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Non-visibility and the politics of everyday presence: A spatial analysis of contemporary urban Iran

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6. CONCLUSION

Resisting Visibility, Joining the Everyday

In this PhD dissertation, I have studied the non-visibility of everyday presence in Iran as developed through the social and cultural formations of the car, rooftop, shopping centre, and sports. With these four particular case studies, I have sought to give an account of an Iranian “urbanism of the everyday”, which is concerned with “recurrent phenomenological patterns” (Amin & Thrift, 2000, p. 7). I claim that cars, rooftops, shopping centres, and sports shape common patterns of practice and affective registers for being public in Iran. Spread over space and woven into the rhythms of daily life, they shape collective sentiments and orient everyday modes of perception and communication. Rather than looking for completely new structures and ways of living, my analysis has focused on the liminal conditions of expressivity within the contours of the established patterns of social and cultural practice. I have argued that, as well as offering possibilities for critique and resistance to the dominant orders of visibility, such liminal situations usually play an instrumental role in the sustenance of those patterns, and are necessary to their advancement and popularity. Therefore, the deviancies and non-conformities that emerge from these liminal moments and spaces are to a large extent insulated against the controlling apparatuses: in countering them, these apparatuses risk putting the whole patterns and systems of cultural and social production (in which they perform and to which they contribute) in danger – systems which in most of the cases are additionally protected by the interests of the market or the state.

In this way, I have taken the routine, rhythmic, habitual, familiar, unnoticed, and ordinary premises of the everyday, and read them as replete with possibilities for non-confrontational modes of resistance and social critique. Integral to the resistive forces contained in the everyday practice is their ability to evade being registered by the panoptic gaze of the policing apparatuses of the dominant power, as a result of their invisibility and unmarkedness (Gardiner, 2000, p. 16). Such resistance is contained in a plethora of uncontrolled and uncontrollable moments of corporeal interaction in space, that might be ephemeral, but intense in affect (such as a look or a bodily movement) (Hubbard, 2006, p. 107). It spans the “polysemy of gestures and symbols” that constitute the everyday, the myriad but fleeting expressions of passion and emotions that – despite their banality – could subvert the “total commodification

and homogenization of experience” that the dominant forces cater for (Gardiner, 2000, p. 15). The subversive potential of the everyday is therefore contained in those “less visible and non-confrontational” moments and ways of being that escape being noticed – and therefore punished – but maintain a momentum which could have great transformative effects over time (Gardiner, 2000, p. 171). I have argued that cars, rooftops, shopping centres, and sports contribute to such non-confrontational modes of resistance.

This way of thinking about everyday resistance entails a conceptual rethinking of the opposition between resistance and power (Highmore, 2002, p. 30). Resistance in this sense does not emerge from a position outside of the domain of the power, but functions within the premises of the dominant discourse (Foucault, 1978). It also entails believing that systems of domination are not always total in their domination, and therefore there remain cracks, knots, and blind spots from which resistance is possible. Seen this way, resistance in everyday life is not about forcefully rejecting the systems of domination, blocking their reach, and destroying their elements. Paradoxically, it entails taking part in those systems in order to “hinder” and “dissipate” the “energy flow of domination” (Highmore, 2002, pp. 151-2). Resistance to subjugation, in this sense, is fundamentally about creative forms of resilience, it entails a coupling of “inertia” and “inventive forms of appropriation” (Highmore, 2002, pp. 151-2).

In a similar fashion, the everyday holds an invitation to rethink the dualism of the visible and the invisible; to envisage a vast array of unseen moments and practices that function within the realm of the seen. I advocate non-visibility as a feature that does not stand in complete opposition to the order of the visible, but partakes in its construction in ways that hinders and dissipates its hegemonic grasp. Non-visibility is about utilizing a multitude of forms of inertia and appropriation so as to resist the discursive construct of visibility and deflect its undesirable effects. Following this line of thinking, I have disregarded those hidden and invisible domains which are strictly defined in opposition to, and secure from, the realm of visibility – such as the private sphere and the underground spaces of subculture. Rather, I have focused on the uneasy and sometimes transient conditions in which the visible and the invisible in the everyday converge and come into conflict. Moments of critique and subversion arise particularly from such liminal spaces.

By rejecting the stark opposition between the hidden and the visible domains, I have also refused to embrace the underlying assumptions of freedom and authenticity that the realm of invisibility enjoys. The compartmentalisation of everyday life into distinct units of behaviour and conduct is a common trope in social and cultural theory. To understand how people behave in public and in front of the judging eyes of others, Erving Goffman (1959) talks about the vast impression management that is required for the presentation of selves. His theory of performativity therefore posits the public stage in direct opposition to “back regions”, where true emotions and impressions that are otherwise managed and concealed can burst out freely and forcefully in seclusion. James C. Scott (1990) likewise sees everyday forms of gestural, performative, and verbal enunciation as discursively (but also spatially) divided into two separate systems of articulation, where everyday forms of dissent amongst subordinate groups are strategically confined to off-stages. He therefore theorizes the “hidden transcript” as those forms of expression that cannot be publicly avowed and are expressed “behind the back of the dominant”, and the “public transcript”, the strictly managed and theatrical interactions that take place within the domain of the power (Scott, 1990).

