Ingvild Flaskerud

Visual Culture, Religion, and Politics in the Modern Iranian Public Sphere: The resemiotization of Twelver Shiite Culture in the Mobilization of Protest

Abstract To contest the results of the Iranian presidential election in 2009, mobilize street protest, and document the regime's responses protesters disseminated posters, photographs, and films on social media platforms. In this article I discuss how their use of signs associated with Twelver Shiite visual, material and performative culture were used to mobilize opposition against authorities who claim to be acting as guardians of a society based on the creed. By giving attention to signs' coexisting discursive contexts and modality, the study seeks to advance the conceptualization of 'recontextualization' and 'resemiotization' in the semiotic study of cultural codes, and to connect the study of Twelver Shiite visual, material and performative culture to the sphere of public discourse in modern Iran.

When Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was declared the winner of the Iranian presidential election on 12th June 2009 and reappointed as president for a second term, widespread protests were mobilized across the country. Accusing the authorities of electoral fraud, thousands of people gathered spontaneously in the streets to demand the removal of Ahmadinejad from the office he had held since 2005. Suggesting their vote had been stolen, the protesters' main slogan was 'Where is my vote?' (*ra'y-e-man kojāst*). The popular mobilization became known as the Green Movement (*junbesh-e sabz*), with activities that would continue until

Ingvild Flaskerud is a visiting researcher at the University of Oslo. Trained as an historian of religion, Flaskerud has done ethnographic research among Twelver Shia communities in Iran and Northern Europe. Her research interests include ritual practice, visual and material culture, pilgrimage, migration, religious authority, ethics, and learning.

spring 2010. The movement can be described as a 'counter public', incorporating forms of protest which, according to Robert Asen and Daniel Brouwer, experience 'varying degrees of exclusion from prominent channels of political discourse and a corresponding lack of political power' (Asen and Brouwer 2001, 2). To contest the electoral results, mobilize street protests, and document the regime's harsh responses, the activists disseminated posters, photographs, and films on various social media platforms. By adding their voices and perspectives to the dominant discourse in the Iranian public, they challenged official ideological and political perspectives channelled through state-controlled media outlets, which ignored reportage on, and discussion of the protests. Despite their efforts, the Green Movement protesters did not succeed in altering the authorities' decision regarding the electoral outcome and Ahmadinejad embarked on a second term as the President of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Nevertheless, the posters' designs offer an opportunity to explore how references to signs conventionally associated with Twelver Shiite visual, material and performative culture are used to mobilize opposition against political authorities who claim to be acting as guardians of a society based on the creed.

The politicization of religious symbols is not unique to the Green Movement. As pointed out by Gustav Thaiss when discussing the protests against the Iranian Shah in the early 1960s, 'under conditions of social change, the meanings and interpretations of myths and rituals are modified as each generation reinterprets the past in terms of its own current premises and values' (Thaiss 1972, 347). Meanwhile, Chelkowski and Dabashi have talked about the 'renarrating potentials' that are constitutive elements of the various performing arts associated with the Karbala event (Chelkowski and Dabashi 1999, 46). Similarly, Gruber notes, the displays in martyr museums make ideological claims and shape the collective memory about the recent past (Gruber 2012, 69). The Green Movement posters thus participate in a visual political discourse which has shifted from presenting regime critique in the past to expressing support for the authorities in the present, to again presenting anti-authority critique in the present. The research question addressed here focuses on two issues: the semiotic and the social, and how they influence each other in the process of mobilizing protest. To discuss the question, I examine four posters designed and circulated by the Green Movement activists, selected because they re-

fer to commonly shared Twelver Shiite cultural codes otherwise appearing in religiously connected contexts, such as rituals and the securing of a saint's protection. The posters are available at the digital poster archive created by Elham Mahootchi and presented in her MA thesis (2014).[1] The appearance of religiously coded signs in the context of a political protest movement represents a discursive recontextualization and possibly also a re-semiotization of the signs' signification and here I am interested in two aspects. How do coexisting discursive contexts and semiotic grounds combine, compete, or support each other in mobilizing the public and criticizing the authorities? What is the bearing of the signs' modality on the process of resemiotization? By giving attention to signs' coexisting discursive contexts and modality, the study seeks to advance the conceptualization of 'recontextualization' and 'resemiotization' in the semiotic study of cultural codes, and to connect the study of Twelver Shiite visual, material and performative culture to the sphere of public discourse in modern Iran.

Analytical Approach

Throughout analysis of the four Green Movement posters selected for this study, I have moved back and forth between examining the posters' visual and verbal language and conferring with available theoretical perspectives that could move the analysis forward. As a result, I have developed an overarching analytical approach which I have used as the framework for a systematic examination of the posters. The analysis proceeds from the assumption that the activists, to communicate their viewpoints to the wider public, expressed themselves through signs that were comprehensible to their audience. Influential theorists of semiotics have pointed to the collective nature of meaning-making processes. Signification, according to Roland Barthes, is developed by a given society and by history (Barthes 1977, 28). A similar idea is presented by Stuart Hall who perceives texts, images, objects, and practices to be cultural representations in which meaning is shaped by conventions and collective consensus (Hall 2002, 1–11). In this respect, we can conceive of the Iranian public as an 'interpretive community', an expression introduced by Stanley Fish to conceptualize how readers may share cultural assumptions or interpretive strategies when it comes to

1. http://www.irangreenposters.org

reading and understanding a text (Fish 1980). For the present study it is also useful to keep in mind Hall's suggestion that cultural representations should be understood, not only as concepts and ideas, but also as attachments and emotions (Hall 2002, 2). To discuss how the posters could mobilize the Iranian public, we can, therefore, think about the public as an 'emotive community'. Given that visual representations in Iran are used for political, liturgical, dogmatic, devotional, and ethical purposes (Flaskerud 2010), I also propose perceiving the public as a 'pragmatic community' that shares common practices. Thus, to discuss the posters' potential for mobilizing this target audience, I consider how religiously anchored signs may engage the public as an interpretive, emotive, and pragmatic community.

A protest movement, however, challenges established paradigms to produce alternative viewpoints and responses. A unilateral focus on collective interpretive, emotive, and pragmatic significations may give the impression that signs are monosemic and stable, that there is a tight correlation between encoding—how a message is formulated—and decoding, that is, how a message is understood. Instead, Charles S. Peirce has emphasized that a sign is 'something that stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity, not in all respects, but in reference to a sort of idea', which he calls the 'ground' (Peirce 1985, 5). Indeed, Peter Chelkowski and Hamid Dabashi's study of the role of visual media in the pre- and post-revolutionary 'art of persuasion' in Iran has demonstrated that a redefinition of religiously anchored signs was essential to their systematization into a new ideological statement (Chelkowski and Dabashi 1999, 51). The shift is comparable to Per Linell's conceptualization of 'recontextualization', understood as the 'transfer-and-transformation of something from one discourse/text in context ... to another' (1998, 154). The premise for his reasoning is that all discourse is constructed within a context. When pieces of a discourse are taken out of their original context and used in a new one, the transfer causes a change in the setting in which meaning is created and some kind of transformation of the meaning. Recontextualization is, therefore, accompanied by 'resemiotization', a process described by Rick Iedema as the shifting of meaning 'from context to context, from practice to practice, or from one stage of a practice to the next' (Iedema 2003, 41). The question I address is how the signification of signs referring to Twelver Shiite objects, practices, and stories are transformed

when transferred into the context of the post-electoral protest movement.

