

***Camera Iranica:***  
Popular Digital Photography in/of Iran

**Shireen Marion Walton**



St Antony's College  
Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology  
University of Oxford

A thesis submitted for the award of  
*Doctor of Philosophy*

**Trinity term 2015**

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**Abstract**

This thesis explores the contemporary genre of popular digital photography, with a specific look at photographs taken in/of Iran. It focuses on the contemporary practice of 'photoblogging' or photography-based weblogging. Photoblogs are the result of the daily posting of digital photographs concerning everyday life in Iran on personal blogs specifically dedicated to photography. The title of the thesis, *Camera Iranica*<sup>1</sup>, refers to the subject and scope of the study, as well as to its digital-ethnographic field site. I demarcate this as a conceptual and transnational cultural field, encompassing the multitude of places and spaces, on- and offline in which Iranians across the world engage in the practice of producing and viewing popular digital photography. Iranian photoblogs are shown to operate in a manner contingent upon a particular 'visual legacy' of contested cultural identity politics since the Islamic Revolution of 1979, propagated inside Iran and in 'the West'. The thesis traces the social, economic and political implications of developments in photography and digital technologies in Iran in light of this backdrop, and explores how and why Iranians in Iran and abroad are taking up popular digital photography for visual storytelling projects, with 'Iran' as their visual subject. Based on the study's empirical findings, I extrapolate theoretical arguments concerning historical and cultural understandings of digital photographs shown and seen in online environments, and propose innovative methodological strategies for digital-visual anthropologists to continue work in these fields.

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<sup>1</sup> My title borrows from that of Christopher Pinney's (1997) book *Camera Indica: The Social Life of Indian Photographs*. In applying theoretical insights from Barthe's (1981) seminal work, *Camera Lucida*, to an ethnographic understanding of photography in India, Pinney highlights the everyday social practices in which photography is enmeshed. This thesis is inspired by his approach and applies it to contemporary Iranian digital photographic practices.

*For*

Simin

Mali & Ali

with love

Every photograph is a certificate of presence  
Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*

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## Glossary

### Persian words and phrases

*Note:* The transliteration system employed in this thesis follows the method outlined by the *International Society for Iranian Studies* (2015), as per the following:

a, e, and o are used for the short vowels; ā, ī, and u for the long; ey and ow for the diphthongs.

The *ezafeh* is written as *-e* after consonants and as *-ye* after vowels (and silent final *h*).

The silent final *h* is written.

The *tashdid* is represented by a doubling of the letter.

The plural *hā* is added to the singular.

The ayn is transliterated as ‘

The Persian letter commonly transcribed as ‘q’ is used in this thesis, though it is pronounced (and alternatively transcribed) as ‘gh’.

|                            |  |
|----------------------------|--|
| <i>āb anār</i>             | pomegranate juice  |
| <i>āghāzādeh</i>           | children of lords  |
| <i>‘akkās-e mossalmān</i>  | Muslim photographer  |
| <i>‘akkās</i>              | photographer   |
| <i>‘aks</i>                | photograph   |
| <i>‘aks andākhtan</i>      | to take photographs  |
| <i>‘Āshurā</i>             | the tenth day of the month of Muharram in the Islamic calendar, marking, for Shia Muslims, the day of Imam Hossein’s martyrdom at the Battle of Karbala  |
| <i>bachehā-ye khiābāni</i> | street kids  |
| <i>Basij</i>               | (lit.) volunteer, Iran’s post-revolutionary paramilitary voluntary militia, who originally mobilised during the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988) and subsequently becoming an established voluntary militia in 1994 |
| <i>Basiji</i>              | member of the <i>basij</i> body  |
| <i>bāten</i>               | inner being  |
| <i>bi-khodi</i>            | (lit.) meaninglessness, self-annihilation  |

|                           |   |
|---------------------------|---|
| <i>chādor</i>             | a loose female garment covering the body, sometimes also the face   |
| <i>chehel manbar</i>      | forty pulpits, Shiite festival of mourning commemorating the martyrdom of Imam Hossein                                  |
| <i>defā'-e moqaddas</i>   | sacred defence, refers to the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988)   |
| <i>dowreh</i>             | circle, salon   |
| <i>dowlat</i>             | state   |
| <i>durbin</i>             | camera  |
| <i>farangi-sāzi</i>       | (lit.) 'foreign style', a style of sixteenth and seventeenth century Persian painting influenced by European art        |
| <i>farhang</i>            | culture   |
| <i>farhang-e shahādat</i> | culture of martyrdom  |
| <i>gharb</i>              | west  |
| <i>gharbzadegi</i>        | 'westoxification', an alternative translation used by other authors is 'occidentosis'                                   |
| <i>gharbzadeh</i>         | westernised   |
| <i>haft sin</i>           | (lit.) 'seven S's'  |
| <i>haghighat</i>          | truth   |
| <i>Hezbollah</i>          | the Party of God, Islamic militant group based in Lebanon, which is supported militarily and financially by Iran.       |
| <i>Emamzādeh</i>          | a Persian word referring to an immediate descendent of a Shi'i Imam, directly related to the Prophet Muhammad           |
| <i>hejāb</i>              | garment for hair covering. The term has many meanings, but in Iran, indicates the appropriate way of dressing in public |
| <i>jang-e tahmili</i>     | imposed war, refers specifically to the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988)   |
| <i>khāreji</i>            | foreigner   |
| <i>khod-shenāsi</i>       | self-study, study of the self   |
| <i>lavāshak</i>           | dried fruit bars typically sold in Iran   |
| <i>ma'jun</i>             | sweet milk drink made with nuts, typically sold at market stalls in cities  |

|                                  |  |
|----------------------------------|--|
| <i>mānto</i>                     | female garment/overcoat covering the body  |
| <i>mellat</i>                    | nation, people   |
| <i>muraqqa</i>                   | (lit.) ‘that which has been patched together’, an album-book containing Persian /Islamic miniature paintings   |
| <i>‘morgh-e hamsāyeh ghāz-e’</i> | ‘the neighbour’s chicken is a goose’, similar in meaning to the English proverb ‘the grass is greener on the other side’   |
| <i>Muharram</i>                  | the first month of the Islamic calendar  |
| <i>nasl-e-sukhteh</i>            | the ‘burnt generation’, born just before, during and just after the Revolution of 1979 and war with Iraq   |
| <i>nasl-e sevvom</i>             | the third generation, born in the 1990s and 2000s  |
| <i>Nowruz</i>                    | Persian New Year   |
| <i>‘PEnglish’</i>                | Portmanteau word and popular term denoting Persian expressed in English alphabet   |
| <i>qahveh-khāneh</i>             | coffee house   |
| <i>rupush</i>                    | overall or manteau   |
| <i>rusari</i>                    | head scarf used for hair cover   |
| <i>safar-e ‘akkāsi</i>           | (lit.) travel of photography, ‘photo tour’   |
| <i>safarhā-ye ‘akkāsi</i>        | (lit. <i>pl</i> ) travels of photography, ‘photo tours’  |
| <i>shahādat</i>                  | martyrdom  |
| <i>shahid</i>                    | martyr   |
| <i>shāl</i>                      | shawl/scarf for covering hair  |
| <i>shi‘at ‘Ali</i>               | the partisans (or party) of Ali  |
| <i>Sofreh-ye ‘Aqd</i>            | an elaborate floor spread seen at Persian weddings made up of symbolic and decorative pieces of Persian food and material culture, representing the intimacy of marriage |
| <i>vāghey‘at</i>                 | reality  |
| <i>zāher</i>                     | outward appearance   |
| <i>zabān-e makhfi</i>            | hidden language  |
| <i>zabān-e makhfi-ye tasviri</i> | hidden visual language   |
| <i>zurkhāneh</i>                 | (lit.) house of strength, male gymnasium to practice the traditional Iranian ancient sport <i>varzesh-e bāstāni</i>  |

### Iranian buildings and governmental organisations

|                                      |  |
|--------------------------------------|--|
| Ātashgāh-e Esfahān                   | Fire Temple of Esfahan, a Sassanid-era archaeological complex located on a hill of the same name roughly 8km west of the city of Esfahan, Iran |
| Behesht-e Zahrā                      | Paradise of Zahra, the name of the cemetery in south-west Tehran which hosts many of the martyrs of the Iran-Iraq war.                         |
| Bonyād-e Shahid                      | Martyrs' Foundation  |
| Dār al-Fonun                         | Abode of Sciences at the Golestan Palace in Tehran   |
| Muzeh-ye Shohadā                     | Museum of Martyrs  |
| Vežārat-e Farhang va Ershād-e Islami | Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance   |

### Iranian photography organisations

|       |  |
|-------|--|
| IYCS: | Iranian Youth Cinema Society<br>(Anjoman-e Sinemā-ye Javānān-e Iran) |
| YPHC: | Young Photographers Club<br>(Bāshgāh-e Akkāsān-e Javān)              |

### Acronyms and words relating to photoblogs

|                  |  |
|------------------|--|
| LGOIT            | ‘Life Goes on in Tehran’ photoblog. The acronym is used in this thesis to refer to both the photoblog and to the photoblogger who wishes to remain anonymous       |
| blogosphere      | a neologism and a generic, popular term, which refers to the existence of blogs in online space  |
| photoblogosphere | a term coined in this thesis to conceptualise the multiple spaces, on and offline and in and outside Iran, where photobloggers and viewers partake in the practice |

## **Notes for the reader**

### **Anonymity**

Most of the individuals cited in this thesis are referred to by their real name. This reflects a conscious ethical policy by the author, which honours photobloggers' desires to be acknowledged for their work and for their views.

Those that wished to remain anonymous in this study are referred to as follows: LGOIT for the 'Life Goes on in Tehran' photoblogger, the photobloggers Arash, and Maryam (Chapter 6. Pp. 243-249), amongst others whose quotations in the text are referenced by the location and date of their interview.

### **Digital Exhibition**

The Digital Photography Exhibition presented in chapter 7 is included on the accompanying CD to this thesis.

### **Fieldwork: timetable, locations and logistics**

Multisited fieldwork for this doctoral project was undertaken between October 2012 and October 2013 in Iran (one month) in the UK (London and Oxford for eleven months), and online for the entire duration of the year. In the original conception of the project, I had intended to spend a majority of my research period in Iran, researching popular photographic activities and practices with Iranian photographers in major cities such as Tehran and Esfahan. Prior to the official start of my fieldwork term, I had established some core research questions, solicited preliminary contacts in Iran and begun to prepare the logistics of my trip. The form the ethnography eventually took – involving one month in Iran, and the remaining eleven months in London, Oxford and online – relates to certain constraints, obstacles and frustrations that I faced at the specific political 'moment' that I began to undertake my research in October 2012, and which I will broadly account for below (see also chapter 2).

During the preparation and planning stage of my fieldwork, I encountered a series of challenges. In the first instance, the Central University Research Ethics Committee (CUREC) was unable to sanction my proposed research agenda to spend one year in Iran conducting ethnographic research. The autumn of 2012 was a particularly

heightened moment of political tension between the conservative Ahmadinejad administration in Iran and western countries. In America, Republican party campaigns during the US presidential election in November 2012 were, along with politicians in Israel, threatening to coerce Iran into a war over their suspected nuclear programme. At the same time, the Iranian embassy in London and British embassy in Tehran had remained shut, following a violent attack on the latter in November 2011, thought to be carried out by members of Iran's volunteer *Basij* militia, in connection with UK-imposed sanctions on Iran. As a result of these fraught international and domestic political climates, travelling to Iran, particularly for British citizens, became a point of contention. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) in London had warned against all travel to Iran for British citizens, and this warning was, in turn, presented to me, a sole British passport holder, by the health and safety and CUREC bodies of the university who both advised against, and could not officially sanction my proposed fieldwork in Iran. Through a combination of pursuing personal contacts in Iran, aided no doubt by my being half-Iranian, coupled with a strong desire to undertake as much of my ethnographic research in Iran as I feasibly could as a sole British passport holder, I eventually managed to obtain a visa for travel from the Iranian consulate in Paris, and spent one month in Iran between October and November 2012.

Back in the UK, I devised a series of digital-ethnographic strategies to continue my research online, with participants I had already met in Iran, including a host of others I spent time with virtually, on Skype, and other platforms listed in chapter 2. It is a testament to the people whose stories I shared in, and whose images and activities I learnt about, even from thousands of miles away, that my ethnography of popular digital photography in/of Iran was undertaken, completed and documented in this thesis. For this reason, a significant proportion of this thesis is concerned with the theories and methodologies of digital anthropology.

Overall, both the research and the nature of my own research trajectory capture a particular historical moment between 2012-2015 in relations between Iran and 'the West'. The period saw an internationally significant political transition from the conservative administration of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, to the presidency of reformist Hassan Rouhani that reflects shifting forms and practices, in media, society and visual culture in Iran. As I finish writing this in 2015 in the wake of a historic nuclear deal

between Iran and members of the international community, and associated hopes expressed inside and outside of the country for Iran's greater integration into the international community after years of isolation, the words and images of Iranian photobloggers documented in this thesis hold timely socio-political salience. Building upon the various socio-technological developments charted in this thesis, it is my intention to return to Iran for a greater length of time than that ultimately afforded during my doctoral research, and to begin a new phase of my visual anthropological research, as Iran continues to negotiate its image on the world stage.

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emotional depths of Iranian online communities and the virtual Abadan, as well as my friends and colleagues in the Oxford Digital Ethnography Group (OxDEG); Heather Ford, John McManus, Eric Meyer and William Kelly for giving me the intellectual space and friendly ears to share my work, and who continue to remind me of the richness of inter-disciplinary dialogue. I embrace my dear friend Grace Tillyard (and my urban family at Wilmington square) for thinking through and feeling much of this thesis with me, and my Oxford housemates from 158 Malborough Road with whom I lived during a critical phase of the writing process: Maziyar Ghiabi, Bille-Jeanne Brownlee, Rafa Gude, Elsa Bouillard and Clayton Goodgame, for their laughter, friendship and perspectives, and who made the best meaning of community hit home.

I am deeply thankful to my family in Iran and the UK, for making my time in Iran in 2012 so rich and compelling, and for filling in the many gaps in my understanding back in England. My brother Robin Walton and Michele Taroni I thank in particular, for *being there*, generously and unwaveringly throughout, and for ensuring that I both make it to the finish line and remember the richness of the world beyond. I am grateful to my Father, Nick Walton, for his support throughout my studies, and whose slideshow rituals and enthusiasm for amateur photography has no doubt shaped my understanding of why we take, show and preserve photographs. The methodological creativity and resilience of this work is overall a reflection of my luminous Mother, Simin. I thank her for teaching me the first lesson of anthropology at a very young age: that learning from and with others is about communion, wherever and however formed. Her aesthetic sensibilities and spiritual attention to everyday life has undoubtedly enabled me to see the kinds of things I was able to see and understand in my research. I thank her in particular for undertaking a special journey of her own during this process in returning to Iran with me, hand in hand. Lastly, I thank my beloved grandparents, Ali and Mali Akhlaghi, to whom, along with my Mother, this thesis is dedicated. I express my profound love and gratitude to them for their unconditional love and storytelling over many delicious barbecues in all seasons, and for being the anchor of my life's spinning plates.

The 'soundtrack' of this thesis I attribute to the music of Hiatus, who captures, musically, much of what I express about Iran here in words.

## Preface



**Iranian photobloggers during a ‘photo tour’ on the outskirts of ‘Aliabad-e Katul, in Golestan province, northeast Iran, in November 2009. Photograph featuring research participants Vahid Rahmanian (standing centre left in green) and Amir Sadeghi (standing third from the right). Used with permission.**

I think the Internet has already changed our world. It is so important these days, for Iranians and for everyone else. Without the Internet and the images everyone shares, how can one know or see the world so much, especially if we don’t or can’t travel? Waiting for new issue of ‘Time Magazine’? Another important thing is that it’s free! I mean, we can all reach it and reach out over it. Sharing our photographs online is our way of keeping Iranian culture alive, in the same ways as literature or art. It’s the age of the camera these days, and everyday photographers are forces of the new age.

(Vahid Rahmanian, online interview with the author, [25/01/13])

These words express the views of one of my main research participants, Vahid, an Iranian, middle-class male in his early thirties. Vahid was born and grew up in Iran before moving in his mid-twenties to pursue higher education and work in Italy. He now lives in Rome, but returns whenever possible to Iran, where he develops his interest in photography alongside his compatriots. For Vahid and many other

contemporary Iranian popular photographers, Iran is both an arena for, and the chief visual subject of his photography. As he explains above, digital technologies and the Internet provide opportunities for him to ‘see the world’ more, which for many Iranians, includes visually exploring socio-political facets of their country’s past, present and future. Vahid’s comments allude to wider global technological developments that have signified a contemporary cultural shift in Iran, wherein the digital medium appears to foster various notions of ‘mobility.’ He describes these movements along different axes and scales. While some Iranians cannot afford to travel in, out of or even across Iran due in part to the crippling effects of the sanctions levied against Iran by members of the international community since the onset of the Islamic Republic in 1979, the Internet is perceived to afford various forms of ‘movement’. As Vahid explains, it facilitates contact, along class and cultural lines and within global flows and ‘scapes’ of all kinds. The kinds of connections individuals like Vahid seek to foster with the west are precisely the kind of ‘corruptive’ foreign-style activities that government hardliners in the Islamic Republic have sought to prevent since the revolution of 1979 by maintaining official control over media, communications and public visual culture. In light of these, and a host of other wider *offline* conditions explored in this thesis, the *online* context takes on heightened social and political salience. In their digital-visual practices, popular photographers such as Vahid harness digital technologies to realise their desires of moving a different form of imagery of Iran into global political, cultural and visual economies in contrast to what they deem to have been fixed by national and international media producers. Hence, a new visual account of ‘Iran’ appears as a chief visual subject in many contemporary Iranian popular digital photographic practices, projects and groups, inside and outside of Iran, which are the focus of this thesis.

In the pages and pictures that follow, I explore several key themes evoked by Vahid, stated above: the role of popular digital photography in bringing about social and cultural change in and in relation to contemporary Iran, the effects of this popular visual cultural work upon Iranians and non-Iranians inside and outside of the country, as well as the function of physical and digital/virtual kinds of ‘movement’ in processes of (re-) imagining the country’s image. In addition, this thesis considers how digital and visual cues can be taken from participants’ own forms of expression in order to develop ‘site-specific’ methodological strategies for digital and visual anthropological research. But first, in order to set the scene for exploring these themes, we must consider the shifting social, cultural, economic and political climates in which popular *digital* photography has become a contemporary genre in its own right in Iran and across the globe. Then, we may proceed to think critically about how anthropologists can set about studying this, in line with established and emerging scholarship.

## CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

### **1.1. Understanding culture and social change through digital-visual media: the ethnographic approach**

The past decade has witnessed a significant expansion in popular uses of communication technologies such as the Internet, digital cameras and mobile smart phones in societies across the globe. Visuality and mobility play a central role in these emerging phenomena, enhanced by their ability (depending on connectivity), to access the Internet. Easy-to-use software applications such as Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, Skype and Dropbox can be downloaded on to mobile devices, expanding the potentials for global inter-connectivity, and popular digital photography is now a widespread practice and central component of online social networking. Such media have fostered the growth of new visual cultures, models of citizenship, social interventions and public forms of engagement. They have also acted as tools of resistance to draconian measures of censorship and surveillance in various social and political contexts. Notable recent examples include the Iranian Presidential election crisis of June 2009 and ‘Arab Spring’ protests (2010-2012) in Tunisia, Egypt, Lebanon and other parts of North Africa and the Middle East. These events saw hundreds of thousands of citizens come together with the help of social media to protest, within and beyond the national frameworks of their countries, against the authoritarian policies and socio-economic crises brought about by respective ruling regimes. In light of these developments, a newly emerged field of scholarship has explored the role of digital media in fostering ‘new’ forms of social and political engagement and grassroots social movements. Much of this literature focuses on grassroots digital activism and presents digital media in hyperbolic terms as technologies of ‘freedom’ and/or ‘resistance’. Anthropologists of media however, have sought to nuance the relationship between media and social

change (Bräucher and Postill 2010; Postill 2012). These accounts show how the study of change through a strictly media-focused framework potentially negates wider understandings of social and political developments in specific historical, socio-political and cultural contexts.

The so-called ‘ethnographic approach’ to understanding the Internet (Miller and Slater 2000) marked a significant turning point in the study of media along these lines. It laid the foundations for the newly emerged sub-discipline of digital anthropology, which is based on the notion that social processes seen in the mediated present predate both the contemporary media technologies and the contemporaneity of the analytical frame (Horst and Miller 2012). Postill’s (2012:1) suggestion that anthropologists of media should combine synchronic with diachronic ethnographic analyses in order to conduct ‘multi-time’ ethnography marks a significant contribution to the on-going project of a digital media anthropology, to which this study of popular digital photography in/of Iran and on the Internet, contributes. A diachronic ethnographic approach to media and social change avoids static and atemporal assumptions about contemporary social processes facilitated by the Internet, and is reminiscent of an earlier emphasis on the importance of history in anthropology (Evans-Pritchard 1961 and others...; Wolf 1982; Faubion 1993). It also avoids the strong techno-determinist stance of earlier approaches to media theory (McLuhan 1964; Schramm 1964; Lerner and Schramm 1976), which considered all social change to be a product of a society’s technological and economic stage of development. At the same time, while avoiding totalising media-deterministic claims, the ethnographic approach need not altogether refute the ability of technology to structure, facilitate and even determine human action. As I will discuss, photoblogs are both human and socio-technological image systems, contingent upon active human and algorithmic processes.

Here, Kittler's (1999:xxxix) ontological techno-materialism thesis, in which he states that 'media determine our situation', but jointly acknowledges how 'our situation in turn can do its share to determine our media', remains a useful schema for thinking about digital photography today. Kittler ascribes a historic agency to technology *and* society that appears a useful model for understanding much of the way in which Iranian photobloggers develop their practices. They do this according to the available technologies to hand, *and* out of the social fabric that activates their (human/social) desires to utilise technology in specific ways (see chapter 3). Indeed, if we are to think of contemporary digital photographic practices as an intersection of variously networked humans, technologies and desires, then the social theories of Latour may also inform our understanding of the relationship between humans and technologies. Latour (1987; 2005) famously ascribes agency to non-humans, whereby what he terms 'actants' (objects, things, entities) have the ability to modify the behaviour of actors within social networks, through a series of actions. In Latour's (2005) conception, the human actor's actions are never fully in control, but are rather 'distributed among agents', not all of which are human. Returning to photography, we may take the agency of technologies into account in thinking about a *distributed photography* in the networked, digital landscape; a notion I explore throughout this thesis. In this conception, digital photographs are examples of Latour's (1987) 'immutable, combinable mobiles'; they carry on action and meaning across time and place.<sup>2</sup> Ultimately, theoretical understandings of the digital photograph, as I will demonstrate, ought to occupy a shifting middle ground – as Latour himself ultimately advocates – between 'cultural' or 'technological' determinism.

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<sup>2</sup> For a relevant discussion on personal photography and digital technologies employing a Latourian analysis see Van House (2011).

Another important social understanding of media afforded by an ethnographic analytical lens involves acknowledging its positive and negative effects upon a society. As I shall show in chapter 3, the 2009 presidential election crisis in Iran is a salient example of the symbiotic effects of social media, employed as both a tool for socio-political change ‘from below’ by citizens, *and* as a measure of control ‘from above’ by the authorities. During this period, the Iranian government harnessed digital media to fortify its surveillance apparatus against ordinary citizens (Morozov 2009; Sreberny and Khiabany 2010), indicative of broader, offline social and political dynamics rooted in the country’s post-revolutionary history.

An ethnographic understanding of social transformation as embedded processes occurring within a culture or society’s developmental history can therefore help to dispel abstract and often atemporal definitions of ‘society’, ‘people’ and ‘change’ in the vast corpus of literature on the subject of digital and social media. This requires thinking about media as practices (Bräucher et al. 2010) situated in everyday life (Pink 2012), as well as acknowledging the importance of attending to the actual and material day-to-day social operations of digital technologies (Larkin 2008) and the wider political, economic and technological ecologies that both enable and constrain its usage.

## **1.2. The Internet in Iran**

The most significant media development in Iran over the past two decades has been the emergence of the Internet. Since its introduction to the country in 1993 (being the second country in the Middle East to adopt it after Israel), Internet usage in Iran has experienced exponential growth, at an average annual rate of approximately 48%, from

under one million users in 2000 to around 42 million in 2012<sup>3</sup>. This gives an Internet penetration rate of around 53.3% of the population, which is considerably higher than the regional average of 26% in the Middle East. At the same time, Reporters Without Borders (RWB) has officially ranked Iran 174/179 in a list of countries indicating the lowest levels of press freedom<sup>4</sup>. This suggests an intriguing relationship between online forms of Iranian expression and the need to contain it by state authorities.

The ways in which Iranians have taken to the Internet inside and outside of the country have attracted a significant amount of international media and scholarly attention. Coinciding with developments in digital technologies and a period of social and political conservatism under President Ahmadinejad (2005-2013), one of the most vibrant ‘blogospheres’<sup>5</sup> in the world has emerged in Iran. Moreover, the use of social media and audiovisual communication by Iranians during the Presidential election crisis of June 2009 has been cited as a major influence on the growth of citizen journalism and its role in the aforementioned (1.1) Arab Spring events (Dabashi 2012; Mottahedeh 2015). Despite these recent developments, Internet-based communication stems from wider realities of politics and culture, and state-society relations in Iran, which are not new to the digital era (Sreberny et al. 2010). The case of Iran and its users’ complex relationship with the Internet therefore is a paradigmatic example of the need to problematise and contextualise the relationship between media and social change I introduced in 1.1.

### **1.2.1. Blogging**

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<sup>3</sup> Statistics taken from 2012 World Banks reports. <http://data.worldbank.org/country/iran-islamic-republic> (Accessed: 15/10/13).

<sup>4</sup> <http://en.rsf.org/press-freedom-index-2013,1054.html> (Accessed: 20/10/13).

<sup>5</sup> A ‘blogosphere’ is a neologism and a generic, popular term, which refers to the existence of blogs in online space. The ‘Iranian blogosphere’ is the Iranian-specific field of online blogs used in popular and academic parlance.

Weblogging, or the act (verb) of producing a weblog, or blog (noun) is a twenty-first century form of online expression. It often involves a commentary on daily life; on popular culture, politics, art and hobbies, by individuals, in what are essentially digital/virtual diaries. In more technical terms, a blog is a web 2.0 tool which takes the form of a user-generated digital platform or stand-alone website which hosts the posting of textual, visual and audio-visual content.<sup>6</sup> For anthropologists and sociologists of media in Iran, blogs are thought to provide a wealth of insights into facets of cultural and political life and subjective experience within a given cultural context (Sreberny et al. 2010; Akhavan 2013). In their seminal (2010) book *Blogistan: The Internet and Politics in Iran*, Sreberny and Khiabany argue that “‘blogging’ has become a short-hand for political expression, journalism by another name and social exploration in a milieu where such exploration is not particularly welcomed’ (Ibid: vii). These stipulations form the starting point for my social enquiry into the *visual* practices and politics of *photoblogging* and popular photography in/of contemporary Iran.

Blogging began in Iran in 2000, when a young Iranian journalist, Hossein Derakhshan set up one of the very first written blogs in the Persian language. After moving to Canada, Derakhshan provided a ‘how-to-blog’ guide in response to a request from one reader in Iran who wished to partake in the practice but did not have the technical ‘know-how’. Since then, the practice has been taken up so extensively by Iranians inside and outside Iran to the extent that Persian is considered the fourth most frequently used language in blogs worldwide, and Iran has been cited as the third-largest country of bloggers after the US and China (this does not include Iranians

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<sup>6</sup> Web 2.0 is a generic term to describe the uses of user-generated Internet technologies, as opposed to static websites. They include social media, blogs, wikis and related web applications.

blogging from outside of Iran)<sup>7</sup>. The Iranian blogosphere therefore presents a sizeable, transnational communicative space within what has been termed the ‘Iranian Internet’ (Akhavan 2013); a conceptual framework consisting of the interlinked, transnational networks of on- and offline spaces of Iranian Internet-linked social activity. The ‘Iranian Internet’ has been written about to a great extent in western media in terms of its status as a vehicle for political mobilisation and purveyor of free speech within the tightly controlled social, political and moral frameworks of the Islamic Republic (Grivitz 2002; Hermida 2002; Delio 2003). These accounts of Iranian blogs, which represent a certain ‘type’, became even more popular during and after the Presidential election crisis in June 2009 – a period of social and political turmoil that witnessed the most tumultuous phase in contemporary Iranian social history since the Revolution (1979) and war with Iraq (1980-1988). Since then, theories of radical social change have dominated understandings of Internet usage in Iran. The Iranian blogosphere has also been quantitatively mapped using digital visualisation methods (Kelly and Etling 2008). Figure 1.1 below reveals some broadly identified trends in types of Iranian blogs users and purposes, from religious factions and state authorities to secular networks and expatriates.

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<sup>7</sup> According to the 2005 National Institute of Technology in Liberal Education (NITL) Blog Census, there were at this time more than 700,000 blogs written in Farsi, out of an estimated 100 million worldwide, although out of this figure the ‘active’ blogs at the time figured between 40,000 to 110,000. <http://www.nitle.org> (Accessed: 18/10/13).

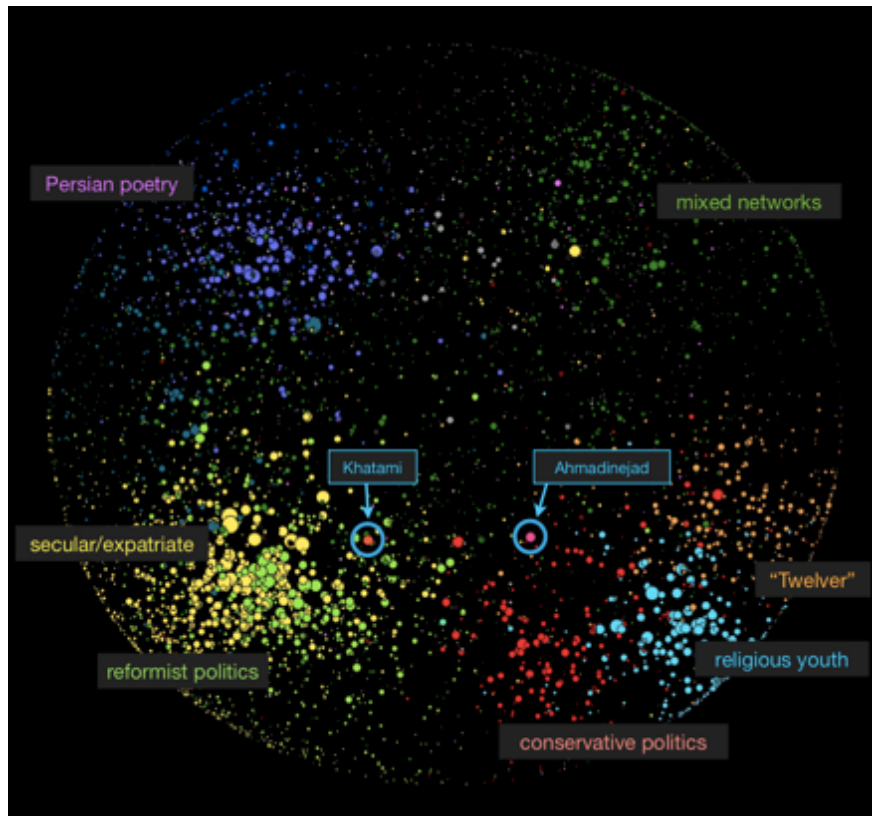


Figure 1.1: 'Mapping Iran's Online Public: Politics and Culture in the Persian Blogosphere' John Kelly and Bruce Etling, Berkman Center for Internet and Society, Harvard University Published online 05/04/2008: [http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/publications/2008/Mapping\\_Irans\\_Online\\_Public](http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/publications/2008/Mapping_Irans_Online_Public) (Accessed: 12/10/13).

In one sense, data visualisation maps such as that shown in Figure 1.1 provide a useful snapshot insight into the social and political spectrum of Iranian blogs within a given period in 2008. Moreover, by showing the use of digital media amidst a broad political spectrum in Iran, it dispels the findings of certain journalistic accounts, news reporting and academic commentaries, which emphasise the primarily political resistance-related and/or socially liberal and democratic nature of Iranian blogs (Ebrahimi 2004; Alavi 2005; Sreberny et al. 2010; Shakhsari 2011). On the other hand, this snapshot view presents a static picture of 'ideal-types' of blogging activities, lacking long-term observation on the topic. Without the ability to situate oneself in the field for a sustained period of time, much of the nuanced dimensions and types of Iranian online

activities, including blog types and distinctions in usage amongst Iranians inside and outside of Iran, remain unseen, altogether missed or difficult to decipher.

The following statement by Derakhshan provides a useful introductory note for this thesis' digital-ethnographic investigation of Iranian photoblogs:

The popularity of blogs among young Iranians suggests that great changes have happened in Iranian society during the past two decades, at least among the new generations of middle-class residents of big cities. It shows that they are carrying new values and promoting new lifestyles, which is very rare among older generations. Individuality, self-expression and tolerance are new values, which are quite obvious through a quick study of the content of Persian blogs.

(Derakhshan [2003] quoted in Khosravi [2008: 157-158])

As the founding figure of Iranian blogging, Derakhshan's statement is a useful primary account of the phenomenon, conveying some insights into why blogging appears to attend to a certain social and cultural appetite amongst a particular generation and demographic of Iranians; the largely politically and socially disenfranchised Iranian secular youth of post-revolutionary, Islamic Iran (Varzi 2006; Khosravi 2008; Mahdavi 2009). Contrary to their parents' and grandparents' generations, this Internet using generation is growing up with social media and digital technologies as part of their daily lives. They make use of the array of digital options for engaging and distributing ideas, identities, images and visual information across the globe. These are deployed in diverse audio-visual media forms, from still digital photography to YouTube videos (Akhavan 2013). The social and cultural effects of these types of popular cultural activities have led some scholars to even speak of a 'Cultural Revolution' (Sreberny and Torfeh 2013) taking place in contemporary Iran, facilitated (though not exclusively) by digital media.

However, Derakhshan's analysis of blogs should also be seen amidst wider contextual factors pertaining to social and political transformations in Iran. Although in

one sense, the ‘new values’ and ‘new lifestyles’ that blogs are ostensibly promoting in Iran, according to Derakhshan, can in some sense be seen in contemporary Iranian middle-class social life, I suggest, along with Sreberny and Khiabany (2010), that these developments ought to be situated amidst the *longue durée* of social change in post-revolutionary Iran, as well as in key moments of socio-political and economic change. These aspects reveal more broadly the variety of ways and reasons that Iranians inside and outside of Iran go online to produce and consume blogs. Derakhshan’s statement that ‘a *quick* study of the content of blogs’ will reveal ‘*new*’ aspects of Iranian culture is precisely where this thesis embarks upon its ethnographic approach to the Iranian blogosphere. It queries both the ‘quick’ method of studying it and the ‘newness’ of its social, cultural and political activities.

There has been some headway made to this end within anthropology. In his detailed digital ethnography on the role of language, culture and power in Iranian blogs, Doostdar (2004) discusses emergent practices and relationships, including the specific linguistic practices of Farsi-language bloggers in the Iranian blogosphere. His work discovered how Iranian conceptions of taboo are continued and have a ‘real’ presence in online socio-cultural space<sup>8</sup>. Doostdar provides an empirical example of the theoretical importance placed on direct connection with the offline social world in digital anthropology (Horst and Miller 2012). In addition, Akhavan (2013) has shown how an ethnographic approach can engender a holistic understanding of Internet usage amongst Iranian society and wider facets of the society itself. She demonstrates these aspects through her conception of the ‘Iranian Internet’ as a diverse and contested

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<sup>8</sup> Doostdar was principally inspired by a controversy caused by certain conservative Islamic intellectuals’ claims inside Iran that blogging had an ostensibly ‘vulgar spirit’, since it did not conform to linguistic, or cultural or moral conventions. According to its critics, the fact that Iranian bloggers could, in public forums, ‘make any kind of cultural, philosophical, religious or artistic claims’ made it a ‘vulgar’ new genre of expression (2004:1). This controversy became known commonly known within weblogistan as the ‘vulgarity debate.’

online and offline socio-cultural space, wherein geographically and ideologically dispersed individuals and groups construct, defend and challenge narratives of Iranian national identity, society and politics. As she acknowledges however, ‘large swaths of its territory remain unexamined’ (2013:35). Akhavan observes the visual component of the Iranian blogosphere and role of visual culture as one of these areas to be examined, but does not go very far into this herself. This study presents the first investigation of its kind to specifically explore one such major and unexamined territory, in looking at the *visual* components of Iranian experience and subjectivity, realised and reformulated on the ‘Iranian Internet.’ In this sense, my analytical focus on popular digital photographic practices in/of Iran offers an alternative and unique take on questions of media and social change in post-revolutionary Iran. Here, visual culture, visual history, as well as questions of aesthetics and aspirations are placed at the centre of the analytical frame.

### 1.2.2. Introducing the topic: Iranian photoblogging

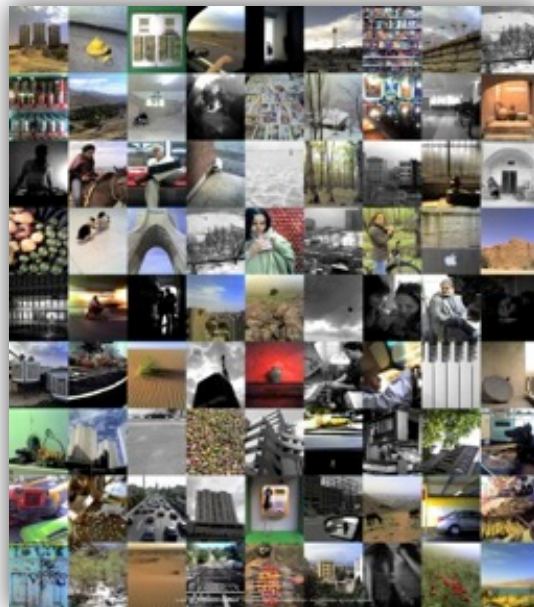


Figure 1.2: Cover page of photoblog 'Life Goes on in Tehran' (LGOIT)

The subject of this thesis concerns a specific area of Iranian blogging hitherto neglected by media and scholarly enquiries alike. It investigates *photoblogging*:<sup>9</sup> a social/media practice that privileges the taking and sharing of digital photographs online as its choice of expressive form. The practice is essentially a popular hobby involving the often daily posting of digital photographs on photography-orientated blogs. This thesis excavates the social basis of photoblogging (the verb) and the photoblog (the noun), showing how the practice marks important new developments in post-revolutionary Iranian society and visual culture. Stemming from this focus, the thesis extrapolates a host of broader observations regarding the production, consumption and circulation of digital photographs shown, seen and circulated on the Internet.

Photoblogging is largely carried out by middle-class Iranian men and women in their twenties and early thirties, living inside and outside Iran. They take photographs in and across the country on digital cameras and camera phones in order to share them with global viewers on self-constructed ‘photoblogs’ on the Internet. Photoblogs serve as alternative low-cost/free exhibition venues for showing photography, beyond official galleries and public museums inside and outside of Iran (and their respective politics, policies and restrictions). They are also linked up to related online social networks such as Flickr, Facebook and Instagram. The practice began in Iran in 2003 when a handful of Iranians made the effort to create stand-alone photoblog sites, which were to exist independently from text-based blogs, as photography-orientated spaces. This suggests that there were different facets of these Iranians’ expressive needs that required visual articulation beyond the conventional, blog format. Amidst a climate of government crackdowns on written blogs, photoblogs, operating upon another semiotic

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<sup>9</sup> For a useful, general discussion of what photoblogs are see Cohen (2005).

level, enjoyed relative autonomy from state censors. Iranians already engaged in online image sharing in pre-existing platforms (such as on Facebook) subsequently began to construct stand-alone digital spaces for sharing their photographs. As has been shown to be the case with text-based blogs (Sreberny and Khiabany 2010: 153-161), members of the Iranian diaspora proved influential in imparting technical knowledge to aspiring photobloggers back home. Some of my research participants cite the influence of Toronto-based Iranian photoblogger, Sam Javanrouh and his 'image-per-day' posting of photographs on his photoblog as a conceptual inspiration for the practice being taken up inside Iran<sup>10</sup>. The practice soon gained popularity as a visual parallel to blogging. Since there has been markedly less global interest in monitoring their content, statistical information on photoblogs is limited. However, statistics taken from two prominent Iranian blog hosting sites, [www.persianblog.com](http://www.persianblog.com) and [www.blogfa.com](http://www.blogfa.com) can be considered here to indicate a sense of scale. In 2014, Blogfa notes 4090 Iranian photoblogs, whilst PersianBlog indicates 6509 photoblogs. Back in 2007, Blogfa had recorded a total of 200 photoblogs through its site (Sreberny et al. 2010). This indicates the kind of exponential growth in popularity that I myself discovered in my digital-ethnographic investigation of the practice. Nevertheless, despite having grown exponentially in recent years, photoblogs hold a generally marginal status in the wider Iranian blogosphere, though, as I will demonstrate throughout this thesis, this does not render them less worthy of critical scholarly attention.

Over the past decade, photoblogging has become a popular means of exploring and debating various visual and symbolic iconographies of Iranian culture and everyday life. Digital photographs shown on photoblogs convey the everyday life, traditions, folklore, religious practices, material culture, food, history, ethnic diversities

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<sup>10</sup> <http://wvs.topleftpixel.com/about.htm>. (Accessed: 12/10/13).

of Iran in rural and urban contexts, in order to share them online with viewers from across the world. As I will show (chapters 4-5), much of this reflects a desire on behalf of the photographers to alter perceptions of Iran and Iranians propagated in official and mainstream visual/media narratives of the country since the Islamic Revolution of 1979, including during certain key moments of social and political conservatism and economic hardship brought about by sanctions imposed upon Iran, as was seen in the post-9/11 international climate from 2001, and under the Ahmadinejad administration in Iran (2005-2013). Many Iranians feel that types of monolithic representations constructed during these eras have ‘de-humanised’ the image of their country and crudely simplified understandings of ‘Iranian’ people. The anonymous photographer behind one of the most popular photoblogs ‘Life Goes on in Tehran’ (LGOIT), and one of my main research participants, summarises a central point about the practice of photoblogging as follows:

I knew early on that the most effective approach to humanizing Iranians was to show the daily life in my immediate surrounding...photoblogging is my medium of choice if for no other reason than the fact that it involves a camera and the Internet. Even a tiny barely functional camera phone provides the means to capture what I wanted to show to the world: the truth about Iran.

(Online interview with LGOIT, [18/03/12])

Here LGOIT captures the overall importance placed on mobile digital technologies (such as camera phones) as appropriate vehicles for alternative systems of representing Iran ‘from below’. He relies on the documentary realism afforded by the medium of photography as well as the mobility and easy usage provided by the miniaturisation of the digital apparatus, recalling Benjamin’s ([1931] 1999) description of analogue photography as a ‘technology of miniaturisation’, facilitating mechanical reproduction. For LGOIT, even a ‘tiny barely functional camera phone’ for facilitating the kind of popular cultural projects of self-representation he captures and communicates via the

Internet. While the digital technology does not itself define the practice, it is an important factor in explaining the popularity of the practice amongst those who partake in photoblogging. Historically speaking, developments in photographic technology have altered its status and publics. Pinney (2008) shows how as photographic technology became increasingly miniaturised and increasingly mobile in the early twentieth century, its *habitus* changed – it was no longer dependent on official support or the same levels of financial investment as in the nineteenth century. LGOIT's remarks above reflect these theoretical observations at the specific historical juncture wherein *digital* photography became increasingly *mobile* in the early 2000s with the advent of camera phone photography. These developments convey some of the main characteristics of what has been theoretically termed a 'fifth moment' in photography's history (Gómez Cruz and Meyer 2012). This 'fifth moment' is characterised by the smart phone – and particularly the iPhone – camera's ability to combine in one device what were formerly distinctive, costly and lengthy processes of producing, processing and distributing photographs. Photobloggers emphasise these novel socio-technological potentials in their quest to 'set the record straight' about Iran.

These uses of popular digital photography can also be seen in other cultural contexts across the globe. The recently established (2013) New African Photography movement is an analogous contemporary example, in which a new generation of African popular photographers are similarly using photography to document everyday life in different African countries to a global viewership<sup>11</sup>. Their project, much like that of Iranian photobloggers, is born out of an awareness of visual cultural representational history, stemming from nineteenth century western, colonial photographic portraits to

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<sup>11</sup> Though it is beginning to develop, academic scholarship on popular digital photography of this kind in Africa remains limited. For a useful introduction to the New African Photography movement, see the recent documentary (2013) on the topic produced via Aljazeera English entitled *Artscape: The New African Photography*, available at: [www.aje.me/10Wn146](http://www.aje.me/10Wn146) (Accessed: 18/04/13).

twentieth century images of ‘third world-ness’, which continue to be propagated in present-day western visual/media narratives. The fact that a similar need for ‘just’ visual representation of cultural heterogeneity and ‘native’ modernity can be seen in contemporary non-western and postcolonial contexts, suggests the need to critically explore how the ‘popular view’ envisaged through the digital camera in ‘ordinary’ terms is another feature of the present photographic ‘moment.’ One of the overall aims of this thesis is to specifically elucidate the social, cultural and communicative basis of *Iranian* photoblogging as, in LGOIT’s words, a ‘medium of choice’. The practice is also as much about the people who become involved as online viewers and subscribers of the visual content as it is about those who produce visual content. For this reason, the title of this thesis, *Camera Iranica*, refers to the scope of the thesis’ digital-ethnographic field site<sup>12</sup>. This is conceptualised as a transnational cultural field, encompassing the multitude of spaces and places, on and offline, in which Iranian popular photographers inside Iran, along with their counterparts in the diaspora act as popular ‘cultural producers’ (Bourdieu 1993), brokering visual information about Iran to the rest of the world via the Internet.

### **1.2.3. Participant photobloggers**

The main research participants in this study are from a shared demographic. They are predominantly young men and women in their mid twenties to early thirties and from a middle-class, university-educated and largely secular background. All of them were born in Iran and have either (1) never left Iran, or (2) migrated for education abroad and remained outside of Iran, or (3) migrated and returned. Mobility is therefore both a

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<sup>12</sup> My title borrows from that of Pinney’s (1997) book *Camera Indica: The Social Life of Indian Photographs*, in which he highlights the everyday social practices in which photography is enmeshed. This thesis is inspired by his approach and applies it to contemporary Iranian digital photographic practices.

central aspect and a conceptual metaphor in photoblogging. It involves: (a) the *physical* movement of photobloggers across the globe (b) the *digital* circulation of digital images they produce, as well as (c) the *epistemological* mobility many photobloggers seek to initiate, by sharing photographs of their country as a way of ‘moving’ its international image beyond dominant visual tropes. Photobloggers have a variety of full-time work commitments, as engineers, university students, journalists, TV producers and IT workers. They have largely not undertaken professional (artistic or technical) training in photography, though, as I will discuss (in chapter 5), my study reveals the photoblog to be a prototypical space for developing the contemporary notion of the ‘amateur-professional’ or ‘professional-amateur’ (Cooley 2006). I approached most of my research participants online by e-mailing the most prominent and prolific photobloggers, beginning with LGOIT. This follows an established methodological strategy in ethnographic research whereby anthropologists make themselves known to the most prominent individuals of a group or community, before developing their network of contacts outward, over time (Watson 1999). Within three months of beginning my fieldwork, what was at first a very ‘localised’ network of digitally collated informants had spread to include over seventy people worldwide with whom I was in contact. I examined over two and hundred and fifty photoblogs by Iranians inside and outside of Iran. Within this broader pool of informants, a total of eight photobloggers (Figure 1.3) took part in the online exhibition presented in chapter 7. They include seven males and one female, which can be regarded as proportionally representative of the wider Iranian photoblogosphere as a whole, since photoblogging – not including social media usage at large – is a predominantly male-dominated activity (see chapter 6 on gender relations in photoblogging)<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>13</sup> I coin the term ‘photoblogosphere’ to refer to the subject area of this thesis, and use it throughout the



Vahid Rahmanian (Italy)



Kiana Farhouhi (Iran)



Amir Sadeghi (Iran)



Omid Akhavan (US)



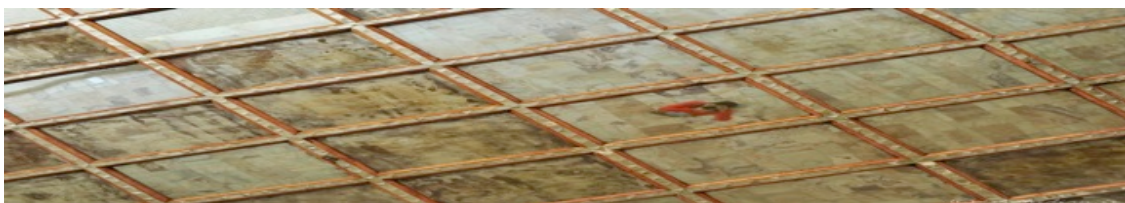
Saleh Ara (UK)



LGOIT (Germany)



Ehsan Abbasi (Australia)



Nikzad Shahidian (Iran)

Figure 1.3: Self-portraits of eight case studied participant photobloggers

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discussion. It derives from the existing neologism, the ‘blogosphere’; a generic term to refer to the general existence of blogs in online space.

As seen in Figure 1.3 above, five of my eight principal participants live outside of Iran including the UK (Liverpool), the US (Los Angeles) Germany (Munich), Italy (Rome) and Australia (Melbourne), and three live in Iran (two in Tehran and one in Karaj). The sample notably reflects some main strongholds of the global Iranian diaspora, the largest being in Los Angeles, with significant communities in the UK and Australia. The photobloggers' personal backgrounds and country of residence form an important point of the analysis throughout this thesis, in which I explore the significance of individual and social biography in relation to the photographic discourses they create. An analogous situation can be seen in the global movement of transnational artists, described by Harris (2006: 699). She argues that 'the cultural logic of one place is not erased on departure from it [but] remains as a memory and an eminently transportable toolbox of art praxis which can be re-used over space and time'. These considerations will be employed when considering the status of the photoblog as a cultural and biographical digital artifact.<sup>14</sup>

### **1.3. Theoretical framework**

This study draws from a theoretical toolkit combined of two relevant fields within the discipline of anthropology: visual anthropology and the more recently established sub-field of digital anthropology. From this basis, it contributes to the nascent sub-field of *digital-visual* anthropology, and the study of popular digital photography therein. Below, I will outline the main theoretical strands within these respective fields and show how they equip this study of Iranian popular digital photographic practices, on- and offline.

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<sup>14</sup> This idea borrows from Appadurai (1986) and Kopytoff (1986) in emphasising the 'social life' and 'cultural biography' of things.

### 1.3.1. Digital Anthropology

This study is principally located within digital anthropology; a new ‘sub-field’ (Horst et al. 2012) in the discipline which conceives of the digital as a *field* as well as a *method* of research. Field sites in the digital landscape are also both *physical* (the geographical location where the Internet is being used) and *social* places (the online environments wherein people form social relationships). Digital anthropology involves the conducting of what was originally termed ‘virtual ethnography’ (Hine 2000)<sup>15</sup>. This approach ‘transfers the ethnographic tradition of the researcher as an embodied research instrument to the social spaces of the Internet’ (Ibid: 8). Here, the ethnographer studies physically disparate peoples by creating meaningful social relationships that are not necessarily less ‘authentic’, or *more* mediated than offline face-to-face communication, as Goffman (1959; Goffmann 1975) earlier argued. Digital anthropologists conceive of online environments as generative of anthropological knowledge through the participatory practices they study (and help to create). These can be studied and academically represented through digital means. For digital anthropologists, online environments and virtual worlds are seen as generative of ethnographic knowledge through the participatory practices studied and contributed to by the researcher. This can be carried out purely online, as shown in Boellstorff’s (2008) pioneering work on Second Life,<sup>16</sup> or digital landscapes can be explored selectively if and when technologically mediated interactions form integral components of participants’ lifeworlds’ (Horst et al. 2012), as is the case in my own research.

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<sup>15</sup> Digital anthropologists such as Miller and Horst supplant the term ‘virtual’ with ‘digital’. This follows from their emphasis on continuity between on- and offline spheres, as opposed to the implied ‘unreality’ of *virtual* reality.

<sup>16</sup> Boellstorff (2008) monograph on Second Life was one of the first to show how ethnography can be conducted exclusively within virtual worlds. This has encouraged anthropologists to take more seriously the prospect of ‘cybersociality’. See also – (2012).

In digital anthropology, emphasis is overall placed on (researching) the ‘vernacular cultures of digital media’ (Coleman 2010). These understandings of digital anthropology contrast with non-anthropological treatments of online contexts, from science fiction writing to postmodernist sociology. The latter speaks of a ‘historically-new reality’ (Castells 1996:92) as a ‘virtual reality’ created by digital technologies, which are somehow disconnected from wider reality. As a consequence, they are conceived of as spaces of simulated ‘play’ for the autonomous, ‘posthuman’ (Halley 1999) subject, who ostensibly exists apart from the rest of social or ‘real life’ (Baudrillard 1983; Turkle 1995; Danet 1998; Silver 2000; Siapera 2012). Such approaches were swift to emphasise radical rupture with the social, and were quickly challenged by anthropologists who questioned the relationship between technology and its creation of ostensibly uprooted and decentred realms of individualism (Hakken 1999; 2003). Despite its focus on media and mediation, digital anthropology remains committed to the holistic approach, which is characteristic of social anthropological research. It attributes cultural significance to social and cultural contexts and political economies that extend beyond the particular online activities of a group, and considers how these impact upon and transcend the mediated frame. In this sense, it can be situated amidst established theoretical frameworks in the anthropological study of marginal groups, subversives or minorities, or in a more directly relevant field to this research, the anthropological study of contemporary art and artists. Central debates in the anthropology of art and aesthetics, for instance, raise relevant questions to digital anthropology, concerning the study of individual practices as part of a wider social investigation (Gell 1998; Pinney and Thomas 2001; Harris 2006; Schneider and Wright 2010; Harris 2012). Aspects of this literature specifically relate to this account

of Iranian photobloggers, who, as I will show, engage in popular forms of art praxis (chapter 8).

Digital anthropology is also establishing new potentials for digital representation and the wider dissemination of anthropological knowledge within and beyond the academy. It provides pedagogical tools, as well as resources for developing collaborative, community-based projects with research participants as co-producers of knowledge. These kinds of approaches and methods already have an established place within the fields of Visual Anthropology and Social Anthropology and Computing, and will be discussed further in chapter 7. The relationship between digital technology and social agency, a salient aspect of Digital Anthropology's theoretical make-up, can also be placed in conceptual lineage with earlier media anthropologists' work with 'indigenous media' practices (Ginsburg 1991; Turner 1991), which sought to elicit emic narratives from research participants. Questions of power relations between researcher and objects of study have however re-emerged in digital anthropology (Cohen and Salazar 2005). Notions of a 'shared' (Rouche 1975) 'public' (Borofsky 2011) and 'activist' (Pink 2011) anthropology are all relevant facets of digital anthropology's historically contingent interest in collaborative methods of visual research, where its action-centred ethos includes a strong element of public outreach.

Overall, the fundamental theoretical grounding of digital anthropology lies within the milieu of material anthropology, from which it emerged. Horst and Miller's three-fold definition of digital materiality is predicated on the following theoretical tenets which this thesis directly applies in its study of photoblogs: (i) the materiality of digital *infrastructure* and *technology* (ii) the materiality of digital *content*, and (iii) the materiality of digital *context* (Ibid: 25). The contention that the social order is predicated not on abstract systems of societal relations, but on a material order,

constitutes an important perspective in which to locate the study of Iranian photoblogs as social and digital material objects of culture. It is from this perspective that this thesis makes the case for the materiality and cultural agency of digital photographs, as presented in chapter 9: ‘the social life of Iranian photoblogs’.

#### **1.3.1.1. Identity on/and the Internet**

A major theoretical question raised by digital anthropologists, and which is of relevance to this study, is whether Internet usage in societies across the globe fosters increased global and societal connectedness, or the fragmentation and atomization of societies along individual, socio-political, cultural or economic lines? In the context of Iran, as discussed, such debates tend to see the Internet as a destabilising and subversive ‘global’ tool promoting internationalism and individualism, which, in turn, becomes linked to resistance theories amongst youth in the Islamic Republic. Early theorists of media and society in the 1990s argued that the so-called ‘network society’ (Castells 1996) was promoting the growth of networked individualism across the globe (Lasch 1991; Turkle 1995; Castells 1996; Siaper 2012). These arguments recall Lasch’s (1991) prophecies about the cultural demise of western (American) society in a capitalised world dominated by militant individualism and preoccupations with fame and celebrity. These post-modernist perspectives gave a tangible media basis to earlier theoretical notions regarding the construction of the self as a ‘performative’ act (Goffman 1959) occurring in a system of socially mediated encounters (Goffman 1975). In contrast, the ‘ethnographic perspective’ to the Internet outlined in 1.1, shows how individual media practices are deeply embedded and embodied in social and cultural frameworks and (transforming) notions of personhood (Miller 2001; Van Doorn 2001; Van Dijck 2007; Dalsgaard 2008; McKay 2010; Miller 2011).

Emphasising social continuity, such studies have reconsidered distinctions between the virtually presented and the ‘actual’ self, characteristic of non-anthropological accounts.

In the context of Iran, a society which is seen as relying on the Internet for transgressing fixed public norms of identity and personhood (Delio 2003; Alavi 2005), theoretical notions of ‘virtual reality’ affording an ‘alternative mode of being’ in ‘public’ have held particular sway (Ebrahimi 2004; Moaveni 2005; Varzi 2006; Khosravi 2008). Such accounts emphasise a strict schism between the private, and public domains: the *zāher* (outward appearance) and the *bāten* (inner being) (Varzi 2006). In one sense, the capacity of new media to facilitate individual practices, the realities of state censorship, socio-political pressures and the intrusive religious moral frameworks, which dominate much of public life in Iran, cannot be denied. However, this study of Iranian popular digital photography in online environments seeks to elucidate a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between the growth of individualism in modern Iran (Adelkhah 1999), as a product of social change, which is also connected to developments in media and communications (Sreberny and Khiabany 2012), as well as evolving and dynamic processes of national and transnational subject formation. It excavates these tensions from their various manifestations in Iranian online environments and its actors’ (state and society’s) multimodal forms of engagement. A main way this is explored is through a focus on the spaces (digital/epistemological) in which digital photographs of Iran foster various notions of community and modulate perceptions of identity, inside and outside of Iran.

#### **1.3.1.2. Youth and online social media**

A significant area of digital anthropology’s interest in the individual, technology and society concerns young people in particular, since ‘youth’ constitute a prevalent demographic of new media and social network users. Anthropological studies of youth

and social media have demonstrated how media and mediated spaces reflect wider offline social forms of behaviour and being. Miller's (2001) investigation of personal websites in Trinidad was one of the first of these studies. Focusing on individuals largely between the ages of 12-17, Miller found that they expressed 'explosive individual creativity and aplomb' (2001: 143) in their appropriation of websites. His findings demonstrate continuity with offline friendship groupings and social networks, where websites were found to conform to Trinidadians' concerns with style and 'gallerying', including the 'dressing-up' of websites with aspects of popular culture they wish to be seen with. These cultural aspects, Miller argued, were relationally negotiated through the digital platform in light of wider expressions of being 'Trini' in the world (Ibid: 16). Similarly, in her study of American, educated, middle-class users of Facebook and MySpace, Horst (2010) similarly found that the way users engaged in acts of self-construction through such sites were deeply social. Expressions of individuality seen in Horst's study were asserted through a process of ordering and re-configuring of space and boundaries in relation to societal norms gleaned from peers and parents. Chapter 8 will demonstrate how Miller's and Horst's findings correlate to similar types of 'gallerying' and self-styling employed by Iranian photobloggers, who use their photoblogs as digital-material extensions of the self.

### **1.3.1.3. The Internet and diaspora**

Digital technologies have also become an important consideration in the anthropology of diasporas. This pertains to the everyday contexts of communication they facilitate for familial, kin-based and social connections across the globe, as well the transnational support networks forged between sparsely located members of a cultural group in 'local' national political projects (Miller et al. 2000; Forte 2003; Landzelius 2006; Panagakos and Horst 2006; Anderson and Burrell 2008; Sreberny et al. 2010). In

her pioneering research on Internet usage amongst the Eritrean diaspora, Bernal (2006) showed how the Internet is not simply about information, but is also an emotion-laden and creative space with the capacity to foster a sense of ‘belonging’ for a community. Bernal conceives of the relationship between digital technologies and diaspora in terms of their ‘homologous’ relationship to each other, where ‘in both cyberspace and the spaces of diaspora...location is ambiguous and to be made socially meaningful, it must be actively constructed’ (Ibid: 661).

In the Iranian digital context of blogs, Alinejad’s (2011) study demonstrates how online communication is the prime vehicle for collapsing divisions of time and space between the diaspora and Iran; a theme also discussed by Sreberny and Khiabany (2012) in their seminal research on Iranian blogs. Such connections foster the sense of an Iranian online community through what Alinejad terms as virtual ‘transnational embodiment’ experienced amongst Iranians at home and abroad (Ibid). In a similar vein, Khosravi’s (2000:13) digital-ethnographic research on [www.iranian.com](http://www.iranian.com) (an online resource for Iranians to connect and share in cultural traditions, family stories and historical experiences), found that in online diasporic discourse, ‘forging an imaginary homeland is the primary project of the diaspora...[where]...virtual return has become a reality for many Iranians who find a homeland in the homepages’. My thesis contributes to literature on the Iranian diaspora and the Internet, demonstrating how Iranians across the world engage with the photoblog as a means of communication and transnational community building. At the same time, my focus on the production, consumption and circulation of digital photographs offers a *visual* contribution to these debates.

### 1.3.2. Visual anthropology and popular photography

Popular or vernacular photography is an established area of visual anthropology. The term ‘popular’ broadly denotes a spectrum of amateur<sup>17</sup> and ‘local’ photography, as opposed to the type of photography used, for instance, by academic anthropologists or artists. As a ‘local’ system of producing visual information, popular photographs are considered by anthropologists to be deeply embedded in the lives of those who own or make them, and are thus considered to be ‘documents of culture’ (Edwards 2004). Main fields of research in this area include collections of private family (‘domestic’) analogue photographs, as well as studio and tourist photography. Anthropologists show how popular photographic practices facilitate a social exploration of the self in diverse societies and cultures across the globe. The ethnographic film (1992) *Photo Wallahs* (MacDougall et al. 1992) is a relevant example. The film captures the activities of a group of middle-class professional photographers in Mussoorie, a popular, tourist-attracting hill station in the Himalayan foothills of northern India in the state of Uttarakhand. *Photo Wallahs* shows the reciprocal relationship between photography and culture by revealing the ethnographic complexity of local photography as a social artefact. The film, as with Pinney’s (1997) seminal historical-ethnography of popular photographic practices in Nagda, India, marks an important contribution to understanding photography and visual representation in local contexts, beyond dominant western theories about what photography ‘is’ and how it works upon the individual within a given social framework. In the Indian context, for both MacDougall and Pinney, photography and the photograph have embedded meanings within the cultural make-up of the communities they study, including amongst the tourists and travellers who pass through it. In their respective field sites, photography

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<sup>17</sup> The terms ‘amateur’ and ‘popular’ will be used interchangeably throughout this thesis.

is shown to be something of ‘extraordinary’ status in India, as a kind of cultural icon. It facilitates a mobile sense of distributed personhood, not simply an individual or frozen moment captured in time. These findings challenge the theoretical tendency to see photography (in western contexts) as purely indexical and/or anecdotal, referring to discrete moments in an individual’s life, or as Lury (1997) has described, ‘prosthetic’ annexes to the self.

Of direct relevance to this investigation of popular digital photography then is Pinney’s (1997) study of photography in India, in which he traces the medium’s status through various shifts in studio photographic practices in Nagda from colonial to postcolonial eras. Pinney showed how a particular ‘visual reality’ came to be constituted through photography, and its entanglement in different, and circulating ‘local’ and ‘global’ systems. In a different context Strassler (2010) has studied national identity and belonging in postcolonial Java through popular photography. In her historical-ethnographic account, she demonstrates how Chinese-Indonesian photographers shape visual contours of Indonesian belonging in postcolonial Java through their aesthetic framing and backdrops, as seen most notably in public photographic studios. Strassler’s suggestion that photographic practices generate visually imagined political subjects can be considered alongside Azoulay’s (2012) broader, theoretical argument about a ‘civil-visual’ discourse. The ‘civil contract of photography’ suggests Azoulay (2008), should be distinguished from the realm of political ontology. It exists, rather, amongst what she terms the ‘citizens of photography’, meaning the photographer, the subject and the viewer. In this contract, citizenship is not something distributed by the sovereign state, but is based on a certain space of the imagination, accessed and declared through the ontology of photography. Azoulay’s (2012: 234) theoretical inclination to foreground the (‘civil-visual’)

imagination as *real*, and not simply, as she puts it, an element of fiction, or the cinematic or literary imagination inspires the approach adopted in subsequent chapters of this thesis. Along with Azoulay, I explore how the civil imagination of photography has become a ‘tool for reading the possible within the concrete’ (Ibid: 234) in Iranian social and political context of popular digital photography.

Variouly inspired by Macdougall, Pinney, Strassler and Azoulay’s approaches, this thesis considers people’s ability to reconstruct and re-imagine their place in the socio-political order through photographic practices. My exploration of the historical role of visual and popular photographic imagery and ideology in constructing notions of post-revolutionary Iranian subjectivity in Iran references these other studies of postcolonial societies and nations belonging to the ‘Global South’. Here, my thesis also contributes to understandings about the construction of certain visual ‘realities’ about geographical places in a decidedly *transnational* context (chapters 4-6). Specific to this thesis then, is its transnational focus on Iranian socio-cultural identity through its historical-ethnographic lens. This leads me towards extrapolating an understanding about the contemporary, popular negotiation of ‘civil-visual’ imaginaries through photoblogs. In this sense, my approach broadens the analytical focus of researching popular photography from the remote village locations and/or the nation state, to include Iranians in the diaspora, as well as international brokers of visual information about Iran in media and photography organisations in ‘the West’ (chapters 5-6). It is this intersection, between ‘local’ and ‘global’ in popular Iranian digital photographic practices on the Internet, which marks this thesis’ original contribution to the well-established field of visual anthropological scholarship on popular photography.

### **1.3.3. Popular *digital* photography**

Popular photographic practices have been transformed with the expansion of digital technologies. A definitive feature of this transformation has been its conversion with and integration into online social networks, such as Facebook, Twitter and Flickr. Within this field, digital photographs seen and circulated on social networks have been shown to lend themselves to forms of cultural community building (Murray 2008; Van House 2011; Were 2013). More specifically, anthropologists are increasingly showing how ‘global’ technologies are becoming linked to ‘local’ politics of visual self-representation, particularly amongst marginalised communities or groups such as indigenous, migrant or minority groups as a part of a people’s claims to subjectivity, political visibility and collectivity (Glowczewski 2005; Brown 2007; Underberg and Zorn 2013; Vivienne and Burgess 2013; Were 2013). In their ethnographic study of a group of activist-orientated queer digital storytellers, Vivienne and Burgess (2013) found that the desire to share private photographic images based on personal stories was directly linked to a public pursuit of social change. Their argument that photographic self-representation refers to wider politics of identity and notions of social and political presence, is useful in considering how Iranian popular photographers use personal digital photography in the contemporary period in a similar vein.

Overall however, empirical studies of online popular photographic practices in applied ethnographic contexts remain scarce, and have largely, to date, not been taken up by anthropologists.<sup>18</sup> As a result, current wisdom on popular digital photographic practices often reflects theoretical observations by sociologists and Science and Technology Studies (STS), and are drawn from predominantly western, and specifically North American, research loci. In these conceptions, digital images, as

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<sup>18</sup> Social Network Site (SNS) photography is an exception to this claim, which has been gaining ground overt the past few years in the context of social media research. See McKay (2010) and Miller (2011).

virtually circulating visual ‘data’, have been perceived to lend themselves primarily to visual communication rather than to any deeper social or historical function. In her discussion on the uses of the visual in personal digital photography, Van House (2011) has suggested that personal digital photographs shown online are becoming ‘more public and transitory, less private and durable and more effective as objects of communication than of memory’ (Ibid: 125). Similarly, in her discussion of shifting notions of ‘everyday aesthetics’ in the context of Flickr, Murray (2008) has argued that digital photography has become less about the ‘special’ or rarefied moments in life traditionally associated with roll-film photography and more about the immediate and fleeting framing of the small and the mundane. Theorists of ‘new media’ are also thinking about the status of the digital photograph along these lines. Campanelli (2010) has argued that much of digital communication online is essentially surface-based and built on aesthetic frameworks. The general image of digital photography on social networks suggested by these insights becomes one of immediacy, ephemerality and a kind of superficiality associated with the speed and ease with which digital technologies can be used. Such theories tie into wider social arguments about the fast-paced and fleeting nature of contemporary communications in everyday life in the west, typified with what Turner (2010) calls the ‘demotic’ turn in digital media.

In contrast, this thesis makes the case for understanding the embedded, cultural uses of digital photographs seen in the transnational Iranian context of image showing and sharing on photoblogs. In chapter 9, I will demonstrate how social memory, nostalgia and even catharsis, along with materiality, sensoriality and corporeality all have prominent places in the social nexus of the photoblog, in connection with the act of viewing digital photographs of Iran online from within given geographical, cultural and temporal contexts. Understanding the digital photograph from these perspectives

emphasises the importance of attending to ‘locality’ (in global and comparative context) in digital-visual cultural practices, all too often associated with/defined by ‘global’ cultural flows and visual economies. Poole (1997) defines visual economies as the political economic and social matrices in which photographs operate and which pattern their production, circulation, consumption and possession. This encompasses both the modes of production and those individuals who use the images’ (Ibid: 9-13). In accounting for Iranian photoblogs, this thesis similarly emphasises the social biographies of *digital* photographs on the Internet. In so doing, it charts some unknown and/or under-acknowledged aspects of how digital photographs ‘work’, socially, online as well as bringing to light a less widely known visual field in Iranian blogging culture. In so doing, this thesis re-considers the presumed ephemerality, atemporality and ahistoricism of digital photographs. Contrary to Nichols’ earlier (2000) claim that the digital image’s ‘material surface is its meaning, without history, without depth, without aura, affect of feeling’ (Ibid: 104), this thesis shows how materiality, history, depth, aura and feeling, re-enter the digital frame (if they ever left). Photoblogs also develop and modify theoretical understanding of ‘everyday aesthetics’, which have been examined predominantly in western contexts (Murray 2008). In the Iranian context of photoblogging, and related social and politic contexts of photography’s production and consumption, the banal photographic image taken in Iran becomes suitably and even politically ‘profound’, when deployed as a form of ‘soft’ politics (chapter 5). In this regard, this thesis moves away from a predominantly Euro-American focus and findings of studies of digital photography, bringing back insights from the contemporary Iranian digital field.

#### **1.3.3.1. Using and studying digital photographs in anthropological research**

The sub-field of photography in visual anthropology today is becoming well acquainted with the digital. Since the advent of the digital in the 1990s, there remains a distinction (albeit a fluid one), between more traditional interests in analogue photography in local field sites and digital photographic practices, including the Internet. The latter field consequently constitutes a 'new' area. One of the main theoretical questions for the anthropological researcher of digital photographs, is how as virtual data and seemingly intangible objects – and without 'real' marks of material substance – they might constitute tangible objects of research (Sassoon 2004)? One possible approach is that digital photographs can be considered in line with anthropological treatments of other intangible/non-physical entities such as religion, law, spirits, witches, possessions, dreams and money: topics which have been a central part of social enquiry since the late nineteenth century, as typified by Durkheim's ([1912] 2008) study of religion and Tylor's (1871) approaches to religion, mythology, arts and other aspects of 'primitive' life and custom. In all of these 'invisible' aspects of lived experience, seeing, of various kinds, equates to believing and meaning for those engaged in the experience and who manifest this meaning into associated material objects. For the contemporary digital-visual anthropologist then, and in line with established approaches in social and visual anthropology, the task is to attend to the indexicality of the digital image, and to trace the conditions in which they, like other intangible or non-'material' entities, have effect. Non-digital examples of this kind of approach are widespread in visual anthropology. A notable example is Morgan's (1998) study of popular devotional images of Jesus Christ in America, which showed how mass-produced images can be venerated in such ways by Christian viewers as to reveal what he terms a kind of 'visual piety', seen in individuals' treatment of the images. Morgan's study demonstrates the notion that people who

engage with images can render them an authoritative way of knowing and experiencing a particular belief system (or a particular cosmology) and (amongst others), provides an empirical example of how anthropologists can study this, ethnographically. As I will illustrate throughout this thesis, similar perspectives can be brought to bear on the digital photograph, where as mass-produced image – and even in the absence of physical material status – it engenders very specific sets of social and cultural meanings amongst a range of viewers (see chapter 9).

#### **1.3.3.2. The digital archive: a theoretical basis for understanding the photoblog**

The social salience of digital images is particularly evident in contexts relating to cultural heritage and museums. In recent years, these areas rely heavily on 3D imaging technologies and the digital scanning of museum objects. In these contexts, the digital image plays an important role in contemporary representations and negotiations of culture (Geismar 2012). In his research on the significance of the digital archive in relation to indigenous cultural heritage, McQuire (2013) found that the rights and ownership of digital images play a crucial role in people's perceptions of cultural rights. In his case study of the State Library of Victoria, Melbourne's digital archives, which contains thousands of images of indigenous Australians, McQuire shows how the digital archive itself is embedded in discourses of power relations. These emanate from the very structure of the archive as a site of debate, participation and collaboration over image rights, rights to usage and interpretation and ability to mediate access and engagement. He terms this the 'operational archive', denoting an active (and not passive) digital cultural space where indigenous Australians realise an active sense of self-determination and reflexivity by coming into close contact with digital images of their ancestors, with strong cultural and emotional implications for descendant communities. Similarly, Brown (2007) has shown how sophisticated 3D

digital facsimiles of Maori artefacts are understood by some Maori people to be just as imbued with ancestral power as the actual physical object. For the Maori, the digital is of equally important value in this specific context of meaning making. Brown describes how in the context of a digital archive, certain ritual protocols and practices had to be adopted to deal with the effects produced by the new digital *taonga* (Maori treasures). What Brown's research usefully demonstrates is the need to take digital images seriously. In showing how digital artefacts have the potential to instil the perception of auratic<sup>19</sup> presence, Brown ascribes a cultural potency to digital images, which show how boundaries between the 'virtual' and the 'real' can become blurred in contexts of cultural engagement. This renders abstract conceptual differences between the digitally represented and the 'real' meaningless out of cultural contexts of use. Resonating with these findings, the concept of digital 'truth' as linked to materiality will be applied to a consideration of photographic 'truth' in Iranian photoblogging in chapter 9. Here, I also examine how Iranian photoblogs operate in line with McQuire's notion of the 'operational archive' (Ibid). The photoblog is a digital space of display and storage, which in turn, becomes the site of Iranian socio-cultural engagement, contestation and negotiation based on active engagement with digital photographs displayed over time by the photoblogger. As I will illustrate throughout my discussion, these images become actively and defensibly linked to Iranian cultural identity politics, inside and outside of the country.

Anthropologists have begun to demonstrate the efficacy and 'realness' of the digital image by employing digital-ethnographic methodologies in order to realise their research purely through interactive digital-visual means. The 'Peru digital' project

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<sup>19</sup> The idea of 'aura' is suggested by Walter Benjamin ([1936] 1972) to refer to the power of art objects over viewers. Benjamin describes the 'unique phenomenon of distance however close it might be...[it]...represents nothing but the cult value of the work of art.' Pp.222-223.

(2013) by Underberg and Zorn, for instance, demonstrates how an immersive and interactive ethnographic experience in Peruvian folkloric festivals can be facilitated entirely online<sup>20</sup>. The project operates much like a videogame and invites users to explore and navigate themselves around downtown Lima. Underberg and Zorn's project shows how the digital facilitates imaginative and immersive experiences eliciting sights, sounds, tastes, and emotions. These aspects will all be considered in looking at sensorial forms of engagement with photoblogs in chapter 9. Their work demonstrates the usefulness of innovative digital - visual research methods and of digital research platforms<sup>21</sup>. These initiatives pave an appropriate conceptual pathway for introducing the innovative digital exhibition I co-curated with my main research participants entitled *Photoblogs from Iran: A Digital Exhibition*, which is presented in chapter 7, and is included as a digital accompaniment to this thesis.<sup>22</sup>

### **1.3.3.3. The mobility of digital photographs**

One of the main issues concerning a theoretical discussion of digital photographs is their mobility. This can be conceived of in practical, conceptual and metaphorical terms. In one sense, images have always been mobile. A wealth of art historical, sociological and anthropological literature has shown how mobility plays a significant role in how images engender meaning making in and across various cultural contexts of engagement (Spyer and Steedly 2013). Mason (2004) demonstrates the transnational circulation of prints, paintings, and in turn, photographs from the sixteenth to the twentieth century, arguing that this signaled the onset of an emerging, global cosmopolitanism. Similarly, Thomas (1999) emphasises the role and transnational flow of images in the construction of colonial identities. He argues that nation making in

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<sup>20</sup> <http://www.perudigital.org>. (Accessed: 10/10/13).

<sup>21</sup> For another example of this kind of contemporary digital research platform see David Zeitlyn's work at [www.mambila.org](http://www.mambila.org). (Accessed: 12/10/13).

<sup>22</sup> [www.photoblogsiran.com](http://www.photoblogsiran.com)

Australia and New Zealand was contingent upon the appropriation and transformation of indigenous motifs and designs. In another emphasis on the mobility of images, Greenblatt (1991) adapts and employs the term ‘mimetic capital’ from Marx to suggest how images are enmeshed in prevailing market forces, and are connected to multiple interconnected sites of representation. Mobility for Greenblatt includes the ‘mobility of spectacle and spectator alike’, which links the ‘unreality of images’ to a ‘dazzling power of display’ (Ibid: 6-7). In this sense, mobility connects the discourse on photography to its capacity for representation, or rather, its ability to capture ‘truth’. Here, we may also consider the relevance of Holbraad’s argument concerning the ethnographic fluidity of truth. Employing the phrase ‘Truth in Motion’, Holbraad (2013:xix) claims that truth is ‘motile’: it follows a ‘motile logic’, which moves and transforms the world. Spyer and Steedly (2013) make a similar argument about the transformative nature of representations in their handling of the image. Presenting a range of studies conducted by scholars, from high art to mass media and political cartoons in a range of social and political contexts, they show how images play a central role in ‘poetic world making’, and in political transformation. All of the above theoretical threads will be taken into account throughout this thesis, and in chapter 9 in particular, which explores how and why producers and viewers of popular Iranian digital photographs online attribute values of ‘truth’ and ‘reality’ to digital images vicariously linked to other sets of image ‘types’ pertaining to Iran.

In his theoretical repertoire regarding images and visual culture, Mitchell (2005) has gone as far as to assign an ontological status to images and an agency (appetite, desires, demands) independent of human control. However, pursuing interest in the social lives of digital photographs, this thesis suggests (chapter 8) that an ethnographic (and not a purely ontological) category can be brought to bear on digital

images seen in online contexts. This follows from Pinney's approach to studying popular photography in India outlined as follows (1997:20): 'I am interested not in the ontological and indexical truth claims of images, but of contemporary mythologies and evaluations'. As I illustrate throughout this thesis, the digital era has introduced new opportunities for exploring contemporary forms of 'mythologies and evaluations' associated with and attributed to popular photography.

A main feature of the new set of criteria for investigation into digital photographs is their potential for high-speed mobility across the Internet (Were 2013). In one sense, digital images are practically mobile, since laptops and smart phones have opened up new opportunities for popular photography and image-production in the on- and offline world. Digital images also move in and across (online) space as they are easily and often immediately shared via the Internet in online environments. Pink (2011:8) describes the mobility of digital photographs as follows: 'rather than being static or locative (or being *of* a place), digital images represent movement...the "event" of photography takes place *in* places, which are continually evolving and moving forwards'. At the same time, mobility has been considered to be one of the major challenges of incorporating digital photographs into social research, due to their perceived vulnerability to misuse, manipulation and unauthorised distribution (Van Dijck 2007; Harris 2013). Key debates in material anthropology (Appadurai 1986; 1996; Miller 1997), however, provide a useful theoretical basis for considering the movement of digital images in terms of the 'social life of things' (Appadurai 1986) in conjunction with what Kopytoff (1986) calls the 'complex biographies of things'.

Overall, in line with Manovic (1995:4), it can be said that the 'logic of the digital photograph is one of historical continuity and discontinuity', both in the historical development of the medium and in its uses in anthropology as a discipline.

One of the theoretical aims of this study is to explore how digital images, in the context of Iranian online environments, have social lives, which move across geographical, conceptual and exhibitionary contexts, forging new cultural encounters and human relationships. This recalls Harris' (2004:139) suggestion that in the movement of art works across the globe, an 'artefactual diaspora' (akin to Basu's (2011) concept of an 'object diaspora'), as the 'temporary physical location for the transmigration of ideas about identity and belonging, both in local and global contexts', is a useful concept. Chapter 9 of this thesis, entitled 'The Social Life of Iranian photoblogs' reveals how a 'digital-photographic diaspora' explains much of the way Iranian digital-photographic images are shared on the Internet in global networks in which persons and the images themselves are apart.

#### **1.4. Contributions to scholarly literature**

This digital-ethnographic study of popular online Iranian digital photography in the specific context of Iranian photoblogs contributes to three strands of anthropological literature: (1) the social anthropology of post-revolutionary Iran *within* and *beyond* the national framework of Iran. Here, it speaks to misconceptions pertaining to Internet usage in Iran and radical social change, and questions the presumed relationship between popular cultural activities in Iran, particularly amongst youth, and acts of 'resistance' to the Islamic Republic. (2) Anthropology and photography, where it makes the case for digital photographs as 'documents of culture', with social lives and biographies and (3) digital anthropological theory and methods, including the sub-category of digital-visual anthropology. Here, the nature of the study itself demonstrates how increasingly self-representing groups and communities can be studied, ethnographically, in collaborative and participatory ways in a digital age.

## **1.5. Summary**

This introductory chapter has established the overall topic of the research, along with its fundamental theoretical components and original contributions to scholarly literature. Iranian photoblogging, as a contemporary practice of popular digital photography, has been located within the theoretical milieu of media, digital and visual anthropology; which together constitute the contemporary sub-field of digital-visual anthropology to which I contribute my empirical findings, theoretical stipulations and methodological approaches.

## CHAPTER 2. METHODOLOGY

The previous chapter provided a theoretical overview of the thesis and located this study in the sub-field of digital anthropology. In this chapter I give an account of the overarching methodological framework employed and designed for this study. This is a composite framework of established and emerging anthropological approaches. It is centred on digital ethnography: the method of digital anthropology, which ‘transfers the ethnographic tradition of the researcher as an embodied research instrument to the social spaces of the Internet’ (Hine 2000:8) in order to conduct ‘embedded, embodied and everyday’ (Hine 2015) ethnographic research on the Internet. In order to justify the applicability of this methodology for this study, I begin the chapter by accounting for why and how I conceptualise Iran as both geographical *and* digital field site.

### **2.1.1. Context of methodology: locating Iran (online)**

Contemporary Iran is no obvious friend to western anthropologists. Changes in the political landscape and diplomatic relations with the west following the onset of the Islamic Republic in 1979 dramatically affected the capacity for western researchers to ‘be there’ to conduct fieldwork inside the country. During the 1970s, Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi’s (reigned 1941-1979) close relationship with the west, coupled with an oil boom economy, had seen a ‘heyday’ in the anthropology of Iran (Hegland 2009:43). Much of this can be explained by way of a ‘hyper-mobility’ involving the crossing of borders (physical and cultural). Many young Iranians began travelling overseas to obtain anthropological training abroad, whilst many foreigners easily obtained research permits to ‘be there’ for anthropological research in Iran. The revolutionary period (1978-79) in Iran dramatically halted fieldwork activity inside the country for non-native anthropologists, most of whom left the country. The ensuing

war with Iraq (1980-1988) and its catastrophic effects on Iranian society only exacerbated the predicament of anthropological research in Iran. In a climate of heavy national consolidation along conservative, Islamic-Iranian ideological lines, promoting (and permitting) cross-cultural enterprises was the very antithesis of the newly formed regime's developing cultural policies. Ideological architects of the new regime argued that cross-cultural associations belonged to the decadence of the former, which they claimed was responsible for ushering in a so-called 'plague' of corruptive, western cultural influence to Iran. Locally known as 'gharbzadegi' (Al-i Ahmad 1962), or 'westoxication' (meaning an intoxication and/or an illness), cultural associations with the west, according to Islamic revolutionary ideologues, needed to be purged (see chapter 5).

