

**Aesthetic Significance and Failure in Shadi Ghadirian's
Photographic Reflections on War in *Nil, Nil***

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SUMMARY

The Iran-Iraq war began in September 1980, immediately following the Iranian Revolution of 1979, and lasted through August 1988. During the war, and for some years after the end of it, the dominant approaches to visualize the war mainly included documentary photography and propagandistic posters and public murals. Later, a gradual aesthetic turn in the realm of the arts replaced the earlier practices.

Shadi Ghadirian's *Nil, Nil* (2008), a series of eighteen photographs, is one example of this aesthetic turn. Thinking about this turn in postwar Iranian society in general and Iranian art in particular, I examine *Nil, Nil* both to recount the artistic significance of the work, and to criticize its aesthetic structure, followed by recounting its potential social consequences. As for the artistic significance, I suggest that the artistic reflection on war invalidates the post-revolutionary state's propagandistic discourse that had exploited the war as a means to promote and sustain its ideological cause. Against the backdrop of the growing internal political tensions, and social frustrations with the consequences of the revolution, I argue that the propagandistic and undemocratic visualization of war was influential on the problematic reception of these visual representations among those parts of the society who were unable to relate to propaganda, which ran short of a more inclusive and all-embracing addressing of war. In this sense, the importance of an artistic contemplation of war lies in its attempt to challenge the propagandistic, exclusive addressing of war, and to come up with possibilities that could unravel the experience of war in more inclusive and all-encompassing ways. As for the aesthetic

critique, I argue, according to Theodor W. Adorno's aesthetic theory, that the formal choice around which *Nil, Nil* is structured has failed to effectively promote the content. Focusing on the notions of tension, contradiction, and shudder as features of an aesthetic experience, I suggest how the work fails to meet these features, thus lowers itself to the boundaries of kitsch. Finally, I conclude that *Nil, Nil*'s aesthetic failure, accompanied by the artist's choice of representing a very individual narration of war, weakens the political effectiveness of the work as it fails to aesthetically diversify the addressing of war.

I. INTRODUCTION: ON HOW TO CHOOSE AN APPROPRIATE APPROACH TO HIGHLIGHT THE ARTISTIC SIGNIFICANCE OF A TRAUMA-RELATED ARTWORK

My intention in writing this introduction is to use its more fluid space to explain the methodology I have used to analyze the artistic significance and the aesthetic failure of Ghadirian's *Nil, Nil*. Staged and taken in 2008, *Nil, Nil* reflects on war in the aesthetic realm twenty years after the end of the war. This "belated" reference to the war could stimulate a psychoanalytic approach as a relatable method that is engaged with scrutinizing the notion and the status of trauma in Iranian contemporary art. This approach could get engaged with a symptomatic reading that interprets the images as haunted with the trauma of war; one that understands the traces of war in the domestic space as the marks of war's afterlife in Iranian contemporary lives. However, I have chosen a political reading of *Nil, Nil*, and would like to explicate the rationale of going beyond a psychoanalytic approach in order to choose a political analysis; one which investigates the criticality of the artistic addressing of war against the backdrop of the propaganda-driven Iranian post-revolutionary visual culture.

This inquiry was initially motivated by a paper on Ghadirian's photographic reflections on the Iran-Iraq war in which I had chosen the aforementioned symptomatic reading focused on the importance of the references to war's afterlife in the Iranian society. Influenced by Huey

Copeland's analysis of Fred Wilson's *Metalwork 1793-1880*¹(Figure 1), I had chosen to interpret this belated response as an evidence manifesting the centrality of the experience of war to the traumatized postwar Iranian subject. Along with that, and in comparison with the earlier visualizations of war in public space murals, I was also interested in the ways in which an artistic project like *Nil, Nil* could overturn the demands of propaganda by challenging the state-sponsored narration of war through bringing it into the private, domestic space. Yet, my interest relied on how an artistic manifestation could aim at releasing trauma from the propagandistic space not in order to get over it, but to own it, act it out, and turn it into a basis for the foundation of contemporary cultural identities. Therefore, upon the decision to turn the initial project into a thesis, I started to pursue a collection of readings on trauma both to review the history of trauma theories, and to think of acting out and working through, mourning and melancholia, as common ways to react to the experience of trauma. The main concern, therefore, was to think of *Nil, Nil* as an example of the postwar art that refers to the traumatic experience of the past, and introduces this experience as a vital and ever-present component of the contemporary Iranian subjectivity; the experience that is also highly influential on the

¹ Huey Copeland in *Bound to Appear, Art, Slavery, and the Site of Blackness in Multicultural America* explains that "In 1992, during a yearlong residency at the Maryland Historical Society, Wilson unearthed a series of neglected artifacts and used them to subvert traditional conventions of museum display, so that in *Metalwork 1793-1880*, silver repoussé vessels surrounded a set of roughly contemporaneous slave shackles ... Through such harrowing juxtapositions of objects as well as through the manipulation of light, sound, and wall text, Wilson's *Mining the Museum* [a series to which *Metalwork 1793-1880* belongs] evoked the material pressures that ordered the lives of black subjects and the larger worlds of which they were part." (7)

formation of post-revolutionary and postwar art, responses to art, and writings on art. However, the gradual familiarity with the history of the emergence and the dominance of trauma theories along with (current) critiques of the trauma culture changed my viewpoint. In this process, my approach moved away from a symptomatic and melancholic interpretation of the images to a political reading which is interested in contrasting the aesthetic reflection on war with the state-sponsored representation of it in the public space murals; one that does not stop at recognizing the trauma of the past, but intends to move beyond it for a better understanding of the history of the past.

Upon the recognition of PTSD in 1980, the post-structuralist focus on trauma fostered the boom in cultural trauma theory in the early 1990s through figures like Cathy Caruth. Therefore, the notion of psychic trauma, as discussed in the work of Sigmund Freud, rose to dominate both the artistic and popular discourses in which both protagonists of fictions and individuals in history are credited as traumatized subjects. The interest in this contemporary culture of trauma, sustained by Caruth and others, was the cause of my initial response to *Nil*, *Nil*. However, the more recent critique of the pervasiveness and downsides of this cultural theory in our world today, brought up by figures like Walter Benn Michaels and others, altered my point of view.

As I moved from the glorification of the traumatized subject as the basis for the contemporary cultural identity in the works of post-structuralists to the critique of this moral categorization of trauma in the works of Michaels, Didier Fassin, and Richard Rechtman, I

began to reconsider my initial melancholic reading. It was through reading their critique of the contemporary notion of trauma and its influence on the cultural identity formation that I became familiar with the downsides of a melancholic reading of the past, and the practice of focusing on the contemporary Iranian subject as (only) a traumatized one. I decided to be cautious about the ways in which a critique might generate fixations on the historical wounds through a melancholic reading.

In *Nil, Nil*, placing a military object in the absence of any human figure at the heart of private spaces and intimate belongings of a domestic space could invite a reading that draws on a melancholic return to act out the past trauma; one that thinks of war as an ever-present element in the post-war Iran. At least, this was my first reading of the work in which I was interested in tracking the ever-existing traces of the war. I am not going to ignore and be blind to the possibility of this reading, and the dominance of this view in the broader reception of the Iranian contemporary art outside of Iran. However, here I do not reflect on the interruption of the domestic space by a military object in order to introduce a postwar traumatized subject who sustains the discourse of victimization through continuing to live melancholically with the memory of war. In fact, observing the dominant cultural tendency to reduce the contemporary subject to a mere traumatized one has encouraged me to criticize this kind of reading. For that reading would dismiss the importance of these images as they cancel the propagandistic discourse, and would recognize them instead as a mere desire to introduce a traumatized subject through creating a haunted space. Instead, my political reading focuses on how *Nil, Nil*

challenges the ideological and suppressive appropriation of war by the state. Its strategy, then, maneuvers around the introduction of a military accessory into the domestic space, not as a desire to introduce a traumatic situation in order to act it out, but as an attempt to question and revise the wartime propagandistic visual regime.

The urge to be focused on this political approach becomes more meaningful when one pays attention to the ongoing application of propaganda in Iran, and to the fact that the society still encounters the propagandistic exploitation of public spaces by the state; the exploitation that aims at contributing to the ideological causes of the state.

