27-01-2023

# The revolution in Iran and our imagination

## Collective thinking about the image and its political function

Rana Issa

This dossier was co-translated with Suneela Mubayi and DocStream Team

We witness the news from Iran with some hope and a lot of feelings of solidarity with people like us who no longer tolerate living under the rule of a terrorizing, authoritarian and imperialist regime. Images of the revolution in Iran

show a clear feminist force on the street in adjacency to many other laboring and ethnic groups that have been maltreated by the regime. In the first week of October 2022, an article was translated from Persian to English (the Arabic translation by Fadi Bardawil from English was published by the platform Megaphone). This article analyzed from a feminist angle the deployment of the image in a revolutionary time. In some of its points, the article is reminiscent of the debate that took place between Syrian intellectuals about image. The problematics of the image and its relation to political mobilization on the street is one of the central questions in our societies today, particularly for the hegemony of the image over the formation of political consciousness and the introduction of political struggles outside their local dynamics.

The writer of the article, L, ties the Iranian contexts, and its revolutionary particularity between the image and the reproduction of dissident acts. She also connects between the image and the insistence that the revolution unfolding in Iran today is not owned by anyone, and that the rebels there refuse to reduce the revolution to individuals or even to a single cause. In the Arab context, and ten years after the eruption of revolution in our countries, we find ourselves at once attracted to the courage of Iranian women and men as well as far away from them. We are separated by an enormous gap despite the geographical closeness. Cultural exchange between us and linguistic exchange between Arabic and Persian has become in recent years the monopoly of the tyrannical alliance between the Iranian regime and collaborating Arab groups and militias in countries like Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Yemen. Our divergence from one another has historical roots that are more profound than the dynamics of the

Iranian revolts in the last decades. Since we entered modernity and were colonized by the West, linguistic communication between Arabic and Persian became very limited. As Suneela Mubayi writes “the rare cultural and epistemic exchange between those cultures” rarely ever happens directly without depending on English as a mediating language.

Our revolutions and intersecting political destinies press upon us the need to overcome the historical fragmentations that separate us, so that we can exchange skills and ideas, and cultivate friendships as a central strategy for change in the regions of tyranny that spill our blood and stunt our lives. We might not have an alternative to English to bridge the breakdown in communication in our current historical moment. Bardawil is aware of the political importance of our intercommunication, so he overcomes the linguistic gap that separates our peoples, and places in the hands of the Arabic readers, particularly the revolutionaries amongst them, a key text that analyzes the revolutionary relation between the image and the street, a relation that is also relevant for us in our struggle against the ruling regimes. This labor does not negate Franz Fanon’s observation that “a man who has a language consequently possesses the world expressed and implied by that language. (Black Skins, White Masks, 1$^{st}$ chapter) and it also does not negate the necessity of encouraging our students and ourselves to learn the languages of our regional neighbors as one of the needed emancipatory paths in our long struggle for recovering our political, expressive, and personal rights from the hold of tyrants that exploit us and humiliate our bodies and societies every day.

In this short dossier, I invited a few friends to read and

respond to L’s text as a modest step to think about what is happening in Iran in relation to what has happened to us. The dossier does not attempt to offer Arab readers a clear update on the bloody turn of events for the ongoing revolution in Iran. Rather it attempts to open questions about our ignorance of each other’s conditions and to forge a shared space. This dossier strives for an intercommunication between our peoples that overcomes its imprisonment in our linguistic shortcomings and labors for its emancipation from our defeats in the face of the cultures of tyranny that has been storming our lives since the nineteenth century. We invited in this dossier some writers who are interested in the intersections between image and the street to think about the image from the point of view of revolution, as we experienced it when we were one day on the streets sharing with the world the daily rebellions against the hegemony of those rulers over our lives.

## Intersecting Images

Fadi Bardawil (Lebanese academic)

Images one more time. Images ten years after they started their flooding. Images after the transformation of revolutions to a massive image depository. We cannot decide from which door to enter, how to organize our thoughts, or even why. Images after satiety. Images post the point of bloating. Can they still have an impact on us?

We are those who were swept away by images, so we took out distance from them. We attempted to embrace them, and started naming them as children do: images of crowds, images of demonstrations, images of faces—the icon,

images of repression, images of fists held high, images of clubs coming down, images of mutilated corpses, images of national unity… then we took our distance and catalogued them: the image commodity, the orientalist image, the tactical image, the image evidence, the poetic image, the humane image… we debated whether there was a contradiction between the necessity of documenting and respecting the dignity of people, dead or alive. We differed on whether the act of documentation has become commodified and become ready for media consumption before it became raw material for artistic works to be shown in international exhibitions.

