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# The Art of the Martyrs

## The *Taziyeh* and Street Art in Contemporary Tehran

### Abstract

The *Taziyeh*'s best known form in Iran is the passion play mourning the death of Imam Hussein and his sons at the historic battle of Karbala. This particular *Taziyeh* is an important expression of Shia Islam. Today, its performance is closely scrutinized and often controlled or censored by the Islamic government. At the same time, it is upheld as an object of patriotic pride and religious commitment, encouraging participants to interpret the events of the battle of Karbala as historically and religiously parallel to the events of the Iranian Revolution and the Iran-Iraq war. In this way, the soldiers who died in these contemporary wars are celebrated as the martyrs who gave their lives at the battle of Karbala. Less known is the way that the aesthetics of the *Taziyeh* performances have influenced another major form of artistic expression in Iran: street art, which includes thoughtfully executed murals as well as quick stencillings and graffiti-like wall paintings. Like the *Taziyeh*, such works are also both censored as well as sanctioned by the government, depending on the political or revolutionary sentiment the painting is perceived to express, which has created an underground movement of non-sanctioned street artists who work covertly, whilst government-supported artists cover the walls of cities like Tehran with approved images, often of Hussein and his martyrs. But the non-sanctioned artists emerge as the "martyrs" in this situation, risking life and livelihood with their revolutionary art in resistance to the current Islamic regime. By analyzing the images of the "art of the martyrs" in contemporary Tehran, this article argues that both the underground and sanctioned street art can be more fully understood through the history of *Taziyeh* performance in Iran, and the way that the public reads such imagery with faithful and political eyes.

Martyrdom, as a cultural symbol, is both an important aspect of the history of Iranian anti-government political protest, and a cornerstone of government-controlled propaganda. Like any symbol, its fluidity allows it to be adapted for cross-purposes. For example, in 1979 when Khomeini was consolidating his power as the revolutionary leader of a new Iran and about to overthrow the secular government of Shah Reza Pahlavi, he fanned the flames of revolutionary spirit by insisting that protestors who died in clashes with the state police were “martyrs”. Years later as Iran retreated from the bloody border clashes of the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), finally cowed by Iraq’s use of chemical weapons, Khomeini, now the representative of an Islamic Republic, again invoked martyrdom’s “holy defense” of the nation to build up the country’s flagging morale (Molavi 2005, 248-253). But nowhere has this fluidity of the symbol of martyrdom been more demonstrably clear than in the giant murals and other forms of public or street art that now decorate the major cities, especially Tehran. Once solely an anti-authoritarian and underground practice (much like graffiti), street art has been co-opted by the current regime to spread conservative ideas. Like martyrdom itself, street art has become a symbolically fluid practice.

On both sides of the political divide, this art, unsurprisingly, depicts martyrdom. Furthermore, the artists themselves are seen as martyrs, sacrificing their independence and artistic freedom. In the case of sanctioned artists, their work is regulated and controlled under the watchful eye of the regime (in the same symbolic manner as the soldiers who fought for Iran during the Iran-Iraq war). For underground street artists, they are sacrificing their freedom and lives by painting on the walls of Tehran, putting themselves at risk of being caught and charged with incriminating anti-regime slogans or murals, and thus in this way seen as revolutionary martyrs. This applies to both sanctioned/pro-regime artists and their underground rebellious counterparts.

The divisions and struggles between the government and anti-authoritarian street artists is a social performance with deep historical roots. In order to understand the interplay of martyrdom and street art in Iran, it is necessary to examine the other artistic ways in which martyrs have been mourned and celebrated. The preeminent example is the *Taziyeh*, the religious drama of condolence and mourning (similar to a Christian passion play) that depicts the deaths of Imam Hussein and his children. In this paper I will argue that the current social drama playing out between the government, the public, and street artists through the murals on the public walls of major cities like Tehran can be read as an analog to one of the most significant moments of the *Taziyeh*, the battle of Karbala and the death of Hussein himself. Although the events of the Iranian Revolution and the Iran-Iraq War are in the past, the work of these artists, both government-sanctioned and in protest of the current regime, conflate the past and the present, in such ways that the martyrdoms of Hussein and his sons at Karbala *are* the martyrdoms of freedom fighters and defenders of the nation in twentieth century Iran, and *are* the martyr-like sacrifices made by the street artists themselves today. In this way we can more accurately understand the interplay between religion, history, and contemporary political life in Iran.

The *Taziyeh* is traditionally performed during the month of Muharram (considered the second holiest month after Ramadan according to the Islamic calendar). Performances of the *Taziyeh*, however, are still under the control of the government. This can cause numerous complications as the state can and does impose its own dogmas upon productions of the *Taziyeh*, thereby confining the artistic

freedom of directors and actors. Responding to the authority of the government in very different ways, both underground and state-sanctioned street artists emerge as “martyrs”, suppressing their artistic independence, meaning that they are not allowed to express their true cathartic element and beautification that they would like to decorate the streets with, instead decorating the streets of Tehran or employing visual propaganda for the Islamic Republic.

Like the martyrs of the *Taziyeh*, these artists, such as “A1one”, are underground hip hop activists who have faced the regime’s response. Unsanctioned street artist A1one’s<sup>1</sup> works grab the attention of the Iranian public because he uses calligraphiti to enhance the cultural meaning behind his pieces and to revolt against the government, just like Imam Hussein revolted against the Yazid army. His artistic process visually refers to the traditional *siyah mashq*, a calligraphic practice where a single sheet includes intricate repetitions of the same word in combinations facing upwards and downwards. Calligraphers usually favour the common Persian cursive script *Nasta’liq* over the more “broken” *Shikastah* script. These sheets, known as *siyah mashq* (literally “black practice” in Persian), are entirely covered with writing as a means to practice calligraphy while conserving paper. Such murals by A1one often portray the word “truth” in the style of *siyah mashq*.<sup>2</sup> “By repeating ‘truth’ on the world’s walls, crafting its seemingly symmetrical yet complex curves and edges, spraying it on in myriad colors, A1one insists on exactly that—the truth” (Zubeck 2016).

