

Mediated Martyrdom in Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*

Renée Altergott
Princeton University

In the opening episode of Marjane Satrapi's fourth volume of *Persepolis*, Marji has just returned home to Tehran. It is June 1989. Although the Iran-Iraq war has ended, the city has been transformed in her absence into a veritable mediascape of martyrdom propaganda and memorialization. Struggling to find her bearings now that so many streets have been renamed after martyrs, she sighs: "J'avais l'impression de marcher dans un cimetière" (4.1 "Le Retour"). Speculating that her upcoming art school entrance exam would likely include a question on "martyrdom," she spends two months training by sketching a photograph of Michelangelo's marble sculpture, *La Pietà* (1499). The day of the exam, having guessed correctly, she alters her drawing to adhere to the Islamic codes of martyrdom iconography: "Ce jour-là, je l'ai reproduite en mettant un tchador noir sur la tête de Marie, un vêtement militaire pour Jésus, ensuite, j'ai rajouté deux tulipes, symboles des martyrs, de chaque côté pour qu'il n'y ait pas de confusion. J'étais très contente de mon dessin" (4.4 "Le Concours"). In other words, Marji believes that inscribing her own Islamic icon with a Western foundation constitutes an act of subversion. This achieves an effect similar to what Typhaine Leservot has termed the "hybridization" of Satrapi's choice of title, "Persepolis," which is "the western name for this pre-Islamic city central to Iranian identity" (128). For Thierry Groensteen, hybridity is the fundamental condition of the *bande dessinée*, whose icons are "at once a production of the imagination and a recycling of icons from every provenance" (42).

However, readers of this *bande dessinée* should experience a moment of déjà-vu, as Marji's exam drawing evokes the propaganda mural she just saw upon her return to Tehran three episodes prior. Within a single frame, Marji stares up, incredulous, as two buildings loom menacingly over her: a 20-meter-tall mural extolling the virtues of martyrdom on the left, and a bombed-out building on the right, its gaping windows and snow-covered windowsills evocative of the rows upon rows of empty graves at the Behesht-e Zahra cemetery (Fig. 1). In fact, if we compare these two frames side by side, we see that Marji's drawing is essentially a *mirror image* of the propaganda mural, down to the shirt pocket detail: a woman in a black chador cradles a fallen, bearded soldier, surrounded by tulips (Fig. 2).

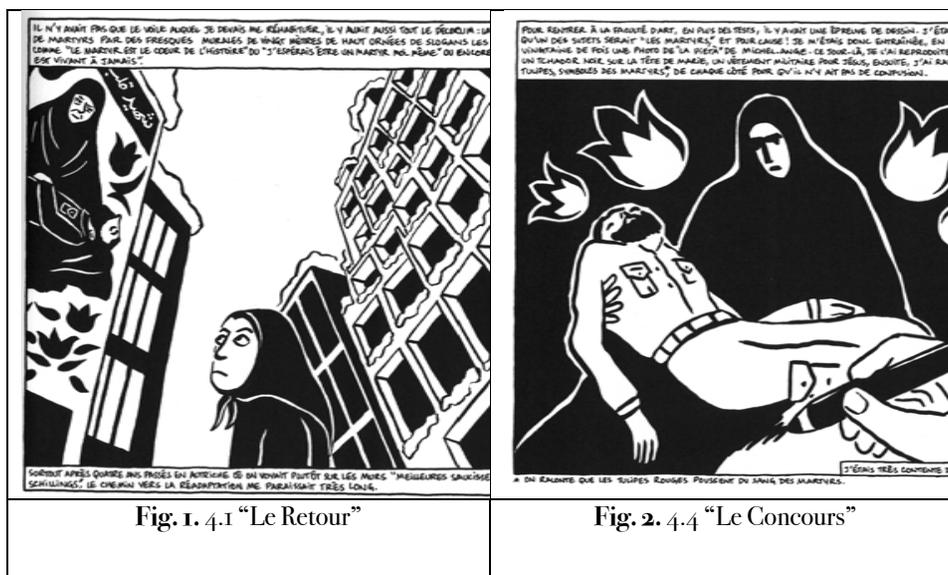


Fig. 1. 4.1 “Le Retour”

Fig. 2. 4.4 “Le Concours”

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Despite westernizing the “reading” direction of the mural by moving the gravitational pull of the martyr’s head from right to left, Marji’s drawing is so similar that it verges on plagiarism. The minor changes in color of the background and the uniform are not enough to refute this charge. The similarity between the two images has not gone unnoticed, but it has only summarily been addressed. For example, in Hillary Chute’s elaboration of the *bande dessinée* as an “idiom of witness” and Satrapi’s ethical gesture of “retracing” in the animated film, she relegates this key scene of graphic “retracing” to a footnote, and claims that Satrapi simply “calls attention to her facility in adopting the codes of this visual culture” (248 n47). To my mind, the reader’s familiarity with this image calls into question Marji’s claim to artistic subversion, and therefore demands a more rigorous critique. Not only are there further repetitions of the Pietà pose within the same album, but protesters appropriated one of these additional frames as a piece of martyr iconography for Neda Agha-Soltan during the 2009 Iranian election protests. This article seeks to shed light on the significance and legacy of Marji’s drawing by bringing key works of written and visual Iranian Islamic propaganda into dialogue with theories of media, witnessing, and the formal aesthetics of the *bande dessinée*.

