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An Analysis of Iconic and Pure Abstractions in Animated Adaptations *of Shahnameh*

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Abstract

Formal abstraction is a stylistic approach to various modes of representations that moves between the poles of reality and (pure) abstract and can be part of analysing any form of visual arts. The formalistic methods and the level of abstraction that an artist employs in embodying a concept can offer interesting artistic possibilities and have an impact on the process of meaning-makings and forms of engagement with the artwork. An instance of this is the various stylistic approaches to the animated adaptations of *Shahnameh*, the canonical Iranian epic poem written by Ferdowsi in 1010 AD. From the first decades of animation's foundation in Iran, this ancient text has been a source of various re-makings. Despite a good number of animated adaptations based on *Shahnameh*, there has been a shortage of documenting these artworks as well as a lack of academic studies and practices, particularly on the topic of their adopted animation designs. For example, all former adaptations have maintained representational tendencies and avoided recreating *Shahnameh's* narratives in purely abstracted forms. Thus, this research aims to study the artistic, meaning-making, engagement possibilities of 'iconic' and 'pure abstracted' forms of animation (two formal potentialities within the abstraction continuum) in conveying some of *Shahnameh's* narratives and contents. This thesis will conduct textual analyses, including case studies, to define iconic and pure abstraction and critically and creatively analyse the impact of iconic abstraction on some of the formerly animated adaptations of *Shahnameh*. Next, to address the gap in the practice, by conducting a reflective practical-based methodology, it will experiment with more pure forms of abstraction in visualising and conceptualising this text. Finally, based on their level of familiarity with *Shahnameh*, employing a semi-structured (interview) method, it will examine five animation experts' responses to and engagements with this text in abstract forms of animation. The result of this study will expand on the stylistic possibilities of iconic abstraction in animation practices. It will validate McCloud's (1993) model (of amplification through simplification) through an examination of iconic stylisations in the animated adaptations of *Shahnameh*. Additionally, it will suggest that the openness and ambiguity of purely abstracted styles of animation can enhance the inclusion of audiences regardless of their levels of affinity with an adapted narrative and offer unconventional, unexpected, and novel perspectives for explorations, where the spectators significantly impact the meaning-making process. These can lead to a deeper understanding of a cultural text and more interpretive and open ways of engaging with its narrative space. On this basis, the formalistic choices made in animation design should be taken into account when reconstructing a cultural narrative since such possibilities can help the adaptation process by amplifying the understanding of the narrative's meanings and providing creative spaces to experience it anew.

Guidelines for Accessing Supplementary Animations

This thesis contains two supplementary animations produced in 2020, *Rostam & Esfandiar* (2:50 minutes in length) and *The Emergence of Zahhak* (5:11 minutes in length). These animations are original artworks created as part of the practice-based method conducted in this study and as the accompanying components for chapters 4 and 5. These videos are available on a USB drive in the university's library. To access these files please contact John Paul II Library, Maynooth University. Additionally, these artworks are available through the online links below:

- The animated short, *Rostam & Esfandiar* can be retrieved using the link and password below:
 - ***Rostam & Esfandiar (2020)***
 - Link: <https://vimeo.com/477728823>
 - Password: *Rostam2020*

- Due to the use of an original piece of music (by Shahram Nazeri), *The Emergence of Zahhak* has a fair use copyright access. This animation is a non-commercial production with the sole purpose of scholarly studies and practices of animation, and it should not be copied or shared without permission. The animated short, *The Emergence of Zahhak* can be retrieved using the link and password below:
 - ***The Emergence of Zahhak (2020)***
 - Link: <https://vimeo.com/493297958>
 - Password: *Zahhak2020*

To access the production materials of these animations (script, mood board, storyboard, and still images from the final projects) and other practical tests conducted during the course of this PhD please check the appendices section.

***“He who has knowledge has power
Knowledge makes an old heart young”***

“Shahnameh, 10”

(Translated by Omidshahar, 2011, p. 79)

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background to the Research

This PhD research was shaped by my fascination, as an Iranian animation artist and scholar, with the spirit and essence of *Shahnameh*, the Iranian national epic poem written by Ferdowsi (1010 AD), a cultural narrative with potential for adaptation into animated forms. While studying an MA in Animation at Tehran University of Art, I often came across various discussions from fellow animators and lecturers on the potentiality of adaptation and a lack of artistic experiments and high-quality productions of animations based on Iranian Literary works such as *Shahnameh*. I myself remember seeing only a few animations based on this text before starting my research. I was curious to document the animated adaptations of *Shahnameh* and examine how these artworks benefited from the possibilities of the animation medium in their adaptation process. As an animation scholar and practitioner, I was also interested in exploring other creative stylistic ways not explored so far for animation adaptations of this poem. This desire to look into previous approaches and further possibilities of remaking *Shahnameh* in animated forms were the starting points for conducting this study.

Growing up like many Iranians, I learned about some of *Shahnameh's* stories, mostly in prose. Back then, because of the significant size of this poem and its old literary language, I only read a few pieces from its original poetic format. When starting this research, I had the opportunity to explore *Shahnameh* in its original form and gain a better understanding of its rich underlying contents. Learning about the depth of this ancient narrative inspired me to study its adaptations in animated forms while examining how some of the underlying concepts of *Shahnameh's* narratives were meaningfully and creatively conveyed, through the design and styles of these artworks. Among sixteen animations that I could document for this thesis, I found several instances which acquired unique formal styles reflecting some of the underlying contents of their adopted narratives. I categorised the formal design of

these animated adaptations as different versions of “iconic abstraction”, a term applied by Scott McCloud (McCloud, 1993, pp. 50–51, 2022; *Scott McCloud, Cartoonist: iconic abstraction*, 2018), the renowned American cartoonist and comics theorist, who used it to describe formal styles that abstract reality in order to amplify intended meanings.

I also realised that although all these animated adaptations are abstracted from reality to some extent, they still maintained representational, figurative, and narrative-oriented¹ approaches. At this stage and as a researcher/practitioner of animation, I was keen on exploring *Shahnameh* through non-figurative and abstracted forms of animation since I believed some of the underlying concepts of this poem are abstracted and symbolic in nature. I was also curious to see how audiences familiar or unfamiliar with *Shahnameh* would comprehend and respond to such abstract formal approaches. Considering that previous examples of such stylisations were not found during the course of this PhD, I speculated that, possibly due to the educational purposes and canonical position of *Shahnameh*, experimental and abstracted animations as a sort of incompatible, inappropriate, or unfaithful approaches were avoided. I was interested to see how viewers with cultural affinity as well as less familiar spectators might respond to the outcomes if this poem was re-made using abstract animations. I believed this exploration could offer some interesting insights for adaptations of cultural texts such as *Shahnameh* where less conventional, expected designs were employed.

Therefore, the goal of this thesis has been to explore the notions of iconic and pure abstraction² in recreating *Shahnameh*'s stories into animated forms. Here, I examine the meaning-making, artistic, and engagement possibilities of iconic, and pure abstract designs and stylizations. I argue that these formal approaches (visualisation and animations) have assisted and can assist, meaningfully and creatively, in recreating some of *Shahnameh*'s stories and communicating some of their underlying meanings. By expanding on the design possibilities of the animation

¹ - In the context of this thesis refers to the structure of an animated film that follows a narrative or linear narrative format

² - The notions of abstraction, iconic abstraction, and pure abstraction will be analysed in detail in Chapter 2

medium, which fall under categories of iconic and pure abstraction, this thesis contributes to the field of animation studies and practices. Furthermore, it will contribute to the adaptation studies and studies of *Shahnameh* by documenting and examining the animation adaptations of this Iranian national epic poem.

1.2 Introduction to the Research

Shahnameh, the book of kings, is an epic poem that is considered to be the most significant Iranian national epic in existence. This poem is written by Iranian poet, Abu I Qasem Ferdowsi³ who devoted more than thirty years of his life to finishing this work in 1010 AD (Khaleghi Motlagh, 2015, p. 29). Ferdowsi wrote *Shahnameh* during the Islamic dynasties of Samanid and Ghaznavid⁴ (ibid), however, the historical time frame of *Shahnameh's* stories falls in the pre-Islamic era of Iran, centuries before he lived. This poem is the story of the Iranian ancient legendary kings and heroes starting from the first man-king (Kayumars) and the foundation of Iran, to the fall of the last Persian empire of Sassanid⁵ by Arabs in 651 AD (Davis, 2007, p. 14). *Shahnameh's* stories start with a significant mythological theme, then develop a greater epic-heroic base and move towards its end while acquiring a historical⁶ tone (Khaleghi Motlagh, 2015).

Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* is, in fact, an adaptation of previous sources including other *Shahnameh* in prose and poetry (e.g. *Shahnameh* of Abū Mansūr), which were based on the pre-Islamic epic traditions (e.g. *Khudāynāmag*⁷) (Omidshar, 2011; Manteghi,

³ - Abu I Qasem Ferdowsi was born in a dehqan family, a member of a class of gentry, in 940 AD, in a village in the vicinity of Tus (Davis, 2007, p. 19). Ferdowsi considered being "a highly educated poet ... (whose) ... lifetime falls in the peak period of Islam's intellectual activities" (Omidshar, 2011, pp. 6–22). Part of his life was during the reign of Samanids (Axworthy, 2008, p. 86) who were supporting the revival of Persian language, culture, and literature.

⁴ - Two Muslim dynasties that ruled over Iran

⁵ - The last pre-Islamic dynasty that ruled over Iran

⁶ - It is important to note that, even though some of the events and figures from *Shahnameh* might be traceable in history, they have been placed in a fictional framework (Aydenloo, 2015, p. 35)

⁷ - During the reign of Sassanid and after centuries of Zoroastrianism (ancient pre-Islamic religion of Iran) dominating Iran's ideology and policy, a historical and epic tradition originated from *Avesta* (the collection of Zoroastrian religious texts) emerged (Manteghi, 2018, p. 25). This tradition was the report of "Iranian kings and heroes' account" (Omidshar, 2011, p. 36) in a combination of mythology, legend, and history (ibid). These stories possibly under the Sassanid king "Khosrow I, Anūshīrvān (531–579 AD)" (ibid) were collected and written down in form of "a Middle Persian book called *Khudāynāmag*, meaning the Book of Lords/Kings" (ibid). This text is known to be the resource for what later was established as the genre of epic poetry and its masterpieces in the New Persian

2018). Still, his work achieved a canonical status due to its literary brilliance and its role in restoring the pre-Islamic Persian cultural heritage and language. It contains various engaging stories and personas throughout “49488 verses⁸” (Khaleghi Motlagh, 2015, p. 34), opening with a preface and then describing the “fifty-eight Iranian kingdoms” (ibid) that are subsets under four empires of Pishdadian, Kayanian⁹, Parthian¹⁰, and Sassanids (see Figure 1). Some of the substantial stories of *Shahnameh* include; the story of Jamshid (one of the mightiest mythological kings of *Shahnameh* who is given immense glory by God yet loses his divine power and fortune due to arrogance), the tale of Zal (the mythical hero who is born with white hairs and is fostered by Simorgh, a mythical divine bird), the story of Zakhak (a tyrant king who has two snakes on his shoulders and rules over Iran for 1000 years), the tale of Rostam and Esfandiar (the unfortunate encounter between the most significant Iranian legendary hero, Rostam and the Iranian sacred immortal prince, Esfandiar in a doomed battle), and many more. Such literary, cultural, and historical positions make *Shahnameh* a suitable text for new adaptations to extend its accessibility, sustain its cultural capital, and offer creative retellings of these narratives.

language. Omidsalar (2011, p. 37) believes that *Khudāynāmag* was a “genre of epic literature” rather than a single book.

⁸ - The version of *Shahnameh* edited by Khaleghi Motlagh (2015) which has been used for this research contains 49488 verses. However, Khaleghi Motlagh speculates that the original writing probably contained 49500 verses (ibid, p.34).

⁹ - Pishdadian and Kayanian were fictional replacements for the historical dynasties of Median and Achaemenid (Yarshater, 1983b; Daryaei, 2006)

¹⁰ - A pre-Islamic dynasty that ruled over Iran

Pishdadian	Kayanian	Parthian	Sassanids
Kayumars	Kay Qobad	Aršak	Ardashir I
Hushang	Kay Kavus	Shapur	Shapur I
Tahmures	Kay Khosrow	Goudarz	Hurmuzd I
Jamshid	Luhrasp	Bijan	Bahram I
Zahhak	Goshtasp	Narsē	Bahram II
Feraydun	Bahman	Hurmuzd the	Bahram III
Manucehr	Humay (Queen)	great	Narsē
Nozar	Darab	Khosrow	Hurmuzd II
Zav	Dara	Ardawan	Shapur II
	Iskandar	Bahram (Ardawan	Ardashir II
		the great)	Shapur III
			Bahram IV
			Yazdagird I
			Bahram V (Gur)
			Yazdagird II
			Hurmuzd III
			Piruz
			Balash
			Qubad I
			Nushirwan
			Hurmuzd IV
			Khusraw Parviz
			Shirwi
			Ardashir III
			Farayin
			Purandukht (Queen)
			Azarmidukht (Queen)
			Farrukhzad
			Yazdagird III

Figure 1: The *Shahnameh's* table of kings (Robinson, 2002; Khatibi, 2014; Khaleghi Motlagh, 2015)¹¹

From the early years of animation production in Iran, *Shahnameh* has been a source of adaptation, particularly for productions targeting children and teens. In his book, *Animation: A World History: Volume II*, Bendazzi (2016b, p. 378) has marked the foundation of animation in Iran from 1958 with experimental animated works of Jafar Tejaratchi. However, in a more popular account among Iranian animation society, the first animation in Iran, known as *Molla Nasreddin*, was created by Esfandiar Ahmadi in 1957 (Van de Peer, 2017, p. 55). Considering 1957 as the starting point of animation history in Iran, the first animated adaptation based on *Shahnameh* located by this research was created fourteen years after, in 1971. This animation is titled *The Discovery of Fire (Hushang King)* and directed by Nosratolah Karimi. *The Discovery of Fire (1971)* is in the possession of the National Iranian Film House and Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, based in Tehran. I gained access

¹¹ - The writer could only find the names of fifty-seven kings in these sources

to watch this animation on 4th September 2020. While this artwork is not among the case studies of this research, its production information is documented in Chapter 3 (see Figure 24: Table of sixteen documented animations based on *Shahnameh*).

Since 1971 a good number of animated adaptations based on *Shahnameh* have been produced. Yet, there has been a lack of documentation of these artworks, as well as a shortage of academic studies, particularly on the topic of their adopted animation designs and the potentialities of such designs for meaning-making and creative outcomes. This research has found sixteen animations¹² (see Figure 24) based on Ferdowsi's book which were faithful to the essence of their narratives¹³ even if some used creative and free methods of retelling. After analysing these artworks, it was interesting to note that, even though some of these animations acquired a more realistic design, and some employed a more minimal style, all of them stand as variant degrees of iconic abstractions. In these adaptations, the forms are abstracted to an extent to not resemble naturalistic imageries but still suggest clear characterisations, and radically abstracted and experimental forms of animation were avoided (see Figure 4, Hero/King character visualisation from sixteen animation adaptations of *Shahnameh*).

Choosing iconic stylisations which have maintained representational (as well as literal and narrative-oriented) tendencies for the animated adaptations of *Shahnameh* may have happened for a number of reasons. First, it might be related to the fact that most of the previous animation adaptations of *Shahnameh* targeted children, teenagers, and young adults as their key audiences. Hence, it can be anticipated that one of the main purposes of making these animations was educational and to convey *Shahnameh's* narrative and its contents clearly. Second is the cultural weight, position, and sensitivity of *Shahnameh*, which can have an impact on a more conservative approach to the remaking of this text in other forms. Finally, the

¹² - Due to a lack of documentation of animations productions in Iran for public and scholarly access, there may be other instances of animations based on *Shahnameh* that this researcher could not locate during her investigation.

¹³ - This research has only listed the animation adaptations from *Shahnameh* where some of its narratives' aspects (e.g., cultural components) maintained and reconstructed, even if using creative and free approaches, and left out other adaptations which appropriated some of *Shahnameh's* characters in a completely different context or story (e.g., *Run Rostam Run* (2017))

primacy of the stories may be a reason for adapters to avoid an abstract depiction, where the purpose is to offer a retelling of the story primarily while engaging and experiencing the medium's aesthetics is of secondary importance¹⁴.

Yet, *Shahnameh's* stories and figures have a great depth in context and can be diversely interpreted. As mentioned earlier, since *Shahnameh* adopted the ancient narratives and traditions that date back to the centuries before it was written, it carries various cultural information related to the pre-Islamic era of Iran. For example, the presence of Zoroastrianism's (ancient pre-Islamic religion of Iran) ideologies and concepts prevail in various tales of this canonical text. *Shahnameh* is also among the ancient epic texts with dominant mythological themes which look into the foundation of the world, the first human, their beliefs and ideologies, and reflects the ancient humans' beliefs towards the sources of natural phenomena expressed through symbols and signs (Parnian and Bahmani, 2012). Hence, it has significant universal and archetypal themes and concepts¹⁵ and can be positioned as a literary work moving between national collective memory (Zand, 2013) and universal ones (Lewis, 2015). Lewis (ibid, p. 315) titles *Shahnameh* as "world literature" and indicates: "(*Shahnameh* is) ... something—of the national genius, or of the genre they represent—and likely to reward lifelong attention because they grapple in a complex, transcultural and engaging manner with "timeless" big-picture questions relevant to the human condition". Arguably, these underlying contents can be interpreted in various experimental and abstracted ways, positioning *Shahnameh* as a suitable text for non-representational and non-narrative forms of remaking. Here, the abstract stylisation can be another way of exploring this text, different from the previous approaches (in which popular readings and interpretations of *Shahnameh's* tales were recreated).

¹⁴ - It might worth noting that while these adaptations followed a story, in most cases in linear formats, and in one case (*Jamshid: A lament for a myth*) episodic and thematic, some of these animations (*Zaal and Simorgh* (1977) and *Jamshid: A lament for a myth* (2017)) have used creative techniques to reflect and mediate the poetic language of the original texts. These will be examined (for each related case study) in chapter 3. *SHAHNAMEH* IN ICONIC ANIMATED FORMS.

¹⁵ - Some of these concepts will be analysed in the six animated adaptations (case studies of this thesis) as well as the two original animations created during this research in chapters 3 and 4.

This PhD is among a handful of scholarly works that exclusively document animation adaptations of *Shahnameh* to explore the components of their animation designs (see Najmedin and Shahkarami, 2013; Fallah and Baramaki, 2014; Ahuee, 2017; Nili, 2017; Paul, 2020). It is the first scholarly research that documents sixteen animated adaptations of *Shahnameh* and investigates the application of iconic abstraction in some of these artworks. It analyses the artistic and interactive potentialities of iconic forms and explores how such formal choices assisted in conveying some of the cultural and universal contents of *Shahnameh's* narrative. By focusing on the design and stylistic possibilities of media, such as animation, as creative ways of revisiting and renewing ancient text such as *Shahnameh*, this study contributes to animation and adaptation studies and the studies of *Shahnameh*.

Next, the current study explores the pure abstract style for recreating some of *Shahnameh's* stories. Due to the lack of practical examples that could be used to analyse the notion of pure abstraction for remaking *Shahnameh's* narrative, the need for practical components has emerged halfway through the research. Thus, this is a practice-based PhD that involves a shorter written thesis compared to traditional PhDs as it also includes practice components in the forms of two animations (2:50 and 5:11 minutes in length) based on two narrative pieces from *Shahnameh*. These artworks have employed abstracted designs and developed as experiments alongside the theoretical investigations to examine the possibilities of abstract imageries and animations in conveying these adopted narratives, artistically and meaningfully, and studying the audiences' responses and engagements with such artworks. Applying a practice-based method to recreate some narrative pieces from *Shahnameh*, using abstract animation, has allowed the production of first-hand data where none existed. In later stages, it additionally permitted a creative and critical reflection on the potentialities of abstract animations in remaking *Shahnameh*, from both an artist and audiences' standpoints. This led to some of the major findings of this study and a contribution to the studies and practices of animation.

Aside from scholars in the field of animation, adaptation, and *Shahnameh* studies, the findings of this thesis are valuable and useful for animation artists (and possibly practitioners of other time-based media with the capacities of formal abstractions)

who are practising with the design-motion components of their medium as new ways of reinterpreting and recreating ancient narratives such as *Shahnameh*. Additionally, this study should be interesting to anyone keen on creative stylistic and design approaches in reconstructing a text into animated forms. Lastly, the case study and practice-based research conducted in this thesis contribute to the broader body of knowledge by providing methods for examining literary texts in design-motion forms, by developing studies, practices, and adaptation studies of *Shahnameh* (as a significant piece of the world literature), and by making the scholarly research and artistic adaptations of this Persian epic poem accessible on an international scale.

1.3 Overall Research Goal and Specific Objectives

As outlined in the introductory discussion in the previous sections, this thesis responds not only to the shortage of scholarly studies of animation adaptations of *Shahnameh* and the impact of these artworks' stylistic approaches but also to the scarcity of exploration of *Shahnameh's* narrative in pure abstracted forms of animation. This research aims to originally examine through theory, practice, and semi-structured interviews some of the artistic, meaning making, and engagement possibilities that are created as a result of employing iconic and pure forms of abstraction for the adaptation of *Shahnameh*, using the medium of animation. So, it attempts to fill the gap in the above-mentioned literature concerning animation, adaptation, and *Shahnameh* studies.

As this study progressed and my knowledge of *Shahnameh* and its animated adaptations developed, I could categorise various stylistic choices employed in these artworks as different versions of iconic abstraction (an abstraction degree between the poles of reality and pure abstraction, discussed in detail in the next chapter). I could also expand on the different styles of animation which fall under the umbrella term, iconic abstraction, as its various formalistic possibilities. I then narrowed down the research; and focused on the creative, meaning-making, and interactive potentiality of different forms of iconic abstraction in conveying the *Shahnameh* narratives and their contents. This research speculates that such formalistic choices

can meaningfully and creatively assist in an adaptation process and a better understanding of *Shahnameh*, due to their formal qualities (e.g., being reductive and expressive) that can amplify the mood and meanings of an artwork.

Having examined iconic abstraction in the animated adaptations of *Shahnameh* and noticing a constant application of this style (design choices that although abstracted from reality yet remained representational) has led to new objectives in later stages of the research. Purely abstracted animations were an unexamined area offering new stylistic methods for remaking *Shahnameh's* content. Thus, I decided to explore, through practice, the artistic and meaning-making possibilities of abstract animations for recreating *Shahnameh*. Furthermore, I examined several expert audiences' responses to these new artworks to understand how the pure abstracted imageries and motions assisted in embodying the *Shahnameh* narratives artistically and meaningfully and how the spectators were engaged with the outcome.

Hence, the overall goal of this thesis is:

- *to study through textual analysis, practical exploration, and semi-structured interviews the artistic, meaning-making, engagement possibilities of iconic and pure abstracted forms of animation in conveying some of Shahnameh's narratives and content in order to understand human methods of meaning-making in visual-kinetic forms, and develop the research, practices, and adaptation studies of Shahnameh*

The specific objectives of this research stemming from the overall goal are:

- to contextualise the notion of iconic abstraction and pure abstraction for the animation medium and explore the creative, meaning-making, and interactive possibilities of these stylistic choices,
- to research different forms of iconic abstraction employed in some of the existent animated adaptations of *Shahnameh* and understand how these formal and kinetic choices artistically and meaningfully assisted in embodying some of the adopted narrative's contents,

- to explore through practice the artistic, meaning making, and engagement potentialities of abstract animation as a new approach in reconstructing some of *Shahnameh's* stories and content, and
- to examine familiar and less familiar expert audiences' responses to and engagements with *Shahnameh* in abstract forms of animation.

1.4 Significance and Contribution

In this segment, I will try to explain more clearly the significance of this study and its contribution to the field of research and practice of animation and adaptation for animation, in addition to a relatively unexplored area of adaptations of *Shahnameh* in animated forms.

Shahnameh is among canonical and ancient epics written more than one thousand years ago. Today, understanding this text in its original poetic language can be somewhat difficult, even for familiar Persian-speaking readers. From the very first decades of animation foundation in Iran, this book has been a source of various adaptations that could benefit from its rich contents while offering new and possibly more accessible ways of seeing *Shahnameh*. Documenting and looking into the existent animated adaptations of this poem that have employed the design components of their medium to convey and heighten specific concepts can be valuable in understanding the potentiality of animation language for the adaptation of cultural text such as *Shahnameh* and, vice versa, in appreciating the potentiality of *Shahnameh's* content for creative animation adaptations. It is also valuable to practice abstract potentialities of animation design (that remained untouched in the case of *Shahnameh*) to explore how one can exploit them as new ways of thinking about, understanding, revisiting, and experiencing ancient narrative such as *Shahnameh* afresh while provoking a sense of curiosity and engagement with the pre-existing as well as new readers of this text. These new practical explorations of *Shahnameh* in abstract animated forms; additionally address the shortage of practical examples in this area which can be useful for related future academic studies.

Hence, the current thesis attempts to expand these research areas and fill these gaps in both practice and scholarly work. The findings of this study are valuable and useful for animation artists (and possibly practitioners of other time-based media with the capacities of visual abstractions) who are practicing with the design-motion components of their medium as new ways of reinterpreting and recreating ancient narratives such as *Shahnameh*. Scholars in the field of animation, adaptation, and *Shahnameh* studies may find the outcome of this thesis of particular interest. Moreover, this study should be interesting to anyone keen on creative stylistic and design approaches in reconstructing a text into animated forms.

Based on the above discussion, this PhD research contributes to the field of animation studies and practices, adaptation for animation, and *Shahnameh* Studies in several ways:

- by introducing some of the rich contents of *Shahnameh* and understanding some of the potentiality of animation design's components in conveying these concepts artistically and meaningfully, as new ways of seeing, revisiting, and renewing such ancient text, thereby creating new knowledge on the study of *Shahnameh* and its animation adaptations
- by enhancing the understanding of iconic and abstract styles of animation in terms of their artistic, meaning making, and engagement possibilities, hence expanding on the understanding of the design potentialities of the animation medium which has operational value
- by offering additional insights on the responses and engagements of familiar and less familiar readers of *Shahnameh's* when using an abstract style of animation for the remaking of this text, hence offering new knowledge on how abstract animation will be comprehended by different spectators
- by creating a number of original abstract animations based of *Shahnameh* that serve as practical examples for the field of animation/ adaptation practices and studies, and the studies of *Shahnameh*

1.5 Methodology

1.5.1 Introduction

The methodologies designed in this thesis evolved gradually and organically, during the course of this PhD, as a response to the research aims and questions. The overall goal of this study — to explore the artistic, meaning-making, engagement possibilities of iconic and pure abstracted forms of animation in conveying some of *Shahnameh's* narratives and contents — reflected the multi-disciplinary nature of this thesis. While the main focus of this research is on animation studies and practices, it also looks into the disciplines of adaptation and literary (*Shahnameh*) studies. Such characteristics suggested a need for the adoption of various methodologies (explained in the next few pages in detail) that could assist in the understanding and evaluation of the subjects more fully by examining the data from various perspectives. Gray and Malins (2004) propose such research approaches in media arts as “a characteristic of artistic methodology (which is) a pluralist approach using a multi-method technique, tailored to the individual project” (ibid, p. 21).

For the analysis of *Shahnameh*, its narratives, and possibilities for the animation medium, it was necessary to conduct textual analysis in the initial stages to locate the potential research areas, investigate related theories, and pose the questions that this thesis sets to answer. In later stages, to examine the previous animation adaptations based on *Shahnameh*, textual analysis in the form of artwork as case studies was conducted. This is a common practice to understand how the animation medium has contributed to the reconstruction of a narrative and/or to interpret the meanings and ideas in an animated work (for other scholarly studies of animation adopting the same approach see O'Brien, 1996; Lim, 2013; Boguszak, 2014; Macdonald, 2015). This method was also suitable to examine the former stylistic approaches and to find out the untouched stylistic areas for the adaptations of this epic poem into animated forms. A lack of practical examples (abstract animation adaptations of *Shahnameh*) that could effectively demonstrate some of the subjects discussed in this study suggested the need for a reflective practice-based methodology, and the creation of animated artworks by the

researcher. Practice-based methodology was employed in this study since it is an effective approach in animation studies for forming first-hand data where there are unexamined critical and creative areas and a shortage of artworks for such investigations (for similar practice-based research see Lin, 2014; Khajavi, 2017). As mentioned earlier, this study detected pure abstraction as a possible stylistic approach for the adaptation of *Shahnameh* in animated forms and due to a lack of such examples a practice-based method was necessary. Finally, to develop the critical, expert views of the research, understand audiences' forms of engagements and interpretations, and to avoid the criticisms of "over-subjectivity"¹⁶ (Gray and Malins, 2004, p. 105), a semi-structured interview method was applied for the analyses of these practice components. In the following segment, I will expand on the various stages of the study, the methods of data collection, generation, and analysis, and an evaluation of the methodologies applied.

1.5.2 Research Process

This research started with a textual analysis of *Shahnameh* and an understanding of its various stories. Scholarly sources such as the nine volumes of *Name e Bastan* by Kazzazi (2014) were among analysed texts, translating the poetic language of *Shahnameh* into contemporary prose Persian and provided an in-depth study and explanation of its metaphoric and underlying cultural and archetypical concepts, in addition to the surface meanings of this narrative. An interest in comprehending how such underlying ideas and interpretations would be conveyed through animated language, as a potential research area, was developed at this stage. Hence, the next step was to look for the animation adaptations of this canonical poem.

Despite extensive searching, I could not find a source in which animations adaptations of *Shahnameh* were documented. So instead, I researched each case through online sources and direct communications with animation experts in Iran (discussed in more detail in chapter 3). The related information about these

¹⁶ - A common disadvantage of research with practice methods suggested by Gray and Malins (2004, p. 105)

animations was also gathered from different available resources, such as the films' credits, online references, and personal communications. Finding a coherent timeline for these animations' dates were particularly challenging since some of these animations have various and sometime conflicting dates (e.g., production date, first release date, release date), and some only mentioned the date at the end of the film or on a website without specifying if this is the movie production date or release date. The second issue with the dates was, some of these movies share their (production or/and release) year in Persian Calendar's format without specifying the month. So, for instance, the Persian year 1383 can be equivalent to both 2004 and 2005 in the Christian calendar (when the month is not specified). An example is the animated TV series *Stories of Shahnameh* (2004-2005). Hence, the dates listed in this thesis are what the researcher could find from the available sources and calculate and arrange them to the best of her knowledge (see Figure 24).

Later, specific assumptions gradually emerged out of a negotiation between textual analysis of *Shahnameh*, a close reading of the design (visual and animation) components of *Shahnameh's* animated adaptations, and the theoretical investigations (iconic and pure abstractions). Among sixteen animations adaptations collected during the study, six artworks were specified for a comprehensive review, evaluation, and analysis. The selective method applied was "Information Oriented Selection" (Flyvbjerg, 2011, p. 230) which is a strategy for choosing cases "to maximize the utility of information from small samples ... (where) cases are selected on the basis of expectations about their information content" (ibid). After analysing the notion of iconic abstraction in chapter 2, this study has expanded on several animations' styles (of caricatured realism (cartoon), comics/comic art, expressive, stylised, and minimal, discussed in detail in chapter 2) as different formal possibilities of iconic abstraction in animated forms. The six case studies were chosen among sixteen animations based on *Shahnameh* since each has represented one or more of the above-mentioned iconic styles, as well as having a better production quality compared to the rest. Here, I chose these six samples since, I believed their stylistic and design methods could offer more efficient data for the related theoretical examinations and be a better fit with the

assigned criteria for evaluation; related to the research objectives and questions. Additionally, I aimed to limit the scope of the study in order to make it achievable within the timeframe of a doctoral programme.

At this stage, I have analysed the underlying concepts of *Shahnameh's* narratives adopted in the six case studies of this thesis to understand the rich underlying contents of these texts. I then closely read the design (visual and animation) components of each animation to comprehend how some of those underlying narratives' concepts were conveyed, artistically and meaningfully, through these animated forms. Furthermore, I evaluated the result of my analysis and observation with the theoretical framework developed in the previous stage so that I reflect on how the applied style (iconic abstraction) and the components of animation design here assisted in outlining and conveying some of the underlying meanings of *Shahnameh's* stories, having an impact on universal and local forms of communication while offering a unique creative experience. By negotiating between the narrative contents, iconic abstraction theory, and the close reading of these animation design-motion components, I argue how the underlying contents of *Shahnameh's* narratives were amplified using different forms (caricatured realism (cartoon), comics/comic art, expressive, stylised, and minimal) of iconic abstraction, in these six animated adaptations. This chapter contributes to the studies of *Shahnameh* and its adaptations in animated forms, in addition to the studies of animation design and its potentialities in reconstructing cultural and literary narratives.

During the examination of the former animation adaptations of *Shahnameh*, a lack of artworks that employed pure abstracted styles became apparent. This creative gap posed new questions and objectives and suggested a need for the usage of a practice-oriented methodology. Because there were no examples of adaptations of *Shahnameh* into abstract forms of animation, to answer the questions of this research looking into the artistic and communicative possibilities of this stylisation for the remaking of *Shahnameh*, the application of a practice-based method involving the creation of original artworks and reflection on the practice was a necessary step. Hence, this part was conducted to look into the potentiality of

abstracted animated forms for the adaptations of *Shahnameh* tales employing “practice – through action and reflection” (Gray and Malins, 2004, p.105). I created two animated artworks (2:50 and 5:11 minutes in length) based on two narrative pieces from *Shahnameh* (*Rotam and Esfandiar* tale, and *Zahhak* tale). The experimental process of creating these artworks and the artistic decisions made by the artist (aimed at embodying specific meanings and creative interactions) were documented in detail (in Chapter 4) and the reflections made during the procedure and on the outcomes throughout this stage.

While the process applied for the creation and evaluation of the original artworks by the researcher for this thesis associated more closely with the reflective practice-based methodology, it might be useful to expand on the notion of practice as research, and its application in this thesis, since it is relatively a new arena¹⁷ compared to more established research methods. Practice as research can refer to “an approach to a subject based on knowledge acquired through the act of creating” (Harper and Kroll, 2007, p. 4). Gray and Malins (2004) explain the role of practice in research as “reconstructing artwork/artefacts to bring about new understanding/insight through the experience of making/re-making” where the personal knowledge gained contributes to “the wider development and understanding of research” (ibid, p. 105). In practice-oriented inquiries, “the research material may not necessarily be replicated, but can be made accessible, communicated and understood”(ibid Gray and Malins, 2004, p. 21). The thesis is the result of creative, critical carefully constructed pathways and results that “can be understood by others competent to judge” (Kroll, 2008, p. 4). While this description gives an overall idea about the practice-oriented studies and its evaluation, a more specific description of its various forms is offered by Linda Candy (2006) as practice-based and practice-led methodologies. She defines these two methods as follows:

¹⁷ - This method is a potential area for development, especially in doctoral education in Ireland. The Artistic Doctorate Resources that are “focused on exploring the landscape of doctoral education in Performing Arts and Film / Screen Media in Ireland” (Bento-Coelho and Gilson, 2020) is conducted in the year 2020 (<http://www.artisticdoctorateresources.com/>). The author of this thesis herself is the first student who is conducting a PhD with artistic practice components in the Media Studies Department, at Maynooth University.

“Practice-based Research is an original investigation undertaken in order to gain new knowledge partly by means of practice and the outcomes of that practice. In a doctoral thesis, claims of originality and contribution to knowledge may be demonstrated through creative outcomes in the form of designs, music, digital media, performances and exhibitions. Whilst the significance and context of the claims are described in words, a full understanding can only be obtained with direct reference to the outcome (ibid, p. 1).

She continues:

“Practice-led Research is concerned with the nature of practice and leads to new knowledge that has operational significance for that practice. In a doctoral thesis, the results of practice-led research may be fully described in text form without the inclusion of a creative work. The primary focus of the research is to advance knowledge about practice, or to advance knowledge within practice. Such research includes practice as an integral part of its method and often falls within the general area of action research (ibid).”

The two definitions above can have overlapping aspects, and the method applied in this thesis can be described both as practice-based and practice-led methodologies. It can be termed as a practice-based method since the original animated artworks created within the course of this PhD were part of the contribution to the knowledge. These animations contributed to the adaptation studies of *Shahnameh*, by practically exploring how *Shahnameh*'s narrative space can be renewed and experienced afresh for familiar audiences and how it can open up to a more universal engagement (for unfamiliar viewers) by applying the pure abstracted style of animation. These practical components also contributed to the studies of abstract animation by offering first-hand data for semi-structured interviews where the researcher has examined how abstract animations based on a cultural narrative would be seen and interpreted by familiar and less familiar spectators. Hence, a full understanding of this thesis's outcomes can only be gained with direct reference to these artworks. On the other hand, the current research

can be described as a practice-led approach since it is concerned with the nature of abstract forms of animation and gaining a better understanding of such practices through “reflection in action” (Gray and Malins, 2004). Yet, because the practice is an inseparable part of this research and the text would not make comprehensive sense without the inclusion of the practical components, the practice-based methodology that involved reflection seems better fitted for the creative method applied and for the outcomes here.

One of the challenges in employing a reflective practice-based methodology is the criticism of “over-subjectivity” (Gray and Malins, 2004, p. 105). In research that includes creation and reflection on one’s own artworks, maintaining a critical view and avoiding personal preferences are necessary (ibid, p. 125). For these reasons, and to develop the critical, specialist knowledge that this thesis aimed to offer, a qualitative semi-structured interview method was used in the next phase. The initial criteria for the inclusion of the participants were their expertise and educational background in animation studies with a more specific knowledge of adaptation for animation, abstract and experimental animation, and the adaptations of *Shahnameh* into animated films (some of the thesis keywords). The reason for selecting expert audiences was to generate data with operational values and expand on critical and creative aspects of the collected data. This study looks into artistic and meaning-making potentiality of abstract animation from both practitioner and viewer perspectives. Hence, including audiences who have worked with or studied the medium of animation seemed most appropriate.

The second condition for the interviewees was the level of their familiarity with the *Shahnameh’s* narratives; dividing their critical perspectives into two groups of familiar and less-familiar viewers. Since this research was looking into a specific text, *Shahnameh*, and its cultural and national concepts and ideas as well as its shared and universal themes, having both groups of spectators who have cultural affinity with the text or not, could offer interesting insights on the various ways they interpret meanings and engage with the practical components of this thesis.

Before the interviews, an ethical review application, was submitted to the Maynooth University Research Ethics Committee. This review involved the

submission of information regarding the current research, the potential participants, the interview process, and an anticipation of potential risks/benefits and measurements taken to avoid and resolve any issues during the interviews. As part of the review process, the information sheets, consent forms, and sample of interview questions (in English and Farsi, per interviewees' languages) were provided. This application and the related documents were reviewed and approved by MU Research Ethics Committee. Next, five experts (two Iranian and three non-Iranian) were approached for this study. The participants watched two animation samples created by the researcher and later partook in an online semi-structured interview with a duration of approximately 1-2 hours. During these sessions and with the participants' consent, the interviews were audio/video recorded. To analyse the collected data from the semi-structured interviews, I employed the thematic analysis methodology and the six phases of thematic analysis suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006). "Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (ibid, p. 79) ... capturing "something important in relation to the overall research question" (ibid, p. 82). Thematic analysis is a useful approach for examining the participants' experiences and perspectives (ibid, 2017, p. 297), hence it is suitable for the current thesis looking into the critical and creative views of six expert audiences and their forms of engagement with the practical components of this study.

During these stages, I familiarised myself with the interview data through translations, transcriptions, and re-reading the information. I then organised and colour coded each set of information regarding the research questions for each interviewee. In the next stage, a set of initial codes were generated, highlighting the interesting and relevant features of the analysed texts. Since this thesis has employed two thematic analysis approaches, inductive (a method where the themes emerge from the overall research data) and deductive (a method where the themes emerge from research assumptions and theories) (see Braun and Clarke, 2006; Clarke and Braun, 2017), based on the conducted codes two groups of initial themes were formed. One collection of patterns emerged from the overall collected data (Inductive TA), and one representing patterns that developed as

direct responses to the research questions and assumptions (Deductive TA). Later, these themes were stated and refined, and a comprehensive report of the research and its analysis guided by these themes was produced (and explained in detail) in chapter 5.

In the last stage of this research, the data collected and reviewed through textual analysis, and the information generated and evaluated through practice and interviews were analysed, categorised, and explained within five chapters and in the last research findings chapter. The scripts, concept arts (mood boards, style frames, and storyboards), and still frames from *Rostam & Esfandiar* and *The Emergence of Zahhak* were also made available in Appendices, through an online link, and through Maynooth library access (see Chapter 4). Figure 2 is an overall look into the “iterative trajectory”¹⁸ (Candy and Edmonds, 2010) of how the PhD thesis was constructed.

¹⁸ - ‘Iterative’ and ‘trajectory’ are two terms borrowed from Candy and Edmonds (2010) reflecting on the non-linear and recursive aspects of the path taken in practice-oriented research (p. 130).

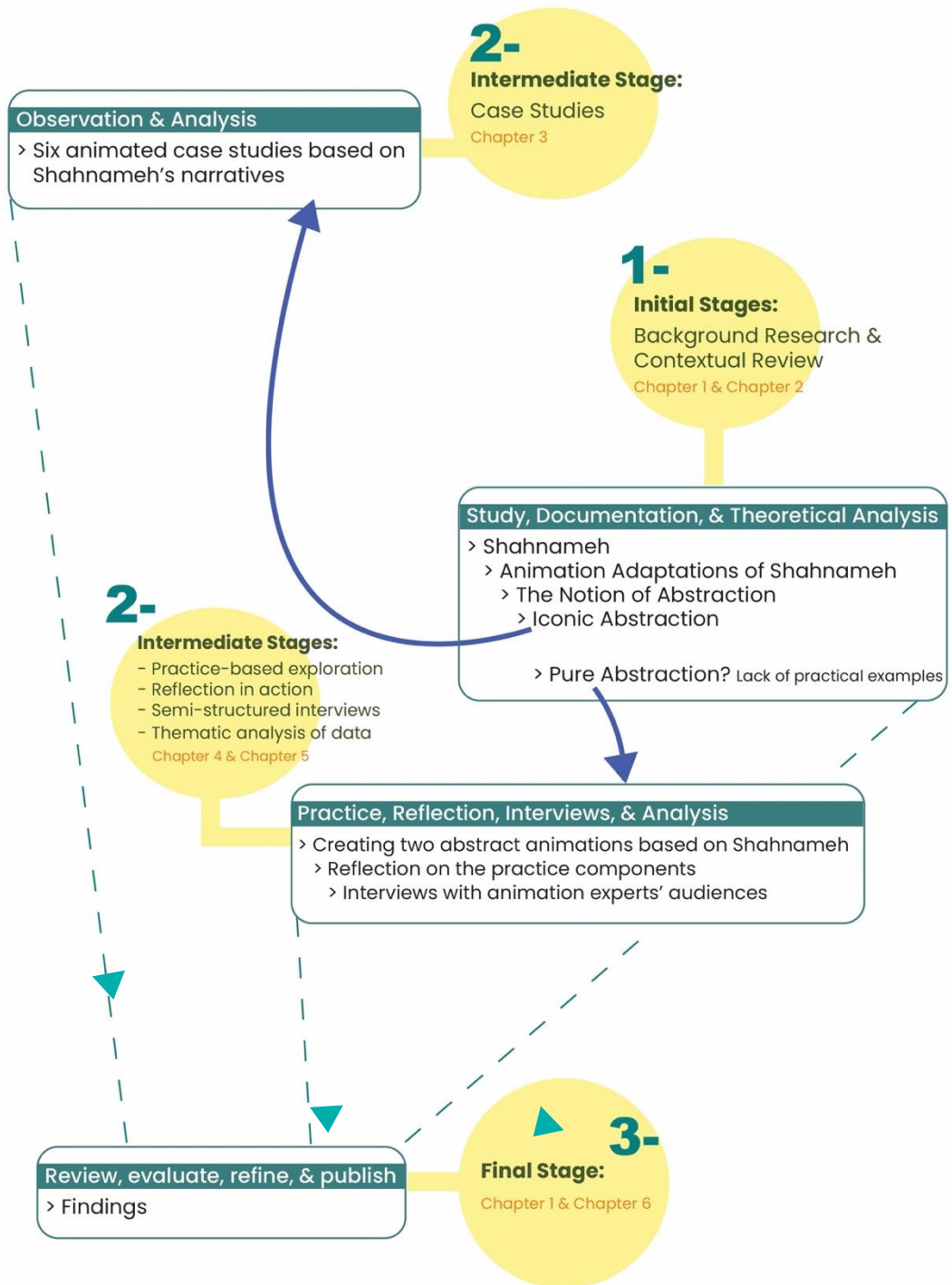


Figure 2: Research Process, Astani (2021)

1.6 Scope, Focus, and Limitations

In this part, I will explain the scope, focus, and limitations of this thesis in order to offer a better understanding of its arrangement. As mentioned earlier, I aim to explore the notions of iconic and pure abstraction in/for the adaptations of *Shahnameh* in animated forms. Besides a personal fascination with *Shahnameh* and its animated adaptations, I have chosen this text since *Shahnameh* is the most significant national epic poem of Iran and a significant work of world literature. *Shahnameh* and its adaptations into animated forms are potential areas of research and practice within adaptation and animation studies. Focusing on the study of *Shahnameh* offers a deeper look into ancient Persian history, mythology, and epic poetry and its substantial archetypal tone. In addition, the analysis of animation adaptations of *Shahnameh* reflects on the creative approaches taken in using the potentialities of animation design in transforming this text (cultural/national and archetypal notions) into different styles of animation. Moreover, remaking this text into abstracted forms of animation produces first-hand data to examine how local and global spectators experience and engage with *Shahnameh* in its animated-abstracted formats.

Hence, it is important to emphasise first; this research focuses on some of the narratives and underlying cultural, symbolical, archetypal meanings of *Shahnameh* by Abu I Qasem Ferdowsi. These concepts are some of the chief underlying layers that form the contents of the stories from this Persian epic poem and can assist in a better understanding of this ancient narrative. Here, I attempt to explore the depth of ideas and concepts beyond the simple reading of this epic poem and evaluate how some of these particular meanings were conveyed through the language of animation, and (in the part that I was exploring the purely abstracted stylisation) how familiar and less familiar spectators with *Shahnameh* interpreted them. Thus, the animated adaptations of other cultural texts that might apply iconic and pure forms of abstraction, have not been included in this study. While there might be some similarities shared, when considering the structure of this thesis, to involve other canonical texts and their animated adaptations would have required a comprehensive textual analysis and case studies for each instance. These would not

fit within the timeframe of this PhD and would not necessarily relate to the transformation and comprehension of *Shahnameh* and its inner narratives. Furthermore, even though my objectives in structuring this multi-method thesis was to offer a study with outcomes that have operational values and can be employed in the adaptation of other canonical narratives working with certain formal possibilities of animation language, I would like to stress that *Shahnameh* is the prime source of evaluation and claims made in this study.

Second, I should clarify to what extent *Shahnameh* is presented and analysed in this thesis and highlight again how I chose certain examples of previous animation adaptations of this poem that helped to explain certain subjects in order to reflect on some of this study's interests. This research does not offer an extensive study of *Shahnameh* due to its size. Instead, it examines six animations based on *Shahnameh* and offers information regarding the adopted narrative's background and meanings based on each case. Yet, because these stories are among the most well-known tales of this book, they can collectively offer an inclusive understanding of *Shahnameh*. In the methodology section, I also mentioned that since the inclusion of sixteen case studies (animations based on *Shahnameh* documented in this thesis) could not fit in the timeframe of this PhD, I applied the "Information Oriented Selection" (Flyvbjerg, 2011, p. 230) which is a method where a researcher chose several case studies based on their efficiency. In Chapter 3, I chose six examples among sixteen that I thought would make better sense within this thesis context and can better explain the related analysed styles and ideas. Additionally, regarding the position of adaptation in this research, I was concerned with the formal possibilities of the secondary medium, animation, and how its design components can creatively and meaningfully assist for the adaptations of *Shahnameh*. Hence, this thesis is not concerned with the literary and adaptation studies in general, which already have established and well-known resources available¹⁹.

¹⁹ - Multiple sources can provide general readings on *Shahnameh*, literary adaptation, adaptation theory. To read more about *Shahnameh* see: *Shahnameh: The Persian Book of Kings By Abolqasem Ferdowsi* (Davis, 2007), *Poetics and Politics of Iran's National Epic, the Shahnameh* (Omidsalar, 2011). To read more about adaptation see: *Adaptation and Appropriation (The New Critical Idiom)* (Sanders, 2006), *Adaptation and Cultural Appropriation: Literature, Film, and the Arts* (Nicklas and Lindner, 2012), *A Theory of Adaptation* (Hutcheon and O'Flynn, 2013a).

Third, since the iconic and pure stylisations are concerned with the formal components of a medium, I will explore the formal properties of animation or what Furniss (2008, pp. 59–82) specifies as the components of animation design: image, line, colour, movement in my case studies and practices (animations based on *Shahnameh*). Still, because the act of abstraction and its employment for conveying certain meanings can be more easily detectable in visuals (e.g., forms, colours, textures), the analysis conducted here offers more information on the visual styles of the animated samples compared to their animations. I should also specify that, while music is used to create some abstracted animated forms and as an accompanying material in the original artworks created in this research, it is not a concern in my discussions and out of the scope of this study. This is because visual and motion elements are essentially the properties forming the design of an animation, and the main components of animation as a motion picture medium. This decision was also related to defining a scope for the current thesis where the focus is on the visual and motion components of the animation. The notions of audio and music and how they can creatively and meaningfully contribute to the adaptation of *Shahnameh* can be a potential area for further studies concentrated on these aural components.

Lastly, I would like to reflect on the creative aspect of this thesis, where my goal is to investigate some of the underlying meanings and concepts of *Shahnameh* by exploiting some of the formal possibilities of animated forms. Since the “meanings (of a text) is never fixed, single or final” (Belsey, 2013, p. 167), and the creativity is unlimited, it is impossible to find all the meanings, ideas, and concepts of this poem, and many of the possibilities of animation language are still open for exploration.

1.7 Thesis Overview

Chapter 1 provides a brief background to the research, an introduction to the study, and defines the overall goals and specific objectives of the current thesis. It then reflects on the significance of the research and its contribution to the related fields,

in addition to an explanation of several methodologies that are structured in various stages of the study for data collection, generation, and analysis. In the last part, the scope, focus, and limitations of the research have been highlighted.

