Interpretive Polarization in the Analysis of Iranian Governmental Murals: Between Cultural Continuity and Visual Authoritarianism

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Abstract

This paper examines the significant interpretive polarization that currently characterizes scholarly discourse over Iranian government murals. The majority of existing literature reveals a dominant Culture-Centric perspective that decodes such paintings through Shi'i iconography and themes of sacrifice, viewing them as genuine cultural phenomena that promote national-religious identity. Consequently, mainstream academic discourse often relies on internal cultural semantics, creating a blind spot regarding the murals' ideological undertones. Conversely, the marginal Power-Centric/Critical paradigm analyzes these artworks as active mechanisms of state power and visual ideology. This interpretive divide is illustrated through two key case studies: first, child-soldier imagery, which the dominant discourse frames as heroic patriotism, whereas critical scholarship identifies it as a mechanism that normalizes violence, obscures state responsibility, and aligns with coercive mobilization; second, leader portraits, which are hailed in the Culture-Centric approach as icons of spiritual leadership, but viewed in critical literature as manifestations of a cult of personality and visual authoritarianism. Ultimately, this research demonstrates how the hegemony of the Culture-Centric discourse obstructs academia's potential to address issues of power, state agency, and human rights. To overcome both cultural relativism and political reductionism, the paper argues for a more integrative analytical framework that conceptualizes Iranian state murals as a “hegemonic tension space” one that bridges local cultural specificity with the political mechanics of public visibility.

Keywords: Iranian murals, visual culture, visual authoritarianism, martyrdom, thematic analysis

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Introduction

Public mural arts in post-revolutionary Iran represent far more than decorative urban embellishments; they constitute a vital site of state visual discourse and ideological spatial management. Since 1979, the walls of Iranian metropolises, particularly Tehran, have been transformed into dynamic canvases projecting state narratives of martyrdom, anti-imperialism, Shi'i iconography, and political legitimacy. Consequently, these public artworks have attracted significant academic attention across art history, visual culture, sociology, and Middle Eastern studies.

However, a critical review of the scholarly literature reveals a fundamental interpretive cleavage in how these murals are analyzed. On one hand, the dominant discourse employs a Culture-Centric Approach, decoding these paintings through internal cultural semantics, Shi'i theological tropes, and national-religious identity. While providing valuable contextual nuance, this paradigm often risks romanticizing state propaganda and fostering a degree of methodological cultural relativism that overlooks mechanisms of political coercion. On the other hand, an emerging Power-Centric / Critical Approach evaluates these murals against universal human rights paradigms and power theory, conceptualizing them as instruments of visual authoritarianism, indoctrination, and social control.

This interpretive polarization is not merely a theoretical debate; it directly alters the analytical vocabulary used to describe state visuals. Key icons such as large-scale portraits of state leaders or depictions of war-participant minors are framed either as “symbols of spiritual guidance” and “patriotic tributes” or as manifestations of a “cult of personality” and “child soldiery.” The reluctance of mainstream literature to engage with critical terminology has produced a systemic blind spot regarding state agency, power dynamics, and human rights within Iranian visual culture. To address this scholarly divide, this paper investigates the theoretical and methodological roots of this interpretive polarization.

Methodology

The research will rely on qualitative research methods and will apply Thematic Analysis in uncovering and coding thematic patterns in existing scholarly literature regarding Iranian murals.

Source Selection and Screening: A full set of basic texts such as books and scholarly journals was considered. And the primary units of analysis were the interpretative propositions and specialized vocabularies used to articulate the function and semiotics of the artworks. Following the textual review, initial codes were extracted and organized into two overarching macro-categories based on their theoretical foundations:

Culture-Centric Themes (View I): Themes that might include national or religious definitions of self, Shiite iconography in the form of stories such as Ashura, and political continuity.

Power-Centric/Critical Themes (View II): Ideas related to social control mechanisms, ideological propaganda, and universal frameworks of human rights.

Validation through Expert Interviews: To further enhance the bipartite model and make the findings more contemporary, a stage of cross-validation through in-depth interviews was performed with experts in the field in the year 2025. This step allowed for an explanation of a

terminology difference between the two approaches, in relation to such key terms as “child soldiery” and “patriotic tribute.”

View I: The Culture-Centric Approach (The Context-Based Approach [1])

This view believes that any study of contemporary Iranian murals must be rooted in the culture, traditions and customs, behaviors, and local semantic frameworks of Iran. According to this group, the interpretation of an artwork approaches veracity only when assessed from within the value system of its creators and audience.

