

BRIEF REPORTS

Disability, Art and Potentiality: Reframing Disability as a Metaphor for Potentiality in the Islamic Republic of Iran

Pieter Verstraete¹, Peter Van Goethem²

1. Post-doctoral researcher at the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences,
Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Belgium.

2. Director and Producer for the independent production company Freshwater Films, Belgium.

ABSTRACT

Background: *There is a lack of studies examining the meanings attributed to disability in Eastern contexts. This is especially true in the case of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Studies – accessible for non-Farsi readers – dealing with the existence and position of persons with disabilities in contemporary Iran are rare.*

Purpose: *The present study is part of an investigative journalistic project submitted to and approved by the Fund Pascal Decroos for Investigative Journalism. The aim of the project was to discover if and how progressive Iranian artists were able to work and express critical ideas in contemporary Iran.*

Method: *Based on a journalistic stay of five weeks in the cities of Tehran, Isfahan, Shiraz and Yazd, the authors attempt to present a particular and up till now neglected perspective on disability in Iranian society. Interviews were conducted with contemporary Iranian artists, including painters, photographers and film directors to see how the bodily reality of disability was transformed into a meaningful, effective and efficient metaphorical instrument.*

Results: *Some of the Iranian painters, directors and photographers considered the artistic representations of disability as a powerful means to engage in present-day political and religious public debate. For the artists the symbolic representations of disability enabled them to express their particular world-views and give voice to their creative insights. For some, war-related disabilities mirrored the cruelty of military hostilities; for others it symbolized the struggle for freedom in Iranian society since the very beginnings of the Twentieth century. One of the results that came out of this journalistic investigation is that some*

Corresponding author: Pieter Verstraete, Post-doctoral researcher, Centre for the History of Education, Pedagogical Institute 03.12, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Belgium. Email: pieter.verstraete@ppw.kuleuven.be

Iranian artists turn towards disability issues and persons with disabilities in order to continue to publicly express their particular world-views.

Conclusion: *Given that the interviewed artists belonged to rather progressive circles of Iranian society, these findings are limited and cannot be generalized, but reflect one aspect of the manifold ways persons with disabilities are represented in contemporary society. In order to provide a complete view on the divergent positions of, and daily life circumstances faced by, persons with disabilities in Iran much more research is needed.*

Keywords: *Iran, disability, resistance, potentiality, metaphor, art*

INTRODUCTION

Disability, Art and the Islamic Republic of Iran

Up till now the majority of published disability studies focus primarily on Western societies. Eastern perspectives on disability-related issues still remain largely unwritten and/or inaccessible for English-speaking scholars. According to Miles, for example, “disability in Eastern religions has generated very little published material and ... the dominant voices of European and North American debates on disability issues proceed with a common underpinning of (post)-Judaean-Christian ethics and philosophy” (Miles 1995, 49). As a case in point we can refer to the existing knowledge with regard to disability and persons with disabilities in contemporary Iranian society. Their life stories and experiences remain largely unknown to an English speaking academic audience. There are, however, a few studies that have been focusing on the intersection of disability and Iranian society. While some of these aimed at exploring the way disabilities are perceived by Iranian communities living in Western countries like Canada and Belgium (Albrecht et al 2009; Dossa 2009), others have been focusing on the history of disability and the status of intellectual, mental or visual disabilities in contemporary Iranian society (Ghasemzadeh et al 2008, Samadi 2008; Askari et al 2010, Hemmati et al 2010, Kashani-Sabet 2010).

Despite the rarity of English publications dealing directly with the situation of persons with disabilities in Iran the existing literature indicates that there is reason to believe 1) that the prevalence of acquired disabilities due to road traffic accidents is rather high in Iranian society and 2) that the discourses by means of which one represents those disabled by war and those who became otherwise disabled differ to a large extent. First of all, Iranian traffic is categorized as one

of the most dangerous on earth. Every year approximately 25.000 Iranians are killed due to a traffic accident. Many others have to face surgical operations, processes of rehabilitation and/or life lasting disabilities (Ardalan et al 2009). Secondly, due to the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s many Iranian male soldiers became disabled (Hiro 1989; Karsch 2009). Besides the deadly cost of death of 1 million Iranian people the Iranian government and the local families had to face the return of a considerable number of soldiers with a disability. In contemporary Iranian Islamic culture these disabled soldiers are celebrated and considered 'living martyrs' (Khomeini, 2005). The special religious status of these men led to the establishment of some financial and symbolic advantages for the disabled soldiers as well as their offspring. Despite this special treatment and the special position attributed to disabled soldiers, however, many of them seem hardly to be able to make both ends meet (Kashani-Sabet 2010).

