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Image Politics: The Circulation and Agency of Images in the Formation of Resistance and Collective Memory in Contemporary Iran

In the course of political and social upheavals, a great number of images are produced and disseminated, yet only a few move beyond recording and representing an event to become consequential images that can arouse collective emotion, create social solidarity, become the emblem of a movement, or contribute to collective memory. This difference constitutes the central problem of the present research. It focuses on photographs published during protests in Iran that have travelled beyond their original context of publication and been reproduced across media, social networks, and urban public space.

Recent scholarship has examined Iranian photography, visual culture, and images of revolution, war, and social protest. However, much of this research has focused on the content of images, their documentary value, or their historical and ideological meanings, while less attention has been paid to the processes of circulation, (re)appropriation, reframing and exhibiting, through which images become active agents. This research therefore focuses on the social and political agency of images, asking how images act and under what conditions such agency emerges.

The study approaches the image not merely as a representation or document of an event, but as an object in circulation whose meaning and function can be transformed as it moves across media, audiences, and historical contexts. It focuses on the life of the image after its production and traces the processes through which an image moves from a document of an event to a symbol with broader social and political significance.

The theoretical framework rests on three axes: image agency, drawing on W. J. T. Mitchell's approach; image circulation, encompassing the movement, reproduction, and reframing of images across media, digital platforms, and public space; and memory studies, with a focus on the work of Astrid Erll and Ann Rigney on cultural memory and mediation, and Jan and Aleida Assmann's distinction between communicative and cultural memory.

Drawing on Mitchell's theory of image agency, this research takes the image to be not merely a medium of representation but something that acts within political and social life, and holds that it does not acquire this agency independently of its social and historical contexts. The study examines how, in the course of an image's circulation, that agency emerges through reproduction, reframing, and reinterpretation across different historical settings. Where an image has been taken up again at a later moment, possible changes in its meaning and function are traced, along with its relation to narratives of the past and to collective memory.

The research covers a span of roughly two decades, from 2009 to the present, a period in which the conditions of image production and circulation have changed considerably, allowing these changes to be followed through the trajectories of individual images. The corpus consists of six to eight photographs produced in the context of protest movements in Iran during this period.

The research employs a qualitative and historical approach based on the tracing of individual image trajectories. Each photograph is examined from the context of production through circulation in media and public space, framing and accompanying texts, reinterpretation and changes in function, and possible reactivation at a later historical moment. Sources include photographic and press archives, domestic and foreign media, digital archives, social networks, and public forms of image use such as posters, placards, and murals.

The research aims to explain the conditions and mechanisms through which images acquire political and social agency, contributing to a broader understanding of image circulation, visual culture, resistance, and collective memory in contemporary Iran.