

Voyeurism and Neda's Death

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On June 20, 2009, a woman named Neda Agha-Soltan was shot and killed on the outskirts of a political protest in Iran. Neda was driving with her singing teacher in the direction of the protest. There is a significant lack of clarity regarding Neda's level of political involvement, and whether or not she and her teacher planned to become involved in the demonstration.¹ Either way, the pair parked several blocks from the heart of the protest. Shortly after exiting the car, Neda was shot in the chest and killed. The bullet hit her heart and doctors were unable to save her. Neda's death was filmed on a handheld phone. The sound of the bullet can be heard as Neda falls to the ground and dies on camera shortly after. The video captures her last words "it burned me". This information can be found in a New York Times published on June 22, just two days after the event, titled "In a Death Seen Around the World, a Symbol of Iranian Protests".² The article includes images from the video, and a link to the video itself.

In *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Susan Sontag discusses the potential drawbacks of viewing violent photography. While Sontag focuses on photography, her message can in many ways be extrapolated to understand the significance of mass viewing of a death such as Neda's. The heart of Sontag's ideology is that the right to view graphic imagery, or as she might put it, "horror", should fall to "only those with the ability to alleviate the suffering". Beyond this, Sontag claims "those without that agency to be voyeurs".³ The belief that viewership of horror is voyeurism to those that have no power to act on what they see stands at odds with Nima Naghibi, who asserts that viewing Neda's death gave power to those that did not have it before. Naghibi

¹ Nima Naghibi, "Diasporic Disclosures: Social Networking, Neda, and the 2009 Iranian Presidential Elections," *Biography* 34, no. 1 (2011): 56–69.

² Nazila Fathi, "In a Death Seen Around the World, a Symbol of Iranian Protests," *The New York Times*, June 22, 2009, sec. World news.

³ Susan Sontag, "Regarding the Pain of Others" (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003).

believes that the widespread viewership of Neda's death was in the end positive, relies on the fact that viewing horror can cause good. Sontag disagrees, believing that "images transfix. Images anesthetize".⁴ Sontag, along with believing horrific images should only be viewed by some, believes that the more graphic imagery a person interacts with, the more numb they will become to it. While it is often framed as a means of catalyzing political movements, horrific media has the ability to turn problems into commonplace aspects of life that seemingly can't or will never be changed.

Naghibi believes Neda's death sparked a movement in Iran. Neda, who was killed eight days after the 2009 Iranian presidential election became famous when her death was posted for the world to see. The video of Neda's death was posted on YouTube the very same day, and played over and over again on cable news sites.⁵ The video is still on YouTube, and today has 670,000 views and over 850 comments, allowing people to react to this death in real time.⁶ Comments include statements such as "This is what I will remember about Iran. For the rest of my life", "Everybody on earth: Wear GREEN!", and "Breaks my heart. RIP Neda, Iran's voice". When this video was posted to youtube, people had the opportunity to witness a video that existed without context, raw footage of a violent death. This outpouring of responses from people all over the world was received differently by Naghibi than it might have been for Susan Sontag.

In *Women Write Iran*, Nima Naghibi discusses what social media "enthusiasts" felt about the 2009 protests and how Neda fit into a social media movement. Naghibi cites a man named

⁴ Sontag, Susan, "On Photography". New York :Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977, 20.

⁵ Naghibi, "Diasporic Disclosures.", 56

⁶ "Neda Agha Soltan Killing Scene - YouTube," accessed April 26, 2020.

Clay Shirky who claimed the protests following the 2009 election marked “the first revolution that has been catapulted onto a global stage and transformed by social media”.⁷ This claim was echoed by *Time* magazine. Naghibi cites *Time*, who “named Neda one of the heroes of 2009” and declared her death “the most widely witnessed death in human history”. Neda’s death was viewed as an event that sparked a revolution and was referred to for the rest of the year as a sign of the power of the internet and a moment of heroism.

