, Expressionistic, Surrealistic, Abstract, National, and Independent Tendencies. After analyzing in his study “those tendencies directly borrowed from the West”, Pakbaz also sheds a light on artistic works, which tried to integrate Iranian visual elements and “to create a genuine Iranian school of contemporary art with a distinctive national character.”⁴ Despite his analytical openness towards modernism, Pakbaz's judgment of the practice of modernist arts in Iran is rather critical. Through this critique, Pakbaz established powerful paradigms which

continue to shape the reception of modernist arts from Iran. According to Pakbaz, Iranian modernism is an expression of belatedness, imitation and often even “plagiarism” of Western modernisms.⁵ He further states that modernist works of art depicted only the artists' subjectivities and represent “a rejection of, and withdrawal from, the world ‘out there,’” with artistic innovation taking place “at the expense of a true maturity in content.”⁶

The assumption that Iranian modernist art refrains from any socio-political content and evolved in a political vacuum became a dominant pattern in Iranian art historiography. In 1979, Ehsan Yarshater explained that “much of Persian painting today remains non-committed and removed from the realities of social transformation” and can be characterized as “an art devoid of any social content.”⁷ The idea that modernist Iranian emerged from a socio-political vacuum, detached from the conditions of its time of origin, has been adopted by following generations of art historians and survived until today. The art historian Combiz Moussavi-Aghdam, for example, maintains that “most of the painters in the 1960s and 1970s were dealing with the aesthetic aspects of modern art with no intellectual potential and interest to consider socio-political criticism in their work” and concludes that contemporary writers, such as Jalal al-e Ahmad and Ahmad Shamloo, who analyzed artistic works against the political background of their time “failed to acknowledge the visual arts as a field with its own intrinsic values.”⁸ This strong emphasis on the autonomy of art demonstrates that these authors share a similar understanding and definition of modernist art. In their texts, art's modernity manifests itself in the autonomy of art, the pureness of form, and the detachment from naturalist and representational styles of expression, thus precluding the idea of modernist art as a means of political expression.

All translations by the author, unless otherwise noted.

¹ Akbar Tadjvidi, *L'art moderne en Iran*, (Tehran, Iran: Ministry of Fine Arts and Culture, 1967).

² Roueen Pakbaz, *Contemporary Iranian Painting and Sculpture* (Tehran, Iran: High Council of Culture and Art. Centre For Research and Cultural Co-ordination, 1974).

³ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 8-9.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 39-40.

⁷ Ehsan Yarshater, “Contemporary Persian Painting, *Highlights of Persian Art*, edited by Richard Ettinghausen and Ehsan Yarshater (Boulder, Colorado: Bibliotheca Persica, Persian Art Series No.1, 1979), 363-277, 364.

⁸ Combiz Moussavi-Aghdam, “Art History, ‘National Art’ and Iranian Intellectuals in the 1960s,” *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* (41:1): 132-150.,144.

It is important to note that there have also been more contextually attuned attempts, such as that of the art historian Hamid Keshmirshakan, who has discussed the adaption of modernist expression in light of Iranian identity conceptions in his numerous contributions to modern and contemporary Iranian art history.⁹ The exhibition *Unedited History – Iran 1960-2014*, which was organized at the Musée d'art moderne de la Ville de Paris in 2014, also followed a more political approach.¹⁰ As I have discussed elsewhere, this exhibition project operated with a specific concept of modernity and increasingly used modernist Iranian arts as an illustration of the country's cultural and political history.¹¹

Nevertheless, the formalist approach would subsequently come to dominate Iranian art historiography and has informed many exhibition initiatives to this day. The exhibition *Iran Modern*, for instance, which was on display at the Asia Society in New York in 2013/2014, used this approach to try to alter the perception of Iranian modernism as a more global endeavor. Proceeding from a formal-aesthetic appreciation of Iranian modernism, it promoted a view beyond mere imitation and belatedness. In doing so, the exhibition project tried to demonstrate that Iranian art was a pluralistic enterprise fully equivalent to Western modernisms in its artistic innovation. With their exhibition project, the curators Fereshteh Daftari and Layla S. Diba aimed to redefine modernism and to re-inscribe Iranian arts into the global modernist canon. Iranian art, according to Daftari, “belongs to the larger landscape of world heritage, to global modernism.”¹² In line with major Western art historiographical practices, such as Alfred Barr's famous chart of artistic expression in the 20th century, the exhibition constructed rigid divisions

to classify Iranian modernist arts. In the context of the exhibition, the strong focus on formal-aesthetic principles and the simultaneous exclusion of the social and political circumstances of artistic production, function as an important means of staging Iranian modernist art as symbol of secularity and emphasizing the autonomy of modernist arts. This strategy has also helped to establish a similarity between Western and Iranian artistic discourses as part of an attempt to communicate the idea that that Iran was already on its way to becoming a ‘westernized’ country before the revolution.

Art and Cultural Politics in Pahlavi Iran

In years after WWII formalism became the dominant methodological approach in the reception and interpretation of modernist arts. In particular, the agency of art critics like Clement Greenberg established formalism as the leading methodology. Concentrating on formal-aesthetic qualities of modernist expression alone, formalist criticism conceals the interdependent relationship of art and its social contexts. In reaction to formalism's dominance in the postwar years, contextual approaches began to flourish, demanding a more synthetic approach towards modernist art production.¹³ Non-formalist art historians revived the debate in the 1990s and criticized formalism and its exclusion of political implications of art as agents of capitalism, which function “to appropriate art to the ideologies and purposes of the art market.”¹⁴ This discussion demonstrated not only how formalist criticism reinforced a depoliticized reading of modernism, it also triggered a methodological shift in art history from formalism to a contextualization that looked at arts' economic, social and political functions. In

⁹ See Hamid Keshmirshakan, *Contemporary Iranian Art, New Perspectives* (London: Saqi, 2013). Also, *Amidst Shadow and Light. Contemporary Iranian Art and Artists*, ed. Hamid Keshmirshakan (Hong Kong: Liaoning Creative Press Ltd, 2011).