Here, I find it useful to work with John Connolly's distinction between the 'source' context and the 'destination' context. In the present study, the source context is the religious culture, understood here as a 'mediated heritage subjected to ongoing creative modifications' (Connolly 2014, 278), while the destination context is the post-electoral mobilization into which the signs are transferred. A broader look at image politics in modern Iran demonstrates, however, that religiously anchored signs have been moved through multiple destination contexts, including the revolution and the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1978– '79, the war between Iran and Iraq from 1980 to 1988, and the post-war era. As these social settings preceded, as well as co-exist with the post-electoral context, the Green Movement's use of religiously anchored signs involves the recontextualization and resemiotization of both earlier and coexisting signs and significations. The situation adds new dimensions to the conceptualization of 'recontextualization' and 'resemiotization' in that signs can be recontextualized several times and that multiple interpretive grounds can coexist. Resemiotization, therefore, does not simply cause a change in a sign's signification. It creates multiple and multilayered meanings which make the sign's signification ambiguous. How may coexisting semiotic grounds combine, compete, or support each other in mobilizing the public and criticizing the authorities?

Above I have presented a situation in which signs are transferred from one source context into multiple sequential or co-existing destinations contexts, to cause transformations in the signs' significations. The opposite development is, however, also possible. In one of the posters circulated by the Green Movement, the visual programme has two possible sources, namely the visual programmes developed to narrate the story about the battle at Karbala and illustrations to the Persian epic drama 'Book of Kings', *Shah-Nameh*. How can the presence of multiple source contexts impact the signification of signs presented in a destination context like the Green Movement posters?

Another issue to consider when discussing recontextualization and resemiotization is the bearing of modality, that is, the particular mode in which a sign exists. Several protest posters depict objects that are carried or worn by people in religious rituals and devotional observances. The signification of these signs

when recontextualized in the post-electoral setting may become entangled with viewers' embodied experiences and emotional attachments connected with ritual and devotional practices, which then serve as a source context. Modality is thus another factor, in addition to context, that can create multilayered and polysemic significations of culturally shared signs. I explore this aspect by following the posters' visual signs into settings in which they are used as ritual devotional objects.

The Post-Electoral Destination Context

To comprehend how Green Movement campaigners used religiously anchored signs to mobilize protest and critique the regime it is necessary to get an understanding of the destination context. What was at stake? The Green Movement posters were created and distributed during a politically tense situation. The presidential election had drawn a high voter turnout, mobilizing 85% of the voting population (40 million). One explanation behind the high turnout was the perceived possibility for political changes. Four main candidates competed for the office: the serving president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Mohsen Rezai, both regarded as conservatives, and Mehdi Karroubi and Mir-Hussein Mousavi, who ran on reformist platforms (Ranjbar 2017, 612–613). People's ability to exercise democratic rights is, however, limited.

Since the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1978– '79, Iran has been a theocracy governed by a Supreme Leader who must be a high-ranking religious scholar, *marja'-e taqlid*. The position is by appointment and the leader serves for life. The Supreme Leader's power is shared with a president elected by the public, but candidates running for presidency must be approved by the Supreme Leader and the appointed Council of Experts (*Majlis-e Khobregan*). Moreover, the electoral process is supervised and controlled by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (*Pastaran-e enqelab-e islami*) under the leadership of Ayatollah Khamenei, who has served as the Supreme Leader since 1989. This structure of power sharing is founded on the ideology and institution introduced by Ayatollah Khomeini (d. 1989) called *velayat al-faqih*, which refers to the guardianship or vicegerency of the jurist consult. When the electoral results suggested Ahmadinejad had won 62.6% of the votes while the widely antici-

pated frontrunner, Mousavi, received a mere 33.7%, Mousavi as well as many Iranians suspected foul play and held the Guards responsible for undermining the electoral process (Ranjbar 2017, 609). In the days following the election in June, thousands of people began walking the streets and gathering in squares as a form of non-violent protest. Demonstrations declined in frequency and intensity in July, but on Quds Day (*Ruz Jahani Quds*), 18th September, a protest was organized at the same time as the annual staging (since 1979) of rallies to express support for the Palestinians and opposition to Israel and Zionism. Protests flared up again in December after the death and memorial service of Ayatollah Montazeri who, shortly before he died, had criticized the brutal way the regime dealt with the popular opposition, calling it un-Islamic (Sadri and Sadri 2010: 171–182). Additional protests were organized in parallel with the annual religious celebrations on 27th December, or the 10th day of Muharram, when the battle at Karbala is commemorated. Again, on 14th February 2010—the 25th day of Bahman—a protest was organized a few days after the official annual celebration of the approval in 1979 of the constitution of the new Islamic Republic of Iran (22nd day of Bahman) (Golkar 2011, 55). The last recorded protest was during the Persian New Year celebration, *nowruz,* on 28th March 2010 (Cross 2010, 174).

The Green Movement was a popular one in that it operated as a decentralized network sustained mainly by ordinary people, particularly young adults, but aimed to address the population at large. It can also be characterized as 'ideologically elastic', as it attracted support from people adhering to various ideologies, including Islamist reformists, liberals, socialists, and secular dissidents (Mozaffari 2010, 4). Initially, the unifying agenda was to protest against what was held to be a fraudulent presidential election, but when the protests, both off-line and on-line, received hardline reactions from the Revolutionary Guards and their policing instrument, the Basiji battalions (*Basij Mustazafin*, 'Mobilization of the Oppressed'), additional demands were raised. These included the release of prisoners arrested in connection with the protests, and the application of the constitutional provisions related to free demonstrations and elections (ibid.). As such, the movement addressed a much deeper frustration with the authorities and their institutions and representatives.

To announce future street rallies and document street events, the activists used social media and were thus able to break the

government's monopoly on the production and broadcasting of news on televised channels, radio networks, and newspapers. Operating as an alternative news channel, the internet enabled people to report consecutively on events and confrontations with state authorities. In this situation, ordinary people acted as 'citizen journalists' (Allan and Thorsen 2009), posting information, reports, photos, and videos related to the protests on social media. Platforms like Twitter and Facebook could serve as accessible and flexible spaces for citizen journalism since, by 2009, over 70% of the population owned mobile phones (Monshipouri and Assareh 2009, 39). Like the street protests, however, the internet activism did not escape retaliations from the state authorities. In fact, Saeid Golkar has described the internet in Iran as a 'battlefield' (Golkar 2011, 57). Since 2009, the Iranian authorities have operated a cyber regime which blocks internet websites perceived as 'anti-government' and 'anti-Islamic'. Accordingly, before the elections in 2009, the control of cyber space was upgraded to curb the flow of digital information while, after the election, the regime stepped up its response to the protesters' posting of news reports by lowering bandwidth and internet connection speeds, and filtering weblog. It also began arresting cyber dissidents and people suspected of planning protest activities (Cross 2010, 175–176). The Green Movement posters were thus created and circulated in a socio-political context administered according to a governmental system whose representatives claimed to represent Islam. The system and its representatives, however, lacked the trust and support of large segments of the population due to limited political influence, lack of freedom of expression, and extensive state surveillance.