Chapter 2 explores the visual-motion possibilities of animation medium using Furniss (2008) and McCloud's (1993) abstraction continuum. This part starts with examining the notion of abstraction within animation studies and practices. It investigates the design, meaning making, and engagement possibilities of animation between the poles of reality and iconic, focusing on the notion of iconic abstraction as the stylistic approach employed for the existent animated adaptations of *Shahnameh*. It then expands on the visual-motion types of iconic abstraction by suggesting and analysing five styles of animation (caricatured realism (cartoon), comics/comic art, expressive, stylised, and minimal) as variant forms of iconic. The second part of this segment looks into the possibilities of the animation medium when its design elements tend to become purely abstracted as an untouched stylistic approach in the adaptation of *Shahnameh* into animated forms. Chapter 2 establishes a background review and contextualises the notions of iconic and pure abstractions within the current study in order to later examine how such stylisations contributed creative and meaningfully to the reconstruction of *Shahnameh* in iconic and abstracted animated forms.

Chapter 3 briefly introduces sixteen animations based on *Shahnameh*, documented in this thesis. It then offers a close reading of six case studies in which various forms of iconic animation designs were employed. It starts with analysing the adopted narratives for each animation and some of the historical, mythological, archetypal, symbolic, and inner ideas of these texts, reflecting on the rich cultural and universal notions of *Shahnameh's* tales. It next explores how some of these concepts were creatively and meaningfully conveyed by employing certain forms of iconic abstraction and speculates what sorts of engagements can be expected from these artistic choices.

Chapter 4 focuses primarily on two short animations, *Rostam & Esfandiar* (2020) and *The Emergence of Zahhak* (2020), that have been developed as part of the practical components of this thesis. These artworks were created in response to a lack of adaptations from *Shahnameh* in which an abstract style of animation is employed.

Through practice and reflection, chapter 4 explores the creative process of remaking two narrative pieces from this poem and some of their cultural and universal concepts into two abstract animations while examining the artistic, meaning-making, and interactive possibilities of pure abstraction from a practitioner perspective.

In chapter 5, by employing a semi-structured interview methodology, the original artworks created in the previous chapter are analysed from the perspectives of a group of expert audiences. In this part, five animation scholars and practitioners, some familiar with the *Shahnameh* and some less familiar with this text, watch two abstract animations and respond to several questions. Using thematic analysis methodology, I will scrutinise the data collected in this segment to understand how these spectators comprehend and engaged with the adaptations of *Shahnameh* in abstracted animated forms. This part also offers these experts' insights on how by employing pure abstraction, one can creatively and meaningfully engage the potential viewers of such artworks.

Finally, chapter 6 concludes this thesis by offering a summary of findings and contributions to the field. In addition, it discusses the strengths and limitations of the research and provides some recommendations for future inquiries on the subject.

2. ICONIC AND PURE ABSTRACTION: BACKGROUND AND CONTEXTUAL REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

The previous chapter offered an introduction to this thesis and its topic and explained the research gap in knowledge and practice. Within the introduction chapter, I have established the current study goals and specific objectives and the issues that this research aims to address. I have also reflected on the significance of this study both in the forms of personal motivations and external rationale and highlighted the contributions of the study to the knowledge and practice of related fields. Moreover, I explained the methodologies employed in each stage of this study and the steps applied for data production and analysis.

In this chapter, I will explore the design and motion potentialities of the animation medium by situating these formal possibilities within Furniss (2008) and McCloud's (1993) abstraction continuum. This part elucidates the path of arriving at the theory and concept of iconic abstraction (ibid) that this research suggests as the stylistic approach employed in the design of sixteen animations based on *Shahnameh*. I then expand on different forms of iconic abstraction, its possibilities for meaning making and engagement, so I can analyse how this style meaningfully and creatively contributed to the reconstruction of six animation adaptations of *Shahnameh* (case studies) in Chapter 3.

Next, I will review and outline the form, meanings, and possibilities of engagement in abstract animation. The abstract animation style has been an untouched approach for the adaptation of *Shahnameh*, and this research aims to practically explore (in Chapter 4) and examine (in Chapter 5) how such adaptations would be engaged and interpreted by new and old spectators of this poem. While the brief examination of abstract animation here might seem redundant to the readers who are more familiar with abstract animation yet considering perhaps other readers of this thesis who might be unfamiliar with this style, an introductory review is necessary.

2.2 Animation and the Notion of Abstraction

Before diving into the subject of animation and abstraction and related theories proposed by Furniss (2008) and McCloud (1993), the following few paragraphs explain briefly how the primary research of *Shahnameh* and its animation adaptations (focus on the stylistic properties of these animations) connect to Furniss's (2008) and McCloud's (1993) studies of abstraction spectrums.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, from the early decades of animation's foundation in Iran, *Shahnameh* (the Iranian national epic poem) has been a source of adaptation for animation. While a few instances of *Shahnameh*'s animation adaptations were mentioned in studies such as *The History of animation in Iran* (1999) by Mahin Javaherian, this research could not locate a source in which a significant number of these animation adaptations were documented. As a personal motivation and in response to a lack of documentation and studies of these artworks and their adopted animation styles, this thesis documented sixteen animations based on *Shahnameh* (see figure 24) by mainly looking into online resources and personal communication with the Iranian animation experts²⁰. Since this research aims to investigate how the formal possibilities of the animation medium have contributed to the reconstruction of narratives from *Shahnameh*, only adaptations that to some extent maintained the essence of the adopted texts were collected for the current studies. Other adaptations that appropriated some of *Shahnameh*'s characters/concepts in a different context or story (e.g., *Run Rostam Run* (2017)) were out of the scope of this thesis and not included.

The early analysis conducted was focused on the formal properties of the documented animations or what Furniss (2008, pp. 59–82) specifies as the components of animation design: image, line, colour, motion. These formal properties are essentially the elements that form the various styles of these animations and the main components of animation as a visual-kinetic media language. During the initial examinations of these sixteen artworks, I realised that all

²⁰ - Two of these Iranian animation experts who significantly helped in locating animations based on *Shahnameh* were Alireza Golpayegani (animation director, producer, and lecturer) and Amir Mohammad Dehestani (animation director, producer, and lecturer)

these animation adaptations are abstracted from reality in different degrees, yet they have maintained representational and figurative styles. In other words, none of these animations employed highly naturalistic or photographic tendencies in their visual or movements styles seen in high-quality CGIs and 3D animations. These artworks also avoided an abstracted style; that is radically pure in terms of visual and motions. An approach where the forms are non-material and reduced to primary shapes, colours, lines, and textures and the animations are fully abstracted and anti-realistic (see Figure 3). Hence, the formal styles of these animations for 48 years (from 1971 to 2019; the time frame between the first and the last documented animations based on *Shahnameh*) stands in somewhere, distanced from, and in-between being realistic and/or being radically abstract (see Figure 4).

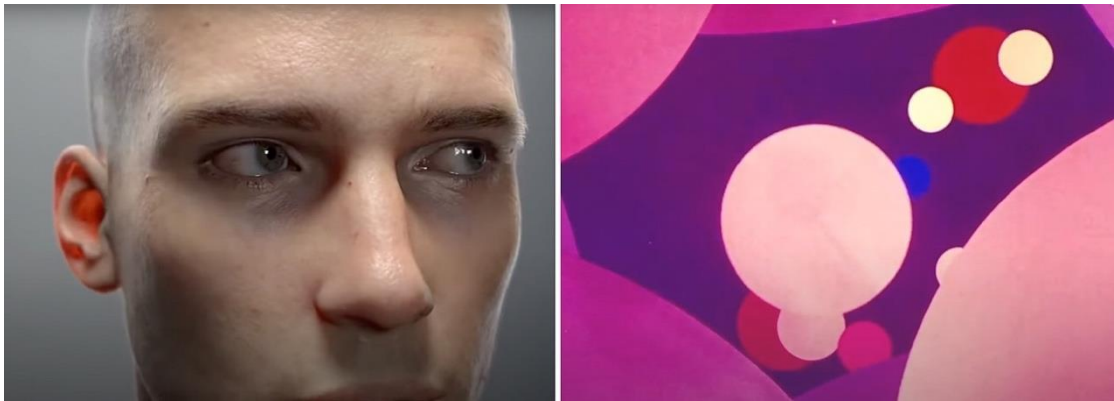


Figure 3: Examples of photo-realistic and pure abstract animations (from left to right): *Realistic Face Render | CGI short film | High quality Human Face* (2018), *An Optical Poem* (1938) (Fischinger, 2017)

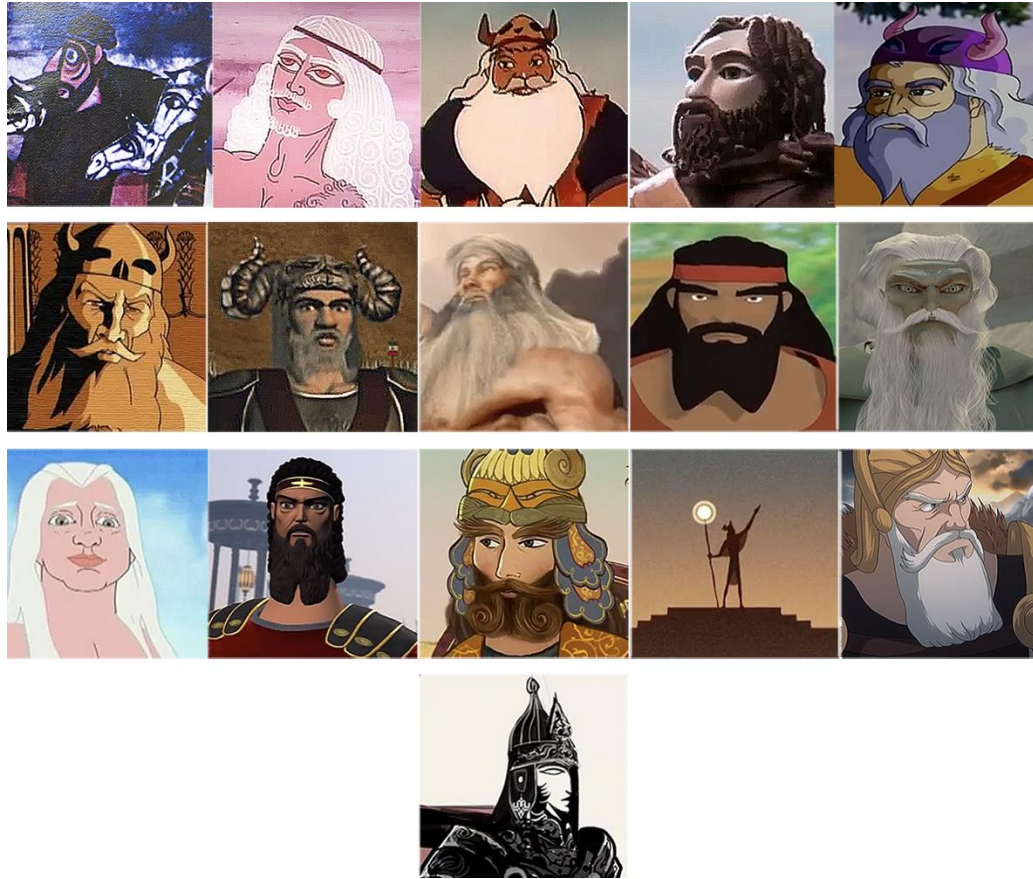


Figure 4: Hero/King character visualisation from sixteen animation adaptations of *Shahnameh*

A study that has proposed an analytical visualisation for such formal tendencies, starting from reality and ending with abstract, is done by Furniss (2008). In her book *Art in Motion* (2008), Furniss analyses the definition of animation while locating all of its possible image types within a motion picture continuum formed between two poles of mimesis (realism) and abstraction (concept). Furniss examines different instances ranging from live-action documentary, visual effects feature film, live-action animated film, animation feature film, experimental and abstract animations to reflect on various levels of formal abstractions within her image type spectrum (see Figure 5).

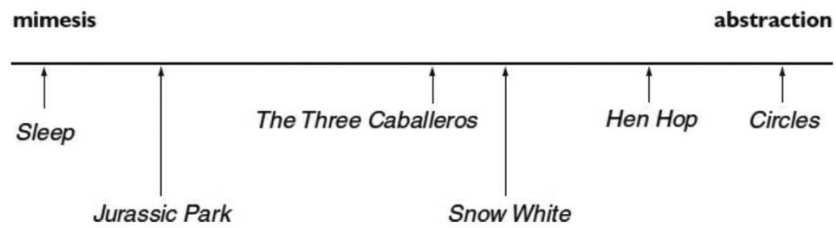


Figure 5: *Live action – animation continuum* (Furniss, 2008, p. 6)

What Furniss’s continuum visualises is the notion of abstraction, a spectrum that could be borrowed to reflect on the visual possibilities of the animation medium, including the styles applied in the animation adaptations of *Shahnameh’s* narrative. Within Furniss’s continuum, the notion of abstraction can be defined by distancing from realistic forms and moving towards abstract ones. It is in this process of moving away from realism towards pure abstraction that the possibilities of numerous image types come to be. It is important to note that Furniss’s spectrum is not focused specifically on the animation medium, since it also includes examples from live-action films. It can be a cautious approach in defining such an abstraction continuum since there are many occasions where one cannot specify a film exclusively as an animation. It can be the product of a mixture of media such as animation, live-action, comics, painting, etc. Additionally, as stated by McCloud (1993, p. 51), an image-type spectrum of this sort belongs to all visual arts. It can be used to define the vocabulary and artistic possibilities of many media such as the ones mentioned above.

Adding to Furniss’s continuum which represents the idea of abstraction between the poles of reality (mimesis) and abstraction, the study conducted by McCloud (1993) offers one more dimension to this spectrum. In his book *Understanding Comics* (1993) McCloud expands the various design and motion possibilities of all visual arts within The Picture Plane, a triangular plane that is formed by three vertices of reality, iconic (meanings), and (pure) abstraction and reflects the numerous formal-stylistic potencies within these three points (see Figure 6). It is worth noting that McCloud particularly focuses on comics and cartoons, for instance by including character designs from comics artworks and animated films as different examples of

imageries with various levels of abstraction²¹. His analysis and visualisation of the Picture Plane will be examined in more detail shortly (on page 55-56).

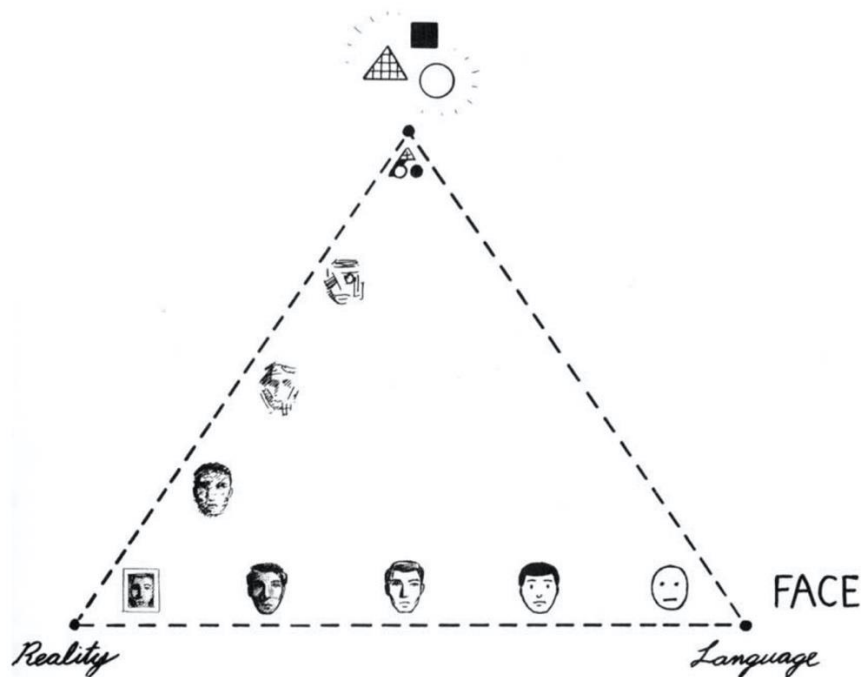


Figure 6: *The Picture Plane/ Big Triangle* (McCloud, 1993, p. 51, 2022)

Acknowledging the shared nature of formal abstraction among various media arts, next this research will focus on defining and expanding this concept for animation studies by exploring the artworks that will primarily be recognised as works of animation. This is to limit the scope of this study that aims to understand the formal possibilities and types of abstraction, particularly the forms of abstraction employed for the animation adaptations of *Shahnameh*, by exploring various styles of animation. It will examine how such stylistic choices (visual and animations) convey meaning and potentially engage audiences. It will then situate these findings in an interdisciplinary analysis of animation adaptations focused on *Shahnameh's* texts. This is in order to understand how some forms of abstraction are used or can be used to, creatively and meaningfully, assist in the process of adapting some of *Shahnameh's* narratives into animated forms.

²¹ - See pages 53 and 54 from *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (1993) and <https://www.scottmccloud.com/4-inventions/triangle/04.html>

2.3 From Reality to Iconic: Contextualising Iconic Abstraction

Even though the notion of reality is not a focused subject of this study, nonetheless it is part of the abstraction continuum and a comparative factor with the other points of abstraction (e.g., mimesis/reality vs abstract), so a brief examination of it is offered here. The idea of reality and its relationship with the animation medium has been a popular way of interpreting animation (see Wells, 1998; Wells and Moore, 2016). In his book, *Understanding Animation*, Wells (1998, pp. 25–26) explains: “By focusing on the issue of 'realism' in animation it is, therefore, possible to begin the close analysis of any one animated film”. At some point, the reason for examining the notion of reality in animation was to reflect on this medium's independency from its overshadowing precedent, live-action (Wells and Moore, 2016, pp. 5–11). Live-action is a “record of the real. (Animation is) an artistic interrogation of” it (Wells, 2002, p. 10), a manipulation of it. Paying attention to the relationship of animation with reality, one can also appreciate the unrestricted capacity of animation language in offering poly-stylistic visuals and motions (not limited to the realistic forms but) ranging from realistic to comics/comic art, to the most abstract forms. This is because, in animation, one can adapt the conventions of various media such as live-action film, photography, sculpture, comics, drawing, painting, dance, music, etc. As stated by Wells and Moore (2016, p. 6):

“Animation is the most dynamic form of expression available to creative people. Animation is a cross-disciplinary and interdisciplinary art and craft, embracing drawing, sculpture, model-making, performance, dance, computer science, social science, and much more. It has a distinctive language that enables it to create the art of the impossible. Whatever can be imagined can be achieved.”

The abstraction continuum starts from the pole of reality, and for the medium of animation, this starting point blurs boundaries with mediums such as live-action film and photography. This is where reality in animation can be constructed, through the attempt of the medium to duplicate, copy, and literally resemble the codes of live-action cinema, naturalistic still photographs, and more importantly, real-life itself. As

stated by Wells (1998, p. 28) “reality in animation ... can only be a comparative and relative form”. Yet, this fabricated reality can attain various representational degrees. In its utmost naturalistic form, it can be a “neutral depiction of ... (events) without the interference of the exaggeration and abstraction ...” (Hosseini-Shakib, 2008, p. 326) known as “Simulational Realism” (ibid). This sort of realism can be seen in 3D and CGI animated works which obsessively replicate absolute realist forms, movements, and conventions (ibid, p. 330) (see Figure 7). Reality can also be exaggerated and have a nuanced level of abstraction “in order to create a greater impression of realism” (Rowley, 2006). This is termed “ultra-realism” (ibid) or “hyper-realism” (Wells, 1998) and initially was assigned to Disney’s formal style and the company’s early feature animations²² (Pallant, 2010). These works used extensive rotoscoping and live-action footage as a reference alongside their specific animation principles (ibid)²³ and had more realistic tendencies in the recreation of movements rather than their graphics.



Figure 7: Still frame from PS4 - *Far Cry 6 Cinematic Trailer* (2021)

As one steps away from the simulational form of realism, the abstraction of forms and animations can be initiated (see Figure 8). This is because the formal (visual-motion) language of animation is no longer concerned with replicating reality and naturalistic

²² - A stylization which was formed during the production of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) (Pallant, 2010)

²³ - This is just a glance into the notion of realism within animation studies as the starting point of the abstraction continuum and not at all a conclusion on its potential degrees and formal possibilities.

details. By distancing from the pole of reality and moving towards the middle of this arbitrary spectrum (Figure 8, inspired by Furniss's continuum and McCloud's picture plane), animation language can now more freely assume many forms and styles in favour of conceptual intentions.



Figure 8²⁴: Abstraction continuum, moving away from reality²⁵

This research has specified several stylisations (in terms of graphics and motions) within animation practices that can be examined as several versions and ranges of abstraction possibilities between the poles of realism (mimesis) and abstract. These styles and inspirations are 'caricatured realism (cartoon), comics/comic art, expressive, stylised, and minimal' that emerged as different forms of abstraction that are not highly realistic nor purely abstracted (see Figure 9), during the primary examination of the design of sixteen animation adaptations from *Shahnameh*, and later during an in-depth study of six cases selected among these animations (see Chapter 3). This section aims to expand on the visual-motion possibilities of the animation medium, where it stands between mimesis and abstract poles, and understand how such styles have contributed to the adaptation of *Shahnameh's* narrative (investigated in detail in further chapters). Moreover, it intends to explain the path of arriving at the theory and concept of 'iconic abstraction' (a term applied by Scott McCloud (1993, 2018), the renowned American cartoonist and comics theorist) that this study recognises as the umbrella term for these six styles of animations, and a stylistic approach that can amplify the underlying concepts of a text in meaningful ways.

²⁴ - The images of continuum created for this paper are arbitrary visual representations, combining Furniss's continuum and McCloud's picture plane to add to the explanation of abstraction, besides scholarly theories and descriptions.

²⁵ - The images of continuum created for this paper are arbitrary visual representations to add to the explanation of abstraction, besides scholarly theories, and descriptions.



Figure 9: Abstraction continuum, stylistic possibilities between the poles of realism and abstract

2.3.1 Caricatured Realism (Cartoon) Animation Style

Bishko (2007) defines the cartoon style generally as the “animation design and movement that adheres to the 12 Principles of Animation”²⁶ (ibid, p. 24) formed by Disney animators. This formal style used reality as a reference and aimed at creating “a caricature of life and action”(Canemaker, 1997, p. 107). Here, the 12 Principles of Animation were employed to recreate life in a believable but expressive manner. In most Disney films, the animation of the characters is inspired by reality and the visual design of these animations evokes the illusion of 3D space using 2D stylised forms. The instance can be seen in various Disney animations such as *Pocahontas* (1995), where the characters’ animations are a mixed result of inspiration from reality, heightened by Disney’s famous animation principles, and their graphics are two-dimensional designs suggesting a sense of three-dimensionality on a flat picture plane (see Figure 10). Yet, cartoon forms are not limited to Disney’s style and do not have a fixed abstraction degree. This form can represent more realistic or abstract tendencies. For instance, cartoons and 2D styles created by UPA are flat, simple, non-realistic, and non-photographic (Thompson, 1892; Graham, 1940; Pierson, 2012). However, in the context of this thesis, caricatured realism (cartoon) style refers to the combination of movements and graphics that can be described as 2D, stylised, caricatured constructions of life that evoke the illusion of three-dimensionality and hyper-realistic movements.

²⁶ - The 12 Principles of Animation are 1. Squash and Stretch, 2. Anticipation, 3. Staging, 4. Straight Ahead Action and Pose to Pose, 5. Follow Through and Overlapping Action, 6. Slow In and Slow Out, 7. Arcs, 8. Secondary Action, 9. Timing, 10. Exaggeration, 11. Solid Drawing, 12. Appeal (Thomas and Johnston, 1981, pp. 47–70)



Figure 10: Caricatured realism (cartoon) style, still frames from *Pocahontas* (1995)

2.3.2 Comics/Comic Art Animation Style

In the context of this thesis, comics/comic art style refers to stylisations that incorporate elements from the visual styles of comics/comic art into their design and animation components. Dating back to the silent era of animation in America, some of the artists who were producing comic art came to also produce animations (Bendazzi, 2016a, p. 38). These artists adapted comics conventions, visual formats, graphic elements, and circular shape-based designs (Canemaker, 1997, p. 102) into their animations' imageries. Inspired by comic art medium these artists also defined an animation style that involved defiance of gravity, distortion of reality, and natural movements in favour of exhibiting "rubbery" (ibid), expressive motions. In general, comic art graphic style can be achieved by simplifying and distancing from reality in varied levels of stylized and expressive forms, colours, and lines. Comic art elements such as multi-frames and sound visualizations/effects are also some of these medium specificities (McCloud, 1993; Jeffries, 2017). An instance of this style can be seen in the animated scenes from the movie *Tank Girl* (1995) which was an adaptation of a comic art series of the same name. Inspired by its source material, the animated sections of this movie display exaggeration, distortion, and expressive qualities throughout its graphic and kinetic components. Colours and forms are reductive and stylised but expressive, and the visualisation of comic art elements such as speed lines and explosion effects was conducted as part of its formal style (see Figure 11). Through the years, as comic art practices have developed in a variety of methods, from the most realistic tendency to the minimalistic ones, its visual impact on animations that adapted comics/comic art looks has diversified as well.

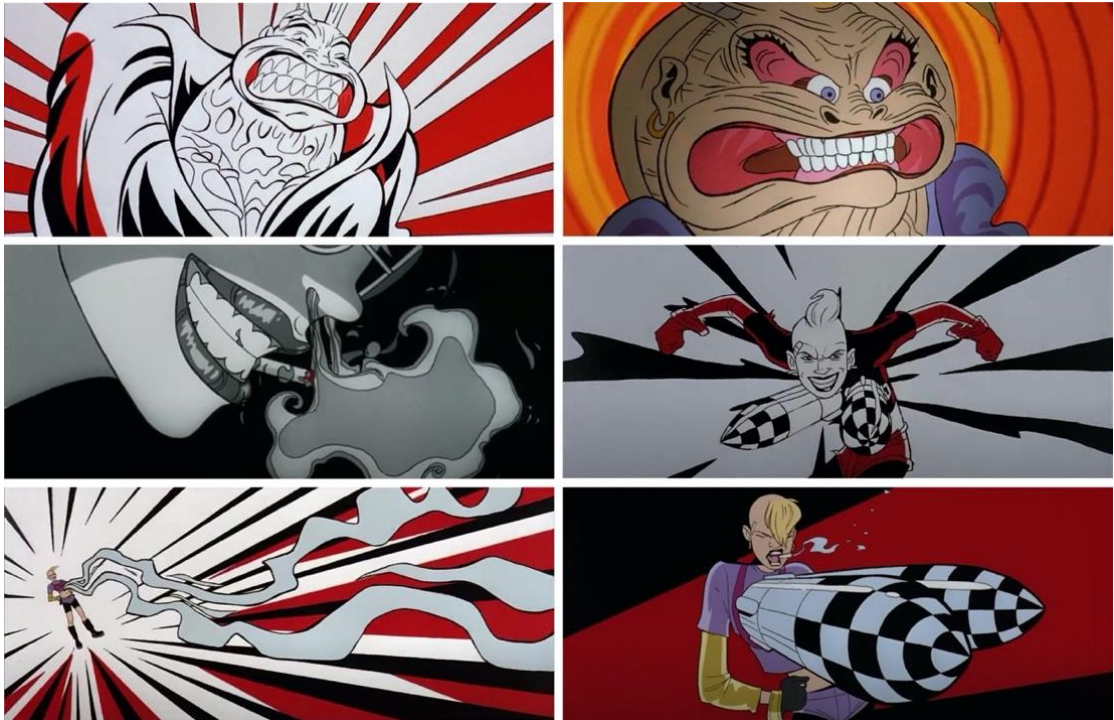


Figure 11: Comics/comic art style, still frames from *Tank Girl* (1995) animated scenes

2.3.3 Expressive Animation Style

Some of the main aspects of expressive visual styles are isolation and exaggerations. An expressive method again avoids naturalism which involves an abundance of visual clutters and details. Instead, in this stylization, an artist isolates the forms, lines, and colours that convey the strongest intended emotions and then exaggerates their visual representations and motions qualities. The purpose is to evoke an intense emotional experience and response in the viewers and attract their empathy and engagement with the artwork (Green, 2007; Power, 2009; Kandel, 2016). One example of this method is the *Corpse Bride* (2005) where the expressive visual design of the characters instantly exhibits their personality trait and emotional status, even when they have neutral facial or bodily expressions (see Figure 12).



Figure 12: Expressive style, still frames from *Corpse Bride* (2005)

2.3.4 Stylised Animation Style

Stylised and expressive styles share many similarities in terms of being reductionist of realistic forms but amplifying in meanings (Boulos, 2016; Van Rooij, 2019). The stylized method, like any of the aforementioned styles, tends to be non-realistic. The reality can involve unnecessary details that distract one's attention. Even motion in realistic manners can be too decorative. Instead, graphic and animation components in the stylized method are abstracted and their unnecessary details are replaced by features (e.g., choice of forms and textures) that can enhance the context and inner meanings. As stated by Chenney (no date), stylized animation is "the generation of motion or images that are intended to convey more than physical realism, ... (a) non-photorealistic animation ... (form that) ... bring real-time graphics closer to traditional artistic styles ...". The animated feature film *Loving Vincent* (2017) can be considered as an example of a stylised abstraction method, where the graphic details of the animation are reduced to not mimic reality. Rather, its formal components are amplified through the usage of stylised form, textures, and brush marks which are inspired by Vincent van Gogh's artistic style, displaying the artist's mental reality and the inner world (see Figure 13).



Figure 13: Stylised style, still frames from *Loving Vincent* (2017)

2.3.5 Minimal Animation Style

A minimalist formal approach is when the formal elements of an animation strongly reject the realistic agendas. Here, the formal design will distance enough from the reality pole to show intense abstract tendencies. One of the pioneers who constructed a minimalistic method in their animations' visual style and motions was United Productions of America (UPA) from 1950 to 1960 (Bashara, 2015). This studio constructed its minimal style through using vivid, flat colours, purified lines, and angular shapes, the absence of details and three-dimensional perspective, and the use of economical and limited motions (ibid) (see Figure 14). By offering such stylization, this formal approach targets “symbolic and conceptual (meanings) rather than representational (ones)” (ibid, p. 89). This method can open up excessively to the “possible emotional states” and universal conceptualizations (Van Rooij, 2019, p. 198).



Figure 14: Minimal style, (left) still frames from *Gerald McBoing-Boing* (1950), (right) still frames from *Rooty Toot Toot* (1951)

The above five animation styles are only some of the possibilities of animation design that can be formed between the poles of reality and abstract and stylistic approaches employed in the design of sixteen animations based on *Shahnameh* (explained in detail in the next chapter). These stylisations can give a comprehensive idea of what would happen when visual and kinetic components of the animation medium distance from realistic tendencies and move towards pure abstraction. Analysing them closely, one can see that caricatured realism (cartoon), comics/comic art, expressive, stylised, and minimal styles share similar characteristics and each one of these styles can be a descriptive part of the other. For instance, a caricatured realism (cartoon) style can be stylized and expressive in terms of its graphic components, and on the other hand, expressive and stylized animations can be categorized as some forms of the caricatured realism (cartoon). These styles collectively represent a degree of abstraction that McCloud (1993) specifies as 'iconic'.

As mentioned earlier, in his book, *Understanding Comics* (1993), McCloud visualises the stylistic possibilities of all visual arts and particularly comics and cartoons within The Picture Plane. This triangular plane is formed by three vertices of reality, iconic (meanings), and (pure) abstraction and reflects the numerous formal-stylistic potencies within these three points (see Figure 15). What McCloud's picture plane adds to Furniss's spectrum is the notion of iconic abstraction, where he expands on iconic formal possibilities as the vocabulary of comic art, mainly by reflecting on his artwork and through the practice of visualisation.

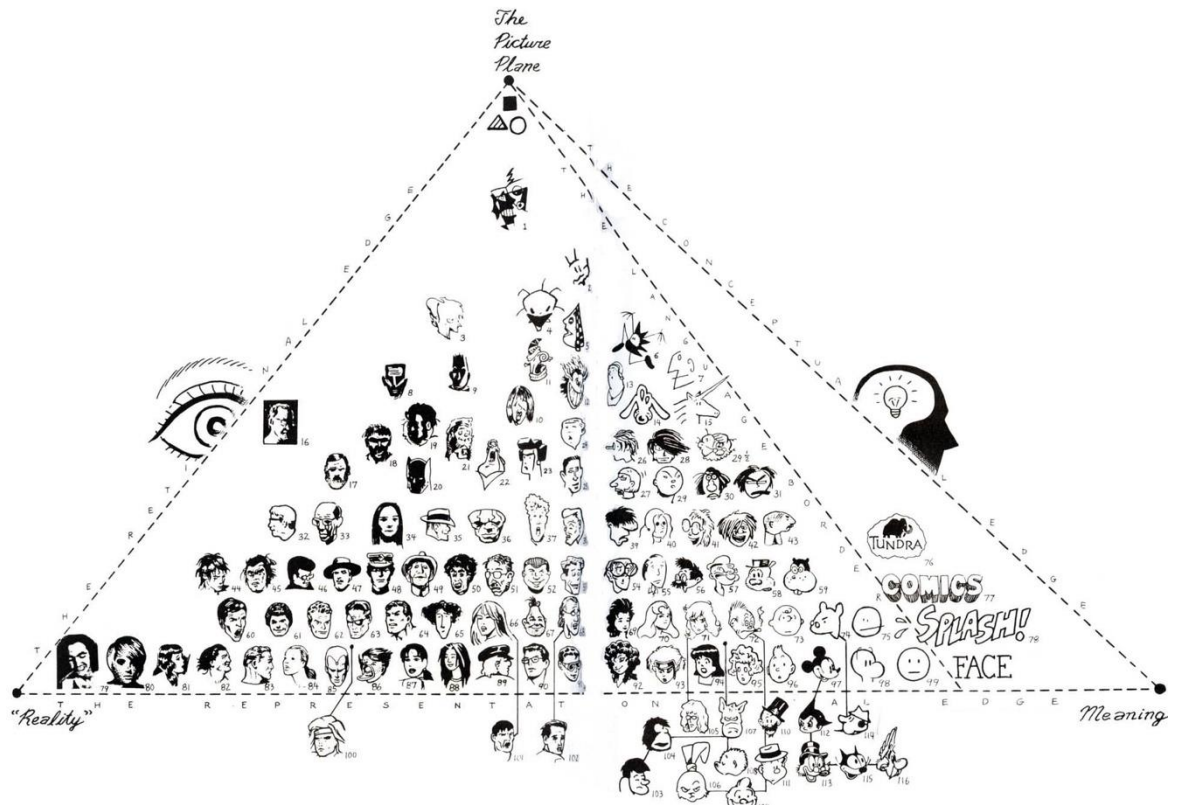


Figure 15: *The Picture Plane/ Big Triangle* (McCloud, 1993, pp. 52–53, 2022)

McCloud’s picture plane suggests that by distancing from the pole of reality, one will get closer to the realm of icons, concepts, and meanings (see Figure 16). This is where the obsessiveness to replicate reality and naturalistic details are declined, so the conceptual intentions are amplified. In this part of the picture plane, every form is concentrated to selectively depict and express explicit meanings. McCloud (1993, p. 51) defines this part of the spectrum as “iconic abstraction” ... “where every line has a meaning ...”. He explains: “... iconic abstraction (is) the idea that you are abstracting from what you see but you are still moving toward the meaning. You still are retaining that full communicated meaning of what it is you are describing ...” (*Scott McCloud, Cartoonist: iconic abstraction*, 2018).



Figure 16: Abstraction continuum, reality to iconic

When it comes to the animation medium and how its design components (graphics and motions) would look when they fall within the iconic spectrum, this research suggests five styles of caricatured realism (cartoon), comics/comic art, expressive, stylised, and minimal as the possible formal outcomes (see Figure 17). These stylistic approaches explain and expand the visual and motion potentialities of iconic abstraction in more detail so one can better understand the artistic outcomes that the application of iconic forms can offer to the creation and recreation of creative works.



Figure 17: Abstraction continuum, different forms of iconic

For instance, the earlier study of these styles in this chapter suggested that in iconic forms, the motions components of animation can acquire non-realistic tendencies that range from a separation from reality, when the notion of realism serves only as a reference, to a stronger rejection of it, when one can recognize the purity of abstracted movements. In more realistic tendencies of caricatured realism (cartoon) motions, the artist can transform a naturalistic movement into a caricatured version in order to create a believable, yet expressive action. And, in a more abstracted approach, the artist can limit and condense the motion to embody its main intention or context. This can be considered as an iconic spectrum where the realistic resemblance of movements is not much of a concern. Hence the iconic motion qualities can be described as caricatured, expressive, and condensed.

In terms of visual components, besides distancing from reality, iconic styles can involve a degree of stylisation, simplification, and flatness with vivid and painterly colour qualities. Iconic graphics are reductionist, isolating, and selective in visual (and animation) structures because (as mentioned briefly earlier) iconic abstraction aims at meanings and concepts rather than resemblance. Hence by brushing away the unnecessary details and a selective choice of forms, lines, colours (and movements)

one can intensify the depiction of intended meanings and concepts and focus the viewers' attention.

The earlier analysis of five animation styles suggested distortion as another possibility of iconic abstraction. Since realism is not a priority, forms can be mutated and distorted (see Comics/Comic Art section), gravity and perspective can be defied, and motion can be anti-realistic, subversive, and exaggerated. The potency of comics/comic art method in twisting and defying motions and forms and subverting the naturalist expectations is one of the popular capacities of the animation medium itself. Thus, in this level of abstraction, the animation medium can easily showcase its potency for formal (image and motion) distortion and subversion.

The notion of "remediation"²⁷ (Bolter and Grusin, 2000) also has an impact on the formal possibilities of this abstraction degree. Within the abstraction continuum, iconic style is in a remediation state where animation can employ the conventions of various mediums other than the live-action film and photography within its stylisations. The iconic style of animated forms can be a result of the formal exchange between animation and mediums such as comic, graphic arts, and visual and traditional arts (e.g., sculpture). Animation can transform and adapt the visual codes, colour conventions, and formal elements of these mediums, as well as using them as a reference to define varied types of abstracted-caricatured motions. In this sense, in iconic forms, the animation medium has the capacity to open up to versatile remediation possibilities which are not concerned with photo-realistic outcomes.

The above analysis explained and expanded on the visual and motion possibilities of the animation medium, particularly iconic styles. The current segment elucidated the path of arriving at the idea/theory of iconic abstraction that this research suggests as the common stylistic approach employed in the animated adaptations of *Shahnameh*. It attempted to explain and expand on the formal (visual – motion) possibilities of iconic abstraction in animation practices by analysing five animation styles of caricatured realism (cartoon), comics/comic art, expressive, stylised, and minimal. This analysis will later assist in understanding how different forms of iconic

²⁷ - "...the formal logic by which new media refashion prior media forms." (Bolter and Grusin, 2000, p. 273)

styles contributed artistically to the design of six animations (case studies) based on *Shahnameh* (see Chapter 3). It is important to note that, this brief analysis only reflects on some of and not the abundance of visual-motion possibilities that iconic abstraction can offer. Further studies can possibly add more details to this research. In the next part, I will examine the meaning making and engagement of potentialities of iconic abstraction by exploring related theories and scholarly research.

2.3.6 Meanings and Interactions: Iconic Abstraction

McCloud (1993) analyses the meaning-making potencies of iconic forms and offers his famous theory of “amplification through simplification” (ibid, p.30). He considers this degree of abstraction as a state where the constructed image does not look like a real-life version of it, yet the viewer can instantly recognize what that image is. Because by purifying the image (concentrating, stylizing, and/or exaggerating, etc.), the idea, concept, or context that the image intends to communicate comes into focus and is intensified through creative selective approaches (see Figure 18). In *The Neurology of Aesthetic*, Ramachandran (2006) also examines the notion of “isolation (less is more)” (ibid, p.17) as a selective act, when one’s attention is directed to specific details in order to eliminate visual clutter and for clear communication.

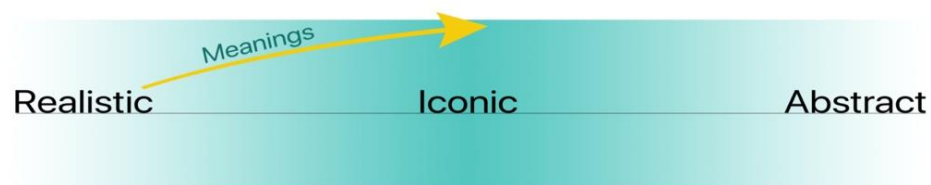


Figure 18: Abstraction continuum, meanings and interactions

In his reflective practice, McCloud (1993) explores this artistic selectiveness that can be achieved in iconic style and allows for expressive qualities in terms of forms, emotions, stories’ ideas, and context. He realizes that iconic abstraction can offer an on-the-surface, inside-out experience of a constructed reality where the expressive shapes, abstracted colours, and minimal movements can reflect more on the psychological state, inner intentions, and personality traits rather than the outer reality (that is simplified for the sake of meanings). Also, since the form can come as

close as possible to a pure reflection of an idea, it can easily carry symbolic, metaphoric, and subjective meanings.

By discharging the details, iconic representation also acquires a universal potency where an image is not realistic enough to resemble an individual identity. This frees the spectators from identifying the image, and even offers an opportunity to see themselves in that image or assign their subjective and interpreted meanings to it (ibid). Examining this part of McCloud's reflection, iconic abstraction seems to offer a dualistic form of engagement with a viewer when the form is open enough to not represent an individual personality, concept, or culture, yet this openness allows for the viewer to individualize the imagery with her/his own identity, ideas, and cultural notions. In another words, this degree of abstraction can offer both a universal and individual engagement with a spectator. However, it is important to note again that iconic abstraction can have different levels of abstraction, "some are more iconic than the others" (ibid, p.27). Some levels of iconic abstractions lean more towards reality, some stand in the utmost iconic peak, and others lean more towards the end of the spectrum where abstractions tend to purify in forms of absolute shapes, lines, and colours. Hence, the meaning-making and the form of engagement can change when the realistic and abstract tendencies of iconic images alter.

This segment of the chapter explored the meaning making and potentialities of engagement in iconic stylisations (both in terms of what an artist can expect and what a spectator can experience). As mentioned earlier, this research suggests iconic abstraction as the common stylistic approach in the animated adaptations of *Shahnameh*. Hence, it was necessary to review the previous theories and literature that elucidate how iconic forms can amplify and convey meanings, particularly for the further analysis of six animated case studies based on *Shahnameh* in Chapter 3.

The next part will offer a critical review of pure abstraction in animation studies and practices. This review will assist in understanding the form, meaning making, and engagement possibilities of abstract style as an untouched area in the adaptation of *Shahnameh* into animated forms. This examination can also assist in better understanding the practical exploration conducted in Chapter 4 (adopting narrative

pieces from *Shahnameh* into abstracted forms of animation) and the creative choices made during the production process.

2.4 From Iconic to Abstract: Contextualising Pure Abstraction

As mentioned earlier, in the abstraction continuum, when moving away from the iconic forms and towards the end of the spectrum, the visual and motion elements tend to become non-figurative, non-representational, intangible, and overtly reduced (see Figure 19). Here is the realm of dots, lines, pure forms and patterns, vivid colours, and non-realistic and unconventional perspectives and motions.

In terms of imagery, pure abstraction does not resemble reality, yet it can play with the spectator's mind to find some sorts of associations between a specific abstract form and a realistic image or literal concept. So even if the pure abstraction does not mimic reality, it can refer to something real, as these forms even in their most essential and reduced entity can be an invocation of the natural world (Furniss, 1994; Turner, 2003; Matthew Collings, 2014) (see Figure 20). The reconstruction of perspective, if there is any, can be a reflection of depth or defiance of it, but it is usually not a naturalistic recreation of it. The notion of perspective hence can be dismissed, and "the film frame (can) become a single space (where) foreground and background are joined into a continually shifting field of action" (Hanhardt, 2015, p. 20) (see Figure 21).



Figure 19: Abstraction continuum, iconic to abstract

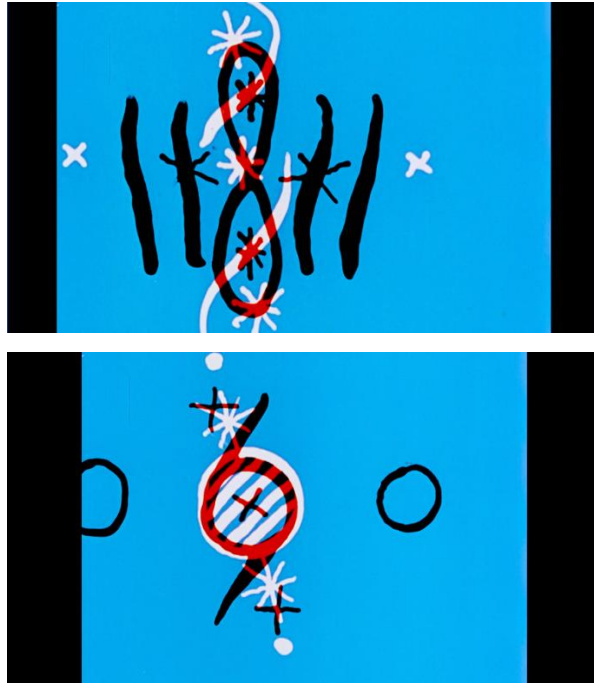


Figure 20: Evocative nature of abstract imageries, *Stars and Stripes* (1940) (McLaren, no date)

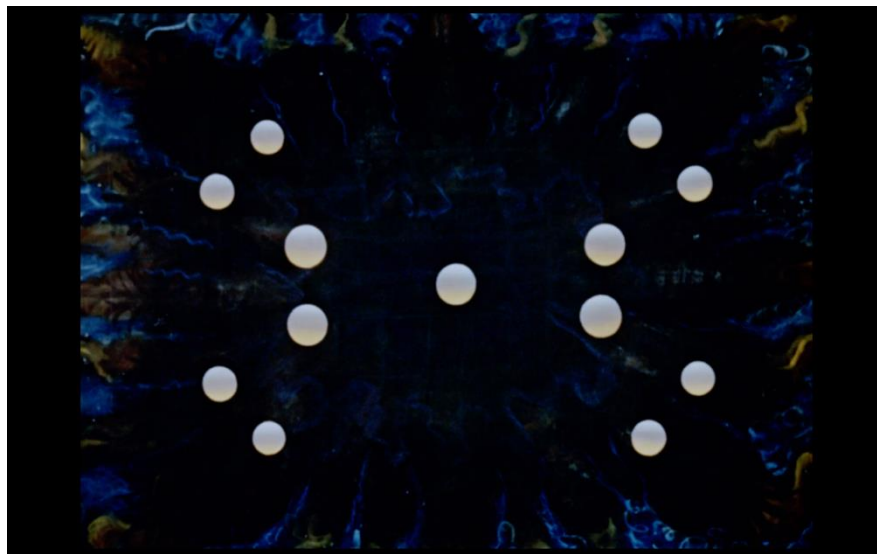


Figure 21: The fused foreground and background in pure abstraction, *Spheres* (1969) (McLaren and Jodoin, no date)

Since the formal elements in this sort of abstraction are mostly pure forms, transmutation and subversive motions can be very natural to them. This means that the notion of movement in pure abstraction can be anti-realistic and abstracted itself. It can open up to all the kinetic potencies that are not an imitation of reality. It can also be very responsive to the element of music, its beat, and rhythmic arrangement as a direct depiction of sound's abstract nature.

In terms of narrative and structure, pure abstraction does not usually follow a linear format of narration and generally has a “thematic” or “cyclical” arrangement (Furniss, 1994, p. 237). Furniss (2008, p. 99) describes the thematic structure as an exploration of an experience, feeling, idea, or concept in a non-linear manner and cyclical arrangement as “a return to the place of origin” (Furniss, 1994, p. 240), a continual process of return and initiation. Yet, this does not mean that the pure abstraction style, could not be employed to re-make and retell a linear narrative. An instance of recreating a linear narrative in a purely abstract animation style is *Mythos* (2 minutes 58 seconds), created by Stephen Kelleher and Chris Guyot (Guyot, 2018; *Mythos: An Animation Retells Timeless Greek Myths with Abstract Modern Designs*, 2019). This short abstract animation is a modern adaptation based on the Greek myths of Sisyphus, Icarus, Persephone, Narcissus, Midas, and Theseus (ibid). In this animation, the creators have condensed the adopted stories, focusing on these narratives' essence while transforming their linear structure into a cyclical format. For instance, the first episode, Sisyphus, is the story of the deceitful king Sisyphus who is punished by Zeus “after numerous transgressions, to push a huge, enchanted boulder up a steep hill. As soon as he reached the top, the boulder would roll back down to the base of the hill, condemning Sisyphus to an eternity of frustrated labour” (ibid). The character of King Sisyphus is portrayed in a sphere form, pushing another (bigger) sphere to the top of an abstracted U-shaped golden hill, and as soon as the character succeeds, the (bigger) sphere falls down into an abstracted U-shaped red pit which brings it to the initial position. Now, the main character (the small sphere), needs to repeat the same action in an endless cycle. A similar cyclical structure happens throughout the animation for each episode based on the core idea of each adopted story (see Figure 22).

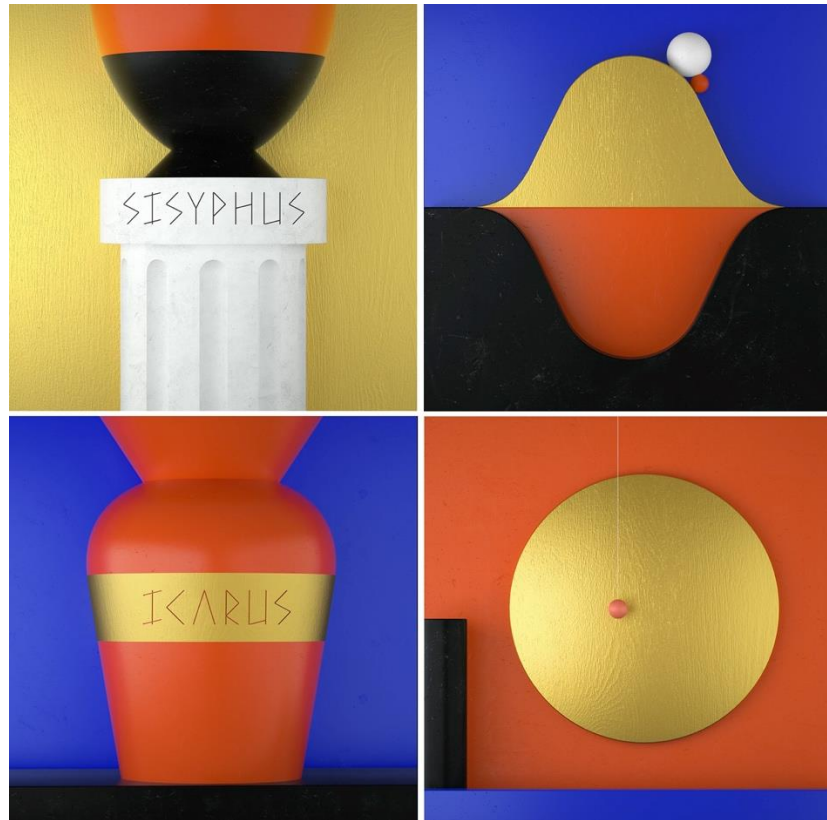


Figure 22: Still frames from *Mythos* (Guyot, 2018)

Mythos adapted a purely abstract style, using pure shapes, bold colours, and vintage textures. Each segment starts with the title of the adopted myth and does not include any subtitle, voice-over, or any additional information related to the original source other than the opening titles. The main characters are transformed into geometric shapes (e.g., spheres), repeating a metaphoric act in loops. This adaptation represents the possibility of using pure abstract animation for reconstructing linear narratives. Yet, to conform to an abstracted style, the stories are condensed to their core ideas, the linear narratives are re-worked into cyclical formats, and associative meanings (e.g., the opening titles) were employed to create a connection between each new retelling to the original source texts.