The importance of explaining my methodology and how it has altered in the course of reading trauma theory lies in the fact that growing melancholic propensities can be seen in this historical moment of Iranian art, and in the post-revolutionary Iranian culture in general. These tendencies are right to recognize the trauma of the past, but they are not necessarily successful in working it through in Freud's sense. Rather, they remain as a fixation that imposes a restrictive reflection on trauma; one that produces traumatized cultural identities, and dismisses social and aesthetic nuances and complexities.

In the conclusion to *The Empire of Trauma: An Inquiry into the Condition of Victimhood*, Fassin and Rechtman close their insightful inquiry on the contemporary state of trauma by arguing that “while trauma is a language that appears neutral and universal in its account of victims, it significantly fails to throw light on certain signifieds and certain agents” (281). Therefore, they argue that the contemporary notion of trauma dismisses the possibility

to come up with various interpretations and to realize different layers of meaning by overlooking the diversity and complexity of experiences “in a collective history, in a personal life story, in a lived moment” (281). This social consensus around observing the present through the lens of the wounds of the past both eliminates individual characteristics and disrupts historical realities. Fassin’s and Rechtman’s probe into the contemporary interpretation of trauma, the interpretation that has transformed from a clinical category into a moral one, can be thought as an influential approach to reflect on the Iranian contemporary art, post-revolutionary and postwar, where the propensity to sustain the traumatized subject dismisses the possibility of delving into the social complexities in general, and the (aesthetic) intricacies of the artworks in particular.

II. ARTTISTIC SIGNIFICANCE: ON WHEN AN ARTISTIC EXPRESSION CHALLENGES THE PROPAGANDISTIC EXPLOITATION

Nil, Nil (2008), a series of eighteen photographs on the subject of war by the Iranian contemporary photographer Shadi Ghadirian, belongs to an aesthetic turn in the visual culture of the post-revolutionary and postwar Iran. This artistic turn is of importance because it deviates from the earlier monolithic and state-sponsored narration of war and revolution through which, as Talinn Grigor explains in “(Re)Claiming Space, The Use/Misuse of Propaganda Murals in Republican Tehran,” “the Iranian-Shi’a-Republican meta-narrative is made” (37).

A brief review of the history of the Iran-Iraq war and the state of the mainstream propagandistic visual regime during the eight-year war can be helpful to better understand the importance of the aesthetic turn in general, and Ghadirian’s *Nil, Nil* in particular. Such an examination illuminates how propaganda had exploited the addressing of war by reducing it to Shi’i visual symbols in order to justify and sustain the cause of the revolution. It also sheds light on the importance of the emergence of the aesthetic practices as they challenge the propagandistic exploitation.

The Iran-Iraq war, known as “the Imposed War” and “the Holy Defense” in Iran, started when Iraqi forces led by Saddam Hussein, benefitting from the chaotic post-revolutionary circumstances, invaded large territories in southern and southwestern Iran by air and land. Iraq’s attack was motivated both by its concern that the Islamic Revolution would inspire the Shi’a population in Iraq and would be exported to the neighboring country, and by the ongoing disputes over borders between the two countries. By occupying “the oil-rich regions” (106), as

Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi explains in “Memory, Mourning, Memorializing, On the Victims of Iran-Iraq War, 1980-Present,” Iraqis hoped “that in addition to their swift military victories, with a halt in oil production the Iranian economy would collapse and the new regime surrender” (106). Saddam Hussein, Ghamari-Tabrizi continues, believed that “[a]long with his then NATO and Warsaw Pact supporters, ... his quick victory, besides setting old border disputes between the two countries, would contain the Islamic Republic and end its leaders’ aspiration of exporting their revolution to neighboring nations” (106). It was true that the post-revolutionary Iran was vulnerable at the time as the result of the upheavals of the 1979 Revolution, the weakened military, internal tensions between diverse political groups and parties, and partial frustrations triggered by this situation. However, “the revolutionary zeal and patriotic fervor” (106), as Ghamari-Tabrizi acknowledges it, was still alive among the nation. The state also worked on advancing the zeal, converging the public opinion, and encouraging the military participation by producing propagandistic posters and public murals promoting and sustaining the Holy Defense. Consequently, early in the war, many were recruited and volunteered to participate from diverse social and ideological terrains. The course of the war, Ghamari-Tabrizi mentions, did not turn out as Saddam Hussein had anticipated:

Iraqi victories turned out to be short-lived. Not only did Iranian military and militia forces halt Iraqi advances but they also recaptured most of the occupied territories. By the end of 1982, the old borders were restored; yet for a variety of political and ideological reasons, neither side was willing to end the hostilities. (106)

By early 1984, Ghamari-Tabrizi continues, it was clear that the battle had turned into a “long war of attrition” (107) since all the territories taken by Iraqi forces earlier had been

already regained. In Iran, the continuation of the Imposed War in spite of retrieving the seized areas, revealed how the war that had come down as a shock to a disrupted nation had transformed into a means to advance the ideological pleas of the post-revolutionary state. However, after nearly eight years of war, Ghamari-Tabrizi explains

[t]he dominant factions that exploited [the war] as a state-building tool now had to face the reality that the country's mounting casualties, in addition to war's enormous economic price tag, could cost them their very existence. With its political legitimacy at stake, and no opposition to blame, the regime could no longer sustain its prevarications on terminating the war. (107)

The urge to terminate the war boosted by the international pressure as the “indirect involvement” (107) of the world powers with the Iran-Iraq war turned into frustration “when the hostility directly threatened the free flow of oil from the Persian Gulf” (107). As the result of the internal domestic complications in Iran, accompanied by the heightened international pressures, war ended when United Nations Security Council Resolution 598 became effective in August 1988, and peace with Iran was restored consequently.²

The dominant visual modes of portraying the war had been structured around documentation and propaganda. The former practice mainly aimed at registering the circumstance in the war front, and the destructions and demolitions of the public or residential

² According to United Nations' Peacemaker website, “[t]his Security Council Resolution calls on Iran and Iraq to observe an immediate ceasefire, discontinue all military actions and withdraw all forces to the internationally recognized boundaries. It requests the UN Secretary-General to dispatch a team of United Nations observers to verify, confirm and supervise the ceasefire and withdrawal of troops. It urges the prisoners of war be released and repatriated without delay after the cessation of active hostilities.”

spaces caused by Iraqi air raids. However, the latter was focused generally not only on sustaining patriotism to bolster the fighting spirit, but also to complete the ideological representational project that had been sponsored by the post-revolutionary state since the early days of its conception.

To flesh out the state of culture in the post-revolutionary Iran during the war, one needs to look for the critical cultural and socio-political changes that were brought by the 1979 Revolution. In the last years of the Pahlavi dynasty, the ruling house of Iran from 1925 until 1979, diverse revolutionary forces, including leftists, liberals, and Islamists, aimed at subverting the regime of Muhammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, which had put in action an authoritarian program focused on economic and cultural modernization along with sustaining nationalism. On the eve of the revolution, the revolutionary parties and groups, in the hope of achieving a democratic nation-state, were mostly dominated by Khomeini, the forerunner of Islamists. As Janet Afary and Kevin B. Anderson elaborate in their book, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution, Gender and the Seductions of Islamism*,

the militant Islamist faction led by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini had come to dominate the antiregime uprising, in which secular nationalists, liberals, and leftists also participated. The Islamists cast the struggle against the Shah as a reenactment of the Battle of Karbala (680 CE), which Shi'ite Muslims mark annually in the month of Muharram by commemorating the martyrdom of Imam Hussein (grandson of Muhammad). Hussein died at the hands of his enemy Yazid in the desert of Karbala (present-day Iraq), in a battle that sealed Yazid's succession to the caliphate. In 1978, Khomeini personified the innocent Hussein, the Shah stood for his nemesis Yazid, and those protesters killed by the Shah's brutal repression were seen as martyrs in the tradition of Hussein's seventh-century followers. (1)

As the Battle of Karbala turned into an inspirational source to fuel the revolutionary spirit, diverse revolutionary forces took up the same religious story as an articulation of their political demands “in the name of national unity” (1), Afary and Anderson recount. Therefore, “the Islamists controlled the slogans and the organization of the protests” (1).