Mobilizing Political Opposition through Internet Posters

It may seem paradoxical that posters designed to engender opposition to a theocratic governance system would use religiously anchored visual language and cultural codes to unite people against the authorities. In this section I analyze the four internet posters selected for this study to discuss how signs conventionally associated with Twelver Shiite visual, material and performative culture were used to mobilize opposition and criticize the authorities.

The Colour Green and the Formation of a Counter Discourse

Not surprisingly, the colour green was the Green Movement's most consistent symbolic reference. Originally, the colour was chosen by the presidential candidate Mir Hussein Mousavi to represent his campaign, but it was soon adopted by members of the public to signal their support. At street rallies, Mousavi's supporters waved green flags and donned green shawls. The photograph in Figure 1, taken in Teheran in June 2009 and later circulated online, depicts a group of young men standing in the street (Mahootchi 2014, 18–19). In preparation for campaigning for Mousavi, one of the men is handing out pieces of green fabric which the others are placing around their necks.

In the pre-electoral context, a situation which opened a window for political change, green became a political symbol standing for social transformation and serving to identify people supporting change; perhaps this is why the colour was picked up to signify opposition in the post-electoral context. In the Iranian Twelver Shiite culture, however, green is also an established sign identified with the Prophet Muhammad and his family, the *ahl al-bayt*. Mass-produced posters depicting the Prophet and members of the *ahl al-bayt* wearing green headgear are today widespread. They can be purchased in shops and at markets and decorate private and public spaces as diverse as home settings, religious ceremonial spaces, shops, taxis and lorries, see Figure 2.

In visual narrative painting, like the story about the battle at Karbala in 680 A.D., the green headgear is also employed to identify the holy protagonists and martyrs in the battle. In the battle, the Prophet Muhammad's grandson, Husayn ibn Ali, fought against and was killed by the army of the Umayyad Caliph, Yazid ibn Muawiya ibn Abi Sufyan, and in the visual storytelling genre, green is applied to identify heroes from villains, the good from the bad, and the just from the unjust. This representative quality of the colour green has become a recognized cultural code in Twelver Shiite popular visual culture which spans more than hundred years. To give but two examples: Imam Husayn and his family members are easily recognizable from the green headgear in the wall painting from around 1905 decorating the interiors of the shrine of Imamzadeh Shah Zayd ibn Imam Ali ibn Husayn in Isfahan, see Figure 3; and the mass-pro-

Figure 1. Mousavi's supporters would wave green flags or don green shawls. Source: www.3xphoto.aminus3.com.

Figure 2. A poster depicting Imam Ali, presented in a perfume store. Photo: Ingvild Flaskerud, Shiraz 2002.

duced paper poster printed in 1997 and purchased from a bazar vendor in Shiraz in 2002, see Figure 4.

Figure 3. Wall paintings from around 1905 depicting scenes from the story of the battle at Karbala in the shrine of Imamzadeh Shah Zayd ibn Ali ibn al-Husayn. Photo: Ingvild Flaskerud, Esfahan 2012.

Figure 4. A poster depicting the battle at Karbala. Photo: Ingvild Flaskerud.

It cannot be established with certainty whether traditional Twelver Shiite visual codes and practices serve as a source context for the Green Movement's use of the colour, but the co-existence of the two signifying contexts—the protest movement and the mediated sacred history—makes green a multilayered and polyvalent sign, and therefore discursively ambiguous. Socially, it takes on a polysemic quality in that it points to various categories of people, that is, contemporary protesters and historical sacred heroes. In both cases, however, green identifies people who stand up for what they hold to be right. Thus, conceptually, green operates as a monosemic sign, signifying morally righteous opposition. If we perceive the electoral protest context to function as an interpretive 'primary ground', and the religious culturally coded system to operate as a 'secondary ground' against which the post-electoral context is evaluated and interpreted, the Green Movement activists can be identified with the heroes at Karbala and other members of the *ahl al-bayt*.

In addition to colour, the practice of wearing green shawls can operate as a cultural code. In wearing green shawls, the activists, deliberately or not, imitate practices associated with Karbala commemorative rituals. Sometimes participants in ritual parades put on green shawls, see Figure 5, and it is common to decorate ritual experts, like eulogists and storytellers, in green shawls to honour them for their eloquence and service to the community, see Figure 6.

Figure 5. Boys wearing green shawls in parades during Muharram.
Photo: Ingvild Flaskerud, Shiraz 2002.

Figure 6. A ritual leader wearing a green shawl at a ceremony commemorating the battle at Karbala. Photo: Ingvild Flaskerud, Shiraz 2002.

Regardless of the protesters' intentions, when structured into this order of signification, the possible alignment of the three coexisting signifying grounds makes the colour green a potent sign in the formation of a counter discourse. The identification between post-electoral protests and historical holy figures who stood up for 'what is right' and contemporary people who keep this memory alive is important to the formation of a counter discourse under a theocratic governance system as it gives legitimacy to the protest movement. The colour green as a cultural code is employed to position the protesters and the movement and question the system of governance.

In the next section, I discuss how the aspect of identification is also an important feature in the posters' mobilizing potential, one related to the posters' capacity for connecting with viewers lived experiences and practices.

