

Death Imagery and Social media

Death as an iconic memory

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Abstract;

Death imagery online is a conflicted area of examination. At moments it assumes a virality that will change public opinion and create moments of iconicity where death functions as a transformative device. The internet with its ineradicable feature to preserve content makes death a performance that can be consumed, stripped of time and space. Death imagery becomes immortalized on the internet, defying the physical mortality of the body as a site of decay and decomposition. This paper examines the death of Neda Agha-Soltan in Iran, exploring the entwined notions of witnessing and how the death event courted virality, immortalizing Neda as a global icon. The internet became a site of double articulation where the act of dying was both contemporaneous and historical - captured, disseminated and consumed non-stop on the internet. This temporal dislocation of the internet means death as a media event can be both banalized as part of popular culture and equally ignite affective communities which can domesticate death for collective grieving, commemoration and agency.

Introduction

Death imagery as a wider construct of media representations is a problematic device. The saturation of death imagery in popular culture and media reporting has inevitably banalized death. Death is also increasingly removed and sanitised from modern life, where the dead body or corpse only occupies the role of being present as part of a ceremonial encounter before it is disposed. Where celluloid and news reporting imposed their own moral or amoral codes on its cultural representation in terms of 'taste, decency or acceptability', death imagery remains a conflicted construct. It contains within it the potency to ignite moments of communal outpouring of grief, and equally it can be collapsed as part of a media story where the human form may not be accorded the same grief you may accord another. Celebrity deaths garner more attention and can become iconic events where these are mediated and spectacularized through public gaze. The assassination of president John F Kennedy (JFK), for example, was not broadcast live by radio or television stations, but the assemblage of the event in the media reports came through both media and amateur photography, particularly the renowned footages by Abraham Zapruder. The assemblage of the death event through media imagery and footages coalesce the bodily processes of dying with a mediated temporality of a media encounter. Public acts of dying through accidents or assassinations

then commit it to a dual temporality, where the moment of dying is fused with a media event in terms of time and space.

The assassination of JFK or the unexpected death of Princess Diana in the tunnels of Paris ignited grief on a scale which transcended national boundaries, propelling these media events to iconic status. Unlike Diana, Kennedy's death is forever captured through the liminal space of being entrapped in the process of dying. Camera angles taken from different vantage points have consigned the event to an iconic moment of media memory. Several amateur and media footages have captured the pathos of the fateful day where these become part of the death event – inexplicable in the magnitude of what it conveys and yet accessible only through the communal grief it invites one into. Its 'publicness' enables the death event to be appropriated into private realms of grief while amenable to a public memorialization.

President Kennedy's death inevitably became part of a media event through the publicness of the presidential procession and the unanticipated events which ensued, inviting spectacle and public interest beyond the point of death or dying. As the assassination of one of the most powerful men in the world, JFK's death event entered the annals of history to be an iconic memory and a transformative device in understanding the world as 'before' and 'after', where 'the event' punctuates temporality or people's social construction of time. JFK's assassination disrupted the notion of an orchestrated media event as conceived by Lang and Lang (1953), where the events which ensued were unscripted to take on a momentum and magnitude of their own. JFK's death, much like Diana's, is entrapped in a miasma of conspiracy where these in many ways reflect society's inability to lay death to rest or to attain closure. Here the potency of the death event survives beyond the process of death and dying.

With death imposing its own predominance, dwarfing the media event and subsuming it under its inexplicable horror, death's prowess to overpower human emotions cannot be overstated. Death imagery in this instance was transformed into an iconic memory. Death prevailed as a lingering image in the media narratives, consigning it to our media memory as an unforgettable event. When events of suffering evoke a mass reaction they become transformative devices both in the project of memory and history, and in forming communion with a wider humanity (Ibrahim 2010). The assassination of JFK was one such moment. In the case of Princess Diana, initial photos mainly showed the mangled vehicle she was travelling in. Death imagery came through the narratives, suggestions and witness testimonies, but the outpouring of grief was made manifest through the crowds in the streets and their reactions. The grief weighed heavily on the nation even without explicit images of death. Both JFK and Diana are public figures and the public nature of their deaths meant their moment of expiry became publicly-owned, publicly experienced and avariciously consumed. As public figures their death could be appropriated into people's private grief even when they may not know these media personalities in a personal capacity.