In addition to these events, politically saturated national and international 'mediascapes' (Appadurai 2002) in the post-revolutionary era (1979-present) have also crudely presented Iran in binary 'black-and-white' and 'East/West' terms (Dabashi 2008). Amidst this fraught political backdrop, younger generations of foreign researchers have become dissuaded from pursuing research inside the country (Bromberger 2009). Although diplomatic relations with the US and Europe have begun to thaw somewhat following the election of a politically 'moderate' President Hassan Rouhani in August 2013, the Iranian government remains unsympathetic to western researchers and international journalists being 'on the ground' in Iran. Both categories of knowledge-seekers have and continue to be negatively associated with espionage, following a complex history of twentieth-century foreign involvement in Iranian political affairs (Sreberny and Torfeh 2014).

Difficult and limited access to Iran for fieldwork-based research following the 1979 revolution therefore presents what Hegland calls a 'professional dilemma'

(Hegland 2009:53) for non-native anthropologists. At the beginning of my fieldwork in October 2012, I was faced with one such dilemma. Access to Iran not just as a researcher, but even as a tourist with a British passport, had just become more difficult than in recent years following a violent attack against the British embassy in Tehran on 29 November 2011<sup>23</sup>. Both embassies in Tehran and London were closed as a result, and those requiring a visa to travel to Iran from the UK had to do so via alternative consulates such as ones in Dublin, Paris or Hamburg. During this period, preference for visa approval was also given to those with Iranian familial connections. In the middle of this frenzied climate, understandings about everyday life in Iran ‘from below’ seemed increasingly as a kind of ‘besieged’ knowledge that I was determined to excavate in my research with Iranian photobloggers. Despite the official advice of the British Foreign Office warning against British citizens’ travel to Iran at the time, I applied and obtained a tourist visa from the Iranian consulate in Paris, a process no doubt facilitated by my status as a half-Iranian British passport holder. I spent one month in Iran between October and November 2012. Brief research trips to Iran (sometimes on tourist visas) are not uncommon for Iranian and non-Iranian researchers. Given difficulties of access, anthropologists have been known to spend as little as two weeks conducting ethnographic research in the country (Hegland 2009; Nadjmabadi 2009). In these cases, as with my own, the pragmatic rationale of doing ‘quick ethnography’ (Hegland 2004) – or, what Hegland calls ‘zip in and zip out Fieldwork’ – supersedes the anthropologist’s commitment to the ideal of ‘being there’ for a sustained period of time. Dividing my limited time carefully between the capital city Tehran and Esfahan (another major city some 200 miles south), I was able to stay

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<sup>23</sup> The incident is thought to have been instigated by the paramilitary *Basij* (a volunteer militia established in 1979 by the revolutionary leader Ayatollah Khomeini) in response to UK-imposed sanctions on Iran regarding the latter’s nuclear programme.

with various members of my extended family, none of whom I'd ever met before, to undertake rudimentary fieldwork activities. I met with local photographers I had connected with online from the UK, conducted interviews, visited emerging gallery spaces in Tehran and participated in what are known as 'photo tours' (*safarhā-ye 'akkāsi*): social occasions linked to group travel and photography (introduced in chapter 3). Throughout the rest of my fieldwork year, I also carried out more traditional ethnographic research amongst members of the second and third generations of the Iranian diaspora who have lived in London since the revolution of 1979, including photographers, artists and curators.

Given that I was unable as a sole British passport holder during a particularly politically fraught period to remain in the country for a sustained period of time, physically being in the country clearly could not constitute the substantive component of my fieldwork. Solutions to the 'professional dilemma' anthropologists of Iran have sought, as Hegland (2009) outlines, have included abandoning research on the country altogether, use of research conducted prior to 1979, as well as turning to the study of the Iranian diaspora. In the Internet era in particular, studies by social scientists have for example explored connections between the diaspora and Iran. However, in the case of my research, I did not see a turn to diaspora studies as the only possible response to limited *physical* access to Iran. What I suggest here in this thesis is another option for (but not limited to) the anthropology of Iran, and one that places the field of research at the centre of the methodological apparatus: namely, that using digital technologies and the Internet to study Iranian popular photographers as part of anthropological research *can* be conducted from a physically remote position without compromising on ethical or ethnographic rigour. This assertion is predicated on two interrelated premises: (a) that physical presence (even in hyper-mobile 'follow the thing' strategy for multi-sited

fieldwork suggested by Marcus (1995)), is not the sole yardstick for determining the ‘authenticity’ of ethnographic research, and (b) that digital-visual methods can position technologies and imaginaries on an ethico-methodological plane in order to reconceptualise notions of access and presence. In order to illustrate the feasibility of these claims, I detail below how I applied digital-ethnographic methods to meet the requirements of my research.

## **2.2. Digital Ethnography**

In order to access and study the social life of Iranian photoblogs, I studied them and their producers and viewers both on and offline. Taking up the call to ‘follow the thing’ (Marcus 1995) with photoblogs, I did this (1) physically inside Iran (for the limited period of time I had access to the country) (2) in the UK and (3) online. The main activities of my fieldwork however, consisted of digital research conducted from my university base in Oxford. Here I employed a digital-ethnographic methodology<sup>24</sup>. This is the digital application of the established tenets of the ethnographic method, namely: (i) long-term fieldwork (ii) participant observation and (iii) conducting interviews. At the same time, it requires being receptive to the specificities of the digital context, which may require additional experimentation with or the development of new methods. Along these lines, Wesch (2007:31) writes:

Understanding human relationships within this new mediascape will require us to embrace our anthropological mainstay, participant observation. We know the value of participant observation in understanding social worlds. Now we need to participate in the new media in order to understand the new forms of sociality emerging in this quickly changing mediated world.

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<sup>24</sup> Digital ethnography has become a generic term to denote the application of ethnographic methods to online research, used across the social and political sciences. A strictly anthropological application of the ‘ethnographic method’ follows a distinctive set of tenets, as defined above. See Boelstorff, Nardi et al. (2012) and Horst and Miller (2012).

The methodology pursued in this research follows both the established tenets of ethnographic conduct in the online context, as well as contributing two innovative methodological strategies as befits the subject and site of the research: a research photoblog and a digital photography exhibition, discussed in this chapter. In the very early days of my research, I began by familiarising myself with the digital landscape by conducting basic ‘blog solicitation’ (Hookway 2008), which involved surveying over two hundred and fifty Iranian photoblogs. The affective, emotive, embodied and imagined aspects of the digital activities I was witnessing in the Iranian ‘photoblogsphere’ soon led me to consider ways that I might emulate the activities of my soon-to-be participants. By respecting the ‘realness’ of the digital spaces of cultural exchange I was observing taking place between Iranian photobloggers – amongst each other, with their viewers, and viewers with each other – I considered how these social practices can be matched in the research pursuit, by way of virtual ethnographic encounters. This required becoming a fully-fledged embodied ethnographer of the Internet and developing research methods, accordingly.

As discussed in chapter 1, my sample of eight case studies reflects the strongholds of the Iranian diaspora – the largest being in the US (Los Angeles), with sizeable communities in the UK and across Europe and Australia (see Figure 2.1). Given their multimodal activities of producing subjective visual discourses in multitemporal frameworks (including different time zones), I designed ways to apply my theoretical and ethnographic commitment to being with and following them on the move. When I was travelling in Iran myself, I set up a research photoblog in order to anchor contact with research participants<sup>25</sup>.

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<sup>25</sup> [www.eastandwestofwhere.tumblr.com](http://www.eastandwestofwhere.tumblr.com). (Accessed: 15/03/15).



Figure 2.1: Research participants based in six countries: a transnational view

Back in the UK, I had to devise ways to maintain presence and connection online. This involved being digitally visible (to them) when I was intending to ‘be with’ them in an active manner. I signalled my presence by being ‘available’ or ‘online’ on Skype, Facebook and other platforms. Invariably, individuals would move between platforms and mobile devices. I needed to be alert and attentive to these online digital migrations, as well as maintaining a clear sense of where they physically were, in Iran or otherwise. These discrete movements are a salient part of the overall ‘mobility’ of my digital field site. Photobloggers’ own uses of locative media and geotagging (see chapter 3), also helped me, as a researcher, to experience being ‘in’ the live moment of the event, as well as accessing it as an archived record, afterwards. In my study, technologically-facilitated ‘being there’ together allowed me to be with participants as they were out and about taking photographs in Iran, as well as in their own homes where, as mentioned, they attend to the technical maintenance and social lives of their photoblogs. Conducting this kind of ‘home ethnography’ (Larsen 2008:156) involved being virtually present with participants in their own homes, which, incidentally

constituted one of the main *physical* manifestations of my various digital research fields.

Digital-ethnographic research was conducted mostly within the online fields, social networks and sites of cultural encounters which this thesis terms the Iranian ‘photoblogsphere’ in order to ‘be there’ in real time with participants from across the globe. This aspect has been cited as one of the unique benefits of a methodology only recently enabled by contemporary digital technologies (Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce and Taylor 2012; Marcus 2012). Several distinct online-based, geographical locations where Iranian photobloggers across the world live and access the Internet were also taken into account in re-conceptualising ‘the field’ (Figure 2.1). In so doing, I follow Clifford’s (1997:21) seminal challenge to the localised, physical dwelling, bounded in space and time, which has been perceived to be synonymous with ‘the culture’, towards locating culture in flux. His emphasis on mobility allows us to ‘follow the thing’ (Marcus 1995:106) when looking at photoblogs, whilst simultaneously ‘walking, not just talking with people’ (Pink 2009:21) in the digital landscape. This is particularly relevant to Iranian photobloggers who physically move, as Harris (2013) puts it in her study of Tibetan artists ‘in and out of (the) place’. In this sense, my field site is hereby defined as a ‘field of social relations’ (Marcus 1995), primarily realised in online space, wherein Iran and the Iranian diaspora combine, through digital photographic practices, to constitute the field of study.

### **2.2.1. Online participant observation: going on the move with photobloggers**

A central tenet of the digital ethnographic method requires establishing presence with subjects, following ethnography’s overall commitment to being ‘in the presence of the

people one is studying, not just the texts or objects they produce' (Miller 1997:72) In this context, digital mobility supplants the physical immobility of the researcher and it is upon this 'being there together' online (Schroeder 2010) that the research dialectic is predicated. Online participant observation was conducted on a daily basis for 12 months, during which I became a 'consequential social actor in online space' (Boellstorff et al. 2012). In fact, the period of fieldwork has been longer and is ongoing, since the digital fields established by the research remain the primary method of keeping in touch and consulting with my research participants during the writing of this thesis. I designed ways to apply my mobile ethnographic commitment to being with them across different time zones, and following them on the move. With their permission, I digitally shadowed photobloggers on the move in Iran in real time. This was undertaken with eight select individuals who had become some of my principal research participants throughout the study (see chapter 1.) The process generally involves the constant recording of digital field notes and observations in textual and photographic digital form on my computer.<sup>26</sup> The taking of screen shots<sup>27</sup> proved crucial to the preservation of online material, lest it should become unavailable or expire online. With permission, I took hand written notes and recorded video and audio calls using a relevant software application. I also printed and physically archived e-mails, chat correspondence and interview transcripts.

### **2.2.2. Exploring the social lives of photoblogs**

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<sup>26</sup> For a relevant discussion on producing 'live fieldnotes' using digital applications see Wang's (2012) report: <http://ethnographymatters.net/blog/2012/08/02/writing-live-fieldnotes-towards-a-more-open-ethnography/> (Accessed: 15/10/14).

<sup>27</sup> Screen shots are digital images taken on the computer by its user to record the image display on the monitor.

According to Urry (2004:35), blogs are ‘one of those machines, that allow people and networks to be connected to, or to be at home with “sites” across the world — while simultaneously such sites can monitor, observe and trace each inhabited machine’. An important aspect of the photoblog as a digital archive is the fact that it can be viewed and revisited at any time provided it remains online. Much of my digital-ethnographic portrait of photobloggers was also drawn from unelicited, existing knowledge sources on the Internet. As public social actors, my research participants inevitably shared information online over a number of years, much of which is available online. Some of them had conducted interviews with or provided information about themselves and their practices to other parties, including journalists, photographic organisations and other bloggers. This was particularly prominent during the 2009 presidential election crisis, when Iranian new media activities were in the global public’s eye. Another part of my investigation included the rigorous study of comment streams on photoblogs dating back to the mid 2000s (when the practice first emerged) as well as numerous other websites, blogs and social media pages I had come across through networked links I had both consciously and haphazardly entered into and in some sense had myself helped to create. I pursued these spaces in my own time frame, during moments when contact with my participants was not possible or restricted. Revisiting and recording information online in this manner proved a useful source of ‘para-ethnographic’ (Holmes and Marcus 2008) material, akin to obtaining relevant historical documents (which I also pursued online), that contributed to my budding corpus of research material. Here, I should note that it is just as important to ‘be with’ participants in digital ethnography, as it is to identify and navigate the ‘negative space’ between points of direct contact. One term coined to describe these kinds of online activities is ‘lurking’ (Hine 2008), a term which recognises the importance of

unelicited data in the ethnographic method, as opposed to soliciting individuals (through questionnaires and interviews). Lurking created a passive form of ‘being there’ that I found useful in situating myself as an embodied researcher of and within the Iranian photoblogosphere.

Based on the anthropological assumption that photographs are ‘documents of culture’ (Edwards 1997), I conceive of photoblogs as social objects. I therefore studied their social lives and lifespans accordingly. I did this in line with earlier anthropological calls to ‘follow the thing’ with social objects (Appadurai 1986; Marcus 1995), which Spitulnik (2002) has specifically related to the social study of media technologies. In her conceptualization of space in relation to digital photographic practices, Pink (2011:8) suggests that images cannot be simply mapped as static nodes in networks, but understood as visual ‘place-events’. She suggests that these are ‘made, carried, consumed, move forward and open up potentialities with perceiving embodied persons as part of specific environmental configurations’ (ibid). Digital photography can therefore be studied ethnographically, by attending to the ‘practices and flows’ (Larsen 2008:142) in which it is enmeshed. I traced these processes accordingly in photoblogs – including their lifecycles (births and expirations) and spaces of production, consumption and circulation – across diverse digital and discursive domains and contexts and publics, inside and outside of Iran. This brought me to spaces of nostalgia, memory making, memorialisation, inter-generational dialogue, diasporic imaginaries, political activism and art, among others (chapters 3-9). I moved with/in these different virtual and material domains and the various technological media (mobile phones, digital cameras, laptops, PCs, Internet cafes) used by producers and consumers in particular contexts to show and interact with digital photographs (Photoblogs, Flickr, Facebook, Instagram). In this manner, I situated myself in what

Monterde and Postill call (2014) ‘mobile ensembles’: the intersection of various digital media, participants and issues found in certain instances of mobile technology facilitated social praxis. The term advances an earlier notion of ‘media ensembles’ (Bausinger 1984) in the digital context, referring to the ‘unique set of mobile (and other) technologies that are brought to bear on a specific collective action’ (Ibid: 2). This is not dissimilar to the notion of ‘personal media assemblages’ (Day Good 2012) seen in relation to social networks, involving a constantly developing and interactive environment of posted photographs, videos, links, comments and applications. In photoblogs, these individual actions are linked to collective practices of representation pertaining to contemporary Iranian identities.

Communication with photobloggers at home and on the move took three primary forms: (1) written e-mail correspondence involving continuous and sporadic cycles of communication (2) audiovisual, or just audio, discussions via Skype at specifically arranged times of the day, month or year in Persian and English and (3) text-based conversations on Skype<sup>28</sup> and Facebook (via the online chat function) in English and a hybrid text informally known as ‘PEnglish’: Persian speech expressed in the English alphabet. The second method proved the most in depth and thorough method, whilst the text-based communication was also crucial, allowing correspondence to be maintained at certain points in the day or year. All of these methods enabled real time communication and various capacities to experience ‘being there together’ online (Schroeder 2010) and develop what Ito (2005) calls ‘intimate visual co-presence’, or what Van House (2007) similarly terms ‘distant closeness’ across time and space. These socio-technological processes, which are already evident

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<sup>28</sup> Skype is an online audio–visual and instant messaging client. It can be used free of charge and allows for long–distance inter-global communication and is increasingly used in online research and communication with participants.

in social actors' own interactions and feelings of togetherness online, become mirrored in the research dialectic, between researcher and participants (see chapter 3 on digital co-presence). Breaks in Internet connection and/or loss of 'traces' for data collection, which I experienced quite often during my research, might equate to 'footprints in the sand' for certain (quantitative) researchers of the Internet. For the digital ethnographer qualitatively studying popular photography on- and offline however, these are all aspects of the overall socio-political 'reality' of the field, and its impact upon the mediating frame, which need to be taken into account (as discussed in the next chapter).

### **2.2.3. Viewership: a constellation of processes**

Studying viewership is another important aspect of understanding photoblogging as a dialogical practice and not merely a one-way, flat or finished representation (Crang 2007; Larsen 2008). As Pink (2011:95) notes: 'amateur photography is not necessarily an activity done for its own sake, but is implicated in other activities'. So too, I suggest, is photoblogging. The photoblog as a live, continually evolving space of photographic and textual content is open to viewers to post comments and respond to individual or groups of photographs. In turn, these give rise to new participatory cultures, which I studied accordingly. My findings were also enhanced by statistical information pertaining to web traffic provided by research participants. This helped me to gain an understanding of viewer types in relation to their location. I explored viewer practices and patterns as a 'constellation of processes' (Spitulnik 2002:338), on- and offline and amongst Iranians and non-Iranians inside Iran and in the UK. As will be discussed in chapters 8 and 9, images and image arrangements elicit diverse reactions amongst viewers, as expressed through comments and other forms of contact. In many cases, photobloggers shared e-mails with me from viewers thanking them for showing

Iran ‘as it really is’. A main method by which I studied viewership patterns more closely was via a digital photography exhibition [www.photoblogsiran.com](http://www.photoblogsiran.com) (Figure 2.2). I introduce this research method below, and discuss in detail in chapter 7, why and how it was co-curated online with select Iranian photobloggers from inside and outside of Iran.

#### 2.2.4. Designing a digital photography exhibition for ethnographic research

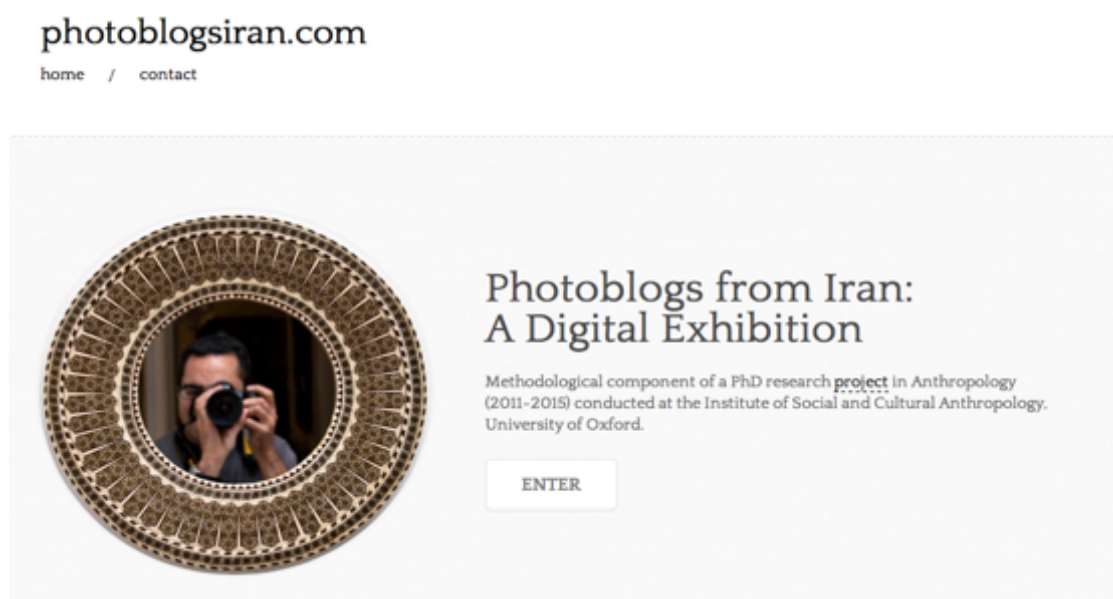


Figure 2.2: Digital exhibition home page: [www.photoblogsiran.com](http://www.photoblogsiran.com)

After nine months of ethnographic fieldwork researching Iranian popular photographic practices in Iran, the UK and online, my principal research participants and I discussed the idea of co-curating a digital photography exhibition of their work. The idea of designing a ‘site-specific’ methodology – insofar as the form of research (a digital exhibition of digital photographs/photoblogs) is constructed in specific relation to the field site (online spaces of/for digital photography) – emerged throughout the research process and stemmed from the decidedly digital and visual nature of the ways I had established relationships with my research participants. An exhibition seemed

appropriate given that it would (a) reflect what photobloggers do, that is to say create digital exhibition spaces in the form of photoblogs to share their photographs with viewers across the world; and (b) establish a relevant aesthetic environment in which to explore photobloggers' practices, photographs and the visual imaginaries in which these are enmeshed. The exhibition was also appropriate to a multi-sited field. It facilitated the coming together of geographically dispersed research participants in a delimited exhibition space within the broader digital landscape and one whose form (a photoblog) is relevant to the subject matter. Through the exhibition, participants were introduced to each other, their work and networks and were able to build a sense of collective identity, as active and creatively involved participants in the project, rather than just being (or being seen to be) isolated bodies in the digital landscape with whom I conducted research. Acting as co-curator gave me a special entry point into the practice, as well as a unique way of collaborating with my interlocutors from outside of Iran, without physically being present with them. In similarly seeking to actively involve individuals in the process of studying them, the exhibition shares affinity with Varzi's (2006) offline ethnographic study of Iranian youth in Tehran. Varzi put together a *dowreh* (circle or salon) of college students in the hope of establishing a 'comfortable environment (as opposed to an environment where the subject simply answers questions...)', which she hoped would 'decrease anxiety or paranoia and create intellectual trust' (Ibid: 14). This collaborative space, wherein she asked them to write their own journal entries, aimed to move beyond a focus group imposed by her research, in to a more collective project that, as she put, it 'became their project' of examining their own lives, in relation to public space and culture (Ibid).

The exhibition discussed here extends these principles to the digital and transnational Iranian context, and it allowed me to carry out various ethnographic

activities. I was able to develop greater ethnographic texture by obtaining first hand experience of what it takes to design, curate, maintain and monitor a photoblog, whilst eliciting details of the process that the presented photobloggers themselves do not necessarily share with the general viewing public. Through the exhibition I also carried out *digital* photo-elicitation: a digital form of the well-established visual anthropological method, which uses images to elicit discourse with participants (Collier and Collier 1986). This demonstrated Pink's (2011:96) argument that 'sharing photographs can become a way of doing ethnography' where the digital media practices of the participants themselves help to shape the ethnographic process in an active, participatory manner. The digital exhibition also re-conceptualizes notions of travel. In one sense, it reformulates the physically 'travelling exhibition' (Kratz 2002) into a research method involving *digital* travel. The site's URL was shared with photographers not taking part in the exhibition, Iranians in Iran and in the UK, as well as gallery curators, artists and journalists in Tehran and London who were contributing to the wider ethnography. This broadened the potential sample base of participating subjects by allowing easier access (virtual and economical) than is traditionally afforded by visiting a physical exhibition. This is particularly salient in relation to Iran, where lack of economic and cultural support for independent artists and initiatives that fall outside the rubric of the Islamic Republic's cultural policies have led to the increasing popularity and credibility of digital exhibitions as alternative spaces for Iranian art and photography in recent years. Digital exhibitions of this kind lend themselves to accessing, convening and studying other groups bound by the confines of wider offline socio-political and aesthetic frameworks (whilst fully attending to the ethical implications of this prospect.) The exhibition also fostered novel forms of

virtual and imaginative ‘travelling’ to Iran amongst those I shared it with, as I will discuss in detail in chapter 9.

The exhibition facilitated my ability to collaborate, assemble and explore the lifeworlds of subjects in dynamic multi-sited and multifaceted research environments. As a collaborative digital and visual participatory method, it is broadly situated in a social scientific Participatory Action Research (PAR) framework (Wadsworth 1998). PAR seeks to establish collaborative relationships in which community actors take an active role in exploring ‘local’ issues alongside a researcher, developing broader strategies for change (Gubrium and Harper 2013:30). This compliments the carrying out of ‘glocal ethnography’ (Salazar 2010) in a range of settings, by recognising the beneficial affordances of collaborative and interdisciplinary research methods in complex contemporary fieldwork *loci*. Collaborative methods attend to relevant questions of how subjects mediate and collectively negotiate an increasingly interconnected world. In the case of my research, this global-local interface is shown in how disparately located individuals collectively aim to negotiate the historically layered image of Iran through visual practices of de/re-construction on the Internet. The digital exhibition provides a useful ‘net’ with which to ‘trap’ (Miller 2001) and engage moving subjects in a digital space of ethnographic enquiry, carved out of the broader digital landscape. This had the effect of creating a ‘home space’ for the research; a virtual headquarters of relative digital ‘immobility’ or stasis, where participants and I could reflect and explore the research theme within the safety and confines of a platform we co-created, again digitally recalling Varzi’s (2006) aforementioned *dowreh* methodology. Such a research environment can elicit certain topics of conversation not shared with participants’ own public networks. Here, I suggest that having a point of collaboration within a suitable ‘contact zone’ (Clifford

1997) between the researcher and subjects can be a useful way of illuminating latent aspects of the research process which might be less obtainable through more direct strategies of soliciting subjects or physically or digitally following them on the move in their everyday lives.

Lastly, the digital exhibition contributes to methodological approaches in the study of social imaginaries. These have been defined as ‘socially transmitted representational assemblages that interact with people’s personal imaginings and are used as world-making and world-shaping devices’ (Salazar 2012:864). Given the wider emphasis in this study of the indexical conditions in which the making, viewing and distributing of images from Iran are historically, socially and politically enmeshed, sharing an ethos of visual storytelling with my participants in the exhibition environment helped us to collectively explore and elicit a range of existing and emerging social imaginaries in a distilled, world *re-creating* environment. The exhibition, as with participants’ own photoblogs, is a site of re-construction, which negotiates perceptions of Iran and ‘Iranianness’ in existing social imaginaries. Asking participants to choose locally generated photographs for the digital exhibition itself makes a ‘local’ intervention on the ‘global’ image of Iran in visual and media imaginaries. Participating photobloggers told me that they felt a vested interest in the digital exhibition as a central part of the research process. They felt that it complemented their wider, offline practices of taking and exhibiting photographs in order to invite people to see Iran in a more discursive light. As a befitting mode of anthropological research *and* representation therefore, the digital exhibition lends itself to studies of image and imaginary-based mobilities wherein issues of visual and political representation are intrinsic to the research questions, as is the case in this study. An analogous contemporary example of a digital photography exhibition used in

anthropological research can be seen in Heidbrink and Staz's (2014) recent project on unaccompanied child migrants: 'Youth Circulations'<sup>29</sup>. This is an online digital photographic archive designed to 'trace the real and imagined circulations of global youth' by collecting and curating photographic representations of unaccompanied child migrants across the globe. As with the digital photography exhibition discussed in this chapter, a digital platform (website) is also used to show visual representational breadth and mobility, as opposed to fixity or 'immobility' as they put it (Ibid).

Overall, the digital exhibition was a useful and befitting method through which my research themes emerged, developed and were communicated to relevant publics. As with broader uses of video and photography in ethnographic research, it aided my analytical capacity to construct what Pink (2011:96) calls the 'ethnographic place', in which the description and theory come together to create a representational rendering of the ethnography. The photography exhibition sufficiently broadens the analytical frame and methodological apparatus in order to meet the demands of other relevant contemporary research.

### **2.3. Summary: engaging (with) digital and visual methodologies**

Overall, the methodological toolbox I designed for this study shows how emerging strategies in digital and visual anthropology provided methodological antidotes to a case of restricted physical access to my geographical field site of Iran. These offered not only a way in to certain field sites, but also a way of building proximity to subjects by imaginatively participating in their mediated lifeworld. Through the 'double lens' of my ethnographic investigation of Iranian photobloggers, involving a 'frame within a frame' analysis of using methods drawn *from* the field (digital photography on the Internet) to conduct my study *with/in* the field, I showed how contemporary

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<sup>29</sup> <http://www.youthcirculations.com>. (Accessed: 15/03/15).

ethnographers can dialogically develop site-specific methods with their fields and with research participants and their practices on the move and at home inside and outside of Iran. In presenting these methods, I argued that these are not *a priori* strategies, nor are they always applicable, but can be applied and developed to complement certain social research questions or to help raise them in the first place. In the case of Iran, a largely ‘besieged’ zone for long-term social scientific research for non-native researchers, I showed how a lack of limited physical access for the foreign/non-resident researcher presented less a predicament of ‘immobility’ than an opportunity for methodological innovation. Innovative methodologies surveyed in this chapter rendered me, as the researcher, ‘mobile’ in a *digital* sense in an otherwise potential state of ‘immobility’. Having conducted my digital-ethnographic research on Iranian photobloggers via these methods, it is my contention that the geo-spatial imperative need not remain the definitive marker of social scientific ‘authenticity.’ This can be changed by moving beyond preoccupation with two conventional ‘virtues’ of ethnographic research: physical movement in and out of physical places and physical presence with subjects. By (re-)emphasising the imaginative and framed basis of both social life and research pursuits (Willerslev 2011), I suggest that physically remote enquiry *is* an ethically responsible and methodologically rigorous methodology of mobility in itself, enabling ‘travel’, connection and knowledge production: all definitive characteristics of ethnography. This opens up a range of methodological avenues (and theoretical possibilities) for relevant studies of physically dispersed people, objects and social imaginaries in flux.

## CHAPTER 3. 'AKS ANDĀKHTAN DAR IRAN (TO TAKE PHOTOGRAPHS IN IRAN): A BRIEF SOCIAL HISTORY

### 3.1. Introduction

This chapter presents a broad genealogy of vernacular photography in Iran, from its emergence in the mid-nineteenth century to the Internet era from the mid-1990s to the present. The purpose of this historical overview is to highlight the continuities and changes in the medium as it emerged and developed in Iran between local and western uses and aesthetics, and as a contemporary vehicle of Iranian self-representation. The chapter focuses on the period most relevant to this study of photoblogs: the mainstream digital era from 2000 to the present. It interweaves this historical account with ethnographic material drawn from my research participants' own experiences of developing their digital practices. The chapter aims to show the importance of wider socio-technological ecologies in which Iranian photographic practices have developed at official and popular levels. I argue that popular digital photography today in Iran should be understood in the context of Internet usage, state-society relations, as well as wider 'global' developments in digital technologies and visual cultures. Mapping various socio-political shifts in this history can shed light on the local conditions, power structures and cultural politics in which Iranian photography has always been enmeshed.

### 3.2. Photography in Iran: a brief historical overview

As discussed in chapter 1, 'new' photographic practices heralded by mobile digital technologies are contingent upon existing photographic media, technologies and social actors. Pink (2011:92) has suggested that any ethnographic understanding of *digital*

amateur photographic practices today must take into account what she regards as the ‘subtle shifts taking place as “new” and “old” meet’. In line with Pink’s approach, this chapter section considers how photography emerged in Iran and came to reflect shifting political, economic and socio-technological climates, which both enabled and constrained its usage. This theme of reflection is a main feature in the history of Iranian photography. In Persian, the phrase ‘*aks andākhtan*, ‘to take photographs’ literally translates as ‘to throw one’s reflection’. The etymology of the word ‘*aks* has a history pre-dating photography. In the Persian language, the word, meaning reflection, has long been associated in Persian art and poetry with reflections usually in water or mirrors. More specifically to the visual arts, the word appears as a technical term from the sixteenth century onwards, where it features in texts dealing with miniatures and illustrations. A prominent example is that of an unknown author, published under the title of *Bustan-i Khatt* (1576-1567), describing the work of the artist Mawlana Kepek (Afshar 1992:263-4). Kepek’s use of polychrome stencils (‘*aks-e alvān*) for calligraphic copying (*muthanna*) and artistic designs (*tarrāhi*) gave rise to the term ‘*aks* and Kepek himself is described in the text as an ‘*akkās* (Afshar 1992:267-268). Following the introduction of the daguerreotype process to Iran during the reign of the Qajar monarch, Muhammad Shah (1834-48), the term ‘*akkās* was attributed to the new medium to mean ‘photographer’ (as it does today). This was not uncommon in countries that incorporated photography into their existing visual cultural traditions. In Japan during the same period, the word *shashin* was given to the new technological invention. It derived from the characters for ‘reproduce’ and ‘true’, or the process of ‘making a true copy’ that had been earlier used to describe the influence of Chinese painting on Japanese art and particularly portraiture (Iiazawa 1994). In India, photography’s relationship to painting was so intimate that, as MacDougall (1992:117)

points out, the word in Hindi for ‘picture’, *chhayachitra* – literally meaning ‘shadow-picture’ (Pinney 1997) – is applied to photographs, whilst paintings can also be referred to as ‘photos’.

In Iran, early photography was esteemed by the Qajar court, for its capacity to enable realist depiction, and was consequently regarded a ‘new kind of painting’ (Afshar 1983:262). Artists and intellectuals considered photography to be a means of aspiring to the achievements of European pictorial realism (Diba 2013:92); a far reach from the well-established Persian visual tradition of miniature painting, rooted in decorative, stylised and abstract forms.<sup>30</sup> Diba (2001) has argued that since the fifteenth century, an indigenous form of realism can be observed in the aspirations of Iranian painting. This is typified by the *farangi-sāzi*, or ‘foreign style’ discernable in Safavid Iran (1501-1736), influenced most notably by sixteenth and seventeenth century European engravings and painting. However, by the nineteenth century, ‘Iranians believed that the camera would give them the ultimate and most modern means to achieve the perfect realism they had sought for so long’ (Diba 2013:86). In a culture that had long enjoyed a tradition of illustrative and figurative art, photography offered a technical, as well as artistic potential and one consciously linked to a wider realisation of Iranian modernity (Brusius 2015).

While it was esteemed as a decidedly modern art form, Iranians also considered the camera to be a scientific apparatus, useful for the recording of visual information, as was common in other parts of the Middle East, North Africa and South and East Asia during this period. Iranian photographers, trained and accompanied by western photographers operating in the region, were sent on expeditions across the country to

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<sup>30</sup> Miniature painting is a tradition of painting on paper, established in Iran from the thirteenth century to the sixteenth century under the Mongul and Timurid periods. Miniature paintings are designed either as a book illustration or a stand-alone work of art, which are also included in albums of such works. In this respect, they are comparable with Byzantine traditions of miniatures in illuminated manuscripts reflecting and also draw visual influences from Chinese painting traditions.

document important military campaigns, ceremonies and historic events (Pérez-González 2012). Under the aegis of a photography-obsessed king, Naser al-Din Shah (1848-1896), himself an avid photographer, the first technical college, the Dār al-Fonun (Abode of Sciences), was established on the grounds of the Golestan palace in Tehran in 1851, as envisioned by his Prime Minister, Amir Kabir (1807-1852) (see Figure 3.1). The institute was modeled on the established European fine art and scientific academies and employed prominent European instructors such as Frenchman Jules Richard (1816-1891), to specialise in the teaching of photography, painting, lithography and music.



Figure 3.1: Naser al-Din Shah on the Peacock Throne at Golestan Palace, 1880, by Antoin Sevruguin. Jay Bisno Collection of Sevruguin Photographs. Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery Archives. Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC. Gift of Jay Bisno, 1985. <http://collections.si.edu/search/results.htm?view=&dsort=&date.slider=&q=FSA+A.15+01&tag.cstype=all>. (Accessed: 10/12/14).

Royal patronage of the medium was not uncommon at the time in other parts of the world. In India, princes and maharajas of Jaipur, Tripura and Bikaner had made a

‘personal hobby of it’, and imported the latest darkroom equipment from Europe (MacDougall 1992:107), demonstrating an enthusiasm comparable with Naser al-Din Shah. Of notable difference however, is Iran’s distinctive relationship with colonising European nations, compared to other parts of the colonised world during the mid-to late nineteenth century.

Photography had been taken up by the British colonial administration in colonial contexts such as India to document the people under its control (Pinney 1997; 1999). Here, official, European photographic documentation of the Indian population from 1851 in photo-ethnological projects such as *The People of India* produced stock ethnic ‘types’ in an ‘almost obsessively bureaucratic’ (MacDougall 1992:96) fashion and subjects were presented as scientific specimens extracted from their social context (Pinney 1997). Though it had played a central part in the Great Game and Britain and Russia’s battle for imperial domination of Central Asia (Ingram 1992; Andreeva 2007), Iran, by contrast, was never officially colonised in the nineteenth century.

Consequently, European travellers visited the country less than parts of the colonised world, such as the Maghreb and Levant regions during this period, though this can also be explained due to Iran’s awkward geographical positioning cut off along the western Iranian frontier by the unforgiving Zagros mountain range (Sheikh and Pérez-González 2012). From the outset, photography in and of Iran was therefore less commercialised than other ‘exotic’ regions, whose vistas had saturated nineteenth century European imaginaries. It did not enter into the same European Orientalist art and tourist markets as a result. The distinctive status and application of the craft in Iran has led scholars to highlight the medium’s history in Iran as one firmly entrenched in local cultures and visual traditions (Pérez-González 2012; Brusius 2015).

However, this vernacularity was not devoid of external influence.

Early photographs in Iran were created by a combination of eminent foreign documentary photographers who were invited to and esteemed by the Iranian royal court. Court photographers, including the king himself, learnt their craft from these renowned foreigners. The most prominent example of foreign photographers operating during this period in Iran is the Georgian, Anton Sevruguin (1830-1933). Sevruguin's work, and the extent to which his photography was either typically 'Orientalist' or social documentary in nature has divided opinion (Bohrer 1999; Pérez-González 2012). Behdad (2001) has argued that indigenous Iranian Qajar-era photographers, having learnt their craft largely from Europeans and notable photographers operating in Iran such as Sevruguin, internalised its aesthetic and epistemic frameworks to such a degree that their own photography was of a 'self-Orientalizing' nature. Citing examples such as Naser al-Din Shah and Sevruguin's erotic sets of photographs, including those privately taken by the Shah of his own harem, Behdad suggests that the 'new art' (photography) in Iran only ended up returning to, reproducing and re-enforcing the formal sensibilities and aesthetic tastes of European painting and its dominant, Orientalist visual preoccupation with the exotic 'East' (Ibid: 142).

However, revisionist assessments of early photography in Iran have emphasised a 'double exposure' (Pérez-González 2012:180) of early indigenous Iranian photographers to local Iranian *and* western visual cultures and technical influence (Brusius 2015)<sup>31</sup>. Following an established corpus of anthropological literature on vernacular photography, early Iranian photography has been similarly shown to be a source of distinct local, vernacular agency, whilst simultaneously bearing hallmarks of western /foreign influence, particularly given that western photographers remained

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<sup>31</sup> The theme of Iranian and western visual/formal coalescence seen here in the early context of Iranian photography is an important thread in the history of Iranian photography. It will similarly be shown to be a significant feature of contemporary Iranian digital-photographic practices.

present and active in Iran during the late Qajar period. Here, in line with other findings from non-western photographic contexts (Pinney 1997; Buckley 2001; Pinney and Peterson 2003; Sprague 2003), aesthetic framing and subject positioning are main indicators of Iranian photographers' idiosyncrasies, in visual dialogue with Victorian photographic tradition. At the turn of the century, and with the growth of public photographic studios in Iran between 1880-1900, Iranian photographic practice had disseminated away from the palace to other (elite) echelons of society, namely amongst the aristocracy (Tahmasbpour 2013). Here, Tehran-based Iranian court photographers such as Reza Akkasbashi and Abdollah Mirza Qajar appropriated props, studio paraphernalia and poses typical of Victorian-style studios in their studio photography. A chair was often used, for instance, for seated poses, as opposed to the more traditional, Iranian kneeling positions used by non-court photographers during the period<sup>32</sup>. At the same time, these forms were also appropriated in local ways to reflect aspects of Iranian culture and visual tradition. An example of this can be seen in the use of Persian carpets as characteristic features of Iranian studio backdrops (Pérez-González 2012:177-178), whose embellishment presented a stark contrast to the realist backdrops used by Victorian photographers in the west.

The local appropriation of backdrops is an important aspect of nineteenth century postcolonial photography. It has been shown to be a prevalent feature of nineteenth century Indian and African photography, where strategies of aesthetic framing, props and backdrops provide opportunities for aspirational expression (MacDougall 1992; 1992; Appadurai 1997; Pinney 1997; Buckley 2001; Sprague 2003; Buckley 2006; Pinney 2008). Particularly notable in strategies of self-styling is local photography's capacity to 'mediate modernity' (Pinney 2003: 202). As I shall

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<sup>32</sup> Pérez-González notes here that this was different, however, in Iranian group photographs, where sitters are always shown kneeling.

later argue (chapter 8), the kind of visual layering and opportunity to ‘add something to ourselves and review our varied appearances’ (MacDougall 1992:104) found in early non-western photographic practices can be found in contemporary digital photographic practices like photoblogging in Iran. In these contexts, western-created and seemingly ‘global’ platforms (photoblogs, Instagram, Flickr) are appropriated in decidedly local, aesthetic ways, through strategies of framing, retouching and editing of background detail. This demonstrates what Miller (2001) calls, in relation to personal websites, a ‘gallerying’ effect, by which individuals reflect aspects of their socio-cultural environments in curating their own web pages. As I will demonstrate, Iranian photobloggers create *mise-en-scène* in ways that reveal selves through similar uses of ‘studio’ props and paraphernalia, such as the use of mirror reflections, which hold symbolic status in Persian culture, for photographic self-portraiture. Iranian photobloggers also demonstrate a mimetic capacity in their adoption of western aesthetic markers as status symbols<sup>33 34</sup>. This forms part of their wider, middle-class, secular, cultural aspirations for Iran to be recognised in the international global community, where it has been politically and diplomatically ostracised (see chapter 5). Their working, framing and presenting of their digital photographs recalls middle-class Indian studio analogue photography discussed by MacDougall (1992) and Pinney (1997), in which they argue that Indian photographers emulated the sophistication and techniques of court photography. Iranian middle-class photobloggers similarly demonstrate a desire to develop aesthetic sensibilities akin to official, Iranian

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<sup>33</sup> On the relationship between mimesis and alterity, see Taussig (1993), who argues that mimesis or imitation is a natural, adaptive behavior of humans, where social distinctions between self and other are porous and flexible. See also Pinney (1997) on this theme in photography.

<sup>34</sup> The work of contemporary visual artist Shadi Ghadirian (Appendix B.4) shows how contemporary Iranian artists play on the genre of photographic studio portraiture in Qajar Iran, visually exploring cultural framing and Iranian vernacular ‘modernity’. On the presence of Qajar imagery in contemporary Iranian photography, see Gem-Scheiwiller (2011).

photojournalists of the 1970s and 1980s (see 3.2 this chapter), as well as with Iranian contemporary artists (chapter 8).

In addition to studio photography, another significant indication of continuity in vernacular Iranian photographic practices (and which bears relevance to discussions of popular digital photography online today) can be seen in early Iranian handlings of the photographic album, and distinctive notions of photographic collage. In her discussion of nineteenth century Iranian photograph albums from the Golestan palace archive, Brusius (2015: 58) argues that ‘lively and ludic collage structures’ mark the display of images<sup>35</sup>. She suggests that this reveals an undermining of linear perspective, which was one of the central concepts upon which photography, as an optical device, was founded in the west. Sourcing albums such as those curated by Naser al-Din Shah himself, Brusius shows how nineteenth century Iranian photograph albums transcended western notions of photographic reality (see Appendix A for a relevant example).

That early (official) Iranian photographic albums evoke aspects of Persian visual cultural tradition will become a relevant point of reference throughout this thesis. In subsequent chapters (chapter 8 in particular) I will consider how in creating photoblogs, which are popular digital-photographic albums (as well as archives and exhibition spaces), Iranian photobloggers invoke and develop existing aspects of Persian visual tradition in contemporary forms. Here, and although within an entirely different time period and at a popular level, Iranian photobloggers continue to exercise the artistic and performative potentials of the medium.

Overall, early photography in Iran signified Iran’s budding technological and visual modernity, as in other contexts during the late nineteenth and early twentieth

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<sup>35</sup> On Victorian collage traditions see Siegel, Di Bello, Weiss and Hofelt (2009).

centuries, where it held the status of art *and* science. This reflects a central tenet of twentieth-century photography theory. Berger (1980:59) identifies the central tension of the medium to be a ‘twin capacity, to subjectivise reality and to objectify it’, whilst Sontag (1977) puts photography and painting on an equal footing, where image and reality are inextricably linked. In subsequent chapters of this thesis, I will show how images and realities (as well as theoretical debates on these issues) re-emerge in the contemporary Iranian context of popular digital photography shown and witnessed on the web, including the wider indices of power, or ‘field of power around the camera’ (Pinney 1997:96), in which photography is always enmeshed.

### **3.2.1. Media and modernity in the making**

Berger (1980:58) states in relation to the development of modern, industrial societies, that it was in the name of science and progress, that ‘photography owes its ethical reputation as Truth.’ As the ultimate expression of technological modernity in the nineteenth century, photography was integral to the introduction of the modern Iranian state, including its ability to document itself and thereby narrativise its own image. The social and political turmoil of the Constitutional Revolution (1905-1907), which resulted in the establishment of the country’s first parliament, propelled the medium on to the public stage in Iran. Photo-documentation emerged during this period and became instrumental in building a modern, visual public sphere in Iran (Khodadadi Motarjemzadeh 2013). Public uses of photography (Berger 1980) became dramatically enhanced during the Pahlavi era (1925-1979), where it played a prominent role in not only documenting various social transformations in the country between state and society, but was also harnessed to wider processes of twentieth-century modernisation and authoritarian reform. Photography soon became institutionalised by the state and directly linked to a systematic pursuit of modern nation-building (Khodadadi

Motarjemzadeh 2013), demonstrating what Sreberny and Mohammadi (1994:49) have described as ‘modernization from above’. Coinciding with the rise of the Iranian middle class in the 1950s, photography was put to various uses within the private and public sphere. Much of this was directed at consolidating an Iranian national identity, albeit one not altogether devoid of western cultural-political influence<sup>36</sup>. Reza Shah (ruled 1925-1941), who had established the Pahlavi dynasty in December 1925 and, being an anti-communist, nationalist monarch was supported by the British government, set out to create the first modern, centralised state in Iran based on a western model of industrial development (Sreberny et al. 1994:49-58). The development of radio in Iran in the late 1920s became a useful tool for this kind of intended technology-facilitated modernisation. On 24 April 1940, Radio Iran was inaugurated and the first nationally broadcast message was the national anthem. The new medium enabled the dissemination of ‘modern’ values to a steadily modernising nation, recalling Anderson’s (1983) theory of the construction of the modern nation state, ushered in by the development of a social consciousness of community through vernacular media<sup>37</sup>. Photography played a prominent role in these processes. Visual documents from public advertisements to photo-identification cards, birth certificates and passports, were all harnessed to a systematic process of producing national and sufficiently modernised Iranian subjects. In a period of low literacy levels (more than 70% of the population were illiterate in the middle of the twentieth century) (Khodadadi Motarjemzadeh: 119), photography was an important means of state-society communication. By propagating images of national culture and introducing a range of new subjects for visual documentation, photographs bore witness to and

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<sup>36</sup> On the ‘westernisation’ of Iran during the Pahlavi era see chapter 5 of this thesis.

<sup>37</sup> See also Freitag (2001), who, extending Anderson (1983) theory to other parts of the world, argues how photography and other media was crucial to the development of national consciousness in India.

simultaneously ushered in the development of an Iranian, national consciousness and societal modernism (Khodadadi Motarjemzadeh 2013).

Alongside these official uses, the newly emerged Iranian middle classes began visiting public studios for official family and wedding portraits and created private family photo albums (Damandan 2004; Khodadadi Motarjemzadeh 2013).

Technological developments in lighter and higher speed cameras, the opening up of camera shops, amateur photography clubs and societies and local competitions in towns and cities across Iran all facilitated social processes by which amateur photographic practices became part of the everyday lives of the middle-classes in Iran, as elsewhere in the world during this period<sup>38</sup>.

During the 1960s, under the rule of a western-influenced monarch, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi (1941-1979), the country experienced relatively rapid economic development, limited political development and a non-existent civil society, coupled with a relatively open mediascape filled with Western cultural products (Sreberny-Mohammadi 1994:100). Western television programs in the 1970s run through private stations such as ‘Sabet’ brought images of violence, sexual explicitness, and advertisements for consumer durables from the Western world into Iranian homes, transforming perceptions of status and west-connected social mobility in urban social and cultural life (Ibid: 63)<sup>39</sup>. Before long, Sabet’s television station was taken over by the Shah’s government in 1969. The authorities perceived the development of Iran’s state broadcasting system in the 1970s to be an important sign of modernisation. As Sreberny-Mohammadi and Mohammadi (1994:5) have suggested: ‘big media became the tools of big authoritarian states’. As will be discussed in chapters 4-6, the notion of

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<sup>38</sup> For general social historical overviews of the development of amateur photography, see Murray (2008), Zimmerman (1995), Slater (1995).

<sup>39</sup> ‘Local’ studies of television watching in ‘traditional’ societies announced a whole new area in the anthropology of mass media. See Abu-Lughod (1999) on television-watching practices in Egypt, Das (1995) on Indian soap operas, as well as Askew and Wilk (2002) for other ethnographic examples.

a national Iranian ‘vision’ soon became a tool of political control and isolationism by which conservative revolutionary Islamic ideologues (from 1979 onwards) came to use photography as a means to isolate Iran, historically, geographically, politically and aesthetically from the west. This unravelled much of the conscious social, cultural and political ties with the west gone before it, as outlined above. Overall, Pahlavi-era photography (official and amateur) marks an important historical backdrop to understanding Iranian digital popular photography today in its particular historical juncture. This wider context shows how Iranian identities and imaginaries became entrenched within western *and* national cultural and aesthetic paradigms, which in turn, play into and against each other in discursive visual and imaginative ways in photoblogs and contemporary digital contexts.

### **3.2.2. Revolutionary turning points in public photography and media communications: the 1970s and 1980s**

The Revolution of 1979 saw the widespread use of amateur photography on the streets alongside more formal types of photojournalism by prominent individuals such as Abbas Attar (b.1944) and Kaveh Golestan (b.1950)<sup>40</sup>. Sreberny-Mohammadi and Mohammadi (1994) offer their concept of ‘small media’ to explain the significance of particular communication technologies during this period. They define ‘small media’ in terms of its ‘manner of use’, as opposed to the physical size of the technologies themselves. It refers to a range of media including cassette tapes, subversive leaflets, informal rumour networks, as well as the growth of an ‘underground’ alternative, peoples’ press. These are thought to have played an instrumental role in mobilising people and communicating developments before and during the revolutionary period of 1970s Iran. With broader reference to Muslim societies, the concept of ‘small media’

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<sup>40</sup> On the role of Iranian photojournalists during the Revolution of 1979, see Balaghi and Gumpert (2002)

can be said to fall under the rubric of Fathi's (1979:129) description of the Islamic pulpit as fostering a comparable earlier form of public communication and sociability. This is a useful historical equivalent to appreciating how people developed and exercised public conscience through media communications in pre-digital forms. That small media denotes agency and civil participation in discursive process of meaning making 'from below', relates to the conceptual stance of this thesis' enquiry into Iranian photoblogging. Subsequent chapters will show how contemporary digital photographic practices purport to be 'counter discourses' of sorts, posited in contradistinction to mainstream, hegemonic mass media discourses<sup>41</sup>. It is important to acknowledge here the theoretical argument outlined in chapter 1: that media technologies do not simply replace the pre-existing status quo, but rather, that older forms are modulated and altered in relation to the new.

Reactions to visual/media production in Iran during the pre and revolutionary periods were incongruent. Secular intellectuals during the 1960s and 1970s called for greater development of basic infrastructure, which had been introduced under the Pahlavi monarchs, akin to that enjoyed by the West. Sreberny and Mohammadi (1994) argue that televisual examples constituted significant political bargaining tools in these pleas. Conservative followers of Khomeini on the other hand denounced media infiltration as pernicious corrodors of 'native' Iranian identity. This, they claimed, would only perpetuate the dependence of Iran on the West. This theme is discussed more in chapter 5 with regards to photography and visual culture. In any case, it is important to appreciate how Iran and 'the west', 'modernity' and 'tradition' (concepts which have all become manifest in debates about Iran at large, as well as its Internet usage-see chapter 1), have in fact been encountering each other for decades. These

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<sup>41</sup> For other anthropological studies of small media see Manuel (1993).

concepts can be traced in socio-political/intellectual discourse and state-society relations alike from late nineteenth to early twenty-first century Iran. In addition, media usage in countries outside of the west (such as those belonging to the ‘global South’<sup>42</sup>) reveal how ‘tradition’ is itself altered at the interface of the encounter with the ‘modern’, without becoming compromised, or altogether erased. The effects of the pervasive interplay of these binaries on the mediated, lived experience of Iranian people has led to what was regarded as the ‘dualistic culture’ (Tehrani 1980; Keddie 1983; Arjomand 1988) or ‘cultural schizophrenia’ (Shayegan 1997) of Iran and Iranians, ostensibly caught between tradition and modernity. These theories feed into the wider intellectual and social climate which Iranian social actors, including photobloggers, are attempting to mediate and balance.

Another major development in Iranian media-visual history was the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988), discussed further in the following chapter. During this period of the so-called ‘Sacred Defense’ (*defā’-e moqaddas*), photojournalism and social documentary photography and filmmaking were crucial in recording and communicating events. They also contributed to the propaganda war machine of the newly formed Islamic Republic, which celebrated the myth-like status of the so-called ‘imposed war’ (*jang-e tahmili*) and the honourable martyrs who fought in it for Iran. Notably, prominent Iranian photojournalists operating during this period had an impact on the contemporary generation of Iranian popular photographers, including photobloggers. One of my research participants, Ehsan (an Iranian male student in his late twenties living in Melbourne, Australia, who I introduced in chapter 1), explained how he had always been interested in Iranian photojournalism. He told me that he was particularly inspired by the work of the ‘great’ Iranian photojournalists of the

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<sup>42</sup> The north-south divide is a socio-economic and political division. The Global South is made up of Africa, Latin America, and developing Asia including the Middle East (and Iran).

revolution and the Iran-Iraq war, such as Kaveh Golestan (1950-2003). Ehsan felt that he had never had the time or the money to pursue photography properly, until he began experimenting with the technologies available to him in the early 2000s (digital cameras and camera phones). He explained how after seeing how easy it was to get going as an amateur photographer with modern easy-to-use technologies, he became inspired to develop his own practice. He situated himself in line with the professional and aesthetic standards of these established Iranian photojournalists.

That Photobloggers today position themselves and their aspirations in line with an established history of Iranian social documentary photography from the 1970s and 1980s, suggests the importance of appreciating the wider context in which aesthetics, technologies, individuals and socio-economic conditions come together to create media practices and discourses. In a similar discovery, Strassler (2010:119) found that amateur Indonesian photographers in the 1970s and 1980s reflected a growing interest in American and international photojournalists who were documenting major events such as the Vietnam war for publications such as *Life* magazine and *National Geographic*. Emulating their political sensibilities and aesthetic practices, she argues that this marked an aspiration which instigated an ‘aesthetic shift away from pictorialist beauty towards documentary reportage’ (Ibid: 49). In the case of contemporary Iranian popular photographers, inspiration is drawn from a palette of existing Iranian vernacular trends in social documentary photography and *reportage* from earlier historical periods, *as well as* more contemporary, global influences from standards and aesthetic tropes set by international photo competitions and prominent individuals (see chapter 6 on popular Iranian photographers vis-à-vis international photo contests).

### **3.3. Public transformations in popular (digital-media) communication: 1990s-present**

The advent of the mobile phone camera in the early 2000s, alongside technological advances in digital cameras, marked the beginnings of the popularisation of everyday picture taking in Iran on a mass scale (for those members of society that could afford it), as elsewhere in the world (Okabe and Ito 2003; Rivière 2005; Gómez Cruz et al. 2012; Berry and Schleser 2014). In general, the onset of the digital marked what has been termed a ‘demotic turn’ (Turner 2010) in ‘ordinary’ people’s uses of media technologies on a ‘global’ scale. One of my main research participants and creator of the ‘Life Goes on in Tehran’ photoblog (introduced in chapter 1), described the social significance of using a mobile phone (originally a simple 1.3 megapixel Motorola RAZR phone before later upgrading to Apple’s iPhone) to document everyday life in Iran in the mid 2000s:

Just the fact that I was taking my phone everywhere with me made it the ideal choice in Iran. Who wants to walk around Tehran with a heavy professional-grade camera around their neck? I chose to use my mobile phone for the freedom of mobility I had with it and also, people didn’t seem to mind some dude taking photos with his phone – they would assume it’s for personal use and wouldn’t question it.

(Online interview with LGOIT, [17/03/13])

In one sense, LGOIT suggests a general appeal of mobile phone photography (that which he suggests allows for greater ‘freedom of mobility’). This fosters a new form of ‘being together’ in ‘daily interpersonal communication’ (Rivière 2005) facilitated by mobile phone cameras. On the other hand, LGOIT also suggests a specific appeal of mobile phone photography in Iran under the ultra-conservative administration of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005-2013). Amidst a clamping down on communications ‘from above’ during this period, people might not, as LGOIT put it,

‘question’ taking their pictures in public as much, if carried out with discretion.

During this socio-political period of hardliner conservatism, a radical political transition took place in Iran. As a backlash to the years of reform under President Mohammad Khatami (1997-2005), which had promoted a ‘Dialogue of Civilisations’ that had re-opened Iran out to the rest of the world, Ahmadinejad saw the unravelling of this political, economic and diplomatic headway, towards a more militant, Islamic and ‘nativist’ re-instating of the revolutionary ethos. Measures were taken to increase punitive cultural policies in public life and communications in Iran. A main feature of this period saw harsher policies directed at the Internet, which was increasingly becoming a prominent means of transnational Iranian social and political communication (see chapter 1). A new form of social agency facilitated by the Internet (and particularly blogging) caused a moral panic amongst Iranian authorities seeking to maintain political and cultural hegemony over public life and attempting to overcome what they perceived to be the threat of ‘infection’ from the west through nascent popular media (see chapters 4 and 5). Draconian socio-technological measures were taken to stunt the growth of the Internet in Iran accordingly. The state-run broadcaster Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB), which oversees a significant amount of official cultural production in Iran, moved to influence state policies on the Internet. Ayatollah Khamenei, the Supreme Leader of Iran, who placed the Internet in the hands of the state, reserved a role for IRIB in all policymaking regarding its administration and regulation. Speed restrictions were imposed in October 2006, which marred widespread Internet usage, restricting it to the few who could pay for better connection speeds. Internet cafés (or ‘*cafénet*’ as they are known in popular parlance in Iran) had emerged in Iran’s big cities in the early 2000s, but were becoming routinely interrupted and shut down by the government. Coinciding with these restrictions during this

period, blogging was experiencing exponential growth as a new form of socio-political expression as a form of ‘politics by other means’ (Sreberny et al. 2010:59).

As detailed in chapter 1, the early 2000s saw the advent of photoblogging in Iran. Individuals took to the Internet in Iran as a new arena for socio-cultural and visual expression in a climate where freedom of expression and global connectivity was being severely dampened. Since its creation by a Vancouver-based company, Ludicorp, in 2004, Flickr has enjoyed considerable popularity in Iran. Many photobloggers cite this image-hosting online community as a main inspiration for developing their interest in photography, particularly for its social and cultural aspects. Due to its popularity in Iran, the Iranian government soon banned Flickr. For some photobloggers, this became a major impetus for what one of my research participants Saleh, now based in Liverpool in the UK, termed ‘going solo’ to set up his own photoblog in order to digitally host photographs himself. Saleh explained this as follows:

Since here in Iran flickr.com and other photography-related sites have been banned, I started my own photoblog in June 2005 in order to share my photos as an amateur photographer.<sup>43</sup>

Overall, greater measures of control were enforced over civil rights, press freedoms and the Internet precisely at a time when new digital technologies such as smart phones were emerging on the international market from 2007 onwards. LGOIT and Saleh’s remarks suggest how the camera phone, coupled with (young) people’s savvy know-how of the Internet involving circumventing official bans, allowed for the kind of discretion desired by public popular photographers in Iran during this hardliner, conservative period in Iran’s Internet-era history, from the 1990s to the present.

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<sup>43</sup> <http://www.8pmdaily.com/index.php?x=about> (Accessed: 10/09/12).

### 3.3.1. June 2009 and the Iranian Green Movement: a turning point for Iranian popular digital photography

The momentous social and political turmoil caused by the protests against the re-election of Ahmadinejad as President in June 2009 altered popular photography's usage, status and its perception amongst the Iranian authorities.



Figure 3.2: 'Human Green Chain' post, Tehran Live, 08/06/09: <http://tehranlive.org/2009/06/09/human-green-chain-in-tehran/>

Headed by the newly formed Reformist Green Movement, hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets across Iran to rally against what they deemed to be an unjust election result, which had re-instated Ahmadinejad to office (Sreberny and Khiabany 2010; Khosronejad 2011; Khatib 2013; Khosronejad 2013; Mottahedeh 2015). During this period, Green Movement social activists and ordinary citizens became symbolically unified on- and offline by the colour green in banners, slogans, clothing and make-up (Harris 2012). On the one hand, this visually referenced Iranian Shiite Islamic visual tradition, where green is widely associated with Islam and Shiism and is often appropriated in political protests signifying Muslim identity (Flaskerud 2010). More widely, it also came to represent the specific changes and freedoms that Iranian reformists were campaigning for.

The events in 2009 are often cited as marking a new era of citizen journalism and political protest (Dabashi 2010; Khatib 2013), where audio-visual digital media became crucial in communicating live events across the globe. In the absence of independent media and a heavy crackdown on foreign journalism in the country at the time, this already ‘visual protest’ (Khatib 2013) became greatly enhanced by the use of mobile phones, in conjunction with the Internet. In the 2009 period, the smart phone had only recently been introduced to the international market with the launch of Apple’s iPhone in January 2007<sup>44</sup>. The device’s ability (given relevant conditions, of access and affordability) to connect to the Internet ushered in a new form of public photography that was, in this sense, potentially more ‘global’ than ever before. As a consequence, Iranians during the 2009 protests demonstrated one of the first global instances of what Mottahedeh (2015) terms ‘hashtag solidarity’, denoting a socio-technological process whereby users are able to link to relevant people, places and concepts and objects, by typing a hashtag symbol (#) in front of a key word. For Iranians, inside and outside of Iran, visual information shared online at this time was perceived to provide evidential ‘proof’ of events occurring inside Iran in a ‘live’ sense. Figure 3.3 showing two photographs from ‘Tehran Live’ shows an example of how photobloggers distribute visual information on their photoblogs during the protests.

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<sup>44</sup> <https://www.apple.com/uk/pr/library/2007/01/09Apple-vents-the-Phone-with-iPhone.html> (Accessed: 12/10/13).



Figure 3.3: 'Human Green Chain in Tehran' post (still image and mobile phone-taken video clip) Tehran Live, 08/06/09: <http://tehranlive.org/2009/06/09/human-green-chain-in-tehran/>. (Accessed: 15/12/14).

These images show how Amir bears witness to one particular protest in Tehran in June 2009. Groups of men and women had formed a human chain 12 miles long across central Tehran as a sign of solidarity with the Green Movement's campaign. Amir records the events as they happen on his iPhone and posts these photographs to his photoblog. He also includes a self-authored captioned description (which is common

practice in photoblogging) to provide wider social and political context for his viewers. He also includes an image taken from the Internet of a map of Tehran, upon which he digitally draws a green line to indicate the line of people formed by the protesters (Figure 3.4). Amir's customary manner of mapping his photographs to their physical locations strikes an important connection between the virtual and the actual location of the photograph. Figure 3.5 shows another example of these efforts to locate the photograph in real space. In this image, Amir shows his viewers precisely where 'Conflict between Musavi and Ahmadinejad fans' is unfolding in the city.



Figure 3.4: Map showing Human Green Chain, Tehran Live, 08/06/09:  
<http://tehranlive.org/2009/06/09/human-green-chain-in-tehran/> (Accessed: 15/02/14).

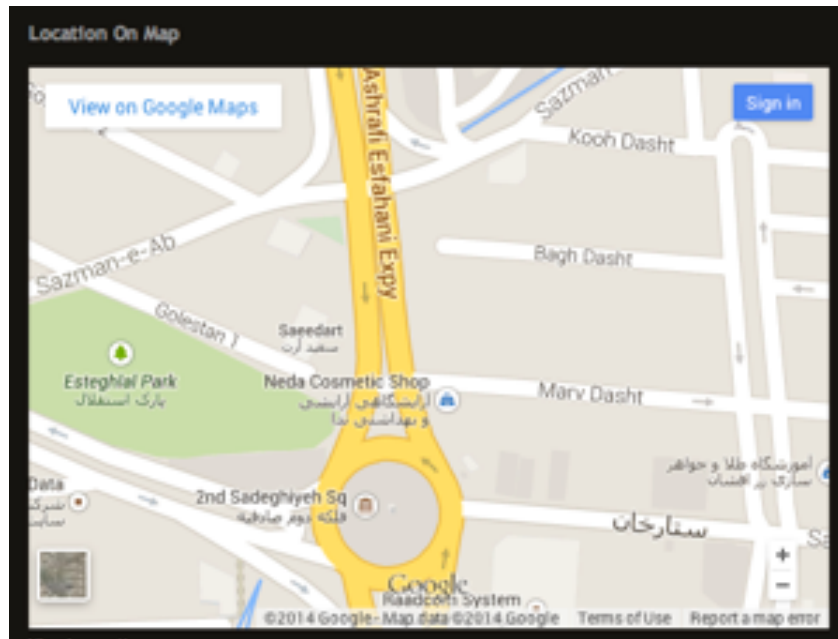


Figure 3.5: Screen shot, Google Map image on post ‘Conflict between Musavi and Ahmadinejad fans’, Tehran Live, 02/06/09: <http://tehranlive.org/2009/06/03/conflict-between-musavi-and-ahmadinejad-fans/> (Accessed: 15/02/14).

Along with many other photobloggers, Amir uses Google Earth, to geotag the location of the digital photograph taken on his iPhone with its reference point on Google Maps, showing exactly where it was taken in Tehran. Photobloggers like Amir also embed short video clips into their posts, showing a variety of live scenes. As with the circulation of analogue photographs, digital photographs shared online enable acts of seeing in specific times and places, to be extended and collectivized. At the same time, digital locative media also grounds the photograph in an extra layer of photorealism (an anchoring in ‘real’ time and place), which has the added dimension of a time and date stamped geographical and physical ‘reality’. Such ‘live photography’ reflects a unique ability to create live postcards of places visited: not the ‘I was here’, of Barthes (1981), but an ‘I *am* here’ (Bell and Lyall 2005). As Larsen (2008:152) notes, digital photography is typified by a ‘time-space compression’ which enables a collective experiencing of ‘instantaneous time’ in the act of making and viewing photographs (Lash and Urry 1994). This affords a particular photorealist ‘vision of modernity’

(McQuire 1998:133), whereby the camera ‘functions as a space-time machine capable of instantiating a potentially infinite chain of eye-witnesses’.

Unlike earlier preoccupations with stasis in the realms of photography and cinema, where the spatio-temporal organisation/manipulation of experience was deemed to be somewhat artificially configured (Benjamin [1931] 1999), geolocative media hereby reconfigures this dialectic of photography by striking a real, and even real time connection between photographer, subject and viewer. One effect of these aspects, is that the digital photograph constructs an ‘intimate visual co-presence’ (Ito 2005) and feeling of ‘being there together’ online (Schroeder 2010) between photobloggers and their viewers<sup>45</sup>. Moreover, the kind of bearing witness shown in this context also constitutes the digital photograph’s status as a self-authenticating agent itself, *as well* one that is implicated in a morally charged, normative pursuit of social, political and visual freedom. The ‘moral authority’<sup>46</sup> of the digital photograph in this context, is thus hereby constructed by virtue of its socio-political agenda and public imperative of collective viewership.

The 2009 election crisis was a time of accelerated online activity for photobloggers and viewers. In such moments, where international media in the country had been severely restricted, ‘new media’ (denoting modern forms of communications akin to the aforementioned ‘small media’ of the 1970s) flourished as an alternative method of global communication. In this context, the photoblog became the site of a virtual message board for viewers to post comments in response to the unfolding situation in the streets. Figure 3.6 shows one example of responses to Amir’s representation of the events in the June 2009 archive of his photoblog. The screenshot

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<sup>45</sup> As discussed, this digital dialectic was also an important basis upon which I developed relationships with my research participants online (see chapter 2).

<sup>46</sup> For a comparative example of the ‘moral authority’ of the popular photograph, see Strassler’s (2010:209-249) study of Indonesian student demonstrations that took place from 1998-1999 in Yogyakarta.

shows comments written mostly by (a) Americans and other foreigners in English as well as (b) Iranian viewers who write in what is colloquially known as ‘PEnglish’ (Persian written in the English alphabet), as well as (c) those inside the country keen to share, communicate and mediate their own experience of events by expressing solidarity on the digital platform<sup>47</sup>. Such comments (which are exemplary of a far broader number of similar sentiments posted on photoblogs) demonstrate solidarity with the political events and Iranians’ ongoing struggles for fair elections and greater socio-political freedoms in Iran. One American viewer remarked how, speaking on behalf of the ‘American people’ at large, he felt a ‘deep kinship’ with Iranians’<sup>48</sup>.

Another, German viewer expressed how:

The whole of Europe is watching you, you are our hope for a free and peaceful future...me and a lot of friends in Germany, Denmark, The Netherlands, Switzerland, Ireland, Iceland, Norway, Austria, Australia and the USA are following right now on Twitter. We share your thoughts, anger and hope!<sup>49</sup>

These comments are naturally, only made possible by the digital photograph’s virtual exhibition venue, on the photoblog and related social network sites. This new, Internet-facilitated public notably includes foreigners and Iranians outside of Iran (both exiled/expat Iranians and foreigners) for whom the photoblog becomes a digital-visual idiom for Iran, at which such global peacekeeping campaigns are directed.

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<sup>47</sup> For further discussion of the politics of commenting, including during the 2009 protests, see chapter 9 on the Social Life of Iranian photoblogs.

<sup>48</sup> Viewer comment, Tehran Live. Posted 12 June 2009: <http://tehranlive.org/2009/06/12/iranian-2009-presidential-elections/> (Accessed: 15/12/14).

<sup>49</sup> Viewer comment, Tehran Live. Posted 12 June 2009: <http://tehranlive.org/2009/06/12/iranian-2009-presidential-elections/> (Accessed: 15/12/14).

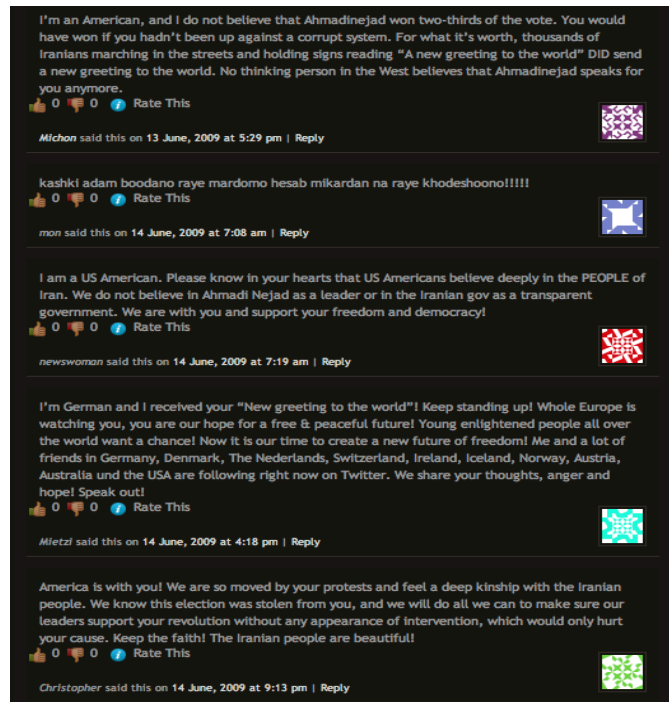


Figure 3.6: Screen shot sample of viewer responses to 'Iranian 2009 Presidential Elections', Tehran Live, <http://tehranlive.org/2009/06/12/iranian-2009-presidential-elections/> (Accessed: 15/02/15).

### 3.3.2. Post 2009-present

The 2009 protests resulted in Ahmadinejad remaining in power, as opposed to the Green Movement's candidate, Mir-Hossein Mousavi taking up presidency. The movement itself was disbanded, its leaders were placed under house arrest and many protesters and ordinary citizens were imprisoned. The death of one Iranian woman, Neda Agha Soltan, shot dead in the street in Tehran, made her a martyr and symbolic, visual figurehead of the Green Movement (Khosronejad 2013). The 2009 period had clear social and political consequences. On the one hand, it increased the (global) visibility of Iran's new media usage, as well as the government's internal crackdown on them (Morozov 2009). Here, as DeNicola (2012:82) reminds, a balance needs to be struck between acknowledging the 'new' visibility of nascent social and cultural groups (such as Iranian photobloggers and their popular uses of geomeadia) and scrutinising its usage by dominant institutions and state-based mapping agencies.

Mobile phones, now considered tools of resistance, were targeted by state censors, who interrupted their services accordingly. Many citizen journalists, including bloggers, digital activists and photobloggers were arrested during this period. According to one discussion I had with LGOIT, 'it was rumoured in Iran during the 2009 period that the regime was thinking about banning the use of phones with cameras altogether!'<sup>50</sup> The events of 2009 led to hundreds of arrests and the imprisonment of prominent photographers, including one of my research participants, Amir, who had documented and disseminated the protests online. The period generally led to an overall decline in public, popular photographic activities. Almost all photographers I spoke with highlighted the conservative backlash following the election protests as a huge blow to their impetus and desires to carry on taking pictures.

Many photographers living in Iran were driven indoors and confined themselves to largely online activity and socialising at this time, whilst those living abroad returned to their countries to maintain communication from afar. Sending out a public statement at the time to his fans on the photoblog, LGOIT expressed the following along these lines:

For the first time in 30 months, I have no photos to share. I still can't bring myself to share my thoughts. I still can't speak. I hate my Nokia phone more and more every day and I can't find the will to use it to snap shot daily life. What is daily life if not with the most basic of human rights? But I am hopeful that the day will come when I will once again be motivated to continue what has been a joyful reliving and celebration of a life that goes on and on and on...in Tehran.<sup>51</sup>

Here, LGOIT describes the related socio-psychological effects of the 2009 protests amongst many Iranians suffering the effects of dashed hope in the quashing of their campaign for fair elections and greater civil rights in Iran. Notably, LGOIT fixates

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<sup>50</sup> Online interview with LGOIT (15/03/12).

<sup>51</sup> LGOIT online statement, 01/10/09: <http://lifegoesonintehran.com> (Accessed: 17/12/14).

their feelings of despair on the material object of their Nokia mobile camera phone, which had been used to record and communicate the events. For LGOIT, the camera phone symbolises both the hope and the failure of the protest's quest for freedoms and basic rights. LGOIT also equates their inability to post photographs with an overall inability to 'speak', due to a certain sadness that was blocking their desires to share images from everyday life in the post-2009 period.

In another example, an Iranian male photoblogger turned artist and curator based in Tehran, Sohrab Kashani (discussed throughout this thesis) explained to me in an online interview just how much he relied upon digital media in the post-2009 period for staying connected with the world. After having been arrested for his activities during the protests, Sohrab did not venture away from his apartment in Tehran for several months due to a form of (undiagnosed) post-traumatic stress. This had left him feeling vulnerable in society. Having consigned himself to physical social self-exile, Sohrab took to playing videogames and began living a more-than-ever mediated life online. He soon developed an alter ego personality, whom he called 'Super Sohrab' (discussed in chapter 8). Sohrab's experiment with developing a virtual or post-human body helped him to combat his sense of isolation and allowed his mind, as he put it, to 'survive'<sup>52</sup>. In another example, though not in specific relation to the June protests, Ehsan (another of my research participants) similarly equated popular photography with a kind of social therapy: 'Taking photos is pure enjoyment for me. It stops me from thinking about my life's issues'.<sup>53</sup> Other Iranian photographers described how their practice connects them to society through a form of transcendental escapism. In the 'About' section of his Facebook fan page, Iranian self-taught photographer turned

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<sup>52</sup> Online interview via Skype, Sohrab Kashani (11/02/14).

<sup>53</sup> Online interview via e-mail, Ehsan Abbasi (10/10/12).

photojournalist Ako Salemi, known online mostly for his street photography of Tehran, describes the following:

I started photography to make contact with the outside world...as I made more progress, I found that I could use the camera not only to express my feelings but also to talk about my thoughts. Maybe at the beginning, for an isolated and shy person like me photography was a way to have contact with the society. But over time my photos have turned to the eyes through which I see my surrounding, a way to see the lives of the others in silence and to show to the people my view to their lives. Living in the world of colors, lines and composition take me to a sweet dream away from the harsh reality.<sup>54</sup>

Whilst some of these testaments refer to the social and political aftermath of the post-2009 period, they also touch upon a wider finding in this thesis concerning the socio-psychological effects of taking photographs in the post-rupture society of contemporary Iran, following revolution, war and the quashed civil protests of 2009. For many photobloggers, the social use of popular digital photography serves as a remedy that re-integrates them into society. It connects them to Iran and to each other through photography's 'civil contract' (Azoulay 2008). This notion makes the 'citizens of photography' (comprised of photographer, subject, viewer) into a community bound by 'visual citizenship', beyond the sovereignty of the state (Ibid). However, the escapism afforded by photography is not reducible to dissatisfaction with the regime *per se*. It can also relate to what Ehsan, based now in Melbourne, describes more generally as 'life's issues'. For Ako from Tehran, the 'harsh reality' he seeks to transcend via his photography provides relief from a stifled economy and living standards, as the result of heavy international sanctions. These findings suggest the need to think broadly about the various appeals of popular digital photography for Iranians beyond the national framework of Iran, and beyond theories, which suggest that the Islamic regime is the chief source of Iranian youth resistance.

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<sup>54</sup> From the 'About' section of self-taught photographer turned photojournalist Ako Salemi's Facebook fan page: [https://www.facebook.com/f64s125/info?tab=page\\_info](https://www.facebook.com/f64s125/info?tab=page_info). (Accessed: 17/12/14).

### **3.4. Popular digital photographic practices in the contemporary Iranian digital-visual landscape**

Following the election of Hassan Rouhani as President in August 2013, regulation of the Internet has again become a pressing political issue, dividing hardliners and more moderate factions in government. Whilst the latter pushed for greater reforms to Internet freedoms, aligning themselves with more moderate diplomatic positions, the former feared they would exacerbate the issue of ‘un-Islamic’ values infiltrating Iran. This pertains to what Ayatollah Khamenei, the Supreme Leader of Iran, proclaimed to be a so-called ‘cultural invasion’ from the west<sup>55</sup>. In March 2012, Khamenei, who exercises supreme power over the country, ordered the establishment of The Supreme Council of Cyberspace (SCC), a new centralised governmental agency responsible for controlling the country’s policies on the Internet, includes initiatives to regulate its usage in accordance with the regime’s political and cultural values. It is also responsible for overseeing the state’s on-going planned implementation of a national intranet that exists separately from the global Internet, not entirely unlike attempts made by the Chinese government towards the same idea in China. Despite these measures of control and aforementioned slump in activity in the direct aftermath of June 2009, popular photography in Iran on the ‘Iranian Internet’ (Akhavan 2013) gained ground and became a thriving activity in Iran in online photography groups. Many of my participants admitted however, that the associated trauma of the 2009 period looms large in the public’s social conscience. Whilst not specific to Iran, the array of continuously evolving online Iranian photography projects and activities today suggests a specific kind of ‘moment’ for Iranian popular cultural expression. As I will discuss in subsequent chapters (4-8), this relies both on the Internet and on photography-based communication

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<sup>55</sup> [www.farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=2627](http://www.farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=2627) (Accessed: 20/04/14). See also chapter 5 of this thesis.

for (what they all largely profess to be) showing the ‘other’ side of Iran: a morally charged pursuit to which they harness their practices.

Notable contemporary examples include domestic popular photography projects such as the ‘Rich Kids of Tehran’<sup>56</sup> (2014) group on Instagram (now blocked by the Iranian authorities), which accrued a sizeable international following of over 100,000 followers from across the globe in just one month (see Figure 3.7). In the initiative, a group of wealthy young men and women from Tehran in their twenties and thirties shared over 300 images and ‘Selfies’<sup>57</sup> of themselves showing their lavish lifestyles, designer clothing, expensive watches, cars and houses. Appropriating the idea from the earlier ‘Rich Kids of Instagram’ Tumblr account<sup>58</sup>, a visual diary of rich, western teenagers’ lives mostly in North America, which became a success in 2012, Iranians attempted to show a Tehran-specific, but very similar version. They claim that this offers ‘another side of Iran’ that the world, used to images of Islamic extremism and chador-clad women, doesn’t get to see. This is a variant of a similar ethos photobloggers put forward in their practices aimed at showing the ‘real’ Iran, though the ‘Rich kids of Tehran’ trend operates, albeit within a more elite economic milieu: the very wealthy. Here, material objects such as expensive houses, cars, accessories and clothing representing their wealth and modern, consumer lifestyles characterises the nature and scope of what they desire to show. As I have already discussed, and will expand upon in more detail in chapter 8, this kind of visual self-styling is a contemporary form of earlier studio settings in which photography has long been linked to local practices of self-representation and expression of aesthetic aspiration through self-accessorising (Buckley 2001; Sprague 2003; Buckley 2006). A notable comparison is Buckley’s (2001:71)

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<sup>56</sup> [www.instagram.com/kidsoftehran](http://www.instagram.com/kidsoftehran)

<sup>57</sup> See chapter 8 on the ‘Selfie’ genre in contemporary digital photography.

<sup>58</sup> [www.richkidsofinstagram.tumblr.com](http://www.richkidsofinstagram.tumblr.com)

studies of Gambian photography, in which he found that individuals ‘complete themselves for depiction’ in stylised ways of ‘cutting and layering’ by adorning themselves with imported goods to express their fashionable living. This was also seen in the earlier example of the nineteenth century royal Iranian photograph album collage. Before long, the ‘Poor Kids of Tehran’ soon emerged on Instagram. This was created in a mocking fashion in October of the same year by other echelons of Iranian society’s media-producing and consuming youth. It uses other sets of photographs posted by group members to visually respond to the original ‘Rich Kids’ group, aiming to undermine the former’s so-called ‘realities’ with other ones, as seen in the poorer parts of Tehran. In the latter’s image series, many photographs are mirrored (and mimicked) by their socio-economic counterparts (see Figure 3.8 below).

In the Rich/Poor Kids of Tehran popular photographic trends, we see a material-digital manifestation of existing class tensions between northern Tehran’s ‘Rich Kids’ and those often living in the South, antagonistically referring to themselves as ‘Poor Kids’ (see Figure 3.9). In both of the groups, comparative images of cars, watches, clothing, houses and food aim to purport respective urban Iranian socio-economic realities ranging from the extremely affluent to humble lifestyles and affordances.

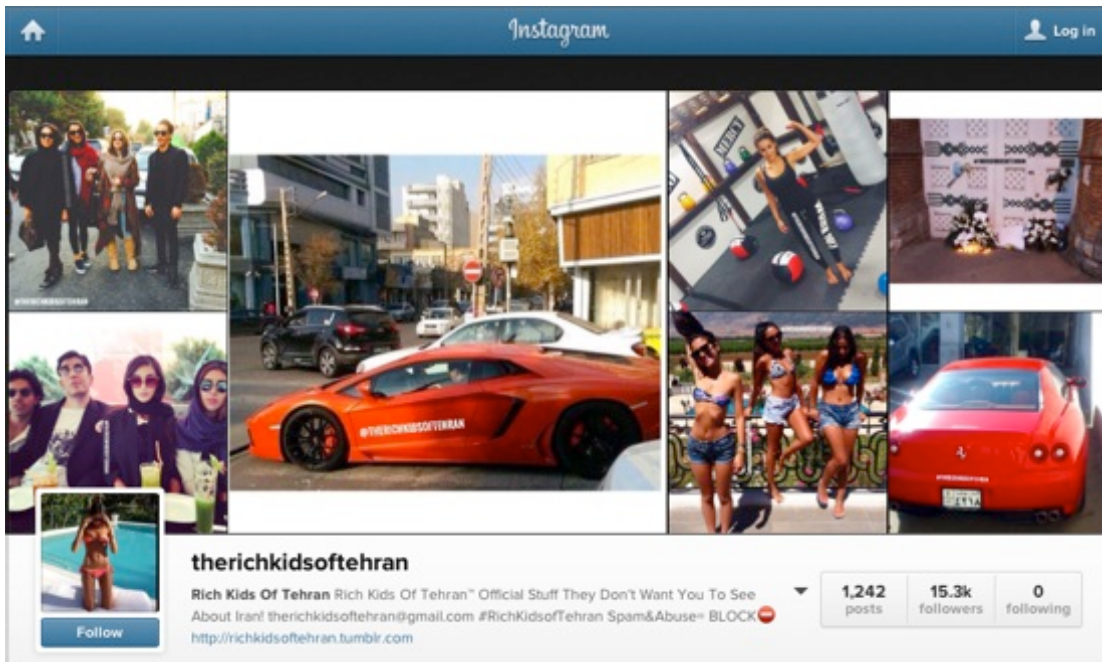


Figure 3.7: Rich kids of Tehran Instagram group: [www.instagram.com/therickkidsoftehran](http://www.instagram.com/therickkidsoftehran). (Accessed: 12/01/15).



