

The Un-zipped Lips of Iranian Women in Ava Maria Safai's *ZIP* (2023)

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Horror film has always been remarkably suited for the transgression of social norms and expectations. Working to shock viewers out of complacency, horror film ruminates on social and political ills to vindicate those ascribed a state of otherness or dehumanization. Far more than an expression of the fantastical and the disturbing, horror films at their best drag real and pertinent injustices screaming into the light. Director Ava Maria Safai's short horror film *ZIP* (2023) (Fig. 1) is an effective condemnation of human rights violations against Iranian women, sparked by the murder of 16-year old Mahsa Amini ostensibly for removing her hijab. The film's closing credits are prefaced by the slogan of the resultant #FreeIran movement, "Women. Life. Freedom" (00:14:02) in a call for the end of the repressive regime in Iran. Millions around the world and in Iran itself rose in protest to the compulsory wearing of the hijab, and remarkably, women have remained the public face of the movement in resistance to Iran's oppressive theocracy.

Safai asserts that *ZIP* was born of a dream, or more fittingly, a nightmare, about "a girl with a zipper mouth who desperately wanted to sing. I woke up from this dream, awake and alert; I knew in this moment that I had a story on my hands which was special." The premise is deceptively simple: this disturbing coming of age story, set intentionally in 1979, features Melody (Gelareh Ghodrati) planning to sing at her high school talent show on the evening of her 16th birthday but her dream is tainted by her father's (Ashkan Nejati) plan for her to meet the man over twice her age that she will be forced to marry. If this was not bad enough, she wakes on the day to discover a closed zipper where her mouth should be (Fig.2). The horror of being rendered voiceless as an inevitable part of becoming a woman is loud and clear as a previously vibrant and assertive Melody



Fig. 1 | Promotional Poster for *ZIP*. Crazy 8s, 2023.



Fig. 2 | Melody stares at her zipped mouth in horror and tentatively attempts to open it in *ZIP*, 00:06:05. *Crazy 8s*, 2023.



Fig. 3 | A close-up of Melody's backpack as she prepares for a day at school in *ZIP*, 00:00:53. *Crazy 8s*, 2023.



Fig. 4 | Melody's glance lingers on photos of her mother in *ZIP*, 00:1:03. *Crazy 8s*, 2023.

finds herself silenced. It seems no coincidence that Melody is the same age as Mahsa Amini, but *ZIP* offers a hopeful outcome for women who refuse to cleave to traditional and oppressive expectations, though not without real pain.

Out of hundreds of submissions, *ZIP* was green-lit for production by the Crazy8s Film Society, a fitting moniker for an organization that tasks emerging filmmakers with shooting the project in 3 days and completing post-production in the remaining 5 (8 crazy days total!). In April 2023, *ZIP* went on to become the first film in Crazy8s's 24-year history to receive a standing ovation at the Centre of Performing Arts in Vancouver, where it was previewed to a 2000-person audience. Behind the gruesome rendering of the zipper, a typically benign tool (Fig.3) repurposed as a painful symbol of the stolen voices of women in the film, is a moving call (or song) to revolution and action that viewers respond to.

The 1979 setting in a Canadian town is pivotal to the film's message. It brings Melody's distress, and thus the allegorical distress of women in Iran, into sharp relief against a backdrop Western audiences can relate to; it also paradoxically illustrates

the disturbing disconnect between the vibrancy of 70s culture in the Western world with its focus on women's liberation and other social movements and the realities of the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979. As Safai elucidates:

"It was really important for me to make a film that Western audiences can understand by watching it and really get a sense of what's actually going on...1979 was the year of the Iranian revolt. Iranians don't like to call that event the 'revolution' anymore, because they don't feel positive about it." (qtd. in Alexandra)