Mythos and the accompanying texts (Guyot, 2018; *Mythos: An Animation Retells Timeless Greek Myths with Abstract Modern Designs*, 2019) exploring its re-making, offer an interesting insight into the possibilities of abstract animation for the recreation of ancient narratives. Yet, these explorations do not engage in depth with the idea of the relationship between the level of abstraction and the possibility to convey a linear

narrative in meaningful ways. For instance, the article does not reflect on how the audiences did or might comprehend this artwork. Hence, this study aims to investigate these gaps in Chapters 4 and 5 through practice-based research, offering original examples with two different purely abstracted styles, various use of associative elements from the original source of adaptation, and interviews and analyses of (familiar and less familiar) audiences' responses to such re-makings.

Overall, pure abstraction is a formal degree that is potentially experimental and subjective and can result in unexpected visual and animation outcomes. As Kandel (2016) explores in his book *Reductionism in Art and Brain Science*, an abstract style would not only be a visualisation of an experience or content, but it can also be the content (ibid, p. 165) and the experience itself (ibid, p. 133). Yet, it is important to note that, like any other kind of abstraction, this form also varies in degree. Pure abstraction shares a blurring boundary with minimalistic and iconic forms. To some degree, it can carry on some visual resemblance, be symbolically figurative, and ambiguously representational, while on another level, when it is radically reduced, it can represent absolute formal qualities mostly free from referential ideas.

2.4.1 Meanings and Interactions: Pure Abstraction

Like iconic abstraction, pure abstraction is also reductive and isolating. Though, the reductionism in these two levels of abstraction can have different results. The act of simplifying in iconic abstractions is to direct the focus on details that can amplify meanings and expressive qualities. In pure abstraction, however, the radical simplification of visuals and animations can free them from representational qualities and lead to the multiplicity of meanings and ambiguous ideas. This is because abstract art is a text open to exploration and speculation, and it purposefully offers unconventional and ambiguous perceptive opportunities. As mentioned earlier, abstract forms can refer to and associate with an idea, concept, emotion in symbolic and metaphoric ways. It can be the exploration of things that are immaterial, non-existent, non-verbal, and universal (Moritz, 1988; Turner, 2003, 2015; Wells, 2007a; Matthew Collings, 2014). As Collings (ibid) states: abstract forms "... are things behind things ...As if reality itself is layered". By freeing the spectator from looking for a clear or literal idea, pure abstraction can amplify the experience

(see Figure 23). This means; when audiences observe and engage with abstracted visual and motion concepts, they probably would be less focused on specific meanings and interact more with the formal possibilities of the exhibited artwork. Here, the experience can be the idea, the subject, the aim, and the outcome.

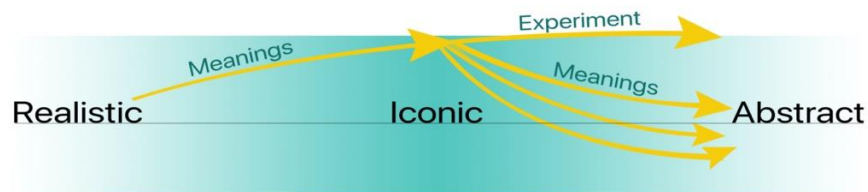


Figure 23: Abstraction continuum, meanings and interactions

Kandel (2016, pp. 23–25) believes the openness of abstract art allows for the spectators to be more actively involved in the process of meaning-making, compared to the representational styles. Here, the audiences need to put in more effort to interpret the artwork when it is emptied from clear informational clues. The more ambiguous the formal visualisation, the more viewers’ creative engagement is needed in the course of interpretation. Kandel also believes that “... abstract art ... subverts the innate rules of perception and relies more extensively on (the brain) top-down information (process) than does figurative art” (ibid, p.28). This means that the way the human brain works to re-construct a visual perception through the received visual codes is different when it encounters abstract art than when it observes figurative ones. In another study, Durkin and others (2020) also describe the viewers’ encounter with abstract forms as a psychologically distant condition where they have more “globally distributed viewing patterns” (ibid, p. 19809). Here, the viewers look at abstract art, not looking for details, but as an overall concept existing in a special and mental distance.

Hence, abstract art can be an open experiment for both the artist and the spectator. The reconstruction and observation of abstract art is a “pursuit of different ways of seeing, both on behalf of the artist and the audience” (Wells, 2007b, p. 82). The artist is free enough from literal concepts, realistic figures, and narrative structures and can explore and depict his/her ideas, the forms, and the medium itself in a deeply individual manner. On the other side, the spectator is also invited to experience and

interpret the outcome in a personal manner while assigning his/her subjective meanings. The diversity of speculations and perceptions will be an advantage of such a formal style because abstract art is supposed to be open and unanswered. It is supposed to evoke multiple standpoints which defy the spectator's expectations and permits him/her to have an individual experience.

Considering the above qualities of pure abstraction and that the adaptation of *Shahnameh* into abstract animation is an untouched area, this research is interested in examining if abstract stylisation is a suitable approach for the adaptation of *Shahnameh* narratives, particularly from a group of experts' audiences' perspectives. The analysis conducted above is significant to this thesis as it has offered a careful critical review of the relevant literature about the notion of pure abstraction. Additionally, it lays the groundwork for practical explorations of adopting *Shahnameh* narratives into abstract animations and elucidating the artistic choices made within the creative process in Chapter 4. These original artworks were later used to investigate how familiar and less familiar readers of *Shahnameh* comprehend and engage with its adaptations in abstracted animated forms (see Chapter 5).

2.5 Conclusion

Earlier, in the introduction to this thesis, I suggested iconic abstraction as the stylistic approach for the design components of sixteen animations based on *Shahnameh*. I also reflected on the gap in the practice of adopting *Shahnameh* narratives into abstracted forms of animation.

In this chapter, I explored the design components of the animation medium using Furniss's live-action animation continuum (2008) and McCloud's Pictures plane (1993). I examined the formal possibilities of animation language between the poles of reality and iconic and elucidated the path of arriving at the idea/theory of iconic abstraction. I then expanded on the visual-motion possibilities of iconic abstraction in animation practices by suggesting and analysing five styles of animation (caricatured realism (cartoon), comics/comic art, expressive, stylised, and minimal) as variant forms of iconic stylisation. This segment also reflected on the meaning-

making and engagement potentialities of iconic abstraction as a formal (visual and motion) tendency that amplifies and pronounces intended meanings and ideas by reducing visual clutter and being formally selective.

In the second part of this chapter, I looked into the possibilities of the animation medium when its design components tend to become purely abstracted (pure abstraction). By referring to several scholarly pieces of literature in addition to some practices from the field of animation, I reviewed and outlined the possibilities of form, meanings and engagements in abstract animation as an open, ambiguous, unexpected, and experimental visual-kinetic form. I also explained that contrary to iconic abstraction in which the act of simplification can direct the focus to the specific details and leads to the amplification of meanings, in pure abstraction, the radical simplification of visuals and animations can free them from representational tendencies and result in the multiplicity of meanings. Therefore, iconic abstraction and pure abstraction can generate different ways of experimenting, interacting with, and comprehending an artwork.

The purpose of the current chapter was to offer a critical theoretical review of the relevant literature and to contextualise the notions of iconic abstraction and pure abstraction within this study. Additionally, it expanded the literature on the artistic capacities of iconic and pure abstraction. This analysis will be helpful in understanding how iconic forms of animation contribute to the reconstruction of six adaptations based on *Shahnameh* in Chapter 3. It will also provide the groundwork for practical explorations of remaking *Shahnameh* stories into abstracted forms of animation in Chapter 4, which will be later analysed by a group of expert audiences in Chapter 5.

In the next part, I will examine six animations (case studies) based on *Shahnameh* that employed different forms of iconic abstraction in the design components of their animation. This part investigates how such design choices artistically and meaningfully assisted in the recreation of several stories from this ancient Persian epic.

3. SHAHNAMEH IN ICONIC ANIMATED FORMS

3.1 Introduction

This chapter starts with a table of sixteen documented animations based on *Shahnameh* (see Figure 24). These animations were created in a time frame between 1971 to 2019 and include the adaptations that were, to some extent, faithful to the essence of their adopted narratives, even if some used innovative and free approaches of remaking *Shahnameh*. As mentioned in the previous chapter, in early analyses, when I examined these animations' design components and styles, it became clear that all these animations are neither highly realistic nor radically abstract. Situating them within an abstraction continuum, the visual-motion styles of these animations were falling somewhere in between two extremes of realism and abstract, explored and suggested in the previous chapter as the iconic abstraction.

Using the background and contextual review conducted in the last section, the current chapter aims to comprehend how using iconic abstraction, creatively and meaningfully, contributed to these animated adaptations from *Shahnameh*. Here, I will examine six case studies (with an overall timing of roughly 8 hours) among sixteen documented animations (with an overall timing of roughly 16 hours, 30 minutes). These six animations are *Zal and Simorgh* (1977), *The Legend of Mardoush* (2002-2005), *Rostam and Esfandiar* (2006), *One Thousand Myths* (2016), *Jamshid: A Lament for a Myth* (2017), and *The Last Fiction* (2018), categorised starting from the earliest example.

At this stage, the "Information Oriented Selection" strategy as a suitable method for selecting cases from a small sample group was applied. In this method, case studies are chosen based on their potentialities for providing better and more comprehensive information. The first reason for choosing the above-mentioned six artworks was related to these animations' better technical qualities and more unique styles (design of their visual-motion components) compared to the rest of documented works. Having a good quality of graphics and animations as well as offering individual

stylisations could potentially provide better and more materials for the critical and creative examinations conducted in this segment. The second reason was that; each of these six adaptations represented one or more of the iconic styles of animation (e.g., caricatured realism (cartoon), comics/comic art, expressive, stylised, and minimal), examined in the previous chapter as an expansion of the formal possibilities of iconic abstraction. Moreover, the selection of only six cases was to limit the scope of this study, to make it achievable within the timeframe of a course of PhD study.

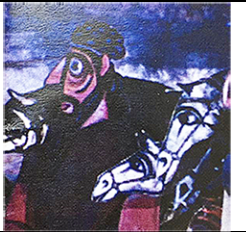

The contextual framework developed in Chapter 2 offered expanded information on the versatile stylistic possibilities of iconic abstraction and the qualities of graphics and motions when different forms of iconic styles are employed. It also reflected how iconic stylisations could amplify meanings and what sorts of ideas and experiences they could convey. This background study was a response to this thesis's objective, analysing the artistic, meaning making, and engagement potentialities of iconic abstraction. Using this framework, the current chapter investigates if those stylistic and conceptual possibilities of iconic abstraction could help to better understand and recreate *Shahnameh* in innovative ways? How?

Since this study focuses on how certain stylistic choices creatively and meaningfully contributed to the adaptations of several narratives from *Shahnameh* into animated forms, it will not be concerned with extensive research on *Shahnameh* and the adaptations studies. Instead, I will examine six case studies based on *Shahnameh* by conducting a textual analysis. These six animations represent some of the most popular tales of this epic poem from its different sections. By conducting a textual analysis for each case (rather than a thematic analysis of all samples) this part provides relative and comprehensive information for each adaptation as well as *Shahnameh* (e.g., stories' background, themes, and meanings), particularly for readers who might be less familiar with this Persian epic. It also looks more thoroughly into how iconic abstraction contributed to the design and storytelling in each case.




The next part starts with a table of the sixteen documented animations based on *Shahnameh*. It will then move on to the examination of the above mentioned six case studies, starting from *Zal and Simorgh* (1977). I will investigate these animations'





production background, styles, adopted stories, and underlying meanings in order to introduce each case study and examine the possibilities of animation design for the reconstruction of *Shahnameh's* narratives and contents. The reason to choose these categories is that they can provide comprehensive data about the visual-motion components of each animation and the underlying themes and subject matters of the adopted narratives. More specifically, the sections that are titled 'Universal and Cultural Concepts' are, in essence, a textual analysis of each tale's historical and cultural background, related psychological notions and characterisation, symbolism, ideology and main themes, archetypal patterns and structures that are common in the national and universal mythology and epic texts. The collection of these concepts elucidates the essential meanings that each narrative carries, supported by various scholarly research examining *Shahnameh's* stories (referenced in the current chapter). This information then can be used to explain how the iconic stylisation was applied in each case study, to remake and renew the adapted text by creating a unique visual style, and how iconic abstraction amplified and conveyed some of the adopted tales underlying concepts.





The findings of this chapter will contribute to the overall goal of the research by examining and understanding the methods of meaning-making in visual-animated forms. Additionally, it will add to this dissertation's objectives by analysing *Shahnameh's* narratives and contents and its adaptations into animated forms and making the scholarly research and artistic re-makings of this canonical piece of world literature accessible on an international level.

	Title	Director	Date ²⁸		Length		Episodes	Story	Theme	Hero/King Character Visualisation
1	The Discovery of Fire (Hushang King)	Nosratolah Karimi	1971	year	4 minutes, 44 seconds	Short		Hushang tale	Mythical	
2	Zaal and Simorgh	Ali Akbar Sadeghi	1977	Year	24 minutes, 15 seconds	Short		Sām and Zāl tale	Heroic	

²⁸ - Since the researcher could not find a source in which animations adaptations of *Shahnameh* were documented, the information about these animations was collected from different available sources, such as the original films, online resources, and personal communications. Finding a coherent timeline for these animations' dates were particularly challenging since some of these animations have various and sometime conflicting dates (e.g., production date, first release date, release date), and some only mentioned the date at the end of the film or on a website without specifying if this is the movie production date or release date. The second issue with the dates is, some of these movies share their (production or/and release) year in Persian Calendar's format without specifying the month. So, for instance, the Persian year 1383 can be equivalent to both 2004 and 2005 in the Christian calendar (when the month is not specified). An example is the animated TV series *Stories of Shahnameh* (2004-2005). Hence, the dates listed here are what the researcher could find from the available sources and calculate and arrange them to the best of her knowledge.

3	Rostam and Esfandiar	Esfandiar Ahmadiéh	2001-2002	Production year	84 minutes, 39 seconds	Feature Film		Rostam and Esfandiyār	Heroic	
4	The Legend of Mardoush	Hossein Moradi Zadeh	2002-2005	Production year/ Release year	(roughly) 100 minutes	Feature Film Trilogy	3 Episodes	Jamshid tale, Zakhak tale, Fereydun tale	Mythical	
5	Stories of Shahnameh	Seyed Mahmoud Saeemin	2004-2005	Release year	(roughly) 21 minutes	TV Series	13 Episodes	Stories such as: Siyāvash tale, Farud tale, Rostam and Esfandiyār, Rostam and Sohrab, Rostam and Shaghad, Akvan Div, Keyumars tale, Jamshid tale, and so on.	Mythical Heroic	

6	Rostam and Esfandiar	Ali Reza Kavian Rad	2006	Year	(roughly) 15 minutes	Short		Rostam and Esfandiyār	Heroic	
7	The Rebirth of Rostam	Saied Ghahari	2006	Year	(roughly) 50 minutes	Feature Film		Rostam and Sohrab	Heroic	
8	Shah Name	Alexandre Shirazi	2009	Year	2 minutes, 21 seconds	Short		Rostam and Esfandiyār	Heroic	
9	The Legend of the Hero Returns	Masoud Abazari and Nowruz Abbasi	2010-2011	Year	86 minutes, 24 seconds	Feature Film		Kay Kāvus tale	Heroic	

10	Simorgh's Heart	Vahid Nasirian	2011	production year	90 minutes, 41 seconds	Feature Film		(Inspired by) Zahhak tale	Mythical	
11	Tale of Zal	Esfandiar Ahmadih	2012	Production year	59 minutes, 39 seconds	Feature Film		Sām and Zāl tale	Heroic	
12	Battle of the Kings: Rostam and Sohrab	Kianoush Dalvand	2012	Year	94 minutes 58 seconds	Feature Film		Rostam and Sohrab	Heroic	
13	One Thousand myths (Hezar Afsan)	Asghar Safar and Abbas Jalali Yekta	2016	Release year	(roughly) 7 minutes	Short	9-13 Episodes	Stories such as: The tale of Haftvād, Zal and Simurgh, Zahhak and Fereydun,	Mythical Heroic Historical	




								Rostam's Seven Labours, and so on.		
14	Jamshid: A Lament for a Myth	Moin Samadi	2017	Release year	(roughly) 12 minutes	Short		Jamshid tale	Mythical	
15	The Last Fiction	Ashkan Rahgozar	2018	Release year	(roughly) 100 min	Feature Film		Zahhak tale	Mythical	
16	Prince of Sorrow	Hamid Rahmanian	2019	Production year	20 minutes, 20 seconds	Short		Siyâvash tale	Heroic	

Figure 24: Table of sixteen documented animations based on *Shahnameh*

3.2 *Zal and Simorgh* (1977)

This section in chapter 3 starts with the analysis of the first case study, *Zal and Simorgh*. This animated short was produced in 1977 by Kānoon, the Institute for the Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults; an organization which targets children and adolescents as the main audiences for their different productions (see *Institute for the Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults - Kanoon*, no date). *Zal and Simorgh* was directed by Ali Akbar Sadeghi, one of the Iranian pioneering animators. The technique used in this film is cel Animation,²⁹ and its runtime is roughly 24 minutes (See *Zal & Simorgh Animation (1977)*, no date; Sadeghi, 1977).

3.2.1 Story: *Zal and Simorgh*

Zal and Simorgh is an adaptation of a story from *Shahnameh* about the birth of Zal, who is a major mythical hero in this epic poem and the father of Rostam (the most prominent hero of *Shahnameh*). As mentioned earlier in the introduction chapter, *Shahnameh's* stories are structured upon mythological, epic-heroic, and historical themes (Khaleghi Motlagh, 2015). tale of Zal and Simorgh belongs to a section of the book that is known to have a significant heroic theme³⁰. In this tale, after years of waiting, Sam who is known as the champion of champions (of his time) becomes father to a son. However, his son is born with all white hairs like an old man and Sam considers this to be an act of punishment by God. In fear of being humiliated by enemies, he sends his son away to be abandoned in the Alborz mountains. Yet, with god's will, Simorgh, a mythical divine bird, finds Zal and fosters him as her child. She teaches him mystic and human knowledge, and Zal grows up to be an extraordinary young man. Years after, Sam hears about this exceptional youth living in the mountains, and later, he dreams of men who are

²⁹ - Cel animation is a two-dimensional animation technique, which in its traditional hand-drawn format, the artist (e.g. animator, layout artist, etc.) draws or paints (the characters movements, background, etc.) on different layers of transparent (e.g., celluloid) sheets.

³⁰ - "... the heroic section is considered to be the most important one. Because two-thirds of the *Shahnameh* is devoted to this part and also it comprises the majority of scholars' research on *Shahnameh*. This period extends from the time of Manuchehr until the conquest of Alexander the Great. The distinguished feature of this section is the prominent role played by the Sistani heroes who appear as the backbone of the Persian Empire." (Zohdi, Faghfori and Oroskhan, 2015, p. 28)

giving him the news of his son being alive. Regretting his act, Sam goes looking for Zal hoping to find him in the mountains. At last, with the help of Simorgh, Zal forgives his father's mistake, and they are united.

3.2.2 Cultural and Universal Concepts in *Zal and Simorgh's* Story

Looking into the deep structure of this tale, it is built upon several layers of history, mythology, archetype patterns, and symbolism. In terms of history, the tale of Zal falls within the *Shahnameh* timeframe known as the Pishdadian reign³¹. Pishdadids were mythical figures and an imaginative replacement for the historical dynasties of Median and Achaemenid³² (Yarshater, 1983; Daryaei, 2006). The figure of Zal is also compared with Achaemenes, the founder of the Achaemenid dynasty in history (Kazzazi, 2014a, p. 498). Hence, this story can be attached to the historical time frame of the Persian empire, specifically the Achaemenid era.

From an archetypal standpoint, this tale is the hero's journey of an exile; from and return to home (Campbell, 2004). It is also about the archetypal relationship between the hero (Zal) and his father (Sam). A popular dynamic in mythology and epic where an inevitable sort of conflict between the hero and his father (the archetypal enemy) emerges (Sam abandons his son because of his white hairs) (Miller, 2000, p. 91; Campbell, 2004, p. 143). This story also has many supernatural and mythological elements, such as Zal himself, who is a supernatural human being born with white hairs, fostered by Simorgh, a magical bird with healing powers and supernatural knowledge, and he grows up on top of the mystical mountains of Alborz. In the older text, he can be traced back to the mythological notion of Zurvan, the god of time in Zoroastrianism (ancient pre-Islamic religion of Iran). Unfolding Zal's characteristics within various *Shahnameh's* stories suggest his archetypal personas of the

³¹ - Tale of Zal birth belongs to the reign of Manuchehr; one of the Pishdadian kings (see the *Shahnameh's* table of kings)

³² - Ancient Iranian empires

“shaman/trickster/helper”³³ (see Miller, 2000) and the ‘old wise man’³⁴ (Taheri, Aghajani and Rezaei, 2014).

In terms of symbolism, Kazzazi (2014b, pp. 852–853) believes Zal is the symbol of time and infinity in Persian mythology. He is born with white hair like an old man, and in this sense, he is a notion of inversion in time and infinity (ibid). As Kazzazi (ibid) explains Zal is a reflection and remnant of Zurvan (the god of time in Zoroastrianism) and a transformation of this deity into a human heroic figure. Finally, besides being timeless, his maturation in the wild under the protection of a supernatural being gives him the superior knowledge and ability to escape death, locating him as the symbol of wisdom and an undying entity.

Analysing this story and its main characters closely above; suggests its connection with pre-Islamic Iranian history and mythology. Zal and Simorgh tale represents some of the popular archetype patterns that are present in ancient epics, in addition to; some significant symbolic notions. These underlying layers reflect the archaic theme of Zal and Simorgh tale and its historical and cultural background as an ancient national narrative and an old universal heroic story. In the next part, I will examine the style of this animation (visual and motion components) to (later) determine how the archaic theme of the original story and some of its cultural, archetypal, and symbolic concepts inspired the formal style of this animation.

3.2.3 *Zal and Simorgh* Animation Style

Zal and Simorgh’s iconic stylisation is the result of a rich and multifaceted relationship between the text and its underlying conceptual layers, the artistic style of the director (Ali Akbar Sadeghi), and the pre-Islamic artistic style.

Starting with Sadeghi and his individual style, he is mainly known as an Iranian surrealist painter and an artist whose work is inspired by both traditions of Iranian painting and western art (Foroutan, 2016). In terms of visualization, Sadeghi’s local

³³ - As stated by Miller (2000), this figure has some extent of divinity and supernatural powers, has a “trans-liminal place” (ibid, p. 243) in the myth, and can escape death (ibid, p. 259).

³⁴ - Having white hair implies Zal as a symbol of wisdom (Mousavi and Khosravi, 2008). A virtue that he carries on within *Shahnameh*, guiding heroes and kings when they need help

influences are “Persian miniature, Qajar and Qahve-khāne (coffee-house) painting³⁵, the naturalistic school of Kamal-al-Mulk”, etc. (ibid, p. 535). Besides his local influences, Sadeghi is also impacted by Renaissance and modern surrealist art and artists such as “Salvador Dalí and René Magritte” (ibid). Additionally, he has a great fascination with the national literature such as Persian epic, myth, legends, and folklore and specifically *Shahnameh* and reflects pre-Islamic Iranian cultural motifs, iconography, and identity in his work (*Ali Akbar Sadeghi About*, no date; Foroutan, 2016) (see Figure 25).

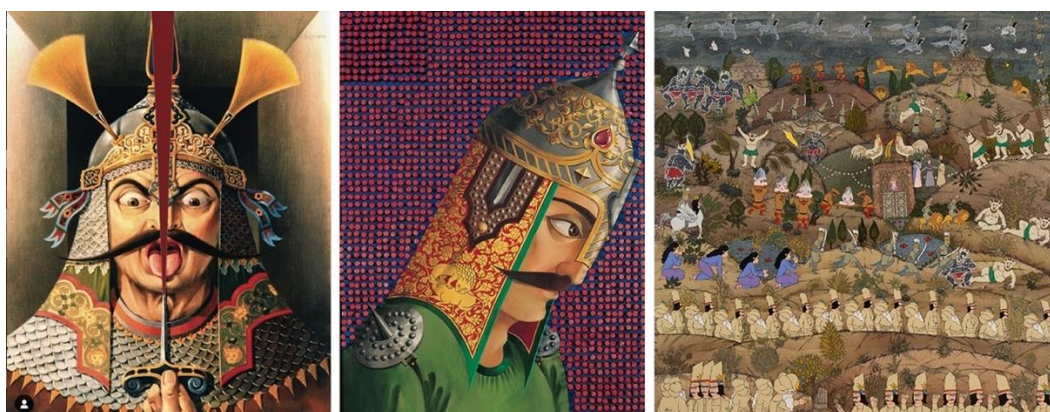


Figure 25: Sadeghi’s paintings (from left to right): *Division* (1977) (*Ali Akbar Sadeghi Foundation*, 2019), *Nail 03* (2005) (*Ali Akbar Sadeghi | Works*, no date), *Retell; The Sun King Recreated* (2015) (ibid)

Next, we can see some inspiration from Pre-Islamic Persian iconography and art forms, and some of the coffee-house paintings’ traditions in this animation. The character design in this animation reflects the substantial influence of ancient Persian art of Achaemenid and Sassanid (see Figures 26 and 27). Several Zoroastrian³⁶ concepts such as the characterisations of Mobeds³⁷, the visualisation of the burning fire³⁸, and the symbolic representation of Ahura Mazda³⁹ are represented throughout the film (see Figure 28). Furthermore, the hieratic perspective which is a

³⁵ - A style of folk painting founded in the Qajar era, visualising national, heroic, and religious subjects to be accompanied with Naqqāli (Iranian dramatic storytelling) for a theatrical representation in old coffeehouses (a traditional form of coffee/tea shops) (Toubaei and Kamyar, 2014).

³⁶ - The pre-Islamic religion of Iran

³⁷ Zoroastrian priests

³⁸ - “The symbol for the religion of Zoroaster is fire. Fire represents the living force in the universe” (Bashiri, 2012, p. 59)

³⁹ - The creator god in Zoroastrianism

common tradition of Iranian coffee-house painting (Mehdizadeh, 2015) is represented in some of the film's scenes where the significant figures are visualized bigger in scale compared to the others secondary/tertiary characters and have a more central position in the frame (see Figure 29).



Figure 26: Comparing the character designs in *Zal and Simorgh* animation with the Achaemenid and Sassanid artefacts and their style, still frames from *Zal and Simorgh* (1977)



Figure 27: Comparing the character designs in *Zal and Simorgh* animation with the Achaemenid and Sassanid artefacts and art style, (From left to right): Sassanid art (*Head of a king | Sasanian | The Metropolitan Museum of Art, no date*), Achaemenid art (*Relief: figure in a procession | Achaemenid | The Metropolitan Museum of Art, no date*), Achaemenid art (*relief | British Museum, no date*), Achaemenid art (Hunt, 2008)



Figure 28: Zoroastrian iconography, still frames from *Zal and Simorgh* (1977)

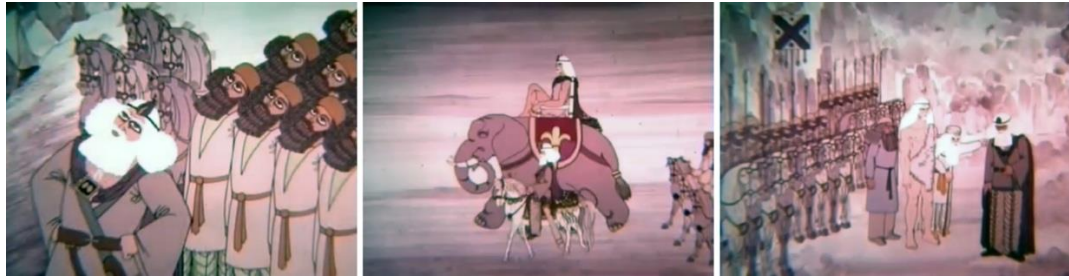


Figure 29: Representation of hieratic perspective which is a common tradition of Iranian coffee-house painting in *Zal and Simorgh* animation, still frames from *Zal and Simorgh* (1977)

Finally, this animation was produced during the first two decades of animation's foundation in Iran⁴⁰, hence, it showcases a limited amount of fluent animating. In some parts of the film, the fade-in effect was used (fading one pose to another pose) to compensate for a lack of frame-by-frame animation, giving a kinetic illustration quality to the work.

3.2.4 *Zal and Simorgh* Formal Abstraction

This part will explore how the visual-motion possibilities of iconic abstraction has helped in reconstructing a creative iconic style for this animation and better understanding of its adopted narrative's meanings.

In *Zal and Simorgh*, by distancing from photo-realistic and naturalistic tendencies and moving towards the traditional artistic styles (e.g., pre-Islamic Persian art, Coffee-house paintings, and Sadeghi's artistic methods) this animation achieved a significantly stylised form of iconic abstraction. In this film, a national art style is conveyed from the ancient artefacts and paintings and is brought to life using the western medium of animation. Not only, is its visualisation inspired by Achaemenid and Sassanid art, and the traditions of Qajar paintings, but also icons and symbols from these forms are directly embodied within the film. Using this level of abstraction, the artistic possibilities of iconic style, allowed for the forms to be simplified and emptied from realistic and unnecessary details. Instead, this simplicity permitted for a selective approach, to reconstruct the national formal tendencies and appropriate the above-mentioned cultural styles, symbols, and icons. It is

⁴⁰ - The first animation in Iran known as Molla Nasreddin was created in 1957 by Esfandiar Ahmadiieh (Van de Peer, 2017, p. 55)

through this level of iconic abstraction, that these forms come into the focus and the realistic details are abandoned in favour of decorative details. This artistic approach can suggest cultural affinity and connection for the viewers, particularly for the one who are familiar with the references.

The simplicity of forms can also make them more accessible for the unfamiliar viewers' comprehension. The style of this animation carries an iconic openness where the characters and space broadly resemble archaic and ancient figurations. The secondary characters such as Mobeds and soldiers are repeated with the least facial and size differences (see Figure 30). These repetitions and their archaic/stylized design locate them "more like every man or every woman" in an ancient setting (Furniss, 2008, p. 66) and less like "objectified" characters (McCloud, 1993, p. 44). Space itself is minimal and empty to shift the focus to the characters and their actions. Thus, both secondary characters and space evoke universal qualities and symbolism that also exist significantly in *Shahnameh's* world. Yet again, these repetitions and simplicity are unlikely to overwhelm the unique decorative style of the animation for an unfamiliar spectator.

Additionally, it might be interesting to note that the iconic degrees of abstraction in this film offer freedom and potency for the depiction of metaphoric meanings and poetic language. In one scene, a green leaf falls from Sam's crown, passing over his wife's pregnant belly, and then growing into a cypress tree. This is a poetic visual metaphor implying the notion of impregnation and the growing foetus of Zal in his mother's womb.



Figure 30: Visual homogeneity, still frames from *Zal and Simorgh* (1977)

Overall, *Zal and Simorgh's* formal style has maintained a cultural affinity with its familiar audiences and offers a level of iconic openness to engage the unfamiliar spectators. It conveys specific historical and cultural information related to this story and builds a link between the adaptation and its source text by using a national iconic

visualization (an association of related designs/symbols with their cultural context). On the other hand, the iconic style of this artwork maintains the archetypal spirit of the myth and depicts some universal tendencies. In this sense, using an iconic (stylised) design for this animation's components can lead to an amplification of cultural meanings and affinities, while their iconic openness and simplicity offer some ease for cross-cultural communication. Lastly, the choice of forms (national visual style, symbolism, decorative tendencies, selectiveness), structure (repetition, simplicity, archaic perspective), and animation (limited motion style) beside the narrative and characterisations have formed a multi-layered collection. A work that carries some of the historical, archetypal, mythical, and symbolical concepts from the original text, highlighting its archaic themes, and showcasing a stylised iconic format of animation. This animated adaptation offers a unique visual-motion experience of *Shahnameh* that can engage different audiences.

This segment explored the iconic stylisation of *Zal and Simorgh* and how it has creatively and meaningfully contributed to the adaptation of this short animation. The next part will investigate the artistic, meaning making and engagement possibilities of iconic abstraction constructed in the second case study of this thesis, *The Legend of Mardoush*.

3.3 The Legend of Mardoush (2002-2005)

The Legend of Mardoush is a feature animated trilogy directed by Hossein Moradi Zadeh and produced and released between 2002 and 2005 (*The legend of Mardosh; Iran's biggest puppet animation under the microscope*, 2021). This work is made mainly for teenage viewers in the stop-motion (puppet) animation⁴¹ technique (*Azhi Dehak Portrays Zahhak Life*, 2013) and has won several national awards (*The legend of Mardosh; Iran's biggest puppet animation under the microscope*, 2021). It is a production of Saba Animation Centre, a media company founded by the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB) in 1995 in Tehran. Saba Animation Centre is

⁴¹ - "stop-motion could be generally defined as creating the illusion of movement or performance recorded over successive exposed frames of film by manipulating, usually by hand, some solid object or puppet or cut-out image in a spatial physical setting" (Purves, 2010, p. 6).

focused on the mass production of educational, cultural, and national animations for children, teenagers, and youth (*Saba Animation Centre*, no date; *About Saba Animation*, no date). *The Legend of Mardoush* is an adaptation of Jamshid, Zahhak, and Fereydun tales from *Shahnameh* in the following three episodes:

1. *The Cup of Divination* (68 minutes, 35 seconds)
2. *Azhi Dehak* (89 minutes, 59 seconds)
3. *The Fight of Fereydun* (100 minutes, 10 seconds)

3.3.1 Story: *The Legend of Mardoush*

The first episode starts with a brief introduction of *Shahnameh*'s primal legendary kings (Kayumars, Hushang, and Tahmures) and then focuses on King Jamshid. In this story, Ahriman⁴² and his evil forces are interfering with Iranians by causing division among people and harming their lands. To put a stop to these evil acts and to weaken Ahriman, the chief Mobed advises the king to find the devil and takes away the Cup of Divination from him. King Jamshid with a group of loyal and skilful men set off on a long journey to find this magical cup. In the end, the king fights and defeats Ahriman and gets a hold of the divine cup. Peace and glory are restored and Jamshid sets the first day of the spring as the start of the new Persian year, Nowruz.

In the second episode, Jamshid is granted Farr⁴³ and achieves unlimited wealth and power. Gradually, this fortune turns Jamshid into an unjust king who believes he is above all. Iran and Iranian suffer from the king's prejudiced manners, yet Jamshid is blinded by his power and arrogancy. People are unhappy with Jamshid and soon after Jamshid's divine power is lost. In the meantime, Ahriman deceives and possesses a young Arab prince named Zahhak and leads him to take over Iran. In a grand battle, Jamshid is defeated by Zahhak, and Iran is doomed by the Ahriman soul. Zahhak kills Iranian youth and feeds their brains to two snakes growing out of his shoulders

⁴² - Ahriman is the dark, evil force in Iranian mythology as well as *Shahnameh* and the main opposing force

against Ahura Mazda, the God of light and truth. The encounter of these two forces and their subjects reflects dualism, which is one of the main themes of Iranian mythology (Axworthy, 2008).

⁴³ - "This word is originally derived from the Avestan word khwarnag" (Bashiri, 1994, p. 178) and it is the Zoroastrian "symbol of legitimacy and divine power" (Bashiri, 2012, p. 15) given by the god.

where once Ahriman kissed and cursed him eternally. This part ends with Zahhak dreaming of a new-born (Fereydun) in his sleep who ends his unjust reign.

The last episode is focused on the mythical character of Fereydun. A legendary hero/king whose father is killed by Zahhak to be fed to Zahhak's snakes. Later, Zahhak orders that all male infants be killed by his soldiers when he dreams of Fereydun bringing an end to his kingship. Fereydun's mother takes him away and he grows up to be an extraordinary hero. With the help of another heroic figure (Kaveh), Fereydun defeats Zahhak, chains him in Mount Damavand, and saves Iranians from his tyranny.

3.3.2 Cultural and Universal Concepts in *The Legend of Mardoush's Story*

Tales of Jamshid, Zahhak, and Fereydun re-created in this trilogy are structured upon multiple layers of historical, mythological, cultural, archetypal, and symbolic concepts. Starting from the historical part of these stories, all three of these legendary kings belong to the mythical dynasty of Pishdadian in *Shahnameh* which historically is equivalent to the empires of Medes and Achaemenids (a fictional replacement of factual dynasties in the Persian mythology) (Daryaei, 2006). Tale of Jamshid particularly has a connection to the history of Achaemenid and the Achaemenid's king, Darius the Great (Zoka, 1978). In Persian mythology, the construction of Persepolis (also known as Throne of Jamshid) and the foundation of Nowruz (New Persian Year) is ascribed to Jamshid, while historically both events are related to the Achaemenid era and are assigned to Darius the Great (ibid).

These stories also fall within a section in Ferdowsi's poem where mythology is a dominant theme⁴⁴. The figure of Jamshid existed much earlier than *Shahnameh* and is a chief Indo-Iranian mythological concept. For instance, this figure has an affinity with Mithra (Mehr), the Zoroastrian deity of abundance, blessing, war, justice, and spirituality (Bahar, 2014, p. 226). Later, in *Shahnameh*, Jamshid is pictured as the mightiest and most prominent Pishdadi king and his reign as a golden age (Kazzazi, 2014a, pp. 316–332). His era is known as the time of many primal innovations,

⁴⁴ - "... (the) first section, from Keyumars to Fereydun (which) narrates the story of mankind as a whole coping with forces of nature is (considered to be) the mythical section" (Zohdi, Faghfori and Oroskhan, 2015, p. 28).

manufacturing, development, prosperity, and the growth of Iranians to a magnificent civilisation (ibid).

The figure of Zakhak (whose traces can be found in pre-*Shahnameh*'s texts such as Avesta as the concept of Azhi Dahāka) is a demonic dragon with three heads and six eyes (Kazzazi, 2014a, pp. 333–336). This concept could be a remainder of ancient myths about nature and natural disasters (e.g., drought and storm) and a result of transforming these phenomena into an evil character (Taslimi, Nikouei and Bakhsi, 2005; Heydari, 2012). Later, this figure attains a human character in texts such as *Shahnameh*, in the form of an Arab prince, Zakhak, with two snakes growing out of his shoulders and who owns ten thousand horses. Another figure in these narratives is Fereydun, a mythical hero whose father is killed by Zakhak to be fed to his snakes. In prophecies, he is the one who puts an end to Zakhak's tyrannic reign and rules over the country after him. In Persian mythology, Zakhak and Fereydun are two parts of one entity with paradoxical features (Amini, 2002). Overall, Jamshid, Zakhak, and Fereydun are incompatible pairs (Heydari, 2012), a common concept in myth.

It is important to note that, the figures and structures of these three stories represent some of the popular archetypal patterns. Starting with the character of Jamshid, he can be positioned as the king-priest archetype whose era is a utopia. He is granted significant divine powers and prospects and has a holy position and impact on his people and country (Yahaghi and Ghaemi, 2007). He is interpreted as being a part of a divine couple, a dualistic mythical figure originated from gods (he is an identical twin with his sister) (ibid). Additionally, he represents a combination of archetypal characters of the old wise man and the hero (ibid, p. 284).

Standing in contrast with Jamshid, Zakhak is the most substantial negative figure of *Shahnameh* (Melaly *et al.*, 2020, p. 26) since he commits several destructive sins during his life. To get the crown, he kills his father that is an unforgivable sin and the only instance of patricide in *Shahnameh* (Zohdi, Faghfori and Oroskhan, 2015, p. 33). He then kills Iranian youth and feeds their brain to his snakes (sin of cannibalism). In *Shahnameh*, Zakhak represents the archetype of dark and shadow (Khosravi, Barati and Rozatian, 2014) by committing some of the most original and vilest archetypal sins (patricide and regicide) (Cross, 2015, p. 412). Finally, Fereydun's tale is a heroic

journey. He is the typical hero who has supernatural tendencies (e.g., rapid growth), supported by supernatural aid (The sacred cow that feeds Fereydun) and Sarosha (the divine angel who guides him). He sets off on a voyage with trials and tests, receives help from the wise old man (another legendary hero, Kaveh), and finally fights and defeats the dragon (Zahhak) (Amini, 2002; Taslimi, Nikouei and Bakhsi, 2005).

Within these narrations, we can also detect some archetypal concepts that are culturally loaded, related to Persian mythology and Zoroastrianism. For instance, the notion of Farr, as the Zoroastrian “symbol of legitimacy and divine power” (Bashiri, 2012, p. 15). This concept is significant in the tale of Jamshid. Farr is the main reason for Jamshid’s ultimate glory and power (Yahaghi and Ghaemi, 2007; Kazzazi, 2014a), and when he turns to an unjust and arrogant king, he loses the god approval and hence is defeated. The other concept is the eternal fight between good and evil, which is substantial in Zoroastrianism and ancient Persian mythology (Axworthy, 2008; Bashiri, 2012).

The interwoven historical, mythological, and cultural concepts in the stories of Jamshid, Zahhak, and Fereydun cultivate a space for symbolism. For instance, Zahhak’s sins situate him as the symbols of dark, evil, death, destruction, flesh, and sensuality (Heydari, 2012; Razifam, 2016). He is also an agent demolishing Iranian wisdom (his symbolic act of brain-eating) (Heydari, 2012). The snakes on his shoulders are not only an implication of his symbolic demonic character but also a reflection of his psychological state (Yazdanpanah, 2007). His corrupted, conflicted, anxious, and narcissistic mind and temperance are only calmed by committing sins, hence, feeding them with blood and death (ibid). Zahhak is on the dark side of the psyche with dangerous tendencies. He cannot be destroyed, but can be contained (Melaly *et al.*, 2020, p. 29) to reach a state of concord (ibid). Contrary to Zahhak, Fereydun is the symbol of light, good, life, spirituality, and freedom (Heydari, 2012; Razifam, 2016). He is the opposing side who captures Zahhak and chains him in Mount Damavand, so the peace and balance are restored.

In the above analyses, we can see a historical connection of these narratives with the pre-Islamic era of Iran, particularly the Achaemenid period and the Zoroastrianism beliefs. Yet, the historical layers are over-toned with the mythological themes where

the actual historical events and figures are replaced by the legendary kings and heroes, supernatural characters, and phenomena. Like many other myths, these stories are constructed upon multiple archetypal concepts, some of which are culturally loaded. These underlying concepts can be interpreted in various ways, where instead of the popular reading of the tale, one can investigate the mythological and symbolic position of the characters and events and reflect their supernatural, otherworldly, inner, and psychological status. Next, we will explore the iconic formal style of *The Legend of Mardoush* to understand how the imageries and animations were employed; to bring some of these inner ideas and symbolism to the surface.

3.3.3 *The Legend of Mardoush* Animation Style

In *The Legend of Mardoush*, we can see an envisioned, intact version of Persepolis as the Jamshid's palace (see Figure 31), and representations of visual icons, symbols, and characters, originated in Achaemenid artefacts (e.g., reliefs and Columns) (see Figures 32 and 33). These imageries can suggest a connection with the historical era of Achaemenids. A visualisation of Mobeds' characters, the fire temple (Atashgah)⁴⁵, and the recurring symbol of fire (see Figure 33) can be a reference to Zoroastrianism as the popular belief system of that period.



Figure 31: The Jamshid's palace, still frames from *The Legend of Mardoush* (2002-2005)

⁴⁵ - The place of worship for the Zoroastrians



Figure 32: The Achaemenid artefacts, (From left to right): *Lotus flowers in Persepolis* (2007), *Persian Column* (2009), *Gate of all nations* (Krapf, 2009)



Figure 33: The Achaemenid and Zoroastrian concepts, still frames from *The Legend of Mardoush* (2002-2005)

Even though, the choice of location, characters, and these above-mentioned concepts can convey some historical and cultural information, it seems in a more nuanced approach, the overall formal style of this trilogy is maintained a reductive and stylised method that we can see in some of Achaemenid and Parthian arts. For instance, if we look at the simple and expressive style of the artefacts in Figure 34, we can find some similarities between them and the visual style employed in *The Legend of Mardoush*, particularly in the designs used for the characters (see Figure 35). Here, the character designs are abstracted and standing far from realistic tendencies, reflecting simple, yet expressive forms. Most of the characters are an instant embodiment of their persona, such as villain, hero, or holy, something that is achieved by using selective graphics (see Figure 36).

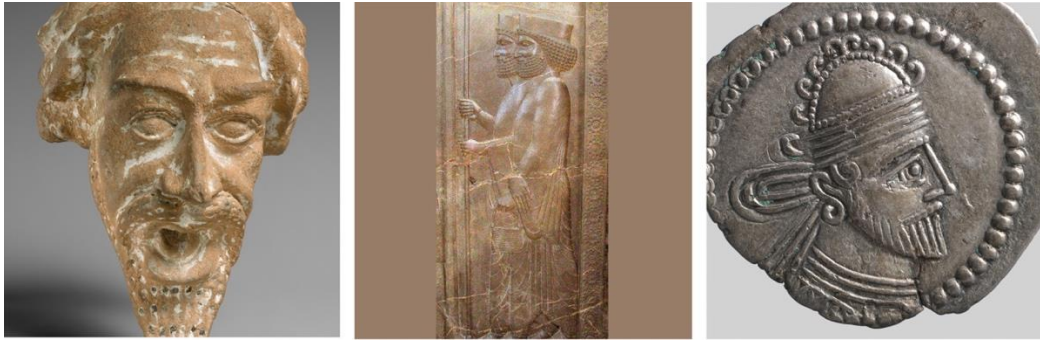


Figure 34: (From left to right): Parthian art (*Spout in the form of a man's head* | Parthian | *The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, no date), Achaemenid art (*Persepolis, Apadana, North Stairs, Central Relief*, 2004), Parthian art (*Drachm* | Parthian | *The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, no date)



Figure 35: The Achaemenid and Parthian art style inspirations, still frames from *The Legend of Mardoush* (2002-2005)



Figure 36: Villains' characterisations, still frames from *The Legend of Mardoush* (2002-2005)

In *The Legend of Mardoush*, the character animation is limited, minimal, and economic. Particularly, in terms of facial expressions that mostly include a restricted amount of lip-synching and basic eyes animation. There are instances where a character talks while his lips look static, yet we hear his voice and see his eyes are moving. This limited amount of animation besides their iconic, stylized facial features, resembles them as talking masks and gives them eerie and uncanny

qualities. These features are more evident in the characterisations of some of the mobeds, who have a blue skin tone (see Figure 37).



Figure 37: The mobeds' characterisations, still frames from *The Legend of Mardoush* (2002-2005)

3.3.4 *The Legend of Mardoush* Formal Abstraction

This trilogy has employed expressive forms of iconic abstraction by distancing from realistic tendencies, simplifying formal elements (graphics and animations), and exaggerating specific design details. Besides the cultural and historical concepts embodied in these adaptations, the visual style of these films resembles some inspirations from stylised Achaemenid and Parthian art forms. As discussed in the previous chapter, in iconic stylisations one can easily adapt and appropriate the components of graphic and traditional arts. This potentiality of iconic abstraction was used, in *The Legend of Mardoush*, to create a unique animation style inspired by ancient Pre-Islamic Iranian art and to construct a meaningful connection between this adaptation and *Shahnameh's* cultural and historical background.

It seems that the expressive, simple designs also highlighted the symbolic positions and psychological status of the main characters and allowed for an outward display of these characters' inner worlds. More than realizing what a character's intentions are, the audiences can have a perceptual experience of it. The symbolism and emotional meanings that the characters' designs suggest are a visual translation of (some of) the source text's symbolic and underlying meanings. For instance, when looking at the characterisation of Zahhak, his simple and expressive design instantly evokes his conflicted, dark inner world and his evil and destructive position in this tale. On the other hand, the feelings and understanding suggested by these simple

and expressive designs can immediately position these characters as universal types of hero, villain, or holy characters. Here, we might comprehend Zahhak as a negative persona (before we realise who he is) only by looking at his exaggerated, expressive character design. Additionally, Holy characters such as the mobeds display otherworldly and eerie qualities, particularly with their anti-realistic (blue skin) and expressive design, a supernatural mood that can be abundant in mythology.

The expressive and reductive iconic stylisation in this trilogy; assisted in transcending the meanings and the context that the adapted narratives carry out. Like previous adaptations, *Zal and Simorgh*, the imageries here can amplify the archetypal and cultural ideas. For instance, the design of the animation reflects Achaemenid and Parthian art inspirations and bring the symbolic status of each character to the surface. It also evokes the characters' archetypal persona instantly. The iconic style created for *The Legend of Mardoush*; can probably engage both the familiar and unfamiliar viewers and offers an expressive uncanny experience of *Shahnameh* in animated forms.

3.4 Rostam and Esfandiar (2006)

The next animated case study employing an iconic animation style is *Rostam and Esfandiar*. In 2006, Ali Reza Kavian Rad directed this animated short for Kānoon, also known as the Institute for the Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults (Kavian Rad; Animations, no date). *Rostam and Esfandiar* is a 2D animation⁴⁶ with a runtime of (roughly) 15 minutes. There is no specific mention of the target audiences for this animation. However, Kānoon generally produces animations for children and adolescents (see *Institute for the Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults - Kanoon*, no date).

⁴⁶ - 2D animation is an animation method in which concepts come to life (move) in a two-dimensional space

3.4.1 Story: *Rostam and Esfandiar*

The tale of Rostam and Esfandiar belongs to the Goshtasp kingship that is considered part of the Kayanian era (see *Shahnameh's* table of kings). Like Pishdadids, Kayanian too was a legendary dynasty and an imaginative substitute for the historical figures of Medes and Achaemenids (Daryae, 2006, p. 500). Additionally, this narrative belongs to the segment of *Shahnameh* (See Zohdi, Faghfori and Oroskhan, 2015) that is known for having a greater heroic tone.