Images of the Iranian revolution reach us after all this. The amazement of beginnings commences. This desire we fear erupts inside us. Images that resemble our first images in how they target the holy symbols of the regime. Also, images that do not resemble at all. More abstract images. Faceless icons. Various solitary forms unified in their difference. Individuals. A veil that burns. A turban in the air. Menstrual pads covering surveillance cameras. Small groups. A dance. Silent bodies. Tomb stones. Silent sports team. A sportswoman that represents her country internationally veil-less. A kiss in the middle of a traffic jam. Simple gestures. A fleeting proverbial scissors. Images that forge a reality. Images that ignite the desire for copying. Images without context. Without comment. Without translators. Without margins. Its abstraction drives it towards a viral planetarity. A simplicity that thickens to touch a deep, intimate nerve. Revolution as the desire to change life. As emancipation of bodies and reshaping of affective structures. An abstraction of images that connects the personal routine with the public system. Images that resist through their saturation of the system’s control of

women’s bodies. Images that confront the watchful control over, and punishment of, life.

Images one more time. No. New images. New intersections become apparent: street/body, public/intimate, viral planetarily/particularity of the regime, publicizing the event/manufacturing reality, representation/ dissent, serial logic/individual creativity, toppling the regime/changing.

## Revolutionary selfie

Rabih Mroué (Lebanese stage actor and playwright)

To be active on the street means that there is a possibility that you enter into the world of image and become viewing material. I do not think it is possible to be at the heart of the event as well as a spectator at the same time. The position of the spectator removes us from the event if only for a brief moment. Spectators are certainly part of what makes an event, but this is not what I am discussing in this short piece. Rather I pick up an issue that was raised at the beginning of L’s long and inspiring text where she speaks of “the gap between watching photos and videos of protests online and actually being on the street (…) between virtual space and reality on the street.”

During popular protests in public squares, becoming captive to image and succumbing to the allure of media images is one of the potential problems we face. Streets and squares turn into a photography studio for the event itself, and protesters and revolutionaries become photographers as well as spectators of their own reality, so that the photographer, the model and the viewer merge together and the three become the same person. The fascination

with the event can reach the point of “revolutionary narcissism”, a condition that becomes manifest in the excessive production of selfies for upload on social media immediately and from the heart of the event. It seems as if we are broadcasting live from the street.

When the focus of the protests becomes the occasion for taking ceremonial photo and selfies, we fall into a trap. I believe this is some of what happened during the Lebanese uprising in October 2019, especially in the squares in downtown Beirut where the uprising became an opportunity for selfies and cementing one’s participation. We went down en masse with smartphones in our hands, to take pictures of ourselves looking like happy participants in a great event full of hope and promise of change. An uprising! We longed to see in it a revolution like the revolutions that we read about in history books. We were genial to the images. We were surprised, up the point of bewilderment, by our sheer number, diversity, and unbridled desire for change. It seemed like our gathering was a wonder of the world. As if our coming together was a miracle or one of the wonders of the world. The surprise captivated all of us to the point where we forgot the intention from taking to the streets – perhaps we deliberately forgot it for fear of the immense change we demanded. We therefore hid behind narcissistic pictures because we were not yet ready for the revolution, with its pioneering feminism, overt and open homosexuality, and single slogan that we all chanted with one voice: “All of them means all of them.” We were distracted with taking pictures and uploading them on social media, watching them with amazement, self-admiration, narcissism, and autoeroticism.

It seems to me that us Lebanese have an extraordinary

ability to turn events, disasters, and all kinds of occasions into photo albums that portray us as victims, oppressed, revolutionaries, heroes, martyrs, and saints, but never ever as rabbits.

A revolution is an action that occurs beyond image. It is also a liberation from the allure of the image, with its frame, symbolism, and iconography. The image is a tool for revolution, not its ultimate aim.

I yearn for us to continue what we started, but without “revolutionary selfies”, without our self-portraits, perhaps even without our cameras. I hope that we can at least learn how to create images of resistance like the one L describes in her truly inspiring testimony.

## Double revolution, double image

Marwa Arsanios (Lebanese artist, filmmaker and researcher)

The first thing we learn from political organizing is that a revolution is double. And we work hard to see the double. It is not a doubling like a mirror reflection or a double projection of the same image on two juxtaposed screens. It is a double perception of different colliding axis; there is the image of the patriarchal regime or system we are revolting against and there is the patriarchy of the comrades. We learn quite early to see the double. The double is not a shadow either. It is the rift within that makes revolution possible. If the revolution splits the image into two images, the double perception splits the revolutionary image into four. Once you see the double it becomes hard to unsee it.

The images of revolutions travel from one place to the other, they travel through our screens, and in each one of them there is an accumulation of all previous images of revolutions. Each revolutionary image carries in it all the previous ones. It is an image inside an image that splits into two and four and more.