Figure 3.8: Poor Kids of Tehran Instagram group: <http://instagram.com/poorkidsoftehran>. (Accessed: 12/01/15).

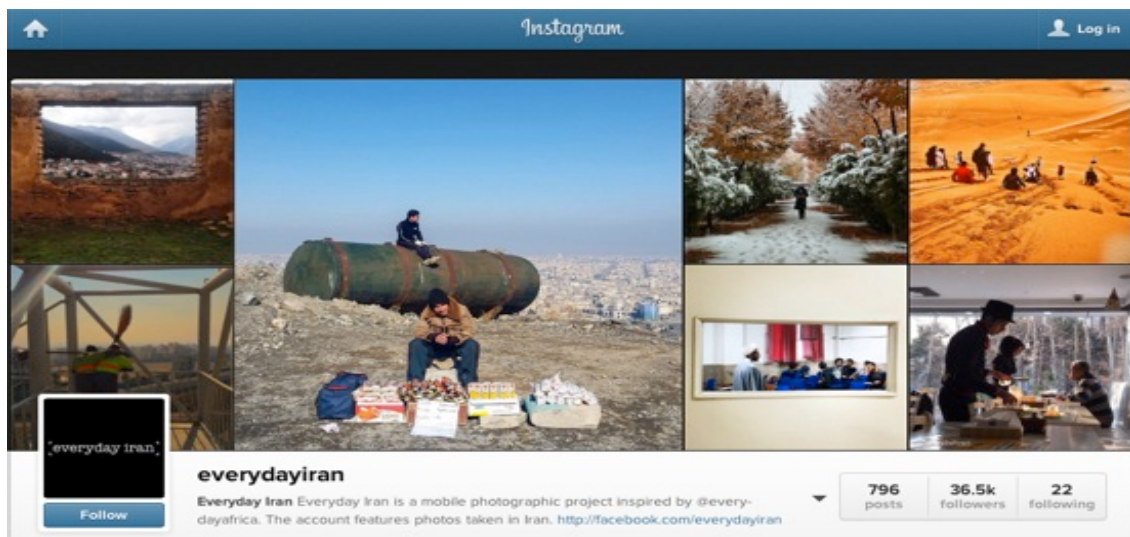


Figure 3.9: Online rivalries: ‘Rich Kids of Tehran’ versus ‘Poor Kids of Tehran’ on Instagram. Image source: <http://stream.aljazeera.com/story/201410091205-0024231>. (Accessed: 12/01/15).

Digital photographs shared online, as with earlier studies of analogue photography capture complex and intertwining subjectivities, relating to class, hierarchy and aspiration. In MacDougall’s (1992) study of tourist photography in Mussoorie, an Indian hill station in northern Uttar Pradesh, physical and economic geography coincided with photography to create what he calls a vertical *photo hierarchicus*. His suggestion that ‘one can read Mussoorie’s social complexity in its photography’ can be brought to bear on contemporary Iranian digital popular photography seen in these online settings (Ibid: 112). In the Rich/Poor Kids groups, physical and economic geographies are similarly implicated in the ‘event’ of photography. This demonstrates a symbiotic relationship between offline and online Iranian social tensions, enunciated through a range of forms. In addition to highlighting existing urban class tensions, digital photographic activities of this kind simultaneously reveal the socially diverse nature of Internet and social media users, in ways which move beyond the paradigm of media-using secular, middle-class ‘defiant’ youth perpetrated by earlier ethnographies of Tehran (Varzi 2006; Khosravi 2008). These activities provide visual evidence of what anthropologists who

are critical of these ‘resistance’ monographs are suggesting; namely, that Iranian youth cultures today say less about any uniform resistance to the state, than the dynamics of class, gender, social mobility and aspirations (Adelkhah 1999; Olszewska 2013).

A plethora of other contemporary examples of popular photographic activities can be found in the online digital landscape today. The ‘Everyday Iran’ on Instagram and Facebook (Figure 3.10) is one prominent example<sup>59</sup>. The initiative began on Instagram in 2014 and is administered by a small group of Iranian photographers in Tehran, who host competitions for the daily showcasing of Iranian amateur photographers’ images from all over Iran (Figure 3.10). It currently (June 2015) has 73,000 followers from across the world on Facebook and the group is constantly growing. Speaking with the project’s founder, Ali Khaveh, I learnt how the overarching impetus behind the Everyday Iran project was to establish a site for showing images from everyday life in Iran to the rest of the world. The idea was consciously inspired by the popular photography project on Instagram entitled ‘Everyday Africa’<sup>60</sup> established in 2012 by the use of the hashtag ‘everydayafrica’.



<sup>59</sup> [www.instagram.com/everydayiran](http://www.instagram.com/everydayiran) and [www.facebook.com/everydayiran](http://www.facebook.com/everydayiran)

<sup>60</sup> <http://everydayafrica.tumblr.com>



Figure 3.10: ‘Everyday Iran’ group on Instagram ([www.instagram.com/everydayiran](http://www.instagram.com/everydayiran)) and corresponding Facebook page: ([www.facebook.com/everydayiran?fref=ts](http://www.facebook.com/everydayiran?fref=ts)). Accessed: 12/01/15.

The Africa site shows thousands of everyday images of daily life across a host of African countries and soon attracted over 100,000 followers. By 2014, photographers from different parts of the world came together online to form the ‘Everyday Projects’ on Instagram, as well as being linked to Facebook; including ‘Everyday Egypt’, ‘Everyday Jamaica’, ‘Everyday Asia,’ ‘Everyday Latin America,’ ‘Everyday Eastern Europe,’ amongst others. Ali told me how on establishing the ‘Everyday Iran’ site in 2014, it had attracted 200,000 viewers in just one week of its going live online. Official statistics he shared with me showed the largest country viewer base to be in Iran, followed by America, whilst the biggest city, beyond Tehran and Mashad in Iran was London. Whilst there seems a somewhat universal appeal to the everyday projects in the popular sharing of scenes from daily life in these contexts, there are deeper facets to the Iranian everyday in these popular articulations that warrant social enquiry. As this thesis seeks to show, these are rooted in the wider social, political, cultural and historical conditions in which images have been produced and circulated in and in relation to an ‘Islamic Iran’, as accounted for in chapters 4 and 5. At the same time that such activities are flourishing in Iran, the state has also taken to the Internet and social

media to pursue its own agendas ‘from above’. These will be examined in chapters 5 and 6.

### **3.4.1. Locating Photoblogging within the contemporary Iranian digital-photographic landscape**

Photoblogs are distinguishable from the relative hype, faster pace and at times antagonistic social behaviors of other social media-based photographic activities, such as the Instagram groups discussed above. Photoblogs are the slower and more sustained amateur auto-ethnographic projects of Iranian individuals, who sometimes in groups, demonstrate an awareness of photographic indexicality. As shall become apparent throughout the course of this thesis, it is this aspect, of being a ‘live’ *and* constantly updated account of the ‘truth’ of Iran at a particular moment in time, posited in contradistinction to other visual realities, that constitutes the major part of the photoblog’s textured appeal for viewers.

Chapter 1 introduced photoblogging, explaining what it is and how it has developed in Iran since the early 2000s amidst a broader Iranian appetite for blogging as a form of socio-cultural and political expression. What makes the photoblog distinct from other websites is precisely that it is a blog (a web 2.0 platform) and not a static web interface. This means that it is predicated on interactivity with viewers and has a particular temporality, contingent upon the posting of new material. The most recent photographic blog entry appears at the top of the page or is placed in the latest month’s archive of that year. One of my research participants, Vahid (a male photoblogger based in Rome), explained that photoblogging is ‘about keeping it live; you have to keep uploading and keep updating it, everyday’<sup>61</sup>.

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<sup>61</sup> Online interview via Skype, Vahid Rahmanian (28/05/13).

As a kind of digital photographic diary of the individual's daily life in Iran, the photoblog is shared online as a visual, archived record of Iran in the 'here and now', but one which is implicated in the act of movement. As I will discuss in further detail in chapter 8, this modifies earlier conceptions of photography as static signifiers of passing moments in time and of the historic (Sontag 1977; Berger 1980; Barthes 1981). The photoblog modifies temporality in such a way as to recall Richardson and Hessey's (2009) concept of the 'dormant archive'. Seen in relation to Facebook, their concept suggests how, through a combination of human and technological action, we are reminded of dormant or decaying connections (old posts, past photographs, things we've 'liked'.) These technological processes transform the 'life spans' or 'bandwidths' of both digital material objects such as photographs and the social relations connecting with them, from the past in the present with an open, and even automatically generated pathway to the future. This attests to the capacity of digital technology to expand temporal, spatial and ontological parameters, which is a hallmark of digital-ethnographic enquiry into popular photography on the Internet.

### **3.5. Offline practices: photography groups, Meetups and 'photo tours' (*safarhā-ye 'akkāsi*)**

As well as organising alternative online groups for the sharing of popular Iranian photography online, popular photographers also engage in offline social practices, centred on the act of taking photos in and across Iran in public. In March 2012, Flickr introduced an online function called 'Meetups.'<sup>62</sup> It aims to help facilitate the offline local meeting up of Flickr members who were connected online (see Figure 3.11.)

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<sup>62</sup> [www.meetup.com/flickr/](http://www.meetup.com/flickr/). (Accessed: 14/04/14).



Figure 3.11: Flickr 'Meetups' home page: <http://www.meetup.com/flickr/>. (Accessed: 24/10/14).

The platform geographically locates users based in the same town or region, with whom one can make contact to arrange to physically meet up for the purpose of going on a 'Photowalk'; a popular activity involving walking with a camera as an individual or as part of a group. Via Flickr, participants of an online group meet up offline and link the photographs taken in their photowalk session to the group's page via the use of a hashtag symbol.

'Photo tours', or *safarhā-ye 'akkāsi*, as they are referred to in Persian amongst popular photographers Iran, are Iranian versions of photowalks. These are offline social occasions whereby groups of young men and women travel to various provinces of the country in order to collectively develop their practice, including the sharing of technical skills. Vahid told me how the origins of the photo tour idea came about in Iran, through informal, offline meetings of photography enthusiasts around the mid 2000s in Tehran. Vahid's first experience of this was in 2006 on an online popular photography group that emerged on Flickr. This particular group first met up in Jamshidieh Park in Northern Tehran. With a sprawling view of the city, Vahid

explained how the location lent itself well to photographic vistas. He described an initial sense of anticipation in meeting the group (all relative strangers) in an offline context. However, once they had all gotten over the initial introductions, Vahid explained, the online personalities and dynamics of the mixed gender group translated easily to the offline setting. He explained the evolution of these kinds of photography groups as follows:

Since around 2006/2007, we had our own original groups in Tehran, but then people in Esfahan, Tabriz and Ahvaz etc. became interested and also began to create their own versions of ours. Sometimes via the web, we would arrange to meet up with these other groups. We were all quite dedicated, the members of our online group used to meet up in *Mellat* Park ('The Nation park', Tehran) every Friday at 10am!

(Online interview, Vahid Rahmanian, [06/05/13])

Physically journeying to various urban and rural locations around Iran provides opportunities for Iranian men and women to socialise and partake in collective creative pursuits, relatively on their own terms. Official photo tours that are state-funded and facilitated mark a different kind of activity in Iran, which is discussed in chapter 6.

Amir explained the unofficial version of the practice in the following terms:

There are many photography groups, both amateurs and professionals, and many different types of gathering. Sometimes we meet to take photographs inside the city, for example inside Tehran grand bazaar to take documentary photos. We will then discuss out photos and experiments together as a group. Sometimes we go to a nature site, like a forest or desert to take photos of nature and the countryside. In some cases in the gatherings, a group leader will hold a workshop on a given photography theme, such as nature, documentary, night photography, etc.

Participants of popular photo tours develop skills with each other within self-constructed occasions for collective learning and socialising beyond the official provisions offered by state-sponsored activities, though notably, many of its participants partake in both (the latter is funded and catered for). Continuing our

conversation, Amir explained the importance of photo tours as spaces for nurturing collective learning:

Photo tours are really helping aspiring photographers in Iran. The most important thing about them is that they allow you to build skills and become more professional by having the ability to practice. This is all possible on these tours. People practice and learn from each other and support one another.

By carving out an alternative public space between the on- and offline spheres, photo tours appear to offer psychological relief from the city, the university, the work place and formal public social roles. One male photographer I spoke with in Tehran, a male engineer in his late twenties, explained the following:

We learn from each other on these occasions. We pass on skills and technical wisdoms to do with shutter speeds, depth of field, setting up shots and generally experiment with taking photos. It's a lot of fun and we make the rules. In general everyone is good-spirited and eager to get better at telling his or her stories.

(Interview held in Tehran [25/10/12])

Echoing Amir's explanations above, this photographer similarly emphasised the importance of practicing and sharing skills together, which they could not necessarily afford to pay to train, or attend university for. From all of the discussions I had in Iran and online about group photographic activities, collective learning seemed the most important reason for participating in photo tours. I learnt from Amir that such groups are not homogenous, but vary in terms of funding, associations, and participants. He continued to explain the following:

Usually, as with our group-where a group of friends decides to travel together for photography, they have to subsidise the tours themselves. In other cases, as we've seen in Iran in recent years, other photography groups with more resources hold their tours outside of Iran. These groups have gone to Africa, India and Indonesia to document their special celebrations, rituals and ceremonies. They show photos of them on photoblogs to compare them to life back home in Iran.

(Online interview with Amir Sadeghi, [18/11/13])

Here, Amir highlights the informal basis upon which these photo tours are organised at the popular or amateur level. In other cases, photo tours involve different activities, including opportunities for foreign travel. Where official photography gatherings are organised by state-sponsored cultural institutions (see chapter 6), a professional group leader is invited to hold a workshop about the tour's visual theme (landscape photography, architecture, portraiture). In order to explore Iranian photo tours more closely in the rest of this chapter, we may pause here and consider a brief ethnographic vignette. The following case study reveals several key themes relating to photo tours and Iranian popular digital photography more broadly.

### **3.5.1. Ethnographic Vignette: 'Libero Ahmed'**

I first learnt about the concept of the photo tour (*safar-e 'akkāsi*) during my fieldwork in Iran in 2012. I had travelled from Tehran to Esfahan (Figure 3.12), some 200 miles south of the capital, in order to gain a different perspective of the topic of popular Iranian photography. Esfahan is known for its grandiose sixteenth century Safavid era (1501-1736) Islamic visual art and architecture, made famous under Shah Abbas I (1588-1629). As a consequence, many domestic as well as international tourists visit the city. One afternoon in early November 2012, I took the opportunity to engage in some sightseeing. Leaving the confines of the majestic city centre, I travelled to the surrounding suburbs, where various other and older historical monuments exist. One of these is the historical mount known as the Ātashgāh-e Esfahān, or Fire Temple of Esfahan, a Sassanid-era relic eight kilometres away from the city and some two hundred and ten meters above the surrounding landscape.



Figure 3.12: Map showing my journey from Tehran to Esfahan.

Image source: [http://www.irantravelingcenter.com/tours\\_iran\\_3days\\_itinerary/](http://www.irantravelingcenter.com/tours_iran_3days_itinerary/) (Accessed: 26/01/15).

Along with fellow (mostly Iranian) tourists that day, I climbed its rocky slopes to the top. At the summit, fellow visitors took the opportunity to catch their breath, as we collectively absorbed the panoramic view: a mixture of ancient Rajai monuments and dry, desert landscape amongst the Zayandeh Rud valley, with the sprawling city of Esfahan in the distance (Figure 3.13). Those who had reached the top engaged in an exchange of remarks and observations about the experience and its goal, reaching the summit, which we agreed was well worth the climb. As fellow travellers and tourists on that day, I chatted in Persian with Iranians as well as in English with a female lone traveller from Finland. One person, an Iranian male traveller in his late twenties from the city of Karaj, to the west of Tehran, explained how he had come to Esfahan as it was one of the most picturesque places to visit in Iran. It was, as he put it, the ‘Vatican’ of Iran – a holy and beautiful place

where art has flourished for centuries, and thus a very suitable place to practice photography<sup>63</sup>.



Figure 3.13: Esfahan Photo tour, Ātashgāh-e Esfahān (8km west of Esfahan), 03/11/12.  
Photograph by the author.

Amidst these general interactions I had with the group at the summit, I met Ahmed: an Iranian male his mid twenties, shown in Figure 3.14. Ahmed was making good use of his camera. He was on a month-long trip around Iran during his time off from work as an engineer in Tehran. He explained how the purpose of his trip was partly for leisure and partly in order to pursue his passion for photography. Ahmed linked this passion for photography to his desire to document what he described as the ‘huge diversity of different cultures just within Iran alone’.<sup>64</sup> Ahmed was an amateur photographer, he explained, with no formal training, and I soon became interested in his outlook

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<sup>63</sup> Interview held at the Ātashgāh-e Esfahān (03/11/12).

<sup>64</sup> Interview with Ahmed at the Ātashgāh-e Esfahān (03/11/12).



Figure 3.14: ‘Libero Ahmed’ at the Ātashgāh-e Esfahān (03/11/12).  
Photograph by the author, taken with permission.

Ahmed described himself as both an Iranian and a ‘citizen of the world’. He even reflected this in his nickname (and online username) ‘Libero Ahmed’, which referenced both his love of Italian culture, cuisine and fashion (‘Libero’ meaning ‘free’ in Italian), as well as his own sense of freedom, as Ahmed. Ahmed loved his country, but also enjoyed travelling and absorbing other cultures, particularly within Europe. Ahmed’s job afforded him the financial means to be able to do this, though not necessarily always the time, since he worked full time in Tehran.

Ahmed described how his camera was ‘part of himself’ in ways similar to Sohrab’s explanation cited earlier describing his camera as an extension of himself in the aftermath of the 2009 protests. Like Sohrab, Ahmed’s camera here forms less a ‘prosthetic biography’ of the *individual* described by Lury (1997) (implying something added somewhat artificially on to the self), but is embodied in and constitutive *of* his wider Iranian subjectivity. Like many of my middle-class, urban-dwelling research

participants who travel to and from Iran, Ahmed is in one sense a kind of domestic tourist, who reflects a ‘reverse gaze’ (Gillespie 2008) towards his own country. However, as I will show in the rest of this chapter, photobloggers are also doing something slightly more unique on their photo tours than mere domestic ‘othering’. As with many of my other research participants, Ahmed’s photography across and outside of Iran provides a mediating lens through which he is able to address national and international images of Iran, by producing and circulating his photographs online. In this context, his photographs acquire meaning by coming into contact with existing and emerging visual systems of representations. Ahmed highlighted the lack of certain freedoms in Iran, particularly in the cultural arena (see chapter 6) as a burden, which obfuscated what he described as people’s ‘right to be free.’

Though he did not enter into an explicit critique of the Islamic Republic, Ahmed explained how he used his photography trips across Iran and abroad as a way of visually realising his sense of the ‘global’ and mobile Iranian citizen he perceived himself to be. Ahmed’s desire for self-expression can in some sense be linked to the social, political and economic disenfranchisement that he, like many other Iranians, experienced under the conservative rule of Ahmadinejad (2005-2013), which had plunged Iran deeper into international isolation. Ahmed explained to me that being born where and when he was in Iran, made him what he called an ‘automatic’ citizen of the Islamic Republic. He did not, as he explained, choose where and when he was born, though he tries his best to live life to the best of his ability in his country that he loves. Notably, his definition of living well included the ability to travel and experience other cultures, both inside and outside of Iran – an affordance he works very hard for, as a full-time engineer. Figure 3.15 below shows Ahmed photographed with the female tourist from Finland mentioned above, whom we both met that day in

Esfahan. She had joined in our conversations, where, incidentally, I learnt how ‘couch surfing’ in Iran was gaining traction amongst Europeans as a way of visiting Iran<sup>65</sup>.



Figure 3.15: ‘Libero Ahmed’ in Esfahan, with a tourist from Finland.  
Photographed by the author, 03/11/12.

Following our meeting in Esfahan, I maintained correspondence with Ahmed back in the UK via e-mail. Our virtual correspondence enabled me to explore his photographic work further, placing it within a broader biographical context. Learning more about his photography-orientated trips inside and outside of Iran led us to discuss, more critically, the sense of global Iranian citizenship he strove to realise through photography and travel.

Ahmed’s definition of ‘Iranianness’ was a fluid cultural marker, which transcended both geographical and temporal fixity. Ahmed was born and grew up in Iran, and many elements of contemporary and traditional Iranian culture infuse his

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<sup>65</sup> Established in 2003, the CouchSurfing website provides a platform for members to arrange to sleep, or ‘surf’, on couches by staying as a guest at a host’s home. Individuals can sign up to act as hosts or travellers. See [www.couchsurfing.org](http://www.couchsurfing.org). (Accessed: 14/04/14).

sense of being in the world. Ahmed explained how before he began travelling, he was firmly entrenched in western ways of life, aesthetics and popular culture, having grown up in a secular, middle-class family in Tehran, with access to global flows through Satellite TV and the Internet. Adopting his own, hybrid form of Euro-Iranianness, Ahmed constructs his own 'Iranianness' within the dominant socio-political order. This includes global facets of other cultures, whose incorporation he felt more comfortable with, even in this imagined, appropriated form, than a purely Iranian one. He saw himself as a global Iranian citizen, but not necessarily an Iranian national subject. This recalls Manoukian's (2012) suggestion that the nation state is not the main source of subject formation in Iran, which, he suggests is more closely linked with aspects of Persian culture, interlaced with aspects of Iranian and European politics and culture, but without aligning fully with either. Ahmed also illustrates what Arghavan (2013) calls the 'cultural bricolage of contemporary Iranian identity, which he defines as a composite picture comprised of local traditions and global styles', and which is particularly seen in contemporary Iranian art (see chapter 8). Ahmed's sense of connection to Iran was through his photography, his travels inside and across the country and the Internet. In these contexts, he gleans a sense of the greater whole of Iran than he experienced in Tehran, develops his sense of 'global Iranian' cosmopolitan identity, and shares these feelings with others, online (see also chapter 5).

### **3.5.2. Iranian photo tour(ism)**

The case of Ahmed described above provided a personal insight into the practice of photography-based domestic tourism, or photo tours. I now turn to discuss aspects of this practice more broadly in order to reveal some of its main characteristics.

Following their desires to document diversity of landscapes, cultures and ethnicities in

Iran, Iranian photobloggers leave their urban dwellings and travel, often by coach, to remote villages and other parts of the country (see Figure 3.16).



Figure 3.16: Photo tour at Behshahr, capital city of Behshahr county in Mazandaran province in northern Iran at the southern coast of the Caspian Sea, June 2011. Photograph by Amir Sadeghi (pictured far left). Also featuring research participant Vahid Rahmanian (standing eleventh from the left).

Photobloggers' documentary photography hopes to expand viewing horizons both for foreigners, as well as for Iranians themselves including those living abroad, and those inside Iran who cannot afford to travel around the vast regions of the country. Central to photobloggers' ability to visually document and communicate what they regard as social and cultural 'truths', are the digital technologies themselves. Without the easy-to-use technology, many photobloggers admitted that they might never have become interested in social documentary photography, nor practically realise their interests by going out and experimenting with their camera phones. Ehsan sums up this sentiment as follows:

Photography, even with mobile phone cameras, can be a really important way of focusing on social issues or a voice of a neglected people. Everyone can now see what life looks like in remote Iranian villages, as well as in the big cities. I

want to help document the vastness of this culture, the culture of where I grew up, and show it to the world.

(Online interview with Ehsan Abbasi, [16/01/13])

Here, Ehsan suggests that digital technologies foster an increased ability for ordinary people to document life in Iran, and for viewers to ‘see’ what Iranian cultural diversity looks like. Vahid similarly explained how:

I think these days photographs are very effective as cultural communication. For example, if I want to communicate the culture of Kurdistan, rather than writing a lengthy article on the Internet – which only a few people can understand or will bother to read – I can show an “essence” of Kurdistan with my photos. When I did that (see

Figure 3.17), I had many extraordinary comments, even from Iranians, telling me that they did not know anything about Kurdistan, that it was so beautiful, that the people look so warm and friendly etc....’

[E-mail correspondence with Vahid Rahmanian, [15/01/13])

In the above explanation, Vahid describes a kind of self-perceived amateur ethnographic’ use of his camera. This usage recalls, albeit unknowingly, early ethnological parlance regarding cultural ‘essences’, or more specifically, the ability on the part of the camera-bearer to ‘capture’ it<sup>66</sup>. This kind of ‘scientific’ colonial photography had created ethnic ‘types’ seen in early photo projects *The People of India* (1868-1875) alluded to earlier in this chapter. Ethnological portraiture also formed an early basis of photography’s role in anthropology (2011), whereby British anthropologist E.B. Tylor (1832-1917) claimed that science of anthropology owes not a little to the art of photography’.<sup>67</sup> In a example, Mead and Bateson (1942) had used photography to try to capture what they called the ‘spirit’ of the Balinese character by compiling an exhaustive catalogue of meticulously captured and displayed photographic ‘documents’ of Balinese cultural customs and practices, particularly pertaining impact of child-rearing practices on the bodily disposition of Balinese society. in different temporal and socio-cultural contexts to these anthropological uses,

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<sup>66</sup> On key debates regarding ‘primitivism’ in anthropology and the category of ‘primitive art’ see Myers (2006).

<sup>67</sup> Tylor (1876), quoted in Pinney (2011):29.

photobloggers are not academic anthropologists, nor do they claim to be long-term academic studies of the cultural groups they photograph. Vahid associates the camera with being able to capture an ‘essence’ of sorts – case of the Kurds of Northern Iran. In

Figure 3.17 below, entitled ‘Kurdish Farmers’, Vahid shows two Kurdish farmers sitting atop a tractor in Iranian Kurdistan in northwest Iran.



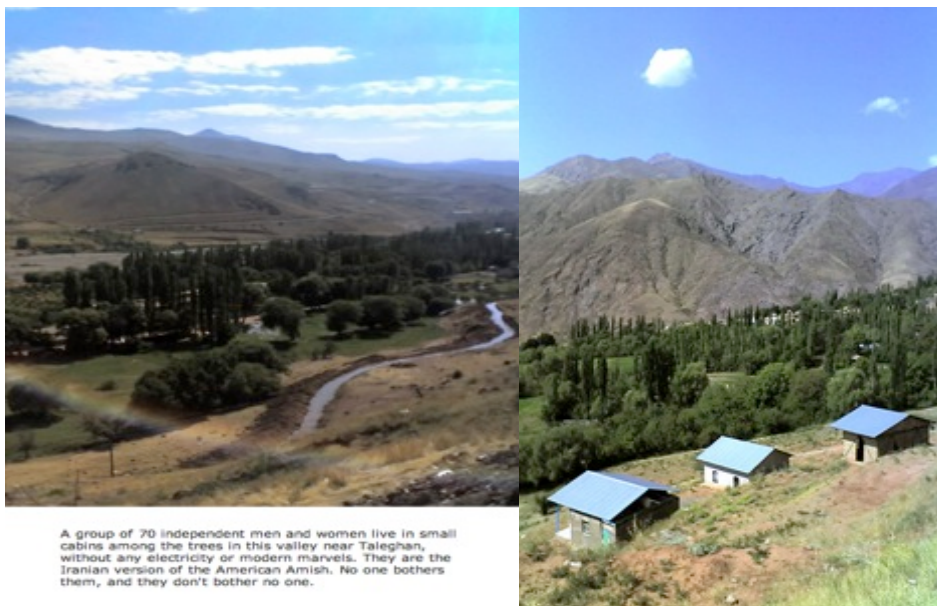
Figure 3.17: ‘Kurdish Farmers’ by Vahid Rahmanian, 2008. (Photograph obtained by the author from the photographer on 15/05/13).

In one sense, the portrait is visually reminiscent of a realist visual preoccupation in nineteenth century European painting, which sought to capture the dignity of traditional labour in rural societies<sup>68</sup>. However, there is also a normative aspect at work in this portrait. The farmers’ smiling faces, their apparent command over their work machinery and tools, set against a diminishing sunset aims to show the ‘essence’ that

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<sup>68</sup> The work of Gustav Courbet (1819-1877) typifies this genre of French Realism.

Vahid perceives sums up the Kurdish people, namely, their friendliness and warmth. This aims to counter dominant newsworthy images of oppressed and/or war-torn Kurds that Vahid feels saturates their international image. In another example, human subjects, about whom a photograph seeks to represent, do not necessarily feature in the photoblogger's photograph. Figure 3.18 shows photographs from the county of Taleghan in the Alborz province of northern Iran. Here, LGOIT represents the people he encountered on this particular bout of photo touring purely by way of their landscape and dwellings. He provides small pockets of cultural information about them in the accompanying captions, describing the small wooden cabins amongst the trees with no electricity or 'modern marvels' with which this group of seventy men and women live, as he had found out, 'quite peacefully'. Photobloggers see their travels to the countryside, deserts and rural villages of Iran as an opportunity to document and/or 'give voice' to the culturally diverse peoples they encounter, speak and spend time with, as Ehsan explained in the quotation cited earlier, they see their role as one which 'focuses on social issues or the voice of a neglected people' even in 'remote Iranian villages'.<sup>69</sup>



<sup>69</sup> Online interview with Ehsan Abbasi (24/08/12).

Figure 3.18: Taleghan, Northern Iran, LGOIT. September 2007. Image source: [http://lifegoesonintehran.com/06\\_September2007.html](http://lifegoesonintehran.com/06_September2007.html). (Retrieved: 09/11/14).

In their journeying through photography (both as physical and metaphorical ‘travel’), photobloggers recall a strikingly similar visual preoccupation with the ‘traditional’, rural and/or marginal societies seen in the visual repertoires of Iranian post-revolutionary art house cinema. In films such as *Gabbeh* (Mohsen Makhmalbaf, 1996), *Takht-e Siāh* (Samira Makhmalbaf, 2000), *Bād mā rā khāhad bord* (Abbas Kiarostami, 1999), and a host of others, Iranian rural lifestyles and stories are presented, celebrated and even self-parodied through notably picturesque use of aesthetics. Tapper (2002: 44) describes this appetite for ‘tradition’ in post-revolutionary Iranian cinema as part of a broader trend in the ‘moralist cinema’ of post-revolutionary Iran, whereby traditional values and conventions characteristic of rural folk – even in the art house films typified by Abbas Kiarostami – are compared favourably with the consumerist ideology of urban areas.<sup>70</sup>

Iranian photo tours also recall other kinds of Iranian middle-class domestic tourist activities similarly involving travel across Iran. Domestic tourism has been identified as a certain alluring trend amongst an increasingly mobile middle-class of Persian-Iranians (Iran’s dominant cultural group) from big cities (Beck and Huang 2006).<sup>71</sup> These particular urbanites, who in Beck and Huang’s study pay trips to the Qashqa’i nomads – Turkic-speaking Shi’i Muslims based in the South-West (and one of Iran’s largest national minorities), visit traditional and rural societies as a means of escaping both the crowded and polluted environments and strict social codes of public

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<sup>70</sup> See also Naficy (2011) and Mottahedeh (2008) on these themes and for further filmic examples.

<sup>71</sup> For further discussion on the theme of ‘native tourists in developing countries’, see Ghimire (2001).

leisure and entertainment exercised by the Islamic Republic in cities and town.<sup>72</sup> Their study suggests that Persian-Iranian middle-class domestic tourists desire to ‘experience a segment of Iran that they had previously only seen on television and in films and photographs’ (Ibid: 309). Rather than simply indicating intrigue in domestic ‘otherness’, they suggest that these Persian-Iranian domestic tourists demonstrate a sense of entitlement to make their visits to rural and tribal cultures based on cultural, socio-economic and ethnic senses of superiority. The kind of contemporary domestic Iranian tourism they describe is not unlike certain strands of western tourism (and certainly in former, colonial-era travel), whereby Euro-American, privileged elites travelled in search of exotic locales to witness and/or capture through photography.

In some sense, Beck and Huang’s analogy of domestic tourists makes a relevant point about Iranian photobloggers, who belong to the same cultural and economic group. Certainly, a ‘right to represent’ the entirety of Iran in their photographic travels is evident in their practices. This can be seen in the variety of images shown throughout this thesis, as well as photographs such as Vahid’s ‘Kurdish Farmers’ discussed above. Neither Vahid, LGOIT, nor any of the photobloggers I met throughout my research expressed any kind of pejorative attitude towards their rural subjects. Unlike the groups of middle-class domestic tourists described by Beck and Huang, the Iranian photobloggers whom I came to know during my research showed sensitivity to local subjects, even to the extent of learning to speak local languages and dialects. At the same time, photobloggers’ photo portraits and the romanticism of rural life they exude nevertheless form a kind of essentialism, whereby their practices can be said to produce a contemporary form of ‘salvage photography’. In its original academic conception, the practice of hunting, retrieving and collecting artefacts from traditional

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<sup>72</sup> Varzi (2006) makes a similar analogy in her study of urban, middle-class secular youth in Tehran, who retreat to spaces outside the city, such as ski resorts to provide relief from the gaze of the state.

societies came to be known as ‘salvage anthropology’.<sup>73</sup> Iranian photobloggers are similarly engaged in acts of retrieving and preserving portraits of traditional ways of life, which they display online in photoblogs. In turn, these form contemporary digital ‘cabinets of curiosities’ for viewers across the world to encounter and, invariably, marvel at.

Demonstrating strikingly ‘anthropological’ interests in traditional societies ‘other’ to their own urban, middle-class, cosmopolitan milieus, photobloggers also appear to demonstrate desires to learn from and empathise with cultural subjects different to themselves. In these ways, Iranian photobloggers can also be compared to the Javanese amateur photographers in Strassler’s (2010) study, who she actually calls ‘amateur anthropologists of a sort’ (Ibid: 63). Their desire for contact across class and ethnic lines beyond their middle-class lives in the urban capital and other big cities recalls the Javanese photographers mentioned above, whose ‘romanticism’ for rural contexts, Strassler suggests, forms a kind of nostalgia for the ‘dream world’ of a pre-modern yesterday. Their concept of stillness (*masih*), an ability to capture Javanese authenticity Strassler explains, equates to a need to leave the bustling, urban metropolis and access a kind of tranquillity lacking in their hectic, modern urban lives. In a similar vein, Iranian popular photographers’ physical travelling to remote areas of Iran forms an extension to their practices of showing ‘authentic’ life as lived in Iran (to the world).

There is also a more pragmatic side to the allure of the countryside and the idylls of rural life demonstrated by Iranian photobloggers. As some of my participants explained to me, photobloggers are acutely aware that producing such images of ‘authentic’, unspoiled or ‘simple’ traditional landscapes and lifestyles in Iran might

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<sup>73</sup> ‘Salvage anthropology’ is a term coined in the 1960s to refer to early twentieth century Euro-American ‘salvage ethnography’, which sought to preserve traditional, ‘exotic’ cultures (such as American Indians) from what were thought to be the fatal changes caused by processes of social and economic development and transformation. See Clifford (1989).

prove commercially profitable outside of Iran, though not all of them pursue these avenues. Nevertheless, nostalgic searches for prize-winning human-interest photographs of third world countries in international photo agencies (as found also in Strassler's study)<sup>74</sup> are a prominent example, whereby as MacDougall (1992:122) puts it in the context of Indian tourist photography, European tourists want to see 'real Indian peasants', without 'being them'. This is akin to an authentic 'brush with Third World hardship', which sustains a sense of knowing the other, whilst Indian tourists on the other hand 'have little interest in such authenticities'. In one sense, a similar search for Iran's 'authentic' aspects characterises photobloggers' travels to regions and visiting Iranian cultures 'other' to their own urban-dwelling contexts. At the same time, photobloggers locate 'Iranian authenticity' in a range of places, beyond the rural or traditional context. As will be shown in chapter 5, this pertains as much to a can of coke or the wearing of jeans in the big cities, to the pastoral nomads of Iran's rural provinces. Physical movement across Iran also plays an important role in their practice, as discussed in this chapter, while a large quantity of time involved in the practice is also spent not moving. As sole managers of their photoblogs, photobloggers spend significant proportions of time editing, uploading, arranging, curating and managing their digital photographs in digital environments. Therefore, both movement and stasis ultimately play important roles in photobloggers' practise of communicating visual information through their photography. As will be shown, in these cases, physical movement becomes secondary to considering movement as concept-metaphor: the ability to epistemologically 'move' Iran beyond its entrenched paradigmatic tropes.

Although in one sense indicative of movement and a broadening of visual/imaginative horizons, photo tours can also be considered in more patriotic terms.

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<sup>74</sup> Interview with Ahmed in Esfahan (02/11/12).

Photobloggers' documenting the various territories and peoples of Iran in these manners suggests a dual desire to 'know', and to *celebrate* one's nation that warrants further reflection here. Photobloggers' normative desires to bring about change to ways of seeing Iran, it seems, cannot be altogether separated from an underlying love of their country that many of my participants, inside and outside of Iran, seemed to share. Many photobloggers literally described their practice as a 'duty' to Iran, namely, to employ their photography as a means of serving the country by representing it in a more discursive light. Nationalism in Iran, as with subjectivity and identity-making, are complex and multifaceted processes, which draw on many intersecting cultural, religious and political elements (as discussed further in chapter 4). Nevertheless, the photo tour described in this chapter appears to be reminiscent of relevant studies of nationalism, insofar as the journeys made by photobloggers are essentially rooted in the specific land and cultures of one particular place. In one sense, what in many ways is the self-referential, 'Iranian' aspect of these photo tours is reminiscent of Anderson's study of the birth of a 'national imagination' through the novel in South East Asia. Anderson showed how this consciousness was formulated by the 'tour d'horizon' provided by the novel, which froze a constructed sociological landscape, whose horizon was 'clearly bounded'. Drawing on Anderson's work in 'Imagined Communities', Freitag (2001) puts photography up front in her analysis of the development of Indian nationalism, as does Strassler (2010) in the Indonesian context. I will return to this idea of photography and nation-building in Iran in the next chapter. It is important to acknowledge here however, how photo tours, dedicated as they are in an almost 'messianic' sense, to capturing and celebrating the geographical and cultural spaces of Iran, combine an 'anti-colonial' sense of a counter discourse (to set the record straight about the country) with

wider patriotic sentiment, without it being altogether clear which sentiment begets which.

At the same time that patriotism is witnessed in photo tours, the specific character of the ‘tour d’horizon’ that many photobloggers desire to offer through their photography is not a purely self-referential view, tied to bounded ideas of the Iranian nation. Iranian photobloggers’ desires to bear witness to Iran through photography extend beyond domestic Iranian photography groups to include diasporic members, as well as members of other cultures altogether. Amir explained how in one instance, he was responsible for hosting groups of foreign photographers in Iran, who came as part of their own photo tours: ‘Around 100 photographers from one or more Chinese photography clubs in Shanghai came to Iran two years ago. I was their photography leader for their visit in and around Tehran. It was a fascinating experience and a good chance to learn more about each other’s cultures’.<sup>75</sup> Such encounters provide instances of cross-cultural exchange and learning, centred on the event of amateur photography and mutual learning, centred on the event of amateur photography (see Figure 3.19 below). This complements the idea I suggest in this thesis overall, that the practice is also a comparative, aesthetic project of learning and communicating about other cultures through photography.

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<sup>75</sup> Online interview with Amir Sadeghi (11/11/14).



Figure 3.19: A group of photographers from a Chinese amateur photography club in Shanghai visit Iran. Photograph by Amir Sadeghi, taken on the outskirts of Tehran in 2012. Used with permission.

In their physical co-presence within a heightened context, or ‘liminal’ space (Turner 1966), popular photographers develop a sense of ‘*communitas*’ (Ibid); a framework of inter-human relations existing beyond any formal structure. They are separated from their norms of modern, middle-class Iranian social life in these tour settings and are re-incorporated (Van Gennep 1977) back in to them, transformed, once the ‘ritual period’ of the tour is over. Photographs produced on Iranian photo tours move beyond what Bourdieu (1990: 36) called (in the context of French domestic tourism) ‘monuments to leisure’. The production and subsequent exhibition of their digital photographs have a notable social basis, pertaining to both the physical, moral and media landscapes in which they are produced. Whilst it may include aspects of leisure, as I will show in subsequent chapters (4-8), their activities and development of their craft is also linked to a wider, normative pursuit of showing Iran to itself and the world. Spending days with each other, either camping in the deserts or residing in lodgings in towns and villages (Figure 3.20), male and female Iranian photographers’ sense of community is

based partially on presence (their being physically co-present with one another), as well as on absence (their virtually connection to a wider imagined viewing public on the Internet). This latter public, though physically absent, is not altogether non-existent to photobloggers, even as they physically isolate themselves from Internet connections in these remote areas in order to take photographs they imagine they will show to global viewers.



Figure 3.20: Photograph by Amir Sadeghi, Maranjab desert, Esfahan province. Used with permission.

The turmoil of the 2009 events led to the imprisonment of photographers, journalists, and ordinary amateur photographers who had documented and disseminated the protests online. Many photobloggers and some of my research participants have spent time in jail in Tehran. This led to a decline in the public activity of photobloggers and their travels across Iran in the direct aftermath of 2009, when almost all photographers I spoke with highlighted the conservative backlash following the election protests as a huge blow to their impetus and desires to carry on taking pictures. Many photographers living in Iran were driven indoors and back online at this time and those living abroad returned to their countries to maintain communication from afar. As I explained earlier

in the chapter (3.2), some fell into depressive states for a few years, where online participation in virtual environments and social networks became more ‘real’ to them than going out into society.<sup>76</sup> In recent years, and following the election of Hassan Rouhani as President in 2013, popular photographic activities are thriving in Iran today as never before.

### **3.6. Summary**

This chapter has presented a brief genealogy of photography’s emergence and development in Iran within shifting technological, social, political and economic contexts. It highlights four main epochs in this vernacular history (1) early royal uses (2) twentieth century Pahlavi modernisation, media-making and nation-building (including the rise of popular photography amongst the middle-classes in the 1950s) (3) social documentary and photojournalism during the revolution and war periods of the 1970s and 80s and the (4) Internet and digital era from the 1990s to the present. This latter period comprises the socio-political and technological context most relevant to this thesis’ study of Iranian popular photography today. I suggest that the social understanding of popular digital practices today should be understood less as ‘new’ and more as part of wider historical trajectories and socio-technological developments. The most notable of these are accounted for in this chapter. This forms part of the overall diachronic ethnographic framework of this thesis regarding transformations in media, visual practices and social change in Iran that I introduced in chapter 1. The chapter allows us to see how photography in Iran, as elsewhere, has always existed within ‘mediascapes’ comprised of power politics, technologies, aesthetics and aspirations, as well as tensions between ‘native’ and foreign photographers’ visual curiosities, all of which are apparent in historical and cotemporary forms of the

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<sup>76</sup> Online interview with a Tehran-based photoblogger (16/06/13).

medium. Overall, I suggest that the combination of the available digital technologies to hand (including their increased capacity for mobility due to geolocative media), combined with broader social-political, economic and personal subjectivities and experiences, also amidst a broader awareness of an established history of social documentary photography in Iran, accounts for a complex ecology of contemporary Iranian photographic practices. As I have shown in this chapter, Photoblogging represents a certain niche within this landscape and a certain historical ‘moment’ of middle-class Iranian visual storytelling in the broader history of vernacular photography in Iran.

## CHAPTER 4. VISUAL HISTORY (I): POST-REVOLUTIONARY VISUAL CULTURE IN IRAN

### 4.1. Introduction

This chapter presents the first of two chapters concerning Iranian visual history, inside and outside of post-revolutionary Iran. These internal and external visual legacies are shown to affect the social memory, lived experience, perceptions and subjectivities expressed by Iranians photobloggers and viewers of their photoblogs. Understanding the impact of this inheritance sheds light on the morally charged and historically aware basis with which many popular Iranian photographers express zeal for their practice. This chapter focuses on the internal visual legacy constructed by the Islamic regime over the past thirty years, whilst the following chapter (5) will consider the external view and propagation of a visual legacy by western media within the international mediascape. Both chapters consider the ongoing contestation and negotiation of these visual legacies in Iranian society and amongst Iranians across the world.

The chapter begins by introducing the status of images and visual representations in the Quran, before looking at how these notions were re-formulated and re-applied by the Islamic regime in the name of post-revolutionary Islamic nation-building. It discusses how images were adopted by the Islamic regime in constructing an Islamic public sphere, highlighting the role played by photography in visually propagating the cult of the Ayatollah Khomeini and the visual representation of martyrdom during the Iran-Iraq war as national and religious ideological construct which had direct social consequences. The official commemoration by the state and its negotiation by social actors is shown to be present in everyday life in Iran and as shown, is played out in digital forms online. The chapter then presents a case study of one photoblogger, Reza, whose photography demonstrates the significance of the

visual legacy discussed. It concludes by discussing the theoretical implications of the photoblog, as popular digital archive, vis-à-vis cultural memory.

## 4.2. Images and Islam

Angels do not enter a house that has either a dog or a picture in it.<sup>77</sup>

In the Islamic tradition, or Hadith, figurative depictions of living creatures, and especially human beings have been interpreted, mostly amongst Sunni sects, as taboo. This aniconism, stemming from the ninth century, is based on the notion realised by the prophet Muhammad, that images, as a non-living beings, have the potential of eliciting idolatry amongst viewers. For certain Sunni groups such as Salafis and Wahhabis, images have been, and continue to be, perceived to have the potential to rival the authority of Allah, leading to *shirk* – the unforgiveable sin of associating with other deities.

However, aniconism, or the opposition of idolatry, has been applied with a profound degree of variety amongst different communities across the Muslim world, and should not be considered any general characteristic of ‘Islamic art’ at large (Flood 2013; Gruber and Haugbolle 2013; Gruber and Shalem 2014). The Shiite Islamic tradition, for instance, has historically been far less strict on the issue of visual representations regarding a range of human and non-human subjects. In Persian art history, images of the Prophet Muhammad have appeared in multiple visual forms from ca. 1300 to 1600 to the present day, while depictions of the Prophet across the Muslim world continue to form part of broader narrative themes that illustrate his life (Gruber 2013; Gruber et al. 2014). These can be found in illustrated epic and romantic poems, as well as in prophetic tales (*qisas al-anbiya*). In contemporary Iran, images of

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<sup>77</sup> Quotation from the Hadith, as seen on: <http://sunnah.com/bukhari/59/128>

Muhammad as a young boy and as an adult prophet are produced as devotional commodities such as postcards, posters, banners, stickers, children's books and carpets (Gruber 2013: 4)<sup>78</sup>. Numerous examples of this flexibility towards visual representations can be seen in the art and material culture of Iranian Shiism (Flaskerud 2010; 2011, Khosronejad 2011). Historically speaking, the human form has been a central component of Persian miniature painting in its heyday between the thirteenth and seventeenth centuries, while historical figures such as the third Imam Hossein continue to play a central role in symbolic processes of religious worship, social and cultural ritual, and political activities in contemporary Iran, as I will discuss throughout this chapter.

### **4.3. Imaging and Imagining in the Islamic Republic (1979-present)**

#### **4.3.1. Founding the 'image regime'**

Varzi (2006) has coined the term the 'image regime' to highlight the role played by images in forming and consolidating an Islamic cultural sphere in post-revolutionary Iran. She argues that 'There is no better example of a nation that is both a discursive construct and an image regime than the Islamic Republic of Iran' (Varzi 2006: 33). Varzi's notion of the image regime actively draws on a 'Foucauldian' paradigm of authoritarian control, which explains how images, and particularly photography, serve as tools of 'governmentality' (Foucault 1991) and state power (Tagg 1988). The image regime is a useful concept when exploring the 'visual economies' (Poole 1997) constructed and contested through images between state and society over the past thirty years in Iran, and which provides a backdrop to photobloggers' contemporary popular

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<sup>78</sup> A notable contemporary example of Iran's continuing depictions of the Prophet can be seen in the recent Iranian film '*Muhammad Rasulullah*' (Muhammad the Messenger of God) (2015), directed by Majid Majidi.

photographic image work within an ‘inter-subjective’ (Berger and Luckman 1966) space of contestation.

Since the early years of the founding of the Islamic Republic of Iran (1979 - present), distinctions between photography and painting in visual representation have been inverted and re-applied as part of the ideological visual work of Islamic nation-building in the post-revolutionary period (Varzi 2006). Such provisions included the purging of social, political and aesthetic remnants of the deposed Shah, involving the systematic eradication of all visual and material markings of western culture (see following chapter 5). Recognising the political potentials of image-production and mass circulation as a mechanism of (totalitarian) control – an idea theoretically raised by Benjamin ([1936] 1972) – the cultural architects of the Islamic public sphere used both painting and photography to visually and ideologically implement the Islamic regime. As I will discuss in this chapter, the original Islamic aversion to painting, as well as the Quranic belief that there is no soul in the image (as it has no ‘live’ presence), became inverted in order for the zeal of post-revolutionary Iranian-Islamic ideology to give images social, political and cultural lives.

Following the Islamic Revolution of 1979, when Islamic clerical revolutionaries led by Ayatollah Khomeini (the founder and spiritual leader of the Islamic Republic) deposed the secular Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi (ruled 1941-1979), images were put to work to produce an Islamic cultural sphere in Iran. Religion was systematically injected into all areas of social and political life after 1979 so that ‘Iranianness’, or what it meant to be Iranian, could be officially dictated in terms of Iranian-Shiite Islamic notions of belonging. Following the revolution Khomeini banned all mystical practices in Iran that lay outside the ideological framework of the state, such as Sufi mystical practices, orders and sheikhs, in favour of strict Islamic

jurisprudence (Varzi 2006). In so doing, as Varzi (2006: 44-75) acknowledges, he moved to oppress public emotion by allowing emotional catharsis only in the external form of the religious body politic. In their analysis of Islamic Revolutionary posters, paintings and photography, Chelkowski and Dabashi (2000) argue that visuality and the image afforded the regime a 'powerful mechanism of persuasion for the self-generating myth of the Islamic Revolution' (Ibid: 3). The type of visual 'myth-making' described by Chelkowski and Dabashi created a powerful precedent, which, as will be shown throughout this thesis, continues to characterise political strategies and visual campaigns pursued by the state in Iran today. In the 'visual world' (Varzi 2006) constructed by the new state, images were acceptable only if they promoted an Islamic lifestyle, celebrated the values of the Islamic republic or the sanctity of the Imam (Chelkowski 1989; Chelkowski et al. 2000; Varzi 2006). State media, photographs, street art, photographs, cartoons, paintings, museum exhibitions and cemeteries were all deployed by the regime to uphold its national imaginary and form a basis through which Iranian identity has been mediated over the past thirty years. Figure 4.1 shows a paradigmatic example of the kind of visual propaganda that was ubiquitous in Iran during the revolutionary period. It is painted in the Iranian 'coffee-house' (*qaveh khāneh*) painting style; a form of popular narrative picture storytelling, which emerged in the Qajar period in Iran (1785-1925) as distinct from court art. It combines European techniques of using oil on canvas with an Iranian visual styling drawn from Persian miniatures. The image shown in Figure 4.1 depicts Mohammad Reza Shah's exile from Iran in 1979 and Ayatollah Khomeini's return from exile in France and Iraq, symbolized by the Eiffel Tower and the holy Shiite *Najaf* shrine in Iraq depicted behind him

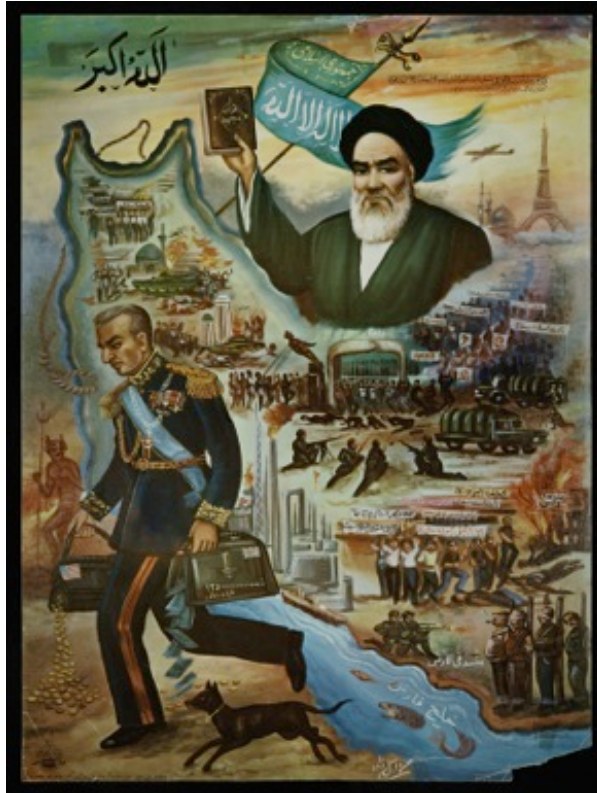


Figure 4.1: The Shah's Exile and Khomeini's Return, 1979, Hasan Isma'ilzadeh, Middle Eastern Posters Collection, Special Collections Research Centre, The University of Chicago Online Library

Here, Khomeini is shown taking up his role as the rightful leader of the Islamic Republic, holding the Quran above the bodies of martyrs of the revolution. The image speaks clearly and confidently to a revolutionary Iranian viewership.

Images and visual motifs drawn from Shiite history and cultural tradition (the branch of Islam followed by 98% of Iranians) were a significant component of the propaganda strategies carried out by the cultural architects of the regime. On a theoretical level, this recalls Anderson's (1983) seminal argument that the emergence of print culture in the late nineteenth century was instrumental in the social formation of nations, through what he calls 'imagined communities', or invisible bonds of belonging which constituted a sense of participation in a national body.

Employing Anderson's theory to a study of photography in India, Freitag (2001) has similarly emphasised the role of images in conferring Indian nationalism. On a cultural

level however, the agency exercised by these images in Iran is rooted in the historical and cultural importance of Shiism in the country's social fabric. In her work on belief and piety in Iranian Shiism, Flasketud (2010) conveys how in Iranian Shiism, an image is perceived as a discursive field with which viewers can engage mentally and emotionally with the representation. Such processes, according to Flasketud, 'can transform emotions and generate cultic behavior...[where] images...may serve to endorse religious dogma' (Ibid: 253-4). An image's ability to facilitate a oneness with God in Shiite Islam was consciously harnessed by the Islamic Republic to projects of national self-consolidation. Crucial to securing this devotion along Shiite-political lines were three inter-related factors, which are discussed in turn below: (i) the linking of spiritual devotion with the cult of Khomeini (ii) the use of the seventh century Battle of Karbala as a plausibility paradigm through which Iranian society was envisaged and (iii) the cult of martyrdom propagated during the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988) to secure sovereignty through crisis management and mass trauma. All three aspects were pursued visually as part of the regime's ideological campaign to render an all Islamic-Iranian subject through the building of what Taussig (1992) terms the 'nervous system' of the modern nation state; that which has become an entity unto itself.

#### **4.3.2. The visual cult of Khomeini**

Khomeini's image became the icon of the Iranian revolution of 1979 and the symbolic figurehead of its subsequently constructed image regime. As its 'founding father', he embodied the idea of the nation and in so doing, created a powerful paternalistic paradigm by which love and devotion were expressed to Iran, Shiite Islam and himself synonymously (Chelkowski 1989: 10). Photography was an important means of constructing this three-fold concept of devotion. During the early years (1979-1989) when the Islamic public sphere was first being constructed, Khomeini was the only

living person to be deemed ‘worthy’ of official representation through photographic media (Varzi 2006:166) This marked a notable shift in Iranian visual culture, since prior to this, public images, from billboards to portraits of saints, had formerly been almost exclusively painted.

During the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988), printed photographs of Khomeini accompanied soldiers to the battlefields. In this context, they served as a kind of ‘photo-icon’ (Harris 2001:140), where, photographs are used to ‘invoke the authority of an exceptional individual’. The status of the photo-icon is conferred by the installment of auratic presence in the mechanically reproduced photographic object, which, treated like a ‘highly life-like being’, supersedes the physical absence of the individual (Ibid: 140). Photo-icons of Khomeini represented a site of spiritual and political worship for young martyrs. Fighting for Iran against Saddam Hussein’s Iraqi forces, Iranian soldiers would carry and pin photographs of Khomeini on to their uniforms. Photographs of the all-seeing leader would also accompany them in death and would be affixed to the graves of the martyred as the upmost sign of national honour. Figure 4.2 demonstrates the ideas discussed so far, namely how Shiite concepts of devotion and martyrdom went hand in hand with Khomeini’s cult of personality. It shows a painted wall mural in Tehran in 2007, depicting a martyr holding the photographic portrait of Khomeini attached to his rifle. The soldier wears a headband, which reads ‘O, the shining moon of the tribe of *Hashim!*’ This refers to the martyrdom of the third Imam Hossein, a central, cult figure in Shiite history. A field of tulips (a visual motif used in Islamic wall murals to denote martyrdom) can be seen along with the shrine of Karbala, the battle field in which Imam Hossein was martyred in the seventh century, in the background. The image is an example of the aforementioned three-fold devotional paradigm consisting of Shiite, national Iranian

and Khomeini-centred symbolic worship, all of which visually came together under the auspices of the ‘image regime’.



Figure 4.2: Tehran wall mural, 2007, depicting a martyr of the Iran - Iraq war.  
Photographer: Fotini Christia<sup>79</sup>

Khomeini’s photographic representation only propagated his cult-like status, bringing it to the masses. Khomeini’s gaze was (and still is) seen everywhere in Iran, most notably on large painted wall murals which adorn many streets and public spaces in the country’s major cities, as shown in Figure 4.3 and Figure 4.4 below.

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<sup>79</sup> [http://dev.wcfia.harvard.edu/misc/publications/centerpiece/win07\\_vol21\\_no1/feature\\_christia.html](http://dev.wcfia.harvard.edu/misc/publications/centerpiece/win07_vol21_no1/feature_christia.html)



Figure 4.3: Painted wall mural of Khomeini, Tehran 2013, from photoblog ‘grace the globe’: <https://gracetheglobe.wordpress.com/tag/south-tehran/> (Accessed: 14/04/14).



Figure 4.4: Khomeini wall mural, Mashhad, Khorasan-e Razavi province, 2007, from photoblog ‘Eurasiaoverland’: <http://eurasiaoverland.wordpress.com/2007/12/09/6i/> (Accessed: 14/04/14).

#### 4.3.3. Iran-Iraq war: murals, martyrdom, and nation-building

No study of post-revolutionary Iranian visual culture is arguably complete without considering the unprecedented social and cultural impact of the Iran-Iraq war (1980 - 1988). Just a few months after the Islamic revolution, Iraqi forces, led by Saddam Hussein, attacked Iran in September 1980. Known in Iran as the ‘Sacred Defense’ (*defa’-e moqaddas*), as well as ‘the imposed war’ (*jang-e tahmili*) the war with Iraq

was the largest mobilisation ever of the Iranian population (even more so than the revolution) and has been estimated to have caused between half a million and one and a half million deaths in total<sup>80</sup>. The category most affected were young men between the age of 18 and 30. During this period, Iranian graphic artists, muralists and photographers sought to mobilise the nation for the defence of Iran. The period is understood as a striking phase in Iranian social and visual history, as Balaghi and Gumpert (2002:135) have argued: ‘Never in the history of propaganda have the graphic arts systematically played such an important role as they did in Iran in the years 1980-1988’. As I will show in this chapter and throughout this thesis, this particular period of visual history bears direct relevance to understanding aspects of Iranian visual culture and lived experience today, seen in photoblogs.

Martyrdom had already been utilised as a mobilising tool during the revolution. However, during the war with Iraq, it became systematically institutionalised. Considered the utmost sign of national pride, martyrs were publically venerated and families of martyrs were financially and socially compensated. A range of ideological, literal, symbolic and allegorical images were drawn from Iranian Shiite history in order to propagate a cult of martyrdom based on vistas of victimisation: Iran was ostensibly not the aggressor and was therefore victimised by Iraq. This required a certain defence and heroism carried out as a ‘sacred’ duty by Iran’s faithful martyrs. Self-annihilation (*bi-khodi*)<sup>81</sup> and cultic behaviour became infused in everything from war songs and chants to the very notion of the ‘glorious’ or ‘beautiful death’ (Varzi 2006:45-75). These aspects came to establish the symbolic atmosphere and semiotic conditions in

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<sup>80</sup> The causes of the war are still largely debated, though scholars generally agree that borderland disputes were a major point of contestation between the two neighbouring countries. See Potter and Sick (2006).

<sup>81</sup> I employ the term *bi-khodi* here, a Persian term literally meaning ‘meaninglessness’, in line with Varzi’s (2006) application. She uses it as a general term to reference both Sufi ideas about self-annihilation (the annihilation of the material ego) and to revolutionary notions of *shāhādat*, or martyrdom (involving physical death).

which a new social discourse of death became ideologically and powerfully linked to devotion and governmentality<sup>82</sup>. In this ideological conception of political martyrdom (and not just a purely mystical notion of martyrdom as a spiritual desire for bodily transcendence), the ideal state of being for a young male Iranian citizen was to die for the nation, conceived of and publically celebrated by the state as the utmost sign of devotion. Assessing the social significance of martyrdom during the war with Iraq, Varzi (2006: 26) suggests that ‘the idea of martyrdom came to represent and conflate the ultimate union of citizen and nation, lover and beloved, and servant of God.’ In effect, this ideological manipulation of Godly devotion served the protection of the state and the early establishment of a bounded society conservative factions of the regime try to maintain today. Members of the Iranian *Basij* today (Iran’s revolutionary paramilitary guard, comprised of young and lower-middle and working class males ideologically committed to the state, and who had fought in the war) interviewed as part of Varzi’s historical ethnography, spoke of the fact that they believed ‘the war was not about getting Iraq, but about becoming closer to God’ (Ibid: 45). Godly and national devotion thus came to characterise much of the way in which devotion framed the state’s control from the outset. Martyrdom therefore constituted a prominent visual theme of the state’s media output. State television, documentary and fiction films and photography exhibitions all worked together in Iran to ‘create a literal and metaphorical state of martyrdom’ (Varzi 2006: 19).

Understanding why martyrdom became such an appropriate and effective tool for consolidating the regime lies in a deeper appreciation of Shiite history and its specific forms of mysticism. Martyrdom is a strong motif in Shiism, stemming from two historical events. The first pertains to the murder of Ali, the son-in-law of the

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<sup>82</sup> Foucault (1991) defines ‘governmentality’ as the ‘art of government’, or, the processes by which the state renders the population governable.

prophet Mohammed, whom the *shi'at 'Ali* (partisans of Ali) believed to be the rightful successor to Mohammed since he was *ahl-e beyt* (part of the family). Before long, Ali was murdered by opposing Sunni factions and Yazid became the Sunni Caliph.

Following Ali's murder, the followers of Ali, known as the Shiites, encouraged Ali's son, Hossein to go to Kufa (in modern-day Iraq) and take power. On his way to Kufa, Hossein was martyred at the battle of Karbala in 680 AD by Yazid's forces under the Sunni military commander, Shemr. Hossein's death marks the second major historical moment in Shiite history.

Anthropological and historical literature has acknowledged how these two events installed a collective memory of persecution and victimisation, which continue to shape the profoundly social ways in which both Ali and Hossein continue to be commemorated in present-day rituals across the Shiite Muslim world (Flaskerud 2010; Khosronejad 2011). During the mourning month of Muharram (the first day of the Islamic calendar), Shiite men whip themselves with heavy chains, cut their foreheads open and beat their chests in order to enact the physical suffering of Imam Hossein at the battle of Karbala. This comes to a head on the tenth day, known as the day of 'Ashura (day of blood) marking the day of Hossein's martyrdom, and in most Shiite communities today, is a public holiday. In other instances, Ta'zieh (known as the 'passion play') is performed. Male performers re-enact the events at Karbala and public weeping amongst female members of the audience is a part of the performance of the social ritual of mourning. At other points throughout the year, ceremonies known as 'Rowzehs' take place, where the story of Hossein's life is told, songs are sung, and wailing again characterises the ritual process of memorialisation through mourning. Such events create socially acceptable places and public theatres of public

mourning, which conjure and maintain Shiite notions of victimisation at the hands of the Sunnis.

An important visual practice in these Shiite devotional practices has been identified in votive images (Flaskerud 2011). Votive images in Iranian Shiism, according to Flaskerud can be understood as ‘pseudo-portraits’, insofar as they share visual characteristics of the portraiture genre. They depict visual themes such as holy personages, narrative images, representations of holy places and portraits of the living or deceased members of a local community. In some cases, they may take the form of banners depicting visual references to the battle of Karbala on a black background. Incorporated into Shiite ritual performance, they are displayed and hung in ritual assembly halls, such as the courtyards of family homes, amidst public shrines and in street processions during Muharram. Votive images ultimately constitute a social means of giving thanks and invoking favour amongst Shiite believers in Iran (Ibid: 161). Iranian Shiism therefore celebrates ‘the beautiful death’ of Hossein in visual and deeply socialised ritual forms. This realisation has been theoretically understood by scholars such as Fischer (2003) as the ‘Karbala Paradigm’: another relevant background of Iran’s social fabric.

#### **4.3.4. The ‘Karbala paradigm’**

The Karbala paradigm is a notion conceived of amongst Shiite communities, which acknowledges the distinctive place of Shiite historical tradition – including most notably the martyrdom of Imam Hossein at the battle of Karbala – in social and cultural life. In the context of post-revolutionary Iran, the Karbala paradigm created a social-semiotic framework in which the image of the war with Iraq throughout the 1980s could be symbolically connected with the ancient battle of Karbala (a notion heightened by the symbolism of the historical location of Karbala in modern day Iraq).

The war was suitably packaged as a historic battle and holy war, or *Jihad*, in which a victimised Shiite community would (again) sacredly defend against the perceived infidels of the contemporary period (Iraq and Saddam Hussein). In effect, the Karbala paradigm pragmatically aimed to consolidate the newly formed Islamic regime in Iran. It sought to consolidate a bounded, inwards-looking society from within by turning attention outwards on to a contemporary external enemy (Iraq). Shiite imagery was therefore consciously invoked from the outset of the war to implement Islamic ideology.

The presence of this iconography continues in the contemporary period in the state's public efforts to commemorate the war. As scholars have concurred, it was not just the war's eight year period, but its ongoing systematic memorialisation and commemoration over the past few decades since its end, that continues to constitute a certain spiritual zeal within the Islamic Republic. The Martyrs' Foundation (Bonyād-e Shahid), a para-statal organization created in 1980 by Khomeini with confiscated assets and properties of the Shah, is a main source of memory making along these lines. As Gruber (Ibid: 71) has shown, the organisation is an 'economic powerhouse' with several hundred companies active in various sectors of the Iranian economy. It has been (and still is) dedicated solely to the commemoration of martyrs in Iran and their veneration and visual representation in society (Fromanger 2012; Gruber 2012). The Martyrs' Foundation's activities have included overseeing the changing of existing, pre-revolutionary street names to those of young martyrs, displaying photographic portraits of martyrs and personal belongings such as audio cassettes, clothing, military plaques, prayer carpets, artistic works and souvenirs from Mecca at gravesites, and funding public photography exhibitions at the country's various museums for martyrs, such as the Central Martyrs' Museum (Muzeh-ye Shohadā) in

Tehran (Fromanger: 50). Built in 1980, this museum has been the largest cultural repository in Iran displaying personal items and art relating to individuals who died during the Revolution and War (Gruber 2012). More recently, it has been eclipsed by the opening of The Holy Defense Museum in Tehran in 2012. The architectural expansiveness, technical proficiency and financial wealth of this second museum render it a prototypical site of contemporary Iranian national cultural memory (shown and discussed later in Figure 4.8).

#### **4.3.5. Visual commemoration and public memorialization**

Memorialisation as a social process is often connected to material forms and visual representation. In his study of war memorials, Mayo (1988:75) has suggested that it is the ‘social and physical arrangement of space and artifacts’ that keeps alive social memory. Huyssen (2003:7) has also placed emphasis on the ‘objects and practices of the present’ such as cities, architecture and monuments which keep the past as present in what he calls the ‘memory archive’. Scholars of the Iranian ‘Sacred Defence’ have equally shown how visual representations and material culture have been central to the Iranian state’s commemorative process, conferring its ability to keep the social memory of the war alive (Flaskerud 2012; Fromanger 2012; Gruber 2012; Khosronejad 2012). Particular emphasis has been placed on public murals of martyrs of the war (Marzolph 2003; Gruber 2008; Karimi 2008; Gruber 2013). These can be explored a little further here, since they will be shown to relate to photoblogging.

Present since the 1980s, public murals can be seen adorning many streets in Iran’s major cities in places where they receive maximum exposure. They provide some of the most visible examples of the visual strategies by which the state seeks to habitually inculcate its ideology in everyday life in Iran, as a wealth of scholarly literature, travel writing and photoblogging has acknowledged. Figure 4.5 below shows

one such public wall mural depicting the faces of thirteen martyrs seen on a wall in Mashhad in 2012.



Figure 4.5: Iran-Iraq war mural, Mashhad, Iran, 2012, from travel blog ‘CouchSurfing Iran’: <http://couchsurfingiran.blogspot.co.uk>. (Accessed: 14/04/14).

In the mid-1980s and around halfway through the war, the Artistic and Cultural Bureau of the Office of Propaganda housed at the central seminary in Qom (a city 78 miles southwest of Tehran, and centre of religious teaching), published a collection of what they considered to be exemplary war murals, along with a clear set of guidelines for aspiring muralists:

Under all circumstances the effectiveness of the revolutionary mural must be kept clearly in mind. Vague, indirect and superfluous paintings should be avoided at all costs. What is significant is to consider what a passer-by can take away in his memory and mind. The artist must study religious texts as seriously as he examines the techniques of other artists. Murals with a theme or a scene are preferable to portraits with no specific message... the location of the murals must be selected

carefully so that passersby can clearly see the complete picture. But the ultimate objective should be brevity of message, deliberate and emphatic brush strokes, clear-cut shapes and brilliant colors. (Chelkowski et al. 2000: 291)

These guidelines convey the sheer importance placed on murals by the state as a visual propaganda medium. Emphasis is placed on the visual communication of ‘specific messages’, which is linked to the state’s perceived ability to affect what they describe as the ‘memory and mind’ of the people. Painted and graphically designed in a manner recalling Soviet-style socialist realism (Chelkowski et al. 2000; Varzi 2006); these murals exist as a half-way form of representation between photography and painting (see also chapter 3 on the relationship between photography and painting in Iran). Individually hand painted, they are intended to stand alone as individual works of art, as well as to be seen publically, to indoctrinate and to endure. They were consciously not mass-produced in a mechanical fashion as with the mass-produced photograph, but acquire their status as art, reflecting Benjamin’s ([1936] 1972:14) notion that the ‘cultic value’ in art works is linked to its ‘display value’. Painted in a realist manner and directly from photographs, these murals depict martyrs’ faces, with their real names in order to propagate the cult of the individual and to personalise the representation as a ‘true’ likeness. This reflects a broader official visual policy, whereby every piece of visual material culture in the Islamic Republic produced graphically, from murals to postage stamps and currency, was instructed to be based on the original photograph of the martyr (Chelkowski 1989: 10). In this sense, photography and martyrdom went hand in hand in war-era Iran, as it continues to do today, reflecting what is known in Iran to be a ‘culture of martyrdom’ (*farhang-e shahādat*) in Iran.

Photography plays an important role in maintaining this specific strand of official Iranian culture. At cemeteries, such as the Behesht-e Zahrā Cemetery in Tehran (the largest in Iran), which hosts many of the victims of the Iran-Iraq war, martyrs are often demarcated by the presence of a photograph, which comes to symbolise his status and self-sacrifice for the nation<sup>83</sup>. Figure 4.6 shows a photograph taken by one photoblogger, Reza (introduced below) of such photo-portraits at Behesht-e Zahrā.



Cemeteries full of war martyrs dot the urban fabric, and a walk through any of these reveals the distressingly young ages of children who volunteered for the front full of youthful zeal to defend their homes and fellow Iranians under attack in the border regions. The child below was only 14 years old when he died on the front.

Figure 4.6: Image: Behesht-e Zahrā cemetery, Tehran 24/03/11. Photography by Reza. Caption provided by the photographer.

Usually, photo-portraits are donated by the families of martyrs following requests from public organisations such as the aforementioned Martyrs' Foundation. They take the form of ID photos, representing the martyr during his lifetime, either as an ordinary civilian or at the front. The photographs are taken from the shoulders up, are in black

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<sup>83</sup> The practice of placing martyrs' photographs on tombstones has become widespread in Iran since the late 1970s. It visually references the veneration of martyred Shiite saints through icons (Flaskerud 2012).

and white and almost always depict the individual as a youth, which corresponds to the reality of the war's main demographic; of young men between the ages of 18 and 30 (Fromanger 2012: 50).

In her study of graveside photo-portraits in Iran, Flaskerud (2012) argues that such objects are culturally and historically located in the visual culture of Shiite Iran. Here, the photographic image represents the re-positing of 'meta-historical truths' about the Imam Hossein and the battle of Karbala (discussed in 1.3). Glass booth display cabinets are attached to each grave, along with an electric light that lights up the photographed faces of the deceased at night. This preserves a sense of their visual presence in contemporary Iranian public life and social memory. Family members often place fresh flowers and other personal material cultural objects, known in Persian as *asar* (referring to both remnants and handicrafts) inside the glass cases as part of their personal rituals of memorialisation.

In one sense, martyrs' photo-portraits can be said to invoke what Benjamin ([1936] 1972: 219) earlier called a 'cult of remembrance of loved ones, absent or dead'. Sontag (1977) was to later echo these contentions in her statement that 'all photographs are *momento mori*', whilst for Barthes' (1981), the photograph is the ultimate document or 'mark' of 'what has ceased to be' and which he suggests is the 'vertigo of time defeated' (Ibid: 183). Graveside photographs of martyrs can in this sense be considered a kind of 'photo icon' (Harris 2001), denoting the process through which photographic objects come to stand for the living body of the person and install an sense of auratic presence. However, there is also a striking sense of present reality at work in the photographs, which is heavily rooted in both the wider, offline social and political context of commemoration in contemporary Iranian visual culture, as well as in the online, digital spaces of public mourning and commemoration. The social

activity witnessed in these respective visual cultural arenas for keeping the memory of the war alive, arguably moves these images beyond (representing) death, towards bearing witness to the present. As I will demonstrate below, the offline process of extending the presence of the dead martyr through the material photograph exhibited at gravesides is something that can be directly brought to bear on digital photography and witnessed in the practice (and social act) of photoblogging online.

#### **4.3.6. The ‘image regime’ goes online**

Scholarship on the visual and material culture of martyrdom in the Islamic Republic of Iran has focused on either the offline social context of the public sphere, or on film-based visual mediums, such as documentary and fiction films and photographs, and the negotiation of these in everyday life (Tapper 2002; Moallem 2005; Varzi 2006; Khosronejad 2012). More recently, attention has begun to be paid to the digital proliferation of these processes in online venues, and to the various forms of engagement with these discourses within the Iranian digital landscape. Akhavan’s (2013) study of the ‘Iranian Internet’ presents one of the first scholarly investigations of the Iranian socio-cultural dynamics of digital-visual culture played out on online. In her book chapter entitled ‘Digitized War: Reconstructing a Conflict Online’, Akhavan investigates the state’s increasing move towards online digital platforms for propaganda purposes. Her research shows how contemporary digital platforms and official state-sponsored websites provide a contemporary outlet for conservative factions within the government to continue to propagate official narratives of the war online. An example she gives is [www.aviny.com](http://www.aviny.com): a website dedicated to the memory of eminent Iranian photographer and documentary-filmmaker of the war, Morteza Avini (1947-1993) hosted by the Aviny Institute in Tehran. The Aviny Institute is part of a number of government organisations taking to the online context to promote

‘Sacred Defence’ culture and secure its continued presence in public memory in the twenty-first century. Other examples provided by Akhavan include ‘The Secretariat for the Coordination and Oversight of the Promotion of the Culture of Sacrifice and Martyrdom’: a website which has been online since 2003 (Ibid: 65). As quoted in the ‘About’ section on the website, it is aimed at ‘upholding the memory of martyrs and celebrating those who sacrificed for the Sacred Defence, providing cultural-artistic facilities for the honoured families of martyrs and those who have sacrificed’.<sup>84</sup> The site’s primary function is to highlight news and current events that honour or support war veterans and martyrs<sup>85</sup>. The Holy Defense Museum in Tehran’s website (<http://en.iranhdm.ir>) I discovered through my own digital-ethnographic research, and it is another salient example of digital forms of Sacred Defence culture. Figure 4.7 shows how the website is digitally structured to reflect three of its central tenets; namely, the cult of the spiritual leaders (Khomeini and Khamenei), the veneration of martyrs and the implementation of Islamic, Iranian national ideology. Such sites offer new virtual spaces for Iranian state cultural production. These efforts maintain aspects of an ideological legacy for a new generation growing up with no direct lived experience of the war itself and provide a contemporary medium for further consolidating national visions of identity and culture. Sites such as these convey an important aspect of this thesis’ overall empirical findings: that Iranian new media engagement ought not be regarded in a purely ‘ground up’, socially and politically liberal, or democratic fashion, nor exclusively as a tool of popular resistance, since digital platforms and mediums are increasingly being used as an extension of state power.

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<sup>84</sup> *Darbāreh-ye Mā* (‘About us’), March 21, 2009, *Farhang-e Eisar*, [www.farhangeisar.com/1388-08-18-16-21-24.html](http://www.farhangeisar.com/1388-08-18-16-21-24.html) cited in Akhavan, N (2013) p.65.

<sup>85</sup> For further examples of government websites centred on the commemoration of the war on the ‘Iranian Internet’ see Akhavan, N (2013). Pp. 64-82.

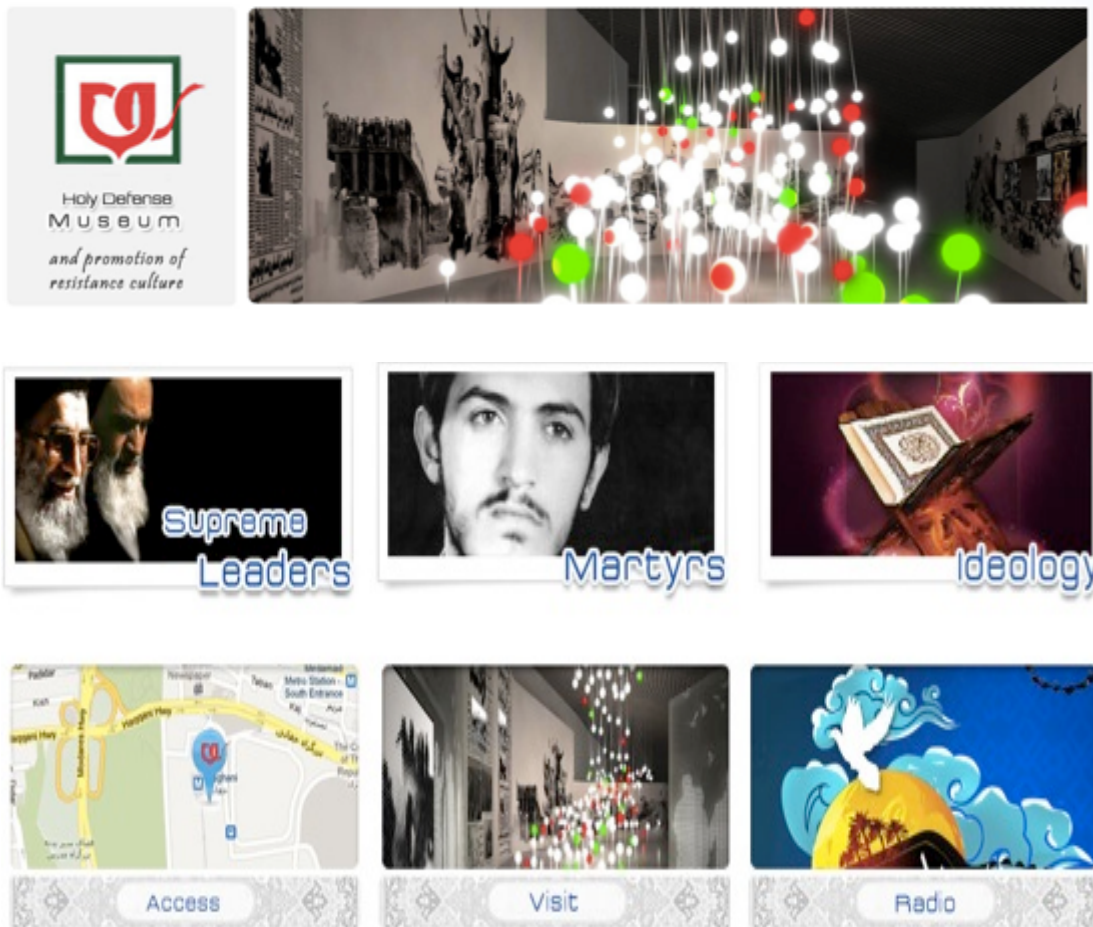


Figure 4.7: Screen shot taken (of the available English option version of the webpage otherwise in Persian) from Holy Defense Museum Tehran’s website’s home page: <http://en.iranhdm.ir> (Accessed: 04/04/14).

It is important to appreciate here therefore, how Photobloggers – of the secular, ‘globalised’ kind that makes up the main case studies of this study – share their online ‘cultural space’ on the Internet with other groups in Iranian society, wherein a range of social actors review and reformulate a range of visual and political narratives.

#### 4.4. Remix(ing) visual culture: contesting visual history on- and offline

Akhavan’s study highlights how online digitised material, particularly audiovisual content, is open to broad, transnational communities of interpretation. As with any non-digital form of ideological narrative, digital-visual discourse can be propagated

and disseminated as much as it is also challenged, appropriated and reformulated. Her work charts hundreds of Iranian blogs created by individuals and social groups that are solely devoted to the war<sup>86</sup>. Content regarding the war shown on these sites naturally provokes mixed responses amongst various viewers who post comments. On one level, patriotic admiration is professed for soldiers, constituting a digital form of veneration of martyrs, amongst Iranians and even some Americans. Transnational Iranian solidarity is also elicited by these discourses, where sharing in a sense of horror of the war, for some, effectively attends to a desire for Iranian national imagined community building. Iraqis also occasionally participate in these discussions, lamenting the war in support of Iranian efforts to depict it for the horror that it was. In these cases, the online space provides a discursive arena in which official narratives of the war are propagated and contested.

However, this does not necessarily constitute resistance to the Islamic regime *per se*. Individual blogs and websites focused around themes of the war do not just reproduce official narratives. Individuals also use these platforms for personal processes of commemoration. Here, practical social issues concerning its aftermath are the focus, such as social, physical and mental health care for traumatised veterans, which the government has failed to sufficiently provide for. These issues find articulation in blogs, particularly amongst those who experienced the war first hand, but also for subsequent generations faced only with mediated legacies of it. These kinds of online spaces convey the development of a nascent informal economy of cotemporary digital forms of memorialization running alongside, and/or independent from official processes and practices.

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<sup>86</sup> One of the main examples given by Akhavan of war-orientated blogs is the group blog 'Veblog-e Omoomi Ettela Resani Defā'-e Moqaddas'. The site provides information on the Sacred Defence, along with links to videos and digital films available for download. (Ibid: 68).

#### 4.4.1. Engaging visual history in photoblogging

Though they may not have lived through the Iranian revolution or the war with Iraq, Iranian photobloggers in their mid to late twenties and early thirties operate within its visible visual legacy. In line with their general ethos of exposing ‘realities’ of life in Iran, various aspects of this visual climate in Iran naturally form part of their visual palette. Photobloggers who actively explore this visual history in their work interrogate the imagery of the past by using different visual strategies. In one example shown in Figure 4.8 below, LGOIT (introduced in chapter 1) shows a photograph taken in June 2010 of the (then upcoming) aforementioned Museum of the Holy Defense being built in Tehran (2004-2012).

