The effect of context on socially-engaged animation: the case of Mr and Mrs. Mockroach

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the University of Brighton for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Following a programme of study at the University for the Creative Arts (UCA at Farnham)

March 2011
Abstract

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This research explores the possibility of introducing socially-engaged animation into restrictive social contexts, by the production of a film that raises issues concerning the contemporary perception and treatment of women in Iran. Through historical examination of Iranian new wave cinema and poetry, it explores stylistic and representational possibilities that help to provide a framework in which such practice can be attempted and discussed. Aspects of socially-engaged animation are examined by analysis of historical examples; the practical component of the PhD builds on these contextual studies to provide further understanding of the medium’s potential for such expression.

Notions of realism within cultural practices, specifically cinema, are explored. Particular attention is paid to non-fiction film, as a branch of cinema that is primarily concerned with the mediation of social realities. Drawing on Raymond Williams’s studies of the term, the research argues for an understanding of realism as an intention to mediate social and psychological realities. The conditions that have informed so-called “documentary animation”, and its frequent engagement with specific socio-cultural issues, are examined. The complex and unique characteristics of the realist engagement this entails is explored by historical research into the subject, and though case studies of two socially engaged films from the tradition of British documentary animation. It is argued that the main characteristic of such animation’s engagement with social realities is manifested through the collage of occasionally realist and realistic and often modernist conventions, informed and governed by an intention to mediate aspects of an independent material world/reality.

The problem of realism in relation to animation is even more complex when considering films produced in contexts of social and political censorship; Eastern Europe under communism has provided important and relevant examples. Official restrictions imposed on animators working in such contexts have prompted them to adopt indirect forms of mediation such as metaphor, allegory and metonymy. These are variously employed to enable discursive mediation of specific issues with the intended audience, while avoiding censorship. The complex and determining effects of social context are investigated via case studies of three Eastern European animated films. It is argued that, in terms of formal and stylistic properties, these films do not adhere to a particular set of realist conventions, and that their formal make-up is mainly affected by the context in which they were produced.

The practical component of the research – the film Mr and Mrs. Mockroach – provides a valuable opportunity to explore the ways in which context affects stylistic and representational choices. A reflexive analysis of the film opens up the complex process of decision-making in terms of intended audience and the possible modes of semantic engagement this implies with regard to the question of censorship. In this way, fresh insights may be gained from the research’s contention that a new and evolved kind of realism underpins this area of animation practice. Such ‘realism’ involves certain ‘amorphous formal characteristics’ and does not adhere to any particular stylistic or formal system. It is rather governed by social context, meaning that it terms of style it is culturally specific.
# Table of contents

Acknowledgements  4

Declaration  5

Introduction  6

Chapter 1  Realism  15

Chapter 2  Socially-engaged animation as a means for intervention  40

Chapter 3  Social engagement in Iranian art: Iranian New Poetry and New Wave cinema  78

Chapter 4  *Mr and Mrs. Mockroach*: the Iranian context and the significance of socially-engaged animation  115

Conclusion  150

Bibliography  162

Filmography  168

Appendix i  Synopsis, *A is for Autism* (1992)  170

Appendix ii  Synopsis, *Daddy's Little Bit of Dresden China* (1988)  174

Appendix iii  Synopsis, *The Flat [Byte]* (1968)  176

Appendix iv  Summary, *Mr and Mrs. Mockroach*  178

Appendix v  Important periods in the history of 20th century Iran that relate to the discussion of this thesis  182

Appendix vi  Image breakdown, *Mr and Mrs. Mockroach*  183
Acknowledgement

Undertaking this doctoral research would not have been possible without the generous support of many individuals and institutions.

First and foremost, I would like to thank my lead supervisor, Dr Andrew Darley, for his unstinting support. He was a fine example of academic supervision; generous with his time, challenging in his feedback and supportive throughout the theoretical and practical stages of the research. I am fortunate and honoured to have benefited from his presence throughout my PhD. I would also like to thank my second supervisor, Sue Loughlin, for her support throughout the practical stage of the PhD.

I am grateful to the Iranian Ministry of Science, Research and Technology for making the undertaking of this research possible. I would also like to thank the staff of Iranian Scientific Representative in the UK for their support and advice throughout the past few years.

I would specifically like to thank Alison Howard, who provided her professional assistance in editing and proofreading of this thesis. Her presence made writing the final draft of this thesis a far more enjoyable process. I am grateful to the staff in UCA Farnham’s Research Office, particularly Mary O’Hagan and Sarah Hawkins. Their friendly support, particularly during the final stages, made the undertaking of this research far less stressful. I would also like to thank Niamh Dodd, whose generosity of spirit and practical assistance over the past few years helped me to overcome the many complicated issues I had to address as an international student.

My gratitude also goes to members of staff in UCA Farnham’s library for their invaluable support, and to the staff in UCA Farnham’s equipment store, who patiently provided everything I needed for the practical component of this research.
Declaration

I declare that the research contained in this thesis, unless otherwise formally indicated within the text, is the original work of the author. The thesis has not been previously submitted to this or any other university for a degree, and does not incorporate any material already submitted for a degree.

Signed

Dated
Introduction

This practice-based research explores the potential of animation for raising popular awareness of matters of social concern, in contexts in which addressing such issues is subject to strict controls. The practical element is an animated film that raises issues surrounding the perception and treatment of women in contemporary Iran.

Two related factors informed the initial idea for this research. As a practitioner of graphic design and animation, I appreciated animation’s potential for expressive and fantastical kinds of representation. However, like many people both in and outside of Iran, I regarded ‘true’ animation as the frame-by-frame construction of what could not be seen in real life. I believed its function was to articulate what emerged from the filmmaker’s pure imagination, rather than to represent reality.

During my academic life in Iran I often visited coffee shops in an area of northern Tehran that was a meeting place for artists, intellectuals and middle-class youth. In this microcosm I witnessed a range of social behaviour that would have been taboo elsewhere in Iran, ranging from lively political debate to wearing ‘inappropriate’ outfits and even dating members of the opposite sex. I began to form the idea of making an animation that would depict my feelings and memories of this place.

Chris Landreth’s film Ryan (2004) at the 2005 Tehran International Film Festival was a revelation, and my first experience of an expressive and fantastical animation that also portrayed an actual life. Its appeal was intensified by its realistic mediation, and the way in which characters and settings had been distorted, thus suggesting the protagonist’s psychological state purely by the use of visual design. Borrowing obliquely from Jan Svankmajer, I dubbed this type of mediation ‘fantastic realism’. The term covers animation’s unique ability to visualize aspects of reality – including feelings and emotions – by its link with plastic and visual arts, and the possibilities offered to the filmmaker by frame-by-frame manipulation of the image. My initial PhD proposal thus emerged: to
examine how animation can extend the range of possibilities available to the artist in terms of representing reality. The idea would be further explored by producing an animation that portrayed aspects of Tehran’s café culture in a ‘realistic’ way.

As my research developed and the defining role of context became clearer, the direction of the research moved. I wanted to explore animation’s potential for the mediation of social realities in restrictive contexts. I decided to narrow my film’s focus to an issue of great social significance in the community I wanted to reach: the treatment and perception of women. This became the central question of my PhD.

It was clear that in the Iranian context any mediation of social issues would face some form of censorship. As an Iranian filmmaker, I am conscious of the raft of government restrictions that control the activities of my peers. I began to wonder how to communicate such a message to an Iranian audience without provoking unwanted suspicion. I realised that the Iranian authorities, which control live-action film production rigorously, impose far fewer sanctions on animated film and its makers. I felt that animation could be a way in which to convey serious ideas while avoiding official censure.

The success of *Mr and Mrs. Mockroach* can only be gauged by showing it to its intended audience in Iran. In order to examine whether the film has successfully achieved its aims, I should have shown it to the Iranian audience. External factors, however, have hampered this field research. As a condition of my research scholarship, I was unable to stay in Iran for a long period during the project. There were also concerns that, should the intention and content of my film become known, my studies might have been curtailed because an Iranian state university is sponsoring me. For these reasons, field research that examines the viewers’ response and the achievements of the film in relation to the intended audience remained for future studies. In this sense my research continues.

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1 It is important to note that, in the short term, new formal systems such as those attempted in *Mr and Mrs. Mockroach* may not always achieve the intended result. Longer exposure may be needed before the public begin to engage with the new form and notice its coded associations. Immediate reactions do not necessarily confirm the success or failure of a film, but are always informative.
Realism was identified as a key concept of my proposed animation. This complex term has been explored in respect of other areas of film, but realism in animation remains largely under-explored. I began to research its wider meanings and applications, focusing on literature, painting, live-action cinema and eventually the philosophy of science. The understanding of realism as an attempt to achieve ‘maximum surface accuracy’ expanded to become a commitment to showing physical, psychological and social forces as they actually exist (Williams, 1976: 261). A key figure in this discussion, Raymond Williams, distinguishes two aspects of realism: as an intention and as a reference to particular methods.

Further questions surrounding realism as an intention to ‘show things as they really are’ (ibid: 259) were raised by analysing recent theories about realist cinema, particularly non-fiction live action, and the arguments of documentary theorists with post-structuralist and postmodernist leanings. It was established that postmodern escapism is rooted in a view of realist art as an accurate representation of the real world. Based on Ian Hacking’s arguments on scientific realism (1983), Williams’ exploration of realism, and Berthold Brecht’s theoretical and practical works, this research develops a new approach to aesthetic realism in response to postmodernist criticism. It defines realism as an attempt to intervene in how social life is shaped and experienced. It is therefore an attempt to change the world for the better, or at least the desire to stimulate such a change. The relevant work of art may or may not involve realistic representation.

Realist art intervenes in the world via a social agency: its audience. This research argues that various branches of art, from non-fiction through new wave live action to socially-engaged animation, invite audiences to act directly to change the structure of society. A three-way relationship between the work, audience and the historical world informs its realism. The artist must prevent audience ‘escapism’ via uncritical immersion in the work. In contexts of oppression, in which representation of controversial issues must be mediated via indirect and obscure means, audience engagement and critical awareness is vital. When a realist work is produced under such conditions, audiences must be tacitly and subtly encouraged to take a critical view of its social realities.
The problem, as this research argues following the arguments of Roman Jakobson (1971) and Brecht (1980), is that as realist practice becomes more widespread, audiences become inured to its conventions. Over time, uncritical immersion is inevitable; novel, unfamiliar modes must be used to disturb established expectations. This is challenging, particularly where indirect forms of representation are involved, but may be achieved by subverting the relationship between film and audience. Animation has the potential to do this because it is not generally expected to address serious issues, but the view that it is suitable only for the depiction of frivolous and fantastical ideas is also an obstacle. An audience that might expect live-action film to engage with serious issues might fail to seek such engagement in animated film, or might not even be interested in animation. Chapters 2 and 4 explore the mechanics of engaging an audience with socially significant topics that must be presented in concealed ways to avoid censorship.

The central element of the research, *Mr and Mrs. Mockroach*, is an example of what this thesis will term a ‘realist animated film’. It is targeted at an Iranian audience, which it invites to reconsider preconceptions of, and treatment of, women in contemporary Iran. It also provides a valuable opportunity for analysis of various issues at pre-production and production stage.

In pre-production, important questions shape the film, but are not directly answered by the completed work. This research suggests that, in terms of realist animation, these relate mainly to social context and audience. What specific social context will inform the filmmaker’s choice of semantic approaches, and on what cultural and/or social issues will he or she draw? What audience does the filmmaker hope to reach, and what characteristics of this audience have been considered? Does this affect the film’s representational and stylistic approaches? Will the filmmaker’s position in terms of the film’s subject and the society in which it is to be received affect its execution? What strategies will be developed to facilitate its making, and to avoid censorship? What will inform the technical and stylistic decisions in terms of image, film, sound and the development of metaphor or allegory? What is the nature of the anticipated response?
Film critics constantly seek answers to such questions, but their studies are often speculative, based on knowledge of the social context, the filmmaker’s stylistic approaches and the characteristics of the relevant branch of cinema. Rarely do those involved with making a film provide a detailed breakdown of issues that have affected its production, and this is particularly true of socially engaged animation. Filmmakers and artists are often reluctant to discuss or keep a record of pre-production decisions and processes. This may be because there is no appropriate forum for discussion; audiences are usually more interested in seeing a film than the mechanics of its construction. In politically constrained contexts, filmmakers may be reluctant to enlighten obscure and metaphorical references lest their films are condemned and their careers jeopardised. Some artists believe that offering too much information could limit the viewer’s experience. As a result, there is little information available about issues surrounding production of socially oriented films in politically restrictive contexts.

It may therefore be argued that one important function of *Mr and Mrs Mockroach* is the opportunity to examine the issues encountered during pre-production of a socially engaged animation made under conditions of censorship. In this sense, it contributes directly to a main aim of this research: to plug a gap in the understanding of the potential of animation as a critical and subversive mode, when used in a restrictive context.

In the sense in which it is used in this thesis, subversion finds its significance with regard to a particular society and audience; two interrelated understandings of the term are developed. Firstly, a work may challenge the beliefs and/or preconceptions of an audience in terms of a particular medium or mode of practice. This may induce the viewer to observe the work from a fresh angle, thus uncovering aspects that had previously escaped notice. Secondly, a work may encourage an audience to challenge and overturn social and cultural norms and religious beliefs.

The idea of animation as a means for criticism and subversion is developed in the contextual section of the research. This is further advanced in the film in terms of Iranian audience and society, challenging people’s expectations of an animated
film. Shocking moments are created by a combination of realistic imagery and a Brechtian kind of cinema, thus insisting that its audience should become mentally and critically involved with the film. These formal experiments are used strategically to prepare the minds of an Iranian audience, inviting it to readdress, criticise and even take action against the unfair treatment of women in their society. The film therefore facilitates examination of the type of approach that might achieve subversive effects for a contemporary Iranian audience.

The thesis is divided into four chapters, the first two of which consider what this research terms ‘realist’ animation in western contexts. This provides a theoretical framework for the production of a critical animation that intends to engage with the social course of events in restrictive contexts. Chapter 1 examines and develops a particular understanding of realism, exploring the importance of context and audience with regard to realist art. It argues that method – understood as a particular set of conventions – should be tested against the social context in which the work is produced and received, an audience indigenous to that context.

Animation practitioners have recognised and used animation to engage with aspects of social reality for almost a century, since Winsor McCay’s short animation The Sinking of the Lusitania (1918). Chapter 2 examines how they have used it to invite audiences to reconsider society from a critical point of view. This chapter is divided into two sections and studies five animated films, two produced in the politically-open context of late-20th-century Britain, and three produced in a context in which social and political criticism was controlled by direct and indirect prohibitions: mid-20th-century Czechoslovakia and the USSR in the late 20th century. In these analyses specific attention is paid to the particularities of social context.

Examination of the British films offers an opportunity to explore the representational approaches frequently seen in recent so-called ‘documentary animations’. Such films often use recorded voices and/or filmed images of real people whose experiences are shown. Further, they often use familiar conventions

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2 These prohibitive measures may take various forms, including the steps that a filmmaker must take to obtain financial sponsorship and screening permission, conformity to particular codes of conduct or even self-censorship.
of live-action documentary. Experimentation with form is a recurring element of this branch of animation. The chapter explores how the use of animation for non-fictional purposes, in ways common to documentary animation, may challenge an audience’s traditional view of animation, fiction and non-fiction live action. The effect on the two films of the socially open context of late-20th-century British society is also examined.

Films in the second group are more relevant to the central question of this research. They were produced in a context in which discussion of social issues was often politically sensitive and severely restricted; a context which resembles that of contemporary Iran. Their directors made extensive use of indirect modes of representation because of the social conditions and the need to avoid censorship and condemnation. Moreover, techniques and modes of representation employed in these films have particular political connotations in their social context. Case studies of the films open up the representational approaches used by the filmmakers to engage with the shaping of social conditions, whilst avoiding official censure.

Chapter 3 moves the direction of the thesis towards the context of Iran and examines two significant branches of Iranian art: Iranian new poetry and ‘new wave cinema’. Its aim is to explore the approaches proposed and developed by realist branches of Iranian art with regard to the characteristics of that social context. This provides a framework for the practical component of the PhD, which was produced for reception inside Iran and with due consideration of the social and political conditions of Iranian society. Based on Williams’ study of realism in western drama and the notion of realism developed in Chapter 1, the thesis argues that Iranian new poetry and new wave cinema are informed by realism. The historical development of realism in the new poetry is examined with regard to the changing conditions of Iranian society in the 19th and 20th centuries.

The new wave cinema is considered to be a realist cinema. The nature of the relationship maintained by films of the new wave with Iranian audiences is explored by focusing on the cinema of Abbas Kiarostami, a key figure in the
movement. By examining the relationship between the Iranian government and
the new cinema at the beginning of the Islamic revolution and more recently, the
research argues that the political and social conditions that required and supported
the Iranian new wave no longer exist. As noted, in an Iranian context animation is
most often associated with light entertainment and a failure to engage with the
mediation of serious issues. Its association with non-realist types of film, as well
as its limited public exposure when compared to live-action film, means that the
authorities are less vigilant in terms of controlling animation. In a context where
live action is under serious scrutiny, this thesis suggests that animation presents
itself as a potent alternative for raising significant and contentious issues without
alerting unwanted attention.

The first three chapters provide a contextual platform for the practical component
of this PhD. Mr and Mrs Mockroach builds on their findings, and considers the
characteristics of Iranian society and audience. It represents an attempt to propose
an alternative to the type of film that has been involved with the experience and
formation of Iranian contemporary life. It facilitates the adoption of a new
approach to animation by the Iranian animation community, inviting those
involved with animation in Iran to recognise the important possibilities it offers in
terms of addressing matters of social concern. It also provides an opportunity to
examine the ways in which a subversive animation, as defined by this thesis, may
be introduced into a politically limiting context. Ethical and political
considerations become important. What types of approach might invite this
audience to seek references to serious matters in an animated film? Which
approaches might best facilitate the avoidance of censorship? How can a medium
traditionally associated with humour and light entertainment be used to invite an
Iranian audience to reflect critically on, and perhaps ultimately intervene in, their
contemporary life? The film provides a context for exploring possible solutions to
these questions, and those posed earlier.

Chapter 4 thus reflects on the questions confronted by the filmmaker during the
film’s pre-production stage, and the proposed approaches. The general view of
both the authorities and the public in Iran to animation are examined, and the
implications of these dominant views in terms of socially-oriented animations are
opened up. The chapter examines the rationale behind the representational approaches of the film and the intended response in relation to an Iranian audience.

The concluding chapter offers a holistic overview of the thesis, revisiting the main objectives of the research and analysing the extent to which these have been fulfilled. It locates the research in relation to existing knowledge, and argues that it has made a number of successful contributions to the field of animation studies. Potential areas of research that have emerged, based on the outcome of the project, are also located and considered.
Chapter 1

Realism

This research explores the potential of animated film for raising awareness of social concerns in a restrictive political context, specifically that of contemporary Iranian society. Socially-engaged animation is premised on an intention to mediate issues involving contemporary society, and is thus founded on a realist intention. It does not adhere to the formal and stylistic characteristics of a specific realist movement, but it is reasonable to assert that it implies an intention to address aspects of social and psychological reality.

Filmmakers of this branch of animation draw their representational choices from a diverse range of realist and non-realist possibilities. As will be shown in Chapter 2, most such films employ modernist modes of representation, including the use of non-narrative form or the development of narrative using montage editing, foregrounding and self-reflection. In this chapter, the concept of realism and its relationship with modernist thoughts and methods of representation will be explored, in order to understand its use in socially-engaged animation. Williams’ study will form the basis of an examination of realism, understood as an intention to address aspects of the contemporary world, in cultural practice.

It has been suggested that realism as a method has virtually disappeared from certain branches of western art, in particular literature. I would argue, however, that since the 19th-century Realist movement, various branches of art have demonstrated a strong determination to address the concerns of contemporary life. The question of method in realist art practice will also be explored. It will be argued, based on the discussions of Williams and Brecht, that audience attention must be carried beyond the artwork to an appreciation of the reality it seeks to convey. It will be proposed that new modes and methods of representation must

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3 In ‘Realism and the Contemporary Novel’ in The Long Revolution, Raymond Williams considers changes undergone by the novel during the 20th century, and argues against claims that the realistic novel has long disappeared from western literature (Williams, 1965: pp274–289).

4 Art practices that have shown a concern to mediate historical and/or social reality include various new wave live action cinema movements and non-fictional forms of art practice, and socially-engaged animation.
constantly be sought. Factors likely to influence the representational approaches of a realist work will be explored, focusing on the discussions of Brecht and Jacobson. It will be suggested that these include audience over-familiarity with conventional methods of a particular system of representation, and the social context in which the work is produced.

In communist Eastern Europe and former USSR, the state supported a genre of art known as ‘socialist realism’. Much of the socially critical animation that emerged in the Eastern bloc during the second half of the 20th century seems to have been a reaction to officially sanctioned art practice, and also seems closely related to modernist movements. The origins and nature of socialist realism will be examined with reference to the arguments of Georg Lukacs, setting the context for exploration of the stylistic and representational approaches of my case studies, and the semantic possibilities of the practical component of this PhD.

**Realism as a question of intention**

Williams defines realism as a term that refers to certain methods and attitudes; as a conscious commitment to showing underlying psychological, social and physical realities (Williams, 1985: 260–61). In order to understand this, two points must be considered: the complex and problematic concept of ‘reality’, and the distinction between realism as *method* and *attitude*. I shall focus on Williams’ understanding of realism in order to demonstrate the complexity of the term, and propose a possible approach that is relevant to contemporary animation practice.

In the last century, different understandings of reality and people’s relationships with it have challenged the function and methods of realism across all branches of human activity. The ways in which recent shifts in the perception of what constitutes ‘reality’ have challenged understanding of realism in art will be explored, and attempts made to identify potential areas of ambiguity. An alternative approach to the type of realism that has developed in contemporary realist animation will be proposed. Realists argue for the existence of a mind-independent reality to which we have access, claiming that it is possible to mediate
aspects of historical reality by diverse means, including artistic conventions and scientific theories. Various other positions argue either that a mind-independent reality does not exist, or suggest that if it does, we have no access to it. Following Hacking, I call those who take these views non-realists. Drawing on semiotics, psychoanalysis and the ideas of Thomas Kuhn, postmodernists argue that, even if the existence of a mind-independent world is accepted, it can only be accessed via mind-dependent representations: outside socially-determined systems of signification, it is impossible to decide whether different theories on reality actually say anything about it. No criteria exist by which to decide how reality may best be represented; every representation is thus simply a way of constructing reality anew.

In *Theorizing Documentary*, exemplifying one such post-modern position with regard to non-fiction film, Michael Renov says:

> I have argued then that all discursive forms – documentary included – are, if not fictional, at least fictive, this by virtue of their tropic character (their recourse to tropes or rhetorical figures). As Hayden White has so brilliantly described, ‘every mimesis can be shown to be distorted and can serve, therefore, as an occasion for yet another description of the same phenomenon’... every documentary representation depends upon its own detour from the real, through the defiles of the audio-visual signifier (via choices of language, lens, proximity, and sound environment.) The itinerary of a truth’s passage (with truth

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5 Hacking argues that anti-realism can concern both entities and theories: ‘Anti-realism about theories says that our theories are not to be taken literally, and are at best useful, applicable, and good at predicting. Anti-realism about entities says that the entities postulated by theories are at best useful intellectual fictions.’ (Hacking, 1983: X) I use the term ‘non-realism’ as Hacking uses ‘anti-realism’ to discuss a variety of approaches which question the realist position, including positivism, empiricism, pragmatism, conventionalism and constructivism, while noting that I find ‘anti-realism’ too strong in terms of certain non-realist doctrines.

6 Kuhn argued that, at every historical stage, science operates within certain theories that are the dominant and prevailing rules of the era. Occasionally it may prove impossible to explain something using current scientific theory; he calls these phenomena ‘anomalies’. As science grows, so too does the number of anomalies, until the point at which their abundance demands new theories. These new theories, he believed, do not simply emerge from the old, but result from a break with the prevailing rules. Thus emerges a new system that is ‘incommensurable’ with the old, and which therefore revolutionizes science (see Kuhn, TS; *The Structure of Scientific Revolution*, 1970, pp1–9).
understood as propositional and provisional) for the documentary is, thus qualitatively akin to that of fiction. This is only another way of saying that there is nothing inherently less creative about nonfictional representations, both may create a ‘truth’ of the text (Renov, 1993: 7).

Renov does not reject the existence of a mind-independent reality. He argues: ‘at the level of the sign, it is the differing historical status of the referent that distinguishes documentary from its fictional counterpart...’ (ibid: 2). For him, however, the conventional and selective structures involved in the process of making a non-fiction film, and the social and constructivist aspects of these representational systems, undermine non-fiction’s claim that it shows aspects of historical reality. He therefore doubts that non-fiction practices can provide an objective representation of the external world. Moreover, he claims that no specific criteria exist by which to determine how effectively different representations approximate, or correspond to, the reality they claim to depict. Such arguments counter the view that objective representation is free from socially-constructed conventions. In common with many theoreticians, Renov views non-fiction film as a *representation* of the world, a perspective that has enabled postmodernist theoreticians to attack the claim that realism ‘shows things as they really are’.

In what follows, the argument that approaching realism in terms of representation can cause irresolvable problems will be explored, and an alternative approach proposed. This centres on an understanding of realism as a way in which to intervene with social and psychological realities/issues. Understanding of realism can be expanded by introducing its various characteristics *in different contexts and at different historical stages*. As more aspects of realism are identified and added, understanding will become more comprehensive and nuanced. Some aspects of contemporary realism will be explored, and subsequently realist approaches in two branches of socially

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7 For a response to Renov from a realist perspective, see Noel Carroll’s ‘Nonfiction Film and Postmodernist Skepticism’ in *Post-theory: Reconstructing Film Studies* (Carroll and Bordwell [ed], 1996).
engaged animation: British documentary animation and Eastern European animation.

Realists have responded to the postmodernist attack by shifting attention to what, following Hacking, will be termed the interventionist aspects of a realist work (Hacking, 1983: 146). Hacking uses a fictional story to explore the complex issue of representation and the roots of anti-realist attacks on realism. He explains that the notion of reality as a question of representation can lead to an irresolvable dispute between realism and anti-realism:

The first primary human invention is representation. Once there is a practice of representing, a second-order concept follows in train. This is the concept of reality, a concept which has content only when there are first-order representations. It will be protested that reality, or the world, was there before any representation or human language. Of course. But conceptualising it as reality is secondary. First there is this human thing, the making of representation. Then there was the judging of representations as real or unreal, true or false, faithful or unfaithful. Finally comes the world, not first, but second, third or fourth (Hacking, 1983: 136).

In this view, attention is diverted from external reality towards a concept of reality that is secondary to our minds, and is thus influenced by changes in our knowledge and systems of representation. It is easy to see how this view can provide a basis for challenging realism: if reality depends on our minds, any social factor that affects how we think can provoke different conceptualisations of reality. Reality as a mind-independent concept is thus replaced by what is primarily a social construct.

Science theoretician Paul Tibbetts adopts a historical approach to explore the problem of representation with regard to realism. He argues that realists recognise the conventional or ‘constructivist’ dimensions involved in representation, but believe representations ‘ultimately have to map onto some inquirer-independent, real-world properties’ (Tibbetts, 1990: 69). From a pragmatic viewpoint, the realists focus on those data points that: ‘… i) are consistent with theory; ii) are theoretically interesting; iii) occasion theoretical
revision or extension and iv) have heuristic value for further research’ (ibid: 69). Moreover, realists stress that representational devices generate non-random data points: under similar conditions exactly the same results can be achieved, and data acquired can be used to intervene with other aspects of material reality in a planned and organised way.  

Anti-realists counter this argument, drawing on the social and conventional factors involved in the process of prioritising data. To them, the factors that determine the process result from a social agreement between the community of enquirers, which is far from being mind-neutral. Tibbetts continues:

Of course, constructivists counter that what constitutes theoretically significant as against non-significant or non-random as against random data points requires reference to epistemic criteria posited by a given community of enquirers. Such criteria include theoretical consistency, heuristic value, predictive accuracy, and Lakatos’ (sophisticated) falsifiability. Apart from such negotiated and therefore contingent evaluative criteria, estimates of significance or non-significance are unresolvable in principle (ibid: 70).

Realists in turn argue that such socially-constructed epistemic criteria must be criteria for evaluating something. The argument can continue indefinitely, but I concur with Hacking and Tibbett that, if realism continues to be discussed from the perspective of representation, the realist/anti-realist dilemma will never end. In an argument based on those of others including Kuhn, Hacking explains the flaws in this obsession with ‘representation’ as a by-product of the human mind:

With the growth of knowledge we may, from revolution to revolution, come to inhabit different worlds. New theories are new representations. They represent in different ways and so there are new kinds of reality. So much is simply a

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8 Noel Carroll argues that it is possible for non-fiction filmmakers to make an ‘objective’ representation of historical reality. He says: ‘Modes of enquiry and their associated avenues of communication are governed by protocols that have been established in order to secure the objectivity of conclusions in the relevant area of discourse. Many of these protocols are concerned with filtering out or diminishing the epistemologically baleful effects of bias...scientists, historians, journalists and even nonfiction filmmakers can bring standards of objectivity to bear upon other inquirers in order to determine whether or not bias has distorted the claims they advance’ (Carroll, 1996: 284).
Hacking continues: ‘realism and anti-realism scurry about, trying to latch onto something in the nature of representation that will vanquish the other. There is nothing there’ (ibid: 145).

Williams’ definition of realism entails that it should be approached as ‘representation of reality’\(^9\). As argued, this requires us to enter a complex, and at times irresolvable, argument concerning the extent to which human representation is able to conceptualise an external reality. It is therefore proposed that the central claim of realism should no longer be viewed as ‘showing things as they really are’, but as ‘a commitment to mediating social and/or psychological realities’. This change of emphasis responds to postmodern concerns about the im/possibility of representing the material world, but does not deny realism’s commitment to offering a truthful description of reality.

It is my belief that realist art also intends to change the social world. As Bill Nichols argues with regard to nonfiction cinema: ‘Documentary film has a kinship with those other nonfictional systems that together make up what we may call the discourse of sobriety... they can and should change the world itself’ (Nichols, 1991: 3). Hacking argues that there is more realism in ‘intervention’ than ‘representation’. By this, he means that it is more helpful to regard realist activities as a means to intervene in the material world, than to believe that their purpose is to provide truthful representations of reality. As will be argued, this position offers further possibilities with regard to realism in art. In the *Oxford English Dictionary*, one definition of ‘mediate’ is: ‘to bring about (a result) by acting as an intermediate stage between stimulus and response, or an intention

\(^9\) Raymond Williams has also responded to this postmodernist criticism by drawing attention to what I call the interventionist aspects of realist activities. In his discussion of the novel, he considers artistic activities as a means for affecting the social world: ‘Reality is constantly established, by common effort and art is one of the highest forms of this process’ (Williams, 1965: 288). Having acknowledged the problems inherent in considering realism as an attempt to provide a likeness of reality, he defines it as an attempt to *understand* and *describe* the movement of social, physical and psychological forces behind the historical world. This definition may or may not involve realistic representation of some kind (Williams, 1985: 261).
and its realization; act as or make use of a mediator’. The interventionist aspect of the definition is important, and is the meaning I wish to emphasise.

Art is an important part of cultural life and activity, and it may be argued that all artistic activities, whether realist or non-realist, have the power to influence society and shape culture. It could, for example, be argued that Mondrian’s abstract paintings had a significant impact on prevailing contemporary social conditions, and that most branches of modernist art that are not considered to be realist have profoundly affected our contemporary world. Such notions raise an important point with regard to this discussion: that different branches of art have been able to affect and intervene in our historical life demonstrates a causal connection between art practices and the world. Through art practices, we are able to intervene in our social and/or historical world, and through them we engage in an act of communicating, reproducing, experiencing and exploring a social order (Williams, quoted in Brooker, 1999: 51). Not only is this an important way of shaping aspects of social reality, but it also has a causal connection with the objective social reality that underlies our lives. The social world is perceived, negotiated and most importantly intervened in by common effort. I would suggest that a strong sense of realism may be located in this ‘cause and effect’ relationship between works of art and social reality. Our access to and relationship with the world is not random; the way in which the social/historical world is shaped may be influenced by planned and organised activities.

The notion of realism so far defended reveals little about the characteristics of realism in art. As argued, the view of art as a way in which to mediate historical and social realities carries a strong sense of realism. The question of whether specific factors distinguish the different ways in which realist and non-realist art are approached has not, however, been explored. In order to do this, the characteristics of aesthetic realism will be investigated.

In his studies of modern realism in Western drama, Williams offers a valuable example, identifying three central characteristics of 19th-century realist drama. These comprise a conscious movement towards social extension; a tendency
towards setting action in the present, and an emphasis on secular activity (Williams, 1990: 229). Though these suggestions are helpful, they cannot be universally applied; not all contemporary realist works display all three characteristics. Rapid changes in society, the emergence of new kinds of art practice, and new ways of representation or semantic possibilities have been determining in this respect. Further, as will be illustrated by reference to Eastern European socially-engaged animation and Iranian new poetry, social and political influences such as censorship and government control mean that sometimes realist practices do not explicitly demonstrate any of Williams’ proposed characteristics. Williams also suggests a fourth characteristic, proposing that certain realist works are ‘consciously interpretive in relation to a particular political viewpoint’ (ibid: 233).

General examinations of the kind attempted by Williams can be useful in terms of orthodox realist practice, and may help to avoid fragmented and narrow studies. A more focused approach, however, which takes account of both the nature of the fields of practice and the historical and social context, may enrich or even transform understanding of contemporary realism. Further, it must be noted that at least two of Williams’ proposed characteristics – a conscious move towards secular action and the setting of action in the present – have been evident in most branches of contemporary art practice, whether realist or non-realist. In this sense, they can be used to identify two discrete stages of art practice: the period before the mid-19th century with its engagement with metaphysical and ahistorical issues, and the period immediately following, with its secular undertone and its location of the action in the present.

It seems obvious that understanding of contemporary realist art practice will be enhanced as more characteristics of different branches are identified. For example, to the above points may be added the comment that, in western literature, a particular method which defines individuals as affected by social forces and explains social forces through individuals has been a strong characteristic of realism (Williams, 1965: 278). It may also be argued that Western realism often takes a stand against dominant ideologies. I shall not attempt to provide a comprehensive list of the properties of contemporary
realism; as argued, my view is that in different contexts and at different historical stages realism may develop different characteristics; in terms of method, realist works can develop various approaches taken from within and outside of traditional realist systems. For me, intention rather than method determines the realism of a work of art. This entails a particular relationship with historical reality: an intention to intervene in and mediate social reality. I believe it is possible to see, as proposed by Tibbetts with regard to science, how socially oriented works can intervene in and mediate aspects of contemporary life, without engaging with the complex and irresolvable philosophical debates around realism and postmodernism. In the next three chapters I shall attempt to expand on this notion.

Socially-engaged animated film often shows the world from the perspective of marginalized and oppressed sections of society. It thus intervenes in the world by drawing attention to neglected issues, giving the underdog a voice, and taking a stand against the majority view. It will be argued that, in this way, it has contributed significantly to issues of social and cultural importance. If, as proposed, this constitutes ‘realism’, it is realism with a specific meaning. Thus, in socially-engaged animation, the notion of realism as an intention to show things as they really are (Lovell, 1980: 65) may instead be seen as an intention to offer an alternative perspective on aspects of culture and society that are shaped by dominant ideologies.

**Realism and the question of method**

In addition to providing alternative perspectives, animations that address social concerns often intervene in the world on a more profound level. Films such as Karen Watson’s *Daddy’s Little Bit of Dresden China* (1988) Marjut Rimminen’s *Some Protection* (1988) and Phil Mulloy’s *The Sound of Music* (1993) seem to invite their audiences to engage with, and take action to resolve, the issues that

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10 Tibbetts argues: ‘One does not have to endorse all the claims of early twentieth century positivism to see the merits of avoiding the murky claims and even murkier arguments of the realist/anti-realist debate’ (Tibbetts, 1990: 80).
they represent. These include child abuse and exploitation, the view of women by male-dominated society, the role of prisons and the polarisation of society in post-Thatcherian Britain. The stance taken in these and other films examined in this thesis is critical. Their directors clearly reveal discontent with the social problems portrayed, and the audience is invited to adopt a similar position. As will be seen in Chapter 2, the methods used in such films are particularly important in terms of the type of relationship they maintain with their audience.

