

Invisible Visible

A meditation on the visual and political culture of Iran



Ehsaee Mohammad

Conceived and to be Created by Oliver Hockenhull

SYNOPSIS

Invisible Visible

Equal parts journey documentary, cryptographic video art piece, and philosophical video essay, INVISIBLE VISIBLE is to be an experiential immersion into a flux of cross-cultural associations: facts, architectures, sites, interviews, myths, dreams, evidences, appearances, and occlusions.

Persia, Iran is:

- ❖ The originating home of Zoroastrianism, the original monotheistic tradition, the prototypical religion of much of the world.
- ❖ It is: one of the nations listed by US President George W. Bush as being a member of an evil axis and said to be a sponsor of terrorism.
- ❖ a hard line Islamic Republic and an ancient and complex civilization, inhabited by a majority Shiite population.
- ❖ an intense worry for some in the West – Nuclear ambitions? A hidden program?
- ❖ Persia, Iran, so often today in Canadian news, and yet so very little visible to most Canadians understanding.

The vast majority of what English Canadians receive as information and cultural perspective on Iran comes from the USA.

US citizens are basically barred from entering Iran and so even the alternative voices from the US don't go, don't report, don't speak from the ground.

In any case what does come through is often both biased and originating from the main stream media, with the agenda of conditioning the content to fit the prevailing ideology in form and in opinion.

The INVISIBLE VISIBLE perspective will be to trace from historical sweeps and intimate contemporary moments a picture of what we don't commonly see: an essential world culture in the contemporary era.



PROPOSED OBJECTIVES FOR THE FUNDING:

- 1.) The acquisition of basic Farsi and a thoroughly researched study of contemporary and historic Iran. A video journaling - travel to Iran for 60 days.
- 2.) To video record interviews with Iranian Canadian artists Aydin Aghdashloo (painter/teacher based in Toronto and Tehran) and Parviz Tanavoli (sculptor based in Vancouver and Tehran). Bios attached as appendage.
- 3.) To produce a well informed, resonate video assemblage of intent, (about 30 minutes).
- 4.) To create a text journal of an analytical, circumstantial narrative. *This poetic narrative trope will personalize the studies and journey, raising the 'documentary' into a mythopoetic realm of enquiry.* The imaginative narrative stream is to incarnate the crisis and flux of contemporary identity. The imagined narrator, filmmaker is a hypochondriac suffering from various psychosomatic (invisible) diseases related to the existential and to meaning itself.
- 5.) To create a working model of a steganographic¹ encoding concealment algorithm for video imagery.
- 6.) The submission of a proposal for full production and financing.

¹ Pertaining to a secret message within an ordinary message. A methodology of hiding a visual image within another visual image

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BACKGROUND AND PREMISE OF INVESTIGATION:

The inspiration and guiding concept behind the work is the pre-Islamic Persian belief in an archetypal world by which every person and object in the *getik* (the mundane, physical world) has its exact counterpart in the *menok* (the heavenly, invisible realm).

This religious concept was taken up by Shaykh al-Ishraq², an important Iranian Sufi (Muslim mystic) philosopher of the twelfth century. In Shaykh al-Ishraq philosophy the *menok* became the *alam al-mithal*³, an intermediate world between our own world and God's.

The *alam al-mithal* cannot be perceived by means of reason or by the senses.

It is by the faculty of the creative imagination alone that enables us to discover the realm of hidden archetypes, - the exercise of the human imagination enables people to return to God by introducing them to the *alam al-mithal*, the world of pure images.

The *alam al-mithal* means in English "the world of pure images".

INVISIBLE VISIBLE a mixture of a video diary and personal philosophical narrative is to use the creative imagination, informed by social and psychological



² Sheikh al-Ishraq's (Master of Illumination), ishraqi style Islamic mysticism, is still practiced in contemporary Iran.

³ This concept is quite a contrast to the iconoclastic tradition we usually associate with Islam. And though we can rightly say that the iconoclastic tradition is in ascendance within Islam today it would be a mistake to not be informed of the various undercurrents and still challenging traditions.

analysis, to frame and think upon the archetypal. It is to peel off the layers of conventional understandings and expose some of the concealed workings, the mental space, of the places and times that is Iran.