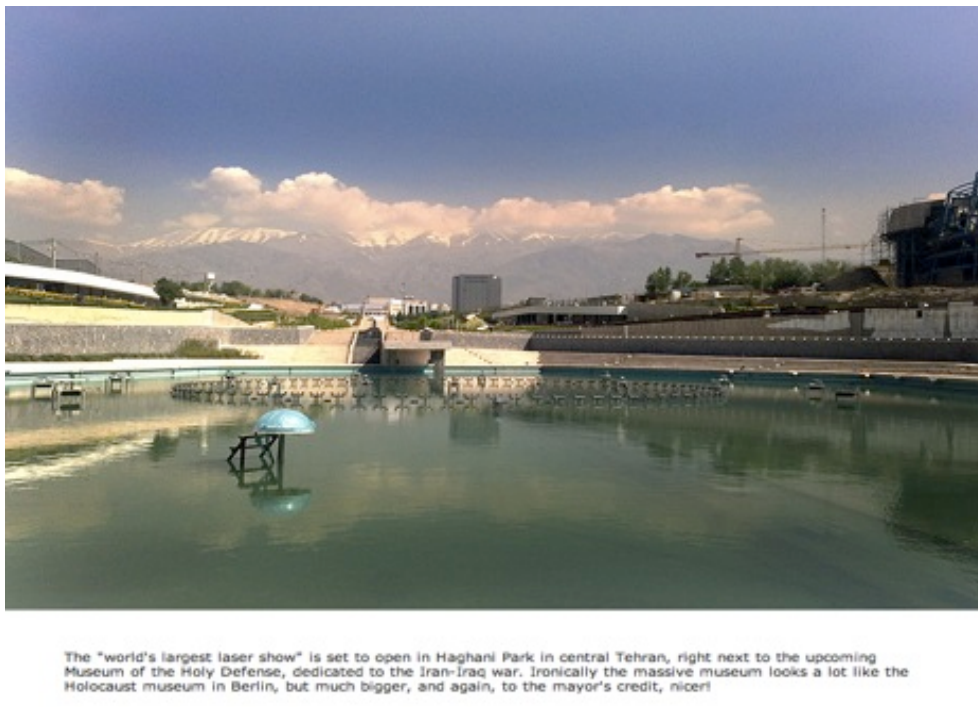


Figure 4.8: Constructing the Museum of the Holy Defense, LGOIT June 2010 Archive ([http://lifegoesonintehran.com/37\\_June\\_2010.html](http://lifegoesonintehran.com/37_June_2010.html))

LGOIT presents the museum as a visual testament to a certain social reality in which commemorating the war in Iran is commonplace. In his usual fashion, LGOIT provides

a descriptive caption of what the building is (a monument dedicated to the war) and where it is located (in central Tehran and next to Haghani Park), at the same time noting its ‘massive’ scale. LGOIT likens it – and somewhat ironically, given the mutually hostile relationship between conservative factions of the Iranian government and the state of Israel – to the Holocaust museum in Berlin as another kind of commemorative monument dedicated to cultural memory.

Another example of photobloggers’ engagements with existing aspects of Iran’s visual social history can be seen in the work of one urban male photoblogger from Tehran, Reza. Like most photobloggers, Reza is generally preoccupied with sharing the view ‘from below’, or ‘from the streets’. Reza has two albums specifically concerning the theme of martyrdom in Iran created in 2011: ‘Parked among the Martyrs’ (20/02/11) and ‘The Politics of Resistance in Tehran’s Graffiti’ (24/03/11) which show photographs he has taken of public commemoration of the war by the state. In Figure 4.9, Reza shows a photograph of a mirror plaque depicting the face of a martyr attached to a lamppost on a street corner, on Madreseh Alley in Tehran, captured in March 2011. Reza’s caption informs the viewer that the image is typical of martyrdom’s generally visible presence in Iran today. Alluding to wider indexical information beyond the image, he explains how the street and nearby square were re-named by the state just after the war, as was a common practice amongst Islamic urban planners. As Reza describes, the image shows how street signs in post-revolutionary Iran include the word martyr (*shahid*) in red, boldly standing out on a typically blue and white sign. Here, the context provided by the photoblogger’s caption is crucial for the foreign or Iranian viewer abroad, potentially less familiar with the extent to which commemoration is a daily, social experience in Iran. As Reza explains in the album’s description, it is a place ‘infused with politics’.

Tehran is a city infused with politics. Every other street is named after a martyr of the Iran-Iraq war, and the most recent street signs include the word "martyr" in red ink on plaques otherwise uniformly blue and white. The sign below depicts an image of the martyr who gave his name to a square near the depicted alley.



Figure 4.9: Reza, 'The Politics of Resistance in Tehran's Graffiti' photoblog archive, 24/03/11.

By framing the image in this manner, Reza's personally authored photograph invites social reflection amongst transnational viewers, who are encouraged to think about how martyrdom is a common feature of a politicised public sphere in Iran. In this capacity, the image is framed and transformed from its primarily commemorative function as intended by the state.

In Figure 4.10, Reza further captures martyrdom's literally towering, everyday presence in Iranian public space. His photograph shows a mural in a car park, depicting a martyr sitting in a tulip field; the iconic symbol of martyrdom during the Iran-Iraq war. Working in a similar function as the mirror seen in Figure 4.9, its commonplace setting intends to symbolically remind Iranians as they routinely go about their daily shopping, of the theme of self-sacrifice (*bi-khodi*), which socially and politically characterises the nation from 'top down'. From his personal experience of seeing these aspects of public visual culture in Iran, Reza explains to his online viewers how such

images are a common feature of the Iranian cityscape and specifically, that many Iranian apartment buildings have been used for wall murals, designed and funded by the Martyrs' Foundation (Bonyād-e Shahid) mentioned in 1.3 above.



A parking lot for a grocery store in Ekhtiyarieh, Tehran presided over by a colorful commemoration of the sort common on Iranian apartment buildings of a martyr killed in the Iran-Iraq War.

Although murals of war martyrs and other revolutionary themes have become less common in recent years, overtaken by Escher-style paintings and natural themes, a few pop up here and there in public art campaigns.

[iran tehran mural public art art war](#)

*This article has been viewed 7238 times in the last 3 years*

Figure 4.10: Image: Reza, 'Parked among the Martyrs' 20/02/11, Caption: by the author of the image

At the same time, Reza's caption informs the viewer that such revolutionary themes, are perceptibly 'less common' today than in recent years. His observations suggest what I also found to be the subtle changes occurring in the government's policies to urban visual culture following the election of President Rouhani in 2013, and

particularly during the writing up of this thesis (2014-2015), amidst the talk of a nuclear deal between Iran and the west.<sup>87</sup>

In another example from October 2007, LGOIT shows a banner seen in an unidentified street in Tehran (Figure 4.11).



This banner asks "what would have happened if we didn't stand up?" During the week of "Holy Defense," war banners commemorate the 27th anniversary of the Iran-Iraq war. It's called Holy Defense because they rightfully believe that the war was imposed, when Saddam invaded Iran on September 22, 1980.

Figure 4.11: 'Holy Defense' banner, LGOIT, October 2007 Archive ([http://lifegoesonintehran.com/07\\_October2007.html](http://lifegoesonintehran.com/07_October2007.html))

The banner, written in Persian, reads 'What would have happened if we didn't stand up?' LGOIT highlights how the banner serves the national narrative of solidarity and defense shown in such memorabilia. They describe how commemoration is even more

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<sup>87</sup> Changes in public visual culture have been apparent from around the mid-2000s in Iran. However, a striking recent example of these changes can be seen in a public exhibition (May 2015) commissioned by the state under the guidance of the Mayor of Tehran, Dr. Mohammad Baqer Ghalibaf, displaying artworks by renowned local and western artists on 1,500 billboards around Tehran. The scheme is thought to be part of the Rouhani administration's (2013-present) cultural policies to signify co-operation with the west, in light of a forthcoming nuclear deal. See <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/may/07/tehran-swaps-death-to-america-billboards-picasso-matisse-hockney-iran> (Accessed: 07/05/15).

visible during the week of the Holy Defense in which its anniversary is annually celebrated.

By documenting and projecting these visual representations online, photobloggers such as Reza in one sense bolster the visibility of martyrdom, and render it even more visible by virtue of its inclusion in a 'global' digital environment. However, they do this in a manner at odds with the ideological intentions of the state. Rather than depicting martyrs as icons to be venerated, Photobloggers communicate martyrdom in a social documentary-realist style. Their combination of their photographs with accompanying captions explains and contextualises what viewers see, namely, the ideological frame in which these discourses, of commemoration and indoctrination, are officially shrouded in public life. If commemoration is predicated on myth-making, where even the paint of the hand-painted wall mural is perceived to be a visual aid of the mural's unique, auratic status, then the kinds of expositional strategies pursued by Reza and LGOIT, amongst many others, debunk the visual myth and aura that these representations seek to create. As LGOIT explained himself, his photography intends to dispel 'false illusions that the state's rhetoric embodies the general feelings of the country' and where national ideology defines Iranian subjectivity in a totalising way<sup>88</sup>. Photobloggers achieve this demystification firstly by turning the image they witness in the street into a digital photograph, which amongst hundreds of others, can be replicated, shared and circulated at the touch of a button, and secondly, by framing the scenes they bear witness to with self-authored captions<sup>89</sup>. Through Reza and LGOIT's photoblogs, we see how the documentary realism of their photography serves to subtly suggest the acute dissonance that such public displays of

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<sup>88</sup> LGOIT Interview (15/03/12).

<sup>89</sup> Not all photobloggers caption their images. For another kind of treatment of the visual depiction of the Iran-Iraq war from another photoblog that only displays photographs, see 'AriQoc' <http://www.photoblog.com/AriQoc/2008/12/13/talaie20years-after-iran-iraq-war.html> (Accessed: 14/04/14).

memorialisation have with the attitudes and interests of ‘ordinary’ people, as opposed to the God-fearing and Khomeini-worshipping political subjects, whom aspects of official visual culture in Iran profess to represent.

As part of their representational palette, photobloggers also show how official narratives of the war are contested in daily life in the offline context. Figure 4.12 below shows an electricity booth in Tehran, snapshotted and posted by Reza online in March 2011, nearly two years after the Presidential Election crisis of June 2009. It features political slogans between Green Movement activists and conservative followers of (the then president) Ahmadinejad calling the other side a traitor or calling for the death of the other, which have been crossed out and re-written accordingly by the respective parties.



Narratives of the war, however, are not the only voices competing for attention on Tehran's streets. Today, every wall and the side of every phone booth has become a veritable shouting match between supporters of 2009 Presidential candidates Mousavi and Ahmedinejad, as each erases the others' slogans out and writes their own.

Figure 4.12: Reza, Electricity booth, Tehran 24/03/11

As Reza explains, 'the electricity booth lays testament to this battle of narratives' which partially define contemporary Iranian visual culture. In another of his examples shown in Figure 4.13, Reza shows a piece of graffiti on a wall in Tehran.

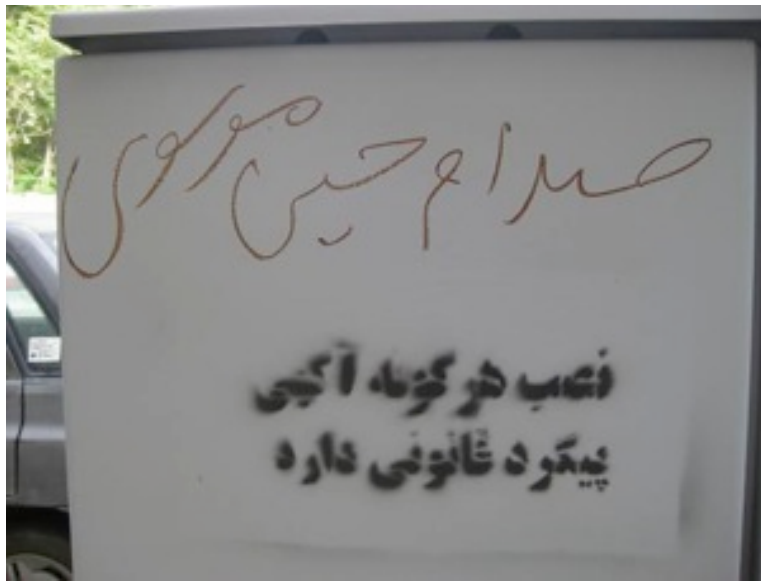


Figure 4.13: Reza, graffiti Tehran 24/03/11

The graffiti reads 'Saddam Hussein Mousavi', wherein members of the more conservative Islamic factions express a historical and contemporary conflation of notions of the enemy, linguistically combining the main perpetrator of the Iraq war (Saddam Hussein) with the leading reformist figure in the socio-political unrest which led to the 2009 protests against the re-election of President Ahmadinejad (Mir-Hossein Mousavi). Reza explains on his photoblog how this constitutes an 'accusation of treachery that utilizes popular memory and fear of the Iran-Iraq war and the need for national defence as a way of slandering political opponents to the neoconservative President Ahmadinejad'. The Green Movement emerges as a salient example of the

war's re-emergence in digital-cultural forms and to which photobloggers' visual practices also contribute.

Photobloggers such as LGOIT and Reza hope that viewers across the world will come to know how Iran is characterised by complex national and transnational subject formation, tensions between socio-economic groups, and between narrations of the past, present and future.

Reza and LGOIT's social documentary image types, along with their accompanying critical commentaries in one sense reflects what Dabashi (2010) has termed a 'post-ideological' predicament in the third generation of Iranians, seeking to move beyond the strict ideological inheritance of the post-revolutionary period (see also chapter 8). However, not all photoblogs intend to move beyond Islamic-Iranian ideology in their representation of (what they perceive to be) social reality. The photoblog 'Hezbollah Photo: an Islamic photoblog' was created by Peyman Sadeghi in Tehran in 2011 (Figure 4.14). It presents a striking comparison to the category of photoblog represented by Reza, LGOIT and many of my principal research participants. Described by its creator as an 'Islamic Photoblog', 'Hezbollah Photo' makes an instant claim to two aspects of post-revolutionary Iranian political culture in its title: Iran's Islamic identity and geopolitical association with Iran-supported Shiite Islamic militant political group, Hezbollah ('Party of God') based in Lebanon<sup>90</sup>.

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<sup>90</sup> Hezbollah was conceived of by Shiite Muslim clerics as a force of resistance to the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982. Its founding leaders were followers of Ayatollah Khomeini. Today, it continues to receive military training, weapons, funding and political support from Iran. See Azani (2011).



Figure 4.14: Title page, 'Hezbollah Photo', <http://hezbollahphoto.blog.com>  
(Accessed: 02/11/14).

Unlike other photobloggers investigated in this thesis, Peyman's photoblog presents a view of Iran precisely through the lens of its post-revolutionary Islamic ideology. The photoblog's home page shows a section introducing Ayatollah Khomeini to viewers, entitled 'Who is Imam Khomeini' (Figure 4.15).

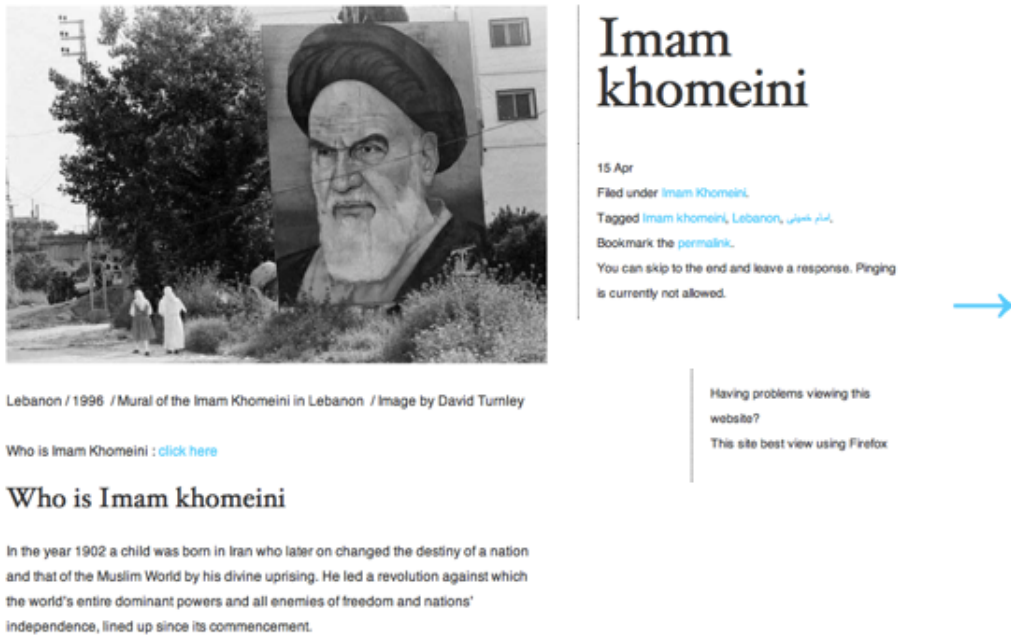


Figure 4.15: ‘Hezbollah Photo’ <http://hezbollahphoto.blog.com> (Accessed: 02/11/14).

The viewer is provided with a brief history lesson through the personally authored description of who Khomeini was and what he did for Iran, namely leading the Islamic Revolution of 1979.

Categories on ‘Hezbollah Photo’ reflect themes of Islamic history and ideology in Iran and the significance of Shiism in neighbouring countries. In Figure 4.16, I show how Peyman’s photoblog compares with the majority of photoblogs in the Iranian photoblogosphere surveyed as part of this study. These include those belonging to the main participants in this study. Figure 4.16 (a) conveys the ten digital albums in Peyman’s photoblog.

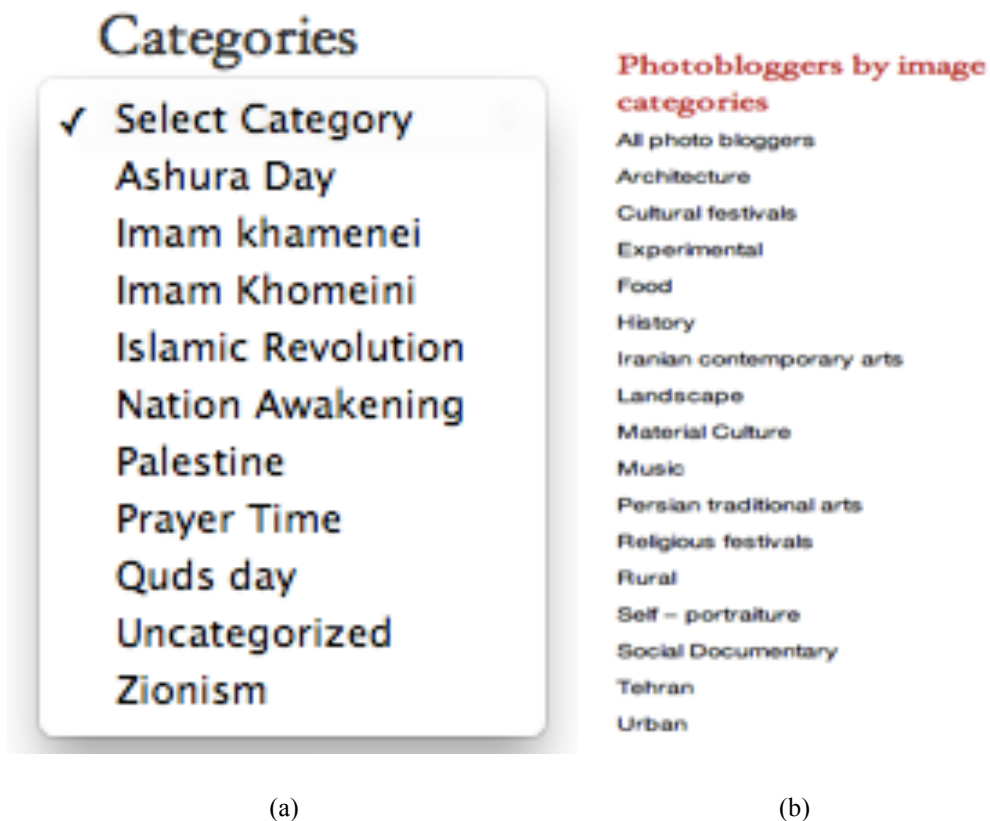


Figure 4.16: Photoblog 'types' (a) 'Hezbollah Photo' (b) Research exhibition 'Photoblogs from Iran'

Figure 4.16 (b) shows the main thematic categories taken from the digital exhibition developed as part of this study, [www.photoblogsiran.com](http://www.photoblogsiran.com), and which showcases the work of my main research participants. Comparing the respective categories of image types, ascribed and approved by their creators, it is possible to see how Peyman's photoblog demonstrates a self-professed preoccupation with Islamic-Iranian national ideology, including its spiritual and political leaders, Khomeini and Khamenei, historical moments of 'national Awakening', such as the 'Islamic Revolution', as well as other Islamic facets of life in Iran such as "Ashura Day", 'Quds day' (the last Friday of Ramadan initiated in 1979 by the Islamic Republic to express solidarity with the Palestinian people against Israeli occupation) and 'Prayer time'. It demonstrates a zealous critique of Zionism including various photographs of anti-Israel protests as well as conveying affinity with the Palestinian cause, against Israeli occupation. These

political and cultural sentiments are thus visually expressed in the structuring of the photoblog, which virtually embody its creator's political inclinations and cultural subjectivity. By contrast, the work of other photobloggers including LGOIT taking part in this research, can be broadly characterised by everyday visual themes such as 'cultural festivals', 'food', and 'urban' and 'rural' scenes of everyday life, without recourse to overtly ideological aspects of Iranian identity. Rather, their showing the heterogeneity of life in Iran constitutes a central ethos of their interest in photoblogging (see chapter 8).

Peyman also developed his photoblog to another photoblog platform via [jux.com](http://jux.com), which he calls 'Resistance Photo' (2011), shown in Figure 4.17.



Figure 4.17: Screen shot, 'Resistance Photo' photoblog by Peyman Sadeghi: <https://resistancephoto.jux.com>. (Accessed: 23/06/14).

The photoblog is an extended version of 'Hezbollah Photo' and presents a virtual gallery of post-revolutionary history and ideology, showing photographs taken by himself, as well as exhibiting existing digital images and video clips from other online sources, such as artists' websites, news sites and from other blogs. The type of 'resistance' referred to by Peyman, is conceived of as a kind of 'nativist' resistance to colonial domination and or (western) cultural hegemony, which was a salient ideological theme during the Iranian revolution in the rhetoric of Islamic ideologue Ali Shariati (see chapter 5). This resistance is today re-configured and conceived of by

Peyman as an aversion to Israeli expansion, both historical and contemporary, in Lebanon and Palestine, as well as to American foreign policy in the Middle East. The specific form of resistance articulated by Peyman demonstrates how ‘resistance’ is not a homogenous category, but a complex and shifting term appropriated and applied by various Iranian actors in various political and cultural identity struggles. ‘Resistance’ in Iran is thus not necessarily a popular democratic resistance towards the oppressive cultural framework of the Islamic regime, as anthropologists of post-revolutionary Iran have highlighted (Varzi 2006; Khosravi 2008; Mahdavi 2009). The resistance shown here rather takes the form of a historical, Iranian-Islamic-Shiite blend of narratives of resistance and heroism. These become manifest in the image types shown on the photoblog, which generate and consolidate attitudes against political and ideological others, who are perceived to be present-day colonial powers (America and Israel). By feeding his images through this binary framework, Peyman suggests that Iranian national identity, at once specific to Iran, can also be extended beyond the nation by uniting against its common enemies. Figure 4.18 shows the striking slogan ‘We are all Hezbollah’ taken from a political demonstration in 2007 against Israel in London, UK on International Quds Day.

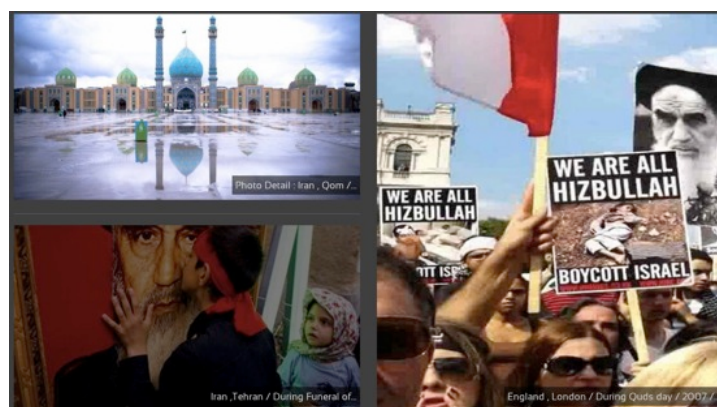


Figure 4.18: Screen shot of ‘Resistance photo’ photoblog by Peyman Sadeghi

It is included on the photoblog next to a photograph taken on the day of Khomeini's funeral on June 3rd 1989 showing a young boy kissing his portrait. This is placed next to a photograph Peyman has taken of Jamkaran Mosque at Qom (an important pilgrimage site for Shiite Muslims).

#### **4.5. Analysis of Iranian visual history: theoretical implications of the digital archive vis-à-vis cultural memory**

In Iran, our past haunts our present. We all cannot agree on the contemporaneity of our present.

(Research participant Sohrab Kashani. Online artist/curatorial statement)

As the chapter has shown, visual histories form an important part of contemporary lived experience in Iran, which is largely characterised by a visible sense of post-revolutionary social transformations. This has given rise to a certain historical consciousness amongst the current generation of Iranians in their mid to late twenties and early thirties popularly known and referred to in academic parlance as the 'third generation' (*nasl-e sevvom*), to which photobloggers belong<sup>91</sup>. Born in the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s and 2000s, this generation has been distinguished from their parents' for having not physically witnessed the traumatic events of the 1979 revolution and war with Iraq (1980-1988). Their parent's generation are known inside and outside of Iran as the 'burnt generation'<sup>92</sup> (*nasl-e-sukhtheh*), born between 1963-1980. However, Photobloggers' forms of critical engagement with cultural legacies are

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<sup>91</sup> See Khosravi (2008), chapter 5: 'The Third Generation'.

<sup>92</sup> The 'burnt generation' in Iran can be considered akin to what is commonly referred to as 'Generation X' in the west, of those born between 1960 and 1980, a concept popularized by the novel by Coupland (1991). Iranians inside and outside of Iran popularly use the term in popular parlance, and it also commonly features in art and culture pertaining to Iran. See the recent photography exhibition at Somerset House in London (April-June 2014) dedicated to the social and political turmoil, entitled 'Burnt Generation': <http://www.somersethouse.org.uk/visual-arts/burnt-generation>

realised through digital platforms stemming from their individual experiences of the public visual environment, and the ubiquitous presence of state ideology therein. In this sense, the kind of social memory experienced by this generation can be understood as a ‘postmemory’ (Hirsch 1997; 2012) of social trauma<sup>93</sup>. This concept suggests that memories become manifest in various cultural and semantic forms (such as photographs, diaries and letters), and are passed on to individuals who were not there to experience them first hand<sup>94</sup>. Photobloggers process this visual inheritance through their own practices, whereby the act of taking photographs in the ideologically charged spaces of the Iranian public sphere for some, constitutes cathartic acts of engagement and/or social healing. This was demonstrated in chapter 3 in relation to photoblogger turned artist and curator Sohrab, who following the socio-political turmoil after the 2009 protests, used digital photography and the Internet to virtually re-join society through his online persona.<sup>95</sup>

Social memory has been explored in terms of the specificity of generational experience. Connerton (1989) has suggested that the memories and experiences of one generation might be so embodied by its members that, due to their mental and emotional isolation, communication with other and often younger generations can often be impeded. Dissonance between generations has also been argued in the case of post-revolutionary Iran. Emphasising the third generation’s culture of defiance to social, political and ideological legacies, Khosravi (2008: 129) has suggested that there

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<sup>93</sup> Hirsch’s (1997, 2007) work on ‘postmemory’ in the Jewish context specifically highlights the role of photography, narratives and visual culture in the process of constructing ‘visual legacies’ of the Holocaust.

<sup>94</sup> See also Huyssen’s discussion of the globalization of memory, which he calls the ‘globalisation paradox’ denoting a process by which individuals come to ‘know’ traumatic events such as the Holocaust out of their original context, by mentally and emotionally associating them with other global, traumatic events. Huyssen (2003): 13.

<sup>95</sup> Other examples of artists whose work visually explores post-memory include Christian Boltanski’s (a second-generation survivor of the Holocaust) photographic installations. Combining personal and collective histories, Boltanski’s work materialises and memorializes the postmemory archive. Altomonte (2009):3.

is a discernable break between the “Third Generation” and their parental generation which is ‘widening more and more’ insofar as the former is seeking vital cultural changes to political, social and aesthetic norms through the Internet. Khosravi suggests this pertains mostly to the cultural ethos of the revolution and its public moral codes. What I suggest here is a different take on inter-generational relationships in Iran. Popular photography is signifying a proximal relationship between the third and ‘burnt’ generation through practices of image making, sharing and circulating which engage and unpack layers of cultural production and embodied social experience. These aspects will be discussed further in chapters 7 and 8.

Chapter one introduced the notion of the photoblog as a popular digital archive. In light of this understanding, it is possible to consider how questions of social memory arising from Iranian photoblogging contribute to theoretical understandings of archives in a digital age. This will engender a broader understanding of some of the implications of the visual legacies discussed in this chapter. In her theory of cultural memory, Assmann (2008) suggests two models of cultural forgetting (which she relates to different rooms in a museum): the ‘passive institutions’ of memory, constituting the ‘archive’ which preserves the past as past, and the ‘canon’: the actively circulated memory that keeps the past in the present<sup>96</sup>. Both the archive and the canon, she suggests, form part of social normality, which is maintained through strategies of mental self-regulation. By the logic of Assmann’s theory, remembering forms the exception to the norm of forgetting. The latter constitutes a ‘necessary and constructive part of internal social transformations’, whilst the former requires ‘special and costly precautions’ (Ibid: 98). The church for Assmann is the paradigmatic institution of active cultural memory, which creates what she calls ‘memorial spaces’ (Ibid: 102).

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<sup>96</sup> For other related literature highlighting social processes of forgetting see Connerton (2009), Augé (2004), Ricoeur (2004).

Examples have been shown throughout this chapter of how the Islamic regime has taken active precautions to construct and maintain a kind of canonical cultural memory through its ideological propagation of its revolutionary ethos and visual commemoration of the Iran-Iraq war. Designed to maintain an ideological public sphere, these processes maintain the historical past in the present by simultaneously purging the historical status quo, namely, the ‘alien’ western cultural, political and social and material influences from the former Pahlavi era (see chapter 5). This aspect of post-revolutionary Iran’s visual culture demonstrates the traditional workings of the archive outlined by Foucault ([1969] 2002) the ‘law that determines what can be said’ (Ibid: 186). In Islamic Iran, this amounted to the dual strategy of mobilising whilst disciplining the population by harnessing visual culture to maintain the presence of a certain ideological past through images here intended to legitimate the ‘habitus’ (Bourdieu 1977) of the social order by becoming internalised in the body through phenomenological experience (Connerton 1989).

However, as has been shown throughout this chapter, this is not an altogether ‘successful’ operation and is held in check by numerous practices of everyday life, off- and online, including the photo tours (*safarhā-ye ‘akkāsi*) of photobloggers across Iran, which remix aspects of the national socio-political narrative with other realities of contemporary Iranian life (see chapter 8 on the aesthetic strategies they specifically employ to do this). Reflecting a cognitive relationship between social memory and human geography (Connerton 2009:10-13), social memory in Iran remains a site of competing encounters with aspects of the past and present. These are engaged with and reformulated through the popular photographic re-framing of existing images on photoblogs, which, as I will show in chapter 9, opens the discourse of ‘Iranianness’ out to broader interpretive communities beyond the national context of Iran. In this sense,

the digital dimension adds to the processes by which social experience of visual history can be consumed and collectively experienced.

#### **4.5.1. Creating the popular digital archive**

Following on from this discussion, it is also important to consider how the Internet and new capacities for digital archiving, as seen in photoblogging, are altering cultural capacities and desires to remember and forget. On the one hand, the very notion of ‘logging’ involves the production of traces that are stored in the web platform’s digital memory. Assmann states that just as the Internet ‘creates a framework for communication across wide distances of space, cultural memory [it also] creates a framework for communication across the abyss of time’ (Ibid: 98). Both the Internet and memory, she suggests, have comparable capacities to collapse time and space. If however, as discussed in chapters 1-3, digital photography shown online has altered the temporality of images through ‘intimate visual co-presence’ (Ito 2005) and a ‘time-space compression’ (Larsen 2008:152) which enables a collective experiencing of ‘instantaneous time’ (Lash et al. 1994), then we might consider more closely how the digital is altering social processing of cultural memory. Here, the distinction between ‘passive’ and ‘active’ memory posited by Assmann may be revisited.

In photoblogging, it may be argued that rigid distinctions between the canon and the archive (which separate notions of past as present and past as past) are altered by the culturally ‘live’ space of the digital social environment. In this context, the digital-photographic image has a notable capacity for mobility, beyond what early critics of the digital called the ‘flatness’ of the digital-photographic object (Sassoon 2004), (see chapters 1 and 8). As this chapter has illustrated, digital photographs on photoblogs move between existing (offline) and emerging (online) visual systems. Images created by the state are projected into the frame as a record of life in Iran at a

specific moment in time, which then becomes logged on the photoblog. This distributes the state's public, offline commemoration of the war and its cultural Islamicisation projects online. In this sense, photobloggers bring the national past in to the digitally mediated frame of the present, and in so doing, activate Assmann's 'canon'. This renders the digital photograph a contemporary cultural artefact of everyday life in Iran. It incites social engagement with the past in a notably active manner, as experienced through the eyes of its subjects and their mediating frames (their photoblog, class, gender, education). Assmann states that the canon is not built up anew by every generation, but outlives the generation who have to encounter and reinterpret it anew according to their time' (Ibid: 100). This is precisely what occurs in photoblogging, where a range of Iranian photobloggers reinterpret the war and its commemoration in contemporary digital forms on their photoblogs, either upholding or debunking the state's ideological narratives. By depicting it online and framing it within self-narrated social critique through captions of the images, they interpret the visual legacy of the war 'according to their time'. This 'time', for photobloggers is the present decade, in which young Iranians in various cultural fields are increasingly taking to digital mediums and platforms in order to explore their cultural identity, which, as this thesis overall seeks to demonstrate, confers their status as contemporary 'cultural producers' (Bourdieu 1993).

At the same time, the 'archive' aspect of photoblogs is also a noticeable aspect of what they essentially are – digital archives with the capacity to store vast amounts of digital data online (see also chapter 8). Here, photoblogs reflect and develop what Assmann calls the 'historical archive' as distinct from the political archive which functions as a more explicit tool for power. Objects in the historical archive have, according to Assmann, 'lost their original place in life and entered a new context

which gives them the chance of a second life that considerably prolongs their existence' (Ibid: 103). The Islamic regime's use of history as a mechanism of public control serves as a kind of public visual archive. This collapses rigid distinctions between the 'political' and the 'historical' archive. Places such as graveyards and martyrs' museums in Iran are paradigmatic places wherein the city constitutes a kind of 'public archive' or outdoor museum. This recalls Duncan's (1991:101-102) notion of museums as 'identity-defining machines' which declare authoritative truths. However, photoblogs move beyond the traditional role of the historical archive defined in terms of historical and cultural preservation. For Assmann, the historical archive has a passive place in cultural memory, stemming from the fact that it is 'inert', or has an essentially storing role or capacity. It is preserved, but is not itself interpreted or made to 'live' (by the archivists) until the academic, artist or other enquirer engages with the material and frames it within a given research context. It is in a state of 'intermediary storage' between the 'no longer' and the 'not yet' (Ibid: 103). Photoblogs, as popular contemporary digital archives, created by the producer and (primary) interpreter of the content, alter this conception of the archive.

The photoblogger, as producer of the visual information and self-archivist, performs a kind of voluntary archival work. He or she acts as a cultural interlocutor vis-à-vis the public visual material and the potential publics of its viewership, brokering and cataloguing visual information about contemporary Iran to the rest of the world. The digital photograph serves as a source of transnational social engagement with Iran, enabling layers of cross-cultural (as well as inter-generational) access and interpretation. Photobloggers carry out a kind of primary-level interpretation of the visual material (offline post-revolutionary visual culture), which they display and interpret on their photoblog, accompanied by captions.

Upon being transformed into digital photographic form and posted online, the image moves to broader interpretive communities, amongst Iranians inside Iran and Iranians and non-Iranians outside of Iran (secondary and tertiary levels), than in the traditional archive (passive)-analyst (active) relationship. The capacity to relate, and to empathise is contingent upon on the wider indexicalities that shape different types of viewers' engagement with the image as Iranian social fact (as will be discussed in chapter 9, which looks at viewer types and the transnational social construction of meaning in Iranian photoblogs).

If the culturally live status of the photoblog is to be theoretically accepted, it might then be appropriately considered in terms of what McQuire (2013) has termed as the 'operational archive' (see chapter 1). This describes how the digital environment facilitates interactivity amongst viewers of a given culture, who are able to discursively engage with it as an object or artefact of culture. In this sense, a social construction of meaning and memory making is able to take place on the very site of the photoblog, as constructive site of (and not just vehicle for communicating) culture. The 'archival' status of photoblogs is therefore more socially and culturally salient than being a space of intermediary and or passage storage. On the contrary, photoblogs are live, and often, a real-time sources of engagement with the content being produced, which in some cases, is reflexively re-formulated vis-à-vis its viewer's responses to certain images. Chapter 9 will explore these ideas in greater detail with specific examples. It will also discuss the life span of photoblogs and how this relates to their 'archival' versus their 'exhibitionary' status, function and social efficacy.

Overall, photoblogs are shaping new social and cultural contours of accessing, remembering and storing visual information about the past in the mediated present. Public art seen in public visual culture in one sense has an ephemeral status. It can be

scratched out, written or plastered over or, as the fate of many public political monuments, from Stalin and Saddam Hussein's statues to the Berlin wall have shown, can be symbolically and ritually pulled down. The process of becoming digitised however, in the form of a digital photograph exhibited on a public photoblog, affects the durability and monumentality of these public art works. In the online context, such works are preserved in the form and temporal context in which they are captured. This affords the work an 'afterlife' in a virtual public, where they are displayed, copied, appropriated and re-contextualised in potentially vast variety of contexts. It is this sense of an afterlife that the photoblog, and digital photography and the Internet affords to public art which signifies its scope for forging new understandings of how cultural memory and visual culture are constructed, consumed and preserved. The digital environment restructures forms of engagement with the past by bringing it into discursive social and digital fields of negotiation, marking a 'contract between the living, the dead and the not yet living' (Assmann 2008:97). Creating new spaces for the reworking of cultural memory across time and space in this manner is, for a specific category of photobloggers (who comprise my main case studies), an important part of their wider cultural campaign to visually alter the world of martyrs, victimhood, others and enemies towards nuanced facets of cosmopolitan, contemporary life. As will be explored further in following chapters, this forms an aesthetic antidote to the visual legacies of revolution, war, martyrdom, totalitarian Islamic ideologies and pristine notions of Shiite-Iranian identity mapped in this chapter.

#### **4.6. Summary**

This chapter has described and assessed the impact of post-revolutionary Iranian visual legacies constructed and contested inside Iran. Contemporary digital arenas of popular engagement with Iranian visual cultural legacies have been shown to be opening up

new spaces for virtual content production, consumption and circulation. Photoblogs serve as a contemporary digital cultural space in which post-revolutionary ideology and Iranian visual history re-emerges, is revived and/or critiqued by photobloggers' visual and textual narratives, whose engagement with the past is discernably active. The chapter concluded by assessing the implications of these engagements for theoretical understandings of the digital archive in relation to cultural memory. It was suggested that the digital framework, coupled with the intentions of the photoblogger, renders cultural memory itself a discursive subject for ongoing transnational cultural negotiation. These findings complement the analysis of various types of viewership of photoblogs presented in chapter 9. The following chapter will now consider the impact of post-revolutionary visual legacies *outside* of Iran upon photobloggers, existing as another narrative backdrop within the international mediascape.

## CHAPTER 5. VISUAL HISTORY (II): IMAGINING IRAN IN THE INTERNATIONAL ‘MEDIASCAPE’

### 5.1. Introduction

This chapter is the second of two chapters concerning post-revolutionary visual history *of* (as opposed to *within*) Iran. Chapter 4 traced the visual construction of Iranian-Islamic identity from inside the Islamic Republic. This chapter now broadens the analytical scope of this issue to include western-produced mass media visual representations of Iran mainly in the field of news photography. It also considers the role played by Iranians in the west in contributing to the maintenance and development of dominant stereotypical image types concerning Iran (and Iranians), mainly in ‘Islamic’, ‘fundamentalist’ or activist terms. In this chapter I identify two aspects of post-revolutionary Iranian visual history, which I refer to as neo-Orientalism and Occidentalism<sup>97</sup>. I suggest that these are helpful concepts for understanding ‘western’ and Iranian state visual representations/self-representations of Iran since the Islamic Revolution of 1979, which largely account for the political and visual conditions in which photobloggers today need to speak about Iran and their ‘Iranianness’ in digital contexts. The latter half of the chapter presents an analysis of the findings presented in chapters 4 and 5, interpreting the effects of both of these international (external), in addition to the national (internal) visual histories have on photobloggers. Here, a ‘third space’ of engagement is suggested to characterise the aesthetic or ‘soft’ political space that photobloggers carve out amidst these dominant visual and political legacies.

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<sup>97</sup> My use of neo-Orientalist in this thesis is restricted to that of visual and photographic representations of Iran by ‘western’ (North America and European) news media. I use Occidentalist strictly in the Iranian, anti-western political context, equating it with a kind of ‘nativist’ disposition. For relevant discussions of both concepts in the Iranian historical and post-revolutionary context, see Tavaoki-Targhi (2001) and Nanquette (2013).

## **5.2. The view from the west (1979-present)**

The previous chapter showed how since its inception (1979), the Islamic regime has utilised images to construct specific image types that would foster the creation of an Islamic public sphere. It discussed how a particular visual reality was constructed during the revolution, subsequent war with Iraq (1980-1988) and in contemporary, digital environments such as a host of state-sponsored websites designed to commemorate these events and their Iranian-Shiite ideologies. Equally important to consider however, is how these kinds of images (of a monolithic Iranian-Islamic identity) have also been propagated outside Iran by the western press in the post-revolutionary period and have also contributed to the international imaginary of what constitutes post-revolutionary Iran. In her historical ethnography of youth and media in Iran, Varzi (2006:25) argues that ‘the Western media portrayed Iran as an impenetrable surface of images and imaginings: a nation of angry fists and of crazed martyrs rushing the frontlines of battle with the Iraqis; a place where for years, black and red, colours of mourning and martyrdom, shrouded the nation’. Due to the relative sophistication of the western press, Varzi goes on to explain how the western media even managed to do this at a faster rate than the Iranian state press, rendering it a fairly useful propaganda branch for the Islamic Republic’s cultural revolution project throughout the 1980s, aimed at creating a totalitarian, Shiite-Islamic public sphere (Ibid: 26). Western media representations thus exacerbated external wide-scale opinion of Iranians as extremist Muslims in the west, whilst also internally propagating the theme of sacrifice for the nation epitomised in the notion of the ‘Sacred Defence’, which the regime had itself carefully constructed since coming to power (see chapter 4). It is therefore important to consider the role played by the western press in bolstering these visual image types in the international ‘mediascape’ (Appadurai 2002). Today, this constitutes a certain

historical awareness of identity construction and visual propaganda amongst the third generation of Iranians growing since the revolution who are currently in their mid to late twenties and early thirties, and to which photobloggers belong.

### **5.3. Neo-Orientalisms**

In his classic Orientalist polemic, Said (1978) argues that ‘the East’ has been historically ‘constructed’ by the colonial parameters of the western imagination. Applying this more recently to the specific study of representations of Islam and Muslims in the western media (North American and European), Said (1981) showed how notions of ‘Islam’, the ‘Muslim other’ and the ‘Islamic threat’ propagated in the west have been systematically constructed in a plethora of media, from visual representations in newspapers, to written journalist reports, academic books and popular culture. He suggests that since the Islamic revolution of 1979, Iran has come to symbolically represent a threat to the west in such a way as to set a powerful precedent for America’s geostrategic relations with Muslim-majority societies at large (Ibid: 83). Said highlights historical events such as the Iranian hostage crisis (1979-1981) involving the seizure of the American embassy in Tehran and the detaining of their diplomats), the Gulf War (1980-1988) and the bombing of the World Trade Centre in 2001 as main incidents in which America has developed its political and ideological aversion to Iran. This has led to an international climate in which, he argues, ‘malicious generalisations about Islam have become the last acceptable form of denigration of foreign culture in the West’ and whose self-constructed climate of political anxiety, in effect, ‘requires Islam to be a menace’ (Ibid: 12). Applying Said’s concerns to the post 9/11 international context, Dabashi (2008) has similarly argued that fictive constructs of Iran continue to characterise mainstream western media

representations of Iran today<sup>98</sup>. In line with both Said and Dabashi, fear of the ‘Islamic other’ can today be said to have created a new kind of neo-Orientalist ‘other’. Iran and Iranians continue to be implicated in existing and new kinds of stereotypes circulating in the international media, political and cultural landscape. Iranians and Muslims across the world find themselves summarily associated with labels such as ‘Islamic extremism’ and the ‘threat of terrorism,’ grounded in the perceived ‘anti-modernity’ of Iran’s post-revolutionary political culture. Most recently, questions surrounding Iran’s nuclear capabilities and the imposition of economic sanctions by the west have also heightened the image of Iran as an international pariah state. Mass media news photography, broadcasting, novels, and Hollywood films all play a crucial role in maintaining the global cultural climate in which present-day Orientalisms continue to thrive. These narratives preclude global awareness of the political, cultural and ethnic diversities of life inside Iran and stake a heavy ideological claim on how notions of ‘local’ cultural identity and perceptions of belonging are experienced within the various Iranian diasporas.<sup>99</sup> Figure 5.1 below shows one example of these types of visual narrative constructions. The photographic image accompanies a newspaper article from the Sydney Morning Herald about the imminent arrival of International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors in Tehran in 2003. The women depicted are categorically referred to as ‘students’, wearing full, black *hejāb* (Islamic head cover) and are watched over by the all-seeing eye of the late Ayatollah Khomeini, whose face features on the wall mural behind.

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<sup>98</sup> Dabashi (2011) acknowledges the self-Orientalising role of Iranians themselves as ‘native informers’ in ‘western’ processes of knowledge-production.

<sup>99</sup> For specific examples of these kinds of western media stereotypes of Iranians in three diasporic settings (Australia, the UK and Canada) see McAuliffe (2007).



Figure 5.1: ‘Students’ walking in front of mural of Ayatollah Khomeini (Sydney Morning Herald, Nov. 12, 2003: 12), from McAuliffe (2007: 36)

The caption refers to the ‘veil of secrecy’, symbolically playing on the womens’ veils shown in the image and the metaphorical, political ‘veil’ behind which western powers perceive Iran to be hiding its nuclear activities. As will be shown, the image is common to a plethora of similar image types found in western media. It demonstrates the way in which politics, Islam and western interests necessarily visually combine in these types of representation of Iranians found in western press accounts. The image also captures another major fact of post-revolutionary visual history; the fact that since the revolution, Iranian women, their bodies and their clothing in particular have been used to visually represent the country (Tavakoli-Targhi 2001; Mottahedeh 2008). Lester Roushanzamir (2004) describes how Iranian women are always constructed for American audiences as outside and other, first to “our” society and secondly, to “theirs”; either they are a hidden, veiled entity, or they are engaged in radical practices of flaunting repressive customs. Adelkhah (2009:215-216) exposes these issues

(western) in anthropological treatments of *hejāb*, where she argues that the veil is paradoxically understood in material terms as an item of clothing, but which is also a latent ‘meta-code’ that crudely evokes the image of oppression. In reality, Adelkhah shows how the *hejāb* has been a source of local agency, independence and social mobility for women in post-revolution Iran, providing them with access to the public sphere, as well as being a ‘frontier’ of everyday negotiation between public and private spaces (Ibid). All of this nuance, as Adelkhah also observes, is lost in simplistic portraits (visual and textual) of oppressed Muslim women that feeds a broader western narrative of freedom (Abu-Lughod 2008).

Offering a contemporary contribution to these debates from within the digital landscape, images of oppressed, veiled Iranian women are arguably today being rivalled with a somewhat renewed preoccupation with *unveiled* women<sup>100</sup>. This constitutes a new kind of exoticism for certain individuals and groups within the international community. In some cases, Iranian women themselves inadvertently feed this appetite for the new exotica. Online digital-visual campaigns, which Iranians use to express their sense of freedom are a prominent illustration of this. To take one recent example, the ‘My Stealthy Freedom’ (2014) project on Facebook<sup>101</sup> (Figure 5.2) is a platform wherein Iranian women across Iran were invited to take photos of themselves without their *hejābs* on in various public and private locations and post them to the site. UK-based Iranian journalist, Masih Alinejad, set up the online group from London in May 2014. Within one month, the page had received over 500,000 ‘likes’ on Facebook, amongst Iranian and non-Iranian women and men in Iran and across the

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<sup>100</sup> Unveiled women became established as a visual trope in the nineteenth century, and is typified in the work of Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres (1780-1867). His depictions of the Oriental harem, in works such as ‘The Turkish Bath’ (1862) are paradigmatic examples of Orientalist art. For a relevant discussion on Orientalist representations in nineteenth century photographic representations of Iran see Bohrer (1999) and Behdad (2001)

<sup>101</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/StealthyFreedom>. (Accessed: 08/07/14).

globe. At the same time, the page also instigated a conservative backlash to the digital-visual campaign, whereby Iranian upholders of the revolutionary ethos of compulsory wearing of *hejāb* (hair cover for women in public), posted vitriolic critiques of the campaign on their own Facebook pages as well as on related social media sites. One website, *Nedā-ye Enghelāb* (Call of the Revolution) published a cartoon depicting two women as pigs scantily dressed in American and British flags with the title ‘Members of Stealthy Freedom Campaign’<sup>102</sup>, suggesting that these women have become corrupted and ‘impure’ by western cultural freedoms. In another case, Iranian state TV commentators, such as Vahid Yaminpour, publically denounced Alinejad on social media sites as a ‘whore’<sup>103</sup>. These attitudes are rooted in Khomeini’s (1981) revolutionary rhetoric, which spoke of how women’s bodies were a prominent site through which foreign corruption or ‘impurity’ had been introduced into the nation during the former Pahlavi era. Khomeini (Ibid: 264) had called these types of women ‘pleasure-seekers’ who in their taste for western popular culture and clothing, had strayed far from the ‘warrior-like’ modesty of Islamic womanhood.



Figure 5.2: Screenshot, 'My Stealthy Freedom' project, Facebook page [www.facebook.com/StealthyFreedom?fref=ts](http://www.facebook.com/StealthyFreedom?fref=ts) (Accessed: 08/07/14).

<sup>102</sup> See <http://www.nedayenghelab.com/vdccoqs02bq148.ala2.html> (Accessed: 16/07/14).

<sup>103</sup> For an account of the conservative backlash against the project see: <http://stream.aljazeera.com/story/201405271418-0023763> (Accessed: 20/07/14).

## Iranian women post pictures of themselves without hijabs on Facebook

Campaign set up by London-based Iranian journalist Masih Alinejad attracts more than 130,000 likes on social media site

Saeed Kamali Dehghan  
theguardian.com, Monday 12 May 2014 19.30 BST  
[Jump to comments \(564\)](#)



The Facebook page 'Stealthy Freedoms of Iranian Women' was set up 10 days ago and has since attracted thousands of photos. Photograph: Facebook

Thousands of Iranian women are taking off their veils and publishing pictures of themselves online, igniting a debate about the freedom to wear or not wear the hijab.

Figure 5.3: Screenshot, The Guardian online, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/may/12/iran-women-hejāb-facebook-pictures-alinejad>. (Accessed: 07/07/14).

Some Iranian men also took the opportunity to make fun of the women's online campaign by photographing themselves wearing the *hejāb*, women's clothing and make-up. They then shared these images on Facebook on a deliberately mocking page entitled 'Men's Stealthy Freedom in Iran'<sup>104</sup>. For its female participants, the 'My Stealthy Freedom Project' attends to a social and political need, shared amongst some secular, middle-class, urban Iranian women in Iran and abroad, to communicate desires for greater public freedom in Iran beyond the mandatory Islamic veil, for whom, the mandatory *hejāb* is an undesired social imposition of modesty. At the same time, it also – albeit unwittingly – introduces a new kind of neo-Orientalism and a contemporary form of what Behdad (2001) calls (in the context of nineteenth century Iranian photography), 'self-Orientalizing' by the 'Orientalist subject'. Iranian women and men today who propagate images of the unveiled subject paradoxically demonstrate both a subversive political, digital-visual protest and at the same time, due to the wider

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<sup>104</sup> See <http://stream.aljazeera.com/story/201405271418-0023763>. (Accessed: 15/05/14).

indexicalities in which these images are now seen as rare, feed the international imagination concerning the established exotic-erotic preoccupation with “what lies beneath” the veil of Iran’s women and Iranian society at large<sup>105</sup>.

Iranian photographers and photojournalists who produce work primarily for western audiences have also introduced ‘the unveiled’ as a new neo-Orientalist, exotic category.<sup>106</sup> A relevant example is ‘Veiled Truths’ (2014), an online photography exhibition created by the Chicago-based, Iranian photographer Hossein Fatemi.<sup>107</sup> It shows twenty images of a range of Iranian (Tehran-based) women. Many of them do not physically wear the *hejāb* in their photographs, though all are photographed through the fabric of them. Fatemi constructs this symbolic trope in order to represent the veil of Iranian society in which these women live (and are also resisting in not necessarily wearing them). Figure 5.4 shows how the Iranian women presented in Fatemi’s exhibition are shown to be living in freedom quite literally ‘behind the veil’.

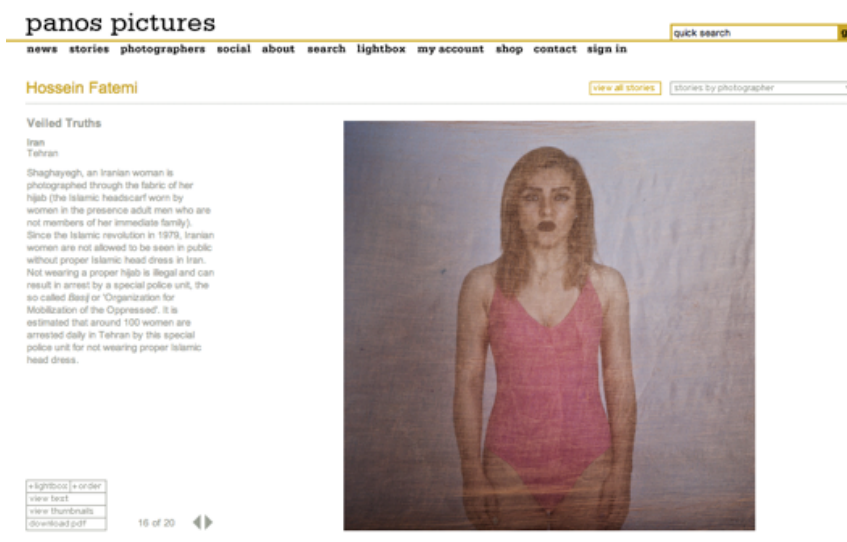


Figure 5.4: Screenshot, ‘Veiled Truths’ online digital photography exhibition by Iranian photojournalist Hossein Fatemi: [www.panos.co.uk/stories/2-13-1638-2132/Hossein-Fatemi/Veiled-Truths/](http://www.panos.co.uk/stories/2-13-1638-2132/Hossein-Fatemi/Veiled-Truths/) (Accessed: 18/08/14).

<sup>105</sup> For a relevant discussion of the preoccupation with unveiling and contemporary ‘neo-Orientalism’ see Anvari (2014) Online [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/17/opinion/the-fetish-of-staring-at-irans-women.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/17/opinion/the-fetish-of-staring-at-irans-women.html?_r=0) (Accessed: 16/06/14).

<sup>106</sup> Interview with London-based Iranian journalist and photographer, Haleh Anvari, London (10/07/14).

<sup>107</sup> See [www.panos.co.uk/stories/2-13-1638-2132/Hossein-Fatemi/Veiled-Truths/](http://www.panos.co.uk/stories/2-13-1638-2132/Hossein-Fatemi/Veiled-Truths/) (Accessed: 18/08/14).

The featured woman, Shaghayegh, wears a revealing body suit and heavy make-up. As with the rest of the women, she confidently confronts the viewer by staring into the lens. This presents a marked contrast to images of anonymous, fully covered, chador-wearing women, which have been a prevalent feature of western representations of Iranian women (as was shown in Figure 5.1). The exhibition is accompanied by textual, socio-political information provided by Fatemi, who provides a social commentary on the following ‘realities’ of Iranian society:

Not wearing a proper *hejāb* is illegal and can result in arrest by a special police unit, the so-called Basij or ‘Organization for Mobilization of the Oppressed’. It is estimated that around 100 women are arrested daily in Tehran by this special police unit for not wearing proper Islamic head dress.<sup>108</sup>

Exhibiting his digital photographs alongside a self-authored social commentary specifically focusing on subversive behavior of Iranian women against the oppressive state, Fatemi establishes a narrative framework in which the state and the people are pitted against each other under an ethos of ‘resistance’. This is precisely the kind of account that obscure understandings of Iran in the west, by fixating it in a constant battle between *dowlat/mellat* (state/society) (Adelkhah 2009: 212), as also discussed in chapter 1. These kinds of online photography projects convey how even Iranian attempts to move beyond the Orientalist framework, in many cases and due to a variety of motivations including financial reward, end up re-affirming old epistemic boundaries (see chapter 6 on images of Iran which ‘sell in Iran and in the International community). As a result, the neo-Orientalist intrigue is maintained and rejuvenated by Iranians themselves, whose marks of ‘authenticity’ to represent their own culture begets their own cultural authority. As I will show in chapter 6, photobloggers are

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<sup>108</sup> <http://www.panos.co.uk/stories/2-13-1638-2132/Hossein-Fatemi/Veiled-Truths/> (Accessed: 07/02/15).

acutely aware of the cultural politics associated with representations of Iranian society, and actively seek to address it in diverse ways.

The coming of the Internet to Iran in the 1990s has itself also been tied to the creation of another kind of ‘Iranian’ visual trope. Western media continue to propagate images (albeit in a ‘modern’ context) of a monolithic, Iranian Muslim identity by juxtaposing it with the very idea of Islam as ostensibly anti-modern and anti-democratic. In these conceptions, Iranians continue to be presented as either a dangerous threat to the west, or as a socially and politically repressed people in need of ‘saving’ by them (Abu-Lughod 2008). The wider, geostrategic notion of the “liberalising forces of western democracy” has often been symbolised by the Internet<sup>109</sup> (a western construct) and its being taken up in a country such as Iran. Figure 5.5 below is taken from an article in ‘The Guardian’ newspaper’s Information Technology (IT) section. It evaluates the rise of the Internet in Iran in 2002 (a year or so before photoblogging emerged in Iran, which, in chapter 1, I suggested to be around 2003)



Figure 5.5: Illustration of woman in the chador, the Guardian newspaper Feb. 21<sup>st</sup> 2002, from McAuliffe (2008: 34)

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<sup>109</sup> See chapter 3 concerning critical debates about Iran, media and modernity. See also Sreberny et al. (1994) and Khiabany (2010).

The depicted figure is shown as a generic ‘Iranian Muslim woman’ image-type. She appears anonymous, with no markers of individual identity. She is also drawn wearing the a *niqab*, a black cloth worn across the lower part of the face in some Muslim countries, but not in Iran. *Hejāb* (a generic term for veiling/covering) is the norm for women in public in Iran, though forms of *hejāb* are themselves routinely modified by women according to changing daily circumstances. Forms of *hejāb*, include the *rusari* and *shāl*, which are often worn in bright colours, and harmonized with the woman’s overall coat (*mānto*). The loose black chador (a cloth used to cover the body, held in place by the hand, and sometimes drawn across the lower part of the face) is commonly worn by women in Iran, though it is not compulsory, except as a condition of entering certain mosques. These cultural details about Iranian society are notably absent from these kinds of images, since their messages are performing specific kinds of cultural work, which are at odds with nuanced understandings of Iranian society; something photobloggers are acutely aware of. The presence of the computer, in this image symbolically represents the Internet and ‘the west’ and provides a stark visual juxtaposition to the oppressive Islamic visual markers such as the clothing, *chādor* and person of the ostensibly oppressed female figure. Such images negate any cultural or aesthetic harmony between (what are presented as) the two opposing geographical, political, cultural and even ontological essentialist categories of Islam/Iran and “the West” (Dabashi 2008).

Contemporary media representations of Internet usage in Iran continue to be framed within the binary opposition of structure (oppressive Islamic republic) and agency (individual user). A modern take on this discourse, as with the *hejāb* issue discussed above, is the role Iranians today play themselves in the maintenance of such

paradigms. In another example, Figure 5.6 shows an article written by a Tehran-based Iranian journalist for Reuters, the London-based international news agency.

## Iran's resistance keeps up cat-and-mouse Web game

BY REZA DERAKHSHI

TEHRAN Tue Feb 9, 2010 3:04am EST

1 COMMENTS | Tweet 0 | Share | Share this | S+1 0 | Email | Print



Figure 5.6: Screenshot, Reuters online article: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2010/02/09/us-iran-revolution-internet-idUSTRE61800J20100209> (Accessed: 07/07/14).

The article describes measures taken by protestors to the conservative government's surveillance of the Internet. This was mostly in connection with the Green Movement, the Reformist movement in Iran and their subversive activities opposing the Presidential re-election of Ahmadinejad in 2009. Using colour photography to depict real people, the dominant image is still the *hejāb*-wearing woman, though she now wears sunglasses and is an active political subject, taking part in public protests.<sup>110</sup> In this image, the face covering and sunglasses worn by the women in this public protest are likely to be connected to the need to protect against either identification by

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<sup>110</sup> In a related example from the field of contemporary Iranian art, which shows how sunglasses are used as an aesthetic device to represent modernity in Iran, see the work of Shadi Ghadirian (see Appendix B.4).

authorities, tear gas used by the authorities during the demonstrations, or both. All of the women hold roses in support of the Green Movement's leader Mirhossein Mousavi. The image conveys a united sense of united youth resistance amongst different social and religious 'types' of Iranians. Unlike the kind of depictions of 'Muslim women' encountered earlier (Figure 5.5), where veiling is used to symbolise muteness and victimhood, in this image, we see an inversion of this trope, where *hejāb* can represent resistance and agency. At the same time that Iranian women's agency is apparent in this image, the photograph can simultaneously be adopted to feed into wider associations in the west and amongst Iranians, between 'modern' Iran, 'green wave' activism and a necessary resistance to the state. In this view, the women not passive or muted here, are nevertheless part of a wider paradigm, namely, the 'resisting Iranian subject.' As was suggested in chapter 1, certain discourses propagated in the west construct various versions of the 'extraordinary' nature of Iranians' social lives, particularly concerning uses of the Internet. Hence, Iranian Internet users are oppressed subjects, or else forever protesting activists. 'Ordinary' uses of the internet, or what Coleman (2010) terms the 'banal' media usage of everyday life, are notably lacking from these accounts and, as subsequent chapters will illustrate, make up the ordinary 'stuff' (and 'soft' political salience) of photoblogging.

#### **5.4. Occidentalisms**

In the contemporary global imaginary (Neo-) Orientalism also has a local opponent. 'Occidentalism' is a competing representation of 'the West' in the image of 'the East' (Carrier 1995). Though a generic term, Occidentalism's Iranian manifestation lies in a post-revolutionary concept of 'nativism' ideologically rooted in political and cultural aversion to the west. The political act of imagining the western other in negative terms in Iran grew out of the more general post-colonial intellectual context of the 1960s, and

1970s, and its rhetoric of national self-determination. Within this climate, Iranian revolutionary ideologues such as Ali Shariati and Jalal Al-i Ahmad presented the cultural emulation of the west by Iranians as something socially and culturally corrosive to the nation in publications such as *Gharbzadegi* (Al-i Ahmad 1962) ('west-toxication'), which was later translated as *Occidentosis* (Al-i Ahmad 1984). A decade prior to the revolution of 1979, Shariati had been writing throughout the 1960s, in an intellectual context which included Frantz Fanon (1963) writing on colonialism in Algeria<sup>111</sup>. Even though Iran had not been officially colonised, Shiite Muslim intellectuals in Iran found affinity with analogous postcolonial struggles in other parts of the formerly colonised world. Comparing these struggles to Iran's national and cultural demise under the Shah, who many perceived as a puppet monarch ruled by the west, Shariati coined the term the 'return to self' to denote a distinctively Iranian Shiite self, free from the pseudo-colonial (cultural) domination from the west that had 'infected' the nation. This state of being, according to Shariati, could be accessed through *khod-shenāsi* (self-knowledge), which would be gained mainly by accessing a firm understanding and appreciation of national identity. For Shariati, returning to the self required the total submission of the individual self to the national body politic. The most tangible manifestation of this 'death of the self', as he puts it, involved physical martyrdom (see chapter 4 on how this discourse was manipulated in order to encourage martyrdom during the Iran-Iraq war). Figure 5.7 illustrates the ideological importance of Shariati during the early days of the Islamic revolution.

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<sup>111</sup> Frantz Fanon had implored Algerians to recognise the importance of national identity and encouraged 'native' cultural awareness in the face of colonial domination and cultural hegemony. See Fanon (1963).

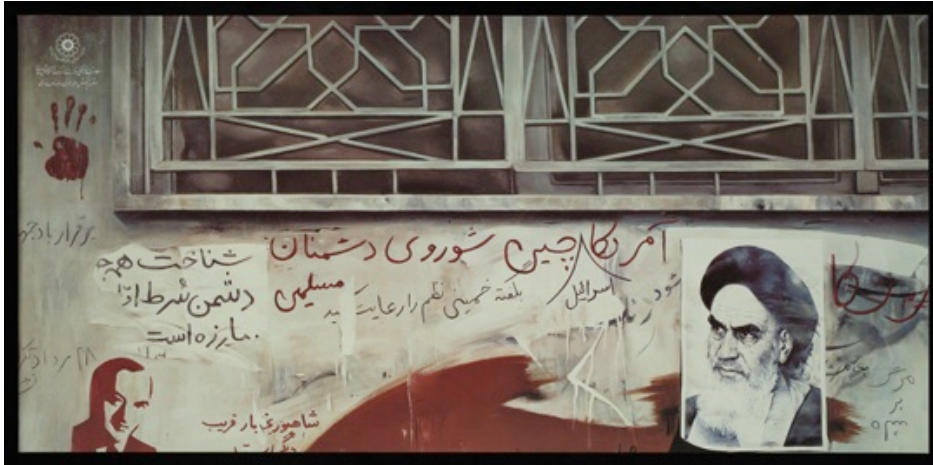


Figure 5.7: Graffiti Wall with Ayatollah Khomeini and Ali Shariati (1981), Middle Eastern Posters Collection, Box 4, Poster 175, Special Collections Research Centre, The University of Chicago Library online resource

In this wall painting from Tehran (1981), an unknown artist has stencilled Shariati in red (shown on the left). A poster of Ayatollah Khomeini, the figurehead of the Islamic revolution (see previous chapter 4), has been superimposed on the wall by passers by. The written graffiti, also carried out by various passers by, conveys anti-American, anti-Shah, anti-Russian and anti-Israeli sentiments in Persian. These are framed by blood-marked handprints, which were a common symbol during the revolution used to express visual commitment to the overthrow of the Shah (Chelkowski and Dabashi 2000).

The political and ideological emphasis on ‘native’ culture emphasised in Shariati’s concept of the ‘return to self’ laid the relevant ideological foundations upon which others such as Al-Ahmad (1962, 1984) subsequently developed their own versions of Islamic-Iranian national ideology. For Al-Ahmad, the particular ingredient prohibiting the path of returning to the self was also that of western cultural influence. He conceived of this as a kind of infectious disease: ‘I speak of being afflicted with “Westitis” the way I would speak of being afflicted with cholera...we are dealing with an infectious disease imported from abroad and developed in an environment receptive

to it' (Al-i Ahmad 1984:27). The 'receptive environment' referred to by Al-Ahmad relates to the political, cultural and social climate under the Shah and Pahlavi era (1925-1979) in which western influences were not only highly visible but were systematically encouraged as part of the respective Shahs' modernisation programmes (see chapter 3). Aesthetically approved western cultural markers included the requirement of men to appear clean-shaven in public, in order to appear more western. For women, laws banning the wearing of the *chador* and the *hejāb* in public had been implemented under Reza Shah in 1936. These measures aimed to encourage a more secular and public, cultural aesthetic in Iran. Such policies enraged Shi'a clerics and more religious men and women in Iran, for whom appearing without the *hejāb* was akin to the body being fully exposed. *Gharbzadeh* became a derogatory term to denote one who was 'westernised'. As I learnt during my fieldwork in Iran and in the UK, it remains a commonly used phrase amongst some Iranians today, where it can be adopted in an ironic and or benevolent manner by older generations who might occasionally refer to their children as *khāreji* (foreigner) for adopting western/ 'global' trends, fashion and aesthetics. In these cases of colloquial uses of the term/concept, the associated negative connotations of having foreign associations do not apply, though they re-appear (if they ever left) in the political sphere today.

Today, Occidentalism in Iran finds its most visible manifestation amongst hardliners within the Islamic Republic and their persistent use of political, anti-American rhetoric. Economic sanctions imposed upon Iran by members of the International community since the revolution, which were particularly severe under the Presidency of Ahmadinejad (2005-2013), as well as the general fragility of diplomatic relations between Iran and the west since 1979 all foster a present-day climate in which various conservative factions continue to self-define themselves in terms of a political,

cultural and religious-ideological aversion to ‘the West’. Figure 5.8, Figure 5.9 and Figure 5.10 below show some contemporary examples of how the Occidentalists ethos established during the revolutionary period continues to be used in various visual political campaigns. Figure 5.8 shows a portrayal of lady liberty (the iconic American statue of liberty) as a de-humanised skeleton figure, shown to be ruling the world by brute force. The figure features upon a backdrop of red stripes and a blue square signifying the American flag as well as Iran’s critical stance of American neo-Imperialism. Similarly, Figure 5.9 shows a painted gun decorated in the patterned stripes of the American flag on top of an Iranian-Islamic visual backdrop. The shapes and colours (blue and yellow) visually evoke characteristic Islamic mosques in Iran. Again, the symbolic message equates to American aggression against Iran. In another, more direct treatment of the theme, Figure 10 more bluntly states ‘Down with USA’ in bold English lettering.



Figure 5.8: Wall painting (from early 1980s) outside US Embassy, Tehran. Image source: <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2010/1104/Iran-marks-anniversary-of-US-Embassy-takeover-with-angry-words>. (Accessed: 06/07/14).



Figure 5.9: Wall painting outside former US embassy (2013), Tehran. Image source: <http://blogs.ft.com/photo-diary/tag/gun/>. (Accessed: 06/07/14).



Figure 5.10: Wall painting outside US Embassy, Tehran (2013). Image source: <http://gulfnnews.com/news/region/iran/ayatollah-ali-khamenei-not-optimistic-but-backs-iran-nuclear-talks-1.1250651>. (Accessed: 06/07/14).

In taking the photograph, the material images on the wall also become framed by the photographer. In becoming photographs, they then acquire further layers of mediation.

The images, as digital photographs, will be used online, on a range of news pages from Gulf News' website to the financial times' blog. Iranian women stand here to symbolise the ostensibly changing face of Iranian 'modernity'. This is marked by the various versions of the Islamic head cover which are shown: ranging from the black, full chador (Figure 5.8) to the 'modern' woman of Tehran who wears bright clothes, listens to her iPod headphones and wears sunglasses (Figure 5.9) as well as the more moderate appearing 'in between' type: a girl with a loosely worn head scarf, wearing everyday, 'modern' clothes (Figure 5.10). The presence of the women figures in these examples indicates what in art historical terms is known as 'staffage', whereby human figures are not the primary focus of the image, but are placed in a landscape for allegorical or other effect. On the one hand, these images bear witness to the persistence of Occidentalism ideology in the Iranian visual public sphere, where they visually document the fact that anti-USA murals still exist. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge how the framing and aesthetic juxtapositions of the photographs are another aspect of their political purchase as digitally circulating visual cultural 'objects' of Iran. Entering into global mediascapes, they become implicated, as visual evidence, in media and political narratives about the 'paradoxical nature' of Iranian society, which has posited a view that Iranians are caught between 'tradition' and 'modernity' in an 'Islamic', as opposed to 'western' political and cultural framework. Such images illustrate what Shayegan (1997) deemed to be the 'cultural schizophrenia' of 'Islamic' societies confronting the 'West', despite the fact that this appears a far more simplified perspective of 'Iranianness', than what Iranians living in Iran or abroad express about their own subjectivities.

### **5.5. Engaging existing visual ideologies in photoblogging: digitising visual culture**

Chapter 4 discussed how certain aspects of visual history, such as the legacy of the Iran-Iraq war are being engaged in photoblogging. It is now important to consider how the neo-Orientalist and Occidentalism aspects of Iran's visual-representational history discussed so far in this chapter are treated by Iranian photobloggers, who harness the (digital) medium to their (visual-political) messages.

#### **5.5.1. Diffusing Occidentalism online**

Taking first the Occidentalism (anti-western) ethos. Figure 5.11 conveys a digital photograph exhibited on one of my principal research participant Amir's photoblog, 'Tehran Live' (October 2013 archive). The photograph shows an official poster plastered by government hardliners on a wall in Valiasr Square, a major junction in downtown Tehran in October 2013. The photographic mural depicts US President Obama standing besides an ancient military commander Shemr (a man dressed up and photographed as him), known in Shi'a tradition as an enemy figure responsible for the killing of Imam Hossein at the Battle of Karbala in 680 AD.



Figure 5.11: Tehran Live, November 2013 archive: <http://tehranlive.org/2013/10/04/obama-billboard-in-tehran/>. (Accessed: 20/11/13).

The banner reads in Persian, *Ba Ma Bash, Dar Aman Bash*, 'Be With Us, Be Safe'. Through the captions function on his photoblog, Amir explains to his international viewers how the phonetic coupling of 'ba' with 'ma' constitutes a deliberate word play in Persian on Obama's name. Moreover, the visual pairing of the villainous Shemr with what appears to be a modern day Hossein (Barack Hussein Obama), sends a symbolic message to Iranians that Obama is not the hero Hossein that he appears, but is a villain in disguise. By this visual logic, anyone who trusts Obama can be considered a traitor, an enemy of the Shi'a, and, by extension, of Iran. The image is a contemporary example of what Harris (2004:140) calls a 'photo-icon'; denoting the use of photographs to 'invoke the authority of an exceptional individual' (such as the

Dalai Lama). In the Obama/Shemr image, the Occidentalism ideology is visually installed in the represented bodies of two important male political figures, whose authority and 'aura', the photograph (and its digitally-replicated form on the photoblog) invokes. The image can be seen alongside other ideological aspects of public visual culture in Iran, such as the wall murals and other aspects of state visual culture previously discussed in chapter 4. In combining past and present images and ideologies from Shiite history, such murals, 'stake positions concerning truth and reality', as Gruber (2013: 4) similarly argues in her analysis of a particular public mural depicting the Prophet Muhammad in Tehran.

Photobloggers utilise the digital-visual medium to engage these ideological visual legacies in the virtual public arena. Moreover, by posting this image, Amir modifies its materiality and publicness. Upon being snapshotted as a digital photograph on his iPhone, the original image is transformed into a digital file and is uploaded (in this case in real-time) to his photoblog. Herein marks the beginning of the digital photograph's online public 'social life' or 'biography' within a virtual visual economy (Poole 1997). In this virtual context, the politically-isolationist message of the image as a form of Iranian anti-American sentiment becomes open to negotiation, contestation and critique within a broad (potentially global) viewing public (but also one that remains clearly defined by, and confined to, its online venue). This new public now includes those outside of Iran (both exiled/expat Iranians and foreigners) seeking to rethink the monolithic ideological divide between Iran and 'the West' of Iranian visual history discussed so far (chapters 4 and 5).

Viewer responses reflect Amir's role as digital curator and translator of the image. One viewer remarked: 'I myself saw this banner, but since it's written in

Persian, I couldn't understand the message'<sup>112</sup>. For those unfamiliar with Persian language, or the symbolic aspects of Iranian political culture it represents, Amir serves as cultural interlocutor, translating layers of constructed visual and symbolic meanings between offline visual culture and his online viewing public. Comments by non-Iranian viewers from across the world generally convey a sense of solidarity with these kinds of attempts to extend the viewing experience of everyday scenes in Tehran (and more broadly across Iran) to the rest of the world: 'You post such good pictures, thank you...I truly enjoy knowing your people are just the same as us. In fact, you are more like us than many of the countries we consider "friendly"'.<sup>113</sup> Such comments are, naturally, only made possible by the photograph's new virtual venue (its move or re-materialisation in the above example for instance from a public urban space to a global online space) and tend to proliferate in times of political crises. In such moments, as in the 2009 disputed presidential election discussed in chapter 3, the photoblog becomes a kind of virtual 'message board' in which hegemonic and/or ideological narratives become subject to scrutiny and critique.

The previous chapter (4) showed how from the outset of the Islamic Republic, photography and visual culture have been systematically harnessed to a public construction of Iranian identity. All of these processes have facilitated a process by which hardliners in the Islamic Republic seek to consolidate the image of Iran by highlighting their political and cultural aversion to its perceived 'others', whether the Sunni, the Iraqi and or the 'Westerner'/American. The Obama/Shemr image (and its digital social [after]life online), captures many of these contemporary aspects of Iran's political-visual history, which are centred on the us/them divide and *gharbzadeh* ('west-toxic') rhetoric and continue to be officially propagated by the hardliner

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<sup>112</sup> Viewer comment, Tehran Live, posted 26/10/13.

<sup>113</sup> Viewer comment, Tehran Live, posted 31/07/12.

factions. At the same time, the very presence of the image in this virtual space importantly demonstrates how individuals and groups actively contest these ideologies in the culturally live spaces of the Internet. Photoblogs provide this space for critical cultural engagement for Iranians and ‘westerners’ alike. More broadly, the image also illustrates the point made in the previous chapter (4) about how the digital context modifies the vulnerability of public art (as susceptible to physical defacement, modification or removal), by affording it a digital, renewed or extended life span. The Obama/Shemr image was officially taken down a few days later, presumably by the more ‘moderate’ authorities of President Rouhani (August 2013 to present) who are engaged in diplomatic negotiations with America regarding their nuclear policies and the related issue of sanctions. However, the fact that the digital photograph continues its presence within a virtual public sphere demonstrates how public art, on becoming digitised, is afforded a renewed durability (with varying consequences) within a potentially greater viewing (virtual) public, than that for which it was originally intended.

Through these examples, as Gruber (2013: 28) also suggests in her analysis of public murals in Tehran, the many forms and multiple messages communicated through these kinds of contemporary images in Muslim majority societies are indicative of the various, and at times paradoxical discourses that give shape to a particular vision of ‘Islamic modernity’. In traversing ‘real’ and ‘virtual’ publics, off and online, the photoblog marks a new feature in contemporary Iranian visual culture that seeks to engage with and mediate these official visual representations amongst broader interpretive communities. That a local photographic practice can suitably ‘mediate modernity’ (Pinney 2003: 202) in these kinds of examples, is what arguably confers the status of the Iranian photoblog as a modern Iranian digital vernacular.

## 5.6. Propagating Occidentalism online

At the same time that the photoblog presents a site for articulating an Iranian digital, modern vernacular, it is important to acknowledge that the ‘modernity’ of this vernacular takes a variety of forms and is articulated through a range of subject positions. Other photoblogs do not necessarily reflect the kind of ‘liberal’, cosmopolitan and globally leaning cultural outlook demonstrated by many of my research participants. In what its creator, Peyman Sadeghi describes as an ‘Islamic photoblog’, the ‘Hezbollah Photo’ photoblog introduced in the previous chapter (4) demonstrates how ideologies such as Occidentalism are not necessarily exposed in order to be contested in photoblogs, but can re-emerge and in some cases, are re-invigorated in the new digital context<sup>114</sup>.

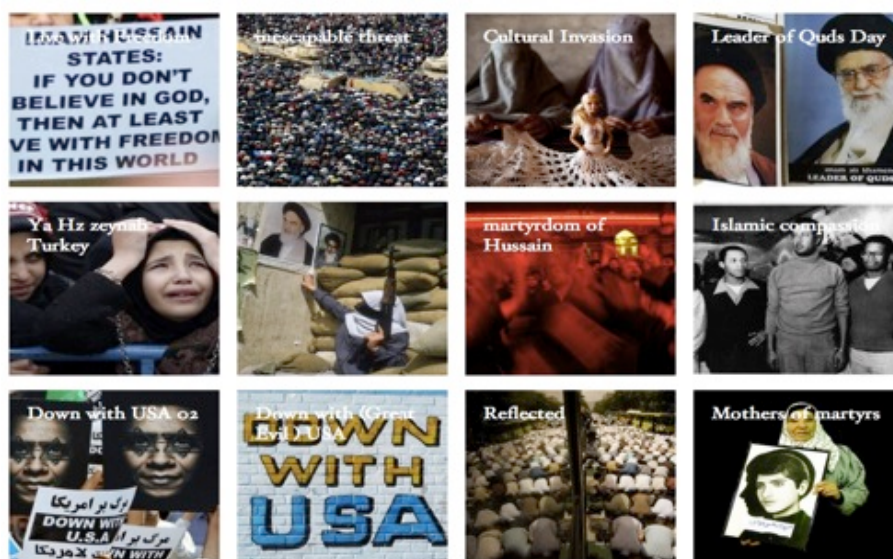


Figure 5.12: Screenshot, cover page, ‘Hezbollah Photo’ photoblog: <http://hezbollahphoto.blog.com>. (Accessed: 08/07/14)

<sup>114</sup> Photoblogs on the Islamic photoblog are a mixture of those taken by its author, Peyman Sadeghi, as well as those taken from other online sources.

Figure 5.12 above shows a screenshot taken from the Hezbollah photoblog's main homepage. It displays the various categories of archives constructed by the photoblogger. Two albums are entitled 'Down with (Great Evil) USA', 'Down with USA 02' and 'Cultural Invasion'. Unlike the self-aware, relative 'objectivity' seen in Amir's treatment of Occidentalism, in which he shows it to be 'at work' in the Obama/Shemr image (Figure 5.11), these titles (and their visual content) indicate the presence of the *gharbzadeh* ('west-toxic') ideological rhetoric discussed earlier in this chapter. The album cover's photographs show the same anti-USA wall painting outside the former US embassy in Tehran as was shown in Figure 5.10, but in this context, these are exhibited as a means of endorsement by the photobloggers. It also shows protest posters featuring President Obama's face with the Star of David (the main symbol of Judaism and the state of Israel) digitally drawn around his eyes in order to signify (and critique) America's political and economic support of Israel. These images are included amidst other albums relating more broadly to Islamic-Iranian ideology, revolutionary history and iconography. The cult of Imam Hossein, the main historic hero of the Shia, Imam Khomeini, The Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988) (see chapter 4), are all aspects which are reconfigured and channelled into a representation of Iran's present-day political struggle with Israel and America via the photoblog. As shown previously to be the case in many Iranian digital contexts in chapter 4, again we see here a visual and symbolic combination of old and new heroes and villains of Iran to make contemporary political points.

To take two further examples from this photoblog, Figure 5.13 below (the album cover for the 'Cultural Invasion' archive), shows a digital photograph of two anonymous Muslim women (though given their style of dress, are probably in Afghanistan). The women appear in the background and are out of focus in the

photograph. They are covered from head to toe in *burqas*, a type of face-covering hejāb specifically worn by women in Afghanistan, and are pictured crocheting an oversized lace skirt for an American ‘Barbie doll’ figure featured in the foreground. The juxtaposition of the blonde, American female figure with the two Muslim female figures, whose burqas locate the image in Afghanistan, poses a strong aesthetic contrast to the viewer. The image establishes fixed, stereotypical representations of both ‘types’ of women, and of the cultures they are meant to represent. The image evokes what Huntington (1993) termed a ‘clash of civilizations’ between ‘Islam’ and the ‘West’, which as I suggested earlier, is a prevalent feature of western media’s visual portrayals of Iranian women.



Figure 5.13: ‘Screenshot, ‘Hezbollah photo’, ‘Cultural Invasion’ archive, untitled: <http://hezbollahphoto.blog.com/archives/206/>. (Accessed: 08/07/14)

Similarly, Figure 5.14 shows another unidentified figure wearing a *burqa*, selling western beauty magazines on the streets of Kabul.



Figure 5.14: Screenshot, 'Hezbollah photo', 'Cultural Invasion' archive, 'Afghanistan, Kabul 2011' <http://hezbollahphoto.blog.com/archives/206/>. (Accessed: 08/07/14)

The only information available to the viewer is that the image is taken from Kabul in 2011. The visual juxtapositions of the conservative Islamic clothing with the magazines depicting the faces of what, at least for the photographer, appear to be 'western' appearing women (although they might not all be), work to suggest that 'Muslim women' are in some sense in the business of being enslaved to the west. This enslavement is symbolised by the depiction of the women from Kabul pictured physically knitting the Barbie doll's dress or selling the magazines (presumably along with the ethos of their political, cultural, and aesthetic sensibilities). Seen amidst the general compositional tone of the photoblog, these images work to incite others to feel angry about this 'cultural invasion' that is shown to be enslaving Islam in neighbouring Afghanistan and, by association, Iran. Peyman hereby encourages his viewers to exercise what he calls an 'Islamic resistance', conceived of beyond the nation of Iran, against these powers, as is also suggested by the title of his second photoblog, 'Resistance photo'<sup>115</sup> (Figure 5.15).

<sup>115</sup> <https://resistancephoto.jux.com>. (Accessed: 08/07/14)

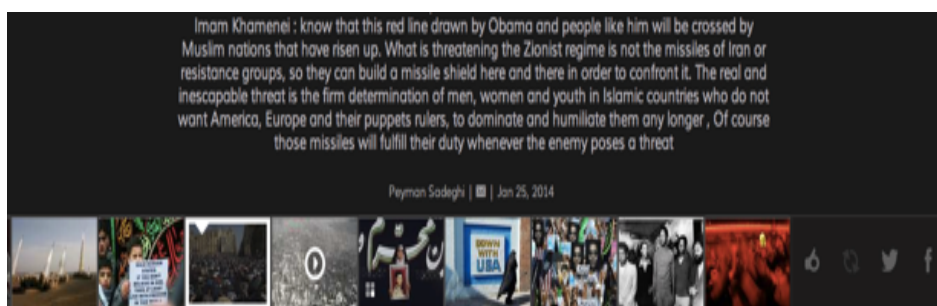


Figure 5.15: Screenshot, ‘Resistance photo’, photoblog: <https://resistancephoto.jux.com/2220427>. (Accessed: 08/07/14).