¹⁰ The exhibition *Unedited History. Iran 1960 – 2014* was also on display at MAXII, Museo nazionale delle arti del XXI secolo, 11 December 2014 - 29 March 2015, accompanied with Italian/English exhibition catalogue: *Iran Unedited History, 1960-2014 : Sequenze del moderno in Iran dagli anni sessanta ai giorni nostri*, Rome, MAXXI/curabooks, 2014.

¹¹ Katrin Nahidi, “Unedited History: Iran 1960–2014 Rezension der Ausstellung im Musée d'art moderne de la Ville de Paris (Mai–August 2014),” *Kritische Berichte. Kunsttopografien globaler Migration* Vol 2. (2015): 135-137.

¹² Fereshteh Daftari, “Redefining Modernism. Pluralist art before the 1979 Revolution,” *Iran Modern* edited by Fereshteh Daftari and Layla S. Diba (New York: Asia Society, 2014), 25-43, 26. Catalogue of an exhibition at Asia Society, September 6, 2013 through January 5, 2014.

¹³ For a further discussion and summary of the debates about formalism in art history, see, Deniz Tekiner, “Formalist Art Criticism and the Politics of Meaning,” *Social Justice*, Vol. 33, No. 2, Art, Power, and Social Change (2006), 31-44. Also see, Johanna Drucker, “Formalism's Other History,” *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 78, No. 4 (Dec., 1996), 750-751.

¹⁴ Tekiner, “Formalist Art Criticism and the Politics of Meaning,” 40.

this context, it is important to note that the way in which works of art are perceived, both politically and formal-aesthetically, strongly depends on the social and historical context that identify visual productions as art. With this in mind, the French philosopher Jacques Rancière has developed in his writings a genealogy of different 'regimes' that determine the identification and recognition of art. By doing so, he demonstrates that art and politics are not distinct fields, but rather strongly interconnected, as he explains:

What goes by the name of the 'politics of art' involves the intertwining of several logics. In the first place, there exists a politics of aesthetics that predates artistic intentions and strategies: the theatre, the museum and the book are 'aesthetic' realities in and of themselves. In other words, they are specific distributions of space and time, of the visible and the invisible, that create specific forms of 'commonsense', regardless of the specific message such-and-such an artist intends to convey and or cause he or she wants to serve.¹⁵

This becomes especially evident in the case of Iran, where the promotion and exhibition of modernist arts was closely tied to the Pahlavi monarchy and its institutions. The official promotion and incorporation of modernism into official state doctrine was an important cultural political strategy of the so-called *White Revolution*, Mohammad Reza Shah's radical modernization program that aimed to transform Iran into a Western industrial nation.¹⁶ The institutionalization of all fields of cultural production was thus less an act of patronage and more an act with power-political implications, especially after the coup d'état that deposed Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddeq. The coup, which was carried out by members of the royalist army and financed by British and US-American secret services, led to the reinstatement of Mohammad Reza Shah, as autocratic ruler of Iran. The

government then tried to prevent a further "politicisation of the society", as Ali Ansari explains, and "decided as early as 1954 to establish a National Guidance Council, whose function was to control broadcasting and be 'an instrument of propaganda'."¹⁷ Consequently, after the political events of 1953, the institutionalization of critical voices against the monarchy expressed through artistic expression became an important strategy for defusing any kind of oppositional criticism.

During this time, looking at art and visiting museum exhibitions demonstrated modernity for Iran's middle and upper class. The members of the royal families, in particular, dressed in the latest Western fashion trends and were often depicted in the media visiting museums and exhibitions.¹⁸ As a patron of modernist arts, Queen Farah Diba was not only an observer of modernist art production, but also inaugurated many modernist art exhibitions. Her presence and involvement in the arts also affected art criticism and the public discourse on modernist arts. Due to Mohammad Reza Shah's censorship, newspapers, both private and state run, as well as magazines and state-run television channels had to herald and promote the exhibitions and portray the royal family in a positive light.¹⁹

Art became a symbol for the country's progressiveness not only on the domestic level, but also for Iran's foreign policy. In the ideological struggle against Soviet socialism during the Cold War, Iran was a close ally of Western powers.²⁰ The appreciation, promotion and collection of modernist art were important political means to establish a connection with Western nations, especially because abstract and American modernist art functioned during the Cold War as ideological weapons that demonstrated a presumed superiority against the socialist East. The instrumentalization of abstract art was intended to construct a common Western identity that crossed

¹⁵ Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics* (London: Bloomsbury, 2010), 141.

¹⁶ Helia Darabi, "Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art as a Microcosm of the State's Cultural Agenda," *Contemporary Art from the Middle East. Regional Interactions with Global Art Discourses*, edited by v. Hamid Keshmirshakan (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015), 221–245, 222.

¹⁷ Ali M. Ansari, *Modern Iran. The Pahlavis and After* (London: Pearson Education Limited, 2007), 162.

¹⁸ Talinn Grigor, *Building Iran. Modernism, Architecture, and National Heritage under the Pahlavi Monarchs* (New York: Periscope Publishing, 2009), 139.

¹⁹ Gisela Fock, *Die iranische Moderne in der Bildenden Kunst: Der Bildhauer und Maler Parviz Tanavoli* (Vienna: Verlag der österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2011), 231.

