

Silent Shout

Photography, Women, and the Iranian Rooftop (1953, 1979, 2009)

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Silence is more eloquent than the union of a hundred tongues.

(Farsi proverb, as cited in Tual, 1986, p. 60)

All of old. Nothing else ever. Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better.

(Beckett, 1983, p. 47)

Abstract

The historical lineage of photographic representations of the rooftop in Iran, as keyed to three pivotal, modern moments – the 2009 elections, the 1979 revolution, and the 1953 coup – demonstrates how the roof functions as a space from which attempts by Iranian women to reorder, contest, and invert political relations through sound have been recurrently staged.

This paper argues that representations from within this photographic lineage constitute a productive political transition between sonic and visual regimes; one that is actually enabled by the unsettling quality of silence made uniquely perceptible, or rendered singly, in the ambivalent vision of photography. Consequently, the images here considered problematize and expand Jacques Rancière's theorization of the aesthetic formation of politics by questioning what might be accomplished politically in the failure to represent, proposing the idea that imaging silence in the midst of turbulent noise might engender a political representation of a different order.

Of primary interest to this argument are two works completed in 2009 (Pietro Masturzo's 2009 World Press Photo of the Year, "From the Rooftops of Tehran, June", and Shirin Neshat's multimedia adaptations of the surrealist Farsi novella *Women Without Men*), each of which formalize the way in which the specific setting of the rooftop, as something we might call, following Michel Foucault, a "heterotopic" site, activates this relationship of (in)audibility and political representation.

Keywords: Photography, gender, Iran, rooftop, Rancière.

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The 2009 World Press Photo of the Year, an image now widely acclaimed in the circles of professional photojournalism, went unpublished in the news media during the year of its making [Figure 1]. Captured by freelance Italian photojournalist Pietro Masturzo

in June of 2009, it pictures a small group of female protesters on a rooftop in a middle-class neighborhood of Tehran, shouting their dissent over the results of the disputed Iranian presidential election of that year. In a later interview with the Spanish press, Masturzo said of his award-winning image: “I had the impression that a special history was taking place on every roof. The protesters were all looking to the past, the present and the future at the same time” (as cited in Calvo, 2010). The rooftop protest, a practice rekindled in the wake of the 2009 elections, in fact restaged one of the main tactics of the 1979 Islamic Revolution in which noise was used as a political weapon against the Iranian state. As one foreign eyewitness of the 1979 events observed, “the most impressive development...were rooftop rallies, a way of defying the 9 p.m. curfew. After dark everyone in the city it seemed was out in their garden or on their roof chanting and yelling [sic]. The city was live with noise” (“Get Rid of the Shah”, 1979, p. 16).

Looking at this particular photograph raises a deceptively simple-sounding question: can you hear this picture? Though it works to literalize and capture sonic protest at the moment of its emission, it is nonetheless bewilderingly difficult to look at this image and simultaneously imagine that we hear something. This is all the more strange considering the photograph centers around a woman caught in the visible gesture of shouting. As a picture, it is not noisy, even if the event it documents and the history it recalls are both loaded with allusions to sound. It would seem a matter of course that the most celebrated photojournalist document of this distinctly sonic phenomenon should give aural expression to the exceptional circumstances (indeed, the “special history”) at hand: exactly thirty years after the Islamic revolution, electrifying calls once again emerged from the rooftops at night in defiance of the state. So why, after all this affective positioning, does the photo still feel and look so quiet? How does it happen that, in looking at this image, we can almost hear the slightly acrid hum of



Image 1. Pietro Masturzo. From the Rooftops of Tehran, June, 2009.

the electric lights in the windows, the buzz of the exposed powerlines overhead, but remain utterly deaf to the woman's otherwise very clearly imaged shout?

As one of the jurors of the World Press Photo competition described it, "the photo has a powerful sense of atmosphere, tension, fear – but also of quietness and calm, and in this sense was a challenge as a choice. We were looking for an image that drew you in, took you deeper, made you think more – not just about showing what we already know, but something that asks more of us" ("World Press Photo", 2010). Indeed, the photo itself discloses very little in the way of demonstrative subtext or obvious narrative. This is partially a function of certain atmospheric conditions that result from Masturzo taking the photo in the hazy interval between evening and nighttime, but it is just as indicative of the general tone of uncertainty and precariousness that pervaded the June 2009 events. The scene pictured is a rooftop in a middle-class neighborhood of Tehran, where three women are loosely congregated. It is evening, not yet dark, but the night has already claimed a couple of buildings in the far distance, throwing their facades into flat, black shadow. A barely perceptible glow emanates upward from the street, lightening a small slice of bluish-gray sky visible at top center. The color of the sky – a relatively minor player up against the photo's imposing light effects and blocky architectural forms (stucco and brick residences in varying hues of stone-white) – quietly graduates from light to dark as the eye moves up the horizon, then presses back down, from dark to light again, as we re-enter the scene below. Outside, the faint glow from the street softly pushes on the encroaching darkness, while inside, shrill, white blasts of fluorescent light aggressively and indiscreetly punch it out.

The photographer used a relatively long exposure for this shot, which accounts for the blown-out brightness in the windows and the motion blur around one of the *chadoris* on the roof. The slight shake and distorted light around several of the window frames indicates that Masturzo was likely positioned behind a closed window. While not associated with any time-based technical feature of the camera – like shutter speed or exposure length – but rather with the happenstance position of its operator, this half-focused, shuddering effect of light nonetheless serves as one of the strongest indicators of temporality in the photograph. It visualizes the disparity between a primary hot spot of light and its luminous afterglow, indexing the range of activity that can occur between two static instants. In this, it parallels the relationship between the two adjacent but un-adjointed spaces of the separate buildings from where the photographer and his subjects are respectively positioned.

