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Article

The Creative Resistance: Subverting Hegemony through Art in Iran

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Abstract

This essay examines how contemporary artistic expression in Iran disrupts hegemonic narratives propagated by both domestic and foreign-funded media. Drawing on McLuhan's (1964) media theory and Hall's (1999) encoding/decoding model, it argues that art functions as a participatory, "cool" medium that counters the high-definition, top-down messaging of propaganda. By revitalizing Iranian myths like Kaveh the Blacksmith and the Simorgh, artists reject isolated martyrdom and foreground collective agency and solidarity. Hegel's (1807/1977) concept of sublation shows how art forms like dance can transform grief into unity and resistance. Yet, drawing on Wittgenstein's (1953/2009) "fly-bottle" metaphor, this essay cautions that art may remain confined within the ideologies it opposes—especially when it excludes marginalized voices. Shervin Hajipour's protest anthem "Baraye" (2022), though widely celebrated, is examined as a case where expressive power risks reinforcing exclusion by overlooking underrepresented perspectives. The essay then turns to Žižek's (2006) reading of Bartleby's passive refusal and Havel's (1978/1985) call to "live within the truth," applying these frameworks to My Favorite Cake (Moghaddam & Sanaeeha, 2024) and two acts of musical defiance by Parastoo Ahmadi (Ahmadi, 2024) and Hiwa Seyfizadeh (Iran International, 2025). These acts exemplify a quiet yet radical rejection of performative compliance, unsettling hegemonic authority not through confrontation but through the authentic representation of erased realities. Ultimately, the essay explores whether—and under what conditions—art can move beyond reactive opposition to become a vital tool for unsettling dominant systems and imagining emancipatory futures in politically restricted environments.

Keywords: Resistance art in Iran, propaganda, hegemony, Žižek's "I would prefer not to," Havel's "Living within the Truth," Simorgh, Kaveh the Blacksmith

Introduction

Over the past century, the discourse surrounding Iranian politics has been shaped by two dominant forces: domestic state propaganda under successive regimes (Bajoghli, 2019; Karimi-Hakkak, 1990) and foreign-sponsored propaganda disseminated through international media, including outlets like BBC Persian (Ganjian & Zanuddin, 2018; Gedmin, 2025). These hegemonic forces have often drowned out the voices of everyday people and overshadowed their stories and lived experiences. Doing so helps maintain existing power structures (Rahimi, 2011). Against this backdrop, art has served as a vital outlet, giving voice to the authentic social and cultural sentiments often suppressed behind closed doors (Bankston et al., 2024).

This essay examines how art disrupts dominant hegemonies by creating a dynamic space for individuals to reclaim agency and resist systems of control. Drawing on McLuhan's (1964) media theory and Hall's (1999) encoding/decoding model, I argue that art—as a form of cool media—fosters participatory engagement that contrasts sharply with the top-down communication strategies of hot media often employed by both domestic and foreign powers. Additionally, the essay explores how art has revitalized foundational Iranian myths, such as those of Kaveh and Simorgh, to subvert state-promoted narratives centred on individual heroism and martyrdom—stories easily instrumentalized by the regime or appropriated by external actors. It further shows how art has the potential to rise above polarized forces, bringing them into a synthesis that reshapes both individual consciousness and broader social structures. This dynamic is illustrated through Hegel's concept of *Aufhebung*, or sublation, in which contradiction is not simply resolved but transformed into a higher unity (Hegel, 1807/1977). This dialectical transformation comes to life in the way dance serves as a quiet yet powerful form of resistance in Iran.

While art possesses transformative potential, it can also inadvertently reinforce the very systems it aims to challenge. Shervin Hajipour's song "Baraye" (2022) exemplifies how systemic oppression can constrain the unifying power of artistic expression. Lastly, Žižek's (2006) interpretation of Bartleby's "I would prefer not to" (p. 342) and Havel's (1978/1985) call to "live within the truth" (p. 22) are explored as alternative strategies to resist authoritarian systems by choosing non-compliance over direct confrontation. This approach is strikingly showcased in the recently released film *My Favorite Cake* (Moghaddam & Sanaeeha, 2024) and Parastoo Ahmadi's *Karvansara Concert* (Ahmadi, 2024). Through these discussions, this essay highlights the role of art in Iran as a platform for reclaiming voices and challenging dominant power structures.

Media Hegemony and the Quest for Unmediated Voices in Iran

Over the past century, the discourse surrounding Iranian politics has been shaped by two dominant forces: the domestic state and foreign-funded propaganda. Successive Iranian regimes have strategically used state-controlled media to dominate public discourse, framing this control as essential for national security and regime survival (Brooking & Kianpour, 2020). Gramsci's (1971) theory of hegemony suggests that dominant groups sustain their power through coercive means and by shaping cultural and ideological norms in everyday life. Through control of institutions such as the media and education systems, the ruling class presents its worldview as common sense—natural, legitimate, and beyond question—thereby encouraging the public to accept existing social arrangements as both inevitable and desirable. This strategic use of institutional influence allows them to manufacture consent, making their dominance appear voluntary rather than imposed by force.

