

Breakout Session 4: Music and Dance

1) Laudan NOOSHIN Hip-hop Tehran: Putting Marginalised Voices on the Global Map

Abstract

As one of the most prominent cultural symbols of the Shah's modernisation project before 1979, all western and western-style popular music was targeted and banned in the immediate aftermath of the revolution: first, because of its associations with the previous regime; second, because of the allegedly crude and explicit song lyrics and sensuous dance movements, which were deemed unIslamic and potentially corrupting to young people; and finally, because this music indexed western cultural imperialism and decadence. Banning popular music conveniently served to confirm both the Islamic and the anti-imperialist credentials of the new regime.

Almost twenty years later, as part of the post-1997 cultural thaw, certain kinds of popular music became tolerated (and in some cases promoted) by the government, something which led, rather unexpectedly, to the emergence of a grassroots alternative popular music scene in Iran. Now, thirty years on from the revolution, a relatively new musical voice has started to emerge. Against all predictions, the fastest growing popular style in Iran in recent years has been hip-hop, with a large number of artists using rap to voice socially- (and sometimes politically-) engaged lyrics. Most operate without a government permit, reaching audiences through the Internet, often through alternative Iranian music sites such as zirzamin.se. A search on YouTube brings up dozens of Iranian rappers, both at home¹ and in diaspora. Within Iran, what is particularly interesting is the number of artists emerging from outside the privileged social milieu of north Tehran hitherto most closely associated with westernised popular culture. Increasingly, singers from less affluent backgrounds are coming to the fore, often from the more religious and traditional areas of south Tehran and the provinces, something which would have been unthinkable a decade ago.

This paper will focus on female rap artist Nazila who forms half of the duo Ariyaspina Girlz. Nazila has received support from the Omid-e Mehr Foundation, a Tehran-based charity which helps young women from disadvantaged (and often abusive) backgrounds by offering educational opportunities and vocational training as well as therapeutic support. The women are encouraged to find creative outlets to express their fears, their hopes and their aspirations. Through discussion of one song, I will explore a number of questions concerning musical style and meaning, questions which in the case of Nazila intersect with issues of class and gender as well as those concerning national identity in an increasingly global environment. In the context of a growing global hip-hop culture on the one hand, and on the other the denigration of hip-hop by official discourses within Iran, how does a musical style so closely associated with western popular culture become embraced by a young woman on the margins of Iranian society? To what extent are hip-hop's (original) meanings as a form of self-expression for the disempowered significant here and in what ways does the increasing popularity of hip-hop in Iran resonate with the social meanings of hip-hop elsewhere around the globe? And what does it mean that thirty years after a revolution that banned all forms of western(ised) popular music, that young people from traditionally religious and conservative backgrounds should be turning to hip-hop to make their voices heard?

Biography

2) Nahid SIAMDOUST

Halal or Haram? Islam and Music in Post-Revolutionary Iran

Abstract

My paper examines the agents, structures and factors that have been decisive in shaping the field of musical production, distribution and consumption in post-revolutionary Iran, with particular attention paid to the first decade of the Islamic Republic. Upon the formation of the new government in 1979, revolutionary cultural committees were formed to direct and control the shape, content and distribution of all forms of cultural production, chief among them music, as music's legitimacy has long been contested within Islam. Hence, the area of musical production provides a particularly fruitful field of analysis for the examination of the contestation, adaptation and transfer of cultural symbols and values. Based broadly on Pierre Bourdieu's notion of the field and habitus, my research moves between two integrated levels of analysis, whereby a picture is drawn of the mutually conditioning structures and agents within the field. Drawing on my fieldwork in Iran, I look at some of the most controversial points of debate – such as the female voice, “halal” music as promoted through state radio and television, as well as the place and role of Western beats and music – and while examining the policies that were implemented (structures), highlight the most influential decision makers (agents) and how their views were informed. Based on my interviews as well as records at Iran's Supreme Council for Cultural Revolution and the Voice and Vision of the Islamic Republic of Iran, I examine the role of religious versus other cultural considerations, and the justifications utilized for these decisions.

Finally, my paper will study the broad social and cultural impacts of these policies in Iran's post-revolutionary decades as they relate to music, and briefly examine a few cases where government positions have been negotiated and contested by musicians and consumers alike. By highlighting religious and cultural idioms as contested sites where identities are constructed and projected, I hope to gain greater insight into the complex relationship between reception, negotiation, production, rejection and reproduction of values and beliefs in a country where the Islamic government promotes an official discourse.

Biography

Nahid Siamdoust is a doctoral candidate in Modern Middle Eastern Studies at St. Antony's College, Oxford University. She holds a B.A. in Political Science and Art History from Barnard College, and a Master's in International Affairs from Columbia University. Before returning to academia, Nahid worked as TIME magazine's correspondent in Iran, and last joined Al Jazeera English in 2006 to work on the channel's global launch out of Doha. Her thesis examines the field of music production in post-revolutionary Iran.