The Mobilizing Potential of Cultural Objects and Embodied Practices

The poster in Figure 7 depicts a Muharram ritual standard, *alam*, which is drawn like a black silhouette in the shape of a crest with finials in the form of hands against a green background (Mahootchi 2014, 38). The text notes that on 26th and 27th December (2009) in the streets of Iran, the Green Movement will organize the event 'Ya Hussein, Mir Hussein'.
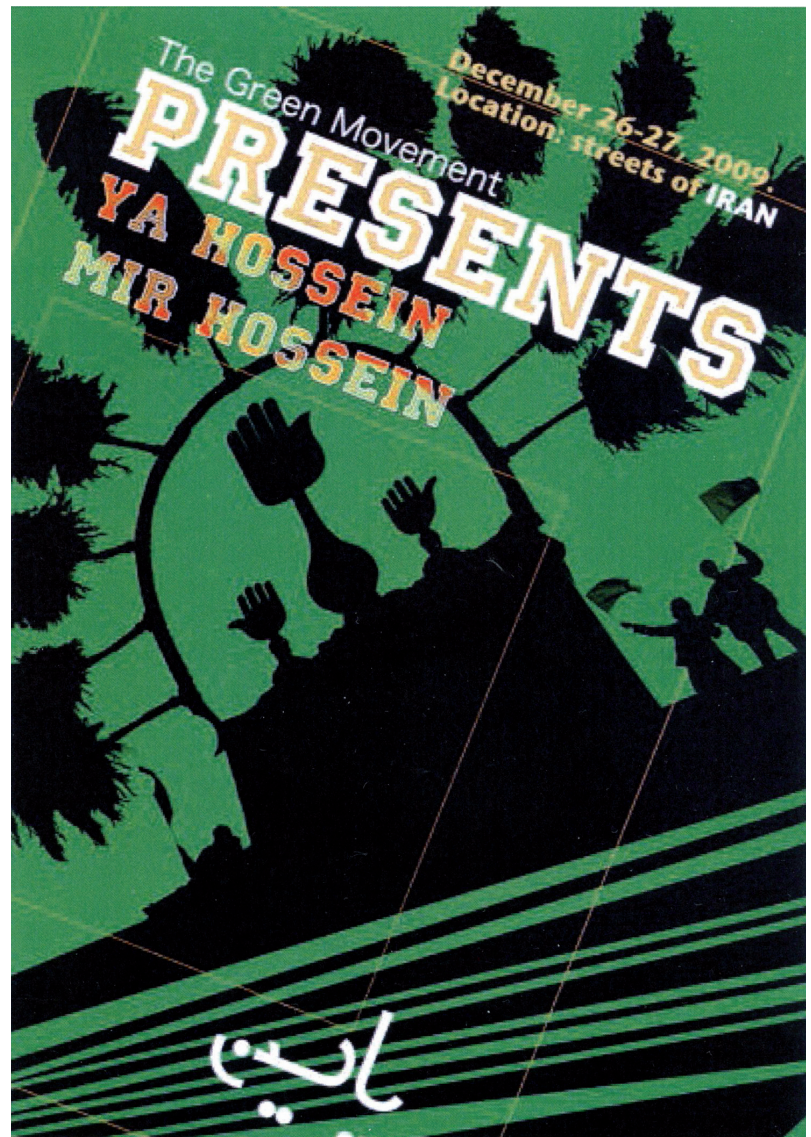
Figure 7. Alam poster.
Source: http://www.design4democracy.
worldpress.com.

Figure 8. Alam paraded in a
Muharram procession.
Photo: Ingvild Flaskerud, Shiraz, 2002.

Ritual standards made of a metalwork crest displayed on a supporting pole are well known to the Iran public as they form part of the historical and contemporary ritual paraphernalia used in Muharram processions, see Figure 8.

The annual rituals commemorating the battle at Karbala run from the first day of Muharram and reach a peak on the tenth, *ashura*, which is a national holiday in Iran. Processions of mourners parade the streets to lament the killing of Husayn, his family members, and his supporters. Elegies are performed by multiple male chanters and broadcast through wheeled loudspeakers, while the marching mourners carry flags and standards, and some perform moderate forms of self-flagellation, *sineh-zani* and *zanjir zani*. Along the routes, the streets are packed with onlookers. As public spaces become steeped in sensations blending feelings of grief and festivity, of nationalistic pride and spiritual sentiments, Muharram is a nation-wide event nobody can escape noticing. A major Karbala symbol, processional standards are decorated with calligraphy, portraits of the *ahl al-bayt*, feathers, and ex-votos (*nazr*, *dakhil*) in the shape of colourful fabrics. The standards represent Imam Husayn and his party of followers, in particular Husayn's half-brother Abu al-Fazl al-Abbas, who was his standard-bearer, *alamdar-e Husayn*. It is held that the young men carrying the processional standards follow in his footsteps and express the carriers' readiness to react to injustice. This idea may serve as a source context for the poster's message. The text, however, explicitly establishes a connection between Imam Husayn and Mir-Hussein Mousavi. The drawing of the standard could therefore also be intended to indicate that Mir-Hussein Mousavi and his supporters act as Husayn's standard bearers.

The significance of the standard in the poster is thus entangled with the viewers' embodied and emotive experiences, including those of the weight of its heaviness and the sensation of proximity to holy characters like Imam Husayn and Abu al-Fazl. Because of the standards' weight, several men alternate in carrying them and the toil they suffer is perceived to be rewarded with divine blessing, *barakat*. The standard itself, moreover, is held to transmit blessings which is mediated by the ex-votos embellishing it. From time to time, standard bearers swing the standard around to let people pass under it to be touched by the ex-votive fabrics decorating it and receive the blessings and protection they transfer. Many viewers, therefore, have intimate
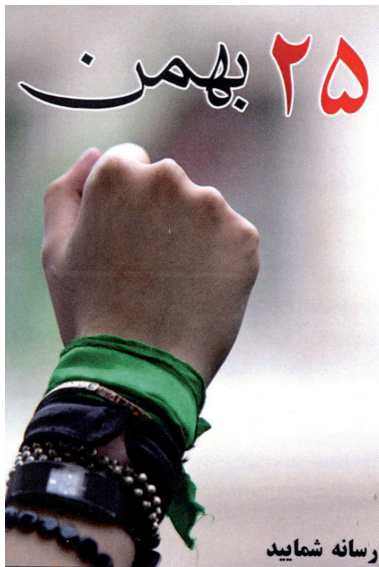
Figure 9. A poster showing a photograph of a raised clenched fist wrapped in green and black wrist ribbons. Source: Iman Navabi official website, http://imannabavi.com

knowledge of, and experience with the standards' material modality. This may impact their perception of the message in the protest poster. The abstraction of the illustrated standard, leading to its becoming an incitement for mobilization may thus be related to the public's corporal and spiritual experiences with ritual standards paraded in the streets. Here, the ritual object's modality as well as the shared emotive and pragmatic aspects of the Iranian public come into play in the signs' mobilizing capacity.

Another example of how the mobilizing potential of Green Movement posters relies on making viewers identify with practices and sentiments in their own life can be found in a poster depicting a raised clenched fist wrapped in green and black ribbons, see Figure 9. The text in the poster announces that a protest will take place on 25th Bahman (i.e., 14th February 2010) and declares, "You are the Medium ". In my reading, the linguistic message seeks to mobilize people to take to the streets on a given date. But what is the mobilizing potential of the raised fist wrapped in green and black ribbons?

The raised clenched fist is a sign of opposition known from protest movements all over the world. More specifically, anyone with a living memory of the Iranian revolution in 1978– '79 will remember how, to express discontent with the Shah and his regime, people took to the streets and protested by raising their fists. Photographs depicting the scenes were circulated to mobilize the anti-Shah movement (Chelkowski and Dabashi 1999, 71, 102, 103). During the early years of the Islamic Republic, the fist continued to appear in posters propagating the new ideologized interpretation of Islam, encouraging citizens to support the building of a new society and to denounce Western values (Abrahamian 1993; Chelkowski and Dabashi 1999). To large segments of the Iranian population the fist is thus associated with anti-regime mobilization as well as with support of a new social order.

The green and black wrist bands, on the other hand, are conventional expressions of 'popular' devotion, by which I mean non-prescribed practices which somehow connect to some form of belief. It is not uncommon to observe Twelver Shiites, in Iran and elsewhere, carrying green or black bands around the wrist, see Figure 10.

Figure 10. A photograph of a woman wearing green or black bands around the wrist. Photo: Ingvild Flaskerud, Oslo 2012.