If method is understood as a particular way of using semantic possibilities and ways of representation, it must be asked whether there are particular sets of conventions, and specific ways of using them, that enable a filmmaker to engage an audience with social and historical issues. The answer is not clear-cut: over the last two centuries, various realist movements have been able to engage audiences with aspects of contemporary social life. These include the 19th- and 20th-century realist novel; socially-engaged cinema in the form of various new wave movements; non-fiction film, and socially-oriented animation. There is, however, no universal way in which social engagement can be facilitated in all branches of art at all times and in any context.

Realism is a historical phenomenon; as such, those operating within its ambit must constantly revise their working methods in response to changing social conditions. Some theoreticians, including Williams, Lovell, Brecht and Jakobson, have argued that the ways in which realist art engages with its audience and the conventions employed are contingent on historical changes within a society in which a work is produced and received. Some argue that any view of realism that isolates it from history, and tries to impose a general system that will respond to all realist practices in different contexts and at different historical stages, is doomed to failure. In the 1970s for example, Lovell argues that, from a Marxist point of view:

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11 For my discussion of these films I am indebted to Andy Darley’s examination of British non-fiction animation (Darley, 1995: 1).
12 For an account of the historical evolution of realism see Roman Jakobson’s ‘On Realism in Art’ in Language in Literature, 1987.
Realism as a critical instrument of working-class politics and sensibility must be flexible in its strategies, and must always consider questions of form and technique in relation to particular audiences as well as in relation to content. (Lovell, 1980: 67).

Brecht and Jakobson are among theoreticians who have paid particular attention to the issue of realist method and the relationship between a realist work and its audience. Focusing on late 19th-century Russian realist painting, Jakobson argues that, by exposure to realist work, an audience is gradually familiarised with its conventions (Jakobson, 1987: 39). It makes immediate references between the representation of a historical object and its referent, forgetting that it is watching a construction – a representation of reality – and therefore largely fails to engage either mentally or critically. The artist is therefore unable to draw attention to unnoticed aspects of the exhibited work: ‘the painted image becomes an ideogram, a formula, to which the object portrayed is linked by contiguity. Recognition becomes instantaneous. We no longer see a picture’ (ibid: 39).

At this stage, Jakobson argues, new conventions and innovative modes of signification are needed to inspire active mental engagement with the work. Through this, the audience will notice the aspects of reality that the artist wishes to portray (ibid: 39–40). Though initially effective, in time these new methods also become old and familiar, forcing the realist artist once again to seek new conventions. In this, subversion, defined as an attempt to challenge the expectations of an audience, finds a significant role. An immediate conclusion that can be drawn from Jakobson’s argument is that realist conventions are socially and historically determined. In his view, the background experience of

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13 Jakobson’s complex discussion of realism goes beyond what is outlined here. He argues that there can be different understandings of realism at different historical stages, and that different concepts of realism can exist at the same historical moment. My argument particularly concerns the ways in which a realist work of art can draw the intended audience’s attention to neglected historical/social issues. This discussion therefore concerns only the first section of Jakobson’s argument as outlined.

14 As will be seen, subversion is defined in two ways throughout this thesis. A work of art may challenge the expectations of an audience in order to invite it to see the issues represented from a new angle; it may also intend to overturn a social order by critiquing it and inviting an audience to intervene in the issues portrayed.
the intended audience determines the stylistic and representational systems that should be used for a realist work of art. While one method might be used effectively for a particular audience in a particular society, it might fail to affect an audience already accustomed to the conventions and representational systems deployed. This point is significant in terms of the practical component of this PhD project, as will be explained in Chapter 4.

In the last few decades of the 20th century, a new movement in socially-engaged British animation revisited the modernist conventions of mid-20th-century political cinema. Filmmakers of this movement achieved strong subversive effects by using the modernist conventions of this cinema in the medium of animation (see Chapter 2 below). It might be argued that a contemporary British audience has become inured to various modernist modes and conventions because of their use by the advertising industry. Strategies including rapid editing and reflexive modes – revealing the process of filmmaking and thus creating a distance between viewer and artwork – have therefore lost their subversive power for this particular audience. This does not imply that modernist modes would be ineffectual for a different audience in another society; an Iranian audience, for example, would not have been overtly exposed to modernist forms of cinema, or advertising because of Iran’s relatively young and underdeveloped advertising industry. Thus modernist approaches may still achieve strong subversive results in Iran.15

Brecht was particularly aware of the impact of subversive methods in realist art. From a Marxist perspective, he addresses two meanings of subversion, arguing that a work of art should invite audiences to question the prevailing forces of society, and see historically determined power relations as open to revision and correction. A realist work should both reveal and subvert society’s dominant ideologies:

Realistic means: discovering the causal complexities of the society/ unmasking the prevailing view of things as the view of those who are in power/ writing from the stand point of the class which offers the broadest solutions for the

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15 See Chapter 3 below.
pressing difficulties in which human society is caught up/ emphasising the element of development... (Brecht, 1980: 82)

Brecht believes that art should represent the perspective of the oppressed and take a critical/oppositional stance against the dominant forces. As a Marxist, Brecht is optimistic about the possibility for social progress and stresses the need to represent the views of the proletariat, which the Marxists believed was the most progressive class of the early 20th century. Brecht’s understanding of ‘popular art’ as a way to represent the views of those on the margins of society is illuminating. He defines it as a form that adopts and enriches the forms of expression used by the masses, and also regards it as a means for education, for him, it is an art that ‘assumes their standpoint, confirming and correcting it’ (ibid: 81).

As a practitioner, Brecht believed that, in order to reveal the ideological and hidden relationships in society, the realist artist must disturb the conventional relationship between artwork and audience. His strategy of ‘estrangement’ – ‘staging phenomena in such a way that what had seemed natural and immutable in them is now tangibly revealed to be historical…’ (Jameson, 1980: 206) is in line with this. Brecht argued that 20th-century social reality was constantly changing, prompting the emergence of new forms of social order that required new modes of representation (ibid: 81). In his view, the old conventions could no longer communicate and thereby achieve the political results that were, Brecht would argue, part of realism’s purpose. For him, therefore, a work of art must also subvert the traditional relationship between audience and artwork, locating it in an unfamiliar position with regard to the work of art. The audience is invited to adopt an active role in terms of mental/critical engagement, thus, Brecht argued, preparing a context in which the artist could direct its attention to the historical/social reality portrayed in the work of art:

In the Brechtian aesthetic, indeed, the idea of realism is not a purely artistic and formal category, but rather governs the relationship of the work of art to reality itself, characterising a particular stance towards it. The spirit of realism designates an active, curious, experimental, subversive – in a word, scientific-attitude towards social institutions and the material world; and the ‘realistic’ work of art is therefore one which encourages and disseminates this attitude, not
yet merely in a flat or mimetic way or along the line of imitation alone. Indeed the ‘realistic’ work of art is one in which ‘realistic’ and experimental attitudes are tried out, not only between its characters and their fictive realities, but also between its audience and the work itself, and not least significant - between the writer and his own materials and techniques (Jameson: 1980: 205).

Brecht specifically regarded realist art as a means for intervention in, and mediation of, social and historical realities (ibid: 82). He believed that art should be used to change the way in which social realities are defined and practised by educating people. As I shall argue in Chapter 3, this view of realism informed certain branches of socially-engaged animation in the second half of the 20th century, including so-called British documentary animation. Like Jakobson, Brecht argued that realist systems of representation gradually lose their subversive effect and become familiar, provoking the need for new forms. These would enable the artists once again to prevent their audiences from immersing non-critically in the work of art, using it simply for escapism and pleasure. The artist could instead draw audience attention to the historical realities that the work represents (Brecht, 1980: 82). In this respect, Brecht believed that realism should use every means, derived from inside and outside art, old and new, to ‘render reality to man in a form that they can master’ (ibid: 81).

Building on Brecht’s perspective, it may be argued that art itself is subject to historical change. In the last century and a half, many totally new branches of art have emerged. Photography, live-action and animation cinema, and various cross-platform forms of fine arts and moving images have impacted significantly on the way art is perceived and practised in contemporary society. New possibilities have emerged as a result of these new forms of practice, and mass communication such as television, radio, satellite and the internet have radicalised the way art is distributed and experienced. It is, therefore, naive to believe that a particular universal genre can set the standard for all realist practices at different times.  

16 This was Brecht’s objection to Lukacs’s understanding of realism (see Aesthetics and Politics, 1980: pp68–86). Lukacs posited that 19th-century writers had managed to develop a formal approach that best represented the totality of contemporary society, and that the critical realism of
Perhaps one of the most important contributions of Brecht and Jakobson is their attention to the role of audience and the social context in which the work is received. If it is upheld that the intention of socially-engaged art is to intervene in social and historical realities, and accepted that subversion plays a significant part in this strategy, as proposed throughout this thesis, the background experience and social context of the audience must be taken into account when considering the semantic and representational possibilities of films such as *Mr and Mrs Mockroach*.

Some points regarding my particular approach must be clarified. The discussion and practice of this thesis is located primarily in that of theoreticians including Brecht, Jacobson and Williams, who were active in the early- to mid-20th century. It could be suggested some now consider their ideas dated, and of little use to contemporary practitioners in developed western society. It might also be argued that modernist modes have been widely adopted in the west and are therefore familiar to western audiences; that they have become comfortable conventions for the dominant forces of capitalist society. Regarding modernism, for example, Jameson argues that ‘what was once an oppositional and anti-social phenomenon in the early years of the century, has today become the dominant style of commodity production and an indispensable component in the machinery of the latter’s [capitalism] ever more rapid and demanding reproduction of itself’ (Jameson, 1980: 209). Others might argue that social conditions in western society have changed significantly since the early 1970s, and that the west has now entered what is generally referred to as the ‘post-modern’ era. David Harvey, in an historical examination of these radical changes, argues that since the 1970s:

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the bourgeois novel should therefore be used as a model for all proceeding realist art. He later proposed that formal approaches to 19th-century critical realism, once adopted by those writing from a socialist perspective, best enable us to represent the reality of early 20th-century capitalism. Brecht, however, argued that the realities of capitalist society are constantly changing. He believed that, in order to describe and reveal the motivations behind the conditions of contemporary capitalism, we should not confine ourselves to the stylistic and formal characteristics of a specific realist art practice. Rather, we should constantly seek innovative approaches that might help the artist to describe the ever-changing conditions of contemporary society. For an expanded account of Lukacs’ views see Chapter 1 below, and Lukacs in *Aesthetics and Politics* (1980: pp28–59).
The experience of time and space has changed, the confidence in the association between scientific and moral judgements has collapsed, aesthetics has triumphed over ethics as a prime focus of social and intellectual concerns, images dominate narratives, ephemerality and fragmentation take precedence over eternal truths and unified politics... (Harvey, 1990: 328)

The kind of art practice – postmodern art – that resulted from the new social experience has produced new modes of practice. Theorists such as Ihab Hassan and Charles Jencks have attempted to classify the new approaches (Hassan, 1985: 123, 124 and Jencks, 1996: 36–37).

All these challenges may be admitted in terms of a western audience. It may be true that contemporary western art practice is dominated by new modes of signification that derive from a changed social structure, but not all countries across the globe have experienced current western social conditions. Postmodernism is a geographical as well as a historical phenomenon that applies to the developed countries of the west. The central part of this PhD project, however, is concerned with a society – contemporary Iran – that has in no way entered the post-modern experience of life. It has been proposed, based on the discussions of other theorists, that it is important to consider the social context in which a realist artwork is produced and received. Semantic and representational approaches of a given work are significantly influenced by these, so the question of intended audience and their background experience is crucial.

Over the last few decades, with the exception of the Iranian new wave, modernist cinema has been virtually unknown in Iran. Iranian television advertising is in its infancy, and for almost two decades after the Islamic revolution state-controlled television aired no advertisements. Restricted access to contemporary western art has prompted the development of forms of advertising practice that often have more in common with Iranian graphic design and mainstream cinema – a combination of Iranian cinema, Hollywood and the mainstream cinema of other countries. In recent history, Iranian advertising agencies have employed far fewer modernist elements than their western counterparts, particularly those discussed in this thesis and developed in the practical component of the PhD.
Despite its international success, Iranian new wave cinema has had little exposure on state television. Even in cinemas, new wave films have been sidelined in favour of mainstream Iranian cinema. Unlike their western counterparts, Iranian people have not become accustomed to modernist modes. I would therefore argue that, in the Iranian context, these approaches can achieve strongly subversive results.

Among theoreticians of postmodern art there is a strong current of belief that contemporary art practice is not completely divorced from social reality. Jencks, Linda Hutcheon and Fredric Jameson have different approaches – Jameson, for example, holds postmodern art in less regard than his peers – but all three agree that at least some branches of postmodern art engage with the contemporary state of western society. They do not suggest that subversion has no place in contemporary art practice, but rather that new modes of practice can achieve subversive effects in terms of present-day western audience and society.

Jencks suggests that postmodern art uses double coding, by which he means that it uses techniques, technology and forms of modernist art in order to subvert them; to criticize modernism’s break with history and its elitist kind of art: To simplify, double coding means elite/popular, accommodating/subversive and new/old’ (Jencks, 1996: 30). On Hutcheon, he says:

As Linda Hutcheon has so exhaustively shown, postmodern fiction inscribes itself within conventional discourses in order to subvert them. It incorporates cultural realities in order to challenge them: a double coding as strategy (ibid: 32).

Both Jencks and Hutcheon offer detailed arguments on the subversive nature of postmodern art with regard to western social realities. My argument is located in this branch of contemporary thought and practice, the theoretical current that nevertheless preserves an important place for social engagement.

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17 It is also important to note that with few exceptions foreign films have not been shown in cinemas in Iran since the 1979 revolution. Internet access is also severely controlled and not freely available.

18 Here, both meanings of the term are encompassed: subversion in relation to the audience and subversion in relation to social structures.
Western postmodern art finds its meaning in relation to an established and dominant historical mode of practice: modernism. Postmodern art is widely regarded as the appropriate mode of practice for contemporary developed western society, but cannot be regarded as universally appropriate. In Iranian society, which is unfamiliar with modernist conventions and in which modernism as a mode of practice and thought has not been established, postmodernist approaches make little sense. An approach that responds to prevailing social conditions is thus required.

As argued earlier, I am a realist according to a specific definition of the term. This is rooted in Williams’s understanding of realism in respect to cultural practice, and in Hacking’s more recent explorations. From this basis, I have proposed that realism refers to an ‘intention’ to ‘mediate’ aspects of contemporary social life. The adoption of this approach is a response to postmodern escapism in relation to the im/possibility of representing social life through cultural activities. I have further argued, following the theories of Williams and Hacking, that a view of realist art as a means for ‘intervention’ in social life offers the potential to respond to postmodern criticism of realism. This apparently new approach is actually founded on the theories of those such as Brecht, who understood realist art as primarily a means for social intervention. Despite the fact that some contemporary theorists might find this position dated, it provides a strong basis for responding to the postmodern reluctance to engage with contemporary life.

For me, the means are not an end in terms of realist art; they are merely the tools by which to intervene in the way that social realities are shaped. I have argued, by revisiting the ideas of earlier theorists, that representational choices in a realist work are primarily determined by the social context in which it is produced and received. As others have argued, it is pointless to use modernist modes that have become familiar and lost their potential for subversive effects on a present-day western audience. I would also contend that it is pointless to use postmodern strategies in a society that is not even familiar with modernist modes of practice.
This thesis primarily examines animation as a means for intervention/criticism and subversion in socially/politically constrictive contexts. Brecht and Jakobson’s theories relating to contexts of political censorship, and animation as a critical or even a subversive practice, have been considered only briefly. Over the next three chapters I shall explore the ways in which certain makers of animated film have used the medium to produce socially critical, and often subversive, films.

Before moving on to examine the ways in which filmmakers have used animation to mediate aspects of contemporary life, I must address a further aspect of realism: socialist realism. This genre was partly developed by the Marxist/realist theoretician Lukacs, and was appropriated by the regimes of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe under communism. It seems clear that most examples of socially committed animation that emerged from the Eastern bloc, such as Svankmajer’s *The Flat* (1968) and Priit Parn’s *Breakfast on the Grass* (1987), consciously adopted representational choices that opposed the characteristics of the prevailing, officially sponsored form. Both these films will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 2. In order to explore this, I shall examine socialist realism in more detail. I shall make a distinction between the doctrine developed by Lukacs, from a Marxist perspective and as a way of advancing a notion of realism appropriate to 20th-century social conditions, and its political and ideological adaptation by communist regimes. This argument will provide a context for my examination of examples of Eastern European animation in Chapter 2.

**Socialist realism, origins and politics**

To understand Lukacs’ definition of socialist realism, it is necessary to revisit his systematic study of 19th-century realist literature. From a Marxist perspective, he argued that the 19th-century realist novel managed to represent the ‘totality’ of contemporary society in literary form. This was achieved by portraying ‘typical’ characters, around which a complete world with its diverse forces and contradictions could be organised (Lukacs, 1970: 142). Further, he noted that the truth of a realist work of art cannot be determined in terms of its relationship
with history, but rather that it should be experienced as an enclosed and complete world by a mind that is temporarily detached from the historical world. Exploring Lukacs’ notion of ‘totality’, Roy Pascal says:

The method of art is...‘anthropomorphic’. It seeks totality in a double sense. First: its task is to make a ‘totality’ out of the reality it is reflecting...like science it has ‘to reproduce the intensive totality, the totality of the essential determinants (Bestimmungen) of the object’, and therefore it is not limited to the external appearance of the object...the work of art is total through another characteristic. It is not a direct expression or copy of an external event, its truth cannot be tested against some particular happening. It is an imitation, an artefact; it is a totality in that it is in itself; it is self-enclosed. It can be experienced only by the contemplative mind, temporarily withdrawn from direct engagement in the world’ (Pascal, 1970:149).

Following Marx, Lukacs argues that there is an underlying unified reality behind the surface of capitalism (Lukacs, 1980: 32). Nevertheless the objective structure of the capitalist economy creates a situation in which elements of society appear ‘disintegrated’. Lukacs argues that when capitalism functions in ‘a so-called normal manner’ (ibid: 32), people living in capitalist society experience it as a unified world. At times of crisis, however, they experience the elements of capitalist society as disintegrated. He argues that realist literature should therefore attempt to represent the true reality, the underlying unity and the totality of the historical world (ibid: 33). Lukacs argued that by developing the approach outlined above, realist bourgeois novelists managed to create a complex world in which there is a balance between the way in which social relations are manifested and their underlying social motivation. By identifying with a novel’s characters and events, the audience becomes enmeshed in the experience of the fictional world, and follows the characters in their attempt to understand and overcome the hidden social forces portrayed therein. The fictional world of the novel thus becomes a microcosm of historical reality; readers emerge from the experience enlightened about the hidden ideological and political relations in their own lives (Lukacs, 1980: 56). He argues:

19 This is what he refers to as the dialectical unity of appearance and essence.
The process of participation enables readers to clarify their horizons. A living form of humanism prepares them to endorse the political slogans of the Popular Front and to comprehend its political humanism. Through the mediation of realist literature the soul of the masses is made receptive for an understanding of the great, progressive and democratic epochs of human history (Lukacs, 1980: 56).

A second important notion derived from the 19th century realist novel was Lukacs’ notion of ‘typicality’. Following Engels, Lukacs argued that in order to portray the ‘totality’ of the time, the realist novelist must seek a central character round whom a complete and unified world with all its contradictions unfolds (Lukacs, 1970: 142). For Lukacs, this typical character is not a hero but an ordinary person ‘caught at the centre of conflicting political and social forces’ (Lovell, 1980: 71). He argues:

The problem is to find a central character in whose life all the important extremes in the world of the novel converge and around whom a complete world with all its vital contradictions can be organised (Lukacs, 1970: 142).

Lukacs argued that the bourgeois novel, by maintaining ‘typicality’ and ‘totality’, managed to represent the underlying reality of contemporary society. In order to formulate the notion of ‘socialist realism’ he introduced a third element, ‘perspective’. He argued that a realist novel succeeds in portraying the true spirit of the time only when written from the perspective of its most progressive class. In Lukacs’ view, capitalism was capable of producing great critical works only in its progressive stage, and by the second half of the 19th century, the bourgeoisie had become a reactionary class. For him, the proletariat was the only progressive class of the late 19th and 20th centuries, and theirs was thus the only perspective capable of exposing the totality of capitalism (Lukacs, 1963: 93) He argues:

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20 Brecht criticised Lukacs’ insistence on developing a well-rounded character, arguing that Lukacs’ theory of realism reduces the complex and multi-dimensional social and historical life to a ‘plot, setting or background for the creation of great individuals’ (Brecht, 1980: 77).
The perspective of socialist realism is, of course, the struggle for socialism...socialist realism differs from critical realism, not only in being based on a concrete socialist perspective, but also in using this perspective to describe the forces working towards socialism from the inside\(^{21}\) (ibid: 93).

Lukacs’ systematic exploration of the bourgeois novel, otherwise of so much value, was undermined by his attempt to generalise and expand the formal and stylistic qualities of a particular historical stage of literature to all successive genres of socially-engaged art. It was this position that Brecht found problematic and criticized as being formalistic:

> The formalistic nature of the theory of realism [advanced by Lukacs] is demonstrated by the fact that not only is it exhaustively based on the form of a few bourgeois novels of the previous century (more recent novels are merely cited in so far as they exemplify the same form), but also exclusively on the particular genre of the novel (Brecht, 1980: 70).

The limitations and impracticality of Lukacs’ view are shown particularly when an attempt is made to apply the formal and stylistic characteristics of the 19\(^{th}\)-century realist novel to diverse forms of art outside literature. He remained focused on the novel form, even though literature was gradually losing its dominance to other branches of art, particularly cinema. Lukacs recognised, and insisted on, the idea of the popularity of art and the significance of both reaching the masses and engaging them in a pleasurable manner. It is therefore intriguing that he largely ignored cinema, the most popular art form of the 20th century. He also failed to explain how his theory of realism could be applied to branches of fine art and newly emerging forms of moving image such as live action and animation. The conventions applicable to the bourgeois novel require the development of narrative over a particular time-span, so it is impossible to apply them to many non-narrative and short forms of contemporary art practice.

\(^{21}\) A more comprehensive account of socialist realism can be found in Lukacs’ ‘Critical Realism and Socialist Realism’ in his *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism* (1963). Communist regimes, particularly during Stalin’s rule, sponsored notions of socialist realism close to those of Lukacs. It is nevertheless important to note that these regimes exercised extreme power to direct socialist realism towards propagandist and ideological purposes, and to denounce alternative kinds of art practice.
History has shown that during the last century some of these new forms, including non-fiction live-action, new wave cinema, and socially-engaged animation, have been quite successful in mediating aspects of social reality. In recognition of this, Brecht proposed that realist artists who wished to reflect on the changing conditions of contemporary capitalist society should instead learn and make use of the conventions and skills developed by modernist movements (Brecht, 1980: 75). Moreover, as Brecht realised, realist conventions cannot derive from literary practice alone. Contemporary realism has benefited considerably from the stylistic achievements of modernist movements across all branches of art and literature.

Eastern European regimes adopted formal characteristics of socialist realism to support and promote their ideological and political objectives. Communist regimes, particularly under Stalin, wielded considerable power to condemn alternative forms of art practice. Socialist realism became the official form of practice. It was in such a context that socially and politically critical artists of the region turned to modernist modes of practice as a way of resistance and subversion. This will be explored in relation to my case studies in Chapter 2.

As realist Marxists, both Brecht and Lukacs believed in the existence of a unified underlying reality. Their point of departure, as Terry Lovell argues, lies in the fact that Brecht defined realism purely in terms of an intention to mediate social reality, while Lukacs argued that only a particular formal system is capable of showing the world as it really is (Lovell, 1980: 77). Thus, while Brecht welcomed new representational forms such as modernist stylistic aesthetics, Lukacs insisted that only the formal and stylistic characteristics of the 19th-century novel could enable realist artists to portray the totality of life.

It may be argued that the discussions of Lukacs, Brecht and Jakobson all relate to realist art practice in a relatively free social and political context. All three presume a context of practice in which external social, cultural and political factors have little effect on artistic choice. In such conditions artists are free to make semantic and representational choices from a wide range of possibilities. Sometimes, however, context may both inform available choice and prevent the use of prevailing modes of
practice. In times of social and political restriction, socially-oriented artists must both consider how to represent an issue to their intended audience, and develop strategies that will enable them to evade censorship while doing so. In such contexts, including contemporary Iranian society, communist Eastern Europe, and in other countries affected by undemocratic and totalitarian regimes, it is often impossible to use direct modes of representation. In this respect, a further facet can be appended to the arguments of Jakobson and Brecht; that social context may engender the need for new modes of art practice. In the context of socially-engaged animation, as will be shown in Chapter 2, this has often resulted in complex formal systems involving indirect modes of practice such as metaphor and allegory.

The ways in which animation practitioners have attempted to address aspects of contemporary social reality will now be examined. As will be argued in Chapter 2, so-called British documentary animation is receptive to formal and stylistic experimentation and the use of modernist conventions. These representational strategies accord closely with Brecht’s notion of realist art. Further, it is clear that works of this kind have been intended as a means to intervene in matters of social reality. In Eastern Europe, however, socially critical animation seems to have produced a formal system that contrasts directly with officially-sanctioned forms of socialist realism. Censorship and social and political restriction have contributed to the formation of this aesthetic, and it also seems evident that the directors of films such as The Flat and Breakfast on the Grass consciously disregarded and at times contradicted ‘official’ conventions. Focusing on my case studies, I shall examine how these directors have used both the possibilities of animation and their own social and cultural backgrounds to reflect on the contemporary conditions of society. In this way, the focus of the discussion will be narrowed towards the field of animation itself, in order to provide a further context for the production of the practical component of my PhD.
Chapter 2

Socially-engaged animation as a means for intervention

In Chapter 1, the concept of realism was explored and a specific approach adopted, following theorists including Hacking, Williams and Brecht. It was posited that realism can be seen as an intention to address social reality, often allied to an attempt to effect positive change. In this sense, a work’s realism is determined not by its formal and conventional systems of delivery, but by the relationship it maintains with people’s lives. Realist art establishes its nature via a social agency: the audience; an artist’s desire to influence a view held by a specific section of society is achieved by educating, informing, motivating or even earning audience sympathy.

Many popular forms of cinema offer a context in which an audience can immerse itself as a form of escapism. Focusing on the discussions of Jakobson and Brecht, it was argued that, in a realist system, an artist must maintain the audience’s critical and mental engagement. The work must therefore incorporate reminders that it addresses aspects of real life, thus discouraging escapist immersion and inviting viewers to consider and analyse these real issues.

This chapter will focus on animation, examining how various practitioners have used it to react to conditions of contemporary life. Films made in a socially open context, in this case, Britain at the end of the 20th century, will be contrasted with films made under the constraints associated with communist regimes. In the first category I have chosen two films, Daddy’s Little Bit of Dresden China (1988) by Karen Watson, and Tim Webb’s A Is for Autism (1992), on the understanding that it is impossible fully to represent the diverse approaches of socially-engaged animators working under favourable conditions. These films nevertheless demonstrate the use of recurring conventions in so-called contemporary documentary animation, and in this sense may be considered representative of a main current in its recent history. Production strategies employed include the use of actual recorded sound; combining different techniques and genres; organising narrative according to the conventions of live-action documentary, and revealing the process of film to the audience.
In the second category, my selection comprises three films made in Eastern Europe and the former USSR: Trnka’s *The Hand* [Ruka] (1965); Svankmajer’s *The Flat* [Byte] (1968) and Parn’s *Breakfast on The Grass* (1989). With reference to these, it will be demonstrated that the use of animation for realist purposes may result in an output that disturbs the traditional relationship between film and audience. Building on the arguments of Brecht and Jakobson, I shall examine how this subversive effect has been used by the makers of *A is For Autism* and *Daddy’s Little Bit of Dresden China* to draw audience attention to marginalized sections of society. It will be suggested that the strategy of challenging the traditional view of different branches of cinema by using animation – a medium not usually associated with realist and non-fictional kinds of representation – for realist purposes, has helped to set up a particular relationship between film and audience. Based on Nichols’ observations, it will be argued that this kind of film has much in common with certain branches of live-action documentary, particularly what he calls ‘interactive’ (Nichols, 1991: 44) and ‘performative’ documentary (Nichols, 1994: 93). It will be proposed that the use of animation for non-fictional purposes – a familiar form used in an unfamiliar way – disturbs established expectations of animated film. Viewers are not certain how to respond, setting up a tension that effectively prevents audience immersion in the film. Films such as the British examples, therefore, would not have had such a strongly subversive effect had they been made in live action. These points will be expanded with regard to my case studies.

All three examples made in a restrictive context have some common ground with the British films, and significant differences that are most apparent in their formal and representational approaches. While the British films take a direct and overt approach to their subject matter, films such as *The Flat, The Hand* and *Breakfast on the Grass* make extensive use of metaphorical and allegorical modes, rendering the references obscure and difficult to unpack. This, it is proposed, was an inevitable consequence of the context in which they were made. It will nevertheless be argued that these films are strongly motivated by a desire to influence contemporary conditions. It will further be argued that they display a bias towards political criticism, which makes them subversive animated films.
The Flat, for example, exhibits characteristics that contrast markedly with those of entertainment cinema, and disregard cinematic conventions officially sanctioned in Czechoslovakia at the time. This ‘counter-form’ becomes a vehicle for criticism of the contemporary political situation. In the following paragraphs the effect of social context on these films will be examined. There will also be an investigation into how, despite these constraints, their makers have drawn on their social and cultural heritage to facilitate their methods of presentation. This exploration will inform my investigation of the representational approaches of the practical component of this PhD. and ultimately its form.

British Documentary Animation: the uncertainty effect

In this section, A is for Autism will be the basis for an exploration of the type of representation demonstrated in a recent current of documentary animation. It will be argued that, when animation is used in a way that resembles familiar forms of non-fiction live action to depict the experiences of members of society, audiences are affected in a complex way that demands considerable mental engagement. The knowledge that the image is constructed, rather than recorded from life, provokes questions about how documentary animation should be seen: whether it is a true representation of life, or a fictional, playful form that maintains some relationship with the historical world. This tension engages the audience critically in terms of response to the unfamiliar mode, and also creates a distance between it and the film. Films such as A is For Autism deliberately accentuate this tension by constantly revealing their ‘constructed-ness’, and by playing with familiar forms of fiction and non-fiction.

22 The complexities surrounding the definition and use of the term ‘documentary animation’ demand a comprehensive analysis that is outside the remit of this thesis. Some theoreticians, such as Wells (1997) include in this category films that do not maintain any indexical (aural or visual) link with the real world. For the purposes of clarity, this thesis adopts a somewhat more narrow assumption that it refers to animations which 1) assert that what they present is the way things actually are in the real world; 2) use the recorded voices or actual images of people whose experiences are portrayed.
A is for Autism (1992): deconstructing live action documentary

A is for Autism was produced by Dick Arnall for Channel 4 in 1992, and is an attempt to depict the experience of autism to people without autism. I propose that the filmmaker intended to introduce the film as predominantly engaged with non-fictional kinds of representation, and also deliberately attempted to challenge established views of nonfiction, fiction and animation. For a synopsis of the film, see Appendix i.

The director of A is for Autism informs the audience that the film attempts to portray the ways in which autistic people experience the world by the use of direct assertions and the familiar conventions of live-action documentary. In what Carl Plantinga calls ‘labelling the film in advance’ the opening titles of the film introduces it as an ‘autobiography’ (Plantinga, 1997: 21). The film is structured round interviews of autism sufferers, and its imagery and sound effects are used to interpret and expand on recorded interviews. In terms of form and method, it follows the conventions of what Nichols calls ‘interactive documentary’; a form that is based on interaction, often in the form of interview, between the filmmaker and the social actors (Nichols, 1991: 44). Interviews of autistic people and edited sound provide a logical account in the conventional manner of an interactive documentary: sound provides a description of an actual experience and image is used to support it.

Though structurally A is for Autism incorporates conventions of interactive documentary, there are significant differences that result in a particular kind of relationship between the film and its audience. This creates a distance – in a Brechtian sense – between them, which I shall explore in the following paragraphs, following an argument developed by Plantinga (Plantinga, 1997: 21). Plantinga suggests that two factors determine whether a film is non-fictional. Firstly, it is introduced as such in the process known as ‘labelling’, and secondly, the audience accepts or receives that film as non-fiction (ibid: 21). The process thus depends on an unspoken relationship between filmmaker and the audience (ibid). Under this system, audience response plays a significant role; the tension created in A is for Autism results because the audience is uncertain how to
approach a film that has been introduced as ‘non-fiction’, yet displays features that seem to contradict non-fiction’s claim to provide evidence of the actual world. A fundamental expectation of documentary that determines audience response, Nichols argues, is that:

[The documentary’s] sounds and images bear an indexical relation to the historical world. As viewers we expect that what occurred in front of the camera has undergone little or no modification in order to be recorded on film and magnetic tape (Nichols, 1991: 27).  

I would argue that A is for Autism profoundly and intentionally problematises viewers’ assumptions concerning the nature of a typical interactive documentary. The images in the film do not attest to, or validate, the spoken commentary; usually, an animated image is highly constructed by extensive use of manipulation, which renders its use as evidence problematic. Here, however, animation is used to illustrate and expand on what is said, in a way resembling how live action is used in fiction films. Image is not indexical; the film is structured around collaged sequences of verbal statements and animated images. In most cases, it would actually have been impossible to provide an indexical image, because the experience related is mental and psychological. Whenever a personal experience is articulated, autistic people’s drawings are used to illustrate it. The animated image thus exhibits illustrative and expressive, rather than factual and evidential, qualities.

Webb’s approach to live action in the film is important: he uses live-action not to provide evidence, as in typical live-action documentary, but simply as an element of a cinematic form. It thus resembles the way in which fiction uses live-action footage. For example, extreme close-up is used for scenes that show hands opening and closing doors, turning taps or playing with coins. The emphasis is thus placed on the action, the obsession with a repetitive behaviour, rather than on

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23 In this thesis the term ‘index’ is used in the sense introduced by US philosopher Charles Sanders Pierce. Pierce argued that everything capable of producing a meaning whether a word, gesture or an image, can be a sign. He divided signs into three categories based on their relationship with their referent: icons, indices and symbols. An index, he argues, has a causal connection with its reference, e.g. smoke has a causal connection with fire and is therefore an index of fire.
The live-action footage does not provide indexical images of autistic people and their actions, but rather illustrates the action. The animated sequences do not demonstrate the validity of the spoken words, but simply portray what is said. I would suggest that this reveals both a reluctance to use live action as evidence, and an intention to interrogate the fundamental role of the indexical link to live action in non-fiction film. As an autistic boy is seen drawing a train, the voiceover explains that he has animated the sequence himself. The director manipulates the live-action footage of the boy by pixilation, a simple act that raises profound questions. Has this simple technical transformation disturbed the validity of the film’s argument? Is the pixilated footage less ‘evidential’ than the live-action footage previously seen? Does the kind of imagery used matter?

*A is for Autism* also reveals another difference in the way sound/image relationship is approached compared with a conventional interactive documentary. Nichols says:

> Interactive documentary stresses images of testimony or verbal exchange and images of demonstration (images that demonstrate the validity, or the doubtfulness, of what witnesses state). Textual authority shifts towards the social actors recruited: their comments and responses provide a central part of the film’s argument (Nichols, 1991: 44)

In the film, the images do not subordinate the commentary, as would be expected in an interactive documentary. Often, image is given special importance and a stronger presence than the spoken word. Though a relationship between sound and visual imagery is maintained, at times the animated sequences become so involving that an audience almost forgets that it is seeing a non-fictional structure. An example is the sequence featuring the drawing of random elements arranged in an unfamiliar way. The use of animation and camera produces an intensely engaging scene: whatever the camera does, some elements of the image are upside-down. The director both guides the audience to make sense of the puzzle, and manages to involve it psychologically. The feeling of bewilderment is heightened as the camera zooms in on the zigzag lines at the centre of the image, an inventive visual strategy provoking a feeling in the audience similar to that
experienced by the autistic person. The visual engagement becomes stronger than the aural, and image foregrounds the film.

