

Upheaval on t

Countering the Authoritarian Gaze in the Iranian Uprisings



You wake up.
You had a dream.



You pick up your phone.
The news is overwhelming.

he Cloud

Nafis
Fathollahzadeh



You pick up your camera,
and set out to record.

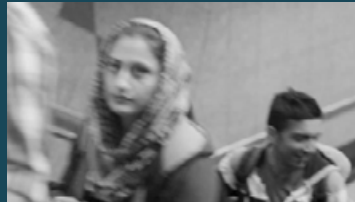


How do we, both as individuals and as a society, see, memorize, and forget in the context of a hyper-documented world? What kind of visibility can remain, be remembered and restored? And how can film and photography challenge authoritarianism on both political and aesthetic fronts, proposing social and formal innovations that engage with collective action? This essay addresses these questions both by looking at visual fragments of the uprisings in Iran, as well as the way image and imagination have countered the authoritarian regimes in Iran and elsewhere.

Digitalization and the social media boom of the early 2000s shifted the production, distribution and reception of film and photography. Media sharing and citizen journalism altered the way news is accessed, challenged authoritarian hegemonic narratives, and established new conditions for visibility. The use of phone cameras and social media for disseminating news during the 2009 Green movement protests in Iran were a sign of this change, shifting the role of photography and film in the animation of political subjectivity and inspiration of social movements. For visual culture scholar Nicholas Mirzoeff, "the revolutions in North Africa and the global Occupy movement saw the effort to find a horizontal



Her eyes were full of hope and fear.



I remember you breaking the silence in the metro.

visuality in which people envisage and visualize themselves as having a name, a place and the right to look.” In his view, this implies a kind of photography that goes beyond “the democratization of the means of reproduction as it was in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries towards a democracy of the self (image)”¹ – enabling people to understand themselves as agents participating in the making of history. The emergence of countless citizen (photo) journalists over the last decade has complicated the notion of the individual eyewitness and challenged the role of the photographer as the sole creator of a unique image, the first on the scene. It has brought a multiplicity of perspectives on

events in times of upheaval, additionally making collaboration possible among users of photography. Social media opened a space for a different form of sociability between two or more people as they look at each other and allow the other to invent them. A collaboration among anonymous people that allows appropriation, reiteration, and reinvention of the authorial image.

Joan Fontcuberta describes this situation as a post-photographic condition when “the author camouflages in the cloud(s). Adoption, recycling, and remixing are standardized. Authorship becomes secondary to content and alternative models of authorship are formulated: co-authoring, collaborative creation and strategic anonymity in which cultural activism is reinforced.”²



You hold her photographs of the women’s march in March 1979, sing a song hand in hand and celebrate International Women’s Day. A woman turns to you and says: take care of yourself.



You see her standing in the middle of the revolution,* in the square, occupying the space on the ground and on the cloud.



You hear the police shouting move on, move on, there is nothing to see here.

*Revolution Square in Teheran

Figures of resistance

Such delegitimization of authorship brings about counter-strategies for resisting the authoritarian gaze, prompting a pluralization of perspectives. In the case of Iran, this is a resistance to censorship and propaganda of the regime, the cliché misery narratives of mainstream western media, or the biased media coverage of the Iranian diaspora.

As individuals became more aware of the ways in which they are being visually controlled, they began to take ownership of their own image and image production. This means moving from being mere “objects” of images to becoming active subjects that challenge hegemonic narratives.

(Self-)Image or self-imagination thus have the potential to generate counter-visibility in the context of authoritarian regimes. On the one hand, various subjectivities – that of a protester, observer, narrator, camera person, and filmmaker – merge into one, creating an image of its own, without intermediacy. On the other hand, they render the spectators as active digital witnesses, editors, critics, and translators. They bring something that was not imaginable before, what is forbidden to be seen, imagined, recorded, and distributed. The personal and spontaneous quality of such (self-)image evokes the imagination of everyone else in becoming that figure. The figure of resistance.

In their essay, “Figuring a Women’s Revolution: Bodies Interacting with their Images”, written a



You saw her in different times, there and elsewhere.



Her image haunted you for decades.

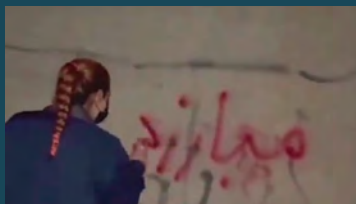


Your imagination became a threat.

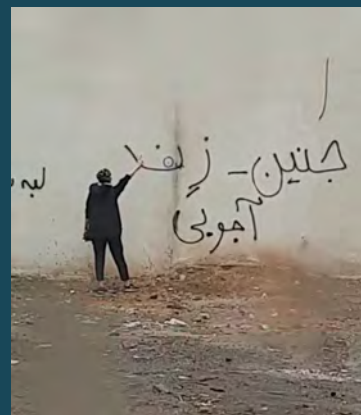
few days after the 2022 protests spread nationwide, L, an anonymous writer based in Iran, describes this potentiality by reflecting on the gap between viewing photos and videos of protests online, and the presence in the street. “A woman would jump on top of a trash bin, face the cars, and lift up her fist, fixed in that figure for a few seconds ... Everybody wanted to join the mass of images they had seen in protest videos from the previous days and from people in other cities. Very few people shouted slogans in these moments. I could clearly see this ‘desire’ to become ‘that image’, that image of resistance.”