Aside from the discordant lighting effects and the repetition of groups of three – windows and women both appear in triads – the other major element of the composition is a rather heavy-handed application of photographic vignette that encases either vertical side of the image in deep, thick swaths of near-black shadow. Given the assortment of light effects in the rest of the photograph, this dramatic darkening around the edges suggests that this detail was likely applied in digital post-production. The handling of the light otherwise makes that kind of high-contrast shadow at the sides impossible to achieve raw, since an exposure long enough to account for the blur of the figure on the rooftop would have created a more pervasive, all-over glow across the entire image. By virtue of this aesthetic choice, it turns out that perhaps the unascertainable quality of the shout does not derive from the spatial

environment the photo actually documents. The viewer's distance from the scene, and fact that the photographer (and by extension the viewer) looks to be cordoned behind window glass, cannot completely account for this silencing effect. The effect also arises from the deliberate enclosure of dark, visual material that invades the rooftop and closes it off from either side, enshrouding it in a contained compositional field. Before it is heard, her shout is already an echo, bouncing off the black, opaque wall that closes in on her space with the advancing night, travelling nowhere.

The vignette effect can also be read as a conscious silencing or muting aesthetic move, and perhaps as the very thing that makes this otherwise politically noisy representation seem so quiet. And, as a compositional element rendered after-the-fact (as such the only calculably 'artistic' or aesthetically-motivated component of the finished image), it lends a theatricality and surreality to what has otherwise been produced and received as unequivocally documentarian. The staginess of the vignette, the way it curtains and composes the scene while also containing it, dilutes and suspends the sense of vivid, living, moving noise that we otherwise know to be populating this moment.

That "From the Rooftops of Tehran, June, 2009", shot in the aftermath of the elections but before Ahmadinejad's reinauguration and so in the peak of the drama, won the World Press Photo's grand prize is odd, considering its lack of clear, journalistic storytelling, and its numerous technical slippages and imperfections to which any trained photojournalist will attest. That it won such high accolades in this news context also tells us something about photojournalism's assumed function in communicating the tenor of political events otherwise largely experienced within the sonic realm. In the end, what makes the image remarkable has nothing to do with its sheer affective power, its virtuosic display of technical or artistic adeptness, or even its ability to make pertinent and digestible an important and timely moment in recent history as per the illustrative standards of the news media. Instead, it is the inconclusiveness and uncertainty it shows in all these functions, and its indeterminate treatment of supposedly determinate things – sharpness and blur, motion and stillness, quiet and noise – that makes it so memorable and so haunting. Meanwhile, "what we already know" about this photo, the "real" but imperceptible fact of its utter noisiness, is simultaneously rendered and withdrawn. The sound it makes is sonically out of its own range, exceeding the expected threshold of visual aurality and registering instead as visually silent. It functions, then, in a different kind of productive transitional space between sonic and visual regimes; one that is actually enabled by the unsettling quality of silence that is made uniquely perceptible, or rendered exclusively, in the ambivalent vision of photography.

Sensation and (Non)Representation; or, How to Do Things with Silence

Synesthesia is a neurological condition in which two or more senses are transposed. Seeing sound, hearing color, tasting shape: these are more than evocative metaphorical idioms, though cross-sensory translations have been employed in art and literature for centuries, from Pythagoras' correlation of color to the musical scale, to hip-hop artist B.G.'s definition of 'bling' as "the imaginary sound produced when light reflects off a diamond" (Thompson, 2009, p. 483). In the actual cognitive process of synesthesia, a documented physiological aberration of the normal brain, sensorial overlaps are

experienced as common and automatic, and the linkages they create are taken to be obvious and logical, if not inherent to the very thing perceived. The capacity to understand verbal descriptions of synesthetic compounds is, however, not limited to persons who fit a certain medical profile. Though the choice to describe a person's voice as 'sharp' or a surface's texture as 'purple' may not occur as immediate or instinctive to many, it is nevertheless still possible to imagine what is meant by such an idea. When good synesthetic descriptions raise questions, they are largely rhetorical ones. "Can you hear this picture?" is one such a question.

As musicologist and historian Veit Erlmann (2004) has posited, "Arguments over the hierarchy of the senses are always also arguments over cultural and political agendas", meaning that the mental and representational act of conflating and reordering (or disordering) perception differently in the hierarchical sensorium has inherent political implications (p. 4). But what does it mean to perform this synesthetic reordering and reprivileging through specifically visual media, such as photography and film? Silencing, as a visual strategy, demands that we approach the above question differently, and ask more specifically what employing this strategy accomplishes politically by conjuring the eye's failure to hear. We can say with some conviction that vision has historically enjoyed primacy as the master sense, as the one to which we have ascribed the greatest responsibility for communicating the world to us, helping to order it, and, by extension, forming us as actors and political participants within it.² But, as Jacques Attali (1985) has proposed, "For twenty-five centuries, [we] have failed to understand that the world is not for the beholding. It is not legible, but audible... Nothing essential happens in the absence of noise" (p. 3). While Attali's intervention carefully corrects a legacy of visual supremacy, we should first note that for both ocular- and aural-centric beholders of the world alike, structures of knowledge and political expression are hinged to the structures of sensorial arrangement, where arguments over what is known are based on what one perceives and in what order. The structures of perception form both the prerequisite and the result of any social discussion "in which there is actually something to discuss" (Rancière, 1999, p. 55). Jacques Rancière's (2006) conception of the political in *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible* has countered that those discussions are themselves ordered and contested first through and by the structural filter of the visual regime. Nothing may happen in the absence of noise, as per Attali's claim, but what constitutes a political action in the first place is always already reliant on its spatial (and thus visual) occupation of perceptible reality.³

Complicating and challenging both Attali and Rancière's models of politics vis-à-vis regimes of representation is a kind of visual or aesthetic silencing that recurs in a lineage of contemporary photographic imagery of Iranian women. These images document or reference Iran's major, modern revolutionary moments: the 1953 coup, the 1979 Revolution, and the 2009 Green Movement. Consequently, the images here considered problematize and expand Rancière's theorization of the aesthetic formation of politics by questioning what might be accomplished politically in the failure to represent, proposing the idea that imaging silence in the midst of turbulent political noise might engender a political representation of a different order. The fact that these visually silent representations also recur in images of the rooftop, a subversive space of sonic protest borne out of imposed limitations on public visibility, serves to

link multiple modes of perception – physical, spatial, ocular, aural – to a specifically politicized counter-site within the regime of the sensible.

