

Aestheticized Politics, Visual Culture, and Emergent Forms of Digital Practice

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The aftermath of the 2009 Iranian presidential election will be explored here from a visual perspective, with attention to its aestheticized politics. The revolution occurred online as well as in the streets, but it has been difficult to evaluate the effect of online activity on the offline world. I argue that both the notion of circulation in new media and theories of representation are insufficient to address the impact of digital culture on protest art and its effect on the public sphere. I propose a theory of practice that accounts for new forms of social practice that is based on a convergence mode of production.

In antiquity the individual and the crowd had no significance whatsoever; the man of excellence stood for them all. The trend today is in the direction of mathematical equality, so that in all classes about so and so many people make one individual and in all consistency we compute numbers. Kierkegaard "Two Ages, 1846." (Hong & Hong, 1978)

The era of crowds is still very much with us, particularly in times of political turmoil and in the developing world. But in a deeper sense [in the digital age], perhaps it has passed. (Schnapp & Tiews, 2006)

In June 2009, the Iranian opposition declared that the recent presidential election had been rigged and its results a lie, and citizens poured into the streets of Tehran and other larger Iranian cities to protest. In a combination of scattered, self-organized efforts, individuals and groups formed one of the world's largest spontaneous social movements of the decade. Parallel to the street activities was oppositional activism with overlapping connection to the streets. However, the causal connection between the online and street movements has been complicated and hard to establish. The Internet, in general, and tools such as mobile devices, in particular, became not only the vehicles for messages and images but also their makers. Images (such as those of Neda, a young woman who died on the streets) became the

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most universal aspect of the information that circulated around the globe. People around the world could see the images, and they interpreted them as signifiers of a movement for social change in Iran. These images, which I call aestheticized forms of political expressions, tap into the historical archive of Iranian narratives of sociopolitical resistance. They also inspire questions about their level of signification, including whether we can read continuity in meaning between the political graphics of the 1979 revolution and similar images in 2009.

What complicates the answer to such questions is the technological discontinuity between the two periods, from one-to-many to many-to-many forms of production. In this recent movement, people produced images both individually and collectively, and the images were based on a *convergence mode of production* (Jenkins, 2006). This is a paradigm shift in how content flows, from media-specific devices (like radios or televisions or cassette players) to devices that can run multiple technologies (smart phones, computers). In this shift, the simple boundary between top-down (or state) and participatory media breaks down. In the convergence mode, mobile technologies have enabled individuals and groups to interact in a particular configuration of space, time, and place.

These shifts have led to emergent discursive practices in cultural production. In the realm of the visual, as it happened in the Iranian presidential election of 2009, images flowed from mobile technologies to the Internet and onto different Web-enabled technologies such as YouTube, Twitter, Web blogs, and various social networking sites. Raymond Williams (1977) argued for emphasizing social practice when discussing media. The notion of practice fills the gap between individual agency and the state; it situates the opposition in a network of active discourses, expertise, and social movements. I argue that the notion of circulation in new media and theories of representation both are insufficient to address the impact of digital culture on protest art and its effect on the public sphere. I propose a theory of practice that accounts for new forms of social practice that is based on a convergence mode of production. My approach here is to expand the notion of practice (media is always already a social activity) to materiality and technology. In convergence culture, attending to both practice and various mobile technologies helps us avoid easy conclusions such as *these are democratic technologies* and *here are technologies of resistance*.

In this article, I analyze aestheticized politics in the images that were produced as protest digital art during Iran's 2009 presidential election. Some images were iconic (such as Neda Agha Sultan as martyr), and many others were political messages (such as *Yar-e dabestani-e man* [My Schoolmate]); all were creatively put together by the image makers as a call for political action in the opposition. These images are rooted in the history of protest art to which the Iranian revolution of 1979 belongs. What has changed is the emergence of specific practices in a digital environment. In fact, in the aftermath of the 2009 election, we can see a division between online and street activism. There was, on the one hand, enormous digital activism that made it possible for people inside and outside the country to achieve a sense of revolution; but, on the other hand, the streets calmed down and did not follow the ongoing digitized revolution. The "digital revolution" eclipsed the actual world of flesh and blood on the streets (Edwards, 2011).

