

Meta-Political Aspirations and Praeternatural Investigations: The Festival of Arts, Shiraz-Persepolis

By Vali Mahlouji

“Persepolis is neither a theatrical spectacle, nor a ballet, nor a Happening. It is visual symbolism, parallel to and dominated by sound. The sound—the music— must absolutely prevail.”

- Iannis Xenakis, 1971

In 1971, Iannis Xenakis introduced his modern musical composition *Persepolis* as follows:

Symbol of history's noises; unassailable rocks facing the assault of the waves of civilization.

Childhood's awakening must be maintained because it represents active knowledge, perpetual questioning which forges the becoming of man.

- 5th Festival of Arts, Shiraz-Persepolis Programme

The words of Iannis Xenakis refer to his own creation, *Persepolis*, which he composed for the occasion of the opening of the Fifth Festival of Arts, Shiraz-Persepolis in 1971. This was the second of two well-known compositional works, which were commissioned by the Festival and premiered at Shiraz. The other was *Persephasa* (1969). *Persepolis* was a 'polytope', Xenakis's term for this *son-et-lumiere* multi-media installation. It consisted of his lighting designs, his music, and his sound projection, composed and performed in harmony with the surrounding natural topography. Performed in the open air at night amongst the ruins of Darius's ancient palace at Persepolis, the music was accompanied by laser lights scanning the ruins, two bon fires lit on the summit of the facing mountain and a group of children from Shiraz carrying lit torches across the silhouette of the mountain. Reflected in the poetics of his words, Xenakis strived to release visceral and elemental forces, to reveal the primordial depths of music, older than even music itself. That had brought Xenakis to Shiraz-Persepolis as it had many contemporaneous cultural experimentalists and artistic innovators from across the north-south divide (the developed and recently

decolonized developing worlds) and the Cold War delineations (Eastern and Western Europe) who, for a period, gravitated towards and became intimately enmeshed in the innovative possibilities, consciously and circumstantially, designed by the Festival. This broadly shared pool of sensibilities eschewed conventional emotional devices. Bent on releasing universal cathartic and ecstatic powers instead, it sought a purer abstracted resonance with elemental instinctual drives. By design and by default, the Festival became the principal bedrock and launch pad of such meta-theatrical praeternatural investigations.

Iannis Xenakis, an intellectual, architect and musician whose interest in the physics and mathematical probabilities of the natural world, of stars, birds, particles, people, rhythms produced one of the most imaginative and prophetic aesthetic explorations in twentieth century music was more than a friend of the Festival. His was not merely a musical involvement. His values stood firmly aligned with the missions, mantras and directorial visions of the Festival and he was commissioned to design the (later aborted) *cite des arts* for Shiraz. This was an impressive and pioneeringly progressive infrastructural plan, encompassing all manner of arts - from visual and performance to poetry and literature - including a state-of-the-art music-technological research institute. However, at the end of 1971 Xenakis abruptly withdrew from collaboration with the Festival his relationship took a politically-informed plunge. The *cite des arts* remained unrealized (a very similar project by him, Centre des arts la Chaux-de-Fonds had opened in France in 1970)¹, a colossal blow to the city of Shiraz. Xenakis's consociating intimacies, his creative commitments to the people and the space, and then his ultimate estrangement and severance encapsulate much of the complexities that were inherent (as well as extraneous) to the Festival.

In an open letter to *Le Monde* he addressed the director of the Festival, Farrokh Ghaffari:

What motivated me to go to Iran is this: a deep interest in this magnificent country, so rich with its superposed civilizations and such a hospitable population; the daring adventure of a few friends who founded the Shiraz-Persepolis Festival where all the various tendencies of contemporary, avant-garde art intermingle with the traditional arts of Asia and Africa; plus the warm reception my musical and visual propositions have encountered there by the young members of the general audience.... You know how attached I am to Iran, her history, her people. You know my joy when I realized projects in your festival, open to everyone. You also know of my friendship and loyalty to those who, like yourself, have made the

Shiraz- Persepolis Festival unique in the world. But, faced with inhuman and unnecessary police repression that the Shah and his government are inflicting on Iran's youth, I am incapable of lending any moral guarantee, regardless of how fragile that may be, since it is a matter of artist creation. Therefore, I refuse to participate in the festival.