The particular interrelationship between visibility/invisibility and audibility/in audibility also parallels a much longer history of politicized representations of women in Iran. In addition to the very concrete visibility of the *chador* and *hijab* as it has been alternately banned and enforced in public spaces by the state since the 1930s,⁴ women's voices have been associated with popular protest and public demonstrations in Iran since at least the mid-1800s (Martin, n.d., pp. 50-66). Visually, the varying presence and absence of the *chador* provides a literal enactment of the distribution of the senses, since the colors, textures, shapes, sizes, forms, lines, and patterns that distinguish one individual woman from another can be glossed over in one homogenizing representational system. More than just a visual problem, however, the public enforcement of Islamic dress codes metaphorically blunts and delimits speech acts in the sense that Aphrodite Désirée Navab (2007) invokes when she asks: "How is it possible to hold a gun, march, fight, and give orders with the *chador* held together at the mouth?" (p. 47).

The direct audible and visible presence of women in public spaces of protest has served to establish a demonstrative economy of political representation in certain historical contexts, especially where official representation has been otherwise threatened or refused. The conscious withholding of the visual or the verbal, however, is an act that is potentially equally loaded with other communicative properties. To understand the complexity of women's speech capacities in patriarchal Iranian culture, claims ethnographer Anny Tual (1986), "language and its uses must, for example, be considered in relation to another very important system of knowledge: the non-verbal" (p. 55). Both the refusal to speak and the choice to communicate without words, via movements of the body, eyes, and face, depend on a shared cultural recognition of silence as a loaded and endlessly expressive mode of communication.⁵ So too with the *chador*, a highly visible political symbol of the theocracy that attempts to constrict and condense a plurality of individuals into an anonymous mass, yet simultaneously allows for a level of subversive invisibility on the level of individual choice. Wearing the *chador* can provide practical protection from the unwanted male gaze, or disrupt the surveilling state's capacity to distinguish one woman from another in acts of public dissent. Since the 19th century, "one of the advantages women had was that, when protesting against powerful officials, their veils protected them from individual recognition, so that they could be more intimidating" (Martin, n.d., p. 55). By partially controlling the conditions of their own visual reception in alternately wearing the veil and so asserting their right not to be looked at, or dressing according to secular custom and so asserting their right to be seen, Iranian women have been called "masters of evasion" working with a complex language of exogenous and endogenous expressive tools.⁶ The unintended consequence of the high-visibility *hijab*, which is designed to limit visual access, is that it carves out an alternative space to assert a certain power in invisibility, whereby women paradoxically don the mantle of that which makes them disappear in order to effectively assert the means to representation.⁷ Such acts of limiting one's vision, both expressively and literally, figure as submissive to and as subversive of contemporary patriarchy in acclaimed Iranian-born graphic novelist Marjane Satrapi's 2006 book *Embroideries*. In one scene, for example, a young female narrator is encouraged by her grandmother to "close her eyes a little", which the granddaughter resists because it ceases to make

her “look vibrant and intelligent”. Her grandmother insists that lowering her eyelids languorously will allow her to find lovers more easily – not one lover, however, but three. “Thanks to her half-closed eyes,” the narrator continues, “my grandma got married three times. My grandfather was her last husband”.

The visual and its direct effect on the political was in fact nowhere more evident than in the visible changes that accompanied Khomeini’s Islamist reforms in Iran’s public spaces during the 1980s, in the early years after the Revolution. “Perhaps nothing,” writes sociologist Asef Bayat (2010), “was more jarring than the sudden disappearance of bright colours from public spaces; black and grey, as embodied in women’s *chadors* and men’s facial hair, now dominated the city’s visual landscape” (p. 108). Film theorist Negar Mottahedeh (2008) has described a certain phantasmagoric effect attending the post-revolutionary government’s scopic limitations on vision: “The panoptic enforcement of the rules of clothing through the active engagement of the police force, the school system, the traffic comptrollers, and even undercover agents in bathhouses to monitor compliance, especially with respect to the rule to appear veiled in public places, seems almost surreal”. What we can perceive of the vastly nuanced and complex languages of silence, the non-verbal and non-visible modes of ‘speech’ employed tactically by women over the last forty years of Iranian cultural production, does not seem to completely preclude or negate the fact that:

the visual dimension, despite Islamization, possessed particular power...which matches the power of women’s words and verbal eloquence... As if regulated through a sensitive lens, the women and their actions moved into sharper focus as the research [on the lived experience of women in contemporary Iran, and how they resist the limitations placed upon them] progressed. (Honarbin-Holliday, 2008, p. 5)

Shifting, blurring, and sharpening as contexts and conditions change, the visibility that sanctions and makes audible political speech is itself a perpetual shape-shifter, reconstituting in an endless play of variation and substitution within the rudimentary limitations and regulations imposed by a sensitive lens. From this more entrenched historicist perspective, one can conceive of the distribution of senses as a photographic metaphor; as a lens that responds to and visually abridges multi-sensorial, trans-temporal inputs of information. With this understanding, it now appears as little coincidence that the highly visible daytime street protests of 2009’s revolutionary movement also worked very consciously with the endogenous power of visualized silence, perhaps in response or rejoinder to the highly audible but in-visible corollary of the nighttime rooftop protest [Image 3]. As a BBC correspondent observed of the street protests in Tehran, “the most remarkable thing about this demonstration is the complete silence. The only sound is a certain amount of conversation. There is no shouting, no chanting – just a really dignified silence” (“Reporters’ log: Iran’s upheaval”, 2009).⁸