Finally, “in the course of a massive urban revolution with several million participants” (1), the Pahlavi regime was collapsed. However, right after the victory of the revolutionaries, Khomeini and his Islamic followers began to suppress the other influential political factions and eliminate them from the new structure of power. In a swift move, as Morad Saghafi elaborates in “Revolution, War, and the Relocation of the Elites in Society,”³ the urge to democratize the state enervated as the revolutionary forces in attacks and attempts against the Interim Government of Iran chose and implemented revolutionary and ideological politics over constitutional approaches in order to “relocate the elites of the society as soon as possible”⁴ (43). The pressure on the Interim Government, Saghafi recounts, was the result of the fears of the revolutionary forces that the Western secularism and imperialism might boost the liberal tendencies of the Interim Government and lead it to fail to fulfill the demands of the uprising that had identified itself with the revolution of the oppressed. Under these pressures, Saghafi continues, the Interim Government resigned two days after the Muslim Student Followers of

³ ثقفی، مراد. "انقلاب، جنگ، و جابجایی نخبگان در جامعه"، *فصلنامه گفتگو*. 23: جنگ ایران و عراق، 35-55.

⁴ Here and below, my translation from the Farsi:

"هرچه سریع‌تر امر جابجایی نخبگان جامعه را به سرانجام برساند." (43)

Khomeini's Line occupied the U.S. embassy in Tehran. This resignation, as Saghaei argues, "was expressive of the total withdrawal of a political approach which intended to rebuild the new government and relocate the elites of the society in a legal way" (44).⁵ It was this substitution that led to the formation and consolidation of a state which intended to rule according to revolutionary ideals and ideologies rather than reformist approaches- those approaches that could be beneficial and useful for the regulation of a state which had been structured upon the desire for democracy. Still, the clashes between those forces that supported the ideological approach based on purification of the government, and those who encouraged legal ways continued to challenge the consolidation of power and create major internal conflicts. However, Iraq's invasion in 1980 postponed the possibility of a considerable confrontation of these forces. As Saghaei explains, "In just a few days after the invasion, almost all the political parties in the country summoned their supporters and the public in general to resist against the invasion, and all of them, including the right, the left, religious and non-religious, asserted that defending the country against the invasion was a sacred act" (48).⁶ Where the initial demand of all the political groups and parties was to invite their followers to join forces against Iraq and to respect unity, the internal tensions as the result of their opposing

"به معنای عقب‌نشینی کامل سیاستی بود که می‌خواست از طریق قانونی به بازسازی دولت جدید و جابجایی نخبگان در⁵ جامعه همت گمارد." (44)

"به فاصله چند روز پس از حمله نظامی عراق، اکثر قریب به اتفاق گروه‌های سیاسی کشور طی اعلامیه‌ها و اطلاعیه‌های⁶ گوناگون هواداران خویش و عموم ملت را به مقاومت در برابر این تهاجم فراخواندند و تمامی آن‌ها اعم از راست و چپ و مذهبی و غیر مذهبی در این که مقابله در برابر مهاجم را وظیفه‌ای مقدس اعلام کنند، کوتاهی نکردند." (48)

stands on the extension of the war continued to challenge the fortification of the emergent state. Soon, Saghafi continues, "the disagreements penetrated the entire political and civic organizations of the society, and the society itself" (49).⁷ Consequently, Saghafi asserts, the government started to work on programs aiming at assessing parties and groups according to their belief or disbelief in the revolution. Therefore,

about two years after the establishment of the new state and in spite of insisting attempts to write [a just] constitution, calling for and referring back to the public opinion for more than once in order to establish legislative and bureaucratic organizations, and efforts to design legal frameworks to deploy the capabilities of the society, Islamic Republic of Iran divided the nation with the least reference to the constitution or any lucid criteria, according to unclear and ambiguous standards, (49)⁸

and suppressed the other participants involved in the revolution, especially major factions of the (secular) left including Tudeh Party of Iran (Party of the Masses of Iran, the Iranian communist party) and The Organization of Iranian People's Fedaian, Majority, Saghafi recounts.

To maintain a hold on this emergent post-revolutionary state, the leadership of the revolution, Khomeini, had recognized that the Islamic Republic needed to produce a socio-political and cultural environment in which the legitimacy of a religious republic would be

"دیری نگذشت که این اختلافات به تمامی نهادهای سیاسی و مدنی جامعه و نیز به بدنه جامعه ساری شد." (49)⁷
"حدود دو سال پس از تأسیس نظام جدید و تلاش‌های خستگی‌ناپذیر در تدوین قانون اساسی، رجوع چندین باره به آرای عمومی برای تأسیس نهادهای قانونگذاری و اجرایی، تلاش در تعیین چارچوب‌های قانونی برای به خدمت گرفتن توان جامعه و ... دولت جمهوری اسلامی ایران بدون کمترین ارجاع به قانون اساسی و حتی معیارهای روشن، اقدام به تقسیم آحاد جامعه بر اساس مقولات و مفاهیم ناروشنی کرد." (49)⁸

perpetuated (Grigor, 2014). In this emergent structure, as Kaveh Ehsani describes in “The Urban Provincial Periphery in Iran,” “revolutionary activists found their way into new organizations and the old bureaucracies, not on the basis of professional qualification but through political credentials” (48) indicative of their loyalty to the dominant ideology of Shi’a Islam. On the cultural level, as an intention to remove the signs of both the imperial past and the secular desires of other political groups, Khomeini aimed at a shift in aesthetics, what Grigor in her book, *Contemporary Iranian Art: From the Street to the Studio*, calls a “representational replacement” (22). Therefore, all the traces of “Tehran-centered modernist and vernacular movements of the 1960s and ‘70s that went hand in hand with the secularist, individualist and nationalist ideology of the ancient régime” (22-23), were to be replaced with propagandistic art; one that aimed to “solve a theoretical predicament that the new theocratic republic faced” (22). The propaganda thus served the ideological dilemma of the political system by promoting the official religion of Iran, Shi’ism, as the rationale of the emergent state (Grigor, 2014). Along with this project, a new semiology was at work to introduce the new “Islamic” subject and to reject a democratized addressing of other political parties and groups of society. Socially, this “politicization of the body,” as Ehsani names it, was incarnated in new norms of

public presentation and ... the interpretation of the individual appearance as a sign of political loyalty ... [and] involved a range of nuances, including types of attire and manners of wearing cloths, ... [the appreciation of] facial hair on men, ... [as opposed to] a groomed mustache without stubble, a goatee, rimmed glasses, colored shirts, necktie or blue jeans. (48)

As the result of these ideological suppressions and eliminations, soon after the revolution, parts of the public were filled with discontent, and were disappointed with the

outcome of the revolution while they realized that the Islamic Republic, despite its democratic promises in the advent of the revolution, aimed at implementing an authoritarian regime.

In the post-revolutionary visual culture, it was the exploitation of the cultural space by propaganda during the war that established and fortified the new dictated public codes. Tehran's post-revolutionary and wartime murals are the manifestations of this ideological approach of Islamification that aimed at obliterating other political and religious tendencies and beliefs. The murals, as H. E. Chehabi and Fotini Christia explain in "The Art of State Persuasion: Iran's Post-Revolutionary Murals," "[c]ast across Tehran's prominent avenues, on both private and public buildings, ... constitute dominant fixtures of the city's visual space. Varying in color, genre, and symbolism, they are of distinctive artistic style, painted and brought to life by regime-sanctioned artists" (1).

Large-scale murals emerged right after the establishment of the Islamic Republic, and are still incorporated into the urban planning of the city and integrated into its public space. Chehabi and Christia explain that murals were introduced "on an extensive and organized scale as part of a propaganda campaign aimed at asserting the Islamic character of the 1979 revolution. The capital, Tehran, received the lion's share" (3). Grigor also elaborates on Tehran's murals in "(Re)Claiming Space: The Use/Misuse of Propaganda in Republican Tehran," as she categorizes them into four thematic categories: "1) the position and the legitimacy of the Faghih or the jurisprudent; 2) the concept or reality of *shahadat* or martyrdom; 3) the evilness of the other; and 4) the virtue and merit of morality" (37).

Among these categories, wartime murals, the second thematic category, were designed to both “explain one of the major dilemmas of today’s authority, namely, the human cost and consequence of the devastating Iran-Iraq War” (37), and to legitimize and sustain “the Iranian-Shi’a-Republican meta-narrative” (37).