- Xenakis, *Le Monde*, 14 December 1971ⁱⁱ

Here, Xenakis condenses and compacts a huge amount of information into several impassioned lines. His letter iterates three important points: firstly, a shared interest in the superposition of civilizations (this was the Festival's core intellectual driving force articulated through engagement with layered, archaic traditions and through juxtaposing them with contemporary impulses resonating with the avant-garde); secondly, acknowledgement of the intellectual daringness and unique direction of the Festival (an undeniably groundbreaking and pioneering experimental space and confrontational position was opened by the Festival locally and globally); thirdly, openness to an eager and engaged young generation (this was a consciously democratising and edifying mission of the Festival). Validating and endorsing the cultural meanings and intellectual articulations of the Festival, Xenakis maps a moral dilemma *vis a vis* a backdrop of state-sponsored repression in Iran. This highlights an incompatibility of the democratic, modern and poetically emancipating terrain of the Festival, which operated in sophisticatedly meta-theatrical zone with the cruder political narratives that constricted and constrained its context.

Despite the passage of over half a century, the artistic territory of the annual *Jasn-e Honar-e Shiraz* or the Festival of Arts, Shiraz-Persepolis (1967-1978), remains one of the major unresolved artistic complexes of the pre-revolutionary final decade. It represents one of the most "controversial trajectories of cultural attitude, policy, and intercultural contact in modern Iranian history"ⁱⁱⁱ and its territory remains a remarkably enduring contested space. Scarcity of original documentary material and voids left by factual blackout following the *paksazi-e farhagni* ('cultural cleansing') initiated in 1979 has served to reduce critical discourse into an enduring overly simplistic binary standoff. In this absence, anti-Festival rhetoric has operated with ferocity sometimes ascribing to it superpowers, reaching near mythological status, with flamboyant histrionics blaming the Festival as a cultural trigger even for the revolution itself.

As far as the post-revolutionary history of the Festival is concerned, it must be remembered that the institution of the Festival was one of the most culturally contentious to be banned and immediately dissolved. The annual events came to a halt and were deemed illegal, un-Islamic. The 'cultural revolution' labelled its genealogies anti-Islamic and of the highest order of counter-revolutionary decadence. In the aftermath of the political collapse of the monarchy in 1979 an organised and all-encompassing Islamising process of *detritorialisation* and *reterritorialisation* was systematically aimed at cultural transformation. Accordingly, all archives and documents associated with the Festival, collated by the National Iranian Radio and Television (NIRT) - its official sponsor and organiser - were banned and removed from public access. These comprehensive archives include films, photographs, interviews, articles, press conferences, catalogues, programmes notes, brochures, bulletins, daily reports as well as television programmes recorded from the performances for national broadcast. These archives remain officially under lock and key today and fiercely guarded. This reactionary policy has its own roots in the pre-revolutionary period.

The present paper and project of the *Archaeology of the Final Decade*, aims to demystify and demythologise the historical object of the Festival such that its terrain is freed up for a present day post-mortem. In the first instance it must be recognised that the Festival's real contested space was its very own space of articulation. This was, as correctly suggested by Xenakis, broadly focussed on the following aims: a confrontational desire to shift contemporary cultural reality at home; an articulation of a precosciently defiant and sophisticatedly novel post-colonial global model; and a defiance of established hierarchical and hegemonic discourses and the Eurogenetic model of culture. If the Festival's *raison d'être* was to implement a shift in contemporary cultural reality (both domestically and internationally) its *modus operandi* was confronting the established hierarchies and contesting the accepted narratives. Confrontation and contestation were not only not alien to its interventionist attitudes, but they were endemic to its modernising stage.

The fact that the Festival chose its 'field of operation' intentionally outside conventional systems of art production set it up, from the outset, against conventional norms - aesthetic, cultural as well as political. A closer look at the political sociology of Iran at the time clarifies an important phenomenon: neither the transcendent utopianism nor the cosmopolitanism that characterised the intellectual project at Shiraz-Persepolis correlated with the concurrent conventional sectarian political formulations that dominated and radicalised the national space in the late 1960s and 1970s. The dominant discourses were undergoing their own significant paradigm shift