During the Pahlavi era, the National Iranian Radio and Television (NIRT) served as a tool for propaganda, promoting the Shah's image while silencing opposition (Karimi-Hakkak, 1990). The Islamic Republic expanded media control through the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB), using it to spread revolutionary ideals and suppress dissent (Bajoghli, 2019). Additionally,

the Iranian state has increasingly utilized cyberspace to consolidate power, control online narratives and monitor dissent (Rahimi, 2011).

This control was particularly evident during the 2022 Mahsa Amini protests, which became known as the Woman, Life, Freedom movement. The death of 22-year-old Mahsa (Jina) Amini, a Kurdish-Iranian woman who was arrested by Iran's morality police for allegedly violating hijab laws, became the catalyst for nationwide protests. Her death in custody ignited a collective outcry against systemic oppression and state violence (Amnesty International, 2023). Initially fueled by outrage over the intersectional oppressions of gender and ethnic discrimination, the Woman, Life, Freedom protests rapidly expanded into a nationwide uprising against state violence, economic inequality, and broader systemic injustices embedded in Iranian society (Afary & Anderson, 2022).

To stifle growing unrest and control the flow of information, the Iranian government tightened its grip on digital spaces through increased internet censorship and surveillance. Sanandaj, Amini's home region and a centre of Kurdish resistance, experienced severe internet shutdowns, while Tehran, as the capital and media hub, faced targeted restrictions to limit visibility and coordination. Nationwide, access to social media applications such as Instagram and WhatsApp was blocked as part of the Iranian government's broader attempt to control information during the protests (Sriram et al., 2022). These actions reflect the regime's broader strategy to preserve control by manipulating digital infrastructure (NetBlocks, 2022). The regime's efforts to control both legacy and digital media serves as a strategy to shape public discourse and guide how people interpret social and political realities. This strategic engineering of discourse reflects Gramsci's (1971) concept of hegemonic power, which is sustained through cultural and ideological influence rather than overt coercion.

Given these circumstances, many Iranians rely on foreign-funded outlets for news coverage and commentary. The 2023 GAMAAN survey found that 54% of respondents watch or listen to Iran International, 42% to Manoto TV, 37% to BBC Persian, and 34% to VOA Persian (Maleki & Tamimi Arab, 2023). In contrast, only 36% engage with state-run IRIB, with 48% never tuning in.

These figures underscore the crucial role of foreign media in providing alternative narratives and commentary that challenge the regime's propaganda. However, these media outlets often rely on foreign state funding, though the funding sources of outlets like Iran International and Manoto are less clear (Farazmand, 2018; MacLeod, 2023). As a result, they are subject to the political agendas of their foreign funders, raising concerns about their editorial independence and autonomy. This dependence can lead to content that aligns more with the interests of their benefactors than with the authentic voices of the Iranian people.

During the 1953 coup in Iran, BBC Persian, as the most prominent non-state media outlet, played a pivotal role in supporting the Shah against Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh, who had initiated a campaign to nationalize Iran's oil industry (Ganjian & Zanuddin, 2018). Mossadegh's plan sought to ensure that the wealth generated from Iran's oil resources benefited the Iranian people rather than foreign oil companies, particularly those based in Britain and the United States (Gasiorowski, 1987). The nationalization threatened the financial interests of Western powers, which had long controlled Iran's oil industry. BBC Persian broadcast content that aligned with the Shah's political interests and those of the Western powers, contributing to the portrayal of Mossadegh as a destabilizing figure and justifying the coup that ultimately reinstated the Shah to power, thereby securing Western economic interests (Ganjian & Zanuddin, 2018).

Similarly, in the 1970s, the United States and the United Kingdom's opposition to Iran's Shah, who had previously served as a reliable Western ally, grew as he sought to leverage Iran's oil wealth to assert national sovereignty and economic independence (Cannon, 2023). This change in direction put the Shah at odds with the strategic interests of the United States and the United Kingdom, both of which depended on steady access to cheap oil and preferred a cooperative, predictable partner in the region (Cannon, 2023). In 1973, the Shah leveraged his position within OPEC to push for a significant increase in oil prices, heightening tensions with Western powers, who saw it as a threat to their control over global energy markets (Cooper, 2011). In response to the changing political landscape, Western powers began to support Ayatollah Khomeini by amplifying his messages, notably through BBC Persian (Ganjian & Zanuddin, 2018). This carefully crafted media campaign

played a key role in elevating Khomeini's public image, portraying him as the heart of the 1979 Islamic Revolution. It paved the way for the rise of the theocratic regime that has shaped Iran's political landscape for nearly fifty years (Ganjian & Zanuddin, 2018). In light of the intersecting forces of domestic and foreign media control in Iran, the following section draws on media theory to explore how art, distinct from more prescriptive forms of communication, engages audiences in participatory and potentially transformative ways.