In an effort to resonate with the Shi’a faith, these large-scale murals were structured upon an Islamic iconography in which, as Chehabi and Christia explain, “symbols revolve around holy sites such as Mecca, the Dome of the Rock, or Imam Hossein’s shrine in Karbala ... [T]he Islamic green [was] overwhelmingly the color of choice. Calligraphy, geometric shapes, and curvilinear designs suggestive of Islamic art [were] also part of the muralists’ artistic repertoire” (6). The prevalent and repetitive figure was the Muslim man, rather young, with a stern but innocent gaze in the military outfit. Often, murals were adorned by the portrait of Khomeini, the founding father of the revolution, to suggest the loyalty of the Muslim combatant to the ideals of the revolution and its founding father. The icon was portrayed both individually and collectively, and the portrayal was usually completed by slogans, Quranic verses, or sayings by Khomeini (and Khamenei). The motif of martyrdom was portrayed and praised by adding visual symbols including red tulips, white doves, wings, or an open window

to the sky, and the juxtaposition of the combatant with these visual signs suggested that he was a martyr (Figures 2-8).⁹

In the wartime murals and in later ones which were inspired by them, the Shi'a Muslim combatant was introduced as the ultimate and ideal fighter. This fighter was an icon accessorized and accompanied by Shi'i signs and revolutionary iconography, and was usually a man with the hallmark of black beard, along with other signs that mostly symbolized the Battle of Karbala, that visually dominated the scene that had other contributors with different religious beliefs and political tendencies as well. This can be seen as an attempt to introduce the emergent Shi'a icon as a legitimate model for the post-revolutionary subjectivity. Therefore, the official art of the war during the 1980s, as Grigor recounts in *Contemporary Iranian Art*, "saw the ... evolution of revolutionary graffiti and posters into official propaganda murals. The Islamization of the revolution forced by the ideological cause of the Iran-Iraq war was pivotal to a shift ... to Shi'a iconography and subject-matter" (23). Propagandistic references to women, mostly seen in wartime posters, were also expressive of the ways through which the state desired to produce "Islamic models of femininity, humility, and defiance. Fatimah and

⁹ Many of the wartime murals were removed from the walls after the war, and replaced by a new wave of murals that aimed at reconstructing the city through beautification. However, some of them still exist, and this artistic/ thematic tradition, in general, has continued to reproduce wartime-inspired murals. Since I could not find reliable dates for these murals and could not make sure which one is a wartime mural, and which one has emerged after the war, I have titled them "Wartime/ Wartime-Inspired Murals".

Zaynab, two of the most famous women in Shi'i sacred history, were harnessed as role models for Iranian women to emulate and embody.”¹⁰

As the frustration with the dictated social and cultural codes grew, the public more and more lost its faith in revolutionary ideals while Iran and Iraq continued to fight. Therefore, as Ghamari-Tabrizi explains in “Memory, Mourning, Memorializing,” “[t]he war, which at its inception had threatened the existence of the post-revolutionary regime, was ... transformed into a vehicle for the consolidation of the Islamic Republic’s power” (107), and was appropriated to fuel the state’s propaganda machine with the iconic Shi’a figure as its main product. The frustration was so intense that when the war ended, the veterans “came back only to realize how oblivious residents of urban centers had grown to their plight. For the nouveaux riches of Tehran and other major cities, the revolution was over” (109).

It is against this backdrop that I argue for the significance of the artistic response to the experience of war in *Nil, Nil*, which is one of the early examples of reflecting on war in Iranian contemporary art; one that challenges the propagandistic addressing of war that aimed to advertise and promote the ideological cause of the state amidst the growing frustration with the “Islamic” Revolution.

¹⁰ From “Women and Children,” a section of *The Graphics of Revolution and War: Iranian Poster Arts*, which is a permanent online exhibit collaboratively produced with a loan exhibition of the University of Chicago's posters on display at the Indiana University Art Museum from October 15 to December 18, 2011.

The propagandistic representation of the war was followed by an aesthetic practice in the visual production of the generation born into and during the 1979 Revolution and the eight-year war. In the exhibition catalogue of *Persian Visions, Contemporary Photography from Iran* co-curated by Hamid Severi and Gary Hallman, David Furchgott refers to this turn in photography practice citing Hamid Severi:

[a]ccording to ... Severi, in the immediate wake of the Revolution and during Iran's war with Iraq ... photography in Iran was largely public, photojournalistic, even propagandistic. In the period since, there has been a turn toward private and aesthetic concerns, driven in part by new support for the use of photography as an artistic medium in the universities, and by a network of galleries, publications, and friendships within the photographic community and the broader art and media worlds. (10)

Examining the diverse body of work in *Persian Visions*, Furchgott is interested in the fact that the photographs of the exhibition “are obviously not isolated from the world of contemporary photography and art” (12), and in fact are connected to the international contemporary practice in terms of technique, skill, formal and conceptual characteristics. Yet, he continues, “that impression of internationalism in some elements of style is offset by the even stronger sense of how deeply these photographs are rooted in Iranian culture, with powerful preoccupations or nuanced inflections that arise from the specific characteristics of the country, its past as well as its present.” (13)

The initial public practice of photography can be explained as the result of an immediate response to the revolution and the war in the late 1970s and during the 1980s. Both state-sponsored practitioners (such as Morteza Avini) and freelance artists (such as Bahman Jalali and Kaveh Golestan) registered their reactions to these enormous historical events in the form

of propagandistic romanticization of the war (Avini), or documenting and chronicling the event (Jalali and Golestan). However, after the consolidation of the state and the postwar settlement of the country during the 1990s, an aesthetic turn in the realm of the visual arts emerged as the outcome of a more distant and meditative response of freelance artists that relied on formalistic nuances to deliver a more private narration of war; one that aimed at adding the voices of more individuals in their diverse experiences with war. This aesthetic turn can be seen as a departure from the earlier public practice in which propaganda played an immense role. Therefore, the importance of the artistic and private reflection on war lies in its ability to challenge the state-sponsored narration of the event manifested in wartime propaganda, in the hope of a more inclusive narration.

Nil, Nil, an example of this aesthetic turn, visualizes the fusion of the domestic space with the traces of war. In one image, a pair of red pumps is juxtaposed with a pair of leather military boots spotted with blood (Figure 9). The same juxtaposition is repeated in other images, placing a gas mask along with dolls and plush toys in a hung kiddie toy bag (Figure 10), an ammunition belt cycling with a delicate lace fabric in a washing machine (Figure 11), a military canteen next to orange juice, water, and salad dressing in a refrigerator (Figure 12), a hand grenade in a fruit bowl filled with green and red apples, oranges and grapes (Figure 13), a multi-colored scarf hung next to a helmet (Figure 14), and an identity tag among pearls and other jewelries in a jewelry box (Figure 15). There is no human figure present in the images, but there are traces of different members of a household, revealed in their domestic and personal

belongings. All images are shiny and polished, flat and colorful. In one of them, a fruit bowl is placed in the foreground, under an even lighting, with gleaming fruits and a grenade whose presence is underestimated by the playfulness of the colors around it. The fruit bowl is on a table which is covered by Termeh, an Iranian precious handwoven cloth. On it, there is an empty small silver plate with cutlery. In the background, the upper half of an empty wooden chair and a green house plant can be seen. Everything seems calm, clean, and untouched as if the image has been taken from a magazine. The only element that makes the viewer doubt the apparent calmness is the military object (Figure 13).

As I explained in the Introduction, locating a military object, in the absence of any human figure, in the private and intimate atmosphere of a domestic space could suggest a reading that draws on a melancholic compulsion to act out the trauma of the past through a series of haunted images. However, here I focus on a political reading that contrasts this artistic attempt¹¹ to the propagandistic visualization of war and challenges the ideological and neglectful address of it by the state.