The green wrist ribbons are cut from pieces of fabrics which have been rubbed on sarcophaguses belonging to the Imams and their descendants, the Imamzadehs. Upon returning home, the fabrics, now held to carry divine blessing and protection, are divided and shared among people (Flaskerud 2018, 48). When tied around the wrist, the ribbon serves to make one safe from bad events, a practice called *bala-gardan* (Persian: warding off or averting evil*)*. The ribbon can also be an expression of the carrier's spiritual attachment to, and affection for the holy martyr from whom protection supposedly radiates. The black band refers to the culturally established way of expressing mourning. People wear black to express grief after the loss of dear ones, while black fabrics are central paraphernalia during the annual rituals in Muharram (Flaskerud 2010). Black is thus associated with loss, mourning, and commemoration. In fact, this was not the first time the protesters combined green and black colours to oppose the authorities. In the days following the election on 12th June, the authorities responded to university students' non-violent demonstrations with dormitory raids and detentions. In a march labelled the 'Green Wave in Black Silence', staged on 18th June, participants donned green and black clothing to protest and commemorate the lives lost since the election.

The protest poster depicting a fist thus combines signs circulating in various social contexts and addresses the public as an interpretive, pragmatic, and emotive community. In recontextualizing and rearranging signs and practices, the poster con-

nects a global visual rhetoric of political opposition and support for change (the fist), with the Green Movement's own signature of protest (the colour green), which is linked to culturally developed notions and personal practices of seeking divine protection (the green wrist band), and cultural expressions of commemoration (the black wrist band). These multiple and coexisting grounds of signification connect the fist wrapped in green and black ribbons to viewers' personal lives, including their values, sentiments, practices, and experiences. Thus, the poster's mobilizing potential profits from its appeal to shared cultural codes as well as its ability to make viewers identify with the objects and practices referred to in the poster.

From the Streets of Teheran to the Plains of Karbala

The protest event announced in the poster depicting a standard (Figure 9) was one of the last public protests organized against the electoral results. The event resulted in severe clashes in Teheran between protesters and the Basiji militia. The day was later labelled 'Bloody Ashura', referring to the tenth day of Muharram when Imam Husayn was killed. Soon after, activists published a poster showing a central panel presenting five photographs documenting clashes between protesters and the Basij battalions, see Figure 11. The photographs are vertically organized to look like a film scroll and originate from an amateur video captured by someone's mobile phone camera (Mahootchi 2014, 34). The four upper photographs depict the turmoil of clashes between protesters and paramilitary groups, giving panned views from urban streets with pick-up trucks, smoke, and people running. The bottom image is a close-up, showing a young protester lying in the street. It is unclear whether it is a man or a woman because the face is smeared with blood. Next to the wounded youth sits a woman bending her head over the protester. Her face is not visible, but the viewer can recognize her headcover, *maqna*, which is worn like a hood to effectively conceal a woman's hair. The garment has been part of girls' school uniforms and women's work uniforms since 1979 and is upheld by the authorities as one of the Islamic state's most powerful symbols.

The scene in the close-up image reflects pictorial models developed in Karbala commemorative visual culture and resonates with an iconic cultural representation of the unjust killing of a
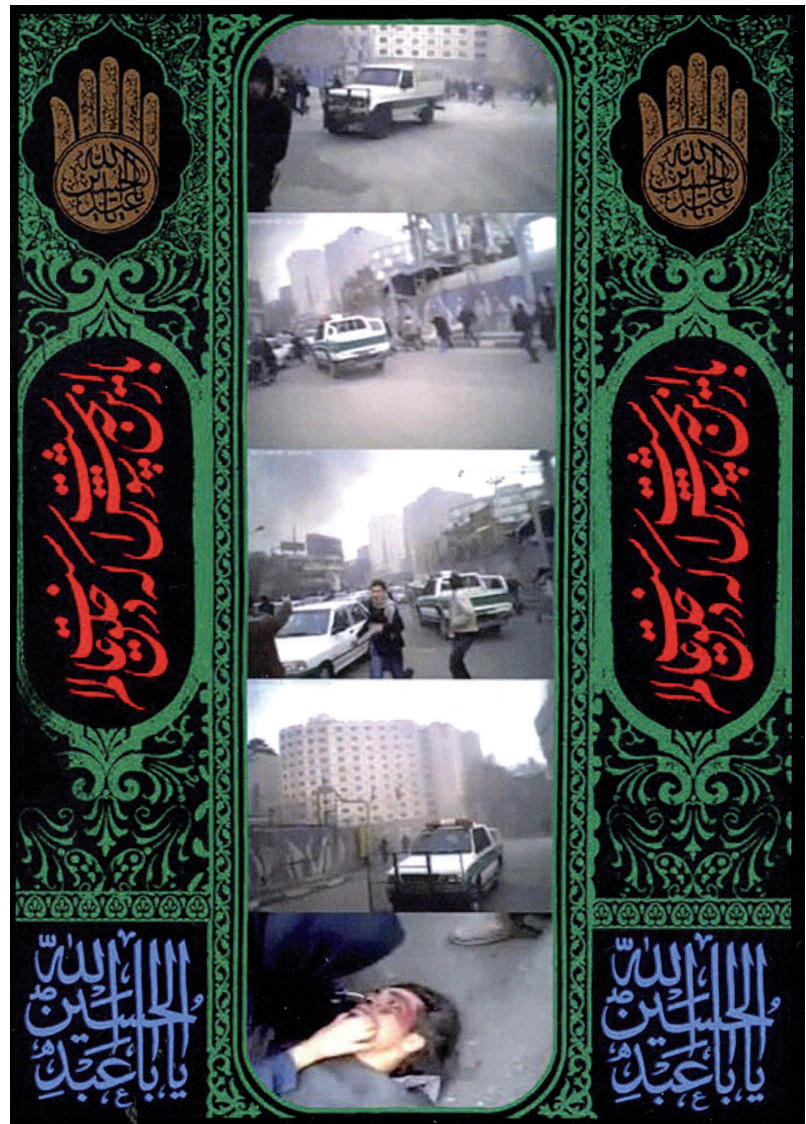
Figure 11. Designed by Osiaan Art Group. Source: Osiaan Art Group, Facebook page October 2011.

youth whose death is associated with martyrdom. An example can be seen in the poster in Figure 4, which depicts Imam Husayn's son Ali Akbar lying wounded on the ground with his back supported by Husayn, who is kneeling behind his son. Husayn is holding his right hand to his own forehead, an indication of grief. Scattered behind them lie fallen horses, shields, swords, and spears, paying witness to the turmoil of the battle. To the right stand countless numbers of soldiers merging into an infinite crowd representing the army of the antagonist Caliph Yazid.[62] The scene is well-known to the Iranian public as posters depicting episodes from the battle are commonly on display during Muharram and used as didactical tools, mnemonic

devices, and emotive stimuli to engender grief in viewers during the rituals of mourning (Flaskerud 2010). If we assume conventional Karbala pictorial models serve as a source context for the poster's design, the battle at Karbala is presented as a framework for interpreting the clashes in the streets of Teheran. In fact, as Elizabeth Rauh has demonstrated, in a drawing posted during the protests, a scene depicting a protester being beaten by the police is inserted in a visual Karbala narrative model known since the nineteenth century (Rauh 2013, 1337).