Art as a Counter-Environment for Dissent

In recent years, art in Iran has emerged as an increasingly vital and independent space for voicing dissent (Karimi, 2023). Marshall McLuhan's (1964) theory of media extensions of human perception offers a compelling framework for understanding how art resists cultural hegemony, not by transmitting fixed ideological content but by reshaping the perceptual environment itself. "The medium is the message" (p. 7), McLuhan famously argued, emphasizing that it is not the content of communication but the form or medium through which it is conveyed that transforms "the scale and form of human association" (p. 9).

McLuhan (1964) viewed artists as especially sensitive to emerging cultural and technological conditions, noting that they "pick up the message of cultural and technological challenge decades before its transforming impact occurs" (p. 65). His concept of the artist extends beyond traditional creators to include anyone with a heightened, holistic awareness of their environment. McLuhan classifies media according to their sensory intensity and the level of audience participation they invite, distinguishing sharply between "hot" and "cool" media. "A hot medium is one that extends one single sense in 'high definition'" and leaves little for the audience to complete. In contrast, a cool medium is "low definition," requiring high levels of engagement and active interpretation (p. 23).

In the context of Iran, state propaganda overwhelmingly employs hot media—televised news, talk shows, drama series, and cinematic productions—that saturate perception and discourage active

interpretation. These are forms that "exclude," as McLuhan (1964) puts it, delivering complete packages of information that intensify single-sense engagement while minimizing dialogic possibility (p. 25). Even foreign-funded outlets operating with opposing political aims often replicate this hot media logic through high-definition, emotionally charged messaging designed to dominate rather than open dialogue.

In contrast, art functions as a cool medium. Its abstract, fragmented, and often ambiguous forms compel the audience to participate in creating meaning. As McLuhan (1964) explains, "Speech is a cool medium of low definition, because so little is given and so much has to be filled in by the listener" (p. 23); the same applies to poetry, visual abstraction, or performative acts that invite interpretation rather than impose meaning. This low-definition character enables art to "include," to "permit casual participation of the senses," and to act as a buffer against the saturation of hot media (p. 32). It opens space for reimagining collective identity and agency—not by countering propaganda in kind, but by inviting the kind of participatory sense-making that hot media foreclose. In McLuhan's terms, the cool medium "demands … involvement in process," resisting the passive consumption characteristic of both state and oppositional propaganda (p. 31). The inherently participatory nature of art positions it as a potent counterforce to the passive reception encouraged by propagandistic hot media.

Stuart Hall's (1999, pp. 513–516) encoding/decoding model furthers this understanding by exploring how audiences interpret media messages. He argues that media producers encode messages with specific meanings that align with dominant-hegemonic positions. However, these codes are not always received as intended. Instead, audiences actively decode these messages, and their interpretations can vary depending on cultural, social, or individual factors. Hall describes three ways audiences engage with media messages: the dominant reading, where the audience fully accepts the intended meaning; the negotiated reading, where the audience partially accepts the message but adapts it to align with their own experiences or beliefs; and the oppositional reading, where the message is interpreted in direct opposition to its intended meaning. This framework emphasizes the audience's active role in interpreting media messages. Art's cool nature fosters

reorientation in audience engagement, moving from dominant readings toward more negotiated or oppositional perspectives. This shift empowers audiences to question prevailing narratives and envision alternative possibilities.

Beyond the realm of art, McLuhan (1964) identifies myth as a perceptual strategy capable of countering the sensory overload and fragmentation characteristic of modern media environments. He defines myth as the "contraction or implosion of any process," suggesting that it condenses complex, temporally extended phenomena into immediate, perceptible forms (p. 25). Within this framework, myth—particularly when expressed through artistic media—serves as a powerful corrective to what McLuhan elsewhere refers to as media narcosis: the numbing of perception that occurs when technological extensions of the self become so immersive that their effects go unnoticed (pp. 41–43). By symbolically collapsing vast cultural or historical processes into concentrated, resonant narratives, myth facilitates intuitive and relational modes of understanding. It offers not just content but form—a means of perceiving the interconnections that hegemonic messaging often obscures or fragments. These works exemplify the transformative power of art and myth as media forms that resist dominant narratives while empowering collective agency. The following section examines how the myths of Kaveh and Simorgh are being reimagined through artistic expressions within the ongoing Woman, Life, Freedom movement in Iran.

Counter-Myths in Art: The Rebirth of Kaveh and Simorgh

Iranian history is marked by individuals who have led resistance movements at profound personal cost, a recurring pattern that reflects a deep cultural narrative of sacrifice. This rhetoric of martyrdom and heroism finds its symbolic roots in Iranian mythology, where legendary figures such as Rostam, Arash, and Siavash embody ideals of courage, self-sacrifice, and moral defiance. In Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* (1010/2006), Rostam is portrayed as a solitary warrior whose unmatched strength and courage are devoted to defending Iran; yet, his battles are deeply personal and often undertaken in isolation, highlighting the burden of heroic resistance (Davidson, 2002; Ferdowsi, 1010/2006). Similarly, Āraš, a heroic archer from Persian mythology, pours all his

strength into a single shot, giving his life as the arrow travels to its furthest limit to set Iran's borders, symbolizing the ultimate act of self-sacrifice for the greater good (Tafazzoli, 1986). Siavash, a legendary prince whose story is most fully preserved in Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*, is portrayed as a figure of profound moral integrity who chooses exile and, ultimately, death rather than betray his ethical convictions. His unjust execution becomes a powerful symbol of innocence, and his legacy glorifies martyrdom in the face of tyranny (Khaleghi-Motlagh, 1996).