Unlike the murals, in all eighteen images of *Nil, Nil* the human figure is removed and substituted with an object. The military boots, the gas mask, the ammunition belt, the canteen, the hand grenade, the helmet, the identity tag, and the other military objects replace the combatant who, in the absence of an accessorized body with Shi'i signs and symbols, can be

¹¹ The word “attempt” has been used to fortify the argument that *Nil, Nil* enters the aesthetic realm, but it is not an aesthetic success due to the failure of its formalistic choices. Therefore, it stays at the level of an artistic attempt rather than a success in the realm of the aesthetic.

envisaged as any possible warrior. Moreover, in the same absence of the human figure, the military-opposing signifiers, including all the objects that belong to the domestic space and personal belongings, open up an imaginary space to envision domestic extensions of the experience of war. Through these objects that surrogate the human bodies, the narrow and exclusive propagandistic addressing of war gets undone, and the undemocratic reportage of war is challenged as the representation of war abandons the murals and returns to the domestic space. In other words, the visualization of war is discharged from the propagandistic murals, leaves the ideologically-driven public space, and reconciles with the private space. Therefore, the very absence of the iconic human figure in these images can be viewed as a political gesture to exempt from the propagandistic representation the personal experience of war as shared by diverse groups of people in post-revolutionary Iran, regardless of their different ideological terrains. This visualization can be interpreted as re-narrating the unofficial and domestic version of war to enliven the claims of the individual memory as opposed to a conformist incorporation into the state-sponsored collective memory.

Rather than suggesting these images as a bedrock for a traumatic paralysis that is melancholically obsessed with the past, I propose that the presence of the military objects, on another level, addresses the ongoing political dynamics in which the individualistic political tendencies are still in tension with the Islamic illiberal collectivism. This pervasive tension has been the outcome of questioning the revolutionary ideals, and the fragmentation of once unified revolutionary forces, partly because of the experience of the eight-year war (Ghamari-Tabrizi,

2009). In this sense, the military objects settled in the domestic space do not only challenge the state's appropriation of the war in the past; observed as a symbol of ideology, they signal the ongoing involvement of the domestic space with the tensions between the individual and the collective.

In "Media/ting Conflict: Iranian Posters of the Iran-Iraq War" Christiane Gruber looks into the propagandistic nature of the wartime posters explaining that: "Iranian posters have much to tell us about the intersection of warfare and its mediations, as well as the role of the graphic arts in the effort to construct a semblance of collective identity and to unify oftentimes fickle public opinion during this extended period of national trauma" (684). Gruber recounts

the use of Shiah notions of Iran-Iraq War as a ... cosmic battle between good and evil; the need to create a sustained ethos of opposition by depicting Iraq as the demonic other; and the construction of the country's hyper-innocence, as embodied by its child soldiers who fought and died on the war front (684)

as three major themes in the wartime posters. Focusing on their propagandistic aspect, she asks if "these materials [did] actually yield a result, say, in spurring their audiences to action or in inciting them to support the newly emergent Islamic Republic" (684)? She then looks for the answer through her analysis of these themes among which the first one shares commonalities with the public wartime murals. In both, the Shi'i symbols are at work to bind the Iran-Iraq war to the Battle of Karbala which had become a source of inspiration since the revolution. Highlighting the juxtaposition of a killed or executed soldier with the depiction of Imam Hussein or any other icon from the Battle of Karbala, "the paradigmatic example of martyrdom in Shiah Islam" (684), Gruber explains how the past and the present comes into one and the

Iran-Iraq war is represented as the contemporary Battle of Karbala in these posters (Figure 16).

This pictorial juxtaposition, Gruber argues,

became the model for an individual's sacrifice for the sake of a collective whole, a pattern which allowed modern martyrial acts to be inscribed within the larger Shiah soteriological framework of salvation. This conceptual alliance, in which the present tense merges seamlessly with eschatological time, was achieved through the government's ideologically driven rhetoric, which was aimed at rallying Iranians to enrol in the war effort. (685)

Even the historiography of the war in the early years of the conflict, as Kaveh Bayat illuminates in "The Historiography of the War,"¹² were mainly focused on the propagandistic aspects that aimed at justifying the cause of the "Islamic" Revolution. Only later, the urge to study the war through a historical approach was added to the prevalent propagandistic portrayal of it. Still, Bayat asserts, the historiography of the war includes loopholes and questions that require clarification. One, among many, is the question of the extension of the war in spite of recapturing the seized territories, including the significant Southern port city, Khorramshahr, in 1982. As explained in "A Review on the Course of the War,"¹³ "Shortly after the liberation of Khorramshahr, the Iraqi state announced its willingness to terminate the war by calling back its military forces -while some Iranian territories were still in occupation. Yet, Iran ... decided to continue the war" (12).¹⁴ This observation is the one that supports the theory of the state's

¹² بیات، کاوه. "تاریخنگاری جنگ"، *فصلنامه گفتگو*. 23: جنگ ایران و عراق، 33-19.

¹³ This article is the editorial to *Goftogu Quarterly* in Farsi, Issue 23 on Iran-Iraq War.

"مروری بر تحولات جنگ"، *سرمقاله فصلنامه گفتگو*. 23: جنگ ایران و عراق، 17-7.

¹⁴ My translation from the Farsi:

"اندک زمانی بعد از رهایی خرمشهر، دولت عراق با اعلان آن که نیروهایش را از ایران فراخوانده است. حال آنکه هنوز بخش هایی از قلمرو کشور را در اشغال داشت. آمادگی خود را برای ترک مخاصمه ابراز داشت، ولی ایران ... بر ادامه جنگ تصمیم گرفت." (12)

exploitation of war in order to accomplish the desire to consolidate its power amidst the post-revolutionary upheavals and postwar tensions.

The question is, however, if these propagandistic attempts were successful in attracting diverse social and ideological groups in order to justify the cause of the revolutionary ideals of the emergent state. The answer, considering the visual realm, is not an unchallenging one due to the need for exact observation and gathering detailed information about the general response to the exclusionary visual practices. However, thinking about their restricted visual semiotics, one can argue that these undemocratic pictorial treatments of war would fail to communicate with the entirety of the public. This observation resonates with Gruber's analysis of the viewers' response to the wartime posters:

[a]lthough the viewers are invited to participate in the depicted scene, they nevertheless remain incapable of fully gauging it on a rational level, not only because the moment transcends the boundaries of human cognition but also because--just like the headless, faceless and blinded protagonists of the scene--it is not attainable through the imperfect tools of optical sight and intellectual insight. (688)

This cognitive quest turns into a problematic communication, as Gruber elaborates. For “the image to truly succeed in advancing its message ... the viewer must be conversant with and receptive to the symbolic lexicon of Shiah Islam, itself drawing upon a range of motifs and themes that form modern Iranian ‘tacit knowledge’” (688).

Unlike the partially incomprehensible pictorial signifiers in wartime posters and murals, the familiar visual lexicon in *Nil, Nil*, set up by the combination of domestic and mundane signs, facilitates the unofficial narration of and communication about the war. In the consequent

interaction, the viewer is able to identify with the individual and domestic narration of war, as opposed to the propagandistic one, that is unfolded within the spectrum of the contemporary cognitive comprehension, and is responsive to the assortment of ideologies.

Where the Shi'i-accessorized human figure limits the all-embracing addressing of war by failing to recognize the diverse ideological (and social) layers involved in the experience of war, the mundane household equipment in *Nil, Nil* brings the narration back into a more comprehensible space. In this artistic attempt, the juxtaposition of the military object with the fruits, food, clothes, toys and other traces of human bodies, challenges the exclusive state-sponsored address, and brings down the narration from the ideologically-driven war murals of the public space to the private space. For where the public space is designed and planned to bring out one official narration of war, the private space, free from the propagandistic mission, is the locus of different wartime experiences of diverse members of society.

The possibility to interpret *Nil, Nil* as a counter-narrative to propaganda is heightened by the absence of the human figure. This lack of the human figure stands in sharp contrast with the ever-presence of the well-known Shi'a icon on the public space murals. The resulting vacancy, then, opens up an imaginary space that can be occupied with diverse personal narrations that belong to different agents of society. This possibility to broaden the scope of narration and add more (unofficial) layers to the account of war is *Nil, Nil*'s considerable achievement as an instance of the aesthetic turn in Iranian post-revolutionary and postwar cultural history. However, this query does not end with the recognition of the importance of the

work, but continues to ask whether *Nil*, *Nil*'s reflection on war is able to (fully) diversify the narration of war, and to be responsive to various layers of the society who have been involved in this experience.