²⁰ Roham Alvandi, *Nixon, Kissinger, and the Shah. The United States and Iran in the Cold War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 7–27.

countries and national borders. As a result, abstraction became a metaphor for a joint Western project that embodied allegedly universal values of freedom and liberalism.²¹ This kind of co-optation of modernist art and the resulting image of modernist art as mere formalist experimentation that emerged from a historical and political vacuum are closely tied to a rather problematic idea of modernity. The deployment of art in such a manner follows a broader pattern observed by Rancière:

The idea of modernity is a questionable notion that tries to make clear-cut distinctions in the complex configuration of the aesthetic regime of the arts. It tries to retain the forms of rupture, the iconoclastic gestures, etc., by separating them from the context that allows for their existence: history, interpretation, patrimony, the museum, the pervasiveness of reproduction... The idea of modernity would like there to be only one meaning and direction in history, whereas the temporality specific to the aesthetic regime of the arts is a co-presence of heterogeneous temporalities.²²

Consequently, these notions of modernity “have been deliberately invented to prevent a clear understanding of the transformations of art and its relationships with the other spheres of collective experience” and help to stage modernism as a pure expression of art’s autonomy.²³

Illness as a political metaphor

Despite the context and historiography of depoliticization, art in Iran often did respond to social conditions and subtly incorporate critical themes. To explore an alternative reading of Iranian modernism beyond straightforward formalism and detachment from its socio-political background, in the following considerations, different pieces of artistic productions will be analyzed through the lens of the concept of westoxification. Westoxification became a powerful term for critique the Shah’s modernization policies. In the 1960s and 1970s,

many intellectuals took a critical stance on the Shah’s top down modernization programs and demanded an alternative concept of modernity, which was not based exclusively on Western paradigms of rationality, secularity, and technical progress. Instead, they called for a modernization under the cultural and ideological umbrella concept of an ‘authentic’ Iranian culture. In this discourse, the term *gharbzadegi* (westoxification) became a prominent political slogan in Iran to criticize the adaptation of Western modernity as practiced in Iran. The publication of Al-e Ahmad’s eponymous essay gave birth to the political debate of *gharbzadegi* and would become highly influential for the rise of political Islam in pre-revolutionary Iran. To this day, *gharbzadegi* has not decreased in importance and continues to constitute a significant political slogan in the Islamic Republic in order to criticize Western influence on Iran. The rise of a political Islam in Iran has often been understood as a rejection of Western modernity that favored tradition and religion over Western ratio and modernity. In his book *Political Islam, Iran, and Enlightenment: Philosophies of Hope and Despair* however, Ali Mirsepassi demonstrates that the concept of *westoxification* arose among Iranian intellectuals due to their interest in German and French anti-modernist and counter-enlightenment theory. In other words, the concept of *gharbzadegi* is not an Iranian concept opposed to Western modernity, but itself a product of European thought turning into a transnational idea that produced an important discourse in Iran.²⁴

The transcultural aspect of the concept of *gharbzadegi* becomes evident by looking at its founder, the Iranian philosopher Ahmad Fardid (1910–1994). After graduating with a degree in philosophy and education from Tehran Teachers’ College in 1935, Fardid translated numerous works by Western philosophers into Persian, including Henri Bergson and Henry Corbin, and also published important articles about Kant and

²¹ Frances Saunders Stonor, *Who Paid the Piper? CIA and the Cultural Cold War* (London: Granta Books, 1999), 1–7.

²² Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics. The Distribution of the Sensible*, edited by Gabriel Rockhill (London, New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2004), 21.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ali Mirsepassi, *Political Islam, Iran, and the Enlightenment: Philosophies of Hope and Despair* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 274.

Heidegger. Fardid was awarded with a state sponsored scholarship and left Iran for Paris, where he pursued his philosophical studies at the Sorbonne from 1946 to 1951. In 1951, Fardid moved to Heidelberg, Germany, where he lived until 1955, in order to deepen his knowledge of German philosophy. It was during this time that Fardid studied Martin Heidegger's philosophy, which would later be decisive for the process of developing his concept of westoxification. Fardid was a passionate and fervent adherent of Heidegger's thought, whose ideas he translated into the Iranian context, and would later become the leading authority on Heidegger's philosophy in Iran, sometimes even called the "Iranian Heidegger".²⁵ As a radical critic of the Enlightenment and secularism, Heidegger's counter-Enlightenment discourse provided Fardid the right vocabulary to express his critique of modernity. As Mehrzad Boroujerdi explains, "Persuaded by Heidegger's views on the spirit of historical eras, the philosophy of being, and the imprisoning nature of modern technology, Fardid speaks of *gharbzadegi* as the interlude between the self and the being."²⁶

After his return from Germany, Fardid "crafted the Islamist discourses of authenticity as a form of romantic nativism."²⁷ He shaped the idea of *gharbzadegi*, which became for him a mode of articulating his opposition to secularism, colonialism, and orientalism as he had them experienced in Iran. To formulate his ideas of *gharbzadegi*, Fardid "borrowed from a counter-modern discursive narrative already existing in the West as well as the Islamic and Persian mystical tradition".²⁸ According to Fardid, most Iranians were not only influenced, but also contaminated by Western thought and had lost the connection to their authentic being. For Fardid, the only way to differentiate Iran from the West and to return to an 'authentic' self was the resurrection of Islamic

spirituality.²⁹ Fardid's concept of *gharbzadegi*, rooted in European philosophical discourses and combined with his spiritual politics was very complex, hardly comprehensible for the masses and his teachings' audience remained reserved to a small group of committed followers and students.

Yet it was not Fardid, but the writer Jalal al-e Ahmad (1923–1969) who popularized the concept of *gharbzadegi* in Iran. In 1962, al-e Ahmad published a ground-breaking essay with the title of Fardid's concept. In the preface, Al-e Ahmad explains that he "borrowed the term *gharbzadegi* from conversations I had with my other mentor Ahmad Fardid."³⁰ Al-e Ahmad turned the idea of westoxification into a book and transformed Fardid's interpretation of the Heideggerian concept in a more intelligible political reading and political slogan for anti-colonial resistance in Iran. Contrary to Fardid, Al-e Ahmad's theory of *gharbzadegi* is a Marxist critique of Western modernity and its blind imitation in Iran. It is a critique of colonialism and orientalism, leading to a call for an alternative global modernity based on Iran's Islamic heritage articulated in a comprehensible yet polemic language.³¹ As a former member of the communist *Tudeh* Party, Marxism provided Al-e Ahmad with the right vocabulary and the necessary theoretical framework to criticize Western economical and cultural domination, as well as the possibility of examining ways of resisting hegemonic powers. Al-e Ahmad's essay not only criticizes colonial power politics, but is also a sharp attack on the Pahlavi monarchy and their suppression of citizens' democratic rights. The politicization of the concept of *gharbzadegi* turned his essay into a political manifesto and was the start of the mobilization of the masses. The one-hundred-page essay became one of the most important books in Iranian history. As Ehsan Yarshater states, "No other essay in modern Persian history has had the same vogue or has achieved comparable success. Its title has

²⁵ Ali Mirsepassi, *Transnationalism in Iranian Political Thought. The Life and Times of Ahmad Fardid* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2017), 112.