Defining the Pietà Constellation

To fully account for the implications of Marji’s drawing, we must first situate it within a broader constellation of interconnected images within the album. In addition to the mural and Marji’s drawing, the Pietà pose already appeared in the ultimate panel of Tome 2, when Taji faints into Ebi’s arms at the airport (2.10 “La Dot”). In Tome 1, there are two instances where God is shown cradling Marji: 1.7 “Les Héros,” where she is smiling, eyes closed, with her head on the right-hand side of the frame; and 1.1 “Le Foulard,” where Marji’s face expresses concern, and her head is on the left-hand side.



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Satrapi’s oriented network of Pietà citations thus culminates in both the scene of drawing, and the revelation of the “prographic” origin of her (allegedly) subversive artistic practice, or the pre-existing image that serves as its basis (Groensteen 41). If Patricia Storace did previously identify Taji and Ebi’s posture as “unmistakably based on the Pietà” (42), the significance of the constellation as a composite unit and formal technique in *Persepolis* has yet to be fleshed out.

For example, Groensteen’s concept of “tressage” (or “braiding”; 146) is a productive measure for the relations between discontinuous images and raises the additional questions of rhythm and sequence. On the one hand, if the third iteration does appear in the privileged site of the last panel of Tome 2, and thus, the very last panel of certain editions, Satrapi does not go as far as to “rhyme” episodes by placing the motif in the same location on the page. On the other hand, in emphasizing the sequentiality of images in an oriented network (174), *tressage* enables us to argue that the accumulative order of interconnected images actually *says something*. As it turns out, bringing these three additional, previous occurrences to bear on Marji’s exam drawing only further destabilizes her claim to subversion. Whereas Marji (the character) appears to reproduce

the mural she has just seen in the diegesis (in 1989), one could argue that Satrapi (the author) has already infused representations at the narrative level with this Western iconographic motif in three previous sites. The sequence of this constellation therefore increases the ambiguity of the fourth instance, by introducing the possibility that the propaganda mural itself has *already been subverted by the author*.

Of course, the very notion that *any* of Satrapi's graphic citations of the Pietà pose, but especially the propaganda mural, are "subversive" hinges on this pose *not* being used in Islamic propaganda. In researching Islamic propaganda symbolism, conventions, and teachings, we may begin to recover the distinction between imaginary and prographic underlying the mural seen by Marji in "Le Retour," that has since been obscured at the hand of Satrapi's homogenizing artistic execution.¹ In the absence of a singular prographic origin of Satrapi's propaganda mural, I will show that its basic elements – the physical disposition of the figures, and the slogan, "The martyr is the heart of history" – both appear separately in Iranian Islamic visual culture.² First, I focus on two artists, Kazem Chalipa and Hamid Qadiriyan, whose paintings depict the martyr/mourner figure in contrasting styles, and were transformed into multi-story murals in Tehran. Second, I trace the origins of the slogan back to the influential teachings of key figures of the Revolution and the War to uncover a deeper, symbolic connection between martyrdom and mediation.

Every Battle is Karbala

Kazem Chalipa was born in Tehran in 1957 to Hasan Isma'ilzadeh, a well-known Iranian coffeehouse painter (De Sanctis Mangelli 253). In the early 1980s, he produced a wide array of paintings that explored the Iran-Iraq War in both its brutal reality and powerful symbolism. One of his first paintings from 1980, entitled *17 Shahrivar* (a date that falls during the sixth month of the Iranian calendar), depicts the aftermath of the Black Friday Massacre of 8 September 1978 (De Sanctis Mangelli 84). Done in the style of Socialist Realism, this scene could have easily been painted from a photograph, and shows a veiled woman cradling a male protester, bleeding from his neck and seemingly deceased.³ The massacre of dozens of demonstrators in Zhaleh Square, Tehran, was a pivotal incident that contributed to the Iranian Revolution. Peter Chelkowski and Hamid Dabashi offer translations of the red and black revolutionary slogans in the background, such as the left shutter: "Praise to Khomeini, death to the Shah" (109).

This scene is sharply contrasted by a painting from the following year bearing the Arabic title *Ithaar*, which has been translated as either "Altruism, giving in abundance" (Chelkowski and Dabashi 162), "Sacrifice" (Khany et al, 58), or "Certitude of Belief" (Middle Eastern Posters, Box 3, Poster 67, U of Chicago). As opposed to *17 Shahrivar*, this painting brings the two symbolic worlds of Karbala and the Iran-Iraq War together beneath the frame of a *mihrab* inscribed with the *Surat as-Saff*, the 61st chapter

(*Sura*) of the Qur'an. The white background, featuring rows of the headless martyrs of Karbala in paradise, parallels the red foreground, where embryonic soldiers are developing within rows of tulips on the left, and soldiers are marching to battle and being put to death on the right, to converge at a central vanishing point. In the center, the ghostly figure of a headless Imam Husayn mounted on a white horse, holding a sword and the Qur'an, stands directly behind an older woman dressed in a black chador, holding a fallen soldier. The fabric of his uniform drapes below his lifeless body to complete the cycle of martyrdom as it transforms into a giant, red tulip (Fig. 6).