> Contemporary Iranian murals are a reflection of traditional and religious beliefs of Iranians; the perception of people and audiences inside Iran, due to national-religious views and beliefs, is different and sometimes contradictory to the views of others. These ‘others’ are people from other countries and sometimes Iranians (diaspora) who have immigrated. (M. Stephan-Emmrich, personal communication, October 29, 2025)

This perspective primarily focuses on Iranian Tradition and Culture, viewing the artwork within a specific framework of “Visual Culture.” Proponents emphasize the necessity of studying works within the framework of Iran's cultural context. The meaning and function of the murals are seen as inseparable from the unique history and societal norms of Iran.

> The themes of the murals speak to deep beliefs in Iranian society, both old religious beliefs - in particular the centrality of the notion of martyrdom in Shia Islam, going back to the quintessential martyr, Imam Hossein, Killed at the Battle of Karbala - and more recent political beliefs - notably the martyrdom of hundreds of thousands of Iranians in the Islamic Revolution and the subsequent Iran-Iraq war. In fact, it is the merging of these two sets of belief that is at the core of the mural's message. (Rolston, 2018, p. 3)

Religious/Cultural Interpretation: In this view, the depiction of figures of the Islamic Republic's leaders is regarded primarily as a religious work, rather than a political statement. This is because the position of leadership in Iran's governmental structure is inseparable from religious personae, and honoring them is an act of deference to a Shi'a theological and jurisprudential tradition.

Tribute to Patriotism: Concerning murals related to those killed in the war, these researchers interpret the purpose of the works as a tribute to the high degree of sacrifice and patriotism demonstrated by these individuals and their families. In this framework, the emphasis on valor and defense of the homeland takes precedence over any potential negative connotations.[2]

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[1] It can also be said to be context-based because some artists produce their works due to social and economic choices that are created within the same socio-cultural context.

[2] The first perspective, categorized as the Culture-Centric or Context-based approach, is extensively reflected in a significant body of existing literature. This interpretative framework, which prioritizes an “authentic” understanding of these works within their local semantic context, can be clearly observed in the studies of Kamali (2006), Chehabi and Christia (2008), Baniasadi (2013), Bombardier (2017), Ahmadi and Taheri (2021), Zarabadi (2016), Marzolph (2013) and Karimi (2017). The works of these researchers exemplify this tendency to view murals as tools for socio-political expression, rather than focusing on the critical mechanisms of political control or systemic oppression.

In essence, this approach attempts to achieve an authentic, contextual understanding of artistic phenomena by avoiding imported or universal concepts.

> The mural arts of Tehran comprise one of the most tactical and long-lasting visual efforts aimed at promoting martyrdom, and especially martyrs of the Iran Iraq War. Several stories high and placed on the walls of reinforced concrete buildings lining thoroughfares or placed on major traffic nodes, these murals typically depict a specific martyr and include his basic biographical information. The murals sometimes also include a variety of recognizable Islamic signs, like the Shia hand standard and the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, or other religious or contextual symbols. They promote martyrdom as a heroic feat, as an act of bravado, and as a religiously consecrated pursuit of self-annihilation. In sum, these murals provide a compendium of highly charged pictorial hagiographies distributed throughout the Iranian capital city. (Gruber, 2008, p. 27)

View II: The Power-Centric/Critical Approach (The Analysis of Iranian Murals as a Mechanism of Social Control)

In contrast, the second perspective analyzes these works using a comprehensive and normative framework, arguing that when studying art, universal values and internationally recognized standards cannot be ignored. According to this view, Iranian governmental mural has become a tool for reinforcing authoritarianism, in conflict with values such as human rights and a free society.

- Prioritizing Human Rights: In this perspective, attention to freedom of expression, the defense of children's rights, women's rights, and human rights must not be overshadowed by the pretext of “attention to culture.” They argue that cultural criteria should not become tools to legitimize the violation of these fundamental principles.
- Cultural diversity: This perspective emphasizes the need to study works in light of subcultures and the dominant culture. The goal is to understand the culture of different sectors, not just what the state presents as culture.
- Critical analysis of power structures: This view tends to analyze state-sponsored murals in terms of concepts of power and control. That is, ignoring the coercive or propaganda nature of a work distracts academic analysis from its primary mission.