While it can be argued that events such as the assassination of Kennedy and the tragic accident which consumed Princess Diana's life were inevitably consigned to our historic memory due to their public profiles, the potency of death imagery in igniting grief or the formation of affective communities needs further examination. What is evident is that death

imagery can be a transformative device in enabling a connection to far away events and in mediating distance. A distant humanity can be experienced through death, and equally death can be banalized as a media narrative, retaining it within a sphere of media performance. But there are instances where death can leap off the pages of media text or digital platforms to court grief en masse. When this happens it can unleash communal agency on the ground and a need for affective communities to partake in this grief and transform these into moments of therapy and communal healing through forms of memorializing, to immortalize the dead.

New media technologies and the death event

The age of broadcasting made the media event of public commemorations, disasters and public relations a manifest visuality beyond press or radio presentations. Moving images broadcast into the domesticity of the home made these into artefacts of communal consumption premised through the vantage point of the media. These events belonged to a media narration of time and space through timed broadcast schedules and the pausing of these during crisis events. With the convergence of technologies, the media event has become open-ended. With the ability of mobile and smartphones to capture images on the move, the role of laypeople in partaking in events and in capturing public imagery on their own phones for uploads and downloads and for social exchange is a vital part of event creation today. Most significantly, mainstream media seeks to incorporate user-generated content (UGC) in the guise of tweets, commentaries and images in the reporting of media events. The incorporation of user-generated content in media reporting has led to a vast amount of literature which has labelled the involvement of a layperson as a ‘citizen journalist’ and the pervasive capture of events through mobile and smart phones as ‘digital witnessing’ (See Allen 2014).

This expansion of event creation has then made it necessary to review new terminologies in event reporting, including the notion of the citizen journalist or digital witnessing, and in tandem what ethical and moral obligations are incumbent on them. Where the citizen journalist operates without the journalistic ethics imposed on him by the profession, how do we then conceive the citizen as a journalist? If this is mainly premised through her ability to capture and upload, the conception is empty in its moral and ethical obligations. Similarly, the notion of witnessing premised mainly through a technological recording of the event, repositions the gravity in the terms of legal and ethical obligations we accord to a witness. More significantly, this notion of witnessing through technological capture privileges the eye while according objectivity to a visual account of events.

Today the bias of the visual in the media event plays a dominant role in constructing our postmodern subjectivity. Images have always been problematic devices in conveying or depicting reality both as photographs and as moving images. Images, particularly photographs, have been the subject of close scrutiny by Roland Barthes, Walter Benjamin, Michael Foucault and Jacques Lacan, amongst others. Barthes (1981: 19) positions pictures as a ‘witness to layers of meaning’, where no one meaning hermeneutically seals an image.

The image's crisis of authenticity and its difficulties in representing reality or misconstruing the 'real' confers it with a dubious status. Its ability to distort reality and exhort the emotive places it into a double bind, where its relationship with reality and truth is problematic. This is further confounded by our obsession to incessantly capture images and to own them, inviting a public gaze without necessarily being accountable to the complex processes of witnessing or bearing the legal or ethical encumbrances of such a position. The bias and pull towards the visual in our postmodern culture then highlights the subjectivity of the postmodern audience, where the burden of proof is premised primarily through the visual.

The anchoring of visual capture through technology impoverishes our reified notion of the witness, where the testimony is not consigned through one's memory alone but through the visuality of the digital artefact. Unlike memory which is intrinsic to the corporeal body, the digital artefact is once removed from the body which produced it and amenable to polysemic readings. Witnessing as a form of experiencing an event through co-presence and memory as compared to the production of a mnemonic device such as a video footage produces a duality in witnessing, where the artefact can be made separate from the body and mind which produced it. It can be treated as piece of evidence in its own right stripped and disembedded from the body and its experiential references or the context of production.

The notion of witnessing has a long theological and legal trajectory. John Durham Peters (2001: 707) describes witnessing as an intricately tangled practice which 'raises the questions of truth and experience, presence and absence, death and pain, seeing and saying.' For Peters, the phenomenon of bearing witness re-opens and raises 'fundamental questions of communication' itself. Peters rightly points out that while witnessing is a cultural, moral, ethical and legal construct, it is clearly under-theorised in media studies. Both John Peters (2001: 708) and Michael Humphrey (2000: 10) write about witnessing and testimony as a legal construct with a long history of establishing facts in trials. Humphrey situates the notion of testimony as truth in news gathering, psychological therapy and entertainment. Peters additionally locates the notion of witnessing in theology where the concept of a witness as a martyr developed in early Christianity. In recent decades there has been a proliferation of literature where witnesses record their experiences as survivors of traumatic events such as World War II. Peters argues that 'witnessing' is an extraordinary moral and cultural force as it fundamentally anchors the act of witnessing to life and death from the theological perspective.