Speaking of resistance of a specifically ‘Muslim’ kind, Peyman does the opposite of a majority of Iranian photobloggers. By capturing these sentiments, and visually illustrating them through his own as well as others’ digital photographs, he exacerbates the divide spoken of by the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei between ‘Muslim nations’ such as Iran (as well as other, Arab-Muslim contexts such as Palestine and Egypt) and what Khamenei’s quote refers to as the ‘real threat’ and ‘the enemy’: America, Europe and their puppet rulers, who ‘dominate and humiliate’ these nations by attempting to rule over them.

Other contemporary examples that reflect similar emphasis on Iranian-Islamic themes include the ‘Akkās-e Mossalmān’ (Muslim Photographer) group (Figure 5.16). As its title suggests, this online popular digital photography group actively embrace the Iranian-Muslim identity label that many others feel do not need to go hand in hand in categorising Iranians in relation to their religion. This photoblog exhibits very specific types of photographs, which brings aspects of Iranian-Islamic culture, mostly pertaining to Muharram and other Shiite rituals discussed in chapter 4, to the online context. Chapter 6 will explore some of these types of state-sponsored photoblogs and groups in more detail.



Figure 5.16: 'Iranian Muslim Photographer' website: <http://akkasemosalman.ir/1391/10/17/359/>. (Accessed: 02/12/14).

Overall, 'Hezbollah photo' and other types of Iranian-Islamic photoblogs reveal how Occidentalistic ideologies, as well as the self-same schism between Iran, Islam and 'the West' re-emerge and are dealt with differently in a range of photoblogs, as they are amongst the spectrum of Iranian society at large. However, in photoblogs, these kinds of conservative uses reflect a minority 'type'. In general, the vast majority of Iranian photoblogs (including those surveyed as part of this research) seek to challenge, negotiate or altogether collapse the constructed schism between Iran and the west in order to visually push, more widely for Iran's international political, economic and cultural inclusion. One way in which this is achieved is through their playful and 'soft' political (Sreberny and Khiabany 2010) use of aesthetics.

### 5.6.1. Collapsing neo-Orientalism: banal aesthetics

I knew early on that the most effective approach to humanizing Iranians was to show the daily life in my immediate surrounding. Iranian-American comedian Maz Jobrani had a joke about how in the news you never see Iranians do mundane things. Like you tune in to someone named Muhammad in Tehran making a cookie! That's what I wanted to do – to show people making cookies!

(Online interview with LGOIT, [14/10/12])

This statement by LGOIT (a main research participant and former member of the Iranian diaspora in LA, before moving to Germany) directly refers here to the kind of media representations discussed throughout this chapter; namely, that neo-Orientalist or exotic image-types seem to dominate images of Iranians in the western press. As LGOIT describes, this has a somewhat ‘de-humanising’ effect on their identity. Photobloggers employ aesthetic strategies in order to address these images with visual irony. This image-work aims to ‘de-exoticise’ Iran and, by connection, ‘humanise’ Iranians.

Visual strategies of de-exoticisation used by photobloggers often involve turning their lens to banal objects of everyday life. This allows them to counter the hype and relatively ‘extraordinary’ nature of what is usually visually associated with Iran: Islam, the black chador, women’s oppression, religious extremism and nuclear enrichment, discussed earlier in this chapter. In the images shown in Figure 16, LGOIT depicts well-known western brands and commodities such as Coca Cola and HP sauce, as they can be seen in an average Iranian café, shop or home.

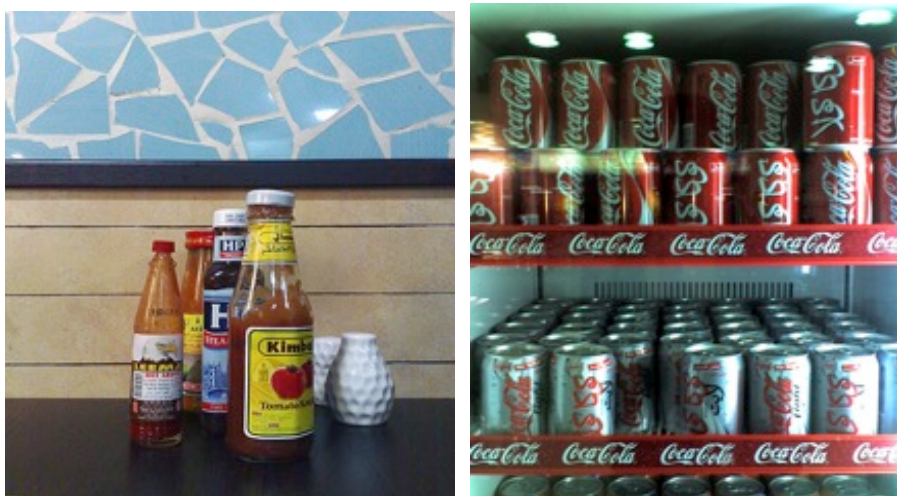


Figure 5.17: Mundane objects of everyday life in Iran, LGOIT May 2009 archive.

These photographs show ‘normal’ objects of everyday life in places that are as much ‘Iranian’ as they could be anywhere else in ‘the West’. Their visual potency is increased through the implicit commentary they offer in the context of economic sanctions, which raise common curiosities abroad about how Iranians actually ‘live’. In addition to showing the photograph as a visual ‘document’, LGOIT goes a step further. As shown in Amir’s interpretation of the Obama/Shemr image, LGOIT hereby positions himself as a cultural broker and ‘in-betweenner’, between Iran and an imagined western viewer to provide context and confer meaning. Making use of captions, LGOIT anticipates and shares in a sense of surprise at the widespread availability of western products such as Coca Cola in Iran, amidst heavy economic sanctions against Iran, particularly during the Ahmadinejad years (2005-2014):

I am amazed at how much business both Coke and Pepsi manage to do in Iran through all wars and political sanctions. They're more powerful than the UN. The Iranian Coke still uses sugar though, which makes it taste better than the corn-syruped American version. (Caption from LGOIT, June 2007 archive)

Chapter 1 introduced the idea of LGOIT as a geographical ‘in-betweenner’, as a member of the Iranian diaspora in LA who has recently moved to Germany, but who was born and grew up in Iran. In light of these movements, LGOIT’s sense of self-aware ‘objective’ regard for Iranian culture suitably demonstrates what Viveiros de Castro (2004) has termed to be a ‘perspectivism’, denoting ‘the ability to look at one’s self as “other”’, and a point of view from which, he suggests, one obtains the ‘ideal view of oneself.’ LGOIT hereby demonstrates the importance of understanding the role of physical location and subject formation in understanding popular photographic practices, evoking Harris’ (2006:698) assertion that ‘Location remains a powerful tool for contextualizing the creative process as embodied experience’. What arguably

makes LGOIT a cultural ‘in-between’ here, is that, unlike in Peyman’s ‘Hezbollah Photo’ discussed above, it is not only Iran that is subject to their scrutiny, but so is the US, whose Coke is ostensibly less tasty than the Iranian one. LGOIT assumes a neutral cultural, in-between ground, comprised of a ‘subjectively objective’ judgment in positing their captioned photograph with a grain of irony. The image of the ‘Iranian coke’ also stands here as a marker of the global-Iranian or ‘local cosmopolitans’ (Ho 2006)<sup>116</sup> which these particular photoblogs, as purveyors of the cosmopolitan, ‘globalised’ Iran, largely seek to represent. This also hints at the contemporary Iranian ‘cultural bricolage’ of identities, that has been identified as a feature of post-revolution and postmodern Iran (Arghavan 2013). LGOIT achieves this by highlighting consumption and lifestyles that are neither specific to ‘the west’ nor lacking in Iran.

Another contemporary example of this deployment of the ‘ordinary’ in popular digital photography on social networks can be seen in the online visual campaign (2013) collectively developed in response to a comment made by Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu. He publically stated how Iranians did not have any freedoms and don’t even wear jeans: ‘I think if the Iranian people had freedom, they would wear jeans, listen to Western music, and have free elections’.<sup>117</sup> Very soon after the comment was made, Iranians, rapidly mobilised on social network sites, posting ‘selfie’ photographs of themselves on their camera phones wearing blue jeans and uploading them on to Facebook. These examples illustrate Miller and Woodward’s (2012) argument about the aesthetics, politics and ‘art’ of the ordinary. In the immigrant context of North London, their own study found that wearing blue jeans was

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<sup>116</sup> Ho uses this term in the historical context of transcultural exchanges in kinship writing and diasporic movements in parts of central and South East Asia, suggesting that it characterizes the hybridity of local encounters with European empires over the past five hundred years.

<sup>117</sup> Full article available at: <http://stream.aljazeera.com/story/201310071822-0023090> (Accessed: 12/10/13).

an important means of embodying an image of ‘ordinariness’ they are often deprived of.

### **5.7. Analysis of the visual history: how Iranian photoblogging occupies a ‘third space’ between national and international ‘mediascapes’**

An isolationist identity, constant fear of war, childish honesty, and political dilemma comprise the different stories we tell of the bewildering and strange times we live in.<sup>118</sup>

For Appadurai (2002), a ‘mediascape’ is the visual culture created by electronic and print media, or ‘the images of the world created by these media, and the way that these come to define “reality”’. Moreover, Appadurai conceives of the imagination as a social practice, ‘existing between sites of agency (individuals) and globally-defined fields of possibility’ (Ibid: 284). In this and the previous chapter, I have discussed how official visual-media representations, emanating from inside Iran and in ‘the West’ commonly propagate monolithic views of what Iran (defined as the Islamic Republic) ostensibly ‘is’ by virtue of what it is not; namely, western, secular, democratic, nor politically and culturally compliant with America and ‘the West’. Circulating within the global imaginary, these representational tropes preclude international awareness of the heterogeneities of life as lived inside the country. For Iranians across the world, this stakes a heavy claim on definitions of ‘local’ cultural identity, affecting how Iranians are viewed in the countries around the world in which they live, even if they have never been to or lived in Iran. It is within this wider indexicality of Iran’s image, where there is little scope for nuance or the ‘ordinary Iranian view, that photobloggers develop their critical consciousness about their culture, which, in turn, becomes the

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<sup>118</sup> Research participant Sohrab Kashani. Online written curatorial statement for a visual art exhibition examining contemporary Iranian identity entitled ‘Subjective truth from Iran’ (21 June-12 July 2013), Centre of Contemporary Art, Tbilisi, Georgia. <http://www.cca.ge/node/68> (Accessed: 05/03/14).

driving force behind many of their digital photographic practices. LGOIT sums up this issue in the following explanation of his practice:

I felt that I had to cancel out, or rather balance out, two flawed approaches in depictions of Iran and Iranians. One narrative was that of a lazy Western media who created a false illusion of Iran as an enemy state. The other was that of the image the Islamic Republic projected of the country, which similarly suggested all Iranians were extremist Muslims who gather around every Friday to chant ‘Death to America’ and ‘Death to Israel’. Something had to be done about this.

(LGOIT Interview, [14/10/12])

As LGOIT explains here, photobloggers like him (excluding the more politically and culturally conservative type of photoblog such as ‘Hezbollah Photo’ and others) cannot relate or acquiesce neither the image of the Iranian self-propagated at home or in the west. At the same time, as ‘globalised’ Iranians, they feel the need to speak up and to present their own version of Iran from below. Another female research participant, Kiana, explained how: ‘The media can change views about a whole nation. These new online photo-sharing systems (photoblogs) are the same, but this time, they provide *us* with the opportunity to show who we really are’. The question of who Iranians ‘really are’ is not something necessarily answered by photobloggers. Rather, they see their role as one of visually documenting the diversity of life in Iran in the hope that viewers will respond, as they invariably do, to their call to re-envision it with an open mind. In light of these findings, photobloggers such as LGOIT, Kiana, and others discussed throughout this thesis, occupy what I call a ‘third’ (representational and socio-political) space existing between established visual tropes. The concept of the third space I use as a means of conceptualizing the ‘in between’ cultural space occupied by Iranian photobloggers is a notion inspired, in part, by Bhabha’s (1994) notion of the ‘third space’ in postcolonial literary theory. Bhabha’s third space is one of ‘hybridity’ and ambivalence, inferring peoples’ ability to amalgamate unique/binary sets of affinities,

and negotiate dominant systems of power. My use of a ‘third space’ here similarly represents a hybridized, or rather, an amalgamated form of agency that is salvaged directly from existing narrative frameworks, or various ‘representational fields’<sup>119</sup> (Harris 1999) which concern post-revolutionary Iranian visual history and cultural identity<sup>120</sup>. In this space, Iranian photobloggers propose a counter-narrative of aspirational aesthetics deployed through their photoblogs and related audio-visual media, including Facebook, YouTube videos, Instagram and Flickr. In this space, they yield their own version of the Iranian ‘everyday’ which intends to serve as cure or remedy to the dominant epistemologies that have structured ways of seeing Iran.

The notion of the third space also works on another level. Photobloggers’ digital photographic practices also occupy a hybrid *technical* ground between pristine definitions of professional and amateur photography, in what Cooley (2006) has suitably termed ‘amateur-professionals’ or ‘professional-amateurs’ referring to the boundaries blurred by widespread digital image-making today. It is the general ‘in-betweenness’ of these individuals and the ways in which they draw on their ‘underdog’ status as popular digital photographers, who platform the everyday views from below, which constitutes an important part of photoblogging’s social efficacy as an alternative visual system of communicating visual information about Iran (see chapters 8 and 9).

While their practices are in some sense ‘of the moment’, the kind of social critique demonstrated by photobloggers is not unique to either the contemporary period, nor to the digital technologies used. As discussed in chapter 1, ideological claims to representing Iranian identity post-1979 have long been subject to multi-

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<sup>119</sup> Harris defines the concept of ‘representational fields’ in relation to her work on conflicting representations of Tibetan identity after 1959. She describes it as a space wherein competing depictions of (Tibetan) culture have been mobilised for the sake of political agendas.

<sup>120</sup> The theme of the cure/remedy borrows here from Pinney (2008; 2012), who discusses how photography in India moved from being regarded by the colonial state as a cure, to a curse or poison, due to its dangerous ability to store problematic evidence, such as that of political struggles and unrest in the colonial habitus.

dimensional forms of negotiation and contestation by Iranians in many cultural arenas, inside and outside of Iran. Most relevant to this study are the parallel contemporary activities of urban, middle-class Iranian youth in many fields of popular cultural production, from music, theatre, poetry and street art (Sreberny et al. 2013). Socially-conscious digital photographic practices beyond photoblogging more broadly forms a salient part of this contemporary cultural critique (Reshid and Araghi 2008), and it is within this flourishing urban subcultural milieu, largely defined along generational lines and access to global cultural flows through the Internet, that Iranian photoblogs ought to be situated. Online forums such as blogs and social networks today provide a ‘melting pot’ of competing narratives in which a variety of these stereotypes, propagated in the media, are being revisited by a new generation of Iranians growing up with social media as part of their everyday lives, and many of whom are widely aware of and actively engaged in negotiating issues of cultural representation.

In the wake of Iranian blogging in the early 2000s, some Iranian journalists claimed that Iranian youth, like young people at large, are becoming increasingly desensitised to politics and increasingly using such media for entertainment, distractions from reality and or narcissistic pursuits (see chapter 1). These opinions reflect earlier claims in the 1970s in the field of (visual) media ecology that the proliferation of media had created a world wherein people regarded it as entailing ‘self-contained environments, having little correspondence with other realities or environments’ (Carpenter 1972:44-45). Though there may be good reason to refute these claims in any socio-cultural context, Iranian photobloggers today expose its theoretical redundancy with particular potency. They demonstrate an active and self-aware engagement with media representations of their country’s history and cultures in conversation with wider, offline political and socio-economic realities which impact

upon their lived experiences, inside and outside of Iran. Photography is often deliberately posited alongside dominant visual-media ecologies running in parallel with theirs, including contemporary art photography, graffiti, film and other media discussed in chapter 4. Popular practices like photoblogging perform this kind of visual negotiation, demonstrating what Mirzoeff's (2011) idea of a 'counterhistory' of visibility from below, as a way of de-centering and actively interrogating existing hegemonic discourses, including the use of photography as historical 'evidence' in official narratives of national and global history.

It is important to assess the extent to which, in moving in to the 'third' space, photobloggers' practices reflect what Dabashi (2010) has suggested (in the context of contemporary Iranian visual artists and filmmakers) to be a 'post-ideological' phase of Iranian visual self-representation. Drawing on Spivak (1988), Dabashi suggests that the 'epistemic violence' of dominant (neo-colonial) narrations are being challenged by new forms of self-representational, Iranian visual knowledge-production (Ibid: 155-178). Whilst some, such as LGOIT, Amir and Kiana discussed in this chapter, seem to demonstrate this post-ideological stance, in their emphasis on the mundane and heterogeneity of life in Iran as social fact<sup>121</sup> (see also chapters 7 and 8), others such as 'Hezbollah Photo' go the other way and seek to re-instate these ideologies through their digital-visual propagation of hardline Islamic-Iranian rhetoric. Overall, this thesis suggests that this latter type presents a minority in the Iranian photoblogosphere and, as subsequent chapters will show, collapsing and moving beyond ideological narratives is often intended (chapter 8) and appears to be visually achieved (chapter 9) between the work of photobloggers and their various types of viewers from across the globe.

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<sup>121</sup> On modernity as 'social fact' within people's 'historical self-understanding' see Keane (2003).

Empirical findings presented in this chapter also contribute anthropological perspectives to contemporary understandings of digital photography online. Scholars working on Flickr have suggested that subcommunities of popular photographers evolve in such online contexts out of a feeling of ‘collaborative experience’ and shared notions of ‘everyday aesthetics’ (Murray 2008). However, Iranian photobloggers’ sense of sub-community is in some sense pre-determined by their culture, age, class and shared interest in doing justice to the image of Iran. It is through this ethos that they take, upload, arrange and share their digital photographs. In Iranian photoblogs, a ‘burden of representation’ (Tagg 1988) is something actively taken on by Iranian photobloggers as a historically self-aware, socio-cultural obligation. Here, they make use of what scholars working on Flickr rightly suggest to be the overall ‘publicness’ of these platforms which are designed for ‘photo exhibition’ (Van House 2007), but to visually perform very specific kinds of cultural work indicative of digital photography’s indexical capacities. The relationship identified in this and the previous chapter between post-revolutionary visual history and its direct employment in photoblogging, extends social understandings of popular online photography today from what has been understood as mere ‘life chronicling’ (Van House 2007: 2721) towards more serious forms of engagement with cultural identity politics. It also demonstrates the notion raised in chapter 1 about the importance of employing a diachronic approach (which incorporates an awareness of historical development within contemporary, media and social change) to the ethnographic study of media in the present.

Finally, photobloggers’ activities raise wider anthropological questions about the kinds of community-building that are being transnationally and transculturally constructed and negotiated by Iranians through popular digital photographic practices

online. The explanation given by Kiana, cited above – that photoblogs ‘provide *us* with opportunity to show them who we really are’ – specifically refers to the everyday, self-representing Iranian subject to whom she feels connected, and not say, to the Iranian national body, or other kinds of conservative religious Iranian photobloggers discussed in this chapter.

Iranain photobloggers conceive of their particular ‘imagined community’ (Anderson 1983) not as participation in the nation state, but as a transnational feeling of culturally belonging to Iran, realized through the digital photographs that are shared and commented upon online. This comprises their ‘civil contract of photography’ (Azoulay 2008), where photography builds relations and ‘citizenship’ between individuals in relation to the power that governs them. The social processes that stem from these connections indicate ‘cultural intimacy’ and a ‘social poetics’ at work (Herzfeld 2005). At the same time, the very concept of the third space introduced in this chapter problematises the structure-agency binary, which sees what Herzfeld (2005) calls ‘creative dissent’ as linked to and/or in conversation with the nation state (see also chapter 6). Photoblogging activities discussed throughout this chapter have shown how a variety of stances towards the Iranian nation *as well as* to the west, move beyond a simple critique of, or severance with either. Iranian photoblogging thus reveals a more complex, transnational process of subject formation in relation to systems of power taking place through photography – through what Azoulay (2008) calls the ‘citizenship of photography’ – than simply one taking place strictly inside Iran, or pitted against the Iranian state. These findings tie into broader understandings concerning the ongoing complexities of contemporary Iranian society at large (Adelkhah 1999; 2009; Manoukian 2012, Olszewska 2013).

## **5.8. Summary**

This chapter, and the previous (4), have presented and critically explored a genealogy of Iran's post-1979 visual-representational history, stemming from inside and outside of Iran. Whilst the previous chapter focused on the internal dynamics of post-revolutionary nation building through visual culture, this chapter has surveyed another important area: the competing image of Iran and 'Iranianness' constructed by international/western media, from the revolution of 1979 to the present, and particularly in the post-9/11 era. That both the Iranian state and 'the West' (with due sensitivity to the use of both terms in this context) were in a sense, equitable perpetrators in constructing monolithic images of Iranians of a certain 'type', is an instrumental factor in this thesis' overall argument that popular photographic image-makers today, at the 'liberal' and 'conservative' ends of the socio-political spectrum, draw their 'need to speak' from a palette of national *and* international visual representations stemming from aspects of this history discussed in these chapters. Though photobloggers' treatments of this visual context vary according to their own subject positions (just as some try to open up national boundaries, others desire to barricade them), the past remains an important component of the on-going negotiation and re-working of Iranian identity seen in photoblogs and, the 'Iranian Internet' (Akhavan 2013) at large. I have shown how photobloggers carve out a middle ground, what I call a 'third space', between official national and international visual narratives, in which they posit their individual subjective views of the country in ways I will explore further in chapter 8. This entanglement, of the national and the international in individuals' daily lives and experiences, is central to the work of Iranian photobloggers.

CHAPTER 6. ‘TOURNAMENTS OF VALUE’<sup>122</sup>: THE COMPETITIVE  
SPACES AND PLACES OF CONTEMPORARY IRANIAN  
PHOTOGRAPHY

**6.1. Introduction**

This chapter presents findings from fieldwork conducted in Iran and online. It focuses on the visual-cultural politics of contemporary Iranian photography. It presents this as a competitive arena wherein official and popular photographic visual narratives compete and intercede with one another with various political, commercial and moral purposes. The chapter begins by describing the various visual economies in which various photographic narratives about Iran are enmeshed and become commoditised, inside and outside of the country. This is discussed in the context of international and national photography competitions and organisations, which determine, in various ways, the ‘value’ of certain images of Iran. In light of what many Iranian photobloggers perceive to be the respective deficiencies in these official contexts, as well as in wider offline socio-political and economic conditions in Iran, they establish their own informal contexts for photography. The chapter moves to discuss these alternative digital spaces of/for Iranian photography in the second half of the chapter and concludes by examining the value that digital exhibitions are perceived to bring to contemporary Iranian popular photographic practices and discourses.

**6.2. The cultural politics of Iran’s official visual economy**

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<sup>122</sup> ‘Tournaments of Value’ is a phrase I borrow from Appadurai (1986), who employs the concept to denote a ‘special arena’ made up of periodic events for expressing value. For Appadurai, the Kula system of exchange in the Western Pacific is the paradigm of this concept. I use the phrase to title this chapter on the competing and contested spaces of contemporary Iranian photography, inside and outside of Iran, wherein the ‘value’ of images of Iran appears as a commodity.

Poole (1997) defines a ‘visual economy’ as the political economic and social matrices in which photographs operate, and which pattern their production, circulation and consumption. Chapter 4 introduced the notion that the Iranian state has constructed its own national visual economy in the post-revolutionary period (1979-present), through which it manufactures and commoditises images of ‘authentic’ Iranian subjectivity along Shiite-Iranian lines. As previously discussed, official cultural production in Iran in the post-revolutionary period is generally administered by the Vezārat-e Farhang va Ershād-e Islami (Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance). More specifically in the context of art production, Hunter (1992) has shown how in addition to ‘Islamicizing’ Iran’s public cultural life, the state has actively installed a ‘revolutionary spirit’ in the country’s artistic life since the revolution of 1979, through which all artistic production is officially channeled. In this view, artistic expression in Iran is endorsed insofar as it advances the goals of the revolution. The introductory statement to the First National Painting Biennial in Tehran in 1991 conveys how the state has attempted to define its own brand of domestic artistic identity based on perceptions of cultural authenticity:

Revision of values and authenticities is neither an artistic and mental reaction, nor is it weakness towards modernism. It is rather a strong attempt to achieve an artistic identity, which is appropriated and understood based on visual and subjective frameworks originating from our cultural authenticity.<sup>123</sup>

This ‘authenticity’ was to be achieved in art as it was to be deployed in public visual culture at large (detailed in chapter 4), and is an ethos that characterises official aspects of Iranian art production, from its visual themes, to its aesthetic references, funding schemes and exhibition contexts.

In light of these conditions, many official art and photography exhibitions and conferences in the country since the 1980s and 90s have celebrated traditional, Islamic

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<sup>123</sup> From the First Biennial of Iranian Painters, Tehran, *Markaz-e Honarha-ye Tajassumi*, 1371/1992, as quoted in Keshmirshekan (2013):147.

cultural values and a kind of ‘Irano-Islamic’ art (Abdolhamid 2006), based on a discourse of *muta’āhhid* or ‘committed’ revolutionary art. This was defined in strict contradistinction to “Western” art, which in the pre-revolutionary Pahlavi era, had welcomed in Euro-American cultural and artistic influences to the country (see chapter 3 on the cultural context of the Pahlavi-era and chapter 5 on post-revolutionary Iranian Occidentalism). Contemporary Iranian artists and photographers in Iran routinely encounter this framework, within which many of them are used to officially operating. In the discussion below, I examine how these official rubrics are seen in many public photographic activities in Iran, and which form part of the wider visual climate of contemporary digital photographic practices inside Iran.

### **6.3. Official and state-sponsored popular digital photographic activities in Iran**

State-sponsored photography competitions for amateurs in Iran are not new to the digital age, though they have increased due to the increased uptake in popular photography in the wake of widely available digital technologies<sup>124</sup>. In 1974 (five years before the establishment of the Islamic Republic), the then Supreme Consultative Committee of Culture and Art established the Iranian Youth Cinema Society (IYCS) (Anjoman-e Sinemā-ye Javānān-e Iran) was established in order to facilitate growing interest in filmmaking and amateur photography. After the revolution, the organisation was revamped under the new auspices of the Islamic state. In 1985 it established its central statutes as follows: (i) to include encouraging the creativity of Iranian youth in line with the cultural values of the Islamic Republic (ii) to train youths in order to improve their cinema culture (iii) to offer training courses and hold regional and

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<sup>124</sup> Interview with retired filmmaker and editor for Iranian state TV now based in Esfahan (30/10/12).

national annual festivals, extending its reach beyond Iran<sup>125</sup>. (Figure 6.1). The IYCS began with four offices in Tehran and now has more than sixty regional offices nationwide. Representing Iran, IYCS is a member of the International Federation of Photographic Art (FIAP);<sup>126</sup> an amateur photography international network established in Belgium in 1946, with now over 85 national associate members. The IYCS organisation's activities and networks paved the way for the founding of the International Iran Photo Agency (IPA), an offshoot of the IYCS founded in 2003 by fine art photographer and university professor of photography Alireza Karimi Saremi, based in Tehran.<sup>127</sup>



Figure 6.1: IYCS home page, <http://www.iycs.ir> (Access date: 21/06/14).

<sup>125</sup> For further information regarding the activities of the organization see <http://www.iycs.ir> (Accessed: 20/06/14).

<sup>126</sup> See <http://www.fiap.net/index-en.php>. (Accessed: 20/06/14).

<sup>127</sup> See <http://arksphoto.com/index.html>. (Accessed: 20/06/14).

Today, the more recently established ‘Young Photographer’s Club’<sup>128</sup> (Bāshgāh-e Akkāśān-e Javān) is a contemporary offshoot of the original IYCS (Figure 6.2). The YPHC is another prominent state-facilitated photographic community aimed at facilitating official amateur, youth photographic activities in Iran.

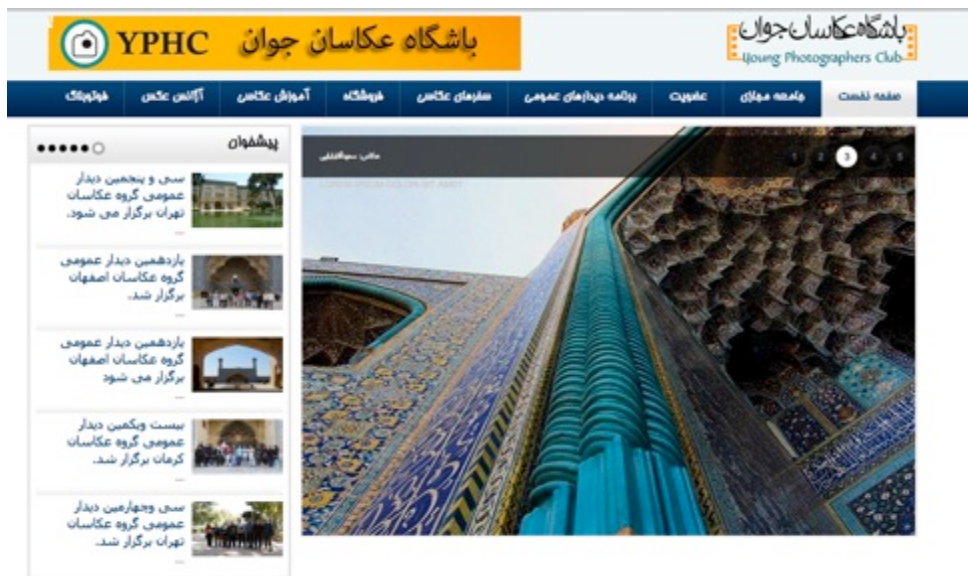


Figure 6.2: YPHC homepage, Young Photographer’s Club, <http://www.yphc.ir/>. (Access date: 21/06/14).

The organisation is run via its online website, but is directly linked to many offline activities. It arranges group meetings in Tehran and other major cities, online competitions with rewards of gold coins (an established method of reward in Iran) as well as photo tours in specifically organised (and officially approved) locations. The members meet with a professional group leader and participate in photographic practices that operate within the lines of the Iranian state’s guidelines of Islamic modesty. To take one example, which illustrates how these groups rely upon online methods for organisation, Figure 6.3 shows a timetable of one YPHC group, the

<sup>128</sup> <http://www.yphc.ir/>. (Access date: 21/06/14).

‘Caspian’ group’s, meeting in March of the Iranian-Islamic year 1393 (2014). Figure 6.4 and Figure 6.5 show participants posing for an official group photo.

**CASPIAN GROUP PLANS PUBLIC MEETING IN ۹۳ YEARS**

باشگاه عکاسان جوان با هدف آشنایی و تعامل بیشتر اعضا و استفاده از تجارب یکدیگر اقدام به برگزاری دیدارهای عمومی با محوریت عکاسی نموده است.

| Hours | Place to visit        | Location                     | Program              | Join            |
|-------|-----------------------|------------------------------|----------------------|-----------------|
| 14:00 | Surrey, the Caspian   | The Water Village congestion | Meet and Photography | Friday 93/06/10 |
| 7:00  | (Surrey, the Imam (AS | Rainbow Falls                | Meet and Photography | Friday 93/06/21 |
| 7:00  | GR, the Qods          | New stone waterfall BID      | Meet and Photography | Friday 93/07/18 |
| 6:00  | (Surrey, the Imam (AS | Mineral Springs Surat        | Meet and Photography | Friday 93/07/25 |

**Note:** Due to weather conditions and possible removal or relocation programs there  
Please plan to bring appropriate clothing and footwear  
All entrance fee is the responsibility of the Member

Figure 6.3: Timetable of activities for Caspian Group Public Meeting, March 2014.

State-sponsored exhibitions, competitions and organised tours across the country are also on the rise today in Iran. These differ from the kinds of informal photo tours described in chapter 3. Whilst the latter are largely self-sponsored and collectively organised, the former are subsidised by the state, Figure 6.4 and Figure 6.5 from the YPHC website, shows how youth activities taking place in accordance with the state are encouraged and sponsored. Participants are provided with an Iranian version of first class, or ‘V.I.P’ (as it is known in Iran) transport in their trips to various historic, natural and religious sites in order to carry out their photographic practices (Figure 6.6). Amir (one of my main research participants and a prominent photoblogger based in Tehran) explained the following in relation to state-sponsored tours:

Most of these official photography tours are held in ancient places around Iran, natural places and places specifically for rituals and ceremonies like ‘Ashura. Sometimes prominent photographers who are not members of the official

website or group (like the YPC) are especially invited to participate in these tours to share their knowledge and skills with others.

(Online interview with Amir Sadeghi, [15/08/13])



Figure 6.4: General meeting of photographers in northern Tehran, with thirty selected participants, aimed at understanding and meeting with members. <http://www.yphc.ir/news/1076-ی-دار-د-ی-ن-و-چ-ه-ار-م-ی-س-ش-د-ب-ر-گ-ز-ار-ت-ه-ر-ان-ع-ک-اس-ان-گ-ر-و-ه-ی-ع-م-وم>.html. (Accessed: 18/10/14).



Figure 6.5: Thirty-fifth general meeting held in Tehran, Golestan Palace, Group photo.  
<http://www.yphc.ir/news/1082-ش-د-بر-گزار-ت-ه-ر-ان-ع-ک-اس-ان-گ-ر-و-ه-ی-ع-م-وم-ی-دار-د-ی-ن-و-پ-ن-چ-م-ی-س-1082>  
 (Accessed: 10/11/14).



Figure 6.6: Members of the ‘Fars group’ photo tour travelling by ‘VIP’ coach across Iran, organised through the Young Photographer's Club

As Amir explains above, the places deemed suitable for these kinds of official photographic activities are of historical, natural or religious and cultural significance. Again, the Shiite festival of ‘Ashura is a prominent visual subject highly subsidised by the state. State-sponsored photography festivals and competitions are also an important aspect of ‘top-down’ photography activities in Iran. Two examples I came across during my fieldwork included the ‘Ashura Picture Exhibition contest’ (2012) and ‘Photo Festival Revolution and War’ (2012), both held in Tehran, as well as an exhibition organised by Chilick dedicated to Iranian mourning ceremonies for the martyrdom of Imam Hossein. Entitled ‘Like This Wine’ (*hamcho-in may*), this exhibition was held in the diplomatic gallery of the Economic Cooperation Organisation’s (ECO) Cultural Institute headquarters in Tehran in January 2013. Two official posters of the exhibition are shown in Figure 6.7. It showcases thirty-three

photographers from the Chilick photo agency. According to the official press release, the exhibition's aim was to 'present the proper rituals held by the Iranian people during the mourning season for Imam Hossein and his companions', responding to an allegation made by Islamic Studies scholars in Iran that the mourning ceremonies have deviated from their original and 'proper' procedures over the past few decades.<sup>129</sup> It then became a travelling exhibition across Iran.



Figure 6.7: Posters for 2<sup>nd</sup> Group Exhibition 'Like this Wine' (*hamcho-in may*) of 'Ashura mourning rituals organised by Chilick photo agency, January 2013, Tehran.

Amir explained how photography festivals run under the auspices of the state are also held in big cities across Iran throughout the year. The city's festival committee invites photographers to submit photographs and, over the course of a few days, a jury judges and rewards winners accordingly. During the festival period, photographers stay in

<sup>129</sup> <http://www.presstv.com/detail/2013/01/08/282431/eco-mounts-'Ashura-photo-exhibition/> (Accessed: 20/16/14).

hotels for free and their food and expenses are paid for by the associated government organisation, as part of the festival. Participants take part in photo tours during the festival, where they are invited to visit neighboring cities, villages and historic sites, free of charge.<sup>130</sup> These kinds of activities are a far reach from the informal, self-sponsored photo tours described in chapter 3.

The websites [doorbin.net](http://doorbin.net)<sup>131</sup> (*doorbin* meaning camera in Persian) shown in Figure 6.8 and Chilick (the name referring to the phonetic sound of a camera ‘click’ with a Persian accent [Figure 6.9]) are further contemporary examples of photography agencies administered in compliance with the state. Chilick has been growing in prominence over the past few years. In the Islamic calendar year of 1387 (2008), the website was officially awarded the title of the best artistic website in the second ‘Festival of Digital Media’ by the Information Technology Improvement Centre, of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance in Iran (Vezārat-e Farhang va Ershād-e Islami). In its ‘About’ section, it states how it aims to ‘offer official activities in photography and cultural and artistic media in the country’.<sup>132</sup> It also has its own official offshoot photoblog, [www.photoblog.ir](http://www.photoblog.ir) (Figure 6.9) which is linked to its main website. This particular photoblog showcases images from aspiring photographers from across the various regions of Iran, whose photographs do not in any way threaten the officially sanctioned parameters of Islamic-aesthetic taste and judgment. In visually keeping with the overall Islamic cultural ethos, this photoblog (as opposed to the greater majority of Iranian photoblogs) exhibits very specific types of photographs, mostly pertaining to Muharram and other Shiite rituals (see chapter 4 on the presence of Shiite iconography in public visual culture in Iran). Once this photoblog site is

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<sup>130</sup> Online interview with Amir Sadeghi (15/08/13).

<sup>131</sup> <http://doorbin.net>

<sup>132</sup> [http://chilick.ir/index.php?page=aboutus.php&lang\\_id=en](http://chilick.ir/index.php?page=aboutus.php&lang_id=en)

virtually entered, it automatically plays audio clips of recorded Shiite lamentation songs mourning the martyrdom of Imam Hossein at the battle of Karbala. These are interlaced with sound clips recorded from ritual processes, of men crying and wailing.<sup>133</sup> These aspects form part of the overall *mis-en-scène* of the photoblog space (Cohen 2005) and its being ‘galleried’ (Miller 2001) in a certain way to reflect its socio-cultural positioning, in this case, vis-à-vis the Islamic Republic’s politico-aesthetic rubrics.



Figure 6.8: Doorbin.net homepage. <http://doorbin.net> (Retrieved 08/11/13).



<sup>133</sup> See <http://vanphoto.photoblog.ir> for an example of this.

Figure 6.9: Chilick photo agency home page,  
[http://www.chilick.com/index.php?page=home.php&lang\\_id=fa](http://www.chilick.com/index.php?page=home.php&lang_id=fa). (Accessed: 10/11/14).

Examples shown here convey how the Iranian government seeks to coalesce digital photographic activities with its own sets of officially approved social, cultural and artistic programmes. In Figure 6.9 taken from the Chilick website, we see a specially featured section of the website dedicated to the British photojournalist Don McCullin (b.1959). McCullin serves here as a cited source of inspiration for budding and current Iranian photographers. This forms part of a broader incorporation of theoretical and practical photographic knowledge drawn from a variety of eminent western and Iranian photojournalists who are used as sources of inspiration and learning from Iranian online photographic communities, groups and clubs, to university degree courses such as those offered by the university of Tehran. Many online articles relating to photography by western theorists can also be accessed and downloaded via these Iranian websites.

These local photography agencies host offline photography competitions, group exhibitions and organise a range of activities for aspiring amateur photographers inside Iran. Existing in contradistinction to online global platforms such as Flickr's similar facilitating of photography-based social activities, these Iranian sites operate within officially sanctioned aesthetic rubrics (see Figure 6.10 below).

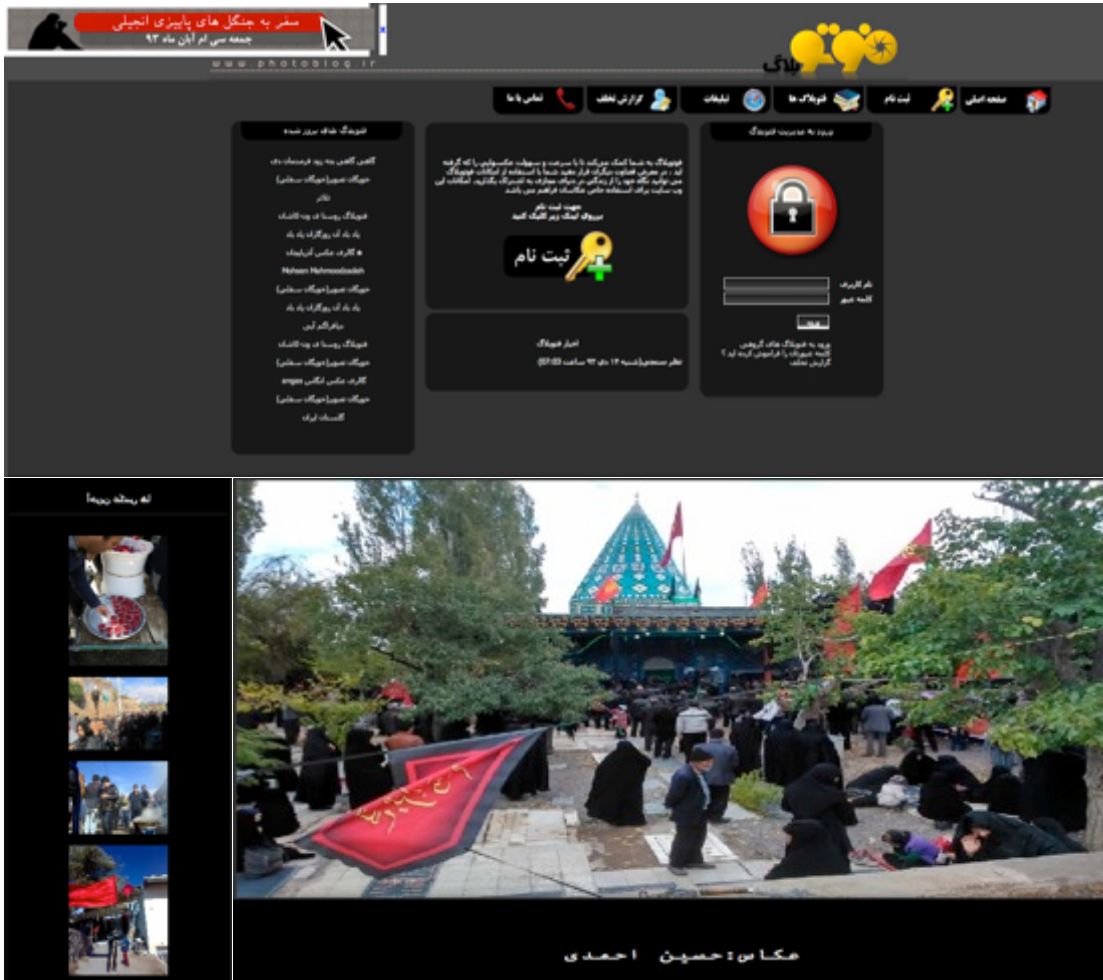


Figure 6.10: Photoblog.ir, sponsored by Chilick.com. <http://www.photoblog.ir/> Home page and gallery: <http://vanphoto.photoblog.ir/559340.htm>. (Accessed: 10/11/14).

Such efforts mobilise people's enthusiasm for new digital participatory cultures to a self-referential pursuit of national consolidation (Akhavan 2013), which has the joint effect of aiming to channel uses of social media away from politically subversive activities, as was seen on a wide scale in Iran in June 2009. As was discussed in chapter 3, photography and digital-visual communications were instrumental at this time in undermining the presidential legitimacy of Ahmadinejad and in expressing needs for democratic rights and political reform in the country. Some young people I spoke with in Iran explained how they felt that popular and more professional

photographers alike engage in these official, state-sanctioned photographic activities for financial support and or public reputation.<sup>134</sup>

The state's policy towards amateur photography shown through its well-funded and carefully administered organisations, competitions and activities forms part of its overall multi-faceted attempts to govern cultural public life through incentives and competitions. Adelpkhah (1999:139) has noted how competition plays a prominent role in processes of socialisation in Iran. Surveying a range of state-sponsored public activities, from Quranic competitions (quotation, comprehension and recital) to Television broadcast 'competition of the week' (a general knowledge programme which has become one of the public's most closely followed programmes) and the culture of heroism promoted in both traditional and modern sports, Adelpkhah argues that 'the public space is in fact imbued with this idea of competition'. As a product of social transformations brought about by a range of issues including political and economic change, oil exploitation, population growth as well as the expansion of the telecommunications sector, an increasing culture of individualism in Iran (based on a self-reflexivity entrenched within an Islamic political framework) has given rise to what she calls a 'fever of competition' in the public space in its particular manifestation of modernity. With this focus, Adelpkhah nuances the notion of 'top-down' authority in Iran by showing how it has rooted itself deep in the socio-cultural fabric of everyday life, at once modulating (within politic-ethical and religious frameworks) the very culture of individualism it promotes: 'Regulated competition...mediates and promotes the individualising process and the relationship between that and the process of rationalisation, bureaucratisation and the creation of an (Islamic) public space' (Ibid: 146).

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<sup>134</sup> Interview with 28 year old male photoblogger in Tehran (30/10/12).

Echoing these observations in the digital landscape, Akhavan (2013) shows how multi-dimensional cultural policies of the Islamic Republic are played out on the ‘Iranian Internet’ (see chapter 1). She gives examples of online versions of the kinds of state-sponsored competitions and initiatives described by Adelhah, as outlined above. Akhavan however suggests that these digital strategies are aimed at youths, with the intention of making the regime’s cultural and political values, ‘relevant to the contemporary new media moment’ (Ibid: 49). The state latches on to this enthusiasm for (and ‘bottom up’ development of) nascent digital popular and participatory cultures and, like many other areas of cultural production, attempts to channel them towards the consolidation of the national cultural and Islamic values (Sreberny and Torfeh 2013). Akhavan also shows how competitions and initiatives facilitated online by the state aim to target a specific age group with the regime’s cultural and political values, making them ‘relevant to the contemporary new media moment’. She gives the example of the National Organisation for Youth, a state entity, which sponsored a blogging competition on the theme of ‘Imam [Khomeini] and Youth’, awarding prizes of gold coins for the top five blogs and a trip to Mecca to perform pilgrimage for the top prize<sup>135</sup>. Her examples can be viewed as analogous to the kind of youth activities described above.

Many young Iranians living inside Iran with an interest in photography take part in these official groups, tours and competitions for various reasons, as will be illustrated below. Others clearly feel frustrated at their lack of freedom and narrow focus on promoting a reproduction of state-approved (and sponsored) visual discourses pertaining to Islam and Shiism. In practice however, my research found that this latter category tends to be more prevalent amongst those who no longer live in Iran. For this

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<sup>135</sup> For further examples of top-down online cultural initiatives see chapter 4 of this thesis as well as Akhavan (2013), chapter 3.

category of photobloggers, the visual freedoms they experience abroad with regards to opportunities for exhibitions translate to frustration and disappointment when they return to Iran and its strictly controlled cultural sphere. In order to illustrate this point, the following discussion draws on two examples from my fieldwork interviews that demonstrate different attitudes to this predicament. One participant (let's call him Arash) is a male, middle-class popular photographer in his late twenties who was born in Tehran but now lives in a European capital city. Another is a female photographer of similar class, age and background who was born and continues to live in Tehran (let's call her Maryam).

#### **6.3.1.1. Ethnographic vignette: Arash and Maryam**

Arash and Maryam virtually knew one another from their mutual participation in a range of Tehran-based online photography groups and social networks (the kinds detailed later in this chapter). Arash is a keen photoblogger and active member of Iranian online photographic communities. He travels to Iran whenever he can to partake in photographic activities inside the country. He relayed the following story to me from his personal experience.

One warm July afternoon in Tehran, Arash was out taking photographs with a photoblogger friend of his, Ali, from another province in Iran, whom he had grown up with in Tehran. Ali had travelled to Tehran to visit Arash for a few days while Arash was in the country. A main purpose of their meeting up was to go out shooting photographs together for their photoblogs. The two young men were walking in Vanak Square in northern Tehran, capturing things which caught their eye, made them stop and look or invited their curiosity as to what Arash described as the 'hidden story' behind the moment of capture.<sup>136</sup> They came across an old man knelt down to pray

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<sup>136</sup> Online interview with Arash (30/09/12).

with his head on the ground. Ali immediately began setting up his shot to photograph the man praying. For Arash however, this particular moment had made him stop and think. Perhaps Ali had found the scene beautiful Arash thought – he might even try to sell it at some point to an international photo agency like World Press Photo. Although Arash had been taking hundreds of digital snapshots that day, he consciously decided *not* to take the photograph, but to leave the elderly man to his private moment of faith. ‘Why should he interrupt this moment, which was nothing to do with him’ he thought. ‘To sell it and profit from it?’

For Arash, this was a ‘moment of realisation as an Iranian photographer’, as he put it. He refused to take this particular photograph of the man praying because, in his own words, ‘I don’t want to preach for the government, for Islam or for the west.’<sup>137</sup> Arash’s view towards this issue reflects a certain, liberal view of modernity rooted in western secular tradition: a modernity that confines religion to individuals and to the private sphere. What Arash seems to bypass in expressing these views however, is that for many living in Iran, the Islamic presence in Iran is deeply entrenched in the socio-cultural fabric of the country. Not only, as Adelhah (1999:178) reminds, because the ideology of the regime aspires to be Islamic, but because it is, as she puts it, ‘more prosaically a part of Iran’. Arash consciously decides to eliminate religious markers of all kinds from his photography in order to reinstall a kind of balance that he perceives to be lacking and at the same time needed in Iranian image politics.

Maryam is a female semi-professional photographer in her late twenties. She had a variety of jobs working for several Iranian state-affiliated news agencies, including the Iranian Quran News Agency (IQNA) and Mehr News Agency (MNA). Maryam had earned a Master’s of Fine Art in photography at Tehran University of

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<sup>137</sup> Online interview with Arash (30/09/12).

Art's Faculty of Visual Arts, but had soon found herself highly educated, with technical skills but without a job. She found work through state organisations, aided by contacts, links and opportunities advertised by websites such as Doorbin.net and others mentioned above. She explained the following to me:

Photography is my passion and my craft and now, I can gladly say, my profession. If I am lucky enough to be earning money for what I love doing, then I won't take this for granted, not in this country. It's not much what I earn, but I've worked hard for it all the same and I'll keep doing it as long as I can.

(Interview with Maryam in Tehran, [29/10/12])

Maryam's compliance with state organisations, as she described in the quotation above, affords her the chance to work and earn a living in Tehran as a photographer, albeit a modest one. This was particularly pertinent given the worsened socio-economic conditions brought about by international sanctions levied against Iran during the Ahmadinejad administration (2005-2013). As previously discussed, many Iranians are kept 'immobile' by socioeconomic conditions on the ground in Iran. They are often paid in local currency, rather than dollars, which involves a significant depreciation of value. During my fieldwork in October 2012, the Iranian rial had fallen to a record low against the US dollar, having lost 80 per cent of its value within a single year.<sup>138</sup> This climate of stagnation affects how aspiring photographers in Iran such as Maryam see the Internet and international exhibitions as affording 'movement': a social mobility conceptualised by the acquisition of economic, socio-political and cultural capital. Maryam had entered in to several international photojournalism contests and on a number of occasions had won first, second or third prizes for her social documentary work. Much to Arash and others' envy, Maryam even managed to buy a brand new car with the prize money from one particularly

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<sup>138</sup> <http://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2012/10/how-does-a-currency-drop-60-in-8-days-just-ask-iran/263159/>. (Accessed: 15/12/12).

prominent state-backed photography contest. In relation to Maryam and others like her, Arash explained the following, and not without a degree of sarcasm:

What can I say? Good for her. Showing Islam is big business here. It is so celebrated by the government. With these state contests, you need to...know the taste of the jury, if you like.

(Online interview with Arash, [30/09/12])

The tension expressed here by Arash in relation to what he viewed as Maryam's steely, pragmatism, is two fold. Firstly, it reflects a socio-economic question deeply rooted in the power politics of official cultural production in Iran, that Iranians like Arash and many outside of Iran (including some of my other research participants) feel disenfranchised from. Maryam is thought here to be serving herself by taking prize-winning photographs that will please the authorities, rather than the less profitable showing of Iran, in 'ordinary' visual terms that defines the photography of Arash and others like him. Arash feels that individuals like Maryam, who appear to profit from taking pictures of religious themes, Shiite iconography and visual subjects pertaining to the revolution and war (such as that of Martyrs' families), do a disservice to expanding visual understandings of Iran in the west. As an aspiring young photographer, with an interest in photojournalism, Arash's frustration is also anchored in the view that he will himself only ever become recognized internationally or at official, national levels in Iran, if he similarly follows suit and does what he perceives as 'selling out', or complying with the Islamic-Iranian requirements of what will get funded or platformed in on and offline exhibitions.

Raising similar questions to those raised by Arash and Maryam's stories, Strassler's (2010) work on amateur Javanese photographers and Indonesian state-run competitions also found that individuals were torn over questions of national participation in photographic activities. In Strassler's study, some amateurs claimed

that state-sponsored competitions were an important impetus in the development of their practice, whilst others clearly bemoaned their rigid, ideological frameworks, which necessitated the production of certain image-types. Photographers who tailored their images to win particular contests were perceived to have forgone the pleasures of individual creativity that amateur photography should ideally provide (Ibid: 59).

The contrasting attitudes of Arash and Maryam are also indicative of the diversity of attitudes to popular photography amongst those living inside of Iran, as opposed to other photobloggers living in various parts of the Iranian diaspora. Iranian photobloggers who have left the country and now largely reside in European countries and parts of North America clearly do not encounter the same sets of relationships and attitudes to state-sponsored frameworks for photography as their counterparts inside the country, for whom the stakes seemed higher. Living in the west, they did not need to comply or operate within these frameworks or take part in state-sponsored initiatives in order to earn money, gain professional repute or exhibit their work. From this position of relative distance, as both 'native' of and (now) visitor to Iran, they were arguably freer in some sense to criticize, or altogether ignore governmental photography organisations, with whom they did not necessarily need to get involved, or rely upon for financial support or official recognition.

Arash and Maryam's contrasting attitudes to the expectations of the state illustrate how trajectories of power in the Islamic Republic are multimodal, ambivalent and overlapping (Adelkhah 1999; Sreberny et al. 2010; Akhavan 2013; Olszewska 2013). Whilst some photographers such as Maryam appear to live comfortably within the official framework of the regime, whether for genuine or for more 'strategic' reasons of self-promotion, financial gain or upwards social and professional mobility (or a combination of all these factors), others such as Arash see the Islamic restrictions

on creative practices as a moral impingement on their capacity for artful, creative expression. The image of the old man practicing his faith in a personal moment, which Arash felt should neither be criticized nor celebrated, but respected and left alone, symbolically reflects Arash's personal dislike of the Iranian state's wider infusion of religion into all areas of public cultural life, and which ultimately reflects Arash's personal decision to leave Iran and take up residence in a European country. While they may be particularly strong, his sentiments do capture a wider sense of frustration felt amongst many popular photographers in Iran with regards to what kinds of images get promoted and why, as explored in this chapter. Arash's refusal to take the photograph for its referencing of Islam however is an extreme position that many photobloggers generally do not share. Broadly speaking, 'Islam' features in their virtual albums on photoblogs as simply another, everyday feature of everyday life in Iran, reflecting Adelkhah's (1999:178) observation cited above. What I did learn from my discussions with photobloggers on this theme is that the 'point' of their practices is not to exclude Islam from their representational palettes. This would be an unrealistic portrayal of the historic and contemporary importance of Islam, including the presence of prayer, ritual and ceremony throughout Iranian society. As a consequence, many photobloggers incorporated religious themes as part of a broader diversity and cultural heterogeneity they intended to capture about life in contemporary Iran, which includes, but is not restricted to Islam.

Overall, these debates form part of a more general picture of the interpenetration and overlapping space between the state (*dowlat*) and the people (*mellat*) (Adelkhah 1999; 2009) in Iran. If it can be accepted that the binary between an oppressive Islamic state and an ever-defiant Iranian subject is a narrative one that is itself steeped in power politics (see chapter 1 on these debates), then it is possible to

appreciate how popular digital photography in/of Iran only confirms what Olszewska (2013:844) calls the ‘multiple modalities of power’ in the Islamic Republic as an ‘imperfect hegemony, governed through a mixture of coercion and consent, visible or diffuse’.

#### **6.4. The politics and poetics of taking photos in contemporary Iran: issues of identity, ethnicity and gender**

In this section, I introduce other sets of dynamics found in Iranian popular digital photographic practices in Iran. Issues of gender, as well as tensions between categories of ‘native’ and foreign (*khārej*) photographers are other manifestations of the contested spaces of contemporary Iranian popular digital photography.

Taking both amateur and professional photographs in Iran, from public squares and Mosques to monuments and other prominent public locations is a commonplace practice amongst Iranians and foreign visitors today. Filmmaking in public however requires a permit from the Office of the Monitoring and Evaluation at the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (*Vezārat-e Farhang va Ershād-e Islami*). The director or production company must undertake a process of official evaluation and critique based on written and unwritten criteria for censorship (Decherney and Atwood 2015). The authorities in Iran rarely trouble amateur photographers, provided that sensitive areas such as governmental buildings and military sites are avoided. However, many of my male Iranian research participants told me that they felt that they were at a relative disadvantage to take photographs of people in public for two reasons: being male and being Iranian. In their experience, female photographers could far more easily gain consent with subjects across Iran, which, they interpreted as meaning that people perhaps generally trusted women more. According to this theory, if a photographer

were a woman *and* a foreigner, they could gain greater acceptance on the part of the sitter. One participant explained this to me directly as follows:

You know, being an Iranian photographer inside Iran, it is actually *more* difficult to take photos of local people. Often, they don't like it. They don't want to pose for you because of many reasons: culture, society, religion, the government and their restrictions on taking photos...all of this makes it difficult for photographers to take photos of people. Photographers don't feel free. But being a tourist is much easier for some reason, I don't really know why?

(Online interview, [03/06/13])

Another Iranian male popular photographer similarly expressed how:

It's so sad that a foreigner can shoot photos way easier than a local...people like foreigners and pose and smile for them. If you are a local on the other hand, they really give you a hard time. They doubt your cause or give you bad looks, and this is just ordinary people, let alone the government or police agencies...

(E-mail interview, [25/03/13])

As the two accounts illustrate, this perceived discrimination against Iranian 'native' photographers appears baffling for some. However, others attempted to interpret this insider-outsider relationship. Vahid, the photographer of the Kurdish Farmers series previously discussed in chapter 3, attempted to explain this quandary via the Persian expression: '*morgh-e hamsāyeh ghāz-e*', meaning: 'the neighbour's chicken is a goose'. In English, this equates to the 'grass is greener on the other side' maxim, whereby, in certain aspects of Persian culture, the other (person or place) is considered honourable by virtue of being other. Vahid himself felt an acute sense of this issue as an Iranian photoblogger now living in Rome, from where he says he idolises Iran, until he goes back for sustained periods of time and witnesses its 'reality', of economic hardship, low employment opportunities, as well as the heavy traffic and smog of the capital. Contrary to much of the anti-western propaganda propagated by hardliners of the Islamic Republic (see chapter 5), foreign visitors to the country,

whether travelling to cities or small villages, are regarded as a rarity and thus a cause of much fascination and lavish hospitality. This socio-cultural observation by Iranian photobloggers relates to (though is not necessarily a product of) the cultural isolationism preached and put in to practice by the regime, as was discussed in chapters 4 and 5. Given this generally welcoming attitude towards foreigner tourists in Iran, I was interested, if not particularly surprised to find that contemporary online social networks facilitating popular tourism and the exchange of hospitality such as ‘CouchSurfing’ have been gaining popularity in Iran amongst visitors in recent years<sup>139</sup>. Facilitated by the interchange between online and offline interactions, these informal networking opportunities provide the opportunity for cultural exchange through hospitality – something Iranians of all classes and backgrounds have always taken great pride in. Nevertheless, many Iranian male popular photographers I spoke with feel that this appreciation of foreigners translates to photography in the form of a kind of discrimination against ‘native’ photographers. Incidentally, this suspicion towards members of one’s own culture shown towards Iranian photographers in Iran reflected wider findings by Iranian anthropologists working in post-revolutionary Iran that Iranians tended to view Iranian-born researchers with government officials and either treat them with suspicion, or make demands on them to interfere with government agents on their behalf (Nadjmabadi 2004:604). Ahmed, a male engineer in his late twenties from Tehran who I met during my fieldwork in Esfahan (see chapter 3), explained this as follows:

In Iran photography is a more male-dominated thing. And even for men, it is so difficult to take photos of people here. They are not happy and familiar with having their photograph taken and I’m not happy or comfortable with that. I’ve seen many nations, I’ve visited many places and countries and I’ve taken many photos from people. I like to get to know people from different cultures. People

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<sup>139</sup> See also chapter 3 of this thesis.

outside of Iran were much more comfortable with my taking photos of them and I was so happy and grateful for that.

(E-mail correspondence with Ahmed, [30/11/12])

In comparison to Europe, where Ahmed often travels to practice photography, he felt that people were far more reluctant to let him take photos of them in Iran, supporting the theory proposed by some of my other male interlocutors above. Viewed in these terms, I myself was allegedly in an ideal place as a female and foreign visitor, to be able to gain access to photographic subjects in Iran. Male participants joked with me in Iran about how I had an advantage over them for being a foreign woman. ‘People will go out of their way to accommodate you’ they told me. ‘You must share your photos with us once you get them!’ they joked. Ironically, given these views, taking photographs of subjects in Iran was *not* a main concern of mine while I was there.

When I did take photographs in public, I did not encounter any major problems. People I encountered (mostly through the middle-class social networks I entered into on- and offline) were very happy to have their photograph taken by me on my camera phone. They described these photos as ‘*aks-e Facebook*’ (Facebook photo), presuming, and at times insisting that I upload them (immediately or as soon as possible) on to Facebook to share with their friends and families. The only peculiar issue I experienced was outside a central mosque in downtown Tehran one afternoon. I had attracted the attention of the authorities while taking photos with my iPhone and was followed and closely observed by two female public officials through the mosque, but with no eventual outcome. This brief episode suggests that while a popular Iranian view may be that foreigners enjoy greater freedoms in Iran than Iranian citizens, the authorities might have another attitude towards this that reflect their own measures of monitoring public life. Iranian photographers’ apparent discrimination towards ‘native’ photographers described to me by some of my male research participants implies their

sensitivities towards image-production in/of Iran discussed in chapters (4-6). Whilst foreigners' images might be used for personal or even public uses in international photography competitions and publications, photography undertaken by Iranians themselves might be undertaken for surveillance purposes and or serve public order.

Speaking with female participants about the gendered observations made by my male research participants, women photographers suggested that this was a more discursive issue than a simple gender bias. They felt that photography was contingent upon individuals' abilities to build rapport with subjects. Age and status of photographers, in addition to culture, gender, and urban and rural contexts were a host of variables cited by female popular photographers in giving their opinions of what generally influenced subjects' authorisation of having their photograph taken in Iran. In general however, they did not confer that taking photographs of subjects in public is necessarily easier for women photographers. At the same time, they do acknowledge that female photographic productivity tends to be higher and more concentrated in the online contexts of social networks such as Flickr, over the more male-dominated actual (as opposed to virtual) public sphere.<sup>140</sup> What transpired from all of these conversations was a sense of 'distributed photography' amongst actors of many kinds. Mobile digital technologies facilitated the taking of photographs in public in Iran for men *and* women, in public *and in* private, in urban and rural contexts, amongst Iranians and foreigners (see also chapters 3 and 8 on these themes). Here, the ubiquity of camera phones, and their wide variety of uses suggests that the camera has, in fact, become a kind of 'prosthesis' (Lury 1997), albeit one that is adjoined with wider social networks.

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<sup>140</sup> Online interview (17/03/13).

## **6.5. International photography competitions: ‘telling the right story’<sup>141</sup>**

Beyond the social, political and economic frameworks in which photographic practice and discourse operates in Iran, for many of my research participants, another relevant issue pertains to the power politics of mainstream, international, professional photography competitions. In one participant’s words, these ‘do nothing’ for the advancement of thinking about Iranian politics, society and culture, due to a systematic promotion of marginal representational discourses which show limited and often highly stereotyped images from the country<sup>142</sup>. The World Press Photo organisation is one example cited by several of my participants<sup>143</sup>. It can be considered here to illustrate the attitudes of many Iranian popular photographers towards the visual politics of photographic representation in/of contemporary Iran that this thesis is broadly concerned with. I was told by one of my participants that if I wanted to learn about Iranian cultural representation and power politics today, I only need to look at this annual contest. World Press Photo is an independent, non-profit organisation founded in 1955 based in Amsterdam. It holds one of the world’s largest annual photography contests for photojournalists from around the world. Photographs are ranked in ten different categories from first to third place. The prize-winning photographs form a traveling exhibition, which is visited by over a million people in 40 countries. A yearbook presenting all prizewinning entries is published annually in six languages. Two of my participants told me that Iranian photojournalists take part in the competition every year. Throughout the course of my fieldwork (2012-2013), in a climate of international anxiety regarding Iran’s nuclear programme, and shifting socio-political conditions under a new President Rouhani (from August 2013), Iranian

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<sup>141</sup> Phrase used by Vahid Rahmanian in online interview (03/05/13).

<sup>142</sup> Online interview (15/05/13).

<sup>143</sup> <http://www.worldpressphoto.org/>

photographers have won prizes in specific categories. In 2012, Ebrahim Noroozi, a photographer who works for the Iranian, semi-official Fars News Agency (FNA) in Tehran, won second prize in the ‘Contemporary Issues’ category for his black and white images (Figure 6.11) showing the hangings of convicted male rapists and murders in the city of Qazvin in Northern Iran (the capital of Qazvin province).



Figure 6.11: Screenshot, ‘Hangings in Iran’ (26/05/11) by Ebrahim Noroozi, [www.worldpressphoto.org/photo/2012-ebrahim-noroozi-cis2-al](http://www.worldpressphoto.org/photo/2012-ebrahim-noroozi-cis2-al) (Accessed: 10/11/13).

The monochrome photographs emphasise the overall darkness of the theme. Noroozi’s captions provide contextual information with details such as the fact that Iran has the ‘second highest execution rate in the world after China, but supplies no official figures for the hangings’. In 2013, the same photographer won second prize in the ‘Staged Portraits’ category for his series entitled ‘Mournful’ (Figure 6.12).

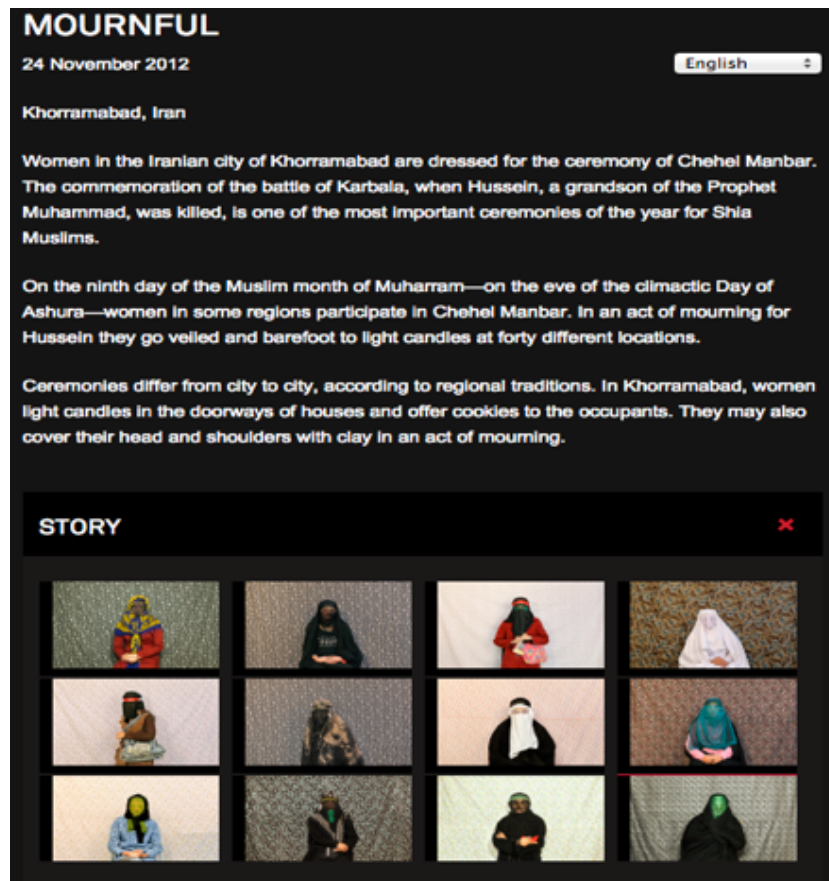


Figure 6.12: Screenshot, ‘Mournful’ series (24/11/12) by Ebrahim Noroozi, <http://www.worldpressphoto.org/awards/2013/staged-portraits/ebrahim-noroozi/12> (Accessed: 10/11/13).

In this series, Noroozi shows twelve women from the Iranian city of Khorramabad in western Iran (capital of Lorestan province), dressed for the ceremony of Chehel Manbar (forty pulpits). This Shiite festival of mourning commemorates the martyrdom of Imam Hossein (see chapter 4) at the Battle of Karbala in 680 AD. On the ninth day of Muharram (the first of the Islamic calendar), known as Tasoua day, women in various regions across Iran cover themselves with a *chador* (garment covering the body) or *rupush* (overall), refrain from speaking, and light forty (*chehel*) candles in forty locations (*manbar*), including in the doorways of houses. As can be seen in Figure 6.11 and Figure 6.12, Noroozi offers two categorical and gendered representations for his Iran entries to the World Press photo competitions in 2012 and

2013 under the rubrics of death, religion and women's veiling. In Figure 6.12, we see twelve women photographed veiled by Noroozi in a staged portrait series aimed at showing women of the city of Khorramabad, Iran dressed for the Chehel Manbar ceremony. The anonymous women are differentiated by their clothing. Some appear with bright colours and quirky handbags, others appear in the most traditional kind of black, *rupush* (overall) attire. In all cases, the women's faces veils cover their faces, though a hint of their face can just about be discerned. These photographs recall Hossein Fatemi's 'Unveiled women' series discussed in chapter 5, which similarly treats the subject of women and veiling as the chief *modus operandi* for visually exploring Iranian subjectivity.<sup>144</sup>

Iranian photobloggers generally feel that these types of images appeal to a western appetite for exotic images of Iranian women, young and old, marked heavily by tradition and medieval social and religious rituals. The previous chapters discussed how Photobloggers' everyday practices visually respond to internal and external visual histories, stemming from Iranian state and western media discourses alike. Here, we see another contemporary representational system propelling Iranian photobloggers' desires to take up popular photography as a digital (and transnational) pursuit of visual storytelling. 'Native' contemporary visual knowledge-producers like Noroozi who take part in these competitions for personal prestige, professional kudos and financial merit, profoundly aggravate Iranian photobloggers and many other Iranians I spoke to inside Iran and in London. They felt that figures such as Noroozi who sell representations of an oppressed Iran to western consumers – what Dabashi (2011) calls 'native

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<sup>144</sup> Notably, Fatemi also has a series on the *Chehel Manbar* festival. See <http://www.panos.co.uk/preview/00177091.html?p=24> (Accessed: 21/10/14).

informants' – only contribute to the negative, overtly religious and homogenous image of the country and its people who appear in need of saving.<sup>145</sup>

One of my main research participants, Vahid, gave one example from his own experience, which illustrates some of the issues raised above from the perspective of Iranian photobloggers. Vahid told me about his experience with one particular international photography organisation called 1x.com, or 'one exposure', which hosts competitions, online. 1x was created in 2007 by two Swedish photography enthusiasts in Uppsala, Sweden, and is dedicated to photojournalism and fine art photography. Vahid explained how despite submitting (what he described as) 'millions of his photos' of Iran of a 'secular' and everyday nature, he was never selected by 1x in the competition. His friends in Iran however, who had submitted images of mosques, prayers, religious rituals, or 'exotic themes' had apparently won weekly contests three or four times each. Reasons for Vahid's lack of success in the competition are not clear, and could well relate to the fact that they were simply not deemed good enough photographs to win. Notably however, Vahid himself put this down to one simple statement: that perhaps he was 'not telling the right story'<sup>146</sup>. Incidentally, the only time that Vahid did win a prize in one of the 1x competitions was with one photograph (out of the 'hundreds' he had allegedly submitted over the years, shown in Figure 6.13). The photograph is of a 'women only' sign on the Tehran metro, with Iranian women wearing dark colours and conveying sullen expressions. From these examples, it is possible to see how contemporary international media photography agencies (much like the examples of news journalism previously discussed in chapter 5) in some sense parallel a process occurring inside the Islamic Republic, which also celebrates and rewards images depicting a monolithic Islamic Iran. I suggest that all of these

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<sup>145</sup> See also Adelhah (2009) on the western appetite for these kinds of discourses about Iran.

<sup>146</sup> Online interview, Vahid Rahmanian, 03/05/13.

overlapping factors and political issues inside and outside of the country only propel Iranian photobloggers to move away from these kinds of dominant visual tropes in their own photographic practices.



Figure 6.13: Winning photo 'Masculine world', on 1x.com photo contest, Photo by Vahid Rahmanian

The World Press Photo and 1x contests illustrate an important issue raised by many Iranian popular photographers regarding the power and politics of visual knowledge-production in international settings. As one of my participants, Arash (introduced earlier in this chapter) put it, 'showing Islamic themes will get you somewhere'.<sup>147</sup> In one sense, the specificity of the visual politics of Iranian photography outlined here is important to understand, and particularly given that photobloggers cite these wider factors as affecting their own subjectivities and visual practices. At the same time, the commercialization of culture-based photography and the related politics of 'visual economies' (Poole 1997) are not altogether unique to the Iranian context of photography. Strassler (2010:54-59) has shown how international

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<sup>147</sup> Online interview (15/05/13).

photography contests (and the amateur photographers who take part in them for personal prestige or profit) since the 1970s have been responsible for constructing durable cultural tropes and stock repertoires of images of Indonesia. She notes how camera manufacturers such as Canon, Nikon amongst others, began sponsoring national competitions in various countries such as Indonesia at this time in order to tap into rapidly growing domestic markets. Strassler gives the example of the Asia/Pacific Cultural Centre for UNESCP (ACCU) as a prominent example of sponsoring such competitions since 1974. She shows how such stock types of Indonesia that these competitions produced convey the colorful aspects of local culture, arts and traditions, which provide 'human interest' stories for global audiences. According to Strassler, photographs from Indonesia featuring in international competitions such as ACCU tended to complement a 'universalizing visual discourse' (Ibid: 55), which, she suggests, marked a visual shift in amateur photography inside the country, as well as a broader blurring of traditional definitions of amateur practice as a purely leisure activity removed from profitable pursuits. As a result of these contests, amateur photographers in Indonesia began to picture things 'uniquely Indonesian' (Ibid: 56), whilst at the same time, ensuring that their photographs appealed to a common humanity, within a globally legible visual idiom. This 'relevance' would achieve what MacDougall (1998) terms as the capacity for 'transcultural' recognition.

Visual precedents for prize-winning amateur images from contemporary Iran however, seem to evoke not a common humanity or 'universalizing visual discourse', but rather, place and culture-specific tropes (Shiism, veiled women, the draconian policies of the Islamic Republic). These serve to aesthetically, culturally and politically isolate Iran from the rest of the world in such a way as to and 'metonymically freeze'

(Appadurai 1988) its boundedness and, simultaneously, deny its varieties and heterogeneities, as photobloggers are acutely aware<sup>148</sup>.

Contemporary Iranian artists who are able to move in and out of Iran, as well as Iranian artists in diaspora are able, on the one hand, to move beyond the rigid aesthetic frameworks of the state's visual-cultural expectations. They exhibit their work in international exhibition settings and travel to take up artistic residencies abroad. At the same time, as they enter into the global art world and its markets, Iranian artists from Iran are often held to account for being from the 'place' of Iran. More specifically, the work of Iranian artists is regarded as having been born within what is largely perceived in the west to be the oppressive conditions of the Islamic Republic, which ultimately produces the 'resistance' art that many curators in the west are eager to market as a commodity in museum and gallery exhibitions. A host of scholarly and curatorial accounts continue to speak of the 'rebellious' nature of contemporary Iranian art and photography, often literally framed as 'resistance' art<sup>149</sup>(Balaghi et al. 2002; Abdolhamid 2006; Issa 2008; Porter 2012).<sup>150</sup> In this sense, Iranian artists of this kind are literally and artistically as Harris (2013) has described in relation to Tibetan artists, 'in and out of place': they are both physically out of Iran or in movement, whilst they also put back into the 'place' of it by the certain appetites and requirements of the international art market. What is interesting to consider here, is how Iranian photobloggers acknowledge that a similar process of essentialisation and reduction is occurring in photojournalism and popular photography competitions hosted by western organisations and institutions, which seek award-winning photographs within narrow

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<sup>148</sup> For a comparative example regarding the visual politics of seeing North Korea, see Shim (2013).

<sup>149</sup> For examples of how Iranian photography in particular, as well as art from other countries in the Middle East and North Africa become framed as resistance, see the (2012) exhibition 'Light from the Middle East: New Photography', curated by Marta Weiss at the V&A museum, London:

<http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/exhibitions/exhibition-light-from-the-middle-east-new-photography/>

<sup>150</sup> For further discussion on the theme of Iranian resistance art by established curators see Porter (2012), Issa (2008) and Balaghi and Gumpert (2002).

visual rubrics. Iranian photographers such as Vahid, and many others discussed throughout this thesis reveal their frustration at the taste of this market for exotic, ‘Islamic’ or defiant images of Iran and Iranians. As a result, they pursue their photography of their own accord and exhibit their work in digital exhibition venues.

## **6.6. ‘Taking matters into our own hands’: popular photography contests and alternative digital platforms<sup>151</sup>**

### **6.6.1. Online groups and ‘taking photography seriously’<sup>152</sup>**

As discussed in chapter 3, Iranian photobloggers take photos in and across Iran and share them on self-authored photoblog pages. Many popular photographers also meet each other online. In the digital landscape, they are able to circumvent aspects of the political and economic frameworks levied by national and international photography organisations and cultural power brokers detailed in this chapter so far. However, the digital context is itself not free of cultural politics (as has also been shown in previous chapters), but constitutes another competitive space of/for Iranian digital photography with which this chapter is broadly concerned.

In the online context, Iranian popular photographers form groups within social network sites such as Flickr and Facebook, as well as photoblog-specific community pages such as [coolphotoblogs.com/iran](http://coolphotoblogs.com/iran), [aminus3.com/country/ir-iran](http://aminus3.com/country/ir-iran) and [photoblogs.ir](http://photoblogs.ir). Here, individuals share, debate and critique each other’s photographs and develop popular photography networks of their own. Many of my participants emphasised the importance of Flickr in igniting their interest in photography. Ehsan, a male photoblogger in his late twenties who lives in Melbourne, Australia explained how:

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<sup>151</sup> Expression used by Vahid Rahmani in online interview (07/03/13).

<sup>152</sup> Phrase used by Ehsan Abbasi in online interview (24/10/12).

My interest in photography began after creating an account on Flickr.com about six years ago (2006). First I was not very serious and just uploaded some personal shots. Gradually, I decided to upload better photos I had taken (in Iran), after getting some feedback. Fortunately, at that time, Iranian groups on Flickr were highly active and I learnt a lot from these groups, not to mention making a number of good friends. We even organised many (offline) photography gatherings all over the country. For some reason though, the community has become less and less active. Perhaps people preferred to spend more time on Facebook, as it is far easier to share photos on there and create events...

(Online Interview with Ehsan Abbasi, [24/10/12])

Ehsan's comments convey how online image-based social networks such as Flickr became popular in Iran and within the Iranian diaspora in the early 2000s. Following its creation in 2004, Flickr was officially banned by the Iranian government, in line with overall policies towards culture and communication, discussed earlier in this chapter, as well as in chapters 3 and 4. As discussed, Iranian Internet users accessed Flickr, and other blocked pages, in line with their general 'know-how' of using VPN (virtual private networks) and online anonymity networks such as TOR to mask their activities and their locations from surveillance and traffic analysis. Despite individuals' ability to access it via these means, prohibition of Flickr is a main reason cited for the rise of photoblogs at this time. In the wake of the Ahmadinejad administration (2005-2013), this heavy period of cultural conservatism saw an increase of Internet surveillance (see chapter 3). Ehsan described how, along with many other friends, he decided to leave Flickr altogether around this time:

Friends and I totally left Flickr and decided to set up our own websites, so I set up my own photoblog and planned to update every single day as well as carry on sharing and exchanging my photography knowledge with other Iranian photobloggers.

(Online Interview with Ehsan Abbasi, [24/10/12])

Difficulties associated with accessing Flickr in Iran partially accounts for the rise of photoblogs at this time, as an alternative digital exhibition space for popular

photography created by individuals using substitute web hosts. At the same time, more nuanced social reasons also reflect photobloggers' attitudes towards mainstream social network sites, in line with their sense of craft and status.

Assessing the relationship between Flickr, photoblog and other online image-sharing sites, Ehsan explained how he perceived the issue to be one of scale and purpose. Photoblogs, he explained, were 'more specific', whereby users have to take the time to create, manage, publicise, update and maintain the photoblog, which often (though not always) involves paying an annual subscription fee for a web host to maintain the site online. Flickr, in contrast, was a readily available (and cost-free) platform for taking photography seriously, which included many in-built socio-technological functions, including, most notably, a readily available global viewership. Ehsan considered Facebook to be 'image-sharing for the masses', which he felt had both its benefits and its drawbacks. For many photobloggers, Facebook is deemed an important part of their ability to reach a wide, global viewership. It is common practice, for instance, for photobloggers to link their photoblogs to their personal Facebook pages, or to create a 'fan page' for their photoblog to attract a wider viewership<sup>153</sup>. In some cases, where the photoblog can no longer be maintained, for personal or financial reasons, these other, cost-free platforms also provide a means of maintaining the photographers' activity and fan-base. Flickr, incidentally, has remained a consistently prominent feature in the history of popular Iranian digital photography, despite instances of online migration and/or temporary preference for other platforms, as discussed by Ehsan above.

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<sup>153</sup> For some examples of participants' Facebook fan pages see LGOIT's: [https://www.facebook.com/lgoit?ref=br\\_tf](https://www.facebook.com/lgoit?ref=br_tf), Omid's <https://www.facebook.com/IranThroughMyLens>, Ehsan's: <https://www.facebook.com/EhsanAbbasiPhotography> and Amir's: <https://www.facebook.com/AmirSadeghiPhotography>

In one conversation I had with one of my female research participants, Kiana, based in Tehran, provided a particularly interesting anecdote with regards to her Flickr page:

The most memorable thing that ever happened to me was some weeks ago, when a German contact of mine – whom I'd never known in person, or even seen his own photos – sent me an email to say that he'd bought me a Flickr Pro account as a gift. He said he found my photos wonderful and honest, and that he wanted to see them all in one place. So he bought me this account for a year. I was so surprised and overwhelmed that I couldn't answer his email for some days, though, I was very grateful!

{Online interview with Kiana Farhoudi, [11/04/13]}

In this case, Kiana's (free) Flickr account was upgraded by a fan from Germany, who had paid the fee (\$24.95) that enabled her to have a higher-level account on Flickr called 'Flickr Pro' for one year. Flickr Pro enables the individual to afford an unlimited upload allowance, along with other benefits such as being advertisement-free.

Examples of foreigners sponsoring popular photographers in Iran are not uncommon. Many photobloggers revealed that they had similar experiences of foreigners and complete strangers purchasing accounts as 'digital gifts.' In some cases this happened when Iranian photobloggers could no longer financially afford to maintain the site, in other instances, it was a sign of encouragement from the viewer, entreating the photoblogger to continue her/his practice. They also invariably received assistance from friends or family outside of Iran.

At the same time that social network sites are relied upon by photobloggers, some of my research participants felt that existing social network sites were not specialised enough as an exhibition context for as Ehsan put it, 'taking photography seriously'. While he admitted that Facebook was a very active site of Iranian popular

photography, Ehsan tries to avoid using it for his own photography. He described his attitude to Facebook as follows:

There are a number of photography groups created by Iranians on Facebook. I personally avoid being active there because there are such a variety of people with very different attitudes, which can be a bit much. Most of the time the members there just post photographs without thinking...discussions about photography or constructive criticism does not happen there (unlike on Flickr and on photoblogs) in a good spirit.

(Online interview, Ehsan Abbasi, [06/03/13])

Ehsan's attitude to Facebook here is similar to Vahid's feelings towards Flickr. Similar kinds of value-judgements are hereby expressed in line with individuals' sense of their status as photographers:

Before buying my first camera, I used to take pictures with my mobile phone. I joined websites like flickr.com and picasa.com and shared my photos with other members. After a while I felt so unsatisfied with these websites and I felt I should have my own website and become a .com instead. So there I was, a citizen of the Internet who liked photography, and yet felt too proud to be a member of an existing website/community.