²⁶ Mehrzad Boroujerdi, *Iranian Intellectuals and the West: The Tormented Triumph of Nativism* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1996), 65.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 68.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Mirsepassi, *Transnationalism in Iranian Political Thought. The Life and Times of Ahmad Fardid*, 141.

³⁰ Jalal Al-e Ahmad, *Plagued by the West [Gharbzadegi]*, translated by Paul Sprachman (Delmar, NY: Caravan Books, 1981), 2.

³¹ Margaret Kohn and Keally McBride, *Political Theories of Decolonization. Postcolonialism and the Problem of the Foundation* (Oxford: Oxford Scholarship Online, 2011), 35-45.

become a catch phrase, used to epitomize in four syllables the basic ill of modern Persian society.”³² Various English translations of Al-e Ahmad’s book *gharbzadegi* emphasize the topic of illness, as for example *Occidentosis: A Plague from the West* (1983), *Plagued by the West* (1981), and *Westruckness* (1997).³³ This article will operate with westoxification as the translation of *gharbzadegi* because this term has become the predominant expression for *gharbzadegi* in Iranian-studies literature. Literally, *gharbzadegi* means west-struckness.³⁴ The term unfolds its power especially through its etymological connotations in the Persian context, as Shirin S. Deylami explains:

At its most literal and, perhaps, simplistic translation, then, *gharbzadegi* can be understood as being struck with a kind of western strangeness that is so alien oneself that one does not know what to do with it. In turn, this strangeness has an intoxicating character.³⁵

From the start, Al-e Ahmad’s famous essay employs the metaphor of illness to diagnose Iran’s infection with the West:

I speak of being afflicted with “westitis” the way I would speak of being afflicted with cholera. (...) Have you ever seen how wheat rots? From within. The husk remains whole, but it is only an empty shell like the discarded chrysalis of a butterfly hanging from a tree. In any case, we are dealing with a sickness, a disease imported from abroad, and developed in an environment receptive to it. Let us discover the characteristics of this illness and its cause or causes and, if possible, find a cure.³⁶

In al-e Ahmad’s book, the metaphor of the illness becomes a central structural principle for his critique of westernization. After formulating his diagnosis, he dedicates major parts of his essay to reconstructing a pseudo-medical history of Iran’s contamination with the West, which he traces back to pre-modern Iran, as, for example, even in Iran’s

mythology and ancient history. From his postcolonial standpoint, Al-e Ahmad constructs a historiographical narrative that explains Iran’s economic and industrial inferiority and dependency on Western countries as results of continuous imperialist and colonial interferences dating back to the age of the crusades. His account of history does not strive to establish an accurate historiography of Iran. Rather, the “point is to find out how the worm actually got into the tree.”³⁷ Severe signs of decay appeared, according to Al-e Ahmad, as early as the Safavid and Qajar periods, in particular, when former rulers of Iran were unable to resist imperialism, as, for example, when the Qajar king Mozaffar din Shah sold Iran’s oil concession to William Knox d’Arcy. “As a direct result of our recent quiescent history, the fate of our politics, economy, and culture went directly into the hands of the companies and western nations which backed them.”³⁸ Like his intellectual mentor Ahmad Fardid, who condemned the Constitutional Revolution due to its secularist aspirations, Al-e Ahmad follows his lead and declares the constitutional period as a substantial reason for Iran’s westoxification: “Today we stand under that banner, a people alienated from themselves; in our clothing, shelter, food, literature, and press. And more dangerous than all, in our culture. We educate pseudo-westerners and we try to find solutions to every problem like pseudo-westerners.”³⁹ According to Al-e Ahmad, westoxification has become a severe problem permeating all sectors of society, including the clergy, the intelligentsia, the villagers, the newly established middle class, and especially the ruling elite and the monarchy, thus causing the loss of Iran’s identity. Nevertheless, for Al-e Ahmad, the clergy represented the least westoxified group in Iranian society, a view that resonated well with the broader political discourse that arose when Iranian intellectuals merged elements from Marxism with elements of Shi’ite

³² Ehsan Yarshater, “Foreword,” VIV; Al-e Ahmad, *Plagued by the West*, VIV-X. VIV.

³³ See the following translations Jalal Al-e Ahmad, *Occidentosis: A Plague from the West (Gharbzadegi)*, translated by R. Campbell, (Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1983); Al-e Ahmad, *Plagued by the West (Gharbzadegi)*, translated by Paul Sprachman (Delmar, NY: Caravan Books 1981); Al-e Ahmad, *Westruckness (Gharbzadegi)*, translated by John Green and Ahmad Alizadeh (Costa Mesa: Mazda Publisher, 1997).

³⁴ For a deeper investigation of the etymological origins of the term *gharbzadegi*, see Shirin S. Deylami, “In the Face of the Machine: Westoxification, Cultural Globalization,

and the Making of an Alternative Global Modernity,” *Polity* Vol. 43, No. 2 (April 2011), 242-263

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 246.

³⁶ Al-e Ahmad, *Plagued by the West*, 3.

³⁷ *Ibid.* 30.

³⁸ *Ibid.* 32.

³⁹ *Ibid.* 33.