Humphrey postulates that giving testimony of one's experiences can be manifested in different forms – speech, literature, poetry, drama, art, music, photography, etc. - but nevertheless, the more dominant cultural form tends to be narrative or storytelling. Humphrey, in citing Milan Kundera, reiterates that narrative comes out of and also shapes experience, and what is generated as narrative is as much a product of forgetting as remembering. Drawing on Engels' notion of memory, Humphrey points out that memory, especially spoken memories, can be constructed as a conversation (2000: 11). In situating the concept within media, John Ellis (2000: 32) reiterates that witnessing can be in some ways responsible for the events which you bear testimony to. He argues that television presents a particular way of witnessing as a domestic act. Similarly, for Tobias Ebbrecht (2007: 223) the

'event' has become a key term in our contemporary culture, where historical moments can become current events as they are commemorated through the media space and hence these mediatized rituals play a role of emphasizing remembrance. The stress here is not on the authentic retelling of an historical event, but the politicization of an event to create a constructed past for the audience.

The notion of the witnessing through digital technologies produces a mnemonic memory (i.e. digital footage or image) which can be consumed out of context and amenable to multiple meaning-making, which widens the notion of the media event. This not only complicates the notion of witnessing but is part of a postmodern visuality where there is an accelerated sense of non-stop capture of events, and as such gaze can fall without warning, connecting it to a wider media spectacle (Ibrahim 2011; 2012). While this gaze is facilitated through technology embedded to the body, the body and act of witnessing can then be decoupled through technology. As such, the digital image or footage can derive its own meaning, ejected from the corporeal body which captured it (See Ibrahim 2007; 2008).

The footages from the capture of events can take on a life force of their own uncoupled from the corporeal body which recorded it. In the assassination of the President Kennedy, Abraham Zapruder was one of at least 32 people known to have made films or stills at or around the time of the shooting (See Rosenbaum 2013; Morris 2013). Zapruder images were used extensively in the events which ensued after the assassination including the Warren commission, a committee set up to investigate the murder. Zapruder shot 486 frames for 26.6 seconds of the fateful event but a single frame (i.e. frame 313) was kept largely secret from the public view for 12 years. Frame 313 is the visceral and powerful impression that the blast came from in front of JFK and blew his head backward (Morris 2013). Zapruder withheld the frame for it had traumatised him and he did not want to be the one to inflict the same trauma on the public. Abraham Zapruder had three copies of his original film made for government investigators. He sold the rights to the original to *Life* magazine for a reported \$150,000. Ultimately, *Life* decided to withhold Frame 313. When Zapruder film was first shown on TV in 1975 including frame 313, people were outraged. The US Government's explanation that one man in a building far behind the President shot him seemed became a dubious proposition for the public and led to the US House of Representatives creating a new Select Committee to investigate the assassination, inviting fresh scrutiny to the events which happened more than a decade ago.

The capturing of events through technology premises the eye as the inquisitor of truth and piecing the 'real' through imagery can mislead and open more doubts rather than resolve what it sets out to answer, as was the case with the Zapruder film which led to a plethora of conspiracy theories. The capturing of events from different vantage points through technology and conceiving this as digital witnessing fails to acknowledge the instability of the visual testimony through still and moving images, while dislocating the ethics of witnessing from a legal perspective. The Zapruder footage predates the digital economy and hence he needed intermediaries to reach a wider public. In today's economy, we can publish content from sites of trauma to widen the spectacle of death instantly. With a mnemonic memory such as an image or footage, the trauma can be replicated and relayed to others.

These can function as tools of mass authentication and provide access to mass gratification or communal politics of pity. Despite our postmodern bias towards the visual, the visual as an unstable entity is never resolved. As we co-opt a wider public gaze into the abject or the death event through mobile technologies, our notion of what is taboo or what is sacred become re-negotiated, particularly in the case of the death event. The withholding of frame 313 and the trauma of its creator finally become uncoupled in the public broadcasting of the video in 1975. In our present digital landscape it is far easier to commodify trauma and death and treat it as a form of capture, uncoupled from the process of witnessing or its moral and ethical dilemmas.