(Online interview with Vahid Rahmanian, [07/03/13])

Like many others, Vahid's sense of pride in his hobby led him to set up his own, stand-alone photoblog. Citing registration difficulties attempting to purchase web space from (often US-built) web servers, as well as the financial costs in Iran in a time of heavy international sanctions under the Ahmadinejad administration (2005-2013), Vahid explained how he asked a friend in Canada to purchase his site on his behalf from abroad. The attitudes expressed by Ehsan and Vahid raise interesting questions about how notions of craft, hobby, status and aesthetic aspiration develop in popular digital photographic practices on the Internet. On the one hand, photobloggers relish the chance to be part of global image-sharing communities such as Flickr, and many believe it to be 'the most important photographic community in the world'. On the

other hand, some individuals also felt the need to go beyond membership in a mass community, taking active measures to set up their individual photoblog sites in order to develop their own visual practices in a more serious context, and outside of the ideal-type of the general community aesthetic developed on Flickr. Murray (2008) identifies this 'Flickr aesthetic' as the amateur photographic framing of ephemera. Iranian photobloggers both partake in and contribute to this 'everydayness' of the Flickr exhibition environment, and simultaneously seek to move beyond its homogenising structure. This suggests the existence of a certain '*photo hierarchicus*' (MacDougall 1992) in the context of popular Iranian digital photography on the Internet, which is linked to perceptions of status, aesthetic taste and professionalism.

#### **6.6.2. Online competitions**

Taking part in online competitions is a significant means by which Iranian popular photographers acquire status and develop their professional aspirations through collective practices. Much of the way photographs are judged 'from below' for example emerges through comment streams (see chapter 9 on viewership) created by other photographers. Murray (2008:158) suggests this to be an important part of how 'community bonds' are formed through photographic practices online, by a 'collective negotiation of the limits of judgment'. Competitions administered through Flickr are a salient example of social and cultural dynamics pertaining to Iranian popular digital photography. 'Flickr Award' is one prominent arena in which Iranian popular photographers accrue social capital by displaying their tastes and distinctions, as contemporary 'cultural producers' (Bourdieu 1993) of the Internet. Figure 6.14 below shows one such 'Iranian Photo Contest'.

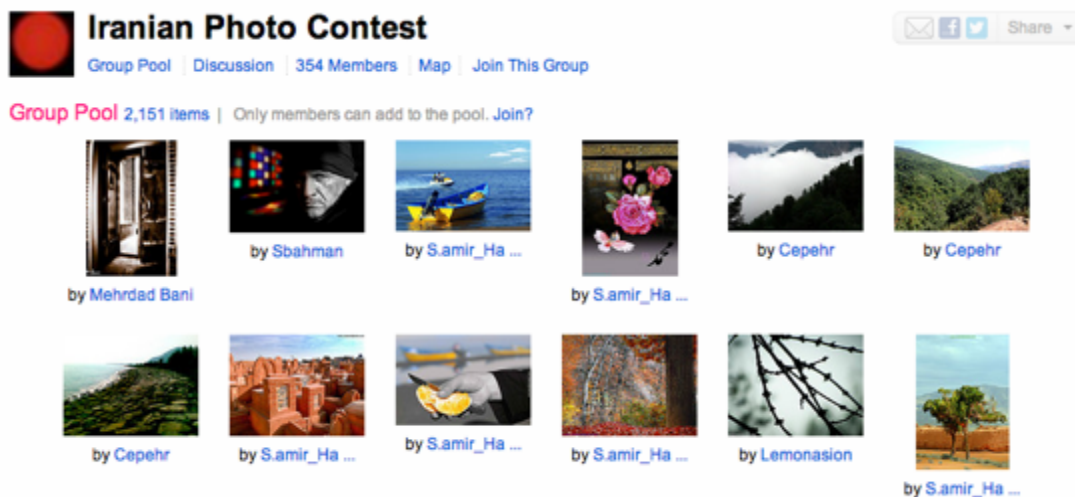


Figure 6.14: Iranian photo contest group on Flickr: <https://www.flickr.com/groups/iranianphotocontestbw/>. (Screen shot taken by the author 08/05/13).

Photo contests such as these on Flickr are set up and run by volunteers. Vahid explained how he ran one such competition for a while a few years ago on a weekly basis. In these instances, viewers vote for the ‘best’ photograph under a theme chosen by the competition’s administrators. Examples given by Vahid included Nowruz festivities (the Persian New Year), wildlife in Iran, nature, monuments and food. The elected winner has the prize of choosing the theme for the following week, as well as the associated prestige. Winners declared their status on their personal pages on the site. The Iranian pages of Flickr, much like on other global online platforms such as Facebook, are predominantly culturally self-referential. Though officially public, they are in practice, spaces in which Iranians interact with other Iranians and comment on each other’s photography. This reflects broader findings which emphasise the potential cultural ‘locality’ of the Internet (Miller et al. 2000) and particularly, of Facebook (Miller 2011), as discussed in chapter 1. On Flickr, this social discourse is largely centred on discussions of photography. Voluntary participants and public viewers comment on the skill (and often beauty) of the photograph and its capture, while photographers debate technical approaches and critique one another’s work.

At once a social networking platform then, Flickr is also a context for serious photography, where many Iranian photographers actively use the site to develop their sense of craft. Vahid explained how established Iranian photojournalists use Flickr as a means of disseminating their work and joining its various communities. He gave the example of Ahmad Kavousian (b.1948) an eminent photojournalist from the pre-revolutionary and revolutionary period in Iran who had documented much of the revolution of 1979 and subsequent war with Iraq (1980-1988). Kavousian moved to Canada in 1996 to start a new life, and has more recently (2010) moved to Portugal. As an Iranian living outside of Iran, Kavousian joined Flickr and is an active member of group discussions on Iranian photo competition sites. Vahid explained to me how Kavousian's presence in any group or contest, makes a serious impact upon its collectively perceived quality and prestige. Upon receiving 'likes' and comments by Kavousian, popular photographers acquire a sense of social and technical capital, which, in turn, they use as currency in their respective online self-promotions, using tag lines like 'Kavousian-approved' or 'Kavousian likes this photo!!'<sup>154</sup>

Drawing on Bourdieu's (1990) earlier study of amateur camera clubs in France in her digital-ethnographic studies of Flickr, Murray's (2008) research found that beyond socialising for socialising's sake, photography-specific group formations online reflected a shared desire to 'build a shared aesthetic and collectively negotiate the limits of judgement' (Ibid:158). Bourdieu had found that members of amateur clubs had disdain for domestic or snapshot photography, so they established their own norms, values and systems of aesthetic judgement. This served to legitimate practices, styles and subjects that were unique to their community. In so doing, these members enunciated their artistic and social class aspiration. In photoblogging, as also seen on

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<sup>154</sup> Online interview with Vahid Rahmanian (28/05/13).

Iranian photographers' activities on Flickr, individuals develop aesthetic sensibility, as well as obtain informal, alternative, online training, collectively in on- and offline contexts. On Flickr this can happen on comments streams in groups, which serve as digital public message boards for sharing technical tips, including how to address issues of lighting, colouring and general strategies for digital manipulation.

Collaborative learning and social exchange also happens in 'meet ups,' which is now an established part of the global Flickr experience<sup>155</sup>. In photoblogging, such opportunities for photography-orientated social interaction and visual exploration happen through a combination of online social forums, as well as on photo tours (*safarhā-ye 'akkāsi*), as was discussed in chapter 3.

#### **6.7. Analysis of off- and online contested spaces and places of/for Iranian popular photography**

The overlapping limitations and affordances of official internal and external visual-political frameworks and photography organisations, as well as wider issues stemming from socio-political conditions, Internet regulation, and economic sanctions in Iran has seen the increasing popularity of digital contexts as alternative exhibition spaces for Iranian photography in recent years. As a consequence, many who use digital environments such as photoblogs and social media for photography perceive them to be a space for 'taking matters into their own hands', exhibiting their work and reaching international audiences. This feeds directly into the discussion conveyed in later chapters, which shows how the photoblog serves as a salient contemporary exhibition space. Furthermore, lack of official provisions for the experimental arts in Iran confers the added value of the digital exhibition space as a relatively free, easy-to-use and

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<sup>155</sup> Through my research, I found that the idea of the photowalk developed in Iran (and possibly other countries) as a part of Iranian digital photographic culture years before the idea became officially commercialised and officially institutionalised on Flickr, as a global social practice.

widely accessible platform. Speaking with the founder of the ‘Everyday Iran’ project on Instagram and Facebook (introduced in chapter 3), Ali Khaveh, I learnt how the increasing availability of digital technologies in Iran had, as he put it, ‘created photographers out of people all over the country’, but that this was offset by a lack of resources<sup>156</sup>. Despite acknowledging some of the state-sponsored groups and organisations cited in this chapter, Ali explained how there are no large non-governmental or commercial photography agencies in Iran, like ‘Magnum’ or ‘Panos’ in the west, specialising in social documentary photography. There were, as he put it, ‘many holes’ in a barely existing domestic arts infrastructure in Iran. Higher education courses in photography (such as the Master of Arts in Photography at the University of Tehran) were similarly described by some photographers and curators I spoke with in Tehran as either out-dated or, too tightly controlled by the state’s moral, cultural and aesthetic frameworks to allow for much freedom for expression. Though there have been some notable changes to cultural policy following the election of Hassan Rouhani as President in 2013 (as also discussed in chapter 3), censorship of all public cultural activities in Iran continues, and artists, curators and dealers continue to find themselves called to the Ministry of Information for questioning (Joobin 2014). Independent art initiatives established under the Ahmadinejad era (2005-2013) continue to be run by private individuals from their homes and private spaces, and most notably, on or via the Internet<sup>157</sup>. This is something examined more closely in the following chapter, which examines the contemporary status of digital exhibitions for showcasing Iranian photography.

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<sup>156</sup> Online interview with Ali Khaveh (03/07/14).

<sup>157</sup> For a prominent example, see the Sazmanab independent, non-for-profit art space in downtown Tehran created by one of my research participants, Sohrab Kashani in 2009, which re-opened after refurbishment in October 2014: <http://www.sazmanab.org/en> (Accessed: 20/10/14). For a relevant discussion of Sazmanab, including how it relies heavily on Internet-based communication tools, see Sreberny-Mohammadi (2014).

Adorno (1978) earlier argued that the administrative aspects of art-making inhibit the artistic endeavour. For Adorno, when art works become part of bureaucracy, they cease to be art. In contemporary Iran however, bureaucratic factors, including limited financial resources, state censorship and difficulty to obtain visas for foreign travel, constitute the parameters through which Iranian art and creativity enter into and develop within global artsapes, via the Internet (Sreberny-Mohammadi 2014). In these ways, Iranian photobloggers, artists and self-styled curators alike exhume their artistic status and garner international attention for Iranian art and photography online, beyond official venues and parameters.

## **6.8. Summary**

This chapter has identified and examined various contested places and spaces of contemporary Iranian digital photography inside Iran and in broader international exhibition contexts. These various arenas form part of the overall *Camera Iranica* of Iranian digital photography in/of Iran with which this thesis is concerned. Previous chapters (4 and 5) have highlighted the importance of visual history in generating Iranian photobloggers' desires to undertake their practice. This chapter has built on the previous discussion by showing how Iranian popular photographers also position themselves in relation to contemporary national and international visual-political economies, and at the same time, negotiate socio-cultural, political and economic tensions that exist amongst Iranian photographers themselves in off- and online space. The chapter concludes by suggesting that what many Iranian photographers perceive are the respective deficiencies in official photography organisations inside and outside of Iran, coupled with limited official economic and cultural support for independent artists and initiatives, have led to the increasing popularity and credibility of digital

exhibitions as spaces for contemporary Iranian art and photography. I will expand upon this notion in the following chapter.

**CHAPTER 7. PRESENTING AN INNOVATIVE DIGITAL-VISUAL  
ANTHROPOLOGICAL METHODOLOGY: A DIGITAL  
PHOTOGRAPHY EXHIBITION: [www.photoblogsiran.com](http://www.photoblogsiran.com)**

**7.1. Introduction**

This chapter presents an innovative visual anthropological research methodology specifically developed and employed as part of this study: a digital photography exhibition<sup>158</sup>. This method formed an important basis upon which I carried out my digital-ethnographic enquiry of Iranian photoblogs, the results of which are discussed in subsequent chapters of this thesis (8 and 9). In this chapter, I explain and critically assess the overall intention, justification, application and efficacy of designing this method for the study of transnational Iranian popular photographers and their practices, in light of relevant ethical and epistemological questions pertaining to both anthropology and to my field site.

**7.2. Participatory co-curating: what, why, how, where, who?**

**7.2.1. What?**

In June 2013, after nine months of ethnographic fieldwork researching Iranian popular photographic practices in Iran, the UK and online, my principal participants (Iranian photobloggers, based inside and outside of Iran) and I discussed the idea of co-curating a digital photography exhibition of their work. The idea of developing an innovative, site-specific methodology emerged during the research process, but seemed appropriate given that (a) it reflected what photobloggers do – they create digital exhibition spaces in the form of photoblogs to share their photographs with viewers

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<sup>158</sup> A CD of the digital exhibition is included as part of this thesis.

across the world – and (b) it would establish a relevant digital environment in which to participate and observe their practices. Here I discuss the resulting digital photography exhibition employed as a methodological component during the research process: [www.photoblogsiran.com](http://www.photoblogsiran.com) (Figure 7.1). I reflect upon both the rationale behind its development, including the extent to which it was co-curated in a collaborative and participatory manner.

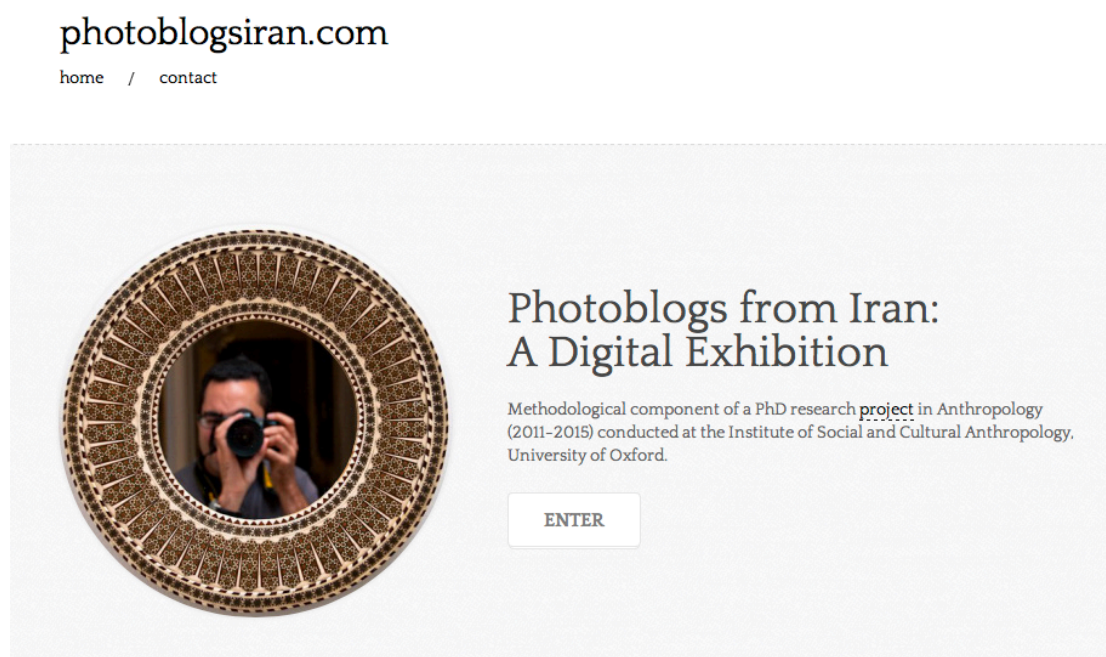


Figure 7.1: Cover page featuring research/exhibition participant photographer Omid Akhavan. Digital exhibition: [www.photoblogsiran.com](http://www.photoblogsiran.com)

Gubrium and Harper (2013:173) define the participatory digital exhibition as a space in which ‘a group of participants work together to create a web-based interface where users may access a multimedia collection of visual, audio and text files’. Notions of the interactive, ‘participatory’ (Huvila 2008) and ‘operational archive’ (McQuire 2013) (introduced in chapter 1) are also important concerns in its overall ethical design. For Huvila, the participatory archive is contingent on a necessary process of ‘decentralised curation’ and ‘radical user orientation’ (placing the subject on an equal footing with

the researcher, as co-curators) as well as a thorough contextualisation of both records and the entire archiving process (Ibid). McQuire's concept of the 'operational archive' denotes an active (and not passive) digital context wherein participants (indigenous Australians in his study) realise an active sense of self-determination and reflexivity by coming into close contact with digital images of aspects of their socio-cultural or historical context (their ancestors), with strong cultural and emotional implications (Ibid). These notions, which are recent versions of an earlier argument in anthropology which acknowledges the agency of informants, who move with/in fields, as opposed to being subjects delimited by a physical location (Clifford 1997), inform the way in which I set about developing the digital research exhibition with participants.

As discussed in the introductory chapter of this thesis, the subject of my research concerns the social (and historical) significance of contemporary Iranian popular digital photographic practices on the Internet. My principal research participants are located in six countries across the globe (see Figure 7.2). Until June 2013 (when I began developing the exhibition), I had already been using a range of digital and visual research methodologies to conduct research with them. This included setting up a research photoblog to document my research in Iran, which I shared with participants. I also joined many popular photography platforms such as Instagram and Flickr in order to enhance my virtual co-presence with participants (see chapter 1). Nine months into the project, I had reached a more reflective stage of the research, having returned from Iran and completed the majority of my fieldwork in the UK and within online digital photography networks. At this stage, I needed to re-connect with participants, and felt that this could be achieved in an appropriate manner which (I hoped) would re-engage their interest in the project. The exhibition seemed a befitting

manner in which to do this, whilst also harnessing their creativities as a group with which to showcase our journey throughout the year together.



Figure 7.2: Research participants in 6 countries: US, UK, Italy, Germany, Iran and Australia

### 7.2.2. Why?

Exhibitions represent identity, either directly through assertion, or indirectly by implication. They are privileged arenas for presenting images of self and “other” (Karp 1991:15)

In the above quotation, Karp identifies a relationship between exhibition contexts and identity politics, seen in relation to offline, physical exhibitions. Digital exhibitions are not altogether distinct from these observations, and as will be shown, can play an important role in anthropological research into questions of identity and subjective experience. At the same time, digital exhibitions are not uniform, nor do they necessarily share intentions or outcomes. They vary according to the research, researcher, participants and the related social, cultural and aesthetic frameworks from which the material emanates. Setting up this digital exhibition as an original research

method, I sought to match two fundamental features relating to my research (1) the unique nature and research requirements of my field site: a transnational (digital and social) field of globally-dispersed Iranian participant photographers and photographs and (2) what photobloggers themselves physically do in their own practices: they use technology to exhibit digital photographs, to various extents, as ‘art’ (See chapter 8 on the relationship between photoblogging and art). An overall methodological ambition of my project was therefore to carve out an ‘art space’ that was also a research space, within the broader digital landscape, in which to collectively explore the research theme (the visual negotiation of Iranian identity and subjectivity through popular photography). Assembling research participants within an appropriate environment, which was initially closed to non-participants, we could talk about and explore issues concerning images of Iran that we were all in the business of producing and/or studying. This gave a sense of focus to our feeling of virtual co-presence (Postill 2013), which I had developed over the course of the year with them on an individual basis through e-mail, Skype and other related forms of digital participant observation (see chapter 1). The exhibition developed these relationships on a more collective basis by allowing participants to interact with one another under the research rubric.

#### **7.2.2.1. Digital afterlives**

Another important practical reason for setting up the exhibition pertains to the life span of photoblogs, which constituted my principal digital source. As individually created and maintained sites, photoblogs are essentially vulnerable digital objects. They have no necessary or guaranteed ‘afterlife’, but are paid for (though some use existing, free software programmes) and maintained by their makers. This means that their activity and longevity is contingent upon their creators’ attitudes towards them. In some cases, photoblogs are user-maintained, as with the ‘Life Goes on in Tehran’ (LGOIT)

photoblog, where the photographer stopped posting images on the photoblog in July 2010, but has kept the web space ‘alive’ on the Internet via an automatic annual subscription to their chosen web server. In these cases, the lifespan of the photoblog continues by the construction and investment in the social life of the photoblog by fans, recalling McQuire’s (2013) argument that ‘photography’s afterlife’, in the context of the digital archive, is constructed through the network of relations and social discourse emanating from it (see chapter 8 for examples of this). In other cases, the individual may not desire to renew their photoblog’s web presence in light of the financial and personal commitment required in maintaining it. Vahid’s photoblog (a main participant in this research) is one example of this, where general life commitments led to him abandoning his hobby. Though Vahid was courteous to inform me of his plans to abandon his photoblog, this leaves the digital ethnographer suddenly devoid of a particular ‘data set’. In these cases, the digital research exhibition can prove beneficial, in extending the lifespan and virtual presence of the ‘dead’ photoblog (Figure 7.3), resurrecting it in another, protected online space (and, if shared, other digital viewing publics) wherein its agency and efficacy are revived and reformulated. In these cases, the digital exhibition extends the live presence of the ‘dead’ photoblog, continuing its contribution to the on-going, discursive field of representing Iran, with which this project is concerned. This process of archiving and preserving marks a contribution to established practices of late nineteenth and early twentieth century anthropology, involving the collecting, representing and exhibiting of ethnographic material.



Figure 7.3: Expired photoblog: <http://photo.vahidrahmanian.net> and Vahid's page on the digital research exhibition [www.photoblogsiran.com/blog/photographers/vahid-rahmanian/](http://www.photoblogsiran.com/blog/photographers/vahid-rahmanian/)

Critical debates in anthropology and museum studies have since addressed this tradition, of what has been termed ‘salvage ethnography’ (Clifford 1989:73), denoting the ‘desire’, as Clifford puts it, to ‘rescue something “authentic” out of destructive historical changes’. My efforts to preserve a dead photoblog in the digital exhibition resurrect debates concerning preservation and display in the digital context. We might consider, for instance, why we or other actors might *want* to preserve something and stop it from expiring, and of equal importance, what resources might we/they have to do so? Thinking through the associated politics and practices of this question puts ancient cultural objects, dead photoblogs and even deceased persons (see provisions taken by Facebook to memorialise users’ accounts after physical death)<sup>159</sup> on an ethico-historical plane which should anchor all critical thinking about digital afterlives, from the museum to the web. Ultimately, the exhibition captures the present digital-

<sup>159</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/help/contact/651319028315841>. (Accessed: 08/12/14).

visual ‘moment’ to which these photoblogs about Iran – constructed at specific times and places by particular individuals using certain technologies – belong.

### **7.2.3. How? ‘Collaboration’ and its limits**

In the first instance, I set about establishing the essential template of the exhibition website, with assistance from two of the participants who were able to devote slightly more time to it and make practical and aesthetic suggestions to work with as a base. The working site was password protected, which allowed for a period (one month) of relaxed co-curating, developing and editing in June 2013, before the site was made ‘public’ in July 2013. It was decided amongst the exhibitors and I, that for the sake of consistency and ease, I was to be the sole manual editor of the page (with access to the main digital editing dashboard of the site). For the sake of both consistency and in anticipation of the exhibition’s future publics (see 1.2.5 below), it would be in English. Participants would make suggestions and changes by communicating them to me, either through e-mail, Skype, Facebook and other ways we had been digitally communicating throughout the year (see chapter 1). My role and activities, as chief overseer of the exhibition, highlights the limits of collaboration in such a project. From the outset, the question of how the Iranian photoblog exhibition might be co-curated was a transparent and fluid topic of conversation between my participants and myself. The most pressing concern (for me as a researcher) was to attend to the balance of power between my desire to design the exhibition with participants and their willingness and/or ability to commit time to the project. Here it is important to emphasise how participatory methods should not be coercive in their commitment to democratic ideals of collaborative participation. This ethical commitment on the part of the researcher should arguably never overshadow the practical realities emanating from the field and from individuals’ own feelings and life commitments. In the case of the

research exhibition, whilst it is fair to term it a collaborative, participatory project, this does not mean that the nature of the participation was entirely equal amongst all participants, or between them and my level of input. The overall commitment to the concept of a collaborative project however provided a base line of consent for subsequently negotiating the level of individual participation from each individual. This ethos, of sharing photographs together in a collaborative spirit, ultimately forms the basis upon which the digital exhibition was collectively envisioned (if not pristinely carried out) as collaborative. I found, therefore, that in practice, devolution of power in its totality, particularly in transnational, collaborative projects carried out across time zones and spaces on the Internet, is not always possible or particularly effective.

Given the nuanced nature of the collaboration in practice, it is useful to speak of the digital exhibition as an on-going point of collaborative contact, akin to Clifford's (1997) concept of the museum as a 'contact zone', of sorts, between myself and Iranian popular photographers. Borrowing the phrase from Pratt (1991), Clifford defines the contact zone as a space of the 'colonial encounter': a convergence between museums and 'others' involving contentious and collaborative interactions and negotiations between parties. Following Gere (1997:59), I suggest that Clifford's theory of museum dynamics translates well to models of 'communicativity' offered by the Internet as a 'space of exchange, negotiation and communication'. In the digital exhibition, such dynamics regarding cultural representation and curating were present, but controlled within an overall ethical framework of research (not being played out in the digital landscape at large as in Gere's analysis of the Internet as a contact zone).

#### 7.2.4. Where?

A main point arising from discussions with collaborators about hypermedia web design and my being the overall facilitator of the project, was my relative lack of technical skills, compared with theirs. They were the competent men and women building, designing and maintaining photoblogs, I the student anthropologist new to the digital landscape as a field of research. If I were to truly attempt to understand their practices as a participant-observer, it was important for me to build a photoblog, which took the form of the digital research exhibition. We discussed many possible formats the project may take, including which aesthetic models would be used in its design. It was decided that the most appropriate thing to do would be to model the research exhibition's design on the participants' own photoblog types and aesthetics, in order to symbolically honour the photoblog format as a mode of communicating cultural knowledge. The construction phase involved three consecutive processes. Firstly, a reliable webhost was chosen, entitled 'iPage'<sup>160</sup>, based on participants' own recommendations and experiences of reliable and unreliable web hosts. Following the acquisition (and my purchasing of the web space), a pre-existing and easy-to-use blog software programme, wordpress.org<sup>161</sup> was then placed on to the web space. Finally, a visual theme or template for the website (which can be bought from wordpress.org) was chosen, again, either with or with the approval of participants. Vahid had used the theme entitled 'AutoFocus' (a theme specifically designed for photographers<sup>162</sup>) in his own photoblog, and since he was one of the most active members of the project at the design stage, after conferring with the other photographers, this was the chosen template.

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<sup>160</sup> <http://www.ipage.com/ipage/index.html>. (Accessed: 15/08/13).

<sup>161</sup> <http://wordpress.org>. (Accessed: 15/08/13).

<sup>162</sup> <http://theme.wordpress.com/themes/autofocus/>. (Accessed: 15/08/13).

### 7.2.5. Who?

The participating photographers were those who constituted some of the main participants in the research process throughout the course of my fieldwork, based on their levels of interest, commitment to the project and ability to take part. From this pool, eight individuals (seven male and one female) became part of the exhibition. Despite the gender imbalance in the exhibiting group, its self-selected nature overruled any categorical interests or distinctions I might have made myself as an individual curator. It also reflects my research participant pool at large, which consisted of mostly male photobloggers.<sup>163</sup> The participating photographers are listed on the right hand side of Figure 7.4. Apart from LGOIT, who maintains their anonymity, each photographer is introduced with their real name. This reflects the ethical policy outlined in the methodology section of chapter 2, whereby I treat photobloggers in the digital research process as ‘Amateur Artists’ (Bruckman 2014), honouring their desires to be named in order to acquire the recognition of their work.

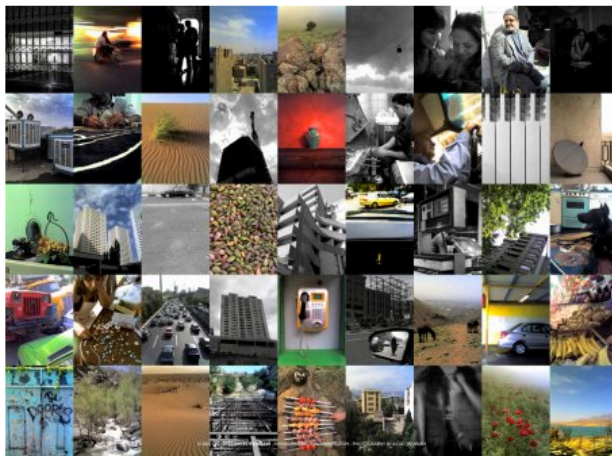
The photographers feature in different locations in the exhibition. In the first instance, they are introduced as a collective, brought together in the research process, indicated by the ‘Photographer Profiles’ tab at the top of the page (Figure 7.4). This brings up a scrolling page with a snapshot image of each photographer in the popular style of a mirror ‘selfie’ (see chapter 8 for further discussion on this visual *motif* in practice). Individuals chose and submitted their own images to represent themselves on their respective pages. We discussed the idea that they should each provide a sentence or two as an introductory quotation to describe interest in digital photography. As a result, each individual’s quotations features below their mirror ‘selfie’ and again, provides an overall introduction to the project and its shared ethos amongst its

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<sup>163</sup> In chapter 3, I discussed how photoblogging is a largely male-dominated practice in Iran.

participants in addressing the purported images of Iran and Iranian identity. Figure 7.5 shows one example of a photographer's profile (Kiana Farhoudi) and how it features on the exhibition.

# Contemporary Iranian Popular Digital Photography



Cover image for the Facebook fan page of the popular photoblog 'Life Goes on in Tehran'.

## Pages

- About
- Background
- Photographers
  - Amir Sadeghi
  - Kiana Farhoudi
  - 'Life Goes on in Tehran'
  - Ehsan Abbasi
  - Saleh Ara
  - Vahid Rahmanian
  - Omid Akhavan
  - Nikzad Shahidian

Figure 7.4: Title page, <http://www.photoblogsiran.com/blog/>. (Accessed 07/08/14)

## Kiana Farhoudi



*Iran is an exotic country and everyone's looking for some exotic images from it, I just hope that my pictures show that we're as normal as anyone else in the world. I want them to be viewed as what they really are, visual experiments of everyday life.*

Figure 7.5: Mirror self-portrait, Kiana Farhoudi, research exhibition participant

At the second stage, photographers have their own main exhibition space. The viewer can enter these by clicking on a name they choose from the list of pages featured on every visited page on the right hand side menu. To take the example of another photographer, Amir Sadeghi (Figure 7.6) illustrates what a photographer's introductory page looks like. Again, a self-selected self-portrait image of the photographer is displayed, along with a small biographical description about them and their work, written in the third person. This was either written by the individuals themselves, or at their request, by me, based on my knowledge about them. In the latter case, these photographers felt that their English might not be good enough in order to articulate what they wanted to say in words. In either case, they proofread and edited these descriptions and discussed them with me before being posted on to their page. Thirdly, the viewer can then virtually enter the chosen photographer's exhibit by clicking the centrally placed tab 'View (Amir's) Exhibit' (Figure 7.7).

## Amir Sadeghi



- Pages
- About
  - Background
  - Photographers
    - Amir Sadeghi
    - Kiana Farhoudi
    - 'Life Goes on in Tehran'
    - Ehsan Abbasi
    - Saleh Ara
    - Vahid Rahmehian
    - Omid Ahmadian
    - Nikzad Shahidian

### VIEW AMIR'S EXHIBIT

Amir lives in Tehran and is the photographer behind the popular photoblog **Tehran Live-Daily Photos from Tehran** which has been live for the past seven years (since November 2006).

He continues to update every month and his photo blog exists as a "sign for everybody that think we don't live peacefully".

Figure 7.6: Amir's exhibition home page: <http://www.photoblogsiran.com/blog/photographers/amir-sadeghi/>. (Accessed: 07/08/14).

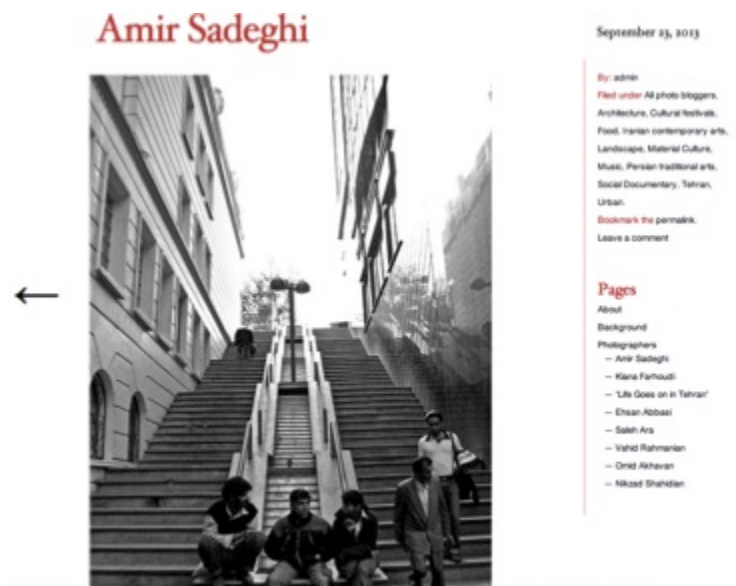


Figure 7.7: Amir Sadeghi Exhibit, <http://www.photoblogsiran.com/blog/amir-sadeghi/> (Accessed: 07/08/14).

At this stage, viewers can scroll vertically at their leisure through the entirety of Amir’s exhibited digital photographs (totalling 50) and navigate at will through other areas of the site. The menu tabs remain on the page for this reason, and can be selected at any point in the viewing process. In addition, the images are all ‘tagged’ in to various categories (a process described later in this chapter). This places the images in select groups (links) which can be clicked on at any stage in the viewing process, in order to be brought to a thematically-grouped virtual exhibit space of photographers who engage with the said category (and whose images they have assigned to that group). To take one example, a category entitled ‘Social Documentary’ (Figure 7.8) shows that all eight of the participating photographers consider their images to belong to a social documentary category. Consequently, the viewer encounters all eight of their pages in this group space and can proceed to enter any of their exhibits from this page. We also discussed my role as researcher-facilitator of the exhibition and how I would contribute, in my own way to the construction of knowledge. My role as

anthropologist was to synthesise the material, the images, the conversations and to provide the necessary contextual information I had gleaned from my investigation of the practice into an accessible form for the exhibition website. I created two pages, the ‘About’ and the ‘Background’ tab (Figure 7.9 and Figure 7.10) which would offer viewers a general introduction to Iranian photoblogging, including its emergence in the early 2000s and how it differs from the wider blogosphere. This contextual information also outlines some of the defining features and social implications of blogging with photographs that I discovered throughout the research process.

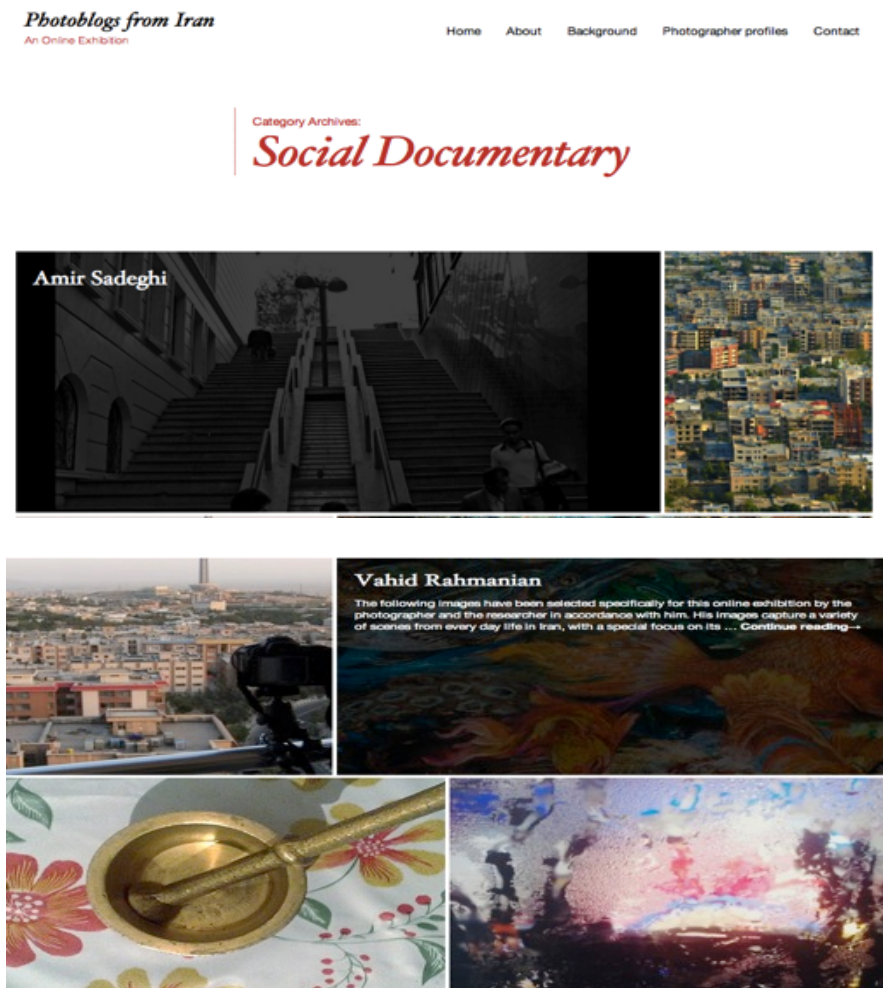


Figure 7.8: ‘Social Documentary’ category:  
<http://www.photoblogsiran.com/blog/category/social-documentary/>

## About

This digital exhibition features the work of eight contemporary Iranian popular photographers, based in Iran (Tehran and Karaj) and five other countries (UK, US, Australia, Italy and Germany), who comprise the principal participants in my anthropological PhD research project on popular digital photography in/of Iran being undertaken at the Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology, University of Oxford.

It was set up in June 2013 as a collaborative participatory digital-visual research tool. A main purpose of the platform is to create a participatory space in which the principal participants of the research can come together and take an active part in the communication of their photographs and output of my research.

The idea to develop a collaborative digital research platform developed out of the photoblog I set up in preparation for fieldwork in Iran in October 2012: **'Imagining Other -> Imaging together'**) in order to share my fieldwork photos with participants whilst in Iran.

The exhibition aims to showcase the selected works of a group of Iranian photographers taking part in the research project, who photograph everyday life in and across Iran. It aims to generate a broader discussion about the social and cultural role of popular photography in Iran today, based on the types of images shown on photoblogs (themselves digital exhibition spaces) and the broader digital/visual contexts in which the making, viewing and distributing of such images are enmeshed.

It also intends to serve as a digital-visual platform, for exploring the role and status of popular, or 'amateur' photography and digital platforms in contemporary transnational cultural politics.

The exhibition includes a range of digital photographs from (and links to) participants' own photoblogs.

It warmly invites comments from viewers.

The exhibited photographers have been brought together in this research through their sharing of a common theme: all self-consciously bear witness to the 'Iranian everyday' in their visual practices. They all show the 'ordinary' aspects of lived experience. This speaks to a significant history of internal and external visual representations of Iran and 'Iranianness' which have dominated global imaginations of the country, its cultures and peoples, in the post-revolutionary period and following the establishment of the Islamic Republic (1979-present).

**Overall my research explores how everyday and popular digital and visual practices Iran are contributing to the global imaginative understanding of the place of Iran. How is the country, its people, customs and traditions being captured on mobile phone and digital cameras by Iranians and what impact do these images have for Iranians living inside and outside, amongst photographers themselves and on a host of viewers from all over the world?**

The photobloggers featured in this exhibition are of Iranian origin and live either inside or outside of the country.

I am grateful for their involvement, courage and visions.

*Every photograph is a certificate of presence*

R. Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (1980)

### Pages

About

Background

Photographers

– Amir Sadeghi

– Kiana Farhoudi

– 'Life Goes on in Tehran'

– Ehsan Abbasi

– Saleh Ara

– Vahid Rahmanian

– Omid Akhavan

– Nikzad Shahidian

Figure 7.9: 'About' section, digital research exhibition: <http://www.photoblogsiran.com/blog/about>

# Background

What is photoblogging?

Photoblogging (photography-orientated web-logging) is a practice of producing photoblogs, which can be understood as digital photographic diaries of personal, popular photographs taken on camera phones and digital cameras. Photoblogs emerged in the early 2000s when Iranian bloggers, as well as those with budding interest in popular photography took an interest in digital photographs being shown and circulated online by Iranians via e-mail and on Facebook and Flickr as an effective form of cultural communication. Following this recognition, and gaining inspiration from the concept of posting an 'image-per-day', established by pioneering **key figures** in contemporary online digital photography, many decided to set up their own individual photoblog sites as personal exhibition sites through which they could communicate the country and cultures of Iran.

Broadly speaking, it is possible to identify 4 main characteristics of photoblogs from Iran:

1. They privilege the visual as a method of digital communication (photoblog are distinct from more mainstream text-based blogs which may or may not feature images).
2. They exhibit popular, amateur or everyday photography. They may be conceptually distinguished from **fine art** or **photo-journalist photography**, both of which have their own distinctive traditions inside Iran and amongst Iranian photographers and artists living abroad. At the same time, their practices (and socio-technological agencies) arguably blur pristine definitions of many of these terms.
3. The photographers have not generally undertaken professionally **training**.
4. **Iran (as place, material culture, landscape, cultural traditions)** is their main photographic subject. Iranian photobloggers share an ethos of **showing everyday life in Iran**. Many photobloggers group themselves as 'Iranian photoblogs by joining Iranian photoblog – specific groups such as photoblogs.ir (no longer active) set up by one of the featured photographers – Saleh Ara, as well as on Iran-specific pages of existing international photoblogs sites such as [www.coolphotoblogs.com/iran](http://www.coolphotoblogs.com/iran) and [/www.aminus3.com/country/ir-iran/](http://www.aminus3.com/country/ir-iran/).

## Pages

- About
- Background
- Photographers
  - Amir Sadeghi
  - Kiana Farhoudi
  - 'Life Goes on in Tehran'
  - Ehsan Abbasi
  - Saleh Ara
  - Vahid Rahmanian
  - Omid Akhavan
  - Nikzad Shahidian

Figure 7.10: 'Background' section, digital research exhibition:  
<http://www.photoblogsiran.com/blog/background>

### 7.2.5.1. For who?

The digital exhibition was primarily intended for the participating actors, namely, the researcher and the research participants (exhibiting photobloggers). This explains the decision to maintain the site as password protected during the development stage from June to September 2013. Following this phase and with the consent of the exhibitors, the password protection was lifted and the exhibition became officially available to the public, making use of what Gubrium and Harper suggest to be the primary goal of

placing exhibitions online in the form of online web 2.0 platforms as namely, ‘to make materials available to a wider public’ (2013:173). Making use of what Van House (2007) calls (in the context of Flickr) the ‘publicness’ of ‘photo exhibition’ (or, the digital display of photograph online) the digital research exhibition ultimately allowed for a wider circulation of the visual material, beyond the private research dialectic between myself and my participants. At the same time, the exhibition’s ‘publicness’ should be nuanced here. The scope of its public outreach was a pressing issue from the early days of the project. I was very clear that the main aim of the exhibition was for research purposes and not for general circulation or wider consumption amongst third parties, such as news agencies and commercial organisations, for whom it might constitute a useful source in reporting about or marketing Iran.

To give one example of the potential problems emanating from the site: a major London-based newspaper contacted me in July 2013 after a member of its press had heard a presentation I gave at a symposium about contemporary art in Iran. The digital research exhibition, I was told, would provide an interesting visual annex about ‘everyday Iranians’ to the paper’s reporting on the Presidential elections in Iran occurring at the time (and which would see Hassan Rouhani assume office in August 2013). Overly aware of the ethics of this proposition, given my thesis’ subject matter on the visual politics of representing Iran, I declined to participate. The case directly references the arguments I made in chapter 6 regarding the marketability of visual content about Iran and the overt politicisation of most Iranian cultural production. With this in mind, the exhibition was directed more towards participants, their photographs and the discourse they elicit. I undertook no crowdsourcing for viewers, which Gubrium and Harper (2013) term one possible strategy of ‘audiencing’ (gaining audiences for the research) in digital-visual research design. The overall publicness of

the exhibition was, in effect, anchored by the ‘virtual intimacy’ (Biella 1994) or ‘distant closeness’ (Van House 2007) afforded by the pre-established relationship between myself and my participants, as social beings throughout the research process, connected in virtual time and space.

In a second kind of viewer public, the digital exhibition was used as a research tool amongst (a) wider research participants, where the exhibition facilitated a use of digital photo-elicitation (see later in this chapter) and (b) in communicating anthropological knowledge within the academy. In the latter case, it provided a locus for thinking through new methods for conducting digital-visual research. Beyond academic audiences, the digital exhibition also struck an interesting relationship with the contemporary art world, as discussed later in this chapter. A possible third public for the digital exhibition was a potentially broader ‘global’ social nexus of ‘netizens’<sup>164</sup>, arising if and when the exhibition was to be actively shared (as opposed to discretely being made public) by myself and research participants on (our) Facebook, Flickr and other relevant online social networks. At the time of writing up of this thesis, these lines of communication have not yet been explored, in line with the research scope of this project. At present therefore, the site is publically live, but not overtly drawn attention to, which means its viewer base remains limited.

With an emphasis on participatory action and co-curation, participants found the digital exhibition a useful way of synthesising my project in a delimited space. Beyond the research rubric however, they also emphasised its potential in the wider cultural politics of representing Iran, which they themselves were involved in. One participant, Amir explained how he considered it an important and relevant method for

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<sup>164</sup> The term ‘Netizen’ is a contemporary colloquial *portmanteau* of the English words ‘Citizen’ and ‘Internet’. It refers to an entity or person actively involved in online communities. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Netizen>. (Accessed: 04/12/15).

my project, which tied into his own efforts to ‘introduce Iran to the world, more as a reality’.<sup>165</sup> Other participants who could not afford the time to take part in the exhibition such as Ahmed, told me how ‘It’s great that you’ve brought different photographers from different places (not just those living inside Iran) in one place for people to see their important work...’<sup>166</sup>. In all cases, photographers expressed satisfaction at the research exhibition’s moderate level of ‘publicness’ at this stage (i.e. live, but not extensively shared), though they were also open to discussing what they saw as a number of potentials for future development.

#### **7.2.5.2. Self-selecting photographs**

The research exhibition was designed to show a range of self-selected digital photographs from the photographers’ pre-existing digital archives on their photoblog sites. These selected images were then collectively discussed amongst participants and myself. Using the exhibition as the basis of a digital photo-elicitation exercise, we discussed the visual representations of Iran and their relationship to contemporary Iranian subjectivity and experience. The first step we took in our co-curating initiative was to discuss which images (out of the potentially thousands from their own photoblogs) would be included in the exhibition. This meant deciding on what Kratz (2002) calls, in her work curating a travelling exhibition of photographic portraits she took of the Okiiek people of Kenya, ‘the ones that are wanted’. In direct relation, it was important to consider, in our exhibition of photoblogs, the ones that might be *unwanted*? Without imposing any typological restrictions on the photographers in their choice of images, it was agreed that they would each select as many images as they wanted for their individual exhibit pages in the exhibition. In a couple of cases, photographers wanted me to choose for them, explaining how they did not know what

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<sup>165</sup> Online interview with Amir Sadeghi (15/06/13).

<sup>166</sup> E-mail correspondence with Ahmed (21/08/13).

kind of thing to submit, or what I ostensibly wanted. Despite clarifying that I did not ‘want’ anything from them, other than their personal choices, we negotiated the process of choosing by my consulting them on some images which I had found striking or interesting, given my own subjective involvement in the research and what I had learnt over the past year. Overall, having the freedom to choose for themselves partially explains the variation in size in each of the exhibits, as well as the various categories of image ‘types’ that emerged. It also reflects the type of photography that they do and their individual attitude towards it. Whilst some such as Amir (who exhibits 50 photographs), are prolific producers of everyday images, uploading to his photoblog on a daily basis, others such as Nikzad (10 exhibited photographs), who aspire to professional photojournalism, take fewer, more stylised ‘artful’ photographs. The submitted/retrieved images totalled 173 (see Table 1).

| <b>Photographer</b> | <b>Number of exhibited photographs</b> |
|---------------------|--|
| Amir Sadeghi        | 50                                     |
| Kiana Farhoudi      | 16                                     |
| LGOIT               | 25                                     |
| Ehsan Abbasi        | 12                                     |
| Saleh Ara           | 17                                     |
| Vahid Rahmanian     | 20                                     |
| Omid Akhavan        | 23                                     |
| Nikzad Shahidian    | 10                                     |
|                     | Total: 173                             |

Table 1: Showing number of images per photographer in the research exhibition

Once they had been submitted and uploaded to the exhibition site (still in draft form and not yet made public), we discussed their ordering and arrangement.

#### **7.2.5.3. Constructing categories**

It had already been agreed at this point that each photographer would have his or her own ‘artist page’ and an exhibit within it (see 1.3). Rather than imposing any pre-arranged structuring of the material, we discussed how the digital potentials of the virtual exhibition might be incorporated into the curating process. One participant, Vahid, suggested that the ‘tagging’ function might be used (just as with photoblogs) to relate exhibiting photographers with certain types of images. These categories would have to first be created on the exhibition’s main database before the photographers’ could assign their selection of images to a relevant category. Discussing the tagging option with participants, all agreed that allowing technology to instigate the structuring of the exhibition in this manner (without altogether precluding their subsequent human choices) was an effective means of facilitating meaning making in an otherwise non-linear hypermedia environment. Moreover, as with some of the photographers’ reluctance to chose their own images, not all participants felt that they wished to assign their work to categories themselves (though they were happy for me to do it). This was due either to time constraints or for the fact that these specific individuals (unlike others) were not in the habit of doing this themselves on their own photoblogs<sup>167</sup>. Again, it was important to be mindful of over-burdening participants with the requirements of active participation. In such cases, tacit or passive participation was preferable.

Out of the broader conversations held with participants, thirteen main categories emerged from the various themes that photobloggers felt characterised their

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<sup>167</sup> Photoblogs are structured differently according to their creator. Whilst some structure their digital archives of images categorically, others do so chronologically. See also chapter 8.

interests as popular photographers. Figure 7.11 below illustrates the list of categories featuring in the exhibition. These include references to the landscape, cultural festivals, arts and cultures of Iran, as well as more ‘artful’ types of what exhibitors and I referred to (following their use of the term on their own photoblogs) as ‘experimental’ photography; that which leans more towards the artistic practices, than which focuses specifically on documenting visible aspects of everyday culture. Once the categories had been decided and the images had been assigned to a category, an overall narrative arc began to mould through our collaborative visual storytelling. Obtaining these findings – seeing what visual themes photobloggers wanted to show –was important both for the purpose of the exhibition, and for substantiating the general analysis presented in chapters 4-6 of this thesis which explored the wider cultural politics and practices of negotiating existing categories of visual representations of Iran in Iranian state as well as international media, through online, popular and alternative exhibitionary contexts such as photoblogs. These chapters introduced the idea that photobloggers aim to diffuse the necessity (in Iran) and/or hype (in international contexts) of certain, representational tropes pertaining to Iran and Islam.

Photobloggers’ ‘ordinary’ photographs of everyday life are offered as an ‘antidote’, and it is precisely this kind of categorical trope, showing nuanced, ‘everydayness’, which features on the digital exhibition. Thus, the ‘local’ categories constructed here for the purpose of the digital exhibition strike a direct relationship with the wider national Iranian and ‘global’ mediascapes in which these photographs (pre-existing on individuals own photoblogs), belong. This implies the relevance and efficacy of the exhibition as a method of research by showing how it was, from the outset, deeply enmeshed within photobloggers’ social worlds and forms of articulating socio-cultural aspirations of ‘salvaging’ the image of Iran via digital-visual media.

### Archives by Category

- All photo bloggers (RSS) (8)
- Architecture (RSS) (5)
- Cultural festivals (RSS) (6)
- Experimental (RSS) (1)
- Food (RSS) (4)
- History (RSS) (5)
- Iranian contemporary arts (RSS) (5)
- Landscape (RSS) (8)
  - Rural (RSS) (4)
  - Urban (RSS) (8)
    - Tehran (RSS) (8)
- Material Culture (RSS) (6)
- Music (RSS) (2)
- Persian traditional arts (RSS) (3)
- Religious festivals (RSS) (3)
- Self – portraiture (RSS) (2)
- Social Documentary (RSS) (8)

Figure 7.11: Categories of photoblogs on the digital research exhibition

Since I was to be the sole figure in charge of maintaining the site, the ‘Contact’ page features my contact details, including my University e-mail address and link to my profile on my affiliated department’s website. The decision to do this reflects current thinking in digital ethnography with regards to the transparency of researchers in online environments, where it is important that the viewing public know who is conducting the research, why and from where (Boellstorff et al. 2012). Some of the photographers suggested that just as they show a photographic ‘selfie’ mugshot of themselves on their biography pages, it would be fitting if I also show a photo of myself to join in with the personalised nature of the exhibition. Since it showcases the work of real individuals, with their real names and photographs, we agreed that this transparency should extend to me, where I would acknowledge my subjectively involved role as participant observer, researcher and co-curator. A photograph from my fieldwork in Tehran, taken by a non-exhibiting research participant at the Golestan

palace (which holds the biggest collection of photographs in Iran [see chapter 3]), was selected by the group, out of a range of proposed options (Figure 7.12).

photoblogsiran.com

home / contact

1



info@photoblogsiran.com

shireen.walton@sant.ox.ac.uk

<http://www.anthro.ox.ac.uk/current-students/our-dphil-students/#c9719>

Comments and thoughts from photobloggers and viewers warmly welcome

Figure 7.12: 'Contact' page, digital research exhibition: <http://www.photoblogsiran.com/contact.html>

This image of me was primarily chosen for its vibrancy in colour and for its compositional appeal, with the pattern on the *hejāb* visually blending in with the ornamental design of the ceramic panelling behind. We also discussed how my involvement, as a foreign woman researcher in Iran – where it had been difficult to gain access to travel – should be appropriately marked, particularly in an exhibition predominantly featuring male photographers. Sharing in this act of photographic self-representation on the exhibition with the photographers in this manner, I was able to maintain their trust and a feeling of transparency and collaboration, rather than simply 'spotlighting' them online, whilst myself 'hiding in the wings.' In chapter 8, I will proceed to discuss how visually joining in through digital-photographic self-portraiture (including 'selfies') was an overall important means with which I carried out

participant observation with Iranian photobloggers (see discussion on self-portrait mirror shots in 8.4.2).

### **7.3. Analysis of using the digital research exhibition: problems, challenges and overall assessment**

#### **7.3.1. Visibility**

A main ethical issue that arises from using a public research platform is the question of visibility. It is important to consider how affecting the visibility of a group of people, who are also research participants, might affect their overall ‘publicness’. This is perhaps not so much a question of my rendering the participating photographers *more* visible, but rather of modulating the margins of their visibility between (their) existing online publics and social networks and ones relating to my research and my framing of the material. The research exhibition does not arguably take them out of their original epistemic context. It upholds the ethical commitment to the theme of everyday Iran, which photobloggers devote their representational practices to. At the same time, upon becoming part of an academic research project, these photographers and sets of photographs adopt other layers of significance than in their original context on their photoblogs. This has the potential to affect the way in which viewers and other members of the photoblog or wider social communities interact with the material and with the participant photographers. In the digital exhibition context, these eight individuals appear as ‘special’, selected or platformed, as in any exhibition environment. It was important to consider how these individuals’ viewer bases might respond to the exhibition? Would they be interested in, indifferent to or suspicious about the research? What would the future implications of this be for the photographers’ credibility as members of the popular photography community and their status within their social networks? Speaking with participants and some of their

fans about these themes, one of the most prominent reactions to the exhibition that emerged was self-pride and a willingness to take part in a research project associated with Oxford University. More specifically, the manner in which my research questions were framed both interested and reassured photobloggers that the study was not going to be a replication of (exhaustive) narratives about Iranian resistance to the state or about the oppressive lives people have in Iran (themes introduced in chapters 4, 5 and 6 of this thesis). In general, participants seemed to respond with enthusiasm to the exhibition, seeking it as an interesting means of developing discourse on Iran. For some, it even potentially boosted their photography profile or kudos as well as their sense of pride in their practices.

#### **7.3.1.1. Representing self-representation: the cultural politics of framing frames**

In curating the exhibition as an anthropological research method, one of the main points for consideration concerned the fact that the digital exhibition was to frame a selection of pre-existing personal digital photography exhibitions of participants (photoblogs). The digital research exhibition was designed as a project of collective storytelling, akin to what anthropologists are finding in the context of virtual museums to be manifest forms of social creativity which directly reflect ‘actual’ (offline) realities (Giaccardi 2011; Geismar 2012; Harris 2013). Although the politics of framing is a main consideration in the politics of curating in general, it was nonetheless important to critically consider the purpose of the digital research exhibition vis-à-vis the visual material it might show and the potential impact of this on the field of Iranian cultural (self-) representation. This kind of consideration requires thinking critically about the impact of activist or applied visual anthropology, whereby the social intervention of the anthropologist actively impacts upon the field in a normative manner, to somehow change or develop it alongside participants’ own activities (Pink

2009). What would the research exhibition be adding to (or potentially subtracting from) photobloggers' own curatorial efforts in designing, hosting and maintaining their own photoblogs online? On the one hand, photoblogs, as popular visual systems existing in online space both pre and post-date the research enquiry. As autonomous exhibitions (though existing within variously inter-linked Iranian/non-Iranian social and photography-based online networks), they have their own publics, followings and types of socio-political purchase amongst a range of viewers inside and outside of Iran. The research exhibition need not attempt to intervene in these networks. Attempting to bring together eight prominent photobloggers under the rubric of social science research would afford a potentially alternative viewership, visibility and understanding of the practice, which all participating photobloggers were keen to explore.

Visual anthropologists who work with the 'Photo Voice' method invite participants to explore aspects of their subjectivity and lived experience using cameras they either give to them, or using the modern technologies participants have themselves, such as smart phones and or digital cameras (Gubrium and Harper 2013). The research exhibition developed as part of this PhD project marks a subtle shift in the way in which anthropologists might carry out these kinds of 'visual interventions' (Pink 2009). In the case of co-curating an exhibition about Iranian photoblogs, the exhibited photographs are not created for the purposes of the research. Rather, they pre-exist and have an online presence in other digital contexts before (and after) the intervention of the researcher (and their becoming part of the research process). Though not altogether new (anthropologists who study artists admittedly study pre-existing systems of visual (self-representation), studying already self-representing subjects does raise important methodological questions for future directions in digital visual anthropology and particularly the Photo Voice method.

The question of ‘the ones that are wanted’ mentioned above in 1.3, naturally raises the issue of framing: what are the ones that are *unwanted* and why might they be left out of the exhibition frame? This politics of representation gets to the curatorial essence of any exhibition. In the context of an anthropological photography research exhibition, it is helpful to consider Kratz’s (2002:1) question seen in relation to her Okiek portraits: ‘How do we know and show who we are and who others are?’ This is a question that Iranian photobloggers themselves explore in their practices, and as I will expand upon further in the following chapter, it involves visually communicating Iran’s social and cultural heterogeneity by showing a broad variety of scenes, peoples, objects and landscapes that all fit in the image of Iran. The challenge, for the visual anthropologist-curator in a digital exhibition about the practice, is to attempt to capture, evoke or distil a kind of ‘essence’ of what Iranian photobloggers do themselves and the kinds of images they take (and why) in a delimited space. This naturally requires constructing – albeit collaboratively and without explicit curatorial direction – a type, or sets of types of visual narratives. At the same time, these can only ever evoke aspects of photoblogging as a far larger phenomenon. As chapters 4 and 5 of this thesis have shown, the Iranian photoblogosphere is a far broader discursive field of socio-political relations and subject positions, which includes the more conservative ends of the political and social spectrum. Incidentally, this latter ‘type’ of photoblog does not feature in the research exhibition, since the creators of these kinds of photoblogs did not respond in the same manner to becoming a research participant as the more socially ‘liberal’ individuals. For this reason, the categories of images, which feature in the exhibition, though substantively diverse, remain within overall social, cultural and visual rubrics of ‘everyday life in Iran’. For the participating photographers then, these types of photographs were the ‘ones that were wanted’.

Figure 7.13 below illustrates this point about framing. Three screenshots can be seen taken from three different photoblogs for the sake of making a broad, comparative point: ‘Hezbollah Photo’, an Islamic photoblog by Peyman Sadeghi (discussed in more detail in chapters 4 and 5), ‘Words Are Never Enough’ by Saleh Areh, a research participant, and the digital exhibition discussed in this chapter.

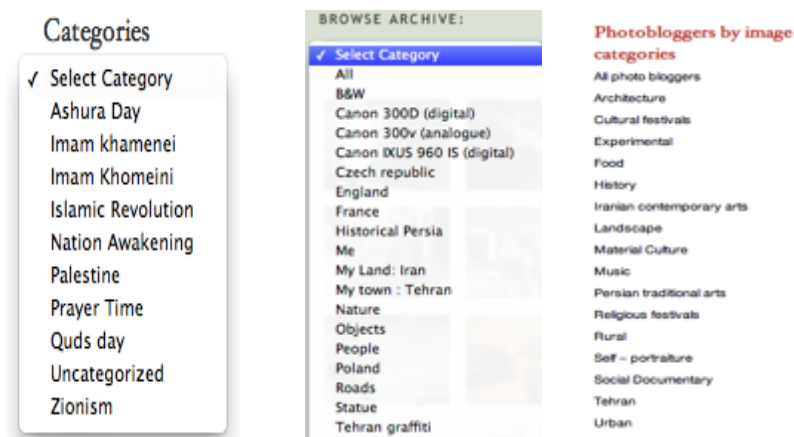


Figure 7.13: Photoblog ‘types’ (from left to right): ‘Hezbollah photo’, [www.photoblogsiran.com](http://www.photoblogsiran.com) research exhibition, and ‘Words are Never Enough’ (by research participant, Saleh Ara).

Whilst Hezbollah Photo privileges Islamic, revolutionary Iranian ideology, with most images pertaining to Shiite rituals in Iran, and aspects of Iranian revolutionary political culture, Saleh’s photoblog (which is broadly indicative of the type of cosmopolitan Iranian photoblogs which make up the majority of the participating research photographers in this study), captures a broader, auto-photobiographical portrait of his travels as an amateur photographer through Iran and Europe. He focuses on aspects of the landscape, history and material culture of Iran. The stark comparison between Peyman and Saleh’s image category types shown here reflects and acknowledges how the digital research exhibition can be considered epistemologically closer to Saleh’s photoblog, than to certain other types of photoblogs existing in the wider Iranian photoblogsphere, such as Hezbollah Photo. If the aim of the exhibition was to

showcase, for mass public consumption, a diverse range of photoblogs from Iran (as might be developed at a later stage after the PhD project), then the partial view provided by the research exhibition's frame admittedly falls short. For the purposes of conducting research with some of the most available and forthcoming members of the community however, this partiality can arguably be accepted as part of the scope of the research framework.

Overall, the visual-narratives constructed through the exhibition space in turn generate visual data to be collectively analysed, but the images themselves have not been generated for the research purposes as in the Photo Voice method. The digital photographs rather are pre-existing images that become part of the exhibition and in so doing, join another visual system. Constructing the exhibition thus involved central activities such as digital photo-elicitation (using the exhibited photos to structure and provoke discourse). I shared the exhibition (via the web link) to other research participants such as curators, artists and journalists who I had interviewed and use it in this manner, as well as photobloggers not taking part in the exhibition, as a befitting, qualitative tool to elicit conversation and discursively explore the subject of representing Iran. The various findings of using this method for digital photo-elicitation are presented below.

#### **7.4. Viewership: principal findings from the digital exhibition**

Between June 2013 and October 2013, the digital exhibition was employed as a method of research. It was either digitally shared (via the URL link) with viewers across the world, or it was physically shown to them (in the UK) by myself on my or their computers. Viewers included (i) Iranian photobloggers not taking part in the exhibition (ii) Iranians in Iran and (iii) members of the Iranian diaspora in the UK (iv) non-Iranians in the UK as well as (v) gallery curators, artists and journalists (Iranian

and non-Iranian) in Tehran and London who were contributing to the wider ethnography (see Table 2).

|   |  |
|---|--|
| Iran (via URL link)   | UK (in person with computer)   |
| Photobloggers not participating in the exhibition                                       | Members of Iranian diaspora in London                                |
| Other Iranians (students, young professionals, filmmakers, retired media professionals) | Students, academics, journalists, artists (non-Iranian)              |
|   | Gallery owners, photography curators, London (Iranian / non-Iranian) |
| Across the globe (via URL link)   |  |
| Iranians in diaspora  |  |
| Non-Iranians (with/without connections to Iran)   |  |

Table 2. Table showing digital exhibition viewers of [www.photoblogsiran.com](http://www.photoblogsiran.com)

In the first instance, Iranian photobloggers, popular photographers not taking part in the exhibition emphasised the important of such an exhibition regarding Iranian cultural representation. Ahmed, an Iranian male young professional in his late twenties who I had met in Esfahan (introduced in chapter 3) and who I shared the exhibition with when back in the UK, explained the following through e-mail correspondence:

It's great that you've brought many photographers in one place to showcase their different photos and their blogs. Now we can see the similarities and differences in their work. In Iran, each province has its own culture, food,

clothes, accents... showing this all together in one place online is the most important aspect of this exhibition.

(E-mail correspondence with Ahmed, [21/08/13])

Ahmed notably emphasised the digital exhibition space – or that which allows for these photographers’ works to be shown and communicated across the globe with ease – to be ‘the most important aspect’ of it. His comments reflect exhibiting participants’ attitudes towards the exhibition (discussed in chapter 2), in which they expressed approval of what they saw as my efforts to help salvage the image of Iran (along with them) when developing the exhibition concept. This renders it what Pink calls a ‘visual intervention’ (Pink 2009) on my part as an ‘activist’ anthropologist. Ahmed’s emphasis on the importance of the digital venue for the exhibition also reflected conversations I had with emerging artists in Iran who were experimenting with alternative exhibition spaces for showing work. Since my investment in them was academic and not commercial, nor part of a political project, it is possible to appreciate why Iranian photographers felt that I myself shared in their normative project of helping them to develop grass-roots art platforms with which to show ‘other’ aspects of Iran beyond media stereotypes and governmental restrictions. Through our digital exhibition, we enjoyed the freedom to discuss contemporary art making, where we explored whilst creating one such digital platform for communication. In doing so, like many contemporary popular photographers, we eluded the official confines of the official art worlds, inside and outside of Iran, in order to make the co-curated material publically available online to a broad viewership.

I also shared the digital exhibition with Tehran-based self-taught artist turned curator, Sohrab Kashani runs a new (2014) non-profit independent art space in

downtown Tehran called Sazmanab.<sup>168</sup> Viewing the digital exhibition, Sohrab acknowledged its simplicity, acknowledging that it ‘serves its purpose’ (as a simple Wordpress blog developed for research purposes), as well as its efficacy as a form of Iranian visual-cultural communication, about self-representation. He went on to reflect upon the importance of digital platforms for Iranian photographers, both within the fraught climate of cultural production in Iran (see chapters 5 and 6) and, relatedly, for it being a low/cost-free and accessible method of getting their work out to various viewing publics. The exhibition provoked Sohrab to think about similar, transnational digital-visual projects he has been involved in himself with for precisely these reasons: of accessibility, affordability and affect. Notable examples include the ‘Never been to Tehran’ and ‘Conflict Kitchen’<sup>169</sup> projects carried out with American artist Jon Rubin, and more recently, the ‘Shared Studio’<sup>170</sup> (December 2014) project designed as a ‘porthole’ between Tehran and New York: a physical shipping container placed in each city equipped with audio-video communications, allowing individuals in the respective locations to speak and ‘be with’ each other, as though in the same physical space. An on-site translator is present, providing live text translation on request. As a digital platform, it uses audio-visual media as a relevant vehicle for cross-cultural connection, between Iran and the west. The digital exhibition developed as part of my research and its capacity for mobility (it can be shared at the press of a button), also prompted Sohrab to reflect upon his own experiments with alternative exhibition contexts to mainstream galleries and museums. A notable example he gave was using a bus as a

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<sup>168</sup> For a discussion specifically focusing on the work carried out by Sohrab Kashani at Sazmanab in the wider context of ‘contemporary art-making’ in Tehran, see Sreberny-Mohammadi (2014).

<sup>169</sup> Conflict Kitchen is a restaurant-art space in Pittsburgh, USA that only serves cuisine from countries with which the United States is in conflict, including Iran, Afghanistan, North Korea, Cuba and Venezuela. According to its mission statement, it ‘uses the social relations of food and economic exchange to engage the general public in discussions about countries, cultures, and people that they might know little about outside of the polarizing rhetoric of governmental politics and the narrow lens of media headlines. <http://conflictkitchen.org> (Accessed: 05/12/15).

<sup>170</sup> See <http://www.sharedstudios.com/home/> (Accessed: 03/02/15).

vehicle for an art project he created entitled ‘A Tehraner's Guide to Sanandaj’ (2013). The project was part of a festival curated by Iranian artist Elham Puriyamehr for Sanandaj's yearly exhibition. It took the form of a touring art installation on a normal city bus travelling across the city of Sanandaj, in the capital of Kurdistan province, northwest Iran on November 19<sup>th</sup> 2013 (see Figure 7.14). Sohrab installed a video camera which streamed the bus on the project's corresponding website (no longer active), which also digitally mapped the bus's movements across the city on a map. The live stream was also shown on a TV screen installed on the bus itself that passengers could view. The audience was the general public getting on the bus at bus stops in the city. Sohrab explained how he envisaged this space to serve as both a physically moving exhibition and public art performance, which would attract people's attention and curiosity about other parts of Iran.

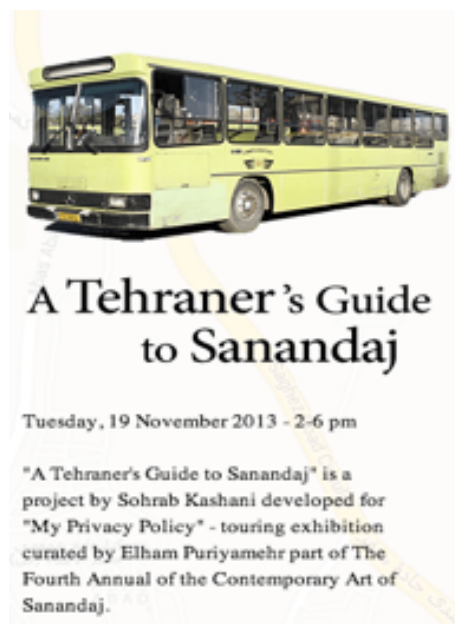


Figure 7.14: Exhibition advert: <https://www.facebook.com/events/1398504377054826/>. (Accessed: 03/12/14).

In another interview I conducted with Ali Kaveh, the founder of the online ‘Everyday Iran’ project on Instagram and Facebook (introduced in chapter 3), I learnt more about attitudes to digital exhibition environments. Ali linked digital platforms to a broader

social awareness of how digital technologies are transforming contemporary, emerging Iranian art more generally (and its official/institutional versus popular definitions). As the principal co-ordinator of one such highly popular digital platform for showing Iranian popular photography himself, Ali, like Sohrab, acknowledged the simplicity and also efficacy of my digital photography research exhibition for being framed and contextualised in academic terms. Ali expressed how he was pleased to see that some of the most prolific photobloggers (names he listed before having seen it) were included in the exhibition, alongside less known aspiring photographers. Both Ali and Sohrab stated that they would be happy to share the exhibition (via its URL link) on their Facebook group pages if and when my participants and I desired. What both Ali and Sohrab demonstrate in their own innovative projects, which rely heavily on digital media, is a creativity developed in response to and dialogically with the politics, problems and paradigms of the contemporary Iranian art world.

Viewed in digital form and not in fixed, physical locations, the digital exhibition developed and used as part of the research into popular photography in/of Iran, in one sense re-conceptualises the notion of the 'travelling exhibition' (Kratz 2002). It involved digital and not physical movement (though the computer bearing it did physically travel). Nevertheless, I found it to be just as effective a research method for exploring questions of contemporary Iranian subjectivity and experience.

Turning from those involved in emerging art ventures in Iran to those more formally connected to exhibiting Iranian art abroad, the digital exhibition received quite different responses. In one case, the curator of photography in a prestigious London museum acknowledged the importance of new digital platforms for showcasing Middle Eastern artists and disseminating their work. However, they did not deem the digital platform, or more specifically, the popularly produced image on a

camera phone to be an artwork in itself, let alone being worthy of exhibition in a prestigious museum. Though the visual content might be ‘interesting’, it was not, as they explained it to me in 2012, considered suitable for a funded exhibition in a physical gallery space. I also encountered a similar response from a boutique gallery owner and curator specialising in Iranian photography in London. After showing the digital exhibition and discussing my findings, which showed how photographic activities were opening up new creative spaces for emerging photographers in Iran, I asked whether it might be possible to install a small physical exhibition of printed digital photographs from Iranian photoblogs in their gallery. In a polite response, the curator suggested a fundamental distinction between the kinds of images shown on the digital exhibition and that which was again, deemed appropriate for display in a physical exhibition venue. Limited financial resources (linked to a value-judgement of the material), was therefore a main factor influencing her/his opinion. As she/he put it, there were ‘no resources for sponsoring an exhibition of content which can be seen and downloaded at the press of a button from a social network site.’<sup>171</sup> As a result, the digital exhibition was again regarded as ‘interesting’, but the conversation went no further. The four cases discussed here (of two Iranian artists/curators in Iran and two London-based curators) convey an interesting contemporary distinction between attitudes towards the showing of Iranian photography of different kinds. The former were living and working inside the country on self-generated funds. They were operating and carving out spaces within the contemporary art world in Tehran (Ali and Sohrab), whilst garnering growing numbers of online viewers and followers from across the globe. The London-based curators and gallery-owners, by contrast, steeped in international symbolic (as well as financial) capital, appeared bound by funding

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<sup>171</sup> Interview in London (26/10/12).

rubrics, as well as institutional definitions of art, which influenced what they were interested in and/or able to show.

Though hardly a surprising finding – and the point here is not to compare the clearly very different outlets of fine art and popular Iranian photography – a relevant finding of this thesis identifies a contemporary ‘moment’ (2012-2015), whereby digital platforms, popular photography and contemporary art worlds are coming into closer contact with each other and appear to be forming new spaces of Iranian ‘art’ production and dissemination in ways which blur official and popular definitions of art and photography. In turn, these are forming emerging digital-visual cultures in Iran, and other countries outside of the west, but which my study shows to be at present, undervalued or neglected by influential members of the official global art market<sup>172</sup>. This includes ‘native’ artists themselves who might benefit from being sponsored by museums and galleries inside and outside their country of origin, to exhibit their work in ‘global’ contexts as ‘local’.<sup>173</sup>

#### **7.4.1. Assessment of the method**

In their discussion of using digital exhibitions as part of digital-visual anthropological methods, Gubrium and Harper (2013:173) suggest that the primary purpose of using a digital exhibition online is to affect a wider public. The digital exhibition presented in this chapter subtly modifies this assumption. Rather than an emphasis on ‘audiencing’ (Ibid), or chiefly seeking to affect broad audiences, it makes the case for using a digital platform for the primary purpose of assembling transnationally located research participants in a delimited online field (and one whose choice of form is relevant to the

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<sup>172</sup> Insights from debates I generated and participated in at the Global Future’s Forum entitled: ‘10 Years On: Everyday Life in Iraq and Iran’, June 7-8, 2013 at The Mosaic Rooms, London. [http://www.southampton.ac.uk/wrc/news/events/2013/06/14\\_globalfuturesforum2013.page](http://www.southampton.ac.uk/wrc/news/events/2013/06/14_globalfuturesforum2013.page) (Accessed:20/09/13).

<sup>173</sup> On this issue in the context of International Biennales, see Anthes (2009).

subject matter: the use of online visual spaces for self-expression through photography), and to use that space for provoking discussion. Here, participants can be introduced to each other, their work and networks, as facilitated by my bringing them together. This has a direct affect on their respective publics, which merge and connect through their coming together for the exhibition. Not only are the participants introduced to each other, but they can also share each other's photoblogs, become 'friends' on Facebook, follow each other on Flickr, Twitter and other relevant platforms.

Not designed for mass public or commercial consumption, nor aimed at quantitatively mapping viewer comments and threads, the lack of public comments on the exhibition (though officially made public), is in some sense a direct product of its intended purpose. Had we agreed to share the link with our respective social networks, more discourse (akin to the kind of 'audiencing' method mentioned earlier) would have been generated. As described throughout this chapter however, actively seeking a range of comments from numerous social networks was not the purpose of the exhibition developed for the project at this stage, though it might signal a potential direction in a future project. A range of viewers inside and outside of Iran to whom I had virtually shown the exhibition also explained how they did not necessarily feel too comfortable commenting (or leaving written traces of their thoughts) on an exhibition that was a designated research platform. They had found the (private) process of browsing and relaying feedback to me a more 'natural' process. Moreover, some participants were themselves not keen on commenting on the exhibition site itself. Some gave the reason that they would not write a comment underneath each photograph in an offline exhibition in a gallery, so the same notion applied to the digital exhibition. In this sense, they preferred to convey their feedback and opinions,

virtually in person with me, or on alternative chat forums such as Facebook group messages or by e-mail. In so doing, they demonstrated a respect for the exhibition space as just that and not simply another web 2.0 blog platform on which to post comments. Others felt that the comments' function constitutes the unique aspect of the digital exhibition and could be explored at another stage of the exhibition's development. The effects of lacking written feedback on the exhibition space in theory can be considered a hindrance to the ability to conduct 'trace ethnography' –participant observation in digital environments using traceable data in logs as tangible data for analysis (Geiger and Ribes 2011) – on the exhibition site itself. At the same time, as mentioned, this 'data' in the form of feedback was retrieved by other means, in other digital contexts beyond the exhibition website. On the subject of publics therefore, it can be concluded that the online nature of the exhibition existed within the limits of its own self-constructed public, which determined how 'far' it was shared and viewed. In this sense, it comfortably met the needs of the research, whilst establishing an existing base for potential further development.

The digital research exhibition developed as part of this project employs and develops the notion of a traveling photography exhibition (Kratz 2002). In her seminal project, 'Okiek Portraits' Kratz created a photography exhibition of her photographs she took of the Kaplelach and Kipchornwonek Okiek peoples who live on the western Mau Escarpment region of western Kenya. The photographs travelled as a group exhibition to different locations across Kenya and America in order to explore the reception of visual representations of the Okiek in different locations. Kratz's work found that exhibition's physical movement exposes the way in which identity politics and cultural stereotypes were reformulated and imagined in different settings. The digital exhibition developed as part of this research does something similar to and yet

distinct from Kratz's method. The digital exhibition can be virtually circulated across the world at the press of a button (the sharing of a URL link). This allows viewers to enter a dialogical space of exploring notions of 'Iranianness' at the interface of the 'local' and the 'global' (a 'locally' produced exhibition existing in a global arena of the Internet, which also, as argued in chapter 1, has 'local' dimensions). In this sense, the globally circulating exhibition about Iran fosters a shared space for exploring questions of Iranian identity. Existing in virtual space, and not fixed in a physical location, movement or travel (regarding Kratz' notion of the travelling exhibition) is thus re-conceptualised as imaginative participation. It is intended to facilitate the epistemic movement of cultural representations of Iran; the normative pursuit of changing ways of viewing Iran that photobloggers are themselves dedicated to, as will be shown throughout this thesis.

#### **7.5. Collaborative digital-visual media design: the digital platform as an anthropological research method**

Emergent digital and visual methodologies are opening up new avenues for conducting ethnographic research *with* (and not just *about*) participants. Although 'new' media are giving rise to new methodological avenues, they also grow out of older approaches and technologies. Visual anthropology's existing engagement with types of participatory media (Ginsburg 1991; Turner 1991; Ginsburg 1994) (see chapter 1), lends itself to what Pink (2006) envisaged as the future of visual anthropology in a *digital* age: a public anthropology capable of making critical interventions. She subsequently argued (2011:228) that 'clearly the collaborative possibilities that the Internet offers to visual anthropologists are yet to be explored'. Today, research on and with the Internet presents a fertile ground for digital-visual ethnographers, as discussed in chapter 1.

Engagements with websites are an early example of collaborative digital media research in Anthropology, where they served as a means of experimenting, platforming and sharing research findings with the people with whom the Anthropologist was conducting research. It also enabled them to invite reflexive contributions and comments from various publics.<sup>174</sup> Biella (2008:2) has emphasised how visual/media research methods in anthropology can help combat cross-cultural racism and cultural ‘indifference’ in the modern, global world. He argues that ‘visual work in anthropology can strengthen resolve, inform emotion, and help us discover and feel what is worth fighting for in the global crisis.’ These have the potential, Biella argues, to promote what he terms ‘virtual intimacy’ (with subjects), as an important step towards cultural empathy. In his ‘Masai Interactive’ and ‘Yanomamö Interactive’ CD-ROM projects in the 1990s and early 2000s, Biella made the case for the validity of applied media ethnography and non-linear hypermedia anthropology, both in research and for pedagogical uses (Biella 1994). Reflecting upon these projects, he argued that departing from the necessity of linear analyses (as a product of written ethnographies) can encourage alternative ideas in thinking about other cultures: ‘Non-linear interruptions guide viewers to rewind and reflect not only on the ethnographic material they have seen, but also on the assumptions, prejudices and anxieties that they bring to their interpretation’. In light of these concerns, it could be argued that websites used for research (such as the digital exhibition presented here, and its interactive basis) have the potential to overcome what Biella has warned to be the danger of flat, filmic visual representations that can accrual reinforce cultural stereotypes, leading to what Wesch (2007) and Pink (2011) call a potential abuse of intimacy.

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<sup>174</sup>A prominent example of this type of research is Ruby’s ethnographic study of a community in Oak Park, Illinois, which can be viewed at: <http://astro.temple.edu/~ruby/opp/> (Accessed: 20/10/13).

Another example of a dynamic, participatory digital-visual framework, is Forte's (2003) website methodology. Forte advocates the creation of websites co-constructed with research participants about their culture, in order to create reflexive partnerships that both explore and transform the research process. A prominent example of this is his website co-created with the Santa Rosa Carib community of Arima, Trinidad<sup>175</sup>. In making the case for the use of websites as a component of collaborative digital-ethnographic research, Forte shows how this new method, what he calls 'co-construction' and 'field-creation' constructs a space in which to collaboratively investigate cultures (and their representations) online. More recently, Heidbrink and Statz' (2014) work curating an online archive also bears relevance to the research methods developed as part of this study. They have established an online digital photographic archive, entitled 'Youth Circulations', which seeks to 'trace the real and imagined circulations of global youth' by collecting and curating photographic representations of unaccompanied child migrants across the globe. Their emphasis on the digital platform (website) as conducive to showing representation breadth and mobility (as opposed to fixity or 'immobility' as they put it) bears conceptual and ethical affinity with the digital exhibition discussed here.

It is from these positions, which take websites, blogs and visual hypermedia seriously as research methods in generating anthropological knowledge, that I hereby introduce one such innovative platform. As discussed, I developed this as an original research method and not out of any *a priori* preoccupation with new digital technologies. On this basis, it served as a befitting tool for specifically exploring my social research topic: popular online Iranian digital photography, online. In so doing, it responds to Pink's (2011:211) suggestion that visual anthropologists can use

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<sup>175</sup> <http://openanthropology.org/za/> (Accessed: 15/03/13).

collaborative methods, interactive hypermedia and the Internet to ‘produce ethically responsible texts that engage with the corporeality of vision, have activist ambitions and might bridge the gap between written and visual academic anthropology’.

## **7.6. Summary**

This chapter introduced, illustrated and assessed the original design and application of an innovative participatory digital visual method developed as part of this PhD project. It presented the digital research exhibition, [www.photoblogsiran.com](http://www.photoblogsiran.com), and discussed relevant potentials, challenges and ethical implications connected with the method. It examined the method in light of relevant established and emerging theoretical and methodological literature in visual anthropology. I argued and showed how the method proved an important component in studying the transnational, digital field site of Iranian popular photographic practices, giving due symbolic acknowledgement to photobloggers’ choices to use digital platforms to communicate visual information about Iran in their own practices. Consequently, participation and collaboration were two essential components by which the exhibition was co-curated with eight participants from six countries. The chapter concludes by assessing the utility of the method, arguing that it harnessed the communicative potentials of using digital platforms in academic enquiry to meet the specific needs of the investigation into contemporary popular digital photography in/of Iran, whereby the nature of cultural politics in Iran has led to a dearth of venues for emerging art and photography, as well and a deficit in foreign anthropological research inside the country. These site-specific factors, amongst a range of methods specific to digital and visual anthropology, constituted the efficacy of the method.