3) Bronwen ROBERTSON

'''I am an original Iranian man!'' Skinny jeans, Persian carpets, and indie rock: expressions of identity in Tehran's unofficial rock music.'

Abstract

Tehran's unofficial rock musicians are expressing anti-mainstream identities through global media. They have appropriated global music sub-genres and online networking communities (Facebook, Myspace, Yahoo360) and are raising questions with their music about what it means to be "Iranian" for youth in the country's capital city.

This paper examines the aural and aesthetic components of some of Tehran's most contemporary unofficial rock music. The author analyses the artists' aesthetics, as they represent themselves through web pages, album cover designs, and their clothing. A discussion of the composition techniques

employed by the musicians, the texts they write and the genre or genres they adopt to convey their messages speaks volumes about what it means to this select group of youth to be 'Iranian', examining how their everyday lives are manifested in sonic form.

A presentation of findings concluded by the author after a year's fieldwork in Tehran (2007-2008) sheds new light on today's Tehrani youth. After speaking with, performing with, and living with Tehran's unofficial musicians, the author muses about inspiration and ingenuity, being 'global', fashion trends and friends. Through an examination of music by the Yellow Dogs, Hypernova, 127, Aluminium MGS and Bijan Moosavi this paper looks at a local manifestation of a global genre and challenges pre-conceived notions of what it means to be 'Iranian'.

Hypernova, for example, unsubtly declares in the second verse of 'Viva la Resistance' from their debut album *Through the Chaos*, "Your theocratic neo-fascist ideology is only getting in the way of my biology". In the bridge, singer 'King Raam' purports, "I will not bow down to your god, this is not who I am" (2008). The Yellow Dog's sing, "I am an original Iranian man, every day I used to f*** my camel maybe ten, there's oil in my veins, suicide bomber, WAH!" Through an analysis of the rhetoric bands choose to use, and through interviews and an examination of their lyrics, the author maps the incorporation of Iranian elements in the new, unofficial rock music. Visual imagery is also examined as the author queries, for example, a photo in which Hypernova's band members are shot bound, gagged and wearing loong, the traditional scarf used as a towel in Iran's public baths, by taxi drivers to polish their cars between calls, and as a frightening fashion accessory by Iran's militia, the Basij.

Biography

Bronwen Robertson, a PhD student at the University of Melbourne, is currently completing her dissertation, "Subterranean sounds and reverberations of dissent: identity and expression in Tehran's unofficial rock music". The thesis is supported with field research conducted in Tehran by the author from July 2007 – July 2008. Bronwen, a violinist and guitarist, performed and recorded material with research participants and also entered TehranAvenue's biennial online music competition. Her thesis examines the ways in which Iranian youth use music as a medium for expressing alternative identities. Other foci include: analysing the selective processes that musicians are using to orchestrate their identities, querying how and why global communications technologies are used to present these variegated identities to their peers both inside and outside Iran, and how their music is experienced by audiences both inside and outside Iran.

4) Emily BLAYNEY

Children's Lives, Adults' Lies: Women's Rap in 21st-Century Tehran

Abstract

A recurring theme in the texts of many rappers in contemporary Iran is that of hypocrisy – not only the perceived hypocrisy of various authorities, but also that of many levels of Iranian social and cultural life. While 'double lives' were also led in pre-revolutionary Iran, post-revolutionary proclamations of morality leave some authorities particularly susceptible to accusations of hypocrisy. This paper explores the theme of hypocrisy, especially as it is articulated in the Persian-language rap texts of Metro 707, a group of three young Tehran-based female rappers. Born as the Iran-Iraq war ended, the members of Metro 707 resent the official emphasis – which has persisted all their lives – on commemoration of the war's 'martyrs', especially at the expense of those born after the war. More specifically, they resent claims that today's Iranian children are the beneficiaries of the martyrs' and veterans' part in the 'imposed war'. Rather, in their texts, the members of Metro 707 suggest that poor urban children, such as those who work on the streets of South Tehran, are often forgotten victims of social changes since the revolution and war.

This paper focuses particularly on one Metro 707 text, which addresses the short life and death, at nine years of age, of a boy who sold fal-e Hafez on South Tehran's streets. The paper analyses the concerns raised by the text and it considers the rappers' attitudes and their questions, as reflected in their lyrics. These questions are addressed not only towards Iran's authorities and their perceived hypocrisy, but also towards those of its citizens that the rappers see as unaware or indifferent. The paper considers the potential roles of texts such as Metro 707's in Iran's changing cultural and communications environment. It reflects on the significance of the members' roles as female rappers and on their focus on the lives of disadvantaged children – and, in turn, on the 'hypocritical' lives of those who fail in their duty to protect these children. Finally, the paper asks how this 'minor' example of Tehran rap reflects some of the many contradictory impacts of the revolution.

Biography