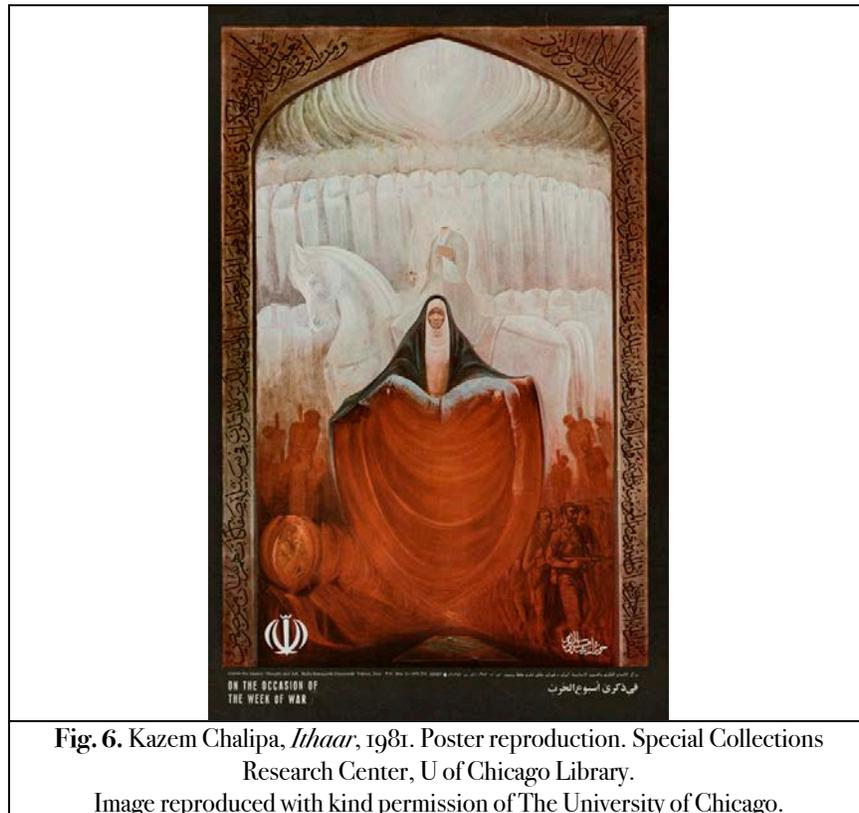


Fig. 6. Kazem Chalipa, *Ithaar*, 1981. Poster reproduction. Special Collections Research Center, U of Chicago Library.

Image reproduced with kind permission of The University of Chicago.

It must be noted, however, that the figure of the sustained mourner is not restricted to women. *Shahid* (Martyr), an Iranian magazine published by the Martyr's Foundation (*Bunyah-i Shahid*), includes many artistic works of propaganda that show men and boys on the battlefield assuming the same pose.⁴ One such painting by Hamid Qadiriyan entitled *Shahid* appeared on the back cover of Issue 253 (*Khordad* 1375, ca May 1996), and depicts a veiled, glowing Imam Husayn, the paradigmatic Shiite "Prince of Martyrs," holding a deceased, anonymous martyr of the Iran-Iraq War.

Of interest to this study, all three paintings underwent intermedial transformations, ranging from the singular, multistory mural, to mass reproduction via printing in posters, stamps, or magazines. Whereas Chalipa's 17 *Shahrivar* eventually appeared on the cover of Issue 256 of *Shahid* magazine (*Shahrivar* 1375, ca August 1996), Chelkowski and Dabashi note that *Itbaar* was reproduced on postage stamps, and at least one mural in Tehran. Their book, *Staging a Revolution*, includes a photograph of one such mural that was located close to the former American Embassy, to the right of a mural of Khomeini's portrait with a deep blue background (162). Fotini Christia provides a more precise location of this mural: "Saadi Street (Darvazeh Dolat), Pamemar, Tehran," ("Art" 5).⁵ Although the accompanying photograph shows that the mural had already greatly faded by 2006, we can still make out the same horse, the headless saints, and the *mihrab* frame; unfortunately, the satellite dish atop a new construction obscures the bottom half, including the woman (Fig. 7).



Fig. 7. Christia, Fotini (Photographer). July 2006. *The Duty of the Teacher Is to Guide, to Train and to Lead* [photograph], part of *Tehran Propaganda Mural Collection*. Cambridge, MA: H.C. Fung Library, Harvard University. Detail. Retrieved from <http://id.lib.harvard.edu/images/olvgroupp1882/urn-3:FHCL:1268159/catalog>
Image reproduced with kind permission of Fotini Christia.

Along the same vein, Christiane Gruber gives a detailed account of the intermedial transposition of Qadiriyan's painting into a mural along the Modarres Highway in northern Tehran, which entailed minor censorship of its violence (Fig. 8). It was

sponsored by the Cultural Center of the “Prince of Martyrs,” and executed on 14 March 2003, in honor of ‘Ashura (28-29).



Fig. 8. Mural of Imam Husayn and an anonymous war martyr, on Modarres Highway at the Resalat Street exit, Tehran. Photograph by Christiane Gruber. Image reproduced with kind permission of Christiane Gruber.

On the one hand, the Pietà pose acts as an anchor, implying a direct link between the sacrifices expected of young men, and the foundational martyrdom of Imam Husayn at the battle of Karbala. On the other hand, the two more symbolic paintings deviate from general mural culture in Iran, which combines idealized photographic portraiture with colors and symbols of the Islamic Republic.⁶

Zayneb's Message

It may be tempting to conclude that the Christian Pietà pose is present in Islamic visual culture, and legible as such to the Western viewer. The scholarly critical apparatuses accompanying Chalipa's works imply as much; Chelkowski and Dabashi write of *17 Shahrivar*: "A pieta-like figure of a woman holding the head and shoulders of a dying male demonstrator takes up the center and foreground of the painting" (109). Likewise, in her write-up of the University of Chicago's Iranian poster archive, Elizabeth Rauh describes the female posture of *Ithaar* as "reminiscent of Christian Pietà scenes."⁷ On the surface, there is a strong parallel between Shiite Islam and Christianity, at least with regards to a founding martyr. However, further investigation into the propaganda slogans that appear in *Persepolis*, and their theoretical underpinnings, reveals further significance behind the "Islamic Pietà" figure in question.