I would therefore argue that the filmmaker uses a familiar convention of live-action documentary but defamiliarises it, so the audience cannot decide whether what is presented is ‘evidence’ of the actual world. It is unclear whether the film’s account of the experience of autism can be accepted as truthful and undistorted, or whether the recorded interviews are used purely for formal experimentation in the manner of avant garde, modernist cinema. It is also difficult to decide whether the use of subjective imagery, of the kind seen in the animated sequences, is acceptable in a documentary film that intends to represent people’s mental states and inner feelings.

As a further complication, the director uses a variety of modernist approaches. In many instances, the audience is shown the actual process of filmmaking, as when animation sheets on a table replace one another to create movement during the train and lift sequences. A mixture of techniques and styles including live action, cut-out, pixilation, paper and stop-motion animation combine to create images that reveal different stylistic characteristics. In terms of style, every few sequences vary: for example, the playground sequence characters are thickly outlined in a style that is completely different from the cut-out image that the woman hugs, and different again from the puzzle sequence.

Particular attention is paid to formal experimentation, especially in the relationship between music and image; at times, editing becomes poetic and expressive. In the train sequence, the image of tracks turning smoothly and rhythmically into one another finds a particular poetic quality that is accentuated by the piano music. These modernist approaches suggest that the film belongs to

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24 For my examination of modernist elements in these two films I am indebted to Darley’s examination of British ‘non-fiction animation’ (Darley, 1995).
fictional, avant-garde cinema\textsuperscript{25}, yet the recorded voices and the claim that it is ‘an autobiography’ suggest that it does not. I would therefore argue that \textit{A is For Autism} uses a complex system that subverts audience preconceptions of what constitutes fiction and non-fiction.

The film also disturbs audience expectations of the function of animation. Though animation has been used for non-fictional purposes\textsuperscript{26} since its early days, and despite recent scholarly attention to so-called documentary animation, it is still primarily regarded as a medium for the production of light entertainment and fantastical kinds of imagery. Even today, the dominance of mainstream forms of animation and advertising supports such a view. The use of animation for non-fictional and serious purposes in \textit{A is for Autism} strongly opposes this view. The audience is confronted not only by unconventional approaches to familiar forms of live action, but also by a fresh approach to animation. This unfamiliar method creates an uncertainty in the audience, which as a result becomes intensely involved in re-evaluating established conceptions about fiction, nonfiction and animation. Following Jakobson, I would argue that the artist has managed to create an innovative form which subverts the traditional relationship between audience and film, resulting in a deeper critical participation on the part of the audience.

Animation theoretician Paul Ward argues that it is unwise to attempt to solve the essential questions raised by the use of animation for documentary purposes:

\begin{quote}
...I argue that] it is erroneous and unhelpful if we wish to fully understand how documentary and animation ... work. Documentary must now be seen as a range of strategies in a variety of media; we can no longer cling to the essentialist notions of what the medium might mean (Ward, 2005: 82).
\end{quote}

I share the view that the use of animation for non-fictional purposes raises serious questions, but believe it is precisely this uncertainty that engages the audience in

\textsuperscript{25} Darley, while exploring the use of modernist modes in British cinema, argues that experimentation and realism are associated in the context of British ‘non-fiction animation’ (Darley, 1995:3).

\textsuperscript{26} McCay’s \textit{The Sinking of the Lusitania} (1918) is generally regarded as the first example of documentary animation.
a constructive and critical way. The use of animation for documentary purposes is paradoxical, and it is exactly how films such as *A is for Autism* subvert the preconceived and traditional relationship between audience and film. The producers of *A is for Autism* did not create an unfamiliar and subversive form simply to question attitudes towards different types of film; they did it to draw audience attention to the actual experience of a misunderstood and mistreated section of society. The critical involvement provoked by the novel formal and social engagement with the film prepares its audience to reconsider its preconceptions of autistic people. The audience is reminded that conventional definitions of different branches of cinema are socially and historically constructed. This raised awareness prepares them to accept that their traditional views of different sections of society are historically and culturally defined, and thus open to re-evaluation. This is a Brechtian approach. The film offers insight into an experience that is strange and unfamiliar to the average person, inviting understanding of, and increased sympathy towards, members of society who see and experience the world differently. Various deconstructive strategies have been used to draw audience attention to flawed perceptions about this section of society. Formal experimentation thus results in an intellectual engagement, which in turn provides a context for re-evaluation of a historically and/or culturally conceived notion.

The film capitalises on the expressive and ‘penetrative’ possibilities of animation, as when the woman explains that as a child she liked to be hugged, though it felt as though she was being swallowed by a tidal wave. The pixilated sequence shows a cut-out girl shrinking as she is hugged, an experience that could only have been shown so simply, effectively and literally using animation. In live action, the filmmaker could only have used certain camera angles or lighting to convey the feeling of fear described by the autistic person. This is also true of the sequence in which a man explains his fear of small shops. The director

27 As a man in the film says, children refused to play with him because they thought he was mad.

28 Borrowing from John Halas, Paul Wells refers to the ‘penetrative potentialities of animation’ (Wells, 1998:122). By this, he means animation’s ability to portray what is difficult to portray by photographic modes of cinema, such as states of mind or the internal structure of an organism.
metamorphoses rooms drawn using simple lines, creating a feeling of uncertainty and instability, while illustrating the claustrophobic atmosphere experienced by the autistic person. This effect could not have been achieved in live action.

A is for Autism exemplifies the way in which animation can be used as a means for intervention in the way we live our lives, helping people to understand and accept those whose experience of the world is different from the perceived norm. It has much in common with recent live action documentaries that Nichols terms ‘performative documentaries’ (Nichols, 1994: 94):

What such films have in common is a deflection of documentary from what has been its most commonsensical purpose - the development of strategies for persuasive argumentation about the historical world...performative documentary marks a shift in emphasis from referential as the dominant feature. This window-like quality of addressing the historical world around us yields to a variable mix of the expressive, poetic and rhetorical aspects as new dominants (ibid: 94).

Among features A is for Autism shares with performative documentary, the most significant seems to be a refusal to provide evidential images of the historical/social reality it represents. The film engages less with the external life of its subjects than with their inner thoughts and feelings, and this emphasis on psychological experiences lends it a unique quality. Nichols argues that performative documentaries stress ‘mood, tone and effects much more than display of knowledge or acts of persuasion’ (Nichols, 2001: 103), which may also be said of A is for Autism. The use of emotive music and expressive sound, the poetic nature of the editing, and the childlike quality of the drawings and animation effectively evoke audience sympathy. I believe that the producers of A is for Autism intended not only to promote better awareness of the condition, but

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29 Nichols argues that this branch of documentary emerged during the 1980s and 1990s and includes Pratibha Parmar’s Sari Red (1988), Jonathan Robinson’s Sight Unseen (1990) and Marlon Riggs’ Tongues United (1989).

30 The lack of indexical or evidential image is the most common characteristic of `documentary animations’.
also to create a more sympathetic view of autistic people within society. The film shows how they experience and feel the world, inviting understanding and sympathy by appealing to the emotions.

A final point that seems relevant to Webb’s involvement with his subject matter is the significant role played by autistic people in the making of the film; it not only illustrates their experiences by using their own words, but also involves them in the processes of animating and musical accompaniment. The screenplay was developed from the drawings of autistic people, who also performed the music. The film’s subjects were given an element of control over the final outcome. Daniel Sellers learned animation and his train sequence was given a central place in the film. This level of collaboration between subjects and director is not uncommon in experimental, nonfiction and independent cinema, in which local people are often employed to take on different responsibilities during the filmmaking process. The use of social actors in documentary film and non-professional actors in new wave fiction cinema requires a more intimate level of collaboration than in industry-based production. Nevertheless, the collaboration in A is for Autism is particularly significant. Autism affects people’s ability to socialize and often results in social isolation. The producers involved their subjects in a social activity, and taught some of them a new visual language. Animation thus became a new and effective way of communication for people who found it difficult to express themselves.

31 The World Health Organisation’s International Classification of Diseases (ICD) explains three criteria for the diagnosis of autistic disorder, including difficulty in verbal communication and lack of ability for social interaction:

1. There must be a qualitative impairment in reciprocal social interaction, relative to developmental level. Behavioural signs include poor use of eye gaze and of gesture; lack of personal relations.
2. There must be a qualitative impairment in verbal and nonverbal communication, relative to developmental level. Behavioural signs include delay in the acquisition of language, or lack of speech; lack of varied, spontaneous, make-believe play.
3. There must be a markedly restricted repertoire of activities and interests, appropriate to developmental level. Behavioural signs include repetitive or stereotyped movements, such as hand flapping; interests that are abnormally intense or abnormally narrow (WHO, cited in Firth, 2003, pp8–9).
In his discussion of Bob Sabiston’s *Snack and Drink* (1999)\(^3\), Paul Ward argues that there is a sense of interaction between the filmmaker and the film’s subjects. This, he says, is more profound than simply using their images and voices (Ward, 2006: 126). Ward argues that Sabiston gives an autistic boy’s family a degree of control over the film by teaching them how to use Rotoshop and to produce images for the film. A similar interaction is present in *A is for Autism*.

Nevertheless, as argued, what seems important is not only the creative involvement, but the fact that autistic people were taught a new way of communication, and involved in a social activity.

*Daddy’s Little Bit of Dresden China* (1988): subverting the principles of live action documentary

Karen Watson’s film uses personal childhood experience to reflect on the issue of child molestation. This serious but often-neglected issue may have significant psychological and social repercussions for its victims. Like Webb, Watson draws attention to a social concern and invites the audience to reconsider its views of it. *Daddy’s Little Bit of Dresden China* is complex and highly unusual with regard to the discussion of fiction/nonfiction. It demonstrates non-fictional characteristics, as when it asserts that child molestation is a real social phenomenon in mid- to late-20th-century Britain. Stylistically, however, it has far more in common with modernist experimental cinema than with conventional documentary form. Once again, the audience is confronted with an unorthodox film that challenges dominant perceptions of fiction, nonfiction and animation. It will be argued that the film primarily challenges the view that indexical link and objective representation is central to non-fictional modes of cinematic representation. As will be suggested, this opposition to traditional views of non-fiction is linked to the director’s feminist perspective, which questions how male/female identity is defined in society. The audience finds itself in an unfamiliar position with regard

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\(^3\) *Snack and Drink* uses the technique of Rotoshop to represent the experience of Rayan Power. Ward borrows the term ‘interactive’ from Nichols’ discussion of interactive documentary outlined earlier.
to a film that requires active mental participation. For a synopsis of the film, see Appendix ii.

In terms of visual style, *Daddy’s Little Bit of Dresden China* is unusual. Its highly unorthodox form combines written statements, spoken commentary and different techniques and styles of animation, and the use of music also contributes. The voiceover is delivered in a naturalistic way, suggesting that what is heard derives from genuine interviews. Early in the film, the story of Snow White is heard, the birth certificate of someone named Karen is seen, as well as actual photographs of a girl sitting on her father’s knee, presumably the director.

The formal characteristics are those of interactive documentary; sound provides a statement and image illustrates or interprets the voiceover. The film also engages with a real social problem, so in this sense demonstrates documentary features. On the other hand, the distinction between fiction and nonfiction is profoundly blurred; Watson goes even further than Webb in merging conventions of documentary and fiction. Unlike *A is for Autism*, there is no explicit assertion or suggestion that the sound is provided by real people. The use of the fairytale, and the fact that in certain sections, particularly the pub sequence, the narrative development is based on the conventions of fiction, makes it even more difficult for an audience to accept the film as a documentary. The use of animation itself contributes significantly to viewers’ uncertainty about how to approach the film’s mediation. In this film, image and music is given a far stronger position in relation to the text compared to *A is for Autism*. Music is particularly strong, and does much to create mood and express feelings. The animated image often completely foregrounds the film, while maintaining a relationship with the verbal commentary.

The design of the stop-motion sequences is so strange, and the animation and music so expressive that their presence completely dominates the voiceover. For example, as the girl explains that her mother could not allow herself to see the reality of her life, the image shows a savage and quite shocking fight between the puppet parents. The mother’s head transforms into a pair of scissors and cuts off the father’s metal lip, and he responds equally violently. Expressive music
contributes significantly to the rough and melancholic atmosphere; a male voice is heard singing – almost shouting – a strange song, as though he is about to go crazy. The combination of music, character design and action is so intense and strange, and at the same time expressive and fantastical, that the audience completely forgets the actual voiceover. In many instances, such as during the pub sequence, in the sections including the cut-out sentences, and when the characters of Lolita and Santa Claus are seen, the voiceover disappears and animated image and music drive the film forward. I would argue, therefore, that the filmmaker has intentionally refused to stress the film’s documentary elements.

*A is for Autism* clearly displays the structure of interactive documentary, underlined by the fact that the film is introduced as autobiographical. In *Daddy’s Little Bit of Dresden China* the structure is blurred, in what seems a deliberate bid to maintain audience uncertainty. In refusing to stress the evidential and indexical aspects of sound and image, Watson questions the significance of the indexical link in cinematic representations of historical reality. As argued by Nichols in terms of performative documentary: ‘this mode stresses mood, tone, and affects much more than displays of knowledge or act of persuasion. The rhetorical element remains underdeveloped’ (Nichols, 2001: 103). This certainly seems true of Watson’s film: it proposes a new approach to the representation of reality in which the indexical link is subordinated. The filmmaker states that child abuse is widespread; evidential images or victims’ accounts are not necessary to prove it. She also invites the audience to take collective action against child abuse, as when the woman claims that it takes place in many families but ‘nobody talks about it’, or when the narrator says: ‘Unfortunately for Snow White nobody questioned the father’s love for her, the girl was silenced, the father forgiven and the mother was blamed’. The film involves its viewers emotionally and expressively; it does not attempt to present a rhetorical argument to confirm the existence of a social problem.

A mood of bewilderment and frustration is created by the combination of various types of animation, careful editing and music. Visually the 2D sections of the film are colourful and expressive, and the cut-out characters change constantly. This suggests that the problem portrayed is collective. The rapid changes also promote
a feeling of agitation that contributes to the overall effect of the film. Through various stylistic strategies, therefore, the director conveys feelings of distress and tension to the audience. I believe that Watson intends to convey both her own feelings, and those of other women who have been abused; by engaging the audience emotionally she can earn its sympathy and support. In terms of music, the film begins with the innocent-sounding tones of a music box, and later dramatic piano music is introduced. During the sequence where the father molests his daughter in the presence of her mother, music resembling a requiem is heard. The juxtaposition of dramatic piano and calm requiem is unusual and disturbing. Towards the end of the film, the male voice intones a strange, mournful song. The rhythm of the film accelerates towards the end; this, combined with the music, creates a feeling of anxiety and unrest.

Music is also used ironically. The tranquil tones of the music box implicitly criticises society’s refusal to take sexual abuse seriously. It also has the same effect as the use of Snow White; in using and questioning a folk tale, the director shows how socially-unacceptable behaviour might be introduced as something innocent. The film does not, however, attempt to offer an objective account of child abuse. For example, in the stop motion sequences the characters have been deliberately designed to flag up their characteristics. The ‘bad guy’ father is made from metal pieces, wire and sharp razor blades, suggesting his rough and dangerous character. He reads the newspaper, smokes and watches television, behaviour representative of a certain type of man in contemporary British society. His erect penis, represented by a screw, is particularly emphasised, referring to his lustful personality. The weak mother, however, is partly made from a wooden spoon, associating her with the housekeeping activities she carries out throughout the film. The girl’s body is made of soft material including feathers, and her head is a china vase. The vase represents something precious and fragile, thus attributing similar characteristics to the girl. It is also a commodity, an object the father owns and can treat as he wishes. The suggestion is that this is how social roles are defined in contemporary British male-dominated society, yet the film

33 The pub sequence, the suggestion that the film is about Watson’s own childhood and the accent of the narrators suggest that the film primarily engages with British society.
intentionally emphasises the polarity between men and women in society. I would therefore argue that the director has intentionally disregarded conventional standards of documentary including objectivity, persuasive argument and indexicality.

The filmmaker adopts a feminist stance, criticising the ways in which male-dominated society defines gender roles and relationship between the sexes; it proposes that cultural norms regarding the formation of gender identity should be revisited. It might be suggested that emphasis on the centrality of an indexical link and objective representation is part of a rhetoric that is characteristic of, and a by-product of, male-dominated modern western society. It seems appropriate that such a film, which mediates a collective experience of life from a feminine perspective, should reject artistic modes of practice that have been shaped from a male perspective, in favour of visceral, subjective and emotional kinds of representation.

Hacking argues that three propositions can be found in social construction work. The fundamental proposition is: X need not have existed, or need not be at all as it is. X, or X as it is at present, is not determined by the nature of things; it is not inevitable (Hacking, 2001: 6). He argues that social constructionists often go further and make two more claims:

1. X is quite bad as it is.
2. We would be far better off if X was done away with, or at least radically transformed (ibid).

I believe that *Daddy’s Little Bit of Dresden China* takes just such a constructionist view of its subject matter. The filmmaker suggests that child molestation is not inevitable but evil; women and society in general would benefit significantly from eliminating it. More generally, Watson asserts that gender formation at the time of production of the film was flawed, and calls on the audience to change its perceptions of male/female identity. The film criticizes women’s association with housekeeping activities, and society’s expectation that they should not be assertive, and should obey their husbands. This, Watson would argue, is not inevitable. It is proposed that the director takes a similar stance to
the definitions and characteristics of documentary film. The suggestion is that the ‘indexical link’ and ‘objectivity’ are not prerequisites for cinematic mediation of reality. The filmmaker contends that these are not appropriate and adequate for the representation and intervention in certain aspects of contemporary experience. We would benefit considerably if we transformed our perception towards these norms; if we regarded non-indexical and subjective kinds of representation as equally appropriate, or even more appropriate in contemporary times, for changing the life experience of some members of society. Just such a stance is taken with regard to animation: we would do much better if we changed our understanding of animation; that is, if we regarded it as a medium that offers powerful potential for intervention with serious social matters. Subverting a social norm is associated with subverting a mode of practice.

This thesis is not concerned with the validity of the director’s stance in terms of current theoretical debate, or whether *Daddy’s Little Bit of Dresden China* can be called a documentary. Its argument concerns the effect created in the audience by the novel, unconventional form. I would argue that films such as *Daddy’s Little Bit of Dresden China* disturb the viewer’s expectations because they hybridise and challenge the dominant view of the ways in which fiction, non-fiction and animation function. The film’s innovative formal system requires a different kind of involvement, and considerable intellectual/critical engagement from its audience. This may pave the way for reconsideration, from a critical perspective, of the social/historical issues portrayed in the film. I believe that the bizarre imagery, particularly in the stop-motion sequences, represents an attempt to create distance in the Brechtian sense. The characters look weird, are made from unusual materials, and their psychology has not been developed according to conventions of classical narrative. These factors prevent the

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34 I argue that the film is a realist film in the sense that it primarily intervenes in the way social life is shaped and experienced. As argued throughout this thesis, I understand realism as an intention to mediate/intervene with contemporary life. It is this meaning of the term and the characteristics of contemporary realist drama outlined by Williams with which I am concerned in the discussion of this thesis.

35 Of course, this subversive effect in relation to audience works only for as long as the traditional views of documentary and animation hold. With the dominance of performative documentary and frequent use of animation for non-fictional purposes, the audience’s view is gradually adjusted: challenging the old perceptions of documentary and animation will no longer be subversive.
audience from identifying with them. Further, the introduction of the stop motion room as a staged room that resembles a theatre stage, is self-reflexive and alienating in the Brechtian sense. Ironic cut-out sentences in parts of the film also provide an unorthodox experience for the audience. For example, towards the end of the film when the image shows a cut-out Santa Claus, the father’s on-screen words read: ‘I gave her a present. What is wrong with the gift of love?’ Cut-out words then appear in rapid succession, with certain words such as wrong and love emphasised in larger type. In such instances, the audience becomes involved in an unconventional act of reading written statements that are presented in unorthodox ways. This, I argue, is both mentally engaging and formally alienating.

Animation is used to represent an issue of serious concern, and in this sense its use contradicts the traditional association of animation with entertainment and fantasy-driven kinds of representation. Watson’s use of a folk tale also contrasts sharply with mainstream practice; it is used ironically to demonstrate that socially harmful and dangerous behaviour may be presented and regarded as innocent. In a wider sense, it demonstrates how social and cultural norms can be shaped by dominant ideologies. Folk tales are commonly used in mainstream animation, but they are also often used for entertainment purposes.

Both the films under discussion use animation to intercede in contemporary social life. Their directors have developed innovative stylistic and representational approaches, resulting in a new experience for the audience. As argued, this novel approach subverts the established perception of different branches of film, requiring active intellectual participation from its audience, which is forced to revisit previous expectations and develop new responses to the new form. The unfamiliar form thus results in a new film/audience social relationship in which the audience participates profoundly and critically. This has two effects: firstly, it prevents the audience from becoming immersed in the film as a form of escapism; the new state of mind prepares it to move from representations of historical realities towards actual social issues. Secondly, inviting the audience to re-define its expectations and views of the film reminds it of the constructed-ness of social conventions. This awareness or attentiveness prepares the audience to
regard the film’s subject matter as historically and socially shaped, and thus demanding of re-evaluation.

Considerations of ‘documentary animation’ generally disregard the vital element of ‘audience’. Animation theorists have defended the use of animation for documentary purposes from three standpoints. Firstly, some theorists including Wells (1997) and Ward (2006) rely on an open reading of John Grierson’s definition of documentary as ‘the creative treatment of actuality’ (Grierson, 1933: 8). Wells sees it as a genre that manifests particular conventional characteristics, such as the use of interview and the ‘voice of God’. It is possible to copy those conventions using animation. Thus, in this view, ‘documentary animation’ is a copy of a genre of live action. Some theorists, such as Ward (2005) and Strom (2003) rely on Plantinga’s argument regarding nonfiction film. Plantinga argues that the question of whether a film is considered as nonfiction depends on an unspoken agreement between the producers of the film and its audience; the first step is for the producers to introduce or ‘label’ the film as nonfiction in advance (Plantinga, 1997: 16, 17). The audience is therefore aware that what it is about to see is a documentary, and develops expectations relevant to the genre.

Animation theorists use Plantinga’s argument to argue that an animated film can be introduced as a documentary in advance. If an animation asserts that what it presents either occurs or has occurred as portrayed in the actual world, it may be called a ‘documentary animation’ (ibid: 17).

Thirdly, as argued by Ward (2005) and Strom (2003), documentary animation must be seen as a branch of nonfiction discourse in general. In this view, comparisons between the types of representation offered by animation and live action should be avoided; animation should instead be regarded as a different kind of art that has the potential to produce non-fictional kinds of representation unique to it. An animated documentary is just as valid as a written documentary.

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36 Wells argues: ‘the closer that animated films conform to ‘naturalist’ representation and use the generic conventions of some documentary forms (for example, the use of voice-over; the rhetoric of ‘experts’; the use of ‘factual’ information etc), the more it may be said to demonstrate documentary tendencies’ (Wells, 1997: 41).

37 Plantinga borrows from Carroll, who argues that films, fiction or documentary are introduced or ‘indexed’ in advance by different strategies including CD or DVD covers, opening titles, or by showing them television channels dedicated to particular genres (Carroll, 1996: 287).
Written words have no causal connection with the historical object, yet there is no objection to their use for documentary purposes. The use of animation is therefore acceptable for non-fictional kinds of mediation (Strom, 2003: 53).

All three positions believe animation can be a powerful medium for engaging with the way social life is shaped, and I share this view. This thesis, however, explores an important issue that all these positions fail to consider. A key element of the kind of mediation that ‘documentary’ or ‘nonfiction’ animation provides is the effect on the audience of using animation for nonfictional kinds of film, and the viewers’ response to this.

Plantinga argues that audience response to a film is a key factor in terms of categorizing a film as nonfiction or documentary. ‘Indexing [labelling] is a process initially begun by the filmmaker, but to function normally, it must be taken up by the discursive community’ (Plantinga, 1996: 311). Thus, labelling Spielberg’s *Jurassic Park* a documentary would not convince viewers that it represents what actually happened in the world. Audience response plays a key role in interpreting the kind of mediation involved in ‘nonfiction’ or ‘documentary’ animation. Plantinga upholds that the use of the photographic image – which has a causal or indexical connection to the historical object – has a strong rhetorical function with regard to nonfiction film (Plantinga, 1997: 58, 59). The audience ‘trusts’ the photographic image and believes that its representation is an undistorted mediation. I would argue that the animated image disturbs this ‘trust’, and that two factors contribute significantly to this. The first is that the viewer’s awareness of the way in which animated and photographic images are created – photographic imagery by the mechanical recording of the real world, and animated imagery as a construction created by an artist – provokes essentially different responses. The second is the predominant association of animation with fantastical and imaginary kinds of film. In general, the use of animation for serious kinds of rendition and engagement with social realities is alien to an audience. *Silence* (1998), by Sylvie Bringas and Orly Yadin, is the story of a Jewish woman. Strom argues that, had it been presented as just a soundtrack, it would easily have passed for a radio documentary. The addition of animated
scenes to illustrate the story makes it more difficult to define the film as a documentary (Strom, 2003: 52).

While it might be argued, in line with Plantinga, that the use of photographic image has a strong rhetorical function in terms of audience, I would suggest that the use of animation has a disorienting and subversive effect. As noted with regard to the examples cited above, it is precisely because of this effect that using animation for non-fictional purposes can provoke the powerful mental engagement of an audience.

*A is for Autism* and *Daddy’s Little Bit of Dresden China* were produced in Britain at the end of the last century. In the last three decades of the 20th century, the social conditions of advanced British society, allied to the emergence of a postmodernist social system, had questioned the modernist belief in ‘linear progress and absolute truths’ (Harvey, 1990: 35). The emergence of psychoanalysis and feminist and postcolonial perspectives and various branches of postmodern thought, had demanded and prepared a context for alternative perspectives of reality. In advanced western societies such as that of contemporary Britain, multi-culturalism established the coexistence of different perspectives. Traditional approaches were no longer considered adequate for the task of representing the complex and multi-dimensional social conditions, and new approaches were required. Nichols argues:

...the emotional intensity and subjective expressiveness of performative documentary took shape in the 1980s and 1990s. These films reject techniques such as voice-of-God commentary not because it lacked humility but because it belonged to an entire epistemology and way of seeing and knowing of the world, no longer deemed acceptable (Nichols, 2001: 101).

When modernist thinking is under interrogation, innovative modes of practice can subvert conventions developed under modernist doctrine to provide alternative approaches. Subjective, emotional and evocative modes of representation are in part a reaction to the objective, rhetorical arguments of traditional forms of documentary. More importantly, new approaches provide alternative possibilities...
and enhance the potentialities of non-fiction cinema, rather than replacing the old modes. As Nichols argues of different modes of documentary, each attempts to provide solutions for the shortcomings of previous modes while eventually manifesting its own limitations (Nichols, 1994: 95). In this context, the use of animation to provide a voice for traditionally marginalised sections of society including women, those with mental disorders, ethnic minorities and socially deprived people may enhance the vocabulary of non-fiction discourse.

It is also worth noting that, when compared to live action, animation is in itself a marginalised mode of cinema. An undervalued mode of practice is therefore used to present the experience of an undervalued element of society. Both films were publicly funded: *Daddy’s Little Bit of Dresden China* was Watson’s final degree project and *A is for Autism* was produced by Channel 4 television. This sponsorship affected the films in significant ways, and allowed Webb and Watson considerable artistic freedom from the constraints of commercial cinema or private sponsorship. They were able to make open and direct reference to social issues and the individuals involved in their experiences, and were also able to experiment in terms of stylistic and representational approach.

My examination of these two films has helped me to understand the character of some current approaches to ‘documentary animation’ in politically benign contexts. Other films, however, are more specifically related to my research. This second sample consists of films produced in social and cultural contexts that hampered or precluded the open discussion of controversial issues, and in which direct or indirect prohibitions operated. Consequently, they use a metaphorical kind of language to make coded references to the issues with which they are concerned.

I chose Svankmajer’s *The Flat* (1968); Trnka’s *The Hand* (1965) and Parn’s *Breakfast on the Grass* (1988) because they were produced in a context similar to that of contemporary Iran. My aim was to investigate the different strategies their animators employed, consciously or unconsciously, to draw attention to certain issues while avoiding official censure. As with the British sample, these animations attempt to draw attention to social issues that are socially and
historically specific. The British films, however, were made in more benign contexts. Their producers were therefore able to represent issues more openly, and were free to use soundtracks, footage and photographs of the phenomena portrayed. External prohibiting factors thus had far less influence on the production of *A is for Autism* than on *The Flat*, which was produced in Czechoslovakia in 1968.

The effect of political censorship is particularly evident in the form of animations such as *The Flat* or *Breakfast on the Grass*: despite their concern with existing social realities they do not fit neatly into any existing category of documentary and non-fiction film. The representational strategies manifest in such films, resulting from their inability to draw directly on elements of the context they address, has made them very different from animations produced in more benign contexts. In order to understand their semantic approaches, it is therefore crucial to examine the cultural and social context in which they were produced. The aim of these case studies is not only to locate my own animation practice in a context of engagement with the representation of social reality, but also to investigate how certain animators have drawn on their own cultural and historical backgrounds in an attempt to produce various works that successfully address social concerns for local audiences, in ways not immediately obvious to those in authority.  

In the last five years, the social situation in Iran has changed markedly in ways that might not be apparent to an outsider, seriously restricting the production of artworks. In attempting to make sense of my case studies I am therefore particularly mindful of the need to consider their social, historical and cultural context: only in this way will I be able to understand the conditions under which they were produced.

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38 It must be noted that not all these films escaped censorship; Svankmajer’s *Leonardo’s Diary* (1972) and Parn’s *Time Out* (1984) were banned, and Svankmajer was prevented from producing films for about five years after *Leonardo’s Diary*. It is interesting to note that *Leonardo’s Diary* is the only film in which Svankmajer has used live action documentary footages of contemporary Czechoslovakian society. In many cases, however, filmmakers have managed to avoid censorship while making references to sensitive social and political issues.
Though political constraints had a significant effect on the production of animations in Eastern Europe and the USSR, it is important to note that Eastern Bloc animators were generally subjected to fewer restrictions than live action filmmakers. This was assisted by state endorsement of the use of folk tales for animation (Liehm, quoted in Hames: 1995: 25). Peter Hames argues that, while the authorities opposed formalism and abstraction, they were more prepared to accept stylisation as a natural characteristic of animation (Hames: 1995: 25). Antonin Liehm argues that it was more difficult to control indirect socio-political suggestions in animated films, which were often based on folk or fairy tales, than to monitor live-action films (ibid: 25). In a context in which live action was under strict control, animators helped to draw attention to controversial issues and thus to shape the course of contemporary life.

**Limiting context and socially engaged animation**

My examination will focus primarily on Svankmajer’s *The Flat* because it offers better potential for the development of my argument. I shall advance it further by a brief examination of Trnka’s *The Hand* and Parn’s *Breakfast on the Grass*. As I shall argue, the directors of these films have drawn extensively on modes, conventions and techniques of artistic practice that, in their own culture, were already imbued with certain political and social connotations. These films are dismissive of officially-sanctioned forms of art practice and critical of political conditions; in this sense they are politically subversive. With regard to audience, however, their approaches are different. *The Flat* uses modernist modes of creating shock and distance, associating itself with specific branches of socially critical Czech cinema in order to draw audience attention to historical conditions, while *The Hand* uses puppet animation, a technique already, at that time, associated with political and subversive practice. These points will be explored in more detail below.
\textit{The Flat [Byte]} (1968): political subversion

Svankmajer is quoted as saying that all his films before the 1989 Velvet Revolution were political (O’Pray, 1995: 48). It is difficult for an audience unfamiliar with Czechoslovakia’s social and political context to understand how animations such as \textit{The Flat} make references to socially and politically sensitive issues. Severe censorship and politically-motivated forms of prohibition forced directors including Svankmajer to use indirect modes of representation such as metaphor and allegory.\textsuperscript{39} Such films were produced mainly for reception in the countries where they were made, for an audience familiar with the cultural and social context. In this section I shall examine the representational and semantic approaches in \textit{The Flat} and explore how films of its type may be approached and understood at a deeper level. For a synopsis of the film, see Appendix iii.

Theoreticians including Michael O’Pray (1995 and 2006); Paul Wells (1997 and 1998); Michael Richardson (2006) and Peter Hames (1995 and 2004) have explored various aspects of Svankmajer’s films, including their mannerist and surrealist elements and their political engagement. My discussion focuses particularly on the ways in which Svankmajer has used his own cultural and social background, different modes of modernist art, and the potential of the medium to engage critically with the contemporary conditions of Czechoslovakian society.

\textit{The Flat} is a difficult film to unravel, not only for those unfamiliar with its social and cultural context but also, I suggest, for a local audience. Absurd events, the frequent use of metaphor, allegory and surrealist elements, and an unconventional non-narrative approach contribute to the shaping of its opaque surface. I would, however, argue that it has elements that suggest a profound engagement with contemporary social and political issues; I believe it takes a critical stance in terms of dominant political and social views. Of these, perhaps the most apparent

\textsuperscript{39} The intention is not to claim that the use of indirect modes such as metaphor and allegory resulted purely from political limitations; metaphor, allegory and irony have long had a presence in the history of Czechoslovakian art. As scholars including Richardson have argued, however, surrealist modes of practice can be said to have had motivations beyond the pressures of the political and social context (Richardson, 2006: 123). I nevertheless argue that the political and social situation contributed significantly to the use of indirect modes in these films.
is its rejection of the conventions of officially adopted forms of socialist realism. As noted in Chapter 1, socialist realism related particularly to literature, and was based on the conventions of 19th-century critical realism. As Lukacs points out, however, by the end of the 19th century the bourgeoisie was no longer a socially progressive class. The newly-emerged proletariat would become the dominant progressive social class of the 20th century. In Lukacs’ view, therefore, only a realist novel written from the perspective of the proletariat could reflect the true spirit, the totality of the time. The new socialist realism shared many of bourgeois realism’s principal characteristics, including optimism about the possibility of social reform.

While Lukacs’ engagement with the discussions of realism and socialist realism represented healthy cultural and critical debate, the governments of Eastern European countries under Soviet influence adopted socialist realism, turning it into an ideological tool to support their values and use for political means. The officially sponsored form of socialist realism thus became heavily charged with notions of propaganda. It was the imposition of this ideologically informed, politically motivated form of socialist realism that, as Yvette Biro argues, socially critical filmmakers of the region reacted against (Biro, 1983: 31).

*The Flat*’s departure from the conventions of official socialist realism can be opened up in two directions: form and content. On formal levels, the film contrasts sharply with the standards of socialist realism. Perhaps the most obvious departure is the lack of any social community in which relationships may be unfolded and communal progress anticipated. The plot develops round a single character trapped in a room; there is no social interaction inside, and no suggestion of a society outside. There seems to be an insistence on showing the protagonist and his world as alienated and detached from any external society. The only interaction in *The Flat* is between the protagonist and objects, which ironically results in nothing but failure: a chair that he cannot sit on; a tap that gushes stones; a spoon that cannot be used, and a bed that crumbles. This approach is, of course, not unique to Svankmajer. Dina Iordanova argues that the focus on individuals and their experiences became an important aspect of the
branch of Eastern European cinema that opposed officially-sponsored forms of socialist realism (Iordanova, 2003: 9-11).

The approach to characterisation seems deliberately opposed to that of socialist realism. Though it would have been difficult to develop a well-rounded character in such a short film, it seems to demonstrate a clear disregard for the norms of characterisation. No information about the protagonist’s character, background, motives or psychology is offered, and nothing happens throughout the eight-minute film to open up aspects of his character to the audience. With the exception of the final scene in which the protagonist’s name is revealed, his character remains opaque. In terms of form and style, the film also belongs to modernist and particularly surrealist cinema. Svankmajer’s excessive use of rapid editing, modes of meaning construction based on montage editing, and the frequent appearance of surrealist elements all suggest that *The Flat* is a modernist film. Iordanova argues that censorship was directed at formal characteristics as well as the contents of films:

> Socialist realism made several demands: the suppression of ‘formalism’ and all experimentation with the art form and commitment to ‘realist’ content; an unspoken commitment to the cause of building socialism and communism; the presence of a strong hero, a member of the working class, who promotes the party line; and a plot developing in the canon of ‘historical optimism’ (Iordanova, 2003: 37).