Rooftop Culture: Limits and Liminals

Prior to Khomeini’s rise to power, in the post-1953 coup, pre-revolutionary era of the 1960s and 1970s, economic growth from oil incomes financed a tremendous upsurge in industrialization projects, public works, and urban development in Iran. Tehran’s population doubled in the ten years between 1965-1975, mostly due to land reform

measures that dissolved traditional feudal powers in the countryside and drew newly displaced rural laborers by the millions in to the city centers, where consumer culture and Western markets were on the exponential rise. With the new influx, Iranian cities became overpopulated, active, and lively spaces where differently classed social groups (comprised mostly of men but diversified somewhat by more secular women) were forced to share a limited urban geography. A kind of street-corner/alleyway sub-culture called *sar-e kouche* formed around the basic activities of socializing, discussing news and politics, and generally passing the time and interacting publicly in the street. After the Islamic Revolution, when Khomeini instated the extremist regime of *velayat-e faqih*, this kind of public circulation and social exchange was lost to “the regimentation of city spaces by *pasdaran* and Khomeinist *hizballahi* vigilantes, who patrolled the streets with clubs and guns to enforce the new moral edicts” of the Islamist state (Bayat, 2010, p. 108).

The public, visible, exterior spaces of the city were virtually transformed into enclosed, ‘interior’ spaces regulated by conservative ideology, and women became the most concretely affected by the imposed behavioral limitations. Consequently, Bayat (2010) remarks, “private spaces and homes became for many the key geographic loci of communication, sociability and recreation” (p. 108). *Sar-e kouche* / “alley culture” gave way to a kind of “rooftop culture”⁹ that still exists in force today. In this early rooftop culture, people – but mostly women – still circulated, but only in spaces relegated to the domestic sphere. Such circulation must be read as a gesture of simultaneous obedience and resistance to the new terms of sociability dictated by the government’s ethos of public surveillance and control.

The female-centric re-occupation of rooftops and domestic interiors has historical precedent in the socialized architecture of the Islamic world, where it has served political as well as informal, convivial functions. In pre-independence Algeria, for example, private domestic interiors became territories of refuge where colonial subjects could convene out of view of the French occupiers patrolling the public streets below. The colonial regime’s inability to fully penetrate the private household frustrated efforts to fully survey and control the colonized, and thus the Algerian house became



Image 2. Shirin Neshat. Feature Film Still *Women Without Men*, 2009. Copyright Shirin Neshat. Courtesy Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels.

retooled during the war as a “cell of resistance” (Celik, 2009, p. 155), with the rooftop representing the oppositional “counter-space” (*espace contre*) (Lesbet, 1985, p. 39) to the street below. Moreover, the very fact of the rooftop’s inaccessibility to sight from the vantage point of the street was perhaps the most crucial aspect of its effectiveness as an instrument of colonial resistance in Algiers, given the long-standing dominance of the European socio-political worldview generated by Cartesian ocularcentrism which not only favors vision above the other senses, but directly equates vision with knowledge and knowledge subsequently with power.¹⁰ The Algerian rooftop “also served as a space of knowledge that defined the forms of social exchange and that was transmitted over generations through memory” (Joelle Bahloul as cited in Celik, 2009, p. 135). Such a space of knowledge, carved out in the context of an actual architectural space, is another kind of virtual *espace contre*, based on differently conceived and socially transmitted forms of belonging and representation.

Algeria’s rooftop culture differed crucially from Iran’s in one important architectural feature: the density and proximity of the buildings in Algiers made it possible to actually pass from house to house along the rooftops, de-necessitating any contact, however brief, with the street below. The above-ground, lateral movement from rooftop to rooftop made uniquely possible by Algerian architecture was not replicated in the Pahlavi-era urbanism programs in Tehran in the 1960s and 1970s. This seemingly anecdotal difference may in fact account for a large part of the urban rooftop’s relative success as a revolutionary tool and tactic in colonial Algiers, versus its uncertain and more complicated status in contemporary, post-revolutionary Tehran.¹¹ Because Algeria’s rooftop culture remained both secreted and traversable, it may not have found cause to join the same sonic regime that developed in Tehran’s urban geography.

The rooftop protest, a sonically generated *espace contre* to the visually monitored streets, was first formulated during the 1979 revolution which ended the twenty-six year reign of Mohammad-Reza Shah Pahlavi, a secular-monarchical dictator installed by a British and US-engineered coup d’état in 1953. The 1953 coup, which violently ousted Iran’s democratically elected Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh, provides



Image 3. “A new form, a new way...” Shirin Neshat. Feature Film Still. *Women Without Men*, 2009. Copyright Shirin Neshat. Courtesy Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels.

the historical and political backdrop to Shahrnush Parsipur's 1998 novella *Women Without Men*, a magic-realist drama interweaving the narratives of five Tehrani women, adapted as a feature-length film and multimedia art production in 2009 by Shirin Neshat and Shoja Azari. Neshat, like Parsipur, is an Iranian-born artist exiled from the country due to the contentious political nature of her work. Her extensive oeuvre in film, video, and photography has largely addressed the complex social, cultural, and religious realities of women and the Islamic state, and her specific interpretation of *Women Without Men* stages the 1953 events as a historical allegory of Iran's present-day political situation.¹² In Parsipur's original text, a politically active female character named Munis commits suicide by jumping from a rooftop. Within several hours of her death and subsequent burial, Munis (or her "double", it is unclear in the narration) is rumored by a neighborhood servant girl to be "seen walking along the edge of the roof by night, and opening mosquito nets to gaze impudently upon the people inside" (Parsipur, 1998, p. 39). In this scene, Munis' walking along the rooftop's edge activates the roof as an imagined, liminal space of transgression, in that she is only able to be there in an invented magic-realist scenario as opposed to one determined by historical reality, as in the Algerian context. Here the rooftop represents a metaphorically transitory, but also actual, physical site; an architectural formation between life and death, memory and presence, interior and exterior worlds. Parsipur collapses these realms in a linguistically pared-down, matter-of-fact narrative style in order to demonstrate the incommensurability and absurdity of all these things actually existing alongside one another and at the same time, utilizing a common strategy of magic-realist writing that pairs with the semantic operation of the urban rooftop in Iran as a space of incompatible simultaneities.