A1one has been arrested multiple times. Whilst we see the regime being tolerant and even more supportive of sanctioned Street Art, any hint or sense that the work is anti-Islamic or anti-constitutional will result in the speedy removal of the said work and punishment of its producer. The regime works to block and prevent activism at all times in order to protect the religious leaders and their political authority. The leaders who once led a revolutionary movement against the Pahlavi monarchy know that if they allow the slightest resurgence of a resistance movement that it will gather support and fluidity, which might then result in another repetition of a revolution, this time *they* would be at the receiving end of the battering stick. An act of cultural resistance is something the regime is no longer able to ignore.

Public spaces began to be visually marked through street art depicting ideological narratives in the midst of the 1979 revolution. Tehran’s walls functioned as canvases, visually presenting the conflict between the main revolutionary factions, which included the Islamists, the Communists<sup>3</sup>, and the Nationalists.<sup>4</sup> Before the Islamic constitution (replacing the monarchical constitution in 1979) was officially adopted, the walls of Iran were territorially demarcated by street art and illuminated propaganda. Revolutionary factions utilized street art to symbolically differentiate certain areas that were beginning to be completely submerged in pro-Khomeini visuals. After the constitution was officially put into motion and the Shah was exiled, the Islamic regime cleared all the walls of the city and restored visual neutrality in Tehran and its public spaces. This was clearly noticeable when Islamists took to the streets soon after the official inauguration of Ayatollah Khomeini, carrying large banners depicting the leader in the same manner as Ashura processions. This form of imagery, however, can be found (extravagantly or in small traces) in street art as a form of revolt and protest against the regime, just as sanctioned art is a form of revolt and protest against the Iraqi’s and the Shah’s monarchy. Islamists used the imagery of *Ashura* to depict Khomeini as the protagonist (Imam Hussein) and the Shah as the Antagonist (the Yazid army).

*Ashura* is a day of mourning and remembrance celebrated on the tenth day of Muharram, commemorating the massacre of Imam Hussain (grandson of Prophet Mohammad) at Karbala by the hands of the Yazid army, and ritualized through public processions. The *Taziyeh* is a symbolic representation of this massacre, in the form of Islamic drama. The Islamic regime related the *Taziyeh* to the 1979 revolution and the war against Iraq by enforcing the ideology of the martyrdom of Karbala onto the soldiers who were preparing for battle against the Iraqi army. The idea of martyrdom became the sole inspiration for the soldiers, preparing them for battle just like Imam Hussain and his army, as depicted in the drama. The regime used the notion of martyrdom, patriotism and the Shi'a branch of Islam to mobilize the masses and troops in order to protect their country, brothers and sisters.

The *Taziyeh* has been described as the only religious drama stemming from the Islamic faith. Several critics claim that no Islamic country has any variety of Islamic religious dramas except for Iran (Badawi 1988, 10). Muhammed Mustafa Badawi argues in *The Oxford Encyclopaedia of the Modern Islamic World* that "the Shi'a passion play called *Taziyeh* is the only serious drama ever developed in the Islamic world, except for contemporary western theatre". Badawi continues, saying that the *Taziyeh* "is virtually the sole dramatic spectacle of a *tragic* nature which we encounter in the Islamic world prior to its cultural contact with the West". However, such arguments betray assumptions about the cultural isolation of the Middle East, and only work to recognize what is already familiar to the Western gaze. Persian theatre, both before and after the region became a stronghold for Shia Islam, has a long and rich tradition, which the simple tragic/comic duality does not fully describe.<sup>5</sup>

The myopia of some Western theatre scholars' approach to the *Taziyeh* as the only "significant" drama in the tragic mode to come out of the Islamic world parallels the way that the Western media misunderstood the social justice motivations of the 1979 Iranian revolution, which hearken back to the calls for justice issued by the Prophet himself. One American reporter described the revolution as "an odd fusion of Islam and late-twentieth century revolutionary politics" (Caryl 2014, 11). This misunderstands and misinterprets the strong call for justice that characterizes the history of Islam. The interesting issue about these cultural dynamics is that once we examine them we see how similar the ideologies and resistance of the 1979 revolutionaries are to that of those seen during the Arab Spring/Green Revolutions of the Middle East in 2012. As a global movement centred in the Middle East, the hip hop genre and its contributing socio-political factors helped form the visual imagery we now see in the political art of Iran.

The religious ceremony from which the *Taziyeh* descended started during the Safavid dynasty (1501 - 1735) but it was not until the Zand dynasty (1735 - 1787) that the first performance of the *Taziyeh* appeared. However, the *Taziyeh* found its true and complete form during the Qajar era (1787 - 1927), which saw one of the most famous directors of the *Taziyeh*, Moin Al Boka, emerge (also known as the master of the *Taziyeh*) (Malekpour 2004, 37, 72).