Background to Image Production

The images that I analyzed for this study are historically grounded, and their signification and usage are connected to historically-situated social practices. Political image making, street activism, mobile technology, and the Internet all have a history, and all of these need to be taken into account simultaneously as the medium, the ecosystem of images. Indeed, the field of political graphic art in Iran has a long history. Its modern roots go back to the constitutional revolution of 1905, but it took a new turn during the revolution of 1979. Posters during this period depicted anti-imperialist themes in protest against the shah's regime (Chelkowski & Dabashi, 2000; Fischer & Abedi, 1990) that were designed and posted on the streets by political groups and individuals who tapped into these cultural resources. Most prominent was the major Shia theme of Karbala (the martyrdom of the third imam, Hossein). The depiction of the Karbala event that took place in 680 A.D. is based on the Shia narration of the confrontation between Imam Hossein and his followers and the army of the caliph of the time, Yazid, in the Karbala desert. In the confrontation, Imam Hossein is overwhelmed and killed by the army of the caliph. The image associated with this event shows a scene of devastation of the imam and his followers and establishes an affective mood of injustice. For the believers it establishes a sense of righteousness and a call for endurance in hardship. The image works as a metadiscourse of right and wrong and calls the believers to rise up and fight injustices in the contemporary context.

In the postrevolutionary era, this theme became central to war films, TV series, and videos, such as the late 1980s TV series by Morteza Avini, *Ravayat-e-Fath* (The Story of Conquest). What has made this affecting paradigm significant is that it has penetrated the visual language of opposing groups. Today, it is perhaps the most used and abused graphic theme in protest art. The theme of Karbala, once effectively used as oppositional images of the 1979 revolution, is now instrumentally used by religious and nonreligious individuals and groups as well as government agencies to mobilize crowds. However, the circulation of these images in the virtual environment has raised the question of their effectiveness.

The confusion about the effect and significance of these images is rooted in technological discontinuity and varying social practices in image making. The hallmark of the 1979 revolution was the cassette tape (Sreberay-Mohammadi & Mohammadi, 1994) circulating religious sermons and political messages among Iranians, a one-to-many mode of production and circulation; in contrast, in the 2009 protests, Internet-enabled mobile technologies circulated images, a many-to-many and simultaneous mode of production and circulation.

The revolution of 1979 and the postrevolutionary government invested significantly, both financially and institutionally, in political visual culture as means of mass persuasion. Pursuing extensive visual campaigns in advertising revolutionary images in public spaces, creating murals and street art, and marking public spaces as Islamic, the postrevolutionary government has been trying to maintain a hegemony over a particular visual culture grammar in the public sphere.

Although this hegemony arguably has been maintained to this date, there are signs of the undermining of this overdetermination. One source undermining the government monopoly of political art was the hundreds of thousands of people who came into the streets during the election of 2009. Their

demonstrations could be seen on the front pages of many newspapers and magazines: many people filling the streets with a large green banner in their midst, with placards, painted faces, and street performances.

This undermining of the government monopoly of political art also can be seen in emerging forms of nongovernmentally sanctioned modes of production that have been generally called underground production (whether visual or musical). The online environment has played a significant role in underground production and circulation. For example, the online environment allowed the practice of editing films or composing music to move to private homes, and various distribution sites made it possible for filmmakers and musicians to bypass governmental control and distribute their productions outside of Iran. These emergent possibilities have been challenged by the government. For the past few years, the government has been talking of a halal (regulated and permitted religiously) Internet, which would be a form of intranet imposed on the citizenry to reinforce the hegemony on cultural production.