This portrayal of dissent centred around isolated acts of heroism has made it exceptionally easy for the regime to suppress opposition, which often remains localized and uncoordinated. Following the 1979 revolution, the regime systematically removed leftist leaders who posed early challenges to its authority (Amnesty International, 2018). The 1998 Chain Murders reinforced this tactic by eliminating intellectuals whose visible defiance made them vulnerable to targeted repression (Human Rights Watch, 1999). During the 2009 Green Movement, the house arrests of figures such as Mir-Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi effectively dismantled the momentum of mass mobilizations (Hafezi, 2025).

This method extended into the diaspora, where prominent exiled figures were similarly singled out and neutralized. The 1992 Mykonos assassinations in Berlin exposed the regime's determination to remove dissident leaders abroad before they could consolidate political influence (Amnesty International, 1997). The killing of Fereydoun Farrokhzad further extinguished a vital cultural voice in exile (Weinthal, 2025). More recently, the execution of Ruhollah Zam (Ardalan, 2020) and persistent plots against Masih Alinejad (U.S. Department of Justice, 2023) exemplify the regime's ongoing strategy of targeting emblematic figures to fragment opposition, leaving it vulnerable, disorganized, and easier to suppress.

This persistent fragmentation has not only weakened grassroots movements, it has also opened avenues for foreign actors to exploit Iranian dissent by positioning political puppets as "opposition leaders" to channel resistance toward serving external strategic interests (Askari, 2018). For instance, during the Woman, Life, Freedom movement, Manoto TV—the most popular

entertainment channel at the time—attempted to portray Reza Pahlavi, the exiled son of Iran's last Shah, as the primary voice of opposition to the regime (Manoto TV, 2022). Through targeted propaganda and nostalgic framing, media outlets such as Manoto TV sought to centralize the Woman, Life, Freedom movement's leadership around Reza Pahlavi, diverting attention from the movement's dynamic and pluralistic character rooted in diverse voices within Iran (Palani, 2023; Ustiashvili, 2025). This narrative positioned Pahlavi's vision, rooted in the legacy of Pahlavism, which emphasized centralized power, militarization, state-led modernization, and cultural homogenization, as an alternative to the inclusive and democratic aspirations of the uprising (Palani, 2023; Ustiashvili, 2025).

Without independent media outlets to challenge this misguided narrative, many Iranians turned to art to more accurately express the true spirit of the Woman, Life, Freedom movement (Sethi & Bankston, 2024). They revived myths like Kaveh and Simorgh through illustrations, poetry, lyrics, plays, and other creative forms, often featuring their images prominently in murals, posters, and protest banners to emphasize pluralism and collective action over individual sacrifice.

During the Woman, Life, Freedom protests, many demonstrators raised the Derafsh Kaviani—the legendary banner of Kaveh the Blacksmith—as a symbol of collective unity and resistance, drawing on its mythological roots in Persian culture as a flag of rebellion against tyranny (Jafari, 2023; Khaleghi-Motlagh, 1994). Kaveh, the blacksmith who led a rebellion against the tyrant Zahhak, symbolizes the power of uniting people against oppression rather than relying on a solitary hero (Ferdowsi, 1010/2006). Similarly, references to Simorgh in art became increasingly frequent as a way to evoke collective strength and solidarity in contrast to individualistic, hero-centred narratives. In *The Conference of the Birds* (Attar, 1177/1984), thirty birds (*si morgh*) journeyed to find the Simorgh and gain its wisdom. By the end of their quest, they discover that the Simorgh is not an external being but a reflection of themselves, collectively embodying the unity and wisdom they sought (Attar, 1177/1984). Revived in Woman, Life, Freedom-inspired art, the myths of both Kaveh and Simorgh served as central counter-narratives to isolated forms of defiance, emphasizing collective effort, mutual support, and diversity.

This artistic reframing, rooted in familiar mythology, distilled the complex demands of the Woman, Life, Freedom movement into accessible, resonant narratives that immediately engaged the public's imagination. By invoking myths like Kaveh and Simorgh, artists symbolically condensed vast historical struggles into intuitive, perceptible forms—what McLuhan (1964) described as myth's power to "implode" complex processes into immediate experiential understanding (p. 25). This creative strategy inspired audiences to reinterpret dominant "hot media" messaging—state-sponsored or foreign-funded—through more negotiated or oppositional readings (Hall, 1999). As a "cool" medium, art disrupted the passive consumption typical of high-definition propaganda, instead fostering participatory modes of engagement and critical reimagining of collective identity. In doing so, artistic expressions resisted hegemonic narratives and reactivated deep cultural memory, positioning myth and art as vital forces in shaping alternative futures.