III. AESTHETIC FAILURE: ON WHEN THE CONTENT FAILS TO GET SEDIMENTED IN THE FORM

The significance of *Nil, Nil* lies in its break with the dominant propagandistic regime of visualization during the war. However, an aesthetic assessment of the work and its formal structure challenges *Nil, Nil*, asking if it is an artistic success. In this section, I intend to recognize this failure by referring to Adorno's dialectical aesthetic theory, elaborated in his *Aesthetic Theory*, as I focus on his reflections on tension and what he calls "shudder". To further my argument and flesh out this formalistic investigation, I compare the case of the aesthetics in *Nil, Nil* with the one in Martha Rosler's *Bringing the War Home: House Beautiful* (1967-72), which is a series of images structured around the same artistic effort of juxtaposing war with the domestic space. The goal of this comparison, considering *Bringing the War Home* as a successful aesthetic model, is to unravel how a fitting formalistic choice can transform an artistic effort to an aesthetic achievement through complicating the notion of tension and amplifying the effect of shudder.¹⁵

In *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno theorizes a dialectical aesthetic model shaped by his experience with modern art as it exists in history. However, applying this theory to *Nil, Nil*, I

¹⁵ In *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno explains that "[t]he shudder is a response, colored by fear of the overwhelming; ... Shudder, radically opposed to the conventional idea of experience [*Erlebnis*], provides no particular satisfaction for the I; it bears no similarity to desire. Rather, it is a memento of the liquidation of the I, which, shaken, perceives its own limitedness and finitude. This experience [*Erfahrung*] is contrary to the weakening of the I that the culture industry manipulates." (245)

do not attempt to discuss the work as an example of Iranian modern art. My aim in applying this framework is to go beyond Adorno's reference to modern art, and to think of his dialectical model of aesthetics as a norm to study the aesthetics at work in *Nil, Nil* in comparison to *Bringing the War Home*. In other words, while his aesthetic theory has been mainly shaped by his experience of modern art, I would like to think of its dialectical element as a factor that can be applicable to other practices of art as well. Therefore, I focus on how he views the dialectical and conflicting engagement of form and content as the main motivation of art, and the producer of shudder, the ideal aesthetic response.

In Aesthetic Theory, Adorno explicates the conflict under "Coherence and Meaning":

Aesthetic success is essentially measured by whether the formed object is able to awaken the content [Inhalt] sedimented in the form. In general, then, the hermeneutics of artworks is the translation of their formal elements into content [Inhalt]. This content [Inhalt] does not, however, fall directly to art, as if this content only needed to be gleaned from reality. Rather, it is constituted by way of a countermovement. Content [Inhalt] makes its mark in those works that distance themselves from it. (140)

Therefore, as he continues, content is accomplished in art through its "determinate negation".

In this process, the more vigorous the negation, the more artworks would be structured on "immanent purposiveness" (140). To complete his dialectical formulation, he brings the notion of form into a polemic with content, introducing form as "[i]ncontestably the quintessence of all elements of logicality, or, more broadly, coherence in artworks" (140). Thinking of dialectical aesthetics then, form should be conceived both in opposition to and through the content. As central to aesthetics and "always presupposed" (141) by it, and as a sharp "antithesis to an empirical world" (141), Adorno believes that it is a must for aesthetics to come up with a

thorough comprehension of the concept of form. To draw out briefly on the history of the perception of form in aesthetics, Adorno recounts how unity, symmetry, and repetition were long enough considered as equals of form. However, in “highly developed modern works, form tends to dissociate unity, either in the interest of expression or to criticize art’s affirmative character” (140-41). As essential to art, mediator of content, and “artifacts’ coherence” (142), Adorno’s ideal account of form is the one that is “self-antagonistic” (142) and “refracted” (142) in which the successful artwork is distinguished from the “merely existing” (142). It is through this right notion of form, “the product of subjective activity” (142), that the subjective activity itself takes place. As a provoker of this mental activity and involvement, then, form should not be considered only as a plain “arrangement of pre-given elements” (142) that work with the logic of “mathematical relations” (142). The limited notion of form achieved through “mathematization” (143) would be incarnated in a one-sided structure as when, for example, “musical form is located in temporal succession, as if simultaneity and polyphony do not contribute to form, or when in painting form is attributed to proportions of space and surface at the cost of the form-giving function of color” (143). As proportionate as it seems, this account of form in fact lacks eloquence and expression, and is only a semblance. In contrast with this, Adorno asserts, the aesthetic form is an eloquent and expressive one, which is “the nonviolent synthesis of the diffuse that nevertheless preserves it as what it is in its divergences and contradictions, and for this reason form is actually an unfolding of truth” (143). This dialectical form is a unity in suspension, which is in a pacified yet intensifying relation to its other. Therefore, it is the tension posited in the dialectics of the form, its divergences and

contradictions that complicates the comprehension and provokes subjective activity. Moreover, this aesthetic account of form would generate shudder as an afterimage, which is a response to suspension and a function of the element of “indeterminacy” (20).

In terms of the content, Ghadirian’s *Nil, Nil* can be seen as dialectical as it juxtaposes the conflicting signifiers, one with ‘the other’, which is the apparent tranquility of the domestic space with a trace of war, and puts them in an ongoing interaction. A pair of red pumps, facing outside, is juxtaposed with a pair of military boots coming in and bringing the war home. A hand grenade is surrounded by fresh fruits in a fruit bowl, a multi-colored scarf is hung along with a grayish helmet, etc. However, on the level of form, this dialectical juxtaposition does not produce a vigorous tension as Adorno addresses in his aesthetic theory. For the military object, as the opposing force and an outsider, does not invade the inside, but sits and fits in perfectly in the domestic space. In this context, the even lighting, and the proportionate composition and “arrangement,” without the application of any technique of cutting, cropping, collage, or montage, produces a solid, bright, and multihued image that is inviting rather than challenging, and fails to generate shudder. The outcome is the companionship among the opposing forces in which, the other, dissolving into the whole, does not sustain its particularity, and does not contribute to the conflict. Empty of conflict, then, the imagery is not a “self-antagonistic” or a “refracted” one, but a self-evident one.

In *Bringing the War Home*, another example with the subject of war produced in a different historical moment and context, Rosler juxtaposes the domestic space with the scenes

from the Vietnam War during the peak of U.S. engagement in Vietnam. These images are a series of photomontages in which the setting of an embellished interior is penetrated by a documentary account of the Vietnam War scene (Figures 17-19). In a catalogue essay written on the series in 1991, Laura Cottingham refers to the significance of utilizing the collage technique in producing the aesthetic effect. Cottingham explains that Rosler's aim to apply this technique which had been "favored by the Surrealists and later the Pop artist ... isn't unconscious, the ironic or the formal," but as a response to Rosler's "frustration" with the images circulating in the media in a way that it sustains an illusion of separation between what happens in the domestic space in the U.S., and what happens in the war in Vietnam. In response to that, "Rosler's montages re-connect two sides of human experience, the war in Vietnam, and the living rooms in Amerika, which have been falsely separated." In this constructed separation, Cottingham continues, the consumer media obliterates the "political and economic connection between your cozy sofa and someone else's dead body," and visualizes them as two unrelated experiences. To unravel the "artificiality" of this deceptive split, Rosler imposes the dead bodies on to the domestic spaces, challenging the separation between the two and the tranquility and beauty of the latter.

Unlike *Nil, Nil*, in Rosler's dialectical juxtaposition of one with the other, the imagery goes beyond an "arrangement" that only puts the opposing forces in "mathematized" proportions, and asks for an aesthetic response that is a critical "subjective activity". The thematic tension between the documentary account of the war and placid interiors is

“sedimented” in the formal practice of collage, imposing the traumatizing account on the organized domestic background. The illusion of the separation between the two apparently unrelated sources of image is vanished as they both come together, through photomontage, in the same picture. The documentary accounts come to speak as they ‘intrude’ on the domestic space and renounce its serenity. Imposing on the image while not fitting in, they are complementary to the truth content of the image but do not accompany, or get unified with each other. In contrast, they remain particular, and speak through their particularity. This eloquent particularity, the conflict, is able to produce shudder, which then transcends to a critical subjective activity.