An important layer in Neda’s death is the fact that it is unclear if Neda was politically active. In a book chapter about the role of social media in the 2009 protests and Neda’s killing, Nima Naghibi writes “There have been conflicting statements about the level of political activism in which she was engaged... Whatever her political stripes, Neda has now attained the iconic status of a hero-martyr of the post election protests”.⁸ Naghibi believes Neda can act as a martyr in death, even if her intentions in life were ambiguous. Naghibi’s goal is to find out how to “balance the politically cathartic and politically interventionary move to memorialize” and at the same time weigh the “unscrupulous appropriation of the remembered's name and identity”.⁹ Martyrdom and memorialization can validate a movement and unify a cause. However, this almost always comes at the price of compromising the beliefs of the martyr, privacy for that person’s family, and putting words into the mouth of a person who is no longer around to say differently.

Naghibi confronts the issue of unintentional martyrdom and glorifying death, raising the idea that it is important “to recognize the potential problems in wielding the footage of her death

⁷ Nima Naghibi, “Claiming Neda,” in *Women Write Iran, Nostalgia and Human Rights from the Diaspora* (University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 17–44.

⁸ Naghibi, “Diasporic Disclosures.”, 60

⁹ Naghibi, “Diasporic Disclosures.”, 60

as a political tool while we prey on people's emotional responses".¹⁰ However, what Naghibi does not discuss is what a political tool in this case refers to. While it is possible that it could refer to what Naghibi suggests earlier in the chapter could be a revolution spurred by social media, with Neda's death serving as the leading example, it is possible a "political tool" simply refers to a graphic and painful death captured and sensationalized by a culture lacking critical thinking skills. The Green Movement itself, and the protests following the presidential election in 2009 were productive. The challenge however, is knowing whether or not this had to come at the cost of propping up a woman who needlessly died as a political tool.

One argument advocating for the dissemination of the video of Neda's death is that it shows people they are not alone, and solidifies a "life narrative"¹¹ experienced by more people than Neda herself. Specifically for diasporic Iranians, Neda's death felt like an intimate part of their own lives. The responses to Neda's death "were expressed, for diasporic Iranians, through a shared autobiographical narrative".¹² Neda became a shared symbol of hope for Iranian people, a tragic event that could turn into a movement not only bringing Iran back to what it once was but improving it. For non-Iranian people, Neda's death gave a glimpse into an issue and a place they would otherwise never have given thought. Naghibi cites a scholar, Sharon Sliwinski, who believes "the spectator witness plays a key role in recognizing the humanity of another; the spectator sees the other as human and feels the other's suffering".¹³ In both of these situations, those being the Iranian and non-Iranian reaction to Neda's death, the viral video of Neda and her

¹⁰ Naghibi, "Diasporic Disclosures.", 61

¹¹ Naghibi, "Claiming Neda.", 17

¹² Naghibi, "Claiming Neda.", 17

¹³ Naghibi, "Claiming Neda.", 25

life are given a meaning by a group of people. Following her death, Neda evolved and was claimed in a way she never was in life.

Sontag sees viewership of horror such as Neda's death differently. Sontag argues that because of the literal way in which photography captures life, reality and photography become unhealthily conflated. By understanding photography as a perfect representation of real life, viewers have "devalued both the copy and the thing itself, and overlooked the profound ways images can and do affect the world".¹⁴ Photography is treated vastly differently from forms of media such as painting and prose. Because of photography's ability to capture any given moment in an instant, it is treated generously as being "true" and perfectly accurate. The shortcoming of this identified by Sontag is that photography is not in fact guaranteed to be as true or accurate as any event it may capture, in the same way that prose and painting will never be, nor are they supposed to be, perfect replications of real life. Sontag is not against photography itself, but is instead against the use of the camera as a "copying machine".¹⁵ Sontag values the power of photography as a way of memory, but believes that trying to view photography as perfectly real discredits the value that photography can have on its own.