## CHAPTER 8. ANALYSIS OF PHOTOBLOG CASE STUDIES

### 8.1. Introduction

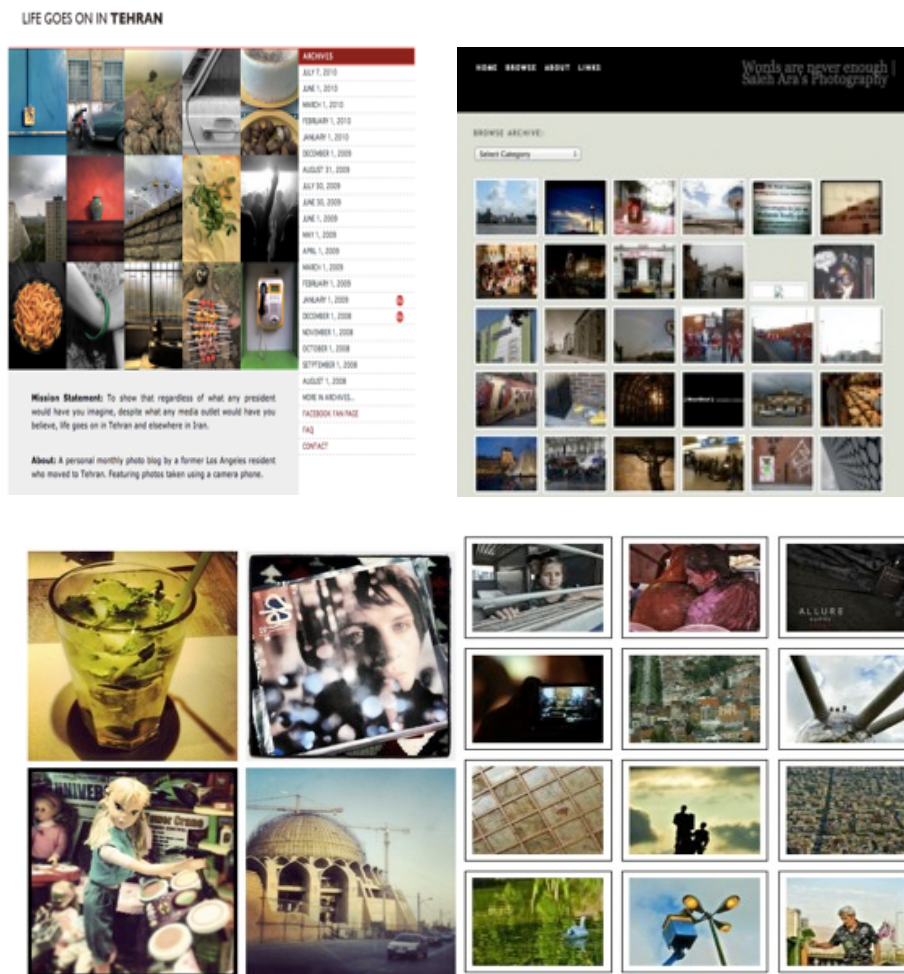
This chapter presents research findings from the online digital ethnography of Iranian photoblogs I carried out between September 2012 and October 2013. It looks at the ‘production’ side of photoblogs by photobloggers, whilst the following chapter (9) considers the ‘consumption’ of digital photographs and the social efficacies of photoblogs amongst viewers. The two chapters together (8 and 9) contribute to this thesis’ overall conceptualisation of photoblogging as a transnational Iranian communicative practice. Examples given throughout this chapter substantiate the argument made in chapters 4 and 5, which suggested that visual history in/of Iran is an important part of the broader transnational visual climate in which photobloggers today undertake their popular digital-photographic practices. The chapter shows how photoblogging, at once social documentary, also demonstrates a form of contemporary art praxis, whose social critique is comparable with contemporary Iranian artists.

The ethnographic findings presented in this chapter are drawn from select case studies of the main photoblogs and photobloggers included in the research, as introduced in chapter 1. The discussion reflects two interrelated types of analysis: (i) interpretive analysis of interview material and (ii) visual content analysis of photoblog case studies, carried out in relation to (i). Chapter 9 presents a third component: (iii) textual discourse analysis of viewer comments existing on photoblogs.

### 8.2. Photoblogs as digital exhibition sites

In previous chapters I suggested that a certain ‘appetite’ for digital exhibition venues exists in contemporary Iran, due to wider offline restrictions and challenges. Economic sanctions, limited resources and lack of state sponsorship for art foundations and

initiatives all constrain the ability of contemporary Iranian artists and photographers to produce and showcase their work. Within this contemporary cultural climate, the Internet and digital platforms are taken up for various kinds of art projects, for reasons of affordability, accessibility and international outreach. Photoblogs are constructed as exhibition sites, where aesthetic strategies associated with the type and display of digital photographs carry out a kind of Iranian digital-visual storytelling. Figure 8.1 below shows how photoblogs technically operate as exhibition spaces. It shows six photoblogs, which demonstrate three main exhibition styles that I found to largely characterise the Iranian photoblog genre: chronological, categorical and biographical.



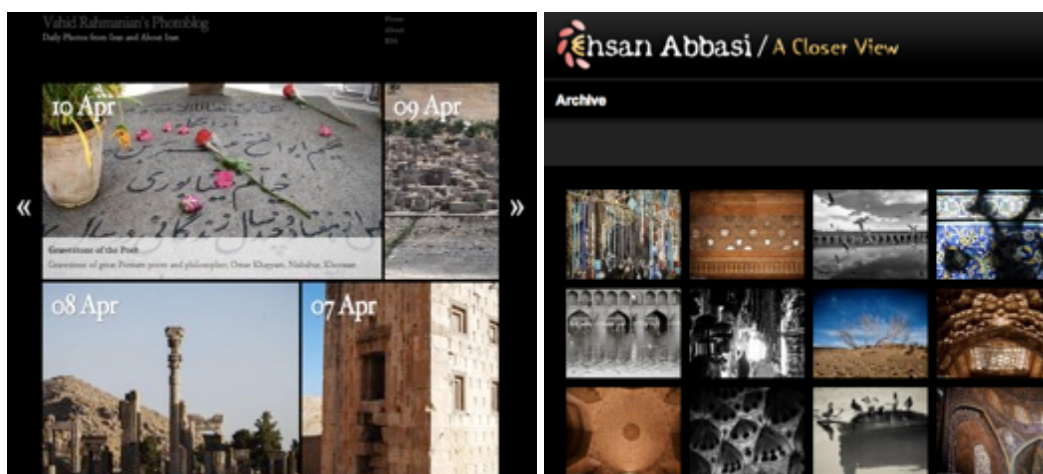


Figure 8.1: Screen shots depicting how photoblogs are visually structured on the screen as photography exhibition-archives. Participant photobloggers from left to right (clockwise): LGOIT, Saleh, Kiana, Nikzad, Vahid and Ehsan.

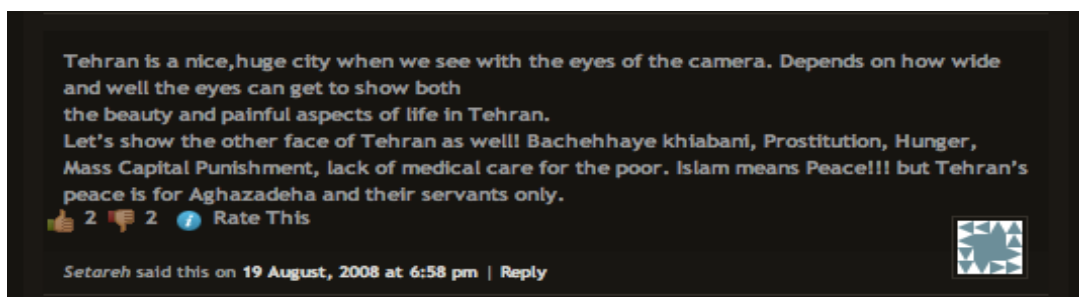
For some photobloggers, the photoblog is a date and time stamped archival record of the photographer’s movements in Iran. As Ehsan, a male research participant and member of the Iranian diaspora in Melbourne, Australia remarked, ‘Photoblogs are mostly intended to document the photographer’s life and where he or she spends most of their time in Iran’<sup>176</sup>. In these cases, photographs are presented chronologically in visual diary form, akin to a more traditional approach in non-photography blogging, where the latest post appears at the top of the blog roll or archive layout. For others, categories pertaining to multiple facets of Iranian life are preferred. In these instances, the photoblog becomes a kind of digital ‘cabinet of curiosity’, whereby viewers can choose themes such as ‘landscape’, ‘Persian art’, ‘Food’, ‘Ethnic groups’, with which to structure their interactive viewing patterns. In other cases, photoblogs are tailored primarily by the individual’s taste. Sohrab, a former photoblogger turned artist and curator based in Tehran (discussed throughout this thesis) explained how ‘my photoblog was like an extension of myself...I’m not a very confident person, so, it was

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<sup>176</sup> Online interview with Ehsan Abbasi (06/01/13).

my way of getting to know myself'.<sup>177</sup> This kind of photoblog recalls what Miller (2001) found in his early study of Trinidadian personal websites to be a kind of 'gallerying' or 'dressing up' of the website as a material extension of the self. Miller's study showed how individuals select the particular elements of popular culture they wish to be 'seen with' (Ibid: 12). Figure 8.1 above shows how some photobloggers focus on popular cultural markers such as CD covers and films, whilst others celebrate ancient Persian history, poetic traditions and art. In these cases, the photoblog becomes a digital-visual idiom for the self and for Iran, which is reflexively realised through the website's auto-photobiographical structure.

From discussions carried out with photobloggers, it is clear that digital storytelling is an important aspect of their practice. This is carried out through expositional strategies of showing photographs, where no single image or narrative dominates, but forms part of a broad gallery of image types. In the following example (figure 7.2) taken from Amir's photoblog 'Tehran Live', one viewer perceives the 'eyes of the camera' to facilitate this kind of representational breadth:



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Figure 8.2: Screenshot of Viewer comment, Tehran Live, posted: 19/08/08. (Retrieved 10/10/13).

<sup>177</sup> Online interview (13/11/12).

<sup>178</sup> Translation of Persian: '*bachehā-ye khiābāni*': street kids. '*āghāzādeh*': 'children of lords'. Since the wealthy Iranians of today are (generally) not literally aristocrats, this is an ironic play on words which implies that the wealthiest classes function like an aristocracy.

Here, the photoblog is viewed in contradistinction to the monolithic stories about Iran typified by mainstream western media narratives, which focus on either an extremist and treacherous Islam or the negative aspects of Iran's socio-political make-up, including capital punishment, poverty, vice and crime. It is this description, of the 'wide eyes' of the camera to capture 'the other face' of the country, that is a central theme for Iranian photobloggers and viewers alike. At the same time that the viewer is critical of western popular understandings of Iran, the comment also appears to be an internal social critique of contemporary life under the Islamic Republic, whose revolutionary promises to serve the poor and bring about greater social equality than under the former aristocratic monarchy, have not been met. Instead, another kind of plutocracy persists in Iran, under an Islamic, clerical rubric. A broader narrative politicised by the Islamic revolutionaries and cited in the comment is that 'Islam means peace' (for Iran). At least for this viewer, this project has failed. 'Peace', for this Iranian viewer, is, in his opinion, only experienced amongst the wealthy elites, whom he refers to, not without a touch of cynicism, as '*āghāzādeh* ('children of lords') and their servants'. The use of PEnglish (Persian expressed in the English alphabet) to express the phrase '*bachehā-ye khiābāni*' ('street kids') suggests that this social critique appeals to an Iranian viewership, in a 'global' viewing context. Using Persian script would almost be too self-referentially Iranian to maximize the potential for 'global' communication, which these photoblogs provide. Here, we see the notion of the 'third space' that I earlier suggested photobloggers occupy (chapter 5) reflecting viewers' own experiences.

As personal digital-visual diaries, photoblogs lend themselves to representational breadth. Having an expansive capacity for storing a vast amount of digital data, their technical make-up alone (even without the indexicality that Iranian

photoblogs evidently also convey) lends itself to ‘digital storytelling’ (Lambert 2002) <sup>179</sup>. The digital archives on photoblogs potentially store and show thousands of personal digital photographs taken by amateur photographers, which can span several years. Van House (2011) has suggested that developments in digital image-related technologies are changing the ‘publicness, temporality and volume of personal photographic images (Ibid: 1). The photoblog, as digital exhibition certainly illustrates this point. It departs from the offline exhibition in the way that it conceives of time, space and access. In this sense, it is a popular form of an ‘operational archive’ (McQuire 2013) theoretically discussed in chapter 1, insofar as it is a culturally ‘live’ space, with a fluid output (of continuously posted photographs) that connect to notions of culture and identity. Photoblog content is not fixed, nor necessarily permanent, but can be adapted by the photoblogger if and when necessary. Leading on from technical to indexical considerations, the photoblog’s digital capacity has the potential to increase the scope for visual representational breadth compared to a traditionally curated cultural exhibition. This capacity is clearly contingent upon the photoblogger, since the photoblog is not altogether independent of human action. Nevertheless, Iranian photoblogs present an interesting response to a central predicament identified in the offline exhibition venue discussed by Mercer (2008), who speaks, in relation to postcolonial art exhibitions, of ‘the overwhelming pressure to try and tell the whole story all at once’ (Ibid: 62). It is possible to identify an element of a ‘postcolonial’ predicament in Iranian photoblogging, in terms of claiming the right to popular self-representation beyond dominant western and national interlocutors as chief purveyors of cultural knowledge and representational

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<sup>179</sup> The precise amount of data permitted on each photoblog site depends on the agreement of the individual’s choice of web server. Some will naturally allow for more content depending on the cost of hiring the web space.

narratives<sup>180</sup>. As shown throughout this thesis, a significant number of photobloggers consciously link the photoblog to a wider epistemic project of combatting monolithic narratives of Iran and broadening the visual and political lens with which to think about it. Kiana, a main female research participant living in Tehran, introduced in chapter 1, explained the importance of ‘showing variety’ in photoblogs. To some extent, *showing* constitutes a conscious strategy for the Iranian youth engaged in popular photography. In her discussion of early uses of the camera in documentary cinema, Grimshaw (2001) provides an interesting distinction between ‘showing’ and ‘telling’ which I find useful in understanding some of the impetus behind Iranian photoblogging. The notion of ‘telling’, according to Grimshaw, involves a certain level of didacticism, indicative of a conscious agenda of communicating of a narrative message. It is a one-way process in which the audience can be passive. This kind of authoritative way of visual storytelling can be seen in the way the Iranian state systematically manufactures Iranian-Islamic subjectivity in public life, as chapter 4 discussed. ‘Showing’ by contrast, involves a sense of exposition or display of a stand-alone image (or system of images). According to Grimshaw’s definition, this engenders a greater discursive capacity, necessitating engagement with an audience. Photoblogging, by its technical nature, as a practice predicated on viewership shows how it is not a purely didactic process, but is intimately connected as well as responsive to viewer engagement.

### **8.3. Digital aesthetics**

A significant indication of photobloggers’ strategies for showing Iran can be seen in their use of aesthetics to incite social critique. Photobloggers privilege the visual as a

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<sup>180</sup> Theorists such as Hamid Dabashi (2008) speak of a ‘colonial occupation’ of Iran, despite it having never been officially colonised. Dabashi conceives of this occupation in terms of Orientalism and western political-cultural representational hegemony. For this reason, Dabashi speaks of Iranian visual cultural production (such as Iranian New Wave cinema) in ‘postcolonial’ terms.

form of communication. This Preference is evident in the titles of some photoblogs, in such examples as *Words Are Never Enough*, *A Closer View* and *Depth of Field*. With the latter title, Ehsan (a research participant based in Melbourne) intends to produce a double visual meaning; being both a technical photographic term for focus (the distance between the nearest and farthest objects in a shot which still appears sharp) as well as, in the photoblogger's desire to create visual depth and occupy a visual space between seeing Iran too closely, or too distantly. In Chapter 5, I coined the term 'banal aesthetics' to introduce the notion that photobloggers play with aesthetics to make 'soft' political points about Iran or more specifically, how people unfamiliar with the country might imagine it to look. Further examples can be considered here in order to reveal relevant variations of this theme. Figure 8.3 below shows a photographic triptych from LGOIT's 2008 archive.



Figure 8.3: LGOIT 2009 archive (30/09/09)

The viewer is instantly drawn to considering what the image ostensibly represents about life 'going on' in Tehran. On a purely visual level and aside from the textual description (though also depending on where the viewer turns their eye first), the shared, grey aesthetics of the left-hand and right-hand image share a visual proximity.

The photographs show rainy, cloudy urban scenes, with similar looking buildings and generic, modern urban markers such as lampposts, telephone poles and electricity pylons. The aesthetic similarities of these images seem to suggest that they are the same location. However, the accompanying caption below reveals that they are photographs of Berlin and Tehran, respectively. The image in the middle of the series shows a market scene and the selling of fruits and nuts; also a typical feature of an Iranian market or bazaar. The photograph was actually taken in Vienna. Intentionally placed in between shots of Berlin (left) and Tehran (right), the image works in a similar fashion, playing with received cultural and geographical assumptions about Iran as imagined visual landscape. In the triptych as a whole, Euro-Iranian affinities are all mixed in together in the same grey, cloudy and rainy grey wash as to bring ‘East’ and ‘West’ closer together. The inclusion of such images on the photoblog work as to play with received visual assumptions of what places, and particularly a place with so much visual narrative history as Iran, ostensibly looks like. In an interview, LGOIT explained how in employing such visual strategies, he wished to dispense with the kinds of images which ‘all too often characterise representations of the imagined landscape of Iran as sands, camels and deserts’<sup>181</sup>, indirectly referencing the kind of paradigmatic Orientalist representations typically associated with western photography of the Middle East and its ‘colonial backdrops’ (Appadurai 1997), which were discussed in chapter 5.

Another example of this kind of visual play on LGOIT can be seen in the photograph of Tehran’s Milad Tower (Figure 8.4) and the Fernsehturm Tower in Berlin (Figure 8.5): both prominent communications towers. The Berlin tower was in fact built by the German Democratic Republic (GDR) in *East* Germany in 1969 as a

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<sup>181</sup> Online interview 12/09/12.

symbol of communist state progress. The Milad Tower (completed in 2009) on the other hand, is located just beside the neighborhood of northern Tehran called ‘Shahrak-e Garb’, or ‘West Town’. In the contemporary context of the LGOIT photoblog, where images are often deployed to encourage viewers to consider similarities between Iran and ‘the *West*’, the images of the Tehran and Berlin towers serve to symbolically represent the importance of cross-cultural communication between ‘East’ and ‘West’ today; an idea realized through the specific use of telecommunication towers that themselves subtly play on notions of ‘East’ and ‘West’, to make the point.



Figure 8.4: Milad tower and freeway in Shahrak-e-Garb, North of Tehran that is yet to open and be fully functional’, LGOIT June 2010 archive (07/06/10).



Figure 8.5: ‘The Fernsehturm (Television tower) in Berlin, located near Alexanderplatz’. LGOIT 2008 archive (21/12/08).

Questioning aesthetic norms in this manner, photobloggers such as LGOIT set about collapsing the perpetuated ontological schism between Orient and Occident, which they feel ‘metonymically freezes’ (Appadurai 1988) Iran as ‘other’. LGOIT explained the significance of the inclusion of images not taken in Tehran, mostly on his travels in Europe in terms of another type of global Iranian ‘reality’: life as an immigrant abroad, whose daily views also visually reference contemporary Iranian subjectivity beyond the Islamic Republic of Iran. He explained how: ‘with over four million Iranian expats living abroad, the immigrant life of Iranians I found just as important to focus on as life at home.’ LGOIT remarked how cultural misunderstandings can equally occur amongst Iranians inside Iran who have never left the country about what life is like abroad:

Just as there are misunderstandings about what life is like in Tehran, there are misunderstandings amongst Iranians themselves as to what life is like in the US or in Germany. Continuing the photoblog while I was traveling abroad meant sharing that experience with people who may not have had it or are perhaps not able to travel.

(Online interview with LGOIT, [15/03/12])

Here, the photoblog intends to serve as transcultural vehicle between Iran and the west.

An example taken from one viewer’s comment in relation to LGOIT’s visual play demonstrates the subtle effects such visual strategies have on some foreign viewers:

It’s been over two years since I last visited your photoblog. And now, like then, the impression is the same: Tehran looks a lot like my city Bucharest. I could recognize so many things: the old elevator buttons look just like old elevator buttons which used to exist in the buildings from my city, I could spot a Renault Logan on the highway, the chair in your friend’s apartment and other things as well. I do believe that sometime in the past Romania and Iran had good commercial relations.

(Viewer comment, LGOIT Facebook page, posted [19/11/12])

Viewers posted replies in response to this comment, expressing similar responses: ‘Had the same feeling’, which was in turn ‘liked’ by subsequent viewers, reflecting the customary online manner of expressing approval towards digital content. In one interview, LGOIT explained how the process by which he selected and presented photographs for display often reflected an intentionally provocative approach:

I wanted to maximize juxtaposition of images not only aesthetically but also thematically. A close up of a beer bottle next to a wide shot of a historic mosque. A party in northern Tehran followed immediately by a funeral in southern Tehran. Well, maybe not such extremes, but that would have been ideal in terms of what I wanted people to think about.

Although we have already seen this visual play at work in previous chapters, here LGOIT directly explains how he perceives the relationship between the visual structure of the photoblog site and the social commentary he desires to provide as photographer and curator.

### 8.3.1. *Zabān-e Makhfi-ye Tasviri*: A ‘Hidden Visual Language’

In a best-selling book documenting urban slang in contemporary Tehran in dictionary form, Iranian linguist Sama’i (2003) employed the phrase *zabān-e makhfi* or a ‘hidden language’ to refer to the specific, informal speech practices of the contemporary generation of post-revolutionary Iranian youths living in Tehran. Though not specific to youth, Sama’i shows how ‘hidden’ semantic codes serve as effective strategies for circumventing state surveillance of public space in Iran. Recent scholarly and journalistic reflections on this book have found ample manifestations of this theme in blogs<sup>182</sup>. Iranian photobloggers (who constitute the same demographic and classes of the urban Tehran youth described in Samai’s urban dictionary)

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<sup>182</sup> For further discussion of this *zabāne makhfi* and its wider manifestation in post-revolutionary Iranian society through the Internet and forms of online communication including blogs, see <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/Culture/The-Review/2004/Oct-16/94256-racing-ahead-modern-slang-in-tehran.ashx#axzz2t1yZUsmY> (Accessed: 12/10/13).

demonstrate a variant, visual example of this idea. What I call a *zabān-e makhfi-ye tasviri* or ‘hidden visual language’ can be said to operate in many Iranian photoblogs as a semiotic strategy that reaches out to other Iranians inside and outside of Iran via a kind of digital art praxis. This can be viewed as akin to what Harris has termed an ‘encrypted vocabulary’ (Harris 1999) in relation to the visual strategies Tibetan artists use in their works to speak to Tibetan viewers over Han Chinese. One example of this aesthetic ‘code’ operating in some photoblogs is the attempt to de-exoticise Iran through the kind of ‘banal aesthetics’ I earlier introduced in chapter 5. In Figure 8.6, LGOIT depicts western brands and basic bathroom products, such as ‘Nivea’ moisturiser, as seen in an average Iranian home.



Figure 8.6: Mundane ‘Iranian’ objects of everyday life, LGOIT August 2008 archive

In interview, LGOIT explained their intention of using images to enact a kind of socio-cultural commentary vis-à-vis the international perceptions about Iran. In his view, showing daily life in ordinary settings was, as he put it ‘the most effective strategy’ for ‘humanizing’ Iranians (see also the discussion in chapter 5 on ‘banal aesthetics’)<sup>183</sup>.

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<sup>183</sup> Online interview with LGOIT (09/09/12).

These sets of photographs are included on the photoblog in order to be viewed as ‘normal’ features of everyday life in Iranian environments, as much as in ‘the West’. On a socio-political level, they also visually respond to economic tensions caused by international political conflict between Iran and America, which raise popular curiosities abroad about how Iranians inside Iran live amidst economic sanctions. While in one sense hinting at an established genre in post-War western art of fetishising objects of everyday life, images depicting everyday bathroom products in this Iranian context make a specific point about Iranian societal and economic ‘modernity’ and normalcy<sup>184</sup>. The fact that photobloggers such as LGOIT express the need to ‘humanize’ images of Iranians thus reveals the sense of counter-discourse that this thesis overall seeks to highlight in the practice, whereby dominant ruling visual systems have ostensibly *de*-humanized the image of Iran. LGOIT also reflects a major concern in the anthropology of post-revolutionary Iran concerning analyses of Iranian society at large. Adelhah (2009:211) reminds us that the view is either ‘excessively political, and militant in nature...or...wretched or exotic’. Photobloggers are aware of this themselves and as a consequence, a visual discourse of ‘ordinariness’ and the social salience of the ordinary ‘stuff’ (Miller 2008; 2010) of every day life is celebrated in Iranian photoblogs, where cultural objects are meant to be viewed as ordinary in Iran, as Iranians are themselves.

Responses from foreign viewers convey how the aesthetic strategy of the mundane employed by photobloggers are considered by some to be an effective means of making people re-consider what they are told by the media, as one American viewer remarked: ‘Thank you for your images. I truly enjoy seeing my “enemy” country in the

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<sup>184</sup> Comparison can be made here with the work of post-WW2 and contemporary European and American artists who place visual emphasis on mass-produced goods, commodities and memorabilia in their work, from Andy Warhol, to British documentary photographer/photojournalist Martin Parr and French painter/photographer Christian Poltanski.

light of non-politics'<sup>185</sup>. The 'non' politics referred to here equates to the 'harder' aspects of 'top-down' (geo) political agendas. Subtly occupying what I earlier called a 'third space' of 'soft' or everyday politics, 'from below' (see chapter 5), photobloggers' visual discourse of the mundane visually recalls what Bayat (2010) (invoking the classic theoretical work of De Certeau (1984)) considers to be the everyday strategies by which 'ordinary people change the Middle East', at least in terms of its image. At the same time, Chapter 9 will subsequently consider how some Iranians actively contest certain images shown on photoblogs, where the photoblog becomes defensibly linked to Iran itself.

The 'Iranian mundane' also constitutes a major visual theme in contemporary Iranian visual art (see also chapter 6 on contemporary Iranian art photography). Figure 8.7 below shows a comic strip of photoblogger turned artist (and research participant) Sohrab Kashani 'doing mundane things' as an alter-ego he calls 'Super Sohrab' (see chapter 6). The comic strip image features Sohrab dressed as an Iranian version of superman going on Facebook, doing the laundry, cooking, eating and sleeping as an Iranian male living in Tehran. Using his own body as the site of his politico-aesthetic articulation, Sohrab responds with irony to the kind of aforementioned viewer intrigue in the west, about how 'ordinary' Iranians live. Here, Sohrab appears as an 'extraordinary' Iranian superhero character, within his very mundane, domestic setting. Sohrab's alter ego marks an interesting comparison to other studies of dressing up for/with photography in other cultural contexts. Similar to the Indian context of popular photography for instance, is how Iranian popular photographers use photography to play with their identity.

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<sup>185</sup> Viewer comment, Tehran Live, posted 31/07/12.



Figure 8.7: 'Super Sohrab' comic strip: 'Doing mundane things.'

In Macdougall's study of middle-class tourist photography in Mussoorie, India, he shows how Indian photographers see their sitters' choice of costume and objects as expressing true feelings, by playing someone else. In this context, photography allows us to 'add something to ourselves and review our varied appearances' (MacDougall 1992:104). Here, 'photography assists in the creation of a reality, not in the discovery (or uncovering of it)' (Ibid: 123), illustrating what Buckley (2001:71) calls, in the context of Gambian studio photography, an 'aesthetic derived from the imaginative world of adornment' (Ibid: 72). Iranian photobloggers such as Sohrab, LGOIT and others discussed throughout this thesis respond to their lived realities by in one sense visually documenting them, as well as visually constructing alternative ones. Aesthetic

considerations were an early focus of theoretical writing on digital photography, where they were often over-emphasised in order to suggest the lack of material status in the digital photograph. Aesthetics remain a contested issue for scholars of popular digital photography in online contexts, where they are often either eschewed by a theoretical preoccupation with indexicality, or else over-emphasised in order to convey the ostensibly surface-based and superficial nature of digital photographic communication, as theoretically discussed in chapter 1. Iranian photoblogging demonstrates the importance of re-visiting aesthetics in contemporary anthropological understandings of digital photographs in online environments. In this context, digital aesthetics play a central role in cultural communications. Photoblogs circulate encrypted visual messages amongst Iranians disparately located across the globe, which, in tapping into wider facets of socio-cultural experience, provides a sense of community for Iranians which incorporates non-Iranians who, in some photoblogs, are actively targeted and invited to view other, 'normal' aspects of the country. The intentional structuring and placement of digital images on photoblog sites thus works as a mechanism for structuring ways of thinking about Iran, and is thus evident of photobloggers' 'artness' and 'alertness to the way form can represent meaning' (Banks and Ruby 2011:11).

The findings presented here in one sense demonstrate the importance of surface discourse and aesthetics that Pinney (2003:13) highlights in his notion of Surfacism. Surfacism, he suggests, indicates a preoccupation with the surface of the image that he finds particularly evident in postcolonial photography, as seen in Indian and West African contexts. Here, emphasis on the performativity of photography allows for 'cultural reinvention' (Ibid) over its capacity to produce indexical trace. Iranian photobloggers demonstrate similar preoccupations with the surface of the image in their practices, as this chapter overall demonstrates. They use the medium of

photography to enact embodied performative interventions on post-revolutionary and contemporary images of Iran and ‘Iranianness’. At the same time, the importance of surfacism in Iranian photoblogs does not negate the presence of indexicality in this context, where, as Pinney has suggested, it does in other, postcolonial contexts (Ibid). As previous chapters have shown, photoblogging intends to produce both documentary photorealist discourses as well as visually stylised portraits of Iranian ‘truths’. In this digital context of Iranian photography then, surfacism and indexicality work in tandem to constitute the social efficacy of the Iranian photoblog amongst producers and viewers, a theme that will be taken up further in the following chapter (9).

Finally, Photobloggers visual discourse of the mundane develops and modifies contemporary understanding of everyday aesthetics, as involving a certain devaluation of ‘special moments’ traditionally associated with roll film photography (Murray 2008). In this Iranian context, digital photographs conversely, *make* ‘special’ the everyday, where even the banal image, such as the coke and blue jeans discussed in chapter 5, amidst a wider indexicality of Iran’s international image, becomes suitably and even politically ‘profound’.

#### **8.4. Characteristic features of photoblogs**

##### **8.4.1. Public and private: *zāher* (outward appearance) and *bāten* (inner being)**

Established theories of photography have emphasised a distinction between ‘public’ and ‘private’ use of the medium (Berger 1980). Such notions bear a striking resemblance to theories of post-revolutionary Iran that emphasise a schism between Iranian private, and public domains, or the *zāher* (outward appearance) and the *bāten* (inner being) (Moaveni 2005; Varzi 2006; Khosravi 2008; Mahdavi 2009). These discourses find a distinction between the ostensibly external ‘image’ and internal ‘reality’, which are thought to manifest in spaces of ‘resistance’ to the socio-political

and moral framework of the Islamic regime. Iranian photobloggers challenge these theoretical strands concerning photography and Iran. Through their practices, photobloggers traverse interior and public domains in Iran. They combine the public imperative of the photoblog site (as an online exhibition space) with public and private shots from their daily lives. In turn, this has the effect of modifying notions of privacy and interior space. A main example of this can be seen in the way viewers are invited to digitally occupy what are strictly gendered areas in offline contexts, such as the women only carriages in the metro (Figure 8.8), or the male-only gymnasiums known as the *zurkhāneh* (Figure 8.9). Photobloggers draw viewers in to the mixed private domains they picture, such as ‘underground’ youth parties in (Figure 8.10), where individuals deflect the otherwise pervasive, public gaze of the Iranian state. These photoblogs are arguably rendered even more poignant by the perceived, ‘real’ nature of the scene as visual proof of what really ‘goes on’ in Iran for Iranian and foreign viewers. These strategies not only bring Iran to wherever the viewer is in the world, but also at times, place the male or female viewer at the very centre of gendered spaces in Iran largely unknown and/or not traversed by Iranian and non-Iranian viewers.

Figure 8.9 (a) and (b) and Figure 8.10 (a) and (b) illustrate these points. The (a) categories depict highly esteemed contemporary fine art works by two prominent contemporary artists. The (b) images are digital photographs captured by photobloggers LGOIT and Omid on a digital camera and camera phone respectively. Despite clear distinctions in formal approaches and methods, there are apparent overlaps in visual themes. Both artists and photobloggers represent hitherto ‘unseen’ spaces of Iran in an attempt to open up the imaginative landscape of viewers across the globe. The *zurkhāneh* series and party images appear in both types of photography,

which suggests the shared socio-political impetus of both types of photographer to penetrate this particular, semi-private space.



Figure 8.8: Research participant photoblogger Vahid Rahmanian. 'Women Only' carriage of Tehran metro.

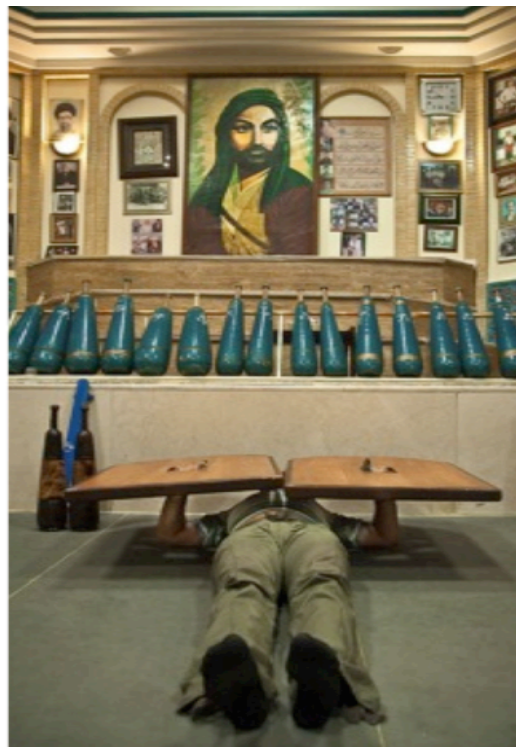


Figure 8.9 (a) Contemporary artist Mehraneh Atashi 'Bodiless' from the series *Zurkhāneh* (2004) (b) Research Participant photoblogger Omid Akhavan, *Zurkhāneh* (2012)

The striking similarities between the two sets of professional and popular photographic works raises interesting questions about classifications of art explored further in the rest of this chapter.



Figure 8.10 (a) Iranian Artist Amirali Ghasemi 'Party Series' (2006)  
(b)Photoblogger LGOIT, 'Party with Friends' (2008)

While both fine art and popular photographers are visually re-appropriating public and socio-cultural space, photobloggers share this presence with online viewers, who are encouraged to share in a remote ‘experiencing’ of Iran (see also chapter 9).

A main source of viewers’ interest in photobloggers’ practices and what makes them unique in this respect, is precisely this ability to simulate a virtual experience of ‘being there’, in Iran, often in a real-time, live sense (also discussed in chapter 3 on photobloggers’ uses of locative media). Aided by the smart phone’s ability to embed photographs, almost instantaneously in the Internet, the digital photograph becomes a zone of connection between viewers, photographers and a virtual Iran<sup>186</sup>. Figure 8.11 shows a female photographer, Yalda Zabihi’s Facebook page, depicting the self-chosen tagline in English, ‘Walk With Me in The City’.



Figure 8.11: Yalda Zabihi, Facebook page (Accessed: 30/04/13).

Yalda presents herself in the ‘About’ section of her Facebook page as an ‘urban photographer’. In her profile photograph, she appears wearing vibrant, colourful

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<sup>186</sup> This ability to be virtually co-present is also an important aspect in my own ability to carry out my research of their practice (see chapter 2).

clothing and a purple headscarf (*hejāb*). Her self-portrait is a far reach from the images of the chador-clad Iranian Muslim women earlier encountered in chapter 5, which have dominated media, journalistic and scholarly accounts of Iranian women. Here, Yalda conveys a sense of the individualisation of public Islamic dress, which Adelkhah (1999) has identified to be a significant means of public/personal self-expression amongst women in Iran. Her albums convey her photo walks through Tehran, where she appears to act, like many other photobloggers, as a kind of unofficial tourist guide, inviting her viewers, as she puts it, to ‘walk with me in the city’ (see also chapter 3 on photo walks and tours). In examples such as these, we see how photobloggers invite viewers to virtually accompany them through their walks through urban and rural landscapes. This enables acts of witnessing in specific times and places, to be extended and collectivised. Here, photobloggers facilitate for viewers what Harris (2006: 699) suggests in relation to the transnational movement of art objects across the globe, is a ‘cognitive exploration of spaces quite distinct from those they routinely inhabit’. However, as with any other kind of physical or tourist journey, these remote experiences are mediated by the epistemic parameters of the viewers’ prior indexical knowledge of Iran, which affects what they are literally able to see for themselves, by virtue of the digital medium.

Photobloggers’ journeys through Iran advance De Certeau’s (1984) notion of walking as a way of writing space: what he describes as the ‘long poem of walking, which manipulates spatial organisation’ in the various, virtual spaces of the Internet. Chapters 4 and 5 showed how visual and material aspects of the country’s political and historical monuments are (re-) engaged in photoblogging. This forms a means of re-visiting and, to some extent, taking ownership over the ideological past and present through the medium of photography. Here, we see more general processes of spatial

appropriation occurring, whereby photobloggers simulate a feeling of ‘being there’ in the country by becoming submerged in ‘live’ aspects witnessed online. These then connect up to viewers’ own temporal, spatial and biographical indices to confer meaning. The physical movements of the photobloggers are also linked to the epistemological journey photobloggers desire their viewers to undertake in re-envisioning Iran via the flows of digital photographs. These findings reflect what scholars of visual media suggest is the need to put movement upfront in thinking about digital images in contemporary social contexts. Pink and Hjorth (2012) suggest this can be understood as ‘emplaced visuality’ or ‘emplaced cartography’ in an age of geolocative media; a nascent site of scholarly investigation which Favero (2014) suggests can unearth hidden or aspects of how social actors today use and re-inhabit space. The relationship between media and social environment demonstrated by photobloggers also invokes DeNicola’s (2012:84) argument that ‘it is no longer sufficient to talk of landscapes being mediated; what we must recognize are those instances where media have become “landscaped”’. In this sense, the digital technologies are ‘landscaped’ with Iran.

In creating a virtual public space for accessing Iran, photobloggers appear to provide an answer of ‘civil-visual’ (Azoulay 2012) presence to Varzi’s question (2006) (discussed in chapter 4) which she put to Iranian informants in her ethnographic study of state-society relations in the Islamic Republic: ‘In the end, do we occupy space or does it occupy us? (Ibid: 4). Photobloggers’ photo walks hereby evoke Benjamin’s ([1940] 2002) notion of a ‘topographical consciousness’, in which he describes a process by which individuals take possession of space by linking the visual landscape of consciousness to the topography of the city. This was an idea Sontag (1977) appeared to have in mind when she similarly considered how photography ‘helps

people to take possession of space in which they are insecure'. Photobloggers create photographic records of presence in offline public space, which has the effect of visually appropriating a sense of 'citizenship' in a global Iranian public sphere. The photoblogger traverses and simultaneously appropriates spatial constructions in the contemporary Iranian public sphere by making use of locative digital technologies. In turn, this reshapes his/her sense of place, both as an individual physically moving in the city and in relation to others (viewers).

The public/private binary division that photobloggers challenge through their practices has been nuanced by certain strands of scholarship on contemporary Iran, whilst, in a more 'global' context, contemporary theorists of digital photography are doing the same. In the first case, Adelkhah (1999: 172) argues that 'in reality, the dynamics of individualisation [in Iran] straddle the two spheres.' She argues that the 'social being restores precisely that continuity between the two spheres, by seeking a new connections and a new harmony between them' (Ibid: 172). Adelkhah (1999; 2009) gives further example of women's practices of veiling (negotiating and individualising Islamic dress) amongst many other examples of daily behavior in Iran, from family politics to broader socio-legal domains such as divorce, that involve negotiation (akin to De Certeau's (1984) notion of 'tactics' and 'strategies'). Nuanced considerations of public and private in the Iranian *digital* context are also discussed by Alexanian (2006). In her study of Iranian blogs in southern California, Alexanian shows how cyberspace and digital technologies tease out new forms of sociality that in turn, reconfigure notions of 'public' and 'private'. Her study found that when Iranian 'private lives' are made public online, notions of 'stranger' and 'insider', particularly between Iranians and Americans, are reformulated. This is something I illustrate myself later in this chapter. Secondly, contemporary theories of digital photography

also complement this perspective on Iranian cybersociality by showing how the increasing presence of digital technologies in everyday life generally involves a renegotiation of the public and private divide, which reconfigures notions of privacy and intimacy (Gómez Cruz and Lasén 2009). The convergence of digital cameras, mobile phones and websites has been cited as central to this process (Van House 2007; Were 2013), whereby photoblogging is a paradigmatic example. Reflecting both of these theoretical strands therefore – on both contemporary Iran/Iranian subjectivities and on digital photography – Iranian photobloggers demonstrate how wider, ‘global’ socio-technological developments tie in with local, existing offline social and media transformations.

#### **8.4.2. Auto-photobiography and self-portraiture**

The manners in which photobloggers visually represent themselves in their photoblogs provides important insights into how they position themselves as Iranian individuals in relation to their wider project of representing Iran. Sohrab Kashani, discussed above in the ‘Super Sohrab’ example, use his own body as the site of his politico-aesthetic mode of expression. This can also be seen in photoblogging, where Iranian photobloggers explore facets of their identity in visual conversation with ‘globally’ and ‘locally’ propagated identities, images and imaginings. The ‘365 project’ by Saleh (a male photoblogger and research participant based in Liverpool, UK) demonstrates these cultural affinities, and how they work upon the self-representing subject. Saleh’s project is an attempt made to document himself photographically every day in the year 2008. He explained how; it was ‘more like a personal social project than purely a photography one’<sup>187</sup>. In a striking image in this sequence, Saleh presents himself to the camera in a series of four images, wearing a Superman t-shirt (Figure 8.12), recalling a

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<sup>187</sup> Online interview 24/02/12.

similar, later use of the Superman theme by Iranian artist Sohrab Kashani in 2011 discussed below.



Figure 8.12: Saleh's self-portrait series. Day 69 of '365 Day project' (21/04/08).

Saleh's superman t-shirt here has the similar function of visually marking 'the West', and specifically, America. A flag symbolising peace is visible in the background of the four photographs. Saleh looks three directions in the different frames: directly out at his viewers, 'East' and 'West'. By the fourth frame, Saleh has removed himself altogether from the sequence and the peace flag solely remains to drive his message home: namely, that he desires peace for his country (Iran) and the end to animosity with between Iran and the west that became particularly acute under the Ahmadinejad administration in Iran (2005-2013) and Bush era in America (2001-2009). Viewers' responses to this sequence are varied. There are those who express general pleasure in viewing Saleh's playful photography, regardless of any political overtones, while for others, reactions are rooted in conservative views of Iranian identity politics. In the latter case, dubious remarks from some Iranian viewers reflect skepticism to Saleh's

apparent embracing of American culture, symbolized by the Superman t-shirt: ‘USA t-shirt...hum!’ Questioning the image in terms of Saleh’s national sense of loyalty to Iran, this same viewer asks ‘r u Iranian or American???’ The perceived mutual exclusivity of the two pristine conceptions of identity expressed in the attitude conveyed in this comment indicates how ideological remnants of the political and cultural divisions between Iran and America discussed in previous chapters (4 and 5) are active in the cultural politics of Iranian photoblogs.<sup>188</sup>

Sohrab Kashani, a Tehran-based Iranian photoblogger turned artist and gallery owner discussed in previous chapters, explores similar conceptual, visual and political themes pertaining to contemporary notions of Iranian identity. In an alter ego he calls ‘Super Sohrab’, Sohrab uses the self-same superhero motif to present an auto-photobiographical project entitled *The Adventures of Super Sohrab* (2011) (Figure 8.13). The project takes the form of a series of performative interventions using photography, an online video and comic strips<sup>189</sup>. Recalling Saleh’s popular Internet-based ‘365’ project undertaken three years earlier, Sohrab similarly invites viewers to consider the placing of various visual, indexical markers of what it means to be ‘Iranian’ and/or ‘western’ with due irony placed on both terms. From these examples, it transpires that Iranian photobloggers and contemporary artists alike share many similarities of subject and approach. By consciously projecting themselves into embodied digital-aesthetic frames, Iranian photobloggers recall what Horst (2010) calls, in the context of American, educated, middle-class users of Facebook and MySpace, the ‘aesthetics of the self’, where aesthetic markers form a central part of processes of self-expression online.

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<sup>188</sup> On the relationship between American and Iranian subject positions in blogs, also see Alexanian (2006).

<sup>189</sup> <http://vimeo.com/34178536> (Accessed: 18/08/14).



Figure 8.13: 'Super Sohrab', Sohrab Kashani in *Azadi* (Freedom) Square, Tehran (2011).

Iranian photobloggers take this a step further, by visually experimenting with a 'vernacular modernity' (Pinney 2003) that they seek to create as a precedent for Iranians more generally across the globe. Shown and exhibited to viewers, online, these images enter into various mediascapes where they perform various kinds of cultural work. Displaying a form of self-satire, they empower Iranians across the globe to come to terms with their own 'Iranianness' and to respond with humour to negative portrayals of Iran. They also intend to communicate to western viewers in showing how wit and self-satire are all part of the 'cultural bricolage' of being Iranian (Arghavan 2013), which connects more than it ruptures with western cultures.

In another example shown in Figure 8.14, Saleh places himself within Andy Warhol's famous pop art portrait series of the 1960s.

Saleh uses a free software programme provided by Apple called ‘Photo Booth’<sup>190</sup> to create the self-portrait.



Figure 8.14: Self-portrait series by photoblogger Saleh Ara: Day 41 of ‘365 day project’ (24/03/07).

Positioned amongst other images on his photoblog ‘about Iran’, this image playfully bridges aesthetic-epistemic boundaries between eastern and western visual and in this case, artistic forms of representation. In a comparative example from the contemporary Iranian art world – and which again highlights similarities between ‘popular’ and ‘professional’ art praxis – Melbourne-based, diasporic Iranian female artist and research participant Hoda Afshar also uses Warhol’s aesthetic template as part of her visual discourse on ‘Iranianness’. In Figure 8.15 entitled ‘Westoxicated #3’, Afshar

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<sup>190</sup> IT company Apple’s Photo Booth software programme has a pre-set template called ‘pop art’. This allows users to take a photograph of themselves on the computer’s inbuilt camera, which automatically appears in four, split coloured frames in Warhol’s iconic pop art style.

uses the genre of pop art as a visual signifier of ‘the west’ in order to explore notions of female Iranian identity.



Figure 8.15: Hoda Afshar, ‘Westoxicated #3’ (2014) from Exhibition ‘Under Western Eyes’.

Afshar produces this visual critique in conversation with stereotypical representations of Muslim women and the contested issue of the veil discussed earlier in chapter 5. The portrait depicts an Iranian woman in the image of Warhol’s portrait of Marilyn Monroe, complete with the self-same golden curled hair, red lips and pink face, wearing a black chador, with the addition of western-styled large sunglasses. The woman’s face is detailed with Islamic inscription, whilst the figure holds a gun to her head in a pose strikingly reminiscent of photoblogger Saleh’s pop art series from 2008 discussed above (Figure 8.15), though in this case, Saleh uses his own hand to represent a gun. Demonstrating a playful sense of irony, the title of Afshar’s piece

refers to the ideological concept of *gharbzadeh*, or ‘west-toxic’ concept discussed in chapter 5, which Islamic revolutionary ideologues in Iran have presented as something socially and culturally corrosive to their conception of ‘native’ Iranian-Islamic identity. Afshar’s work, which forms part of a wider exhibition entitled ‘Under Western Eyes’ (2014) shows a range of digitally-manipulated photographs which, in the artists words, ‘criticise the continual representation of Islamic women in the contemporary art world as veiled, subjugated and suppressed... a homogenous group which is often celebrated as an exotic commodity, a stereotype mass-produced and parcelled for western audiences as a consumer item’<sup>191</sup>.

Studying the work of ‘transcultural’ artists in the transnational Tibetan cultural context, Harris (2006: 712) shows how ‘the virtual spaces of art may enable [a] kind of autobiographical repositioning and refashioning’ of cultural identity, an idea of direct relevance to the ways in which Iranian photobloggers also embody their photographic practices. Similar kinds of autobiographical self/re-positioning are thus visible in the work of both contemporary artists and photobloggers, as illustrated further in Appendix B of this thesis. Describing the biographical approach demonstrated in the work of contemporary transnational artists, Harris (2006) employs the terms the ‘virtual spaces of art’, or the international landscapes of the postmodernist art world which transnational artists inhabit and exhibit in. In photoblogging, this virtuality has a literal digital manifestation, in the online exhibition space in which individuals tell their auto-photobiographical stories about Iran as Iranians, living in and moving between Iran and various diaspora. Kiana (a female participant photoblogger living in Tehran) described what she sees as very much ‘her own story’ in relation to her social and cultural experience. In one interview, she explained the following:

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<sup>191</sup> Statement from the artist’s webpage: <http://www.hodaafsharart.com/#!slideshow/c1vut> (Accessed: 12/12/14), and email correspondence with the artist (02/05/14).

I take pictures because I want to show my life, as simple as that. My photos are very personal to me. They're the personal experiences of an Iranian girl. They are reflections of my thoughts and a visual description of my state of mind.

(Online interview with Kiana Farhoudi, [14/07/13])

Kiana adopts a highly personal form of 'digital story-telling' (Lambert 2002) in her photoblogging practice, which, as she explains, is directly connected to her sense of self. In turn, this becomes distributed and reformulated through her photoblog as an auto-photobiographical archive. In Kiana's own words, she conceives of herself as 'an Iranian girl', living in contemporary Tehran and, as a result, subject to all of its conditions, expectations and experiences. The inclusion of one image (shown in Figure 8.16) as part of her digital-visual catalogue strikes an intensely intimate tone. It presents a self-styled collage of four photographs, which together represent, as indicated by the image's title, 'a visual description' of her 'state of mind'<sup>192</sup>



Figure 8.16: Self-portrait, Kiana Farhoudi 'A Visual Description of my Sate of Mind. Everyone's got their story and I've got mine...' (23/05/13)

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<sup>192</sup> For a relevant social anthropological discussion on depression amongst youth in post-revolution Iran see Varzi (2006). Varzi cites this issue as a product of the intrusion of the state in everyday sociability, including the strict policing of the public sphere by the 'morality police', amongst other side-effects of 'governmentality'.

Here, Kiana's popular digital photography, which she shares with viewers online performs a socio-psychological role. It appears to fulfill a need to share her 'story' with others. This recalls Sohrab's explanation cited earlier in chapter 3, which revealed how taking photographs in public in order to share them online helped him on a personal level to deal with the emotions and experiences associated with the aftermath and chaos of the 2009 election crisis. In this case, as earlier discussed, the act of picture taking helped Sohrab, and many other photographers I spoke with, combat loneliness and fight depression by feeling connected to a greater community than that immediately or physically accessible in Iranian society. Popular photographers hereby appear to benefit from the socio-psychological effects of visualizing parts of themselves in a distributed sense through mediated forms. As another of my participants explained how 'It (taking photographs and sharing them online) felt good. I felt like I had to do it and it felt important. It's about getting those feelings out'<sup>193</sup>.

In addition to inciting socio-political critique concerning the image of Iran, many Iranian photobloggers believe that this strong biographical element also characterises the photoblog, as a mobile photographic practice. Ehsan, a photoblogger based in Melbourne, described how, 'I think photblogs document the photographer's life and experiences and where he or she spends most of their time'<sup>194</sup>. Figure 7.17 illustrates how Ehsan chose to depict himself on his photoblog. In the only photograph Ehsan shows of himself on his photoblog, he presents a self-portrait of himself as a shadow against the walls of one the most famous mosques in Iran, the Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque in Esfahan.

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<sup>193</sup> Online interview (12/10/13).

<sup>194</sup> Online interview (06/01/13).



Figure 8.17: Self-portrait, Ehsan Abbasi in Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque, Esfahan (05/02/09).

Merging himself with this iconic Iranian architectural backdrop, Ehsan appears here to be an Iranian tourist, demonstrating his sense of cultural in-betweenness that many other diasporic Iranian photobloggers seem to share. In reflecting both his proximity and his distance as a member of the Iranian diaspora in Melbourne, Ehsan's shadow is present in Iran, though he is not entirely visible or, necessarily culturally, fully 'there'.

Mirror self-portraits are somewhat of a visual *leitmotif* in Iranian photoblogs and provide further examples of how photobloggers, including those living outside of Iran, visually place themselves inside an Iranian cultural frame. Rather than simply using a generic popular contemporary photographic trope known as the 'Selfie' (a generic term for a snapshot taken with a camera phone by the user of themselves using the front camera lens), many Iranian photobloggers choose to present themselves

within a frame of a mirror<sup>195</sup>. Before long, the mirror self-portrait became a popular meme in the Iranian photoblogosphere (a term I coined in chapter 1), with the effect of marking the individual's identity as a photoblogger in the wider online environment of the Internet<sup>196</sup>. For this reason, a Persian 'mirror selfie' became a method with which I joined the Iranian photoblogging community myself as a participant observer (see Figure 8.21). In their adoption of mirror shots into their visual practices, photobloggers evoke a well-established artistic and photographic tradition of self-portraiture through the medium of a mirror (Zeitlyn 2010). This creates the effect of a doubling of the self; a frame within a frame which presents, in Sontag's (1977:52) words, 'a reality in the second degree'.

Examples below show the mirror shots of participating photobloggers in the digital exhibition (discussed in chapter 7). In Figure 8.18, Saleh is pictured wearing a modern baseball hat, associated with Western popular sporting culture. This is framed within a traditional, Persian handcrafted mirror. Omid, a member of the Iranian diaspora in Los Angeles, introduces himself by placing his image within a typically Persian handcrafted mirror, visually referencing the Persian cultural backdrop (Figure 8.19). Nikzad, a photoblogger from Karaj (a city near Tehran) chooses a different style, reflecting himself in the mirror ceiling of the Golestan Palace: the former residence of the Qajar monarchs and symbolic birthplace of Iranian photography, as discussed in chapter 3 (Figure 8.21). I also chose to position myself at the Golestan Palace (Figure 8.21) for the symbolic purpose of representing my own approach as an anthropologist studying popular Iranian digital photography in line with Iranian photography's

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<sup>195</sup> The photographic 'Selfie' is at the time of writing (2014) a budding area of new social research. For general discussion of the genre see Berry and Schleser (2014) and Rettberg (2014) and in the contemporary Iranian context of the 2009 election crisis, see Mottahedeh (2015).

<sup>196</sup> Though the origins of this visual meme in photoblogging are difficult to decipher, photobloggers explained to me how they witnessed this trope emerge on eminent photoblogs and copied it in their own practices.

broader history. Vahid, a photoblogger living in Rome, not only employs the mirror motif, but takes his cultural reference one step further in choosing to use the highly symbolic Haft Sin mirror, associated with the Nowruz (The Persian New Year) (Figure 8.22). Mirrors generally carry deep symbolic weight in Persian culture and often feature in poetry. In the Haft Sin (seven S's) display for Nowruz, the mirror features alongside seven symbolic items beginning with 's'. One interpretation of the Haft Sin ritual proposes that the mirror symbolises the sky, another suggests that it reflects the notion that an individual receives, or is reflected back, that which she/he emits into the world. Mirrors are also prominent features of the marital Sofreh-ye 'Aqd (an elaborate floor spread seen at Persian weddings made up of symbolic and decorative aspects) before being taken to the marital chamber, where it represents the intimacy of marriage.



Figure 8.18: Self-portrait in mirror by Saleh Ara



Figure 8.19: Mirror self-portrait by Omid Akhavan



Figure 8.20: Mirror self-portrait: by Nikzad Shahidian at the Golestan Palace, Tehran



Figure 8.21: Photographic participant observation: self-portrait of the author in a mirror at the Golestan Palace in Tehran (30/10/12).



Figure 8.22: Mirror self-portrait with Nowruz table by Vahid Rahmanian

Photobloggers' self-portraits using mirrors thus appear to reflect a notably social (Iranian/Persian) category of the person, in line with what McKay (2010) found in her study of Filipino users of Facebook to be a form of digitally-distributed personhood through digital photographs in online space. Drawing on Strathern's (1992) use of the term 'dividuality' (Marriott 1976): the notion that personhood is socially constructed through systems of exchange within social networks, McKay (2010) showed how exchanges of digital images on Facebook allows observers and participants to both generate and criticise norms for personhood and relationships, on and offline. As a way of talking about how people are composed of distinct entities, 'dividuality' is one way of thinking about how photobloggers negotiate their 'Iranianness' within the broader 'global' context of the Internet.

Contrary to certain theoretical trends which speak of the high saturation of images in the digital age of mass-communications, which ostensibly reduces the digital photograph's meaning (Nichols 2000) as an object of culture (Sassoon 2004), here we see another aspect of the digital photograph, performing specific kinds of cultural work. For Iranians who create and share digital photographs on photoblogs, digital photographs are often not impersonal, nor de-territorialised from the socio-political contexts in which they are produced; something also explored more specifically in the following chapter. The digital photograph here does not appear to be supplementary – what Lury (1997) terms 'prosthetic' – or something added, somewhat artificially to the individual. Rather, the image is directly implicated in the biography of its maker, who appears visually and symbolically connected to Iran. Having captured and distilled the photobloggers' curiosities, frustrations and aspirations, the photoblog becomes a digitally distributed (and discursively contested) virtual extension of the self that moves the image of its maker and their 'Iran' into broader interpretive communities.

‘Iranianness’ here is not revealed through photography’s science or ‘truth’, but performatively constructed through the intersection of individual, social and visual narrative threads. Taken together, these make up Iranian photobloggers’ aesthetic logic. Photobloggers produce visions of their country by engaging with the expressive, theatrical potentials of the digital medium. In her study of popular photography in late colonial and postcolonial Java, Strassler (2010) suggests that studio portraits operated in a similar way to that which Pinney (1997) found in his study of popular photography in Bhatiusuda, India, namely, that playing with appearances using studio backdrops operated within a ‘world-creating’, rather than a ‘world duplicating’ mode. Contrary to Euro-American theoretical treatments of photography as privileged records of the ‘real’ or, as an indexical record of ‘that-has-been’ and ‘emanation of a past reality’ (Barthes 1981: 77), anthropologists of vernacular photography have showed how photography has a more active role, with the ‘capacity to make traces of persons endure’ and ability to construct the world in a more perfect form through staging (Pinney 1997: 149). This transformative and future-orientated dynamic is reminiscent of what Strassler calls the ‘as if’ of the medium; indicating a ‘prophetic’, or proleptic (Pinney 2008; 2012) world-making capacity to transform the world.

This idea bears relevance to the kind of aspirational uses of digital photography seen in popular Iranian digital photographers today, regarding the various sets of images of Iran they seek to salvage from the past and in the present, and for the future. In this regard, the digital environment of photography does not mark the presumed early capacity of scientific photo-documentation to release subjects from the conventions of bourgeois portraiture, but rather can be understood as a contemporary digital ‘studio’ space for socio-political expression, and one that I have showed to be not devoid of indexicality. Here, props and backdrops equate to photobloggers’

manipulation of photographs, archives and captions. Bearing affinity with earlier photographic studios along these lines, photobloggers similarly visually tell stories through material culture. In the studio context, these visual aids have been thought to represent individuals' social and cultural aspirations, forming a kind of 'cinematic experience' (MacDougall 1992:121), whereby individuals witness themselves in a certain frame, and share this with others. In turn, this encourages new ways of seeing Iran and Iranians. Digital photographs here do not define people or reveal reality, but assists in the creation of alternative epistemic models of envisaging it (see chapter 9). In this context, the photoblog, similar to the studio space, reverses Benjamin's notion that 'reality has seared the subject' in the photographic capture (Mertins 1999:217). Rather, the Iranian subject here sears multiple inherited and contemporaneously experienced realities (surveyed in chapters 4-6), and implicates these (and their historicities) inside the digital frame, which, as a public exhibition context, is a discursive arena of/for Iranian cultural identity politics. In this sense, the photoblog provides an interesting digital, online contribution to anthropological studies of photography as well as other related aspects of photographic theory. Sontag's (1977) emphasis on the violence of photography, as a 'fantasy-machine' in American society which, along with guns and cars makes it dangerously 'addictive', is arguably hereby challenged by photobloggers' use of photography in the Iranian digital context. In this context, the 'fantasy' element is part of Iranian photographers' creative ability to re-imagine the aesthetic and political boundaries of their own cultural image, beyond the molds for it that they have inherited and/or witnessed. If successful, their popular 'auto-photoethnographic' projects about Iran might just create the conditions in which Iran's presumed ontological alterity to the west and the rest of the world can be challenged and reformulated into a 'different, but ordinary' model that many

photobloggers are seeking to attain for themselves, other Iranians and for their country's image.

Overall, contemporary Iranian artists and photobloggers share auto-photobiographical methods in their respective photographic works, offering social commentary in strikingly similar ways. In so doing, they act as transcultural agents for brokering visual information and cultural ideas about Iran and Iranian societal modernism in different exhibitionary contexts, though with similar visual motifs and socio-political agendas drawn from the self-same exposure to a particular visual legacy. These findings raise a host of broader questions about digital popular versus professional photographic practices that are affecting definitions of 'art'. I expand upon this question of art below as a way of concluding this chapter.

### **8.5. *Non-art and agency***

Visual anthropologists who produce images as part of their research, along with those who study visual forms and representations frequently face the question identified by Banks and Ruby (2011: 11): "But is it (also) art?". The issue, it seems, lies in defining or measuring the 'artness' of the art object, which they suggest must involve attending to the question of what it means to those who produce and consume the visual object and thereby collectively engage in the social construction of its meaning. Chapter 9 will explore photoblogs' 'consumption' amongst viewers. Here, however, it is possible to further consider the artistic intentions behind Iranian individuals who participate in photoblogging. As was discussed in chapter 3, the relationship between photography and older forms of art such as painting, is a central concern in theoretical writing on photography. This relationship was a chief realisation amongst some of its earliest practitioners in a variety of cultural contexts, such as Iran and India, where the new medium became integrated into existing visual cultural

traditions (chapter 3). Photography's relationship to painting and visual art continues to raise relevant questions concerning the definition of art and artist in digital photographic practices shown and seen on the Internet. Iranian photobloggers offer an interesting contemporary contribution to this issue. On the one hand, some Iranian photobloggers humbly refute any classification as artist, with embarrassment, humility, or outright rejection, denying any kind of talent on their behalf akin to artistic craft. Vahid (a research participant based in Rome) expressed an aversion to any classification of himself as an artist in any formal or professional sense, as he put it, he does not make a living from his practice:

I don't consider myself an artist. I believe an artist is one whom makes his living by some sort of art. I am a man with a camera. Does having a camera make me an artist? Does having a pen and paper make me a writer, or a piece of mud make me a sculptor? No, it does not. I may take pictures, or write a visual diary, but I am not an artist. So what am I? I am some kind of witness maybe. I see things and those that are important to me, and then I want to show them to others, including myself.

(Online interview, [15/03/13])

Rejection to the title of 'artist' amongst some Iranian photobloggers, as demonstrated by Vahid, might possibly reflect an eschewing of honour and display of humility that is considered more ethical a code of conduct in Persianate societies. In any case, it need not preclude our ability to conceive of photoblogs as artists in their own right, who exercise significant 'symbolic capital' as contemporary 'culture producers' (Bourdieu 1986). In one sense the 'artness' of photoblogs can generally be seen in light of Gell's (1998) conception of art as social agency, whereby art operate within an object's social nexus.<sup>197</sup> A relevant application of this theory is Miller's (2001) anthropological understanding of Trini websites. However, certain examples shown throughout this

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<sup>197</sup> For other ways of thinking about categories of 'art' that are relevant to photoblogs, see Dewey's theory of 'Art as Experience': ([1932] 2009).

chapter have demonstrated a more conscious conceptual, visual and socio-political proximity of Iranian photobloggers to formally recognised Iranian contemporary artists and their art works. In these cases, artistic intention appears to be something pursued more by some photobloggers than others who prefer to remain within the genre of documentary realism. Figure 8.23 shows one photographic work by Nikzad Shahidian's (a research participant based in Karaj, Iran) conveying the kind of more artistically stylised photographic image seen on photoblogs. The photograph, entitled 'The Crowd' (2012), shows a series of upside-down lettuces, resembling a crowd of people viewed from plan view.



Figure 8.23: 'The Crowd' (2012) by Nikzad Shahidian

Here Nikzad chooses to move beyond the genre of photographic realism, often seen in snapshot digital photography in order to present an image and caption that moves into the artistic realm of photography and social commentary. Demonstrating sophisticated use of digital software manipulation tools such as Photoshop, Nikzad hereby makes a visual statement about mass-scale societies such as Iran and the place of the individual

therein. In another example, popular female photographer, MarMar, based in Shiraz, Iran also uses the medium of digital photography as a tool for artistic socially conscious photography. Two images shown in Figure 8.24 convey two works entitled ‘Forced’ and ‘Weeping’. MarMar provides a written caption to the ‘Forced’ image (Figure 8.25), which emphasises the feelings she expressed through the visual images.



Figure 8.24: ‘Forced’ and ‘Weeping’ by MarMar

MarMar’s images and words capture her personal experiences and sense of self as an Iranian woman living under strict moral and social codes of conduct in the Islamic

Republic. She expresses how these 'force' her to 'put up with' aspects that restrict her freedom, which she appears to 'not like' or 'believe in'.

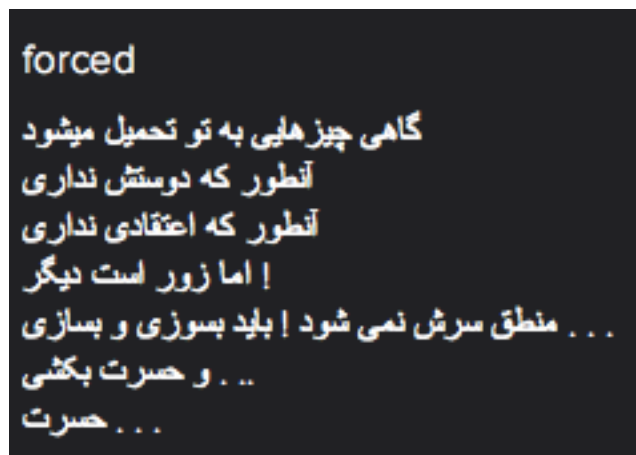


Figure 8.25: MarMar, caption to 'Forced'

### **Forced**

Sometimes things are imposed on you

you do not like it

you do not believe in it

But you do not have a choice!

It doesn't follow any logic!

You have to burn quietly and put up with it .

And feel regret...<sup>198</sup>

Through her digitally manipulated images, MarMar poses an artistic discourse on femininity, beauty, the veil and the effects of enforced codes of behavior. This recalls the application of similar themes by other contemporary Iranian artists such as Hoda Afshar discussed earlier (Figure 8.15).

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<sup>198</sup> Translated from the Persian by the author.

The relationship between contemporary Iranian fine art photography and photoblogs poses interesting anthropological questions about the social significance of popular forms of digital, 'artistic' expression in cultures across the globe. These new forms of expression are increasingly demanding that the established art world itself, including artists, patrons, curators, archivists and academic world, including digital/visual anthropologists, engage with new digital zones of online engagement. At the same time, this 'new' context does not breed altogether 'new' activities. Iranian photobloggers demonstrate visual, symbolic and stylistic affinities with aspects of Persian visual/art tradition, which provide evidence of cultural continuity between mediums in the wake of technological developments. At the same time, the accessibility and affordability of the digital medium blurs categorical types of art production, where Iranian artists and ordinary men and women alike use and rely on digital and online visual media in the generation of social critique. Photoblogging then, as a digital vernacular photographic practice, is arguably neither strictly 'amateur' nor part of the wider Iranian art world, to which it runs in parallel. The practice occupies an alternative digital exhibition space on the Internet, where it incorporates broad visual lexicons into its everyday visions of Iran in order to access deep levels of social critique. These move well beyond 'narcissist' (Lasch 1991) or ephemeral (Murray 2008) understandings of digital images in online social network, providing broader evidence of popular digital photography's indexical status in line with established social anthropological understandings of the medium.

Overall, photoblogs combine artistic, aesthetic and ethnographic agencies. This makes up their social efficacy as transnational vehicles of cultural communication, which places them within a certain '*photo hierarchicus*' (MacDougall 1992) within the broader digital landscape of popular social/media photography on the Internet. In

conceptualising photoblogging, it is therefore useful to draw on relevant key debates in the anthropology of art and aesthetics which raise the question of what constitutes art, as well as ethnography (Schneider 1996). Understanding what Schneider and Wright (2010) have termed as the ‘in between’ space between ethnographic and art practice can illustrate how Iranian photoblogging offers popular contributions to these debates. On the one hand they are artful, demonstrating clear aesthetic intention. At the same time, as was shown earlier in this thesis (chapter 3), they also demonstrate an amateur ‘ethnographic’ interest through their documentary realism. Travelling around the country on photo tours (*safarhā-ye ‘akkāsi*), photobloggers visually explore the traditions, folklore, religious practices, material culture, food, customs, history, ethnic diversities and everyday rural and urban life in and associated with Iran. As a contemporary genre that is not altogether new, nor pristinely classifiable, perhaps the most faithful theoretical account of photoblogs can be considered along lines identified by Weiss (1995:777), who speaks of a hybrid state of art praxis that is ‘neither strictly ethnographic not paradigmatically artistic’.

## **8.6. Summary**

This chapter has shown how photoblogs operate as transnational vehicles of Iranian socio-cultural communication. It has highlighted the technical structure of the photoblog site as an interactive and ‘live’ gallery and/or archive space, which lends itself to digital-visual storytelling and contestations of Iranian personhood. The aesthetic strategies employed by photobloggers have been discussed in terms of encouraging new ways of thinking visually about Iran, with various effects and implications that will be taken up in the next chapter (9). The chapter has identified some of the more broad characteristic aspects of photoblogs, including its combination of private and public uses of photography, as well as auto-photobiographical methods.

Conceptual and methodological affinities with the work of contemporary Iranian visual artists have been illustrated in order to make the case for the overall ‘artness’ of this popular digital practice alongside its documentary realism. Demonstrating both the art and realism of Iranian photoblogging thus reveals the continuity within the contemporary digital medium of popular photography, which previous chapters paved the way for understanding in the broader history of Iranian photography (chapter 3).

## CHAPTER 9. THE SOCIAL LIVES OF IRANIAN PHOTOBLOGS

### 9.1. Introduction

This is the second of two analytical chapters (8 and 9), which present and interpret empirical data from my digital-ethnographic investigation of Iranian photoblogs. Insights are also drawn from the digital exhibition I employed as a research method (presented in chapter 7). The previous chapter focused on the visual content of photoblogs: the photographs photobloggers take and share and the various aesthetic strategies they employ in order to put forward normative discourses about seeing Iran in a more discursive light. This chapter moves from the production of photoblogs to their site of ‘consumption,’ among viewers, where it extrapolates patterns in viewership based on principal findings amongst a variety of viewers across the globe. As introduced in chapter 1, key debates in material anthropology (Appadurai 1986; 1996; Miller 1997) provide a useful theoretical basis for this chapter’s preoccupation with the flows and circulation of digital photographs. As also reflected in the title of this chapter, these approaches shows how photographs form part of the ‘social life of things’ (Appadurai 1986) more broadly, as well as what Kopytoff (1986) usefully calls the ‘complex biographies of things’. The chapter involves a discourse analysis of comments seen on photoblogs. I contextualise and assesses my findings in relation to interviews conducted with viewers of photoblogs on- and offline.

As outlined in the theoretical overview presented in chapter 1, two main questions raised by this chapter are (1) how can *digital* photographs, which are virtual (and seemingly intangible) objects, be accepted and investigated as tangible ethnographic media? In turn (2) in what ways do digital photographs give rise to new participatory online cultures that anthropologists can study? I explore these issues in light of the various types of communities formed on and through Iranian photoblogs.

The chapter concludes by extrapolating some wider theoretical observations about digital photographs shown and seen online. In light of my findings, I make the case for digital photographs as image objects; worthy of ethnographic enquiry, and through which social and cultural subjectivities are articulated, negotiated and ultimately, can be studied.

### **9.1.1. A note on method**

As outlined in the methodology chapter of this thesis (chapter 2), viewership of popular digital photography is an important aspect of understanding it as a social/media practice, and not a finished representation (Crang 2007). As Pink (2011:95) has argued, ‘amateur photography is not necessarily an activity done for its own sake, but is implicated in other activities’. More broadly, the act of taking photographs often occurs with destinations for display in mind, be it the family album or a website (Van House 2009). Previous chapters have demonstrated how digital photographs from Iran shown on photoblogs are routinely taken and even ‘galleried’ (Miller 2001) on the photoblog with imagined types of viewers in mind. Indeed, the photoblog as a live, continually evolving blog roll is open to viewers to post comments to corresponding photographs.<sup>199</sup> In turn, the social lives of digital photographs give rise to digital participatory online cultures that are centred around practices of viewing. The emphasis in this chapter is on the points of contact between producer and consumer, which comprise the multi-textured social efficacies of Iranian photoblogs. As also stated in chapter 1, the analysis presented here respects the study of text as subjective expression in online environments. Following from this, it employs the method of ‘textual listening,’ (Boellstorff et al. 2012); a method akin to ‘ethnographic

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<sup>199</sup> Occasionally, some photobloggers (such as LGOIT) restrict viewers’ ability to comment on the photoblog site itself. Instead, they invite comments to a corresponding Facebook page, which features the same sets of photographs.

listening' (Green 1995) – which pays qualitative attention to cultural meaning in verbal articulation – in the text-based discourse of individuals' posted comments in online environments. An early pioneer of media anthropology, Spitulnik (2002:338) highlighted the importance of attending to media reception. She suggest that we need to understand this as a 'constellation of processes that includes: direct responses to media content; decodings of media messages, phenomenological comporment towards media technologies and appliances; social relations amongst groups of media users; and the material, economic and cultural conditions of media ownership and use'. In this chapter, I aim to address the various components of Iranian photobloggers' 'reception constellation'.

## **9.2. Who views Iranian photoblogs?**

Viewers of Iranian photoblogs are varied and diverse. It is impossible for the qualitative researcher to convey the vast variety of viewers from around the world, or sample a large range of their comments. However, within the scope of this study it is possible to broadly categorise types of viewers of photoblogs based on (a) the digital ethnographic investigation I conducted of a number of photoblogs and their viewers and (b) the digital exhibition, which as discussed in chapter 7, I used as a digital photo-elicitation method as a means of exploring the research theme (visual expressions of 'Iranianness' and Iranian identity). Statistical information provided by various participants also helps to gain an understanding of viewer types in relation to their location. However, as previously discussed in chapter 1, this kind of quantitative information does not in itself convey much without a critical consideration of the comment itself or the photograph it relates to.

In her conceptual evaluation of space in relation to digital photographic practices, Pink (2011:8) suggests that images cannot be simply mapped as static nodes

in networks, but understood as visual ‘place-events’. She suggests that such ‘place-events’ are ‘made, carried, consumed, move forward and open up potentialities with perceiving embodied persons as part of specific environmental configurations’ (Ibid:8). All of the comments surveyed as part of this study of Iranian photoblogs respond to photographs viewed in connection to the place of Iran. If we can accept Pink’s (Ibid) argument that images are not independent of place, but are contingent upon encounters with things, then it is possible to identify and categorise sets of viewers of Iranian photoblogs based on their expressed physical and or emotional/cultural proximity to Iran (ranging from none at all, to a lot). With this in mind, four main distinctions broadly account for viewers of Iranian photoblogs. These are listed in table 1. As shown, there is no necessary correlation between an individual’s physical proximity to Iran and Iranian versus non-Iranian viewer. Rather, as will be shown throughout this chapter, there are far more nuanced aspects of responses associated with various types of subject positioning.

| <b>Proximity to Iran</b>                    |
|---|
| (i) Born or live(d) in Iran                 |
| (ii) Travel to Iran<br>(often/not often)    |
| (iii) Exiled/migrated (and/or never return) |
| (iv) Never physically been to Iran          |

Table 1. Viewers of Iranian photoblogs

Clearly there are no pristine ‘types’ of person in any viewership. Nor is the identity of an individual posting comments online ever fully discernable by acknowledging their

name or language they chose to comment in (though it is an important aspect concerning the scope of qualitative online ethnographic research, discussed in chapter 1). Based on what viewers from various countries and with distinctive biographic trajectories express about themselves in relation to Iran, it is possible to extrapolate relevant, if not exhaustive, patterns of viewership from within the Iranian photoblogphere.

As shown in the table above, firstly there are those who were either born or have lived in Iran (Iranian and non-Iranian), whom may or may not have some memory of the place. Secondly, there are viewers who travel to the country, either often or not often (again Iranian and non-Iranian). Thirdly, there are those who are displaced, exiled or have migrated from or left the country either before, during or after the revolution of 1979 and have never returned, and lastly there are those who have never been to Iran and have no first hand experience or memory of it (largely foreign but also Iranian second and third generation migrants' children). Non-Iranian viewers are from a range of countries, though with a heavy weighing on North America and European countries such as Italy and Germany, as well as across South and Central Asia.<sup>200</sup> Another method with which I studied viewership patterns and responses was in constructing my own synthesised pool of viewers using the digital exhibition. As discussed in chapter 7, I employed this as a research method in order to carry out activities such as *digital* photo-elicitation: a digital version of the visual method of using images to elicit discourse with participants digitally online and physically, via my laptop, with subjects in the UK.

### **9.3. Principal findings**

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<sup>200</sup> Digitally generated web statistics of photoblog viewers' geographical locations, shared with me by my main research participants.

A prominent overall finding from posted comments and attitudes expressed by viewers of Iranian photoblogs is that visual information conveyed by digital photographs shown on photoblogs provide a form of evidential ‘proof’ of events occurring inside Iran in a live sense. This perspective is expressed by Iranians and non-Iranians, and was seen most notably during the Presidential election crisis of June 2009. In this case, as discussed in chapter 3, digital technologies ushered in a new form of social media-based citizen journalism, enabling people around the world to bear witness to live events unfolding in Iran in real time. Chapter 3 also introduced the idea that photobloggers take pride in engaging in social documentary realism in connection with a wider project of showing the ‘real Iran’ to itself and to the rest of the world. Their desires to show the ‘truth’ (*haghighat*) and a ‘reality’ (*vāghey‘at*) of life in Iran constitute a fundamental and definitive characteristic of their practice.

Viewers’ responses largely convey an appreciation for these commodified, ‘authentic’ Iranian vistas, aimed at salvaging the image of Iran from ‘below’ and from within. Responses to LGOIT’s photoblog seem to generally appreciate this documentation of everyday life in Iran in a manner which comes perhaps as close to the ‘truth’ about the country as any western filmic or mainstream media representation could aspire to show. One Iranian viewer inside Iran expressed their gratitude for LGOIT’s ability to narrate such a kind of truth about Iran: ‘Thank u for showing people what’s real and what’s not!!!’ (November 11, 2011, LGOIT Facebook page). In another example from an Iranian viewer, shown in Figure 9.1, a comment reads: ‘This site is so profound and surely from this good work, people can understand how Tehran is not simply all about war and bad people...’<sup>201</sup>

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<sup>201</sup> Viewer comment, *Tehran Live*, posted 31/05/08 translated from the Persian by the author. The original comment is posted in Persian, written in the English alphabet, or ‘PEnglish’.

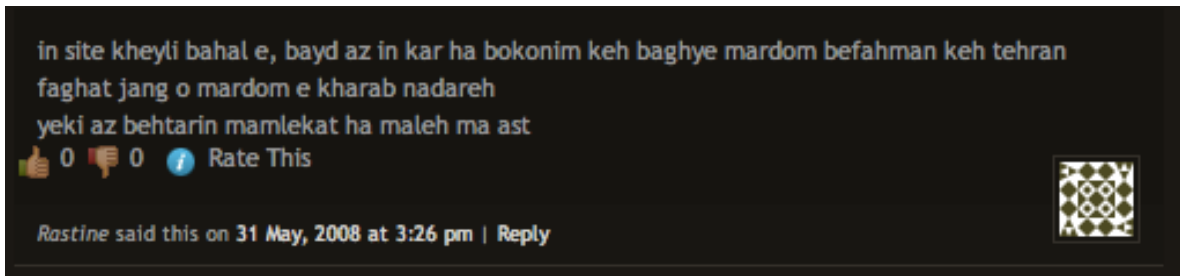


Figure 9.1: Screen shot of viewer comment. (Accessed: 28/11/14).

Non-Iranian viewers also generally convey a sense of gratitude for the existence of photoblogs for reasons connected to ‘truth’. They use them as alternative news accounts, as well as accessible venues for garnering cultural information about the country’s diversity. As one comment reads in Figure 9.2:

Your blog is such a great piece of information! I discovered it due to the election conflicts, but I am enjoying looking at all your pictures throughout the years...it really opens my eyes to your culture. Thank you.

(Viewer comment, posted on Tehran Live on 16/06/09)

In most expressions of gratitude, the photoblogger’s authority and ‘authentic’ ability to represent Iran is attributed by the viewer for the fact that these are, notably *popular* (and not official) images of the country, posited by Iranians. Unlike other categories of Iranian/non-Iranian image-producer earlier encountered in chapters 4 and 5, these photobloggers’ style of vernacular documentary realism is deemed ‘worthy’ to represent the country precisely in the apparent absence of ideology and hard politics.

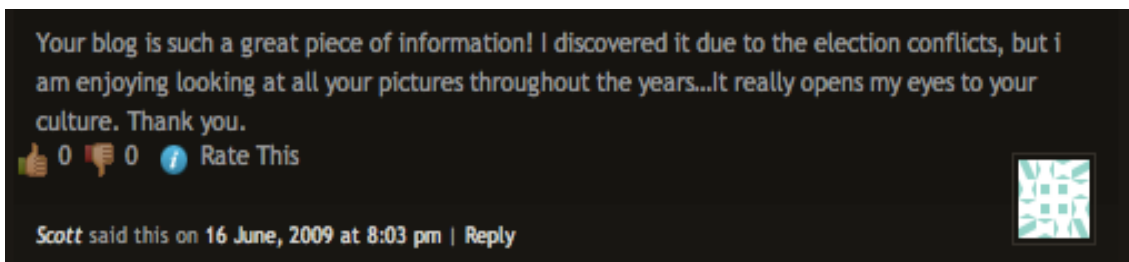


Figure 9.2: Screen shot of viewer comment. Retrieved by the author on 28/11/14.

In a particularly pertinent example, Figure 9.3 shows how concepts of truth (*haghighat*) and ‘realism’ (*vāghey‘at*) move, fluidly, between photographer, photograph, photoblog and viewer. It shows a photograph taken by LGOIT of a graffiti painted on a wall in Tehran in November 2008 depicting the IT company Apple’s logo.

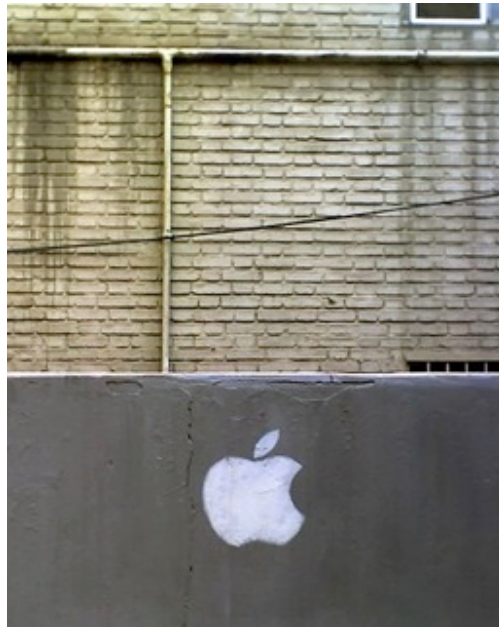


Figure 9.3: LGOIT September 2007 archive, 30/11/08. (Retrieved 30/03/12).

The accompanying caption reads:

Unfortunately, there are no Apple stores in Iran. But there is however, this random graffiti on a random wall in a random residential neighborhood. If my computer breaks down, I might as well bring it here and pray to the Apple gods.<sup>202</sup>

The original image exists as a graffiti painting on a wall, which was subsequently photographed by LGOIT as street art, before taking on a new context as a digital photograph on the photoblog. This image blends the material (the wall, the graffiti) and the virtual (its photograph), which is a process typical of what photoblogs do at large.

The photograph has been ‘liked’ ninety four times and ‘shared’ seventeen times.

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<sup>202</sup> LGOIT September 2007 archive: [www.lifegoesonintehran.com/06\\_September2007.html](http://www.lifegoesonintehran.com/06_September2007.html) (Accessed: 10/12/12).

However, the comments are far from uniform. Some viewers equate the image's materiality (the wall) with its online incarnation as art: 'Remove that Apple from my favourite city at once,' reacts a user suggesting protest or disbelief. Here, the viewer reacts to the graffiti on the wall, thus circumventing the mediating digital frame and ignoring the artistic/aesthetic intention of the photoblogger, however politically engaging, ambiguous, or even provocative this photograph was meant to be. The viewer's reaction is directed at the graffiti on a wall *in his city*, suggesting a certain defensiveness of what should or should not be seen (in his opinion) in the offline, everyday Tehran cityscape. Other viewers of this particular photograph go the opposite direction, emphasising the digital medium of the photoblog as a cultural mediator in representing Iran; they react to the very presence of the photograph in this virtual space, rather than, or in addition to, what it depicts. Comments such as 'What is this?' and 'In Life Goes on in Tehran??' show how for some, the Apple logo is perceived as being as (if not more) out of place in a photoblog 'about' Iran as it is in Iran itself.