In terms of form, it may be argued that Svankmajer takes a different approach to officially approved forms of art practice. Though he did not join *The Prague*

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40 Joseph K is the protagonist in two Kafka novels, *The Trial* and *The Castle*. The name is important because there is an analogy between these novels and the plot of *The Flat*, though the association reveals little about the character and psychology of the protagonist; Kafka also makes no attempt to develop a character in the classical sense. The significance of the reference therefore seems political. Kafka’s novels and short stories were widely condemned by the Eastern European authorities, mainly because of their formal and stylistic characteristics and their political and social connotations. Kafka’s writing style places his novels in sharp contrast to the conventions of socialist realism, and his books were banned in Czechoslovakia until 1963 (Holloway, 1983: 243). The association of *The Flat’s* protagonist with Joseph K seems to be an attempt to locate the film within the branch of Czechoslovakian art that did not follow the conventions of the dominant doctrines.

41 O’Pray observes some of the surrealist elements of Svankmajer’s films, most of which are present in *The Flat* (O’Pray, 1995: 65). These include particular attention to the power of tactility in objects; animation of inanimate objects; black sarcasm and the use of outmoded objects.
Surrealist Group until the early 1970s (Hames, 1995: 40), most of the elements of his surrealist period are already present in The Flat. The subversive strategies the early 20th-century surrealists managed to develop, and its implicit and explicit associations with political and doctrinal movements including Marxism, made surrealism one of the most politically-charged modernist art movements. In The Flat, Svankmajer uses animation to develop extremely powerful subversive effects by revisiting surrealist approaches. Many examples of unexpected, shocking events include the stones that emerge from the tap, the bed that turns into a pile of sawdust, and the wall that is first hard and then so soft that an egg can penetrate it.

The film’s association with surrealism is also particularly significant in the context of Czechoslovakia in 1968. O’Pray argues that Czech surrealism must be seen as a response to the suppression that followed the Prague Spring uprising (O’Pray, 1995: 48). The movement was, in fact, a reaction to the totalitarian and rationalistic system of socialist ideology, which became even more repressive and unbearable after the Prague Spring. In this respect, it is possible to see the significance in terms of the artistic process of the surrealists’ attention to irrational activities and the free play of mind. This does not imply that Czech Surrealism and Svankmajer’s cinema is entirely a reaction to a particular historical moment; such a view, as Richardson argues, would not do justice to the complex movement of Czech surrealism, which saw Stalinism and its consequent manifestations as symptomatic of a wider problem in society (Richardson, 2006: 123). I nevertheless find it necessary, and vital to this discussion, to stress the significance of surrealist approaches to contemporary conditions of life in Czechoslovakia in 1968.

Another element of the film seems equally important: it is fair to say that irony has a significant place in The Flat’s representational approach. Irony has had a strong presence in the art of Czechoslovakia yet, as noted by Biro with regard to Czech New Wave cinema in the mid-1960s, the irony here is heavily impregnated with a sense of pessimism about the possibility of social progress (Biro, 1983: 38). The protagonist seems to have two aims: firstly, to use the objects in the room, and secondly, to escape his prison. In both, he fails. He cannot connect
with objects because none reacts in a way that could rationally be expected. There is water in the stove; stones issue from the tap; a mirror shows his rear view; an egg is too hard to eat; the spoon is full of holes, and the light bulb is so hard it breaks the wall. Every object seems to do the opposite of what it should, yet even this is not the logic of this prison. The wall that seems soft suddenly becomes hard; the egg that can break a table reverts to its soft quality and smashes in the protagonist’s hand. The only rule of this new world is unpredictability; the result is uncertainty and bewilderment. There is no chance of escape from this nightmarish world; when a man carrying a rooster enters and gives the protagonist an axe, he breaks the door and discovers a brick wall. It is inscribed with the names of others, presumably previous victims, and he adds his own name. The single moment of hope is thus followed swiftly by an episode which rules out any possibility of escape, and ultimately despair.

While the relevant authorities could show a degree of flexibility towards formal experimentation, it was against the fundamental tenets of socialist realism to adopt a pessimistic stance towards the possibility of social progress. Such an approach could be interpreted as showing disregard for, and disappointment with, the principles and achievements of the communist revolution. Nikita Khrushchev’s comment at the Third Writer’s congress of 1959 is illuminating in this regard. He said:

[The party] is behind those writers...who take positive phenomena as their basis and... show the ‘pathos’ of labour, setting man’s heart alight, urging them forward and pointing to a new world. In their positive heroes they somehow epitomize all the best characteristics and qualities of man and contrast them with negative images demonstrating the struggle of the new against the old, and the inevitable victory of the new (Khrushchev, quoted in Vaughan James, 1973: 92).

The points explored above – stylistic and representational departure from socialist realism and a pessimistic view of the possibility of social progress – find their social and political significance in terms of a social context in which a dominant mode of practice, socialist realism, prevails. In this sense it can be argued that the
political sensitivity of *The Flat* lies in its disdain for the conventions of socialist realism. The episodes examined above represented a reaction against officially imposed forms of art practice; to use Biro’s term, a ‘counter-image’ is produced (Biro, 1983: 31).

A final point that finds its meaning in terms of the historical realities of the country will now be examined. In her discussions of Eastern European cinema during the 1950s and 1960s, Biro argues that a serious engagement with a particular notion of ‘history’ is apparent in the films of the region. This is not an understanding of history as ‘a given period of the past, not as something finished and remote, but as an active and outgoing reality constantly threatening cataclysms, as tyrannical power playing constantly with man’ (Biro, 1983: 30).

Biro argues that, in films of the period, an attempt to examine the social, political, psychological and historical circumstances that contributed to the contemporary experience of life is strongly present. Such exploration inevitably involved asking socially and politically sensitive questions. Such an approach to history is also present in *The Flat*. On many occasions, Svankmajer has expressed his fascination with old objects (Svankmajer, quoted in O’Pray, 1995: 66). He sees them as witnesses of historical events; his responsibility as a filmmaker is to release their history, to ‘let [them] speak for themselves’ (ibid:66). In this sense, the irrational behaviour of the objects in *The Flat* can be interpreted as the result of the absurd and unfortunate history they have witnessed. Viewing the film from this perspective suggests that the struggle between the protagonist and the objects, and the feeling of bewilderment that results from his inability to make sense of them, reflects Czechoslovakian society’s struggle with its puzzling and often tragic history.

The contextual examination above provides a framework by which to read the film’s metaphorical suggestions in the light of the historical reality of a specific society. In the context of Czechoslovakia in 1968, the metal claws that pin down

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42 Biro argues in relation to the cinema of Eastern Europe during communism that: ... ‘the official rhetoric-appropriate for romantic, simplified conceptions has overwhelmingly prevailed, for it has been maintained by all the power of autocracy. Therefore, it seemed logical that every gesture of polemics, every daring movement against its bleak, false model, needed to be, in principle, a sort of counter-image’ (Biro, 1983: 31).
the protagonist can be interpreted as a reference to official censorship. The fist that comes in and punches the protagonist in the face is clearly analogous with the suppression of the Prague Spring by outside forces.\footnote{The Prague Spring is one of the many occasions in the history of Czechoslovakia in which outside forces have interfered in the affairs of the country.} The room’s claustrophobic atmosphere can be read as a reflection of oppressive political and social conditions. It is not suggested that *The Flat* should be read entirely in terms of the social and political suggestions it makes, but this research is nevertheless concerned with the ways in which Svankmajer engages with socially and culturally specific issues. Much of what is observed in *The Flat* finds its meaning in terms of society in 1960s Czechoslovakia. It is possible that the director did not intend to convey some of the many inferences that can be derived from *The Flat*. Despite this, as will be argued throughout this research, there are strong suggestions that the primary intention of these films was critical engagement with contemporary social and political issues.

As argued, *The Flat* is a difficult film to understand because of the use of indirect modes of practice and specific representational approaches. It is important, however, for socially-engaged films to engage their audiences critically with the mental unpacking of references to historical and/or social realities. As argued in Chapter 1 with regard to the discussions of Brecht and Jakobson, subversive strategies become important in relation to such forms of art practice. One particularly effective way in which Svankmajer subverts and engages his audience is by using metamorphosis and realistic kinds of representation to create shock. The realistic visual imagery that results from the use of pixilation combined with metamorphosis has enabled the director to achieve extremely disturbing results. For example, when the naturalistic bed crumbles into sawdust it intensifies the effect of the scene. Similarly, a strong effect is created when the bulb breaches the wall, because historical experience tells the viewer that a glass bulb should be fragile. The film is laden with such moments and this, it is proposed, prevents its audience from disengaging with the film. Through such representational strategies Svankmajer manages to keep his audience constantly engaged with the film, despite its complex form. Yet this does not involve
immersion in the work; this kind of involvement maintains the audience in an attentive and curious state of mind, so its members become mentally involved.

*Breakfast on the Grass* is an animated film made in Estonia in 1987. It provides a valuable platform for the exploration of the ways in which different social circumstances, and more importantly different historical periods, have affected the representational approaches of the socially-engaged animations of communist countries. The film is structured round five interrelated episodes. Anna, George, Berta and Edward must each accomplish a task in order to dine together. Anna must fetch apples, George must retrieve his black suit, Berta must rediscover her identity and Edward is charged with obtaining a key to the meeting place, a park. Eventually, the audience realises that the four protagonists are the subjects of Manet’s painting *Le Déjeuner sur l’Herbe [Luncheon on the Grass]* (1863) and that the meeting place is the setting of the painting itself.

The film is surprisingly uncompromising in its references to conditions in Estonian society, and the wider context of the reality of communist society. It begins with the words: ‘We dedicate this film to those artists who went as far as they were allowed.’ Parn’s depiction of his characters’ nightmarish and absurd society chimes uncomfortably with the reality of contemporary communist society. Apart from the sequences of Edward’s home and the final meal, the entire film is in grey tones. Characters other from the protagonists seem alarmingly similar in design, perhaps in indirect criticism of a communist system that precludes the development and recognition of individuality; many scenes feature long queues of identical characters.

Buildings and backgrounds also seem worryingly similar. In almost every episode a car crash is heard, which can be interpreted as a warning of the approaching demise of society. An artist resembling Picasso is constantly arrested by two secret agents.

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44 I am indebted for my discussion of this section of the film to Chris Robinson’s examination of *Breakfast on the Grass* in Animation Journal, Volume 8, Number 1, Fall 1999.
George has a wonderful home adorned with paintings. Delicious food covers his table and relaxing and beautiful music plays. He revels in his life, until a gust of wind blows open his window. The dull, grey outside world enters, ruining everything and transforming him into a monotone man like everyone else in society. The many difficulties the characters endure include the negotiation of absurd bureaucratic systems for just a moment of pleasure. This, I suggest, criticises the communist system for taking bureaucracy to such absurd lengths that even the most natural and elemental pleasures become virtually impossible.

*Breakfast on the Grass* contains many implicit, and at times explicit, references to the experience of life under communism, references that are obscured in *The Flat*. Though the films have apparent stylistic and representational differences, they share notable features. Among these are the use of indirect modes such as metaphor and allegory, irony, unconventional modes of narrative and association with the resurgent movement of surrealism in Eastern Europe in the 1960s and 1970s.45 It is surprising that a film which incorporates such biting humour and such strong social and political criticism was made in what was then a republic of the Soviet Union.

The film was made during what was considered to be the ‘Golden Age’ of Estonian animation.46 (Robinson, 1999: 17). Robinson argues that, for a short period in the second half of the 1980s, a unique social context prevailed in Estonia. Mikhail Gorbachev’s introduction of *Glasnost* and *Perestroika* contributed significantly to the emergence of a more relaxed attitude to political and social criticism, but state financial support remained strong (ibid: 17). Central sponsorship under communism has often implied severe political and ideological control, but for this brief period Estonian state sponsorship functioned almost like British government support; socially engaged filmmakers were able to work in an atmosphere free from the constraints of commercial cinema that tolerated an

45 It may be argued that *Breakfast on the Grass* is not a surrealist film *per se*; nevertheless, references to the works of surrealist painters such as Dali and the use of elements frequently used in surrealist works such as an apple, seem more than accidental.

46 Robinson, borrowing from Parn, describes the period from 1985–1991 as the golden age of Estonian animation. This is when Mikhail Gorbachev introduced significant changes into the Soviet Union, that resulted in the disintegration of the country and the independence of republics including Estonia (Robinson, 1999: 17).
unprecedented level of criticism. Czech filmmakers could therefore address contentious issues far more overtly than before, and it may be posited that the context for Estonian animation briefly resembled that of late 20th-century Britain. This in no way implies that Estonian society as whole enjoyed the same level of freedom and openness as in Britain.

Trnka’s *The Hand* (1965) is another example of an animated film that criticises contemporary social and political conditions. A potter is working in his home. He is apparently contented until a large hand, to which he defers, breaks in and insists that he should make clay models of hands rather than pots. The potter refuses, and shuts the hand out of his home. The hand refuses to give up, and tries various ways to convince the man to make a model of a hand. One of these involves showing him a television programme that apparently depicts the historical significance, and perhaps the power, of the hand by showing the hands of various despots including Napoleon and Hitler. The more the hand tries to convince the potter, the more he resists. Eventually, the hand turns the potter into a marionette and puts him in a cage. The potter escapes and returns home, but dies during an attempt to prevent the hand from entering his home again. The hand honours him like a hero and organises a respectful funeral for him.

*The Hand* is the last film in the Czech veteran’s filmmaking career, and a rarity in terms of engagement with political issues. Though made during the comparatively relaxed period preceding the Prague Spring, it is still surprising that such a film was produced. At the time, Trnka was a nationally and internationally respected and influential artist. It seems obvious that this international acclaim helped to prepare a more relaxed context for the film’s production. References to Nazi Germany may also have been part of the strategy by which permission to make it was obtained.

Stylistically the film shares the characteristics of most of Trnka’s films: the colourful, simple and stylised setting, the unique character design and his skill as a stop-motion filmmaker. Its political suggestions, though they are metaphorical and indirect, can easily be unfolded by any audience with a degree of familiarity with Eastern European and Czechoslovakian history. I shall nevertheless discuss
The Hand from a particular perspective; that it offers valuable insight into how a particular technique can find a new significance in a specific cultural/social context. The association of puppet theatre with political art in Czechoslovakian history lends a new dimension to the use of puppet animation in the film. Michael O’Pray argues that under the Habsburg rule in the 17th century, Czechoslovakian natives felt an urge to protect their cultural identity as a means of political resistance. One effective way to do so was by the use of puppet theatre, which therefore became an instrument for engaging with social issues and political resistance (O’Pray, 1995: 259). In the light of this, I shall argue that puppet animation finds a similar place with regard to The Hand. The film is another example of how an artist’s cultural and social background can be used effectively for realist purposes.  

This chapter has focused on case studies, exploring some of the different approaches developed by animation practitioners in order to influence aspects of life in contemporary society. It has been argued that, in restrictive contexts, animated filmmakers have used their own cultural backgrounds to great effect in their indirect engagement with topical social realities. Understanding of how these films engage with contemporary life often requires considerable familiarity with the history and culture of their countries. The defining effect of social context on animated film produced under extreme censorship has often led to complex formal systems. Filmmakers have drawn extensively on culturally determined artistic forms and techniques of representation. Consequently, the choices of technique and style that are made derive their meaning from context. Further, the audience must become actively mentally involved with the films in order to unpack their indirect references.

The films examined in this chapter demonstrate how animation can be used successfully for social intervention, both in socially and politically open contexts.

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47 Here I refer to the particular understanding of realism that has been applied throughout this thesis; realism understood as an intention to intervene in aspects of contemporary life (see chapter 1, above).

48 Obviously, in order to understand a film involved with social and cultural realities, familiarity with context is necessary. This point nevertheless has particular significance and a central place in understanding the coded references of films such as The Flat and Breakfast on the Grass.
and under censorship. They illustrate animation’s diverse potential for the mediation of historical life. The different social contexts have inspired dissimilar formal approaches, but all share a common intention to intervene and shape contemporary experience of life. During examination of the ways in which filmmakers have drawn on their own cultural and social backgrounds, it was proposed that the relationship these films make with their audiences plays an important role in their mediation. This is particularly true of both the British examples, and *The Flat*. Through very different strategies, the filmmakers have managed to subvert established expectations, and in so doing define an intellectually active role for the audience. As argued, the use of animation for serious kinds of film is significant with regard to these films. In the context of Eastern Europe the use of animation also finds a new significance; where live action is under serious scrutiny, it seems to be a powerful alternative vehicle by which to raise significant and contentious issues without alerting undue suspicion.

The conditions present in mid-20\(^{th}\)-century Eastern Europe and the USSR of the late 20\(^{th}\) century might seem to have little in common with contemporary Iran. I would suggest, however, that with regard to animation there are significant areas of coincidence. As in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union during communism, Iranian animation is generally sponsored and distributed by the government. The process is mediated through various governmental organisations. An organisation named *Saba* is responsible for most big budget animation projects including animated series and occasional animated features. It is the equivalent of *Soyuzmultfilm-Studio*, the state funded studio that controlled animation production in the former Soviet Union. In the last few decades, three further Iranian government institutions have been involved with producing short animated films: *The Institute for the Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults* (known as *Kanoon*); *The Iranian Young Cinema Society* and the *Centre for the Development of Experimental and Documentary Cinema*. These four organisations have been the main sponsors over the last three decades, though in recent years, other bodies have begun to commission and produce animation. A few state-funded art universities produce a small number of student films each year.
Though state sponsorship offers a degree of freedom by relieving the economic pressure attached to the commercial film industry, it must also be recognized that, as in Eastern Europe, it has been used as a government strategy to exercise control over the content of productions. The degree of monitoring varies in different organisations and at different periods, but official control is omnipresent. Further, in Iran animation is generally considered to be primarily concerned with the production of light entertainment and fantasy-driven film. Iranian new wave cinema has contributed to a general realisation, by both the population and the authorities, that live action cinema has the potential to produce serious kinds of art, and engage with issues of social and political importance. Thus in present-day Iran, as in Eastern European animation of the last century, animation enjoys a context of relative freedom compared with live-action. Unlike Eastern Europe, however, Iran has no comparably strong tradition of animation. Animation as a serious form of artistic activity is young and widely unfamiliar to the public. Even as a form of entertainment, Iranian animation is relatively underdeveloped and unfamiliar to local audiences. This creates a particularly difficult situation for filmmakers such as myself, who wish to produce animation that is socially oriented. Since animation is mainly seen as a form of entertainment and diversion, an Iranian audience – which is prepared to spend time on live-action films involving complex references to cultural realities and experiences – is either not interested in animation or is not looking for serious content in animated films.

In the next chapter I shall focus on social engagement in relation to the Iranian context. Two significant branches of Iranian art, Iranian new poetry and ‘new wave cinema’ will be explored. The nature of what this thesis calls realist art practices in Iran will be considered, and the relationship between the governments of Iran during the last century and these two branches of Iranian art explored. The intention is to examine the types of relationship that Iranian socially oriented art has maintained with a local audience. Changes in the political and social landscape of Iranian society over the past three decades with regard to Iranian new wave cinema will be further examined. This study will prepare a context for the production of the practical component of this PhD, an
animated film that raises issues regarding the state of women in contemporary Iran.
Chapter 3

Social engagement in Iranian arts: Iranian New Poetry and New Wave Cinema

This research explores the possibility of introducing socially engaged animation into restrictive social contexts, by the production of a film that raises issues concerning attitudes to and treatment of women in Iran. Chapter 3 explores various stylistic and representational possibilities that help to provide a framework in which such practice can be attempted and discussed, by historical examination of Iranian new wave cinema and poetry. This thesis argues that engagement with the mediation of contemporary social realities has been central to 20th-century Iranian new poetry, and examines the social context that contributed to its emergence.

The nature of the transition from classical Persian to Iranian new poetry, and the emergence within it of elements of realism, will be opened up by using case studies and examination of the discussions of key theoreticians and practitioners of the movement. It is argued that the association of modern forms inspired by western free verse with realist elements, such as adopting a secular stance and engaging with contemporary social life, becomes the central characteristic of the new poetry. In this chapter, elements of realism in Iranian new wave cinema are explored; it is argued that this should be regarded as a continuation of the path taken by new poetry during the 20th century. The case is made that the central characteristics of the new poetry, a combination of realism and modernism, are similarly central to new wave cinema.

The relationship between the two branches of Iranian art is not straightforward. Iranian new poetry’s engagement with politically sensitive issues in the constrained conditions of mid-20th-century Iran produced works that often used metaphorical and disguised kinds of representation. Iranian new cinema, however, remained engaged primarily with the mediation of social and/or cultural conditions, in ways that challenged Iranian regimes less overtly than the new poetry. As a result, filmmakers were not forced to use indirect modes of representation such as metaphor, allegory and metonymy as frequently as their
literati counterparts. As will be argued, certain social and political circumstances also facilitated the practice of new wave filmmakers. While a commitment to represent the circumstances of contemporary life is strongly present in both movements, there are notable differences in terms of formal characteristics.

The international success of Iranian new wave cinema, and its relationship with the Islamic government, has been the subject of serious debate for film commentators both in and outside Iran. In this chapter, the relationship between the Islamic regime and new wave cinema is explored, and the social and political motivation behind government support for the new wave considered. The nature of social engagement in the films of Kiarostami is invoked as a focus for this discussion.

The practical component of this thesis, Mr and Mrs Mockroach, draws attention to a particularly sensitive issue in contemporary Iran. The film was produced in Iran for reception in Iran, so the characteristics of socially engaged branches of Iranian art and their relationship with censorship must be examined. A framework for pondering its representational approaches is constructed by examining how Iranian artists have managed to draw on the experience of contemporary life, despite the socially and politically limiting context.

**Iranian New Poetry**

Poetry had dominated the arts in Iran for almost fourteen centuries until its gradual replacement by cinema, which became the most popular and arguably the most important art form in modern Islamic Iran. Persian classical poetry underwent decisive changes during the 19th and 20th centuries, resulting in the emergence of a new form known as Iranian new poetry. The first section of this

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50 For my discussion of Iranian poetry I am indebted to Langaroudi and Hakkak’s comprehensive examination of its history during the late 19th and 20th centuries.
chapter will examine the social and historical context and the nature of these changes.

The transformation of poetry occurred during Iran’s transition from pre-modern to modern, beginning in the mid-19th century and culminating in the early 20th century (Hakkak, 1995: pp14–15). It resulted from lively debate among poets and theoreticians surrounding the nature and place of poetry in modern Iran, which was informed by revisiting traditional Persian poetry and examining western literature (ibid: 1). Though this generation of Iranian literary figures had a comprehensive understanding of Persian classical poetry, their output suggests that knowledge of western literature was limited (ibid: 1). Using historical evidence, Hakkak argues that, until the early 20th century, the concept of western poetry they introduced was largely based on speculation, and claims made about the nature of western literature were largely unsubstantiated:

The nature and significance of poetry in modern Iran cannot be understood without a close reading of the conditions that gave rise to it and the processes that determined its shape. The principal condition was Iran's familiarity with European cultures, and the processes consisted of a series of negotiations and contestations within Iran's literary community. The ideas and arguments presented, the scenarios envisioned, and the textual examples offered were the result of a continuous dialogue with the tradition of classical Persian poetry on the one hand and, on the other, with largely imaginary ideas about "European literature" (Hakkak, 1995: 1).

Nevertheless, Iranian theoreticians’ proposals regarding the relationship between modern poetry and society, and their later insistence that poetry should engage with contemporary issues, seem to have a clear connection with modern western realism.

In Chapter 1 the concept of realism was explored, stressing that realism should be seen as a term that may develop different characteristics at different historical periods and in diverse social contexts. Understanding of aesthetic realism is enriched by examination of its characteristics in different branches of art at various social and/or historical moments. In Chapter 1, realism was defined as the
‘intention’ to intervene in aspects of contemporary life. Following Brecht, it was argued that formal and stylistic conventions do not define the realism of a work of art; realism is rather determined by a social relationship that the artist maintains between his/her work, the audience and existing historical reality. In my view, realism is established by an intention to invite an audience to engage critically with the way in which contemporary social life is shaped.

Williams identifies three central characteristics in realist drama of the 19th century: a conscious move towards social extension; emphasis on secular action, and action set in the present (Williams, 1990: 230). He argues, with particular regard to the works of Brecht, that a branch of realist drama also demonstrated a fourth characteristic: it became ‘consciously interpretive in relation to a particular political viewpoint’ (Williams, 1990: 233); which is to say that political engagement became a feature of realism. The emergence of these characteristics in Iranian new poetry and cinema will be examined, based on the argument that between the mid-19th and early 20th centuries, these realist elements began to emerge in poetry. Towards the middle of the 20th century, a shift in the new poets’ representational approaches is witnessed: poems become more metaphorical and social/political references more indirect. The despotic and dictatorial regime of Reza Shah seems to have been a major factor. Langaroudi argues that his rule created a suffocating atmosphere for the new poets (Langaroudi, 1991: 175), and that his intolerance of social criticism and control of the press led to a particularly bleak period in the history of the literary new wave (ibid: 175). Poets were thus forced to take refuge in metaphor and allegory.

The rule of Reza Shah lasted almost two decades, long enough to shift the direction of the new poetry towards indirect and obscure kinds of practice. Further, apart from a short period following World War II, Mohammad Reza Shah followed his father’s lead and imposed constraints on the activities of politically oriented poets of the new wave. A shift in the formal characteristics of the new poetry thus occurs, in that references become indirect and ambiguous. Criticism of the political/social situation had, however, been a recurring theme in new poetry since the mid-19th century; it was thus already associated with political criticism (Hakkak, 1995: 266).
The emphasis on realist aspects of the new poetry and new wave cinema does not imply an attempt to construct contemporary Iranian poetry and cinema wholly in terms of realism; both movements have more to offer. It is further clear that these movements have developed various stylistic approaches, which are often modernist and non-realist. It will nevertheless be argued that a realist intention to engage with aspects of contemporary social life has informed both Iranian new poetry and Iranian new wave cinema. This intention has taken on various forms and methods during the past century and a half.

Iranian New Poetry and Realism: an Historical Review

Ahmad Karimi-Hakkak traces the roots of the development of the new poetry to an early 19th-century literary movement known as ‘the Return’ (Hakkak, 1995: pp25–31). He explains that Return Movement poets such as Habib-Allah Qa’ani played an important role in the reform of classical Persian poetry. My discussion concerns a slightly later period that marks the emergence of the concept of poetry that engages with contemporary life. Figures such as Fathali Akhundzadeh (1812–1878); Mirza Aga Khan Kermani (1854–1896), and Mirza Malkom Khan (1833–1908) believed that western literature was superior to Persian classical poetry, proposing that it should be adopted as a model by Iranian poets. Their suggestions that western literature was a secular art seem to have begun to invite Iranian poets towards realism. Akhundzadeh, for example, criticizes Persian classical poetry for engaging with religious and metaphysical stories. He argues that Western literature engages predominantly with the mediation of the natural world, and invites Iranian poets to adopt a secular stance (Akhundzadeh, quoted in Hakkak, 1995: 34).

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51 The first attempt to look to western literature as a source of inspiration for Iranian poetry was by Fathali-Akhundzadeh. In Maktubat [Correspondence] (1865), he introduces new western terms to Iranian people, including poesy, which is defined thus:

‘Poesy consists of such a composition as to include the expression of the conditions and character traits [ahval va akhlaq] of a person or a (group of) people [tayefeh] as it is in truth [kama hova haggoj], or of the exposition [sharh] of a topic, or of the description [vasf] of the circumstances of the world of nature in verse in the utmost excellence [jowdat] and effectiveness [tasir]’ (Akhundzadeh, quoted in Hakkak: 34).
In what is evidently an attempt to emphasise the social role of poetry, Kermani makes the somewhat extreme claim that Persian classical poets are to blame for the corruption of rulers throughout the Islamic period. Mirza Malkom Khan raises a more comprehensive argument inspired by his socialist leanings, delineating his own view of the ideal function of poetry. He derides the complexity of contemporary poetry, suggesting that true poetry should be able to communicate with the masses, and that to do so it should ‘favour new ideas over verbal sophistication’ (ibid: 53). Like his fellow reformists, however, he fails to articulate either the characteristics of this ‘ideal poetry’ or the shortcomings of the traditional form.

A further ‘new generation’ of young poets in the early 20th century was more concerned with moulding the new Iranian poetry, and began to experiment with different possibilities in terms of both form and subject matter. In the next section of this chapter, these experiments will be explored and the ways in which the new poets departed from tradition examined.

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52 In *Nameh-ye Bastan* (Book of Ancient Times) he says:

‘Once we have looked into the history of the Islamic poets and their praised patrons, we will say: it was indeed the poems and panegyrics of Abu Nowwas and the like that threw the Abbasid caliphs into the habit of drinking and snoozing and other kinds of corruption. It was the qasidas of Onsori and Rudaki and Farrokhi and suchlike that brought about the demise of the Samanids and the Ghaznavids’ . . . It was the sycophancy of Anvari and Zahir and Rashid and Kamal that gave rise to such wicked and self-conceited kings. It was the love lyrics of Sadi and Homam and their cohorts that corrupted the morals of Iranian youth. . . It was the despicable abstruseness of Khaqani and the likes of him that led astray Mirza Mehdi Khan and the author of *Tarikh-e Vassaf*. It was the long-windedness *nafas-derazi* of Saba and overelaborateness of Shehab and fatuousness of Qu’ani that has today eradicated the love of virtues and hatred of vice from the nature of Iranian nobility, availing them of extraordinary viciousness and turpitude (Kermani, quoted in Hakkak, 1995: 42).

53 My argument will primarily examine the nature of formal and subjective experimentation and the solutions that led to the emergence of Iranian new poetry. My main concern is exploration of the social context, and examination of those changes that resulted in the emergence of what, it is suggested, are realist elements in Iranian new poetry and later in Iranian new wave cinema. I do not aim to provide a comprehensive history of the formation of Iranian new poetry, so certain key figures in the path towards reform will inevitably be sidelined or neglected.
Iranian New Poetry during the Twentieth Century

The Constitutional Revolution of 1905 is seen as a defining element in Iran’s move towards modernity. Events that unfolded around it provided the social context for the emergence of a new generation of poets, whose view of the role of poetry departed from the traditional view that poetry had little to do with contemporary reality. These intellectual poets and critics believed that poetry of the constitutional era needed to begin a negotiation with society (Langaroudi, 1998: 37). Langaroudi explains that poets of this period fell into two groups: pro- and anti-court poets. The former remained at court, enjoying their comfortable lives, ignorant of contemporary society and writing traditional poems. Others, including Irajmirza, Mohammad Taghi Bahar, and Aref Ghazvini, left to join the people, beginning a movement that would be known as the ‘poetry of the constitution’ (Langaroudi, 1998: 37).

Langaroudi argues that a defining characteristic of poetry of the constitutional era was its rejection of the high-born and bombastic vocabulary of traditional Persian poetry; instead, it embraced the everyday language of ordinary people (ibid: 37). Poetry’s new social function responded naturally to the needs of constitutionalists and was welcomed by the public. Hakkak argues that from this point the post-constitutional period began to be seen as radically different, and an almost-complete contrast to the past (Hakkak: 1995: 101). This view, allied to the increasing familiarity of Iranian literati with western literature, contributed to a poetic movement that emphasized the need for a radical break with classical poetry.

A defining characteristic of the debates of the post-constitutional era was the attempt to locate the sources of inspiration for the new form. While those such as Bahar argued that the new poetry should emerge from tradition, others including Taqi Raf’at thought traditional poetry lacked the wherewithal to inspire a form that responded to contemporary reality (Hakkak: 1995: pp110, 133). Drawing on examples of traditional poetry, it was argued that social conditions and reality had changed dramatically in comparison with earlier centuries, and that the formal

These, Langaroudi argues, were the poets of the Return Movement.
conventions and vocabulary of traditional poetry rendered it incapable of reflecting on the contemporary world. In the new generation’s discussions, therefore, the rhetoric of reform begun by the previous generation was replaced by more informed debate. This concerned possible sources of inspiration, and how to create a new form that offered better possibilities for the mediation of the experience of life in Iranian society of the time. Bahar and Rafat represent two sides of this discussion.

The decisive changes in Iranian poetry may be discussed in two broad areas: the general view of the relationship between poetry and society allied to the role and place of contemporary poetry in modern Iran, and the major changes in the formal and stylistic aspects of Iranian poetry. In each, a structured move towards realism can be seen. As will be argued with regard to Mirzadeh Eshghi’s poem *Se Tablow [The Three Tableaux]* (1924), the first change was a departure from engagement with metaphysical issues, and a turn towards the historical world, which may be interpreted as a secular stance to life. The second was a conscious effort to engage with contemporary issues. ‘Contemporaneity’ thus became the second defining characteristic of the new poetry. The third concerned perceptions of the role and place of the poet in society. In classical Iranian poetry, the poet generally assumed the role of wise man, charged with leading the current generation towards salvation. Under the new thinking, he became a social entity ‘driven by forces, desires, and visions no different from those of the general citizenry’ (Hakkak, 1995: 134). Moreover, Iranian poets had traditionally reserved a significant place in their poems for moral lessons. Hakkak argues that the new poets no longer accepted the relevance of such morality:

As for the problem of a new poetry, these early debates facilitate the production of a poetry that would not derive its relevance solely from the moral vision enshrined in it. Moral preachment is envisioned, in spite of its historical interpenetration with

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55 Hakkak argues in relation both to Bahar and Rafat that the notion of poetic expression seems to be shifting from the provision of a contemporary voice for universally valid ideas to the possibility of revealing one’s own specific feelings, emotions and social situation (Hakkah, 1995: 115).

56 I have borrowed this term from Nochlin’s discussion of 19th-century Realism (Nochlin, 1990: 103).
poetry, as an activity essentially independent of aesthetic expression and not as a condition of literary creativity (ibid: 133).

Thus, in the new system, poets were transformed from master moralists to observers of contemporary social life.

**Se Tablow (The Three Tableaux) and realist elements in the new poetry**

Towards the middle of the 20th century, the movement for radical change to the form and vocabulary of classical poetry gained strength, leading eventually to the shaping of Iranian new poetry. To understand the nature of these changes, it is necessary to understand the characteristics of Persian classical poetry. Full justice to this complex subject cannot be achieved in this thesis, but an attempt will be made to illuminate key aspects relevant to this discussion.

There were twelve traditional forms of Persian classical poetry, each governed by strict rules and with its own particular function. Most had fixed metrical systems from which no poem ever deviated, and into which poets had to fit whatever they wanted to say. Thus, for example, the Ghazal comprised 7–12 rhyming couplets and a refrain, with each line sharing the same metre, and was used to describe personal traits. In most cases, each couplet within a poem functioned as a separate unit, and apart from the metrical structure there was no unifying element. The position of individual couplets could often be exchanged without significantly altering meaning. Langaroudi refers to the former as the external and the latter as the internal formal characteristics of Iranian classical poetry (Langaroudi, 1991: 121).

A more complex characteristic of Persian classical poetry is its system of creating meaning: throughout its history, it has managed to create a web of metaphoric associations. These are not governed by rules, but have become both a classical vocabulary and a system of signification. For example, an eye may be associated with a narcissus; a candle, butterfly or nightingale with a lover, and an arrow a beloved’s eyebrow. In such a system, words find new meaning: the word ‘arrow’ in a Ghazal provokes a connection with a beautiful girl’s eyebrow, not a weapon.
Moreover, as previously explained, classical poetry has traditionally departed from engaging with the historical world in favour of the metaphysical. When the word ‘beloved’ is seen, an explanation of her behaviour, apparel or the colour of her eyes is not expected: there is always one ideal lover, one beloved and one location.