in line with much of the rest of the 'third world': directed away from the need to 'catch up' with modernity towards an introverted self-dialogue in quest of the authentic unadulterated self. This was defined by an apparent moral indigenous rebellion against 'cultural imperialism'. As in much of the third world a correlation was applied: "imperialist aggression at the level of economy was, it was argued, matched by that at the level of culture. Here the 'culture' being discussed was much more that of the elite, the intelligentsia, than that of the population-as-a-whole, and the debate was at first confined to this milieu".^{iv} The loaded neologism *gharbzadegi* ('westoxication', literally 'west-struckness') coined as early as 1959 by philosopher and intellectual Ahmad Fardid epitomized this idea. This correlation came to serve the thinking and purposes of both the Left and the Islamists in Iran of the 1960s and 1970s. It was exemplified by the new intellectualisms of Jalal Al-e Ahmad (who adopted *Gharbzadegi* for the title of his influential book in 1962) and Ali Shariati (influenced also by revolutionaries like Franz Fanon), what Hamid Dabashi refers to as "theologies of discontent".^v This discrediting of those who were influenced by Western ideas and values formed the ideological bedrock of the suppressive 'cultural revolution' that dismantled much of the intellectual infrastructure of Iran immediately after 1979.

Far from being rooted in indigenous thoughts and exigencies, *gharbzadegi* and indeed the core intellectual drive of political Islam can be traced back to ontologies of Heideggerian critique of man.^{vi} They derive their arguments not from any solid native cultural roots or local groundings but from Heideggerian rejections of Western metaphysics and from an intrinsically European counter-Enlightenment position. The three prominent exponents of this approach had definitive interests in European thinkers more so than any indigenous philosophical strands: Al-e Ahmad in Camus and Sartre, Shariati in Heidegger and Sartre, Fardid in Kant and Heidegger. According to Ali Mirsepassi, overt hostility towards the ideas of the West conceals a much deeper original fascination with them.^{vii}

Whilst underlying postcolonial impulses of 'nativism' and 'return to the self' would have resonated with the core thinking of the Festival, the reactionary and totalitarian attitudes that the politically conventional dogmas of these discourses ultimately articulated could not share the modern stage of the Festival. This standoff is responsible for much of the controversy around the Festival. Dogmatic sectarian radicalism in political ideas failed to respond to the Festival on its own terms. This dogmatism not only inhibited any acknowledgement of, but simply failed to recognise, the Festival as 'an autonomous, liberal and modern space'. Hence, it rejected and self-righteously condemned the Festival under facile banners of elitism,

gharbzadegi ('westoxification' or 'west-struckness') and cultural irrelevance. It failed to recognize that if there were an economy of prestige at play in this space of cultural negotiations, then it would be most safely placed amongst the forces of the peripheral, the 'third world', the dissenting, the unorthodox, the countercultures, the outsiders. It failed to condone the radical 'third world' writing back which was the dominant dynamic in action, consciously articulated by the Festival as a post-colonial proposition.

Intellectually and curatorially, the Festival had a very qualitatively different interpretation and approach to cultural nationalism. Its proclamation of 'cultural difference' *vis a vis* the colonial (Western) was aimed at a democratization of hegemonic and hierarchical value systems of culture. Colonialism as a system of exploitation or articulation of cultural dominance was to be bypassed, annulled. By circumventing reductive and dichotomous binaries of the modern and traditional, native and alien, the Festival asserted its own "democratic relational sphere, both temporally (by including a wide spectrum of performances from across artistic historical periods) and spatially (by improvising alternative performing spaces across the city and in the natural setting)."^{viii} It followed a liberal praxis of pluralistic accommodation of the 'other in the narratives of the same'. Here the Festival's articulations are in contradistinction to, and markedly more sophisticated than, the prevalent (dogmatic) rhetoric of the Left, which stuck in a binary standoff and facile shortsightedness failed to appreciate its creative transgressiveness. In relation to those prevalent political discourses, the Festival operated in an intellectually autonomous and 'metapolitical' zone, determinedly negotiating its 'own terms'.

It self-consciously set out to map a modern discourse around coexisting heterogeneous truths "providing meaning to possibilities of disjointed, dispersed, and interchangeable points of view."^{ix} It focused on achieving a fertile dialectical between values of permanence and change, eternal and new, in what Marshall Berman refers to as "a contradictory unity, a unity of disunity."^x The anti- and (post-)colonial were aesthetically and conceptually juxtaposed in complementarity, relationally reinforcing or extending a whole.

The Festival was never felt to be rigorously tied to either classical or traditional forms. While presenting programs based on traditional art-forms on the one hand, the organizers offered the most avant-garde expressions, on the other.

