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[http://thanatosjournal.files.wordpress.com/2012/12/meis\\_mobiledeathvideos\\_than222013.pdf](http://thanatosjournal.files.wordpress.com/2012/12/meis_mobiledeathvideos_than222013.pdf)**Mobile Death Videos in Protest Movements: Cases from Iran and Syria on Television: Balancing Privacy and Voyeurism****Mareike Meis****Abstract**

In the Iranian and Syrian protest movements, the emergence of videos of dying protest participants recorded by mobile phones and disseminated via social platforms (esp. YouTube) have played a significant role in mobilizing and solidarizing the broader public for these movements. In this regard, several questions on the broader effects of such media phenomena in protest and conflict contexts arise; e.g., on how mobile videos recording death are perceived and construed in different media and public contexts, and which implications the prevalence of such videos brings about for the public perception and interpretation of the Iranian and Syrian protests and conflicts. The article presents an explorative study on two mobile death videos that appeared in course of the Iranian and Syrian protests and conflicts: the mobile video of Neda Agha-Soltan's death in Iran and the mobile video of a man filming his own death in Syria. Special emphasis is given to the discursive and media-aesthetical effects of these mobile death videos by focusing on their symbolic and representational impact, the affectivity of these recordings of death, and the discursive and aesthetical practices in bringing forward certain accounts on the protest and conflict reality in Iran and Syria.

**Introduction**

In recent years, protest movements in the Middle East and North Africa have given public visibility a significant new dimension.<sup>1</sup> Among these movements, the so-called Iranian Twitter Revolution in 2009 (Sreberny & Khiabany 2010, 174) and the Syrian YouTube Uprising starting in 2011 (Khamis, Gold, & Vaughn 2012) are well-known instances of a process juxtaposing a one-to-many communication of mass media with a many-to-many communication on social media. The growing use of social media, in which an asymmetrical communication is gradually replaced by a more symmetrical one, has participatory and emancipatory effects on both civic and political activism and on practices of reporting and documenting (ibid., 4; Shirky 2008, 107; Burkart 2007, 7, 167–68; Ali & Fahmy 2013, 57).

In this respect, mobile phones in general and mobile videos and images in particular have become instruments through which protest movements and civil society make their voices heard worldwide and put their (political) interests on the global agenda (Döring & Gundolf 2006, 256; Castells et al. 2004, 212; Castells 2012). Notably in Iran and Syria, videos of dying protest participants captured on mobile phones and disseminated via social platforms have played an outstanding role. As Starr observed:

It was from Iran ... that the world first saw the grainy phone camera images of pro-democracy activists being gunned down by state forces. But it was in Syria that mobile phone cameras gave illustration to an entire revolution. (2012, 55)

The proliferation of mobile phone images and videos from Iran and Syria raises several questions about the broader effects of such media phenomena in the context of protest and conflict, including how mobile videos recording death are perceived and construed in different media and public contexts, and what the implications of the prevalence of such videos are for the public perception and interpretation of the Iranian and Syrian conflicts. This article focuses on the integration of a discursive and media-aesthetic perspective in one approach to the analysis of mobile death videos in the protests and conflicts in Iran and Syria. Its aim is to point out the oft-neglected interdependency of discursive and media-aesthetic effects and to identify central points of reference for further research on the public perception and interpretation of the Iranian and Syrian situations.<sup>2</sup>

For this purpose, the article presents an exploration of two mobile death videos that appeared in the course of the Iranian and Syrian protests and conflicts: the mobile video of Neda Agha-Soltan's death in Iran and the mobile video of a man filming his own death in Syria. Despite their many similarities these videos were in fact selected because they differ in one central respect. Both emerged as manifestations of a conflict between a civil society and an authoritarian regime, and both were subject to a process of utilisation for different actors' purposes and (political) interests. By and large, both videos have the same plot—a protest participant is shot by a sniper—, but the incidents are shown from two very different perspectives: in the Iranian case, the mobile video was shot from an observer's perspective and provided an intense visual account of Neda's death, whereas in the Syrian case, the mobile video was shot from the cameraman's point of view and shows an unseen and uncertain, but nonetheless affecting death of an unknown person. Because of these distinct aesthetics and displays of death, these mobile videos meet the criteria for a study of the interdependency of discursive and media-aesthetic effects on public perception and interpretation of the Iranian and Syrian protests and conflicts. Given the exploratory nature of this article, the public reception of the videos is examined in different media contexts, namely news coverage, documentaries, and artistic performances, as a model for further study. The respective reports, sequences, and artistic pieces were selected by means of the snowball system to provide a first examination of and approach to the phenomenon of mobile death videos in these particular protests and conflicts.

The following sections first introduce the discursive and media-aesthetic perspectives as applied in this article and combine them into one research perspective for the study of the selected mobile death videos via the concept of agential realism. Second, the broader conflict situations in Iran and Syria and the appearance of the selected mobile videos are briefly outlined. Third, the mobile death videos are examined for their discursive and media-aesthetic effects on the perception and interpretation of the Iranian and Syrian protests and conflicts. Of particular interest are the symbolic and representational effects of the selected mobile death videos, the affective impacts of these recordings of death, and the discursive and aesthetic practices in making public certain accounts of the protest and conflict reality in Iran and Syria. Fourth, the wider consequences of the discursive-media-aesthetic effects of mobile death videos for the prevailing order of power are explored. Finally, the conclusion summarises the broader implications of mobile death videos for the public perception and interpretation of protests and conflicts and indicates points of reference for further research.