Virality and the Death Event

Unlike the death events of President Kennedy and Princess Diana, Neda Agha-Soltan was not a celebrity but she reached celebrity status through her death image. When Neda Soltan, a 26-year old, was shot by Iranian military forces, the role of the cell phone as a visual testimony to events in Iran became a point of political significance. The footages of the young woman being shot and dying were captured by two different mobile phones (BBC 2009; Time 2009). The mix of amateur videos filmed on the move, commentaries and postings circulated around the web showing protest, carnage and resistance during the election protest in Iran in 2009. During these events, new media technologies provided an invaluable insight into student protests in Tehran, Shiraz and Hamedan, broadcasting it to the international community particularly when the last student uprising in Iran was putdown some six years ago.

When Neda, an innocent bystander was shot during this protest event, she became a symbol of resistance and martyrdom. Images of Neda dying were uploaded on the internet and courted global attention. Equally, opposition web sites and television channels which Iranians view with satellite dishes repeatedly broadcast the video. Time magazine (2009) described Neda's massacre as 'probably the most widely witnessed death on human history'. Overnight Neda became a symbol of the resistance movement against President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's widely disputed re-election. In the weeks that followed, Neda's massacre sustained media attention both in Iran and around the world with still and mobile images uploaded on the internet. With Neda's story shocking the world, her death videos went viral on the net. From complete anonymity in real life, Neda reached heroic status through her death event which gained global attention. The virality of the internet has always been of interest to researchers in terms of what ignites and courts mass attention with the public. In Neda's case many elements came together, making her reach internet stardom through her demise and invoking a mass politics of pity from near and distant audiences.

The death of Neda needs to be contextualized against the restrictive media environment in Iran and the shift in the journalistic practices in Western media to accommodate news reports from Iran. The protest events of 2008 and 2009 were ousted through new media technologies, as the Iranian government placed harsh restrictions on media coverage during this period

(BBC 2009). Local and foreign journalists in Iran were prohibited from reporting on the continuing protests in the country over the re-election of Ahmadinejad which was deemed as rigged by the protestors (Wilson 2009). The protests had been going on since the June 12th elections in 2009 and this had an effect of prompting citizens to turn to the internet to disseminate information about the events in Iran.

Though Iran had 7.5 million web users, which was the second highest in the middle east in 2006 after Israel, Iran shut down access to some of the world's most popular websites and users were unable to open them, including *Youtube*, *Amazon*, *Wikipedia*, *IMDB.com* (online film database) and *The New York Times* site following instructions to service providers to filter them (Tait 2006). The BBC Farsi website was also blocked. In November 2006, Iran had announced measures to stamp out 'illegal and immoral' content, especially those which undermined the country's national unity or insulted sacred texts and symbols mirroring the degree of censorship in the country including foreign books and satellite dishes (Tait 2006). More than 5 million national and international sites are blocked in Iran through internet providers through a list supplied by the authorities. The ban was seen as a response by authorities to stop the corrupting influences, particularly Western propaganda, through explicit video footages on Youtube which are seen as antithetical to Middle-Eastern and Islamic values (See Stelter 2009; Rosen 2009; Tait 2006). A member of Iran's judiciary commented in September 2009 that:

'The United States supported Web sites such as Facebook and YouTube with the aim of influencing the rioters and undermining the government's position both nationally and internationally. Sites such as Facebook and YouTube were devised by the United States in order to wage a psychological war against Iran.' (cf. Mackey 2009).

In 2013, Iran was amongst five other countries which has been branded 'Enemies of the Internet' by Reporters without Borders (2013). The state was labelled thus due to its harsh punishment of jailing bloggers and blocking websites by employing filtering technology to block content which it deems as harmful or corrupting for the Islamic society. Despite the block on Youtube in Iran the site was still receiving videos even though the traffic had slowed down to ten percent (Wilson 2009). One significant aspect of Iran was that, even prior to the 2009 election protests, the country had about 100,000 bloggers who were viewed as substitutes for the country's once flourishing but now largely suppressed reformist press (Tait 2006). As such, video sharing platforms such as Youtube and Liveleak enabled the world to peek into the resistance and protests on the streets in 2008 and 2009 through bloggers' vantage points and through mobile recording technologies.