In order to fully appreciate the characteristics of the *Taziyeh*, an understanding of Islam and the branch of Shi'ism is fundamental. Therefore, with careful consideration, this paper will examine the history of the battle of Karbala (the historic event from which Shi'ism first stemmed), the development and symbolism of the *Taziyeh*, the mobilization of the Iranian citizens during the 1979 revolution, and the Iran/Iraq war of the 1980s. I have attempted to symbolically link these directly to the

theatrical discourse of the *Taziyeh* and *Ashura*. The *Ashura*, or day of mourning for the martyrdom of Imam Hussein, is of great importance for Shia believers because Imam Hussein is “the paradigmatic martyr” (Yarbakhsh 2014, 30). The eight-year war against Iraq was recognized as the complete structure and setting of the *Taziyeh*—“the battlefields were Karbala, all months were Muharram and all days were Ashura” (Gruber 2008, 30).

To clarify the ways in which the *Taziyeh*, as a form of drama, symbolizes the massacre of Karbala, it is important to understand the Shia branch of Islam and the events which led to the processions which take place during *Ashura*. According to the Holy Quran man should surrender himself to the one god and obey his commands. The massacre of Karbala stemmed from the death of Prophet Mohammad in 632 AD. After the death of Prophet Muhammad, there was a row over his succession, which led to the establishment of the two branches of Islam; the Sunnis (who followed Abu-Bakr, Omar and Uthman, who were the first three caliphs) and the Shias, who followed Ali (the fourth caliph and cousin/son-in-law of the Prophet) (Jafri 1979, 13-17). The term Shia is translated as “follower”, which relates to those who believe that Muhammad’s family, including Ali and his grandsons, Hassan and Hussein were the rightful successors of the Prophet. In accord with the Shia sect, when Prophet Muhammad died, the leadership of Islam was to pass on to Ali.<sup>6</sup>

The battle between the Yazid army and Hussein’s army first escalated in Medina (Mecca). However, knowing a bloodbath was brewing, Hussein and his army left Medina in order to show respect to the house of God (Mecca). On route to Karbala, Hussein realized there was nothing in front of him and his army besides death and martyrdom and delivered a powerful speech to prepare the barbarity that was ahead of them. On the tenth day of Muharram, known as *Ashura*,<sup>7</sup> Imam Hussein and his army, including his family and followers, faced the Yazid army at Karbala. Hussein delivered his final speeches in front of his followers and the Yazid army, and this speech constitutes the primary text of the *Taziyeh*:

Yazid made me choose one of the two: either I draw my sword and defend my honour and religion or surrender to shame and humility... I am obliged to choose the first way... Death is the beginning of our joy. There is only one bridge between this world and the other world and that is death. If we are victorious it will not be anything new for us and if we are killed, the world will know that we are not defeated. (Malekpour 2004, 20)

The ideology behind martyrdom, which is so heavily placed within the narrative of the *Taziyeh*, is an integral component of Shi’ism. The characters of the *Taziyeh*, like the martyrs of Iran/Iraq and Karbala, are well aware of the internal and external meaning of *Shuhadat* (martyrdom). They march forward towards their tragic destiny, with no fear, no hesitance, knowing that their destiny has already been sealed. As an allegorical drama where the audience sees itself in the struggles and sacrifices of the martyrs, the purpose of the *Taziyeh* is parallel to the principle of martyrdom, an act of religious faith rather than a theatrical spectacle. As a mourning ritual, the participation of the whole nation is involved; as the sounds of war, the screams of soldiers and the cries of their mothers and widows pollute the air as if the performers and audience were reliving the events of the battle today, and indeed might experience the drama as a ritual bringing history to bear in the politics of the present moment. The *Taziyeh* is a complete revolution in the religious consciousness of Shi’ism. The symbolic resemblance to that of the war against Iraq is evident in multiple cases, from the symbolic use of the *Kafan*

(the cloth used to cover a dead body) to the scene in which Ali Akbar says goodbye to his mother in the manner of a soldier leaving for battle, never to return again.

Approaching its more theatrical form, we can identify certain symbolic-narrative structures of *Taziyeh* that refer to the war as such:

- i. The Plot—*the war against Iraq*.
- ii. The Characters—*the soldiers*.
- iii. The Thought—*the ideologies and politics behind the revolt against Iraq*.
- iv. The Spectacle—*the war itself*.
- v. Songs—*the chants and eulogies played on speakers*.

One interpretation of the *Taziyeh*, which was re-enacted in 1997, fully describes the politically allegorical function of the ritual performance. Jamshid Malekpour, the author of *The Islamic Drama*, witnessed this particular theatrical performance, which focused on the story of Imam Hussein's son, Ali Akbar, and his journey to the battlefield of Karbala. The performance was divided into two separate acts. The first act centred on the gloomy departure of Ali-Akbar, parting ways with his father, mother, and aunt. The second act focused on his conflict with the Yazid army, resulting in his martyrdom. During this enactment, which took place in a *Takiyeh* (theatre), the men and women were segregated and sat on different sides of the Mosque, which was the circular space in which the *Taziyeh* was performed. The stage arrangement was minimalistic, with two different sides of the arena allocated to the rival camps of Imam Hussein and the Yazid army. Everyone in the audience wore black, and black banners illustrated and painted with Quranic verses covered most of the interior architecture. A eulogist then emerged to sing religious songs praising Imam Hussein, preparing the audience for the array of emotions they were about to feel during the performance. A drummer, trumpeter, and flautist entered the circle and sat amongst the male audience. After the eulogies were sung during the course of about half an hour, the musicians began to play, hence announcing the official start of the *Taziyeh*.