Islam in order to establish a political opposition towards the autocratic Pahlavi regime.⁴⁰ This strategy had the following consequences, as Janet Afary and Kevin Anderson explain, “The new discourse also expressed solidarity with several more traditional figures, especially Ayatollah Khomeini, who opposed the government of Muhammad Reza Shah and his agenda of reform.”⁴¹ In turn, the religious leader Ayatollah Khomeini embraced Al-e Ahmad’s battle cry of westoxication and integrated this term in his sermons and Al-e Ahmad’s book became “essential reading for Iranian revolutionaries of all stripes.”⁴²

Illness as a political metaphor in modernist Iranian art production

Jalal al-e Ahmad’s discourse on *gharbzadegi* and his attempt to create another version of modernity were not only limited to the fields of politics and history. Rather, they comprised all fields of cultural production, including literature, architecture, cinema and especially modernist arts in Iran. During this time, modernist arts were a relatively new phenomenon in Iran. New artistic expression, which slowly moved away from the naturalist-realist styles of earlier generations of painters such as the former Qajar court painter Kamal ol-Molk (1848–1940), and responded to European trends such as impressionist and expressionist tendencies, was taught at the recently founded Faculty of Fine Arts at Tehran University. The faculty was established in 1940 and directed by the French architect and archaeologist André Godard. Western paradigms of modernist expressions were quickly disseminated in Iran, especially through the initiative of individual artists, who pursued their studies in European art academies and art studios and, upon their return, exerted a great influence on younger generations of visual artists. One

important example of this movement is the painter Jalil Ziapour (1920–1999). He received a state sponsored scholarship and went to study modernist European art at the École des Beaux-Arts and at André Lhote’s private art school in Paris.⁴³ As a member of the Puteaux group, Lhote introduced Ziapour to Orphic Cubism. This in turn, provided Ziapour with a vocabulary suitable for exploring the possibilities of creating a specifically Iranian expression of modernism.⁴⁴ In fact, in order to achieve an Iranian version of modernism, in his artistic works, Ziapour merged cubist aesthetics, such as multi-perspectivity, the dissolution and flatness of space, and the introduction of time as autonomous pictorial means, with local Iranian motives like mosques or tribal people from rural areas. Not only did he search for “true” Iranian art in his own artistic works, he also elaborated on these issues in his theoretical writings. Only shortly after his return from Paris, Ziapour proclaimed the steps necessary to accomplish painting’s true purpose in his artistic manifesto, *Refute of the Theories of Past and Contemporary Ideologies from Primitive to Surrealism*, which circulated widely in various newspapers and magazines.⁴⁵ As in the later writings of Al-e Ahmad, Ziapour utilizes the metaphor of illness in this early example, which can be seen as one of the first attempts of theorizing modernist arts in the Iranian context. As a member of the *Fighting Rooster Association*, which Ziapour had founded with artistic colleagues of his in 1948 and which maintained relationships with the Communist *Tudeh* party, the painter was familiar with leftist cultural discourses. The government suspected that the *Fighting Rooster Association* was maintaining ties to the Communist party and censored the association’s eponymous magazine in order to prevent communist propaganda.⁴⁶ One reason for this was probably that Manouchehr Sheybani, a founding member of the Fighting

⁴⁰ Janet Afary and Kevin B. Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution. Gender and the Seduction of Islamism* (Chicago: Publisher, 2005) 57.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Deylami, “In the Face of the Machine,” 242–263, 248.

⁴³ For further examination of Jalil Ziapour’s artistic practice, see Alice Bombardier, *Les pionniers de la Nouvelle peinture en Iran. Œuvres méconnues, activités novatrices et scandales au tournant des années 1940* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2017).

⁴⁴ See Katrin Nahidi, “Cubism in Iran – Jalil Ziapour and the Fighting Rooster Association (Korūs-e Jangi),” *Stedelijk Studies*, Issue 9: Modernism in Migration:

Relocating Artists, Objects and Institutions, 1900–1960. Fall 2019. <https://stedelijkstudies.com/journal/cubism-in-iran-jalil-ziapour-and-the-fighting-rooster-association/>

⁴⁵ Jalil Ziapour, *Refute of the Theories of Past and Contemporary Ideologies from Primitive to Surrealism*, accessed April 4th, 2019, http://www.ziapour.com/wp-content/uploads/2008/12/jalil_ziapour_theory.pdf

⁴⁶ Aida Foroutan, “Why the Fighting Cock? The Significance of the Imagery of the Khorus Jangi and its Manifesto ‘The Slaughterer of the Nightingale,’” *Iran Namag* vol. 1, no. 1 (Spring 2016), XXVIII–XLIX. XXXV.

Rooster Association, and Nima Yushij, who contributed with his poems to the Fighting Rooster's magazine, were official members of *Tudeh* party. But, in addition, Ziapour's promotion of and commitment to Cubist expression in Iran was viewed with scepticism because, for government officials, "the association between cubism and Communism was known in Iran."⁴⁷

In the case of his manifesto, Ziapour uses the idea of a parasite in order to argue that painting has not yet developed its true purpose and full potential due to its infestation with a parasitic infection. For Ziapour, the parasite represents, on the one hand, naturalist-realistic styles that strive to depict reality and, on the other hand, visual abstract language without any connections to natural forms observable in real life. The parasite, as a figure of thought, helps Ziapour not only to define his concepts of a new art, but also to argue for a kind of formalistic revolution in all fields of Iranian art, including music, theater and painting, and to decide in favor of a clear break between modernism and earlier artistic styles, when he writes:

Not even Classicism, Romanticism, Fauvism (except for a bit Impressionism and Cubism), no other movements have done painting justice, nor have they taken into consideration its vast domain and, by infesting painting with parasites, they have hindered painting.⁴⁸

Though, in the course of his text, Ziapour harshly criticizes the naturalist modes of expression of former artistic generations in Iran, he also admits that artistic styles and their techniques reflect societal needs during a specific time, stating:

The more the social concepts change, the visual subjects also change to the same degree. There were times in life when it was necessary to paint religious themes, and to show humans' ascension and parade in outer space, and to show them flying in the material and spiritual world, to express their spiritualism, and there have been times when artists instead of flying and religious scenes they paint objects. So we can see even the most avant-garde

painters having one thing in common and that is visual representation of the themes to express their personal spiritualism. And later we can see because natural forms did not adequately represent artist's perceptions, painters due to necessity started to adjust the forms, to increase or deduct them to express their ideas more precisely.⁴⁹

In summary, one can say that Ziapour's employment of the parasite metaphor helps him to argue for the necessity of introducing an Iranian audience to new artistic discourses, an audience that had not yet developed the familiarity and viewing habits necessary for understanding modernist expression. For Ziapour, in reaction to the fundamental changes and rapid transformation that modernization had brought to the country, new modes of artistic expression had to be created. In this context, Ziapour transforms illness as a political metaphor into a trope in order to bring into view the shortcomings and failures of earlier artistic styles and thus emphasizes the societal necessity to search for new means of expression.