Such a co-existence of real and metaphorical spaces of transgression was earlier theorized by Michel Foucault in a mid-career lecture-turned-essay entitled "Of Other Spaces," published posthumously, in which he conceptualized a kind of counter-space he termed the 'heterotopia.' In contrast to utopias and dystopias, which do not exist in actuality but bear a direct cognate relationship to the real space of society, heterotopias are:

real places – places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of



Image 4. "...And in this turbulence and noise, there was almost silence underneath." Shirin Neshat. Feature Film Still. *Women Without Men*, 2009. Copyright Shirin Neshat. Courtesy Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels.

society – which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality (Foucault, 1967).

Heterotopias, by Foucault's prescription, are locatable in "probably every culture, in every civilization" in the real world by way of six interconnected principles. The first four principles deal with aspects of the heterotopia's appearance around incidents of social struggle, and their capacity as spaces to index multiple and simultaneous temporalities ("heterochronies"), and their meta-referentiality in relation to both other impossible and actual sites. Heterotopias are "capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible", as when a small parcel of the world becomes symbolic of its entirety. Foucault's illustrative example of this one aspect is, conveniently enough, the traditional Persian garden, and the rest of his text is peppered throughout with case studies of what constitutes heterotopic space in the perceptible world and where they can be found. Thinking through Foucault's criteria simultaneously in terms of the actual space of the rooftop and the representational space of the photograph illuminates the ways in which photography and modern Islamic architecture converge and activate one another, amounting to a specific site of the political within the regime of the sensible. Foucault's heterotopias also operate in a system of conditional opening and closing, becoming alternately penetrable and impenetrable based on culturally determined points of access; as in, for example, women's unique level of access to the Iranian rooftop and the domestic interior, and as in the aperture's conditional opening and closing with regard to changing conditions of atmospheric light.¹³

The film adaptation of Parsipur's novel begins with Munis alone on the rooftop. A female voiceover speaks about a long-awaited silence as Munis jumps (or rather, releases, as per the narration) peacefully to her death [Image 3]. There is no dramatic leap, no conventional act of political martyrdom in the scene, only a tentative embrace of silence through the act of suicide, and a search for what the voiceover calls "a new form, a new way". Versions of this same scene – Munis on the stone-white rooftop cloaked in the black *chador*, her head and hair uncovered and a clear blue sky overhead – are reprised in the middle of the film and once again in the final scene, each time accompanied by a different sub-soundtrack layered behind Munis' voiceover.¹⁴ As the turmoil of the political storyline starts to crescendo throughout the film, culminating in August of 1953 when the Shah's tanks roll through Tehran amid throngs of demonstrating Mosaddegh supporters, the same voiceover remarks: "And in this turbulence and noise, there was almost silence underneath" [Image 4].

The rooftop in *Women Without Men* represents, on the one hand, a limited space, expressed by Munis' suicide as well as what is implied in the act of climbing up to the roof when there is no possibility of going out and away, into the world. This limitation is reinforced in the first repetition of the rooftop suicide scene, which immediately follows a scene in which Munis and her friend Faizeh are forbidden to walk out in public unaccompanied by the man of the house. The roof also functions as a liminal

space in terms of its architectural and social displacement between home and world, private and public, and in its doubled symbolism as both an escape route and a site of death. A heterotopia that repeats, but differently each time, the recurrence of the rooftop becomes sonically malleable to the scene and circumstance in which it occurs.¹⁵ It adheres neither to its own prior or subsequent iterations, nor to the greater world-space of the film as a whole. And it manages to juxtapose in 'real' cinematic time multiple temporal incompatibilities, such as the allusion it makes to the surreal possibility of dying not once, but three times.

By suggesting that "Politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time", Rancière (2006, p. 14) imputes that the visual is the a priori order conditioning the possibilities of speech. This is, in one important respect, a radical departure from Habermasian conceptions of the public sphere as a text-based political space that privileges the literate, reading subject, a model itself rife with its own problems and pre-constituted structural hierarchies. But why would Rancière choose to return to the historically predominant visual sphere in order to theorize the constitution of its corollary expressive pair, the "what can be said about it", "the talent to speak"? A paradox: or something that hangs between two registers, one of which defines meaning-making as language (speech proper) and its conditioning prerequisite as visibility. In this seemingly ouroboric re-privileging of visual models within an otherwise radical re-conceptualization of political possibility, is Rancière showing all of his cards? Perhaps not, but neither is Masturzo's camera, Neshat and Parsipur's confabulation of possible and impossible realities, or the complex perceptual situations that both works ultimately aim to show.

It is clear that the issues are potentially manifold when Rancière's formulation of the politics of aesthetics are evaluated against the image of the Iranian rooftop and the (non-)sonic perceptual space it generates. In Rancière's model, the visible precedes and conditions the audible. In making the audible possible, the visual makes the whole of political representation salient. That politics relies on the visual to distribute the audible is substantiated in one way by the photograph as an object, in that it exists as a visual medium first only to ask a series of sonic questions second. At this stage, then, it seems Rancière is right, but only up to a point, since the audible being distributed in this case is apprehended as a muted, closed-off sound. This auditory sphere is closer to silence than speech, and does not fall within the domain of demonstrable language, or "the talent to speak," as Rancière would have it. In Masturzo's photo, the aesthetic muting of the vignette notwithstanding, the shout's very unintelligibility is suspended and held aloft between incongruous registers of representation in several other facets: 1. In the supposed language barrier between the Iranian subjects (shouting in Farsi) and the photographer (an Italian native), in which the codified language of one is literally perceived as noise, not speech, by the other, 2. In the placement of photographer and viewer behind a window, which partially distorts what is visible as well as audible, and 3. In the socialized inbetween-space that is the rooftop in this place and historical context.