By the order of King Goshtasp, Esfandiar brings his army to Zabulistan, to capture and chain Rostam. Goshtasp is afraid of losing his crown to his immortal son, Esfandiar, and to get rid of him, he asks Esfandiar to fight with the mightiest hero of Iran, Rostam. Following the king blindly, Esfandiar tries to convince Rostam to surrender peacefully and come to the king's court in the chain, promising him that he will free Rostam before the night comes, just to avoid a fight. However, being chained is the utmost degradation for a hero, particularly for no good reason. Hence, Rostam does not accept Esfandiar's proposition and asks him to reconsider. Subsequently, these two heroes are compelled to confront each other and to avoid unnecessary bloodshed they decide on a one-on-one war. While the two heroes are fighting, their armies are engaged in a conflict and two of Esfandiar's sons are killed during the fight. The devastating news is given to Esfandiar, and he is determined, even more, to revenge Rostam. Since Esfandiar is immortal, Rostam's swords and arrows do not harm him. Rostam gets badly wounded and leaves the battleground for the day. Rostam's father, Zal, summons Simorgh (the mythical bird) and asks for her supernatural aid. Simorgh heals Rostam, using her magical feather, and tells him the secret of Esfandiar's vulnerability. She asks Rostam to make a two-bladed head arrow and throw that at Esfandiar's eyes, his only vulnerable body part. At last, when Rostam cannot convince Esfandiar to end this pointless fight, he throws the arrow and injures him badly. Before dying, Esfandiar asks Rostam to foster his son (Bahman) and teaches him battle and kingship skills.

3.4.2 Cultural and Universal Concepts in *Rostam and Esfandiar's* Story

Kazzazi (1987, p. 517) considers the tale of Rostam and Esfandiar as “the most significant epic story of *Shahnameh* and Persian mythology {Author’s translation}”. When looking deeper into the studies (e.g., Kazzazi, 1987, 2014b; Parnian and Bahmani, 2012; Zohdi, Faghfori and Oroskhan, 2015; Dehbir Sayaghi, 2019) done on this story, it seems Rostam and Esfandiar tale has a significant tragic theme and is built upon some popular archetypal patterns which have some cultural specifics.

In this story, for the first time, two righteous iconic figures of *Shahnameh* stand against each other and fight to the death. Rostam is the mightiest heroic figure of *Shahnameh* and is known as the hero of heroes. He portrays the “Persian exemplar of the hero” (Zohdi, Faghfori and Oroskhan, 2015, p. 32) and has dedicated his whole life fighting for Iran, and the “Iranian royal families owed their kingship to him” (ibid). For this reason, he is also known as “the bestower of the crown” (ibid) and is granted the honor of freedom by ancient kings (he shall not be chained). Rostam is also one of *Shahnameh's* figures who is given divine power (heroic Farr).

On the other side of this story, Esfandiar represents kingship, as he is a prince who is the son and successor of King Goshtasp. Esfandiar is the main force in extending his father’s territory and their religion, Zoroastrianism. In Iranian mythology, it was believed that the prophet Zoroaster assigned Esfandiar as the defender of Zoroastrianism and granted him immortality (Kazzazi, 2014b, pp. 735–736). So, this prince’s entire body is invulnerable to any harm except his eyes. Esfandiar has devoted his life to this religion and the king, and in this story, he follows the king’s order, to chain Rostam, regardless of his disagreement with this act. Esfandiar is also granted divine power (sovereign Farr) and since he is a sacred being, if anyone kills him, that person will be doomed in this life and hereafter (Dehbir Sayaghi, 2019, p. 262).

In *Shahnameh's* ideology, the king and the hero are two faces of the same coin (Kazzazi, 2014b, p. 664), and even though they might criticize each other from time to time, their existence is dependent on one another. Through a harmonic relationship, the king and hero maintain the divine power (Farr), which is the secret of the country’s glory and wealth (Parnian and Bahmani, 2012, p. 106). In this narrative, for the first time, these two forces stand against each other. Rostam

represents the heroic Farr, and Esfandiar is the symbol of sovereign Farr (Kazzazi, 1987). Their opposition is ominous with failure as a possible outcome for both. Rostam kills Esfandiar by getting supernatural aids. However shortly after, he is also killed in a nonsignificant battle as a result of the doomed fate that Esfandiar's death brings upon him (Kazzazi, 2014b, p. 664). This unfortunate deed gives this story a significant tragic theme, alongside its epic tone, and reflects on the connection of history and *Shahnameh*, because this poem can be considered as a glorified story of the Persian empire and its downfall (A poetic interpretation). Kazzazi (ibid) suggests the death of Rostam as an end to the mythical and epic tone of *Shahnameh's* narratives and where the later segments tend to find a greater historical theme.

Next are some of the chief archetypal relations of this story, such as the recurring conflict between a father and son, and a king and hero. The examples of father and son rivalry are Esfandiar's disagreement with Goshtasp about chaining Rostam for no good reason, and Esfandiar's encounters with Rostam who is "considered (to be) the foster father of all the warriors and kings of Iran" (Zohdi, Faghfori and Oroskhan, 2015, p. 29). Also, the controversy of Esfandiar (Goshtasp) and Rostam is the archetypal pattern of a king and hero conflict. Miller (2000, p. 317) suggests this as a common tension between these two personas even though both a king and hero are of the same nature. Largely, this story reflects the universal pattern of the opposition of dual forces.

The deadly quest of a tragic hero is another substantial archetypal concept in this narrative. Miller (2000) describes a tragic hero as a type who has an excruciating internal conflict, has flaws that make him blind to the truth or the right choices, and he will be removed by supernatural aids (ibid, pp. 7–8). Esfandiar's characteristics and journey follow the same pattern pushing this narration into a tragedy. This character also belongs to the archetype of immortal heroes, who are granted immortality by a divine force, yet they all have a vulnerability that causes their unexpected death. Kazzazi (2014b, pp. 803–805) describes these heroes as a symbol of human desires for immortality; however, their short and tragic life reflects the failure of such wishes.

Based on the above analysis, we can determine that some of the most dominant inner ideas and meanings of the Rostam and Esfandiar story are its prevailing tragic theme, with a connection to the demise of the Persian empire, the inner/outer

conflict and agony of the archetypical personas, and the notions of duality and opposition. In the next segment, I will analyse the iconic stylisation of this animated adaptation to understand how it has assisted in reconstructing and amplifying these underlying themes and concepts through the components of animation design.

3.4.3 *Rostam and Esfandiar* Animation Style

The *Rostam and Esfandiar* animation incorporates the elements from the visual style of comics/comic art into animated forms. Some parts of the film can even be interpreted as a motion comic. In these segments, there is a limited amount of animation and instead, the comic art frames follow one another while a narrator recites lines from the story (see Figure 38) over these moving images. Several popular traditions of comics, such as multi-frames, captions, speech balloons, and incorporation of texts and images are applied to the style of this short (see Figure 39). Additionally, several iconographics from Persepolis architecture and reliefs are depicted in the illustration of the backgrounds and environment, which can imply a historical connection with the Achaemenids (see Figure 40).

Compared to the two previous adaptations, this animation is more realistic, both in terms of imageries and animation. Yet, it is still far from a naturalistic format, and it represents an iconic style incorporating visual elements of comics/comic art. The movements of the character are a closer imitation of natural movements, and their characterisation is a caricatured version of reality. This film also represents various camera angles in its cinematic style and techniques such as switching back and forth between two main characters during the animation (see Figures 41).



Figure 38: Comics/comic art inspirations, still frames from *Rostam and Esfandiar* (2006)



Figure 39: Incorporation of comics/comic art traditions into the animation visual style, still frames from *Rostam and Esfandiar* (2006)

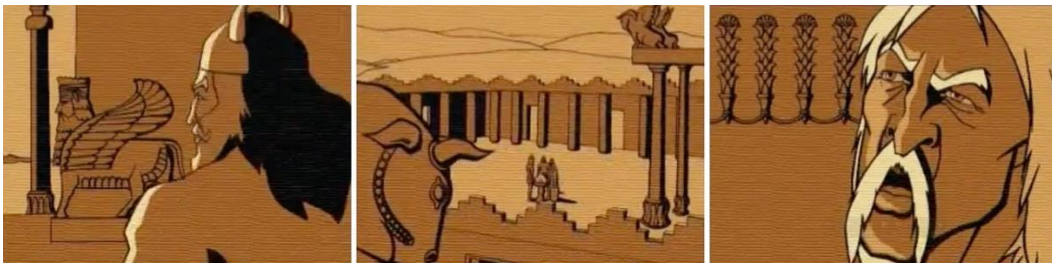


Figure 40: Inspirations from Persepolis architecture and reliefs, still frames from *Rostam and Esfandiar* (2006)



Figure 41: Camera angles and switching back and forth between the main characters, still frames from *Rostam and Esfandiar* (2006)

The graphic style of this film resembles an ink/pencil illustration which is particularly amplified by the application of a rough paper texture to its overall framework. A minimal warm colour palette is used which has given a vintage and stylised look to

the film. The use of thick lines and a bold contrast and shadows also has intensified the expressive qualities of the characters. In some scenes, the visual style shifts to a black and white colour format where the pencil marks become more visible, and this gives the scene a kind of hand-drawn feel and look (see Figure 42). Finally, the backgrounds are empty and simple, and only depict the most required visual clues, which can assist in shifting the viewers' attention to the characters and their actions.



Figure 42: The pencil marks, still frames from *Rostam and Esfandiar* (2006)

3.4.4 *Rostam and Esfandiar* Formal Abstraction

The formal abstraction in this animation is an iconic style incorporating the design elements of the comics/comic art, adapting the vocabularies of the comics/comic art medium into animated forms. It depicts a degree of abstraction that can also be interpreted as a caricatured version of reality. The openness of iconic abstraction (not copying reality but distancing from it to assume many forms) is used in this adaptation to appropriate the traditions of various mediums. For instance, a combination of comic art traditions (e.g., multi-frame, caption, text balloons) and cinematic devices (such as camera angles, back and forth transitions) is offered to create a versatile motion picture experience. Additionally, the visual style of this animation is inspired by drawing medium marks, depicting a pencil-ink look on a paper-like textured background. This specific choice of stylized forms, use of minimal colours, bold lines, and contrast pronounce the agonised and conflicted expressions of the characters. Such stylisation, alongside the formal devices borrowed from other mediums (comics, film, and graphic arts), assisted in highlighting the underlying tragic theme of the source text and embodying some of its archetypal concepts as set out below.

From a national point of view, this is a tale in which two of *Shahnameh's* iconic forces are standing against each other for the first time and their fight and downfall is a poetic retelling inspired by the history of the Persian empire and its tragic collapse. From an archetypal standpoint, this is the common pattern of contrasting character types who are two different parts of one entity and confront each other, which leads to a disastrous outcome.

This idea of dichotomy is visually depicted through the usage of minimalistic colour design, especially when the scenes turn to black and white, and when the camera switches back and forth between the two main characters. Next is the tragic theme that is also communicated through the formal design of this animation. The story's mood and the psychological state of the characters (their inner conflict, suffrage over the impossible decisions, etc.) are depicted through iconic imageries, which are stylized and expressive, particularly in their facial expressions. By the application of these caricatured forms, thick lines and outlines, bold contrast, and flat colours, the underlying emotional moods (conflict, agony, anxiety, etc.) are brought to the surface which can imply the tragic feeling of the narrative (see Figure 43).

The visual style of this animation, the choices of forms, colour palette, shadows, and lines evoke and amplify the doomed and sad feeling of the narrative and bring them up to the surface. These creative choices can assist the less familiar audiences to comprehend that the imageries are not visualising a happy tale but a lament. Because the colours, lines, and shapes are selective, they instantly convey the underlying and symbolic meanings. In this way, the iconic stylisation of this animation can engage different spectators by toning up the emotional and tragic themes of the film.



Figure 43: Still frames from *Rostam and Esfandiar* (2006)

In this part, I have explored how an application of comics/comic art stylisation and the iconic abstraction qualities of imageries and motions in *Rostam and Esfandiar* has

helped visually transmit some of the adopted narrative's meanings. Like previous examples, iconic abstraction has had an amplifying impact on the narrative meanings. In the next case study, I will examine how Persian miniature was employed to create new retellings of *Shahnameh* in the *One Thousand Myths* series.

3.5 One Thousand Myths (Hezar Afsan) (2016)

In 2016, the animated series, *One Thousand Myths (Hezar Afsan)* was released by Saba Animation Centre. This series consists of 9-13⁴⁷ episodes with roughly 7 minutes runtime for each segment and is directed by Asghar Safar and Abbas Jalali Yekta. The technique used in these animations is digital cut-out⁴⁸ and it mainly targets kid and teen audiences (*One Thousand Myths (Hezar Afsan)*, 2017). The 9 episodes of *Thousand Myths* are titled as follows:

- *The Legend of Sleeping Deev⁴⁹ in the Mountain*
- *The Legend of the Haftvad Worm*
- *The Legend of Zal and Simorgh*
- *The Legend of Fereydun and Zahhak*
- *The Legend of the Dragon Mountain*
- *The Legend of the Girl and the Deev*
- *The Legend of the Strange Dream*
- *The Legend of the Magic Gate*
- *The Legend of the Sweet Dream*

3.5.1 Story: One Thousand Myths

In this part, the stories adopted in the *One Thousand Myths* series will be briefly described. While the stories of Zal and Simorgh, and Fereydun and Zahhak were

⁴⁷ - In an online source and interview (Ruzban, 2017) The director of the series, Yekta, mentioned that this series will be produced in 9 and possibly up to 13 episodes. This author could only find and access the 9 episodes of this series.

⁴⁸ - A type of stop-motion animation where the various parts of characters, background, and objects seem to be cut out of paper or other material

⁴⁹ - A type of monster in Persian mythology

explained in the previous case studies (see *Zal and Simorgh* (1977) and *The Legend of Mardoush* (2002-2005)), they will be mentioned again briefly below.

- *The Legend of Sleeping Deev in the Mountain*

A deev (monster) who was sleeping in a mountain wakes up and attacks the city. With his magical breath, he turns all the soldiers into stones and then captures the king. The pahlevan (the hero) is informed about this attack and hurries to rescue the city and the king. He fights with the deev and traps him inside the mountain. He then breaks one of the deev's horns and by blowing it, breaks his spell and turns the soldiers back into their human forms. This story is a free adaptation of a tale in *Shahnameh* known as *Rostam's Seven Labours, The Seventh Labour*. This narrative belongs to the mythical reign of Kayanian, located in the segment with a greater heroic tone.

- *The Legend of the Haftvad Worm*

A girl who goes to the mountains every day and knits some wools, finds a worm from a fallen apple. Soon she realises that this worm has magical power and if she feeds the worm, it will knit dozens of balls of wools for her. She takes the worm to her home and her father. With the help of this magical creature, they make a fortune. However, the father becomes greedy and feeds the worm too much, so the worm gets bigger and bigger every day, and eventually, it turns into a dragon and attacks them. A hero-king comes to their help and kills the dragon and rescues the family. This episode is loosely inspired by *The Tale of Haftvād Worm* from *Shahnameh* which belongs to the part of this book with a stronger historical tendency and within a time frame known as Parthian kingship.

- *The Legend of Zal and Simorgh*

The king becomes father to a son with white hair all over his body. The king finds this embarrassing, so he orders his soldiers to abandon the child in the mountains. The magical bird, Simorgh, rescues the child from the wilderness and fosters him as her own. The child grows up and becomes a strong man while the king is aged and regrets his act. The king sets out to find his son. With the help of Simorgh, they are uni

ted, and Zal forgives his father. This episode is a loose adaptation of Zal's tale which, as mentioned earlier is part of the segment with a greater heroic theme and within the timeframe of Pishdadian.

- *The Legend of Fereydun and Zahhak*

Zahhak, the tyrant king with two snakes growing out of his shoulders, imprisons young men and lets his snakes kill them. He later dreams of a newborn (Fereydun whose father was killed by Zahhak) in a swaddle blanket and when he approaches to see the infant's face, a lion jumps out of the blanket and attacks him. Warned by this nightmare, he orders his soldiers to kill all male newborns. Fearing for his son's life, Fereydun's mother runs away and takes him to a deserted place, where he drinks from a magical cow's milk and grows to become a strong hero. Years later, Fereydun attacks and defeats Zahhak, revenging his father's death and freeing the country from his tyranny. This short is freely based on Zahhak's tale from *Shahnameh* which belongs to the era of Pishdadian and a section that has a dominant mythological tone.

- *The Legend of the Dragon Mountain*

While the king is hunting wild goats in the mountain, the cliffs start shaking, so he falls from his horse and loses consciousness. He then wakes up in a house where a farmer and his wife are looking after him. After a while the king feels better and soon, he finds out that the reason for that earthquake is a dragon living in the mountain which terrorises the villagers occasionally. He decides to fight with the dragon and with the help of the farmer's wife who is a brave woman, they finally defeat and kill the monster and free the village. This story is loosely based on *The Tale of Bahram Gur with the Farmer's Wife and His Killing of the Dragon* from *Shahnameh*. This narrative belongs to the era of Sassanid which has a greater historical theme.

- *The Legend of the Girl and the Deev*

Wild boars are attacking the city and causing damage. The king goes hunting these wild animals. After hunting all, the king chases the last one, deep into the mountains and finally slays the boar. He then comes across an abandoned castle and meets a girl who is imprisoned there by a malicious deev. The king fights with the monster but is defeated and the deev throws him into a deep pit. The king's bird flies away to

inform the pahlevan of this accident. The pahlevan gallops to this lost castle, fights and kills the deev, and frees the king and the girl. This animation is a free adaptation of *Bijan and Manijeh's* story from *Shahnameh*. The original narrative belongs to the timeframe of Kayanian with a dominant heroic tone.

- *The Legend of the Strange Dream*

The king dreams of a ceremony and while he is enjoying this festive occasion, a half-human half-boar creature gets the cup of wine from his hand and takes over his throne. The king wakes up and asks the fortune-tellers to tell him the meaning of this nightmare, however, no one can offer an explanation. Finally, a gifted young boy comes to the king's court and informs him that this dream is a warning. There is a man hidden in women's clothes among the king's servants. Realizing this, the masked person reveals his identity and attacks the king. The guards stop the man and the king's life is saved. This short is based on a tale known as *The Dream of Nushirwan*. This narrative is from a segment of *Shahnameh* which covers the Sassanid kingship and has a historical theme.

- *The Legend of the Magic Gate*

The pahlevan is hunting and chasing wild goats into the deep jungle. He then reaches an abandoned gate and even though his horse is uneasy, he decides to pass through the gates. Further, he finds a festive spread of foods and drinks, so he sits down and eats from this generous feast. Suddenly, an enchanted woman appears from nowhere and offers wine to the pahlevan. Bewitched by her beauty, he drinks the wine and soon he passes out. He then wakes up to realize that he is chained, and the woman is a witch. With the help of his horse, the pahlevan breaks free and kills the witch. This story is based on *Rostam's Seven Labours, The Forth labour*, which belongs to the Kayanian era and carries a substantial heroic tone.

- *The Legend of the Sweet Dream*

It is night and the pahlevan decides to get some rest in the jungle. Soon he falls into a deep sleep, dreaming of a castle with a beautiful woman and a magical feast. But his horse is uneasy as it feels something dangerous is coming. The horse wakes the pahlevan up several times, however, since he cannot find anything threatening, he

gets angry with the animal. At last, the pahlavan wakes up from a nightmare and realizes that a malicious dragon is about to attack him. With the help of his horse, he fights and defeats the dragon. This animation is a free adaptation of *Rostam's Seven Labours, The Third labour* tale. It comes from the Kayanian time section which seems to represent a greater heroic tone.

3.5.2 Cultural and Universal Concepts in *One Thousand Myths's* Story

The *One Thousand Myths* series has offered a collection of stories from four dynasties (Pishdadian, Kayanian, Parthian, and Sassanian) that form the overall timeframe of *Shahnameh*. These stories also come from different sections that have overarching mythical, heroic, and historical themes. The original tales are shortened substantially for a 7- minute segment and possibly for the sake of children and teen spectators. The makers of this series have adapted several aspects of the narratives that they have borrowed. Many of the characters and events are eliminated and mostly the very essence of the stories is retold. There is no dialogue in the series and instead, the orchestra music is the major audio component of these animations.

The cultural concepts that these narratives carry, are also broad. Looking into the original texts, these stories are about national heroic figures such as Sam, Zal, Rostam, Fereydun, and Bijan, as well as the legendary and historical kings such as Zahhak, Kay Kavus, Ardashir, Bahram Gur, and Nushirwan. In *One Thousand Myths*, these figures are merged and outlined in two character-types of the hero (pahlavan) and the king. Some of the main inspirations from *Shahnameh* are the supportive relationship of the hero and king characters. In *Shahnameh*, heroes have always been the backbone of the government and on occasions when the king or kingship was in danger, they would be the main force to act and defuse the threat (e.g., the main role of Rostam in *Shahnameh*). The ideal king himself has a supportive position for his people and this role has also been adopted in some of these stories. Another substantial concept from Zoroastrianism is the eternal fight between light and dark which is brought to the surface in these animations when the short narrative is constructed around a confrontation between the protagonist and an evil figure.

Looking into the archetypal structure of this series, episodes number 1,2,4,5, and 6 mainly depict the universal plot of a heroic fight with a dragon/monster and a confrontation of good and evil. Episodes number 3,8, and 9 broadly represent a hero's journey and quest which in some parts display the hero's maturation through his fight with a dragon (evil figure). And in episode 7, the story is about a king-priest who receives mystic warning through his dream. In terms of archetypal characterization, the most prominent figures are the hero and king and a depiction of their archetypal relationship. Lastly, the fantastical components of these narratives are highlighted or amplified, particularly in the stories coming from the *Shahnameh's* section which has a dominant historical theme (e.g., *The Tale of Haftvād Worm*). So, the epic and mythic or historical tone which can be found abundantly in some of these narratives is reduced to display short stories of common people and heroes who come across a supernatural creature, phenomena, or an evil figure and overcome the obstacle, sometimes with supernatural aids.

In *One Thousand Myths*, the creators have looked into the essence of their source narratives. They have constructed a broader and more universally accessible version of their texts. These animations are mainly portraying a fantastical world of common people, heroes, kings, and supernatural beings, where the good always confronts and overcomes evil. Following on from here, we analyse the formal style adopted in these animations to understand how the visuals and motions assisted in the embodiment of the essence of these narratives, their archetypal concepts, and fantastical themes.

3.5.3 *One Thousand Myths* Animation Style

The visual style of *One Thousand Myths* is significantly inspired by the Persian miniature artistic style. "Persian miniature painting was emerged as a means of illustrating books, usually accompanying works of poetry" (Marashi, 2002, p. 483). "This art evolved in Iran during the Seljuk dynasty (1038-1157 CE)" (ibid) and achieved a high level of sophistication and perfection during the later centuries. Some of its popular characteristics originated from different periods are "the ornamentally posed figures with almond eyes and round faces" (ibid), the use of "bright colours and fine details" (Gray, 1930, p. 24), "no use of shadow or reflection"

(ibid, p. 25), popular use of “the three-quarters angle for faces” (ibid), a “birds-eye perspective, ... and use of various planes and natural scenery” (ibid, p. 48).

As mentioned above, this art style was used as visual component accompanying poetic works such as *Shahnameh*. Hence, there is a prominent relationship between these sorts of imageries and the visualisation of this text. The makers of this animated series have adapted this iconic and national painting style in its flourishing Islamic forms for their work. For instance, by looking closely at these films’ formal style, an inspiration, particularly from the *Shahnameh of Shah Tahmasp* (also known as *Houghton Shahnameh*)⁵⁰ can be detected in these animations (see Figures 44 and 45). Compared to these miniatures, the *One Thousand Myths* imageries are less decorative and detailed, to accommodate the design/animation process and adjust to the characteristic of a motion picture medium. Yet, the film has displayed an escape from reality into this ideal and fantastical world by recreating its individual logic of forms, colours, and perspective. The overall look is stylised, detailed, and decorative and the characters are inspired by the look of men, women, and creatures from these local paintings. The characters are also designed in bright colours from a three-quarter angle, and the same approach to the notion of perspective from the Persian miniatures can be seen in some scenes of these animations. Finally, the characters' animations are limited but expressive. For instance, even though there are no dialogues, but the characters’ thoughts, feelings, and actions are conveyed through their facial expressions.

⁵⁰ - Houghton *Shahnameh* was “written and illustrated in the second quarter of the sixteenth century”, during the Safavid dynasty (Welch, 1976, p. 7).



Figure 44: Still frames from *One Thousand Myths* (2016)



Figure 45: Persian miniatures from the *Shahnameh of Shah Tahmasp* (Welch, 1976, pp. 138, 103, 162, 98, 122, 127, 101)

3.5.4 *One Thousand Myths* Formal Abstraction

The formal degree of abstraction in the animated series, *One Thousand Myths* is iconic and stylised. This collection of works has adapted a national art style (Persian miniature painting) for its simplified narratives from *Shahnameh*, to offer accessible and transcultural readings of this poem accompanied with visual concepts that can display cultural correspondence.

This series has a reductive approach to the stories it borrowed. Here, *Shahnameh's* tales are shortened; and simplified into scripts that represent the essence of the

story, with most episodes focusing on the two archetypal characters of king and hero. The main themes are universal notions of the heroic fight and journey and confrontation of good and evil. Additionally, the element of fantasy is amplified significantly in the appropriated narratives. Yet, the formal style of the animation is supplementary. It communicates cultural affinities through a recreation of stylised, detailed, decorative, and expressive imageries and animations inspired by Persian miniatures. In this adaptation, the iconic level of abstraction provides an opportunity for a creative integration of the Persian miniature; for the remaking of *Shahnameh* into animated forms. The result is a fantastical world of kings, heroes, creatures, and common people reconstructed in an Iranian art style, where both archetypal concepts and national imageries have mutually contributed to the outcome. Visiting and revisiting *Shahnameh* in this style can be engaging and informative for audiences with different levels of familiarity. For unfamiliar readers, this adaptation offers an accessible version of *Shahnameh's* poems accompanied by culturally rich visual components. For familiar viewers, it can be a new way of re-reading this epic poem and experiencing the Persian miniatures in a motion picture space.

3.6 *Jamshid: A Lament for a Myth* (2017)

The animated short, *Jamshid: A lament for a myth* (2017) is directed by Moin Samadi and produced by Raiavin Studio and DEFC (Documentary & Experimental Film Centre). This work is made in 2D/3D digital animation with a runtime of roughly 12 minutes (*Jamshid: A lament for a myth* (2017) - *IMDb*, no date; Ahuee, 2017). The makers of this film did not have a specific audience group in mind while making their work (M Samadi 2021, personal communication, 13 April).

The story of Jamshid (and his confrontation with Zahhak); was described earlier for the second case study of this thesis, *The Legend of Mardoush* (2002-2005). While the adaptation of this narrative/character from *Shahnameh*, in *Jamshid: A Lament for a Myth* (2017), involves an individual approach, the following explanation of the story and analysis of its underlying meanings (cultural and universal concepts) might carry some repetition.

3.6.1 Story: *Jamshid: A Lament for a Myth*

Jamshid: A lament for a myth (2017) is related to the character of Jamshid, whose origin goes back to Indo-Iranian mythology. In later texts such as *Shahnameh*, he is known as; one of the most significant figures with a saint-king character. He is one of the Pishdadi kings (historically equivalent to Medes and Achaemenids eras) whose tale is in a segment of *Shahnameh* with a prominent mythical tone. In this animation, the god (Ahura Mazda) grants Jamshid with divine powers (Farr) to build a utopian world and bring prosperity for his people. Jamshid, who is an agent of light and goodness, builds cities and a glorious palace. However, in the underground, evil is planting the seed of darkness and wickedness. The demon of winter is awakened, and a severe winter is coming. Jamshid takes his people to a protected underground palace while winter takes over the world for a thousand years. Then, when the winter weakened, a majestic throne, carried by birds and angels, is made for Jamshid to fly to the sky. With the help of God, Jamshid pierces the clouds and lets the sun shine over the world again. Winter vanishes and people celebrate Jamshid. They start worshipping Jamshid like a god, putting him on a seat of power where he is far away from everyone. For this sin, Jamshid loses his divine powers, and evil takes over his soul.

3.6.2 Cultural and Universal Concepts in *Jamshid: A Lament for a Myth's* Story

The character of Jamshid and his tale can be analysed and interpreted in various ways. The creators of *Jamshid: A lament for a myth* have reconstructed their story using several inspirations, not only from *Shahnameh*, but also from ancient texts such as *Avesta*, *Rig Veda*, and Indo-Iranian ancient manuscripts (Paul, 2020). They have considered several retellings of this story where Jamshid is an obscure mythical concept rather than a character (Ahuee, 2017). This narrative also has some affinity with the “universal myth of flood” (Zeneise, 2017). From an archetypal perspective, this retelling of Jamshid’s tale is a mythical story of a heroic figure fighting with the flood and winter demons, the archetype pattern (also the Zoroastrian idea of) light vs dark, good, and evil confrontations.

From a cultural point of view, the Zoroastrian concept of Farr is a chief part of this adaptation. In the original tale, Jamshid is granted Farr and acquires the utmost glory and success in his lifetime. Because of this divine support, he has many great achievements, and his era is known as a utopian period. Yet, Jamshid becomes arrogant, and this leads him to claim to be God. Owing to this sinful claim, he loses all of his glory and soon is defeated and later killed by Zahhak, one of the most demonic figures of *Shahnameh* (see Yahaghi and Ghaemi, 2007; Kazzazi, 2014). The ideas of divine power and Jamshid's rise and fall has been reconstructed in this animation. This film is a celebration and mourning of the mythical Jamshid. In *Shahnameh*, the rise of Jamshid as the mightiest king and his tragic downfall and death is dramatic, and this animation has specifically captured this theme in its narrative and visual structure.

In the next parts, I will explore how the iconic abstraction was employed in this animation through visuals and animations to formally convey the obscure mythical characteristic of Jamshid, the idea of light and dark confrontation, the symbolism of Farr, and the dramatic theme of Jamshid's rise and fall.

3.6.3 Jamshid: A Lament for a Myth Animation Style

The creators of *Jamshid: A lament for a myth* constructed a minimal iconic style for this non-dialogue animation. The characters and the environment of the film are designed with an absence of details, flat/limited colours, purified lines, and simplified and semi-angular shapes. More specifically, a creative silhouette visual method and dominant grey tones are used in this film, which was an inspiration from "Kurosawa's Throne of Blood (1957) and ancient cave paintings" (Paul, 2020). Characters are posed either in three-quarters or profile angles (Ahuee, 2017, p. 110) with particularly clear gestures in the absence of realistic details, shadows, and colours. The character of common people, soldiers, flying angles, even animals, plants, and objects are repeated in similar forms and mainly the character of Jamshid and his magical cow have acquired a nuanced individuality. This repetition of similar characters has amplified the universal qualities in its overall look (see Figure 46).

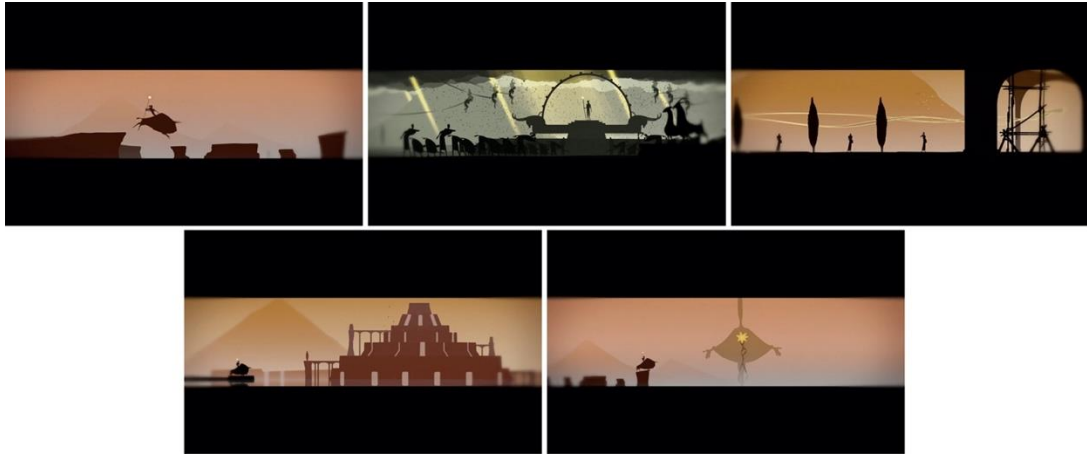


Figure 46: Still frames from *Jamshid: A lament for a myth* (2017)

The reductionist and abstract approaches in this work have opened an opportunity for symbolic visualisations. Various symbols such as the star and the god's hand as the symbol of Ahura Mazda or Persian deities, the birds as symbols for various notions of Farr (divine powers), the cypress trees as a notion of prosperity and so on, are embodied during this short (see Figure 47). Even if the visual style of this animation is minimal, the motion components such as characters' animations are hyper-realistic. Here, the characters are moving in a realistic but exaggerated manner. This approach to the animation of these characters has complemented their minimal silhouette look by making their actions and emotional states clearer and more expressive.

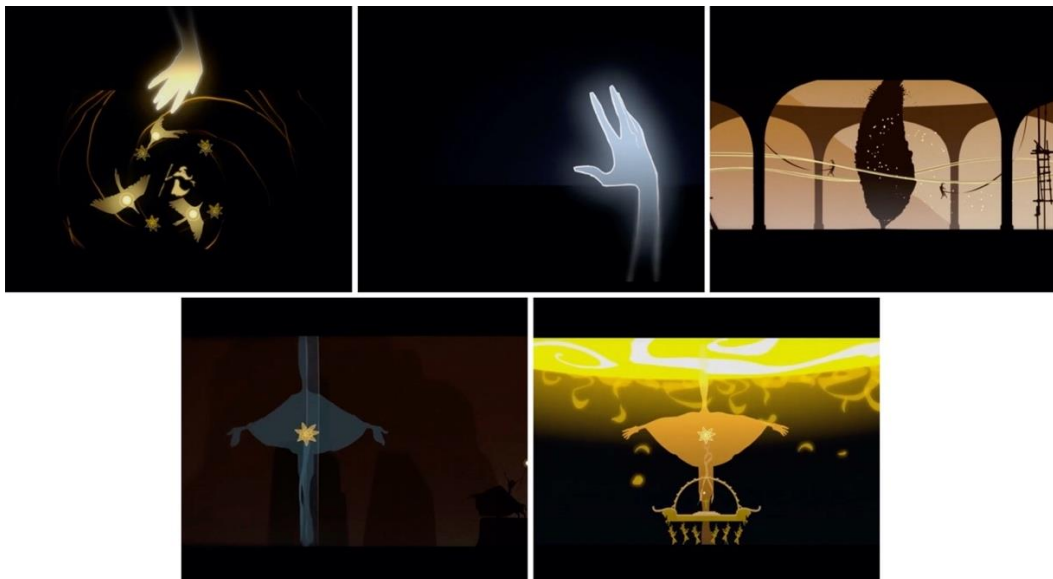


Figure 47: Symbolic visualisations, still frames from *Jamshid: A lament for a myth* (2017)

This animation is constructed in a widescreen setting that can be a popular option for the epic genre (Meyer, 2014, p. 6). The wide shots (extreme long shots) are dominant, and no close-up is used to maintain Jamshid as a mysterious notion in the film (Paul, 2020). The narrative develops in a non-traditional manner. The progress of the story has an episodic structure, moving among different chapters of Jamshid's tale, "Be the chosen one, Be the king, Survive, and die" (ibid). It is also thematic by transitioning between the two worlds of dark and light, underground and above (see Figure 48). Finally, this animation represents a significant dramatic theme by using a "theatrical mise en scene" (Ahuee, 2017, p. 110) accompanied by orchestra music.

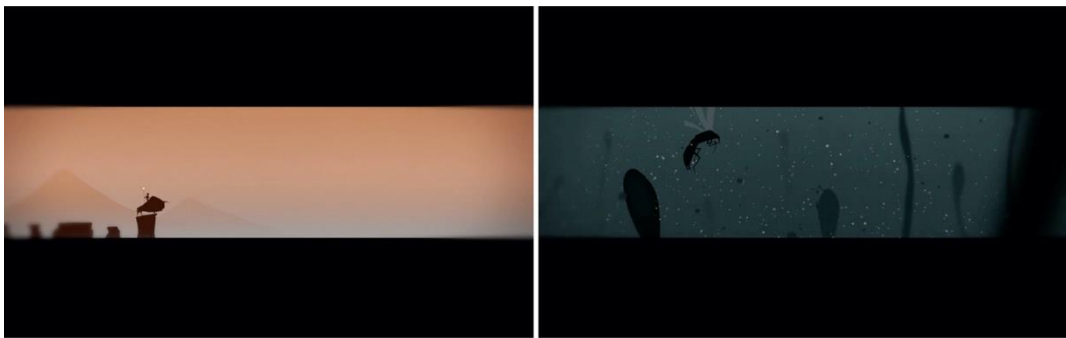


Figure 48: Transition between the worlds of light and dark, still frames from *Jamshid: A lament for a myth* (2017)

3.6.4 *Jamshid: A lament for a myth* Formal Abstraction

The creators of *Jamshid: A lament for a myth*, have applied a minimal form of iconic abstraction to the visual style of their animation. These formal approaches were used to reconstruct the mystical and obscure origins of Jamshid, to highlight the archetypal tone of his tale, and to offer a novel experience of this narrative in a dramatic/theatrical format. This adaptation has approached the concept of Jamshid as multi-cultural, looking into the various speculations of this tale. They have used flat, stylised, abstracted characters in silhouette mode, a limited colour range dominated by shades of grey, and wide shots. By employing such formal choices, they have recreated the figure of Jamshid not as an individual being, but rather as an obscure concept and positioned him at a far distance from the spectators where he exists in an unreachable mythical world. Additionally, the transitions between the world of dark and light can be a visual embodiment of the good and evil eternal encounter, and the

story is broadly based on the notions of the hero fight with a demon and the universal tale of the flood. The minimal, stylised forms beside the hyper-realist animations have also allowed for a focused and expressive depiction of symbols such as the hand as the symbol of Ahura Mazda and the birds as the symbol of Farr. Finally, the dramatic rise and fall of Jamshid, a subtle inspiration from *Shahnameh*, is also depicted through the thematic/episodic story structure and the theatrical visualisations and compositions. Here, the formal style of this work has offered a visually poetic experience that celebrates and mourns the rise and fall of Jamshid, a mysterious and symbolic concept in Persian, Indian, and universal mythology.

Using the (minimal iconic) design components of animation, this adaptation does not represent Jamshid as a clear and individual persona. Instead, it broadened and universalised this character/concept. Even though some cultural concepts (such as the notion of Farr) are embodied in this work, the story is visualised in an open way for spectators' speculation and access, regardless of their level of familiarity with the original texts. It represents a narrative space about the legendary, mystic hero, the gods, and demons in minimal iconic forms. Next, I will examine how iconic abstraction is employed in the last case study of this thesis (*The Last Fiction*) to serve the adopted narrative's meanings and subject matter and create a new visual-kinetic retelling of *Shahnameh*.

3.7 *The Last Fiction* (2018)

The last fiction (2018) is a feature animation directed by Ashkan Rahgozar and produced in Hoorakhsh Studios. This film is a 2D/3D digital animation with a runtime of roughly 100 minutes, and it mainly targets "teens, young adults, and adults" audiences (*The Last Fiction*, no date). *The last fiction* is screened in various national and international festivals and won several awards (*The Last Fiction* (2018) - *IMDb*, no date).

This animation is an adaptation of Zahhak's tale which is described in the previous case studies. Therefore, the following story and examination of its underlying meanings might include some repetitions.

3.7.1 Story: *The Last Fiction*

The Last fiction is based on the tale of Zahhak in *Shahnameh* which as mentioned earlier belongs to the Pishdadian dynasty and has a prominently mythical theme. In this film, Ahriman (evil) and his army are attacking the country and king Jamshid, his soldiers, and allies are fighting against them. Finally, with their resistance and with the help of divine aids (Farr) granted by God, Jamshid wins the battle. He then structures a majestic palace and city (Jamkard) to protect his people from the devil's harm. But, because of his greed and arrogance, his soul contaminates and, Jamshid loses his divine protection. Ignoring his vulnerability and with the desire to possess more territories, he leaves the country and substitutes Mardas (father of Zahhak) as the temporary governor. But Mardas dies soon after, killed by his son Zahhak who has a demonic soul, and Jamshid himself never comes back.

Zahhak is suffering from enormous pain since he sold his soul to the devil and to calm his pain, he kills young men and eats their brains. Later in his dreams, Ahriman informs him of a newborn who will rise against him and end their demonic domination. Afraid of this prophecy, Zahhak orders his soldiers to kill any new-borns in the city. People realize his cannibalism and tyrannic actions and under the leadership of a blacksmith called Kave, they rebel against him. Even though they are defeated by Zahhak soldiers, they can save the chosen infant, Afaridoun (Fereydun). Kaveh takes Afaridoun to a hidden place where he grows up, learning to fight and be a leader. But he first must learn how to let go of his inner rage, vengeance, and arrogance in order to be able to fight with Ahriman. In this journey, Afaridoun is tested and then granted divine powers. In the end, he and his army confront Zahhak and in a grand battle, where finally the agents of light stand against Ahriman and his subjects, Afaridoun defeats Zahhak and chains him in the Damavand mountains.

3.7.2 Cultural and Universal Concepts in *The Last Fiction's* Story

We have analysed some of the cultural and universal underlying layers of the Zahhak tale in the previous adaptations. Yet, there are several cultural concepts from the original tale that are highlighted in this animation. Stemming from Pishdadian's belief (Jahadi and Jahanshahi Afshar, 2016), one of *Shahnameh's* philosophies is to preserve

the national identity and its glory. To achieve such purpose, the country must unify around an ideal king (Yousefi *et al.*, 2012), a king “who has Legitimacy, by holding Farr and lineage,⁵¹ and justice, by possessing inherent and acquired moral virtues” (Khaleghi Motlagh, 2015, p. 70). If a king commits sins such as arrogance and injustice, he will lose his legitimacy and his corruption will affect the whole country. The consequence would be the domination of evil, suffrage, and death. These moral virtues, justice, avoidance of arrogance, and vengeance are also the qualities that a hero should acquire to be a righteous ruler. In *the Last Fiction*, the impact of Jamshid’s contaminated soul on the country and the moral maturation of Afaridoun are coming to focus as the main part of its narrative. Additionally, the concept of Farr, and the eternal fight of light and dark, which originated in Persian mythology and Zoroastrianism, are reconstructed in this work.

Looking into the psychological meanings extracted from the source text, a significant part of *The last fiction’s* narrative is focusing on the character of Zahhak, his inner conflict, tortured psyche, and enormous pain caused by his unforgivable act of killing his father. The concept of patricide is one of the utmost sinful acts in *Shahnameh* (Zohdi, Faghfori and Oroskhan, 2015) and its negative weight has been particularly embodied in the characterisation of Zahhak. In addition, the notion of the psyche and the unconscious is particularly emphasized in the embodiment of Zahhak’s character where he is constantly moving between two states of dreaming and awakening, inner and outer, natural and supernatural while agonising over his choices and suffering from them. In his unconscious state, Zahhak hears the truth and is warned, but while he is conscious, he ignores it.

From an archetypal standpoint, this narrative is structured around the archetypal relationship between the father and son (Zahhak and his father), a hero journey and quest (Afaridoun and his heroic journey to become the righteous leader), the notion of good encountering evil (the fight between Ahriman and light, and Zahhak and Afaridoun). Next, we will explore the iconic formal style of *The last fiction* to

⁵¹ - Being from a bloodline of Iranian kings

understand how the imageries and animations were employed; to bring some of these inner ideas and concepts to the surface.

3.7.3 *The Last Fiction* Animation Style

The creators of *The Last Fiction* have employed several visual forms (multi-stylisation) in making this animation. While Aguilar (2019) suggests that this animation has some inspiration from classic Japanese animations, it seems that the dominant style used for the majority of this animation can be categorised as the caricatured realism (cartoon) style since the 2D visual design of this animation evokes a sense of three-dimensionality on a flat picture plane. Besides the graphic components of this film, an inspiration from reality can be seen in particularly the characters' animation of *The Last Fiction*. Yet, in different parts of the film, a minimal/abstract and a comics/comic art visual style are also represented. For instance, when there is a flashback, accompanied by a voice-over, the visual style tends to resemble comics/comic art inspirations, such as the use of flat, minimal colours, bold lines, strokes, sharp shadows, and expressive and stylised shapes. In other parts, when a character is in a dream state (e.g., Zahhak's subconscious and his dreams) or when the narrative is an embodiment of supernatural or abstract concepts (e.g., the devil's visualisation and the fight between light and dark), its formal style tends to be minimal and abstracted (see Figure 49).



Figure 49: From left to right: caricatured realism (cartoon) style, comics/comic art style, minimal style, still frames from *The last fiction* (2018)

Compared to the previous animation adaptations of *Shahnameh*, this animation has considerable technical improvements that include a degree of competency in realistic character animations, detailed concept design, and visual effects (see Figure 50). The characters' motions resemble naturalistic actions, and their animation can be considered as a degree of hyper-realist animation (copying reality in an expressive

way). In terms of story, the film has used a linear narrative style, however, this linearity is broken several times, with the flashbacks or transition into another world (past, dream, subconscious, supernatural), particularly by shifting among various visual styles and degrees of abstraction.



Figure 50: Still frames from *The last fiction* (2018)

3.7.4 *The Last Fiction* Formal Abstraction

The last Fiction feature animation appropriates the story of Zahhak by employing the three iconic stylisations of caricatured realism (cartoon), comics/comic art, and minimal. In this film, several cultural and universal concepts of the adapted narrative are reworked, concepts such as the idea of nationalism in *Shahnameh* and the role of the king in its maintenance, and the ethical virtues for its heroes and kings. This story is also about the archetypal relationship between a father and his son, the heroic journey and quest, and the confrontation of good and evil. While these notions were reconstructed through the narrative, the formal style of this animation and the employment of various degrees of abstraction (mentioned above) has assisted in the embodiment of characters' emotional and psychological states and the supernatural concepts of this tale.

This animation represents three visual styles of caricatured realism (cartoon), comics/comic art, and minimal. Using different levels of abstraction and formal approaches has led to a multi-stylised visual experience. In the majority of the film, the use of colours, lines, and forms are selective and expressive. The character animations are also hyper-realist which means actions are an imitation of real movements in an exaggerated manner. This formal approach can be categorised as a caricatured realism (cartoon) form of iconic abstraction. Yet, when the narrative takes a turn into the past, or the inner world of the characters (dream, subconscious), or the supernatural world of Ahriman and light, the formal style changes too. For instance, when it flashbacks to the grand battle between Jamshid and Ahriman army, we see comics/comic art inspirations. In these segments, the colours are reductive to suggest another timeframe from the present with a more expressive visualization. Additionally, in the parts where the torn and conflicted inner world of Zahhak is embodied, or when the story shifts into the mysterious world of supernatural forces, the imageries tend to become radically minimal in accordance with the abstract nature of these notions. The multi-stylisation employed in *The Last Fiction* is an artistic approach in which the visual and motion components of animation were designed in several forms (caricatured realism (cartoon), comics/comic art, and minimal) to embody and translate the underlying meaning and psychological ideas of the adopted text. In this way, the components of animation design, in iconic forms, have offered a new visual experience and amplified the story and its context.

3.8 Conclusion

In this third chapter of my thesis, I have documented sixteen animations based on *Shahnameh* and investigated the iconic formal style (imageries and animations) of six of these films in order to understand the artistic and meaning-making possibilities of this stylisation for the remaking of the adapted narratives in these six animated films. For each case study, I have explored some of the historical, mythological, archetypal, symbolic, and underlying meanings of its adopted narrative under the title of 'Cultural and Universal Concepts' to reflect on the richness of *Shahnameh's* stories, both as the Iranian national epic poem and an old universal heroic tale. Then,

I studied how some of these concepts were conveyed creatively and meaningfully by employing certain forms of iconic abstraction in these animations.

I argued that *Zal and Simorgh* (1977) embodies an iconic form with stylised and decorative tendencies since this stylisation was inspired by some of the Iranian traditional art forms (e.g., Ali Akbar Sadeghi's artistic style, the Pre-Islamic Iranian art forms, and artefacts). I explained that the simplicity, reduction, and selectiveness of iconic abstraction, the use of pictorial repetitions, and the rejection of realistic and objectified visualisations have allowed for the recreation of a stylistic outcome that conveyed both national-cultural visual information, as well as evoking archetypal tendencies and iconic openness. In this way, the design of this animation evokes the underlying archaic theme of the adopted narrative. Therefore, *Zal and Simorgh* represented cultural and universal aspects of its source while being visually communicative with familiar and less-familiar spectators.

In *The Legend of Mardoush* (2002-2005), I suggested that by reducing the visual clutter and exaggerating the necessary elements of the imageries, this animation represented an iconic formal style that tends to be expressive. The expressive traits of the visual style have assisted in embodying the symbolic position and psychological status of the main characters and allowed for an outward display of their inner world. Additionally, it can immediately suggest their archetypal persona as hero, villain, and holy figurations. I also discussed that, in some parts, the anti-realistic qualities of visuals and movements, have reflected the eerie and uncanny concepts and underlying mythological theme of the narrative. In such ways, the constructed iconic style has transcended and communicated some of the cultural and universal concepts of the adopted source.

When analysing *Rostam and Esfandiar* (2006), I explained that this adaptation has employed an iconic formal style that predominantly incorporated the tradition of the comic art medium. Here, I go back to the analysis conducted in chapter 2, where I explored iconic abstraction as a stylistic form that attempts to move away from the codes of reality and instead move closer to the tradition of visual and traditional arts, as one of its artistic potentialities. I explained using the comics/comic art forms of iconic abstraction, with minimalistic colour palette, thick outlines, bold contrast, and

flat shapes, and by employing some of the cinematic techniques, this animation has embodied the underlying tragic theme of its narrative, the character's inner conflict and suffrage, and the idea of dichotomy that stem from its historical, cultural, and archetypical concepts.

Next, in *One Thousand Myths (Hezar Afsan)* (2016) I reflected on how the original narratives were shortened and simplified to retell the adopted stories' essence, the heroic journey, the universal notion of good and evil confrontation, and mainly represent the archetypical hero and king, common people, and supernatural creatures. Then, I explored the similarities of characters and environment designs in the *One Thousand Myths* animations with the miniatures in the *Shahnameh* of Shah Tahmasp. I explained that by adapting an iconic form that tends to be stylised and is significantly inspired by Persian miniature art style, the formal style of these animations has reflected the fantastical qualities of the original texts and worked as supplementary, carrying cultural association with *Shahnameh's* background. Also, even if these designs were simplified and accommodated for a motion picture medium, they still reflect an escape from realism and an entry to the ideal and fantastical world of *Shahnameh* in decorative forms. Hence, this animated series has offered a fantastical, transcultural, and accessible adaptation of some of *Shahnameh's* tales with the combination of appropriated narratives and cultural art forms.

For *Jamshid: A Lament for a Myth* (2017), I argued that the formal style of this animation tends to be visually minimal with an expressive style of animation. I explained that by employing a silhouette visual method, flat shapes, limited/grey toned colours, and wide shots the imageries have acquired an obscure and mysterious quality, and formed a mental distance with the figure of Jamshid. These formal choices were applied to amplify the obscurity of Jamshid as a mythical, multi-cultural concept. Another formal contribution in this film was reductive choices to bring certain symbols to the focus, and pictorial repetitions to convey the archetypical qualities of the narrative. In addition, I pointed that the episodic structure, thematic transitions, and theatrical settings embodied the underlying and dramatic themes and main ideas of this narrative (e.g., the rise and fall of the mythical Jamshid, good and evil eternal fights, heroic fight). Lastly, I argued that by employing this minimal

iconic style, *Jamshid: A Lament for a Myth* has broadened the idea and narrative space of Jamshid's tale and highlighted its universal traits.