As Alexandra observes, "by 1981, under the laws of the regime, women were mandated to wear the hijab" ("Local Short Film"). The film opens in the vibrant, sunlit, pastel aesthetic of Melody's room, in which she dances wearing yellow pyjamas and prepares for school to an upbeat disco track: "You better zip, baby, better get my fix..." (00:00:32-00:00:34). The original song is noteworthy as the playful lyrics foreshadow a more insidious meaning to the idea of zipping: rather than being a lighthearted prompt to arrive or zip quickly to an impatient lover, it is an imperative to relinquish agency. Melody's room is marked by iconic musicians whose counter-culture ideas continued to resonate in the 70s, like *The Beatles* and Janice Joplin. Indeed, Melody is an aspiring singer-songwriter herself: viewers learn that she has attempted to share her voice in the talent show since grade 8, and even her teacup is adorned with music notes, but her father has quashed her attempts at every turn. A shot of Melody's calendar in vignette informs the audience that it is January 31, 1979, one day before Melody's birthday and in the timeline of the film, just 11 days before the revolution in Iran that would see it return to conservative traditions. The forewarning of things to come is echoed in the relative normalcy of Melody's room, where the codified signifiers of childhood permeate the mise-en-scène: teddy bears, yellow curtains with flowers, and a close-up of a framed photo lined with roses of Melody and her best friends all set the stage for the jarring undermining of childhood and self-expression to come. One shot lingers on two photos of a woman that viewers are encouraged to assume is Melody's mother (Fig.4). She is not present in the film, and she sits cross-legged, wearing stylish dresses with knees and shoulders exposed. It is a striking reminder that until 1979, women in Iran enjoyed far more cultural freedom in terms of dress than they do today.

Melody's father is quick to tell her that instead of performing in the talent show, she will be meeting Omid (Soheil Khojasteh), the future husband he has arranged for her, and his family. Further, he does not want to hear her talking about her music (00:01:19-00:01:20). As Melody spars with her father, reverse shots frame him subtly in low angle to suggest his prominence in the power dynamic between them. He addresses her in Persian rather than English, which she insists on using, and there is a clear tension between the desires and communication styles though his message is clear: Iranian tradition and culture is binding, and she must adhere and conform. At the outset, however, Melody is outspoken about her dreams and



Fig. 5 | Omid and his father unzip the mouths of female family members so that they can eat in *ZIP*, 00:09:56. *Crazy 8s*, 2023.



Figs. 6 and 7 | Melody is presented with Birthday cupcakes, 00:06:42; Melody is laughed at in class, 00:07:14.

intentions; she has a voice and uses it in the face of patriarchal assertions both at home and in school: In class, she corrects her male teacher when he compares the female body to a chicken coop and erroneously asserts that the uterus is a vagina on a diagram of the female reproductive system. The boys in class are no better; they goad her by asking if she'd like to "nest their egg" (00:02:54) and are summarily embarrassed when she points out that they do not have eggs. Attempts to intimidate her or reduce her to her body, her ability to give birth, or be treated as an animal for reproduction fall flat. The moment speaks to the importance of having a dissenting voice in the face of misinformation and ignorance about women and their bodies, but it is one that Melody loses when she wakes on her birthday to find her mouth zipped, her attempts to pull the zipper unbearably painful, and her dreams stifled.

The use of a zipper as a tool of pain, distress, and muffling reflects the violent oppression of women in Iran and the cost of pushing back. At her birthday dinner with her future in-laws, sister, and husband, Melody has become a silent server. Women prepare the food that nurtures but are themselves only sustained with permission. As Melody offers tea to her guests, viewers are horrified to realize that none of the women seem physically able

to take sustenance because of their zippers. During dinner, they eat only when their father or husband un-zip their mouths, a process that looks uncomfortable at best and painful at worst (Fig. 5). Inherent is a subtext of women's bodies controlled and disfigured. Part of the hellishly effective detail is the care taken by SFX artist Andy Le: the longer a woman has worn a zipper, the less sore the zipper prosthetic appears. Melody's wound is new and raw, but her mother in law's scars have faded. In effect, they all bear the physical evidence of a traumatic wound newly and forcibly imposed or faded but hellishly effective over time. The zipper is evidence of ongoing violence that pales but does not end or heal. Every woman, we are told, gets a zipper at age 16, and the men are excited about the notion of a new leader that will make women with zipped mouths a tradition once more. Indeed, according to Afary, following April 1st, 1979 in Iran, the Family Protection Act that provided extended rights to women in marriage was declared void, and *komitehs* were formed to patrol the streets and enforce Islamic codes of dress ("Iranian Revolution").