Let us begin with the partially obscured slogan of the mural Marji sees in "Le Retour." Of the three translations of martyrdom slogans she offers the reader ("Le martyr est le cœur de l'histoire"; "J'espérais être un martyr moi-même"; and "Le martyr est vivant à jamais"), the visible script of the mural matches the first. The fuller view afforded by the animated film version of *Persepolis* (2007) allows us to complete our transcription of the Persian slogan: 'shahīd qalb-e tāriḫ ast' ("The martyr is the heart of history"). This phrase alone carries an overwhelming resonance for Iranians, as it can be traced back to the influential lectures of Dr. 'Ali Shari'ati (1933-1977), an intellectual revolutionary often hailed as the chief ideologue of the Islamic Revolution. Shari'ati completed his doctorate in Paris, collaborated with leaders of the Algerian FLN, and translated works by Frantz Fanon into Persian. Many of Shari'ati's phrases served as ready-made revolutionary slogans, and as such, were shouted and painted on protest banners during the Islamic Revolution, and later inscribed onto the graves of those who were killed during demonstrations (Fischer and Abedi 212). The phrase in question originally appeared in a 1970 lecture, and has been translated by Mehdi Abedi and Gary Legenhausen as follows:

A shahīd is the heart of history. The heart gives blood and life to the otherwise dead blood-vessels of the body. Like the heart, a shahīd sends his own blood into the half-dead body of the dying society, whose children have lost faith in themselves, which is slowly approaching death, which has accepted submission, which has forgotten its responsibility, which is alienated from humanity, and in which there is no life, movement, and creativity. ("After Shahādat," 248.)⁸

Chelkowski and Dabashi even provide photographic evidence of the continued use of Shari'ati's slogan in mural propaganda during the Iran-Iraq War.⁹ It is sometimes misattributed to Ayatollah Khomeini, who echoed this phrase in his own teachings after Shari'ati's death, asserting that the martyr is "the heart of history and the blood of each

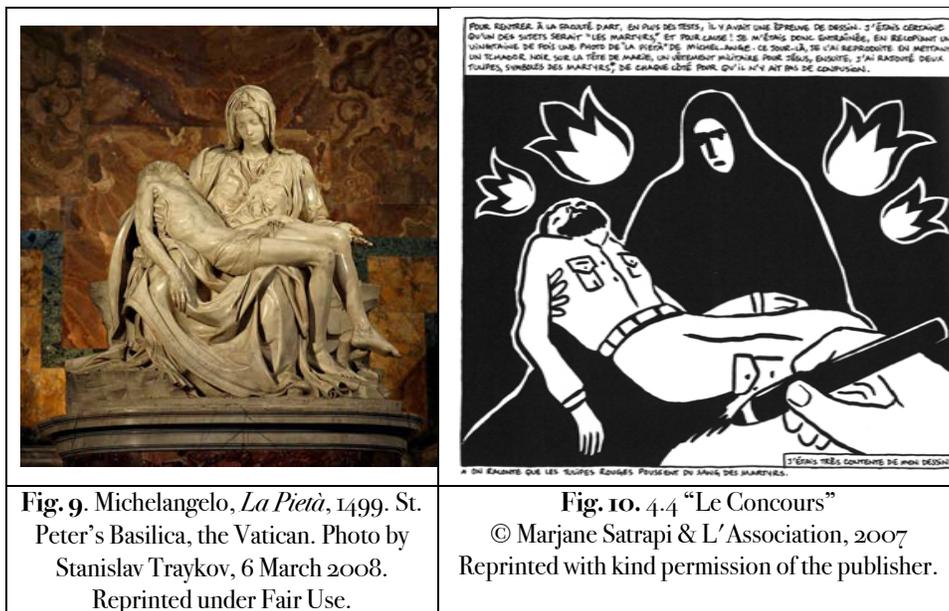
martyr is like a bell which awakens the thousands” (*Iran Times*, 16 Nov 1982, 12, qtd Dorraj 512 n60). In any case, in their writings, Shari’ati, Khomeini, and Ayatollah Mutahhari (1920-1979) all elaborated a vivid, and sometimes shocking, imagery that insisted upon the regenerative powers of the martyr’s blood, which, as we have seen, is not usually portrayed literally, but rather symbolized through red tulips. Thus, it is not surprising that the other slogan that appears in *Persepolis* (2.6 “La Cigarette”) comes from Mutahhari: “Shahādat means the transfusion of blood into a society, especially into a society suffering from anemia. It is the shahīd who infuses fresh blood into the veins of the society” (“Shahīd” 136). Instead of following the aesthetic conventions of mural composition, Satrapi offers the reader a literal translation of this slogan in the following frame to capture the way she interpreted such propaganda as a naïve young girl.