The first group of performers, the camp of Imam Hussein and his loyal followers, entered the yard, dressed in three different colors: green (which represents freedom and revolution) white and black. The performers then circle the stage three times before ultimately making their settlement on the right-hand side.<sup>8</sup> The musicians continue to play, filling the atmosphere with an eerie ambiance. Imam Hussein's character sits on a chair while the rest of his family sit on a rug in front of him. He then proceeds to stand and sing religious songs about the Tragedy of Karbala and of Imam Hussein's martyrdom. Although this performance is centred on Imam Hussein's eldest son, Ali-Akbar, the audience is constantly reminded of the immense sacrifice Imam Hussein made for the Shi'a belief system and for peace. Another symbolic reminder of his character, as previously mentioned, is that he is dressed in green, to also remind the audience of the Prophet and sacredness. His children, Ali-Akbar and Ali Asghar, are also dressed in green. As Imam Hussein finishes his eulogies, the Yazid army enters the yard. They too circle around three times before settling on their side. The Yazid army, covered in red clothing, which symbolizes blood and their pugnacious nature, sit down, while Ibn-e-Saad and Shimr sit in chairs. Now we enter a very crucial element of the *Taziyeh*: the attempt of the performers to politically inspire the audience.

As Shimr, who is clothed in red and carrying weapons, approaches the middle of the *Takiyeh*, he presents himself to the audience. Then in a strange display, he starts to pay his utter respect to Imam Hussein, and begins to rebuke the Yazid army, who under his command did such harm to Imam Hussein and his family at the Massacre of

Karbala. “You people who have gathered here! Be aware that none of these people are Imam Hussein, or the martyrs of Karbala, nor am I the Shimr. And this place is not Karbala! The only purpose of this gathering is to mourn and to honour the martyrs of the Karbala” (Malekpour 2004, 108).

The allegorical significance lies not only in the content of the drama, but also in *how* it is performed. Not only does the character (actor) detach from the role he is playing, he also reminds the audience why they are here. The main reason for this detachment can be due to two particular reasons. The first one being that as an actor, he is indeed a follower of Shi'ism and Imam Hussein, and loves and respects him. The second reason is to remind the audience, who are emotionally engaged with the *Taziyeh*, that this is a re-enactment and not real, in case they were lose control over their emotions and become violent towards the characters. This method, much like Brecht's alienation technique, creates a critical distance between self and character, history and drama, but it also allows the authority or government to produce more bitterness, anger and hatred towards the people that butchered Imam Hussein because it directs focus to the real (past) event, rather than the dramatic re-enactment (Malekpour 2004, 2-3).



**Figure 1.** In this mural/painting, which is displayed at the Shohada Museum in Tehran, Ashura martyrs are depicted as soldiers fighting in the Iran-Iraq war for the Islamic Regime. The white horse with the green banners represents Imam Hussain. The images around the white horse symbolically relate to the supreme leader, Ayatollah Khomeini, as Imam Hussain himself. Artist unknown. Photo by the author.

While there are many countries within the Middle East that have mainly Shi'a populations or are politically influenced by Shi'ism, our primary focus is only on Iran. The *Taziyeh* uses an eclectic approach in order to portray one of the key moments of the Islamic faith by combining street art, theatre and music to show the brutality and ignorance of the people of Karbala and the enemies of the Imam Hussein. The performance creates great emotional impact in this way. Beautifully haunting productions coincide with the *Muharram* celebrations in which Shi'as celebrate and mourn the life and death of Imam Hussein. Street art elements interact with the performance of the *Taziyeh* through the use of calligraphy drawn on flags and the paintings of Imam Hussein and his family on large banners.

The beauty of Islamic aesthetics, especially in architecture and calligraphy, also reflect faith and ideology. Incorporated into hip hop, Islamic aesthetics can be a poetic way for one to commit to a life that is based on the peaceful teachings of Islam, where men and women of faith and spirituality are "taught to fear not of man" and only of the one higher being, worshipped as far back as time came to exist, "to fear Allah alone."<sup>9</sup> These aesthetics are crucial to understand in order to clarify the relationship between Shia Islam and the elements of street art that are displayed in hip hop culture. Four different elements are included in these ceremonies, as there are also four elements that make up hip hop in Iran:

- i. **Mosques:** "Mosques are social institutions architecturally written ever so gracefully into the fabric of urbanism around the Muslim world" (Dabashi 2011, 1). Muslims all over the world find solitude and peace upon entering a Mosque in order to reflect and give thanks for all their blessings. Mosques in this regard are places of gathering for people who share the same beliefs and same ideologies, similar to those found in street art movements. In a symbolic manner, just like people gathering around each other in Mosques to pray, street art creates spaces for people to gather and express their cathartic appeal to one another on the walls of Iran.
- ii. **Preacher (Imam):** Preachers in this regard are like MCs or leaders of historical culturally movements such as the Black Arts Movement, Nation of Islam, the Civil Rights Movement and in general the African Diaspora Revolutions. Visiting preachers would deliver speeches on various (and at times political) issues, while mournfully recounting Karbala stories. Street artists preach their ideologies, whether just to produce beautification on the walls or to tell stories using their paint and spray cans.
- iii. **Visual imagery:** The Art of Martyrs portrays images of Imam Hussein (and his soldiers) and are painted around different parts of cities. They are also painted on flags, which are carried in *Ashura*. This blending of world revolutionary culture with the Art of Martyrs sets the stage for the adaptation of hip hop aesthetics to Iranian street art as well.
- iv. **Music:** Music plays a pivotal role in the way the ceremonies of *Ashura* are held. The most common form of music played in these ceremonies is that which came from African roots (which evolved into the beat and rhythm of hip hop). The Dammam (bass drum) is a popular instrument, sounding very much like the rhythmic beats found in hip hop music. "My sense is that in the specific manner of dancing and musicianship that



are interwoven with our Shi'a ceremonial practices, we are heavily influenced by African, particularly East African, dance and music" (Dabashi 2011, 4).