So how does Melody's affliction resonate with her Canadian classmates? Not how we might expect. Part of the horror is that Melody isn't really met with concern or empathy, but with discomfort at best and derision or glee at worst. When she arrives at school, her friends seem mostly uncomfortable, as though they do not know what to say. Her Canadian female cohorts are not subject to the coming-of-age zipper and maintain a sense of distance and discomfort (Fig. 6). In a pointless gesture that unsuccessfully tries to gloss over the horrific reality of Melody's involuntary silencing, she is offered birthday cupcakes that she cannot physically eat. "Have you tried unzipping it?" (00:07:26) one friend asks, in what is perhaps the well-meaning but misguided tendency to ask of women in repressive regimes why they simply have not tried removing the hijab. Disturbingly, Melody's classmates, male and female alike, all laugh at her inability to retort or express herself, even as her teacher continues to spew sexist misconceptions about menstruation (Fig. 7). In essence, the subtext alludes to North American and European culture's lack of understanding about the importance of being heard and the horror of not having a voice in Iran, but *ZIP* makes this point explicit.

Despite the horror, *ZIP* emphasizes the spirit of revolution, as painful as that might be. "How much does your voice cost?", we are asked at the end of the film, and we are encouraged to answer it considering the full range of subject positions we inhabit, and upon which the film reflects, depending on age, culture, religion, and geographical location.

In Melody's room, her print of "The Unicorn Rests in a Garden," one of the seven scenes in *The Unicorn Tapestries*, hints at her personal revolution (00:00:59). According to The Met, this is one of 7 of the "most beautiful and complex works of art from the late Middle Ages that survive. Luxuriously woven in fine wool and silk with silver and gilded threads, the tapestries vividly depict scenes associated with a hunt for the elusive, magical unicorn" ("The Unicorn Rests"). Depicting a unicorn tethered to a tree and constrained by a fence in a garden, it is



Fig. 8 | Melody prepares to emancipate herself at the talent show in *ZIP*, 00:12:24. Crazy 8s, 2023.

often considered a depiction of the beloved tamed; the confinement is meant to be happy, as the space contains pomegranates, a symbol of both fertility and marriage (“The Unicorn Rests”). It is worth noting that the unicorn is being hunted very much against its will in the tapestry series, so that despite the claim to willing confinement, and that the chain is not secure and the fence is low enough to be cleared, the scene reads more like this confinement is the result of a broken spirit. The print is a wonderful allusion to traditions that can be broken rather than breaking those who are subject to said traditions but the cost to Melody and her real-life counterparts is high. It becomes clear that the only way to assert her voice is to rip the zipper off, but she sings her original song about being free, in Persian,

beautifully and clearly to a rapt audience through the bloody and yet somehow beautiful maw that is now her mouth. With its foil cut-out stars and its iconography of a teen girl in formal wear, coming of age and exposed and bloody on stage, the talent show is notably reminiscent of director Brian dePalma’s *Carrie* (1976). Like writer Stephen King’s original 1974 novel and the film that follows it, *ZIP* also explores patriarchal fear of women coming into their own power and warns that such a move is inexorable. With the song of revolution strong in her lungs, Melody galvanizes the women in Omid’s family to open their zippers, and *ZIP* reminds viewers that there is an ongoing fight for women’s rights in Iran that refuses to be stilled, muzzled, or zipped. ■

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