The poster in Figure 11, by referring to a culturally established template which commemorates the battle as a great tragedy, addresses the Iranian public as an emotive and pragmatic community. The photographs are framed by two identical black calligraphic bands presenting texts and signs from the Twelver Shia visual and verbal elegiac repertoire. At the top of each band is inserted a sign known as the 'Hand of Abu al-Fazl', *dast-e Abu al-Fazl*, and on the inside of the palm is written a greeting: *Allah, ya Ibn Abd al-Husayn*. The greeting is repeated at the bottom of the band. A text in red below the hand reads: 'Again, what is this revolt among the creatures of the world? Again, what is.' (*Baz in che shuresh ast keh dar khalq-e alam ast. Baz in che.*) The incomplete passage can be recognised as part of the first line from the twelve-stanza elegy, *tarkib-band*, composed by the famous Safavid court poet, Muhtasham Kashani (d. 1587), to mourn and honour the martyrdom of Imam Husayn. The elegy remains one of the masterpieces of Persian literature and, in its oral form, the poem has become standard fare in Muharram ceremonies. Today, the first one or two lines of the poem often appear on wall hangings decorating ritual locations and home set-

2. A text explains: 'Effigy of his Honourable Ali Akbar, Peace be upon him. At the time when he became a martyr on ashura, in the lap of his great father, his Honourable Aba Abd Allah al-Husayn. Peace be upon him.' (Timthal hezrat Ali Akbar, alayhu al-salam, hengam shahadat ruz Ashura der daman pedar buzurgvar Khoda, hezrat Aba Abd Allah al-Husayn, alayhu al-salam).

Figure 12. A wall hanging (*parcham*) referring to the first lines of Kashani's elegy. Photo: Ingvild Flaskerud, Shiraz, 2000.

Figure 13. A wall hanging presenting parts of Kashani's elegy decorating the shrine Imamzadeh Zayd in Muharram. Photo: Ingvild Flaskerud, Teheran, 1999.

tings during mourning assemblies, see Figure 11. Sometimes wall hangings present longer passages from the poem, see Figure 12.

The brief reference to Kashani's poem in the poster indicates that the designer expects the viewers to know the poem and fill in the rest, or at least to identify the text as introducing a Karbala elegy and recognize its emotive ambience. As the citizen journalistic documentation of clashes in the streets between protesters and paramilitary groups refer to the martyrs of the battle at Karbala, framed by conventional Karbala articulations of grief, the poster provides narrative content as well as emotive modality for people to reflect on the situation and shape their conceptualization of it.

Comparing how the fate and body of modern martyrs are represented in murals appearing in Teheran between 1997 to 2009, Ulrich Marzolph detects a development in the visual language that is relevant to the present discussion about recontextualization and resemiotization. Around 2008, the realistic and often gruesome martyr portraits are gradually replaced by an abstract, symbolic language in which a rose indicates martyrdom, and a white dove and butterflies symbolize the martyr's soul in heaven (Marzolph 2013, 166). This is an old symbolic language commonly used to commemorate past events and heroes—like the battle at Karbala and its martyrs—which often appears in ritual commemorative practices. Nevertheless, when transferred to a new context, Marzolph suggests, this older abstract language is capable of retaining the graphic murals' propagated concepts of martyrdom. However, the abstract character also seems to contribute to expanding the new murals' horizon of signification in that its depersonalized character makes the signs very 'suitable for promoting the past as the foundation of identity' and 'perpetuating the martyrs' lives and ideals into the future' (Marzolph 2013, 172–173). There is thus a recontextualization of older, abstract signs into modern martyr murals in which the old signs still refer to significations associated with the source context and relate to martyrdom and redemptive award. In the destination context, however, the reference, the martyr, shifts from the holy heroes of Karbala to contemporary citizens supporting the Islamic Republic. The Bloody Ashura poster presents a similar method, but by changing the destination context, the martyr is associated with the Green Movement.

The visual and verbal descriptions of modern martyrs are, Marzolph suggests, evidence of the 'popularisation of martyr-

dom as a constitutive element of the Shiite creed in today's Iranian interpretation' (Marzolph 2003, 96). In its combination of signs referring to established cultural codes and current events, the Bloody Ashura poster, I suggest, operates in discursive and non-discursive ways to challenge the co-existing politized conceptualization of martyrdom in modern Iran, and the authorities' appropriation of the Karbala event in its ideological project. Two important tropes in the official ideological project are the 'battle at Karbala' and the 'martyr'. One of Imam Husayn's epithets is *Sayyid al-Shuhada*, often translated as The Prince of Martyrs. Today Husayn's death is interpreted as an 'active' martyrdom, that is, as fighting and dying while trying to reestablish a just society, following in the footsteps of his father Imam Ali and grandfather, the Prophet Muhammad. In the build-up to the revolution in 1978– '79, the expression 'Every place is Karbala, every month is Muharram, and every day is Ashura' was turned into a popular slogan and Muharram processions transformed into powerful modes of public mobilization. Accordingly, in parallel with the martyrs at Karbala, demonstrators killed by the Shah's troops were designated 'martyrs' (Chelkowski and Dabashi 1999). After the establishment of the Islamic Republic, martyrdom continued to be glorified, now connected to the protection of Islam and, by association, the Islamic Republic. The conceptualization of martyrdom was again modified during the Iran-Iraq war to incorporate sacrifices endured to secure the survival of the nation. Now facing an external enemy, the war was conceived of as a cosmic battle between good and evil, resonating with the battle at Karbala, while martyrdom was developed as a dominant theme to recruit soldiers, to honour fallen combatants, and to console their mourners. In this context, martyrs were defined as those who had given their lives to defend the country and, by extension, its ideological and political system, while their self-sacrifices were connected to the eschatological promise of redemption. In the post-war era, the martyrdom theme has been developed to serve as an important supplement to the Karbala theme in promoting the authorities' ideological position and the state's identity. In this context, the conceptualization of martyrdom is given a wider interpretation, in that any person whose violent death can be linked to the service of the Islamic Republic, no matter the task, is regarded as a martyr.

A central institution in defining the modern conceptualization of martyrdom as a religio-ideological-national protective

sacrifice is the Foundation of Martyrs, *Bunyad-i Shahid*, established in 1980. In the multimodal visual propagation supervised by the Foundation of Martyrs, fallen soldiers are described with references to Islam, specifically emphasizing their heroic sacrifices and the promise of a rewarding afterlife. Assigned with the authority to issue martyr certificates on behalf of the state, the foundation decides who qualifies as a martyr. It also supervises the public visual representation of martyrdom and has been instrumental in the shaping of a 'culture of martyrdom', *farhang-i shahadat* (Gruber 2012, 71–72), promoted through educational institutions, art festivals, and book exhibitions (Saeidi 2004), martyr museums and graveyards (Gruber 2012, Shirazi 2012), books and magazines, films and documentaries. The presence of modern martyrs in public spaces is inescapable as major streets, schools, and hospitals are named after post-revolutionary martyrs, and memorials appear as billboards, mural paintings, graffiti, banners, and posters (Marzolph 2003, 2013; Gruber 2008, 2009; Bombardier 2012; Fromanger 2012, Talebi 2012), see Figures 14 and 15. Martyrs are also made physically present as

Figure 14. A major street in Shiraz lined with posters of fallen soldier martyrs from the Iran-Iraq war. Photo: Ingvild Flaskerud, Shiraz 2014.

