

# (Re)Claiming Space

## The Use/Misuse of Propaganda Murals in Republican Tehran

Propaganda murals and posters extolling the virtues of the Islamic Republic of Iran are familiar sights in the urban space of Tehran. While their bold messages refer to a repressive regime, they coexist with movements and ideologies of popular resistance and ultimately contribute to the complexity of Iran's contemporary socio-political development and environment.

Asian Art >  
Central Asia

By Talinn Grigor

Tehran is a megalopolis with fifteen million inhabitants: its population diverse, its culture rich, its pollution poisonous, its topography fascinating, and its dynamics consuming. Once the capital city of the Qajar and the Pahlavi Dynasties, now Tehran is the nucleus of the Islamic Republic of Iran. In this gigantic 'Republican' and 'Islamic' space, various competing visions of modern Iranian identity are negotiated and sustained through visual images that enhance the urban space. Public murals on various high-rises in present-day Tehran, which immediately catch the visitor's attention, are artistic expressions of local ideological struggles.

These large-scale painted murals inform the meta-narrative of the Islamic Republic and are also manifestations of visions, accounts, and realities of a unique society in the process of (un)making and (re)defining itself. Although unmistakably reinforcing the so-called repressive 'regime of the Mullahs', these overwhelming icons are reclaimed and re-edited by the people who use/misuse/consume them on a daily basis. Far from providing a single account of political persuasions transmitted from above, contemporary Iranian society is neither easily decipherable nor apparent in these murals. The people who occupy the cityscape contest these stories every day. They assemble in parks and squares with family members, friends and strangers to mould a different and often contradictory vision of the Iranian social landscape. The masses are drawn to these events, often to challenge the mainstream images of Iran; images that the Islamic Republic wants to disseminate and that the Western mass media is only too eager to consume. However, behind, under, and next to this so-called 'Axis-of-Evil' reside countless sites of resistance, which mould and structure the truly dynamic character of that same Iran.

### The Murals

The design of the murals falls into four thematic categories: 1) the continuity of the position and legitimacy of the Faghih or the jurispudent; 2) the concept and reality of *shahadat* or martyrdom; 3) the evilness of the Other; and 4) the virtue and merit of morality. Each category has acquired a specific aesthetic quality consistent throughout in the examples seen in Tehran.

The first image depicts the figures of Imam Khomeini and Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, looking towards a sundown where the top inscription reads, 'We will continue on the path of the Imam and the martyrs of the revolution.' The mural evokes the theme of the rightful and legitimate succession of leader-

Mural of the Iran-Iraq War Veteran on Ferdowsi Avenue, Tehran.



Photo taken by the author, January 2002.

Mural of the American flag on south side of Karim Khan Zand Boulevard, Tehran.



Photo taken by the author, January 2002.

ship to the position of the Faghih. After Ayatollah Khomeini's death in 1989, Ayatollah Khamenei became his heir to the post of jurispudent. These images, as iconographic typologies, often depict both men in profile, one overlapping each other; both in black turban and mantle. This connotes an ideological and a temporal compression from the past to the present, graphically legitimizing the leadership of Ayatollah Khamenei today by the late Ayatollah Khomeini.

The second image signals one of the major dilemmas of today's authority, namely, the human cost and consequence of the devastating Iran-Iraq War. The image represents a soldier with a missing leg, looking nostalgically towards the horizon. The caption above is head reads, 'the value of you, the veterans, is more than that of our martyrs'. The Islamic Republic has found itself in the awkward position of explaining away a futile war to its citizens. Invariably, the war veterans are rewarded and glorified, often at the expense of the dead. In the narrative of martyrdom on these murals, the male soldier – always white and often young – is the sole protagonist of that war. He is brave but modest, religious but proactive, and distinctively non-Western looking. He is often juxtaposed with a religious figure that guides him on the path to God.

The third group of images comes directly out of the iconography of the 1979 revolution.<sup>1</sup> The image represents the American flag with skeleton-heads and falling-bombs replacing the stars and the stripes. In Latin lettering, the writing reads, 'Down with the USA' the typology of these murals conveys the topic of the 'Great Satan' which involves the United States and Israel. The images are always abstracted and reduced to familiar symbols such as the American flag or revolutionary slogans such as 'death to America'. The social unity of the revolution is recalled and maintained by the narrative of these paintings that evokes the perpetual dehumanization of the revolutionary 'other'. This 'other' has become a sign that is vital to post-revolutionary Iranian identity precisely because the history depicted in this image is missing; the image fails to tell the story of Mohammad-Reza Shah who took his cues from the CIA, hence the American flag.