In Tehran, the underground Street Art movement functions on information and ideas channelled through underground media (Chaffee 1993, 16). The suppression of social media in Iran has led to other alternative means of exchanging information among the urban youth. Street art is one of these alternatives. Their work in an open pluralistic system with both formal and informal censorships.

Islam as a harsh religion that forbids music and art, and, in particular, that the Quran 'directly' bans art of any structure or form, is a grave misunderstanding of Islam as both religion and culture. While it is not directly banned, extremists have attached the *haram* or 'forbidden' label to art. The faith itself (according once again to a very small minority), frowns upon "figurative depictions of living creatures, especially human beings" (Zahrs 2016). This statement is filled with contradictions, as shown in one of the largest Shi'a populations in Iran. The Islamic government has bombarded the city of Tehran with paintings of martyrs on buildings and walls. So if it was the case that Islam is forbidden to contribute to the arts, how did these ideologies end up as the main structural base for the street art culture? Here we see a wonderfully united Islam, one that brings together Shi'as and Sunnis in order to create a transglobal cultural movement that strives for peace and equality.

The aesthetic expressed through the teachings of Islam in post-modern Afro-America are apparent in the rebellious movements of street art that we are now seen in the Middle East. The Afro-American diaspora and Islam have similar historical roots, dating all the way back to the era of slavery known as Maafa. Islam as a whole, as the Prophet Mohammed described it, was a faith and practice that was—and still is—a peaceful, beautiful, humanized stream of love, compassion and tolerance, where "citizenship was based on faith rather than contemporary nation-state distinctions" (Cooke and Lawrence 2006, 265). The compatibility of hip hop and Islam is very clear to any close observer who is not blinded by the "flashing lights" of westernized capitalism, which goes hand in hand with eastern capitalism.

The most visually and most politically conscious of all the hip hop elements is graffiti. Street art, which is the daughter of graffiti, is the socio-political commentator of urban art in the Middle East. In Tehran, the underground Street Art movement functions on information and ideas channelled through underground media. The suppression of social media in Iran has led to other alternative means of exchanging information among the urban youth. Street Art is one of these alternatives. The underground media is indeed a valuable, if not treasured, commodity, in which artists are able to communicate and organize social protests, artistically or politically (or both). If we examine street art in Iran alongside hip hop style graffiti, we will find these specific things:

First, both the underground street artists and hip hop artists challenge the politics of public representation, especially the representation of ethnic, cultural, and political minorities against the control of an ideological status quo. The importance of street art can be seen and felt in repressive regimes such as Iran and Iraq where "authoritarian systems attempt to reduce public space". Understanding and gaining insight into the use of visual language, whether through direct poetic statements or oblique symbolism, draws a portrait of defiance of "public space". Artists attempt to navigate their activism and concerns through the beautification of street art in public

spaces. “Through visual imagery and iconography, street art communicates messages that focus on themes such as: anti-war, anti-capitalism, anarchism, greed, poverty and so forth” or vice-versa, sanctioned by the government in order to spread propaganda. In relation to globalization and direct capitalism, street art also acts as a manifesto contesting the market domination and the exploitation of the consumer serving as a rather ironic form of propaganda indicting consumerism and the excesses of materialism in a public space (Gleaton 2014, 3).

The term ‘graffiti’ originally defined the ancient inscriptions found on the ruins of Pompeii, being the plural form of the Italian *graffito* meaning “scratch”. In its modern sense, the term is applied to drawings on walls and other urban elements, created in a public space without authorization, with spray cans or different types of paint, centred on a text, an image or a combination of both. In ancient times, “[b]ones and stones were used for carving by early man, who also anticipated the stencil and spray technique by blowing ‘colored powder’ through hollow bones around his hands to make silhouettes” (KRS ONE 2009, 30). Most of the graffiti that emerged from the start of the 1960s was affiliated with gangs and inter-personal relationships between members of the Afro-American communities. The work was often concerned with ownership of



**Figure 2.** *Statue of Death (representing America) unable to penetrate the barbed wire, which represents the map of Iran. Someone has written on this mural with a marker “Death to Khomeini”. This mural represents unsanctioned street art that reflects the relationship between hip hop, the underground media, and contemporary Islam as it is understood by Iranian youth. Artist unknown. Photo by the author.*

space and territory, its loud and colourful presence infiltrating public spaces that were supposed to be unmarked and un-rattled by the “fraught conditions of the urban communities” (Chafee 1993, 4). Although unauthorized, such interventions in public

spaces make visible the tacit labor and culture of those whose lives actually constitute the city.

Although Iranian street art and westernized graffiti are similar in visual terms, they differ in medium of communication. Iranian street art is more anti-regime in its form whilst street arts abroad is directly towards anti-capitalism. Street art plays in a whole different division (though sometimes in the same league as graffiti) in the world of mass communication, serving in the same league as other socio-political communications. Street art has the ability and function to “shape and move human emotions and gauge political sentiments”. Through language and visual symbols the artist uses their surroundings as a blank canvas to “help shape perception” (Chaffee 1993, 4-5). Street art ideology protests against the powers of oppression, suppression and subjugation, as does graffiti, but it caters to a large public in an attempt to ideologically sway public opinion. In contrast, graffiti in hip hop culture plays to a select audience of witnesses who are adept at deciphering the symbolism of the imagery within a specific socio-cultural group, one that understands itself resisting dominant modes of public discourse—modes which often seek to silence or erase such culture, unless it has been appropriated for mass consumption. While sanctioned street art seeks to promote ideology, graffiti resists it.