### **A Discursive-Media-Aesthetic Research Perspective on Mobile Death Videos**

This article proceeds from the understanding that in today's digitalised world, discourse practices and the aesthetic materiality of the media are elements that both constitute and result from what is perceived as reality. The underlying

theoretical assumptions for this understanding derive from the merging of Foucauldian discourse theory, media aesthetics, and the concept of agential realism, which are sketched in the following paragraphs.

Examined from a Foucauldian perspective, discourses are not mere conglomerates of signs, but practices that systematically constitute the objects and subjects being talked about (Foucault 2008 [1969], 525). Discourse practices follow regulative formations, i.e. constitutive epistemological rules, which determine—or at least constrain—which statements are considered or recognised as meaningful within a particular discourse (Doll 2012, 52; Foucault 2008 [1969], 504; Foucault 2008 [1966], 28–29; Barad 2007, 63). Put differently, discourse practices are the conditions that circumscribe what is speakable or visible in public discourse and how reality—or a given protest or conflict situation—is perceived and interpreted (Maasen, Mayerhausen, & Renggli 2006, 13–14). The analytical attention of a Foucauldian discourse perspective is directed to the identification of struggles of interpretation in which discourse and counter-discourse are situated in conflict with each other and become the arena for negotiation processes between power and counter-power (Foucault 2008 [1976], 1104–05; Jäger 2001, 130). Hence, a discourse analysis concentrates on the relation between statements, the conditions of their validity regarding their discursive truths, and their circumstances of existence within a discourse (Doll 2012, 52; Foucault 2008 [1969], 504).

Usually, the Foucauldian discourse perspective is applied to texts, turning the research focus to what is speakable or unspeakable in discourse (Mayerhausen 2006, 78). However, Foucault (2008 [1969], 580–81) also took the materiality of a statement into account in identifying its discursive effect. Although he primarily considered the syntactic and semantic level of statements as well as their authorship in *the Archaeology of Knowledge* (2008 [1969]), the inquiry on the discursive effects of the materiality of statements should not be confined to the context and form of utterance, but also include an audio-visual and affective dimension of sensual experiences. In this respect, the media embeddedness of statements—e.g. in a mobile video—makes a difference in the discursive effect. With this in mind, one enters the field of media aesthetics.

As applied in this article, media aesthetics refers to questions on the perceptive effects that originate in the technical apparatus and in the particular form of media expression (cf. Schnell 2002, 208). The research objective of a media-aesthetic approach is therefore the exploration of media-specific potentialities and features in the sense of techniques and means for processing contents and objects (cf. *ibid.*). In accordance with Walter Benjamin's (1936) thinking, a media-aesthetic perspective focuses on technical mediation and the manner of reproduction. In his essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* Benjamin (*ibid.*, 4–7) inquired into issues on the aesthetics of photographic and film representations, which are still debated today (e.g. questions on the here and now, cursoriness and repeatability, or authenticity and authorship). Consequently, the technical apparatus of media is a central aspect of the perception, constitution, and representation of reality (*ibid.*, 13–14).

Thus, a media-aesthetic perspective is an important complement to the discourse-analytical study of media phenomena, as it goes beyond the often exclusive focus on verbal and visual statements in discourse-theoretical inquiries and overcomes the broad disregard of the material and aesthetic quality of media. Especially given Leschke's (2013, 21–22) explanation of the emergence of new media with cultural and social valency, which opens up new aesthetic forms of representation, reaches new recipient groups, and thereby challenges the traditional order of the so-called definatory power, the importance of merging a discourse-theoretical and media-aesthetic perspective in the study of mobile death videos in the context of the Iranian and Syrian protests and conflicts becomes apparent. Karen Barad's (2007, 26) concept of agential realism represents just such a unifying approach.

In general, the concept of agential realism endeavours to provide a new understanding of how discourse practices are related to the material world (ibid., 34). Barad (ibid., ix) understands the perceivable reality as a social-material practice that is equally constituted by discursive and material, human and non-human, natural and cultural factors. She defines the relation between these different factors as reciprocal *intra*-action and posits that being in the world is not an individual, but an entangled matter. Individuals or entities do not pre-exist an interaction, but only come into being in the course of and as part of their interrelated interactions (ibid., ix). Thus, following Barad (2007, 336), the media-aesthetic and discursive effects of the selected mobile death videos can be understood as reciprocally and equally involved in the intra-active constitution, perception, and interpretation of the conflict and protest reality in Iran and Syria.

Hence, the discursive and aesthetic dimensions of mobile death videos are analysed here as interdependent and intra-active aspects of the perception and interpretation of conflict reality in general, and of the Iranian and Syrian protests and conflicts in particular. Analytical questions on this basis are: (1) What are the struggles of interpretation that unfold in the context of the selected mobile death videos and whose views and voices are visible and audible in the public discourse? (2) What perceptions and interpretations derive from the media-aesthetic quality of the selected mobile death videos and how do they relate to the visibility and audibility in public discourse? (3) What order of power becomes apparent in the discursive-media-aesthetic practice in the context of the selected mobile death videos?

Building on the interdependency and intra-activity of discursive and media-aesthetic effects, I will not address these questions in a sequential manner, but rather will interweave them by focusing on different analytical themes. This method is guided by Barad's (2007, 30) approach, which is related to her concept of agential realism. Her methodology promotes a diffractive analysis,<sup>3</sup> in which insights provided by different theoretical approaches are not read against, but *through* one another to shed light on the making of differences as they occur. Following an outline of the broader protest and conflict contexts in Iran and Syria, I study the discursive and media-aesthetic effects of the selected mobile death videos on this basis.