In the last case study, *The Last Fiction* (2018), I highlighted how this film employed a multi-stylised formal abstraction that moves between different iconic styles (caricatured realism (cartoon), inspirations from comics/comic art, and minimal forms). I explain that to embody the idea of shifting to another timeframe (e.g., past), the visual style of this animation tends to resemble comics/comic art stylisation, and for the segments that represent the characters' inner world and psychological state (e.g., dream, subconscious), and the supernatural concepts (e.g., the world of light and evil), the formal style of the animation tends to become minimal and abstracted. Here I argue, by changing to these various iconic forms of animation, the linearity of the narrative is broken, and the visual language of the medium has assisted in conveying some of the underlying ideas of the adopted narrative in a new formal experience.

Examining the above six case studies suggested a connection between the design of these animations and the contents of their adopted stories. In these artworks, the visual and motion components of each animation have assisted in conveying some of the underlying cultural and archetypal meanings, story themes, symbolic ideas, psychological state, inner intentions, and personality traits from *Shahnameh's* narratives. This confirms the accuracy of McCloud's analysis (McCloud, 1993; Scott McCloud, *Cartoonist: iconic abstraction*, 2018) of iconic abstraction as formal tendencies that can amplify the underlying concepts (of a text) in meaningful ways. Because, in iconic forms, visual clutter is avoided and graphics and motions are concentrated, these components instantly convey conceptual meanings. Such stylisation is particularly suitable for the adaptation of ancient cultural texts such as *Shahnameh*, built upon multiple layers of inner meanings and symbolic concepts. The application of different iconic styles in the above examples have assisted in creating a transcended, on-the-surface, and inside-out experience of the adapted tales from *Shahnameh*, making the reading and understanding of this poem more accessible for the less familiar audiences (transcultural engagement).

The possibility of remediation (Bolter and Grusin, 2000) offered by iconic abstraction was particularly appropriate for creating several cultural (Iranian) styles of animation

for some of these adaptations. This was because, in iconic abstraction, animation can adapt the visual and kinetic codes of other media such as traditional arts, graphic arts, and comics. Iranian traditional arts such as Persian miniature, Qajar and Qahve-khāne (coffee-house) paintings, and the pre-Islamic artefacts of Achaemenid, Parthian, and Sassanid have rich histories and cultural weights. The capabilities of the animation medium (to distance from reality and move towards iconic forms) have allowed for the adaptation of, and inspiration from, (some of) these Iranian art forms in the design of (some of) these animations. Alongside creating various visual-motion experiences, the remediation potentialities in iconic abstraction assisted in creating cultural association and engagements through the design of these animations.

Chapter 3 explored different forms of iconic abstraction employed in six animation adaptations of *Shahnameh* and served the overall objective of this dissertation by explaining how the design of these animations assisted, artistically and meaningfully, in embodying the underlying ideas and concepts adapted from *Shahnameh's* stories. Additionally, by scrutinising some of the popular narratives from *Shahnameh*, their underlying cultural and archetypical concepts, and by exploring the animated films based on these narratives, their production and artistic designs, this section contributed to the research, practices, and adaptation studies of *Shahnameh*. The next part explores the reconstruction of two narrative pieces from *Shahnameh* into abstract animations (pure abstraction).

4. SHAHNAMEH IN PURE ABSTRACT ANIMATED FORMS

4.1 Introduction

Chapter 3. *Shahnameh* in Iconic Animated Forms explored the existent animated adaptations of *Shahnameh* and noted that the animation designs of these artworks remain somewhere between a departure from reality and a movement towards iconic imagery. Even if, in one of the examples, *Jamshid: A lament for a myth* (2017), the formal style of the animation was minimal, yet the overall stylistic approaches in these animations adapted various forms of iconic styles but avoided pure abstraction. This confirmed the premise in this body of research that there appears to be a scarcity of *Shahnameh's* animations in abstracted styles (pure abstraction).

Given that this research is interested in examining abstract stylisations; as new ways of reinterpreting and experiencing *Shahnameh* in animated forms, the aforementioned deficit is worth exploring. Therefore, in order to inspect this gap, I employed a reflective practice-based methodology as an effective approach for producing primary data. I created two abstract animations (2:50 and 5:11 minutes in length) inspired by two stories from *Shahnameh*. These two animations are titled *Rostam & Esfandiar* (2020) and *The Emergence of Zahhak* (2020). The current segment is devoted to the analysis of these two animations as part of the practical components of this thesis to examine and reflect on the creative and meaning-making potentiality of pure abstraction.

The reason for producing two practice components was to explore different artistic possibilities of abstract animation and provide enough data for critical analysis of these artworks later in the thesis. To conduct these practices, I have applied for and secured an external fund, ASIFA-Hollywood's Animation Educators Forum 2020-21 Scholarship. This scholarship assisted me in acquiring the software and hardware equipment for making the two artworks created for this research. The number of produced artworks was also the result of the obtained budget, equipment, and the available timeframe for setting up the project of creating animated films.

In Chapter 5. Semi-Structured Interviews of Experts as an Analytical Approach to the Practice, these two animations (*Rostam & Esfandiar* and *The Emergence of Zahhak*) will be observed by a group of animation experts as informed audiences. The findings of chapters 4 and 5 feed the overall questions of this dissertation by elucidating the artistic and meaning-making potentialities of abstract animation as a new approach in reconstructing some of *Shahnameh's* stories and content and reflecting on the familiar and less familiar expert audiences' responses to and engagements with *Shahnameh* in abstract forms of animation.

For information on how to access the animated shorts *Rostam & Esfandiar* (2020) and *The Emergence of Zahhak* (2020), please check the 'Guidelines for Accessing Supplementary Animations' section (page 12). To access the production materials of these animations (script, mood board, storyboard, and still images from the final projects), please check Appendices. Artworks from other practical tests conducted during the course of this PhD can also be found in the Appendices.

4.2 Rostam & Esfandiar

In 2020, as part of the practice-based research components of this study, I animated and directed an animated short in abstracted formal style titled *Rostam & Esfandiar*. This work is a 2D digital animation with 2 minutes and 50 seconds runtime. For this film, I targeted audiences who may or may not be familiar with its source material, the *Shahnameh*. This is because the familiarity and unfamiliarity of audiences, in general, seem to have an impact on how the readers of a certain text (e.g., *Shahnameh*) might engage with and respond to its adaptations (see Knowing and Unknowing Audiences book chapter by Hutcheon and O'Flynn, 2013).

4.2.1 Narrative and Style: *Rostam & Esfandiar*

This animation opens with a text written by me, offering a brief retelling of Rostam and Esfandiar's story. This piece briefly reflects upon *Shahnameh's* ideology of kings and heroes' relationship, the characters of Rostam and Esfandiar, their unfortunate encounter, and its ominous outcome, and is inspired by the original tale in *Shahnameh*, as well as a scholarly analysis of this story by Kazzazi (1987). This introductory segment is as follows:

In ancient Iran, kings and heroes were God's agents ruling over the country and maintaining order and justice. Their harmonious relationship was the key to the country's glory and Prosperity. However, during the Goshtasp reign, the king's soul was contaminated with greed of power. He wanted to get rid of his son, the sacred prince, Esfandiar since Goshtasp was afraid to lose his crown to him. To eliminate Esfandiar's threat, the king sent his son on an impossible mission, to fight the mightiest hero of Iran, Rostam. In his heart, Esfandiar was discontent with the king's decision to battle with this righteous hero for no good reason. Yet, he closed his eyes to the truth, believing that the king's word is God's word. By a twist of destiny, this Iranian prince and hero stood against each other. In an excruciating battle, Rostam finally took over the combat and defeated Esfandiar. For the first time, the harmonious relationship of kings and heroes was broken, and the sacred prince, Esfandiar, was killed at the end. As a consequence of this unfortunate encounter, Rostam was doomed, and he perished soon after.

Next, after the text fades out, the frame splits into two worlds of blue and gold with a shivering border, where blue and gold are adjacent. From one of these worlds, an abstract shape (circle) comes to be. A shape that can move between these two worlds and exist in each one of them. The circle then stands in the middle of two worlds, where it embodies its two parts, half blue, half golden. From here, the two parts of the circle form harmonious motions (yin and yang⁵²), and from their interplay, other abstract forms come to be. Yet, at some point, a black triangle enters this world and falls into the golden half. This disturbs and breaks the borders of the two worlds into triangle forms and soon after the circle entity is affected too. The two parts of the circle split into two separate triangles and start attacking each other. The blue triangle diminishes the golden one, but soon after it disappears too.

Rostam & Esfandiar is an experimental pure abstract animation in which the main elements (and characters) of this work are pure forms such as dots, lines, abstract shapes of circles and triangles, and patterns (Islamic abstract patterns). The use of the colours is minimal and the main two complementary colours used here are dark blue and gold. The background is simple and empty, only a simple plate divided in two, depicting two worlds of gold and dark blue, blended with a faded rusty, old texture. The element of motion is non-realist, transmuting, and responsive to the background music. Additionally, the story develops thematically, embodying a dualistic theme of harmony and paradox of animated absolute forms (See *Rostam & Esfandiar*, supplementary animation submission, and Figure 51, still frames from *Rostam & Esfandiar*).

4.2.2 Cultural and Universal Concepts in *Rostam & Esfandiar's* Narrative

My retelling of Rostam and Esfandiar story is significantly inspired by a scholarly paper titled *ستیز ناسازها در رستم و اسفندیار*, *The Conflict of Incompatibles in Rostam and Esfandiar Story* {Author's translation}, by Kazzazi (1987). In this paper, Kazzazi explores the concepts and deeper meanings that form the underlying layers of this tale and its main figures' characterisations. This story is a tale of two significant figures in *Shahnameh* and their ominous confrontation. Rostam is the mightiest hero of *Shahnameh* and is granted

⁵² - Although yin and yang are originated from Chinese culture and philosophy, they also represent the universal idea of two complementary forces.

heroic *farr* (divine power and approval). Esfandiar is a sacred prince, the Zoroaster's agent for spreading Zoroastrianism, and King Goshtasp's son and successor. He is also immortal and is granted the sovereign *farr*. Being chosen and protected by divine forces, both Rostam and Esfandiar are two parts of an entity, and their agreeable relationship is the secret of the country's glory and prosperity (Kazzazi, 1987).

From a cultural perspective, this story represents national concepts such as the notion of *farr* and the destructive effect of offending it⁵³. It also represents the *Shahnameh* ideology of how a confrontation between royal families and knights which has always been supportive (Kazzazi, 1987), can result in a disaster (e.g., weakening of the country and downfall of the Persian empire). From an archetypal standpoint, it is a look into the universal notion of dual forces which have the same origin, can temporarily function harmoniously, but inevitably will disagree and confront each other (ibid). Finally, inspired by both a local and universal idea of such confrontation, these forces fight restlessly, until one defeats the other, however, by the death of one, the other one perishes too since their existence is dependent on one another (ibid).

⁵³ - Both Rostam and Esfandiar are granted *farr* and divine approval, hence their conflict or assaulting of one, particularly Esfandiar who is immortal and sacred, can be destructive. For instance, whoever kills Esfandiar will be doomed (Kazzazi, 2014b, p. 770).

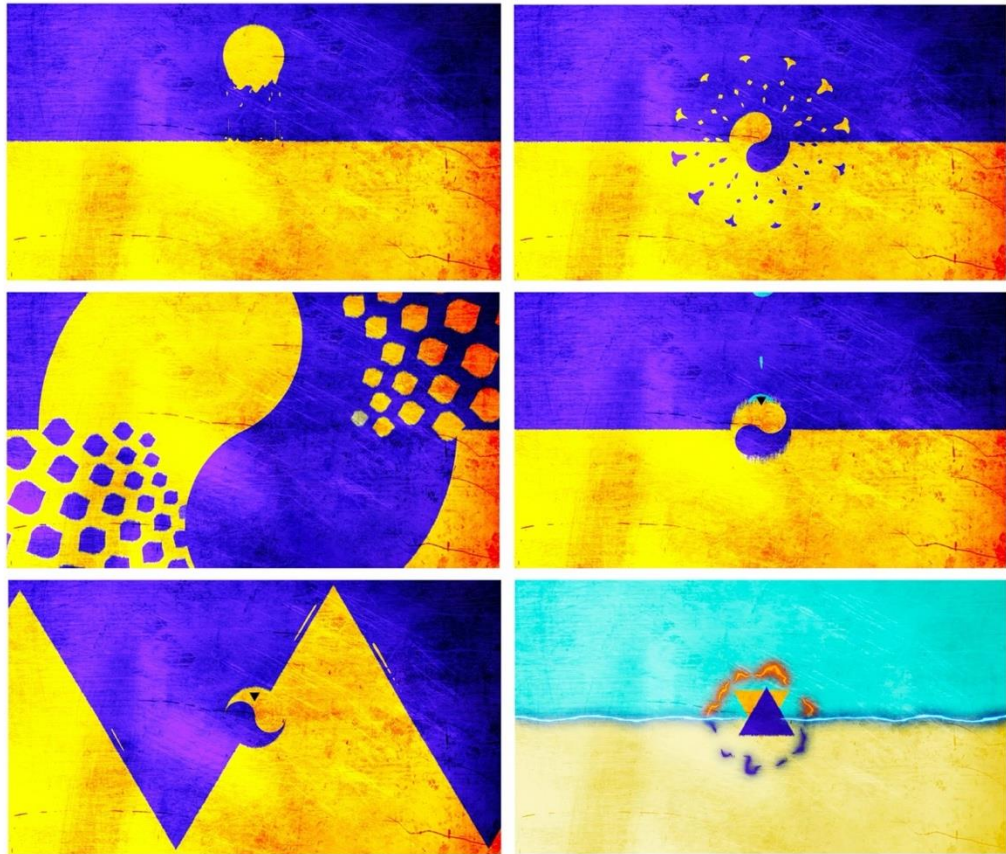


Figure 51: Still frames from *Rostam & Esfandiar* (Astani, 2020)

4.2.3 Reconstruction of *Rostam & Esfandiar*

The first idea in the making of *Rostam & Esfandiar* was to create this animation in an abstracted formal style to examine the reconstruction of this story, using purely abstracted design. The previous animated adaptations of this tale based on *Shahnameh* that I could find for this research, all maintained a representational and figurative style. I aimed to explore pure abstract forms of embodiment and their artistic, meaning-making, and engagement potencies in the reconstruction of this tale. Since this research is focused on the component of animation design, I planned to employ the notion of pure abstraction in the formal style of my artwork rather than the story. However, selecting this method impacted the retelling and reconstruction of my narrative, as I will explain next.

Since selecting the visual style was the primary step of this practice, I approached the narrative thinking how would it best serve an abstract style of animation? The original story from *Shahnameh* involves various details and characterisations, and it

has a linear structure. This reading of the text seems too literal and arguably better fitted for a representational method. Hence I started looking into the papers and articles which analysed the tale of Rostam and Esfandiar in *Shahnameh* (e.g., Kazzazi, 1987, 2014b; Malmir, 2006; Zohdi, Faghfori and Oroskhan, 2015). The textual analyses that are done for this story offer some perspectives about the underlying themes, meanings, and contexts, such as the archetypal patterns that structure the narratives and personas, the symbolic meanings, symbolic roles of the characters, their psychological status, as well as the psychological tone of the story.

The idea that I found most interesting in this story, suggested by Kazzazi, was the paradox and conflict of incompatible forces which is also a universal pattern that existed in epic and mythology. In his analysis, Kazzazi explains (ibid, p. 517) that epic originates from mythology, and the foundation of myth which builds the essence of an epic is the contradiction of incompatible forces. This perpetual concept can be seen between good and evil forces, two heroes, the hero and his enemy, the hero, and natural or supernatural forces, etc (ibid). He then concludes that *the tale of Rostam and Esfandiar* is the most epic story of *Shahnameh* and Iranian mythology since the concepts of conflict and dichotomy are the main essences of this narrative and its protagonists (ibid).

As examined in the case study, *Rostam and Esfandiar* (2006), in the previous chapter where the related story from *Shahnameh* was rebuilt in a narrative oriented format using an iconic style of animation, these concepts (conflict and dichotomy) were part of the underlying layers of the story, hinted at through some visual techniques and adding to the story's depth. Here, using a different approach, I decided to retell and represent these inner ideas as the main subject of my practice. As discussed in chapter 2 in the section titled 'From Iconic to Abstract: Contextualising Pure Abstraction', abstract forms are suitable for visualisations of symbolic and universal meanings which can be ambiguous, immaterial, and not very literal (see Moritz, 1988; Turner, 2003, 2015; Wells, 2007; Matthew Collings, 2014). Hence, I considered the pure forms, colours, and motions as a compatible formal interpretation of the abstracted concept of dichotomy, since a non-figurative method can be suitably associated with such a non-literal idea.

In this animation, I reduced the two main characters, Rostam and Esfandiar, into abstracted forms and minimal colours to embody their metaphoric positions as two contradictory parts of one entity. At the beginning during their agreeable status, these two characters are symbolically visualised in the forms of circles, splits of a circle (two parts of a circle), and they have harmonic motions (e.g., yin and yang). When the film represents the paradoxical positions of these two figures, they are embodied in the form of triangles with hostile motions against one another. The colour gold is metaphorical, representing the glorious world of sovereign and Esfandiar, and the colour dark blue symbolically visualises the mysterious character of the hero, Rostam. These two colours are complementary (Fussell, 2019) to reflect that the hero and the king are two parts of one entity that complete and contradict one another. Recreating the tale of Rostam and Esfandiar in abstracted forms of animation has offered an opportunity to look into the symbolic and abstracted inner ideas of this narrative and bring them to the surface as the main subject matter of a new adaptation. Here, rather than narrating this tale, I was able to embody its underlying symbolic and universal ideas in a purely visual-motion experiment.

Lastly, I included the brief narrative at the beginning of the film to create an associative relationship between the tale and the abstract forms. My purpose was for audiences to read this text, then see the animation, and they might try to associate these two together and have an active involvement in the interpretation process. Yet, by putting the text at the beginning and not using it within the work, I avoided interrupting the animation since I wanted to offer a seamless visual-motion experience, open enough for individual speculation. In the next practice (*The Emergence of Zakhak*) however, I have not included an introductory text, to compare (in Chapter 5) how viewers with different levels of affinity with *Shahnameh* will comprehend these artworks, and if including such associative materials (e.g., brief introductory text) will have an impact on the understanding or engagement of the audiences.

The main theme of *Rostam & Esfandiar* (paradox and conflict of incompatible forces) can be considered a shared concept in epic and mythological texts from around the world, and yet each spectator may find different meanings when watching the film based on their individual and cultural experiences. This is because abstract forms are

open and ambiguous, and they can invite multiple interpretations. My purpose was to create a new visual-motion experiment of *Shahnameh*'s story for both familiar and less familiar audiences, free from literal expectations, which provoke various interpretations and curiosity. I considered this as the potentiality of pure abstraction where a new entry to the popular reading of the original text is offered.

4.3 The Emergence of Zahhak

As part of the practice-based research components of this study, I animated and directed an abstract experimental animation titled *The Emergence of Zahhak* in 2020. This short has a runtime of 5 minutes and 11 seconds, and I used mixed techniques in the making of this film. Similar to *Rostam & Esfandiar* animation, for this animation too, I targeted audiences who can be either familiar or unfamiliar with the original text.

4.3.1 Narrative and Style: *The Emergence of Zahhak*

The Emergence of Zahhak is inspired by the story of Zahhak from *Shahnameh*, several scholarly articles⁵⁴ analysing this tale, and an accompanying original piece of music, Avazkhani (feat. Ferdowsi Ensemble) by Shahram Nazeri. It is a personal interpretation and a visual-kinetic embodiment of the moment when Zahhak and his doomed soul emerge in the universe. The artwork visualises five verses (ten hemistichs) at the beginning of the original narrative (Kazzazi, 2014, p. 47) which are translated by Davis (2007, p. 51) as follows:

"Zahhak Reigned for a thousand years, and from end to end, the world was his to command. The wise concealed themselves and their deeds, and devils achieved their heart's desire. Virtue was despised and magic applauded, justice hid itself away while evil flourished; demons rejoiced in their wickedness, while goodness was spoken of only in secret".

The animation starts by showing the universe when light was ruling, a sacred universe (mandala) of harmony and rhythm. Darkness unleashes an evil soul into the mandala, a snake that contaminates the cosmos and which can multiply. The devil swallows the light and awakens Zahhak, the Serpent King. In the end, Zahhak's hideous soul takes over the world and frees wickedness and evil.

The Emergence of Zahhak is an experimental abstract animation that is constructed by a combination of live-action footage and 2D digital animations. The original piece

⁵⁴ - Articles such as: Taslimi, Nikouei and Bakhsi, 2005; Yazdanpanah, 2007; Heydari, 2012; Khosravi, Barati and Rozatian, 2014

of music, Avazkhani (feat. Ferdowsi Ensemble) by Shahram Nazeri, has a significant place in forming the graphics and animations of this film. I employed the Cymatics: Speaker Dish experiment (Stanford, 2014) to visualised this piece of music. In this experiment, I attached a round pot saucer (using watercolour masking tapes) to a box speaker dish, filled it with vodka⁵⁵, and then vibrated the dish by playing Nazeri's music (see Figure 52).



Figure 52: Cymatics: speaker dish experiment (Astani, 2020)

Next, I video recorded the abstracted forms and motions, which were created on the surface of the vodka, by the music tone vibration and the movement of the speaker dish, in order to translate this piece of music into organic moving forms. The round shape of the pot saucer and the dominant dark colour of the pot and, the white colour of the vodka (against the dark background) inspired me, to slightly adjust the footage. I set the circle form of the pot in the centre of my layout as the mandala and the universe into which Zahhak emerges. I also modified the overall colours into pure black and white (see Figure 53). The patterns, which were created on the surface of

⁵⁵ - In the Cymatics experiment conducted by Stanford (2014) vodka is used as the liquid that produces the best vibration result.

vodka, also inspired me to choose digital brushes in TV paint⁵⁶ with the same texture quality, for designing and colouring my animation layers.

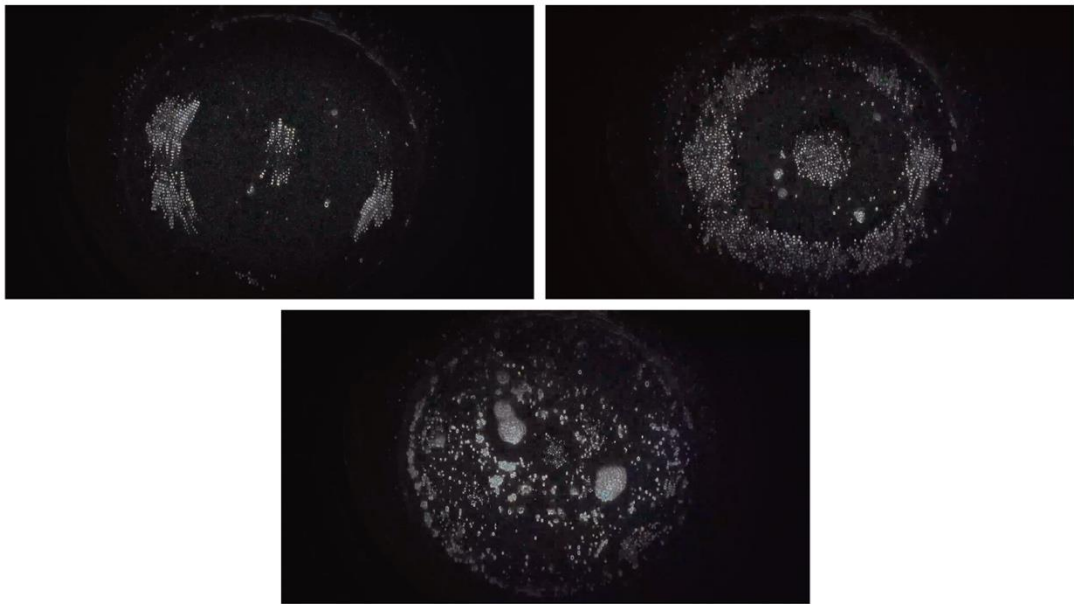


Figure 53: Still frames from the edited footage of cymatics: speaker dish experiment's recordings (Astani, 2020)

In the next stage, I added some layers of animation to the footage, which was a personal interpretation of the adopted text and its symbolic and conceptual meanings and which was inspired by the music and the recorded moving graphics. The style of the animation is abstract and minimal, and I employed single white colour against the black background. The animations of characters and abstracted forms are stylised and minimal, as well as being responsive to the music. Additionally, this animation follows a thematic narrative structure based on the development of the music and live-action footages' themes (see Figure 54). These stylistic choices were visual-kinetic responses to the underlying themes and meanings which this animation intended to convey, explained in detail in the next segments.

⁵⁶ - 2D animation software

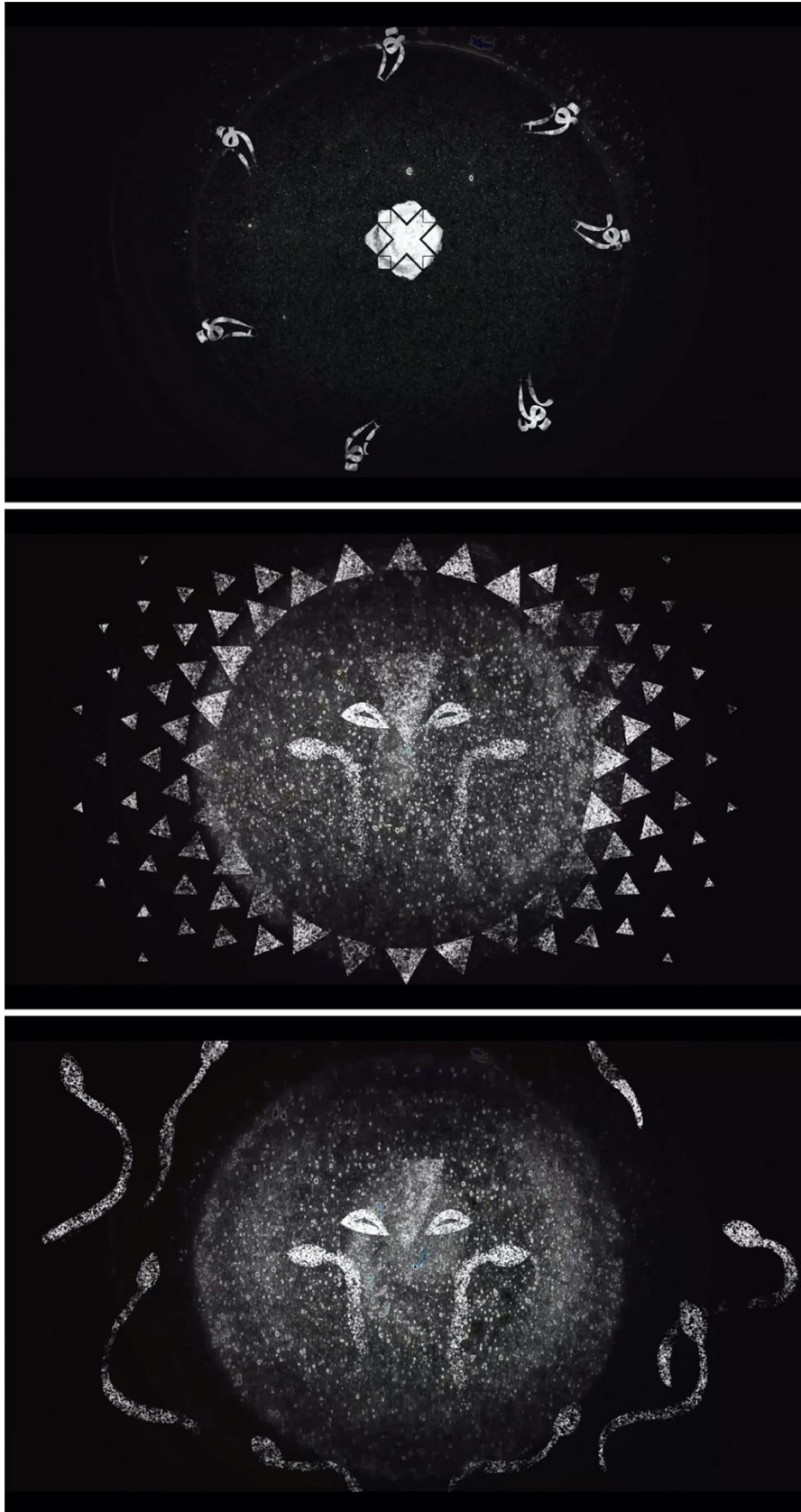


Figure 54: Still frames from *The Emergence of Zahhak* (Astani, 2020)

4.3.2 Cultural and Universal Concepts in *The Emergence of Zahhak's Narrative*

Initially, I started looking into the representation of Zahhak in *Shahnameh* and scholarly articles which have analysed this character's cultural, archetypal, symbolic, and psychological position in Persian mythology (e.g., Taslimi, Nikouei and Bakhsi, 2005; Yazdanpanah, 2007; Heydari, 2012; Khosravi, Barati and Rozatian, 2014). Zahhak is the most demonic persona in *Shahnameh*. He trades his soul with the devil and kills his father to reach the seat of power. The evil kisses Zahhak's shoulders where two snakes grow out of them. Zahhak then takes over Iran and kills young men to feed their brains to his snakes to calm them down. His conflicted psyche and sins of cannibalism and patricide frame him as the darkest and most evil symbolic figure in the book which rules over Iran for a thousand-years (Heydari, 2012).

Looking into archetypal patterns, Khosravi and others (2014) believe Zahhak is the archetype of Shadow and the dark side of the psyche. In *Shahnameh*, he was the shadow of Jamshid, one of the mightiest mythological kings of *Shahnameh* who loses his farr (divine powers and approval) due to arrogance and injustice (ibid, p.84). After Jamshid's soul is contaminated, Zahhak (Jamshid's shadow), takes over him and his kingdom. Hence Jamshid and Zahhak are two parts of one entity or in other words, two conflicting parts of one psyche (ibid, p. 90). 'Snake' which is a symbol of darkness and wickedness is closely associated with Zahhak's characterisation and is a metaphor for his unforgivable sins, conflicted psyche, and temperament (Yazdanpanah, 2007, p. 171). Zahhak, feeding the snakes that are growing out of his shoulders with the brains of Iranian youth, is a symbolic act of demolishing collective wisdom (Heydari, 2012). Additionally, Taslimi and others (2005), and Heydari (2012) suggest that this character is a mythological embodiment and symbol for natural disasters such as drought and fire. Having these symbolic positions in Persian and universal mythology, and the psychological potency of this character are significant perspectives that can be adopted for new retellings of this piece from *Shahnameh* into various media forms.

4.3.3 Reconstruction of *The Emergence of Zahhak*

In the making of this work, the main idea was to offer a new formal style and perceptual experiment, as well as looking into the inner concepts of this story. In previous adaptations, Zahhak's tale and his character were recreated in a figurative manner, following the literal and linear structure of the original text. While in such representational approaches, the symbolic and psychological layers of this character can be hinted at by different creative methods of storytelling and/or character and concept designs, my purpose was to skip these figurative and literal methods, and instead bring the inner concepts that construct the underlying layers of Zahhak's persona and narrative to the surface, as the subject matter. Considering pure abstraction, as a formal style that can effortlessly associate with symbolic, metaphoric, and emotional meanings, I employed this method to represent a visually abstracted interpretation of Zahhak's emergence into the universe and his dark, obscure nature. In this experiment too, I aimed to apply the notion of pure abstraction to my visual-kinetic materials and not the narrative itself. However, choosing the abstract formal style again impacted the position of the narrative, to be one of the formal components⁵⁷ of this artwork.

In the next step, I started looking into other possible inspirations and I was open to experiments that could determine an unexpected formal outcome. Since abstract animation has an immense potency to be responsive to, and visualise the music, I initially searched for a music piece about this poem that could be correspondent to the dark mood of Zahhak and his story. Avazkhani (feat. Ferdowsi Ensemble) is a music track based on this tale by Shahram Nazeri, a well-known singer of Iranian traditional music. This musical piece recites the first five lines from Zahhak tales in *Shahnameh* (mentioned above). I considered this combination of lyrics and instrumental music to be compatible with the inner meanings of this story and to reflect its underlying mood. Then, I came across the cymatics experiment (explained above) which allowed me to transform/translate Nazeri musical track's vibrations

⁵⁷ - Using the Cymatics experiment, verses from the original poem were translated into animated abstract forms which constructed part of the animation. Hence, the narrative literally was transformed to a visual participating component.

and tone into organic unpredicted abstract patterns. I applied this experiment since I was interested to see how the versed music would be translated into visual-animated forms without my interference. It helped me to achieve some unplanned abstract forms in response to the music and add to the unexpected possibilities of the work. Here I exploit the free and experimental aspects of pure abstraction to create an outcome that can be visually creative and new for the eyes. The music and resultant abstract textures determined the next steps, such as the choices of layout, colour palette, brushes, and animation. All these materials came together to offer an experimental abstract animation with the main subject of Zahhak's appearance in the universe as the symbol, psyche, and archetype of darkness, evil, and shadow.

This work is designed with a minimal colour palette of black and white to reflect the dark, shadowy mood of the story and its main character. The formal style of this animation is minimal and abstracted. The forms are reductive, and the story develops in a thematic manner, following the rhythm of the background music and moving patterns. The music which recites a few lines from this tale in Persian can create associative meanings for audiences who are familiar with the language and *Shahnameh*. The music also has visual harmony with moving textures since these patterns are an organic transformation/translation of the music. The animation starts in a dark plane, where, in its centre, there are some elements of light reappearing in correspondence to the music rhythm. The abstract shape, inspired by Islamic abstract patterns, come to be in the centre and the word 'نور (light)', in Persian typography, repeats around this abstract shape in a circular space. The texts used here are not easily readable since their purpose is primarily decorative and mainly used as visual elements. As the music takes on kinetic organic textures it fills this circular space, an area that symbolically represents a mandala or a mystic universe⁵⁸. This is the state when light ruled over the universe.

However, a snake enters this world and swallows the element of light, and the name of Zahhak (ضحاک in Persian typography), reappears around the universe. As the singer starts reciting the poem, Zahhak with the two snakes growing out of his

⁵⁸ - Yazdanpanah (2007, p. 180) suggests, based on Avestan texts, the fight between good and evil (Fereydun and Zahhak) happens in a mandala shape space.

shoulders awakens and emerges in the mandala. His hostile existence is symbolised by the appearance of triangular forms around the mandala. All the elements of light disappear and evil agents, in the form of snakes, are freed by him into the world. The snakes force goodness to disappear and set this world on fire, a symbolic representation of Zahhak's destructive existence. The reappearing triangles and snakes are metaphors for his prevailing evilness and wickedness in the world.

By choosing the abstract formal style and being open to experimenting with the possibilities of abstract animation, I was able to look at the stylistic and narrative possibilities of my mediums (literature and animation) from a different perspective. Since this practice was not concerned with being representational and literal, I was able to work on a different experiment with the music, shapes, and motions, and achieve an unpredicted result. The choice of abstract style also led me to look at the original text differently. Instead of reconstructing the popular retelling of this tale, I was able to investigate the symbolic position and psychological status of the main character to pursue an unconventional perspective and explore an intangible concept for a new adaptation that offers an inside-out experiment. The purpose of this work was to offer a different way of seeing (compared to the previous animated adaptations of Zahhak tale), both in terms of style and story, in an open formal/narrative space where the spectators can find some related elements to the source text while bringing their own speculations and understanding.

4.4 Conclusion

In this chapter 4, I outlined the process of creation and analysed the final output of two artworks that I developed throughout the course of this study as part of the practice components of the thesis. The analysis is an exploration and reflection on the process of adapting two narrative pieces from *Shahnameh* into pure abstract forms of animation, conducted as part of this dissertation's objectives to look into the creative and conceptual possibilities of this stylisation for the new re-makings of *Shahnameh*.

In *Rostam & Esfandiar*, choosing pure abstraction as the formal style of the animation has provided the opportunity to examine, and bring some of the symbolic and abstracted inner ideas of this tale to the surface, as the main subject matter of the adaptation. More specifically, this adaptation is about the paradox and conflict of incompatible forces which is an underlying concept from the original text. I have explained that, by using some associative elements such as a brief introductory narrative, I have tried to create connections between the adaptation and its source. Yet, I have argued that the arrangement of the text and animation and the abstracted formal style of the artwork keep the outcome open enough for the spectators' multiple and individual speculations. This was to offer a formal experience of the adapted concepts and possibly a new entry to its narrative space.

In *The Emergence of Zahhak*, employing experimental practices and pure abstract style have offered the possibility of retelling some of the symbolic and psychological concepts of the Zahhak story from *Shahnameh*. This adaptation was particularly about the ominous appearance of Zahhak in the universe as the symbol, psyche, and archetype of darkness, evil, and shadow. I have argued that the pure abstraction provided a potency to form an inside-out unpredicted experience of this piece. Instead of telling a story, *The Emergence of Zahhak* has offered an open narrative space where the spectators can experience these ambiguous and not very literal ideas engaging with the pure forms, colours, patterns, motions, and music. Here the audiences can assist in constructing the story by interpreting the associative meanings and bringing their own imaginations.

The practice of making these animations provided the possibility of creating data for creative and critical analysis where it was non-existent. The research and exploration of *Shahnameh*, in the forms of abstracted animations, could not have been accessed without the application of a practice-based methodology and the making of these animation pieces. While this segment has reflected on the meaning-making and artistic possibilities of pure abstraction from a practitioner viewpoint, the next chapter will analyse a group of informed audiences' (animation experts) perspectives regarding these two practical components. It will examine how these works conveyed their intended narrative, what meaning these viewers comprehended from the two adaptations, and what sorts of artistic possibilities and engagements were offered by employing an abstract style of animation in these artworks. I will then compare my assumptions (as the practitioner) with the responses received from these audiences in the next chapter 5's conclusion. The findings of Chapter 5 feed into the overall questions of this study, expanding on the meaning-making, engagements, and artistic potentialities of abstract animation for the adaptation of cultural texts such as *Shahnameh*.

5. SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS OF EXPERTS AS AN ANALYTICAL APPROACH TO THE PRACTICE

5.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I have employed a qualitative research method and conducted a number of semi-structured expert interviews in order to analyse two abstract animations that I have created based on *Shahnameh*'s narratives. A significant part of this thesis is to investigate the notion of pure abstraction as a stylistic approach for the animation adaptations of *Shahnameh*. Due to the lack of such examples, I have created two animated shorts, *Rostam & Esfandiar* (2020) and *The Emergence of Zahhak* (2020) to examine this hypothesis so that such formalistic choices can creatively and meaningfully assist in the process of adapting *Shahnameh* into animated forms. While in the previous chapter 4, I attempted to explore this hypothesis and answer the main questions of this research through practice-based and reflective methods, in this chapter, I aim to seek experts' critical and creative responses to this research's questions using the practice components of my study.

5.1.1 Participants' Background and Inclusion Criteria

The animation experts (scholars and/or practitioners) interviewed for this research are Hannes Rall (professor of animation studies, independent animator, and director), Ashkan Rahgozar (writer, animator, director, and producer), Pamela Turner (associate professor and independent animator), Moin Samadi (independent animator and director), and Carmen Hannibal (PhD candidate). The following is a brief introduction of each expert, ordered based on the time when the interviews were conducted.



Figure 55: Moin Samadi⁵⁹ (Samadi, no date)

Moin Samadi is an Iranian independent animator and director who has started his education and professional work in 1990 (Zeneise, 2017). He has created various short animations, interactive animations, and games during his career and has won several awards and recognitions (Samadi, no date). In 2017, Samadi released the animated short *Jamshid: A lament for a myth*. This film is based on the story of Jamshid in *Shahnameh* and other sources of Persian mythology. For this project and as a subject which he was personally interested in, Samadi did an extensive study in Persian mythology and has a deep understanding of *Shahnameh* and its cultural and historical background. He also created a minimal visual style for his animation which arguably is an instance of *Shahnameh's* adaptation with the most distance from realistic visualisations. Therefore, I asked him to participate in my study as an animation expert who is familiar with *Shahnameh* and the artistic adaptation of this text.

⁵⁹ - This interview was conducted online and in the Persian Language on July 18, 2021.



Figure 56: Hannes Rall⁶⁰ (*Hannes Rall*, no date)

Hannes Rall is a professor of Animation Studies at the School of Art, Design, and Media (ADM) at Nanyang Technological University (NTU) in Singapore (Rall, 2019, p. 8). He is an independent animator, director, and artist who has won several awards and recognitions for his animations and still artworks and has exhibited and screened his creations across different countries (Rall, no date). Rall's research and practice interests are "adaptation of classic literature, folk legends and fairy tales for animation from both Western and Asian source material" (*Adaptation for Animation: Transforming Literature Frame by Frame*, 2019). During his career and up to now, he has published various papers, book chapters, and books focusing on animation studies and practices, such as *Adaptation for Animation: transforming literature frame by frame*, published in 2019. I approached Rall as one of my research interviewees to benefit from his expertise and critical views in animation studies and practices, and literary adaptations for animation. I also planned to analyse his perspectives on the practice components of this research as a non-native expert audience who has less familiarity with *Shahnameh's* Narrative.

⁶⁰ - This interview was conducted online on July 20, 2021.



Figure 57: Ashkan Rahgozar⁶¹ (*Ashkan Rahgozar*, no date)

Ashkan Rahgozar is an Iranian animator, writer, director, and producer who started his early career in animation in 1999 (*Ashkan Rahgozar - IMDb*, no date). He is the “founder and chief executive of Hoorakhsh Animation Studio” (ibid). Some of this studio’s productions are feature animation, short animations, experimental and advertising films, music videos, and computer game animations, and since the foundation of this company, Rahgozar has won numerous national and international awards for several of his productions (*About - Hoorakhsh Studios*, no date). In 2018, he released *The Last Fiction*, an animated feature film based on the tales of Jamshid and Zahhak from *Shahnameh* (*The Last Fiction*, no date). In this interview, Rahgozar has mentioned that *Shahnameh* has been part of his life growing up, and he has an intimate connection with and a deep understanding of this text (Rahgozar 2021, Personal communication, 28 July). Hence, I interviewed this animation expert to benefit from his artistic and critical perspectives on the adaptation of *Shahnameh* into pure abstracted forms. He can also be considered an informed audience who is familiar with the possibilities of the animation medium, production challenges, as well as *Shahnameh* narratives.

⁶¹ - This interview was conducted online and in the Persian language on July 28, 2021.



Figure 58: Pamela Turner⁶² (*Animation Evolution: Pamela Turner*, 2010)

Pamela Taylor Turner is an associate professor in the department of Kinetic Imaging, at the Virginia Commonwealth University (*Pamela Taylor Turner*, no date). She is also an independent animator and media artist with various animated films which are exhibited nationally (in the USA) and internationally at film festivals and galleries (ibid). Her research interests are focused on independent, experimental, expanded, and abstract animations, as well as new media practices (ibid). She has several publications such as Siggraph's conference proceeding, *Content and Meaning in Abstract Animation* (2003). I have asked Turner to participate in this research as an animation expert with extensive knowledge of abstract and experimental animation studies. Additionally, I aimed to get Turner's critical and creative views on the practice components of this study as a non-native expert audience who is less familiar with *Shahnameh's* narrative.

⁶² - This interview was conducted online on July 29, 2021.



Figure 59: Carmen Hannibal⁶³ (*Carmen Hannibal*, no date)

Carmen Hannibal started her education in 2013 with a BA in Character Animation, and an MA in Animation Production (2014) (*Carmen Hannibal*, no date). She is currently a PhD candidate in Animation, in the School of Communication, at Royal College of Art in the UK (*ibid*). Her research expertise and interests are experimental animation and film, metaphor studies, philosophy of language, hermeneutic phenomenology (Hannibal, no date). I asked Hannibal to be one of my research participants in order to benefit from her knowledge in experimental animations studies and formalistic analysis of animated films. I also aimed to investigate Hannibal 's critical and creative perspectives on the practice components of this study as a non-native expert audience who is less familiar with *Shahnameh*.

The first criteria for the inclusion of the interviewees was their expertise in animation studies and practices, particularly in the areas of adaptations for animation, abstract and experimental animation, and the animated adaptations of *Shahnameh* that include some of this thesis' keywords. The reason for targeting animation experts is because this research is analysing the notion of pure abstraction in the animation medium for an adaptation process; and since the questions are seeking critical and creative responses on the animation's formal and stylistic potentialities, interviewing

⁶³ - This interview was conducted online on August 2, 2021.

a group of animation specialists could potentially generate more useful results and feedback due to these candidates' existing expertise and skillsets.

The next criteria were the level of participants' familiarity with this Iranian national epic poem. Because this research is looking into a particular narrative, *Shahnameh*, and its underlying cultural and universal concepts, having the critical perspectives of both viewers who have cultural affinities with it or not, may offer interesting insights regarding the research questions posed here. Thus, I divided the participants into two groups of familiar/native audiences (Ashkan Rahgozar and Moin Samadi, both Iranian experts with experience in adaptations of *Shahnameh* into animated forms), and less familiar/ non-native audiences (Hannes Rall, Pamela Turner, and Carmen Hanibal). Also the familiarity and unfamiliarity of audiences, in general, seems to have an impact on how the spectators might engage with and respond to the adaptations of a canonical narrative (see *Knowing and Unknowing Audiences* book chapter by Hutcheon and O'Flynn, 2013).

5.1.2 The Interview Questions and Process

This thesis explores pure abstractions focusing on the hypothesis that this stylisation can creatively and meaningfully assist in the process of adapting *Shahnameh* into animated forms and engaging the familiar and less familiar spectators in new ways. The thesis asks: what kinds of artistic possibilities could be offered to *Shahnameh's* adaptations; how the text and its (cultural/archetypical) meanings could be conveyed; and what kinds of creative engagements could be expected when employing this stylisation. I categorised these questions under titles of; artistic, engagement, and meaning-making potencies of pure abstraction. I also designed several sub-questions to expand on the possibilities of responses and to avoid suggesting an answer to the interviewees. For instance, instead of asking how the text and its (cultural/archetypical) meanings could be conveyed, I break this down this into several questions exploring if cultural and archetypical meanings are something that audiences would comprehend from these animations and how they describe those meanings more specifically. The sample of interview questions, including the categories, main questions, and the breakdown of the questions into sub-questions can be found in Appendix III: Interviews Materials.

Before conducting the interviews, I submitted an ethical review tier 2 application to the Maynooth University Research Ethics Committee. In this application, I submitted information regarding my research, the potential participants, the interviews process, and I addressed the potential risk/benefits and the measures to avoid and resolve any issue during the interviews. I structured information sheets, consent forms, and the sample of interview questions, following the MU Research Ethics Committee guideline. In addition, I provided these forms in both English and Farsi (Persian) languages, because I planned to interview several native Iranian experts. This application and the related forms were reviewed and approved by MU Research Ethics Committee. Next, I contacted a list of candidates through their official contact information. I initially planned to have a gender-balanced group of participants, however, several female experts⁶⁴ whom I contacted, were not able to partake in this research due to professional and personal occupations and I have not received responses from some of the other female experts whom I emailed. Hence, this section was structured by interviewing two female and three male experts. All the interviews were conducted online due to Covid-19 restrictions and the interviewees' consents were recorded through signed sheets and video/audio records at the beginning of each interview.

To analyse the interview data, this research employed a thematic analysis methodology and the six phases of thematic analysis as offered by Braun and Clarke (2006). These six phases are: "1. Familiarizing yourself with your data, 2. Generating initial codes, 3. Searching for themes, 4. Reviewing themes, 5. Defining and naming themes 6. Producing the report" (ibid, pp. 87–93). In the first stage, I familiarised myself with the collected information by translating (non-English recordings), transcribing all the interviews, and re-reading these transcriptions. Next, I organised each set of data related to the research questions and assumptions for each participant. At this stage, I also colour coded the data from different interviews that were implying interesting and similar ideas, some in response to the questions of this research and

⁶⁴ - Louise Bagnall, Amy Ratelle, Maria Lorenzo Hernandez, Jane Batkin, Maryam Mohajer, Leila Honari, Sara Khalili, were among animation experts and scholars who were contacted by this researcher.

others as emerging new thoughts, as the result of the research questions. The examples of colour coding interviews' data can be found in Appendix IIII: Interviews Materials.

In the second phase, a set of initial codes were generated (ibid, p. 88) from the previously categorised information. These codes were short pieces of information highlighting the interesting and relevant features of the analysed text. An example of analysed text and generated codes can be located in Appendix IIII: Interviews Materials.

During phases 3 and 4, the generated codes from the previous stage formed several potential themes. In this part, two thematic tables were formed, one reflecting the themes that emerged from the overall collected data⁶⁵, and one representing patterns that emerged as a response to the research questions and assumptions⁶⁶. Next, the information relevant to each theme was organised and the accuracy of these patterns was checked in relation to the data. Later in phase 5, the main themes of the research were defined and set as several titles guiding the different segments of the current chapter (To see an example of a segment from the thematic table, based on research data, and an example of a segment from the thematic table, based on research questions and assumptions, check Appendix IIII: Interviews Materials). In the last phase, a comprehensive scholarly report of the analysis and results was produced.

The findings derived from the interview research reflect on the expressive and perceptual forms of storytelling in abstract animation as new and multifold ways of experiencing an adapted text. These findings also suggested the open space and ambiguous aspects of abstract animation as a potential approach for enhancing the inclusion and access of the audiences regardless of their levels of affinity with an adapted narrative. Additionally, the interviews' data reflected on the abstract stylisation's potentiality to assist in a deeper understanding of a cultural-national narrative, the dominant involvement of the spectators in the process of meaning-making, and the necessity of maintaining the ambiguity and freedom in recreating an abstracted animation space in order to better engage various spectators. Lastly, the interview results offer speculations on possible audiences of such work, highlighting the viewers' visual competencies as a principal

⁶⁵ - Inductive thematic analysis; a method where the themes emerge from the overall research data (see Braun and Clarke, 2006; Clarke and Braun, 2017)

⁶⁶ - Deductive thematic analysis, a method where the themes emerge from research assumptions and theories (see Braun and Clarke, 2006; Clarke and Braun, 2017)

factor. The following segments are a detailed analysis of these findings, including some of the experts' discussions related to each topic.