Besides the widespread presence of disabilities in the Iranian population, disability is also said to be a reality for the highest leader of Iranian Shi'ite religion, which also opens a window to the emerging cultural re-interpretations of disability. In contrast to so-called social models of disability, these cultural approaches do not focus so much on the ways persons with disabilities are oppressed and discriminated, but rather emphasize the manifold positive aspects and possibilities intrinsically bound to experiences of disability (Devlieger et al 2007; Verstraete 2011).

The present study is part of an investigative journalistic project submitted to and approved by the Fund Pascal Decroos for Investigative Journalism. The aim of the project was to discover if and how progressive Iranian artists were able to work and express critical ideas in contemporary Iran. The Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance is the pivotal agency in the implementation of guidelines for artists. This Ministry issues censorship-measures and seeks to control the cultural production of all artistic disciplines in public life; artists who want to exhibit paintings, direct a movie or publish photographs have to submit a detailed proposal to this organization. After being evaluated by officials the artist gets a decision letter that approves or disapproves the submitted project.

METHOD

The data presented here are based on a journalistic stay of five weeks in the cities of Tehran, Isfahan, Shiraz and Yazd. Interviews were conducted with contemporary Iranian artists, including painters, photographers and film directors to see how

the bodily reality of disability was transformed into a meaningful, effective and efficient metaphorical instrument. All of the artists interviewed belonged to progressive parts of Iranian society. Two of the three interviews we will refer to in this article, with a painter, a photographer and a director, were conducted in English. For the other one we made use of a translator. All of the interviews were registered on a small Flip-cam

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Artificial Body Parts and Freedom

The work of Iranian painter Ms. E., illustrates well how disabilities are being represented artistically in such a way that it allows artists in a way to evade the cultural censorship and publicly stimulate debates dealing with sensitive topics such as war, freedom of expression and political change. In contrast to what is commonly thought in the West, the resulting pieces of art are not relegated to the artistic underground, but can be exhibited in public. Since more than 30 years the artificial body has been the central theme of Ms. E.'s work. Her paintings time and again feature amputated bodies and mutilated body parts. If for the official governmental organizations in charge of cultural censorship the representation of physical disabilities might be interpreted as a celebration of the 'living martyrs', Ms. E. renders a completely different explanation for the central place attributed to disabilities in her work:

"Most of the time I paint body parts. I never paint a complete body. Sometimes I paint a body without legs, sometimes hands and legs without body, sometimes heads without body. I do know why. I have thought about this many times ... all those atrocities that happened in this country: the revolution, the war with Iraq and the prosecution of leftist intellectuals. We absolutely had no idea. Regular people did not know. There were no mobile phones, computers or internet. I suppose that all generations who lived here do feel the shortcomings and impairments that resulted from those massacres. I believe they have become a part of ourselves now ... All those events affected so many body parts of myself and others that we all in a certain sense have become disabled".

For Ms. E. physical disabilities symbolize the cruelty of Iranian history and mirror in a subtle way the feelings that progressive Iranians have towards contemporary tendencies to radicalize some interpretations of 'Islamic government'. Actually, according to Ms. E., the representation of disabilities has the power to remind

the spectator of the continuous struggle for freedom of the Iranian population since the beginning of the Twentieth century. Showing us a large canvas that was painted just after the elections of 2009 and which figures a number of artificial legs carrying a number of artificial arms into a red horizon she continued:

“This painting for instance. I painted it just after the beginning of the Green Revolution ... This painting deals with our history. For me this amputated body symbolizes the history of freedom in my country. It’s very symbolic. It’s about 150 years struggle of the Iranian population for freedom”.