**Figure 3.** In this contemporary interpretation of Ashura (war of Karbala), soldiers are on their way to martyrdom. These soldiers are read simultaneously as soldiers of the Iran-Iraq war and as Imam Hussein's soldiers. The birds represent freedom; the green banner represents Imam Hussein (who also used the color green during the battle of Karbala); the woman is holding the holy book of Quran over the heads of the soldiers as they make their way towards the battlefield. Artist unknown. Photo by the author.





**Figure 4.** This piece of Street Art is a form of protest against the oppression of women by the patriarchal system. The artist has portrayed a female football player who is holding dishwashing liquid instead of a trophy, because in reality she is a champion of the kitchen. This work hints at the feminist movement seen in Iran. Artist: Black Hand. Photo by the author.

Now that we have seen how the street art reflects the revolutionary ideologies of both the underground movements and the Islamic state, we can consider how such imagery and its placement in the public sphere speaks to the historical and contemporary performance of the *Taziyeh*.

The smell of death and rebellion has polluted the air of Tehran over the past forty years. The defiance of the youth against the repressive regimes they have been placed under has been the fuel of protest movements since the 1979 Islamic Revolution. The symbolic similarities we have encountered between the Islamic Revolution, which took place in 1978-79, the Iran/Iraq war and the Green Movement, which arose after 2009, are quite poetic in both context and aesthetics. These movements started in the beginning as peaceful demonstrations of freedom, demanding a better and equal life for all, singing romantic revolutionary songs, creating an atmosphere of happiness, love, and friendship. The irony we face, however, is that the children of the same youth who stood up to a corrupt monarchy and wanted to install a

constitution based on Islamic values and respect for religious clerics in the 1979 Islamic Revolution are now standing up (after the Green Movement) against the regime their parents once fought for. The youth of the Islamic Revolution were disenchanted by the Shah's policies and the youth of the Green Movement are disenchanted by the Islamic regime's policies. In between, we saw a religious war, something to unite the people of Iran for a short period of time and distract them from the truths of oppression and authoritarianism. The youth of Iran have repeatedly used "social behaviours to challenge and subvert the fabric of morality as defiance against the ideologies and conservative cloth "woven by the Islamic regime" (Mahdavi 2013, 13-15). Street Art is mainly used against authoritarian regimes and governments which use oppression against their citizens to gain control and power over them.

Khomeini once stated that the 1979 revolution was a "revolution of values" with its model based entirely on the traditions of Shi'ism and the power of authority (both politically and culturally) belonging to the hands of religious scholars. The Islamic Republic gained popular support by enforcing the emotional influences of fear and guilt upon the citizens of Iran, reminding them evidently about the consequences they will



**Figure 5.** The satellite and hand represent the “propaganda” sent via the west. Artist unknown. Photo by the author.

face if they allow their traditions and traditional heritage to fade away under the Shah’s western policies. This coincided with the Islamic leader’s interpretation of Shi’a beliefs, in which he claimed, “God is the sole sovereign and legitimate legislator” (Asrar 1993, 288). He continued by using the Shi’ism model in the context of delegitimizing the Shah, stating that the monarchy was implementing a structure that was not based on “ritual knowledge and faith” but one that was only present within “a single, homogenous space”, therefore dismissing any Islamic beliefs. This tactic brought upon an instant effect, as the country became increasingly worried about political authority in the hands of nonbelievers (Shaul and Goldberg 2014, 43).

Forty years on, Iranian Islamic conservatives have used the term ‘Westernized’ to describe the youth of Iran. Both ‘Westoxification’ and ‘Westernization’ are used to refer to the loss of Iranian cultural identity through the adoption and imitation of Western models and Western criteria in education, the arts, and culture, and the transformation of Iran into a passive market for Western goods and a pawn in Western geopolitics. What we have seen is the emergence of a counter-revolution, one constructed against the morals and doctrine of conservative Islamic viewpoints. The urban youth felt suffocated in the lead up to the Green Movement, feeling as if the regime (and rightly so) was treating them as pawns on a chessboard. The movement grew rapidly and adapted into an opposing platform based on equality, social justice, and freedom. This counter-revolution of not just political reform but values had slowly developed into a cultural revolution of the youth. The fear that was once placed and injected into the souls of the citizens was no longer effective. This counter-culture is not





**Figure 6.** A work of propaganda at the former U.S embassy in Tehran. Artist unknown. Photo by the author. Artist unknown. Photo by the author.

just in relation to the 1979 revolution. We have discovered that the main components (anti-establishmentarianism, a culture of experimentation, civil disobedience, young people as leaders, and distrust of authority) are all interconnected within the different movements, and the need for social change is at the heart of the powerful symbolic term variously translated as 'Westoxification'.