Social media sites such as Flickr, Youtube and Twitter became spaces of non-stop conversations, images and updates on the situation in Iran. The amount of material that was being published at these sites led *The New York Times* to claim that this phenomenon was breaking the cardinal rules of journalism. This meant that news sites no longer questioned the sources but asked questions about its validity later (Stelter 2006). News websites such as *The Guardian*, *The New York Times* and the *Huffington Post* published blogs, videos, Twitter posts and narratives from Iran through the flow of information in new media and social media

spaces. Broadcasters such as CNN showed numerous videos submitted by Iranians in the protests against the re-election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad on June 12 2009.

A global stage of spectatorship and a mainstream media hungry for content was already present and existing when the death imagery of Neda was uploaded as part of the leaked visibility into Iran during this period. Instrumental mechanisms were in place in the guise of mainstream media to enlarge visibility to stories appearing on the internet, aiding it to go viral. Neda entered the global stage at this point of newsmaking with changing values and norms in the modes of production, where the ousting became primary and the issues about validity became secondary. Neda as a story of female victimhood amidst a sea of protests and media restrictions came to define the resistance in Iran. She provided a human face to a distant humanity in turmoil and in the process enabled disconnected audiences in faraway lands to make a connection through her tragic death. Neda in many ways was also the 'orientalist' fantasy of the West, locating the East through its barbaric and atavistic stance, unable to achieve the Western ideal of democracy and eternally burdened by its regressive values. Beyond the orientalist readings, Neda provided a human face to the 'disorder and savagery of the Middle East' for the Western audiences. She offered the means to make politics personal and the repeated images of unjust death elicited both solidarity and a communal politics of pity which transcended both time and space. The context of Neda's capture against a backdrop of severe press restrictions, ban on new media and restrictions on media coverage is important, for it represents an ousting of events which had been made inaccessible. The mass consumption of Neda's death event sought to authenticate and visualize what had been made invisible by the authorities. Here death became viral courting, global spectatorship and a politics of pity to immortalize the young woman.

Neda as a Symbol of Martyrdom

Against the turbulent political context of Iran, Neda became appropriated as symbol of political protests and resurrected as a martyr both online and offline. Neda's death imagery of mindless sacrifice with streams of blood from her face and body offered latent and symbolic readings to the Iranian as well as a universal audience. The notions of blood and sacrifice have theological significance for most religions, and with it Neda transcended cultural and religious divides to be recognised through her victimhood. The representational element of blood has been debated in different doctrines and sociological literature (See Janowitz 2015; Douglas 1966). According to Janowitz (2015: 194) different meanings can be attributed to blood based on different classification system of whether it is sacred or profane, pure or impure. The symbolic readings of blood as such impress the imagination and it can thus be identified with both weakness and strength as well as fear and repulsion (McCarthy 1969). In Neda's case, the bloodletting against a punitive political context reified her as sacred symbol and for Iran she came to signify the protests against an unjust regime according her martyrdom. In view of the public attention surrounding Neda, authorities prevented a public

funeral or wake and also prevented gatherings in her name. The Iranian society is infused with a culture of martyrdom, with funerals as religious and cultural rituals becoming a rallying point in the country historically. Notably, during the unrest that presaged that 1979 Islamic revolution, processions on the 40th day of mourning for fallen protesters became landmarks that created the momentum to topple the shah's regime (*The Guardian* 2009). Neda's resurrection as a martyr in Shia dominated Iran ignited the historical and religious resonance of the martyr in the landscape. In the context of Iran and the Islamic terminology of the martyr, the notion of the 'witness' became entwined in complex ways, constructing Neda as witnessing paradise through her bloody sacrifice, hence encoding sacred symbolic meaning to her unjust death.

The construct of the martyr is a highly interpretive term in Islam. It has been amenable to many readings and has been interpreted in various ways through the centuries. These readings are not beyond the cultural perspectives of the peoples and terrains in which Islam is embedded. Ironically, beyond new media technologies, the notion of the witness is entwined with the notion of the martyr in Islam, according dual readings to its conceptual understanding. In the Quran, the technical terms for martyr (*Shahid*) and martyrdom (*Shahida*) refer to the 'eyewitness'. In addition to the Quranic references, the terms *Shahid* and its plural *Shuhada* are found in hundreds of Hadiths (words and deeds of the prophet) and in Sira literature (or biographical accounts) recounting events from the earliest times in the Prophet Muhammed's mission. These accounts are at the heart of the juristic discourse on martyrdom and they make it clear that the early Muslims understood the foundational Quranic references to the Shuhada as referring to those who died in battle during a military jihad (Freamon 2003: 319-321).