5.2 When the Form Becomes the Story and the Way it's Retold: Abstract animation as a form of expression, exploration, and immediate perception

In chapter 2, exploring the potentialities of pure abstraction in terms of form, meaning, and interactions (in previous studies) suggested that rather than following a linear narrative form, pure abstraction is suitable for exploring the feelings and ideas of a narrative. Chapter 2 discussed that abstract art is less focused on clear meanings and better fitted for offering a formal experience of non-literal and immaterial concepts. In current chapter 5, I explored the abstract animation for the retelling of two stories from *Shahnameh*, where an underlying cultural/universal idea from each tale was the main subject matter for each animation. After showing these artworks (*Rostam & Esfandiar* (2020) and *The Emergence of Zahhak* (2020)) to five animation experts and analysing their responses and forms of engagement, one outlined area was how significantly the story and storytelling in *Rostam & Esfandiar* and *The Emergence of Zahhak* relied on the design components of these animations.

Like most abstract animations, *Rostam & Esfandiar* and *The Emergence of Zahhak* were not offering linear or literal forms of narrative. Yet, because of the associative elements and references (such as the films' titles, a brief introductory text, the subtitles, the music, culturally loaded symbols, etc.), the audiences (interviewees) were aware that they are exploring a specific story and narrative space. These associative elements were incorporated in the abstract spaces of these animations since abstract imageries and motions alone would possibly not allow for connection to and/or comprehension of an adapted narrative and its underlying ideas. While the dominance of form is still maintained regardless of this connection between the purely abstracted design components (visual and motions) and a particular narrative/meaning, here the visual and kinetic elements become the narrative itself and influenced the narration style. So instead of telling, the story and the intended meanings were echoed, expressed, and evoked, through a rich visual and tactile

experience. Looking at these two animations, the expressive and perceptual qualities of storytelling offered by pure abstraction allowed the spectators to explore not only the story and the forms but also the story through the forms.

An instance pointed out in our conversation by Samadi (2021, personal communication, 18 July) was the use of bubble-like textures⁶⁷ in *The Emergence of Zahhak* (2020). In his experience, these bubble-like textures evoked boiling imageries and tactile sensation and suggested the start of a revolution by Zahhak, and him declaring a new ideology and order. In another conversation, Turner (2021, personal communication, 29 July) suggested that in these animations the spectators are looking really at the design elements (e.g., pure forms, colours, motions, textures) and design principles (e.g., harmony, balance, contracts). But they are also exploring the ideas of balance and imbalance, harmony, and a lack of it, emanating from the story (*Rostam & Esfandiar*) through these design elements and principles (ibid). In another word, as stated by Hannibal (2021, personal communication, 2 August), here the meanings come from movements, shapes, colours, textures, and sounds.

Besides offering an individual method of retelling and experiencing a story through expressive and evoking formal qualities, abstract animation offers the possibility of engaging the viewers' visual and tactile senses. The immediacy of these perceptual experiences can be heightened when the design components of an abstract film are even more purified. Turner (2021, personal communication, 29 July) reflected on this and explained that the purity of abstract visualisation can evoke and stimulate a pure, more immediate connection with our various senses. For instance, the ability to use textures or different materials, in their purest conditions can induce enjoyable tactile sensations and reminded us of touch (ibid). Another example is the pure complementary colours and primal shapes which can instantly echo certain moods or emotions.

Therefore, while non-literal non-linear characteristics of pure abstraction might position this style as a non-conventional way of remaking old narratives, it is still a valid method for multifold explorations and experiencing such texts, as the purely abstract stylisations employed in *Rostam & Esfandiar* (2020) and *The Emergence of*

⁶⁷ - Bubbles produced on the surface of vodka as a result of being vibrated by the audio (for more details see chapter 4)

Zahhak (2020) offered some new experiences of the adopted narratives to both familiar and less familiar viewers. This section highlighted the distinctive ways of storytelling when employing abstract styles of animation and the expressive and perceptual possibilities of this form. The next discussion looks into the open-ended quality of abstract animations as a potential approach for the adaptation of *Shahnameh* that can enhance the inclusion and access of various audiences into this Persian epic poem's narrative space.

5.3 Freedom and Inclusion: Abstract animation as an open space for spectators' investments, projections, and access

During these interviews, we discussed the idea that abstract animation is a more open-ended way of storytelling and understanding a narrative where the subjectivity of both the artists and the viewers is embraced. Rall (2021, Personal communication, 20 July) suggested that pure abstraction is a different visual language that departs from representational tendencies. Using abstract and symbolic imageries that are culturally loaded can offer more stories out of images. Rahgozar (2021, Personal communication, 28 July) also pointed to the possibilities of meanings in abstract animation that can be as varied as the audiences of the work since each person can find some individual ideas from watching these animations. In this way, abstract animation provides the creator and the audiences with more freedom for story-making and storytelling (compared to representational and figurative styles of animation).

But what is the point of such freedom? Rall (2021, Personal communication, 20 July) explains; because in pure abstraction we are not given concrete imageries, the space between the text and its visualisation is more open. Here, the spectators can engage and move more freely within the narrative space with their imaginative ideas. Abstract stylisation offers more room for these audiences to invest and project their thoughts. Thus, viewers can bring new layers of meaning to an artistic experience and make this engagement multifold and diverse. In a way, we are encouraging the viewers' inner cinema where more sub-stories can be formed by the audiences, resulting in unpredicted, versatile outcomes (ibid).

Another possibility offered by pure abstraction is its accessibility and capacity for inclusion. Turner (2021, personal communication, 29 July) reflects on this notion and suggests that abstract animation can be a place of inclusion, where the viewers are freed from identifying with a character. In representational forms, if the characters are not what the spectators imagined, this can divorce them from the story and create a sense of alienation (ibid). While in abstract arts, where there are no representational tendencies, characters and concepts are open to being imagined by the viewers, and this frees the audiences, inviting them to be included (ibid). In this way, abstract forms avoid alienating people and offer accessibility, universality, openness for their subjective visions.

Looking more closely into *Rostam & Esfandiar* (2020) and *The Emergence of Zahhak* (2020), Rahgozar (2021, Personal communication, 28 July) reflects on the interactive potencies of abstract animation that can engage audiences by the possibilities of opening various conversations between the artist and the medium, the artist and the audiences, and the audiences and the adapted work. Today, the more interactive a work, the more we find it valid and authentic, and by interactive, he meant, when an artwork makes us think, ask questions, look for answers, and challenge us as the audiences (ibid). Rahgozar (ibid) further explained; since abstract works are symbolic in nature (not offering a clear answer and can have various assumptions), they can be considered more interactive.

Yet, it is important to be aware that not everyone would engage with abstract arts. Turner (2021, personal communication, 29 July) explains abstract animations can be difficult to watch, particularly for a long time. When looking at an abstract artwork, the audiences are engaged differently (compare to representational style), and they are working slightly more (ibid). They possibly would struggle to read and make sense of the film, and at some point, they would give up to experience (ibid). Samadi (2021, Personal communication, 18 July) also reflects on this notion and suggests; today's audiences do not have much time and patience, so we cannot count on most viewers to see these abstract animations and then go investigate the related source of adaptation. Looking at and comprehending such artwork can be time and energy-consuming (ibid). Yet, as explained by Hannibal (2021, Personal communication, 2

August) whether the spectators pick up the intended meanings and engage with the work or not, does not disqualify the abstract work. Abstract animation is a stylistic possibility in which open space for the viewers' investment, involvement, and access is provided, and this can be a new method to explore stories such as the adopted narratives from *Shahnameh* in this thesis. It is then the spectator's choice as to how and to what extent engage in the whole process and interact with the work.

The discussion above concluded that the openness and freedom of abstract animation offer more space for the interaction and involvement of audiences in reinterpreting an adapted text and can open up to more universal engagements with the source of an adaptation (e.g., *Shahnameh*). Next, in the following segment, we examine the potentialities of abstract animation as a form of adaptation that can lead to a deeper comprehension of a cultural-national text such as *Shahnameh*.

5.4 Abstract Animation as a Stylistic Approach for Deeper Understanding of a Cultural-National Narrative

As mentioned in chapter 2. Iconic and Pure Abstraction: Background and Contextual Review, by discharging the details and distancing from reality, abstract imageries and motions can acquire universal potencies where the forms do not resemble something individual, but they can be a symbol or idea of something shared. Having this characteristic, abstract stylisation can be considered as a creative approach to the remaking of stories that are very well-known and universal. An example is *All the World's a Stage* (2016) by Hannes Rall, based on a popular monologue from *As You Like It* by William Shakespeare (Rall, 2019, p. 224). However, considering the animated adaptations of *Shahnameh* collected in this thesis, which all maintained representational approaches, one of the questions asked here is, would a purely abstracted style be suitable for the animated adaptations of *Shahnameh*: a text that might not be as popular or universal as Shakespeare's texts? Also, can the lack of such examples (discussed in chapter 1) be an indication of this text's incompatibility with or local disinterest in abstract animation as a possible stylistic approach to the remaking of *Shahnameh*? These were the sub-questions raised in this research when looking into the meaning-making

and engagement possibilities of pure abstraction, leading to the next discussion on how abstract animation can actually enhance the understanding of a cultural-national narrative, suggested by both familiar and less familiar experts.

At the beginning of our discussion about this subject, both Samadi (2021, Personal communication, 18 July) and Rahgozar (2021, Personal communication, 28 July) explained that literary narratives such as *Shahnameh* can be considered abstract in nature. Rahgozar (ibid) mentioned that these sorts of texts formed and reformed through centuries imagined differently through generations and reached us today in this form. Samadi (2021, Personal communication, 18 July) particularly pointed to the starting segment of *Shahnameh*, where centuries of a mythical kingdom and historical eras are summarised in a few lines or pages. Being an ancient text, which carries multiple stories and comes together through centuries of recreations, *Shahnameh* is constructed upon various symbolic and abstract concepts that make this poem a potential narrative to be remade in animated abstracted forms. Here, by using abstract animation, we can look closer to the symbolic ideas of *Shahnameh* and convey meaning in their purest and summarised version, where, by embodying only one symbol, we can suggest multiple meanings. Using abstract animation is not just a potential approach in the remaking of *Shahnameh*. It is also a way to a better understanding of it. Rahgozar (2021, Personal communication, 28 July) noted that to abstract *Shahnameh*, we need to first symbolise its stories. This can lead us to explore the underlying layers of our texts, understand the writers' deeper intentions, and get closer to the core/spirit of the narratives, to be able to embody those notions in symbolic forms. This kind of creative exploration can result in a deeper and new understanding of *Shahnameh*, a literary work that is rooted in Iranian national identity and culture. Then, in this way, the forms/style can offer some sort of impact, rather than just being entertaining or enjoyable (ibid).

While abstract animation can offer a deeper understanding of a cultural narrative such as *Shahnameh* for the familiar spectators, it can also provide the unfamiliar viewers with a more accessible version of the local text. As mentioned earlier using abstract forms can enable audiences to understand the broader aspects of a narrative and its universal concepts. They can find the relevant concepts in these

stories that would overlap with various narratives across the world since different cultures can share many similarities. For instance, when watching *The Emergence of Zahhak* (2020), Hannibal (2021, Personal communication, 2 August) pointed to the concept of the snake as a significant universal symbolism of evil which also reminded her of the snake in the garden of Eden. In another instance, when analysing *Rostam & Esfandiar* (2020) Rall (2021, Personal communication, 20 July) pointed to a very similar story in German, a heroic tale where the father must kill his son. Additionally, if looking even closer at these universal concepts, one can find their inseparable connection to some Iranian cultural contents. For example, Rostam and Esfandiar confrontation besides being a universal concept where incompatible forces (e.g., king and hero) inevitably confront one another, can also point to some Iranian ideologies regarding the downfall of the Persian empire⁶⁸. Therefore, depending on their curiosity, abstract animation can provide a space for unfamiliar audiences to explore and untangle the narrative using their archetypical knowledge and reach some levels of comprehension and appreciation.

5.4.1 A style to preserve the essence of a text while liberating its narrative space

Finally, thinking about how employing pure abstraction can assist in a better/new understanding of *Shahnameh*, Rahgozar (2021, Personal communication, 28 July) noted that having the possibility of recreating this text into abstract animations is an opportunity to go beyond the popular readings, expectations, and familiar forms of this narrative, and reconstruct it for today's language, new visual and conceptual methods. Hannibal (2021, Personal communication, 2 August) also agreed with this idea and stated, both *Rostam & Esfandiar* (2020) and *The Emergence of Zahhak* (2020) acknowledge the historical parts of their source, yet they took a critical distance from it. This is a possibility of abstract formal style that can preserve the essence of a text but liberate it in an open space for new interpretations and

⁶⁸ - In his analysis of *Rostam and Esfandiar's* story from *Shahnameh*, Kazzazi (1987, 2014b, pp. 664–665) pointed to the connection of this story and Iranian ideology of how a confrontation between royal families and knights which has always been supportive could result in a disaster, downfall of Persian empire.

recreations. She added that; the openness of abstract animation could be part of the text's renewal. It is a creative method to make this ancient narrative more relevant and interesting, particularly where we might not identify with some of their ancient values or standpoints. It is a way of questioning them, untangling them, and understanding them anew. Following the discussion in the next segment, we explore what kinds of meanings are comprehended by the familiar and less familiar audiences. This part particularly highlights the determining impact of participants in the process of meaning-making when interpreting the abstracted animation adaptations of *Shahnameh*.

5.5 Interpretation of Meanings: The viewers' dominant touch

During the interviews I asked each participant how they have interpreted *Rostam & Esfandiar* (2020) and *The Emergence of Zahhak*? And in their opinions, what kinds of meanings from *Shahnameh* were conveyed through the abstract imageries and motions in these animations. I aimed to analyse each participant's understanding of these adaptations and look into the possible differences and similarities between experts' responses who are familiar with *Shahnameh* and the ones who had less knowledge of this poem.

For *Rostam & Esfandiar*, Samadi (2021, Personal communication, 18 July) comprehended the story as a universal tale of confrontation, balance, and imbalance. An encounter of dualistic forces of day and night, good and evil. The visualisation of the cycle reminded him of the lion-bull iconography in Persepolis. This motif dates back to the "Achaemenid era" (Sathe, 2012, p. 75) and suggests different "astronomical meanings, seasonal events, and is a symbol of the time cycle of the day, with the lion representing the sun and bull the night" (ibid) (see Figure 60). He recognised that the animation is about two similar forces with an ominous destiny. They confront one another, and when one defeats and destroys the other, it will be defeated and destroyed itself. The arrow (black triangle) is coming from an ancient external source which makes it significantly mythical, and the rest is destiny. We see balance, imbalance, and balance again.

For *The Emergence of Zahhak*, Samadi found the abstract visualisation to have more of a national and local tone. This was due to the usage of visual and textual elements (e.g., Arabic typography), and the background music by the Iranian singer Shahram Nazeri who is reciting part of the original poem. In Samadi's opinion, the background texture of bubbles inside a circle evoked boiling imageries and the start of a revolution by Zahhak. It evoked a sense of roaring and excitement, things are starting, and something is happening. It conveyed the idea of the birth of a disaster.

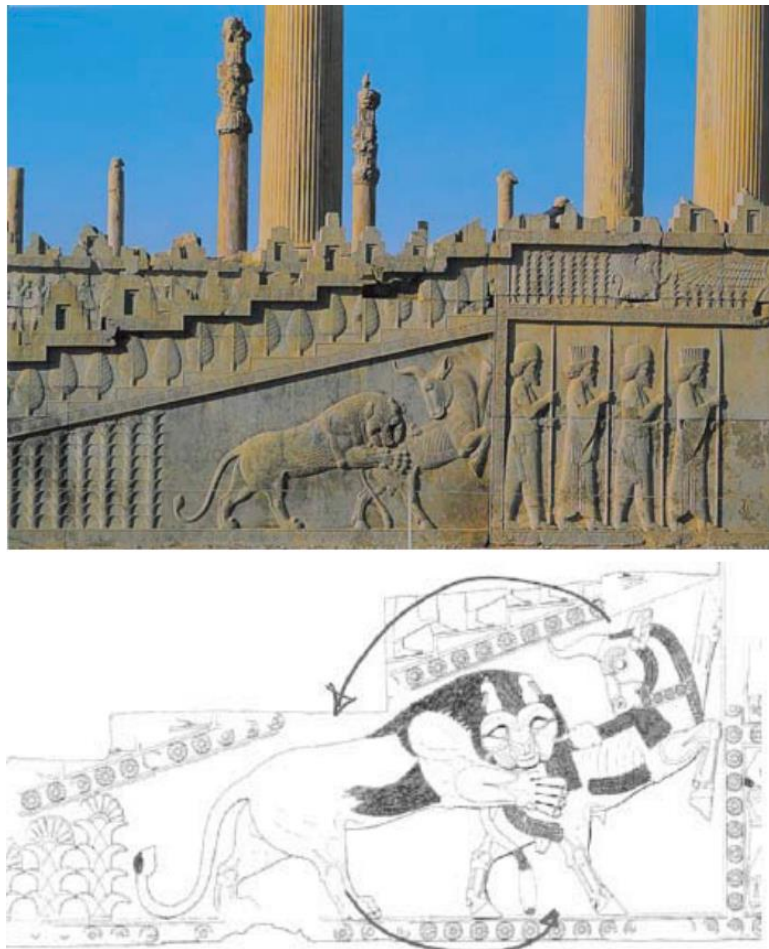


Figure 60: *Lion-bull motif in Persepolis* (Sathe, 2012, p. 76)

The symbolic forms also conveyed various meanings. For instance, the symbol of snake as the notion of evil and deceit, a snake swallowing an abstract form as the symbol of brain-eating by Zahhak which can also suggest that Zahhak was bringing a new ideology and order, the symbol of fire and its connection to Aži Dahāka (Zahhak

in form of a dragon in Zoroastrian texts), and little triangles covering the scene as a notion of Zahhak overcoming and conquest. Samadi also pointed out that *The Emergence of Zahhak* can refer to a historical incident of domination of a group over Iran who has some sacrificing beliefs.

The next participant, Rall (2021, Personal communication, 20 July), mentioned that from the first animation, *Rostam & Esfandiar*, he got the ideas of conflict, contrast, development, motion, resolution, and overall ambiguity. He also finds the story and the idea of the king and hero comprehensible in this animation. From the second animation, *The Emergence of Zahhak*, he got a cosmic sense, a world-building concept where a universe is emerging, and interplays of forms, things forming things, concepts appearing and disappearing, abstract notions are constructing and dissolving. The animation was evoking a certain mood and feeling of a universe coming to be in constant change and movements, and it was inducing the notion of competing and conflicting forces.

Asking Rahgozar (2021, Personal communication, 28 July) how he interpreted *Rostam & Esfandiar* (2020) and *The Emergence of Zahhak*, he mentioned the ideas of paradox, constant change, and an eternal inevitable encounter from the *Rostam & Esfandiar* (2020) animation. He noted that none of the two characters or concepts (Rostam and Esfandiar) represented in this animation were only black or white, they could be both, while constantly changing their forms and position. This reflected the idea that none of these two mythical figures were entirely good or evil. In the second animation, *The Emergence of Zahhak* (2020), Rahgozar found the idea that this animation was the story of how Zahhak become who he was. It was a tale of his becoming since from the beginning he was only a gem, a human, and a pure soul (neither good nor bad). However, the external conditions and his choices lead him to whom he becomes, an evil agent.

We then explored the same questions with Turner (2021, personal communication, 29 July). In her opinion, *Rostam & Esfandiar* was offering a visual experience of complementary colours (purple, blue, yellow, orange), themes of balance, disbalance, harmony, and a lack of it (design principles). Some of the designs also carried some cultural references, and the work was evoking the idea that there is no

hierarchy, no good and evil. Then something alien (the black triangle) was introduced into this world and changed its dynamic. It created struggle and opposition and an experience of a familiar, universal conflict. In *The Emergence of Zahhak*, she interpreted the snake as a strong symbolism of evil. Something precious in the middle was swallowed, consumed, and disappeared, and the animation suggested that something dark was happening. She found the bubble-like textures in this work enjoyable since it was visually enchanting while offering a tactile sensation.

In the last interview, Hannibal (2021, Personal communication, 2 August) suggested that In *Rostam & Esfandiar*, she got the idea of two conflicting sides, tension, escalation, and then evaporation. It was about a dynamic relationship and somewhat a general concept. From *The Emergence of Zahhak*; she got this perception that something is happening inside the circle, a form (circle) that often evokes a holistic sense and here resembled a community. The snake was a strong symbolism of evil and (as mentioned earlier) it reminded her of the snake in the garden of Eden. She got the idea of an encounter between dark and light, where evil was interfering with this community and evil was happening.

When analysing how these familiar and less familiar experts with *Shahnameh* interpreted the two abstract animations, *Rostam & Esfandiar* and *The Emergence of Zahhak*, based on this poem and what kinds of meanings they found in these adaptations, the less familiar experts interpreted meanings such as universal concepts, the essence and the big picture of the story, emotional meanings, certain moods, and some fundamental ideas. They also pointed to some similarities between the ideas of these animations and stories and symbolism from other cultures that they were familiar with. In a way, they complemented these abstract animations with their cultural and individual loaded meanings. On the other hand, the familiar experts, besides interpreting the universal and archetypical themes and concepts of these two animations, also perceived more detailed and precise ideas related to *Shahnameh* and its historical, literary, mythological, and cultural background. They complemented the abstract space of these animations with national and culturally loaded references based on their knowledge of *Shahnameh*, particularly some of the related concepts which they found personally fascinating. Some of these ideas were

information that even if associated with *Shahnameh* but brought to the narrative space of *Rostam & Esfandiar* and *The Emergence of Zahhak* by these audiences as new interpretations. Both familiar and less familiar experts found the essential meanings that I intended to convey in some extent (in *Rostam & Esfandiar*; the idea of paradox and conflict of incompatible forces, and in *The Emergence of Zahhak*, the idea of the Zahhak's ominous appearance in the universe as the symbol, psyche, and archetype of darkness, evil, and shadow), yet added their subjective, diverse interpretations as well. They noted or brought with them cultural concepts, some related to *Shahnameh*, and others related to the viewers' background, knowledge, and interests that can be considered as a new level of experiencing and understanding these adaptations and the source text.

This segment pointed to the significance of abstract animation as a visual-kinetic form in which the viewers are given wider participatory spaces for the construction and exploration of meanings. This stylisation allowed the formation of new layers of meaning within *Shahnameh's* narrative space. It permitted the audiences to bring their knowledge and personal fascinations into this experience and stretch and explore *Shahnameh's* story space from multiple angles. The above observation also provided knowledge for artists in the field of abstract art who are interested in the remaking of ancient texts, to understand how such adaptations would be digested by different audiences. The next part explores familiar and less-familiar viewers' engagements with abstract animation adaptations of *Shahnameh* and the importance of maintaining the open-ended qualities of abstract stylisation.

5.6 Forms of Engagements: The necessity of freedom

Another area discussed with the five experts' interviewees was if, between *Rostam & Esfandiar* and *The Emergence of Zahhak*, they found one animation more engaging than the other one? And why? These questions were looking into the ways these viewers were engaged, with the abstracted style of these adaptations.

Overall, the participants were engaged with both animated samples while having versatile experiences of each artwork. Rahgozar (2021, Personal communication, 28 July) and Turner (2021, personal communication, 29 July) found *Rostam & Esfandiar* interesting due to offering a more open and ambiguous experience of the adopted narratives and universal engagements. Although, some experts (Rahgozar and Hannibal) suggested that this animation offered too much information by including the brief introductory story. On the other hand, Samadi (2021, Personal communication, 18 July), Rall (2021, Personal communication, 20 July), and Hannibal (2021, Personal communication, 2 August) found *The Emergence of Zahhak* a more wholesome experience because of having more national/cultural references. In their opinion, the combination of images, texts, and music was more seamless in this animation. It seemed that the associative materials (e.g., music, imageries, text, subtitles) used in these animations, provided some references from *Shahnameh*. These references, in some instances, evoked cultural connections, while in other cases, they were interpreted as limiting the imaginative space of the narrative. For instance, Rall (2021, Personal communication, 20 July) stated that the informational cues used in these animations could work as an anchor for abstract forms to assign meanings, and build connections, and suddenly the whole idea becomes more attractive. He (ibid) pointed to *The Emergence of Zahhak* and explained that this animation offers more cultural reflection by the way the music is linked to the film, with a more original visual language, and through the organic combination of images, texts, and music. In *The Emergence of Zahhak*, these materials were complimenting and not following one another (e.g., not similar to *Rostam & Esfandiar* where the text comes first, and then the forms, motions, and music start). Rahgozar (2021, Personal communication, 28 July) also reflected on this and suggested that the text at the beginning of *Rostam & Esfandiar*, offering a brief narrative, could be much shorter to

leave the space more open for audiences' curiosity and avoid giving away a conclusion or clear idea of the work. Thus, compared to *Rostam & Esfandiar* which starts with a preface, the way *The Emergence of Zahhak* was constructed, allowed for a freer entry into the animation space before giving out too much of the story. Of course, not all the spectators have the same experience. For Turner (2021, personal communication, 29 July), the music and subtitle used in *The Emergence of Zahhak* reduced the positive ambiguity of the work and its abstracted nature by evoking representational imageries.

While the discussion above reflected on the diversity of audiences' experiences and engagements, one significant idea outlined during these conversations was the necessity of maintaining the openness and ambiguity of abstract animation when remaking these narratives. Regardless of the audience's levels of affinity with *Shahnameh*, both groups of the viewers appreciated the unlimited qualities of abstract animation that allowed them to freely explore the stories through moving abstracted forms. In each artwork, where the viewers felt too much information and references from the original text (*Shahnameh*) were given, the possibilities of openness and freedom for their interpretation were limited. These negatively impacted the viewers' engagement with the adaptation, and the outcome received some criticism mentioned above. Hence, all the participants appreciated maintaining the freedom that the abstract style of animations here provided for their personal explorations and interpretations of the adapted work. While the current segment explained how the different participants of the research were engaged with abstracted animation adaptations of *Shahnameh*, the following discussion offers some speculation on the possible audiences for such artworks from animation experts' standpoints.

5.7 Speculation of Possible Audiences

The notion of audiences is a significant part of this research, particularly when looking into the audiences' engagements and comprehension of *Shahnameh* in abstracted animated forms. Although delving fully into the audience's theories is beyond the possible scope of the current study that is focused on the methods of meaning-making and engagements in animated forms and the development of *Shahnameh* adaptation studies and practices, it is still important to consider the notion of audiences since it is an impactful matter when talking about adaptation and engagement.

Apart from analysing how five participants of this research responded to the abstract animations based on some narratives from *Shahnameh*, I talked with these experts about the speculation of possible audiences for such artistic experiments. Some related topics discussed during these interviews were, who will be interested in watching abstract animation adaptations of cultural texts such as *Shahnameh*, and where? Is there an age limit for the audiences of artworks such as *Rostam & Esfandiar* (2020) and *The Emergence of Zahhak* (2020)? And is there a difference between familiar and unfamiliar audiences in terms of engagement with such animations?

One area all these experts agreed upon was an audience's knowledge, interests, and, more importantly, her/his level of visual experience and competency as significant factors determining if the viewer engages with abstract animations like the ones mentioned above. Based on their experiences, the interviewee experts speculated that the most likely audiences of abstract arts would be people with better visual knowledge, related backgrounds, and education or spectators with some kinds of interests. Some instances can be artists, people who attend cultural events, audiences interested in the original text (*Shahnameh*), the time-based media arts (animation), experimental works, technical and stylistic innovations. Depending on the viewers' visual experiences and interests, they would engage with artworks such as *Rostam & Esfandiar* and *The Emergence of Zahhak* at different levels. Additionally, during several conversations, it was noted that the best possible place for the

distribution of animations that employ abstract and experimental approaches would be festivals, and festivalgoers would be some of the audiences of these artworks.

We also discussed the age of audiences who would possibly interact with *Rostam & Esfandiar* and *The Emergence of Zahhak*. Thinking about this, Rahgozar (2021, Personal communication, 28 July) explained that although generally, we consider abstract films for adults, we cannot assume that these works are non-permitting for children. Hannibal (2021, Personal communication, 2 August) agreed with this idea and added, it would be misleading to think of all adults as competent spectators and younger viewers as dumb audiences. It is possibly a better judgment if we rely on the audiences' visual knowledge, rather than their age (ibid). Just looking at the two practice components of this thesis, both Rall (2021, Personal communication, 20 July) and Rahgozar (2021, Personal communication, 28 July) suggested that children and younger adults can find *Rostam & Esfandiar* attractive and engage with the vivid colours and interplays of the forms in this animation. Here, the bright colours and playful forms could easily have some affinity with the abstract world of children's minds (Rall, 2021, Personal communication, 20 July) since they intuitively respond to abstract forms (Turner, 2021, personal communication, 29 July).

The analysis in this section was also interested in how the level of the audience's familiarity with the adopted text, *Shahnameh*, can impact the way they engage with the adaptations. The interviewees agreed that there would be a difference between these two groups of spectators in the ways they interpret the meanings and ideas and experience and explore the animations. For instance, Samadi (2021, Personal communication, 18 July) noted that familiar audiences with the *Shahnameh* probably interpret these animations more precisely and detailed while analysing which parts or concepts from the original text embodied in these films. For unfamiliar viewers, they would possibly reach an understanding and appreciation of the work even if they would not know the whole story, they would possibly pick up the broader aspects of these narratives. Hannibal (2021, Personal communication, 2 August) also speculated that familiar audiences would probably look at the new approaches made in these adaptations compared to previous retellings of the source text, while the cultural cues and technical sides of these animations would probably be more

interesting for unfamiliar viewers, to learn. Finally, Turner (2021, personal communication, 29 July) suggested that unfamiliar viewers would not have the same cultural connection, so they interpreted these works differently. On the other hand, for familiar spectators, these abstract animations can allow some freedom of entry into the poem, where they can bring their pre-knowledge and interpretations of *Shahnameh*. Yet, it is worth noting that when it comes to the possible audiences of abstract works in general or regarding the practice components of this study in particular, the above discussion can only offer some speculations, and this area needs a focused and comprehensive audience research.

5.8 Conclusion

The key findings outlined in the above discussions have offered insights on the artistic, meaning-making, and engagements possibilities of pure abstracted forms of animations. When looking into the adaptations of some narrative pieces from *Shahnameh* using abstract stylisations, the interviewee experts noted that the design components of such animations significantly impacted the story, the way it was retold, and the ways the viewers experienced it. The storytelling here is expressive and perceptual, allowing the spectators to explore the story through the forms. Abstract stylisation can offer a new and multifold method (at least in the case of *Shahnameh*) of retelling and exploring narratives in expressive and evocative manners while engaging the viewers' visual and tactile sensations.

We then investigated the freedom and openness of purely abstracted style, as not only one of its substantial artistic possibilities which allow spectators to be included and invest their imaginations but also as something expected for a successful engagement of audiences with such artworks. Having embraced the subjectivity of both the artist and the viewers, the open-ended qualities of pure abstraction can provide the opportunity for projections of participants' thoughts. This can result in the formation of new layers of meanings and more stories out of the abstracted imageries. Here, because there is no determined answer, everyone is included. It is a place of inclusion, access, and universality, and regardless of how familiar the

viewers are with the adopted narrative, the openness and ambiguity of abstract style is something appreciated and even necessary. The openness of abstract forms can offer freedom of entry into the story space to these viewers and a chance to partake in reconstructing it and/or exploring it as new.

The audiences' analysis also suggested the potentiality of abstract animation as an artistic approach to explore and visualise the underlying layers of an ancient narrative such as *Shahnameh*, to get closer to its core and spirit, to better comprehend the writer's deeper intentions, and to explore the text's symbolic ideas. Additionally, employing this stylisation can provide a universal version of the adopted narrative in an open-ended and accessible form with the possibility of provoking viewers' curiosity about the source text background and roots. In this way, the abstract animation can be an approach employed for a deeper understanding of a cultural-national text such as *Shahnameh* for both familiar and less familiar readers. Moreover, in such forms of adaptation, the essence of the text can be preserved while its narrative space can open up for new interpretations and recreations. Here, the artistic possibilities of abstract animation can assist in renewing an old text for novel readings.

Another finding of this section was related to the ways familiar and less familiar experts-audiences understood the meanings and engaged with the two abstract animations based on *Shahnameh*. After analysing their responses, it seemed that both groups of spectators comprehended the intended ideas appropriated from *Shahnameh* to some extent. Less familiar experts particularly picked up the archetypal concepts, the broader, and inner ideas of the adopted stories. They also pointed to the overlapping concepts of these adaptations and narratives or symbolisms from other cultures that they were familiar with. The familiar experts offered more detailed and precise meanings related to *Shahnameh* and its cultural background, in addition to understanding the universal and archetypal concepts of the adopted narratives. Both familiar and less familiar audiences particularly welcomed the openness and ambiguity of abstract animations, and based on their knowledge and interests, both groups added multiplied individual meanings to these adaptations' narrative spaces.

Lastly, this chapter offered speculation of possible audiences' who might be interested and invested in seeing the adaptation of cultural texts such as *Shahnameh* in abstracted animated forms. The study anticipates that people who have better visual experiences, those who have more interest in the text (*Shahnameh*) or the animation medium (e.g., artists and theorists), and festivalgoers would possibly engage more with these abstract works. In terms of age, the interviewees assumed both adults and younger viewers could enjoy these animations depending on their visual knowledge and understanding. Additionally, it was agreed among these experts that the familiar and less familiar spectators probably engage with these works differently. As mentioned above, the familiar viewers might pick up the more precise interpretations from the source texts while revisiting them with more freedom. And for less familiar audiences, abstract animation can provide a universally accessible experience of the local narrative. Yet, as noted earlier, these are some speculations and, in the future, focused studies in this area are needed.

6. CONCLUSION

The following concluding section collates the arguments and findings from the previous chapters and offers an account of this PhD thesis's goals and objectives and the extent to which they have been achieved. It additionally demonstrates the chief finding of this study based on the research methods applied, and lastly, it reflects on the contributions made throughout.

6.1 Summary of the Findings and Contributions

Since the foundation of animation in Iran, *Shahnameh*, the Iranian national epic poem, has been used as a source of adaptation. Despite several animated adaptations based on this epic poem, there has been a shortage of documenting these artworks, as well as a lack of scholarly research, particularly on the topic of their adopted animation designs. After documenting sixteen animations based on this poem and looking closely into the components of their design (visuals and motions), some of the instances presented unique stylisations, categorised in this thesis as different forms of “iconic abstraction” (McCloud, 1993, pp. 50–51). Here, the style of these animations seemed to be formed as a meaningful and creative reflection of their borrowed narratives' contents. It was also noted that the formal style of these animations for 48 years (from 1971 to 2019; the time frame between the first and the last documented animations based on *Shahnameh*) stands somewhere distanced from and in-between being realistic and/or being radically abstract (see Figure 4). Even if, in one of the examples, *Jamshid: A lament for a myth* (2017), the formal style of the animation was minimal, the overall stylistic approaches in these animations adapted various forms of iconic styles but avoided pure abstraction. This lack of practical examples (adaptations of *Shahnameh* into abstracted forms of animation) posed new research questions and reflected another potential creative area that needed to be explored. These questions involved examining the abstracted possibilities of animation language for retelling/remaking the Iranian national epic poem and how such adaptations would be comprehended and engaged with by audiences who are familiar or less familiar with this text. Hence,

the current multidisciplinary research (that spans animation, adaptation, and literary (*Shahnameh*) studies/practices) is formed in response to the shortage of research examining the adaptations of *Shahnameh* in animated forms. Additionally, it explored the possibilities of iconic and pure abstracted forms of animation in recreating and reinterpreting this canonical poem. More specifically, the thesis set out to study through textual and thematic analysis, practical exploration, and semi-structured interviews the artistic, meaning-making, engagement possibilities of iconic and pure abstracted forms of animation in conveying some of *Shahnameh*'s narratives and contents. This research hypothesised that these animation styles could creatively and meaningfully assist in reconstructing *Shahnameh* in new formats and for novel experiences and help gain a better understanding of and engagement with its cultural and archetypal contents and meanings.

To this end, I have analysed the notion of abstraction within the animation medium and explored the design components of the animation medium using Furniss's live-action animation continuum (2008, p. 6) and McCloud's Picture plane (1993, pp. 51–53). This thesis explained the notion of abstraction as occurring when the visual and kinetic components of the medium distance themselves from the pole of reality and move towards the poles of iconic abstraction and pure abstraction. The study first investigated various forms of iconic abstraction as stylisations applied for the existent animated adaptations of *Shahnameh*. It expanded on different forms of iconic abstraction and argued that the employment of iconic abstraction in animated adaptations of *Shahnameh* amplified and pronounced intended meanings by reducing visual clutter and being formally selective. This thesis also suggested that the concentrated iconic designs of these animations can bring culturally loaded graphics and their meanings to the surface yet maintain their accessibility for engaging the less familiar readers of *Shahnameh*. It then explored the notion of pure abstraction as an untouched potential animation stylisation for remaking the Iranian national epic poem through practice and interview. The findings of these segments suggested that the openness and ambiguity of abstract animation provided the space for positively dominant participation and creative engagement of both familiar and less familiar readers of *Shahnameh*, alongside understanding and experiencing this text anew.

As briefly explained above, to achieve the overall objective of this thesis, I narrowed down my investigations to explore the notion of iconic abstraction in formerly animated adaptations of *Shahnameh* and to examine the notion of pure abstraction through original animated artworks created during this study. While this thesis was progressing, specific goals emerged following the overall objective of the research. These specific objectives discussed in the introductory chapter were:

- to contextualise the notion of 'iconic and pure abstraction' for the animation medium and explore the creative, meaning-making, and interactive possibilities of these stylistic choices,
- to research different forms of iconic abstraction employed in some of the existent animated adaptations of *Shahnameh* and how such animation designs artistically and meaningfully assisted in embodying some of the adopted narrative's contents,
- to explore through practice the artistic, meaning-making, and engagement potentialities of abstract animation as a new approach to reconstructing some of *Shahnameh's* stories and their content, and
- to examine familiar and less familiar audiences' responses to and engagements with *Shahnameh* in abstracted forms of animation.

Figure 61 represents an outline of the conducted research processes and findings, and the next part explains how the above specific goals have been addressed, during the course of this PhD and the relevant findings of each stage in detail.

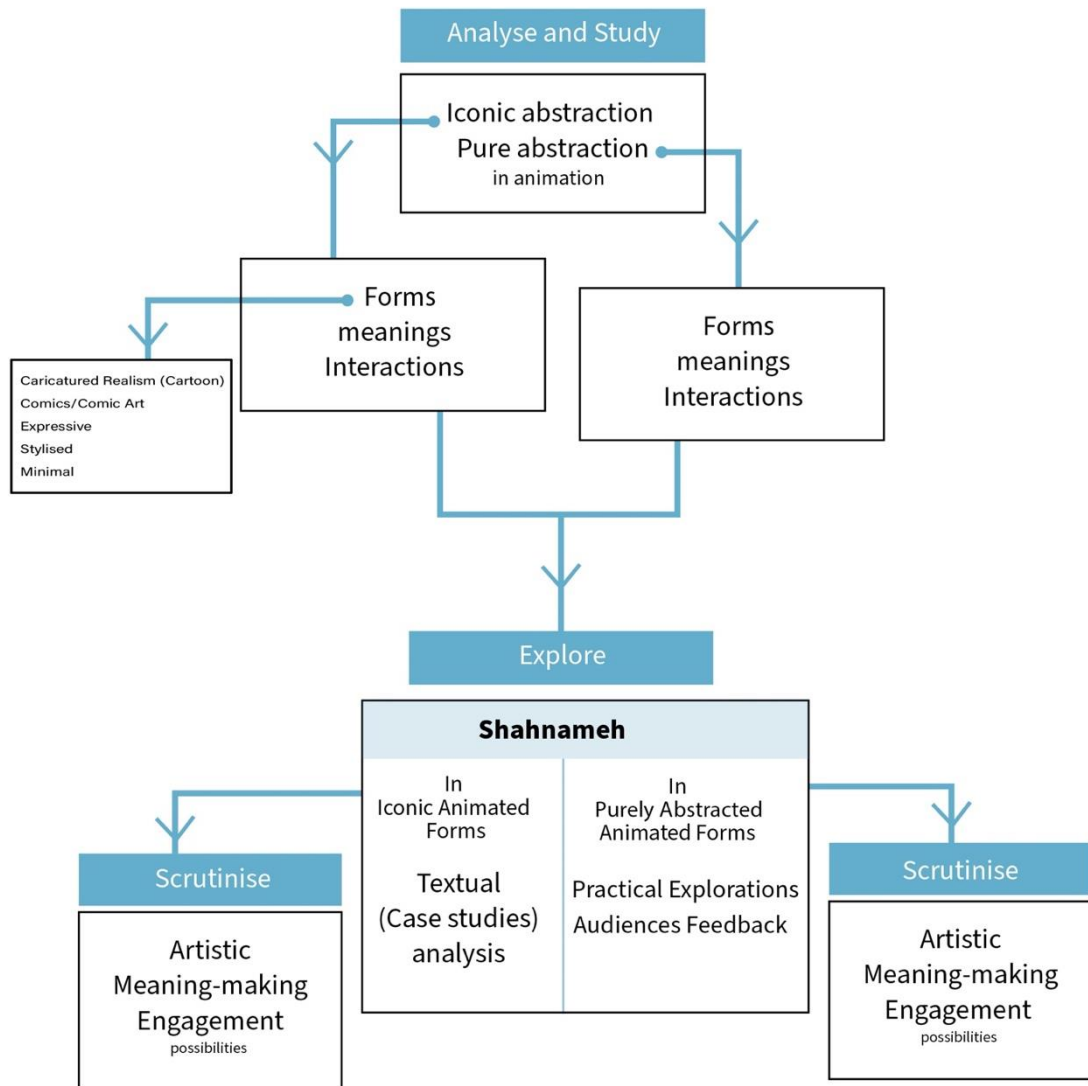


Figure 61: The outline of the research and findings, Astani (2021)

In **Chapter 2. Iconic and Pure Abstraction: Background and Contextual Review**, I focused on the notions of iconic and pure abstraction inspired by McCloud's *Picture plane* (1993, pp. 51–53) and Furniss's live-action animation continuum (2008, p. 6). I analyse these two spectrums by thinking about the components of animation design; image, line, colour, movement (Furniss, 2008, pp. 59–82). This part initially examined the studies and definition of iconic abstraction and then expanded on the stylistic possibilities of this style within animation practices. I explored animation forms such as caricatured realism (cartoon), comics/comic art, expressive, stylised, and minimal and argued that these five stylisations are some of the formal possibilities and various versions of iconic abstraction. I then moved to study theories and works of literature, exploring the ways iconic forms convey meaning, the possible ideas they can embody, and the potential ways spectators are engaged when looking at iconic visuals and motions.

Chapter 2 reflected on the notion of iconic abstraction as a stylistic approach distancing from reality, still maintaining the full communicative meanings of texts. In iconic designs, visual clutter is reduced to intensify, pronounce, and bring the intended meanings and ideas to focus. The non-realistic qualities of iconic forms tend to push meanings to the surface where the realistic clutter and details are left out. The lack of resembling reality also advances iconic forms to give birth to numerous visual styles based on artistic imagination and conceptualisations. Here, the visual and motions are less about following the codes of reality, and more about representing an imagined idea or a distortion of it. The output would usually be animation designs that tend to be stylised, simplified, and flat with vivid and painterly colour qualities focusing the viewers' attention on certain ideas, moods, emotions, and concepts. The iconic form of animation can also be suitable for adapting the conventions of graphic arts and traditional arts (remediation). This later point proved to be useful for creating cultural affinities and national styles of animation for some of *Shahnameh's* adaptations by using the traditional Iranian art forms and artefacts. The second part of the chapter dissected the idea of pure abstraction, as the endpoint of the abstraction continuum, where the components of animation design tend to become overtly non-realistic, intangible, and reduced, usually structured

thematically or cyclically with experimental and unexpected outcomes. It also analysed how pure abstracted graphics and motions convey meanings, the potential meanings they embody, and the sorts of engagement one can expect from the viewers of such artworks. Because purely abstracted stylisations are free from representational tendencies and even anti-realistic, these do not make them meaningless. In pure abstraction, visual and motions can refer to and associate with something (in reality) or with an idea, even if those meanings/ideas can be multiplied, conflicting, or ambiguous.

In terms of interactive possibilities, while both iconic and pure abstractions seem to invite shared (universal) engagements, where the moving imageries are open for identification and interpretations of various spectators, the way these two styles are comprehended can be very different. In iconic methods, the meanings and ideas are simplified (accessible) and amplified (come-to-focus) for clear and expressive communications, while in pure abstraction, the concepts and meanings are obscured and multiplied for free and experimental interactions. This chapter contextualised iconic and pure abstraction within the current thesis and examined the artistic, meaning-making, and engagement qualities of these forms to understand how these qualities contributed to the adaptations of *Shahnameh* in the next parts.

Chapter 3. *Shahnameh* in Iconic Animated Forms focused on the analysis of iconic abstraction within the existent animation adaptations of *Shahnameh*. Sixteen animations based on this poem, created in a time frame between 1971 to 2019, were documented in this segment. Among these animations, this research looked into six case studies and scrutinised how various forms of iconic abstraction (caricatured realism (cartoon), comics/comic art, expressive, stylised, and minimal) contributed creatively and meaningfully to the re-making of these artworks. These six animations were *Zal and Simorgh* (1977), *The Legend of Mardoush* (2002-2005), *Rostam and Esfandiar* (2006), *One Thousand Myths* (2016), *Jamshid: A Lament for a Myth* (2017), and *The Last Fiction* (2018).

In this segment, I proposed that one of the possibilities that iconic abstraction provided for the animation adaptations of *Shahnameh* was the re-making of national-cultural styles of animation (e.g., *Zal and Simorgh* (1977) and *One Thousand*

Myths (Hezar Afsan) (2016)). This study reflected on some of the Iranian traditional and decorative arts (e.g., Persian miniature, Qajar and Qahve-khāne (coffee-house) paintings, the pre-Islamic artefacts of Achaemenid, Parthian, and Sassanid) as art forms that inspired and shaped the styles of some of *Shahnameh's* animations. I explained that because of the stylised, abstracted, and non-realistic qualities of iconic forms, in this level of abstraction, one can easily adapt the conventions of traditional and decorative arts. Here, using iconic stylisations were suitable approaches for the re-creation of such Iranian art styles (that are also abstracted and stylised) in the animated works based on *Shahnameh*. Therefore, by appropriating and representing Iranian art forms in their components of animation designs, these artworks maintained a cultural connection with *Shahnameh*.

Examining the above six case studies also suggested a connection between the designs of these animations and the contents of their adopted narratives. In these artworks, the visual and motion components of each animation assisted in the transmission of some of the underlying cultural and archetypal meanings, story themes, symbolic ideas, psychological states, inner intentions, and personality traits from *Shahnameh*. For instance, I argue that in *Zal and Simorgh* (1977), the iconic animation design evokes the archaic theme of the adopted narrative. In *The Legend of Mardoush* (2002-2005), the iconic design of animation assists in portraying the symbolic and psychological status of the characters, displaying their inner world and archetypal persona outwardly, and embodying the underlying mythic and uncanny themes of the story. In *Rostam and Esfandiar* (2006), the iconic animation style highlights the ideas of tragedy, conflict, suffrage, and dichotomy from the original text. In *One Thousand Myths (Hezar Afsan)* (2016), the iconic style of this animated series stimulates the fantastical traits of the adapted narratives from *Shahnameh*. In *Jamshid: A Lament for a Myth* (2017), the minimal iconic style of the animation is a conceptual and creative embodiment of the main character's obscurity, and the dramatic, heroic, and archetypal themes of Jamshid tale. And finally, in *The Last Fiction* (2018), the multi-stylised use of iconic forms was a creative and meaningful visualisation of different timeframes and the characters' inner world and mental states.

As mentioned above and explained in Chapter 3, the various forms of iconic abstractions employed in these six adaptations of *Shahnameh* have offered several creative possibilities, such as the adoption of culturally loaded visualisations and symbolism, exploiting the conventions of traditional, graphics, and comic arts, forming designs that evoke universality and iconic openness through simplification and repetition, an outward display of the inner concepts, and multi-media and multi-stylised experiences. This case study research also proves the accuracy of McCloud's theory (McCloud, 1993, p. 30; *Scott McCloud, Cartoonist: iconic abstraction*, 2018) of iconic abstraction as formal tendencies that can amplify the meanings through simplification. Because in iconic abstraction, visual clutter is reduced in favour of amplifying the intended ideas, the cultural meanings and symbols can come to focus while; still maintaining a universal openness which is a potency of non-realistic and reductive imageries. Hence, by employing such iconic forms, the adopted narratives in these six adaptations can engage a variety of spectators regardless of their familiarity with the *Shahnameh* while still carrying the cultural/historical tone of this canonical poem.

Chapter 4. *Shahnameh* in Pure Abstract Animated Forms responded to the shortage of animated adaptations of *Shahnameh* in pure abstracted style. The chapter aimed to feed into the overall research question exploring the artistic, meaning-making, and interactive possibilities of pure abstraction for the re-makings of narratives from this poem through reflective practice. Two original abstract animations titled *Rostam & Esfandiar* (2020) and *The Emergence of Zahhak* (2020) (2:50 and 5:11 minutes in length) were created and analysed during the study. In the first practice, *Rostam & Esfandiar*, employing an abstract stylisation allowed for working with the underlying symbolic and archetypal ideas of the original story rather than focusing on its popular literal reading. The information that structured this new retelling was gathered not only from the original text but also by looking into other scholarly studies interpreting the main ideas and underlying meanings of *Rostam and Esfandiar's* ancient story. The animation particularly; aimed to embody the ideas of paradox and conflict of incompatible forces (the hero and the king), a significant archetypal theme of this literary piece, decorated with some cultural concepts. Here, the pure abstraction allowed for reducing these main characters to some of their most essential meanings and metaphors, while some

associative references, such as the introductory texts at the beginning of the animation, were offered as a sort of anchor attached to the source. Using the abstracted design of animation, I attempted to keep the obscure qualities of this form for the possibilities of versatile engagements and interpretations of the spectators. Hence the stylistic possibilities of pure abstraction here assisted in conveying the underlying symbolic and archetypal meanings of *Rostam and Esfandiar tale* in a border visual-animated space, inviting the viewers' novel interpretations and experiments of the original text and a new entry to its narrative space.

In *The Emergence of Zahhak*, the experimental approach to the recreation of the Zahhak tale in animated abstract forms allowed for the inclusion of various materials, such as texts from the original poem, a piece of music, and some live-action footage as the components of this animation. The main idea of this film, embodying the ominous appearance of Zahhak in the universe as the symbol, psyche, and archetype of darkness, evil, and shadow, also came from a deep reading of the Zahhak poem in *Shahnameh*, as well as scholarly research examining the underlying metaphoric and psychological concepts of this narrative. Hence, the retelling created in this research was a multi-layered multimedia experiment of the story that included related ideas from various texts/mediums, besides its primary source, and avoided a repetition of its well-known literal version. Here, the nonliteral and experimental nature of abstract animation suitably assisted in looking at some of the underlying cultural/universal concepts of the source (as the subject matter) and achieving an unpredicted stylistic outcome. The anti-realistic and ambiguous nature of this form additionally aided in forming an experimental space where the viewers can be a part of its construction by offering their speculations and individual meaning-making.

