MURALS AS A PLAY ON SPACE IN THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN

by Samuel Blanch

THE CORPSE OF THE SHARIA

What has happened to the Sharia, the partly autochthonous institutions and practices of Islamic governance, under the conditions of modernity and the power of the nation-state? According to Wael Hallaq, the idea of an "Islamic law" or Sharia administered by the nation-state is an impossibility.[1] The classical "paradigm" of Islamic governance embodied such different conceptions and practices of the rule of law, of the legal subject, and of epistemology, that any synthesis with the contemporary "vertical" power of the nation-state is impossible.[2] It follows that modern experiments with "Islamic law" in the recent histories of Pakistan, Aceh and elsewhere are so encompassed by the state paradigm as to not be worthy of consideration by Muslims asking what an "Islamic governance" might look like. Hallaq describes the Islamic Republic of Iran, similarly, as an instance of the state's "[subordination and disfigurement of] Sharīʿa norms of governance, leading to the failure of both Islamic governance and the modern state as political projects."[3] But what kind of state is this? What else might we say about a system of governance that would allow no *room* for alternatives, that would occupy a *space* in such a way as to displace all others?

Such a picture of the nation-state and its unimpeachable sovereignty is the effective premise of much of the literature on the Iranian mural arts after the 1979 revolution. The Islamic Republic of Iran is a profoundly pictorial regime, as witnessed most obviously by its continued production of political murals throughout the streets of Tehran and beyond. And these murals are considered registers of the sovereign's representational control. As Chelkowski and Dabashi have put it, the mural arts are a function of "a pictorial revolution, a revolution in full semiotic control of the representation of itself."[4] This, to be clear, is something like a restatement of Benjamin's famous thesis about the aestheticization of politics; about the state's incorporation of the populace in the unfreedom of the fascist polity through artistic production on a mass scale.[5] The literature on Iranian murals springs from an assumption about the sovereign representational capability of the nation-state to make and dispense with images. This literature draws on a huge range of murals across time. But it does so having already implicitly or explicitly adopted Chelkowski and Dabashi's claim about the sovereign's representational capacity. In short, the literature asks about the sovereign and the representational economy. It asks *who* the sovereign is; who is it that makes images? *What* do these images say? *How* does the sovereign say it? These questions assume the mechanics of a "spatialised" sovereignty. They enquire about the movement of a modernity already pre-figured in terms of "formal

1   Wael B. Hallaq, *Sharīʿa: Theory, Practice, Transformations* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Wael B. Hallaq, *The Impossible State: Islam, Politics, and Modernity's Moral Predicament* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).
2   Hallaq, *Impossible State,* xi–xiii.
3   Hallaq, 2.
4   Peter Chelkowski and Hamid Dabashi, *Staging a Revolution: The Art of Persuasion in the Islamic Republic of Iran* (London: Booth-Clibborn Editions, 2000), 8.
5   Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008), 269.

FIG. 1
Mural on Resalat Square, 2018, Qom. Photo: the author.

consistency" and therefore reliant on the idea of a "single legislator."[6] My intention here is not to interrogate the capacity of the legislator or sovereign as such. My focus, rather, is on the murals themselves, and on the way that they operate to shift and destabilise the purported *availability* of space to the sovereign.

Images like figure 1 strike us with the force of their sovereign assertion.[7] Located at a roundabout in the seminary city of Qom in central Iran, the mural captures the entwinement of the martyr paradigm within the modern nation-state. A martyr in the form of a dove flies up and into a trompe l'oeil archway and is transfigured into a supernova as he enters the gate of paradise. Still the dominant subject matter of Iranian murals, one cannot underestimate the prominence of the martyr in contemporary Iran, a "paradigm" forged out of Shia myth, the revolutionary turmoil, and eight years of total war with Iraq.[8] A white epigraphic ribbon runs along the top of the panel. In an Arabic calligraphic style, it marks the mural and the building in the name of the original martyrs of Islam, claiming this site with a benediction highly particular to the Shia sect.[9] Most prominently, the mural features the massive figure of the revolutionary leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, pictured here as steward of the martyrs. If there was any doubt, his piety is acclaimed by his hands raised as at the outset of the mandatory prayers. The end of his turban falls down amongst the folds of his cloak, the black symbolising his status as a descendent of the Prophet's family.