Art as Dialectical Transformation of Self and Society

Building on insights from McLuhan and Hall, we can examine how art catalyzes transformation within societal structures and individual lives. Hegel's concept of sublation (*Aufhebung*), central to his dialectical framework, explains art's ability to transcend opposing forces (Hegel, 1807/1977). Through its participatory nature, art becomes an environment for sublation, integrating contradictions into a dialectical exchange that synthesizes a higher unity, preserving and transforming its elements.

Art does not remain confined to its material form or initial conception; instead, it evolves by incorporating limitations and oppositions into a unified whole (Hegel, 1807/1977). In doing so, art transcends finite limitations, creating holistic representations that connect deeply with both personal experiences and social dynamics. Through this Hegelian framework, art surpasses mere resistance or expression to envision alternative societal possibilities and foster cultural transformation. This transformative potential of art is demonstrated in the dance example discussed

next, where sublation is embodied as a process of overcoming and elevating human experience, with art becoming a force for profound social and cultural change.

Sublation Through Dance: From Khodanour to the Ekbatan Girls

Since the onset of the Woman, Life, Freedom movement in Iran, dance has emerged as a profound symbol of resistance, challenging not only the regime-imposed cultural portrayal of Iranians but also the broader narrative of repression (Ghadery, 2023). Dance, as an expression of defiance, gained visibility after the death of Khodanur Lajai, a young Baloch man killed during the "Bloody Friday" crackdown in Zahedan in October 2022. A haunting photo of Lajai, bound to a pole with a glass of water placed just out of reach, became a stark symbol of the regime's brutality against religious and ethnic minorities (Azad, 2024). Following his death, a video of him dancing joyfully circulated widely online, prompting others to share similar clips of victims dancing, transforming dance into a poignant form of remembrance and resistance (VOA Farsi, 2022). These dance videos exposed the vibrant, personal realities of Iranians, sharply contrasting with the regime's portrayal of Iranian life as sombre, pious, and rigidly moral.

In November 2022, dance as an act of opposition was further elevated when a woman in traditional Baloch attire performed a dance in Tehran's Azadi (*Azadi* meaning "Liberty") Square to honour Lajai (Alinejad, 2022). Her act, openly defying the regime's bans on public dancing and mandatory hijab laws, quickly went viral, inspiring numerous variations of dance videos filmed at the exact location. Each video redefined dance as a form of resistance, with performers incorporating their stories of oppression and unique styles, including breakdancing, ethnic dances, Sufi whirling, and even TikTok routines. These performances, which were widely shared on social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok, enriched the original message, transforming it into a dynamic and evolving cultural moment (Furlong et al., 2023). Through a Hegelian (1807/1977) lens, dance encapsulates sublation. It mediates the tension between the regime's oppressive narratives and the people's yearning for freedom, reshaping personal grief into collective defiance. This synthesis

bridges personal creativity with broader cultural resistance, making each performance a symbol of unity and transformation.

In a paradoxical response, one of many attempts to co-opt the movement's message appeared in a choreographed dance performance released on Aparat—Iran's state-approved video platform—which featured a version of the Woman, Life, Freedom slogan that replaced *azadi* (freedom) with *agahi* (awareness), reframing its emancipatory call into a nationalist appeal for vigilance and sacrifice (Aparat, 2022). This act, designed to co-opt the rising influence of dance, effectively forced the oppressors to engage in the very medium they sought to suppress as a measure to maintain cultural relevance. Through Hegel's dialectical framework, this can also be seen as a moment of sublation, in which the regime's attempt to neutralize dissent instead integrates the transformative power of dance into its own counteraction (Hegel, 1807/1977). Far from suppressing the subversive potential of dance, the regime inadvertently accentuated dance's unifying and catalytic role, validating its capacity to transcend repression, mediate societal contradictions, and inspire cultural change.

As these dance videos spread on social media, a new dialectic emerged between the people and TikTok, a platform that not only enabled the sharing of dance videos but also connected Iranians to the world. The global phenomenon of TikTok dances further amplified this dynamic, which reached a critical moment in March 2023 when five young women from Tehran's Ekbatan neighbourhood filmed themselves performing a TikTok dance to the song "Calm Down" by Rema and Selena Gomez (Rasool, 2023). Their performance, in modern crop tops that reflected Western fashion trends and revealed their waists, boldly defied the regime's strict moral codes and hijab laws. Reclaiming public space in Ekbatan, a neighbourhood with a long history of dissent, they turned their surroundings into a stage for resistance. Released on International Women's Day, the video went viral, inspiring numerous similar dance videos globally and across Iran. Although the young women were detained, forced to apologize, and coerced into recording a video confession, the regime's attempt to shame them only amplified the symbolic power of their defiance.

In Hegelian (1807/1977) terms, the regime's suppression of the women's actions paradoxically led to the synthesis of their dance into a more potent symbol of defiance. By attempting to suppress the act, the authorities inadvertently amplified its significance, transforming it from a fleeting gesture into a powerful emblem of resistance. By staging sanitized performances on Aparat, the regime paradoxically advanced the dialectic—adopting the very medium it sought to suppress and thus affirming dance's cultural power as it struggled to remain relevant. In addition, each recreation of their dance in solidarity further evolved into acts that not only preserved the essence of the original but also introduced new dimensions, adding layers of meaning and significance. This ongoing dialectical process continues to redefine dance in Iran, transforming it into a powerful medium for confronting oppression and inspiring societal transformation.