Figure 15. A billboard in the city centre presenting portraits of fallen soldier martyrs from the Iran-Iraq war. Photo: Ingvild Flaskerud, Shiraz 2014.

coffins, allegedly containing the remains of unrecognizable martyrs, *shahidane-gomnam*, of the Iran-Iraq war (Talebi 2012, 121), are paraded through urban streets in military motorcades before being buried at designated sites around the country.

However, as Fromanger has argued, it would be reductionist to perceive the martyrdom culture as merely staged by the authorities (Fromanger 2012, 52). The effects of the revolution and the war with Iraq were deeply felt by the population, with many families losing one or more members. In fact, the first representations of martyr memorials were the result of private initiatives and the many martyrs' cemeteries and museums, carefully designed from media-specific ideological perspectives, are also important spaces for personal grieving and solace (Fromager 2012; Shirazi 2012; Talebi 2012). Martyrdom in modern Iran is thus highly politicized as well as deeply personal. The Bloody Ashura poster speaks to both and herein lies the potential for challenging the officially politicized understanding of martyrdom.

The Revolutionary Guards and the Basiji, in particular, have embraced the modern conceptualization of martyrdom. Basijis often call themselves 'martyrdom-lovers' (*ashiqan-e shahadat*) (Moin 1999, 249–250), and in the early 1990s, the Revolutionary Guards established a sub-organization of the Basiji which specialized in anti-riot tactics to combat domestic unrest called 'Ashura Brigades' (Menashri 2001, 122). The Bloody Ashura poster depicting a youth injured after clashes with paramilitary forces contests such self-perceptions of the Basiji and Revolution-

ary Guards, whose retaliations were encountered by the post-electoral protesters both in the streets and on the internet. In fact, the movement's contestation of the authorities' hegemonic understanding of who qualifies as a martyr was made explicit from the very beginning when a young woman named Neda Aghasoltan was shot and died during demonstrations on the day of the presidential elections. The movement, headed by Mir-Hussein Mousavi, announced her to be the first martyr of the resistance movement. Referring to Neda as a martyr, Shirazi concludes, spread a 'divinely ordained, religious mantle over the entirely political uprising' (Shirazi 2012, 114).

In depicting a civilian wounded by the regime's paramilitary supporters in a style that imitates a Karbala narrative, the Bloody Ashura poster can also be seen as directed at the re-elected president, Ahmadinejad. For his 2005 presidential election campaign he adopted as his key slogan 'Islam without justice is not Islam' (*Islam bedun-e ´adalat Islam nist*) (Monshipouri and Dorraj 2021, 207). The allusion to 'justice' may have a dual reference. The slogan could refer to Ahmadinejad's vision for his social politics and his appeal to the economically underprivileged and unemployed with promises of financial improvements. Implied in the slogan is a critique of the reformists, whom he portrayed as corrupt and responsible for growing economic inequality. Embedded in the slogan is thus the casting of Ahmadinejad as 'just' and, as such, representing Islam. The slogan, moreover, connects with the ethos of the Revolution.

In his critique of the Shah's politics, Khomeini developed a rhetoric based on notions of the 'underclass' and 'disinherited' and frequently addressed the people as 'the oppressed of Iran', *mazlum-e Iran* (Sreberny-Mohammadi and Mohammadi 1994, 106). A *mazlum* is someone who has been ill-treated and the concept has been central to the development of the Twelver Shiite identity. Following the Twelver Shiite understanding of history, Imam Ali, deprived of his right to succeed the Prophet Muhammad as the leader of the Muslim community, and Imam Husayn, killed at the battle of Karbala, archetypically epitomize the *mazlum* as wronged individuals. *Mazlum*, however, also refers to someone who is humble and considerate of others (Dabashi 2008, 302). In the Twelver Shiite collective memory, Imam Ali is remembered as identifying with the poor and needy in society and, thus, as a considerate and just ruler, a dualism exploited by Khomeini. In the pre-revolutionary build-up, he cast him-

self as a defender of the oppressed, while after the revolution he argued that the candidates best suited to secure the protection of the *mazlum* under a just governance would be Islamic jurisprudence experts operating under the rule of the *velayat-e faqih*. About thirty years after the revolution, Ahmadinejad, although a lay person, inscribes himself in the modern version of the archetypical narrative of the 'just ruler'. The photographs presented in the Bloody Ashura poster depicting the authorities' violent responses to non-violent opposition can be interpreted as questioning both the official and Ahmadinejad's understanding of 'justice'. The poster thus connects visually, conceptually, and emotionally to co-existing religious and political discourses in modern Iran.

The photograph of the wounded youth in the Bloody Ashura poster has, however, a second possible source context, namely the illustrations to the Persian epic drama 'Book of Kings', *Shah-Nameh*, composed by Abu al-Qasem Ferdowsi (d. ca.1020). Chelkowski has drawn attention to the iconographic resemblance between paintings representing Imam Husayn mourning his dying son Ali Akbar and those illustrating Ferdowsi's story of the famous hero Rostam comforting his dying son Sohrab (Chelkowski 1989, 109). The resemblance is not surprising since both visual programmes were developed by coffeehouse painters, *naqqashi qahveh-khaneh*, in the nineteenth century, when coffeehouses often served as ateliers for the Karbala *pardeh* painters (painting on canvas) (Bulookbashi 1996, 104). For two modern visual renderings of the scenes, compare Figures 4 and 16.

Figure 16. *Qahveh-khaneh* painting depicting Rostam sitting by his son Sohrab, whom he has fatally wounded. Tehran 2012. Photo: Ingvild Flaskerud.

Shah-Nameh is counted among the works referred to as *adab* literature which invites people to improve their character and engage in ethical reflection on how to act in order to be wise and do what is just (Mahallati 2015). This body of literature includes various literary genes like the Qurʾan, Sufi poetry, parables, and secular and religious stories (Ormsby 2010, 53–78; Sajoo 2010, 1–30; Alshaa 2017). The three best known stories in *Shah-Nameh* involve the death of sons as the result of their fathers' actions, thus casting the offsprings as the innocent parties. The most famous character is Rostam, the Persian king's most renowned champion, who meets his son Sohrab on the battlefield. Never having met before, Rostam fails to recognize his son, and Sohrab is fatally wounded by his father (Ferdowsi 2007, 186–214). Rostam then recognizes his son due to the clasp the young man wears on his upper arm. Ferdowsi's literary rendering of Rostam's grief when he sits by his dying son states, 'Violently he wept and tore his hair and heaped dust on his head' (Ferdowsi 2007, 210). The son replied, 'I tried in every way to guide you, but no love of yours responded' (Ferdowsi 2007, 210).