The new poets broke away from classical poetry’s system of signification as well as making decisive changes in its internal and external formal characteristics. Firstly, they began to depart from the metaphysical system and explain events in a naturalistic way. In this regard, *Se Tablow (The Three Tableaux)* by Mirzadeh Eshghi (1894–1924) is illuminating. The poem, which Hakkak regards as the first example of new poetry, begins by telling where and when the story is set:

**Se Tablow**

*Ava’el-e gol-e sorkh ast o enteha-ye bahar*
*neshasteh-am sar-e sangi kenar-e yek divar*
*javar-e darreh-ye darband o daman-e kohsar*
*faza-ye shemran andak ze qorb-e maghreb tar*
*hanuz bod asar-e ruz bar faraz-e evin*

*nemudeh dar pas-e koh afatab tazeh ghorub*
*savad-e shahr-e ray az dur nist payda khub*
*jahan nah ruz bovd dar shomar nah shab mahsub*
*shafaq ze sorkhi nimi-sh bayraq-e ashub*
*sepas ze zardi nimi-sh pardeh-ye zarrin*

*cho aftab pas-e kuhsar penhan shod*
*ze sharq az pas-e ashjar mah nemayan shod*
*hanuz shab nashodeh aseman cheraghan shod*
*jahan ze partov-e mahtab nur baran shod*
*cho now’ arus sefidab kard ru-ye zamin*
agar cheh qa’ edatan shab siah ast padid
khelaf-e har shabeh emshab degar shabi-st sepid
shoma beh harcheh keh khub ast mah migu’id

bia keh emshab mah ast o dahr rang-e omid
beh khod gerefteh hamana dar in shab-e simin

(It’s the start of the rose, the end of spring.
I am seated on a rock, next to a wall
On a sloping hillside near Darband's dell.
Shemran's horizon dimmed from the dusk;
Yet above Evin some traces of the day remained.

The sun has now set behind the mountain,
The city's silhouette is only half visible from afar;
In reckoning, this moment counts as neither day nor night:
The dusk resembles half a banner of revolt in redness;
The other half is yellow, like a golden drape.

As the sun disappeared behind the mountain
The moon emerged, through the trees, from the east.
Before the day turned night, the sky became festooned with lights, and
Showered the earth in streams of moonlight.
Like a new bride, the earth powdered its face white.

Commonly at night blackness appears,
Yet unlike all nights, this night is all white.
You call all you love ‘moonlike.’
Come! This night is moonlike, the world
Takes on a hopeful hue on so silvery a night.

(Esgqi, quoted in Hakkak, 1995: 216)\(^{57}\)

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\(^{57}\) I am indebted to Hakkak for his translation of the poems discussed in this chapter.
In traditional Iranian poetry, night may be signalled by a description of Jonah entering the dark interior of a big fish; an army of black slaves conquering white overlords, or a beloved spreading her long black hair over her white body. Similarly, moonrise may be conjured by metaphor: the appearance on a roof of a beloved, an ideal of beauty whose radiant face outshines the celestial luminary, or whose perfectly-arched eyebrow challenges the crescent moon to a sword-fight (ibid: 216). Eshqi’s departure from tradition is evidenced by his disregard for conventional systems of signification and a move towards naturalism. The moon, shade and night are treated as material realities rather than as vehicles for referring to immaterial and metaphysical states, or as the point of entry to a moral sermon. Eshqi is also specific about space and time: the rose begins to flourish at ‘the end of spring’. Thus from the start, the reader is confronted with a new world: the historical, material world rather than the familiar, metaphysical world of classical poetry.58

There is, however, a metaphorical association between the poem and contemporary reality. Hakkak argues that, in its first few lines, Eshghi metaphorically marks the demise of the constitutional revolution and the blood the Qajar regime shed in order to secure its power (ibid: 221). The story starts at the end of spring – a reference to the spring of the revolution – and the beginning of the rose. As the rose is often associated with the colour red, and in Iranian culture redness often indirectly represents blood, Hakkak argues that the poem’s beginning refers to conditions in contemporary Iran. Further clues in the poem support this claim.

The story of the first tableau takes place over an evening as the narrator reports night’s approach in detail. The reference to night finds new significance when the poem is considered in terms of contemporary circumstances. As will be seen, the poet’s description of sunset turning the sky half red and half yellow is significant; Hakkak argues that has indirect social/political connotations (ibid: 222). Yellow in the vocabulary of the time was associated with monarchy and red, as noted,

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with blood and revolt. Thus, Hakkak argues, Eshghi uses these metaphorical associations to locate his story in terms of the actual conditions of contemporary Iranian society: the struggle of people in the course of the Constitutional Revolution against the Qajar dynasty. The poet nevertheless goes beyond these indirect associations to refer directly to contemporary issues.

In the first tableau Eshghi tells of the village girl Maryam’s secret date with a lover. In the second, she has committed suicide: the narrator explains that her lover tricked her into having sex by promising to marry her, but reneged on his promise when she became pregnant; she believed she had brought shame on herself and her father. The final tableau tells of Maryam’s grieving father, a native of Kerman. Sacked from his government job because he refused to ingratiate himself with high-ranking officials, he joined the Constitutionalists, moved away, and married. As the people celebrated the revolution, his daughter was born. He was imprisoned when Mohammad-Ali Shah became king, and lost his sons in the second constitutional war. The poem clearly engages with topical political, social and cultural issues, and all elements of modern realist drama observed by Williams are apparent in it. Further, the poet adopts a critical stance to the political conditions of society.

Eshghi was a political activist who was put to death in 1924 by Reza Khan (later Reza Shah), founder of the Pahlavi dynasty (Langaroudi, 1991: 146). Though poems with political undertones are frequently found in the history of the new poetry, it is rare that poems written in Iran make such direct and apparent reference to contemporary conditions. Eshghi’s political sensibilities explain the overt political engagement seen in *The Three Tableaux*. The social conditions under which the poem was written, shortly before the Pahlavi regime was established, are equally important. The weakness of the Qajar dynasty and the influence – albeit perhaps diminished by then – of the constitutionalists, afforded

59 Islam is strongly opposed to sex between a man and a woman who are not married, and Iranian religious culture is equally dogmatic. It is extremely embarrassing and culturally unacceptable for an unmarried girl to become pregnant. Even in present-day Iran there are strong views against this and the issue is seldom discussed. The significance of Eshghi’s reference to such a cultural taboo at the beginning of the 20th century is therefore clear.

60 Kerman is the centre of one of Iran’s central provinces.
more relaxed conditions for social/political criticism than during the Pahlavi era. Poems written just a few years later have become far more metaphorical and associations less direct.

Arguing that in terms of western literature a new understanding of realism emerges during the 20th century, Williams says: ‘we can be convinced of the reality of an experience, of its essential realism, by many different kinds of artistic method, and with no necessary restriction of subject-matter to the ordinary, the contemporary, and the everyday’ (Williams, 1965: 275). This argument can also be applied to the poems of mid-20th century Iran.

A strong engagement with the political and social situation is nonetheless apparent in new poems throughout the mid-20th century. Hakkak argues that during the mid-20th century a discursive community emerged, which interpreted the poems of key figures such as Nima from the stance of the socialist left. By the 1960s, he argues, the new poetry had become associated with oppositional and often left-wing (socialist/communist) positions (Hakkak, 1995: 266). The close relationship with the left of most key poets of the movement including Nima Yushij, Siavash Kasra’i and Ahmad Shamloo was also instrumental in associating their poems with such perspectives. An example is Yushij’s Filthy Hope (Omid_e Palid), first published in 1943 in the pro-Soviet weekly Nameh ye Mardom, and prefaced by an interpretive piece by Tabari, a member of the Tudeh party.61 Nima tells of night’s struggle to prevent the day from beginning, and begins as roosters herald the dawn:

**Omid_e Palid**

*Dar Nahieh-ye Sahar Khorusan*

*Inguneh be raghm-e tiregi mikhanand*

*Ay amad sobh-e rowshan az dar*

*Bogshudeh be rang-e khun-e khod par*

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61 The Tudeh party was Iran’s most active communist party during the Pahlavi regime.
Sowdagarhay-e shab gorizan
Bar markab-e tiregi neshasteh
Darand ze rah-e door mi-ayand.

(In the reign of the dawn, roosters
Are singing thus, despite the darkness:
‘Behold! Bright morning has arrived through the gate,
Having opened its wings, the colour of its blood.
Seated on horses of darkness,
The night’s traders are fleeing, they are now coming from afar.)

The poet continues by associating night allegorically with a dark veil and the world’s smoky head. The roosters’ songs are so forceful that they tear the veils asunder, which encourages them to sing even more loudly. The morning is presented as a new world order:

Ay amad sobh khandeh bar lab
Bar bad deh-e setizeh-ye shab
Az ham gosal-e fesaneh-ye howl
Peyvand-neh-eqatar-e ayyam
Ta bar sar-e in ghobar-e jonbande
Bonyan-e degar konad
Ay amad sobh chost o chalak
Ba raghs-e latif-e ghermezih-sh
Az qolleh-ye dashtha-ye bas dur
Ay amad sobh ta kea z khak
Andudeh-ye tiregi konad pak
V-aludeh-ye tiregi beshuyad

Asudeh parandeh-i zanad par.

(Behold, morning is approaching, a smile upon its lips,
Destroyer of the night's challenge,
Unraveller of the myth of fear,
Connector of the train of days,
To lay a new foundation
Upon this revolving mass of dust,
To raise another storm
In the heart of this defiant storm.
Behold, morning is approaching, fast and fleet-footed
With the delicate dance of reddish colours

From atop sullen peaks
From the corners of faraway steppes.
Behold, morning is approaching, to wipe off
The darkness accumulated on the face of the earth,
To wash clean those contaminated by the darkness,
So a bird may open its wings in peace.)

The poem once again depicts daybreak and returns to describing the night’s agony. The night is sad and mournful, as though it has been bereaved, and tries to prevent the particles of darkness from leaving the day’s body. In vain, it attempts to use them to create an artificial night. Eventually, in what is described as the night’s absurd hope of the ‘dawn’s demise’ the poem ends.

Mibal ad har koja bebinad
Andisheh-ye mardomi beh rahi-st dorost
V-andar deleshan omid mi-afzayad

Mipayad
Mipayad
Ta hichkeh bar rah mo in nayad
Az zir-e sereshk-e sard-e cherkash
Bar rahgozaran
Mandeh negaran
Misanjad rowshan o siah ra
Miparvarad u beh del
Ommid-e zaval-e sobghah ra.

(It devours, wherever it sees,
The thoughts of the people treading the right path
As hope increases in their hearts.
It watches
And watches,
Hoping no one will set out along the path.
It stands eyeing the passers-by

From beneath its cold, slimy tears.
It gauges the bright and black,
In its heart it nurtures
The hope of the dawn's demise.)

(Hakkak, 1995, pp249–53)

Filthy Hope is clearly less overtly critical than The Three Tableaux, but in the context of 1940s Iran strong engagement with contemporary issues can be found. Tabari and Hakkak locate the poem in context in a bid to unpack its metaphorical suggestions. Tabari reads it in the context of Iran immediately after World War II, suggesting that morning indirectly represents a new social order, and night the corrupt social and political situation

During World War II, three nations took control of different parts of Iran: the USSR, the US and Britain. Reza Shah was forced to quit in 1941 and was replaced by his young son Mohammad Reza. For about seven years these three countries struggled to gain power over the most strategic parts of Iran. Langaroudi argues that historical relationships meant that Britain and the US lacked public appeal, while the USSR had strong popular support (Langaroudi, 1991, pp220–221). The Communist Revolution had transformed Russia into a nation that represented an ideal social order. In such a context Tudeh, Iran’s main communist party, was formed and gained considerable
imagery of morning, he suggests, represents the inevitable victory of the left-wing movements in Iranian society. Nima’s praise of Tabari’s interpretation helped to establish *Filthy Hope* as a politically/socially oriented poem. Hakkak argues that, disregarding both the fact that the poem was first published in a pro-Soviet newspaper, and Tabari’s reading, it contains references that suggest critical engagement with contemporary circumstances. The poet’s left-wing stance is particularly evident (ibid: 254).

Hakkak argues that by the middle of the 20th century, the expression of political views through poetry was established practice (ibid: 255). He also contends that earlier Nima poems, including Khanevadeh-ye Sarbaz (The Soldier’s Family), Qoqnis (The Phoenix) and Vai bar Man (Woe and Well-away) suggest serious engagement with contemporary politics. References to the opposition between night and day are seen in the work of Nima and other 20th-century poets, in particular Dehkhoda’s *Yad Ar*... [*Remember...]* (1909). Hakkak says this is an allegory for contemporary social and political conditions (ibid: 255).

It may be argued that Nima’s metaphors show clear links with similar signifying vocabulary used in the discourse of the Iranian left during the 1940s (ibid: 155). This is laden with stirring rhetoric: socialist victory is ‘as inevitable as tomorrow’s rising sun’, while the passage of time will lead to ‘the death of capitalism’ and ‘the dawn of socialism’ (ibid: 55). The significance of the image of morning as a bird with blood-coloured wings seems clear: it refers to the Soviet revolution. Many similarly critical examples can be found in the poetry of

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63 Writing to Tabari concerning his interpretation of *Filthy Hope*, Nima says: ‘I cannot leave it unsaid how much you have earned my trust in your judgement’ (Nima, quoted in Hakkak, 1995: 260).

64 *Yad Ar*... (*Remember...*) was a political poem written by Ali Akbar Dehkhoda in memory of his friend and political activist Mirza Jahangir Khan Shirazi, principal editor of the constitutionalist newspaper *Sur-e Etrafi*, who was executed on June 24, 1908, by order of Mohammad-Ali Shah. For an examination of the poem see Hakkak: 1995: 60.
mid-20th century Iran. From this perspective, it may be argued that *Filthy Hope* has strong political undertones.

*Filthy Hope* is among many examples that are not straightforwardly realist. I agree with those who argue that, purely in terms of form, such poems do not belong to conventional understandings of realist art. I would propose, however, that its indirect and obscure formal and stylistic approaches are primarily a response to censorship and contemporary political constraints; the inevitable consequence of the Pahlavi dictatorship. As noted, the political constraints of the rule of Reza Shah resulted in a shift towards metaphorical and allegorical kinds of representation in mid-20th-century poetry. Many examples show that poets remained strongly involved with social and political criticism, albeit in heavily veiled ways. Poems such as *Filthy Hope* chimed with the 20th-century left-wing movement that aimed to change Iran’s political landscape. It may be argued that such poems attempted to intervene with, and even at times subvert, the social/political atmosphere in Iran.

The second major departure from the formal characteristics of classical poetry also constituted the final step in the formation of the new poetry. This may be seen in the work and writings of Nima Yooshij (1895–1960), who changed the appearance and practice of Iranian poetry by altering radically its internal and external formal characteristics. Building on western free verse, he discarded classical Iranian forms, changing a poem’s units from single lines to a combination of lines that could vary in length according to its requirements. He argued that the new realities of Iranian society demanded a form that was more responsive to such a social structure. He also argued that such a form should be able to move beyond the text to direct an audience towards engagement with the realities that constituted the social context behind the work (Nima, quoted in Langaroudi, 1991: 121).

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65 For examples see Akhavan-e Sales’s *Zemestan [Winter]* (1955); Ahmad Sahmloo’s numerous political poems including *Dar in Bonbast [In This Blind Alley]* (1979); *Akhare Bazi [End of the Game]* (1978) and *Az Amoohyat [Of Your Uncles]* (1955) and Hooshang Ebtehaj’s *Farda [Tomorrow]* (1952) and Caravan (1952).
As seen in the two examples discussed, units in new poetry are often connected sequentially, so their position cannot be changed without affecting overall coherence and meaning. These stylistic changes were further established by Nima in an extensive body of theoretical and practical work. Nima transformed the audience’s experience of reading a poem, requiring it to adjust expectations and to regard poetry in a different way: to see it, in fact, as a reflection or a mediation of contemporary social reality. Hakkak argues that these stylistic approaches were not the most significant changes during the process of reform, but I would suggest that the subversive effects on an audience of such a transformation should not be underestimated. When an audience that has become accustomed to particular formal systems is confronted with a radically different form, the new system requires it to make an effort to become critically engaged. Through this active engagement with the poem, it becomes prepared to unpack its indirect references to contemporary social circumstances. This is unprecedented in the history of Iranian poetry, and a new formal system thus becomes associated with a new approach to the historical world. Nima’s stylistic amendments to poetry’s external characteristics were a defining step in the formation of the new poetry, leading to a radical change in views of the function and place of poetry in contemporary Iran.

In summary, the new poets are no longer considered master moralists but social beings, affected like any other member of society by social realities. The new system of poetry locates the reader differently with regard to the text; he or she is no longer a passive listener but an active participant in the process of decoding it and moving towards understanding of the historical reality. As noted, Iranian new poetry was defined by its involvement with contemporary social and/or political reality. By the 1970s, however, it had begun to lose its significance in society. Langaroudi, perhaps somewhat simplistically, explained its historical development before the Revolution in four phases: ‘the 1940s saw the formation of the new poetry, the 50s saw it flourishing, the 60s was the decade it established itself and also started to decline, in the 70s it stopped flourishing and lost its respect’ (Langaroudi, 1999: 2).
In the decades following the 1979 revolution cinema became the most popular – and arguably the most important – art form in Iranian society. In the next section aspects of Iranian cinema will be explored, and it will be argued that the branch often termed ‘new wave’, as it emerged through the works of certain filmmakers, was a continuation of the path taken by Iranian new poetry in the 20th century.

**Iranian New Wave Cinema and social engagement**

By the 1970s, Iranian mainstream cinema known as *Film Farsi* had gained considerable popularity. Valuable attempts to locate Iranian cinema’s historical development include Sadr’s *Iranian Cinema: A Political History* (2006); Hamid Dabashi’s *Close Up: Iranian Cinema, Past, Present and Future* (2001); Naficy’s numerous writings on the social history of Iranian cinema and Nilufar Ashtari’s PhD thesis *Unveiling Iranian Cinema* (2004). This thesis, however, is concerned with the particular branch of Iranian cinema known as ‘new wave’, and the exploration of social engagement within it. Though new wave cinema would eventually be seen as a contrast to Iranian mainstream cinema, it will be argued that this was not the only motivation behind its development. As will be demonstrated, Iranian new cinema may be understood more correctly as a continuation of the path taken by Iranian new poetry during the second half of the 20th century. The characteristics of new wave cinema will be explored and some of the associated controversy addressed, with particular regard to the works of Kiarostami. It will be argued that realism, as explained in relation to Iranian new poetry, has been the defining characteristic of this cinema.

To the disappointment of some critics, the new wave has never produced political films *per se*. Thorough investigation, however, reveals that it has produced significantly subversive works. The social and political context that helped new wave filmmakers to flourish and achieve international success will be explored. Finally, the social changes that have prompted increasingly limiting and unfavourable conditions for new wave practitioners will be examined.
On the decline in Iranian poetry Langaroudi argues that, with few exceptions, nothing major was published during the 1970s (Langaroudi, 1999: pp 183, 278, 390). He also explains that Iran had become relatively prosperous as a result of a rise in the price of oil. This new wealth was not, however, invested in the fundamentals of society, but was primarily spent on schemes intended to present Iran as a developed and modern country. The motivation was the desire to create a feeling of prosperity and optimism within society, and a positive image of Iran on the international stage (ibid: 11). One such scheme was the promotion of Iran’s cinema industry as a popular form of entertainment. Sadr argues that, despite the Shah’s efforts to portray Iran as a prosperous country, the fabric of Iranian society was undermined by severe poverty (Sadr, 2006: 130). In this social context, the form of cinema later known as Iranian new cinema or Iranian new wave cinema emerged.

A significant characteristic of the new form at this stage was its pessimistic view of the conditions of contemporary life. Thus, from the outset, Iranian new wave cinema set up in opposition to government propaganda. This socially critical stance immediately separated it from the main body of Iranian cinema, and in less than a decade it managed to establish itself as a contrast to mainstream entertainment cinema via the attention it gave to social realities. Moreover, it extended its subject-matter to previously marginalized aspects of society. The movement is believed to have emerged with Dariush Mehrjuie’s 1969 film *The Cow* (Elena, 2005: 40), an allegorical comment on social insecurity and paranoia based on a short story by Gholam Hosein Saedi and set in a deprived village. The films of talented new wave exponent Bahram Beyzai paid particular attention to women. Abbas Kiarostami, another key figure, concentrated on the under-represented topic of aspects of Iranian urban and suburban life before the revolution. Amir Naderi explored aspects of cultural and social life in his native southern Iran. A defining characteristic of the new form, therefore, was its social

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66 Elena mentions several films of the new wave during this period that the authorities accused of presenting Iranian society from a critical perspective. Many of these films were banned for some years (Elena 2005: 40–43).
extension. Not surprisingly most of the films produced by the new wave were banned by the Shah’s regime (ibid, pp 40–43).

As shown, adherence to social realities was also one of the characteristics of Iranian new poetry. Over almost a century, Iranian new poetry theorists and practitioners attempted to divert the direction of poetry from its engagement with metaphysical and immaterial issues towards contemporary historical realities. The new cinema moved this forward not only by concentrating on contemporary social issues but also by focusing on the representation of socially marginalized groups. Thus the hallmarks of such cinema were the previously-ignored problems faced in deprived suburban life, rural communities, and by children and women.

**Iranian New Wave Cinema and the Islamic Government**

This thesis must address the relationship between the Islamic government and Iranian new wave cinema. In the last four decades, the government has been the main sponsor, contractor and distributor of cinema. From the 1980s to the first few years of the 21st century, new wave directors received considerable financial sponsorship, and their films were regularly sent to international festivals. In this sense, it can be argued that the worldwide recognition of Iranian new wave cinema was to a considerable degree facilitated by the government. In the last decade, however, the relationship between government and filmmakers of the movement has deteriorated drastically. Few new wave directors now live in Iran, and almost none are ever permitted to make films. The government seems to be...

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67 As will be discussed, despite this similarity in intention, works of the two movements have marked stylistic differences. The films of new wave cinema directed less explicit criticism towards Iranian governments, particularly post-revolution. Compared with the overtly political poems of the mid-20th century, new wave cinema enjoyed more freedom in terms of representational approaches. This is manifest in the films, as the directors have used both direct and indirect modes of representation.

68 New wave veteran and political activist Mohsen Makhmalbaf has long ceased making films in Iran; his recent films have been produced with foreign sponsorship in neighbouring countries including Afghanistan, Tajikistan and India. Kiarostami’s Iranian filmmaking career has been put on hold; he had to make his last film *Certified Copy* (2010) outside Iran. Directors of Kurdish origin such as Bahman Ghobadi have moved to Iraqi Kurdistan to make films. Bahram Beizaei...
engaged in a systematic attempt to halt the activities of filmmakers of the movement. This can be attributed partly to the right-wing government’s hard-line policies. It should nevertheless be noted that during the first two decades of the Islamic regime, until Mohammad Khatami’s presidency of 1997, the right wing had considerable power.

In terms of policy, the current government can be linked to hard-line administrations of the Islamic regime’s first two decades, yet its relationship with Iranian new wave cinema differs considerably. It is unlikely that this antagonism was prompted by a change in the approach of new wave filmmakers. With few exceptions\(^69\), they are making films similar to those of the 1980s and 1990s; their output has not become more overtly involved with politically sensitive issues. In the following paragraphs the social and political motivation for the Islamic government’s support of the new wave and the reasons behind the current oppression of the genre will be explored. At the same time, I shall examine how films such as *Mr and Mrs. Mockroach*, the practical component of this PhD, might approach contemporary social issues.

One of the most interesting characteristics of the new cinema was its secular stance towards life. This was not a novelty, but a transformation that dated from the 1960s. As a result of exposure to western art, Iranian artists and literary figures had already broken ties with traditional and religious forces. The new directors, most of whom were middle class, had strong links with the secular section of society, in particular literary and secular revolutionary characters. Short stories and plays, unknown in traditional Iranian literature, had become commonplace; some new wave cinema directors had already begun to collaborate successfully with contemporary literary talents. *The Cow* was the outcome of one such collaboration.

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\(^69\) Bahman Ghobadi’s *No One Knows About Persian Cats* (2009), which portrays aspects of contemporary Iranian underground music, is among few examples of films with a strong political undertone. The only director of the movement who has produced overtly political films is Makhmalbaf, who made his political films during the 1990s.
The secular cinema practiced by certain figures of the new cinema was tolerated by the post-revolutionary Islamic regime. Ironically, the Islamic government even provided a comfortable atmosphere in which Kiarostami and other new wave filmmakers could continue their artistic activities. Many commentators, both in and outside of Iran have debated the reasons for this unlikely relationship, and two of these will be explored below. Firstly, the new wave’s engagement with the poor and socially marginalized chimed with the Islamic regime’s rhetoric that it belonged to the poor. It was therefore tolerated as long as it did not suggest that the Islamic government was founded on popular ignorance. Secondly, the regime realised that cinema’s portrayal of an exotic and innocent Iran could be used to rebuild the country’s international reputation (Sadr, 2002: 227).

Immediately after the revolution, Iranian cinema faced a serious dilemma; almost all reviews conclude that the new regime’s first five years constitute the most vague period in its history. Naficy (Naficy, 2002: 34, 35); Hamid Sadr, (Sadr, 2006: 171), and Azadeh Farahmand (Farahmand, 2002, 82) are among those who have discussed the issue. Naficy notes that the problem was informed by various political and economic factors, and suggests reasons for the slow revival of Iranian cinema after the revolution (Naficy, 2002: 34). He also refers to post-revolutionary attempts to rid cinema of elements considered inappropriate or taboo by the new regime:

…purification measures and persecutions, however, are only one set of reasons for the slow revival of cinema during the transitional period. Islamization was by no means a given, as many other factors contributed to the creation of a fluid and contentious atmosphere within the film industry. These included the financial damage that the industry suffered during the Revolution, a lack of government interest in cinema during the transitional period (for example, the first five-year budget plan in 1983 ignored cinema altogether), the absence of centralized authority and thus antagonistic competition over cinema between various factions (for example MCIG [Ministry for Culture and Islamic Guidance], the Foundation of the Disinherited and the Revolutionary Committees), a lack of an appropriate cinematic model (there was no ‘Islamic’ film genre), heavy competition from imports, a drastic deterioration in the public image of the industry as a whole, the
haphazard application of censorship, and the flight of many film professionals into exile (ibid: 34).

Sadr agrees with Naficy’s view that the new regime found the definition of Islamic cinema problematic and had no particular criteria for addressing films (Sadr, 2006: 170). He also suggests that 20th-century Islamic theoreticians had failed to address cinema. One suggestion from the government was that cinema should reflect the contemporary atmosphere of society in terms of revolutionary spirit:

Naturally there were conflicting views regarding what Iranian cinema should or should not be in the early years of Revolution. Initially, realism was offered as the prefect instrument for expressing the struggles of the society. This outlook shunned both ‘cinema as entertainment’ and ‘cinema as opium’. In June 1981 the politician Muhammad Ali Rajai stated that: ‘People’s slogans must be reflected in films. Films should express the people’s demands and aspirations and they must also create a sense of hope and a spirit of defence. The pressing issue of the deprived and the Islamic revolution must be presented in films (Sadr, 2006: 170).

Immediately after the revolution, Mohammad Ali Rajai’s endorsement of the kind of cinema that engaged with the lives of ordinary people allowed some space for a socially-engaged cinema of the new wave. As noted, the portrayal of rural and suburban life had become characteristic of new wave cinema. The government was obviously eager to see films that celebrated the achievements of the revolution, but in practice had the flexibility to tolerate minor criticism. Explaining that films that did not directly criticize the regime were tolerated, Farahmand quotes the head of the Farabi Cinema Foundation Mohammad Beheshti:

Criticisms is not forbidden; there are transgressors in all walks of life … But when a filmmaker introduces a miscreant, a police officer, or a teacher, let us say, it has to be clear whether he is criticizing an individual or the system as a whole. If the latter, then he must be stopped (Beheshti, quoted in Farahmand, 2002: 91).

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70 Rajai was the influential and popular president of Iran for a short period in 1981. In August 1981 he and other key figures of the revolution were assassinated during a meeting.
Those directors of the new wave cinema who contrived to work did not explicitly oppose the revolutionary values of the Islamic regime, so it is not surprising that films focusing on children and rural life met far less opposition from the authorities.

As noted, the new wave cinema emerged before the revolution as a socially engaged and secular cinema. After the revolution, some filmmakers including Naderi and Shahid-Sales left Iran. Filmmakers including Kiarostami and Bahram Beyzai, Mehrjui and Taghvaei however, continued their pre-revolutionary experimentation. All began their fiction filmmaking in Kanoon (Centre for the Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults), which promoted non-mainstream artistic experimentation. Despite its name, Kanoon’s most valuable works were made for an adult audience. Kiarostami’s career began with a short film, Bread and Alley (1971), based on an autobiographical story by his younger brother Taghi. It concerns a boy who is sent to buy bread but whose way home is blocked by a dog, and shows how the determined boy manages by ingenuity and courage to overcome the problem and return safely. The strong continuity in Kiarostami’s work can be seen by comparing the plot of this film to that of his first international success, Where is the Friend’s Home? (1987). This is the story of Ahmad, a schoolboy who mistakenly takes a classmate’s exercise book. Knowing that his friend will be punished if he neglects his homework, he sets out on an epic journey to return the book. He is unsuccessful, so he resolves to complete the homework himself and return it the following day. Kiarostami made many films before and after the revolution, with similar themes based on similar boy characters.

Post-revolution, Beyzai also continued to develop his distinctive style, which was heavily charged with symbolism and an engagement with women and children. The commitment of these directors to engage with aspects of contemporary society remained central after the revolution, when they matured artistically and produced their best work. My argument, however, is that they developed what they had already begun, and that despite the controls and censorship that resulted, the revolution did not cause major changes in the stylistic and formal choices of this first generation of new wave filmmakers. After the revolution a new
generation of filmmakers joined the movement, of which Mohsen Makhmalbaf is the best-known. Other successful directors include Bahman Ghobadi, Jafar Panahi, Abolfazl Jalili and Rakhshan Bani Etemad. This new generation remained mostly committed to the characteristics of the new wave, which were frequently found in the films of the pre-revolutionary era. The revolution therefore had little effect on the main body of Iranian new wave cinema, and the government was clever enough to realize that it would be of more benefit to support the new wave.

As noted, the decline of Iran’s international image post-revolution and during the Iran-Iraq war prompted government hopes that it could be rebuilt through new wave films. With its exotic locations and its portrayal of innocent rural life and determined children, new wave cinema managed to introduce a new Iran to the world (Sadr, 2002: 227). Thus historical coincidence and political motivation secured its continuation. These points must be expanded in order to understand the complex relationship between the Islamic regime and the new wave movement, which has caused controversy both inside and outside the country. However, as Naficy observes, the new cultural dialogue did not produce a better international image for the Islamic government:

International acclaim for Iranian cinema did not translate into political prestige for the Islamist government, as the regime’s opponents in exile had feared. Iranian exiles, international audiences and film-reviewing establishments abroad were sophisticated enough to understand the constricted political contexts in which the films were produced. (Naficy, 2002: 53)

So far, an attempt has been made to explore Iranian new wave cinema in historical context, arguing that it can be more correctly understood as a continuation of the new poetry movement. It has been proposed that realism is central to both movements, and attempts have been made to demonstrate different aspects of such realism. I have also tried to define the paradoxical relationship between the Iranian government and new wave cinema, and explore the political motivations behind it.
In the next section aspects of the new wave will be examined with a focus on the works of Kiarostami. I believe that Kiarostami occupies a particular place in the tradition of the new wave cinema. Firstly, his international success has made him a source of inspiration, and his works a model for the new generation of new wave film makers. Most of these, including Panahi, Gobadi, and Akbari, learnt cinema by working directly or indirectly with Kiarostami. The practice of using non-professional actors and rural locations in Iran did not begin with Kiarostami; others, such as Naderi and Shahid-Sales, had already made effective use of such methods, but his commitment to this practice combined with his international success, have made these quintessential aspects of new wave cinema. His influence has been so strong that the term ‘Kiarostamiesque’ is frequently used in discussions about films of the movement, yet his cinematic style has remained unique in the history of Iranian cinema.

Kiarostami’s distinctiveness derives from two main factors, the first of which is the way in which he defines and locates both director and audience. His direction has moved gradually away from the didactic towards defining a far more active role for his audience, and he has managed to develop a uniquely subversive cinematic form. Earlier, it was proposed that changes in the formal aspects of Iranian new poetry culminated in the final stage of development of the new form. It was argued that the new formal system introduced by Nima had an important political effect, and played a defining role in the realisation of the new poetry. Kiarostami has managed to develop and perfect such a subversive form in his cinema. Most Iranian critics, however, view this political cinema as simply experimentation in terms of form, and have ignored the potential effect of his cinematic style on his audience.

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71 By ‘subversive cinema’ I mean that Kiarostami’s work disturbs the conventional relationship between audience and film, subverting the orthodox social relationship and thus demanding a more intense mental engagement from his audience. As will be discussed, this mental/critical engagement sometimes involves questioning contemporary socially or politically sensitive issues. His cinema is thus subversive with regard to audience and at times in relation to contemporary topical issues.

72 It is not suggested that this subversive cinema is unique to the Iranian new wave; it is rooted in French new wave cinema, particularly the works of Godard or Brecht. Kiarostami has, however, managed to develop a unique subversive cinema that, I suggest, has strong links to Iranian new poetry.
On numerous occasions Kiarostami has insisted on his cinema’s close relationship to Iranian poetry, either in interviews, by citing poetry in his films or by borrowing the titles of famous poems for his films (Elena, 2005: pp187, 193). Other filmmakers of the movement have also frequently insisted on their close relationship with Iranian poetry. Some, such as Kiarostami, write poems while others such as Makhmalbaf write short stories on serious topics. In arguing that Iranian new wave cinema must be seen as a continuation of the new poetry, I have another, somewhat different, point in mind. As noted, the association of a modern form with a realist kind of practice eventually shaped the new poetry. Similarly, the association of particular modernist forms of film with a realist kind of cinema lent the new wave cinema its distinctive characteristics. Moreover, the stylistic strategies used in both branches seem to have strong links with western art: the use of anti-Hollywood systems of narration, non-professional actors, and self-reflexive modes of representation with the resulting distanciation effect had all been practised in most new wave cinemas of the west. In the following paragraphs this argument will be opened up with regard to the cinema of Kiarostami.

Case Study: Where is the Friend’s Home? (1987)

As noted, a defining characteristic of Iranian new poetry was its particular view of the role of the poet and its understanding of the poet/audience relationship. It was argued that the new poetry defined the poet as a normal member of society, abandoning the traditional view of poet as master moralist. As shown, the new

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73 Makhmalbaf, for instance, defines the significance of poetry to Iranian filmmakers thus: ‘If behind every European film-maker we tend to see a painter, behind an Iranian film-maker there is always a frustrated poet or an unhappy troubadour’ (Makhmalbaf, quoted in Elena, 2005:190).

74 Such modernist strategies include revealing the process of filmmaking to the audience in Close-up (1990), Through the Olive Trees (1994) and Homework (1989), and using unconventional forms of narrative formal experimentation which result at times in abstract and poetic imagery (see my examination of Where is the Friend’s Home? below).

75 In his writings Nima shows a particular fascination with the free verse of Walt Whitman (1819–1892). See for example Nima, quoted in Langaroudi, 1991: 109)
poets were more observers of contemporary social realities than teachers. Their poems invited audiences to take an active role in relation to historical reality. This impulse strongly informed almost the whole of Kiarostami’s output, in which various strategies were used to disturb the audience’s presumed relationship with the medium of cinema. Such disorientation included the frequent use of repetition, revealing the process of filmmaking to the audience, and departure from the established conventions of cinema, specifically the Hollywood system of narration.

On various occasions, Kiarostami refused to provide the visual and literal information traditionally expected by an audience, and *Where Is the Friend’s Home?* (1987) reveals many examples of this strategy. The film begins by introducing Ahmad and his friend Mohammad Reza in a typical Iranian classroom. Everything in the sequence has been arranged naturalistically: the dialogue, camera position and the children’s reactions all convey the serious atmosphere of a traditional Iranian classroom. Naturalism can thus be said to function as a strategy to heighten the seriousness of an event: the audience also senses the importance of the homework. Mohammad Reza’s teacher reprimands him for neglecting his homework so, when it realises that Ahmad has mistakenly taken his book, it fears the consequences. Ahmad wants to return the book, but his mother will not let him out; no matter how hard he tries to explain, she refuses to listen. Finally he decides he must escape.