In this dissertation, by contrast, I have studied the liminal conditions in which the stage and backstage, and the public and hidden transcript, meet and create new constellations. This way, I explain not only the way people learn to act and perform in public, but also the ways in which myriad new identities, sentiments, and social relations come into existence in everyday life that defy any one or other pre-defined positionality. In the liminal spatio-temporalities of cars, rooftops, shopping centres, and sports, it is precisely this potential for the creation and actualization of a multiplicity of embodied ways of being and cultural practice for which I have argued.

In looking for the politics of active and non-conformist presence in everyday life, I have deliberately avoided ‘heterotopias’ where ‘other’ forms of social relations – counter-publics – and different modes of cultural practice – sub-cultures – could be said to be lived and actualized. The concept of heterotopia, as theorized by Michel Foucault (2008), entails a notion of an absolute break from the traditional time and conventional spaces of the everyday. It describes those places that are positioned outside of regular spaces of everyday life, that “are absolutely other than all the emplacements that they reflect, and of which they speak” (Foucault, 2008, p. 17).

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They point to “various institutions and places that interrupt the apparent continuity and normality of ordinary everyday space”, and therefore “inject alterity into the sameness, the commonplace, the topicality of everyday society” (Dehaene & de Cauter, 2008, pp. 3-4). Even though, at first sight, all of the four spatio-temporalities that I have analysed might stand out as ‘other’ spaces and times – indeed, it is common in critical studies to consider the shopping mall as a heterotopia – the consideration of the way these spatio-temporalities constitute common conditions for engaging with the everyday, rather than escaping from it, is fundamental to my approach. They contribute to the established patterns of publicness rather than breaking away from them; they join the flow of everyday life rather than interrupting it.

My claim is that possibilities for sustained social and political critique lie in moments when articulations of alterity meet the normative and conventional, developing in conjunction with each other rather than in seclusion. It is in the liminal conditions of co-presence that the orders of the visible and invisible enter a process of conflictual negotiation. The liminal conditions of non-visibility that I have sketched out in this thesis resist being conditioned as invisible and subjugated to the hegemonic discourse, which exercises its power by “activating selective in/visibilities” (Brighenti, 2007, p. 339). Rather than accepting the dominant power’s renditions of visibility – based on which the non-conformities would be defined and stigmatized as ‘other’, and therefore assigned to invisibility – the modes of presence that I have been arguing for strive to deactivate, redefine, and reframe the hegemonic imposition of visibility. In asserting non-conformist ways of presence, they do not intend to unveil and reveal “real interests” or a “true reality” in opposition to the one articulated by the power, but rather they aspire “to re-articulate a given situation in a new configuration” (Mouffe, 2013, p. 79).

Such liminal conditions of non-visibility offer radical political critique, since, rather than being “merely oppositional or conceived as desertion”, they engage with a certain aspect of the existing hegemony in order to “disarticulate/re-articulate its constitutive elements” (Mouffe, 2013, p. 79). Rather than accepting being assigned to certain times and spaces and modes of visibility, the cultural practices that I have sketched strive to “re-frame” the given orders of the visible, intervene in the constitution of the orders of the sensible, and therefore “re-configure the fabric of

sensory experience” (Rancière, 2010, pp. 139-140). They connect to politics, and carry the force of social and political change, particularly for the sustained way in which they invent “new configurations between the visible and the invisible” and give voice to new sensibilities and “bodily capacities” (Rancière, 2010, p. 139). It is through such furtive and liminal conditions for artful ways of presence in the space between visibility and non-visibility, and absence and presence, that I see moments of critique being enacted in Iranian everyday lives.

Although my focus in this project has been on Iran, the notion of non-visibility is helpful, and in ways necessary, for understanding everyday lived experience globally. The concept is useful for critically examining the creative ways in which people around the world strive to resist and hold back the dominating forces of market capitalism and neoliberal urbanism that regulate their everyday living conditions. An appreciation and critical analysis of everyday modes of resistance around the world is particularly necessary today, because, on the one hand, everyday life around the world seems to be inescapably governed by particular global structures and economies that orient collective sentiments and regulate ways of practice – such as the Internet and creative industries – while, on the other hand, these same structures open up myriad possibilities for creative modes of cultural practice and engagement in public.

In addition, non-visibility is a relevant concept for addressing such potentialities for resistance and creativity, because globalization fosters conflicting concerns over visibility. On the one hand, in the networked society and under the precarious job opportunities under neoliberal employment schemes, visibility and self-presentation are deemed essential for gaining “a kind of presence or recognition in the public space, which can help to call attention to one’s situation or to advance one’s cause” (Thompson, 2005, p. 49). However, as everyday life in the twenty-first century has become increasingly susceptible to various forms of surveillance in the real and virtual public domains – in urban centres and on the Internet – people around the world have developed significant concerns over visibility and exposure. More specifically, aspirations for non-visible and undisclosed modes of presence develop in reaction to the dangers of being stigmatized in societies in which fear of certain bodies and appearances – such as the migrant, asylum seeker or terrorist – are increasingly being created and spread based on visible markers and appearances. Under the dominance of such affective economies of globalization, “to pass through a

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space” writes Sara Ahmed, “requires passing as a particular kind of subject, one whose difference is unmarked and unremarkable” (2004, p. 122). This is why my analysis of the politics of public presence in Iran contributes to understanding tactics of non-visibility within the broader field of cultural and visual studies.