Tehran is rich in these and other images that portray the value of morality categorized in the abstracted concepts of beauty, honesty, courage, devotion, etc. At times, the messages on these public signs are clearly literal; the black ink on the white background decrees ethics as universally self-evident. The bold and simple aesthetics of the murals reinforce their equally simplistic and absolute morality.

### The (Re)Claiming?

The most striking quality of these murals consists of their site and scale. They are painted on the sides of private and public tall buildings and are visible from the main avenues. The well-designed, well-planned, and well-placed representations are intended to be seen from far and by many, where the Iranian-Shi'a-Republican meta-narrative is made. Tehran's urban planning incorporates the place and motif of these murals as integral to its master map. The proportions, the colours, the figures and their formal relations to each other within the frame are meticulously calculated and assembled. These signs and their meanings are intentional.

Nevertheless, the presence of these murals is also very practical. After the Iran-Iraq War in 1988, great effort and money was spent to turn Tehran into a more agreeable urban place. When President Rafsanjani launched his reform program in 1989, he appointed Gholamhossein Karbaschi as the innovative mayor of Tehran. After a decade of war and revolution, Tehran had 10 million inhabitants who where suffocating in a city designed for 3 million people. Karbaschi managed to bring many positive changes to the urban complex; the improvements are remarkable.<sup>2</sup> The 1979 popular upheaval had imprinted Tehran with an enormous amount of graffiti. Most public surfaces were inscribed with the very voice of the people, buttressing their demand for a just regime. These graffiti remained intact well into the late 1980s. The effort of the mayor to bring aesthetic and urban betterment to the capital included whitewashing public surfaces and adorning them with 'beautiful murals'. The disorderly, spontaneous,

and popular graffiti of the revolutionary days yielded to the orderly, pre-designed, and pre-approved paintings of the post-revolutionary government. The city, at the end of the day, seemed to 'look cleaner'. Needless to say, this kind of iconographic cleaning can also be read as a historic cleansing of parts of Iran's revolution. These new murals certainly make the urban experience 'tidier', they also tell a selective story about the revolution and its ensuing years. Architecturally, the earlier graffiti were at eye-level and accessible. Fluid both in form and meaning, they could mutate overnight. In contrast, these contemporary murals are placed at the uppermost vertical space of the city; they are remote, fixed, and static both in form and meaning.

Iran, however, is not as monolithic as these murals depict. These icons are only glimpses into one of the many stories told within the Iranian urban space. The individual and collective practices that one witnesses in Tehran's public domain testify to a society in constant mutation. In everyday society, young couples occupying the municipal park benches – in a very legal way – subvert the very policies of the clerics by flirting with each other; what they are doing is lawful, but nevertheless undesirable. Also witnessed in the Iranian cinema, this kind of 'bending the rules' or 'stretching the law' is an everyday practice of the ordinary Iranian. These teenagers know quite well that – as artist Krzysztof Wodiczko asserts – when our heritage is simply removed, it prevents critical projections on and off of it. Conversely, when that same so-called 'heritage' is not reclaimed, re-edited, and reproduced, it goes unchecked only to become yet another sphere within which the cohesive power can operate.<sup>3</sup> This kind of individual activation of the public domain is not really the binary opposite of the collective murals, rather they both coexist as competing visions of reality, endlessly subverting each other and contesting their public-ness. The murals and the teenagers become a cultural text endlessly open to interpretations and interplays, persistently exposed to simple use/misuse as two sides of the same coin. As such, by inhabiting the same space, both reveal the intrinsic workings of a democratic society in its process of making, amending, and reclaiming form and meaning. <

### references

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- Adelhkah, Fariba, *Being Modern in Iran*, New York: Columbia University Press and Centre d'Etudes et de Recherches Internationales (2000).
- Wodiczko, Krzysztof, College Art Association 90<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference (21 February 2002) Philadelphia, PA, USA



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### Notes >

- <sup>1</sup> See: Abrahamian, 1993: images.
- <sup>2</sup> See: Adelhkah, 2000: pp.14-15.
- <sup>3</sup> See: Wodiczko, 2002.