The image of women waving their veils on Jina Amini's funeral in Saqqez carried in it more than four decades of Kurdish women organizing and a century of feminist upheaval that split the image. Jin Jyan Azadi and the Kurdish autonomous women's image is an image inside an image outside a state that shakes the Iranian state to its core.

## Revolution of bodies

Yassin Al-Haj Saleh (Syrian writer)

Revolutions are actions of bodies. They are stimulated by rebellious affects. The high aspirations of a revolution are inevitably the outcome of affects and bodies. Not only is the bodily and the affective consistent with such aspirations, but also together they shape aspects of the revolution both directly and indirectly. This latter face of the revolution might take a longer time to manifest.

The Iranian revolution, which combined popular mobilization with women actively taking off their veils and revealing their bodies in public, as well as toppling the turbans from the heads of clerics, is a prime example of the convergence between the embodiment of emotions and the collectivity of aspirations. Both veils and turbans symbolize coercive religious power. These are liberational acts

because they are carried out by “the people,” an association of oppressed citizens, and not by the government that veils and turbans, as well as assaults, arrests, tortures and kills the people.

The slogan of the Iranian revolution – “woman, life, liberty” – seems more existential than historical. This slogan brings together three registers: feminist, environmentalist, and liberal-democratic. Woman refers to a realistic and known creature, and not limited to its value in a slogan. Likewise, the word “life,” even if more abstract, refers to what brings the living together, or the biosphere.

What refers to reality acquires value when the referent is the site of difference, as is the case of women always, and as is the condition of life in the era of ecological crisis. This is how “woman” becomes value, so does “life,” and of course liberty. A sweeping glance at images from the present revolution in Iran suggests a movement towards what is corporal and ontological. These levels are intrinsically connected to what the movement on the street is opposed to: an eternal, messianic, and imperial religious rule. The immanent here revolts against the transcendent, and the this-worldly against the godly.

## A Life Overspilling

Lisa Deml (German art curator and researcher)

For a while I feared, contrary to my anarchist beliefs, that the only way to remedy the neocolonial exploitation and resource extraction of citizen image makers prevalent since 2011 would be to tighten copyright, impose authorship, and monetize image testimonies—but no, the “photocentric”

uprising in Iran, as L so incisively outlines it, has proven me wrong. This revolutionary movement enacts an image practice far from hegemonisation and capitalization, along a feminist notion of fluid and collective individuation, toward a figurative commonality, in difference but without separability.

Desire is the starting point and breeding ground for what L terms a “still-feminine uprising,” a desire “to join the flood of images,” “to become that image,” “to be that woman with that figure of resistance”. This figural essence marks a shift from face-centrism to facelessness, from singularity dressed in armour to genericity in everyday attire, “from the beautiful body to an inspiring figure.” The formal exigencies of violent repression and security concerns, such as the backward perspective, pixelation, and anonymisation, are reappropriated as a subversive visual language and political force. Relieved of the shackles of the face and name, the figure of revolution is collectivised, a container to be filled, a pose to be embodied, an image to be inhabited, a situation to be activated. As such, L speaks not of a “transformation of the self to an ideal body” but to “each body,” spreading the body politics of women across every street, in Iran and beyond.

The drive of female and feminist desire opens up spaces of possibility for creating new figures of resistance in an endless chain of becomings. A new understanding of (female) bodies in potential thus emerges whose revolutionary figuration displaces the ‘I’ so that it is neither mine, nor yours, but belongs to a shared struggle. As I understand, these relational bonds and mutual dependencies coalesce into a new form of sociality performed through practices of figural expression and

dispossession. Indeed, dispossession can name a process of deliberately taking flight from the fold of possessive individualism and authoritarian control and entering into forms of collectivity that would at the same time oppose structural, repressive forms of dispossession.

Perhaps the gap that L describes “between my watching self and my self on the street” is precisely where her and all woman’s multiple exposures eventuate, whereby she recognises herself in the state of not being herself, of being dispossessed of oneself, of feeling both less and more than one. As such, desire may be understood as a perpetual bodily remainder, an excess, a reserve, a life overspilling as it gathers itself up to refigure and reconfigure itself beyond oneself.

## I want to become the image

Adam Hajj Yahya (Palestinian art curator and researcher)

It happens within a moment. We witness a revolutionary image that arouses our desire to perform and create. A moment through which something occurs in a way that was impermissible for a long spell of time. When the masses overcome their dissociations to practice temporary amalgamation, where door keys lock homes from the outside rather than from within. We return to our streets to rise without precedent or prior planning. We know it is our moment of return. But it would be false to claim that no form of planning had taken place. Such forms of conspiring are intangible, unannounced, yet collectively concurred through subterranean channels and signals, through a collective unconscious of the oppressed. As it was in Palestine’s Unity Intifada and Sudan’s ongoing revolution,

the popular uprising in Iran reveals to us how images awaken our desire for liberation.