This opinion criticizes Group I for not fully understanding the relationship between art and power, viewing their approach as academically insufficient in addressing the manipulative functions of governmental art.

Dr. Judith Albrecht who believes in the second view, says about the first view:

> It's a new form of Orientalism. You know, it's the reproduction and re-enactment of Orientalism because now Western disciplines and universities are still “othering” a country like Iran. There is still this process of “othering” in it. I think it's a weird combination of an unpolitical stance, some disciplinary biases that are still extremely Eurocentric and don't understand the complex context or don't want to include it and think they can do without it. I don't think they can. (J. Albrecht, personal communication, December 15, 2025)

Michel Foucault emphasizes that power is not just a physical force but a form of “action upon actions.” In his seminal essay, he notes: “Power relations are rooted deep in the social nexus,

not reconstructed above society as a supplementary structure... a society without power relations can only be an abstraction" (Foucault, 1982, p. 791). From the perspective of View II, the state-sponsored murals are not mere cultural reflections, but active mechanisms of power that seek to direct the conduct of citizens and legitimizing a totalitarian government.

The Core Conflict: Accusations of Self-Censorship and Disregard for Documentation

The height of this conflict lies in the accusation of academic self-censorship leveled by View II against View I. The critical view claims that View I, through conscious omission, refrains from using essential and necessary academic terms in describing the phenomena. Some of these terms include:

- "Cult of Personality" when describing murals of leaders.
- "Child Soldiery" in the analysis of murals depicting children killed in the war.
- "Dictatorship" in analyzing the structure supporting these works.

View II believes that disregarding these concepts and turning a blind eye to official and investigative reports from human rights organizations strips the articles of their critical and realistic dimension, inadvertently placing them in service of the official narrative.

> Specifically when it comes to art history and specific disciplines, the discipline is performed in a very unpolitical way. Researchers have a specific bias, and because of this bias, they don't even see what they are reproducing. They are incapable of seeing that they are reproducing a specific censorship. [...] So there is a crucial problem of cultural relativism in it. Cultural relativism is something that is not serving the cause. I mean, cultural relativism should help to understand a culture on its own terms, but it shouldn't mean that you are not looking into the historical and political context. You cannot just exclude that. And I think this is happening. This is why people create these kinds of texts, and you will find a reproduction of propaganda from Iran reproduced by researchers outside of Iran. (J. Albrecht, personal communication, December 15, 2025)

The interpretive polarization observed in the analysis of murals signifies a deeper challenge within the realm of contemporary Iranian Art History, the dimensions of which are not merely aesthetic or cultural. In fact, the fundamental dispute over how an official artwork should be classified within the History of Revolutionary Art—whether it is a piece with deep religious/ritualistic roots or an official and ideological art—inevitably transcends disciplinary boundaries and leads to a larger theoretical challenge in Iranian art history and political science.

However, the difference between the two sets of literature is further emphasized by their different focus of analyses as well as their objectives. The Culture-Centric Approach (View I) focuses more on the internal elements of the murals, such as the use of Shiite iconography (including notions of "Ashura" or "martyrdom") as well as national-religious symbolism (including calligraphy). The outcome of such analyses will commonly evaluate the continuity of the works within mural traditions, with the objective of determining the use of the artwork as a tool of cultural communications for messaging within a controlled social environment.

By contrast, the Critical Approach Based on Universal Values (View II) focuses its content analysis more specifically on issues that relate more closely to political ideology and the issues of power. Primarily, their focus centers on issues such as the image of war, terrorism,

and their ideals that threaten world unity, directly opposing the beliefs of individual rights, promoting hostility towards others, including Western countries, as well as images of females being presented with stereotypes or limitations. This group would argue with a critical focus, as their methodology would clearly note, conceptualize, and critique images that support violence, discrimination against genders, as well as the suppression of beliefs that are often supported through human rights documents. Thus, their second objective would seek to show how such public art works would often advocate or depict ideals that contradict human rights in the public realm.

Painting of the Leaders of the Islamic Republic From Two Points of View

In Figure 1, we see the face of the Leader of the Islamic Republic. The interpretive conflict becomes most apparent when analyzing the pervasive and large-scale images of the Iranian leader in contemporary urban environments.