Whilst the city walls were completely restored, not long after the regime took hold of power, street art in Tehran experienced another surge. Street art depicting antimonarchy images and slogans



started appearing around the city. Although it could be claimed that the artists who painted the walls of the city were sanctioned by the regime to draw these images, we can also link this sudden outpouring of angst against Reza Shah's Monarchy to the

**Figure 7.** This mural is again using the religious beliefs of Shia populations, mixed with anti-Shah, anti-America and anti-Israeli slogans to serve the revolution. The element of blood is seen all over the mural and in particular on the hand. This piece is directly supported by the Islamic Regime as it has not been removed or tampered with. Artist unknown. Photo by the author.

emotional grievances and frustrations faced by the citizens during his rule. In regimes of long or harsh authoritarian rule, an emotional catharsis often takes place immediately after its demise. The emotional rage and frustrations from repressive control and the inability to freely express oneself or to air one's grievances often produce an outpouring of slogans and sentiments from a broad spectrum of society. This catharsis allowed the people to symbolically mark the start of a political transformation and provided them with an expressive, therapeutic outlet. In a way, they were able to engage in an outpouring of emotions after experiencing years of corruption and repressive silence. The Islamic Republic almost instantly detected the potentiality and effectiveness of street art as a communicator, recognizing its form as being politically and ideologically profound, and began utilising public space to its advantage. With this knowledge, we then saw the further attachment of Shi'ism and the "rhetoric of martyrdom (the exploitation of figures of speech and other compositional techniques of martyrs)" becoming the main themes of murals painted around the city (Zickmund 2003, 22-41).

This regime then went on to exercise a high display of visual or "gargantuan" propaganda through street art. The climax of this visual bombardment reached its peak during the Iraq-Iran war. At the same time, the *Taziyeh* was also performed as theatre and through street art. During the 1980-88 war against Iraq, martyrdom developed into



**Figure 8.** Stencil of a soldier (martyr) during the Iran/Iraq war. Artist unknown. Photo by the author.



a vehicle used for forceful mobilization by the state as propaganda. It reminded every citizen that the men who were sent off to battle did not just die for the nation or regime but died for the belief system of Shi'ism. Saddam Hussein's men and country were mostly practicing the other branch of Islam, Sunni'sm. This prompted the men and women of Iran to further revolt against Iraq, and stand firmly and bravely, just like Imam Hussein and his men, in defiance of the revolution. The *Taziyeh* and the battle of Karbala were used by the regime to control the masses, using metaphysical, philosophical and the psychological aspects and needs of the Shi'a faith to reinforce elite power, both culturally and politically, whilst relegating the opposition. The regime appropriated the *Taziyeh* in a religiously radical way by depicting the war against Iraq as a symbolic equivalent of the Karbala. Said another way, the regime politicized the *Taziyeh* by drawing explicit analogies between its historical narrative and the Iran-Iraq war.

The full force of the regime's street art propaganda and *Taziyeh* elements reflecting the martyrs also took flight in the form of political inspiration. These beautifully haunting productions coincide with the Muharram celebrations in which Shi'as celebrate and mourn the life and death of Imam Hussein. The celebrations are crucial in order for us to interconnect the nature of Shi'a Islam and the foundation of street art. Street art is a very common factor in these ceremonies, although it is not defined as street art but as "Islamic art" or the "Art of Martyrs". Images of Imam Hussein are painted around different parts of the cities performing these ceremonies and are also



**Figure 9.** The lettering reads "Shahada" (There is no god but God). In this picture we see how calligraphy, as a spiritual practice, a marker of religious observance, and a politicizing act, have been used to serve the revolutionary purpose of the religion. The religious verse, the most important one in Islam, is used as an inscription, and politics is represented by the silhouette of the crowd in the background, showing people raising their fists as a means of protest. Artist unknown. Photo by the author.



painted on flags/banners, which are carried in *Ashura* processions. Such images are always manifested in Tehran, not only during *Ashura* but on a day-to-day basis with murals painted all around the city.

The city saw a surge of revolutionary murals painted in honor and in support of the martyrs of the war. The regime encouraged the public to stand proud and fight for their country, to be fearless and celebrate the promise of a high reward in the case of martyrs. “Self-annihilation in the holy war is seen as the highest spiritual state” (Varzi 2006, 190). Here we witness a regime that plays and manipulates with the public and the culture of that public by celebrating martyrs and Islam (Shi’ism) for its own advantage. Not only does the regime use these tactics as ‘political inspirations’, but also the authoritarian manifestations of the *Taziye* in Iran go so far as to be plainly pure distraction tactics.

Over the past decade or so, Iran has gone through a rapid urban transformation. The more restless and dissatisfied the youth are with the current structure of the country, the more the government applies beautification in public spaces, although the underground street art movement counter-reacts by applying their own ‘beautification’. However, there is always the tinge of *Taziye* in the air specifically during Muharram. There is a distinct smell of aerosol cans and paint-stained hands around the city amidst this cultural war between the sanctioned and the unsanctioned



**Figure 10.** The inscription reads, “Every day is Ashura, every day is Karbala” (The Museum of Martyrs). Artist unknown. Photo by the author.

just like the distinct smell of death on the battlefields of Karbala, depicted in the *Taziyeh* as performative. Here, we can somewhat see the distinct features of street art as drama drawn on the walls of Iran.

Over the past decade or so, Iran has gone through a rapid urban transformation. The more restless and dissatisfied the youth are with the current structure of the country, the more the government applies beautification in public spaces, although the underground street art movement counter-reacts by applying their own 'beautification'. However, there is always the tinge of *Taziyeh* in the air specifically during Muharram. There is a distinct smell of aerosol cans and paint-stained hands around the city amidst this cultural war between the sanctioned and the unsanctioned just like the distinct smell of death on the battlefields of Karbala, depicted in the *Taziyeh* as performative. Here, we can somewhat see the distinct features of street art as drama drawn on the walls of Iran. Based on the new artistic reformations of murals and newly funded schemes supported by the culture budget, the Iranian government has awoken to the effectiveness of the function of Ashura and *Taziyeh*. Murals have been taken more into consideration in terms of the way they reflect upon the culture. Hence the new reformation, in which murals are sanctioned either directly by the government or through the budget given to *The Foundation of Martyrs*,<sup>10</sup> which allows the transition of sanctioned Street Art from purely visual propaganda to cultural distraction to undertake radical transformations within newly artistic requirements. Spatial representation, the aesthetic and metaphysical applied within the context of some murals, no longer directly represents the in-your-face socio-political context, but rather slowly manifests into a poetically symbolic image that focuses on the reflective nature of the environment and the societal issues that emerge within an institutionalized space.