### **The Iranian Green Movement 2009 and the Mobile Video of Neda's Death**

The protest movement in Iran—better known as the *Iranian Green Movement* and often called *Iran's Twitter Revolution*—began in the context of the Iranian presidential election in June 2009. The Green Movement was constituted on the verge of the election by a grassroots mobilisation of the Iranian people, who supported the reformist campaign (Jafari 2010, 181; Sahimi 2010, 295; Emamzadeh 2011, 19). On June 12, the announcement of Ahmadinejad's two-thirds victory dashed the hopes of the reform-orientated population (Abrahamian 2010, 66). The reformists' supporters claimed election fraud, and shortly afterwards green waves of protest filled the streets of Tehran (Jafari 2010, 180, 186–88). After the first demonstrations, the Iranian government took drastic measures: it imposed a ban on demonstrations, threatened to execute everyone who had participated in or called for demonstrations, and unleashed thousands of revolutionary guards and Basij militia<sup>4</sup> on motorbikes armed with assault rifles, knives, and truncheons to put a stop to the protests (Abrahamian 2010, 68). Nevertheless, the street protests continued throughout the year (Hashemi & Postel 2010, xv).

One crucial reason for the persistence of the protests was their social-network character, the backbone of which was digital media such as the internet and mobile phones (Sahimi 2010, 304; Kurzman 2010, 7). Although the Iranian regime carried out a widespread „media crackdown“ (Sabety 2010, 119) by blocking mobile communication and websites as well as by expelling foreign journalists and shutting down foreign broadcasting and oppositional newspapers (Alizadeh 2010, 4; Abrahamian 2010, 68), it did not succeed in stopping the stream of information flowing out of Iran. First and foremost, Twitter and mobile phones took centre stage once the protesters found ways to unblock websites and disseminate their reports and images of the conflict (Hashemi & Najjar 2010, 128). Videos and photographs recorded by mobile phones became accessible to the international public via blogs, Facebook, and YouTube (Sabety 2010, 119; Sreberny & Khiabany

2010, 173; Emamzadeh 2011, 21). In the absence of other information sources, foreign news media soon came to rely on these amateur videos, photos, and reports in covering the events in Iran (Sabety 2010, 120; Emamzadeh 2011, 21).

One sad zenith of the mobile phone and social media usage was reached on 20 June 2009: Neda Agha-Soltan—a young, female Iranian student—was shot dead in the streets of Tehran. Her dying moments were captured on a mobile video and disseminated via YouTube for the whole world to be witnessed (Bashi 2010, 40; Emamzadeh 2011, 24; Sabety 2010, 121). Shortly after the video was released on the web, the opposition declared a Basji militiaman the perpetrator; the Iranian government on the other hand accused a protest participant. To this day, the real circumstances of Neda's death remain unclear (Bach Malek 2010, 287). However, her death played an important role for the Green Movement and the following protest actions.

The first mobile video of Neda's death was uploaded on YouTube on 20 June 2009—the very day the incident took place. The uploading user identifies himself in the description of the video as a doctor who was coincidentally close to Neda when she was shot. He gives a detailed eyewitness account of the circumstances of her death, the location, and the perpetrator. He also identifies the maker of the mobile video as a friend of his who had accompanied him that day (FEELTHELIGHT 2009). As it happened, Neda's death was captured not once, but twice. On 21 June 2009, a second video was uploaded on YouTube, showing the 40-second footage of the first video followed by a 13-second footage of the incident filmed by another mobile phone user. The description of this video is less detailed; it notes only that the name *Neda* means *voice* in English, and comments on the world's witnessing and remembering her death (pmayer33 2009).

Almost instantly, the footage of Neda's death gained worldwide attention, not only via the internet, but also through international media coverage, e.g. by the BBC, CNN, Al-Jazeera, France24, and Euronews, which included single sequences of the footages in their reports (Afshar 2010, 242). Still images from the mobile videos were also reprinted in newspapers and news magazines and distributed via news websites (e.g. Heyer 2009; Putz 2009a; Wernicke 2009b; Jaschensky 2009a; von Rohr 2009; Abadi et al. 2009). Moreover, Neda's death gave rise to documentaries by the BBC and HBO (batracom 2009a-f; TheNedaOfIran 2010a-g) and inspired artists to compose songs and poems in her memory and in the cause of the Green Movement, accompanied by videos containing the filmed sequences (e.g. sepehrpro 2009; VideoHalls 2013; voetbalnu 2009; GregVguitarist 2009; IranBrave 2009). The impact of these media accounts of Neda's death and the mobile footage is elaborated on below following a brief introduction to the Syrian case.

### **The Syrian Uprising and the Mobile Video of a Man Filming His Own Death**

The Syrian uprising occurred in the broader context of the Arab Spring. The starting point is usually referred to as 15 March 2011, the date when demonstrators were shot dead and hundreds were injured during demonstrations in Dara'a (Syria) in response to the arrest of school children who had written graffiti demanding the fall of the regime. In the following days, men, women, and children took to the streets in other Syrian cities and villages to express their solidarity and to demonstrate against police arbitrariness, the emergency legislation, corruption, and nepotism (bpb 2011; Wieland 2012, 18). To suppress the protests, the regime resorted to military force, deployed snipers, laid siege to cities, and conducted mass arrests and tortures. Nevertheless, the intensity and the reach of protests increased, and in response to the regime's violence, the protesters' demands changed: in July of 2011, more than one million Syrian people called for the resignation of President Bashar Al-Assad (Asseburg 2013, 12).<sup>5</sup>

International journalists and observers alike have depended on the social media for reporting and getting an idea of the events in Syria (Gerlach & Metzger 2013, 5). Foreign journalists are subject to an entry ban. The Syrian news media have been state controlled since 2001 and provide a biased perspective on events (Wimmen 2011; Pies & Madanat 2011, 4). In

this restricted environment, ‘mobile phone videos became virtually the only way to report on protests’ (Comminos 2011, 9), while YouTube emerged as the central platform for citizen video reportage—giving the protests the byname *YouTube Uprising* (Youmans & York 2012, 30).