Picturing the Mutilated Body

Besides Iranian painters Iranian photographers have also been focusing on disabilities and persons with disabilities. One of them is Mr. M., who used to be a war photographer for the Islamic Republic News Agency during the Iran-Iraq war. Very soon after the end of the war Mr. M. realized that for many Iranians the war was not over yet. Not only were there many soldiers that came back from the war disabled, many civilians too were confronted with unexploded devices and consequently lost a limb or had to amputate an arm many years after the guns had fallen silent. So from the 90’s onwards Mr. M. devoted himself to making photographs of those civilians and soldiers who became disabled due to (the consequences of) armed hostilities between Iran and Iraq. In one of his pictures, for example, Mr. M. portrays a young girl from the Kerner-e Ghar region who was severely injured when a landmine from the war exploded next to her. Due to the explosion the girl lost one arm, one leg and only could make use of one eye thereafter. For twelve years now Mr. M. has been active documenting the lives of many similar stories and tries to reconstruct photographically the way those disabled by war related detonations take up their lives again.

By means of pictures like this Mr. M. hopes to contribute to the coming into being of a world without war. All of the pictures convey a universal message of peace and criticize (the consequences of) warfare in general. Although all of the pictures try to visualize the enormous resilience of disabled civilians and their courage to carry on with their lives, Mr. M.’s picture of a young deaf and blind boy probably realizes this the most. This picture is about a young boy who lost his arms, legs and vision due to the explosion of a landmine while playing football in his village. Despite his multiple disabilities the boy exhibits an enormous will power and succeeded in learning to read Braille by means of his lips alone. This picture taken by Mr. M. displays the daily battles the

disabled civilians have to undergo in order to create a world where their voices also are being heard.

Iranian Cinema and Blindness

The pictures of persons with disabilities taken by Mr. M. clearly aim at creating a world without cruelties and warfare. Disability in this way not only is something that is oppressed and discriminated, but also holds the possibility for triggering public debates about the need for a more humane way of dealing with each other and tackling our problems. It is this potentiality that also can be encountered in the representation of persons with disabilities in Iranian cinema. Some of the directors we encountered during our travel through Iran told us that in many Iranian movies one could encounter persons with disabilities. *Two Legged Horse* of Samira Makhmalbaf, *A Time for Drunken Horses* of Bahman Ghobadi, *The Color of Paradise* and *The Willow Tree* of Majid Majidi, *Kandahar* of Mohsen Makhmalbaf and *Leili is With Me* of Kamal Tabrizi are only a few examples of movies wherein persons with disabilities play an important role. All of the directors we interviewed confirmed that the censorship of Iranian cinema during the 80s was in the hands of a blind man who decided which movies could be directed or broadcasted and which parts had to be censored. Very soon however, also in Iranian cinema, persons with disabilities also would be given a rather different role.

One of the directors interviewed made clear that some of his colleagues seemed to make use of disabilities and persons with disabilities in order to discuss and open up reigning interpretations of Islamic faith. An example of this, he said, could be found in the movie *The Color of Paradise*. In this movie the relationship between a father and his blind son is pictured after the blind boy returns home from the capital city where he lived in an institution. Being confronted with the rejecting attitude of his father the boy at a certain moment starts to question the existence of Allah. Here it becomes clear that the director makes use of the typical characteristics of one particular disability, namely blindness, in order to question the existence of God. In a way this reminds us of the book *Letter on the Blind for the Use of Those Who See* where the French philosopher Denis Diderot makes use of a fictitious conversation between a blind mathematician and a Catholic priest in order to express his ideas on science and religion (Diderot, 1749). Blindness, being used as a metaphor in a French book dating back to the Enlightenment or presented in a recently released Iranian movie, thus seems to hold in itself the promise or the potentiality of a conversation and change to come.

CONCLUSIONS

In this article we have tried to make a small contribution to the existing knowledge with regard to the meanings attributed to persons with disabilities in Iranian society. Given the primarily Western orientation of contemporary disability studies and the fact that many Iranian disability-related publications are not accessible for English readership, there is little known about the position of persons with disabilities in Iranian society. On the basis of interviews conducted during a journalistic stay in the Islamic Republic of Iran we have found out that some Iranian artists do represent persons with disabilities in a particular way. Persons with disabilities are transformed into symbolic figures that enable Iranian artists to publicly trigger discussion about sensitive topics like politics, freedom of expression and religion. If these findings of course cannot be generalized and much more research is needed with regard to the daily life circumstances met by persons with disabilities living in Iran, our data nevertheless show that disabilities and persons with disability in the East also can trigger a critical potential towards life, politics and the world.

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