Even more pertinent to our study is the way these ideologues use two separate figures to argue that martyrdom and witnessing are in fact intertwined, inextricable imperatives of the Islamic Republic. Although this interdependence is already contained in the etymology of the word “shahīd,” with “martyr” having been derived from “witness,”¹⁰ Manochehr Dorraj has argued that the concept of martyrdom withstood a “complete metamorphosis” after World War II (511). First, Ayatollah Taleqani defined “witnessing truth” as the condition for martyrdom: “Anyone who has understood this truth and divine goal and has stood for it, sacrificing his life, is called “*shahīd*” in the terminology of the Qur’an and jurisprudence. The *shahīd* is the one who has experienced the *shuhūd* (vision) of truth” (“Jihad and Shahadat” 67). By ascribing a clear intention to the act of martyrdom that had not necessarily been explicit, Taleqani further politicized the concept, and ultimately mobilized a volunteer army for the Iran-Iraq War. However, for Dr. Shari’ati, martyrdom alone did not suffice. In his same, previously-discussed, 1970 lecture, “After Shahādat,” he argued that the paradigmatic sacrifice of Imam Husayn would have been forgotten if it weren’t for his sister Zaynab, whose duty it was to bear witness to his martyrdom by spreading the message. Shari’ati condenses this dual relationship between martyrdom and bearing witness into the opposition of “the blood” and “the message” (249). The older-looking women in Chalipa’s *Ithaar* and Satrapi’s propaganda mural may therefore be evoking Zaynab, who was 54 when her brother died (10 October 680 CE). In the most cited passage of Shari’ati’s lecture, which often appears in visual martyrdom propaganda, he declares: “All battlefields are Karbala, all months are Muharram, all days are Ashura [...] One has to choose either the blood or the message, to be either Husayn or Zaynab, either to die like him or survive like her” (251). In sum, martyrdom is nothing without the subsequent transmission of its message. Witnessing is understood, then, to be an act that both precedes and follows martyrdom, the condition and the result; it is not enough to simply witness; one must bear witness.

Ultimately, the main artworks cited above—in their original, mass-produced, and mural forms—precede the publication date of Satrapi’s fourth and final volume (3 August 2003), and could have, at least in theory, inspired the mural in *Persepolis*. While there is

no direct evidence that she was familiar with these specific images, they nevertheless point to a broader saturation of the martyr/mourner pose in the visual culture of both the Islamic Revolution and the Iran-Iraq War. Moreover, Islamic teachings, writings, and slogans leading up to the war suggest that what Western viewers identify as a “Pietà-like figure” actually evokes the coupling of Husayn and Zayneb, who embody the Islamic imperatives to self-sacrifice and to bear witness to sacrifice. Acknowledgement of the Islamic roots of this pose further reinforces the link between Satrapi’s formal repetition of this *specific* figure within *Persepolis* and her own “injunctions to ‘never forget’” (Chute 143).

This brings us back to Marji’s scene of drawing as retracing. On the one hand, since the Pietà-like pose is not foreign to Islamic martyrdom iconography, it should not be enough on its own to truly constitute formal subversion, neither during the act of drawing represented diegetically in 4.4, nor on Satrapi’s behalf in the interwoven iterations of this pose throughout the album. Neither East nor West can lay claim to such a universal experience and ubiquitous pose. Put another way, within the closed space of Satrapi’s album, the subversive aspect of Marji’s drawing is illegible as such. On the other hand, as soon as the reader brings external references to bear on this question, it becomes readily apparent that Marji’s drawing is much closer to a literal reproduction of Michelangelo’s statue than the previous iterations, through the precise angle of Jesus’s head tilted backwards, Mary’s right-hand fingers bracing him beneath his armpit, and the angle of his right arm as it dangles by his side.



Although Ebi and Taji's pose comes close, Ebi's face is in shadow, his hand is under her head, and her head is not tilted back. To my mind, in having Marji name the prographic source of her submission, Satrapi upends the obscuring homogenization of her own style, thus restoring the legibility of the intermedial subversion of her drawing. Furthermore, the fact that her reproduction of this statue in particular would have entailed sketching a mostly nude, male body *also* registers as subversive, as this is precisely the type of artistic training that will subsequently be denied to Marji and her female classmates later in Tome 4.

But what of the rest of the constellation? The revelations concerning the final iteration need not discount the ethical work underlying Satrapi's formal *trassage*. Let us recall that Chute's theorization of the ethics of "retracing" ultimately rests on the fact that Satrapi inscribed her own movement and gestures into the animated film version of *Persepolis*, thereby restricting said work to the author alone, during a moment of intermedial transposition (172-73). Bearing this in mind, I would like to propose that the formal technique of *trassage* already serves to implicate the reader as a witness, using repetition to teach her to "never forget" Satrapi's own graphic testimony by raising her memory of previous occurrences throughout the act of reading. In the following section, I will show how an alternative instance of intermedial transposition marks the apotheosis of Satrapi's constellation of Pietà poses, by taking that last step from passive reception to active transmission.

Politicizing Persepolis

The imperative to bear witness, as conveyed by Dr. Shari'ati, seems to find resonance in John Durham Peters' seminal essay on media studies, entitled "Witnessing." By reframing witnessing in terms of "mediation," he pinpoints the necessary operation from reception to transmission, whereby the passive viewer must become an active speaker:

A witness is the paradigm case of a *medium*: the means by which experience is supplied to others who lack the original. To witness thus has two faces: the passive one of *seeing* and the active one of *saying*. [...] What one has seen authorizes what one says: an active witness first must have been a passive one. (709)

The cell phone video capture of the murder of Neda Agha-Soltan during the 2009 election protests in Iran has raised new questions about the incursion of media into the process of witnessing and bearing witness that, according to Peters, is *already* mediation. In this final section, I will first assess what has been placed at stake by this recent intermedial turn of witnessing. Second, in the modern digital age, it has become nearly impossible to account for the myriad forms and endless variations of martyr iconography for Neda that were produced around the world in the months that followed her murder.