At first, the Syrian regime intended to shut off the internet completely, but decided to allow access to Facebook, Blogspot, and YouTube to enhance its means of surveillance. Although this move demonstrates the potential use of the social media for state repression (ibid., 322), for the Syrian government the attempt to maintain control of the news agenda and insurgent behaviour backfired badly: After political activists transferred mobile phones, cameras, and laptops to Syria illegally, videos disseminated via mobile phones and uploaded to Facebook or YouTube provided the international public with images of unarmed demonstrators and protesters shot down or beaten down by regime forces (Axford 2011, 683; Youmans & York 2012, 230; Khamis, Gold, & Vaughn 2012, 9).

As the civil war in Syria turned more and more violent, the videos on YouTube likewise increased in their display of brutality. The short clips soon became part of the conflict, each side producing its own propaganda material or picking up existing material from the other side either to discredit or intimidate the enemy (Salloum 2013). One example of how video material became an instrument of war and conflict is the mobile video of a man recording his own death, which was uploaded to YouTube on 4 June 2011 (netspanner 2011).

The video is available on YouTube at least twice in its original form—once with an English heading and description, once with an Arabic heading and description.<sup>6</sup> The camera shoots the surrounding buildings in a poor quality and unstable pan; troubled Arabic voices and gunshots are heard. By chance, the camera catches for a few seconds a man in a green suit: he approaches the man doing the filming, aims a rifle at the cameraman, and then shoots him. The image breaks off; a rustling sound is heard. The image goes blank for more than thirty seconds while the Arabic voices seem more agitated and a groaning, human sound is audible. After one minute and 24 seconds, the video ends, leaving many questions: What happened to the man who was shot? Is he dead? Who is he? Who is the man with the gun? Why did the cameraman not hide or duck when the gun was pointed at him? And is the video real or fake?

In the English version, the video itself as well as the description offers little information about the broader circumstances of the incident. The caption simply says, ‘Man films his own death while covering protests in Syria’ (ibid.), and then proceeds to a translation of the Arabic dialogue in the video. In the translation the cameraman and one of his companions describe the situation as an unreasonable, armed attack on Syrians by military forces on 1 June 2011, then someone says that the cameraman was shot in the head. The last line quotes the companion as saying, ‘What you were filming?!?!’ (ibid.), thereby characterising the video as an (un)fortunate accident and creating an impression of authenticity. However, the authenticity of the footage has been highly disputed in the commentaries on YouTube (ibid.). The video also became the subject of news reports and artistic performances, which will be examined below.

Having introduced each case, as well as the theoretical and methodological approaches, I will now proceed to an analysis of the selected mobile death videos from Iran and Syria. The following paragraphs examine the discursive and media-aesthetic effects, firstly, by looking at the impact on the perception and interpretation of the protests and conflicts in terms of international mobilisation and solidarity with the movements and, secondly, by concentrating on their influence on the visibility and audibility of different stories on the conflicts and protests in public discourse.

### **The Mobilising and Solidarising Impact of the Mobile Death Videos**

The mobile death videos have had a worldwide mobilising and solidarising effect. Particularly in the Iranian case, the videos

strengthened the ideological basis of the movement, as Neda's death became a public happening as the result of the worldwide dissemination of the video and the images of the incident. Three central features stand out in this respect: the function of the mobile death images as visual proof and symbols of state brutality and the asymmetric violence that persists in Iran and Syria; the recourse to religious and cultural myths in the accounts of Neda's death; and the impact of the images on the affectivity of human tragedy and death.<sup>7</sup>

*Visual Proof and Symbols of State Brutality and Asymmetric Violence*

One significant feature of the solidarising effect is the witness account produced by the videos and their intimate closeness. The grainy quality of the mobile videos resembles what Dovey has described as a 'low grade video image' (2000, 55) in the context of camcorder footage used in documentaries. According to Dovey, the low quality video image 'has become *the* privileged form of TV "truth telling", signifying authenticity and an indexical reproduction of the real world' (ibid.; italics in original). For this reason, the grainy video images imply that the recording shows what was before the camera. Features such as to-camera close-up, shaking camera movements, and an embodied intimacy of the technical process create a feeling of immediacy in regard to the presence and the filmmaking (ibid., 56–57).

Furthermore, considering not only the unsteady movement of the mobile camera towards Neda, who is lying on the ground, then the camera's closing in on her face and circling the persons surrounding her to get an unobstructed shot of her dying seconds, and also considering the moment of recording from the filmmaker's point of view, we come closer to an instant of disturbing immediacy. As Kurzman described it:

Somebody at this demonstration saw a person get shot, and within a second or two, he took out his cell phone, turned on the video function, and filmed the victim. He didn't take a quick picture and run away from the sniper. Instead, he walked toward Neda. There is no zoom function on standard cell-phone cameras, but by the final frame of the video, Neda's face almost fills the frame. Thus, the cameraman must have held his phone out just a couple feet from this dying woman. There's something cruel in that, but also something very media savvy—knowing that the close-up will maximize the impact of the image. (Kurzman 2010, 13)

Considering Strangelove's statement that YouTube and its amateur videos are perceived as providing 'a more authentic experience' (2010, 65)—i.e. something more real than TV—, the participating and sympathetic impression of the mobile video of Neda's death becomes apparent. Complementing the sympathetic aesthetics of the mobile video, Neda and the circumstances of her death were framed in a way that made her symbolically useful on an international level in the cause of the Green Movement. For instance, news reports accentuated the violent aspect of Neda's death, while at the same time stating that Neda had fallen victim to a brutal militiaman of the regime (Wernicke 2009b).