After the relatively long home sequence, Ahmad sets out to find his friend. He only knows that he lives in Poshteh, a neighbouring village. During his quest he meets his grandfather in a local Shaikhane (coffee shop). Like other adults in the film, the old man refuses to listen, and sends Ahmad to fetch a cigarette. The camera remains on the grandfather as Ahmad departs, and the audience is forced to wait and hear his important thoughts on raising children. This long sequence works almost like a patch in relation to the rest of the film. It is disturbing in the sense that we want to follow Ahmad; like him, we are anxious to find Mohammad Reza and return home before dark, but are forced to endure the grandfather’s ponderous moral diatribe.
Ahmad fetches the cigarette and the search is resumed. A beautiful hill topped by a single tree and a winding pathway connects his village and Poshteh. This provides another opportunity for Kiarostami to disturb audience expectations, by showing Ahmad’s trip to and from Poshteh three times in almost-identical shots. The use of music specific to these three sequences intensifies the sense of repetition. In an extreme long shot, later to become Kiarostami’s signature, the hill becomes abstract and almost poetic, in complete opposition to the Shaikhaneh sequence and in contrast with the naturalistic tone of the film. Majid Eslami makes an interesting comparison between this strategy and Iranian poetry:

“The repetition is so much here that it gets distanced from the realistic dialogues and becomes abstract’ in the same way that poetry makes use of repetition in order to make rhythm. (Eslami, quoted in Elena, 2005: 70)

It is also interesting to note that the image of the tree on a hill and the path to Poshteh visualizes Sepehri’s poem. Though not suggesting a connection, I am reminded of the way in which Fellini entangles dream and reality in his film 8½.

In the same way, Kiarostami’s film suspends the audience between abstraction

76 Sepehri’s poem The Address begins: ‘Where is the Friend’s Home?’ This is the reply:

...“Don’t you see that poplar tree?
Well, right before the tree,
There is a lane that you’ll recognise, I think.
For it is greener than a heavenly dream.
For it is generously shaded with the deep blues of love.
Well, if you see.

So walk down that lane
And you’ll arrive at the garden of sense
Turn to the direction of the solitary lake
Listen to the genuine hymn of leaves
Watch the eternal fountain
That flows from the spring of ancient myths
Until you faint away in pure fear.

And when a rigid noise clatters into the fluid intimacy of space
You’ll find a child
On the top of a tree,
Next to the nest of owls
In the hope of a golden egg.
Well, if you see.

You may be sure; the child will show you the way.
Well, if you just ask for
The abode of the Beloved.” (translation: Maryam Dilmaghani)
and naturalism. The final instances of such an unconventional system of narration occur in the film’s final sequences. After following Ahmad, we are finally near Mohammad Reza’s home. Along with the carpenter and Ahmad we cannot wait to see it, yet once again Kiarostami refuses to respond to our expectations: the camera remains with the carpenter while Ahmad enters a dark alley to reach his friend’s home. Shortly afterwards, we are back at Ahmad’s home. We see him and know that he has been punished, but are once again denied access to the scene. Kiarostami refers to this strategy of ‘showing by not showing’ as his ‘cinematic ambition’ (Kiarostami, quoted in Elena, 2005; 154).

Thus through various strategies Kiarostami manages to disturb the audience’s conventional relationship with film, inviting it constantly to re-adjust its relationship with the film and thereby demanding a greater level of mental engagement. This redefinition of the film/audience relationship is just one level of his strategy; at a deeper level such disorientation works to invite interrogation of the social realities portrayed. Elena explains this in relation to the Shaikhaneh sequence, in which Ahmad insists that he cannot fetch a cigarette because he must return the book:

Ahmad’s disobedience should not be seen as a simple and trivial escape in search of his friend’s house, but as a genuine rejection of the suffocating rules of a patriarchal system governed by the weight of tradition, by a closed order that is a small-scale version of the ‘rules of the game’ of an oppressive society (Elena, 2002: 69).

I share Elena’s view that Kiarostami invites his audience to question the traditional social structures portrayed in his films, but believe that his criticism is directed primarily at Iranian culture. In this, I concur with Dabashi that Kiarostami’s cinema is constantly engaged with revisiting traditional aspects of Iranian culture (Dabashi, 2001: 62). Dabashi concludes, however, that Kiarostami’s cinema, in general, is far from political (Dabashi, 2001: 62). Here,
my position departs from that of both Elena and Dabashi. I believe Kiarostami is not primarily engaged with questioning the Iranian government’s policies; his cinema has never been political in that sense. I therefore disagree with readings such as those of Elena, which go beyond cultural criticism to introduce an element of political criticism. Though Iran’s traditional patriarchal culture had given way to an oppressive political system, there is little evidence of political allusion in *Where is The Friend’s Home?* I therefore believe that attempts to read the film in these terms go beyond its intention; Kiarostami has often said that he does not believe in such political engagement. Even when his films engage with culture, they simply raise an issue and leave the audience to decide.

On certain occasions, however, Kiarostami’s engagement with cultural issues has involved political engagement. For example, *10* (2002), a rarity among his oeuvre, engage with the contemporary treatment of Iranian women. This issue has always been sensitive for the Islamic government, and in recent years struggles for women’s rights have taken centre stage. It thus follows that any film that engages with issues concerning Iranian women will find itself dealing with politics. Kiarostami’s *The Taste of Cherry* (1997) deals with the politically-sensitive issue of suicide, and the playground chanting sequences in *Homework* (1989) may be said to carry political overtones. I do not, therefore, share Dabashi’s view that his cinema is ‘the furthest from political’ (Dabashi, 2001: 62); I believe it is primarily involved with cultural issues, but that he has never compromised when this entails political engagement.

the director reminds the audience that social conventions are historically shaped and subject to question and revision.

78 Elena, referring to Emanuela Imparato, argues that on a wider level Ahmad’s disobedience can be interpreted as rejecting an ‘Islamic social, political and religious system regulated by eternal laws...’(ibid: 69)

79 Until recently Kiarostami avoided serious engagement with issues concerning Iranian women. Though women had certain roles in his films, he was often criticised for paying more attention to men and children. Since the making of *10*, Kiarostami has shifted focus; his last three films have been primarily engaged with women and their concerns.

80 Engaging with cultural criticism does not always involve holding the government responsible for those traditions. At times, however, as briefly mentioned in Kiarostami’s cinema, it might involve criticism of issues that are politically sensitive and condemned by the government. In such instances cultural criticism might be interpreted as political questioning.
The recent work of a new generation of Iranian cinema theoreticians and critics appears to reveal dissatisfaction with Kiarostami’s reluctance to engage in political matters. There is also a sense that, in the vocabulary of these critics, ‘political’ means engagement with contemporary political issues. Such political cinema seems implicitly to be regarded as more valuable or superior. While considerations of finance and censorship considerations have prevented Iranian cinema from exploring these topics, I believe that the significance of the work of directors such as Kiarostami has never lain in their engagement with political issues. Nevertheless, as Ashtari argues, and as discussed with regard to some of Kiarostami’s films, in the Iranian context engagement with social issues is often associated with political engagement. In Unveiling Iranian Cinema Ashtari makes another important point, arguing that ‘quality films’ often contribute to discursive debates, within and outside Iranian society, around contemporary social and political issues:

The quality cinema distinguishes itself from the model cinema in that it has multiple layers, is often critical and subversive of Islamist ideology and has developed a unique cinematic style and language. Some academics have regarded the criticism to be social rather than political. However, it is my contention that in Iran, the social is highly political. Tied to the currents of progressive politics and social concern, the quality cinema often causes political controversies and, by being widely discussed in the press, both in and outside Iran, helps to open up the culture of debate. (Ashtari, 2004: 302)

Rather than involving themselves with direct political criticism, films of the new wave often provide an opportunity for discursive debates on a range of social and political issues. While the frustrating social situation of Iran in the last few decades has understandably intensified calls for overtly political cinema, Kiarostami’s output must be seen as equally subversive. Such cinema reminds the

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82 As noted, Ashtari uses the term ‘quality film’ to refer to films of the new wave.
audience that no tradition is fixed, and that every cultural and social norm is historical and subject to revision and correction.

The Islamic government has become aware of the role of Iranian new wave films in raising critical debates around the contemporary circumstances of society. As noted, however, their international success has failed to enhance the government’s image. In recent years, international acclaim for Iranian new wave films has often been interpreted as a political attempt to support a socially critical cinema that opposes the government. At the beginning of the Islamic regime, poverty and social injustice were blamed on the policies of the Pahlavi regime, and during its first two decades economic and social problems were attributed to what was presented as a long imposed war with Iraq. Almost four decades on, economic and social difficulties are the Iranian people’s main concern and one of the government’s most significant problems. It is no longer desirable to portray the poor and the marginalised; not only does it no longer fit the rhetoric of the government, but it can also present serious challenges. The social and political context that once required and supported new wave cinema has changed significantly; the government, it seems, is unable to visualise a place for it in contemporary Iranian society.

The stylistic and representational approaches of the new wave, and its naturalistic location and dialogue and simple plots, have become familiar to the government. Further, the naturalism of plot and dialogue means that these films often refer directly to social and cultural issues. It has therefore become extremely difficult for filmmakers to address issues of social significance. I would argue that adoption of a more complex formal system, which involves indirect modes of representation, could facilitate social engagement in ways that would not be immediately apparent to the censors. The new poets have already successfully used this approach.

In an Iranian context, animation is often associated with light entertainment and lack of engagement with the mediation of serious issues. Its association with non-realist kinds of film, and its limited public exposure when compared to live action, means that the authorities are less vigilant in terms of controlling
animation. In a context in which live-action film is under serious scrutiny, animation, I suggest, could be considered a potent means for raising significant and contentious issues without alerting undue suspicion. This, however, presents many difficulties: while animation filmmakers enjoy a far less restricted context than live action, they may face obstacles in terms of audience. An audience that is prepared to look for serious social and cultural references in live action films might fail to seek such involvement in an animated film or indeed show no interest in such films. The use of indirect modes of representation often demands active participation in terms of mental and critical involvement of an audience, the problems faced by Iranian animators are evident.

In the next chapter I shall focus on the practical intervention produced as part of this research, the film *Mr and Mrs. Mockroach*. I shall examine how, as an Iranian animator, I have examined my culture and the possibilities it offers with regard to my own film. I shall also reflect on how my research into animation in other contexts and aspects of Iranian art has assisted me with its conceptualisation and production. I will further reflect on the difficulties faced in relation to the Iranian context and audience, and the solutions that have been proposed and developed in the film. This reflexive examination offers an opportunity to increase understanding of issues involved in the production of a realist animation in present-day Iran.
Chapter 4

*Mr and Mrs. Mockroach: the Iranian context and the significance of socially-engaged animation*

My research into Iranian art, my examination of realism from historical and epistemological points of view and case studies of socially-oriented animation prepared a contextual background for the production of my film *Mr and Mrs. Mockroach*. In this chapter I shall concentrate on the effect of the Iranian context in which the film was produced on its formal and representational characteristics. The particularities of Iranian society in terms of what this research calls realist animation will be explored, and the constraints this imposes on the practice of socially-oriented animators and the opportunities it offers will be examined in detail. The specific problems addressed during production will be discussed, and the solutions I have proposed in order to represent a specific social issue – discrimination against women in Iranian culture and society and its effect on their lives – will be explored. With reference to my film, the rationale behind some of its representational and stylistic elements will be opened up with regard to audience.

Social engagement in Iranian animation has a history of about four decades, but apart from a few films primarily produced by the Institute for the Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults (IIDCYA) in the 1970s and early 1980s, Iranian animators have displayed a general reluctance to address issues of social and cultural significance. It can be argued that, other than for educational purposes, socially-engaged animation in Iran has largely been neglected. This is intriguing because, for many reasons, animation might have been expected to take a more active role in the mediation of contemporary Iranian life. In the first section of this chapter I shall explore briefly why I believe the Iranian context offers animators a unique opportunity to do this, and examine why such engagement has not yet materialized. I shall conclude by proposing ways in

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83 These include *Tehran to Tehran* (1983) co-directed by Nafiseh Riahi and Sudabeh Agah; Kiarostamis’ *Toothache* (1980), and *A Drop of Oil, A Drop of Blood* (1983) by Farshid Mesghali
which animation’s involvement with contemporary Iranian conditions might be approached and facilitated.

As argued in Chapter 2, animation’s use for reflecting on contemporary experience of life was particularly significant in the context of the former USSR and Eastern Europe under communism. It has been argued that the general view of animation as a medium not often associated with serious and socially-critical films has allowed animators relative freedom compared to live action filmmakers. I shall argue that similar conditions can be said to exist in Iran today, in that the general perception of animation facilitates its use for realist purposes. I shall open up the discussion to contend that the use of animation to produce films that invite an audience to approach the contemporary state of Iranian society from a critical point of view is of particular relevance to contemporary Iran.

The second part of this chapter concentrates on Mr and Mrs. Mockroach, the practical component of my PhD. Through reflexive examination of this film and issues encountered in its making I shall explore specific aspects of the Iranian context and their effect on the production of what I propose is a ‘realist’ animated film. I shall also set out the semantic and strategic decisions that have enabled me to represent to an Iranian audience the crucial issue of prejudice and discrimination against women in contemporary Iran and its impact on their social lives. Through examination of my film, I shall examine the possibilities for introducing this area of animation into the Iranian context. This exploration of a socially-oriented animated film, produced from within and for reception in a restrictive context, helps to illuminate the particular kind of realism which, this thesis claims, has developed in this sphere of animation. As argued, this realism does not adhere to any particular formal and stylistic system, but centres on an intention to intervene with aspects of social reality. This realism involves amorphous formal characteristics governed by social context; as such, they are culturally specific.

As argued in Chapter 3, Iranian art, particularly cinema and poetry, has a long history of engaging with social realities. A strong argument can be made that realism, understood as an intention to mediate aspects of social life, has been
central to these branches of Iranian art at different stages during the last century. More specifically, towards the middle of the 20th century, central characteristics of modern realism became defining forces in Iranian new poetry and were transferred to ‘new wave’ cinema in the 1970s. As I have suggested, drawing on the work of Williams, these included social extension, emphasis on the actions of the present, a conscious move towards a secular stance and a serious intention to mediate aspects of social realities (Williams, 1990: 230).

The perception in Iran of animation as a medium of simple comic humour and light entertainment, and the general belief that it produces a more innocent kind of representation than live-action, has encouraged the authorities to be less vigilant with regard to animated films. Animation thus operates in a less-restrictive context than so called ‘serious’ kinds of art such as literature, fine art, live action film and theatre. During the last three decades, the type of animation most readily tolerated by the Iranian authorities has included films based on folk tales. Folk tales are considered particularly suitable for animation; they are viewed predominantly as innocent stories suitable for safe entertainment and, perhaps more importantly, as vehicles for moral and ideological teaching. Ironically, as potential bearers of ideological and moral lessons, folk tales offer enormous potential not only to reinforce traditional or established values but also as a platform for social criticism. To achieve this, however, their underlying ideological connotations must be uncovered and the ideas they involve treated critically and creatively.

Socially-engaged film has often been associated with independent and low-budget cinema. Filmmakers of the movement often believe strongly that the method of making a film validates its ideas. Further, for political and economic reasons, the use of non-professional actors, small crews and real locations has been an integral part. Stephen Lacey explains this with regard to British New Wave cinema:

The rejection of the studio system was tied closely to a rejection of a particular view of the world, which both the theatre and the cinema attacked as being ‘snobbish, anti–intelligent, emotionally inhibited, willfully blind to the conditions
and problems of the present, dedicated to an out-of-date, exhausted national ideal.

(Lacey, 1995: 166)

In this respect, realist animation has been particularly interesting. There is a strong tradition of collaboration with non-professionals in animation, for example films such as *Snack and Drink* (2000), *Abductees* (1996) and *A is for Autism* (1992). This kind of animation is far cheaper to produce than live-action, offering a significant financial independence. Further, would-be live action filmmakers in Iran must negotiate a complicated system of official procedures set up to control the live action film industry. A new system introduced after 1989 took account of professional history: veteran practitioners and those with a history of compliance faced fewer restrictions, while those who had broken the rules found it more difficult to obtain permission. Official controls have, of course, varied according to political climate; post-revolution, the period of Mohammed Khatani’s presidency (1997–2005) is generally considered the least restrictive. Animators, however, have always enjoyed relative freedom; to date, no Iranian animator has required permission to produce a short film. Further, animators do not need screenplay approval, unless required by sponsors as for big-budget productions. Even then, the process is far more relaxed than for live-action features.

The need for realist art has often been strong in periods of political turmoil and social adversity. Iranian live action cinema, despite its complex relationship with government and its dependence on official sponsorship, has played an active and significant role with regard to contemporary social, political and cultural conditions. Through artistically significant films, Iranian filmmakers have both expanded human sensitivities and raised some of the most important debates on contemporary society. It is intriguing that Iranian animators, who benefit from comparatively favourable conditions, have not undertaken serious involvement

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84 Iran’s *Film Monthly* editor Houshang Golmakani summarized the pre-production monitoring stages adopted by the late 1980s. The synopsis had to be approved by the Council of Screenplay Vetting, after which the Council for Screenplay Inspection gave the project a green or red light. Pre-1989, the next stage was to obtain production permits listing cast and crew. If the finished work was approved, exhibition permits specified where it could be shown (Golmakani, quoted in Farahmand, 2002: 93).
with their society.\textsuperscript{85} One reason for this may be the overwhelming emphasis on fiction and fantasy in Iranian animation. Originality and stylistic innovation in the context of Iranian animation are often seen as synonymous with fantastic types of representation. Animators in this field often draw on a naive notion of the medium-specificity argument\textsuperscript{86}, which argues that animation should leave engagement with the historical world to live action and instead engage with the realm of fantasy. The argument, which is the prevailing view both in and outside the academic world, is that animation should either do what live action cannot do, or should do what it does best, in this case producing fantasy-driven works that emerge from the imagination of the artist. The Iranian establishment has been more than content to endorse this apolitical and socially uncritical kind of animation. Eastern European animation, especially Zagreb animation, is popular with, and widely respected by Iranian animators. Eastern European animation’s serious engagement with contemporary social and political issues is recognized worldwide, and recognition and exploration of animation’s potential for producing realist kinds of film has spread through Canada, Australia, and the UK. There is little evidence that Iranian animators have even noticed the strong engagement with contemporary life in these established movements.

There is also an economic factor. In the last decade the Iranian government has invested significantly in animation, injecting new life into a flagging industry and bringing short-term financial benefits for practitioners.\textsuperscript{87} It might be argued that financial sponsorship boosts the economy, but it is difficult to ignore the fact that

\textsuperscript{85} A thorough examination of this issue is beyond the scope of this thesis, but I shall explore briefly what I see as the problem’s most significant contributing factors and leave comprehensive discussion for future studies.

\textsuperscript{86} The medium-specificity argument reserves a particular domain of practice for every artistic medium. Domains are determined by the nature, and often the physical structure, of a specific medium. For example, the domain of painting might be argued to be two-dimensional while three-dimensional effects constitute the domain of sculpture. Proponents of the argument might contend that each art form should engage only with the production of what it alone, by virtue of its particular nature, can achieve. It might also be interpreted as stating that every medium should pursue what it can, by virtue of its nature, achieve most effectively. For the medium-specificity argument I am indebted to Noel Carroll’s discussion in \textit{Film and Theory: An Anthology}, Stam, R. and Miller T. (Eds.), pp: 40–50).

\textsuperscript{87} The long-term impact of the scheme remains to be seen.
a similar initiative effectively enabled the government to control the live action industry. Agnes Devictor explains:

The goal of the cultural leaders was to create a new national style: a purified cinema from which ‘immorality’ would be erased, both in the making of the films and in the films themselves. Islamic morality must be respected in front of as well as behind the camera. In order to fulfil these aims, the state had to intervene in two different but related fields: moral control and economic support. (Devictor, 2002: 67)

Over the last decade, most Iranian animators have been attracted by the financial benefits of state funding, and so there are now very few independent animators working in Iran. The two main areas of animation, television advertising and animated series, have also developed, again partly as a result of government initiatives. Until recently, almost all animations aired on national television were imported, but towards the middle of the 1990s it began to run ‘home-grown’ advertisements. Thus animation, which had never previously been the main source of income for its filmmakers and had been seen as a more independent, artistic activity, became a profession. The government is now the principal sponsor, contractor and distributor of animation, overtly supporting subject-matter including propaganda and films based on religious or moral stories and folk tales. Conditions have therefore become increasingly limiting for those wishing to pursue ‘realist’ animation practice, and Iranian animators have become even more reluctant to approach sensitive issues.

Nevertheless, as argued, animated filmmakers could still take a more active role in mediating contemporary social, political and cultural issues. In the current climate, academic institutions may be the best place in which to explore, both theoretically and practically, animation’s potential for producing realist kinds of film. This is because they benefit from relative autonomy; financial support, both in terms of creative and labour resources and equipment and professional supervision, and a high level of intellectual and often social engagement. What is

88 Apart from a minority group who mainly worked at IIDCYA and university students, often those who practiced animation in the 1980s and 90s were professionally active in other areas of art. Illustration, graphic design, painting and caricature are among the main areas.
needed, I would suggest, is a change in the dominant view of animation within academia.

The Iranian government has become increasingly alert in relation to the new wave cinema. The international success of Iranian films has not, as they hoped, improved the government’s standing among foreign audiences. Increased awareness of Iran’s internal political and social situation has enabled foreign audiences to undertake a far more sophisticated and informed analysis of the relationship between this branch of cinema and government. As Iranian filmmakers revealed an increasing willingness to approach sensitive issues, the government responded by curtailing their activities. If Iranian realist cinema is to survive in the current volatile and repressive circumstances, it is vital that it finds new modes of practice.

I would argue that if Iranian animators and academics were to realise animation’s potential for social intervention, they could make an important contribution to the struggle for a better way of life in contemporary Iran. Animation could go much further in representing the problems of marginalised sections of society, highlighting social, cultural and political concerns, raising public awareness and, in short, intervening within contemporary society. This onerous task would require considerable theoretical and practical exploration; in the prohibitive political context of Iran, the use of direct modes of representation and established conventional forms provokes condemnation and censorship. Indirect modes of representation such as metaphor, allegory and metonymy, however, could be used to ‘code’ a film, thus concealing its message from the authorities. As suggested throughout this thesis, animators should also explore the representational possibilities offered by Iranian culture and art, as well as socially-engaged animation produced in other contexts.

Mr and Mrs. Mockroach is made with an intention to intervene in the way in which animation is perceived and practised by the Iranian animation community. It is designed as an example of how animation might be used to address and criticise the social conditions of present day Iranian society, despite the unfavourable limitations imposed by censorship. In the following paragraphs I
shall concentrate on the film as an example of a realist animation – as discussed and explored throughout this thesis – produced in the Iranian context. Through reflexive examination I shall open up the problems I faced in producing the film and the ways in which context has affected its representational and strategic elements. With reference to specific parts of the film I will discuss the problems, the semantic and stylistic approaches taken and the rationale behind them.

Social context and the production of a socially-engaged animation: the pre-production stage of Mr and Mrs. Mockroach.

This film, produced from within Iran for an Iranian audience, offers a valuable opportunity to investigate the effects of context on the making of a socially-realist animation. I have considered a range of factors including the structure of Iranian society and the cultural background of my audience, as well as the limits imposed by political resistance with direct reference to contemporary social issues. I also looked at the possibilities offered by animation and the approaches of other animators, particularly those practising in similar circumstances. Through this, I have attempted to develop ways in which to invite my intended audience to reconsider and perhaps even intervene with the ways Iranian society and culture has defined a sensitive social issue while avoiding condemnation and censorship.

The film is made by an Iranian practitioner/researcher who is permanently resident in Iran, but is a student in an institution outside the country. This position has had considerable impact on the PhD project in general and the film in particular. The political sensitivity of this PhD project means that it would not have materialized in an Iranian institution, and the film would have been turned into a personal project. The contextual section of the research would have been less fully resolved than in this thesis, and this particular reflexive chapter would probably have been a diary compiled of my thoughts, sketches and memories. The project would certainly not have developed theoretically as it has now. In relation to the practical component, however, the position of the filmmaker has affected the representational approaches of the film in complex ways.
The film was produced for reception in Iran and with an Iranian audience in mind. My status as a permanent resident of Iran and the fact that I will return to Iran when the film receives public exposure means that I have had to consider censorship as seriously as those practising inside the country. As explained earlier, permission is not necessary for the production of a short animation in Iran. The live action sections were produced in an apartment in Iran with a small crew including a cameraman and few actors. Attempts to obtain permission to film sections of Tehran street life failed because of the limited time available. The necessary sequences were therefore filmed without permission, using a small hand-held camera. I produced the animated sections alone in my studio/room in the UK, much as I would have done had I produced the film in Iran. One advantage of animation in limiting contexts is that, because short animation is often made in private and with a small crew, it is difficult for the censors to control the production process. It could therefore be said that making Mr and Mrs. Mockroach outside Iran did not particularly affect its production stage, except that in Iran I might have received some assistance from animators interested in the film. As will be seen, however, it had determining effects on the pre-production phase.

At pre-production stage, significant decisions were made about the film’s semantic and stylistic approaches. Most were informed by the dual considerations of Iranian audience and censorship, allied to the central problem of how to draw audience attention to social and cultural issues affecting women in modern-day Iranian women while avoiding censure. Audience response can never be accurately predicted, even within the tested formulae of the entertainment industry. As for censorship, even when a film’s message is presented in concealed ways it is never certain that these will escape official notice, particularly when a section of society – the intended audience – is intended to see and understand them. Mr and Mrs. Mockroach was produced for a local audience, and its approaches were designed to raise particular kinds of response in that

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89 I returned to Iran for five weeks during the summer of 2009 to film the live action sections.

90 These documentary sequences did not ultimately find a place in the film.
audience. It would have been useful to test different approaches on an Iranian audience in order to confirm which might achieve the best results, but the fact that I was based outside Iran and the limited time available precluded this.\textsuperscript{91} Time is an important aspect of practice-oriented PhDs that involve animation. Animation takes a long time to produce, so any required trials must be anticipated and planned carefully.

The film’s length and techniques used are also important. A key decision was whether to make a complete film or a series of short sequences that could be used to test different approaches on an audience. But there are few opportunities to screen unfinished films, except to a limited audience during conference or seminar presentations, and even short animated sequences take a long time to produce. My studies prevented me from spending much time in Iran during my PhD, and in any case too much exposure of my film might have jeopardized my research. I therefore decided to make a complete film based on my contextual examination of the background experience of an Iranian audience, the particularities of the Iranian society and my research into other branches of Iranian realist art.

The advantages of producing a fully resolved film include the fact that it has more chance of public exposure inside Iran, and a higher opportunity of being seen by its intended audience. Though the primary object of this research was to address a local issue for an Iranian audience and to contribute to Iran’s animation community, it was important to also maintain a connection with the wider animation community and audiences outside Iran.\textsuperscript{92} A complete film can gain this through submission to animation and film festivals in the west.

Another significant decision was whether to use conventions of familiar modes of animation – mainstream and entertainment animation – that would be more accessible to viewers, or experimental approaches that would be less familiar and potentially less entertaining, though more challenging. As a practitioner I am

\textsuperscript{91} Production of the film took about two years. More than a year was spent on pre-production that was carried out alongside the final stages of the conceptual section of the research.

\textsuperscript{92} Maintaining a connection with the animation community outside Iran is particularly important, not only to determine the extent to which the film has been successful aesthetically, but to maintain the link with new approaches in the context of contemporary animation practice.
more inclined to experimental and non-orthodox forms of animation, but this was not the main reason why I chose the latter approach. As discussed, animation in Iran is generally associated with light entertainment and fantasy-driven kinds of representation, often for children; it is the kind of film that does not engage with serious issues. Had I used familiar conventions of mainstream animation, there was a risk that my audience would fail to notice its serious engagement with contemporary social conditions. To represent the issues that I wished to address in an entertaining way might effectively have ‘normalised’ them. It therefore seemed more appropriate to challenge my primary target audience’s understanding of, and expectations of animation. I wanted to make my viewers think about the reasons why I had used animation in such an unusual way. It was also more likely that an audience would associate a film that was serious in tone and representation with serious content. Finally, a complex formal system would more easily allow the concealment of social references, thus helping to avoid censorship. I therefore explored approaches that had been developed and used successfully by experimental animators in other social contexts, and the kinds of response and relationship that those films had maintained with the intended audience.93

The basis for making the film was a contextual study, which meant that it was produced during the second half of the research. A concerted effort was made to develop strategies that might invite an Iranian audience to engage critically with the social issues presented in the film and even to consider intervention. This interference may involve re-evaluation of attitudes and behaviour towards criticising and inviting others to re-evaluate and correct their own cultural/social behaviour, and interrogating the ideological abuse of women and the religious basis that underpins this political and ideological mistreatment. As discussed, this research examines the formal approaches that may be taken to prepare viewers to engage consciously and critically with the historical issues represented in a film. In the following paragraphs some of the approaches developed in Mr and Mrs. Mockroach will be explored. Examination of whether the film has achieved its

93 This study constitutes Chapter 2 of this thesis.
intentions in terms of an Iranian audience and context must be the subject of future research.

**Pre-production and considerations of censorship**

Despite recent efforts by activists and defenders of women’s rights to draw public attention to the unfair and inhumane laws affecting women, and the oppressive conditions frequently imposed on them by Iranian culture and society, the authorities have widely attempted to deny the problem. Any attempt by art practitioners to approach this issue must necessarily involve sensitive negotiation. Part of the pre-production process involved talking to women who had suffered physical and psychological violence, and consulting people who had researched aspects of Iranian society’s flawed and discriminatory attitude to women. For many reasons, however, I decided not to base my film on individual interviews. Iranians, particularly women, are reluctant to discuss problems on film or even in sound-only recordings; political, ethical and cultural issues prevent them from speaking openly. The use of actual footage or the voices of individual women could put them at risk. In addition, revealing that the film is about the experience of actual Iranian women might attract undue attention from the censors.

Many issues that affect women in contemporary Iran have become social norms, including the wearing of the veil; religious and traditional views of women’s responsibilities and their place in the family; the definition of how women should behave in society, and women’s rights. These cultural and social norms derive from Islamic laws regarding women and family, and individual women might not necessarily be conscious of their effect on their lives. They are, however, no less significant than more direct and tangible iniquities, such as the physical and psychological violence that women may experience from their husbands, sons or male colleagues. It might even be suggested that traditional and religious views sanction such violent behaviour. I was in fact more concerned with the social and cultural issues regarding women in general than with individual experiences. For

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94 Fear of official censure, as well as ethical and cultural considerations, often makes people reluctant to be interviewed in front of the camera. In general Iranians are less fearful of sound-only recording.
these reasons I decided to forgo interviews of individual women and instead draw attention to the underlying problems.

My research into Eastern European and British socially-engaged animation had established the potential of folk tales to address social issues, particularly in contexts of political and social restriction. Furthermore, the Iranian authorities’ positive attitude towards films based on folktales was potentially useful in terms of avoiding censorship. I wanted an Iranian tale that offered a suitable basis from which to address the plight of contemporary Iranian women. After some deliberation I chose Auntie Cockroach, a tale that directly addresses marriage and physical violence.

On the surface Auntie Cockroach seems critical of violence towards women, but on investigation of the historical changes it is clear that it has been used to ‘normalize’ male dominance and violence in Iranian society at different times.\(^{95}\)

That this is a children’s story is significant in that it creates an early mindset that violence against women is a social norm. I have approached Auntie Cockroach in two ways: firstly, to open up the story’s underlying implications to an audience and invite them to look at it in a more informed and critical way, and secondly, and more importantly, as an attempt to raise concerns about the religious, ideological and cultural constraints imposed on contemporary Iranian women.

Some actors approached for the live-action sections were reluctant to take part because of the film’s political overtones. The decision to cover the faces of participating actresses was taken partly to prevent recognition, but also enabled me to present issues concerning women as something involving the whole of society. The iconic image of a woman shrouded in a black veil speaks volumes about the place of women in contemporary Iran. In this sense the use of animation was vital: it enabled me to do what would have been impossible in live

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action\textsuperscript{96}, and also to achieve a result that, in live action, would have carried serious political and ethical implications.

I filmed the live action sections in summer 2009, shortly after the general election that led to a political crisis and several months of widespread protest in Iran. Ironically, the political circumstances helped me to find my small crew. Many young artists had become politicised by events and were prepared to become involved in a more serious way.

**Complexities regarding indirect modes and their function in relation to the intended audience**

The complex formal system deployed in *Mr and Mrs. Mockroach* is in part rooted in my own style of filmmaking, but choice of technique and modes of representation was primarily informed by my wish to invite a particular section of Iranian society to take a critical view of the prejudice and discrimination that Iran’s patriarchal culture has imposed on women, and perhaps to re-evaluate this.

The most challenging part of the project was to find ways of representing my subject to a particular audience while avoiding censorship.\textsuperscript{97} The use of a folk tale formed part of the solution, while the remainder was the use of indirect modes of representation such as metaphor and allegory. In his discussions of nonfiction film, Plantinga makes a point about the function of images as icons. Working from Pierce’s account of the sign and signification he argues that, although the iconic aspect of an image enables it to communicate visual data in the most efficient way, when it comes to complex social relations, images on their own often ‘can not account for human motivation or causal relationships’ (Plantinga,

\textsuperscript{96} These examples include various instances of metamorphosis in the film.

\textsuperscript{97} As I explain below, my primary audience was to be the educated urban section of Iranian society.
In other words, image alone cannot communicate complex social relations.

Though Plantinga’s discussion engages only with the photographic image and concerns its iconic and indexical aspects, it is with the potentialities of images as symbols for representing aspects of the real world that realist animation often engages. I share Plantinga’s view that images alone often cannot offer the specificity with which verbal argument communicates information on social events, but I also believe that visual information can go beyond mere mimetic representation in the sense of simply representing the look of things, and in relation to knowledge of the real world. There are many examples of this, particularly with regard to the portrayal of psychological states of mind and inner thoughts in socially-engaged animated films. This symbolic aspect of the image finds particular significance in terms of discussing social realities in restrictive political and cultural conditions, where direct references could have serious consequences.

Indirect modes of representation operate in a similar way; their portrayal of social realities is often complex and opening up meaning requires a certain amount of audience effort. Though these tools can offer interesting opportunities, in practical terms it is difficult to refer to socially and historically specific issues solely through metaphoric and allegorical language. Like photographic images in nonfiction live action, indirect modes often require some sort of external information, whether verbal commentary or background information that one might reasonably assume is held or understood by the audience, to illuminate their implicit references. In restrictive production contexts it is often impossible to use direct commentary either in conventional forms of nonfiction live action

US philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce argued that everything capable of producing a meaning, whether a word, gesture or an image, can be a sign. He divided signs into three categories based on relationship with their referent: icons, indices and symbols. An icon, like a photograph, resembles its referent; an index has a causal connection with its reference, e.g. smoke has a causal connection with fire and is therefore an index of fire; a symbol, such as the word chair, has an arbitrary connection to its referent. Signs may incorporate one or all of these characteristics: a photographic image is typically iconic, indexical and symbolic.

Once again animations studied in this thesis provide examples. The films of British animator Phil Mulloy, manage to represent complex issues such as social inequality in contemporary Britain primarily through the visual language of animation (see, for example, The Sound of Music [1992]).
(e.g. ‘voice of god’ or interview) or in other forms common to fiction. Where language is used, it must be sufficiently obscure to allow multiple interpretations yet clear enough to make the point. Audience familiarity with context and subject-matter is therefore vital. While traditional modes of nonfiction cinema, with their rhetorical kinds of representation, strive for clarity and often demand very little in terms of audience comprehension of the film’s message, socially-engaged films that use indirect modes rely heavily on audience background knowledge and willingness to undertake a more central role in terms of reading or deciphering the film.

In *Mr and Mrs. Mockroach* I have used a combination of verbal and visual language to refer obliquely to contemporary issues concerning Iranian women. For this I had first to decide on my intended audience, then to uncover elements of their culture, history and society that would enable me to convey my message. My choice of audience will be examined in detail below.