Art as 'Oppositional Opportunity'

Art holds the transformative potential to challenge and reshape cultural paradigms, as explored by Hall(1999) and McLuhan (1964), while reconciling contradictions through the dialectical synthesis of opposing forces, as described by Hegel (1807/1977). However, this potential carries a significant risk: If confined within existing ideological frameworks, it may inadvertently reinforce the very structures it seeks to dismantle, becoming trapped within the system it opposes and ultimately sustaining its boundaries. Derek Briton (2024), an Associate Professor in the Faculty of Humanities & Social Sciences at Athabasca University, refers to this phenomenon as "oppositional opportunity," where acts of resistance, rather than dismantling foundational structures, merely react to them. By failing to address the deeper ideological systems at play, such resistance risks perpetuating oppressive dynamics under a different guise.

Drawing on Wittgenstein's (1953/2009, p. 103) "fly-bottle" metaphor—which illustrates how individuals, like a fly trapped in a bottle, become ensnared in the self-imposed limitations of language and thought, unable to perceive solutions beyond the conceptual boundaries they inhabit—art too can become confined within such epistemic structures. It may mistake its gestures of resistance for liberation, while in reality, it remains bound to the very frameworks it seeks to

oppose. Briton (2024) warns that certain forms of resistance, though appearing autonomous, may reinforce rather than disrupt dominant systems. In this light, opposition that does not challenge a system's foundational ideologies risks reinforcing the very binaries and structures it aims to dismantle. A compelling example of this dynamic is Shervin Hajipour's song, which became an anthem for the Woman, Life, Freedom movement in Iran in 2022 (Hajipour, 2022).

Opposition within the Fly-Bottle: Shervin Hajipour's "Baraye"

In 2022, at the peak of the Women, Life, Freedom movement in Iran, Shervin Hajipour's song "Baraye" emerged as a powerful manifesto for the uprising (Hajipour, 2022). The title, translated in Persian to "For" or "Because of," was inspired by a viral Twitter (now X) trend, where Iranians used the hashtag #womanlifefreedom to share their reasons for protesting the regime. The aim was to spread the hashtag and raise global awareness about Iran's situation. Shervin Hajipour collected these tweets and turned them into powerful lyrics, encapsulating the grievances that fueled the uprising. Lines like "For the freedom to dance in the streets …," "For the fear we feel when we kiss …," "For the imprisoned elites …," "For the collapsing economy …," and "For the polluted air" portrayed widespread frustrations and hope for change (Lyricstranslate, 2022). Released on Instagram on September 28, 2022, "Baraye" garnered immense attention, with over 40 million views in just 48 hours. Predictably, authorities quickly arrested Hajipour, forcing him to take down the song (Tayebi, 2022). Despite these efforts, "Baraye" continued circulating online, symbolizing resistance and gaining global recognition. It even won the Grammy Award for Best Song for Social Change the following year (Recording Academy, 2023).

While "Baraye" struck a chord with many Iranians, it also received criticism for excluding the experiences of marginalized groups, particularly those in Kurdistan. Behrouz Boochani, a Kurdish-Iranian journalist, recognized the song's impact but remarked, "I truly could not connect with this song because it had no link to the streets of Kurdistan" (Boochani, 2023). This critique sparked a broader discussion about excluding marginalized experiences from the widespread rhetoric of grievance and dissent—an ongoing conversation. This example demonstrates what Derek Briton

refers to as *oppositional opportunity*. While "Baraye" powerfully challenged the Iranian state's oppressive structures, it also echoed the shortcomings of an ideological system that excludes ethnic and religious minorities. This example reveals how even oppositional art can inadvertently replicate or even reinforce systemic oppression.

Using Wittgenstein's (1953/2009, p. 103) "fly-bottle" metaphor, "Baraye" can be understood as resistance that, while transformative in its immediate impact, remained entangled within the boundaries set by the state's cultural and ideological frameworks. The song's reliance on a social media-driven campaign limited its reach, as access to digital platforms is uneven across Iran (Freedom House, 2023). Unequal internet access, particularly in marginalized regions like Kurdistan and Baluchistan, excluded certain voices from the tweets and, consequently, the lyrics. Instead of integrating the fragmented realities of Iran's diverse population, the song, to some extent, reinforced binaries of inclusion and exclusion that sustain systemic inequities. Moving beyond reactive responses requires strategies that directly challenge and dismantle the systemic foundations of power. Žižek's (2006) analysis of Herman Melville's (1853) *Bartleby, the Scrivener*, provides an intriguing framework for such disruption, as explored in the next section.