In the Syrian case, the aesthetics of the mobile death video entail a comparable immediate and sympathetic appeal, especially given that the unstable panning of the camera appears to convey the anxiety of the man behind the camera who falls victim to the regime. However, a more important symbolic effect emanates from the two-fold shooting violence shown in the video. As Rabih Mroué (2012, 29) has already indicated in his artistic performance, the double shooting—one with a rifle and the other with a camera—signifies the two conflicting sides: the forces of the regime armed with automatic weapons and the protesters armed with mobile phones. In this regard, the video functions as visual proof of disproportionate violence and state cruelty against civilians, which is ongoing in Syria.

Thus, in both cases the mobile videos of protesters' deaths are strong visual symbols of the state brutality and asymmetric violence prevailing in Iran and Syria, which is having a justifying effect on the cause and stance of the protest movements. Together with the witnessing and sympathetic appeal of the videos' aesthetics, the solidarity and support for the protests is legitimised.

*Female Victim or Martyr? Ambitious Representations of Neda and the Ideological Strengthening of the Green Movement*

The exhibits of Neda's death in international reportage had an ambitious character. On the one hand, the media portrayed her as the innocent female victim of a male-dominated regime, a passive bystander who accidentally got caught up in the struggle against the powers that be (Afshar 2010, 243–46). On the other hand, an opposite characterisation of Neda prevailed: that of a female martyr and active fighter for a (morally) higher cause (i.e., the cause of the Green Movement).<sup>8</sup> In this regard, mainstream media described Neda's martyrdom as self-sacrifice in the struggle for freedom and democracy for the Iranian people (Jaschensky 2009b; Putz 2009a).

While the former portrayal accords with the symbolic effect of the mobile death video in terms of attesting to the presence of asymmetric violence in Iran, the martyr portrayal is closely linked to an identity-establishing effect for the supporters of the Green Movement. In light of the omnipresent phrase 'I am Neda' on social network sites and protest signs (Putz 2009a), Neda's death—or her sacrifice—offered potential for strengthening the collective identity and ideological foundation of the Green Movement. Furthermore, the title 'the Jeanne d'Arc of Iran' or Tehran bestowed on her in news reports (ibid.; Davis 2009) extended the symbolic effect of Neda's martyrdom to the international level. In the myth, Jeanne d'Arc's actions have been described as resistance to authority in the battle for law, justice, freedom, and peace (Heilig 2008, 20; Schäfer 2011; Rieger, Breithecker & Wodianka 2003, 152). The reference to Jeanne d'Arc attributes a similar aspiration to Neda and the Green Movement. Through recourse to this collective figure of Western culture, the cause of the Green Movement gained cross-cultural legitimacy.

Moreover, Jeanne d'Arc has been depicted as an emancipated fighter in the myth (Rieger, Breithecker, & Wodianka 2003, 152; Heilig 2008, 20). Invoked as a parallel to Neda's death, the analogy alludes first and foremost to the discrimination against women in Iran. The reference to the French martyr emphasises the emancipated role of women in the Iranian Green Movement, as well as their desire for more freedom. Neda, and in a symbolic sense Iranian women as a whole, take a stand for their ideals and for political change just as the historical model did. Considering the prevailing Western desire to liberate Muslim women (Kurzman 2010, 9), this portrayal in the mainstream media made Neda the iconic symbol of the century-long struggle of Iranian women for freedom and emancipation and thus increased international solidarity with the Green Movement.

*The Affectivity of Human Tragedy and Death*

In the mobile videos of Neda's death, the displayed patterns of 'revolutionary action and state brutality appeal to wider audiences largely because they are touched primarily by the human [tragedy] being played out' (Axford 2011, 684). And although the effect of these scenes may be fleeting (ibid.), it is amplified by the frequent revisiting of the videos in other media context. The human tragedy of this event was evident in numerous reports that covered the grieving of Neda's family and friends, as well as the various ceremonies of mourning both in Iran and abroad (e.g. Putz 2009b; Jaschensky 2009b; von Rohr 2009; batracom 2009f). Furthermore, in Neda's case human loss was personified because her identity was revealed right from the start.<sup>9</sup>

The dramatic language in the news reports on Neda's death reinforced the impression of human tragedy and charged the coverage emotionally (Reimann 2009, Putz 2009b; Wernicke 2009b; Jaschensky 2009a). This emotion-laden representation



of Neda's death is a central aspect of the international mobilisation of the Green Movement. According to Castells (2012, 13–14), emotions are highly relevant for social movements on an individual level. Citing the theory of affective intelligence, Castells points to fear and enthusiasm as the most important emotions for social mobilisation and political action, and develops a logic of transformation from emotion to action that is 'rooted in outrage, propelled by enthusiasm and motivated by hope' (ibid., 15). This kind of logic may drive a social movement if a communication process enables the connection of emotional activation from one individual to another and thereby creates an empathic relationship and a sense of togetherness by sharing feelings attached to an emotional event (ibid., 14–15):

If many individuals feel humiliated, exploited, ignored or misrepresented, they are ready to transform their anger into action, as soon as they overcome their fear. And they overcome their fear by the extreme expression of anger, in the form of outrage, when learning of an unbearable event suffered by someone with whom they identify. (ibid., 15)

Neda's death qualifies as the unbearable event with which supporters and sympathisers of the Green Movement could identify. As a young protester, she represented the part of Iranian society that was hit particularly hard by state repressions and that was depicted as the regime's principal antagonists during the protests. Thus, the recording of Neda's death functioned both as proof of the prevailing danger and violence in Iran against demonstrators who are fighting for their rights and as testimony of the willingness of the Iranian people to push against the Iranian regime for their rights. The combination produced a shared experience of outrage and enthusiasm necessary for a feeling of worldwide togetherness and solidarity with the Green Movement.