One approach in *Mr and Mrs. Mockroach* was to create metaphorical and metonymic associations with elements in Iranian culture and society. For instance, two types of cloth are used: one is a black veil as worn by Iranian women in public, while the other is a white veil that Iranian women wear at home and for prayer. The association of the former with outdoor life and society and the latter with home and family was used to reinforce the ubiquitous presence of religion in contemporary views towards Iranian women. The sharp contrast between the black and white veil indirectly suggests the inflexibility and rigidity of religious views of women.

Another strategic decision was to refer to previous works that engaged with aspects of society’s view of women either from a critical or affirmative stance, specifically the Jaheli genre, and the political play *Shahr_ e Ghese* (The City of Tales). The significance of this strategy is that these works have been explored by critics, so people have gradually become aware of their overt and hidden references to social issues and the underlying connotations, Iranian audiences are also familiar with the characters in these films and plays. The use of the Jahel from the Jaheli genre and the donkey and elephant from *Shahr_e Ghese* therefore
helped to indicate cultural and social issues that would have taken a long time to develop.

**Considering the background experience of the audience**

*Mr and Mrs. Mockroach* addresses aspects of current mistreatment of women in Iran and invites Iranian audiences to reconsider their own attitudes. As an artist, I have used the medium in which I practice to draw attention to this social issue. As argued in Chapter 1, my approach towards realist art is to emphasize its mediational and interventionist aspects. I see realist art practice as a way to influence social realities by inviting people to adopt a critical stance towards, and even engage with resolving issues concerning their lives and those of their contemporaries. This view is close to Brecht’s understanding of realist art, as a potentially subversive form that disturbs the inevitability of the established social orders in the mind of the audience. Through this subversive act the work of art encourages the audience to question existing (in most cases, ideologically and politically charged) relationships within society and invites them to act to correct those issues. In this form of art practice, active audience involvement in the sense of mental/critical activity is important. As argued with regard to indirect modes, these forms rely profoundly on audience understanding of the social and cultural context. It is in relation to the audience, their experiences, and the social context in which they live that most decisions relating to stylistic and representational possibilities are made. Stanley Aronowitz explains this point with regard to the American moviegoer of the early 1970s.

Unlike the important efforts of Japanese and European film-makers to fix the camera directly on the action and permit the scene to work ‘itself’ out, American films are characterized by rapid camera work and sharp editing whose effect is to segment the action into one-or two-minute time slots, paralleling the prevailing styles of television production. The American moviegoer, having become
accustomed in TV watching to commercial breaks in the action of a dramatic presentation, is believed to have become incapable of sustaining longer and slower action. Therefore the prevailing modes of film production rely on conceptions of dramatic time inherited from the more cross forms of commercial culture. The film-maker who subordinates the action and the characters to this concept of dramatic time reveals a political inside technique that is far more insidious than ‘reactionary’ content when viewed from this perspective; the filmmaker such as Howard Hawks who, refuses to subordinate art to the requirements of segmented time, becomes more resistant to authoritarianism than the liberal or the left-wing filmmakers who are concerned with the humanitarian content of film but have capitulated to techniques that totally reduce the audience to spectators. (Aronowitz, 1992: 116, 117)

Aronowitz offers a powerful argument for the need to consider the previous experience of the audience in relation to the medium of cinema. The international dominance of Hollywood means that his argument is applicable to contemporary cinema audiences in most countries; more importantly, it demonstrates the importance of making informed representational choices. I would suggest that in the Iranian context, lack of exposure to modernist kinds of mediation, and a relatively young and immature advertising industry100, means that modernist forms such as strategies of estrangement and reflexive modes still have strong subversive effects.

My film primarily aims to address the educated urban sector of Iranian society, though other sections of society are not necessarily excluded. It is said that more than 70% of Iranians live in cities, so urban people not only make up the majority of the population but also possess the means and power necessary to make social changes. This does not imply that rural women suffer less discrimination or that their problems are any less important. Iranian urban life, however, has long been exposed to the western concept of modernity, though its precise nature and

100 After the 1979 revolution, Iranian television did not air advertisements for more than a decade. Advertising returned around the beginning of the 1990s, but access to western TV channels and interaction with foreign agencies was limited, so it was some time before the new generation of advertising agencies began to follow western standards. Iranian audiences remained comparatively unfamiliar with modernist forms of film because of the dominance of Hollywood and commercial films on national TV, plus lack of exposure to European cinema, particularly new wave. Even Iranian new wave cinema did not receive much TV exposure.
evolution remains ambiguous and subject to examination. It is, for example, interesting to see how western modernity with its secular leanings has been introduced and incorporated into the overwhelmingly religious society of Iran.\textsuperscript{101} This ‘modern life’ has involved exposure to western secular systems of thinking, mass media, arts and literature. It has entailed re-evaluation of traditional and cultural norms, particularly among Iran’s educated urbanites, which as a result are receptive to social/cultural criticism. The restrictive context of Iran necessitates the use of unconventional and indirect strategies involving a somewhat obscure kind of artistic practice. A more sophisticated audience will be familiar with and therefore more receptive to indirect kinds of representation. As argued, such social engagement is central to fulfilling the task of realist films produced in socially and politically limiting conditions. Unlike films produced in relative freedom, which demand little from their audience in terms of decoding their mediation of social issues, socially-engaged films produced in limiting contexts rely heavily on audience willingness and effort to unpack meaning.

Clearly, violence towards women is not peculiar to Iranian society, though my film’s representational and stylistic elements and their associated historical references find their meaning in an Iranian context. A non-Iranian audience might find interpretation of these culturally-specific references challenging, and I am aware of the ambiguities this might present. Nevertheless, I have consciously decided to engage chiefly with an Iranian audience. Non-Iranian audiences are invited to view my film as a socially-oriented work, in terms of the conventions it shares with such forms of animation produced in other contexts.

\textbf{The folk tale Auntie Cockroach}

My film is based on the popular children’s story \textit{Khaleh Sooske (Auntie Cockroach)}. As noted, on the surface, the tale engages critically with the issue of physical violence towards women, but taken in historical context the implicit connotations of the story become clearer. There are three versions, each of which

The heroine is a beautiful young cockroach whose father can no longer support her. On his instructions, she sets off for the city of Hamadan to seek a rich Bazaari man, Mash Ramazoon, in the hope that he might marry her. On her way she meets four local men, a grocer, a butcher, a carder and a blacksmith, each of whom proposes marriage. She asks each man in turn how he would beat her if they quarrelled. Each replies that he would beat her with the tools of his trade. In fear of her life, she refuses to marry any of them. Finally, she meets Mr Mouse. He also proposes, and from this point the three stories diverge. In the first, Mr Mouse says that he would beat Auntie Cockroach, but only with his soft tail; she agrees to marry him because it is the least violent option. In the second, Mr Mouse is too violent, and she refuses to marry him. In the third, Mr Mouse says he would not beat her at all. She happily becomes his bride, but this is not the end of the tale: one day while trying to drink hot tea from a cup, she falls in. Mr Mouse jumps in to rescue her, but dies in the attempt.

Links between the story and the misguided attitude to women in Iranian culture are evident. It has been argued that at different historical stages endings of folk tales have been altered to achieve different ideological effects. It has been suggested that the ending of the tale I have chosen to work with – the third version discussed above – was changed to imply that men who disregard cultural norms, in this case violence towards women, will eventually face unpleasant consequences. Whether or not this was the intention, it is plausible to suggest that this version implicitly condemns non-violent men. The ideological effects of versions one and three with regard to children also need careful attention, because they condone maltreatment of women in different ways. Version one suggests that physical violence is a social reality and that women should find a husband who is not too violent. Version three suggests that men are by nature violent to women and a man who refuses to conform will suffer the consequences. Each associates women with domestic activity: Auntie Cockroach keeps house for her

102 Recently there have been attempts to change the story. The versions referred to are basically variations of a single story.

father and is set to become her husband’s housekeeper. The story has been used as a base from which to draw on instances of social discrimination and cultural hostility towards women. While remaining faithful to the overall narrative, I have treated details freely. I shall now offer a summary and explain why I have chosen certain techniques and stylistic approaches.

**Deconstructing Mr. and Mrs. Mockroach**

*Mr and Mrs. Mockroach* is structured in three sections. The first concentrates on marriage; the second depicts Auntie Cockroach’s relationship with Bazaari men (traditional businessmen) and the final section engages with her relationship with Mr Mouse. Within each are subsections that function as independent units. Three groups of image have been used: the first shows a four-year-old girl narrating the story to camera; the second consists of live action scenes, and the third the animated sections, each drawing on cultural misconceptions about women in contemporary Iran. These metaphorical sections each use a part of the story to explore an aspect of social discrimination against Iranian women. For a summary of the plot, see Appendix vi.

As argued throughout this thesis, I believe that for a realist work of art the method, that is to say the ways in which the conventional and stylistic possibilities are used, finds significance in relation to an audience. In different contexts and at different historical stages, similar methods may achieve dissimilar effects. Contemporary realist cinema not only transmits some sort of knowledge of the social world, but can also move beyond it, motivating the audience to act on what they have seen. *Mr and Mrs. Mockroach* certainly intends to go beyond simply raising a contemporary issue: it intends to encourage its audience to take action concerning the issue it depicts. If, as my research suggests, Iranian new wave cinema has begun to lose its once-strong subversive character, new strategies will be needed to achieve subversive effects. My film is in part a practical response to that theoretical proposition.
Exploring subversive approaches in *Mr and Mrs. Mockroach*

Animation has a particularly interesting potential to provide radically-compressed forms of time and space. Live-action cinema, with its use of editing techniques, has managed to provide a condensed form of the time-space relationship; before that literature and drama had achieved similar effects. Cinema successfully expanded this pre-existing quality to other forms of art practice by the use of technological and stylistic innovation such as montage editing and juxtaposition of different places and times in a limited filmic time space, Animation has gone even further, via its unique representational systems. Animation’s links with fine art, as well as its facility for frame-by-frame manipulation of an image, has made it a medium with particular expressive qualities. Animators are able to portray spaces that could not be represented as effectively through live-action. An example is the way in which access is given to inner thoughts and psychological states of mind in many so-called documentary animations (see Chapter 2).

Animated films such as *A is for Autism* not only portray unique kinds of space but also transform them into one another in a rapid and unique way. The speed with which the action moves from one space to another or from one experience to another is at times breathtaking.  

As a representational mode specific to animation, metamorphosis offers unique potential for exposing an audience to new and at times extremely shocking, kinds of mediation. It can produce compressed forms of time and space by creating rapid ‘transformations’. As seen in the works of Svankmajer (see Chapter 2), these rapid transformations can provoke extreme audience reaction, and exposure to such imagery can be an intense experience. Metamorphosis involves a lively, fast and disorienting organic process that is difficult to express in words; in the space of a few seconds, every element of the image transforms into something new. In seeing one image metamorphosed into another, the audience witnesses not only a rapid transition but also the process of transformation. Those moments of transition are extremely powerful; they create a kind of shock that can in turn

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104 For further discussion see Wells, P. (1998) *Understanding Animation*, pages 69-122
prompt a deeper analysis of what has been seen. I believe that the self-reflexive quality inherent in metamorphosis has the power to prevent an audience immersing fully in the work as a form of escapism. Metamorphosis creates a distance that can help to remind the viewers that what they are watching is only a film. In this context, it is possible that audience attention might be diverted from the actual work towards the historical issues it presents. In films that employ indirect modes of representation it is important to create this sense of awareness; the audience must be mentally and critically engaged with such films in order to unpack their coded references.

An example of such an approach in *Mr and Mrs. Mockroach* is the sequence in which a half-armature, half-clay body of a woman metamorphoses into different characters that eventually transform into a huge stone (see appendix vi). This sequence shows two screens. The left screen shows an animated sequence of the woman, while the right screen shows a live-action scene of a woman in a black veil who beats herself and shouts restlessly. On the left screen, an armature turns into a female body holding a mouse’s head, which metamorphose quickly into a female head that is being caressed by two hands. The head then disappears into a huge stone that covers the entire scene. This sequence refers indirectly to the stoning law. The audience sees the process of transformation while trying to follow the story that unfolds rapidly before the camera. The fast transformation requires considerable concentration from the audience in order to follow the scene. At the same time, witnessing the process of animation raises the audience’s awareness of the moment; that what is seen is a cinematic construction. It is possible, therefore, that the final shot, when the woman’s head disappears into a stone, registers more strongly in the viewer’s mind.

The live-action image on the right screen makes it even more difficult for the audience to concentrate, thus requiring more effort and concentration on the part of the viewer. The sequence continues as the live-action scene appears on both screens. A man carrying a white sponge head of a donkey appears on both sides.

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105 The double screen sequences of the film are quite demanding and may result in the audience disengaging with the film. For this reason the live action scenes have been designed to be simple in terms of action and to unfold slowly, allowing time for the audience to concentrate on the animated sections while not missing much of the live action.
Through editing, a formal relationship between both screens is maintained. At times it seems as if the man might leave one screen and enter the other. This formal engagement distracts the audience from the veiled woman in the background who is frenziedly beating herself and shouting. The disturbing sound goes out of synch with the image and adds to the ambiguity of the sequence. The sequence moves from a series of metamorphosed animated scenes to a formal game play between live action image and sound. The audience is confronted with an intense representational system that is constructed by combining quite different semantic approaches: the naturalistic acting and voice in the early live action scene and the realistic animated image portraying meaningful actions transform into absurd and rather poetic live action shots by the end of the sequence. The filmmaker’s intention was to stimulate the audience’s mentally, thus preparing it to engage with deciphering the metaphorical references made in the film.

Another example of the use of metamorphosis to engage the minds of viewers is the section in which an armature attached to the head of a dog transforms into a human body. Every stage of the making of the character is revealed; the metamorphosis occurs quite rapidly in comparison with the preceding scenes, and the sudden change of speed and rhythm is shocking in itself. Mise-en-scene and lighting have been designed specifically to intensify the scene’s eerie feeling. Here, the audience not only sees the process of animation but also witnesses the steps the filmmaker has taken in order to create the character of human/dog. The resulting imagery is intended to shock the audience into a heightened state of awareness, thus preventing its immersion in the work.

Another approach adopted in Mr and Mrs. Mockroach is the use of episodes. This form has been associated with some of the most interesting socially-engaged animated films, such as those of Svankmajer and Parn, and allows an opportunity for beginning to challenge the audience’s orthodox experience of cinema.

In Mr and Mrs. Mockroach different approaches have been employed to resist audience identification with characters. Familiar forms of film narrative have been avoided and in places challenged to provide a new relationship between film
and audience. The viewer is required to engage critically with the film in order to begin to understand and respond to the new representational form. Apart from the recurrent image of the little girl narrator, no section of the film offers a conventional narrative, yet each unit is calculated to provide an allegoric system that draws attention to concrete social issues regarding the social treatment of contemporary Iranian women. Each autonomous unit in the film operates as a complete short episode. My thinking about this stylistic system was influenced by Iranian poetry.

Classical Iranian poetry is characterized by its form, in which every line is a complete unit, operating independently of other lines. It is often possible to change the order of lines without significantly affecting the poem’s message and overall structure. The ‘new’ Iranian poetry made two changes to this system, first expanding ‘units’ of poems so that each could contain multiple lines; in new poetry the end of each unit is determined by artistic requirements rather than convention. Moreover, in new poetry units do not operate independently and a connection is maintained between them; changing the position of units in a poem disturbs its unity (see Chapter 3 above). I have appropriated and attempted to combine the classical and new poetic systems to achieve a new stylistic order in *Mr and Mrs. Mockroach*.

The film consists of small units, each complete in itself. A unifying element – the small girl narrator – puts them in order, but the causal connection between units, as seen in classical narratives, has no place in the film. Thus, while a sense of narrative continuity is preserved, it is achieved via unconventional means. *Mr and Mrs. Mockroach* is not, however, an abstract film that is concerned purely with form: it is rather engaged with the mediation of concrete social issues.

**Cultural codes and inter-textual references**

The consideration of how to mediate key ideas and themes with the target audience involved extensive use of cultural references. In the limited time
available, I was able to represent complex issues by drawing on direct and implicit references to earlier Iranian cinematic works and genres that have engaged with aspects of women’s place in society. To illustrate what these approaches involve, and how they have been employed in the film, I shall focus on the section showing Auntie Cockroach’s encounter with Mr Butcher.

Before the revolution, a particular genre of mainstream Iranian cinema or *Film Farsi* was enduringly popular: *Film Jaheli*. It features the Jahel, a bourgeois gangster type embodying the worst aspects of male chauvinism. He is recognised by his iconic outfit of black suit and hat, white shirt and distinctive shoes. He carries a knife and a cotton handkerchief known as a Yazdi. The Jahel represents all forms of male pleasure, much – if not all – of which involves female suppression and exploitation. The genre has been regarded as the ultimate manifestation of Iranian patriarchal society (Dabashi, 2001: 26). Audiences that enjoy Jaheli films are not always aware of the ideological connotations; even the filmmakers who used the formula as a vehicle for entertainment appear at times unaware of its ideological significance.

For my film, I needed a strong male character that would represent the worst of the opinionated and illogical views of male-dominated society towards women. I decided to use the Jahel because I did not have time or space to develop a character that could match his impact; the character embodied the immediate and familiar associations that had already been developed in the Jaheli genre. This enabled me to concentrate on portraying other issues concerning contemporary women. Most importantly, the long-standing popularity of the genre with its insulting and discriminatory attitude towards women provides historical evidence of such prejudice in Iranian society. It was important to confront the audience with their recent history and thereby present the enduring fact of mistreatment of women.106

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106 It is always possible that an audience will not see or read a film as the filmmaker intended; every mode of communication allows a degree of interpretation. This is particularly true of metaphorical representation, but there are means by which the filmmaker can assist his intentions. These include attention to social and cultural context and consideration of the ways in which background knowledge can affect audience experience.
Films such as *Mr and Mrs. Mockroach* attempt to reveal these embedded notions to the very community that has historically been involved with their production and reception. The butcher character in *Mr and Mrs. Mockroach* is a Jahel type, as manifested by his iconic outfit. The use of character types out of context always carries the risk of abstraction and of reducing multidimensional characters to flat personalities, but films such as *Mr and Mrs. Mockroach* are not concerned with well-rounded characters. What is important is the opportunities provided in terms of addressing social issues.

It has been argued that two types of women have been present in most of Iran’s pre-revolutionary cinema: ‘chaste’ and ‘unchaste’ women.\(^7\) Chaste women represent cultural values such as motherhood, domesticity and being a dutiful wife; the ultimate manifestation of the perception of a good woman. Unchaste women, however, are associated with social life, pleasure, a disregard for domestic and nurturing activities; effectively, everything taboo in Iranian culture. These women provided pleasure, primarily sexual, both for the film’s male characters and for its male audience.\(^8\) Though the Jahel character disappeared from Iranian films after the revolution, women remained misrepresented, except that the stereotypical ‘chaste’ woman now also had great respect for the revolution and the codes of hijab in addition to her domestic duties. Unchaste women were now associated with pre-revolutionary (and at times anti-revolutionary) thoughts, all kinds of crime and disregard for the codes of hijab in addition to their neglect of husband, home and family. This polarized view of women remained intact long after the revolution, as evidence of the depth of discrimination in Iranian culture.

Unfortunately, some of the strongest support for this stereotyping comes from women within the traditional and religious sections of society. These traditionalist and religious women help to maintain discrimination by endorsing the opinions of


\(^{8}\) For several years only men were allowed to visit cinemas; when women were finally admitted their patriarchal atmosphere deterred women from visiting for a long time.
male-dominated society, and by showing disapproval for women who express liberal views and support the struggle for better treatment of women. The veiled female character in the ‘butcher’ scene is performing a superstitious ritual used to protect loved ones. Her evident admiration of the brutal Mr Butcher also underscores the role played by the traditional and religious female in maintaining societal standards.

The butcher scene also uses metaphor to refer to another significant issue in contemporary Iran; the practice of stoning women. The story of Auntie Cockroach draws attention to the cruelty of the men who would show their disapproval by beating her. Mr and Mrs. Mockroach also refers indirectly to the issue of stoning when the tools metamorphose into a large stone that smashes the pomegranate, a metaphorical representation of the female character. Mr Butcher is seen engaging in the sexually-charged act of sucking a pomegranate as the pomegranate is punished. The episodic approach, unconventional forms of narration, metaphor, metonymy and allegory, and references to previous artworks are used calculatedly throughout Mr and Mrs. Mockroach to inform the audience that the role of women in society is not fixed, but belongs to history and should thus be open to revision and correction.

Consideration of a political satire that was performed and staged at the beginning of the Islamic revolution may help to further illuminate my approach. Bijan Mofid’s Shar_e Ghesseh (City of Tales) uses animal characters to criticize contemporary Iranian society. The Auntie Cockroach character was used to make social criticism, though the play concentrated on her romantic relationship with Mr Mouse and did not engage with the rest of the tale. In the play Mr Mouse is presented as an ardent lover, consumed by a kind of passion familiar in classical Iranian poetry. In this, the love object can be either a mystical or an earthly being, but in either case there is no chance of union. Auntie Cockroach, however, is seen as a teasing modern girl rather than a traditional heroine. The play highlights the unpleasant sexual attitudes of the male characters who lust after her.

109 In present-day Iran if a woman is found guilty of adultery the punishment may be death by stoning, in which she is buried in the ground up to her neck. People throw stones at her until she dies.
Even more interesting is *Shahr_e Ghesseh*’s portrayal of other characters. Two, the elephant and the donkey, seemed relevant to my film. In Islamic law, a couple whose marriage has ended in what is known as a ‘triple divorce’ (*Se Talagh_e*) are not allowed to reconcile.\(^{110}\) If the man changes his mind and wants his wife back, the law states that she must first marry a different man. This is achieved via a religious ‘middleman’ known as a *Mohallel*, who marries the woman himself. He then divorces her, allowing the couple to remarry lawfully. Not only is this law absurd, but it also entirely disregards the woman’s view: it does not matter what she thinks or wants, it is all about the man. In *Shahr_e Ghesseh* the donkey represents a man who has allowed a Mohallel – portrayed as a wily fox – to marry his wife three times. The suggestion is that the donkey has brought shame on himself because the Mohallel has tricked him in order to seduce his wife repeatedly. The woman’s view is, of course, ignored.

The elephant character in *Shahr_e Gheseh* allegorically represents a deeper social issue: the thorny path towards modern life in Iran. On a trip to the City of Tales, the elephant character falls and breaks a tusk. No doctor is available, so people decide to cut off his other tusk and put it on his head. They decide that his long trunk looks wrong, so they cut it short. Their actions transform the elephant into a strange creature and no-one knows what to call him, so he is sent to the Home Office to ask for an identity card in a new name. Ironically, the elephant is given a human name. In this, it seems that the playwright is attempting to represent the struggle towards modern identity and the absurd paths taken in this direction by Iranian society. My use of these characters invites the audience to make intertextual associations between fable (*Mr and Mrs. Mockroach*) and political writing (*Shahr_e Ghesseh*).

The unconventional nature of my film, with its use of indirect modes, makes it difficult even for an Iranian audience, so I felt that I needed to offer some indication of how to approach it.\(^{111}\) As with the Jahel, the use of these characters

\(^{110}\) In a triple divorce, a man states that he divorces his wife three times, thus confirming that the marriage is irretrievably broken and that reconciliation is not an option.

\(^{111}\) As noted, there is a degree of openness in relation to the way a film is received and read. What we as filmmakers can do is present cultural and social clues and invite the audience to make the intended associations. It is never certain, though, how an audience will read a film. One aspect of the use of metaphorical kinds of representation in prohibiting contexts is that they allow a variety
enabled me to expend more of the film’s time in exploring the role and place of women in modern Iran and the historical relationship between the role of women and the issue of modern Iranian identity. For example, in the ‘elephant’ section, the deformed head of an elephant (reminiscent of that in Shahr_e Ghesseh) is seen on a table at the centre of the image. Two veiled women are seen marching in the background, as though guarding something precious. The elephant character in Shahr_e Ghesseh is male and is used to refer to the fundamentally male-dominated society. Thus, while visually depicting the old metaphor of women as guardians of Iranian society, I simultaneously question the sanctity and value of what they are supposed to protect: that male-dominated society.

**Sound and music in Mr and Mrs. Mockroach**

Sound was designed as an important signifying element of the film and is intended to make several significant contributions to the way in which meaning is conveyed. One of the main contributions of sound in the film is that it heightens the realistic feeling of the animation. The realistic clay characters and the use of real objects are accompanied by naturalistic sound. The models and armatures for the characters in Mr and Mrs. Mockroach are life-size or even larger, which enabled the filmmaker to locate the camera very close to them. Close-up and extreme close-up shots are used frequently, with the intention of producing a claustrophobic atmosphere. Sound plays an important role in increasing the realistic-ness of the scenes. This in turn heightens the effect on the audience of seeing the film; the idea was to make it seem as though the microphone was attached to the characters, recording sound created by the slightest movement. This is particularly evident in the sequence in which a dog and a hen surround a baby. We can hear the dog’s breath and every sound it makes while walking and urinating on the baby. The pecking sound made by the chicken is exaggerated and the audience hears the sound it makes while moving around. The baby’s voice is also exaggerated. The experience of the sequence for the viewer is intended, therefore, to be intimate yet uncomfortable. It might be said the
claustrophobic atmosphere created in the film is in a sense analogous to the atmosphere of contemporary Iranian society in relation to women.

Sound is also employed in a deliberate attempt to refer to cultural beliefs within Iranian society regarding male/female relationships. The butcher scene is an example: the instrument used to create the rhythmic yet intense music is a traditional Iranian percussion instrument called a zarb. In Iranian culture the zarb is used exclusively in an ancient sporting arena known as a ‘Zoorkhanah’ (house of power). Traditionally the Zoorkhanah was used to train Iranian warriors, but over time it came to mean a sports field where men honed their bodies using equipment resembling ancient weapons. Wrestling is also an important part of the training. The rhythmic music for training is performed live by a musician/ritual leader called a ‘Morshed’ (leader) who plays the zarb and recites Persian classical poetry. As an institution the Zoorkhanah used to promote positive values in men such as modesty, care for the poor and patriotism. The sport ‘Varzesh_e Pahlavani’ (Heroic Sport) and its court (the Zoorkhanah) are highly respected in Iranian culture and considered to be iconic traditions in need of preservation and respect. The Zoorkhanah is, however, an exclusively male space; women are not allowed to enter either for training purposes or as spectators. In this sense the sport represents the traditional views of Iranian culture, which refuses women access to certain aspects of Iranian social life for religious and moral reasons. In recent years some Iranian female photographers including Mehraneh Atashi have created thought-provoking artworks drawing attention to the absence of women at the Zoorkhanah.112

The zarb has also been used in Iranian cinema, particularly in the ‘Jaheli’ genre, and has thus become associated with male chauvinism, masculinity and films that often marginalize women in their exclusively male-oriented representations. In the butcher sequence in *Mr and Mrs. Mockroach* the rhythmic music of the zarb begins as the butcher sucks the juice of a pomegranate. Meanwhile, the image on the left shows different tools that rapidly change into one another on top of a pomegranate that is located on a table. The rhythm of the music becomes faster

112 Examples of Atashi’s photographs can be viewed here: http://www.iranian.com/Atashi (accessed 11/02/2011)
and faster, reaching its peak as a female character enters the scene. The introduction of the woman is intended to create a disruption, thus disturbing established expectations: in this case the dominant presence of the male butcher. The music gradually becomes slower and slower until a stone on the left smashes the pomegranate. The sound is intended as an invitation to the Iranian audience to reconsider their cultural and traditional values regarding the place and role of women in society.

**Keeping the audience engaged**

In animated films such as *Mr and Mrs. Mockroach*, their intensive use of indirect modes and short length (often less than ten minutes) means there is a danger of opacity in terms of unpacking implicit meaning. It was therefore a challenge to find ways in which to maximize audience exposure to the more complex sections, and to maintain mental and critical involvement. One solution was repetition, which was particularly helpful with regard to the metonymic associations made with historical realities. A white tablecloth featured in most scenes is just like the veil traditionally worn by Iranian women at home. This veil has two main functions: firstly, to conceal a woman’s body from men, and secondly for prayer. Though it is an iconic object, when not in use it is difficult to distinguish from regular sheets of cloth. I wanted to depict the white veil’s widespread presence in Iranian society and needed it to be recognized as a veil rather than a tablecloth. The white veil has a metonymic association with the religious beliefs that have historically suppressed Iranian women. The device of its repeated incorporation in the *mise-en-scene* is intended to invite the audience to wonder whether it might be a white veil rather than simply a tablecloth, as well as a reference to the constant influence of religion on the lives of women in Iran.

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113 Traditional Iranian houses were designed round a central yard with rooms spreading in a rectangle around it. Different families (often related) shared one house and its central yard, so women were veiled even in the home. Even when architecture began to follow the western notion of separate houses and flats for individual families, people often entertained guests, whether neighbours, friends or relatives. At home, women wore white veils, and these are still worn quite widely in the traditional and poorer sections of Iranian cities. In religious families the white veil is also worn for prayers. It is also worn during in wedding ceremonies and for religious events. It is difficult to find an Iranian family, religious or non-religious, which does not have at least one white veil. The white veil in this sense represents the depth of religion in Iranian society.
Most of the issues faced by women, including religious suppression, political and ideological abuse and physical and psychological cruelty, are repeated rather than occasional. The manifestations are varied and at times not overt, but undoubtedly women are constantly exposed to prejudice and discriminatory behaviour. Physical violence, for instance, is not limited to the violence of a husband towards his wife; often, male children follow their father’s lead and abuse their mothers. It is not unusual in traditional families for fathers to treat their married daughters violently. Bullying of women by male colleagues is also widespread. In *Mr and Mrs. Mockroach* violence is portrayed frequently in different forms: the male hand attacking the female hand, the dog attacking the baby, and the smashed pomegranate remind the audience that mistreatment of women is endemic in society.

The strategy of creating shock has been used calculatedly to prevent the audience from uncritical immersion in the film, and the decision to use realistic stop-motion animation was in part informed by this. The surprise created by revealing the process of filmmaking to the audience is intensified when the image looks and moves in a realistic way and the sound is realistic. In the ‘hand’ sequence, for example, a realistic female hand that is moving in a convincing way suddenly breaks. Viewers, who may have been lulled by the realistic representation into forgetting what they are watching, are suddenly reminded that the hand is clay and that this is an animation. Similarly in the ‘baby’ sequence, the realistic appearance of the child and the cockroaches intensifies the shock experienced when the hand chops off a chunk of the baby’s face.

Independent filmmakers have reacted against the excessive use of naturalist kinds of representation in mainstream cinema; they are often reluctant to use it or may at times react against it.\(^\text{114}\) I believe, however, that used carefully this kind of representation has the potential to provide a context for achieving subversive effects. As discussed in chapter 2, in Eastern Europe, specifically Czechoslovakia, stop-motion animation is associated with a particular kind of

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\(^{114}\) I am thinking in particular of non-realistic experimental examples of British socially-engaged animation and the work of the National Film Board of Canada. The rejection of naturalistic kinds of representation by filmmakers of these movements can be seen as partly a reaction against the realistic representation of mainstream cinema, in particular Disney.
political puppet theatre. One of its most thought-provoking exponents is Svankmajer. It can be argued that surrealism, with its rejection of traditional and cultural norms and its explicit or implicit political stance, was one of the most political movements of modernism. The surrealists made effective use of realistic representation to achieve shocking effects. Svankmajer has achieved astonishingly subversive results in what he calls ‘fantastic documentaries’ that combine realistic representation with a kind of spatial realism made possible by stop motion. Svankmajer was aware of the subversive effects of such realistic kinds of representation. It has rightly been argued that Svankmajer’s unique works should not be reduced simply to their political and subversive effects, but I have deliberately chosen to use similar modes of creating ‘shock’ in order to achieve subversive effects. My decision to combine live action and animation, my insistence on maintaining a realistic kind of representation and the choice of technique must therefore be seen in this context. It is important to note that various disruptive devices have been used to draw audience attention to the social realities outside the film and invite them to engage with these critically.

As argued at the beginning of this chapter, animation in Iran is not generally regarded as a genre with the potential to represent serious issues. An Iranian audience that associates animation with light entertainment and simple comic humour might not look for social references in such a film. It was therefore important to make a film that countered this general perception of animation; one that invites the audience to regard it as serious cinema rather than a cartoon entertainment for children. The decisions to use realistic stop-motion and black and white film, combining animation and live-action and avoiding comic situations have been in part informed by the intention to produce a kind of animation that the audience considers serious enough to expend time and energy.

115 In an interview with Peter Hames, Svankmajer explains his subversive animations as ‘fantastic documentaries’. He says: ‘As in painting the moving image is always drawn more to reality (the appearance of reality). The more deeply a person probes into the fantastic, the more he needs to be realistic in form. I repeat time and time again that it is my desire to make ‘fantastic documentaries’. The nearer I get to this goal the more subversive effects my films will have (Svankmajer, in Hames (ed.) 1995:112).

deciphering. Formal choices such as self-reflexive modes of representation and the use of stop-motion have another function in relation to non-Iranian and in particular western audiences. I have therefore attempted to invite foreign audiences - who will naturally find it difficult to make sense of the social and cultural references in the film - to make associations between Mr and Mrs. Cockroach and socially-engaged western animation, thus approaching it as a socially-oriented film.
Conclusion

The main objective of this research was to examine whether, in contexts in which the discussion of social issues is politically sensitive and strictly controlled, animation can be used to influence how life is shaped and experienced. Its findings were applied to the production of an animated film, *Mr and Mrs Mockroach*, which was designed as an intervention into the way women are treated in contemporary Iran. This film allowed an opportunity for examination of the issues surrounding the production of what this research identifies as a realist animation produced in a politically limiting context.

Three interrelated areas of exploration set the contextual background for the film, and eventually constituted the first three chapters of this thesis. Art’s potential as a means for intervention in historical reality was explored, and the key concept of realism introduced. Traditionally, realism is taken to refer to specific methods, allied to an intention to *show* things as they *really are* (Lovell, 1980: 65); the shortcomings of this view were explored in the light of postmodern criticism. Based on the theoretical and practical works of Brecht (1980), the ideas of Williams (1965 and 1985) in relation to realism in cultural practices and the ideas of Hacking (1983) in relation to scientific realism, the thesis proposed a specific understanding of realism in cultural practices. It defined realism as an intention to *intervene* in the way in which social/historical reality is shaped. It was posited that this expanded perspective of realism explains more accurately the type of mediation used for films such as *Mr and Mrs. Mockroach*.

Art changes the world via a social agency: its audience. Realist art encourages critical appraisal of the nature and structure of society by educating, enlightening, provoking and gaining audience sympathy. But how can films such as *Mr and Mrs. Mockroach* motivate audiences to intervene in the world? Is there such a thing as a ‘realist method’? Can method, understood as a set of conventions, determine the realism of a work of art? Building on the ideas of Brecht, it was argued that an artwork’s realism is not determined by the conventions used to produce it, because these may vary according to social and/or historical context; what determines realism is the relationship between the work, its audience and
the historical world. Realist art intends to invite audiences to consider how society is shaped, and even to act directly to improve morally unacceptable social conditions. This research explores a particular kind of socially-engaged animation that intends to engage an audience critically with the work. In such art practice, subversion finds an important place. Chapter 1 explored this idea.

A realist artwork may be subversive in two senses. It may, by disturbing audience preconceptions, discourage uncritical immersion in the work, or it may employ formal systems that challenge audience expectations. Either will help to inculcate the heightened awareness that sustains intellectual involvement in the issues addressed. Realist art may also attempt to subvert social order, by demonstrating that social and cultural relationships are historically determined and that certain entrenched opinions should be reassessed. In this section of Chapter 1, the discussion was informed by the arguments of Jacobsen, and the arguments and practice of Brecht. It was posited that the social context in which a work is produced and received, and the background experience of an audience with regard to it, are among factors that influence representational approaches employed in realist art.