In these moments of performing and seeing, the image becomes the instrument of the oppressed and the material infrastructure through which these signals are transferred; an agent with the aim of liberating our captured, sedated, and hypnotized desires. The image demonstrates that desire is not only predicated on lack, but that desire also withholds a productive and creative quality. Beyond this lack lays an abundance of non-negated potentialities that are unseen, untapped, and unrecognized. This singular "lack" which desire can be misattributed to, in turn confines and incarcerates the ways that desire is circulated.

Images of disobedience reveal to us how our desires have been disarticulated from their productivity and exploited for their abundance: we do not demand the freedom which we do not have, instead we create the liberation we strive for from within the negative. Such images maintain an unshackling political potential. They are contagious and transmittable through the act of seeing. They hold the ability to agitate our desires out of their hypnosis and liberate us into producing new realities, images, performances, and disruptions that incite different contracts of living. In this event, the image becomes the signal that initiates a new libidinal economy where our desire operates towards the production of social orders, dissident from the current one. The return of the repressed is that of repressed desire.

> I want to become that image; I want to create this situation.

Mastering the art of images, the women of Iran simultaneously resist capital's sedation of their desires and revolt against the patriarchal regime's surveillance and control. Their images are faceless yet powerful in what they signal and command. Their images are without identity yet impel an intimate call to arms. In a time where regimes use the production of our images as a tool of suppression and governance while capital fractures our unity through manufacturing our images as iconic and individuated, the women of Iran have activated the image as a signal of unrest. It is maneuvered as an infrastructure upon which a revolutionary future is assembled, a foundation for a new economy of desire which shields its ability to dethrone oppressive social structures. The image is indeed the material support for dreams of a different social order, an initiation of performances where the abolition of suppression is the first cue.

> We are free from thinking about death. We have left death behind.

For this reason, the transmission of images we are witnessing from Iran's intifada/inqilab all belong to the faceless. They tell us that if they had a face and name, they would become images of mourning and remembering. The daughters and sons of the streets refuse to be remembered, even as heroes. Yet, they ask us to be seen as fighters and acknowledged for their desire for freedom. They revolt against the framing of history and their commodification as symbols and icons, insisting on the performance of signals and invitations through imagery. Just as we recognize Mahsa's face and name due to her murder, we come to know the faces of others who suffered,

or are “destined” to suffer, a similar fate. As we witness the influx of images of raised Kurdish fists facing us backward alongside sorcerous Iranian pixels burning scarves and cars, we pray to never know the names and faces of the people in Iran’s streets, yet always listen to their images and what they are signaling and teaching us, until a new revolution of seeing is born.

## The Absence of Images

Salma Shamel (Egyptian researcher)

I tilt my laptop screen obscuring the sightline in case my mother enters my bedroom without knocking. I hide the image of a naked body of a woman I do not know encircled by hundreds of men. In fact, the image is not of a body. It is an image of flesh, flesh jabbed with elbows, stripped, grabbed, dragged, and hurled by hundreds of unidentified men. This image will soon cease to exist upon the request of Egyptian authorities. A decade later, my friend Yasmin El-Rifae will publish Radius, a book about the feminist intervention group we formed in Tahrir to rescue women we didn’t know, who were beaten, attacked, and raped by men we couldn’t identify in protests we didn’t necessarily plan to attend, while our revolution struggled to survive. In the book, my flesh will turn into a pseudonym, and pseudonym will turn into a figure with disfigured memories. In this decade that separates flesh and pseudonym, there will be less and less images.

At the heart of L’s text, bodies desire to become images. But they do not desire to become images that capture events and conflicts, rather, they desire “figure-centered” images that seize a history of bodies, bodies that refigure

the distance between viewing and presence. To desire becoming figure-centered images, L says, is at the heart of a feminist revolution. Does this mean that the desire to not become an image is at the heart of a counterrevolution? What happens to the body when its stops desiring images? What happens to bodies in the absence of images?

There are no images of Alaa Abdel Fattah's body after seven months of hunger strike. No images of his body turning into flesh to return undead. There are no images of the economist Ayman Hadhoud who disappeared and reappeared dead at the Abbasiya Mental Health Hospital in Cairo. There are no images of Egypt's courtrooms, no images of its prison cells. In the absence of images, we are relieved and violated, rescued from the pain of seeing dear ones go through these experiences, and violated as the opposition between viewing and presence is entrenched. I cannot consume images from Iranian streets, cities, and villages. There is a buffer zone, a neutralized distance, asserted between my cognitive capacity and the content of these images. Is it a liberating act to breach our own defense mechanism? To self-transgress? To bring in the images of others to fill in the absence of our own images?