- *5th Festival of Arts, Shiraz-Persepolis Programme*^{xi}

The Seventh Festival Arts was shaped around the contemporary art of traditional societies. Our societies have been evolving in recent years under the shadow of the technologically dynamic West. Our cultures are becoming recast in a new crucible. The impact of the West is a force we must contend with. Our responses to it should well be witnessed, both for the mutual edification of non-Western countries, through which we can study precedents and solutions in reasserting our age-old cultural heritages, and for the interest of Western artists, who might draw inspiration from the perspectives of other cultural arenas.

- *7th Festival of Arts, Shiraz-Persepolis Programme*^{xii}

[...] traditionally influenced pieces from the Third World countries provided theatre 'with a difference', modern yet linked with another age.

- *7th Festival of Arts, Shiraz-Persepolis Programme*^{xiii}

Essentially an ephemeral (public) performance space, the Festival was able to formulate its own spatio-temporal set of values and parameters of expression and encounter in order to function as a *temporary autonomous zone*^{xiv}. This was in line with the spirit and essence of performance itself – of spontaneous and ephemeral intervention in public space with a view to creating a blurred dynamic spontaneous atmosphere where our – spectator and performer – individual and collective experience of the everyday and of the present is intensified and a utopia can be lived for a brief moment. Also in line with the nature of performance, contradictory inner workings and internal ambiguities were seen as the very source of creative power. The Festival boldly encouraged transgressive creativity, which was not always easily received:

The Sixth Festival was considered by many to be the most 'difficult' to date. [...] There was little appeal to 'popular' taste, a sure sign that Festival organizers now knew what they wanted and were prepared to present it regardless of critical comment, which was not slow in coming. The controversy that boiled over in normally placid Shiraz was rightly considered part of what the Festival is all about, and as a welcome stimulus to artistic creativity and art criticism in Iran.

Aligned with Artuadian positions of *undoing* and destabilising (bourgeois) structures of culture and aesthetics, the Festival proposed a developmentally necessary Faustian mix of creative and destructive potentialities. Its motto became to 'embrace and contain' cultural controversy, despite, and even in opposition to, popular tastes and widely consumed cultural production in the Iranian cultural reality. The disturbance of "orderings of subject and society alike"^{xvi}, what Kristeva calls, putting "subjecthood in trouble"^{xvii}, became its own curatorially avante-garde articulation in the Iranian contemporary context. In this context, such a policy imposed from above, may be analogous to Kristeva's idea of rethinking transgression as "not a rupture produced by a heroic avant-garde outside the symbolic order but a fracture traced by a strategic avant-garde within the order"^{xviii}. It is "not to break with this order absolutely (this old dream is dispelled) but to expose it in crisis, to register its points not only of *breakdown* but of *breakthrough*, the new possibilities that such a crisis may open up".^{xix} In Fischer-Lichte's words, for new symbolic order and identity to emerge out of the old, spectators' identity is to be destabilized ("in terms of their perception of self") and the spectator transferred into a situation where frames, rules and values are in conflict, "thus putting self-image and self-understanding to a searing test".^{xx}

The sophisticated underlying dimensions of logic and intention and of theory and practice within the Festival - as an 'institution of art' - have inevitably and considerably enhanced and compounded the degree and enduring longevity of the contestation attached to it. The fact that no informed or substantial critique has been put forth to seriously engage with the topography, vision and praxis of the Festival points further suggests that it existed as a 'temporary autonomous zone' beyond and outside the conventional political discourses of its time. Further complexity is introduced by the very nature of its artwork, which in its ephemerality and spontaneity remains abstract and non-material. Here, artistic status remains embedded in the objects aestheticity, contained within its particular *eventness*,^{xxi} and not held within the artefact that it creates. The distinctive ephemerality of the cultural product and the non-materiality of the dynamic process that happened between actors and spectators without the production of a disposable artefact that can be handed down or fixed, sets the Festival apart. The object is no longer materially present and hence, non-transferable, non-commodifiable. This non-materiality and abstract nature of the cultural capital of the *Festival of Arts* contrasts it with a comparable institution, namely the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art (TMOCA - which also stirred up resistance and controversy at the time of its formation and

was similarly exposed to criticism in its relevance). For this reason, whilst TMOCA and other cultural initiatives of the era have been endorsed and validated by generations of artists and intellectuals who inherited their actual, material and intellectual assets, the *Festival of Arts, Shiraz-Persepolis* remains to date a complex area of obscurity and polemical contestation.