A notable example of the incorporation of illness as a metaphor finds its visual expression in the works of the painter and sculptor Bahman Mohassess (1931–2010). In his paintings, drawings, collages, and sculptures, Mohassess uses a figurative language, depicting hybrid beings part human, part animal. Irrespective of their outer appearance, Mohassess' creatures are always set isolated and alone against a monochromatic background. One painting exemplary of his oeuvre is *Fifi sings of joy* (1964), (Fig. 1). The title and the depiction in the painting diverge severely, while retaining a bitter irony. The portrait shows Fifi, a female figure, completely isolated on a white yellowish surface. The depiction of Fifi consists of a rectangular red torso with broad shoulders and a female bust. A very skinny neck connects the head to the torso. The figure's head has been replaced with a huge, open, and screaming mouth. The figure beats its chest with its hand, reinforcing the scream. Although the lack of eyes and the abstract language

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ziapour, *Refute of the Theories of Past and Contemporary Ideologies from Primitive to Surrealism*.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

of forms impede the viewer's identification with the figure, in its combination of content and forms, the painting generates an emotional involvement on the part of the spectator. The pastose application of the paint creates a tactile and sculptural dimension that brings Fifi to life.



Figure 1. Bahman Mohassess, *Fifi Sings of Joy*, 1964. Oil on canvas. 85.5 x 66 cm. Collection of Ramin Haerizadeh, Rokni Haerizadeh, and Hesam Rahmani. Photo by Ramin Haerizadeh.

Fifi sings of joy is a striking example of Mohassess' works as a painter. In it, amorphous and isolated creatures' aesthetic execution reveals visual parallels to the pictorial worlds of European modernist artists, such as Francis Bacon and Pablo Picasso. The visual proximity of his works to modernist European artistic discourses also explains why Iranian art historiography has at times reduced Mohassess' work to a mere expression of artistic subjectivity. This was the

case, for example, in the context of the exhibition *Iran Modern* held in 2013 at the Asia Society in New York, when Fereshteh Dafari, one of the exhibition's curators stated, "A misfit in art historical narratives and intolerant of all political systems, Mohassess found refuge in his own private mythology and in Rome".⁵⁰ To Daftari, Mohassess' "private mythology" is the reason for his artistic independence: "Not inclined to create a national idiom nor interested in progressive western or Italian movements such as Arte Povera, he lived his life as a fish out of water."⁵¹ This framing by *Iran Modern's* curator models Mohassess works as an example of radical subjectivity and presses them into the mold of the mythical male genius, an obsolete narration that disregards the social embeddedness of artistic practice. Contemporary art critics, however, emphasized "the bitter protest and eloquent satirical metaphors" in his works and compared his artistic practice with the Mexican muralism during the Mexican Revolution.⁵²

In the 1950s in Iran, Bahman Mohassess joined Jalal al-e Ahmad and other political activists taking an active stance in the struggle for the nationalization of Iran's oil.⁵³ During this time artists and intellectuals joined the protests on the streets, filled with high hopes for the nationalization of Iran's oil and a resulting democratization of the country.

The nationalization of Iran's oil industry was initiated by Mohammad Mossadeq. After his appointment as prime minister by Mohammad Reza Shah in 1951, Mossadeq started implementing measures to nationalize Iran's oil. Due to colonial and imperialist power-political interests in 19th century, Iran's oil industry was widely under the control of foreign oil companies. With his policies, Mossadeq not only tried to put an end to colonial interference by imperial forces, but also used his position to strengthen the constitutional system in Iran and to weaken the monarch's power.⁵⁴ The coup against Mossadeq, sponsored by foreign intelligence services, and the re-installment of

⁵⁰ Daftari, "Redefining Modernism. Pluralist art before the 1979 Revolution," 34.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² Yarshater, "Contemporary Persian Painting," *Highlights of Persian Art*, 364.

⁵³ Jalal Al-e Ahmad, "For Mohassess and the Wall [Be Mohassess va baray-e divar]. *Adab wa hunar-i imruz-i Iran. Mağmū'a-i maqālāt-I*," edited by Mustafa Zamaninya (Tehran: Našr-i Mitra, 1994), 1341-1355, 1344.

⁵⁴ Ervand Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran* (Cambridge: Publisher, 2008), 116.



Figure 2. *The House is Black*, 1962, 20 minutes, black and white, Forough Farrokhzad (director), Ebrahim Golestan (producer).

Mohammad Reza Pahlavi as Shah of Persia was the cause of trauma, disappointment and political retreat for many activists. Or, as Al-e Ahmad regretfully explains, “In those days, we hurried to make history. But even though his [Mohassess’] posters had no political benefit, at least they were drawing exercises.”⁵⁵ For many Iranians, the coup d’état of 1953 represented a tragic event, for Bahman Mohassess, it was the reason to turn his back on Iran and migrate to Italy, where he had previously studied art. He took up his permanent residence and remained there until his death in 2010.