Urban Spaces: Overdetermination Undermined

During the election of 2009, there were fewer visual materials for the campaign than there had been for the previous election and fewer giant posters of candidates overlooking the cityscapes of Tehran and other major cities. There were at least two reasons for this change. First, the government sought to limit visual material for the campaign by cutting the funding for it based on allegations of inequity in spending campaign money and that some candidates had access to more resources than others. Second, and more importantly, the government worried that it had lost some popular support, so it sought ways to create hope among the people and bring more of them to the polls. The government shifted from using images to televised debates of candidates to show a democratic face and to engage the citizens. It was in this spirit that the city hall in Tehran provided blank billboards that candidates could literally write on, and the national TV channel focused on televised debates in which candidates could express themselves with unprecedented freedom. Perhaps another reason was to portray the idea of a democratic campaign related to a "democratic" system.



Figure 1. Campaign bulletin board provided by city hall. (Photo by author, 2009.)

Populist themes were central to the initial visual campaigns of the two main rivals. Ahmadinejad (the incumbent) used a socialist-realist-styled poster, while Mousavi (the opposition leader) from the beginning tried to revive themes from the 30-year-old Islamic revolution, fighting the tyrant through the story of the self-sacrifice of the third Shiite imam. Mousavi's first name, Mir Hossein, became synonymous with Imam Hossein. It was common to hear "Mir Hossein ya Hossein!" in public gatherings of Mousavi supporters. (*Mir* refers to kinship with the Prophet Muhammad, similar to *Seyyed*, descendent of the prophet. Therefore, in this slogan, Mousavi's situation is equated to Imam Hossein and his fight for justice.



Figures 2 and 3. Campaign posters: Ahmadinejad (left, translation: *The Populist, only Ahmadinejad*). Mousavi (right, translation: *Mir Hossein Mousavi*). (Photos by author, 2009.)

The campaign to bring people out did work, and people came into the streets—to the government’s dismay, because they came out to express their demand for change. In fact, it became clear that “the people” that the government had in mind was not the *umma* (the community of believers), nor democratic voters, but voters who affirm the will of the leader rather than electing their own candidate. If there were any ambiguity before about this, the government’s reaction to the protest resolved it. As Manoukian (2010) suggests, “crowds” become both the site of the process of this disambiguation and yet at the same time are mobile and heterogeneous.

In the aftermath of the election, street demonstrations grew in grandeur. They turned to violent clashes with security forces. For the next 6 months, protestors took every occasion in the calendar of the history of social movements in Iran as an opportunity to demonstrate, and the state perceived each demonstration as a challenge. Massive arrests, killings, and theatrical trials were ongoing. This activity culminated in major clashes on Ashura (the 10th day of the Islamic month of Moharram, the day of the

martyrdom of Imam Hossein). The state was on high alert, worried about the possibility of losing power altogether.

Visual Underground: Convergence Mode of Production

But the street protests dwindled. As they did, the revolution remained online in digital form. The remainder of this article will focus on visual material that emerged specifically online. These materials shed light on forms of collaborative practices and on the meaning-making process that occurs in an online environment.

In convergence culture, attending to both practice and various mobile technologies helps us avoid easy conclusions such as *these are democratic technologies* and *here are technologies of resistance*. Several articles have addressed the fallacies of these quick reactions. For example, Morozov (2011) talks about the fallacy of "Iran's Twitter Revolution," the fact that the government controls the Internet flow and speed. There is a race between the government's effort to block the Internet, on the one hand, and the citizens' desire to access the information flow on the Internet, on the other hand. Burns and Eltham (2009) discuss the shortcomings of online activism in Iran as an exemplar to social networking enthusiasts in relation to its uses for propagating democracy. These assertions are further demonstrated by online data-gathering analysis, a method that Devin Gaffney (2010) has used in relation to the 2009 election.