The rooftop as a setting featured prominently in the various didactic channels of international news media during the Green Movement protests of 2009, but it remained virtually obstructed as an actionable site in 2009 in its constant, telegraphic

reference to past revolutionary history, as well as its ambiguous visual interface with technologies of contemporary communication.¹⁶ It was in no small part the creative use of late 1970s technology (tape recorders, overseas radio broadcasts, and newspapers) that allowed for the Islamic resistance movement in 1979 to take hold and circumvent Pahlavi authoritarianism in repurposing the tools of the modernist state and turning the “technologies of domination” into “technologies of the self” (Afary, 2005, p. 4, 89). Journalists and cultural critics of the Green Revolution have tended to graft this historical situation on to an incomplete understanding of the influence of Twitter, YouTube, and other social networking platforms on the 2009 Iranian elections, with Twitter receiving the most attention due to an influx of media reports that the site was shut down by Ahmadinejad’s government censors during the height of the protests.¹⁷ Hundreds of videos of rooftop protests were uploaded on YouTube between election night and Ahmadinejad’s re-inauguration date, but this and other social networking activity did not set regime change in motion, as had their technological counterparts in 1979. Moreover, the poor visual legibility of most of these amateur videos, shot at night with cheap consumer-grade cameras and camera phones, reiterated the many disruptions and improvisations of an otherwise “complete” transmission of political organization attending this particular “distribution of the sensible”.¹⁸

One internet video that demonstrates this difference effectively, which has received a substantial but by no means overwhelming number of hits on YouTube,¹⁹ is of a rooftop protest dubbed over with the voice of Hila Sedighi reading a poem about the death of her classmate Neda Agha-Soltan, a young woman who was murdered by a Basij militiaman while observing the protests in Tehran on June 20th [Image 6].²⁰ The video employs two different sources of overlapped sound, and one barely perceptible, jerky, low-resolution and almost completely black image sustained over about two minutes and 26 seconds of unedited nighttime footage. Of the two sound elements, the live rooftop shouts in the distance come across as vitriolic and cathartic but also atmospheric, relegated to the register of background noise, while Sedighi’s voiceover is aurally dominant but cinematically quiet, restrained and mournful. Sedighi eventually begins to weep as she nears the end of the poem, which translates:

Tonight you can hear the sounds of ‘Allahu Akbar’ louder than the nights before. Where is this place? Where is this place which has been closed in from every direction [sic]? Where is this place where people can only cry out to God? [...] Where is this place where nobody remembers us? Where is this place where we only have our own silence from which to raise our voices to the world? [...] Stand on rooftops to pray... Where is this place? Would you like me to tell you? This place is Iran. This place is my birthplace and yours. This place is Iran.

Contrary to Rancière’s formulation, this imperceptible image does not constitute a lack of representation. It does not indicate a failure to distribute, but rather constitutes a charged political utterance of its own accord. How exactly does this realization complicate Rancière’s still-compelling model, especially considering the fact that we are, at the end of the day, dealing with photographic media and with visual objects? In one sense, we have arrived back at the primacy of the visible, but now with an exploded and expanded concept of how visibility may be politically enacted in situations of limited visual transmission. Rancière presupposes that representation is

formulated only in that which is resolutely seen and heard, which is enacted outright, which is clearly demonstrable and undistorted. In *Dis-agreement*, he writes: “But the point is that the demonstration proper to politics is always both argument and opening up the world where argument can be received and have an impact – argument about the very existence of such a world” (Rancière, 1999, p. 56). Here, on the one hand, is a potential space carved out in the act of questioning the very structures that make visible (and hence feasible) the world of political possibility. Hila’s repetition of the line “Where is this place?” and its coda, “Would you like me to tell you?” also serves as an implicit questioning and re-opening of these same structures. But it turns out that it is only by way of the seemingly iconic, large-scale, visible event, the absolutely represented political action – a form that adheres to and resembles if not mimics, the *demonstrable norms of existent political power* – that this redistributive property can be opened up and potentially refashioned. Rancière continues: “Politics exists wherever the count of parts and parties of society is disturbed by the inscription of a part of those who have no part... Politics exists as long as the singular forms of subjectification *repeat the forms of the original inscription* of the identity between the whole of the community and the nothing that separates it from itself” (Rancière, 1999, p. 126, italics mine). In other words, he is here suggesting that while the demonstrable norms of existent political power by those who have no part allows for the reassembly of political formation, it still falls short of ‘politics’ as long as the aspirations of the minor subjects (those who have no part) are not visible in the very terms set by the major regime, or its demonstrable norms. Where they are not, the political as such does not properly exist. In this prescriptive, there is no accounting for the dissidence and ambivalence of photographic vision, the non-aspirational subject as a legitimate agent, the language of silence as an expressive tool, or the willful exit from any dominant sphere of representation as aspirations that, unto themselves, might also comprise forms of political action. Reading affectively silent pictures such as Masturzo’s therefore requires a model of photography that locates its politics not in the aspirational mimicry or demonstrability of the vociferous shout, but rather in the failure of the image to register as audible on the same set of terms as the dominant forms of political representation.