View I identifies such murals using the original term “symbol of leadership/imam,” which is consistent with Shiite artistic traditions as well as the spiritual legitimacy (marja'yah) of leadership. This group regards the portrait images as continuing religious/allegorical representations, as they believe that the purpose of the images lies in promotion of national-religious identity, as well as providing a moral example for society. They see the grand scale and multiplicity as implying the person's spiritual, intellectual, as well as omnipresent, impact on culture. This reading is, first of all, based on the Islamic-Iranian Cultural Studies. This view, when it comes to the political aspects of these works, sees them as a form of religious propaganda to strengthen the government.

Emphasizing this context-based religious interpretation, Prof. Dr. Manja Stephan-Emmrich explicitly noted during our interview:

> Here in the department, in religious studies, we view the Leader of Iran, Ayatollah Khamenei, primarily as a ‘religious figure.’ Framing this character strictly as an oppressive figure or dictator in scholarly research is an error stemming from the biases and prejudices of opponents of the Islamic Republic. (M. Stephan-Emmrich, personal communication, October 29, 2025)

This statement clearly illustrates how View I prioritizes internal theological legitimacy and religious authority (marja'iyyah) over political critique, framing anti-regime or critical perspectives as external political biases rather than valid analytical frameworks.

On the other hand, View II disagrees with the local religious perspective, as they see this artwork as a “cult of personality” in itself. A cult of personality is defined as the conscious use of symbolism intended to create a superhuman and sacred image of the leader, usually aiming to present an idealized, irreproachable, and uncriticizable image of the state.

View II asserts that the massive size and number of such artworks, likening them to historical figures such as Saddam Hussein or Joseph Stalin, mean ideological control as well as the silencing of other voices within the visual culture of the city. The primary finding of View II is that this artwork represents Visual Authoritarianism, contravening the civil rights of cities requiring an open and critical visual culture, rooted in Critical Cultural Studies and Power Theory.

Figure 1
Unfinished Portrait of Iranian Leaders

Note. Photograph by the author (2015).

WAR-Participant Child Murals From Two Views

This conflict in perspective is evident in the analysis of murals depicting "child martyrs" from the war (Figure 2). View I (Culture-Centric Approach) offers a reading in which these paintings represent a "Tribute to Patriotism," emphasizing the great sacrifice and courage shown by these individuals and their families. This view recognizes these paintings as a means to achieve a "genuine cultural expression derived from Shiite symbolism and nationalist/religious values," intended to create a "moral example for society, rather than a means to impose repression."

Dr. Paola Rivetti believes that since children in Iran volunteer to go to the war fronts, it is better not to use the term child-soldier:

> Children have to go to school, you know, they don't have to go to the war fronts. But do not use this term. The way in which you can express your opposition to a certain phenomenon, to state propaganda really, is about, for instance, highlighting how families have been, you know, how many families have lost children who went to the war fronts. so you can talk about the impact of state propaganda, and you can talk about the negative or the social cost of state propaganda. But do not say it's bad because it depends-I mean, you know, for some people it's not bad, it's actually a good thing to do. (P. Rivetti, personal communication, December 16, 2025)

View II (Critical Approach), rather, assesses these paintings by applying a definition within a human rights paradigm, titled "Child Soldiery," focusing on a critique that these paintings perpetuate values incompatible with international human rights charters relating to the protection of children's rights, seeing these as mechanisms of controlling society and implementing a form of "visual authoritarianism" to promote an "ideological state" message

through the glorification of violence. In the second view, if mural art ignores the systematic victimization of children, the risk of these acts being repeated in the future increases.

Albrecht argues that under a totalitarian system the idea of "free will" becomes empty, since the whole visual and educational environment (murals and textbooks included) is designed to brainwash the child. As a result, the idea of an "individual being a volunteer" becomes utterly irrelevant to social engineering and propaganda influence, and it shifts the accountability for an event to the child and/or their families rather than to the state that led them to their death. This approach risks reducing "systematic state policies" to "the inevitable costs of war," effectively obscuring the agency of the state in exploiting children (J. Albrecht, personal communication, December 15, 2025).

Figure 2

A Mural of a 13-Year-Old Soldier Killed in the War

Note. Photograph by Christiane Gruber (2008), Visual Anthropology, 21(2), p. 27.

Conflicting Academic Views

Therefore, in the analysis of contemporary Iranian governmental murals, there emerges a deep polarization in the interpretation among academicians that goes beyond any form of aesthetic difference, thus posing a constitutive question to the basic categorization of post-revolutionary artwork as such. Academia remains divided between a Culture-Centric Approach (View I), which formulates its interpretation along the principles of Shi'ite iconography, thus interpreting the murals as a form of authentic cultural practices, (and in the political arena, sees it as propaganda to gain power, not a tool of repression)[3] and a Critical Approach (View II), which formulates its interpretation along the principles of universal human rights, thus condemning the murals as a form of visual authoritarianism.