Visually, Bahman Mohassess’ lonesome creatures resemble the cinematic language of Forough Farrokhzad’s documentary *The House is Black* (1962) about a leprosarium in Azerbaijan. In her documentary, the poet Farrokhzad (1934–1967) successfully stages the infectious disease of leprosy as a means to articulate a powerful social critique and to establish documentary film in Iran as an “effective way to use art and anthropology for political ends in a society with strict censorship.”⁵⁶

According to Roxanne Varzi, the film’s documentary character “functions solely in the realm of metaphor where the disease of leprosy comes to stand for stagnation, inertia and a spiritual void that she felt were eating away at the core of Iranian society.”⁵⁷

In *The House is Black*, Farrokhzad takes an anthropological approach to presenting the human bodies bearing the marks of leprosy, their daily routines, and the absurdities of daily life in the colony, accompanied by voiceovers of her reading her own poems and citations from Quran. The film begins with a rather classical opening scene and presents the image of a woman looking at herself in the mirror (Fig. 2). But, the female’s image does not conform to common beauty standards. Her face is rather heavily marked by leprosy.

The following scenes are a skillful montage of visual material documenting the daily life, sound, and poetry of leprosy. The film carefully portrays the colony’s different groups of inhabitants and illustrates the absurdities of an alleged normality, leaving the observer with only bitter irony, as, for example, in a scene in which a teacher tells a

⁵⁵ Al-e Ahmad, “For Mohassess and the Wall [Be Mohassess va baray-e divar]. *Adab wa hunar-i imruz-i Irân. Mağmū’a-i maqālāt-I*,” 1344.

⁵⁶ Roxanne Varzi, “Pictura Poesis: The interplay of poetry, image and ethnography in Forough Farrokhzad’s *The House is Black*,” *Off Screen* Vol. 18. 2014. Accessed 16th May 2019, <https://offscreen.com/view/house-is-black>

⁵⁷ Ibid.

classroom full of boys why they should thank God for their parents, even though many of the children are orphans. The children are the only inhabitants of the colony in the film, whose bodies are not yet marked by leprosy, but who are also at a high risk of infection. In terms of health education, the hospital scene takes center stage in the film's narrative when a voice from off-screen explains the causes and treatment of leprosy, but identifies poverty as main reason for the transmission of the disease.

The film's pictorial language and means of narration create an atmosphere of monotony that emphasizes the feeling of hopelessness. Images reappear throughout the film, for instance, depicting a man walking down the street again and again, while, in the meantime, a woman's voice recites the days of the week. While Farrokhzad's poetic documentary presents the terrible effects of leprosy and the exclusion of the afflicted, the illness also functions here as critical metaphor. As Hamid Dabashi explains, "*The House is Black* can be watched as a commentary on Iran under the Pahlavis, a society sick and afflicted with a disease and yet incapable of curing its ailment with reason and science."⁵⁸

In fact, many artists responded in various ways to Jalal al-e Ahmad's metaphor of the illness when reflecting on the socio-political discourse in Iran. In doing so, they contributed to the broader discussion of the conditions of modernization and the debate on how to create an Iranian modernity without becoming too westernized. Generally speaking, modernist art and intellectual production have been mutually beneficial in their reciprocal development. A closer look at Al-e Ahmad's text reveals that he did not limit his critical views to politics and history, but also commented on different fields of cultural production, such as literature, cinema, architecture, and modernist arts. In his various writings about modernist arts and

exhibition practices, al-e Ahmad expressed his thoughts and ideas about modernism. In these articles, al-e Ahmad implements his concept of an alternative modernity, which is opposed to westernization and attempts to construct a significant-other in the history of Western modernity. His essays clearly demonstrate that Al-e Ahmad did not discard the achievements of the modern age, such as modernist artistic expression, but that he demanded an Iranian version of modernization. In these writings, Al-e Ahmad communicates a postcolonial concept of modernist art, advocating an Iranian modernism based on the terms of hybridity and mimicry as sources of artistic innovation. To create new means of expression, he calls for a hybrid merging of European artistic discourses with Iranian topics. In other words, as Homi Bhabha states, "the importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace two original moments from which the third emerges, rather hybridity is the 'third space' which enables other positions to emerge."⁵⁹ This kind of hybridity is, for Al-e Ahmad, the only source of innovation that can create a modernist expression which is not simply decorative, but also politically committed to serving in the fight against colonization and westernization. Thus, for Al-e Ahmad, modernist art stands in the service of striving for a better society the goal of which is, "to eliminate poverty and to provide spiritual and material welfare for all people."⁶⁰

Interestingly, Al-e Ahmad saw these artistic aspirations most realized in the works of the Italian painter, writer and physician Vincenzo Bianchini (1903-2000). Bianchini participated in Italy's colonial war in Ethiopia 1935-1937 as a doctor. After his return to Italy, he became an active member in the anti-fascist resistance in Rome. In the 1950s, Bianchini moved to Iran to treat people in rural areas as part of an Italian medical aid program and lived there until the Iranian Revolution in 1978/79.⁶¹ Through his artistic

⁵⁸ Hamid Dabashi, *Corpus Anarchicum. Political Protest, Suicidal Violence, and the Making of the Posthuman Body* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 141.

⁵⁹ Jonathan Rutherford, "The Third Space: Interview with Homi Bhabha". *Identity, Community, Culture, Difference*, edited by J. Rutherford (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990), 207-221.

⁶⁰ Al-e Ahmad, *Plagued by the West (Gharbzadegi)*, 60.