It is, however, clear that the facile and simplistic politicized accusation of the ‘wrong act, at the wrong time, in the wrong place (by the wrong people, for the wrong reasons)’ is now obviously defunct and in need of reconsideration. No retrospective analysis of the Festival can fail to be impressed by its progressive artistic content and its sophisticated curatorial direction. Any discussion about the nature, role and relevance of the Festival, must start from this recognition (as the impassioned Xenakis made a point to emphasise in spite of his withdrawal). The sheer commitment with which the Festival endorsed Iranian performance arts across all forms - modern, traditional, and ritual - and successfully juxtaposed them alongside hitherto isolated Asian and African expressions, as well as, contemporary avant-garde impulses was monumental and historically unprecedented. Its utopian, humanistic and universal aspirations are recognised as pioneering and unlike any other known to a festival of its kind and its autonomous, anti-hegemonic and radical perspective - in intellectual and aesthetic terms - remains unique.

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ⁱ Iannis Xenakis, *The Music of Architecture: Architectural Projects, Texts, and Realization*, Sharon Kanach, ed. and trans. (Hillsdale, NY: Pendragon, 2006) Section 3.04, footnote 6, as cited in Kayhan International Edition, 9 December 1968. Sources drawn from the Xenakis Archives at Bibliothèque Nationale de France. A description of this project is also briefed in Robert Gluck, *The Shiraz Arts Festival – Avant-Garde Arts in 1970s Iran*, *Leonardo*, Vol. 40, No. 1 (2007), 25-6, as follows: “To summarize Xenakis’s proposal, according to his “General Guidelines,” the Center was to be an interdisciplinary and collaborative “scientific research center” for sound and visual arts, cinema, theater, ballet, poetry and literature, to “continue all the activities year round of the Annual Festival of Shiraz-Persepolis.” In addition to public presentations, the center would support ongoing work by up to 40 visiting and 50 permanent artists, scientists and staff members. It was to be “essentially based on the most advanced research and technological events, leading us towards the future of Art,” open to all people, fostering exchange between its participants and the city (not “an intellectual ghetto”), sharing resources with the university, cultivating traditional arts “observed through the light of the most advanced research and experimentation.” (ibid.)

ⁱⁱ Iannis Xenakis Open letter to *Le Monde*, 14 December 1971 cited in, Xenakis, op. cit., Section 4.10.

iii Vali Mahlouji, *Perspectives on the Shiraz Arts Festival: A Radical Third World Rewriting*, cited in *IranModern*, edited by Fereshteh Daftari and Layla Diba, (New Haven: Asia Society Museum/Yale University Press, 2013), 87

iv Fred Halliday, *The Iranian Left in International Perspective*, in *Reformers and Revolutionaries in Modern Iran: New Perspectives on Iranian Left*, ed. by Stephanie Cronin, *International Affairs* (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-), Vol. 80, No. 5 (Oct., 2004), 30

v Hamid Dabashi, *Theologies of Discontent: The Ideological Foundations of the Islamic Republic*, (Transaction, 2006)

vi Ali Mirsepassi, *The "Marvelous" Life and Thought of Ahmad Fardid*, Lecture delivered at the School of Oriental and African Studies, London 13 November 2013.

vii *ibid.*

viii Vali Mahlouji, *op. cit.*, 87-8

ix *ibid.*, 88

x Marshall Berman, *All that is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982) 23

xi Quotes are taken from the original catalogues of the Festival of Arts, Shiraz-Persepolis

xii Quotes are taken from the original catalogues of the Festival of Arts, Shiraz-Persepolis

xiii *ibid.*

xiv The term was coined by Hakim Bey (aka Peter Lamborn Wilson), poet and cultural critic who also visited and wrote about the Festival on several occasions. According to the writer, these zones function as geographies and conditions that intensify our experience of the everyday and of the present.

xv Quotes are taken from the original catalogues of the Festival of Arts, Shiraz-Persepolis

xvi Julia Kristeva, cited in Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real* (October Books/MIT, 1996), 153

xvii *ibid.*

xviii *op.cit.*,157

xix Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real* (October Books/MIT, 1996), 157

^{xx} Erika Fischer-Richte, *Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual, Exploring Forms of Political Theatre*, (London: Routledge, 2005), 220

^{xxi} *op.cit.*, 25