L argues that “these protests are not crowd-centered but situation-centered, not slogan-centered but figure-centered ... In an endless cycle, image

and figure transform into one another. Images are published and distributed, and they arouse the imagination of bodies. People thereafter go to the street not with the bodies that they are, but with the bodies that they can and want to be. With their own imagination. Their revolutionary act is to incarnate this imagination. In truth, in this tying-together of image and street, representation and reality mutually orient one another.”³ Many examples of self-imagination were visible during the 2022 revolutionary uprisings in Iran. Some circulating videos were reports from events that narrate the scene or comment on it, adding details about the time and place. Scenes from protests, police attacks, vigils, funerals are among those that function as forensic documentation of state violence, while some others take the form of a statement or manifest.



You wrote it on the walls,



in your own language;

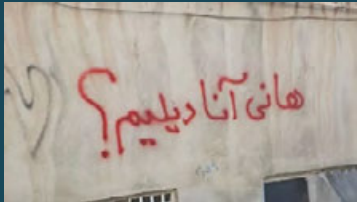
Graffiti on the wall,
“struggle” in Farsi

Graffiti on the wall, “Women,
life, freedom” in Balochi

Scripts for a revolutionary cinema

In one of the videos shared from Mahabad, a town in Kurdistan, the filmmaker walks towards the fire behind the barricade. The camera sets the fire in the center and protestors in the background. The atmosphere is intense. The protest roars while gunshots can be heard. A man talks passionately in Kurdish:

*From Mahabad
To two martyrs of Tabriz
To Nika⁴
To all freedom fighters who lost their lives
In Sari
In Mashahad
In Tehran
In Marivan
In resilient Piranshahr
In mount Arbaba in Baneh
In bloody Bookan
In bloody Sanandaj
Salute to the people of Mahabad
Salute to the streets
Salute to the leaders of this revolution, the women
Women, the leaders of the revolution
Victory is yours*



where is my mother tongue?



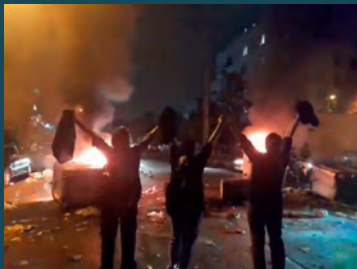
Graffiti on the wall, "Where is my mother tongue" in Turkish

It is a letter from Mahabad to all other cities and revolutionaries and a video with a specific addressee. It is directed by the liberated bodies, on the spot, without any mediator, in their first language.⁵ It's short and impulsive in duration, undisciplined in form and production, independent and anonymous in distribution. This is how I see the production and distribution of a script for a revolutionary cinema, a kind of a militant cinema of the 21st century.

This photographic and videographic common archive on the internet impacts the processes of remembering and forgetting, rendering collective memory into an observable and accessible phenomenon. Digital memorialization confronts the

concept of history in which authoritarian power is the only entity capable of visualizing society, writing history, and preserving rights through archival resources. As the internet becomes a repository of collective memory, it is conditioned to its rules; "internet doesn't forget". Our collective memory since then is stored on the cloud alongside places, objects, names, and other entities that Pier Nora described as *lieu de mémoire*, or sites of memory.

In other words what was thought to be an instant image in the digital ephemera of our forgetful modern societies transforms into a specter – a spectre that haunts the present and the future, summons up from the clouds, and transcends borders.



You called her name on the streets



In Sari
In Mashahad
In Tehran
In Marivan
In resilient Piranshahr
In mount Arbaba in Baneh
In bloody Boekan
In bloody Sanandaj



Her name summoned up a spectre

Graffiti on the wall, "Mahsa, Nika, Asra", three women that were killed during the revolutionary uprisings of 2022

Endnotes

- 1 Mirzoeff, Michael. "The History of the Anonymous and Horizontal Visuality." *Art History in the Wake of the Global Turn*, by Aruna D'Souza, Yale University Press, 2014, p.204.
- 2 Fontcuberta, Joan. *The Post-Photographic Condition*. Kerber, 2015, p.6.
- 3 L. "Figuring a Women's Revolution: Bodies Interacting with Their Images." *Jadaliyya*, 5 Oct. 2022, jadaliyya.com/Details/44479
- 4 Nika Shakarami was 16 years old when she died under suspicious circumstances suspected to involve violence by security forces in Tehran during the 2022 Iranian protests following the murder of Jina (Mahsa) Amini.
- 5 Farsi is recognized as the official language in Iran despite the diversity of cultures and languages. Speaking other languages than Farsi and education in first language in the schools and universities is sanctioned and it is used as a tool of oppressing diverse ethnicities.



Graffiti on the wall, "For the right of self-determination" in Farsi



that haunts the present and the future

Graffiti on the wall, "Freedom is a daily activity" in Arabic



Graffiti on the wall, "Our revolution is feminist" in Arabic



here and elsewhere.

Women, Life, Freedom