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PROCESS

This project is ambitious, but entered into with a realistic degree of humility. Iran is an extraordinarily complex, multi dimensional and singular civilization. The Persians created a few dozen advanced Empires of high culture and achievement before Canada became a dominion. Though I will be relying heavily on my own research, readings, studies and experiences I will also be interviewing a number of Iranian artists and scholars and asking them to guide me – and the audience through particular subject areas. (Two of the artists are Canadian-Iranians and have already agreed to be interviewed. Both of these artists have studios in Canada and Iran.)

The work is vehemently process orientated and the architecture of the work is ultimately made visible in the making of the piece.

The essay documentary form, or at least the kind of essay documentaries I make, are dependent on virtually invisible associative structures that become visible through the work of the poetic and visual sensibilities of the author, and the particularized montage of the finished piece.

What follows are notes that run in parallel to the concept of *the making of the invisible visible* and *the world of pure images*. They are individual references of the enquiry.

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some guiding cultural symbols, artifacts and metaphors

➤ The Hidden Imam, the Mahdi

It is said that in the 10th century, the 12th and last Imam of the Shiite branch of Islam disappeared. He is said to be hidden by God and will reappear at the end of history to lead an era of Islamic justice. But lately, actions by -- and rumors about -- Iran's president have renewed interest in the 12th Imam.

The belief, which helped to inspire Iran's Islamic Revolution 27 years ago, diminished in importance over the years. Till most recently.



Tehran was lit up on the eve of the birthday of the 12th Imam, known as the Mahdi. He is said to have gone missing in the 10th Century but is expected to return.

"The concept of the Mahdi is not just the embodiment of an Islamic doctrine possessing a religious character but rather signifies a universal aspiration of mankind with the variety⁴ of its religions and creeds. It represents an innate aspiration through which people, despite the variety of their beliefs and their means of recourse to the Unseen

(ghayb), perceive that there is, for all mankind on the earth, a promised day wherein the divine messages with their momentous significance will be fulfilled and their ultimate objective will be realized, bringing the long

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⁴ The Zoroasterians also have an invisible messiah figure. The Peshotan will appear at some unspecified future time. It is believed that he was the chief disciple of Zoroaster and was so holy that he attained immortality. He is thought to be living with 51 disciples in a cave monastery under sacred Mount Alburz (Iran) invisible -until his future Emergence.

*and arduous human journey through history to its ultimate destination."*⁵

Most people, throughout history, believed that history itself had no meaning, or that its meaning was solely as precursor to salvation.

Salvation was thought, and is thought, to be as liberation from time.

Yet salvation seems to be always postponed, at least within the monotheistic religions of Islam, Christianity and Judaism. These are religions of the perpetual "not yet", a term popularized and forming the core of the philosophy of the Marxist theorist Ernst Bloch. ("Das Prinzip Hoffnung - The Principle of Hope")

In INVISIBLE VISIBLE determining factors of history will be discussed unabashedly and as a fact-based antidote to the intoxications of a tomorrow not yet come.

The unseen, the holy world of perpetual fulfillment, is like the creative imagination on steroids, it is a powerful balm against the forward nature of time. This forward nature of time is experienced as an oppression, an opaque, towering wall between the individual and the expression of a true self. Unhindered by the syntax of tic and toc, a mythic and effortless innocence is gained via a resignation to the eternal.

History is a war against the intoxication and hallucination of the moment but you cannot wage this war if you deny reality: if you cannot remember, or remember how to remember, then there is no reality.

⁵ A Discussion Concerning the Mahdi by Martyr Sayyid Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr-quddisa sirruh Translated from the Arabic by Mujahid Husayn

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- *Persepolis, the greatest surviving masterpiece of the ancient Near Eastern Civilization, the remnants of the Shah's party, and an early CIA coup, now long forgotten (invisible histories).*



This world-renowned archaeological site, Persepolis (central Iran), was begun by Darius I in 518 BC and continued to be built for 150 years. The city had an area of 125,000 sq. metres and was burnt to the ground by Alexander the Great, apparently while he was quite drunk.