Visual activism has flourished online via mobile video devices, YouTube, Twitter, and social networking sites—all technologies that enable new forms of sociability and collaborative possibilities. Cell phone video has created a potential for eyewitness accounts of events, and with speedy online circulation, these video clips can reach millions of viewers, at times bypassing national restrictions. YouTube as a repository of videos has set the stage for viral networking. Twitter has made quick and short messages from individual voices a game changer in journalism. And social networking sites such as Facebook have provided venues for visual activism, with users sharing and tagging images in order to circulate them to targeted individuals and groups.

The online digital environment provides a transnational space not only for the circulation of images but also, and more importantly, for their production. Political cartoonists and graphic artists (most of whom have gone into exile) especially moved to the online environment to both produce their protest art and circulate it through social networking sites such as Facebook. In addition, after Mousavi's camp promoted the slogan, "media is you," amateur graphic artists flourished online, producing political posters. For instance, the Facebook group Iranian Graphic Artists became the repository of 2009 protest posters that self-proclaimed graphic artists, not necessarily professional graphic artists, individually or collectively created and circulated online. Mousavi's Facebook page itself was created by an Iranian who lived in Germany; because the campaign created no Facebook page, this poster became the Facebook voice of the presidential candidate. Many digital posters appeared after the election, signed with authors' first names or pseudonyms. Internet sites such as United4Iran.org or rahesabaz.net (the Green Path) were set up by individuals, but are now mostly gone from the Internet and untraceable. In all of these examples, circulation and production merge online.

It is important to understand that most of the political posters that appeared online did not exist in the streets of Iranian cities. Nor is there a group of graphic artists in Iran that would want to claim connection to them. In this ethnographic observation lies the answer to how new forms of online practice—and therefore the connection between online and street movements—are emerging, which I elaborate below.

Emergent Forms: Icons, Video-collage, Hieroglyphic

Like the proliferation of mobile devices, the transnational space of the Internet itself promotes a convergence culture mode of production. As users move video or images from one platform of practice to another, different tools are provided by that particular technology. Each platform of practice produces an instance of the art that awaits convergence with the next instance in the next platform. For example, phones and video devices initially framed grainy images of the streets in a particular way that these devices allow; these grainy images, in turn, became the first aesthetic representation of that particular event. When a protestor uses a mobile device (such as a cell phone) to record an image, that image represents the real event; then, as others transport the image to other platforms, such as the ones discussed below, it becomes yet another object of social, political, and aesthetic practice—that is, the tools that particular technologies provide plus people, their expertise, and their social relations.

In the cases described below—the online images of Neda Agha Sultan, the video production of the Karbala scene, and the video production of *Yar-e dabestani-e man* (My Schoolmate)—I analyze the effect of the convergence mode of production on the images themselves and the ways in which they transform or stay the same through this emergent process of social and material practice.

Icons and Martyrs

The images that appeared most often and became iconic were those of martyrs, such as images of those who were killed allegedly by the government forces. Mobile phones and video devices have been instrumental in producing the first establishing sense of an event. These devices have enabled a sense of street realism by producing an easily transferable sense of an event, but by the same virtue they have isolated and abstracted images from their context.

Two important icons were the images of Neda Agha Sultan and Sohrab Arabi, protestors who were killed by government forces immediately after the election of 2009. The original pictures showed the two protestors on the street, in action, but later artists used these abstracted images and further worked on them and subjected them to various social and technical practices. Neda was shot within days after the election. As she was walking with her music teacher and observing a street demonstration, Neda was suddenly shot from the rooftop of a building. She fell to the ground, and a medical doctor who happened to be nearby offered assistance, putting his hands on her chest to stop the bleeding. Within seconds Neda died. The first images were in a mobile video of her actual death. Other images quickly followed, and Neda's image moved from the grainy mobile video to artistic experiments in a variety of media: painting, sculpture, cartoons, a slide show, and collage. Two years later, a Google search of her name yields more

than 675,000 results; some of the YouTube images have been viewed more than a million times. Neda's image appeared in perhaps more online forms than any other political image of the post-2009 protests.