For these viewers, the photoblog appears to serve as a visual idiom for the whole country and its culture. This example raises relevant points about how digital photographs become implicated in wider indices that, in this case, become possessively linked to identity politics. These issues recall McKay's (2010) similar findings on the uses of digital photographs on Facebook. McKay also found that observers and participants in image exchanges generate and criticize norms for personhood and relationships, both on- and offline. More broadly, these findings illustrate Pinney's (2008: 143-148) discussion of Barthes' (1981) distinction between *corps* and the *corpus* in photography: the former being the photographic 'event' (the photograph) and the latter being the wider indexicality, or as Pinney puts it, that 'something else' which the particularity of the photograph can never be transcended to provide. The

photograph of the Apple image (the corps) is hereby made meaningful for individuals and groups of viewers (the corpus), as expressed through their comments.

Further evidence of the photograph's uncontrollable and non-linear social life, can also be seen in how it maintains presence and status over time. In November 2011, over four years after it first appeared on the photoblog in September 2007, several readers revisited the post when the founder of Apple, Steve Jobs died, to post their condolences underneath the digital photograph featuring on the corresponding Facebook fan page. Here, the digital photograph serves as a kind of virtual 'shrine', gaining an altogether different temporality and social efficacy than originally intended by the photographer. In this context, the digital photograph demonstrably forms what Latour (1987) termed as an 'immutable, combinable mobile', describing how non-human objects/entities are able to carry on action and meaning across time and place. Examples cited so far demonstrates a salient point about how meaning is assigned to online posts by 'consumers' of digital photographs through indexical processes which have no necessary bearing on the intentions of the photographer. This requires further critical attention here.

Contrary to the claim that digital photographs, as intangible data, lack the 'authentic' material status of physical photographic objects (Sassoon 2004), the way in which 'belief' is hereby attributed and performed in relation to certain digital photographs of Iran, seen online as if they were 'real,' makes a case for their continued, material and affective status as cultural objects of meaning. The social efficacy of the digital photograph here is comparable with Morgan's earlier (1998) theory of 'visual piety': the notion that people who engage with replicable images (such as popularly produced images of Jesus Christ) render them an authoritative way of knowing and experiencing within their belief system, or else a particular cosmology

(see chapter 1). Chapter 4 introduced the notion that in Islamic history, the representational image has traditionally been regarded with suspicion as a non-being, since humans could not 'breathe life' in to it, as stated in the Quran. Similarly, a lack of physical material substance has also been central to the critique of the digital photograph. As a seemingly intangible object, it has been thought to be incapable of providing physical evidence of its past lives and thus, present status (Sassoon 2004). It cannot be touched, nor interacted with, and thus, will only ever have secondary status to the print photograph. With digital photographs (of Iran) considered here, it is possible to suggest that it is the ethnographic and social substance that transforms the digital data viewed on screens and makes it 'real'. Through these processes, the digital photograph becomes imbued with meaning in such a way as to compensate for its lack of physical status. In her ethnography of contemporary Tehran, Varzi (2006), amongst others, has argued that Iranian Sufi mysticism is so deep rooted in Iranians' social consciousness that it is possible to identify manifestations of it in contemporary social practices. She aptly terms this 'sufi cool': a remixed version of traditional Sufi spirituality and contemporary Iranian youth culture, involving activities ranging from Rumi poetry reading to modern yoga groups. As discussed in chapter 4, a major aspect of visual-spiritual tradition in Iran relates to the treatment of the image in Sufism. In the tradition of Ibn Arabi's (1165-1240) spiritual mysticism, the intensity of the spiritual existence depends on the degree of 'reality' invested in the image (Corbin 1998). This older concept, of the embodied creative imagination, can be applied to a contemporary understanding of digital photographs online. Without making this conceptual explanation an altogether Iranian-specific argument, it is possible to see, for instance how digital photographs become effective insofar as individuals who make and view digital images invest various degrees of 'reality' in them, whether through

eneration or contestation. In the case of photoblogs, this truth-making process is enhanced when the nature of the investment is personally and symbolically linked to Iran through a phenomenology of engagement. A significant area in this regard is how digital photographs serve as virtual transnational bridges for the Iranian diaspora, discussed below.

### **9.3.1. Diasporic connections and transnational imaginings**

Digital photographs on photoblogs foster varying degrees of ‘virtual intimacy’ (Biella 2008) between viewers and images, and amongst viewers themselves. They bring about a feeling of ‘distant closeness’ (Van House 2007), whereby viewers connect with Iran, regardless of their physical location. At the same time, digital images and image arrangements elicit diverse reactions amongst specific ‘types’ of viewers along various axes, as earlier discussed in relation to Table 1. There are clear cases where Iranians in Iran and in diaspora respond to digital photographs in particular ways. In these instances, the digital photograph taps into specific indexicalities of ‘Iranianness’, which brings about a range of responses. For some diasporic Iranians, digital photographs act as emotional and imagined bridges to the country. One Iranian viewer’s comment on Tehran Live summarises this point:

Hello Amir *āghā* (Mr. Amir, or Sir), I love your photoblog, it is such a genius idea. Through the years, the memories have faded and looking at your photoblog is like being reacquainted with your birth city (again) through photography.

(Viewer comment posted in English on Tehran Live on 02/04/08)

These types of comments are plentiful throughout the Iranian photoblogosphere.

As another viewer of LGOIT remarked: ‘I used to live in Tehran decades ago [before the revolution] when my folks were working there. Interesting to see it today...’<sup>203</sup>.

Comments from non-Iranian viewers worldwide, who once had a personal connection to Iran, convey how the photoblog presents a salient point of access to personal history. For those with actual memories of living in the country, the visual ‘truth’, of what Iran really looks like becomes a vicarious experience in the present, mediated through the culturally ‘live’ space and personal time of viewing the photoblog and the many material aspects of life in Iran it represents.

The abundance of these kinds of comments suggests that photoblogs are performing various kinds of cultural work. To a certain extent, this can be considered as a visual contribution to what Alinejad (2011) has described in relation to Iranian (non-photography-specific) blogs as a kind of ‘transnational embodiment’, denoting users’ ability to embody real memories of place. Alinejad’s concept describes the general, connective affordances of digital communication amongst Iranians at home and abroad. In collapsing the geographical sense of distance between diaspora and home, digital technologies facilitate the construction of Iranian online communities. Photoblogs facilitate these memory-making processes specifically through the sharing, viewing and circulating of digital photographs. As was shown in chapter 4, photoblogs also go a step further in this direction. They formulate ‘postmemories’ (Hirsch 1997; 2012) of Iran for younger generations of Iranians, who did not physically experience (or were too young to remember) living there. In his online ethnographic study of internet usage amongst Iranian diaspora, Khosravi’s (2000) digital ethnographic research on [www.iranian.com](http://www.iranian.com) (a site for Iranians across the world to connect and share memories and experiences about Iranian history and culture), found that in online

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<sup>203</sup> Viewer comment posted on LGOIT on 06/13/12.

diasporic discourses, ‘forging an imaginary homeland is the primary project of the diaspora...[where]...virtual return has become a reality for many Iranians who find a homeland in the homepages’ (Ibid: 13). As was discussed in chapter 1 regarding theories of digital photographs and diaspora, nostalgia is a central concept in the connective capacity of digital photographs. Earlier theorists of analogue photography understood nostalgia to be at the heart of the medium. Sontag (1977:15) notably argued that photographs are inherently linked to nostalgia, as they essentially constitute memorials: ‘All photographs are *memento mori*: to take a photograph is to participate in another person’s (or thing’s) mortality, vulnerability, mutability. Precisely by slicing out this moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to time’s relentless melt’.

More recently however, anthropologists of popular digital (and analogue) photography have revised the traditional relationship between photography and nostalgia. Pink (2011) has suggested that photographs do not (just) take people back (as in playing ‘back’ a video), but entail a process of moving forwards within environments in which they are a part. She suggests that when we ‘consume’ photographs they can never take us ‘back’, but are part of new ‘constellations of processes’ (Massey 2005), which are always in movement, or moving forwards. Although the movement of photographs is certainly not new to the digital era (as discussed in chapter 1), the virtual movements of digital photographs raise interesting questions about the connective capacities of the digital medium to link past and future through the mediated frame of the photoblog and its viewing present. In chapter 4, we saw how the digital context affects social memory, in keeping the past active and ‘live’ in the present, which to a certain extent shapes the future. Here, we see the notion of movement at work in viewers’ emotions. Individuals both virtually travel (back) to

Iran, as well as connect themselves (and their nostalgia) to the forward-moving circumstances of the present.

There are many instances where digital photographs of a particular time or place in Iran assume wider affective aspects of viewer's (and not the photograph's) temporal context; an idea introduced in relation to the Apple image shown in Figure 9.3 above. The disputed Presidential election of 2009 is a salient example of these indexical aspects of popular digital photography, as discussed in chapter 3. During August 2013 upon the election of Hassan Rouhani as President of Iran, many viewers channelled their attitudes and aspirations to this event through digital photographs seen on photoblogs. One female research participant, Leyla, an Iranian student in her late twenties who now lives in London and who I met through my research network, illustrates this point. Upon viewing the digital photography exhibition I had co-curated as part of this research (discussed in chapter 7) on my laptop in a coffee shop in London's Kings Cross, Leyla expressed the following:

It's great that people nowadays have these opportunities to see other aspects of Iran which were always right there beneath their noses, but which they never dared to see. Of course the photographic technologies help, it's now far easier to see what life is like in other countries. Let's hope for more improvement and understanding for Iran, the new president has a lot of work to do, but these new initiatives on social media; Flickr, Instagram and photoblogs are setting the wheels in motion...

(Interview with Leyla in London [20/08/13])

Viewing the digital exhibition of Iranian photoblogs, which show pictures taken in Iran over the past few years, Leyla voluntarily began expressing her present hopes for greater political and cultural ties between Iran and the west under the Rouhani administration (as opposed to Ahmadinejad's hardliner, conservative government, 2005-2013). This would mean that more people could see for themselves what the kinds of photographs shown on the digital exhibition (and photoblogs generally) reveal

about Iran; namely, the ordinary, the lived experience of people and not just the country's political affairs, as was discussed in chapters 5 and 8 in relation to mundane photographs of everyday life, such as of Coca Cola cans and bathroom products. Leyla's linking of the photoblogs to present socio-political circumstances reveals digital photography's connective capacities. Digital photographs cause people to (re-)imagine the distant and recent past in the present and to connect personal, family, political and socio-economic narratives with immediate contexts of the country existing outside of the photographic frame, which is a fundamental evidence of digital photography's other lives.

At the same time that diasporic comments constitute a category of responses to photoblogs, in some cases, the notion of what Iran 'is' today (for Iranians living abroad, whether diasporic or exiled), becomes markedly akin to foreign viewers total unfamiliarity with the country. For this category of viewer, with little prior visual information about Iran, the photoblog can facilitate the building of transnational, aesthetic connections, particularly concerning Iran and the west, as was also illustrated in the previous chapter. As one Canadian user commented:

'I was astonished to see how much like North Vancouver Tehran looks! Now I understand why so many Iranians live in North Vancouver!'

(Viewer comment, posted on Tehran Live on 11/01/10)

These responses suggest that while visual strategies used by some photobloggers such as LGOIT of juxtaposing Tehran with images (real or mental) of other cities have relevant effects in cases where they are intended, it is also by no means controlled or determined by the photoblogger. Rather, it is *made* significant by viewers' indexical connections and attributions. Many such comments attest to the polysemic nature of digital photographs to access a wider social nexus of 'Iranianness', beyond the surface

visual content of the image. In these experiential contexts, personal narratives are invoked, become ‘materialised’ (in the digital form of the comment) and become part of a public viewing context wherein they connect to other people’s experiences and memories, forming collective communities anchored by photographs of everyday life in Iran.

#### **9.3.1.1. Ethnographic vignette: Paul Schroeder and imagining Abadan**

As part of my digital-ethnographic research methodology, in addition to conducting research amongst Iranians, I shared the digital research exhibition with non-Iranians who had lived and worked in Iran during the decades before the 1979 revolution. For this non-Iranian category of viewer, viewing recent photographs from Iran served as an affective and phenomenological bridge connecting them both back to their image of Iran and to their own subjective pasts. In one case, I corresponded online with an American man, Paul Schroeder who now lives in Chicago. I met Paul through a contact in Iran who was a retired television producer and documentary filmmaker from Esfahan, and who was helping in my research. Paul Schroeder had lived with his family in the oil city of Abadan in Khuzestan province in southwest Iran during the 1950s, since his father, Charles, was working in the National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC), based there. Abadan is a satellite city built by the British after the Second World War. Due to the significant activities of the Oil company over the course of the twentieth century, many international employees and their families came to Abadan to work and live. As a result, it became a thriving cosmopolitan hub in the pre-revolutionary period in Iran. Shortly after the revolution of 1979, the city became the front of the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988). Almost all of the population of Abadan migrated during this period to other parts of Iran (Esfahan, Shiraz), or abroad. Given this history (and the continued trauma of it in the lived experience of many Iranian

migrants), the subject is one of profound nostalgia, and particularly for those who had lived or worked there during its heyday in the 1950s and 60s. Speaking about my work and the digital exhibition, Paul was prompted to reflect upon the emotive power of digital photographs (in this case, old slide photographs which had been consciously digitised) as a means of connecting people from across the world to Iran. Paul offered his own example of his experience posting a series of digitised personal family slide photographs from Abadan in 1958 on to a website dedicated to Iranian nostalgia and shared memories and lives, [www.iranian.com](http://www.iranian.com). The photographs appear on the website as a photo-essay entitled ‘Memories of an American boy’<sup>204</sup>. Paul shared the following remarks with me on the subject:

Since posting my photographs via The Iranian, I've heard from about 300-500 people from all over the world directly via email and other online groups about the photos. Photos clearly elicit memories as basis for conversation and learning and there is not doubt that just these photos have made a contribution to people who lived in Abadan at that time, completely unexpected by me when I posted them. My goal was pretty simple: create a personal bridge where it seemed needed. It did hit me not long after posting the photos that there is a sort of ‘Global Village’ of Abadan that had to wait for various network technologies etc. to develop in order to emerge.

(E-mail correspondence with Paul Schroeder, [23/08/13])

Paul remarks here attest to the power of photography, and specifically in the digital context, to connect people to local history and cultural experience. Paul acknowledged the transnational reach of his Father’s slides, which were shared and viewed in digital form online from a multitude of locations across the globe. These photographs have an extraordinary impact upon Iranians (as well as non-Iranians such as himself) with personal memories of Abadan, where they foster transnational cultural ties and community building, in this case, for Abadani-Iranians living in various Iranian diaspora. In a particularly notable instance, an Iranian photoblogger from Abadan,

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<sup>204</sup> <http://iranian.com/Abadan/2007/April/1958/> (Accessed: 03/12/14).

Arash Abkhoo, used his photoblog to pay tribute to Paul's Father, Charles Schroeder upon hearing about Charles' passing away. Figure 9.4 shows a section of Arash's photoblog designed as a digital-visual shrine to the photographs of Abadan taken by Charles Schroeder and digitally preserved by his son Paul.



Figure 9.4: Photoblog tribute to Charles Schroeder by Arash Abkhoo, posted November 30<sup>th</sup> 2011: [www.arashpix.com/weblog/2011/11/post\\_5.php](http://www.arashpix.com/weblog/2011/11/post_5.php). (Accessed: 03/12/14).

In addition to the photographs, Arash writes a sentimental post describing what Charles' photographs have done for the visual cultural heritage of Iran and for future generations to learn what life was like in this part of the country before the revolution. Arash's moving written tribute to Charles shown in Figure 9.5 highlights the value of these photographs for Iranians and specifically for Abadanis, many of who now live in the UK and America:

Mr. Schroeder, when war broke out I was only a child and didn't have any memory of earlier years. I knew about Abadan from my grandfather's and grandmother's tales, the stories I heard from my mother and father. You translated their stories into pictures, documenting the images that were in our minds and converting them into reality. You gave us photos of everyday places, bambow, dairy farm, joogh, taxis, daleh barber, Braim village, refinery office, First Lane, amiri, the labor day celebration ... Thank you for these.

Mr. Schroeder, you are alive in your photos, and your memories from one century will carry forward from one generation to another. Now I can fathom the secret to your youthful and happy life. Few of the people whose photos you shared are still alive. Who can not be moved by the glance of a little girl who wistfully watched your daughter Ellen riding her horse, or the smile of the little boy offering a lamb in his hands, or the proud way of standing of the taxi driver who seems to be the owner of the world. Now the images of the barber and the poor children of Braim village will not disappear from humanity's mind.

Mr. Schroeder, you have defeated death. The world just owned your body, but your soul has been released from its cage.

God bless you.

Figure 9.5: Screen shots of excerpts from online tribute to Charles Schroeder by Abadan-born photoblogger Arash Abkhoo<sup>205</sup>.

In the above tribute, Arash cites the importance of Charles' photographs for, as he puts it, 'translating' the stories of his Grandparents of what Abadan was like before the war, into pictures and durable visual documents. In turn, these photographs became an important 'reality' for him and for others', by structuring ways of remembering. This finding recalls Hirsch's (2012) concept of postmemory developed in relation to post-Holocaust trauma (discussed in chapter 4). The concept denotes how individuals in Jewish families came to 'know' events through the various cultural and semantic forms (such as photographs, diaries and letters) in which actual memories are made manifest. These become passed on to individuals who were not there to experience them first hand, forming a simulation of memory. Transposed to the post-revolutionary Iranian

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<sup>205</sup> For the full text see: [www.commoncoordinates.com/AbadanInThe50s/AbkhooTranslation.pdf](http://www.commoncoordinates.com/AbadanInThe50s/AbkhooTranslation.pdf) (Accessed: 03/12/14).

context, these digital-visual media have become, for Arash, who lived in Abadan as a child, as ‘real’ to him, as he puts it, as any actual memory, for which he appears to be very grateful.

Here, my findings bear affinity with Khosravi’s (2000) earlier ethnographic observations of the [www.iranian.com](http://www.iranian.com) website, wherein he notices a section dedicated to Abadan. Khosravi found that former Abadanis used the section of the site to post their personal memories and stories of a place they still consider to be their hometown. Khosravi found that these sentiments were most concentrated in the photography section of the site:

Old pictures from pre-revolution time as well as pictures of postwar Abadan are displayed. There are pictures of streets, squares, hotels and clubs, but also photos of the Abadan football team, a student group in the 1970s, and a 'typical house.' Throughout the section, the visitor is struck by anguish and a nostalgic mourning for a beloved city, which no longer exists, but has gained a new virtual life. (Khosravi 2000:13)

As a researcher working on the Schroeder archive, I was able to access an online network of Abadani Iranians, which in turn, opened the gateway to productive offline social interactions. Paul had introduced me to a couple of ex-Abadani Iranians who now lived in and around London. I met them in September 2013. These two middle-aged women played important roles in maintaining Abadanis’ online social community, which they maintained in their spare time. They did this via websites specifically dedicated to Abadani networking and the sharing of photographs, stories and related memorabilia. The most prominent of these is the website entitled ‘Abadan: Cool Under the Sun’: a semi-private (password-protected) virtual community of thousands of transnationally dispersed ex-Abadanis mostly now living in the UK and US<sup>206</sup> (Figure 9.6). Individuals share videos, photographs and stories on the site,

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<sup>206</sup> [www.abadan.ning.com](http://www.abadan.ning.com)

arrange annual meet-ups in Iran and locations across the world and generally partake in historical and cultural-specific social networking based on collective shared experiences. In order to join the site, individuals have to undergo a brief memory test, answering questions relating to old facets of life and times in Abadan such as the name of various streets, shops or places. Protecting the site in this manner serves the practical function of limiting unwanted web traffic, as well as establishing the kind of self-contained Abadani cultural community its creators and users sought to establish.

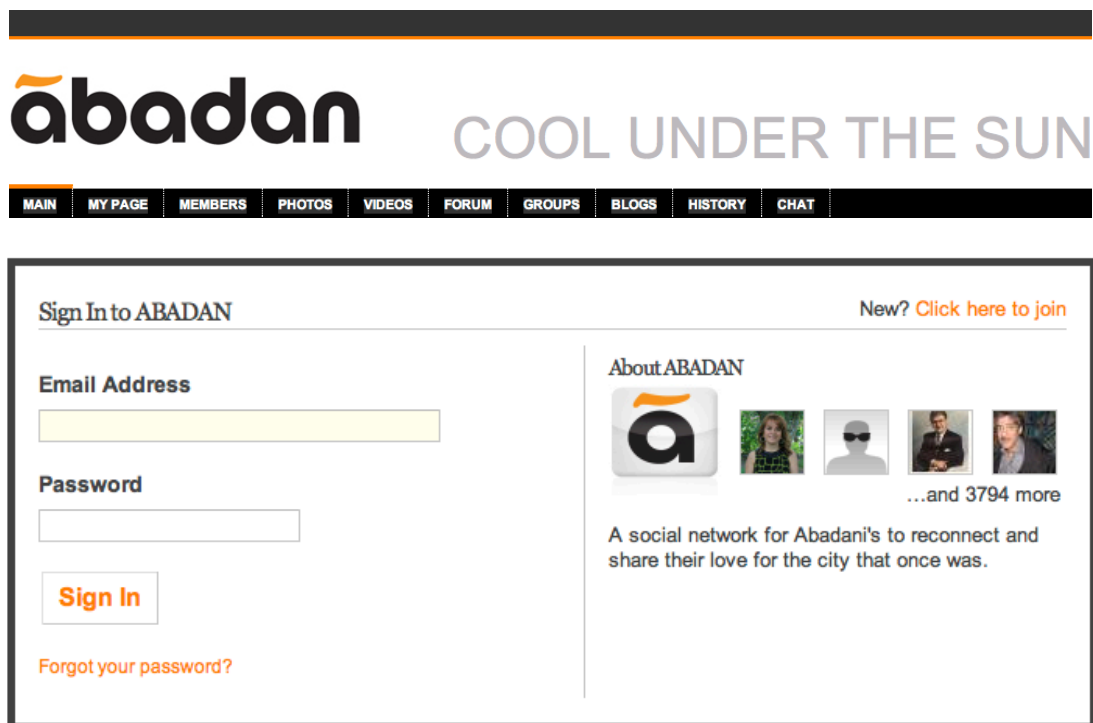


Figure 9.6: Abadan site: 'Cool Under the Sun': [www.abadan.ning.com](http://www.abadan.ning.com). (Accessed: 10/11/14).

The Abadan website demonstrates, in a concrete way, ethnographic theories of the local, and often self-referential cultural spaces of the Internet (Miller et al. 2000) surveyed in chapter 1. In this sense, members of social and cultural communities befriend and interact with one another in ways that localise the global context of the Internet at large. However, as I have shown throughout this thesis, Photoblogs differ to

these social network sites, as they are openly accessible and even designed with a broader global viewership and with forging cross-cultural connections mind. What is interesting to consider in photoblogging, is how this locality emerges naturally, regardless of producers' intention. I managed to join the Abadan site with the help of research participants. My offline conversations with ex-Abadanis enhanced our already warm online correspondence. Through these women's emotional responses to speaking about the place and (emotional) space of Abadan, I was able to enhance my digital-ethnographic observations (and theoretical stipulations) about the 'reality' of the digital, or rather, how the digital becomes 'real', in certain cultural and personal contexts of use. Overall, the example of Abadan highlights the interconnectivity of digital photographs, people, culture and generations in networked and non-linear processes of meaning making facilitated by the Internet.

### **9.3.2. Engaging the senses**

As discussed so far, photoblogs appear to mediate relationships between remembered, imagined, embodied and affective experiences. Digital photographs also perform another kind of social and cultural work, through engaging the senses. Pictures of Iranian food are a salient example of this. Food photos are a generally prominent image category in Iranian photoblogs and elicit strong reactions, particularly amongst members of the Iranian diaspora. In one example, LGOIT captures a market vendor mixing a typical kind of milk sold in stalls in Southern Tehran called *ma'jun* (Figure 9.7).



Figure 9.7: *Majun*. LGOIT, March 2009 archive: [www.lifegoesonintehran.com/24\\_March\\_2009.html](http://www.lifegoesonintehran.com/24_March_2009.html) (Accessed: 12/10/12).

The image elicits a range of responses from viewers expressing specific and more general longings for specific tastes, smells and sights of Iran. Often very visceral responses to this image such as *bah bah* (a colloquial term in Persian and equivalent of ‘yum yum’ in English)<sup>207</sup> in addition to other comments describing the smells, textures and tastes of the image are tied in with a wider sense of longing for traditional sights sounds and tastes of Iran. In other examples across the range of photoblogs surveyed, *āb anār* (freshly squeezed pomegranate juice) and *lavāshak* (dried fruit leather, typically sold in Iran), are seen alongside various (non-food related) images in the

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<sup>207</sup> LGOIT, March 2009 archive: [http://lifegoesonintehran.com/24\\_March\\_2009.html](http://lifegoesonintehran.com/24_March_2009.html) (Access date: 04/05/12).

private settings of Iranian homes. Figure 9.8 below shows tradition Iranian cuisine in one such every day setting.



Figure 9.8: Iranian food in the home, LGOIT February 2009 archive: [http://lifegoesonintehran.com/23\\_February\\_2009.html](http://lifegoesonintehran.com/23_February_2009.html). (Accessed: 12/10/12).

For Iranians or those already familiar with the smells and tastes of Iranian cuisine, these photographs become a salient point of nostalgic connection in their ability to imagine being in Iran. Such images express a longing amongst Iranians and those who have visited Iran for specific tastes, smells and sights only to be found in Iran. More specifically, the digital photograph brings them directly to precise areas of downtown Tehran with which they associate the image and the smells and tastes. In these examples, digital photographs engage viewers in an experience of the ‘smell’ of a Tehran street, or inside of an Iranian home by eliciting sensorial reactions arguably no less ‘real’ than that elicited by a print photograph. In these ways, viewers, Iranian and non-Iranian, all of whom voluntarily engage in small acts of visually participating in a

shared experience of Iran, demonstrate a sensorial ability to virtually ‘taste’ the photograph. Such findings illustrate, in the digital context, Stoller’s (1989) earlier argument that print photographs could be literally ‘tasted’ in a phenomenological sense.

### 9.3.3. Cross-cultural images and imaginings

Photoblogs form clusters of viewers and responses. These can stem from both shared online viewing patterns, as well as from bonds formed in/in relation to actual, offline social contexts. Figure 9.9 depicts a series of comments in response to research participant Amir Sadeghi’s photograph posted on his photoblog Tehran Live, of the Milad Communications Tower, a symbolic feature of the Tehran cityscape we encountered earlier in chapter 8.

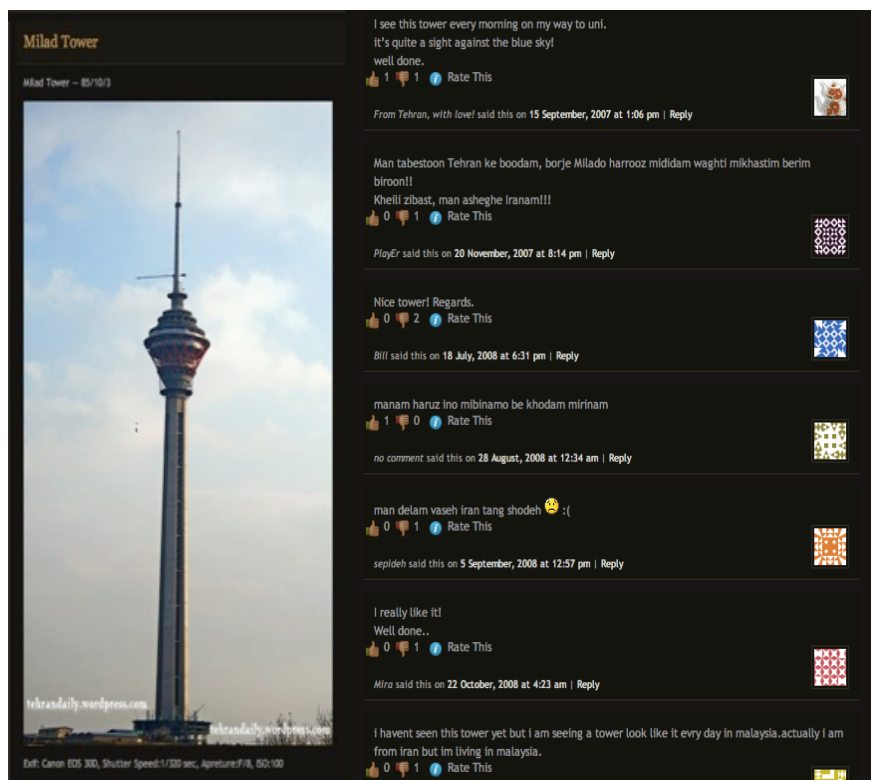


Figure 9.9: Comments posted in relation to Milad Tower image by Amir on Tehran Live. [www.tehranlive.org/2006/12/24/milad-tower/](http://www.tehranlive.org/2006/12/24/milad-tower/). (Accessed: 01/12/14).

The Milad tower is a symbolic modern marker in northern Tehran and features in many other photoblogs, as earlier discussed in LGOIT's use of it as an aesthetic strategy of visually placing it with the Fernsehturm tower in Berlin (see chapter 8). Three important findings from the above example of Amir's photograph of the Milad Tower reflect types of responses to digital photographs seen on photoblogs at large. These can be considered here as a useful recap. Firstly, there is a sense of viewers' sharing in the visual experience of collectively witnessing the tower online, akin to the virtual co-presence which chapter 3 suggested to be an important aspect of the photoblog's appeal and agency as a vehicle of communication. This might be as a direct reflection of how they do so/or have done so in offline contexts in the present, recent or distant past. A comment from an Iranian student viewer from Tehran reads: 'I see this tower every morning on my way to Uni...' In response to this comment, another similarly remarks: 'I also saw this tower every day when I was in Iran over the summer when I wanted to go out...' and 'Me too, I see it every day also. It's beautiful, I'm in love with Iran'. The second type of response pertains to the ensuing nostalgia that arises from the act of viewing the digital photograph: 'I miss Iran so much', complete with a digital-visual emoticon depicting an unhappy face. In these cases, the digital photograph activates actual memories of the past in the instant of the viewing, forwards-moving present. Thirdly, the digital photograph facilitates a sense of connection to Iran amongst Iranians living abroad who participate in the wider shared social experience created by the photograph, beyond that which it actually depicts. One Iranian viewer based in Malaysia for example commented how 'I haven't seen this tower yet, but I am seeing a tower that looks like it every day in Malaysia...' <sup>208</sup>

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<sup>208</sup> Viewer comments: <http://tehranlive.org/2006/12/24/milad-tower/>. (Accessed: 01/12/14).

Other examples of how digital photographs shown on Iranian photoblogs affect ways of seeing in cross-cultural terms include photographs of Christmas. Photographs such as those shown in Figure 9.10 are a salient example of the ‘other sides’ of Iran photobloggers by and large desire to show to foreign viewers.



Figure 9.10: ‘Christmas night in Tehran’, ‘Tehran Live’:  
<http://tehranlive.org/2008/12/26/christmas-night-in-tehran/>. (Accssed: 01/12/14)

Responding to these photographs, European viewers remark how they ‘can’t believe it...Tehran is more Christmassy than my own city!’<sup>209</sup> Others expressed how they were surprised by the strong visual, material and cultural presence of Christmas in Tehran/Iran, by which they learnt something new and unexpected about everyday life in Iran: ‘I am totally blown away. Not only did I never dream such Christmas things- and so beautiful-would be found in Iran...but I also learnt something. Thank you!’<sup>210</sup> Other examples read ‘Thanks for sharing what Christmas in your city looks like. I am amazed that there is such emphasis on this holiday.’ Another viewer remarked ‘Wow, I never knew that Tehran looks similar to how things are in America during the Christmas season!’ Iranian viewers, again, demonstrate gratitude for the photoblogger’s attempt at ‘normalising’ Iran: ‘Thank you for sharing this face of Tehran’.<sup>211</sup> These comments suggest that, at least for these viewers, photobloggers’ efforts to encourage people to revisit their conceptions of Iran beyond the ‘other faces’ depicted by mainstream media inside and outside of the country (see chapters 4-6), do appear to have social, cultural and political effects. These photographs of Christmas decorations and objects also effectively bear witness to the ‘locality’ of global material-cultural phenomena (Miller 1998), in the online setting.

In her ethnographic study of Flickr, Murray (2008:159) has suggested that ‘the overall focus on the everyday brings both snapshot and professional photos closer together in terms of their value to the community’. In the viewing context of Iranian photoblogs, such ‘value to the community’ appears to stem from the viewer’s ability to access and ‘experience’ Iran through digital-visual media. In this sense, digital

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<sup>209</sup> Viewer comment: <http://tehranlive.org/2006/12/24/milad-tower/>. (Accessed: 01/12/14).

<sup>210</sup> Viewer comments: <http://tehranlive.org/2008/12/26/christmas-night-in-tehran/>. (Accessed: 01/12/14).

<sup>211</sup> Viewer comment: <http://tehranlive.org/2008/12/26/christmas-night-in-tehran/>. (Accessed: 01/12/14).

photographs of Iran connect the viewer to the photoblog/photoblogger, to their personal and collective histories, and to each other.

#### **9.4. Chapter analyses**

##### **9.4.1. Analysis *i*: Digital photographs, memory and the diasporic/international imaginary**

This chapter contributes to an established literature on the anthropology of diasporas (see chapter 1) by placing the digital photograph at the centre of relevant debates. I have showed how digital photographs perform various layers of cultural work pertaining to Iranian memory, nostalgia and I have discussed the relationship of these aspects to contemporary experience. Contrary to the perspective that holds that digital photographs are ‘more effective as objects of communication than of memory’ (Van House 2011: 125), my thesis at large illustrates how the Internet (or rather, people’s uses of it), construct frameworks for the re-working of cultural memory<sup>212</sup>. Chapter 4 discussed how photoblogs affect social and cultural memory by intervening in actual (offline) visual culture in Iran. These propel existing aspects of official revolutionary/post-revolutionary ideology and visual rhetoric into broader, digital viewing publics and interpretive frameworks, where they continue to be negotiated and reformulated in online space. The narrative spaces afforded by the digital landscape in allowing space to engage with this history opens up interesting pathways for inter-generational dialogue, worthy of further study.

For viewers of Iranian photoblogs, virtuality and visuality work in tandem to perform new kinds of visual memory work, which (as any kind of memory work) is always performative, contingent, and heavily dependent on imagination and storytelling (Kuhn 2007; Kuhn 2010). What arguably makes these virtual venues successful in

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<sup>212</sup> For further discussion on the relationship between Internet/media and memory see Morris-Suzuki (2005), Hoskins (2009), Van Dijck (2007), – (2008) and Rutten, Fedor and Zvereva (2013).

producing memory is their dependence on photographs, given their status as indexical reflections of visible 'truths'. For all of these viewer types, the photoblog, as with the family album of actual photographs (as discussed in this chapter in relation to Abadan) forms what Kuhn (2007:285-6) calls 'occasions for communication, cross-cultural exchange and cultural continuity'. The occasion or 'event' of viewing the photoblog, like the physical photographic album, is an interactive space wherein photography and memory work meet and go forwards together. This process is also demonstrated by how differently the digital exhibition is viewed and responded to amongst various individuals, with differing connections to Iran. The photoblog is therefore a contemporary digital site of memory work. At once the locus of a digital photographic album and public message board, it also forms an experience of viewing comparable to that of actual photographs. Langford's (2001) research on family photographs preserved in archives showed that even strangers with no prior knowledge or connections to the content wove stories around the series of images. This process formed a kind of 'performative viewing' (whereby photographs serve as props to interpretive performances).

In photoblogs, this kind of viewing practice operates on two levels. Firstly, most viewers of an individual's photoblog are likely to be relative strangers to the photoblogger. Their experience of viewing the photoblogger's personal photographs online occurs in publically accessible contexts. This is comparable to the public display of family albums in museum displays, though the latter often exists as a historical document, whilst the former is taken and exhibited in the (very recent) present. Secondly, relationships to the material are reflexively generated through viewers' proximities to Iran, as shown throughout this chapter. In one sense, Iranians and others with connections to (particularly pre-revolution) Iran, express strong ties, rooted in

memory, nostalgia and curiosity, along the lines of ‘what does Iran look like today?’ These relate mostly to their personal experiences. At the same time, complete strangers also interpret the series of photographs presented on photoblogs in diverse, personalised readings. These mediate facets of their own imagined/actual experiences of the country. Individuals may feel ‘strong’ or ‘weak’ personal and cultural ties to the place of Iran, accordingly. For some viewers, the photoblog serves as a visual-digital idiom for Iran itself, or rather, *their* Iran. Moreover, an individual’s emotional connection with Iran may be more pronounced from a remote position – of exile/political or psychological inability to return – where it is rooted in imaginaries, than in the case of physical proximity. Iranians who fled during the revolution demonstrate this kind of capacity for remote sensing via the digital photograph, for whom the Islamic Republic is *not* their Iran, but rather, a frozen landscape in a plethora of mediated forms, images and memories.

Writing about the social efficacy of photographs in India within wider Hindu traditions, Pinney (1997:171) suggests a relevant concept with which he explicates the social efficacy of photographs. He terms this ‘proximal empowerment’. Pinney’s concept denotes the ability of powerful objects (such as photographs) to bring about a sense of proximity on the part of the individual towards sacred beings or deities. This agency is rooted in the physical materiality of analogue photographs, and is predicated on bodily contact with the photographic object. In a different context, Harris (2004) has shown how in Tibetan photography, it is often not just the physical material properties of a photograph which afford it its social agency, but also the more ‘intangible’ aspects. The concept of reincarnation, as discussed by Harris in relation to Tibetan photographs of sacred individuals such as the Dalai Lama, reflects a relevant material anthropological understanding of how objects become animated or made alive

by a 'life force'. Harris' emphasis on the intangibility of physical objects in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition of reincarnation (in which objects and bodies pass through a series of life cycles and where substances can become insubstantial only to be reformulated) makes an important theoretical point concerning the relationship between photography and materiality. Coupled with Pinney's concept of 'proximal empowerment' outlined above, both of these wisdoms (concerning the material and the immaterial) can be brought to bear on digital photographs shown and seen on Iranian photoblogs. As discussed, digital photographs clearly lack physical material qualities and cannot affect the same haptic registers as physical ones. However, their social efficacies, as intangible objects, are constituted precisely in the *absence* of a physical manifestation. Unlike print photographs, digital photographs are able to travel at speed through space and time. In turn, the transnational reach of these photographs constitute their materiality' and meaning, as constructed by viewers. For Iranians in the diaspora, or those living in exile, where the actual physical space of Iran is unattainable, it is within the virtual domain in which these digital photographic objects circulate, that Iranians can tangibly connect with an 'aura' of Iran. Here, I contend that lack of physical status does not prevent the digital photograph to foster feelings of cultural proximity and hence, that it is a palpable social document of culture.

#### **9.4.2. Analysis ii: 'Truth' (*haghighat*) and the digital photograph**

Sharing our photographs is our way of showing the truth about Iran to the world. It gives us the opportunity to show who we *really are*.

(Online Interview with Kiana Farhoudi, [24/06/13])

As discussed throughout this thesis, Iranian photobloggers share a broad ethos of showing a certain level of social and cultural 'truth' about Iran. A main way they set about achieving this is to show Iranian heterogeneity as a social fact to viewers.

In order to better understand how truth operates in Iranian photoblogs, it is important to consider further the status of the digital photograph vis-à-vis (its capacity for) representation. A main ‘paradox of digital photography’ (Manovich 1995) pertains to its tenuous status as vessel of representation. Some have argued that this essential unreliability (based on the easy manipulation of photographs) belies its status as a document of culture (Sassoon 2004). The essence of this critique is predicated on the apparent schism of the digital with the physical, material photographic object. Failing to ostensibly provide evidence of either its material, other lives, or, in its representation of ‘what-had-been’, it has been perceived to lack the traditional norms of self-authentication and ‘certificate of presence’ (Barthes 1981). This ostensibly renders it devoid of meaning and unlike what Mitchell (1992) calls ‘normal’ (nondigital) photographs. In this chapter, I have explored (and made the case for) the social lives of digital photographs. This involves debunking what Sturken and Cartwright (2001) (in response to Mitchell’s (1992) argument about the lack of truth in the digital) call the ‘myth of photographic truth’. In this sense, truth, as an *ethnographic* (and not an ontological) category, can be brought to bear on digital photography in online contexts, in line with Pinney’s statement (1997:20): ‘I am interested not in the ontological and indexical truth claims of images, but of contemporary mythologies and evaluations’. It is precisely the ‘mythological’ status of the Iranian digital photograph, which produces its own evaluations amongst producers and viewers. This approach, I suggest, should be the starting point for the digital-ethnographer aiming to excavate the subjective construction of cultural meaning in digital photographs shown and exchanged via the Internet.

In light of these treatments, it is possible to attribute to digital photography, broader, contemporary handlings of ‘truth’ in anthropology. Holbraad’s (2013)

argument that ‘truth’ be regarded as a fluid ethnographic object of enquiry, for instance, bears relevance to the theoretical outline of ‘truth’ established in this chapter. Writing about the cultural relativity of truth in the context of Afro-Cuban practice of Ifá divination in Havana, Holbraad (2013:17) argues that ‘familiar assumptions about truth as a property of representations that reflect reality are inadequate for understanding practices’ *own* claims to truth’. He highlights the primary importance of an alternative concept (pertaining to his Cuban field site) of *Oracular* truth: that which transforms and not just represents the world as is. Employing the phrase ‘Truth in Motion’ to conceptualise and demonstrate the fluidity of truth, Holbraad’s (2013:xix) claims that truth in this context is what he calls ‘motile’. It follows a ‘motile logic’, which moves and transforms the world. The transformative and future-orientated dynamic described by Holbraad is reminiscent of what Strassler (2010), in the context of popular photography calls the ‘as if’ of the medium, indicative of a ‘prophetic’ or proleptic world-making capacity of photography (Pinney 2008; 2012) that I introduced in chapter 1. Understanding the photoblog from this perspective is then arguably less about the inherent truth-claims of the representations depicted by the images (though clearly what they show is very important to both photographers and viewers), than investigating how and why viewers attribute value, virtue and ‘truth’ to certain visual systems. Representations are, as Holbraad (2013:245) states ‘inherently doubtful, since the ontological “gap” between them and the world they purport to reflect leaves the possibility of error open as a matter of logical principle’.

Accepting these limitations in photography, as a ‘consciously mediated form of representation’ (MacDougall 1992:123), is a helpful theoretical starting point for appreciating how Iranian photoblogs, and the *digital* photographs they contain, ought not be held to account by anthropologists on grounds of being false, fake, manipulated

or any other unreliable quality critically associated with digital technology. As Manovic (1995) reminds us in writing about the digital photograph, human fabrication and manipulation have always existed in (analogue) photography, as well as in other art forms, whilst Benjamin's ([1931] 1999) emphasis on the 'optical unconscious' of photography, which puts technology on a conceptual plane with magic, similarly points to the intangible (non-physical) realm, where effects are produced. Fabrication does not stand up therefore as a unique critique of the digital, for its inability to be 'real' or 'true'. As MacDougall (1992) reminds, 'since photography is not caught up in the search for unitary truths; it need not be afraid of paint, or of being self-referential.' As I showed in previous chapters (3 and 8), self-styling and playing with aesthetics demonstrate how Iranian photobloggers show no such fear of (virtual) 'paint' in their artistic practices.

As I have shown throughout this chapter, digital photographs, as with analogue photographs, are able to generate 'truths' through indexical processes and viewer attributions, which in turn, accounts for the photograph's agency. Here, Barthes' (1981) seminal preoccupation with the index, and Tagg's (1988:35) rather different emphasis on social practice – the latter conceived of as placing photography 'within the truth' – have their respective places in retrieving a broad, ethnographic understanding of the many functions and efficacies of Iranian popular digital photography shown and seen online. In the various spaces on the 'Iranian Internet' (Akhavan 2013), truth as a motile virtual object moves with the digital image as it travels in and across time and space. It does this when it connects to the social, the cultural and – as has been shown in previous chapters – the political and the ideological. In the digital context, rather than indicating stasis, the 'event' of photography (Barthes 1982) (which comprises the image's photorealism, as a marker

of time and place [Pinney 2008:3-4]) takes place *in* places that are continually evolving and moving forwards *with* shifting notions of truth. Digital photographs are viewed and become meaningful online in movement as they move through what Ingold (Ibid: 1805) calls ‘meshworks’, defined as ‘organisms being constituted within a relational field... a field not of connectable points, but of interwoven lines’. In light of this concept, it is possible to situate these digital photographs (and their online viewing publics) as part of an even larger virtual ‘meshwork’ of Iranian images, ideologies, histories and dominant discourses, which were detailed in chapters 4-6. These aspects intersect, coincide and move forwards together in the digital, imaginative and actual environments implicated in the radial system of contemporary Iranian popular photography seen on the Internet, in indexical processes that are not altogether new to the digital age. What constitutes the ‘truth’ about Iran, as expressed and constructed via a range of photoblogs (and their viewers), is therefore an altogether deeply socialised process by which layers of historical, cultural and visual-political narrations and imaginings intercede with one another in broader attempts to express and define ‘Iranianness’. For these reasons, Iranian photoblogs are what I call *world re-creating* environments. They serve as a kind of contemporary digital ‘studio’ space for developing and exhibiting individuals’ individual and collective explorations of Iranian identity.

#### **9.4.3. Analysis *iii*: Accounting for the materiality, sensoriality and corporeality of digital photographs in movement**

Exploring the agency of the digital photographic object, the discussion in the previous chapter (8) focused largely on aesthetics. It explored how Photobloggers employ aesthetic strategies in order to challenge pre-conceptions about Iran. As an anthropologist, it is equally important to consider other ways that photoblogs operate,

socially. This requires what Pinney and Thomas (2001) refer to as looking ‘beyond aesthetics’ in our interests in the visual, as it does with Larsen’s (2008) suggestion to move beyond representation in ethnographic approaches to contemporary digital photography on the Internet. In Iranian photoblogs, moving beyond aesthetics and representation points to other relevant fields involving material and sensorial perspectives relevant to the social life of Iranian digital photographs discussed in this chapter.

Re-thinking images through a phenomenological approach to the senses, Pink (2009) argues that digital photographs are enmeshed in multisensory environments, which in turn, impact upon their production and consumption. Pink suggests that discourses provoked by images can be ‘metaphorically, and not just materially, grounded’ (Strecker 1987), invoking a range of phenomenological and sensorial perspectives (Bhaumik and Edwards 2008). Here Pinney’s (2009) notion of ‘corporetics’ (or sensory corporeal aesthetics) is a useful model for appreciating how digital photographs can be understood as having sensory qualities. The concept derives from Pinney’s work studying the consumption of devotional images in rural India, where he found that villagers engaged with images as ‘the sources of future interventions’ (Ibid: 418). Pinney shows how corporetics are theoretically relevant to a range of contemporary contexts, including cinematic viewing experience. Drawing on Pinney’s concept, Pink (2011:4) suggests that his emphasis on movement, or going ‘forward with an image’ can be extended to thinking more generally about how ‘existing images are implicated in corporeal relationships, through which persons can continue to move forward in both physical environments and affective and imaginative domains.’

These understandings move beyond the presumed flatness of digital photographic images and/or their surface content, drawing attention to wider and corporeal factors. In this sense, the photoblog moves beyond the flatness of what Sekula (1983) earlier called (in the context of the analogue photographic archive) ‘universal inventory of appearances’ and move closer to the robustness of what McQuire (2013) terms the ‘operational archive’: a ‘live’ digital site of cultural negotiation (see chapter 1). In sensory terms, digital ‘materiality’ comes into being in Iranian photoblogs when the image becomes internalised by the viewer, who connects the flatness of the presented digital surface (or, the virtual image viewed on the computer or mobile phone screen) with their sensory faculties. In turn, these processes make up the photorealism of the digital photograph and its ability to simulate ‘texture’ and even taste, as shown above in relation to various examples.

In her critique of the digital photograph as a non-viable ethnographic object, Sassoon (2004) argued that an essential lack of reliability calls digital photographs into question. Echoing Benjamin’s seminal argument concerning ‘technological reproducibility’ ([1936] 1972) – which ostensibly rendered copies devoid of historicity – Sassoon shows similar scepticism towards the mass-produced digital photograph. She suggests that digitisation denies the capacity to interact with the photographic object as a piece of material culture, shifting the user’s point of engagement to the surface of the image and its aesthetic content over any other possible form of engagement. Along these lines, Sassoon distinguishes between what she calls the ‘unique value [of the] original photographic object’ (the original work of art in Benjamin’s thesis) and its ‘digital referent’ (the photographic copy for Benjamin, whose unique value, for Sassoon, is further mitigated with the digital). In this conception, the digital photograph is therefore deemed to be less ‘real,’ forming more of a virtual annex, than

a social object in its own right (Ibid: 186). These critiques of the digital take issue with the concept of material translation, regarding digitisation and/or digital photography to be somehow less ‘authentic’ in the wider history of the medium. However, as I have shown throughout this thesis, globally circulating digital photographs *as well as* digitised analogue photographs exercise profound impact upon viewers of many kinds. A main example of the latter discussed in this chapter is the digitised Schroeder family album of Abadan shared online by its creator’s son. In the digital landscape, these rare amateur photographs from the pre-revolutionary south can be viewed across the world, extending the act of bearing witness to these striking, cosmopolitan images of the country beyond a privileged few who are able journey to physically visit the albums at the University of Harvard Library in the US where they are now kept (see chapter 1 on the theoretical basis of the digital archive). Theoretical preoccupation with physical objects thus ought not preclude understandings of other socio-cultural processes and potentials afforded by new mediums and forms of ‘materiality’ (as discussed in chapter 1).

In contemporary popular digital photography today – and particularly where online dissemination impacts upon the desire to take photographs, as in the case with photoblogs and social network sites (SNS) – distinctions based on value judgments between physical photographic objects and their digital referents are, I suggest, rendered irrelevant. In popular digital photography, the digital *is* the material object and, as has been shown in this chapter, becomes the site of much timely sensorial and corporeal engagement with politics, culture, history and identity. Moreover, if belief, memory and the senses are already part of a kind of ‘virtual’ image work (just as the imagination is ‘virtually’ harnessed in the mind’s eye to structure ways of seeing and being in the world), then digital photographs, as virtual image-objects, are arguably an

archetypal technology of the contemporary cultural imaginary. They can foster ways of experiencing (and researching) cultures based on imaginative participation, empathy and remote sensing; all of which are facets of pre-digital, human cognition.

These online systems also exercise levels of social interaction beyond the online communities they foster. During my fieldwork, I came across several cases where viewers and other photobloggers had contacted other photobloggers and viewers in order to meet up with them offline in major cities such as Tehran, Esfahan and Shiraz. They did this for the purpose of photography-orientated social and professional networking. LGOIT explained how he used to regularly meet with Iranian photobloggers on a weekly basis at a café in Tehran with individuals looking to become involved in photography, join amateur groups and extend the city's network of budding photographers. Through these occasions, LGOIT admitted to becoming 'good friends with some of them...our friendships have outlasted some of our blogs, as well as my stay in Iran'.<sup>213</sup> Almost all of my participant photobloggers had similar experiences of making new social connections, and on- and offline relationships through their photoblogs. LGOIT further revealed how non-Iranian friends became encouraged to visit Iran after viewing their photographs even under the conservative Ahmadinejad administration (2005-2013), which through its hardline approach, had alienated Iran in the international community's eyes, compounding its image as an inaccessible and troubled place.<sup>214</sup> These examples (and others presented throughout this thesis) demonstrate a fundamental tenet of digital anthropology: that online experiences and social interactions are embedded in offline social realities. In this sense, the notion that materiality is only constituted by the actual 'dirt and damage' of the object's 'other lives' (Sassoon 2004) may be conceptually reconsidered as the destructive effects (the 'dirt'

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<sup>213</sup> Online interview with LGOIT (15/03/12).

<sup>214</sup> Online interview with LGOIT (02/10/12).

and ‘damage’ if you like), caused by post-revolutionary hegemonic representational systems inside and outside of Iran, which my interlocutors all highlighted in accounting for their practice. Photobloggers’ visual-epistemic systems are just as ‘real’ and present within the radial systems of popular digital photography in/of Iran on the Internet as any physical remnants of (analogue) photography’s other or past lives. Overall, the very act of viewing digital photographs constitutes their ‘materiality’ for Iranians and non-Iranians. This conception of digital ‘materiality’ extends to the corporeal and the sensorial, providing further evidence of digital photography’s social (and anthropological) salience.

### **9.5. Summary**

The findings presented and discussed in this chapter relate to viewers of contemporary popular photography in/of Iran, as seen on photoblogs. I have discussed how digital photography, whether pictures taken on camera phones and posted to photoblogs, or in the form of digitised material photographs as with the Schroeder family archive of Abadan, are ultimately constitutive of the place of Iran. Digital photographs are made ‘live’ as well as *alive* through collective practices of sharing and community building. They are also made mobile through these indexical processes, as opposed to simply being static visual representations of a place in time. Digital photographs in this context have largely been shown to be ‘in movement’ insofar as they connect disparately located and varyingly positioned viewers to Iran. This includes, but also moves beyond nostalgia, towards multitemporal and multisensory engagements with and within new media ecologies as well as pasts, presents and futures. Digital photographs shown and seen online have been shown to perform many nuanced layers of cultural work. For Iranians living in the diaspora, digitally circulating photographs provide the opportunity to connect with family and friends in Iran and to virtually/imaginatively envision Iran

from afar. For foreigners, it provides an opportunity to experience versions of Iran beyond established visual tropes and paradigms.

I conclude that photoblogs come to serve as points of access for Iranian and foreign viewers, who are able to digitally ‘experience’ or ‘participate’ in Iran, not as a fixed locality, but as an embodied ‘place-event’ in flux, which fosters phenomenological forms of (re-) engagement inside and outside of Iran. Overall, viewership of digital photographs discussed in this chapter is one (important) part, of an overall ‘constellation of processes’ (Massey 2005:141) in which the place of Iran is negotiated and re-constructed in photoblogs. These processes involve the convergence of people, cameras, the Internet, discourses, visual histories and other socio-technological processes with which this thesis at large has been overall concerned. Taken together, these constitute what I suggest to be a contemporary digital ‘ethnographic moment’ of online visual storytelling ‘from below’, facilitated by the joining of new technologies with old, as well as the ongoing, dynamic interplay of multiple socio-cultural and political ‘realities.’

## CHAPTER 10. CONCLUSION: ‘FORCES OF THE NEW AGE’



Figure 10.1: ‘Photo tour’ at Kaboudwāl waterfall near ‘Aliābād-e Katul, Golestan province, northeast Iran, in November 2009. Featuring research participants Amir (seen centre, in striped jumper), Ehsan (fifth from the left) and Vahid (second from the right). Used with permission.

### 10.1. Thesis summary

In the preface to this thesis I quoted one of my main informants, Vahid, remarking upon the fact that popular digital photography in and of Iran was so significant, that Iranians who make and share digital photographs were ‘forces of the new age’. In this thesis I have explored these claims, amidst a broader discussion that examines the various ways in which this ‘new’ age is being demarcated, the mediums through which definitive markers of it are being communicated, and how contemporary social, visual and technological transformations can be understood in line with older forms and processes. By investigating the contemporary genre of popular digital photography on the Internet, and its convergence with the Iranian social web in the form of photoblogs (photography-oriented blogs), my study offers theoretical, empirical and

methodological contributions to knowledge concerning contemporary Iranian society and the experience of Iranians living in various diaspora through the lens of socio-technological developments in photography from the mid-2000s to the present day. Here, economic, technological and socio-political developments have collided and intersected in such a way as to construct the field of ethnographic enquiry (Iranian photoblogging in the new media landscape), and render it accessible to the ethnographer. Having worked with a range of interlocutors inside and outside of Iran, I have extrapolated theories about the meaning and social basis of Iranian photoblogging. I have shown how the practice constitutes a technologically facilitated social, cultural and political process, whereby middle-class Iranians and non-Iranians across the world set about re-envisaging the image of Iran online. I have discussed how this visual and digital engagement has emerged from specific socio-political circumstances and visual cultural traditions, and broader media ecologies (traditional print, and contemporary digital) within the country's recent and longer history.

In one respect, I have demonstrated how Iranian photoblogging is a product of recent social and technological developments, which I outlined in chapter 1. The advent of mobile phone cameras in the early 2000s, followed by smart phone photography has been instrumental in the development of photoblogging and popular photography at large, as also discussed in chapter 3. In this sense, photoblogging belongs to a certain contemporary 'moment' in the history of photography following the invention of mobile phone photography. Gómez Cruz and Meyer (2012) have termed the present era a 'fifth moment', characterised by the smart phone (and particularly the iPhone) camera's ability to combine in one device what were formerly distinctive, costly and lengthy phases of producing, processing and distributing photographs. These developments have increased accessibility, mobility and as a

result, have popularised the practice of amateur photography along socio-economic lines, leading to the emergence of nascent digital-photographic cultures across the globe. Iranian photoblogging, the subject of this thesis, is one such contemporary culture, which simultaneously draws on older visual forms and social/media practices.

In another respect, Iranian photoblogging is not new, though its precise form is of the technological moment. As I have argued in chapters 3-6, the moral force behind the practice – that which constitutes Iranian photobloggers’ ‘need to speak’ about their country – reflects producers and consumers of Iranian photoblogs’ broader historical awareness of political, ideological and economic forces at work in areas of government, mainstream media, and photography organisations, inside and outside of Iran. Through their various claims on visibility, Iran, and Iranian identity, the visual politics of these power structures have impacted upon the national and the transnational Iranian subject. It is within the various virtual heterotopia (mediascapes/ideoscapes) in which perceptions of Iranian identity, subjectivity and belonging are enmeshed, that Iranian photobloggers inside and outside of Iran develop their aesthetic strategies for visually speaking back and up to power. Here, Iranian photobloggers carry out a certain visual-historical negotiation, which realises Mirzoeff’s (2011) prospect of narrating a ‘counter-history’ of visibility as a way of de-centering and interrogating hegemonic visual discourses constructed as historical ‘evidence’ in national *and* transnational settings. In this sense, Iranian photobloggers are a contemporary example within a broader lineage of Iranian social actors, filmmakers, visual artists, poets, journalists and bloggers engaging with questions of Iranian identity, in ways that are both political and poetic. Iranian photobloggers also continue routine, offline social processes of subject formation and identity negotiation

‘from below’ in their daily lives, incorporating and sculpting them into their photographic practices.

Iranian photoblogs are therefore in the business of occupying space (what in chapter 5 I called a ‘third space’) of popular discursive engagement between internally and externally propagated visual media discourses. This ‘third space’ is an epistemological space for rethinking the image of Iran. It is a dynamic, digital interface of intersecting global and local visual forms and traditions, in which photobloggers convene together a range of digital, viewing publics from across the world in a ‘civil contract of photography’ (Azoulay 2008). In light of these findings, I argued that digital photographs shown and seen online are ‘in movement’ in a digital *and* epistemological sense. This metaphor of mobility captures how photobloggers broadly seek to mobilise the image of Iran out of its ‘besieged’ status, where official image brokers have held it in captivity. These mobilities are augmented by photobloggers’ physical travels across Iran, on what they refer to as ‘photo tours’ (*safarhā-ye ‘akkāsi*), discussed in chapter 3. On these social occasions for photography, photobloggers leave the confines of their urban middle-class dwellings in order to access (and visually communicate) broader facets of lived experience across the country in remote and rural settings. These efforts serve the broader visual ‘truths’ about Iran they seek to capture. In so doing, they simultaneously connect disparately located viewers (as well as the ethnographer studying them) to Iran by facilitating opportunities for virtual travel. In light of their activities, Iranian photobloggers present a paradigmatic, but not an exclusive contemporary example of Internet-facilitated cultural politics, shaped by morally charged counter-visualities.

The idea of popular, or ‘soft political’ resistance to hegemonic power structures that this thesis identifies in Iranian photoblogging however is not new to the digital

age, nor exclusive to Iran. As part of a wider historical discussion, I showed how photoblogging shares a conceptual lineage with earlier ‘small media’ (Sreberny et al. 1994), such as cassette tapes, pamphlets and television broadcasting used as alternative media and communications during the revolutionary period of the 1970s. I also examined continuities and developments in photography and Iranian visual culture, since the introduction of the medium to the country in the mid-nineteenth century. In chapter 3, I illustrated how Iranian photoblogging recalls earlier forms of Iranian photographic practice and broader features of Persian visual art, in terms of styling, aesthetic framing, use of collage and subject positioning. As I discussed, these aspects signified early Iranian photographers’ idiosyncrasies, as seen in nineteenth century photograph albums and early twentieth century studio practices. I suggest that these older facets of Iranian photography, including its ‘in-between’ status between ‘science’ and ‘art’, and combination of western and Iranian forms, find contemporary manifestation in Iranian photoblogs. I showed how photoblogs serve as both digital album/archive *and* contemporary studio space for photobloggers’ documentative *and* performative uses of photography. To further illustrate this point, in chapter 8 I exhumed a hitherto unacknowledged relationship between Iranian photobloggers and contemporary Iranian artists in terms of their similar visual strategies for communicating visual, cultural and political nuance. I suggested that this relationship reflects photography’s older relationship between documentary realism and art practice in Iran, as all as in other non-Western/postcolonial contexts across the globe.

While historical continuities in Iranian photography and visual/media communication have been highlighted, contemporary developments in digital media have also been shown to render new forms of ‘local’ agency and art praxis. Here, another kind of space that I have shown Iranian photobloggers construct is one of

exhibitions. As digital exhibitions, photoblogs broaden the scale of immediate viewership and potential interpretive communities beyond those of print photographs, creating interactive and instantaneous occasions for bearing witness. Photoblogs provide alternative, low-cost/free digital venues for showing Iranian photography independent of official galleries and public museums inside and outside of Iran. In chapter 6, I showed how Iranian popular digital photography is developing in broader, international digital exhibition venues, as it is inside Iran itself. This allows for both ‘inside’ and ‘outside’, as well as official and popular perspectives to meet and reformulate. I argued that the limitations and restrictions of official, internal and external visual-political frameworks and photography organisations, coupled with wider offline socio-political conditions in Iran, such as Internet regulation and economic sanctions, has seen in one respect the increasing popularity of digital contexts as alternative spaces for exhibiting Iranian art and photography. At the same time, online platforms are also taken up for official (state-sponsored) outputs of visual-cultural production. As I discussed in chapters 4-6, state-funded activities and initiatives also provide salient opportunities for popular photographic activities to develop inside Iran. Many popular photographers in Iran routinely benefit from state-sponsored photography initiatives, including exhibition spaces, competition prizes, equipment and training. In light of the above observations, my study concludes that contemporary Iranian popular digital photography is a competing and contested field of popular cultural activity, taken up amongst successive generations of Iranians in forms and practices that are simultaneously new and not new, reflecting both international and national outlooks.

## **10.2. Implications of the study**

As outlined in the theoretical overview of this thesis (chapter 1), my study offers

theoretical, empirical and methodological contributions to three principal anthropological areas of scholarship: (1) the social anthropology of contemporary Iran (2) anthropology of popular photography and (3) digital-visual anthropology.

#### **10.2.1. Social anthropology of contemporary Iran**

My study makes a specific contribution to social anthropological scholarship on Iran by showing how aspects of Iran's broader social, cultural and political complexities are revealed through its photography. In this regard, I have shed light on the interstitial cultural spaces of the 'Iranian Internet' (Akhavan 2013) *and* on Iranian society more broadly. In line with established anthropological studies of analogue photography in other social contexts, I have demonstrated how complex and intertwining subjectivities relating to class, hierarchy, and aspiration are articulated through contemporary Iranian digital photography. I showed how digital photographs shared online reflect a range of Iranian subject positions. In chapter 3, I illustrated how existing socio-economic tensions between Internet-using Iranians living in neighbourhoods in northern and southern Tehran are articulated through digital photography and material culture, in examples such as the 'Rich Kids' and 'Poor Kids' groups on Instagram. In chapters 4 and 5, I also examined the more socially, culturally and politically conservative type of Iranian photoblog. These are often referred to as 'Islamic Photoblogs' by their creators, and include examples such as the 'Hezbollah Photo' photoblog, and the 'Muslim photographer' (Akkās-e Mossalmān) online group. These kinds of popular digital photographic activities, some of which are state-funded/facilitated, transfer traditional as well as reformulated aspects of Islamic-Iranian (revolutionary) ideology into the contemporary digital landscape. Through these examples, I emphasised the socially diverse nature of Iranian society, and its contemporary Internet and social media users, which simultaneously moves beyond the paradigm of media-using secular, middle-

class ‘defiant’ youth perpetrated by earlier ethnographic studies of Iran. I have suggested that a symbiotic relationship between offline and online Iranian socio-economic and political tensions can be seen in a range of Iranian digital-photographic practices on the Internet. This digital landscape is itself a contested socio-political environment, wherein a certain ‘*photo hierarchicus*’ (MacDougall 1992) reflects perceptions of status, aesthetic taste, professionalism and aspiration.

Although belonging to a similar demographic, photobloggers’ (and my analysis of them) move beyond a necessarily subversive or a dialogical relationship with the Iranian state, with broader implications for anthropological scholarship. While some may not acquiesce with the Islamic regime in Iran, nor its political, social or aesthetic codes, many photobloggers have also grown up living directly under it, whilst those who live abroad are used to officially complying with it as a condition of travelling freely in and out of the country. Aside from the period of overt socio-political crisis in June 2009, following the re-election of Ahmadinejad as President, Iranian photobloggers and their practices demonstrate how many Iranians are more preoccupied with living their daily lives in nuanced, complex and expressive ways of regulating/directing/re-making their Iranian subjectivity than necessarily or consciously ‘resisting’ the state. Here I argued that categories of ‘resistance’ and defiance are often born outside of Iran; in mainstream media discourses, academic literature, or, as I showed to be the case of some of my research participants, amongst types of hyper-mobile photobloggers who move in and out of Iran, but who themselves live in Europe and America (chapter 6).

Lastly, my thesis offers timely methodological contributions to anthropological scholarship on Iran. I have argued that lack or limited physical access for foreign/non-resident researchers of Iran, as has at times been the case in the post-revolutionary

period, presents less a predicament of ‘immobility’ than an opportunity for methodological innovation (chapters 2 and 7). Not only do digital technologies mobilised in the pursuit of ethnography enable ‘travel’, co-presence and connection with subjects in ‘the field’, but they also engender a unique ability to enter into certain physical spaces that might otherwise be inaccessible to the ethnographer. As discussed, this allows the contemporary anthropologist to be virtually co-present with subjects in places in live (and non-live) forms. In the Iranian context, this enables a salient ability to traverse outer (*zāher*) and inner (*bāten*) domains, which yields broader facets of the wider socio-political relationship between these social spheres than previously afforded by earlier scholarly/media-based accounts of the pristine nature of the public/private divide in Iran. Rather, as my study has shown, we may consider how digital technologies mark subtle continuities and transformations in offline social spheres in Iran, amidst successive generations of middle-class social actors growing up with technology embedded in their daily lives.

Insights acquired through my digital-ethnographic study also contribute to existing fields of scholarship on Iranian society and diaspora. I have highlighted the transformative role of digital photography, the visual and the virtual in shaping psychosocial processes of connection between Iran (real and/or imagined) and its various global diaspora. In chapter 9, I revealed facets of generational and cross-generational experience and engagement with digital photographs of Iran online worthy of further critical enquiry.

Having excavated various contemporary ‘virtual’ Iranian field sites, my digital-ethnographic study broadens the horizon of anthropological scholarship on Iran from studies necessarily undertaken physically inside Iran, or amongst the various diaspora (chapter 2), showing how imaginative, symbolic and affective aspects are a viable

subject of ethnographic enquiry themselves, particularly when they are important aspects of people's life experience and shifting subjectivities. As I showed through my work with Iranians growing up in a media-saturated post-revolution era in Iran, a post-9/11 international climate, and amidst a socio-economic context of sanctions, narrative nodes can impact upon research participants' self-perceptions of personhood, and can be incorporated into the design and application of ethnographic research methods.

In light of these empirical, theoretical and methodological contributions, this thesis makes a significant contribution to a burgeoning field of digital-anthropological scholarship on contemporary Iran, by yielding digital photographs, visual economies, social imaginaries, and distributed virtual communities all as viable ethnographic research *loci*.

#### **10.2.2. Popular digital photography**

My study of popular Iranian digital photographic practices has also brought back from the Iranian digital 'field' established and emerging insights concerning contemporary photographic theory. Through my empirical findings, I have re-directed emphasis in digital photographic theory on individual 'life chronicling' (Van House 2007: 2721) and/or narcissistic social media usage, towards broader forms of socio-political engagement taking place in digital contexts. Here, contrary to wider social theories on the need for instant gratification in late modern consumer society (Bauman 1998) – a notion in which contemporary digital media has been implicated in the west – photography in this contemporary Iranian, digital context reflects a decidedly *slower* frame. The 'speed' of this photography is largely determined by indexical and narrative factors that are present in processes of photographic production *and* reception. I have argued that Iranian photobloggers construct their unique temporality on the Internet along moral and socio-political lines. This slows down and 'traps'

surfers of the Internet (Miller 2001), provoking them to think more critically about Iran. Along these lines, my thesis reinstates the ethnographic perspective of attending to ‘locality’ in the study of media and contemporary digital popular photography, which are both all too often associated with ‘global’ cultural trends and visual practices.

In addition, I have shown how photoblogs (and the digital photographs of Iran that they exhibit) come to serve as points of phenomenological and imaginative access points for Iranian and foreign viewers, who are able to virtually ‘experience’ and ‘participate’ in Iran, not as a fixed locality, but as an embodied ‘place-event’ in flux. For foreigners, the photoblog provides a digital ‘cabinet of curiosity’ of Iran, a window of access to visually uncharted territory, establishing opportunities to bear witness to the country beyond newsworthy and other official visual paradigms. For Iranians (particularly those living in the diaspora), digitally circulating photographs provides the opportunity to connect with family and friends in Iran and to virtually and imaginatively envision it from afar. This includes, but also moves beyond nostalgia, towards multi-temporal and multi-sensory engagements with and within new media ecologies, as well as subjective pasts, presents and futures.

Here acts of viewing digital photographs are imbued with a historical, political and moral force, particularly for Iranians across the world, as they set about visually reclaiming aspects of themselves online in digital frames. The added stamps of ‘reality’ afforded by locative media enhances these processes, providing evidence of digital-photographic indexicality, wherein photographs are presented and viewed in a documentary-realist manner as certificates of ‘truth’ (chapter 9). At the same time, I have shown how photobloggers’ performative and artistic interventions on the ‘truth’ of Iran, seen in their digital-visual self-styling, aesthetic strategies of representation

and photographic self-portraiture, are also viewed as testaments of ‘truth’, despite their artistic and expressive form (chapter 8). These truth attributions reflect a sense of transnational Iranian and non-Iranian need to visually locate ‘authenticity’ in diversity.

In this thesis’ introduction, I suggested that Iranian photoblogging shares various political and visual-cultural affinities with other nascent digital-photographic cultures in postcolonial/non-Western contexts, such as in contemporary African digital photography. Coupled with the affinities highlighted throughout this thesis with vernacular photographic practices in other contexts such as in India and West Africa, my study overall moves us closer to appreciating what Pinney (2012) calls a ‘world-system photography’: one which grasps the historical inter-connectedness of practice, beyond the ghettoization of local specificity – something that many Iranian photobloggers themselves seek to achieve. In the Iranian context of popular digital photography then, we see a direct manifestation of Edwards’ (2011:186) contention that working with (analogue) photographs provides potential for ‘expanding anthropological theories of photography, which at the same time connect to major anthropological concerns such as memory, identity, ethnicity, nationalism and globalisation.’

### **10.2.3. Methodological contributions to (digital-visual) Anthropology**

Lastly, as a digital ethnographer in a still largely uncharted terrain of ethnographic research, I am able to conclude that the field of popular online digital photography is readily accessible to anthropologists. Along these lines, I have developed and presented innovative methodological strategies with which, I suggest anthropologists today can physically, digitally and metaphorically ‘move’ to undertake ethnographic research if and when required, or when faced with a potential predicament of physical ‘immobility’.

These methodological stipulations stem from my having re-emphasised, in the Iranian digital landscape, the relevance of established theoretical approaches in social research, namely (a) the imaginative and framed basis of social life (Goffman 1959) (b) the phenomenology of space and place (Ingold 2000), as well as (c) anthropological research pursuits themselves (Willerslev 2011). These elements help us to critically investigate the media-produced myths and social imaginaries (Taylor 2004; Salazar 2012) in which constructed paradigms of culture, not excluding those of academic anthropology, are enmeshed.

The digital photography exhibition presented in chapter 7 (and as a CD accompaniment included as part of this thesis) was designed and employed as a research method that directly reflects Iranian photobloggers' subjective experiences and digital-visual forms of communication. As a research method, the exhibition allowed geographically dispersed research participants to assemble in a delimited research zone online. This had the effect of creating a 'home space' for the research; a virtual headquarters of consciously constructed digital 'immobility' or stasis in an otherwise dynamic research field consisting of many participants in multiple time zones. I discussed how the digital exhibition allowed research participants and researcher to convene, explore, and reflect upon the research theme within the safe confines of a co-curated platform. It also provided a useful basis for transnational, virtual and interactive photo-elicitation with viewers across the globe and ultimately served as a communicative vessel through which the research themes emerged, became distilled, and were disseminated. The site remains a space of knowledge-dissemination and critical scholarly engagement. It is also a digital testament of my study and the 'moment' to which these media practices about Iran – carried out at specific times and places, by individuals using certain technologies – belong. A major realisation during

the course of my doctoral project was that failing to recognise, document and archive these contemporary digital-visual cultures could have a negative impact for future anthropological understanding, research and teaching. My project paves a way for future work in this area, with broader implications for visual anthropology, digital humanities, museum studies, cultural heritage, as well as theoretical understandings of digital archives and exhibitions.

Bronislaw Malinowski (1922), the founding father of ethnographic fieldwork, established the view that anthropologists need to be physically present with the peoples they study in order to understand and legitimately represent them. In this regard, fieldwork was posited as an authenticating measure, conceived of as a kind of ‘antidote’ to the activities of earlier ‘armchair anthropologists’, who Malinowski and his successors accused of producing imagined, ethnological portraits, and of being physically removed from the peoples and places about which they wrote<sup>215</sup>. Today however, thanks to the convergence of established and emerging theoretical and methodological trends in the social sciences with developing digital technologies, we are perhaps in a position to reconsider the Malinowskian imperative concerning physical presence. Having conducted one such digital ethnography, it is my contention that the geo-spatial imperative is not necessarily *the* definitive marker of methodological ‘authenticity’ in anthropology. My ethnographic study of Iranian popular digital photography illustrates, more broadly, how long-term fieldwork *can* be conducted with/in a country and/or a culture with participants from a physically remote position, without compromising ethical or methodological rigour. Here, I suggest, with a grain of irony, that the contemporary anthropologist may in fact, if and when they

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<sup>215</sup> ‘Arm chair anthropology’ is a phrase denoting 19<sup>th</sup> century ethnology, whereby scholars studied cultural ‘others’ remotely through mediated forms such as travelogues and colonial and missionary reports.

need to, return to the proverbial *and* physical ‘arm chair,’<sup>216</sup> whilst ‘being there’ with research participants through digitally facilitated forms of engagement. I have showed how these strategies met the specific demands of my study of Iranian photobloggers, but also suggest their more general applicability in studying physically and digitally dispersed, but variously networked, people and objects. Such methods, I suggest, lend themselves to anthropological studies within and beyond online environments and photography – to research, for example, on migration, tourism, as well as to investigations pursued in/of places to which the researcher has limited physical access. In presenting these methods, I have argued that these are not *a priori* strategies, nor are they always applicable, but can be effectively applied, sculpted and developed to complement key social research questions – or even help raise new ones.

To conclude, my study has explored the intersection of digital technologies with the practice of popular photography at a particular historical juncture in Iran and more broadly across the globe. In so doing, it reflects and generates debates concerning a contemporary, applied and engaged digital anthropology in/of Iran, and beyond, marking a nascent field of critical ethnographic scholarship on media and social transformation evolving alongside its locus of study. It is my contention that established *and* emerging scholarship, both theoretical and methodological, continues to *inform and be shaped by* developing digital technologies and mediating landscapes. This affords anthropology a firm contemporary grasp on global social and media transformations, as well as on the medium of photography as it continues to evolve in the twenty-first century between traditional print and digital culture, off - and online.

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<sup>216</sup> For a similar analogy of the armchair to the one made here (albeit not cited as a case for digital anthropology), see Willerslev (2011).

## Appendices

### Appendix A

This section corresponds to the discussion presented in chapter 3, p.87 on the visual style and composition of Iranian photography albums.

The following image is a photograph taken from Naser al-Din Shah's private photograph album, housed in the Golestan palace photography archive in Tehran. It shows a cut out photographic self-portrait of the Shah, who positions himself in the album floating in space amongst specifically positioned photographs of some of his wives and members of his harem, who sit on benches.



Naser al-Din Shah, Album page 289, albumen print. Golestan Palace Library in Tehran. Example cited in Brusius (2015:58).

At the top of the composition, a male eunuch, Mohammad Khan Khaje, hovers tilted to the left at a ninety-degree angle. The precise significance of the arrangements are unclear, and this is heightened by the fact that these albums are meant solely for private display and viewing by the Shah, who alone was allowed to access his harem. However, the arrangement appears to break up conventional notions of space and dimension in its placing of figures and calligraphic text, transcending western notions of photographic reality. As Brusius (2015: 58-59) indicates in her analysis, the album's visual compositional flair hints at the Persian miniature tradition of painting in which figures spread beyond the frame of a picture. Miniature paintings were similarly stored in book-like albums known as *muraqqa*, literally meaning 'that which has been patched together' in Persian. Miniature paintings were also similar in physical size to photographs during this period, further indicating how the 'art' of Iranian photography never truly broke away from this Iranian visual tradition (Diba 2013).

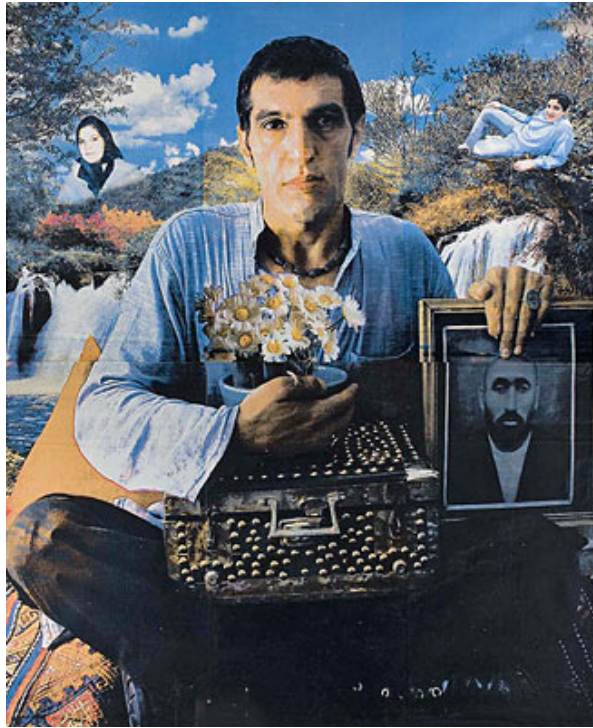
## **Appendix B**

*Note:* The following works of contemporary artists correspond to the discussion presented in chapter 8, which illustrates the performative and artistic uses of photoblogs by Iranian photobloggers.

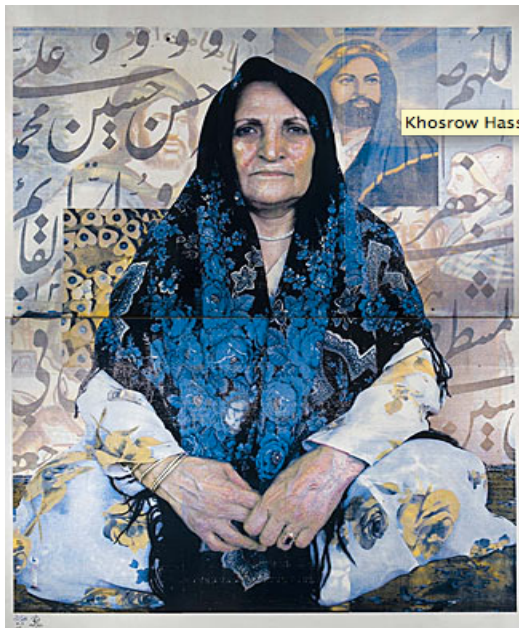
See section 8.4.2 on 'Auto-photobiography and self-portraiture'. Pp.343-359. Examples are referenced from p.349

### **Appendix B.1**

A relevant contemporary Iranian visual artist who explores western perceptions and reductive stereotypes of people from the Middle East and Iran is Khosrow Hassanzadeh (b.1963 Tehran). Reflecting similar sensitivities to Iranian photobloggers in being regarded in the west as a 'terrorist' for being Muslim or from an Islamic country like Iran (see LGOIT's description of these associations in chapters 5 and 8), Hassanzadeh uses a range of visual media (painting, textiles, collage, photography) to visually play with these associations. In his 'Terrorist' (2004) series, Hassanzadeh questions western perceptions of Islam and Muslims by portraying himself, his mother, and his sisters (all observers of Islam) as terrorists. Though their mediums and technical proficiencies may vary, what photobloggers and contemporary Iranian artists alike are both arguably (re-) claiming, is a right to self-representation, and one with a clear socio-political message.



‘Self-portrait.’ ‘Terrorist’ (2004) series by Khosrow Hassanzadeh



‘Reyhan Hassanzadeh’



‘Azimeh Hassanzadeh’

‘Terrorist’ (2004) series by Khosrow Hassanzadeh

These examples demonstrate how Iranians, inside and outside of Iran of different generations are exploring perceptions of ‘Iranianness’ in different formal/informal modes of expression within a post-revolutionary Iranian visual

artistic tradition of post-Orientalist social critique. This allows them to explore the notion that Iran can be and or is ‘modern’, ordinary, mundane as well as religious, spiritual, traditional and many other things, but that monolithic portraits, reductive stereotypes and terrorist imaginaries have no place here. These artists and photobloggers show how Iran can have cultural and or political ties with the west without undermining its cultural identity or ‘native’ authenticity.

## Appendix B.2

The work ‘My Identity’ (2003) by Gonkar Gyatso conveys these themes in another cultural context. Here, the artist visual plays with his own Tibetanness by placing himself within four distinct cultural, historical and artistic compositional frames



Gonkar Gyatso, ‘My Identity’ (2002) series

Gyatso evokes certain ‘types’ of Tibetan identity in line with his own biographical trajectory and transnational migration between Tibet, India and London, the cumulative effect of which is visually traced in his work (Harris, 2006).

### Appendix B.3

A comparative example of this kind of autobiographical and self-aware ethnographical framing can be seen in the work of Bangalore-based artist Pushpamala N. in her 'Ethnographic series' (2000-2004) created in collaboration with British photographer Clare Arni. As another example of cultural identity play, here the artist uses the medium of photography to both visually reference and explore photographic modes of ethnographic representation. She places herself within the photographic frame in traditional Indian dress.



Pushpamala N. 'Ethnographic Series' (2000-2004)

The series draws attention to the stylistic conventions of early anthropological studies of cultures through photography by simultaneously reconstructing and deconstructing visual-narrative tropes.<sup>217</sup>

#### **Appendix B.4**

Shadi Ghadirian, an Iranian artist based in Tehran also uses photography in this ‘ethnographic’ manner to explore historic, visual narrative tropes pertaining to Iran in line with questions of modernity, religion and cultural identity.<sup>218</sup> In her series ‘Qajar’ (1998), Ghadirian employs the conventional portrait style used in the late nineteenth-century Qajar period in Iran (see chapter 3), including the sitter’s wearing of traditional Qajar women’s clothing. The subject is featured amidst certain modern western material cultural objects including a mountain bike, a stereo and a can of Pepsi, presenting a conscious visual juxtaposition on the part of the artist.

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<sup>217</sup> For further examples of South Asian artists similarly exploring notions of identity through the legacy of photography in British-occupied India, see the catalogue for the San Jose Museum show entitled ‘Postdate: Photography and Inherited History in India’ (05 Feb - 02 August 2015): <http://sjmusart.org/exhibition/postdate-photography-and-inherited-history-india>

<sup>218</sup> On the re-emergence of nineteenth century Qajar imagery in contemporary Iranian photography, see Gem-Scheiwiller (2011).



Shadi Ghadirian, 'Qajar' series (1998)



Shadi Ghadirian, 'Qajar' series (1998)

Visually playing with aesthetic markers in this fashion, Ghadirian here is not unlike photobloggers in their use of photographic frames and visual genres to explore mundane objects in Iran to ‘normalise’ the Iranian epistemic landscape as discussed in the examples given in chapter 8. Ghadirian makes a salient point about the relationship between Iranian tradition and modernity that bears conceptual and visual affinity with popular Iranian photographers. In highlighting the relative modernity of the Qajar period, she suggests that modernity in Iran, and specifically for Iranian women, is neither lacking, nor new. In using the conventional nineteenth century Iranian studio set-up as a poignant representational backdrop, Ghadirian’s images convey the continued ‘modernity’ of Iranian women in contradistinction to conceptions that Muslim women are anti-modern (see chapter 5 on this issue).

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