In 1971 the final Shah of Iran, Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, put on a huge celebration in the pine forests that surround the Persepolis monument, to celebrate the 2500th anniversary of Persian monarchy. He built a massive and opulent tent city⁶, inviting the elite from the entire world to attend. Maxims in Paris catered it, flying in delicacies daily.

According to some historians the Shah's extravagance was not much appreciated by his subjects and it has been suggested that the luxurious party was the turning point heading inescapably towards the Iranian Revolution.

Interestingly the remnants of this tent city is visible at the Persepolis site and it could serve as a good visual segue for talking about the Shah, empire, and the CIA's initiated and financed coup



⁶ Archival footage should be available of this event

against the Iranian nationalist Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh ⁷

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➤ The Zoroastrian connection

We can thank or blame depending on your opinion, the ancient Zoroastrians of Persia for the creation of the concept of a split world. The invisible world of perfection and the visible world of our mundane realities, the split world of evil doers and the righteous, the divided world of heaven and hell, of eternal salvation and eternal damnation. There is even speculation amongst some scholars that the Yin and Yang of South East Asia originated from the conceptualizations of the dual world of the Zoroastrians and was translated along the trade routes.



Fire Chamber, Yazd, Iran

"First taught amongst nomads on the Asian steppes around 3500 years ago, Zoroastrianism is one of the earliest revealed religions and is of enormous importance in the history of religions. It has links with the ancient Vedic beliefs of India and even possibly to a remote Indo-European past. It has influenced northern Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam and was the state religion in Iran from 6th century BC to 7th century AD."
Massoume Price

Yazd is the ancient home to the largest Zoroastrian population in Iran. The city dates from AD 224. It is a city in the desert with some quite unique architectural features. Example: the badgers are windtowers – an ancient system of passive air-conditioning.

The Zoroastrians were often, in the past, considered by the West to be simple 'fire worshippers'. This

⁷ Mohammad Mossadegh (19 May 1882 - 5 March 1967) was the democratically elected prime minister of Iran from 1951 to 1953. The CIA - with British assistance - undermined Mossadegh's government by bribing influential figures, planting false reports in newspapers and provoking street violence. Led by an agent named Kermit Roosevelt, the grandson of President Theodore Roosevelt, the CIA leaned on a young, insecure Shah to issue a decree dismissing Mossadegh as prime minister. By the end of Operation Ajax, some 300 people had died in firefights in the streets of Tehran.

superficial reading has been supplanted as of late by a greater appreciation – a much subtler picture – of what is really going on, -and of the elegance and poetry of this, one of humanities most ancient religions.

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➤ Alamut

Within a high mountain valley in central Iran stands "the castle of Alamut, the fortress retreat of Hasan-i Sabbah, which became legendary after the 1273 visit of Marco Polo and his description of the 'Old Man of the mountains' and the 'Ashishin'.

Alamut is a site of a real and mythic history. It is evocative of our own times in terms of the strategy of assassination and terror.

Of what is being termed asymmetrical warfare.

A war of the invisible against the visible.



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➤ War and Rumour of War

There is continuing speculation that the US is aiming for war against Iran and that with or without evidence of the development of nuclear WMD by Iran, war will happen.

The disaster of Iraq goes back to claims of subterfuge, of the hidden, of the invisible stockpiles of WMD ready to massacre the good citizens of Idaho. The US Gov. and world media now seem bent on portraying that Iran too is hiding an apocalypse aimed at the heart of the West.

AP Sept 14, 2006 US Iran report branded dishonest

"The UN nuclear watchdog has protested to the US government over a report on Iran's nuclear programme, calling it "erroneous" and "misleading".

In a leaked letter, the IAEA said a congressional report contained serious distortions of the agency's own findings on Iran's nuclear activity.

The report alleges that an IAEA inspector might have been removed at Iran's request "for not adhering to an unstated IAEA policy barring IAEA officials from telling the whole truth about the Iranian nuclear program."



The IAEA shot back that the claim was "an outrageous and dishonest suggestion," but Rogers stood by it Thursday. 11

"The Iranians said take him off the program, and they said OK. You can't have Iran getting to pick who is their inspectors," Rogers said.