One of the earliest renditions of Neda was made by the caricaturist Bozorgmehr Hosseinpour, who based his image on the raw mobile video. This was arguably the first abstraction of the actual image, the first aestheticized (though representational) image of Neda circulated online. Using the Internet to circulate street art is an emerging way of linking the street to the virtual world; for example, Banksy, the British graffiti artist, has used online photos of his site-based art to expand his audience globally. In Iran, cartoon and caricature artists—such as Mana Neyestani, who mostly worked for newspapers—started using the online digital environment to spread their art prior to 2009.



Figure 4. Image of Neda Agha Sultan rendered from mobile video.

(Courtesy of Bozorgmehr Hosseinpour, 2009.)

The place that Neda's image occupies in the collective imaginary in the West could be compared to that of the Tank Man from Tiananmen Square in June 1989, the young Chinese man who stood in front of a tank to protest the massacre of hundreds of people a couple of days earlier. A few professional news photographers took his picture and smuggled the film out of China. The difference in technological materiality between the two events, Neda's shooting and the Tank Man's protest, has been explored by Patterson and Whitehouse (n.d.). The photographers of the Tank Man had to physically transport their image out of China, and, more importantly, the state could control the access of Chinese viewers to this image. So while the Tank Man became a symbol of freedom in the West, his image remained out of the mass media and carried no political meaning in China. In contrast, Neda's case happened in the age of the

Internet and YouTube, collaborative work platforms where nonprofessional photographers could transfer, share, manipulate, and appropriate images easily. Thus, Neda Agha Sultan became the iconic image of the post-2009 election both in and outside Iran.

One of the main organizing affective devices for these visual works has been the Karbala paradigm, the martyrdom of Imam Hossein (the third Shiite imam) as a metaevent of injustice. At the time of the revolution, activists used the allegory of Karbala to liken the shah to Yazid, who committed horrendous injustices. Allegorical references to the martyrdom of Imam Hossein were central to political aesthetics both historically and especially after the revolution of 1979. After the revolution, though, its uses could no longer be distinctly associated only with religious groups. In the aftermath of the election of 2009, these allegorical references became more contested. There is more diversity in their usage. A few artists have created YouTube collages in which they have tried to challenge the secular versus religious division, targeting the state's exclusive right to use the Karbala paradigm. As Mousavi tried to revive revolutionary mottos from 1979, artists and activists found the online digital environment to be a space of incarnation of aestheticized politics where they could assert that state-sponsored political slogans deviated from their original meanings. Mousavi's revival of the paradigm, they could say here, was an act of proliferation and subversion of religious symbols.

One of these materials is a video collage by Reza Deghati (2009). Consider the image from the video shown in Figure 5, in which Neda's face is superimposed on every woman's face in the frame. This frame is taken from a popular rendition (widely circulated, online and offline) of a late-19th-century depiction of the Imam Hossein's household in Karbala. The original popular rendition shows only the tents and the women who are facing Zuljinah (the imam's horse). Zuljinah is bringing the news of the imam's death to the household; it is the marker of tragedy and injustice. In the original drawing, to the right of Zuljinah there is no one, just the landscape. In various collage techniques that Deghati applied to the original, he added the face of Neda to the scene. In addition, farther to the right in this image, modern anti-riot forces (a collage of actual images of riot police in Tehran during the 2009 election) are attacking protesters. The video continues, including various images of individuals who were killed during the postelection demonstrations of 2009. Although the images are not animated—they are laid as wallpaper or tableaux in a coffee-house painting style (this genre of painting, usually displayed in public spaces, sets a mood of nostalgia and remembrance of the past)—the YouTube format creates an animation effect with familiar warm colors of red and yellow. The elegiac music that complements the images is a mix of songs that are associated with mourning during the commemoration of the Karbala event.