None of the above-described features is found in the mobile death video from Syria. Nevertheless, this video too conveys a moment of human tragedy in its aesthetic device, and it too taps into the affectivity of death. If this video is taken as a document of the last images the cameraman saw, then Mroué's (2012, 30) performance once again provides important points of reference. The scenes in the video give an impression of the cameraman's psychological and physical experience in the moments before his death. The shaky, unstable, fast-moving images, the unclear and unfocused view of the surroundings resemble his 'nervousness, stress, fear, and excitement' (ibid.) and seem to be the result of the trembling and shaking of his body. The effect continues after the gunshot, when the spectator stares at a blank screen that perhaps mirrors the vision of the mortally wounded man lying on the ground, gazing unfocused into the distance, while the spectator listens to his agonising groans and the bewildered voices around him. Thus, even though the person behind the camera remains unknown, the incident is not personified, and this death is unseen and uncertain, the video's aesthetic devices nonetheless convey an intense moment of death and the human tragedy of the protests, producing a solidarising effect in the cause of the Syrian protest movement. Hence, the moments of human tragedy and death contained in the mobile death videos from Iran and Syria have had an effect on the protests movements both on a discursive and a media-aesthetic level.

### **Telling One's Own Story: Visibility and Audibility in Public Discourse**

The mobile death videos have played a significant role in the Iranian and Syrian protest movements by telling the protester's version of events and making their part of the narrative about the conflicts more visible and audible in public discourse. In this regard, two aspects are of particular importance: the symbolic function and the discursive deployment of Neda's face and voice, and the creation of discursive spaces of truth telling by relying on the question of authenticity and authorship as a regulative formation.

*The Face and Voice of Neda and the Representational Power of Amateur Videos*

Neda gave the Green Movement a face – literally (Kurzman 2010, 9). In the days following the incident, protest crowds carried signs displaying the young woman's portrait and images from the videos (batracom 2009e, 03:25–03:32). Neda's gravesite became a kind of sanctuary of resistance to the Iranian regime, when 'the opposition attracted hundreds, perhaps thousands of people to Neda's grave' (Kurzman 2010, 13–14) for the traditional Shiite mourning ceremony. During the ceremony, shrines were constructed using Neda's picture and stills from the mobile videos (batracom 2009f, 04:29–04:58). As Castells (2012, 55, 59–60) has observed in explaining the Egyptian Revolution, these public displays of the injustice and tragedy of Neda's death turned out to be a kind of occupational practice that transformed the streets of Tehran and other cities 'into the visible public space' (ibid.) for the protests. The mobile videos of Neda's death, as well as the mobile death video from Syria emerged as 'brief digital memorials' (Martin 2012, 20), which occupy both real and virtual space in their different material manifestations. In this respect, the public mourning and the condemnation of the protesters' deaths in real and virtual space were practices of protest and resistance, while the mobile death images became a tool for giving the protester's storyline higher visibility in the public discourse.

Moreover, Neda also gave the Green Movement a voice. On social networks, the sentence, 'They killed Neda, but not her voice', showed up repeatedly (Putz 2009a; Jaschensky 2009a). This phrase, in a variety of forms, became ubiquitous in different media contexts and gave rise to various creative works. One example is a song by the singer-songwriter Kawehi, which deals with the actions leading to Neda's death and the coping process from a personal perspective. In Kawehi's description of the video, the artist explains what motivated her to write the song by referring to the symbolism of the voice: 'Neda became the face of Iran's democracy movement – and the voice of women in Iran. ... There are more important voices that need to be heard – and this time, I choose for it to belong to one woman: Neda' (VideoHalls 2013). The lyrics also draw on this symbolism: 'They want you gone and silent / Declare you a martyr and let the streets run violent / ... / A voice should be heard / You showed me why and how'(ibid.). Neda may be physically gone, the song implies, but her voice – her message – stays alive.

The voice symbolism gains even more significance in relation to protest signs bearing the inscription 'Where Is My Vote?' pictured frequently in news reports (e.g. Abadi et al. 2009; Kolb 2009; Wernicke 2009a). Because 'vote' refers to one's political or electoral voice as well as to the human voice, the dissemination of the mobile video and the subsequent publicising of Neda's death had a liberating and empowering effect on the repressed Iranian people who were reclaiming their (political) voice and their public visibility and audibility.

The widespread and freely accessible mobile video of Neda's death is an example of 'amateur videography enabling people to (re-)gain 'an ancient form of representational power', as Strangelove puts it: 'the power to tell their own stories' (2010, 9), which transforms the hegemonic discursive order of 'who is saying what to whom' (ibid.).

*Authenticity, Authorship, and Discursive Spaces of Truth Telling*

Given the large number of videos showing violent incidents during the Syrian uprisings which have been instrumentalized for warfare and political purposes, it is hardly surprising that doubts have been expressed about the mobile death videos from Syria, despite their authentic and realistic resemblance to the grainy and shaky video images. Yet in the absence of international journalists in Syria, short videos captured by mobile phones or handheld cameras and uploaded to YouTube 'were important in showing both Syrians and the wider world that protests were actually taking place ... around the country' (Starr 2012, 55). In this vein, news media such as *AlJazeera*, *The Guardian*, and *Der Spiegel* picked up the mobile video of a man filming his own death despite its questionable authenticity and uncertain authorship (AlJazeeraEnglish 2011a; Black & Hassan 2011; Schröder 2011). Nevertheless, the problematic nature of the video gave rise to a strategy in which the

issue of authenticity and authorship turned out to be a discursive tool in creating a particular story of the ongoing events in Syria.