The IAEA has been down this road before, when it entered the fray over Iraq's weapons program before the 2003 U.S. invasion."

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➤ CODE, SIGNAL, AND CIPHER – Invisible Track/Undocumented Feature

This aspect of the work will be a virtually invisible layer of articulation accessible via a judiciously allocated key.



The content of the hidden track will consist of an argumentative rhetorical discourse dealing with issues of social consensus and a revealing of the structures and applications of ideological invisibility. It will be the harder reading, a more critical and secular reading (though persistently respectful of human intents and dreams).

The goals and conceptual framework of the project itself will be saliently exposed in the proposed technique.

This hidden commentary, this 'easter egg'⁸ treat will require some original research and experimentation in video steganography.

⁸ In computing, or in DVD play - Easter eggs are messages, graphics, sound effects, or an unusual change in program behavior, that occur in a program in response to some undocumented set of commands, mouse clicks, keystrokes or other stimuli. One well-known early Easter egg found in some Unix operating systems caused them to respond to the command "make love" with "not war?". The largest easter egg is purported to be in the Atari 400/800 version of Pitfall II, which contains an entire game that was more complex and challenging than the original Pitfall II (Pitfall). Many personal computers have much more elaborate eggs hidden in ROM, including lists of the developers' names, political exhortations, snatches of music, and (in one case) images of the entire development team. The 1997 version of Microsoft Excel contained a hidden flight

The technical research angle to INVISIBLE VISIBLE is no small task and would advance the substance of this project, advance my own artistic practice, and advance the practice of video art by the exploitation of a new 'space' within video art- the cryptographic.

An admission that yet furthers the argument: cryptography in the arts is not particularly new- many artists throughout the centuries have included cryptographic messages into their art. Leonardo is most famous for hiding messages within his work as well as using secret languages. *Video cryptography however is new territory.*

The basic research, the coding of another cryptographic video signal hidden within the visible signal, has not been done by any video artist.

*"It would be madness, and inconsistency, to suppose that things which have never yet been performed, can be performed without employing some hitherto untried means."
Francis Bacon*

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CONCLUDING NOTE

Today we know that neither history, nor difference has an end. We see that it is more and more necessary to understand and appreciate other cultures. A discursive regard and a valuation of Iran, an attention to it, and the revealing of at least some of its many complexities and contradictions, especially in the dangerous climate of today that works overtime and in all media to reduce and diminish whole civilizations, is I believe of eminent account and, hopefully of utility as well.

SCHEDULE

October – May'07 – primary research
May – July'07 – travel in Iran
August – Feb.'08 – edit, write, develop production
proposal for March 1 '08 deadline.

TRAVEL ITENERARY

1.) Vancouver – London – Tehran – Behesht-E Zahra – Alborz Mountains – Esfahan – Garmeh – Yazd – Shiraz – Persepolis – Naqsh-E Rostam – Lake Orumiyeh – Ardabil – Alamut – Takht-E Soleiman – London – Vancouver

The best time to visit Iran is in the spring. After Iranian New Year celebrations which go on until April 8th or so.

Canadians can fairly easily get a 30 day visa from the Iranian Embassy in Ottawa. A further extension of 30 days is available in Iran.

Iran is *not* a dangerous country for Westerns to travel in. I will be shooting with a small HD video camera and only shooting in situations that are 'ok' as far as the authorities are concerned. This is not a search for the locations and documentation of hidden nuclear facilities!

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CONTINGENCIES

The situation between Iran and the USA and by extension Canada is somewhat volatile. There is a small chance that rules for Canadian travelers may change if diplomacy and reason fail and the relationship deteriorates. Then there is also the unappealing possibility that while you are judging whether or not to support this project the US moves forward with a bombing campaign against Iran.

What I here suggest, after consultation with David Poole of Media Arts at the Council, is that the work is still judged according to a normal criteria. I will adjust the study/work to fit the evolving circumstances, either traveling at a later date, or making the piece more about Iranians in Canada, and about the geopolitical situation – all yet in terms of the conceptualizations laid out in this original proposal.