Comparing the aesthetic response to *Nil, Nil* with *Bringing the War Home*, one can argue that the truth content in *Nil, Nil* cannot successfully be translated into a dialectical form in which two opposing forces are in conflict with each other. The proportionate composition and the gleaming imagery reduce the visualization to the practice of commercial photography where the outcome is a solid and beautiful image in which no indeterminacy is actualized. In this corresponding formal “arrangement,” it would be challenging to think of the ‘fitting’ particular as to be able to speak. Referring back to Adorno’s aesthetic theory, “[i]t could almost be stated as a rule, one that testified to the depth at which form and content [Inhalt] are mediated in each other, that the relations of the parts to the whole, an essential aspect of form, is constituted by way of detours. Artworks lose themselves in order to find themselves” (147). In the absence of any “detours,” under the proportionate lighting and soft lines in the composition that merge into

each other, one could even argue that the work shares boundaries with kitsch as there is no formal tension and disturbance sedimented in the image, and as the formal features, structured around proportion, result in a clear-cut and evident imagery that does not demand a critical aesthetic response.

Adorno asserts that art is motivated by conflict and is only survived by contradiction. In *Nil, Nil*, however, it was examined (in comparison with *Bringing the War Home*) that the proportionate composition, with the fitting particular dissolved into the whole, enervates the dialectical ether, which is the outcome of contradiction. Moreover, the polished and solid surface of the work seems to be unwilling to magnify the un-beautiful as its antithesis. Therefore, the opposing force, the military object, is complaisant with its dialectical partner, the domestic space.

Examining the formal choice in *Bringing the War Home* once again, one notes how Rosler magnifies the particularity of the dead bodies against the tranquil backdrop of the beautiful interior in her photomontages to warn the audience of the direct link between the two apparently unrelated sources of image. In *Roadside Ambush* (Figure 17), for example, the inviting and spacious living room with its white walls, floor, and ceiling, comfortable sofa and armchairs, and a window that looks out upon greenery, is penetrated by the dead body. The crumpled body lying in the interior disrupts the artificiality of the proportionate lay out, the pervasive soothing effect of the white color, the coziness of the space, and even the natural beauty outside the window. Mocking the beauty, the juxtaposition reminds us of the ongoing

situation which had been vastly ignored. Where this emphasis on the visibility of the bodies in *Bringing the War Home* is the result of Rosler's frustration with the ignorance of the media and parts of society to recognize that "the war is always home" (Cottingham), the absence of the dead or suffering body in *Nil, Nil* can be seen as the frustration with the propagandistic exploitation of the bodies during the war, overrepresented in public space murals. Therefore, the tension in *Nil, Nil* between the military object and the private space can be seen as a desire to undo the exploited narration of the war, retrieve the narration into the interior, and re-narrate the private experience of the war in the absence of the body. Then, the body is eliminated and replaced by a trace, the military object, that can be taken as the symbol of the diverse range of participants and experiences of the war. However, the harmonious composition does not allow the frustration to be manifested as it is in *Bringing the War Home*. Therefore, the work suffers from the absence of frustration and "self-antagonism," the contradiction and suspension, and the lack of vigorous "formal" tension between the opposing forces. The result, therefore, is an obvious, concrete, and interrupted image.

This obviousness in the gleaming images resonates with Clement Greenberg's account of Kitsch in his "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," in which, after appreciating the avant-garde, Greenberg speaks of kitsch as its rearguard: "simultaneously with the entrance of the avant-garde, a second new cultural phenomenon appeared in the industrial West ... kitsch: popular, commercial art and literature with their chromeotypes, magazine covers, illustrations, ads, slick and pulp fiction, comics, Tin Pan Alley music, tap dancing, Hollywood movies, etc." (11). As a

product of industrial revolution and the cause for the pervasiveness of “universal literacy” (11), Greenberg believes that kitsch requires the availability of a well-known culture whose “perfected self-consciousness” (12) is misused by kitsch. Therefore, kitsch is “self-evident” (16), one in which the familiarity of the form with the experience of the audience avoids the intensified subjective activity. In kitsch, the audience “recognizes and sees things in the way in which he recognizes and sees things outside of pictures- there is no discontinuity between art and life ... so realistically that identifications are self-evident immediately and without any effort on the part of the spectator” (16). Therefore, Greenberg concludes, "if the avant-garde imitates the processes of art, kitsch ... imitates its effects" (17).

In “East from the West, an Interview with Shadi Ghadirian,”¹⁶ Iman Afsarian, the contemporary Iranian artist and art critic, criticizes Ghadirian’s *Nil, Nil* along the same lines. Criticizing Ghadirian’s works for their directness, and for sending the message in a very direct way that leaves nothing unsaid or challenging, he argues that

the critique ... is of their straightforwardness. For instance, the cultural dichotomy is depicted by juxtaposing the traditional clothing with technological phenomena in one image, and the message is transformed in no time. The work’s message is ... so clear that nothing is left unsaid ... while art usually put us in a blank space that only can be

¹⁶ "شرق از غرب، شادی قدیریان در گفت و گو با ایمان افسریان و مهران مهاجر،" *فصلنامه حرفه: هنرمند*. 33 (تابستان 1390). 56-63.

filled with effort ... I think art happens when something is remained unsaid thus challenges the mind. (58)¹⁷

Afsarian continues by asserting that his critique of Ghadirian's oeuvre does not address the what of it, but the how of it. In other words, Afsarian sees no problem with the cliché subject matter that Ghadirian choses to reflect on, but with the approach that she picks to grapple with this subject matter. Therefore, Afsarian argues, it is not a failure for the artist to be interested in the discourse of dichotomies. It is, however, her formalistic choice that is problematic. For the way through which Ghadirian structures the content, Afsarian believes, is confined to a basic critical challenge that does not extend to an analytical phase. The result is, thinking of Adorno's aesthetic theory, a harmonious composition that lacks contradiction and the ability to produce shudder.

There are definitely similarities between Greenberg's account of kitsch and the harmonious and un-conflicting composition, polished imagery, and the self-evident content in *Nil, Nil*. However, one might still argue for the significance of *Nil, Nil* and ask if the aesthetic failure at work is enough to renounce the work as art and recognize it as kitsch. To come up with an answer, I look back to Adorno and his account of kitsch, for while Greenberg in "Avant-

¹⁷ My translation from the Farsi:

"نقدی که به این کارها وارد است، صراحت آنهاست. مثلاً دوگانگی فرهنگی با قرار دادن پوشش قدیمی در کنار پدیده‌های تکنولوژیک در یک تصویر نمایش داده می‌شود و خیلی سریع پیامی منتقل می‌شود. پیام اثر ... واضح است و چیزی نگفته نمی‌ماند ... در حالی که معمولاً هنر ما را با نقطه خلاءای مواجه می‌کند که به سادگی پر نمی‌شود ... به نظر من هنر در آن نقطه‌ای اتفاق می‌افتد که چیزی نگفته می‌ماند و ذهن را به بازی می‌گیرد." (58)

Garde and Kitsch” sharply distinguishes kitsch from art, Adorno views kitsch in a more flexible way due to his dialectical theorization of the aesthetic.

In *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno indicates that “kitsch is an idiosyncratic concept that is as binding as it is elusive to definition” (36). Kitsch, Adorno explicates, is not the renunciation of art, “originating in disloyal accommodation to the enemy” (239), but is a hidden element in art that awaits an opportunity to flourish. This recounting of dialectical proximity between art and kitsch helps us to not entirely renounce *Nil, Nil*, and to consider the work in order to realize its artistic significance. However, thinking about Adorno’s aesthetic theory, it is not sufficient for art to be the locus of a polished arrangement in which form does not challenge the beautiful and leaves it untouched. Where there is no expression of self-antagonism, the experience of shudder “as a response, colored by fear of the overwhelming” (245), is enervated. For Adorno, then, kitsch is “the beautiful minus its ugly counterpart. So kitsch, the purified beauty, becomes vulnerable to an aesthetic taboo that in name of the beauty declares kitsch as ugly” (“Kitsch” in *Essays on Music*, 2002). In another elaboration on kitsch in *Aesthetic Theory*, he explains that it is the obsession with “the illusion of a pure realm of beauty” (252) that can deceive art to fall into the realm of kitsch:

The sensual appeal of art continues to be legitimate only when ... it is the bearer or a function of the content rather than an end in itself. One of the difficulties of new art is how to combine the desideratum of internal coherence, which always imports a certain degree of evident polish into the work, with opposition to the culinary element. Sometimes the work requires the culinary, while paradoxically the sensorium balks at it. (276)

Referring back to these observations and Adorno's recounting of the proximity between art and kitsch, I would like to argue that the aesthetic failure in *Nil, Nil* resonates with Adorno's account of kitsch as an obsession with the pure realm of beauty. Therefore, the aesthetic error of coming up with a polished arrangement that extends the notion of beauty to its edges disqualifies *Nil, Nil* from aesthetic success.