YouTube Search Browse Movie

Neda of Ashura ندای عاشورا

AkkassBashi 1 video



Like Share **20,866**

Uploaded by AkkassBashi on Dec 25, 2009

Neda of Ashura ندای عاشورا 42 likes, 7 dislikes

Figure 5. Screen shot of digital collage of Neda Agha Sultan in the story of martyrdom of Imam Hossein. (Courtesy of Reza Deghati.)

The original is a popular rendition of a late-19th-century depiction of the Karbala event. In this image, Zuljinah, the horse of Imam Hossein, returns to the imam's household camp without the imam. Available at http://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=Mv9ehsW6PN8&feature=player_embedded#. Other artists, such as Shoja Azari (Kino, 2010) have used a similar collage style to liken the event of 2009 to that of Karbala in the seventh century.

Reinscribing the Past with a Twist

During the revolution of 1979, it was common for people in the Iranian diaspora to gather to watch slide shows that packed together visuals, words, and music. Such events inspired mobile forms of political expression by aestheticizing political ideas for the opposition groups to the shah in diaspora; they worked almost as a small procession, such as the ones that people form during the commemoration of the event of Karbala, each group tailoring its own version a particular event, creating a desired effect for their local audience. This type of slide show has now become easier to make online. Authors can tap into a much wider range of materials. More people can make them (and can make them anonymously) and show them to much wider audiences, well beyond particular locations or familiar networks. Perhaps most importantly, Internet-enabled technologies enable activists to bypass governmental control. The Internet has created an ecology in which activists can reincarnate and reinterpret the old in new forms.

To explore this theme further, I turn to a contemporary video/slide show production that has been created and circulated online. The music video, which became important online, is called *Yar-e dabestani-e man*, or My Schoolmate (whereismyvotenyork, 2010). An activist site, whereismyvotenyork (run by a group of civil rights activists in the Iranian diaspora) commissioned an Iranian underground music group, Tehranosaurus, and a video artist, Kourosh Shemirani, to make the video.

The song the creators chose had a long history. Mansour Tehrani wrote the lyrics in the 1970s, and pop idol Fereydoun Foroughi sang a version of the song then; it became popular among the disenfranchised young and politically oppositional youth of the time. An excerpt of the lyrics in the subtitles reads:

*My grade-school friend
You are on my side
As the teacher's cane waves over our heads
You are grief and my sigh
Carved are our names
On body of this blackboard
As the scars of injustice and oppression
Remain on our bodies*

At the time, film, music, and literature set the political mood with symbolic techniques, likening the dictator to a teacher, for example. The Internet made it possible for activists to transport the popularity and political resonance of this song into the atmosphere of the post-2009 election. The fusion of their talents, enabled by the Internet and financed by the philanthropic diaspora, generated the most effective version of *Yar-e dabestani-e man*. The video shows two kids playing together in a park, contentedly and innocently. As they go to school, the trouble starts with an authoritarian teacher who beats them. The school is likened to the society and the teacher to a dictator. This experience forms the children's first political consciousness. The video achieves a sense of unity and common struggle through

the music. The resulting video won the Farhang Foundation (a Southern California-based Iranian American philanthropic foundation) prize for short video in 2011.

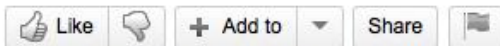
This video is far from the only modern version of the song. A Google search yields more than 43,000 results for *Yar-e dabestani-e man*, mostly on YouTube, mostly slide shows with *Yar-e dabestani-e man* as the sound track. Pictures come from different works and milieus, such as protest posters, all evocative of the fight against tyranny. On a different theme, during the 2009 election campaign, when Ahmadinejad called the protesters a bunch of *khas o khashak* (dust and trash), many YouTube videos were made online to protest his depiction of the crowd.