This polarization of opinion reaches its peak with a basic debate within academia over terminology, as exemplified in Group I's reluctance to employ any term such as “Cult of Personality” or “Child Soldiery” due to the risk of adopting a critical or subversive stance toward the state.

Consequently, the experts studying the murals in Iran can be classified into two types:

1. Those who see Iranian governmental murals (such as paintings of Iranian leaders, martyrs, etc.) as a form of cultural expression, which have a religious/political function.
2. Those who see Iranian governmental murals as political propaganda to silence dissent and support the oppressive government.

The second approach (Power-Centric) also faces methodological and interpretive challenges despite its capacity to expose mechanisms of political control. Reducing all visual elements and traditional symbols solely to “a tool of repression for a totalitarian system” may lead to overlooking the profound aesthetic layers, historical connections, and sincere beliefs of an audience that perceives these works beyond a mere political statement, viewing them as part of their religious life-world. In fact, just as View I may be accused of “cultural relativism”, View II is at risk of “political reductionism.” By imposing universal standards and imported frameworks, this approach may fail to grasp the “internal” meaning of the artwork for local actors, thereby defining the agency of both the artist and the audience exclusively within the confines of power structures.

Regarding the research conducted on Iranian mural art, a crucial point must be noted: the Culture-Centric Approach (View I) represents the dominant discourse within the academic and research environment.[4] With only a few exceptions, scholars operating within academic

[3] In the first perspective, although the presence of political aspects in government murals is not ignored, these works are analyzed simply as a form of propaganda to strengthen the state and promote national-religious identity. Proponents of this approach see the propaganda in these works as a tool for “political communication” in a controlled social environment, but avoid identifying this art as a mechanism for reproducing oppression, discrimination, or a tool for consolidating a totalitarian system.

[4] The designation of View I as the “dominant discourse” is based on a comprehensive review of the existing literature cited in this study. It has become apparent throughout the course of this investigation that Iranian government-approved mural paintings have generally been viewed by a significant volume of existing scholarly writings cited throughout this study—by Kamali in 2006, Chehabi and Christia in 2008, Baniasadi in 2013, Bombardier in 2017, Ahmadi and Taheri in 2021, Zarabadi in 2016, Marzolph in 2013, and Karimi in 2017—as cultural expressions or tools of political propaganda. Essentially, no significant volume of existing scholarly writings has established a broad theme regarding such mural artworks specifically pertaining to mechanisms related to the regulation or promotion of oppression within a totalitarian system. In addition, the specific critical

institutions interpret Iranian governmental murals as a natural reflection of Iranian customs, beliefs, and lifestyle, as well as the country's mode of governance. Rather than identifying these works as tools for reinforcing and legitimizing an oppressive regime, the prevailing body of literature as evidenced by published articles in this field—largely views them through the lens of authentic cultural expression.

Conclusion

To avoid both “cultural relativism” and “political reductionism,” this paper proposes that Iranian state murals should be analyzed as a “hegemonic tension space.” In this framework, the artwork is more than either a truthful likeness of culture or a mere technical apparatus of repression; it is, rather, a realm in which “the religious beliefs of the audience” are entwined with “the political will of the state.”

Acknowledging this complexity allows concepts such as “personality cult” or “child soldier” to be examined not merely as political labels, but as critical categories in analyzing how “faith” is transformed into “ideology” within urban visual space. By bridging local cultural specificity with the political mechanics of public visibility, this integrative approach opens new avenues for evaluating state-sponsored art without diminishing either cultural nuance or political critique.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

During the preparation of this work, the author used Gemini (Google AI) and Grammarly in order to edit language, refine academic grammar, and format the structure according to conference guidelines. After using these tools, the author reviewed and edited the content as needed. The author further declares that no other AI or AI-assisted technologies have been used to generate content in writing the manuscript. The ideas, design, procedures, findings, analyses, and discussion are originally written and derived from the careful and systematic conduct of the research, and the author retains full responsibility for the integrity and content of the publication.

terminology highlighted by View II—such as “Cult of Personality” or “Child Soldiery”—is entirely absent from the aforementioned sources, further confirming the hegemony of the culture-centric paradigm in current academic circles.

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