Art as a Refusal of Hegemony

Rather than reacting within the parameters of dominant structures, meaningful resistance may require a refusal to engage with them on their own terms. This form of subversion involves a withdrawal from the logic of oppositional affirmation—a strategy explored by Slavoj Žižek (2006) through Herman Melville's (1853) *Bartleby, the Scrivener*. Melville's story centers on Bartleby, a law clerk whose quiet refusal to perform expected tasks—encapsulated in his repeated phrase, "I would prefer not to"—baffles his employer and disrupts the smooth operation of a Wall Street office. Bartleby's resistance is not overt rebellion; he does not argue, protest, or attempt reform. Instead, he opts out, unsettling the system through a passive yet persistent refusal.

Žižek (2006) interprets this refusal as a model for a different kind of politics that escapes the dialectic of resistance and incorporation. Bartleby, Žižek argues, "does not negate the predicate; rather, he affirms a nonpredicate: he does not say that he does not want to do it; he says that he prefers (wants) not to do it." This subtle but significant distinction marks a shift "from the politics of 'resistance' or 'protestation,' which parasitizes upon what it negates, to a politics which opens up a new space outside the hegemonic position and its negation" (p. 381). Rather than opposing the dominant order in ways that risk reproducing its terms, this mode of refusal suspends participation entirely. In art, such a stance resists being absorbed into the structures it seeks to critique, not by attacking them directly, but by making their logic inoperative. It gestures toward alternative imaginaries that cannot be co-opted because they do not speak the system's language at all.

This logic of refusal—neither confronting nor complying but stepping outside the system's symbolic terms—parallels Václav Havel's (1978/1985) conception of dissent in *The Power of the Powerless*. Havel recounts the story of a greengrocer who quietly resists an authoritarian regime not through protest but by refusing to display a political slogan in his shop window—an act expected of every citizen as a demonstration of loyalty (p. 22). This refusal may appear trivial, but it breaks from the performative rituals that maintain the illusion of public consensus.

According to Havel (1978/1985), these rituals are not genuine expressions of belief, but coerced performances rooted in fear of standing out, retribution, and exclusion. It is not conviction but compliance that drives participation. When repeated across society, these small acts of conformance uphold the regime's appearance of legitimacy. However, as Havel contends, even a modest refusal can unravel this illusion. As Havel writes, "By breaking the rules of the game, he has disrupted the game as such. He has exposed it as a mere game. He has shattered the world of appearances, the fundamental pillar of the system" (p. 23). Withdrawing from performative compliance reveals the system's dependence on collective complicity and exposes its fragility. This mode of resistance differs from traditional confrontation, which often risks reinforcing the structures it seeks to dismantle. Instead, as the following example illustrates, it challenges the very

foundations of hegemony by refusing to participate in its logic, opening a space for transformation through nonparticipation.

Living within the Truth: The Subversive Power of My Favorite Cake

Within the contemporary cultural landscape of Iran, few works of art embody Václav Havel's (1978/1985) concept of "living within the truth" and Bartleby's "I would prefer not to" (Melville, 1853) better than the film *My Favorite Cake* (Moghaddam & Sanaeeha, 2024). Directed by the married duo Maryam Moghaddam and Behtash Sanaeeha, the film tells the story of Mahin, a 70-year-old widow in Tehran who decides to rekindle her love life. This narrative boldly challenges the regime's portrayal of women as secondary and submissive citizens. This challenge is especially true for older women, often reduced to depictions of piety and helplessness, characterized as self-sacrificing, passive, and stripped of personal desires or agency. Every detail in the film—its settings, wardrobe, dialogues, and character portrayals—rejects the regime-imposed depiction of Iranian life often seen in state-approved media. Instead, it embraces an authentic picture of everyday life in Iran, liberated from the disciplinary gaze of state cameras and the oppressive blade of censorship. The film rejects the regime's narrative not through explicit political declarations but by authentically representing private realities often erased in Iranian state media. It depicts women unveiled indoors, characters consuming alcohol, and scenes of dancing. These offences are all punishable by fines or lashes under Iranian law and are strictly prohibited on Iranian TV and cinema (Islamic Parliament Research Center, 2013).

Through its choice to reject the regime-dictated portrayal of life, the film "lives within the truth," exposing the glaring disparity between public restrictions and private truths (Havel, 1978/1985). When interviewed about how they arrived at such a bold and unprecedented decision, fully aware of the consequences it would entail, the directors stated, "We did not want to continue lying about Iranian women" (DW Persian, 2024). In their public statement at the 2024 Berlin International Film Festival—read aloud in their absence due to a travel ban—the directors reaffirmed this stance, declaring that "this time, we decided to cross all of the restrictive red lines and accept the

consequences of our choice to paint a real picture of Iranian women – images that have been banned in Iranian cinema ever since the Islamic Revolution" (Moghaddam & Sanaeeha, 2024, February 16). In further defiance, the filmmakers bypassed Iran's official release channels, avoiding state censorship entirely. Instead, they presented the film internationally, where it garnered critical acclaim, including the FIPRESCI Award at the 74th Berlin International Film Festival, the Silver Hugo in the New Directors Competition at the 2024 Chicago International Film Festival, and several other accolades (Chicago International Film Festival, 2024; FIPRESCI, 2024; Momeni, 2024).