However, the fact that one of the icons in question was the first frame from Satrapi's constellation of Pietà poses opens a new line of inquiry into intermediality, propaganda, and the *bande dessinée* beyond the pages of *Persepolis*. Drawing from the writings of Shari'ati and Peters, I will therefore compare three main media formats of Neda's iconography – video, portraits, and the *bande dessinée* frame – to determine the extent to which intermediality enhances, or hinders, the imperative to bear witness.

Witnessing at Stake

On 12 June 2009, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad declared an early re-election victory of 63% over his main opponent and leader of the reformist “green movement,” Mir-Hossein Mousavi. In the following weeks, millions of Iranians took to the streets to protest what they considered to be controversial results. Neda Agha-Soltan, a 26-year-old who aspired to become a tour guide abroad in Turkey, joined the protests starting 15 June. What had largely begun as peaceful – or even silent – demonstrations quickly grew violent once Ayatollah Khamenei officially endorsed Ahmadinejad and warned that protests would be met with consequences.¹¹ Neda's mother recalls that three *basiji* (volunteer militia) women had even approached Neda to discourage her from participating, explaining that the *basiji* men viewed female beauty as a threat, and were likely to target her, or even shoot her (Thomas). On 20 June, on her way home from protests in Amir-Abad, Neda was shot directly in the chest by a sniper, “seemingly unprovoked” (Mortensen 6). Despite the efforts of her music teacher, Hamid Panahi, and another bystander, author and translator Dr. Arash Hejazi, she died within minutes. To this day, no one has been charged with her murder, but it is widely reported that a *basiji* soldier essentially carried out Khamenei's warning.

Two protestors captured Neda's final moments on cell phone video, the longer of which was uploaded onto Facebook and YouTube later that evening by an Iranian asylum seeker in Holland, to attract global attention to the injustice (Tait and Weaver). The second video consists of a 15-second close-up of Neda once she is already unconscious and bleeding heavily. Despite their poor image quality, even the earliest models of the camera cell phone offered a new individualized mode of capturing irrefutable proof, sufficient to counter the authoritative media of the State. Then again, it places both passive acts of witnessing at stake: the original moment of witnessing, and the subsequent reception of testimony. For the spectator-witnesses who observed Neda's final moments through their cell phone screens, the original “moment of witnessing” collapsed onto the mediated object it produced, or in the words of Paul Frosh and Amit Pinchevski, mediation has blurred the line between testimony production and consumption (595). The subsequent intermedial shift in transmission from social media platforms to international news networks subjected the footage to a seemingly infinite repetition loop evocative of the mediatized collapse of the World Trade Center towers.

The argument that the media's treatment of 9/11 footage evacuated the horrific events of their history and meaning (Gleich 161) could just as easily have been about Neda. Therefore, if *Time* magazine would declare Neda's death "probably the most widely witnessed death in human history" that year (Mahr), the global reach of the rebroadcasted cell phone video testimony came at the expense of ethical engagement, as its facile reproducibility disallowed meaningful, ethical retracing of trauma.

The Birth of an Icon

Shortly after 20 June, a still-frame from the shorter, close-up cell phone video—at which point the life has left Neda's eyes and blood is streaming from her nose and mouth—was reproduced as an icon of her martyrdom. As an image, the increased iconicity of Neda's bloody portrait flouts the aesthetic conventions of traditional Iranian martyr iconography by literally conveying the "blood" instead of the "message." However, its circulation on the internet and transformation into protest posters points to an engaged viewership committed to not only bearing witness to the *facts* of her murder but transmitting this video testimony to others around the globe.

Of course, not all protest posters displayed the same icon. Other posters used the same still frame, but stylized her dead gaze by filtering it through Shepard Fairey's signature aesthetic (best known from the "Obama Hope" campaign poster of 2008). More common still were two beautiful portraits of Neda: a conservative one of her wearing a black chador, and a family photo showing her in a pink button-up shirt, smiling and unveiled. Apart from public demonstrations in the streets, many paid tribute via the trending hashtag #IamNeda, or even assumed Neda's identity in their online avatars by swapping out their Facebook profile names or photos with hers. Paris-based Iranian artist Reza Deghati synthesized this slacktivist expression of solidarity with public protest through his "Neda Masks" projects, realized on 25 July 2009 in Paris, and 12 June 2010 in Washington, D.C. Participants were invited to visit his website to find instructions on how to download, print, and transform Neda's smiling, unveiled portrait into a mask (Fig. 11).¹² The artist's condition for the photo shoot was that no other words be visible, besides the poem "*Ma hame yek Nedaem, Ma hame yek sedaem*" in both Persian and English, "We are all one Neda, We are all one calling." The fact that "Neda" means "voice" or "calling" in Farsi brings further symbolism to her silencing by the Iranian State.