Subversion is a familiar term in western cultural practices and studies, and has had an important place in modernist art. Some contemporary theoreticians or practitioners might doubt whether subversive effects can be achieved in relation to an audience living in advanced western societies. This research located a current in contemporary thought and practice that still considers an important place for subversion, with reference to recent postmodernist theorists including Jencks (1999), Harvey (1990), Jameson (1980) and Hutcheon (2002). Building on the arguments of Jakobson and Brecht, this thesis argues that one way to achieve subversive effects in contemporary art practice is to use new modes of practice in ways that are not typically attributed to them. For example, animation is not usually seen as an appropriate kind of cinema for the mediation of serious social

\[117\] It must be noted that not all realist works intend to provoke viewers to intervene in social realities; some merely provide information about aspects of the historical world. Further, some works that attempt to inspire such intervention are unsuccessful: audiences may fail to note the points presented, or may note them but fail to take corrective action. This research nevertheless contends that an \textit{intention} to invite critical engagement with issues presented has a strong presence in realist art.
issues, so it is possible that it might disturb audience expectations if used for non-fictional types of representation.

The importance of the social context in which the work of art is received was stressed.\textsuperscript{118} This thesis argued that, for various reasons, modernist approaches carry the potential for achieving subversive results in an Iranian audience.\textsuperscript{119} Chapter 2 advanced this discussion by focusing mainly on animation’s potential to intervene, with particular emphasis on how the viewer is affected when animation is used for non-fictional types of film. Using five different examples, it explored the use of animated film to achieve subversive effects, in terms of a particular audience and a specific social context. The discussion focused firstly on two socially-engaged films made in the benign context of late 20\textsuperscript{th}-century Britain. These were analysed to show how audience expectations can be disturbed when films that portray real issues and adopt familiar conventions of live-action documentary are made using animation. This unexpected fusion of semantic approaches raises questions about how animation works, and about how some types of live action work. A ‘documentary animation’ may demand its audience’s profound mental engagement in order to understand an unfamiliar kind of film; such films challenge cinematic convention in order to deconstruct social conditions. It was proposed, following an examination of social conditions in late 20\textsuperscript{th}-century Britain, that there is a profound relationship between the films’ representational approaches and the social context in which they were produced.\textsuperscript{120}

\textsuperscript{118} This research proposed that postmodernism is a geographical condition, and that western countries have long been in the postmodern era. Further, comprehensive use of modernist modes by western media has familiarised audiences with these conventions, so they may no longer achieve subversive effects. Iranian society has not yet entered the postmodern stage, so audiences have not been overtly exposed to modernist kinds of art. It may therefore be argued that new, postmodern modes of practice that prevail in the contemporary west may not be entirely appropriate for Iranian society.

\textsuperscript{119} Among reasons for the Iranian viewer’s limited exposure and familiarity with modernist modes is the dominance of entertainment cinema, the underdeveloped Iranian advertising industry, and limited distribution of Iranian new wave and foreign modernist cinema inside Iran. Modernist strategies are therefore still fresh and have the potential to achieve strong impact in Iran.

\textsuperscript{120} The emergence of postmodern multi-culturalism and various branches of postmodernist thought in advanced western societies led to a challenge to modernism’s belief in ‘linear progress and absolute truths’ (Harvey, 1990: 35). The new postmodern society accommodated different
The second section of Chapter 2 focused on three politically critical animated films produced in the repressive atmosphere of the USSR and Eastern Europe under communism. It explored how animation may be used to achieve political criticism in contexts in which it is discouraged by direct and indirect protocols.\textsuperscript{121} This discussion was central to the aim of this thesis, and was particularly relevant to the type of mediation involved in the practical component of the research. The filmmakers’ representational approaches were explored, and the effect of context on these was examined. These films were made using indirect modes of practice, in a cinematic form more readily associated with light entertainment and fantasy, and therefore attracted less official suspicion. It may, however, be too simplistic to assert that animation facilitates social criticism. In order to avoid censorship, complex forms combine with metaphorical methods of representation; the resulting films are often difficult to unpack. The issue of maintaining the mental engagement of an audience becomes even more significant in terms of identifying these indirect associations.

Social context, it was argued, is particularly significant in terms of these films. In the time and place in which they were made, surrealist and modernist modes of practice and the use of certain techniques of animation carried discrete political connotations. The use of animation for serious purposes, the departure from the ethos of socialist realism, and the use of metaphor and allegory to challenge the \textit{status quo} resulted in politically critical films. It was contended, however, that despite significant formal differences, all three films engage primarily with the mediation of actual social or cultural and political issues.

\textsuperscript{121} These restrictive measures may take various forms, including the processes that filmmakers must undergo in order to obtain sponsorship and permission for production and distribution, the codes of conduct with which they must comply and even self-censorship.

points of view that had often been marginalised and neglected when the modernist voice dominated. It was suggested that the examples of British ‘documentary animation’ discussed in Chapter 2 were made in a social context that paid attention to ‘worlds and voices’ other than those of the (male-dominated) modernist discourse (ibid: 48). Further, in a social context in which many of modernism’s standards were challenged, the traditional definitions of animation and live-action documentary were rejected.
Wells (1998), Frierson (1994), Rowley (2005) and Darley (1997 and 2000) are among the few theorists who have tackled the issue of realism with regard to animation. Most studies have focused on an understanding of realism as a matter of method and aesthetic; animation’s potential for representing the world in convincingly realistic ways. Little attention has been paid to its potential to intercede in historical life: an intention to intervene rather than represent. Similarly scant attention has been paid to animation’s subversive and critical potential, apart from a few studies of Eastern Bloc animation during communism by critics including Hames (1995 and 2004), O’Pray (1995), Wells (1997 and 1998) and Moritz (1997). In general, studies of socially-engaged animation, including ‘documentary animation’, do not address the vital factor of audience. The nature of the relationship that ‘documentary animation’ maintains with an audience, and the type of response it elicits, are thus questions that remain to be answered.

Studies of the animated films of Eastern Europe under communism often ignore the relationship that films of the region maintain with their intended audience. It has been suggested by, for example, O’Pray (1995) and Hames (1995) that such films are subversive because of their makers’ refusal to conform to officially-sanctioned modes of practice, and because they criticize the condition of their contemporary societies in metaphorical ways. From the basis of an examination of The Flat, this thesis argued that subverting the minds of viewers in order to achieve mental engagement can be seen as an important strategy for realist animation in socially-limiting contexts. This thesis also examines how audience response may affect understanding of the mechanics of socially-engaged animation, including ‘documentary animation’. It offers an innovative interrogation of the ways in which animation may disturb the relationship between film and audience to criticise or even subvert a social order, illuminated

122 Fatemeh Hosseini-Shakib’s doctoral thesis The Hybrid Nature of Realism in the Aardman Studio’s Early Animated Shorts (2009) is one of few in-depth examinations of the term. This was published after the conclusion of my own research, so her arguments are not considered here. Though her conclusions are important they do not appear significantly to affect the substance of my argument.

123 Darley’s exploration of what he terms British ‘non-fiction’ animation is an exception in this regard. He pays particular attention to the Brechtian aspects of some of the British films and defines them as primarily critical with regard to the social issues they address.
by the arguments of Brecht and Jakobson. It may therefore be suggested that the arguments of this thesis make a significant contribution to the field of animation studies.

The first two chapters of this thesis examined social engagement in the context of western animation. Chapter 3 explored the characteristics of Iranian realist art in the last century from the perspective of an Iranian audience and government. Two significant branches of Iranian art, cinema and poetry, were examined, and Williams’ study of realism in Western drama (1990) was used to posit that Iranian new wave cinema and Iranian new poetry are informed by realism. Historical examination located the emergence of realist elements in new poetry; over a short period in the mid-20th century it became established as an active force in a discourse that aimed to influence the political landscape of Iranian society. Poetry thus became a means for political intervention. It was suggested that the Pahlavi regime of 1925–1979, particularly under Reza Shah (1925–1941) was instrumental in pushing Iranian poetry towards metaphorical and allegorical kinds of signification.

Iranian new poetry maintains a particular relationship with its audience. It was argued that changes in the formal aspects of poetry have a significant effect on its audience: Nima’s new poetic formal system disturbed Iranian readers’ expectations of conventional poetry, so that an unfamiliar form became associated with a new understanding of poetry. The new poetic system thus, by implication, became associated with political criticism.

The relationship between Iran’s Islamic government and Iranian new cinema was examined. Chapter 3 argued that during the Islamic government’s first two decades, political and ideological motivations prepared a favourable environment in which the new wave could thrive. The work of Kiarostami, as a key figure in new wave cinema, was examined. It was proposed that the strategy of ‘showing by not showing’ plays an important part in disturbing audience expectations. Kiarostami deliberately left gaps in the narrative, thus challenging traditional expectations and requiring his audiences to take an active role to fill in the blanks. His innovative formal system invites viewers who have become intellectually and
creatively involved with this cinematic form to challenge blind acceptance of social, cultural and political norms. In common with many new wave filmmakers, Kiarostami does not primarily or overtly criticize the government for Iranian society’s shortcomings, but often provides a framework for the exploration of sensitive social issues.

Chapter 3 argues for the significance of using animation for realist purposes in contemporary Iran. Sweeping social changes in the country have created an increasingly hostile atmosphere for the kind of film produced by new wave filmmakers, and censors have become aware of the movement’s approaches. Further, new wave’s characteristic naturalism of location and dialogue make it difficult for filmmakers to make coded references to contemporary issues. Alternative approaches are required: it seems clear that, in the immediate future, criticism of contemporary conditions in Iran will require new kinds of art practice. Animation is just such a mode, capable of providing an opportunity for intervention in the course of social events without attracting undue official attention. This thesis concluded that, in a context in which live-action film is under severe scrutiny, animation might be a potent alternative. The findings of the research were therefore used to inform the making of a film that was designed to invite an Iranian audience to consider critically how women are perceived and treated in present-day Iran.\(^\text{124}\)

Live action cinema has long been used to engage with serious social concerns in Iran, but the use of animation for this purpose is unprecedented. Iranian filmmakers have tended to use animated films to represent historical events: though such films are few in number, they are significant in terms of artistic achievement. This thesis attempts to demonstrate that there is another way in which Iranian filmmakers can inculcate social conscience in their audiences. This potential new direction was suggested by exploring animation’s potential to influence audiences to criticize and intervene in issues that affect their lives. Its

\(^{124}\) Several approaches were employed to fulfil this objective, including confronting an Iranian audience with historical examples of the cultural mistreatment of women; questioning the validity of social and/or religious values, and pointing to the ideological and political intentions behind cultural beliefs. These were mediated via a complex stylistic system developed to challenge received expectations and beliefs on the part of the audience.
practical component, *Mr and Mrs. Mockroach*, invites the Iranian film community to re-evaluate its belief that the medium of animation is suitable only for fantasy-driven types of representation and light entertainment.

When I began this research project in 2005, Iranian new wave cinema still had a strong international and national presence. The comparatively relaxed attitude of Iran’s previous government had prompted a significant increase in contemporary art practice, most notably cinema. Since then, the situation has changed markedly, and the activities of new wave filmmakers have literally been put on hold. If Iranian cinema is to maintain a defining and central role in the formation of contemporary Iran, it must find alternative approaches. It may therefore be argued that, in the context of Iranian society, this project’s major contribution is its proposal that animated film offers enormous possibilities in terms of the mediation of social life. In this sense, it may be regarded as a powerful alternative to live-action cinema.

*Mr and Mrs. Mockroach* represents an attempt to develop a neo-Brechtian approach to cinema in a context of stringent censorship. In such a context, few animated films challenge and subvert audience expectations in order to engage viewers critically with social issues. Svankmajer’s films are an exception, but even of his oeuvre, *The Flat* seems unique in its attempt to reflect on the immediate reality of Czechoslovakia in 1968.125 The rationale behind the approaches developed in *Mr and Mrs. Mockroach* is that a modernist Brechtian cinema, combined with indirect modes of representation, is appropriate to social conditions in contemporary Iran.

As the central element of this research, the film provided an opportunity to develop a realist animation in the sense outlined in the theoretical and contextual explorations undertaken by the project. Different approaches that could be seen as subversive in terms of an Iranian audience were addressed. Nevertheless, an equally important contribution of the film is that it provided a valuable opportunity for close observation of factors that might affect the production of a socially-engaged animation produced in politically limiting contexts. The process

125 *The Death of Stalinism in Bohemia* (1990) also reflects overtly on the social history of the country, but was produced after the collapse of communism in Czechoslovakia.
of making the film allowed an opportunity to explore how factors such as the social, political and cultural characteristics of a specific society and the background experience of a particular audience might inform the filmmaker’s semantic choices. In this sense, it may be argued that the information generated during pre-production – the result of thinking about solutions for various obstacles encountered by the filmmaker – was at least as important as the film itself.

In Iran, animation is associated with light entertainment and films suitable for children. It is not seen as likely to engage with serious social and political matters. This view has placed animators in a difficult position: on one hand, they have enjoyed a more relaxed context of practice than their live action counterparts, and attracted less attention from the censors. On the other hand, it is extremely difficult to attract the right kind of audience. Iranians who might be receptive to references of social and political significance in live action film, might not seek or expect such enlightenment in an animated film. Indeed, such an audience might not be interested in animation. Chapter 4 provides a reflexive analysis of Mr and Mrs. Mockroach, exploring the rationale behind its representational choices. It examines the approaches taken with the aim of directing the attention of its intended audience towards a politically-sensitive issue while avoiding censorship.

Iran has a relatively long history – dating back to the 1960s – of engagement with the representation of subjects belonging to the historical world, and the use of animation for educational purposes. Iranian animators have not yet, however, explored the full potentialities of what I term ‘realist’ animation; in fact, after the Islamic revolution this area of animation remained widely underdeveloped. Chapter 4 examined the specifics of the Iranian context in relation to animation production, and proposed two reasons why Iranian animators have been reluctant to involve themselves in real issues concerning contemporary life. The view that animation occupies a particular domain of practice – the fantastical world of the mind of the artist rather than the real social world – has contributed significantly to this disinclination. Another factor was that in the last decade the government was the main contractor of animation. The issue of why Iranian filmmakers have
not used animation to mediate contemporary social concerns was not central to this project’s discussion, so was not fully developed. It nevertheless offers intriguing potential for further research.

Little information is available about the precise conditions that affect the production of realist animations in contexts of strict censorship, and even less about the mental processes that informed filmmakers’ representational choices. Reflexive examination of the nature that was offered in Chapter 4 is rare in the field of animation. It may therefore be proposed that the most important contribution this research makes to the field of animation studies is its deconstruction of what was involved in the making of *Mr and Mrs. Mockroach*, a prototype of what this research develops as a realist animation and which was produced in the prohibitive context of contemporary Iran. This reflexive examination considered two important elements: firstly, how consideration of the conditions of Iranian society and audience and the position of the filmmaker as a student studying outside Iran has affected the film, particularly during its pre-production, and secondly what representational approaches have been developed as a result of considering these influences.

Almost all studies of politically critical animations produced under oppressive conditions concern the former Eastern Bloc. Studies of filmmakers including Svankmajer, Trnka, Lenica, Norstein and Parn have examined the characteristics of the films of the region, and offered some enlightenment about the communist system and its impact on animation. This thesis contributes to existing knowledge by adding information concerning a previously little-known context, that of contemporary Iran, to the discourse on socially-engaged animation.

The reflexive examination of Chapter 4 suggested that I have successfully employed semantic elements that the contextual section of the research regards as important in relation to ‘realist’ animation produced in prohibiting contexts. In the light of discussions undertaken during the thesis *Mr and Mrs. Mockroach* may be regarded as a subversive film in terms of an Iranian audience. The film demands active audience involvement: the combination of realistic stop-motion animation, sound and planned strategies of metamorphosis create shocking
moments in the film. The alliance of complex forms and self-reflexive strategies raises audience awareness of the moment: viewers understand that they are watching an animated film that is constructed in certain ways. The traditional expectations of an Iranian audience with regard to animated film are constantly challenged, and formal experimentation is accompanied by frequent metaphorical references to various examples of unfair treatment of Iranian women. With these elements in place, the film appears suitably constructed to engage the intellectual and curiosity of its intended audience, thereby provoking it to question the validity of social, cultural and religious norms depicted. The heavy use of metaphor and complex formal approaches, however, has made the film difficult for a normal audience to unpack. With this in mind, several cultural references have been incorporated with the intention of guiding the audience.

An Iranian audience’s experience of new wave cinema might cause it to associate formal experimentation such as that employed in Mr and Mrs. Mockroach with social and/or political criticism. I am nevertheless concerned whether the correct balance has been achieved between engaging the viewer’s mind with the film and directing it towards the realities portrayed. There is a danger that the film will draw more attention to itself than to the social issue it intends to mediate.

I am now considering my next step following completion of this research project. For the reasons explained above I decided not to enter my film in the February 2011 Tehran International Animation Festival. Iran’s most important film festival, Fajr International Film Festival, no longer accepts animated films in its short film category. Another organisation, The Cinema House, has a separate animation category in its annual awards, but films are judged in camera and are not screened publicly. My first choice is the Tehran International Short Film Festival, which is held annually in November and attracts considerable public attention, particularly from the younger generation. Other opportunities include

126 There is no attempt in Mr and Mrs. Mockroach to conceal the process of making a stop motion animated film. The holes on the wooden base are never hidden; cracks on the clay characters remain to be seen by the audience and the wire armature is often revealed. In the dog/human metamorphosis sequence the viewer is shown the filmmaker/sculptor’s every decision in the process of making and animating the character. In the final scene, the use of sound is self-reflexive.
screenings by various organisations involved with animation, which offer the chance of feedback from Iranian animation practitioners and theoreticians. I hope to submit the film to international festivals; though it not aimed primarily at a non-Iranian audience, it will still allow me to test the film’s aesthetic achievements, and to examine it in the light of contemporary currents in animation practice. I may also screen the film during presentations of this practice-based research, mainly at universities.127

My status as a researcher and practitioner studying outside Iran has significantly affected the direction and outcome of this project. It has influenced both how the practical component was defined, and its role and contribution to the project. Chapter 4’s exploration of these factors offers a valuable insight for those in a similar situation who are interested in undertaking practice-based research. Mr and Mrs Mockroach has the potential to illuminate research concerning how animated films that engage with the mediation of serious issues will be received in Iran.

The Iranian authorities’ reaction to the film is of particular interest. Will its coded references escape the censors’ notice? If they are alerted to the issues it addresses, will they tolerate an animated film of this type, or will they ban it and prevent the making of similar films? It will also be intriguing to see the response of those involved in animation in Iran. It is at least possible that the Iranian authorities might more readily tolerate socially-critical animation, thus helping to facilitate the future development of more accessible kinds of representation in such films. Ultimately, Mr and Mrs. Mockroach may persuade Iranian filmmakers to use animation to engage with issues of social concern.

127 Discussing the film openly and publicly is not easy considering the current situation in Iran, and this option will need to be considered carefully.
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Appendix i

A is for Autism (1992): synopsis

The film opens with a shot of a drawing board, on which adult hands place a naïve, brightly-coloured drawing of a house with: ‘my house, my dog my and sister’ (sic) written on it in childish script. A flute is heard. The shot dissolves into a live-action image of a boy, then cuts into a pixilated image of him drawing circles on a sheet of paper. Piano music begins and continues until the end of the film. The image of the boy cuts into the drawing and the circles begin to animate. A series of drawings of single characters, beginning with simple representations and growing in complexity, metamorphose into one another. Children’s voices are heard over the music. The scene cuts to white, and as a child’s voice explains: ‘My first drawing was of street lights’ an abstract depiction of street lights dissolves into a series of drawings featuring various modes of transport, but latterly only trains. A pixilated image of a boy draws a train on paper and a man’s voice is heard: ‘This is the beginning of a film and it lasts exactly 11 minutes.’ Live action shots of various hands write the film’s title on different surfaces, and an adult’s hand writes: ‘A collaboration’. A live-action shot shows a hand turning on a tap and water flowing. Over a naïve drawing of a boy in a room with many lights in it, a young man’s voice says: ‘This autobiography consists of information about my hearing and eyesight playing tricks on me.’

A live-action shot shows a child’s hands tearing strips off a paper sheet. An animated drawing shows a figure walking upstairs, and a female voice says: ‘I didn’t talk until I was three and a half years old’. The image cuts to a live-action shot of a finger picking out a note on a piano, then a drawing of a road junction with ‘One Way’ signs. An adult voice says: ‘I knew I was different. I knew I came across as different.’ Live-action shots show various light switches being turned on and off. Over images of drawings of different rooms metamorphosing into each other, a man’s voice explains that, as a pre-school child, he hated small shops because his eyesight made them look even smaller. Against a background of images of drawings of numbers and dates a man’s voice explains that, at the
age of six, he was fascinated by numbers and taught himself to count. Various drawings of a descending lift are shown as a voice is heard counting: ‘160, 161, 162...’

A live-action shot shows a turning door handle, as a man’s voice describes how he loathed the sound of people talking at a mother and child club because it sounded ‘like thunder’. For the same reason, he hated going into town; the noise was unbearable. Various drawings of street scenes are shown against a background of traffic noise. A live-action shot shows a finger picking out notes on a piano. The man’s voice explains that sometimes, at nursery, his sight blurred and occasionally when other children spoke to him he could scarcely hear them. Sometimes, their voices sounded ‘like bullets’. An animated drawing of figures outlined thickly in black shows children moving around a central, almost static figure. The distorted voices of children create a dreamlike atmosphere. Another male voice explains that sometimes other children would not let him join in their games because they thought he was mad. He says: ‘I was tensed up and had a way of flapping my hands. I was different, and kids don’t like kids that are different.’

Live-action shots show children opening various doors. A male voice explains that he was often lazy at school because sometimes his ears distorted the teacher’s instructions, or his eyes blurred and stopped him seeing the blackboard properly. He says that sometimes he could hear a word and understand it, but soon the words started to merge into one another making them impossible to understand. An image shows words on a blackboard merging confusingly into one another. The voice continues, comparing his vision and hearing to ‘an untuned television’. Drawings of underground tunnels metamorphose into one another as the voice heard earlier continues counting: ‘301, 302, 303...’ Drawings that refer to the Abba hit Dancing Queen are seen, as a paper facsimile of a disc rotates on an actual gramophone turntable. A piano is heard playing Dancing Queen as the man continues to count.

A pixilated image shows a woman in a chair, hugging a cut-out drawing of a child. A female voice says that as a child she craved tender touch, but at the same
time ‘being hugged felt like being swallowed by a tidal wave’. As she speaks the drawing diminishes and finally disappears, and she clasps her hands over her stomach. A man’s voice explains that, when he was 16, he could not look people in the eye, but fixed on a point about 45° away. The female voice explains that she still finds it difficult to take part in normal conversation. Another male voice explains that if someone tries to point out something, especially something he might find interesting, he often has difficulty locating it. Background images show a drawing with various elements including a church with circling figures, a tree, a flying bird, random zigzag lines, and an upside-down house and car. As we try to decipher this, it rotates clockwise as the camera zooms in. The house and car are now the right way up, so all seems to have been restored to its correct order, but as the camera zooms out it reveals that the tree, church and other elements are upside-down.

Live-action shots show coins being flipped, a child’s hand working an old-fashioned metal spinning top, and a gramophone record spinning on a turntable. A woman’s voice explains her preoccupation with spinning things: it shut out other sounds that she did not like. The action returns to the image of the child’s hand tearing off strips of paper. A man’s voice explains that he used to carry an empty Shell petrol tin that his uncle gave him everywhere, and drawings of a petrol station and road and rail signs are seen. The counting is heard again: ‘670, 671, 672…’

A train is being animated as a male voice explains his childhood obsession with time and punctuality. A live-action shot shows a tap being turned on and water flowing. A child’s voice asks: ‘Why are the street lights going on?’ and another voice explains: ‘Because it’s getting dark’. An animated drawing shows a gramophone record turning. The woman seen earlier explains that as a child she repeatedly asked the same question because it gave her pleasure to hear the answer. Sometimes she heard and understood, but sometimes the sound of speech reached her brain ‘like the unbearable noise of an onrushing train’. Images of a train are seen on animation sheets that replace each other on a table. The counting voice is heard: ‘737, 738, 739…’ Live-action and pixilated shots show a boy drawing a train as his voice explains that he likes trains because they
are interesting. He describes his drawings in detail and says that he has made animations of trains. Images of these are seen.

Earlier scenes are repeated: dates on a calendar; a gramophone record turning; the animated figure mounting the stairs; hands shredding the sheet of paper; the drawing of a disc on a turntable, a coin spinning, a drawing of an elevator, fingers on the keys of a piano as it is played. Above this is heard the counting: ‘989, 990, 991…’ The counting voice coughs, then continues counting until it reaches 1,000. The image shows the boy’s hand tearing strips off the sheet of paper featuring the drawing of the climbing figure. The piano music rises to a climax as the last strip of paper disappears. The screen goes black and a man’s voice says: ‘this is the end of the film’. As the credits appear a voice explains: ‘I used to like watching Channel 4 because it was new’.
Appendix ii

Daddy’s Little Bit of Dresden China (1988): synopsis

In a dark room a king and his wife are dining. A young female narrator tells a modified version of Snow White, about a king who so loved his beautiful wife that he kept her away from other people in a huge, lonely castle. One day, the wife gave birth to a beautiful girl. The image cuts to a facsimile of the birth certificate of a girl named Karen as the narrator says: ‘The girl was even more beautiful than her mother, and the king loved his daughter even more than the queen.’ We see photographs of a father with his daughter on his knee.

The image cuts to a black shot. Handwritten words appear on screen: ‘You are mine, the king said, ‘and nobody can take you away from me’. The narrator continues: ‘Unfortunately for Snow White nobody questioned the father’s love, the mother was blamed, the father forgiven and the girl silenced’. The image cuts to a black screen on which the film’s title appears.

Curtains part and a staged room (stop-motion sequence) in which strange characters are sitting is seen. A woman with a head made of grapes and an arm made from a wooden spoon is sewing, a man with a body made of metal pieces and razor blade lips is reading a newspaper and a girl whose head is a china vase and whose body is made of feathers is playing. We see photographs of a happy family.

A female narrator says in voiceover: ‘It’s happened in so many families, and nobody ever talks about it. I think it’s changing now, but in my family nobody talked about it for 20 years.’ In the background, a fairy music box is playing.

Cut to a black screen. Collaged images of men sitting on a sofa at the centre of the picture replace each other. A teenage girl appears sitting on a man’s lap. Another female narrator says in voiceover: ‘He wanted me to sit on his lap every time he was watching TV. I still did that even at 17. It is incredible to me now.’
The image cuts to a pub scene, where men are playing with cards featuring indecent images of naked women. The discussion of two pub staff suggests that the men are betting on their daughters. One says: ‘They're perverts. What normal person would do that?’ As he speaks, he throws a dart at a board with a pornographic playing card at its centre. Another member of staff tells a waitress to smile as she serves the men.

Cut to the stop-motion room where the woman is cleaning everything including the father’s body. Music creates a melancholic atmosphere.

A cut-out image of a sexy girl is animated on a black screen. Cut-out letters form the word ‘Lolita’ then the sentence: ‘Of course I am precocious, why else would my father be molesting me?’ Music: a woman sings a calm, requiem-like song.

Back in the staged room the father is cuddling his daughter. A different female voice says: ‘Adults become really scary when you are a child. They don’t relate what is going on with you to anything that might have happened to them when they were kids.’ Another girl continues: ‘When I really hated him, I’d spit in his tea.’ The music is still calm. A girl’s voice says: ‘My mum couldn’t allow herself to recognise my reality.’ The music becomes harsher, creating a mood of anger and frustration using a combination of piano and a high-pitched voice. The parents are fighting viciously, ripping each other apart.

A cut-out Santa Claus appears on a black background. The words: ‘I gave her a gift. What is wrong with the gift of love?’ appear.

The sound of the musical box is heard against a black screen.

*Final credits.*
A man is thrown into a room and the door locks behind him. As he watches, rough metal hooks wrap themselves round the edge of the door. He follows chalked arrows marks on the floor to a torn curtain that conceals a toilet. He returns to the door, but as he tries the handle it falls off, so he gives up and begins to look round the room. It is sparsely-furnished with bed, table, chair and a stove. There is a mirror on the wall. He looks into the mirror, but sees only his rear view. He tries to light the stove, but water gushes out. On the wall is a formal group photograph of religious men surrounding two women; there are white crosses above each of their heads. Above this is a mutilated photograph of a naked woman. He stands on the chair to reach the photograph, but its legs telescope. The ceiling light begins to swing, smashing a hole in the wall. As he peers through it, a fist on a telescopic arm comes in and punches him. Food is on the table. He tries to eat bread, but it is inedible. He tries to eat soup, but the spoon is full of holes so he pushes it away. A mug of beer constantly changes size, finally shrinking into a thimble-sized cup which he drains. The cup transforms into a large beer glass, empty save for the dregs. He tries to peel an egg, but it falls through the table, hitting his foot. He throws it at the wall in disgust, and it passes right through. As he attempts to retrieve it his hand becomes stuck in the wall, so he digs it out using the perforated spoon. As he withdraws his hand, the egg he has retrieved is crushed. He leans on the table, but his hands pass right through. He turns on the tap and a large stone plops out, breaking a bowl he has placed beneath. He opens a cupboard, and dogs jump out and eat all his food before leaving. He shuts the cupboard and tries to rest on a bed, but as he dozes it disintegrates into a pile of sawdust that covers him. He stands, but as parts of his body touch the walls and table, metal hooks fasten on to his clothes; he frees himself by removing his jacket and trousers. He is now barefoot, and wearing only underpants and a shirt. The hand on a rod comes through the wall again. A man in black wearing white gloves and carrying a rooster enters the
room, accompanied by surreal choral music. He bounds in slow-motion across the room, beckoning to the protagonist, presents him with an axe and leaves, closing the door behind him. The protagonist smashes the door with the axe, but there is a wall behind it. On the wall are many names and dates. He adds his own name: Joseph.
Appendix iv.

Mr and Mrs. Mockroach: summary

Title: Mr and Mrs. Mockroach

Section One: Marriage

(A little girl is heard narrating the story of Auntie Cockroach)

Girl: Once upon a time there was an Auntie Cockroach who was sweeping her home.

*Pictures of a dead mouse lying on a table rapidly cut into each other. The scene cuts to a stop-motion animation section showing a mouse’s head, which decays and metamorphoses into a cockroach. A shouting face appears beneath the table.*

(The girl appears in front of the camera and continues)

**Girl:** One day her dad came home and said to her: ‘I have grown old and can no longer support you financially, go and get married.’

Section One: Mash Ramazoon

*Cut (animated stop-motion section) to a female hand rotating in front of the camera with a male hand in the background. Smoke is seen, and the sound of a hubble-bubble pipe is heard. The image cuts to a close-up of an elderly man, Mash Ramazoon, as a baby’s leg emerges from his head. The leg falls down and transforms into a liquid. A female hand is seen dancing. Images are seen of Mash Ramazoon smoking a hubble-bubble and two hands, one in prayer using a rosary and one calculating using an abacus. A baby appears on a hand and turns into a liquid. Babies’ hands emerge from Mash Ramazoon’s head. Close-up images of an injured baby’s head that rapidly turn into each other are seen; the image finally cuts to an extreme close-up of a snake.*

**Girl:** Auntie Cockroach asked ‘Who should I get married to? Her dad replied: ‘Go to Hamadan and marry Mash Ramazoon.’
Cut back to the hands. The female hand attracts a male hand that begins to touch her tenderly. An image of a battered female hand appears for few seconds as a shocking sound is heard. The love scene continues until the male hand tries to impose dominance and the female hand resists. The scene becomes violent; the male hand begins to beat the female hand, using various domestic tools. The final shot shows the cruelly-battered female hand in the foreground with the male hand in the background. The sequence ends with a close-up of a hand praying with a rosary.

Section Two: Men of Bazaar

(Various shots of the girl are seen as she narrates this section of the story)

Girl: Auntie Cockroach walked and walked until she came across Mr Butcher, Mr Grocer, Mr Carder, Mr Blacksmith. Asked: ‘Will you marry me?’ Auntie Cockroach replied: If I married you and we had a quarrel, how would you beat me?’ They each replied: ‘With my butcher’s knife’; ‘with my scale’; ‘with my carding tool’; ‘with my hammer’.

Cut: the scene shows a double screen. On the left is a man wearing a black chapeau, black coat, white shirt and pyjamas (reminiscent of a Jahel character). He carries a butcher’s knife in one hand and is sucking juice from a pomegranate. Meanwhile, a woman in a black veil enters the scene from right. She is burning Isfand, which she moves above the man’s head, then leaves the scene to the left. On the screen on the right a pomegranate is seen on a table, above which hang various tools. These rapidly metamorphose into each other until a giant stone falls on the pomegranate and smashes it. Over the scene a rhythmic music created using Zarb is heard. The rhythm of the music accelerates until the female character enters the scene. From this point the music becomes slower until the stone smashes the pomegranate.

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128 Isfand is a herb used in Iranian traditional surgery for sterilization. In contemporary Iran its use is associated with a superstition that the herb has the power to send bad spirits away from people.

129 Zarb is an Iranian traditional percussion instrument that is particularly used in an ancient sport called ‘Varzesh e Pahlavani’ (the heroic sport).
**Girl:** ‘No, no, no, I won’t marry you. If I married you I’d get killed.’

*Cut:* [animated stop-motion section] A baby lies on a table in a dark, claustrophobic atmosphere. A dog sniffs around the child and urinates on and around her. A hen is pecking at the surface of the other side of the table. The action continues for a short time, then the animals confront each other. The scene cuts to a shot of an armature attached to a dog’s head lying on the table, which then metamorphoses into a grotesque human body. The half-dog, half-human creature moves its hands towards the baby’s head and chops off a large chunk of her cheek. In the next shot the hen lays a pomegranate next to the baby’s head; the pomegranate suddenly smashes.

**Girl:** Auntie Cockroach walked and walked until she meets Mr Mouse. Mr Mouse asks: Where are you going? Auntie Cockroach replies: I am going to Hamadan to marry Mash Ramazoon. Asked: ‘Will you marry me?’ Auntie Cockroach said: ‘If I married you and we had a quarrel how would you beat me?’ Mr Mouse replied: with my soft tail.

**Section Three: Mr Mouse**

*Cut (animated section):* an arm hits the table and metamorphoses into a wave which then turns into a shouting face and eventually a mouse.

*Cut:* two screens are seen. The left screen shows a table covered with the white sheet, at centre of the image. A woman wearing a black veil enters, agitatedly beating herself and shouting. She moves from behind the table and falls to the ground in front of the table, hitting herself on the face and crying. On the right screen is seen an animated image. Something drops on the table, which appears to have water on it. The water starts swirling and a mouse’s head joins in the whirl. The live-action scene moves to the right as the action continues. On the left screen a new animated scene appears. A female body metamorphoses into a huge stone. Both screens now show the live action image. A man carrying a white
donkey mask enters the scene on both screens. Heedless of the woman he wanders aimlessly around.

**Girl:** Auntie Cockroach asked: ‘Are you going to really beat me?’ He replied: ‘Of course not. Why should I beat you?’

*Cut* (animated stop-motion section) a seated woman is cradling a mouse as if she is breastfeeding it. The mouse turns into liquid and disappears and the woman breaks down and metamorphoses into a female head. Scars gradually appear on her face as though she has been beaten. A cockroach emerges from her face.

*Cut:* Two screens are seen. On the left a boy shoots a little girl as disturbing sounds are heard: firstly a gunshot and secondly an elephant apparently in pain. The right screen shows a table covered in a white sheet, bearing the deformed head of an elephant. Its trunk is cut short and one of its tusks is on its head. In the background two veiled women, one carrying a pan and the other a broom, march back and forth as though guarding the elephant’s head. A male voice (presumably the director’s assistant) is heard: ‘Ready, sound, camera, sequence 6, scene 1, take 7, action!’

*Cut:* a black screen; music begins and the final credits appear on screen.
Appendix v.

Important periods in the history of 20th century Iran that relate to the discussion of this thesis:

The Iranian Constitutional Revolution: 1905-1907

Pahlavi dynasty: 1925-1979

The rule of Reza Shah Pahlavi: 1925-1941

Occupation of Iran by British and Soviet forces during World War II started in: 1941

The rule of Mohammad- Reza Shah Pahlavi: 1941-1979

Tudeh Party: 1941-1953

Mosaddegh government and the nationalisation of oil industry: 1951-1953

The Islamic Revolution of Iran: 1979

The government of Mohammad Khatami: 1997-2005

The government of Mahmood Ahmadinejad: 2005 to the present
Appendix vi.

*Mr and Mrs. Mockroach*: Image break down