IV. CONCLUSION: ON THE QUESTION OF POLITICAL EFFECTIVENESS

The aesthetic failure in *Nil, Nil*, as discussed in the previous section, reduces the promotion of the content, its sedimentation into the form, and the experience of a vigorous shudder. This artistic decline is accompanied by another weakening formal decision which is the artist's choice to pick an even and similar setting resembling a bourgeois household in all the eighteen images. This limited display challenges the political effectiveness of the project and reduces it to a very personal narration of the war. Therefore, where *Nil, Nil* takes the first crucial step to reclaim the narration of the war by retrieving it from the propaganda-driven public space, it fails to fully diversify the narration, and only stays in the form of a personal diary.

Pointing out the very exclusive narration of the war in murals, Grigor in “(Re)Claiming Space” explains that “[i]n the narrative of martyrdom on these murals, the male soldier— always white and often young— is the sole protagonist of the war. He is brave but modest, religious but proactive, and distinctly non-Western looking” (37). In *Nil, Nil*, the absence of the human figure challenges this restricted portrayal of the protagonist of the war. However, the undiversified interior in all the images of the series exhibits a household that belongs to upper middle class urban dwellers and their peculiar lifestyle. The same context repeats in each and every image of the entire series, revealing the household that has enough income to afford a well-off lifestyle. This solid atmosphere, structured around semi-luxurious accessories and semi-prosperous

settings, suggests a personal and liberal claim on the war, one that forecloses the rendition of the claim of other participatory groups in the war who do not belong to this setting.

Picking on the same issue, Iman Afsarian in “East from the West, an Interview with Shadi Ghadirian” invokes a resonating critique of the class structures and asks if one can resist considering some of Ghadirian’s works free from the mechanism of the market:

the photos look like advertising images. Even if [these images] intend to criticize the system of the market, they would be incapable of doing that since they seem to exist in the system itself. This idiosyncrasy is especially obvious in the war series in which the language of the work is the language of fashion and consumption and at the same time seems to aim at a slight critique of war and violence. It is like talking about the complexities of the war, out of entertainment, in a gorgeous gathering in which all the guests are dressed up and great food is served. (60)¹⁸

Thinking about the social groups that are left behind in *Nil, Nil*, it can be concluded that while the work can be interpreted as an artistic attempt to release the narration of the war from the propagandistic space, and bring it back to the multi-layered domestic space, it ends up with the same exclusive and monolithic observation that conceals the involvement of other groups of the society aside from the liberal bourgeoisie. This ignorance could manifest the individualistic propensities that strengthen the formation of the contemporary political subjectivity. Therefore, where *Nil, Nil* can be seen as an attempt to undo the undemocratic

¹⁸ My translation from the Farsi:

"عکس ها گاهی خیلی شبیه به آن عکس های تبلیغاتی است. اگر هم می خواهد نقدی به آن سیستم داشته باشد ناتوان است چون خود درست درون آن مکانیسم قرار گرفته؛ به خصوص در کارهای مجموعه جنگ این موضوع خیلی واضح تر می شود که زبان آن زبان فشن و مد و سرمایه داری است و در عین حال نقد خیلی ملایمی هم به جنگ و خشونت دارد. درست مثل اینکه وسط یک مهمانی شیک و اشرافی که همه لباس های مد روز پوشیده اند و غذای عالی سرو می شود بابت سرگرمی کمی هم از مشکلات جنگ گله کنیم." (60)

propagandistic portrayal of the war, it only stays at the level of an isolating and individualistic narration of it, and fails to become an inclusionary portrayal. The authoritarianism at work in propaganda is challenged by the demands of the private vantage point. However, the private itself suppresses the public as it leaves out whoever that does not belong to its familiar context. This repetition of neglecting the public in its entirety sets forth a significant question about *Nil*, *Nil* as an instance of Iranian contemporary art; a question that wonders if the work and the like are able to reflect on the people who are left out of the authoritarian state because of the ideological disagreements, or they are themselves platforms to portray one very special ideology of living that is practiced by the liberal bourgeoisie. If the latter is the case, then these works, as examples of contemporary Iranian art, do not grapple with artistic potentials of the aesthetic realm enough to profoundly challenge the exclusionary strategies of the state, and to give voice to the neglected post-revolutionary and postwar social agents.

V. FIGURES



Figure 1, Fred Wilson. *Metalwork 1793-1880* from *Mining the Museum: An Installation by Fred Wilson*. 1992-1993, Slave shackles with silver pieces, Maryland Historical Society. Copy of original owned by the Maryland Historical Society.



Figure 2, *Wartime/ Wartime-Inspired Mural*. Post-1980, Iran, Web. Accessed November 2014.



Figure 3, *Wartime/ Wartime-Inspired Mural*. Post-1980, Iran, Web. Accessed November 2014.



Figure 4, *Wartime/ Wartime- Inspired Mural*. Post-1980, Iran, Web. Accessed November 2014.



Figure 5, *Wartime/ Wartime- Inspired Mural*. Post-1980, Iran, Web. Accessed November 2014.



Figure 6, *Wartime/ Wartime- Inspired Mural*. Post-1980, Iran, Web. Accessed November 2014.



Figure 7, *Wartime/ Wartime- Inspired Mural*. Post-1980, Iran, Web. Accessed November 2014.



Figure 8, *Wartime/ Wartime- Inspired Mural*. Post-1980, Iran, Web. Accessed October 2016.



Figure 9, Shadi Ghadirian. *Nil, Nil #1*. 2008, 76x76 Cm & 76x114 Cm, C-Print.
shadighadirian.com © 2009-2016



Figure 10, Shadi Ghadirian. *Nil, Nil #5*. 2008, 76x76 Cm & 76x114 Cm, C-Print.
shadighadirian.com © 2009-2016



Figure 11, Shadi Ghadirian. *Nil, Nil #6*. 2008, 76x76 Cm & 76x114 Cm, C-Print.
shadighadirian.com © 2009-2016



Figure 12, Shadi Ghadirian. *Nil, Nil #7*. 2008, 76x76 Cm & 76x114 Cm, C-Print.
shadighadirian.com © 2009-2016



Figure 13, Shadi Ghadirian. *Nil, Nil #10*, 2008. 76x76 Cm & 76x114 Cm. C-Print. shadighadirian.com © 2009-2016



Figure 14, Shadi Ghadirian. *Nil, Nil #4*. 2008, 76x76 Cm & 76x114 Cm, C-Print.
shadighadirian.com © 2009-2016



Figure 15, Shadi Ghadirian. *Nil, Nil #3*. 2008, 76x76 Cm & 76x114 Cm, C-Print.
shadighadirian.com © 2009-2016



Figure 16, Kazim Chalipa. *Certitude of Belief (Yaqin)*. * ca. 1981, From Middle Eastern Posters Collection, Box 3, Poster 67, Special Collections Research Center, The University of Chicago Library.

*During the war, this wartime poster was replicated as a large-scale mural.



Figure 17, Martha Rosler. *Roadside Ambush* from *Bringing the War Home: House Beautiful*. 1967-72, 49.9x59.9 Cm, Photomontage.

MoMA

© c. 1967-72 Martha Rosler



Figure 18, Martha Rosler. *Red Stripe Kitchen* from *Bringing the War Home: House Beautiful*. 1967-72, 60.3x46 Cm, Photomontage.

MoMA

© c. 1967-72 Martha Rosler



Figure 19, Martha Rosler. *Balloons* from *Bringing the War Home: House Beautiful*. 1967-72, 38.4x29.5 Cm, Photomontage.
MoMA
© c. 1967-72 Martha Rosler

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