All three media channels gave essentially the same account of the mobile death video and the Syrian protests. They stated that the authenticity of the video could not be verified and that the identity of the cameraman was unknown, as there were no foreign journalists on the ground who could—and this is the underlying subtext of these lines—provide an impartial testimony of events (*ibid.*). It was explained that the footage apparently showed a scene in the city of Homs where a shooting took place on 1 July 2011—without reason and without any protests happening.<sup>10</sup> The targets were identified as Syrian citizens, the perpetrators referred to only as *someone*. The media called the gunman a Shabiha militiaman,<sup>11</sup> based on information provided in the video. The reports continued by referring to another video clip uploaded on YouTube covering a similar protest action in Homs, allegedly showing the same picture: unarmed demonstrators fleeing in panic from rifle fire with one protester falling dead on the street. In contrast to the first video, the identity of the person shot dead was revealed and confirmed by an eyewitness and expert account, namely Human Rights Watch (Black & Hassan 2011; Schröder 2011).

In these reports, the news media created a space of truth telling where the lack of certainty regarding the authenticity and authorship of the video was compensated for by other accounts that showed similar events and provided indicators that might prove the footage true. These accounts comply with a discursive practice of truth telling that refers to the authoritative power of eyewitness and expert reports.<sup>12</sup> In this context the question of authenticity and authorship is, in Foucault's (2008 [1969], 504) terms, a regulative formation as it is a conditional factor for the discursive validity of statements related to mobile videos occurring in the course of the Syrian conflict.

The question of authenticity and authorship also plays an important role in context of the mobile video of Neda's death. In light of its ambiguous circumstances, a similar interpretative struggle over the authenticity and authorship of the mobile videos between pro-regime and pro-movement actors prevailed in news reports (e.g. Babayigit 2009; Heyer 2009; Jaschensky 2009b; Shrivastava 2009), as well as in commentaries on YouTube (FEELTHELIGHT 2009) and emerged as a constitutive rule for the existence, validity, and relation of statements in discourse. The mobile death videos from Iran and Syria are, therefore, a case in point for the ongoing struggle on the prerogative of interpretation of the conflicts in Iran and Syria. This struggle is exemplified in the issue of authenticity and authorship, which functions as the epistemological condition allowing for the connection of different statements to one coherent discursive thread and provides these statements with validity in the discursive spaces of truth telling. However, given the above-mentioned authenticating effect of the aesthetic appearance of the recording of Neda's death, the importance of acknowledging both discursive and media-aesthetic aspects in the study of mobile death videos in protest and conflict contexts becomes apparent. The broader implications deriving from a discursive-media-aesthetic perspective on mobile death videos are explicated in the next section.

### **The Discursive-Media-Aesthetic Effect of Mobile Death Videos**

The grainy quality of the images in the mobile videos of protesters by comparison with the high-quality images of the protests provided by state-owned media (e.g. AlJazeeraEnglish 2011b) makes the interplay of discursive and media-aesthetic effects in the struggle for the prerogative of interpretation and the establishment of reality-shaping truths apparent. As Mroué (2012, 20, 31) illustrates in his performance, the stable and clear images of state-owned media are achieved by using tripods, which provide stability not only in aiming a camera, but also in aiming automatic weapons. This gives rise to several associations: Firstly, the clear and stable images of the state media outlets are discursively connected to the armed and lethal violence of the Syrian regime. Secondly, the images become proof of the regime's intention to stay in power (Martin 2012, 20), its attempt to demonstrate 'the clarity of its vision and its purity' (Mroué 2012, 32) and thereby the veracity of its point

of view. However, if we stop to consider the preparation needed to produce these images (setting up the tripod, arranging and focusing the camera, and so on), their phoniness quickly becomes apparent (*ibid.*).

Thus, the unclear, shaky, and unstable images produced by the protesters seem in comparison more sincere as they try to give a genuine, uncensored account of the events in Syria ‘in order to report to the world what they are going through’ (*ibid.*, 31). In this sense, the mobile death video from Syria—and this can also be said about the video of Neda’s death—manifests an act of protest against and resistance to a repressive and violent regime by providing a divergent account of reality. This is achieved by relying on a different kind of narrative and a different kind of aesthetics. Similar to Martin’s (2012, 20, 23) statement about the camera as a weapon of war and revolution, these mobile death videos are an aesthetic weapon of protest and resistance that is part of a counter-discourse setting out to undermine not only the hegemonic discursive order, but also the *aesthetic* order that is attempting to dominate the perceptions and interpretations of the Iranian and Syrian conflicts.

Not only are the mobile videos especially immediate and affecting documents of killings committed by brutal regimes, more important, they also *claim* to be true testimonies of death and irrefutable documents of the life-threatening situation for protesters in Iran and Syria. As recordings of death become increasingly subject to a process of constant revisiting, reframing, and contention in a discursive struggle of power and counter-power, the affective images of death become part of the constitutive process of conflict reality in today’s digital media environment. What stands out in this context is that these visual representations of death are employed as discursive and aesthetic weapons of protest and resistance that challenge the hegemonic order of power. This process is linked to an altered surveillance landscape in which it is no longer a single eye—i.e. the all-seeing camera of the powers that be—scanning the surroundings, but many eyes equipped with mobile phones and handheld cameras, which take on an observing and documenting role and challenge the established discursive and aesthetic order. In contrast to Martin’s (2012, 22) interpretation of this change in surveillance practice, this altered landscape builds on a constant and overt surveillance that is no longer cumulated in one, but rather in many observers who can publicise what is seen almost instantly in the moment of observation. Moreover, digital technologies allow for unlimited modifications and adaptations before re-entering the panoptic order. Thus, what ensues from Foucault’s (2008 [1975], 900ff) concept of panoptism and Rheingold’s (2002, xxi, xviii) references to the panoptic effect of today’s networked society and grassroots activism in this context is a new kind of panoptic effect, all of whose facets are not yet understood.