Brown (2004: 431, See also Lewinstein 2001) believes the martyr reference to be borrowed from Syrian Christians for whom martyrs constituted those who by their manner of death witnessed the reality of heaven and the supremacy of God. Thus notions of witnessing, suffering, death and heavenly reward were then intimately entwined in Christian life (Lewinstein 2001: 78). This notion of an 'eyewitness' posed a challenge to Muslims of finding an association between the notion of paradise and the act of witnessing (Brown 2004; Lewinstein 2001). This prompted a number of varied readings and interpretations. Similarly modern scholars (See Lewinstein 2001; Goldziher 1971) are of the view that early scholars had expanded the meaning of *Shahid* to martyrdom due to the Christian and Greek linguistic connection between witnessing and martyrdom. As Brown (2004: 432) posits, early martyrdom became a corollary of struggle (Jihad) on behalf of the truth, and accordingly early accounts of martyrdom reflect this connection. Conflict within the Muslim community also played a role in expanding the notion of martyr, where martyrdom was not only seen as a struggle against non-believers but a goal worth pursuing in its own right.

Whilst the early philosophical debates of Islamic martyrdom revolved around the struggle for truth, some of these interpretations were heavily influenced by the earliest accounts of Muslim martyrs who went into the battlefield. The martyr who loses his life 'in the cause of God' did not die but entered paradise. The link between martyrdom and paradise was premised through the belief that 'martyrs are first of all spared from the normal pain of death.

They then proceed directly to the highest station in paradise, without waiting for the day of judgment, and without enduring interrogation in the grave by the angels' (Freamon 2003: 299).

The category of the martyr was expanded beyond the primary martyr who dies in a battlefield in the cause of God to include many kinds of death, including those who die from disease or accident, women who die in childbirth, death while engaged in a meritorious act, such as the pilgrimage to Mecca, a worthwhile scholarly pursuit, or after leading a virtuous life (Freamon 2003: 321). Whilst these categories are not directly referenced from the Quran they are constructed through the Hadith. Scholars such as Goldziher contend that these extra categories were added to mediate believers from rushing into martyrdom and these different categories sought to impress believers that even the normal course of everyday life could lead to the reward of paradise.

Brown (2004) proclaims the internal struggles within the Ummah as crucial in shaping the construction and appropriation of the martyr as a political and religious symbol for different communities. For example, for the Shi'ite Muslims, the dominant sect in Iran, the death of the Prophet's grandson, Hussein became the defining event of Islam and their community. The massacre of Hussein and his followers at Karbala in 680 became a seminal event for the Shi'a and even today major rituals of the community focus on the celebrations of martyrdom. Kermani (2000), in his eloquent account on the Battle of Karbala, explains that Muslim historiography has described the battle's vivid imagery. He points out that no historical event has ever moved the Shi'ites as deeply as the Battle of Karbala. Hussein's 'passion became the founding myth in the cultural memory of the Shi'ites and traditional accounts repeatedly reveal the extraordinary extent to which the myth functions as a critique of the actual course of Islamic history'.

In response, the Shi'ites over the centuries created ritual ceremonies of mourning each year during Muharram¹. Kermani illuminates the fact that mourning and private grief became public ceremonies of self-flagellation and processions after the Saffavid dynasty (which was Shi'ite) took over power in Iran after 1502. The martyrdom of Hussein at the Battle of Karbala was appropriated as symbolic of Iranian national identity and established a distance from the Sunni tradition of the Arabs. Kermani (2000) asserts that the cult of mourning which was already rooted in the culture was exploited by the Saffavids. Martyrdom, self-sacrifice and veneration of martyrs have become a dominant aspect for Shi'a religion and in contrast the Sunni do not valorize the suffering of martyrdom as a seminal cultural or religious construction. Even in present day Iran, the notion of martyrdom is a vital and resonant part of their communal imagination and identity, influencing political discourses, symbolic actions and gestures (Kermani 2002).

