

No One Knows About Totalitarianism

A review of “No One Knows about Persian Cats”

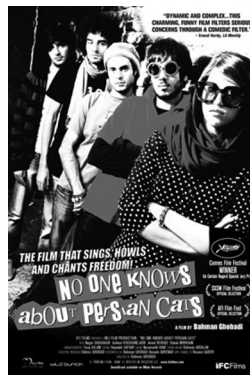
By Yiftach Ofek

“No One Knows about Persian Cats” is a film about

Tehran’s underground western music scene. Its plotline is simple. Not much happens. Ashkan and his girlfriend Negar are a teenage couple who front the alternative rock band “Persian Cats”. They try to recruit more musicians while planning a tour outside Iran. With the help of Nader, a fellow musician and local “contrabandist”, they explore various bands around Tehran, all while attempting to obtain fake passports. The couple explores unusual locations for band practices, in assorted locales ranging from construction sites to animal barns, where the cows are treated to a musical spectacle.

The pace of the movie quickens near the end, when armed policemen invade the apartment where a party was taking place. Ashkan, fleeing the policemen, throws himself out of the window. We do not know what happens to him. Hearing about it, Negar also throws herself off a balcony. We do not know what happens to her either. But the movie has no intention of tying up loose ends. Portraying life in modern Iran without these loose ends would be impossible. To understand why, we need to keep in mind that this type of music, played under these specific conditions, is not a mere aesthetic pursuit. It is a political statement. “No One Knows about Persian Cats” is a powerful exposure of the nature of totalitarianism, and the people who live under its regime. It cannot be seen as anything less.

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As opposed to being driven purely by a story, this movie is instead driven by its realism, cinematography, and naturally, its soundtrack. Resembling the abrupt documentary style employed in Christopher Guest films and television shows like “The Office” or “Modern Family”, the camera-work gives the film an air of realism that further empowers its message, made all the more powerful by the subtlety of its exposition. Totalitarianism is never explicitly discussed, merely alluded to.

In a powerful scene, Ashkan and Negar drive through the streets of Tehran with a Labrador retriever puppy in Ashkan’s lap. They suddenly get pulled over by a policeman who the viewer cannot fully see. When Negar asks the policeman what the problem is, he informs her that it is forbidden to drive with dogs in the car, and demands that she surrender the dog to him. Ashkan and Negar resist, but eventually the policeman takes the dog. Again, we are left not knowing the dog’s fate. We only know that the dog was taken away by the faceless power that upholds the law. Such is totalitarianism. Such is modern Iran.

The film was directed by Iranian-Kurdish director Bahman Ghobadi, who directed the much-acclaimed “Turtles Can Fly” in 2004, the first film produced in post-liberation Iraq. At the time, many reviewers in the West could not help noting the mildly-articulated yet prominent pro-American stance of that film, depicting as it did the suffering of the Kurdish community under Saddam Hussein’s Ba’ath Party. While focusing on the Kurds, Ghobadi exposed to Western eyes the people who suffered under authoritarian rule. Similarly, in “Persian Cats”, Ghobadi brings to our attention an element often missing from our discourse about Iran. By that I mean

that although surely Ghobadi's criticism is directed against Iranian tyranny, I wonder whether some his criticism was directed against the West's recent ambivalence toward the totalitarian phenomenon.

Such criticism, of course, would not be unfounded. After all, wasn't totalitarianism *passé*? We seemed to have abandoned the question of totalitarianism long ago. The collapse of the Berlin Wall, the international military campaigns against nationalist aggression in Iraq and the Balkans, the peace processes in Northern Ireland and the Middle East, the expansion of NATO and the solidification of the European Union, all pushed studies of totalitarianism out of vogue. We had other things to concentrate on. Now that the democratic West won over the tyrannical East, we could focus on expanding democracy ever more. We could focus on

things like "recognition" of differences and minorities, and accepting the "others" in our midst.

But while we were busy celebrating our victory, did we forget the moral gulf that separated democratic government from a tyrannical one? As Paul Berman pointed out in his excellent 2003 book "Terror and Liberalism", totalitarianism continued to reign and thrive under our unwatchful eyes. Paradoxically, we were so busy celebrating the "other" that we allowed ourselves to be blinded to the moral plight of fellow human beings. In other words, we forgot that totalitarianism still existed in the world. It is this lesson that Ghobadi teaches us in respect to Iran. There are people there like us. They are not nameless "others". They listen and play music that is like ours. They deserve a better life. **Q**



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