Street art, which has emerged from graffiti "to have fewer rules and embraces a much broader range of styles and techniques" has had a long and difficult journey from the streets of Tehran (Ganz 2006, 11). It is a form of art that is known as the art of protest, rebellion and disillusionment of mainly youth populations against totalitarian establishments and imposed political, social and religious rules. The reason street art in Iran has worked better than other forms of art has to do with the harsh state censorship that limits art activities to private, underground galleries and gatherings, while street art is creating an opportunity for Iranian artists to offer their art, albeit only for a short time, to be seen by the public. The *Taziyeh* has changed drastically over the past few decades. We are currently witnessing two parties challenging each other for power. The moderates do not wish to impose harsh censorship upon the *Taziyeh*, rejecting the idea of conservative opposition to cultural activities. However, the conservatives' lust for power might impact the art form of the *Taziyeh*, solely due to its Islamic value.

Artists previously sanctioned by the government to draw murals based on martyrdom or war or the theatrical deliverance of the *Taziyeh* are now in Tehran; the underground Street Art movement functions on information and ideas channelled through underground media. The conservative Islamic regime blocks activism at all times in order to protect the religious leaders and their political authority, seeming to forget their own revolutionary roots when they led the opposition to Pahlavi. Or, now that they have power, perhaps they understand all too well how any allowance of resistance has the ability to gather the support needed to become a landslide—that is, another revolution, with themselves now in the role of the deposed.

It is now possible to come to the conclusion that the street art we have encountered has developed into a social and artistic movement, depicting mostly social injustice, desire for peace within communities and the citizens, whilst drawing a cultural connection between the *Taziyeh* and the underground graffiti scene. Sanctioned street art in the past decade or so has gone from murals of martyrs to murals of beauty such as large painting of birds (representing freedom), children (representing the future) and nature. It is a movement that will be continued in the future regardless of race, nationality, religion, boundaries and punishments.

The *Taziyeh* and *Ashura* have now evolved into beautified works of art, performing the same function, through both sanctioned and un-sanctioned art, and they will always have a strong cathartic gloomy element behind it and alongside it, a tint of political art. What was once a threshold for propaganda has now turned into a symbolic reminder of patriotism and a strong religious aide-mémoire. However, as an act of cultural resistance it is something the regime is no longer able to ignore.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> A1one (تنها) is the street name of a visual artist who created graffiti and street art in Iran, especially on the walls of Tehran. For profiles of contemporary artists in Tehran such as A1one, see Ewa Zubek, "Street Art in Iran: Social Commentary on the Streets of Tehran", *Culture Trip*, October 14, 2016, <https://theculturetrip.com/middle-east/iran/articles/street-art-in-iran-social-commentary-on-the-streets-of-tehran/>. Accessed February 2019.

<sup>2</sup> See A1one's Flickr account for examples of his "Persian graffiti" calligraphic murals of truth or *haghighat* at <https://www.flickr.com/photos/irangraffiti/>. Accessed March 12, 2019.

<sup>3</sup> The Communist Party of Iran was banned before the Islamic revolution. The party supported the revolution but was later banned by the Islamic regime and its members were arrested and many executed.

<sup>4</sup> The climactic confrontation between Khomeini's theocrats and the National Front occurred in June 1981 after parliament approved the law of retribution (*qisas*, aka blood revenge or 'an eye for an eye').

<sup>5</sup> For an account of this misunderstanding (or lack of information), see Willem Floor, *The History of Theatre in Iran*, Mage Publishers, Odenton, MD, 2005.

<sup>6</sup> Shi'a itself has many branches. The largest group is called the 'Twelvers' and is concentrated in Iran. They follow the twelfth Imam from Ali to the Mahdi, the last Imam who mysteriously disappeared in 844 and according to Shi'a lives and will return as Messiah to bring justice and the right faith to the world.

<sup>7</sup> The month of Muharram is the most important period in the Shi'a calendar. A time of mourning, self-sacrifice and acts of devotion, Muharram is the first month of the Islamic year and means to Muslims 'sacred' or 'forbidden'. Ashura is the tenth of this month and the tragedy of martyrdom of Hussein took place on this day on the plain of Karbala. This is why the *Taziyeh* is also called 'Drama of Ashura' or 'Drama of Karbala'. According to Muslims, this day is also the day that God created Adam and Eve and the day that Ibrahim (Abraham) was asked to sacrifice his son but was given a ram to sacrifice instead. There is a *Taziyeh*, *Abraham's Sacrifice*, that shows a connection between Abraham's sacrificing his son for God and Hussein sacrificing himself for God and Islam.

<sup>8</sup> The influence of Persian culture can be seen in the West, as most readers will be familiar with the notion that the devil or demon sits on the left, while the angel is on the right.

<sup>9</sup> "...so fear them not, but fear Me, if you are (true) believers..." (Qur'an, 3:175)

<sup>10</sup> The Foundation of Martyrs and Veterans Affairs is an Iranian foundation receiving its funding directly from the national budget. The Foundation gives home loans to disabled veterans and the families of the martyrs.

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