In **Chapter 5. Semi-Structured Interviews of Experts as an Analytical Approach to the Practice**, a group of expert audiences analysed the two practical components (*Rostam & Esfandiar* and *The Emergence of Zahhak*) created in the previous segment. This group consisted of five animation scholars and practitioners, some familiar with the *Shahnameh* and others less familiar with this canonical poem. The purpose of this chapter was to investigate how these “knowing and unknowing audiences” (Hutcheon and O’Flynn, 2013b) comprehend and engage with the adaptations of this poem into

abstracted animated forms. Chapter 5 also aimed to benefit from their expertise and perspectives on the artistic possibilities of abstract animation for the adaptation of *Shahnameh*. Examining these experts' responses suggested that the pure abstraction style is a suitable creative approach to reconstructing the underlying layers of *Shahnameh*, its essence and spirit, the poet's hidden deeper intentions, the symbolic, universal, and archetypical concepts of this narrative. By employing pure abstraction, rather than retelling *Shahnameh's* narratives in a literal, narrative-oriented manner, an experience and expression of the adopted tales were offered. Here, the components of animation design become the story and the way it is retold, evoking the intended ideas instead of explaining or clarifying them. While the employed pure abstracted style offered universality, openness, and a space for the inclusion of the spectators and their subjective interpretations and projections, both familiar and less familiar audiences could also find and bring some culturally loaded ideas.

In terms of engagement with these abstract adaptations, both familiar and less familiar spectators find the experience freeing, multifold, and interactive with the possibility of opening questions and conversations and inviting the audiences into the meaning-making process. *Rostam & Esfandiar* (2020) and *The Emergence of Zahhak* (2020) offered freedom for entry into; and new ways of experiencing their adopted narratives, particularly for familiar viewers. These experts engaged with and pointed to the details related to *Shahnameh's* background, trying to form a connection between these adaptations and their own knowledge of *Shahnameh*. Less familiar experts, however, engaged more with the broader aspects of these stories, pointed to the archetypical patterns suggested in these artworks, and also brought some new ideas to the narrative space of these animations that they found relevant. Retelling *Shahnameh* in abstracted forms of animation provided an opportunity here for a deeper understanding of this cultural-national narrative from different perspectives where the essence of the *Shahnameh* is preserved while its narrative space is liberated. It is worth noting that, regardless of the audiences' degrees of affinity with *Shahnameh* and the canonical position of this poem, both groups of experts expected and appreciated the freedom, openness, and ambiguity that can be offered by employing a pure abstracted style, and criticised visual or

conceptual attempts that suggested too much information or clarity. Lastly, these experts agreed that the abstract animations based on *Shahnameh*, or abstract artwork in general, can potentially engage audiences with better visual experiences and more interests (e.g., interest in the medium, style, the source of adaptation, etc.), and such works can best be appreciated in festivals and cultural events.

When analysing how abstract forms and motions can potentially convey meanings in these adaptations, less familiar spectators (interviewees) comprehended the universal concepts, the essence and the big picture evoked by these adaptations, and the underlying ideas and themes of the adopted tales. They also pointed to some similarities between the ideas of these animated adaptations and stories and symbolisms from other cultures they were familiar with and assigned some individual meanings related to their own personal and cultural experiences to the narrative space of *Rostam & Esfandiar* (2020) and *The Emergence of Zahhak* (2020). The knowing viewers pointed to more detailed and precise ideas related to *Shahnameh's* background, besides understanding the universal and archetypal ideas of the adopted narratives. They also suggested some new cultural information that could be interpreted from these animations and which they personally found fascinating. Both groups comprehended the intended essential ideas of *Rostam & Esfandiar* (2020) and *The Emergence of Zahhak* (2020) to some extent. Yet, the abstract nature of these adaptations allowed for an expansion of the adopted narratives space by including viewers' subjective and diverse interpretations and meanings, some related to *Shahnameh*, and others coming from the viewers' background, knowledge, and interests. This reflected the dominant touch of the audiences on the outcomes of abstracted artworks.

While the first introductory chapter briefly outlined the contributions of this research to the fields of animation studies and practices, adaptation for animation, and *Shahnameh* Studies, here I explain these findings in more detail. This thesis contributes to the artistic exploration and studies of animation designs in the adaptation of *Shahnameh* through expanding on the stylistic, meaning-making, and engagement possibilities of animation design in iconic and abstracted forms and by developing the studies of *Shahnameh* and its adaptation studies and practices, elucidated as follows:

- **Presenting an analysis of some of the most popular stories of *Shahnameh* and their adaptations into animated forms**

This thesis introduced *Shahnameh*, the Iranian national epic poem and a valuable work of world literature. It is the first scholarly research in which sixteen animations based on this poem were documented, and two original abstract animations based on *Shahnameh* were produced (as the practice components of the thesis). Throughout chapters 1, 3, and 4, detailed analysis of some of *Shahnameh*'s most popular stories, adapted in these animations (six case studies and two original artworks), were offered. For each animated adaptation, the cultural, historical, mythological, symbolic, and archetypal concepts of each adapted narrative were examined and explained how these contents were conveyed creatively and meaningfully through the design components of each animation. This research expanded the depth and understanding of *Shahnameh* (as a potential source of inspiration, knowledge, and entertainment). It additionally developed *Shahnameh*'s scholarly research and artistic adaptations and made these resources accessible. Therefore, this thesis contributed to the studies, practices, and adaptation studies of *Shahnameh*.

- **Developing the stylistic possibilities of iconic abstraction in animation practices, validating McCloud's (1993, p. 30) model (of amplification through simplification) by an examination of iconic stylisations in the animated adaptations of *Shahnameh*, and proposing the potencies of iconic abstraction in reconstructing *Shahnameh* into animated forms**

By focusing on the components of animation design (visual and motion), this thesis has contextualised the notion of iconic abstraction as a style employed in the existent animation adaptations of *Shahnameh*. It then expanded the visual-kinetic types of iconic abstraction by suggesting and analysing five styles of animation (caricatured realism (cartoon), comics/comic art, expressive, stylised, and minimal) as variant forms of iconic. Additionally, by scrutinising six animated adaptations of *Shahnameh*, their narratives, underlying cultural and archetypal concepts, and their designs, this thesis

examined and validated McCloud's (1993, p. 30) theory for iconic stylisations as formal tendencies that can amplify the meanings through simplification. It explained how each form of iconic abstraction creatively and meaningfully amplified the underlying contents of each narrative in the six animations based on *Shahnameh*, assisted in creating a national style of animation, and offered more accessible readings of *Shahnameh* in animated forms.

- **Producing abstract animations based on *Shahnameh* and proposing the potencies of pure abstraction styles of animation in reconstructing *Shahnameh's* narrative space**

Having the components of animation design (visual and motion) in mind; this thesis has contextualised the notion of pure abstraction as a stylistic potentiality of animation language. To address a gap in adapting *Shahnameh* into abstracted forms of animation two original artworks (*Rostam & Esfandiar* and *The Emergence of Zahhak*) were produced. Using these practice components, the thesis then reflected on the possibilities of abstract animation in bringing the symbolic and inner ideas of *Shahnameh's* narratives to the surface and visualising them as the subject matter of the adaptation. The study suggested that such abstracted reinterpretations of *Shahnameh* offer open, unpredicted, and more interpretive and interactive ways of experiencing this poem. It can also provide new entries to *Shahnameh's* narrative space dominated by pure forms, colours, patterns, and moving elements. Hence, the current research added to the creative studies and practice of abstract animations as potential ways of unfolding, renewing, and extending the life of ancient texts such as *Shahnameh*.

- **Developing insights on how abstract animation would be comprehended and engaged by audiences, more precisely how abstracted animation adaptations of *Shahnameh* would be comprehended and engaged with by familiar and less familiar audiences**

In chapter 5, this thesis analyses the responses and forms of engagement of five expert audiences (some of whom were familiar, and others were less

familiar with *Shahnameh*) with animation adaptations of the Iranian national epic poem in abstracted forms. This segment expanded on the expressive and perceptual forms of storytelling in abstract animation, the open space of this stylisation for audiences' inclusion and investment, its potentiality to assist in a deeper understanding of a cultural-national narrative, the dominant involvement of the spectators in the process of meaning-making, and the necessity of maintaining the ambiguity and freedom in recreating an abstracted animation space. It additionally offered speculation on possible audiences of such work, highlighting the viewers' visual competencies as a principal factor. This segment added insights to the scholarly research focused on the spectators' conception of abstract art and abstract animation.

- **Creating Practical samples of abstract animations based on *Shahnameh* (*Rostam & Esfandiar* and *The Emergence of Zahhak*) and highlighting the value of practice-based research**

As explained in chapter 1, the purely abstracted form of animation as new ways of rethinking, embodying, understanding, and experiencing ancient texts is an untouched creative area in the case of *Shahnameh*. The animated artworks developed throughout the course of this thesis were a response to the shortage of such practical examples in the field of animation/adaptation studies and practices, as well as the studies of *Shahnameh*, and a full understanding of the thesis's outcomes could only be gained with direct reference to these original artworks. Hence, the practice components of this dissertation contributed to the above-mentioned fields by providing new data for current and future analysis. Moreover, practice-based methodology provided the option to examine the process of meaning-making in the animated adaptations of *Shahnameh* from a practitioner/artist standpoint. By creating and adapting from the position of a practitioner, this researcher has the opportunity to extract intended meanings from *Shahnameh* and embed these concepts into new, unexamined forms of adaptation. This approach provided the researcher-practitioner with more possibilities, space, and clarity for creating and examining data, not limited to the existent artworks that would not adequately

answer the questions of this thesis. Therefore, this study highlighted the importance of practice-oriented research to address gaps in knowledge and as a practitioner model of creative cognition and analysis.

6.2 Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

During this PhD, I encountered several challenges and limitations. Firstly, one of the early challenges of this study was to find the existent animation adaptations based on *Shahnameh*. At the time of the research, I was based in Ireland, and since I could not locate other scholarly research documenting some of the previous animations based on this poem, I collected these adaptations, extracting from different sources, through online research, and personal communications with animation experts from Iran. Later, when I secured an external fund offered by ASIFA-Hollywood's Animation Educators Forum (2020-21 Scholarship) that allowed me to travel to Iran to access some of these animations which were not in public access and look for any other possible adaptations, I faced covid-19 travel restrictions. Due to the limited access explained above, while this thesis offers first-hand documentation of sixteen animated films based on *Shahnameh*, there is a possibility that there are other instances left undiscovered. Additionally, as mentioned in chapters 1 and 3, I only included adaptations where some aspects of *Shahnameh's* narratives (e.g., cultural components) were maintained and reconstructed, even if using creative and free approaches, and left out other adaptations which appropriated some of *Shahnameh's* characters in a completely different context or story. Therefore, other studies looking into all the possible animated adaptations and approaches in the remaking of the Iranian national epic poem can be potential research areas for the future.

Secondly, in exploring how iconic and purely abstracted animation designs have contributed to the communication of meaning in the adaptations of *Shahnameh*, I have examined some of the underlying content and themes in several narratives from *Shahnameh*, content such as cultural, mythological, historical, symbolical, and archetypal meanings and ideas of these tales. However, *Shahnameh* can be explored and scrutinised from other different perspectives. For instance, looking into

its poetic language, literary structures, etc., and investigating if/how each of these notions was interpreted through the designs of reconstructed animations.

Thirdly, in analysing the notion of iconic and pure abstraction, I have focused mainly on the visual and kinetic properties of the animation medium or what Furniss (2008, pp. 59–82) specifies as the components of animation design. This was because these formal properties are essentially the elements forming the design of the animation and its main components as a motion picture medium. It also allowed me to define the scope of the research and focus on analysing these elements in the animation adaptations of *Shahnameh*. Music, script, composition, and immersions are other components and possibilities of animation medium whose different forms can be explored and examined for reconstructing cultural texts such as *Shahnameh* in future studies.

Fourthly, in chapter 2, I briefly pointed to the notion of reality as the starting point of the abstraction continuum. Like pure abstraction, highly realistic styles are also an untouched area for the adaptation of *Shahnameh* into animated forms. As mentioned earlier, all formerly animated adaptations of this poem have employed representational styles. Yet they have been abstracted from reality and have attained various forms of iconic abstraction. While I speculate the reason for not choosing a highly naturalistic style in the adaptation of this text might be related to a lack of technical competency and resources in Iran, this can be a potential area for further practice-based inquiries.

Fifthly, I have investigated several animated films and pointed to caricatured realism (cartoon), comics/comic art, expressive, stylised, and minimal inspirations and styles of animation, as various versions of iconic animation design in order to expand on the formal possibilities of iconic abstraction (in animation practices) and later explore these five styles in the animated adaptations of *Shahnameh*. Since the number of animations that can fall under the category of iconic abstraction is large, any research about such stylistic possibilities can hardly be exhaustive. Hence, the formal possibilities of iconic abstraction analysed in this thesis are only some of its visual-motion potentialities and investigating other animation examples and styles will most likely add to the insights of this thesis.

Sixthly, another significant challenge in conducting this research was the shortage of practical examples for analysing the possibilities of pure abstraction for the adaptation of *Shahnameh* into animated forms. Applying a practice-based method, where some artworks in the form of animation were produced, proved to be challenging, expensive, and time-consuming. During this process, I had to seek internal and external funds (ASIFA-Hollywood's Animation Educators Forum 2020-21 Scholarship) for purchasing technical devices, storage, and related license. Additionally, creating an animation solely without the possibility of collaboration (due to financial restraints) during the limited time of the PhD years did not allow for broader practical explorations. Thus, my study of artistic, meaning-making, and engagement possibilities of pure abstraction for the adaptation of *Shahnameh* resulted in the production of two final artworks for this thesis. More practical examples are likely to offer more knowledge on the possibilities of pure abstraction in the animated adaptation of this canonical poem.

Finally, the audience research conducted in this thesis consists of five animation experts who some were familiar with the *Shahnameh*, and others were less familiar with this poem. This study presented insights (see chapter 5) into how these knowing and unknowing spectators comprehend and engage with the abstract animated adaptations of *Shahnameh*. These experts also offered their critical knowledge about the artistic possibilities of abstract animation for the adaptations of *Shahnameh*. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, other comprehensive audience research where larger groups of viewers who have different levels of visual literacy or where the audiences are from different age groups are still needed. These studies can offer additional information on how similar creative approaches can invite new readings of and engagements with ancient texts such as *Shahnameh*.

6.3 Significance of Findings and Potential Further Applications

In this final segment, I would like to start by highlighting (again) the importance of *Shahnameh* as the most significant Iranian national epic in existence and one of the major bodies of the “world literature, ... something of the national genius, or of the genre (it) represents and likely to reward lifelong attention” (Lewis, 2015, p. 315). *Shahnameh* is one of the surviving ancient epic poetries, that contains numerous stories with a connection to primaeval history and mythology, as well as a rich literary and poetic language and structure that make this text a valuable source of knowledge, inspiration, and enjoyment. The current study is among the handful of scholarly research documenting and looking into several animated adaptations of *Shahnameh*. To analyse some of the most popular stories of *Shahnameh* adapted in these animations, this thesis translated and included several scholarly references which were only available in Farsi (Persian) language. It also conducted a critical practice-based exploration of making *Shahnameh* narratives into abstracted forms of animation for the first time. Therefore, part of the significance of the present study is its contribution to the development of studies and practices and adaptation studies of *Shahnameh* and its role in making the scholarly research and artistic adaptations of this Persian epic poem accessible, on an international scale.

Next, this study expanded the notion of iconic abstraction in animation studies which has significance for both academic and practical explorations of the field. Animation is a potential medium for abstraction, manipulation, and distortion of reality by achieving different levels of iconic abstraction in its visual-motion designs. Identifying different types of iconic stylisations and expanding on their visual-kinetic potentialities in animation practices and examining how the application of iconic stylisations in animated films contributed to the transmission and amplification of narratives’ meanings, can make scholars and practitioners of the field conscious of iconic abstraction’s formal properties and meaning-making possibilities. This can help in describing and analysing different forms of iconic abstraction more accurately and highlighting new directions in the artistic practices of iconic abstraction. The description of iconic abstraction provided in this thesis allows scholarly research and practice in the animation field to become more expanded and thus more insightful.

Furthermore, besides developing the stylistic possibilities of iconic abstraction within animation studies and practices, the work conducted here offers an evaluation of McCloud's (1993, p. 30) model (of amplification through simplification) through several case studies. The result of this analysis and the framework conducted to examine the accuracy of this model can be employed in other academic studies (focused on animation or other forms of visual and kinetic arts) which will use McCloud's theory. For instance, studies exploring the abstracted design choices made in animated works and the impact that such stylistic selections might have in conveying certain ideas and/or understanding the underlying messages of these creations.

Also, the findings of this thesis have particular significance for changing the ways purely abstracted animations for the adaptations of cultural texts (such as *Shahnameh*) would be approached by artists and researchers. While abstract animations are known as ambiguous, experimental, and open forms of expression, this thesis proposed that these qualities can positively contribute to the adaptation of ancient narratives such as *Shahnameh*. Based on the audiences' responses, the openness and ambiguity of abstract animation can enhance the inclusion and access of the audiences regardless of their levels of affinity with an adapted narrative and offers unconventional, unexpected, and novel perspectives to its explorations, where the spectators significantly impact the meaning-making process. This can lead to a deeper understanding of a cultural text and more interpretive ways of engaging with its narrative space. Additionally, such results can also add to the understanding of how abstract arts would be comprehended by audiences and expand on its (artistic and meaning-making) usability for artistic works, therefore having a role in developing the studies and practices of abstract arts. Furthermore, the two practice components of this thesis (abstract animations based on *Shahnameh*) can be useful for future studies investigating the adaptation of *Shahnameh* and other ancient cultural texts into abstract animations. The practice-based methodology conducted in this thesis can also be beneficial for similar research areas (e.g., in animation and creative media arts) as an approach that can address the gaps in the practice and for inquiries focused on practice-based methodology as a practitioner model of creative cognition and analysis.

Finally, this research and its outcomes reflected the impact of animation design on the communication of meanings and ideas, more precisely on the reconstruction of old narratives and concepts. The frameworks conducted to evaluate animation medium alongside literary medium, and the result of these analyses can be beneficial for future academics and artists' explorations of (the critical and creative potentialities of) animation language for the re-making of literary narratives.

***“I am immortal, I am eternal Lord
Because I have sown the seed of the word”***
(Shahnameh Quotes by Abolqasem Ferdowsi, no date)

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** For Shahnameh animations filmography please check Figure 24: Table of Sixteen documented Animations based on Shahnameh, pages 72-76.*

APPENDICES

Appendix I: *Rostam & Esfandiar* (2020) Production Materials

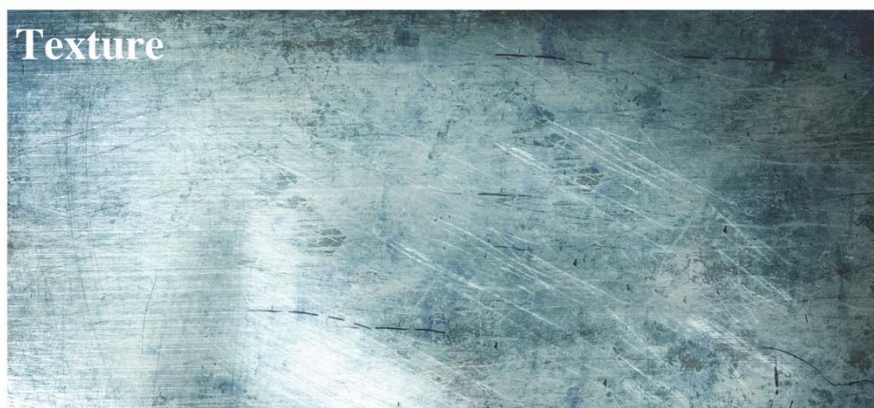
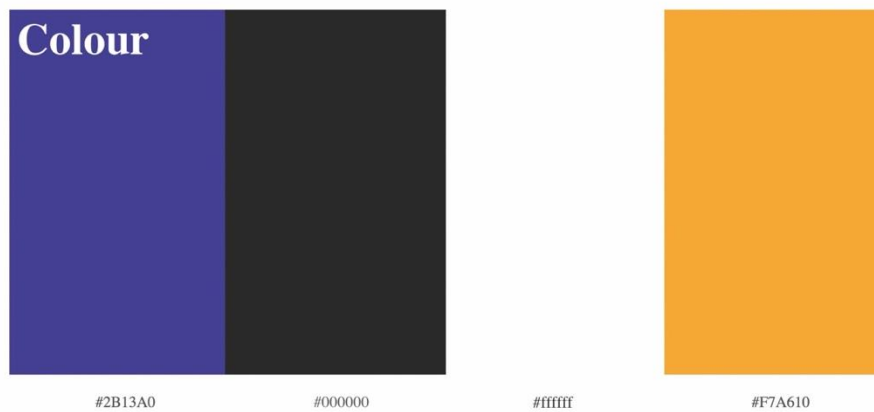
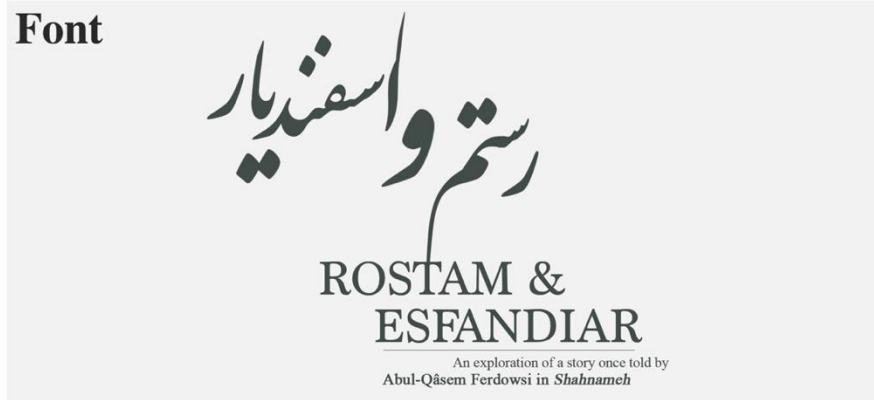
Animation Access

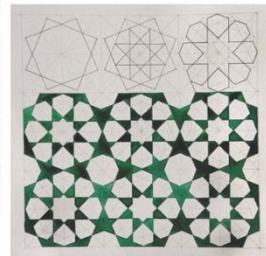
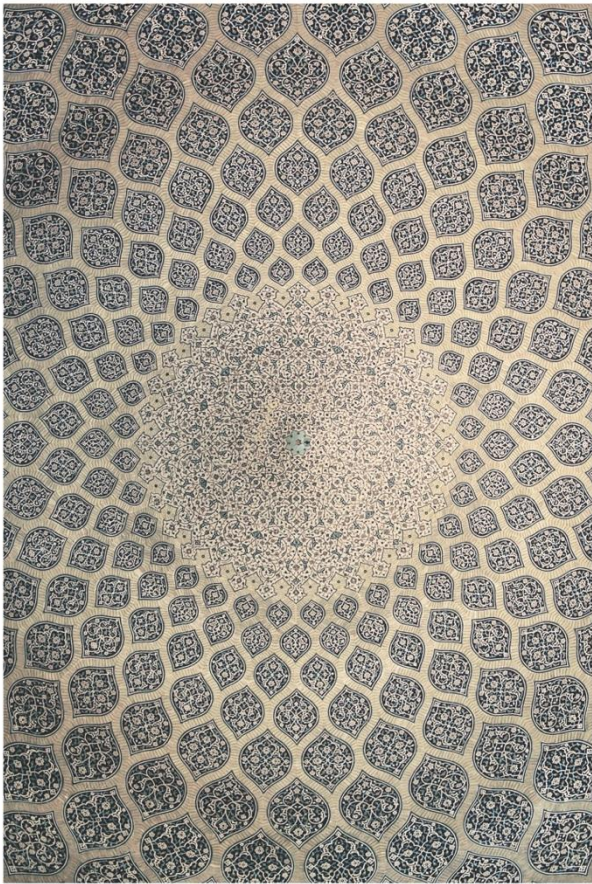
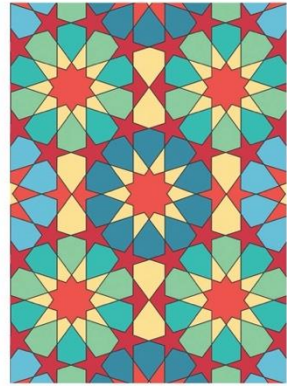
Please check the 'Guidelines for Accessing Supplementary Animations' section, page 12.

Script

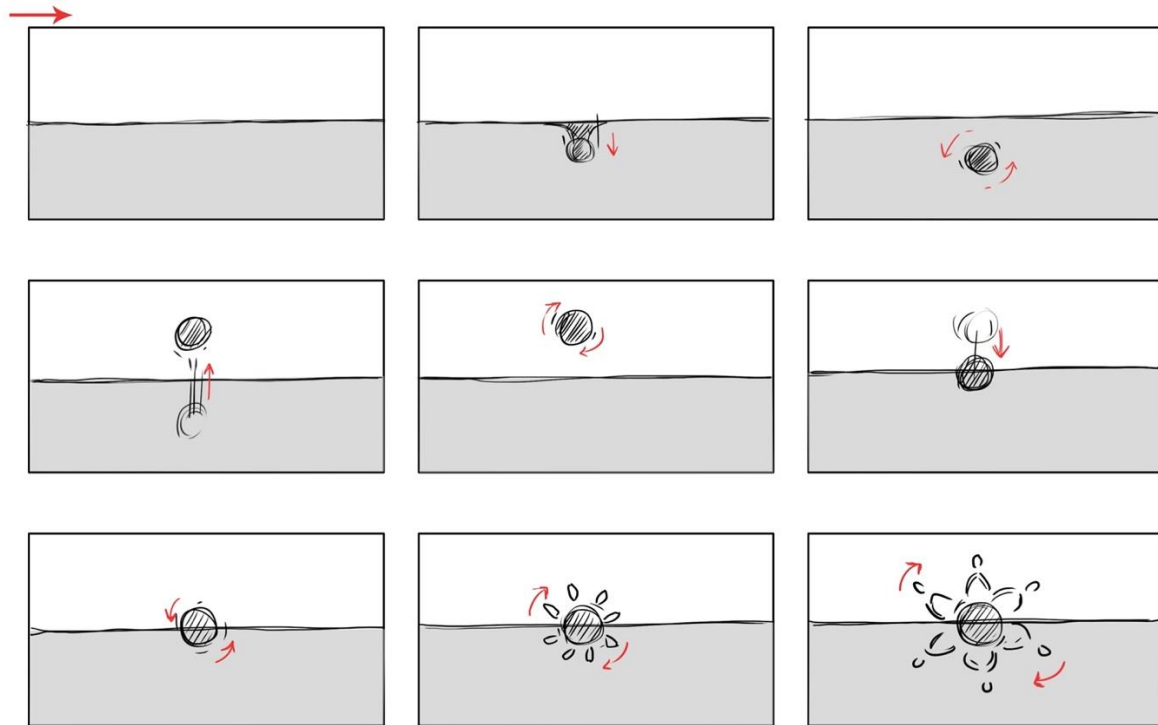
In ancient Iran, kings and heroes were God's agents ruling over the country and maintaining order and justice. Their harmonious relationship was the key to the country's glory and Prosperity. However, during the Goshtasp reign, the king's soul was contaminated with greed of power. He wanted to get rid of his son, the sacred prince, Esfandiar since Goshtasp was afraid to lose his crown to him. To eliminate Esfandiar's threat, the king sent his son on an impossible mission, to fight the mightiest hero of Iran, Rostam. In his heart, Esfandiar was discontent with the king's decision to battle with this righteous hero for no good reason. Yet, he closed his eyes to the truth, believing that the king's word is God's word. By a twist of destiny, this Iranian prince and hero stood against each other. In an excruciating battle, Rostam finally took over the combat and defeated Esfandiar. For the first time, the harmonious relationship of kings and heroes was broken, and the sacred prince, Esfandiar, was killed at the end. As a consequence of this unfortunate encounter, Rostam was doomed, and he perished soon after.

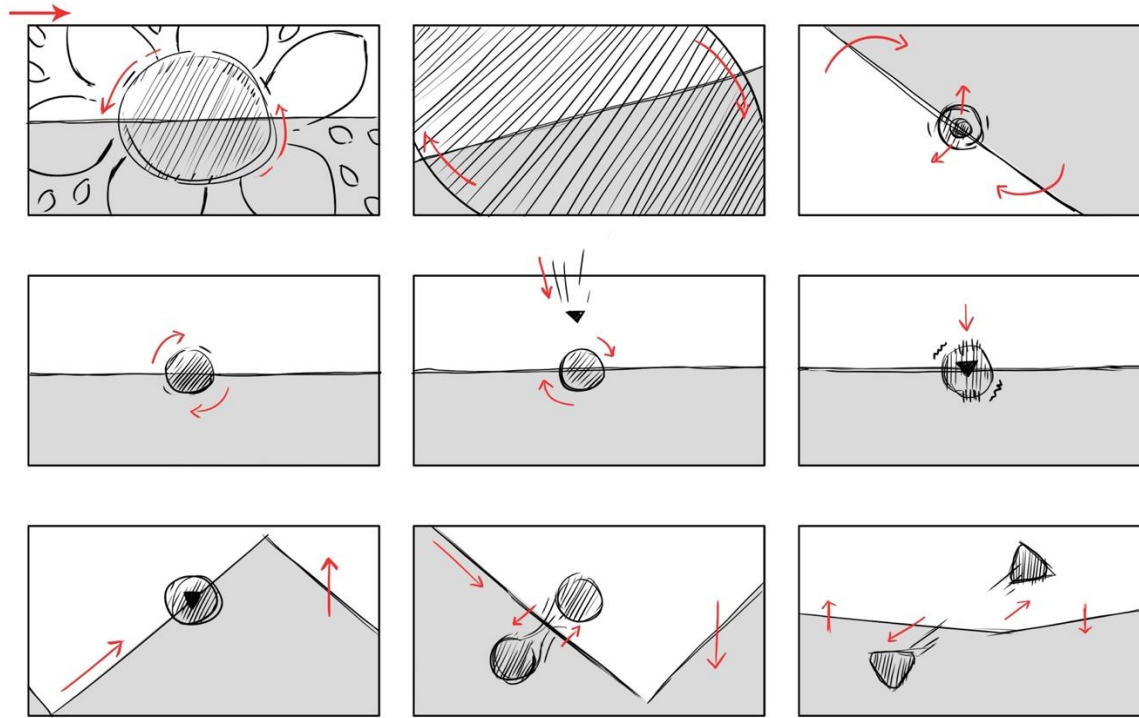
Mood Board

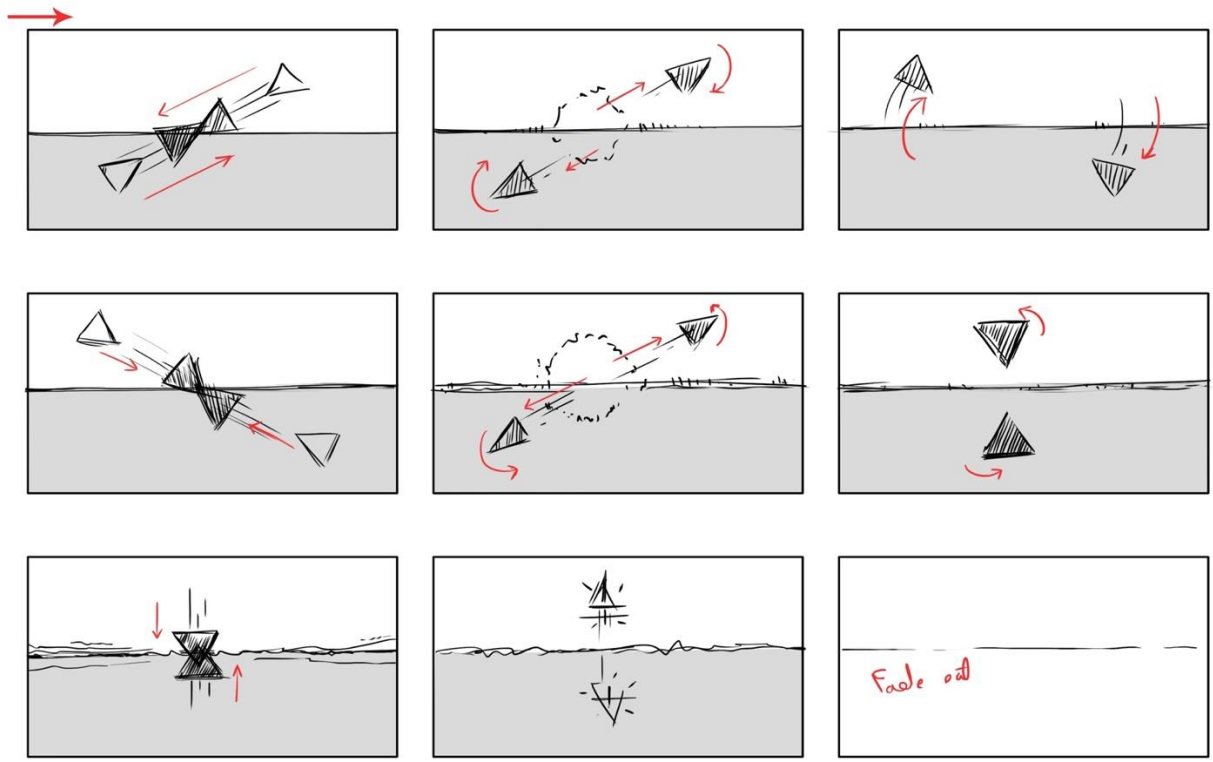




Storyboard



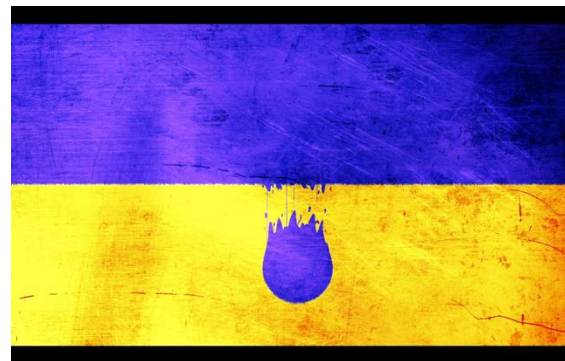
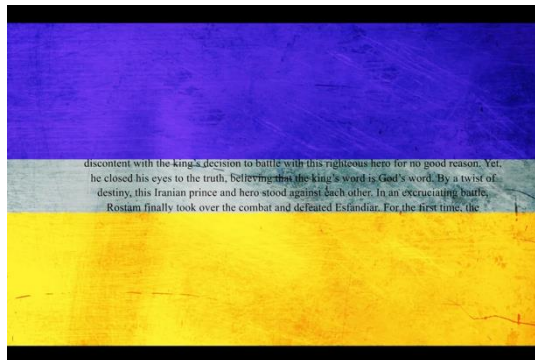
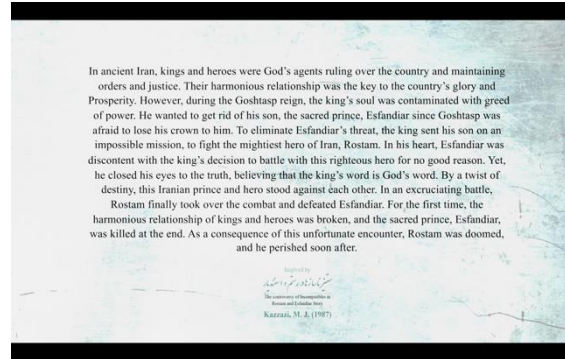


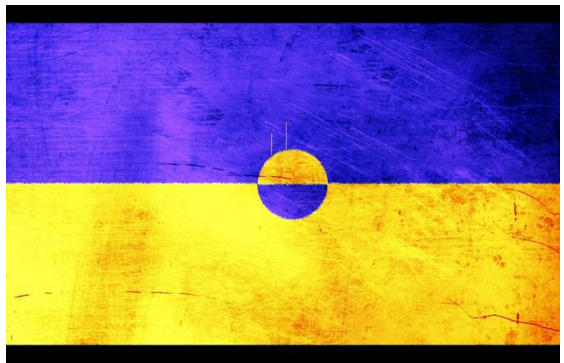
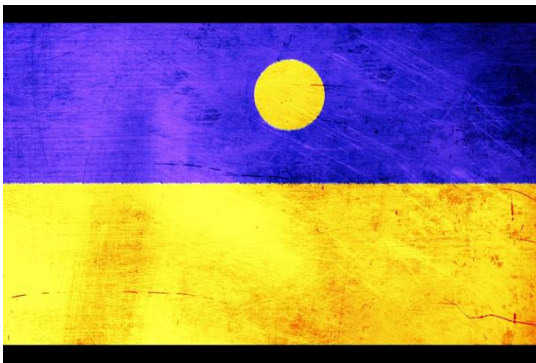
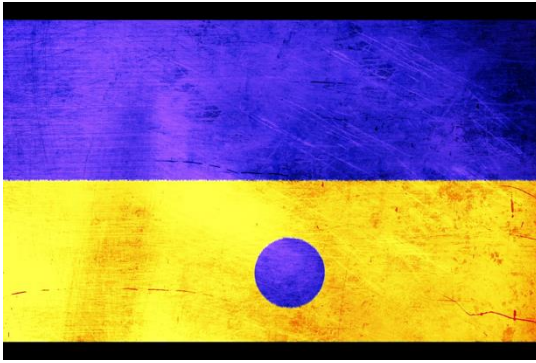


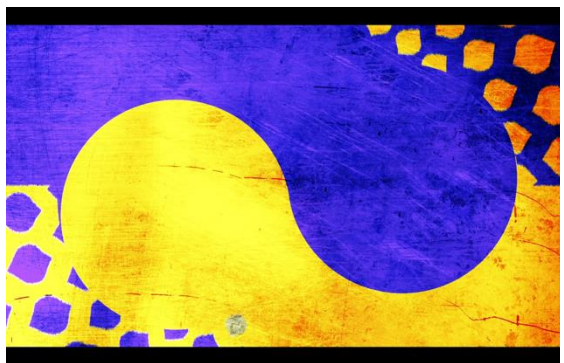
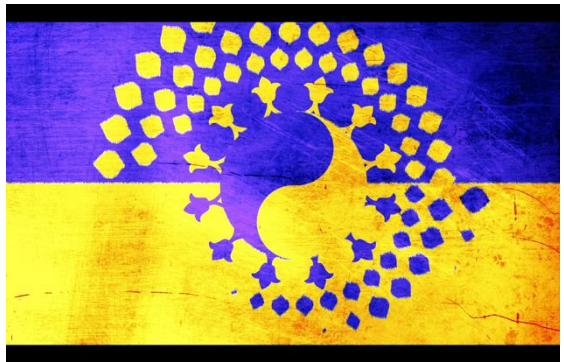
Style Frame

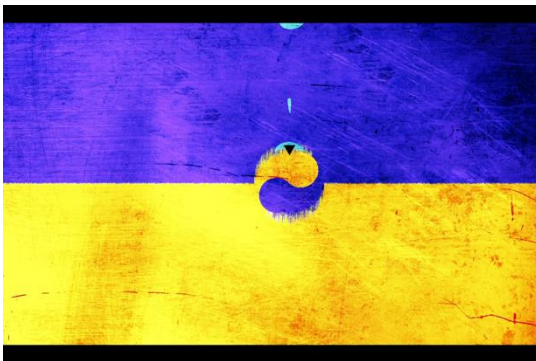
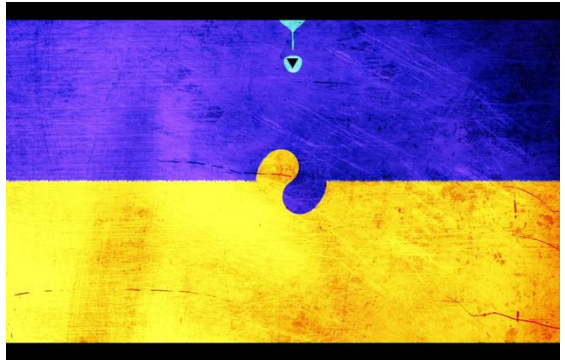
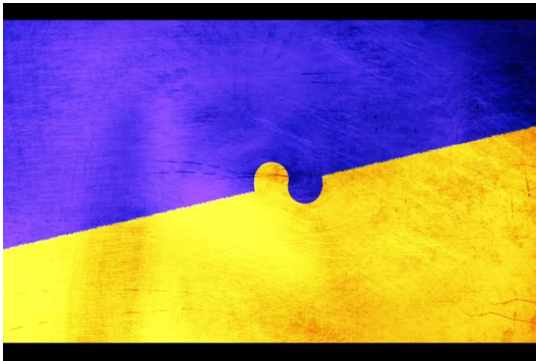
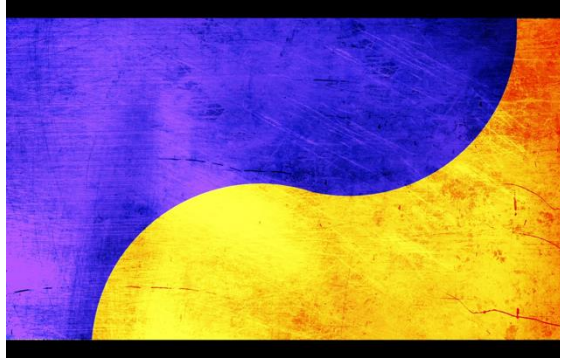
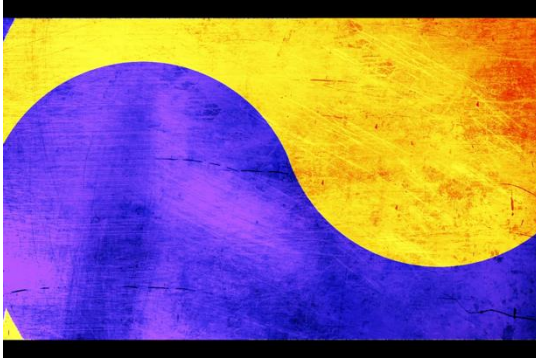


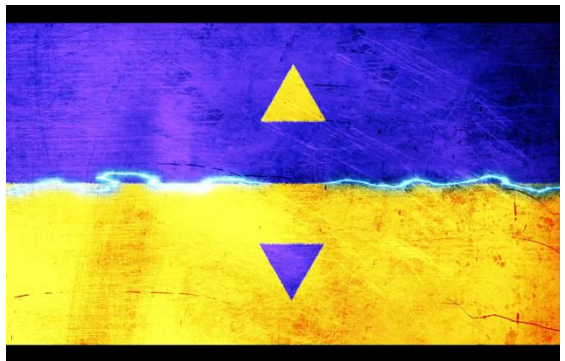
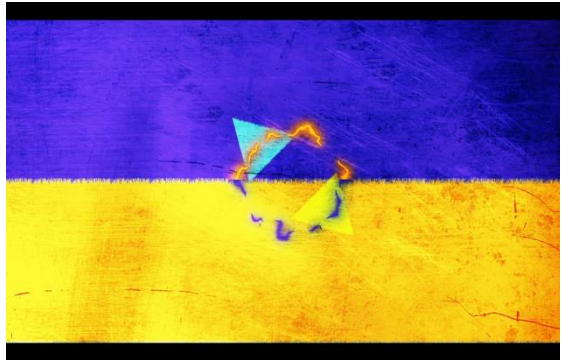
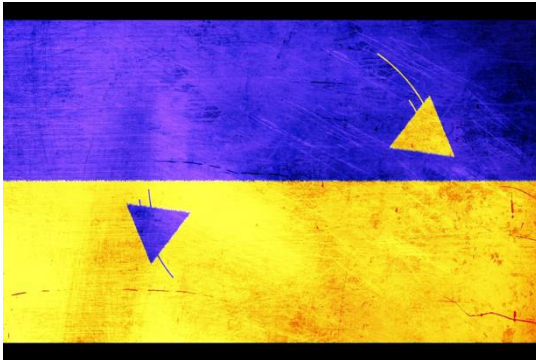
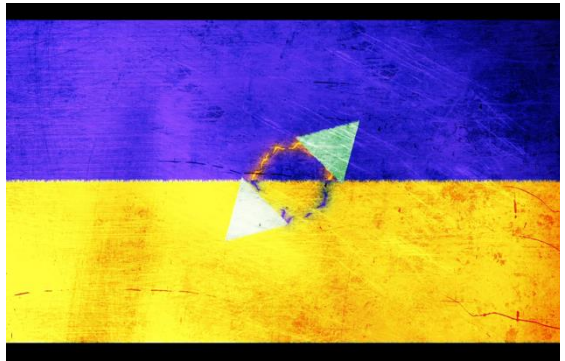
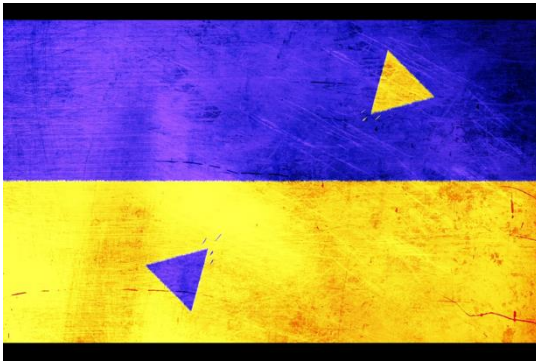
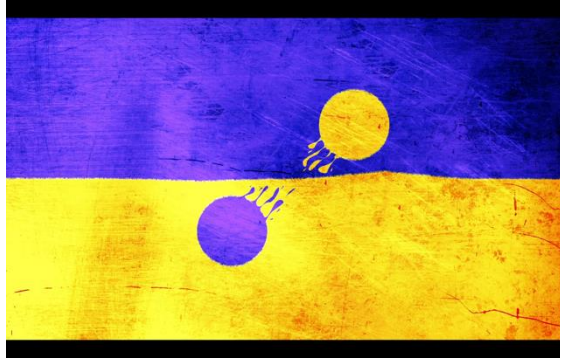
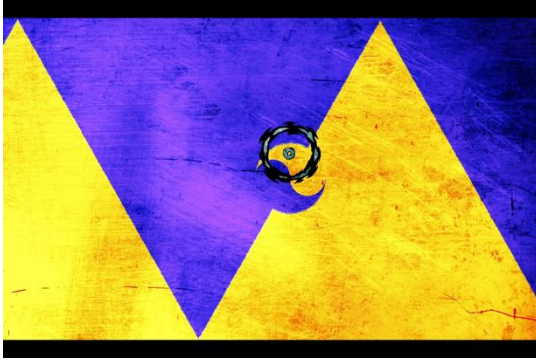
Still Frames (final project)

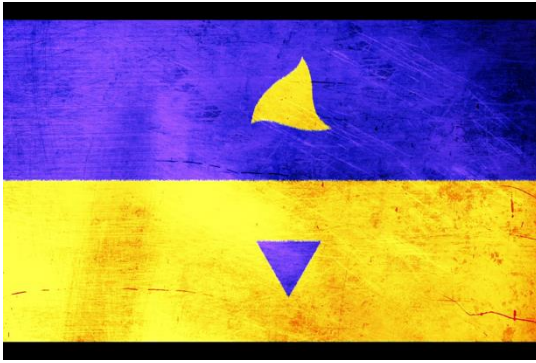














Appendix II: *The Emergence of Zahhak* (2020) Production Materials

Animation Access

Please check the 'Guidelines for Accessing Supplementary Animations' section, page 12.

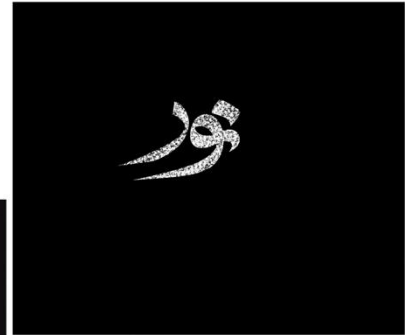
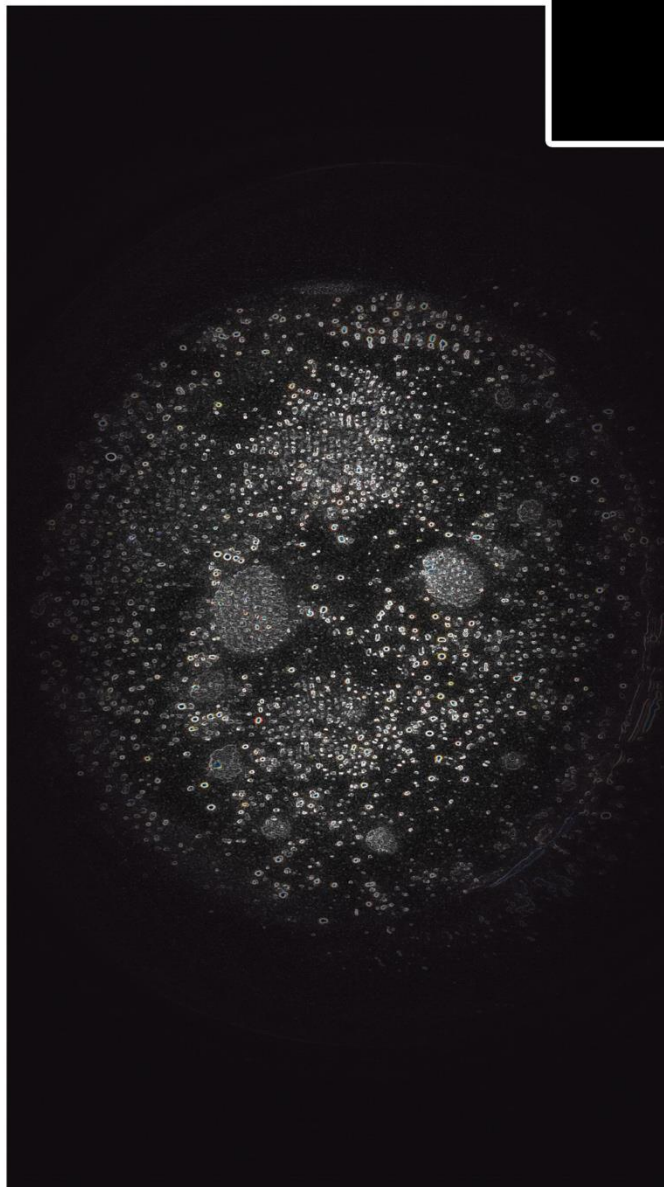
Script

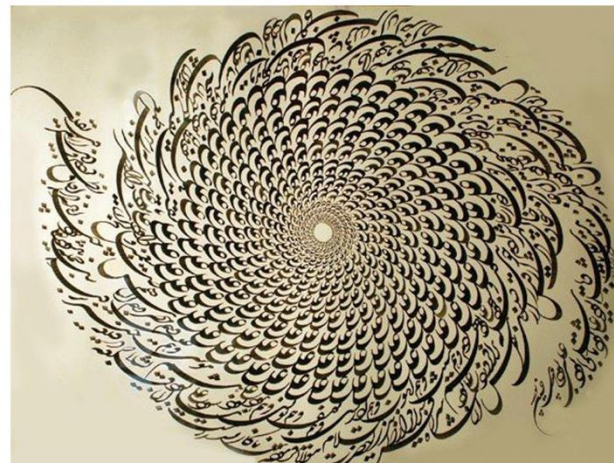
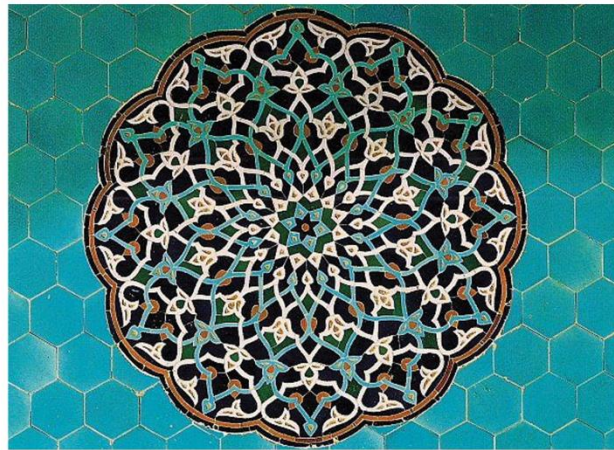
"Zahhak Reigned for a thousand years, and from end to end, the world was his to command. The wise concealed themselves and their deeds, and devils achieved their heart's desire. Virtue was despised and magic applauded, justice hid itself away while evil flourished; demons rejoiced in their wickedness, while goodness was spoken of only in secret".