## Conclusions

This article has used an examination of two mobile death videos from Iran and Syria to draw attention to and provide a first understanding of the interdependent and intra-active relationship of discursive and media-aesthetic effects in the perception and interpretation of protests and conflicts in today’s digitalised world. By exploring the solidarising and mobilising effects of selected mobile death videos from the Iranian and Syrian protest movements, as well as their impact on the visibility and audibility of deviating statements in public discourse, the analysis has shown that these recordings of deaths are affective discursive and aesthetic weapons in the struggle over the prerogative of interpretation and the shaping of what is perceived as reality. In this regard the issues of authenticity and authorship emerge as a pivotal regulative formation in the struggles over the interpretation of the Iranian and Syrian protests and conflicts, which operates on both the discursive and media-aesthetic level. Therefore, taking into account the research into the reality-shaping effect of mobile phone videos on the discursive and media-aesthetic levels yields significant insights into new ways of perceiving and representing conflict and protest incidents that have come about through the prevalence of social media. In the case of the Iranian and Syrian conflicts and protests, the increasing many-to-many communication via mobile videos and YouTube threatens the traditional asymmetric power relationship between a state and its citizens and potentially transforms the established panoptic order.

This article presents only a snapshot of the mobile death videos from the conflicts in Iran and Syria. More detailed and comprehensive studies are needed to analyse the effects of this kind of video as a discursive and aesthetic weapon in protest and conflict. For this purpose the central hypotheses that can be extracted from this article are: (1) mobile death videos are instances of omnipresent and permanent visibility and audibility introduced by the many-to-many communications of social media, signifying the entry into a new panoptic order; and (2) discursive and media-aesthetic effects are interrelated in the representation and interpretation of protests and conflicts, and they influence intra-actively what is perceived and recognised as protest and conflict reality. Moreover, given the explanations of the concept of agential realism and the intra-action of discursive and material factors, questions arise concerning the epistemological and ontological nature of conflict reality in the course of social media applications, which demand further research.

1. Castells defines protest movements in relation to social movements. Both arise from the 'suffering of people' (2012, 230), but unlike social movements, protest movements 'embody the fundamental project of transforming people into subjects of their own lives by affirming their autonomy vis-à-vis the institutions of society' (ibid.).
2. This paper draws on my ongoing PhD research into the significance of mobile phones and mobile death videos in the conflicts in Iran (2009) and Syria (2011–).
3. In physical terms, diffraction describes the behaviour of waves when they encounter an obstruction or interfere with each other. 'Unlike particles, waves can overlap at the same point in space' (Barad 2007, 76); the encounter produces either a larger or a smaller wave. Thus, in principle, the term diffraction refers to a phenomenon of difference in which disturbances signify an effect that constitutes a difference in the configuration of the world, which can interfere with other effects of disturbances (ibid., 72).
4. The Basij militia is a paramilitary organisation whose purpose is to defend Iran against the United States and internal enemies (Nordbjaerg Christensen 2010, 21–22).
5. Today the insurgents are demanding not only the fall of President Bashar Al-Assad, but also a basic re-definition of Syria's political constitution (Schumann & Jud 2013, 44).
6. The Arabic version is available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q0pFYXHy9CY&feature=related>.
7. This elaboration is based in part on a discourse analysis of the news coverage of two leading, opinion-forming German print media—*Süddeutsche Zeitung* and *Der Spiegel*—on mobile phone usage in the Iranian Green Movement, which I conducted in the course of research for my master's thesis (Meis 2012). The analysis was based on an examination of 68 news reports published from 12 June 2009 to 6 December 2009.
8. Martyrdom has a special relevance in Twelver Shia Islam, which prevails in Iran. According to Twelver Shia Islam, all Imams with the exception of the twelfth have died a violent death, suffered innocently, and are considered martyrs. To this day, the readiness for self-sacrifice in connection with grief for the fate of the Imams remains a characteristic feature of Twelver Shia Islam (Gronke 2009, 24, 107).
9. Owing to time pressures, the international news media at first mistakenly identified the woman in the video as Neda Soltani on the basis of messages and images circulating on Twitter and Facebook. This false information was later corrected. However, for the living Neda Soltani the mistake had serious consequences: she was pursued by the government and had to flee Iran (Emamzadeh 2011, 24).
10. The Guardian gave a more precise location of the incident as Karm al-Sham, a neighbourhood in Homs (Black & Hassan 2011).
11. Today the Shabiha is a kind of reserve army carrying out organised violence against civilians to protect the regime from the revolutionary threat (al-Haj Salih 2012, 2–4).
12. In her analysis of the practices of modern science, Haraway (1997, 23–39) points to the importance of having witnesses to establish credible facts; she elaborates on the interplay of objectivity, subjectivity, technology, materiality, and public

and collective witnessing in the agency of truth telling. As for experts, according to Foucault (2003 [1999], 10), the status of a person in society determines the weight attributed to his or her statement. Thus, expert accounts inspire a high degree of confidence in a statement that is on a subject related to the expert's knowledge and position in society (Balasak 2013, 19).

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