In the true spirit of Havel's (1978/1985) call to "live within the truth," the filmmakers chose the restrained refusal of Bartleby's "I would prefer not to" (Melville, 1853) over reactionary political rhetoric. In an interview with Deutsche Welle Persian (2023), the filmmakers explained that the script for the film was completed before the emergence of the Woman, Life, Freedom movement—a time already marked by widespread civil unrest and violent crackdowns by riot police. Although they had the opportunity to revise the script to include a more explicit political message before production began, they deliberately chose to preserve the original version, stating they "did not want to continue lying about Iranian women". This decision reflects their resolve to rise above reactionary resistance, opting instead for a candid expression that heightens the subtle impact of their resistance.

As anticipated, the Iranian regime censored *My Favorite Cake* and imposed harsh penalties on its creators. The film was banned from screening in Iran, and its directors, Maryam Moghaddam and Behtash Sanaeeha, received 14-month prison sentences suspended for five years and additional fines. Their passports were confiscated, preventing them from attending international events, including the film's premiere at the Berlin International Film Festival (Dalton, 2025). Despite these challenges, *My Favorite Cake* deeply resonated with Iranian audiences, many of whom felt their real lives were reflected on screen for the first time.

Perhaps inspired by the unapologetic defiance seen in *My Favorite Cake*, other Iranian artists have also begun asserting their creative and civil liberties. On December 11, 2024, Iranian singer and composer Parastoo Ahmadi live-streamed her *Karvansara Concert* on YouTube, performing without the state-mandated hijab and in direct violation of Iranian laws that prohibit women from singing solo in public (Ahmadi, 2024; Islamic Parliament Research Center, 2013). The performance, held in an empty historic caravanserai, quickly went viral and was praised for its artistic courage and cultural significance. Shortly after, Ahmadi and two accompanying musicians were arrested and charged with violating "legal and religious standards" and producing unauthorized content. She was detained for two weeks and released on a 3 billion toman (approximately $38,500) bail (Mehrnami, 2024). In her public statement, Ahmadi expressed, "This is a right I could not ignore—singing for the land I passionately love" (Mehrnami, 2024). Her musical defiance has since been recognized as a landmark moment in Iran's broader struggle for artistic freedom and women's rights.

Another notable instance of female artistic defiance occurred on February 27, 2025, when Iranian singer Hiwa Seyfizadeh, also performing without the state-mandated hijab, was arrested mid-performance during a live concert at Emarat Rooberoo Hall in Tehran. In its report, Iran International (2025) cites music journalist Bahman Babazadeh, who noted that although the event had received prior authorization, the presence of a mixed-gender audience violated Iran's ban on solo female performances. Seyfizadeh was detained on stage by security forces, and the venue was promptly shut down. She was released on bail on March 1, but authorities have yet to confirm whether formal charges will follow.

Much like the defiance exemplified by *My Favorite Cake*, the artistic resistance shown by Ahmadi and Seyfizadeh exposes the fractures in the regime's illusion of cultural control. These acts of authenticity—performed not in overt confrontation but through intimate, everyday expressions of truth—challenge the performative compliance imposed by state ideology. By publicly refusing to conceal realities such as women singing, dancing, or living with their hair uncovered, these artists reveal the profound disconnect between the state's rigid dictates and the lived experiences of its

people. In doing so, they undermine the regime's symbolic authority at its core, asserting creative freedom not through grand rebellion but through the quiet, powerful insistence on representing life as it is.

Conclusion

Art in Iran occupies a pivotal space in resisting narratives shaped by both the regime and foreign-funded propaganda. Drawing on theoretical frameworks from McLuhan, Hall, Hegel, and Žižek, this essay has explored how artistic expression operates not only as creative output but as a potentially subversive medium capable of transforming perception, fostering collective identity, and unsettling ideological control. Reimagined through art, myths and archetypes like Kaveh and Simorgh challenge dominant paradigms of isolated martyrdom, offering instead collective, life-affirming visions of resistance. At the same time, dance has emerged as a powerful vehicle for dialectical transformation, translating grief and constraint into public acts of unity.

However, as Hajipour's "Baraye" illustrates, art can also remain caught in systemic exclusion cycles, reproducing the silences it intends to break. The quiet defiance embodied by *My Favorite Cake*, Parastoo Ahmadi's Karvansara Concert, and Hiwa Seyfizadeh's interrupted performance illustrates an alternative mode of resistance—one that neither conforms to state spectacle nor engages in direct confrontation but instead disrupts power by representing life truthfully and without apology. These examples suggest that art may offer a means of refusal that disorients hegemonic expectations and opens space for imagining otherwise. However, the acts highlighted in this essay often stem from relative privilege—access to digital platforms, global visibility, or international recognition—that many marginalized communities in Iran do not share. This disparity prompts further inquiry: Whose resistances remain invisible? What forms of expression emerge from Iran's most excluded geographies and subjectivities? Moreover, how might they alter our understanding of what counts as subversion?

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