Similar to the way video capture confused the act of witnessing with the consumption of a mediated object, some have called out the objectifying nature of Neda’s martyr iconography. For example, Carsten Stage has analyzed a few of these visual items through the lens of Scott Lash and Celia Lury’s concept of “thingification” (*The Global Culture Industry*, 2007), arguing that Neda “increasingly became an ‘image-object’ after her death” (421). Nima Naghibi expresses ambivalence toward the Fairey filter, for its evocation of Andy Warhol’s critique of consumer culture necessarily predestines Neda’s icons to be “forgotten and discarded upon quick consumption” (30). To my mind, through this gesture of donning the Neda mask and taking to the streets, demonstrators enact a sort of bodily retracing not unlike Satrapi’s bodily inscription of trauma in her animated film, the main difference being that they look forward in empathy and solidarity, imagining a shared future trauma by coming to terms with their own vulnerability.

The Accidental Martyrdom of Neda Soltani

While the reproduction, dissemination, and wearing of portraits, be they bloody or conservative, all constitute acts of engaged “bearing witness” beyond the passive “witnessing” of the video loops, the viral nature of such transmission unfortunately also came with severe consequences for one woman in particular: Neda Soltani (b. 1977). Under pressure to quickly identify the victim in the cell phone videos, journalists took to Facebook and, confusing their last names, ended up entering a fourth portrait into the

mix of icons in circulation in the news and on the streets. Soltani had uploaded her profile photo to Facebook on 7 June 2009, which depicted her in a dark, flowered headscarf. In her self-published memoir, *My Stolen Face*, Soltani recalls with bitter irony the naïve incredulity with which she learned, through a flood of emails and Facebook invitations from strangers around the world, that she had supposedly been martyred. Her attempts to contact the networks and correct this error backfired, and her passport photo continues to be confused with Agha-Soltan's *to this day*. In her own words: "Not only did they have no interest in correcting their error, but they also had to maintain it, because the world had by now identified my face as the symbol of resistance and opposition. My face was engraved in the collective consciousness of the world" (Chapter 8). As opposed to the episode in *Persepolis* where Ebi laughingly recounts the harmless transformation of a dead cancer victim into a martyr of the people (1.4 "Persepolis"), the endless circulation of Soltani's portrait placed her life at stake, and for all intents and purposes, produced a second martyr. Once Ahmadinejad requested an investigation into Agha-Soltan's murder, accusing various Western forces of "plotting against Iran's government by killing Neda," Soltani was threatened, detained, and questioned. After a narrow escape to Greece, she arrived as a refugee in Germany, where she still lives in exile. The plight of Neda Soltani illustrates how "bearing witness" in the modern digital age, in the form of viral dissemination, may look like active engagement, but still evacuate images of meaning much like the video loops of Neda Agha-Soltan's final moments.

Recasting Marji as Neda

This brings us to one last item of Neda's martyr iconography, in the form of a recycled *bande dessinée* frame. First, from 20-27 June 2009, Payman and Sina (pseudonyms) created a ten-page adaptation of *Persepolis* using Photoshop and Adobe Illustrator. Both artists were of Iranian origin but had been born after the 1979 Revolution and had thus spent most of their lives outside Iran. As of June 2009, both were living in Shanghai, and Sina specialized in viral marketing. Satrapi and her editor gave them full permission to use images from *Persepolis* (Delorme 210), and they ultimately used 44 vignettes, reordering them to tell the story of the 2009 election protests, with new speech bubbles and captions in English for a global audience. The resulting ten-page work, *Persepolis 2.0*, was posted on www.spreadpersepolis.com on Saturday, 27 June 2009, and culminates with the frame of God cradling Marji in the Pietà pose from 1.1 "Le Foulard." A caption was added to recast Marji as Neda, which reads: "Don't cry Neda. Your death will not be in vain..."

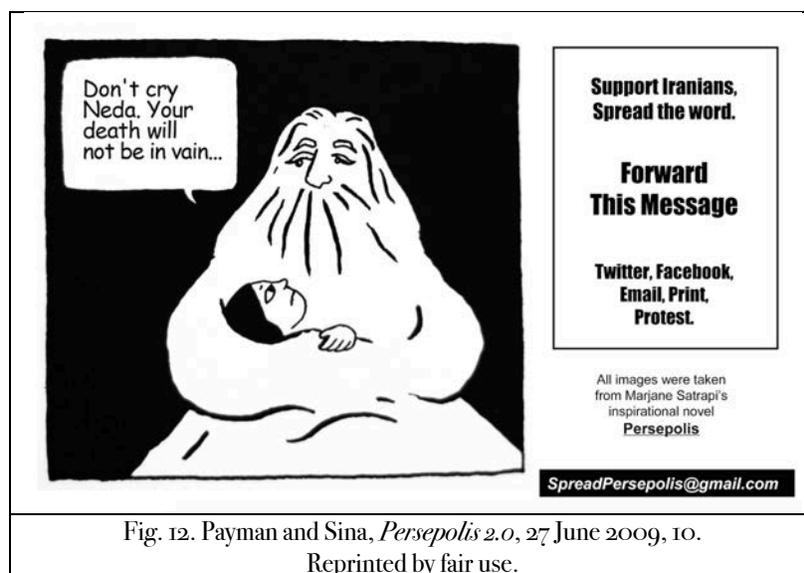


Fig. 12. Payman and Sina, *Persepolis 2.0*, 27 June 2009, 10.
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As opposed to the photo-realism and specificity of the propaganda murals, which were intended to highlight individual sacrifice, it is precisely Satrapi's homogenized aesthetic that enables this representational shift from Marji to Neda. In a fitting extension of Satrapi's constellation, what once conformed to martyrdom propaganda has since been turned into liberal propaganda contesting the Islamic regime. If I previously proposed that the interplay between repetition and memory in Satrapi's use of *tressage* simulated the act of witnessing, this remains in the passive realm, as it stops short of bearing witness. The viral dissemination of various portraits of Neda may have gone a step beyond the spectatorship of either the repeated Pietà or the video loop, but as the case of Neda Soltani has proven, the stakes are exponentially higher. The appropriation of Satrapi's frame as a protest icon accomplishes the shift from passive witness to active bearing witness without placing anyone at stake. What is more, this has the potential to impact future readings of Satrapi's Pietà *tressage*, as new readers of the *bande dessinée* may now in fact recognize the first image of the constellation from Neda's global martyr iconography.