Video Clip 1 is emblematic of the mode of production discussed in this article. Hands are drawing a picture or sign of peoples' hands with two fingers up in a victory sign. A mobile device is shown in the clip that contains another image of hands making victory signs, modeling the action that the drawing hands simulate—a hint that the artist is not working from the actual protest but one mediated through technology. It's all very reflexive. In this video production, several plateaus of artistic practice and activist discourses come together. The fusion music of Fared Shafinury, the Iranian American musician, the animation work of Simon Ampel, the interpretation of an old song from the 1970s, the interpretive discourse, and the commission of the New York-based activist group, Where is My Vote NY, merged in an online ecology to create this protest art, thus forming a convergence mode of production.



Yar-e-Dabestani e-man w/Subtitles

whereismyvotenyork 12 videos



24,073

Uploaded by [whereismyvotenyork](#) on Feb 20, 2010

Video Clip 1. Yar-e-Dabestani e-man with subtitles.

Available at http://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=fvJW8_-zR4E

Courtesy of WIMV-NY: Video produced by Kourosh Shemirani and music by Fared Shafinury and Tehranosaurus, in 2010. Where Is My Vote NY, "Yar-e-Dabestani" FFF2010 1st Prize Winner of Farhang Foundation.

Although the political structure has changed significantly and it is no longer easy to capture the political scene with such simple symbolic techniques, the video achieves an allegory by combining the song (evoking memories of the past revolt) with the animation (depicting an experience of everyday life in Iran) in a warm green and yellow color that the second-generation Iranian diaspora often uses to signal a

third space that is neither in the West nor in Iran, but somewhere in between where they would like to associate themselves with.

Like the multiplying images of Neda, this video and the many slide shows of this song illuminate the modes of social practices emerging in the landscape reshaped by the Internet. These emergent modes frame specific forms of sociability where different people and technologies come together without a sense of physical proximity, transforming 19th-century assumptions of the public sphere.

Elements of Image Making in New Media

The last part of this article examines how new media shape the notion of practice, enabling a more collaborative and yet dispersed mode of production.

Simulation

Digital processing makes simulation—that is, imitating a particular form or model in a computer environment—possible, which in turn adds a new dimension to representational art. Simulation holds the potential for collaborative work when the object moves from one plateau of practice to another.

Much of Iranian digital art consists of what has been scanned and translated from a nondigital environment. Recall the event of Karbala, when artists transferred the imagery of the event (the metaimagery of protest among Shiite Muslims) to the digital environment. They created the possibility of group work or made that material available to a wide and indeed unknown number of other activists and artists, while also inventing techniques to represent the Karbala paradigm in new ways and to new ends. Again, when Reza Deghati (as discussed above) merged images of Karbala and current demonstrations in a YouTube environment, both the allegory and the protests gained new meaning, and both became available for further art.

Image-Thing

Simulation creates the possibility of what W. J. T. Mitchell (2005) calls an *image-thing*, a concept that speaks to how contemporary media is addressed by its audience. In this concept, viewers (including other artists) have opportunities to interact with the image. Through this interaction images become alive and move away from being strictly representational. Images are not only to be understood but also addressed. What is important is how people interact with them and create a new meaning. For instance, in the aftermath of the 2009 presidential election in Iran, the question was raised as to whether these images of protest hold the same religious values as of those in the revolution of 1979 or whether people used them in completely different, perhaps secular or subversive, ways (Dabashi, 2009). I would argue that because these images are produced in a convergent mode of production, their signification is always emergent—that is, they can be religious, secular, and subversive, depending on the context and audience. In this way a representational analysis is insufficient.

In the aftermath of the election, images of the oppositional movement saturated the media. From grainy images of street protests to aestheticized images of martyrdom and agitating animations that

tapped into the memory of people and the recent history of Iran, these images were more than representational images. They were indeed simulated ones that made possible, or constituted, a digitized revolution. The concept of image-thing enables us to move away from the simple question of whether there is a direct representational connection between, for example, Reza Deghati's rendition of the Karbala event and an actual intended religious event or procession of the Karbala. It instead focuses on how the social practice of such image making allows participatory meaning making to achieve multiple ends and allows participants to form multiple meanings toward various ends.

