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“Politics of Martyrs’ Images in Lebanon and Palestine’s Urban Visual Culture: Advertising Resistance or Discipline?”

Thanks to the generous SKJ fellowship, I got the chance to travel to Lebanon visiting Palestinian neighborhoods and camps in order to explore the visual representation of grief and trauma through the idea of martyrdom, and their role in constituting political identity and gender roles.

Prior to traveling, I was aware that political struggle was being reflected in everyday visual culture, and that visual language was a mean for construction of identity and distribution of the idea of resistance. As a scholar interested in methodology of political psychoanalysis I wanted to specifically learn more about martyrs’ images as the representation of loss, and unending trauma. By engaging with new theories, like Butler’s argument in “vulnerability and Resistance,” and necropolitics, I sought to explore the connection between loss and its visual representations like funeral rituals and martyrs images and the idea of resistance. I also aimed to scrutinize such ambiguous connection in contemporary Middle East to ask how do they work, rather than what do they mean.

Through exploring various neighborhoods and cities, and checking the poster archives of American University in Beirut and the office of two political parties (Fath and Amal), I could get the general sense of their semiotics through time, in relation to the political party’s ideological orientation. For example, image of individual Martyrs of Hezbollah could be seen in Shia neighborhoods and in the south of Lebanon. Those images were mostly announcements of their death, as well as the date and location of their funerals and one can see the traces of older Hezbollah’s martyrs’ images and clearly track the Shia iconography and even Iranian post-revolutionary iconography in them. It is no surprise that women had no place in urban visual culture of that community, with the exception of the mourning mothers. Despite the almost absolute absence of women in urban visual culture produced and supported by Hezbollah, Fath, and so on, women did have an influential presence in the Marxist political party.

While the most dominant commentary on this issue is that they bring the struggle into everyday life and express the necessary permanence of memory of the martyrs, my experience (after being on constant exposure to them and checking the archives of hundreds of martyr posters for various usages) put this well-established premise in doubt. Living in Palestinian neighborhood close to Sabra-Shatila refugees’ camp, I noticed that images are occupying two distinct position, or one can say function in two different realms of meaning, which will collide at some points. Those images that constitute an important part of visual experience of the citizens in everyday life, on the one hand, are banal, not even eye catching, and signify death and destruction. On the other hand they function as transcendental and communicate the sublime. It seemed to me that this way of signification – destruction of the “meat being” and the perpetuation of the sublime – makes identity and character totally flattened and skippable.

While there is, of course, a link between these images as the most prominent element of urban visual culture and the concepts of “collective identity” shaped around loss and resistance, visual analysis of them in large scale (300 pictures) brings in other premises as well. Their stylistic uniformity (there is little difference between the ways that figures’ faces were rendered in the posters from suicide bombers to the normal citizens that were killed by Israeli attacks) and the iconic character of the posters (in the

sense each martyr hovers between himself and the icon he became), I propose that they do not work only in domain of mourning, memory and functioning to strength collective identity under attack, but they also act in the domains of discipline, order, and gender normativity. Also, as the figures are usually rendered so impersonal, flat they hardly can create sympathy over their bodily "vulnerability," and therefore cannot be easily framed by the Butlerian theory on resistance.

Without any doubt, suffering and loss are constitutive parts of Palestine's nationality that must be reminded and practiced as a thread that binds the nation together, either in exile or the surrounded inside of the occupied land. However, visually analyzing this overwhelming and ubiquitous presence of absence, finds other purposes than commemoration and communal loss.

Admitting that urban visual culture affected by the martyr images is not a comprehensive image of the soci-political situation of the country, another cluster of question emerges. One can ask does the ubiquity of martyr images in these dispassionate ways disavow connections between forms of violence and loss. How does the ubiquity of the images that refer to death affect the viewers' relation to life and death? If those images that function as normative regulatory are usually produced by parties and, what is the system's benefits from such regulation? What might be the influence of the regulation of gender norms on resistance against occupation? And finally, how could their lack of innovation in design through generations be explained?