Sontag characterizes these beliefs by making two claims about photography: photography is predatory, and photography is voyeuristic. The predatory nature of photography lies with the photographer, "to photograph people is to violate them... it turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed".¹⁶ Photographers, while often framed as nothing more than journalists or

¹⁴ Sarah Sentilles, "Misreading Feuerbach: Susan Sontag, Photography and the Image-World," *Literature and Theology* 24, no. 1 (2010): 38–55.

¹⁵ Sentilles, "Misreading Feuerbach: Susan Sontag, Photography and the Image-World.," 43

¹⁶ Neil Evernden, "Seeing and Being Seen: A Response to Susan Sontag's Essays on Photography," *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 68, no. 1 (1985): 72–87.

recorders of events, hold lots of power. Taking a picture gives the photographer power and a voice to control the subject in the picture and their story. Regarding voyeurism, Neil Evernden captures Sontag's argument "Photography not only permits but encourages, and some would say demands, the condition of detachment that is prerequisite to voyeurism".¹⁷ To view a photograph that displays horror without possessing the power to affect the outcome of the image is voyeuristic. Any given viewer of a horrific photograph does not have control or power over the situation depicted. The detachment that this viewer has from the photograph is as simple as not being the subject of the horror.

I agree with Sontag's argument that photography and horrific media tends toward voyeurism moreso than revolution. As it relates to Neda's death, I do not think widespread viewership of her death itself was necessary or justified in sparking political commentary as Naghibi claims. The 2009 protests led to an important deeper look into Iran's political climate. However, the use of Neda as a figurehead was the result of treating her death as a political statement, and was not fair to Neda or necessary politically.

Furthermore, it does not matter whether or not Neda was politically active. Claims have been made on both sides of this issue. While "some reports describe her as uninvolved in politics, suggesting that she was merely an innocent bystanders",¹⁸ newspapers reported that Neda's singing teacher claimed "she was killed after agreeing to accompany him and two other friends to a protest".¹⁹ It is not important whether or not she was politically involved. However, it is greatly important that her treatment as a martyr and a hero justified the dissemination of the

¹⁷ Evernden, "Seeing and Being Seen", 75

¹⁸ Naghibi, "Diasporic Disclosures.", 60

¹⁹ Guy Adams, "Election Outrage That Turned Neda into a Political Protester | The Independent," accessed April 26, 2020

video of her death. In a press conference, Barack Obama spoke about Neda's death: "While this loss is raw and painful, we also know this: those who stand up for justice are always on the right side of history".²⁰ Here, Neda is propped up as a political figure, made to be something she was not by a real political figure. Had the footage of Neda's death not reached so many eyes, this narrative of Neda as a revolutionary would not have existed. This does not mean Neda's death did not matter or was unimportant. Instead, it means that politicizing Neda was a tool for people to view horror without moral inhibition.

It is impossible to know if the 2009 protests in Iran would have gained the ground they did without Neda. For this reason, it is challenging to say confidently that it was not a net positive for her death to be seen by so many people. That being said, it does not matter, or make viewership of Neda's death moral as a result of this possibility. It is more likely than not that Neda was simply a projection of feelings held by many, and was simply chosen as an unlikely face to be placed at the front of a movement. Viewership of Neda's death was important for some. It helped Iranian people build a case for governmental reform, and awakened international leaders to an issue that couldn't be reported on due to suppressed media coverage. That being said, the 670,000 people that viewed Neda's death on YouTube beginning the day of her death did not become revolutionaries as a result. Sontag's belief that viewing horror is not in fact the same as experiencing it rings particularly true. For those that viewed Neda's death and claimed dedication to Iran's cause, or spoke out via Twitter against a dangerous regime, they have only further distanced themselves from Neda. There is safety and detachment in voyeurism.

²⁰ Adams, "Election Outrage That Turned Neda into a Political Protester | The Independent."

When the world watched Neda die, Iran did not change as a country. It is my belief that those people that viewed Neda's death and had no power to act upon what they saw had no right to see it in the first place.

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