Still, what is the nature and the result of our (and Rancière’s) seemingly tautological return to pictures, and to the visual, as the thing to which political representation ultimately adheres? For better or worse, and for all the photographic situations that push and complicate various synesthetic divisions, might we be wiser to accept the reality of what the widely circulated photographic image as a contemporary social text represents? The reality of the photograph now, as Robert Harriman and John Lucaites (2007) insist, “confirm[s], alters and enhances an old truth: public culture is a visual culture.” (pp. 294-295, italics mine). Like prior Habermasian models, against which resolutely visual arguments are progressively positioned, the valorization of the visual and the representational models it authorizes delimits a certain framework around a conception of the public. A “frame that blinds”, to borrow a syllepsis from Judith Butler, visual primacy constructs a kind of vignette around political possibility. Yet it also attests to the idea that “public life is a way of seeing” (Lucaites, 2007, p. 302) which does not foreclose potential other ways of seeing or apprehending cultural, social, and political information through non-dominant visual means. The interpretational recovery of what is lacking or foreclosed in a visual representation

might in fact reveal its greatest area of significance, especially given the context and framework of the specific historical and political moment from which it arrives. I link this idea of mobilizing lack in the service of representational possibility to a more fundamental interrogation of photography's communicative social value. This will address the question of what a photograph might be equipped to 'say' in the absence of political speech proper. The quietude of the single-frame photograph, its frozen, *tableau vivant* suspension of the moving, multi-sensorial world, bears consequences in terms of what it alternately makes audible or points to as inaudible, with the latter sometimes being the louder. Silence can be deafening; and in the cases of Masturzo's photograph and Neshat's film, what silence helps us to do is visually mediate various sensory publics in order to reintroduce (or refuse) the dominant ordering and perception of disembodied sensorial circulations within a larger conceptualization of political space.

'Louder than the Nights Before' or How to Fail Better

The white garment and black *hijab* of the shouting woman on the rooftop in Masturzo's photograph indicate a likely generational split with the other two figures pictured there.²¹ Most elder women in Iran still wear the full black *chador*, whereas younger and more urbane women dress in variants of the traditional black. Though the *chador's* cultural origin is in the urban middle class, today it is mostly associated with poorer, more conservative women and with the grandmotherly generation of the middle class. The woman in white, our auditory protagonist thus far, may be the daughter or a younger relative of the *chadori* seated behind her, whose composure and posture is more difficult to read. Slumped slightly in her seat but remaining alert, her face is directed up and outward, pointed toward the city. Her arms, pulled in toward her body, are heavy and still on her knees. Is she bored? Tired? Wary? Overwhelmed?

As the nightly rooftop protests begin to take their toll, exhaustion – maybe protest fatigue – slips in to the image by way of the seated *chadori* figure, the assumed representative of multiple generations and iterations of revolutions lived and lost to history. Her voice fades and retreats, whether by continuous and prolonged strain, or by the dilution of urgency that accompanies one too many years of unrequited struggle. The presence of several historical generations here secures the insecure place of photography as an unresolved, intermittently effective tool of political representation. Rather than chiding its insufficiencies or lack of iconic coherence, making of it a latter-generation straw man to beat against for its failure to illustrate or solidify the context of the news, the World Press Photo judges with whom we began seem to have understood wisely that Masturzo's photograph works precisely because it fails. Enconced within a medium so typically understood in terms of its successes to show everything, this is no small claim. An image that indeed makes you "think more", about failure and about the many valences the word takes on in circumstances of dissent from the status quo, it squarely refuses to show us "what we already know". What we already know about the events of 2009 comprises many failures: First, the Green Movement's short-lived presence in the news cycle and its failure to resonate in the long-term public conception as a revolution proper. Second, the failure of the collective protest effort to re-route Ahmedinejad from regaining his seat in the government. Third, the limited understanding of the Green Movement as the failed Arab Spring initiative.

By definition, 'failure' implies a dichotomous pairing with 'success', a simplistic

framework in which far too many complex contemporary political struggles find no essential coherence. The medium of photography and its incomplete reckoning with its own promise of transparency troubles our eyes with the proposition that “perhaps transparency is an illusion that refuses to be called what it is. “Perhaps”, wrote a critic of Shahrnush Parsipur, “speculating on the work of Iranian women authors of fiction in the early 1990s but simultaneously opening up, through such contextual specificity, a world of intervention spanning more than a century of political struggle, “there is always yet another layer of walls and veils to rend” (Ibid., xv.). The silence of photography, the aural and optic closures it portends, should compel us to listen for those layers; to learn how to see and hear beyond pre-constituted obstructions; to fail better.