Neda's imagery of death was compelling and graphic, captured in an in-between state of life and death, as she is forever trapped in a liminal state on the internet with her life ebbing away. The notion of the witness plays out in a myriad of dimensions in the Neda death event.

¹ Muharram is the first month of the Islamic calendar and one of the four holiest months for Muslims.

Immortalized between life and death (which is freeze-framed through photographic images) with her eyes open, she is witnessing both the injustices on the ground and, as a martyr (commissioned through the struggle), equally paradise. The witnessing of her death through mobile technologies pauses time through her entrapment in the liminal space and theological readings resurrect her as a witness to an immortal utopian world which paradise signifies. The according of the martyrdom in many ways redeems her from the brutality and injustices on the ground, imbuing her with a higher station in her afterlife. This attribution of martyrdom emerges through the communal agency on the ground motivated by the communal politics of pity, particularly in Iran socialized to the rituals and practices of martyrdom in its cultural and historical context.

Neda's death imagery emerges through these multiple readings both in terms of the specific context of Iran but equally through the universal pull towards the abject as evident through death imagery. Beyond the symbolic readings, death has a universality where Neda is accessible as a death trope to one and all. The circulatory potential of the internet means that Neda can be consumed in situ and equally stripped of it. The notion of victimhood portrayed through a young and beautiful woman is a potent theme in myths, literary fictions and fairy tales across cultures (O'Connor 1989: 132). Neda invoked both latent and explicit cultural codes we are socialized into and, as such, a global audience could relate viscerally to the pathos of death laying claim to her innocent presence in a scene of turmoil. The loss of an innocent life pictured through the gory details of her dying and the inevitability of her death sent it into a viral fervour, making her death event amenable to private and public grief.

Audiences' ability to domesticate grief and suffering presented through the mass media is dependent on various elements; personal experiences, networks, social and communal ties, sense of loss and belonging to an event, the quest for social justice and reparation for loss, and the degrees of vulnerability an event can evoke. Pain and suffering become tools to conjoin private and public memory. Neda in the online spaces becomes amenable to multiple iterations. Resurrected from her bloody images of death, in commemoration sites which emerged to remember her as a martyr of the events of 2009, she is recomposed in a different demeanour to be alive and vibrant as a memory of the people through tributes, poetry and odes to the young women emerging from Iran, as well as beyond her native land to include diasporic Iranian communities as well as those without a connection to Iran. While the authorities sought to limit the commemoration of Neda in Iran, the prolific memorializing of Neda online stood in sharp contrast, making her an ineradicable presence and immortalizing through the imagery of death.

Conclusion

Death can court virality or be banalized as a non-event. In the case of Neda, she evoked a mass reaction in global humanity through an outpouring of grief and commemoration sites and rituals which emerged online and offline to immortalize. Many elements propelled Neda to the centre stage as a mediated death event. Neda was part of a secret ousted visuality, where new media technologies were enabling the world to look at the events inside Iran despite the tight restrictions on foreign media coverage and a ban on social media sites. The West's interest in the regressive politics of the Middle-East situated through the notion of orientalism further heightened their appetite to consume the East through this vantage point during a media shut down. The changing codes of journalism in its fervour to accommodate user-generated content meant that mainstream media were reading and willing to give extensive coverage to Neda, who became the symbolic face of resistance. Neda provided a morphological identity to politics in Iran, with which the rest of the world could filter the events through. Beyond the universal codes a death event offers in terms of the abject and relating to death as a corporeal reality, Neda tapped into the mythic realm where literary imagination has socialized an audience into relating to the pathos of a young beautiful woman being the object of sacrifice and vulnerability in a brutal male world. Her victimhood was re-appropriated to accord her heroic status, and in the readings of her resurrection as a martyr she showcased its cultural and historical resonance in Iran. Equally were showcased the properties of the internet as a site for media rituals to memorialize the slain and the sacrificed, both in terms of user-generated content and in terms of the ability of the internet to be ineradicable and immortalize the death of the corporeal body through its digital memory. Neda also became a site to challenge and re-engage with the notions of witnessing from different perspectives, re-igniting the crisis of digital witnessing but equally the mechanisms within it and the inexplicable power for visual images to become a life force of their own. As probably the 'most witnessed' death, Neda thrived on the visual subjectivity of the postmodern audience in filtering and consuming the world through this visual bias.

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