⁶¹ Information about Vincenzo Bianchini is very rare. Bianchini's works have been sold at international art auctions and the auction house Sotheby's, for example, provides some biographical information about the painter. Accessed June 6, 2019

practice as a painter and his friendship with the artists Bahman Mohassess and Parviz Tanavoli, Bianchini became an active member in Tehran's art scene and displayed his works in Iran on various occasions. Although Bianchini was never fully integrated into the canon of Iranian modernist arts, his art works are part of the collection of Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art to this day. For Al-e Ahmad, Bianchini is part of a larger group of Western intellectuals, who turned to Eastern topics in their works because of "the effects and frustration in the West and its machine in the 20th century," a phenomenon that he also observed in the works of Hermann Hesse, Thomas Mann, Albert Camus, and Henry Corbin.⁶² Contrary to the writers mentioned, however, Bianchini was not interested in relaying his acquired knowledge about the East to a Western audience. Rather, his artistic works mirror the socio-political circumstances in Iran and reflect Bianchini's professional practice as doctor. This combination of social documentary and artistic practice increase the relevance of Bianchini's art production, for which reason Al-e Ahmad favors Bianchini's work over other artistic productions, stating that "it is not the time just to sit and read about the footprint of the East and Eastern theosophy in Hermann Hesse's 'Journey to the East' or in Thomas Mann's 'The Magic Mountain.'"⁶³ Bianchini's critical stance as a Westerner towards European modernity and his critique based on first-hand experiences with colonial violence and wars were a special confirmation for Al-e Ahmad in his opposition towards Western modernity, who emphasized in his article that Bianchini "said himself that he hates the Europe that turned the world into war and blood twice within fifty years."⁶⁴

Stylistically, Bianchini uses abstract expressionist language in his works, merging it with local content, such as camels or tribal people, which the self-taught artist encountered in Iran as well as on his

humanitarian missions during the Algerian war and the war in Congo (Fig. 3).



Figure 3. Vincenzo Bianchini, *Girl from Khuzestan Province*, ca. 1970, oil on canvas, 90 x 60 cm, Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art.

As the art critic Karim Emami explains, "He turns out sketches and watercolours in a twinkling of an eye. He is pre-occupied with unprivileged humanity, strives to record their suffering, but has no patience to out neat and studied work."⁶⁵ For Emami, the abstract expressionist technique represents not only Bianchini's means of expression, but is also a way "to show his sympathy for the man who has to battle the harshest conditions of nature in order to survive."⁶⁶ And, as Emami further states, the painter obtained the

<http://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2017/boundless-dubai-db1701/lot.37.html>

⁶² Jalal Al-e Ahmad, "Vincenzo Bianchini. Doctor and Painter [Vincenzo Bianchini. Tabib va Naqash]. *Adab wa hunar-i imruz-i Iran. Mağmū'a-i maqālāt-I*," edited by Mustafa Zamaninya (Tehran: Publisher, 1994), 1325-1339, 1329.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 1330

⁶⁵ Karim Emami, "Down the milky way all the galleries are lit up," *Karim Emami on Modern Iranian Culture, Literature and Art*, edited by Houra Yavari (New York: Persian Heritage Foundation, 2014), 232-233, 232.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

necessary authority as eye-witness, for, “Dr. Bianchini knows these people because he has spent several years of his life out in the wilderness, in the midst of the Kafir sands and in the heart of the Congo jungle to help heal their wounds.”⁶⁷

Like Emami, Al-e Ahmad commends Bianchini’s expressionist technique because this spontaneous style detaches the painter’s artistic practice from the rationality and mechanization of the West. In this regard, Al-e Ahmad ascribes Bianchini’s works with tremendous significance, which, however, lies less in their technical execution than in the artist’s depiction of the darker sides of modernity. In his text from 1958, Al-e Ahmad observes Bianchini’s depiction of loneliness as the artist’s main theme. The subject of loneliness represents for Al-e Ahmad one of the most severe symptoms of the 20th-century disease of westoxification and mechanization which he diagnosed in Iran. Bianchini’s artistic turn to the depiction of nature epitomizes for the author an attempt to find “a cure for the individualistic grief in the giant loneliness.”⁶⁸ In doing so, Bianchini succeeds in incorporating Iranian themes in his paintings, a strategy which turns Bianchini, in Al-e Ahmad’s opinion, from a European into an Iranian painter. “In conclusion,” he explains, “I have to admit that what he has been doing until now and what he made visible in his works about Iran, is more than all of the attempts related to our culture and art by our artists.”⁶⁹ Bianchini’s art gained for Al-e Ahmad an immense significance because his artistic works resonated well with the author’s theoretical writings and his critique of colonialism and Western modernity. As a Westerner and medical practitioner employing the metaphor of illness, loneliness and human suffering as excesses of colonial modernity, the persona of Bianchini the “painter doctor” comes to function as a confirming authority for Al-e Ahmad’s assertions. Especially, after Bianchini’s return to Iran from the Congo, where he lived during the Congo Crisis (1960-1965), Bianchini’s paintings obtained a mirror-like

function, documenting colonial violence and the Western powers’ century-long abuse of Africa (Fig. 4).



Figure 4. Vincenzo Bianchini, *Abstract Person*, 1977, oil on canvas, 110 x 85 cm, Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art.

Looking at these paintings, in which Bianchini depicted the “apocalypse in Congo” in modernist shapes and colors, which, for Al-e Ahmad, “had become a language for a world,” the viewer becomes terrified, but at the same time benefits from the cathartic effect and understands that “the African human being is ill, badly ill”, contaminated by Western capitalism and imperialism leading to the exploitation of Africa’s natural resources of diamond, ivory, and gold.⁷⁰

Illness as a political metaphor opens new perspectives on artistic expression in Iranian arts. Through the adaption and translation of a modernist language of forms, it becomes a motor

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Al-e Ahmad, “Vincenzo Bianchini. Doctor and Painter [Vincenzo Bianchini. Tabib va Naqash], 1330.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

for use of aesthetic innovations as a critical tool to reflect upon contemporary social and political discourses. In the process of interpretation, however, formalist criticism often obscured art's critical implications. While Iranian modern art was and has continued to be considered as a transparent representation of modernization, a contextualized approach to the historiography of modernist arts demonstrates that modernist expression often functioned through metaphors of illness that responded to contemporary political controversies. Iranian modernist arts are thus not mere representations of the general concept of modernization, but are also depictions of Iranian society and the time in which they were created. This plurality of approaches, especially in a new emerging research field, has the potential to liberate artistic expression from being judged one single entity and to mirror the rich diversity of modernist arts in Iran.