Earlier, I argued that the subversive aspect of Marji's drawing was not fully legible without consulting Iranian propaganda, Islamic teachings on martyrdom, and Michelangelo's statue. As for Neda, it is also true that viewers only learn of her "Westernized looks" through two of the main photographic sources of her iconography—the cell phone videos and the pink portrait. Much like the women Marji encounters upon her return to Tehran, Neda's choice of clothing (a baseball hat, blue jeans, and Adidas-style sneakers), her thin figure, sculpted eyebrows, and "signature Iranian nose job" (Sabety 123, qtd Naghibi 25-26) have been interpreted as small acts of defiance to the imposed conservative Islamist dress code. Nima Naghibi gives a rather cynical reading of

Neda's rapid transformation into a martyr icon, arguing that global outrage over Neda's murder was largely dependent upon her legibility as a Westernized woman (26). To my mind, learning of Neda's Westernized looks validates the use of Satrapi's Pietà constellation to commemorate her, as she embodied the subversive hybridization to which Marji aspired with her drawing. At the same time, the pose, subject matter, and homogenized style of this frame do not explicitly evoke Michelangelo's Pietà as Marji's drawing does, leaving room for the Islamic imperative to bear witness embodied by Zayneb.

Notes

1. Groensteen cites the Hergéan line as an example of a unifying or "homogenizing" aesthetic style, which conceals the "double origin" of the BD icon, or its joint imaginary and documented inspiration (42). For the relationship between Satrapi's aesthetic style and trauma, see Chute 145-46; for the context and significance of Satrapi's choice of black and white, see Baetens 111-18.
2. Although it does not have any direct bearing on our analysis, it is worth noting that Satrapi's animated film version of *Persepolis* (2007, in collaboration with Vincent Parronau) does depart from the graphic novel in that it cites the iconic mural outside the former U.S. Embassy (or "Den of Spies") in Tehran, showing a skull-faced Statue of Liberty.
3. This was recently displayed alongside three of his other paintings in an exhibit entitled "Unedited History. Iran 1960-2014" at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, from 16 May - 24 August 2014, and then at the MAXXI (Museo nazionale delle arti del XXI secolo) in Rome, 11 Dec 2014 - 29 March 2015 (De Sanctis Mangelli 82-85).
4. For example, the cover of Issue 66 (15 *Mordad* 1363, or 6 August 1984) depicts two men in this position, and the children's insert of Issue 78 (15 *Bahman* 1363, or 4 February 1985) features a drawing of a young boy cradling a fallen adult soldier.
5. Christia originally displayed her personal research photographs in an exhibit entitled "Walls of Martyrdom: Tehran's Propaganda Murals," which was held at Harvard's Center for Government and International Studies from May-July 2007.
6. For an overview of the artistic guidelines for propaganda murals put out by the Artistic and Cultural Bureau of the Qom Seminary's Office of Propaganda in the mid-1980s, see Chelkowski and Dabashi, 291. For more on the role of photography in public and private martyr memorialization beyond the mural, see Varzi, *Warring Souls*, along with her documentary film, *Plastic Flowers Never Die*; and Fromanger, "Variations in the Martyrs' Representations."

7. <https://www.lib.uchicago.edu/collex/exhibits/graphics-revolution-and-war-iranian-poster-arts/new-battle-karbala/>

8. Lecture originally delivered “the day after ‘Shahadat,’ in 1970 in the Grand Mosque of Narmak in Tehran, the night after Ashura” (Abedi and Legenhausen 252 n1).

9. In one panel of a series of murals along Imam Khomeini Avenue in Andimeshk, the phrase appears in calligraphy alongside the logo of the Martyrs’ Foundation (108, Fig. 7.1).

10. There is some speculation that the semantic evolution from “witness” to “martyr” in both Farsi and Arabic is in fact calqued from the derivation of “martyr” from Ancient Greek μάρτυς (“mártus” or “witness”). It is interesting to note that Fischer and Abedi indicate that there is some ambiguity to the term “shahīd” in Shari’ati’s phrase: (“shahīd qalb-e tārikh ast (martyrdom/witnessing is the heart of history)” (212). Fischer and Abedi have therefore altered their citation of Abedi and Legenhausen (“After Shahadat” 248; cited 97), who originally left the term “shahīd” untranslated. While the Farsi terms for “martyr” and “witness” are related, there is in fact a distinction between the two terms, indicated by different vowel lengths: ‘shāhid’ means “witness,” and ‘shahīd’ means “martyr.”

11. Looking back on the tragic events, Dr. Arash Hejazi, one of the men caught on film trying to save Neda’s life, said: “He virtually signed Neda’s death sentence on that day” (Antony Thomas, *For Neda*).

12. <http://wearealloneneda.wordpress.com/>

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