Shahnameh: The Persian Book of Kings By Abolqasem Ferdowsi
Davis (2007, p.51)

Mood Board

Text . Texture . Colour

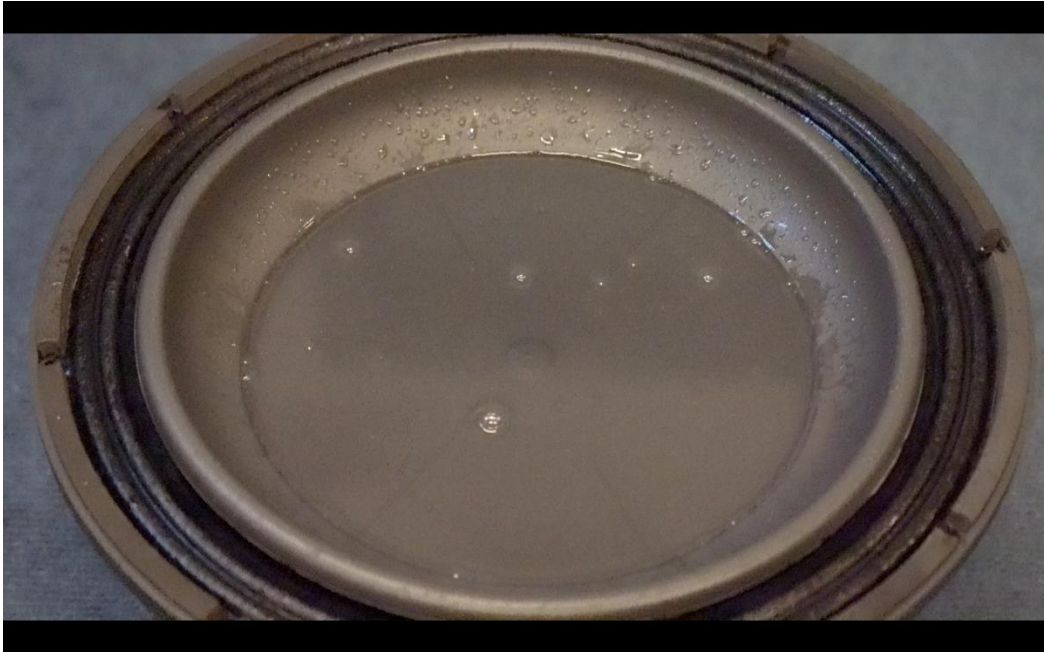
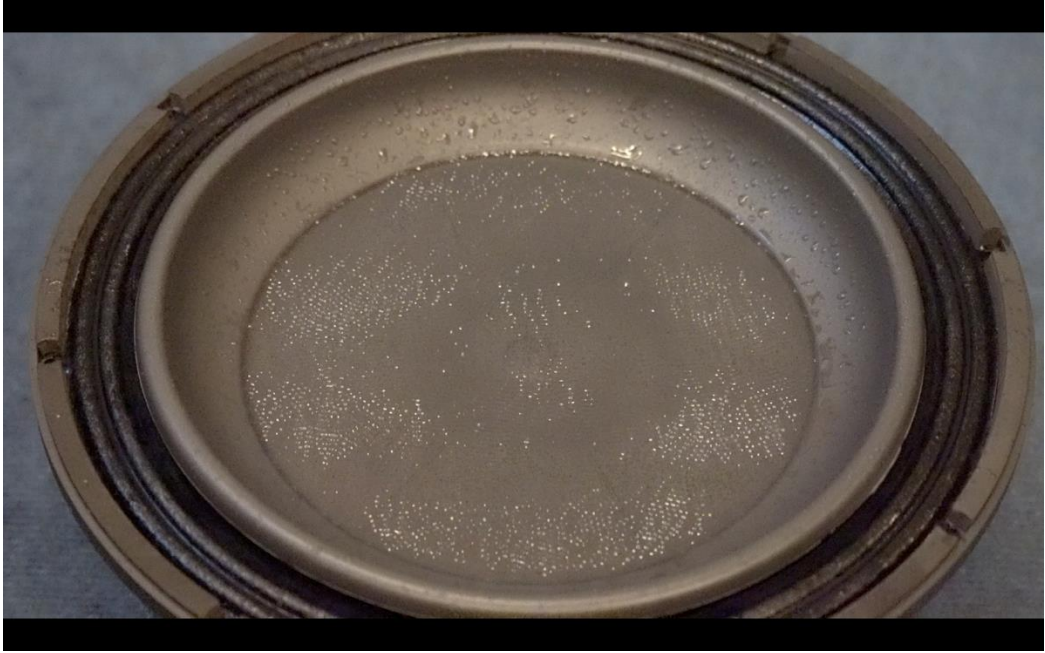




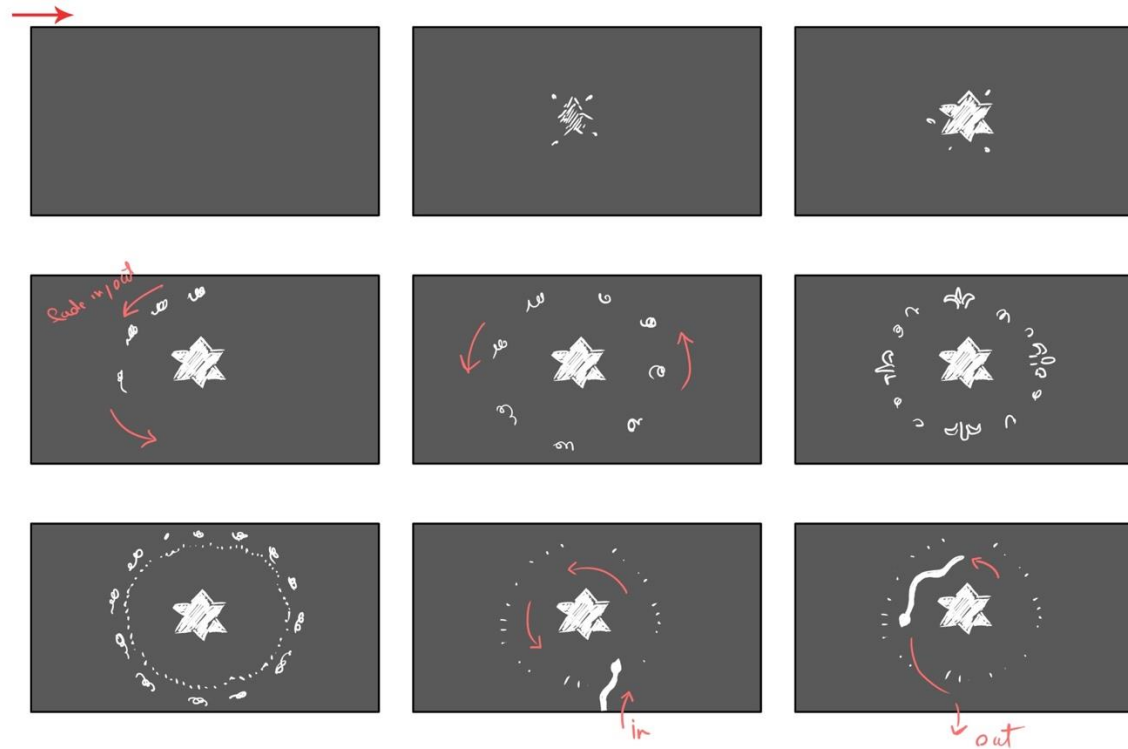
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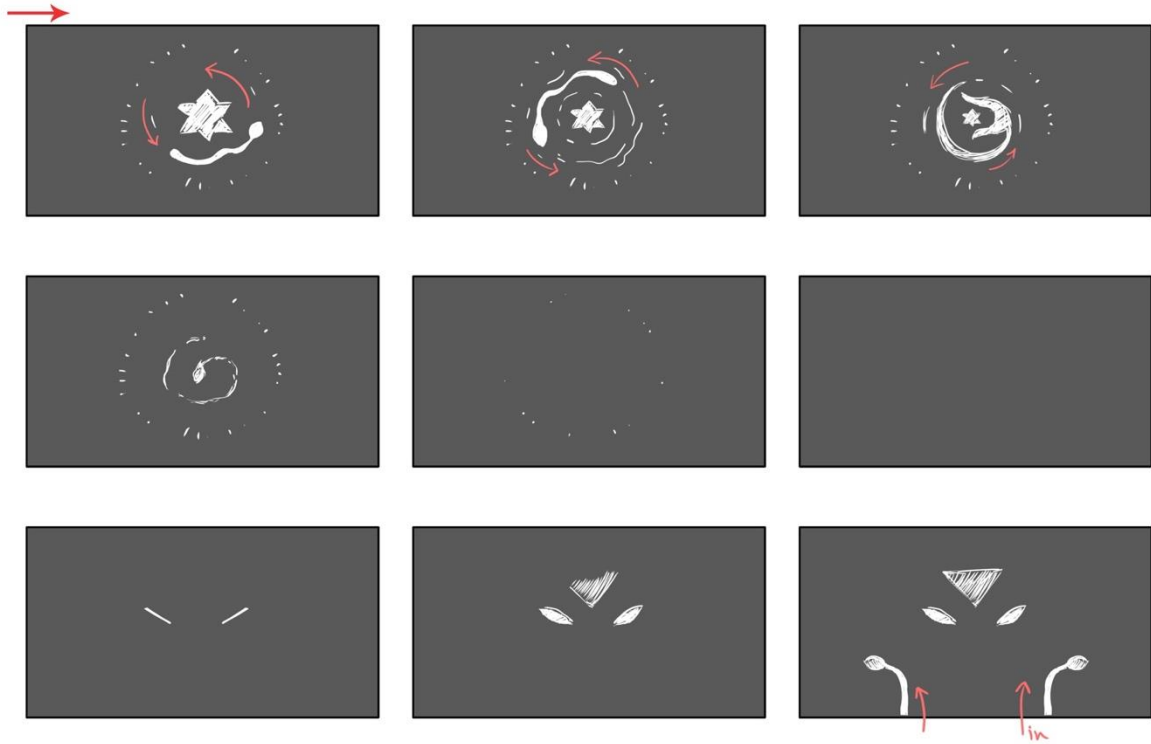


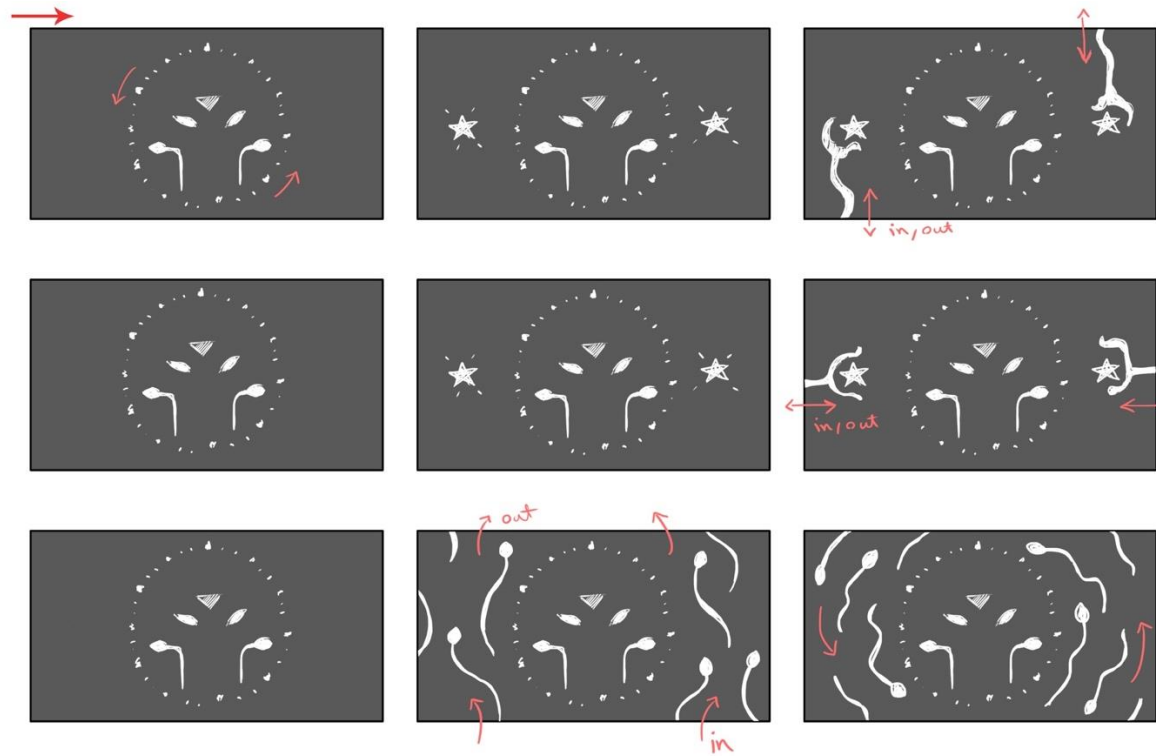


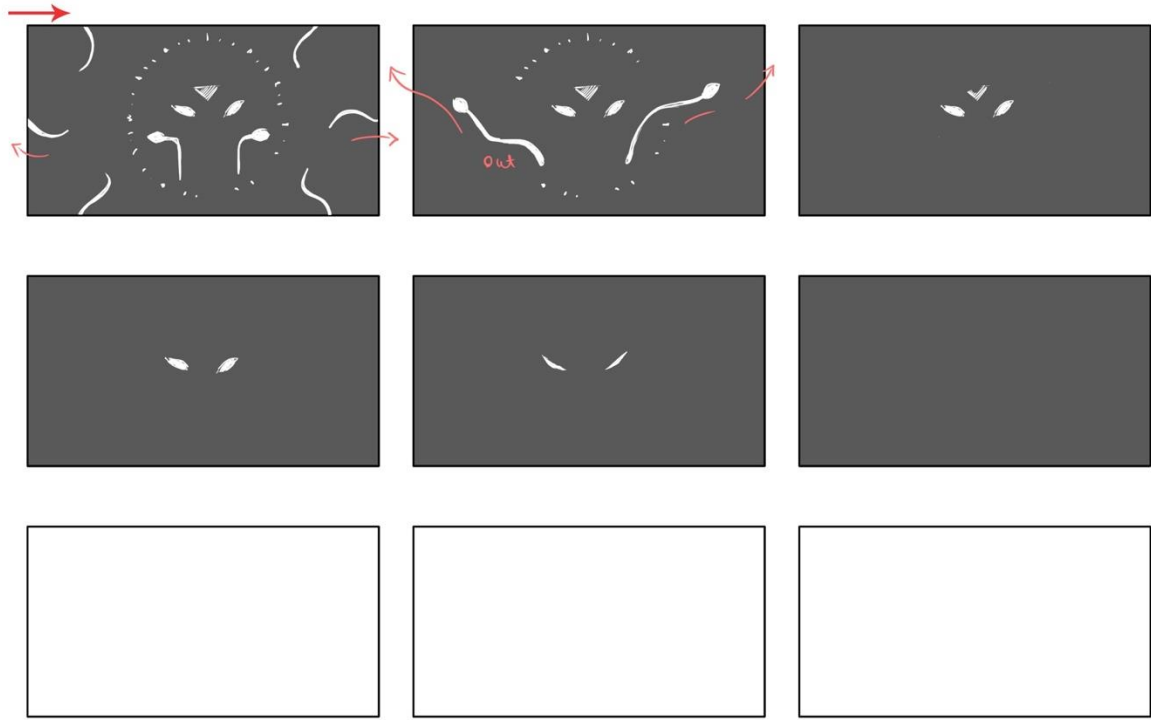


Storyboard

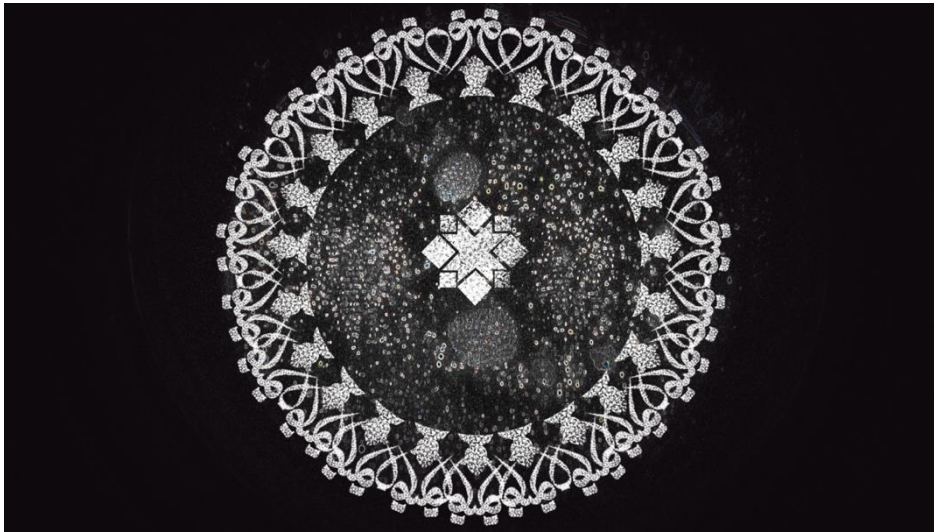




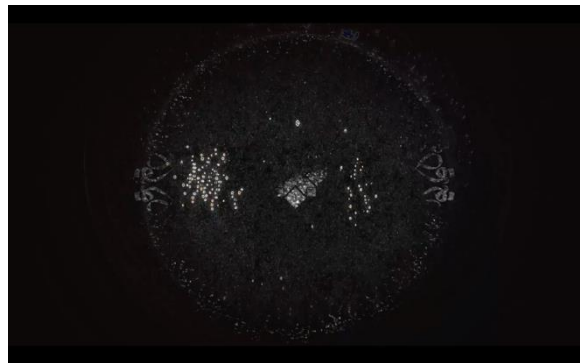


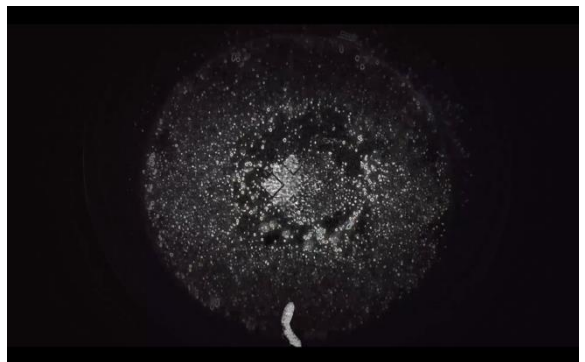
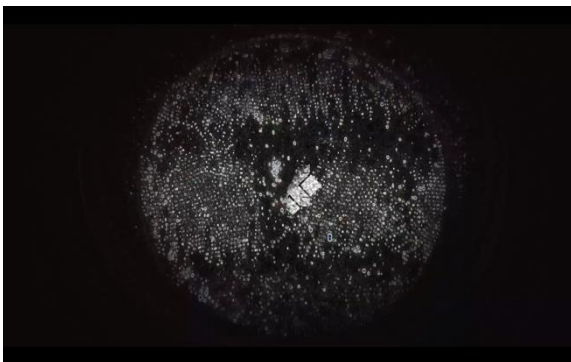
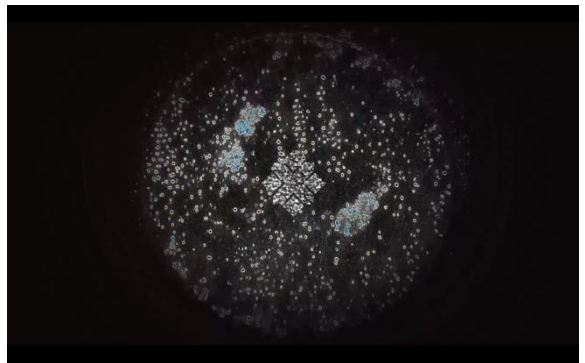
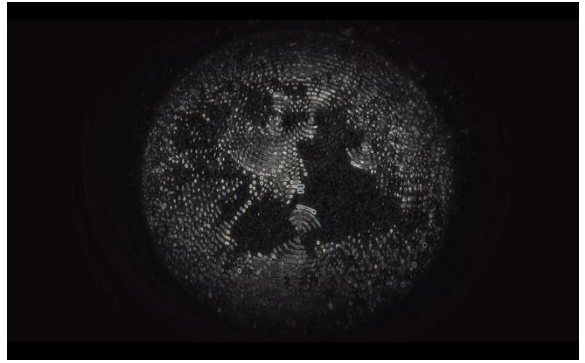
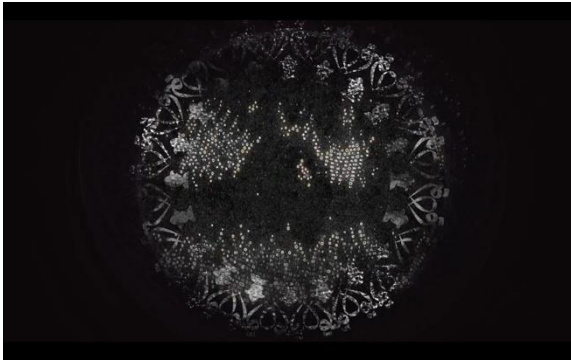


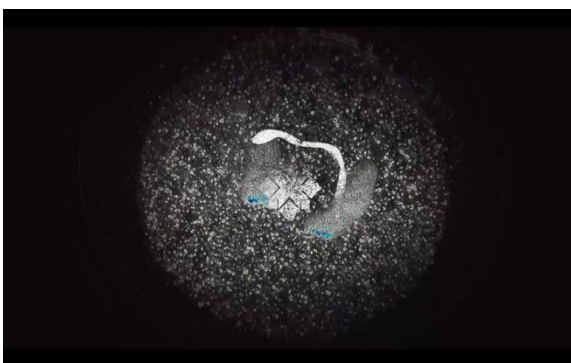
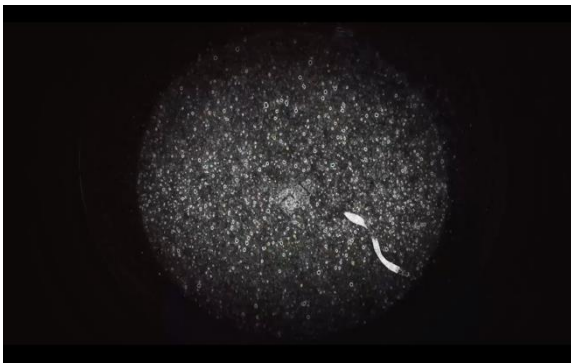
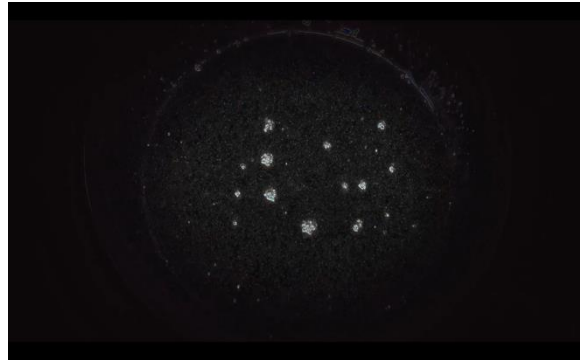
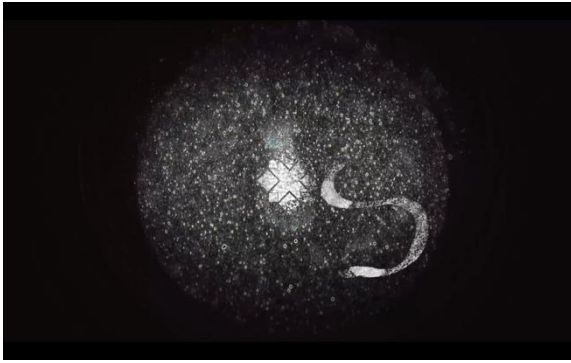
Style Frame

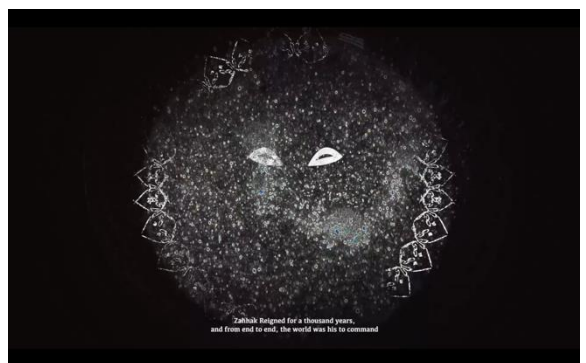
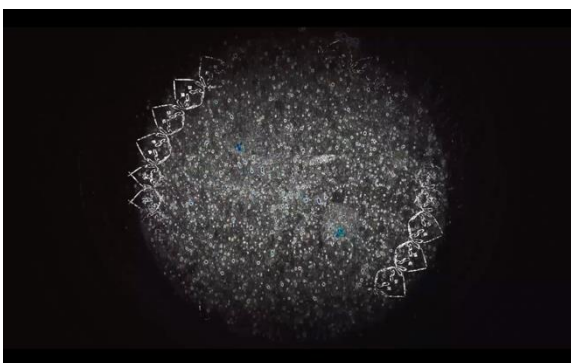
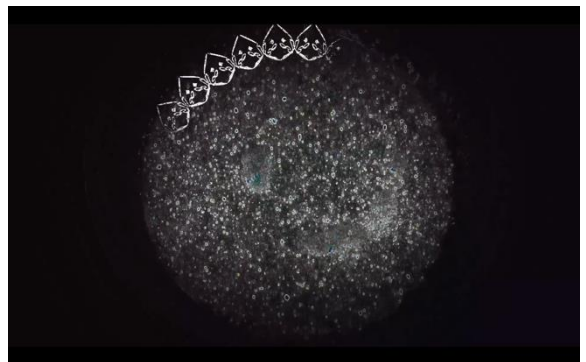
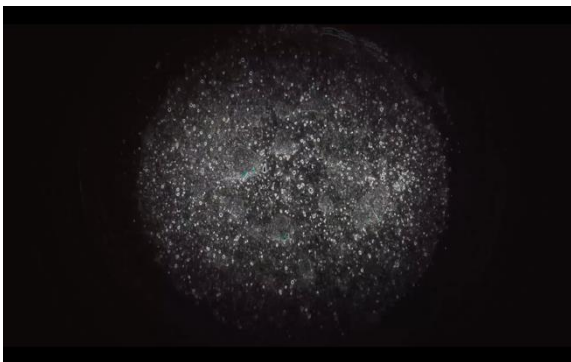
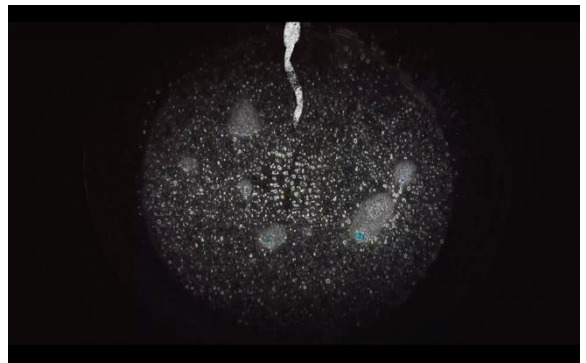
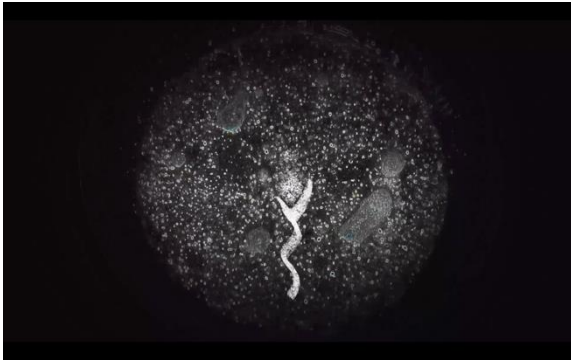


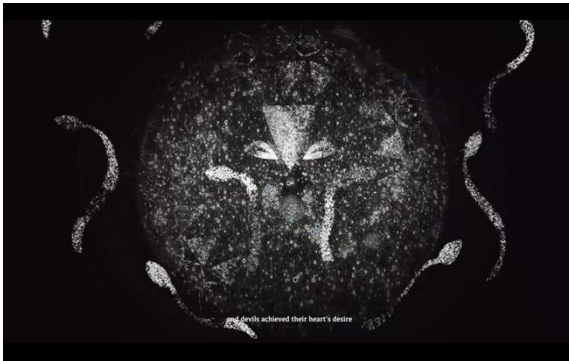
Still Frames (final project)

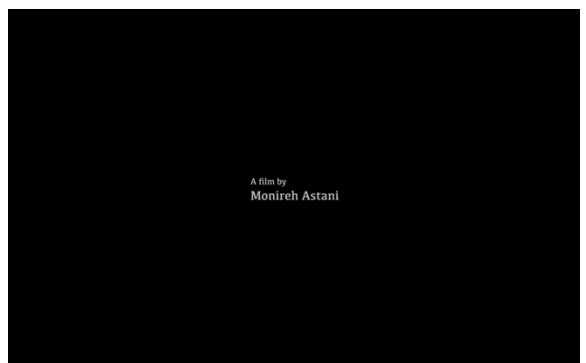
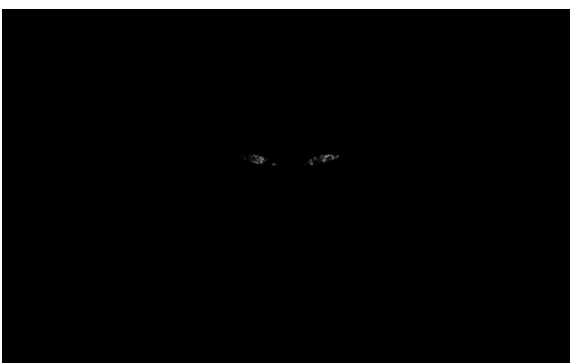
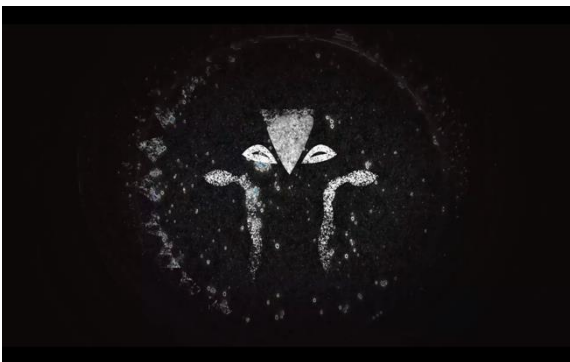
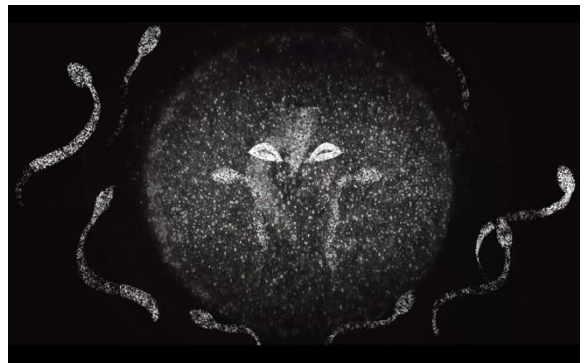












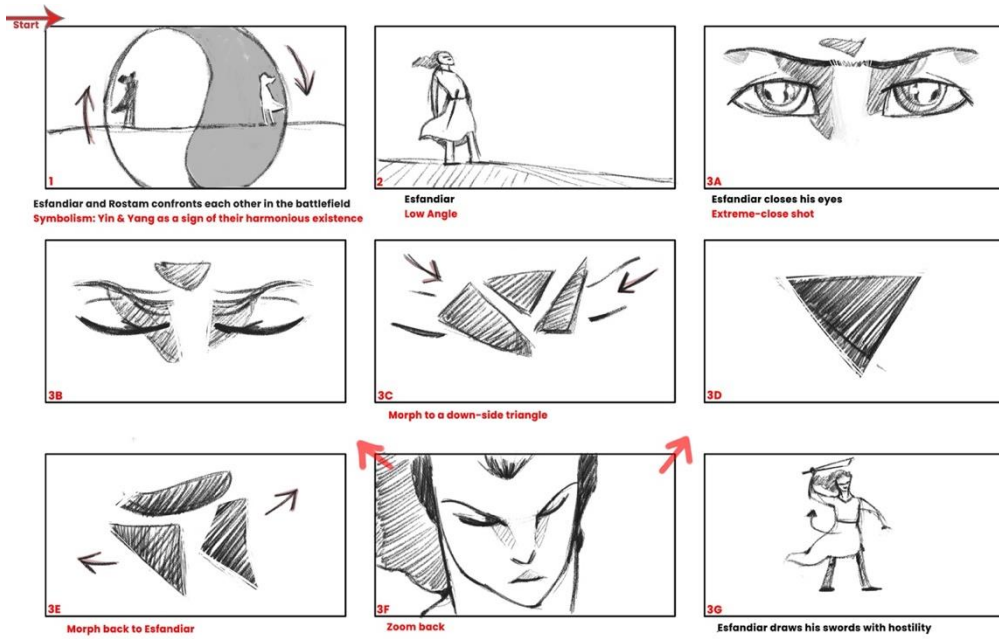
A film by
Monireh Astani



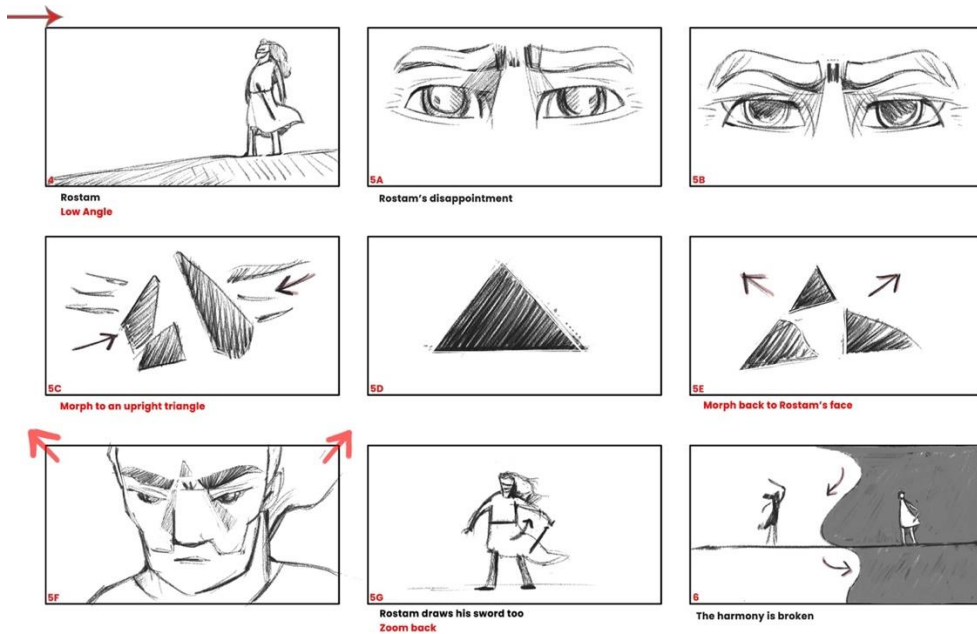
This animation was produced with the financial assistance of the ASIFA-Hollywood's Animation Educators Forum 2020 Scholarship

Appendix III: Tests

Concept Art Design Test (Rostam & Esfandiar)

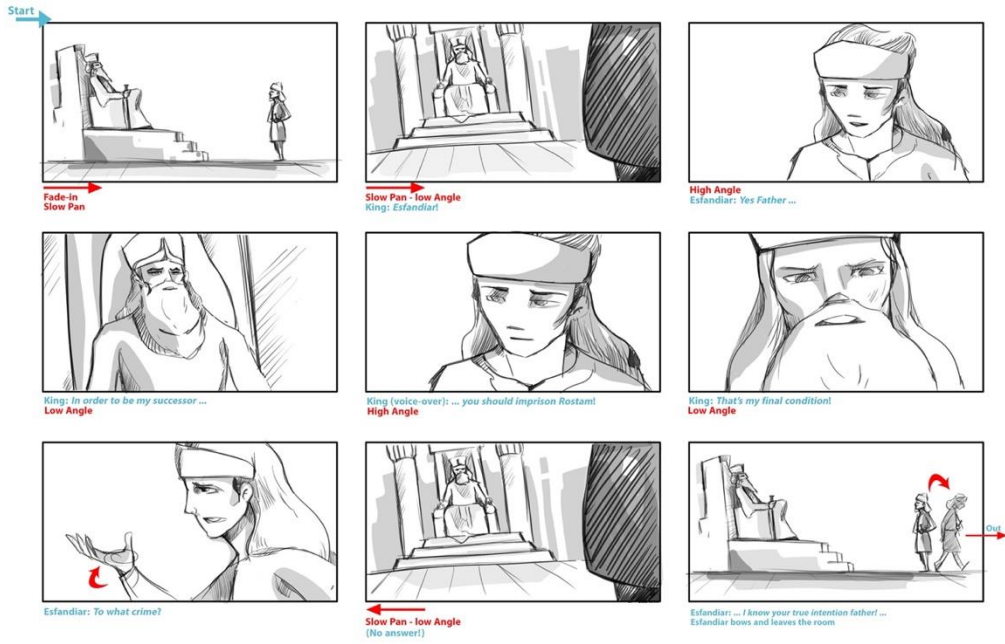


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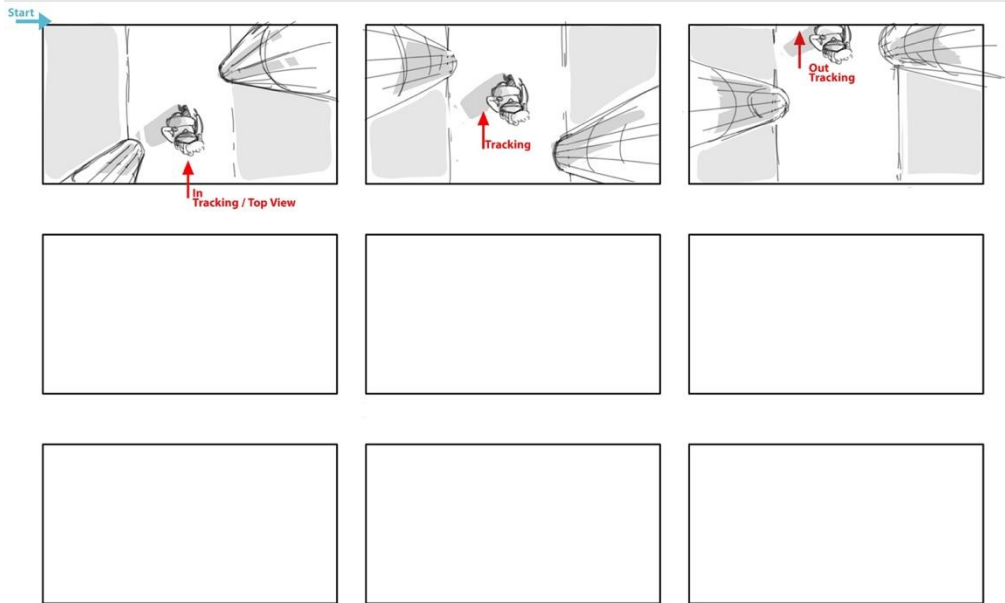


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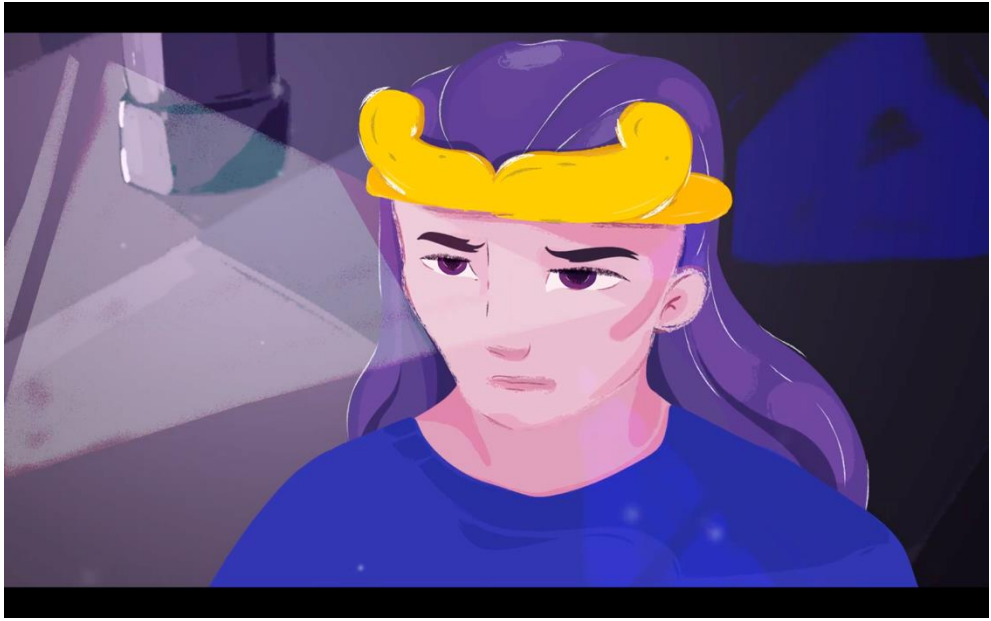
Page:1



Page:2















Links to the Animated Test (Rostam & Esfandiar)

Esfandiyār and Goshtasp:

<https://vimeo.com/477658139>

Interactive Abstraction (Prototype):

<https://vimeo.com/477707997>

Appendix III: Interviews Materials

Sample of Interviews' Questions

	<p><u>ARTISTIC POSSIBILITIES</u></p> <p><i>Through pure formal abstractions in animation, what sorts of artistic possibilities can be offered for the adaptations of Shahnameh?</i></p>
<p>Questions group no-1</p>	<p>All animated adaptations of <i>Shahnameh</i> (collected in this research) have maintained a representational and figurative formal style. Do you think cultural texts such as <i>Shahnameh</i> can be approached from a non-figurative formal perspective?</p>
	<p>What do you think about these two abstract animation adaptations of <i>Shahnameh</i> (the practice components of this research)?</p>
	<p>Can these sorts of pure formal abstraction offer a new visual experiment of <i>Shahnameh</i> to the viewers? Would you consider that as an adaptation?</p>
	<p>What do you think about an artistic process, where the artist transforms the text (in this case, <i>Shahnameh</i>) into his/her intended style or possibilities of his/her medium?</p>
	<p>Can choosing and prioritising the abstract formal style lead to a different approach to the narrative? (For instance, to look at the story differently, to adapt a different perspective of that story, to investigate other related text or context?)</p>
	<p><u>ENGAGEMENT POSSIBILITIES</u></p> <p><i>What kinds of creative engagements can be expected (from the viewers and the artist)?</i></p>
	<p>Do you find these animations to be engaging? Why?</p>

Questions group no-2	Would the abstract formal style help to evoke and extend the curiosity and creativity of the artist and the spectators?
	Would the abstract formal style encourage people to visit or revisit old texts such as the <i>Shahnameh</i> ? In another word, would new stylistic approaches such as abstract style help to extend the life and accessibility of this text? Or do you think that might be damaging to its cultural or artistic position?
	What do you think is the potential impact of these adaptations? Who would be the audience of these kinds of work?
	In the studies of abstract art, some of the qualities of this form are being open-ended and have the capacity for multiple meanings. Do you consider these as creative advantages in adaptations of text such as <i>Shahnameh</i> ? Or as disadvantages?
	Do you think the obscure and open-ended qualities of abstract works like these, can more actively engage audiences in the creative process (experiencing and meaning-making)? Why?
<u>MEANING-MAKING POSSIBILITIES</u>	
<i>How can the text and its meanings (cultural and archetypal concepts) be conveyed?</i>	
Questions group no-3	Do you think these abstract forms of animation can communicate some meanings or ideas from adapted texts? What sort of meanings or concepts do you think were conveyed in the samples provided?
	What do you think about the methods used in these works to create associative meanings and connections between these animations and their primary source (e.g., the use of a brief text offering the story, and the music track based on <i>Shahnameh</i>)?
	Do you think these associative elements can assist in the process of meaning-making? In the reconstruction of the original text's spirit?

Examples of Colour Coding Interviews' Data

Questions group	no -1
Hannes Rall 20/07/21	<p>We discussed the idea that abstract animation is a more open-ended way of storytelling that embraces the subjectivity of the artists and the viewers. Hannes suggested that pure abstraction is a different visual language that departs from representational tendencies. Using abstract and symbolic imageries that are culturally loaded can offer more stories out of images. Because in abstract forms the space between the text and its visualisation is more open. Hence, it offers more room for the spectators to invest and project their ideas and thoughts. In this way, audiences bring new layers of meaning to an artistic experience. It can be a process where they see abstract forms, receive some loose knowledge of the text through references from the formal elements, then imagine and project their new meanings, and this can lead to a new level of understanding of the original narrative and the adapted animation. He also added that abstract style can offer a novel experience where the main idea of a story is echoed (rather than being told) through formal materials such as forms, colours, motions, and music.</p>
Questions group	no -1
Rahgozar 28/07/21	<p>To answer this question, Rahgozar explained that literary narratives such as <i>Shahnameh</i> can be considered abstract in nature, since these sorts of texts formed and reformed through centuries, imagined differently through generations, and reached us today in this form. Looking even closer into the <i>Shahnameh</i> as an individual text it is constructed upon various symbolic and abstract concepts. Now, having the possibility of recreating this text into abstract animations is an opportunity to go beyond the popular readings, expectations, and familiar forms of this narrative, and reconstruct it for today's language and new visual methods. Rahgozar noted that in order to abstract <i>Shahnameh</i> we need to first symbolise this piece. This is another possibility of pure abstractions that lead us to explore the underlying layers of our text, understanding the writers' deeper intentions, and getting closer to the core/spirit of the narrative to be able to embody those notions in symbolic forms which can be considered abstract in nature. This can result in a deeper understanding of <i>Shahnameh</i>, a literary work that is rooted in Iranian national identity and culture. Then, this way of recreating <i>Shahnameh</i> in abstract forms can offer some sort of impact, rather than being entertaining or having a conclusion.</p>

An Example of Analysed Text and Generated Codes

Analyses text	Coded for
<p>We discussed the idea that abstract animation is a more open-ended way of storytelling that embraces the subjectivity of the artists and the viewers. Hannes suggested that pure abstraction is a different visual language that departs from representational tendencies. Using abstract</p>	<p>1- open-ended way of storytelling 2- offer more stories</p>

and symbolic imageries that are culturally loaded can offer more stories out of images (Rall, 2021).	
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An Example of a Segment from the Thematic Table, Based on Research Data

Questions group	Example of codes	Initial Themes	Final Themes
1, 2, 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Experiential - Expressive - Evocative - Immediate connection with various senses - Meanings comes from movements and forms 	Abstract as a form of expression and exploration (tactile/sensual)	<i>When the Form Becomes the Story and the Way it's Retold: Abstract animation as a form of expression, exploration, and immediate perception</i>

An Example of a Segment from the Thematic Table, Based on Research Questions and Assumptions

1 st /no-3 Research Question	Do you think these abstract forms of animation can communicate some meanings or ideas from adapted texts? What sort of meanings or concepts do you think were conveyed in the samples provided?		
Research Assumption	Using abstract stylisations, the adaptor can meaningfully convey the subject matter of each abstract animation sample (reflecting some of the underlying universal and cultural meanings of the adopted texts from <i>Shahnameh</i>) to both familiar and less familiar audiences.		
Questions group	Generated codes	Initial Themes	Final Themes
2	<u>Less familiar:</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The subject matter - Universal meanings - Affiliated cultural meanings (Archetype) - Individual meanings <u>Familiar:</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The subject matter - Universal meanings - Cultural meanings (personally found more interesting) - Individual meanings 	Both familiar and less familiar audiences found the intended meanings to some extent and the big picture, yet they added their subjective, diverse (universal, cultural, archetypical) interpretations as well.	<i>Interpretation of Meanings: the viewers' dominant touch</i>

Appendix IIIII: List of Publications and Presentations

- **Astani, M.** 2022: “Abstracting Shahnameh: An Analysis of Audiences’ Interpretations and Engagements” In *21st Century Animation: Innovation, Aesthetics, Approaches*. CILECT. (Under review)
- **Astani, M.** 2022: “The Emergence of Zahhak: A practice-based, reflective analysis of reconstructing an ancient narrative into abstracted animated forms”, *33rd Society for Animation Studies (SAS) Annual Conference*, Teesside University, UK, 26 June-3 July.
- **Astani, M.** 2020: “A Media Specific Analysis of Animation’s Abstraction in Adaptations of Shahnameh”, *The Visioning the Future Online Seminar Series: Students Artistic Experiments*, Ireland, 24 September.
- **Astani, M.** 2019: “Cultural Adaptation and Appropriation of Ferdowsi’s Shahnameh”, *The Association of Adaptation Studies 14th Annual Conference*, Masaryk University, Brno, Czech Republic, 19-20 September.
- **Astani, M.** 2019: “Animation and its creative language in cultural adaptation”, *31st Society for Animation Studies (SAS) Annual Conference*, Lusófona University, Lisbon, Portugal, 17-21 June.
- **Astani, M.** 2018: “Adaptation and Audiences: The Problematic Nature of Cross-Cultural Adaptations”, *Irish Audience Studies Network Inaugural Symposium*, Maynooth University, Ireland, 5 December.
- **Astani, M.** 2016: “A Fantastic Adaptation: Investigating the Elements of Fantasy within the Context of Shahnameh as a Popular Source of Adaptation in Iranian Animations.” *ASIA ANIMATION FORUM 2016 Animation+ Collective of Imagination*, pp. 177–194. Bucheon: Asia Animation Forum (AAF).