Collaborative Image Making

Political cartoons, animations, and comics have found a new space in the ecology of new media. Whether the digital environment has helped raise the importance of these genres of representation or whether they have enabled a new way of storytelling online is subject to debate. In general, the use of these genres for nuanced storytelling offline has been on the rise in the Middle Eastern scene of cultural production, as we can see in works by Joe Sacco (2002) and Marjane Satrapi (2003). All are explicitly collaborative forms of image making. One form of such collaboration online is Web-comics, which can be seen as an emerging genre of the convergence culture mode where politics, cartoons, and animation meet in a new market for political drawing. For example, a Persian writer, an Arab illustrator, and a Jewish editor came together to make the Web-comic *Zahra's Paradise*. What started as an experimental work among unlikely collaborators turned into an important Web production.

Media Practices and the Transformation of the Public Sphere

In the aftermath of the election of 2009, particular social practices merged with technology to simulate another revolution in Iran. Images became live: sometimes they became objects with which Iranians in Iran and its diaspora expressed their opposition and imagined a democratic future, and sometimes they became detached from what was happening in the streets of Iran. To outside viewers, such a digital revolution can eclipse what actually happens on the streets. The transnational audience is likely to forget street life in favor of what they see, read, and hear online—to read the online material as mirroring actual experiences. After the Arab Spring, the street social movement in the United States reemphasized the importance of location, as in Occupy Wall Street.

Did these online images actually affect political life in Iran? Let me make the following suggestions:

1. During the period of June to December 2009, the color green, Neda, and *Yar-e dabestani-e man* helped create a social mood, a force that unified people and objects for a shared yet heterogeneous experience of diverse political forces. I have argued in this article that the online activities and street protests occurred parallel to one another, with the former continuing long after the latter were suppressed. Although there is not a one-to-one connection between the two, the online activities created the condition of possibility of a social affect, mood, and force.

2. Digital democratic activism focuses on bringing about social change through technology. In the case of Iran, activists shifted their strategies, markedly, after the suppression of the Green Movement leaders. There is less of the protest art described above, which targeted human rights and freedom in general, and more of practical and urgent issues that range from securing Internet access for ordinary Iranians through anti-filtering sites and VPN connections to innovative forms of social organization. Both in Iran and among the diaspora, Iranians are discovering new media beyond activism. Although the Iranian government controls the Internet and threatens to close down the connection to the outside world, digital culture is expanding.
3. The technology that made street eyewitness accounts possible is also tied to legal and political discourses that often lag behind the new technology. Some of the eyewitness accounts from Iran were recorded on Nokia cell phones. But the government has used the same technology; the technology and those who provide it are being blamed for government spying and eventual imprisonment of activists. In defending itself against these charges, Nokia referred to *lawful intercept technology* (Rhoads & Chao, 2009), a technology that allows the government to screen and record mobile phone conversations, as standard procedure for voice control, but this seems to be a technical and legal assertion. Yet a year after the election, activists were still trying to gather cases where Nokia intercept technology had led to the imprisonment and perhaps even the death of other activists. If this case advances in court in favor of activists, it will shift the nature of debate about the intent and effect of technology in that the use of Nokia intercept technology could become unlawful.

Throughout this article, I have argued that in order to understand the politicized images that emerged during Iran's presidential election of 2009, we need a theory of practice in the age of digital culture. Digital environments rely on convergence modes of production where signification is emergent. I have further argued that analysis of images that are the results of this convergent mode of production should start with understanding the social practices that led to their making. The physicality of street politics is giving way to a digital ecology where mobile technologies have enabled individuals and groups to interact in a particular configuration of space, time, and place. These emergent forms of practice are leading to the transformation of the public sphere.

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