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ENDNOTES

1. As one of many potential points of comparison, widely circulated press photos of the recent revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt and Bahrain are overwhelmingly ‘loud,’ as per photojournalistic conventions of protest imagery in the contemporary news media. The irate, shouting protester - shot at close range, fist raised, body tensed and angled energetically forward – can practically be heard yelling in opposition. There are innumerable examples, both historical and current, of this kind of ‘noisy’ photojournalistic image of popular dissent.
2. The primacy of the visual and its relationship to power, and hence political arrangements, has been a persistent preoccupation in human political culture and philosophy from Plato to the present. According to Martin Jay, “even in its negative guises [as in destructive capacities of ‘the evil eye,’ the annihilation wrought by vision in the Medusa, Orpheus and Narcissus myths], its [read: vision’s] power was evident. Indeed, it might be argued that the very ambiguities that we’ve noted in Plato’s thought were instrumental in elevating the status of the visual”. The status of the visual is also essentially political in that it determines what is or is not literally visible in a commonly inhabited space. Following this, Jacques Rancière (by way of Kant and Foucault) has argued that aesthetics – not just vision – is at the base of politics, in that aesthetics comprises historic “regimes of visibility” rather than just a set of particular artistic modes. For Rancière, aesthetics predetermines the sensible by establishing the a priori forms that determine what things present themselves to common sense experience. For more extensive discussions and analyses on these propositions, see Jay, M. (1994). *Downcast eyes: The denigration of vision in twentieth-century French thought*. Berkeley: University of California Press, and Rancière, J. (2006).
3. “‘Speaking out’ is not awareness and expression of a self-asserting what belongs to it. It is the occupation of space in which the logos defines a nature other than the phônè” (Rancière, 2006, p. 37). In other words, noise is not recognized as a political expression or political speech unless it occurs from a particularly sanctioned space in the visual field.
4. *Hijab* refers to both the traditional head covering worn by Muslim women as well as the Islamic code of modest, conservative dress in general. The *chador* is the Persian version of the full-body covering, a loose garment or cloak that is usually black and is worn most commonly by conservative, older, rural, and *shi’a* women. The *chador* and all iterations of the *hijab* were banned by the secular government of Reza Shah in 1936 when it was deemed incompatible with the ambitions of the state’s modernization program. After the revolution in 1979, the Islamic government made wearing the *hijab* mandatory in public. Today, Iranian women are not required to wear the *chador*, but many still do. The *hijab* is still technically required, though the rules and their enforcement have loosened.
5. Tual’s analysis of silence and speech unpacks the ambiguity of the Farsi word *javâb*, which alternately means both reply and refusal: “Refusal is always difficult to express for an Iranian; sometimes it is even impossible, and one finds substitutes, equally indicative, like silence.” (Tual, 1986, p. 60)
6. Talinn Grigor (2006) argues that the choice to either wear the veil or to “dress secular” each comprise feminist gestures, in that they both convey insolence toward the representational system(s) governing the norms of female visibility in Iran (p. 55).
7. “By wearing the badge of purity”, writes Nesta Ramazani (1993), an independent writer and frequent lecturer on the topic of women in Islamic culture, “women can move about freely. By wearing the badge of modesty, they may fight for

women's rights. By wearing the badge of moral rectitude, women compel the state to back up its claims to the equality of men and women within Islam" (p. 424).

8. Videos of the silent street protests in Tehran, where participants were frequently masked or muffled and carrying signs verbally indicating their dissent, are also widely available on YouTube.

9. The term "rooftop culture" was first used to my knowledge by Kevan Harris, Ph.D., in a personal communication, February 6, 2011.

10. Martin Jay and Michel Foucault, among other scholars, have both offered extensive analyses on Cartesian ocularcentrism's relationship to political power and social space.

11. Also, according to Harris, "people tend to use their roofs for things like laundry, etc., and so one is always worried that someone else is looking at you up there – ogling." Hence the Iranian rooftop is not an entirely female-centric, inaccessible counter-space mirroring the street, like in Algeria, but, more of an inbetween space straddling the domestic interior (which is largely female-dominated) and the outside (male-dominated). (Harris, personal communication, February 6, 2011.)

12. Neshat dedicated the film "to the memory of those who lost their lives in the struggle for freedom and democracy in Iran – from the Constitutional Revolution of 1906 to the Green Movement of 2009".

13. Foucault's fifth principle of heterotopias: "Heterotopias always presuppose a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable. In general, the heterotopic site is not freely accessible like a public place. Either the entry is compulsory, as in the case of entering a barracks or a prison, or else the individual has to submit to rites and purifications. To get in one must have a certain permission and make certain gestures" (p. 26).

14. The background soundtrack to the voiceover during these three different reprisals consists of: 1) the call to prayer over a loudspeaker, which is then cut off suddenly and followed by complete silence, 2) street protests in the distance, and 3) a few steady, elongated musical tones, reminiscent of a digitally slowed, single violin note.

15. Foucault (1967): "society, as its history unfolds, can make an existing heterotopia function in a very different fashion; for each heterotopia has a precise and determined function within a society and the same heterotopia can, according to the synchrony of the culture in which it occurs, have one function or another".

16. A tradition of historical meta-referencing in public demonstrations by Iranian women predates the rooftop protest, as Vanessa Martin (n.d.) shows in her discussion of 19th century protests as allusions to 17th century ta'ziyya passion plays. Like the relationship between the rooftop demonstrations of 1979 and 2009, one iteration was not a direct extension or reprisal of the other, but rather "part of a development that [gave] political expression a new form" (p. 61).

17. See for example, Ramin Admadi (2009), and Elisabeth Mahoney (2010). It remains unclear whether Twitter was interrupted by government intervention or whether it crashed as a result of so many people trying to access the site simultaneously. For more information, see "Iran Elections: A Twitter Revolution?" (2009).

18. Criticizing Slavoj Žižek's hasty comparison of the 2009 protests to 1979 as a Freudian 'return of the repressed' of the old Khomeinist fervor, Hamid Dabashi (2009) counters: "But whence and how the assumption of a retrograde, nostalgic return to the fetal position of the nascent revolution? Shouldn't in fact 'the improvised forms of protest' (a very apt description) alert the philosopher [read: Žižek] that we have had, perhaps, a massive generational shift, an epistemic shift even (occasioned by the narrative exhaustion of ideological legacies, exacerbated by the internet, computer literacy, and cyberspace social networking) after which there is no illegal/illogical U-Turn?...No, sir! If anything, they were (all the indications suggested that they were) sick and tired of that revolutionary zeal and political animus, and were in fact holding their parents responsible for the calamity they had found themselves in, hanging over their heads the banality of the idea of an Islamic republic, or even worse a Velayat-e Faqih".

19. 166,408 hits as of 7 March, 2011.

20. Neda's death was caught on video by a cell phone camera, uploaded onto YouTube and seen around the world within a matter of hours. Her bloodied, lifeless face has become perhaps the most iconic image associated with the election scandals, and her death "probably the most widely witnessed death in human history". The sheer coincidence that Nedā means "the voice" or "the call" in Farsi should not go unmentioned, either (Krista Mahr, n.d.).

21. My thanks to Kevan Harris for his observations on the visible generational discrepancy between the figures, without which I would not have made these interpretations.

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