The combination of signs from two source contexts into one destination context enlarges the culturally available interpretive frame for understanding the image depicting the clashes in the streets of Teheran. The similarities in the visual renderings of the wounded youth in the streets of Teheran, the fatally wounded son of Imam Husayn in the historical battle at Karbala, and the young combatant in the national epic drama, may invite comparisons to be made between the destiny of the three. Perhaps all three can be conceptualized as *mazlum*, wronged individuals. However, if we perceive the stories about Ali Akbar and Sohrab as source contexts for the interpretation of the Bloody Ashura poster, there is also an important difference to consider. Ali Akbar was killed when standing up to what was perceived to be an illegitimate regime while Sohrab was killed by his father, a figure who is supposed to offer protection. In thus turning the attention towards the offender, one could argue that Iranian youths, like Al Akbar, are killed by illegitimate authorities, and like Sohrab, are forsaken by those who should offer protection. There are, most likely, many other possible interpretations to be drawn. What is important is that the photograph's discursive field is expanded to not simply function as documentation of one event, but to invite comparison and evaluation between events. As such, the Boody Ashura poster also addresses

the Iranian public as a pragmatic community experienced in the ethical examination and interpretation of the *adab* literature.

The resemiotization of Twelver Shiite Visual, Material, and Performative Culture in Mobilizing Protest

The central question that has been examined in this article is how references to signs conventionally associated with Twelver Shiite visual, material and performative culture can mobilize political opposition against authorities who claim to act as guardians of a society based on the Twelver Shiite creed. The question addresses two issues, the semiotic and the social, and how they influence each other in the process of mobilizing protest. The Green Movement activists' reference to well-established signs and practices seems to confirm Hall's suggestion that 'members of the same culture share sets of concepts, images and ideas which enable them to think and feel about the world' (Hall 2002, 4). However, the movement's use of shared signs to mobilize protest against the authorities contradicts the concluding part of his argument, 'and thus to interpret the world in roughly similar ways' (ibid.). This raises some questions regarding the polysemic, semantically versatile, and even contrastive potential of otherwise shared cultural signs.

The posters' potential for mobilizing protests and presenting critique, I suggest, lies in the polysemic and ambiguous signification of the signs, which has accumulated through multiple instances of discursive recontextualization and resemiotization to create multiple and multilayered meanings. The recontextualization of signs referring to Twelver Shiite objects, practices, and stories in the post-electoral context of protest, places already established and shared significations on new interpretive ground that shapes the signs' resemiotization. But for the signs to function as mobilizing tools and expressions of critique, the viewers must be able to connect the signs' source and destination contexts. Here, the electoral protest destination context functions as an interpretive 'primary ground', and the religious and culturally coded systems operate as coexisting 'secondary ground' against which the post-electoral context is evaluated and interpreted. The mobilizing power of this interpretive structure is that the Green Movement activists can be identified with the he-

roes and/or victims at Karbala who stood up for 'what is right', the young heroes and/or victims of *Shah Nameh* killed by their guardians, and contemporary people, thereby challenging the coexisting official interpretation of the battle at Karbala, martyrdom, and legitimate governance.

The resemiotization of the objects and practices presented in the posters is also reliant on the viewers' pragmatic and emotional experiences. Ever since Twelver Shiism was made the official religious creed in Iran in 1501 A.D., the public has been exposed to and participated in religious visual storytelling conveyed through theatre (*tazieh*) (Rahimi 2012), painting on canvas (*pardeh*) (Chelkowski 1979, 1989; Peterson 1981; Bulookbashi 1996), tile paintings (*kashi-kari*) (Mousavi 2018), lithographed books (Marzolph 2001), wall hangings (*parcham*), posters (Flaskerud 2010), and films (Aghaie 2004). Important to this tradition of visual communication is the creation of signs assigned specific and stable denotational meanings which are then recontextualized into multiple social and political settings. While images, flags, banners (*parcham*), and standards (*alam*) are paraded in government-supervised public processions and public halls (Chelkowski 1986), they also decorate ritual venues in peoples' homes where they are used to afford the individual and the community powerful settings for worship and devotion (Flaskerud 2005, 2010). Here the objects function to stimulate deeply personal emotions and experiences of the sacred, to produce collective ritualized expressions of mourning, and create favourable liturgical moods for people calling on holy intercessors to ask for divine help and protection. Today, collectively shared, religiously anchored signs, objects, and practices thus coexist in ideologized, authority-controlled social contexts, in ritualized devotional settings, and in personal, spiritualized situations. Each of these pragmatic contexts creates certain emotional and interpretive frames which can operate in isolation from each other or in combination to produce multilayered meanings.

The Green Movement posters profited from the culturally developed practice of transferring religiously anchored signs through multiple destination contexts, the coexistence of several interpretive grounds, and the multiple and multilayered semiotic potential attributed to each sign. The green and black wrist bands and the standards, for example, not only connect with politized and dogmatic frames of signification but refer to collectively shared and private devotional practices and emo-

tional experiences. When the signs connect with viewers' own actions and subjective experiences, sometimes of the sacred, this creates an interpretive ground which may compete with hegemonic patterns of signification. Pragmatic and emotional aspects of the religiously anchored signs may, therefore, be just as important as discursive aspects in mobilizing protest and expressing critique. Thus, resemiotization depends not merely on the signs' recontextualization but also on their multimodality and the intersemiotic translations between the various modalities, such as visual rhetorical signs like posters and material objects like standards. The situation permits what O'Halloran et al. describe as 'semantic expansions that extend beyond those possible with one resource alone' (O'Halloran et al. 2016, 205).

Similarly, the Bloody Ashura poster is an example of resemiotization based on the signs' multimodality, presenting photographic images from street protest as a form of citizen journalism which is organized to connect with Karbala visual narratives as a form of liturgical object, framed by visual and verbal elegiac expressions from ritual culture. At the same time, this poster offers a semantic expansions that extend beyond one source context, the battle at Karbala, to include a second source context, namely stories from *Shah-Nameh*, the national epic drama. In challenging the authorities' hegemonic interpretation and their legitimacy, the protest posters function as abstractions, a suggestion inspired by Sussane Langer, who has conceptualized symbols as 'any device whereby we are able to make an abstraction' (Langer 1953, x). With the Karbala event and the story about Sohrab lingering in the background as secondary interpretive frames, the Bloody Ashura poster can be interpreted as posing questions frequently addressed in the *adab* literature: 'What *is* justice?' '*Who* represents justice?' As such, the Green Movement posters shape a counter public in the sense of creating parallel discursive arenas wherein activists can formulate and circulate interpretations of collectively shared signs which challenge the authorities' interpretations.

The Green Movement posters thus participate in a visual political discourse where signs associated with Twelver Shiite visual, material and performative culture have been used in the past to generate support for the Safavid Shahs' Shiification of Iran and to critique the Pahlavi Shahs' regime, and in the present to express support for the Islamic Republic of Iran as well as to critique the Republic's authorities. The posters were able to present

a critique of the electoral results and the authorities by continuing to inspire a resemiotization of the signs. The resemiotization was based on the identification between the protesters and members of the Prophet's family and with famous characters from the national epic drama, the appeal to the public as an interpretive, emotive, and pragmatic community, and to the viewers' experiences, values, emotions, and practices.

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