This mural is fluently aestheticised politics, and indeed an image of sovereignty itself. The execution of its photorealist representation of Khomeini, the appeal of the cleric's benevolent and pious downward gaze, the masterful rendition of the flat plane of the trompe l'oeil wall, is one of the most technically proficient examples of contemporary mural arts that I saw during my field research in Iran. Employing what Gruber calls an "idiom of persuasion,"[10] the Imam Khomeini gives the martyr's death a beneficent aura of appeal. There is no crude appeal to war here, no other nationalist symbols,

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6   Here I draw on Catherine Pickstock's critique of modernity as "spatialized," which describes the ontological "middle" of modernity in terms of the "the portable, convertible, formalized, transferable, mercantile city." See Catherine Pickstock, *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), especially chapter 2.

7   It seems to me telling that when I have displayed this image at conference presentations, Iranian emigres in the audience have tended to react with obvious emotional and even physical discomfort. Such is the force of the revolutionary leader's aura for part, although certainly not all, of the Muslim community in Australia.

8   The literature on this issue is huge. For the complexity of the representation of martyrs see Ulrich Marzolph, "The Martyr's Way to Paradise: Shiite Mural Art in the Urban Context," *Ethnologia Europaea* 33, no. 2 (2003). For a broader account of the importance of and dynamism of martyrdom in the broader Shia context see Fouad Ajami, *The vanished Imam: Musa al Sadr and the Shia of Lebanon* (London: IB Tauris, 1986). For classic accounts of the so-called "Karbala paradigm" in Iran, see Michael M. J. Fischer, *Iran: From Religious Dispute to Revolution* (Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press, 1980).

9   The epigraphy reads: *al-salām ʿalā al-ḥussein wa ʿalā alī bin al-ḥussein wa ʿalā awlād al-ḥussein wa ʿalā aṣḥāb al-ḥussein* (peace/greetings be upon Hussein and upon Ali bin Hussein and upon the children of Hussein and upon the companions of Hussein).

10   Christiane Gruber, "Images of the Prophet In and Out of Modernity: The Curious Case of a 2008 Mural in Tehran," in *Visual Culture in the Modern Middle East: Rhetoric of the Image*, ed. Christiane Gruber and Sune Haugbolle (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2013), 16–17.

no macabre remembrance of blood spilled or youth lost.[11] Just so, it represents an aestheticised death no less directed by the state, and moreover, a normalisation of the sovereign dispensation of death. Much has been written about sovereignty as the power of decision over the exception, as that "originary structure in which law refers to life and includes it in itself by suspending it."[12] And here, although Khomeini looks down in humble rectitude, the dove's trajectory is diagonally upwards through his hands and into the archway. It is as if Khomeini begets Iran's martyrs precisely in the moment of his exemplary piety, his prayer urging them towards death and paradise. Recalling the foundational moment of the Shia, when the Imam Hussein was martyred in the deserts of Iraq, the Shia say that "every place is Karbala, every day is Ashura." In this mural, however, it is the head of state who claims sovereignty over the martyr paradigm as renewed in the war with modern Iraq. The wartime experience of the Iranian population and the historical memory of the Shia Islam are folded up within his hands. Consistent with the Hallaq thesis this would be the image of a congealed Islamic governance, where all possible sacrifices are rolled up into the hands of this man. And is this not sovereignty itself, where the fields of dead soldiers along the borders of Iraq and Iran are declared and made constitutive of the ongoing state?

Yet it is the purpose of this article to probe the limits of Chelkowski and Dabashi's thesis. After surveying the range of historical and visual materials already covered in the literature,[13] I focus on four murals to ask does the sovereign indeed have "full semiotic control of the representation of itself"? What would a *problem* of representation entail for this thesis? What might a *scratch* in an image mean for the execution of sovereign power? Consider the mural above. In the economy of sovereign representation, what might we say about the use of the illegible Persian *nastaliq* script, markings that surround the gateway like the scratchings of a bird? This use of a script uniquely associated with the Persian literary tradition could be an oblique attempt to stamp the route to paradise with an Iranian character. However, that would cover over the way the cement of the wall has been scraped with the black of this pen. And what might we say about the failure of the trompe l'oeil device, as the left side of the arch extends too far down? What is the splash of red ochre behind the Imam deforming the wall's otherwise coherent spectrum of sandy yellow?[14]

I describe these scratchings and splashes as breaks in the sovereign representational economy. Rather than focusing on the vulnerability of sovereignty in terms of the sovereign's body, my focus is on the space of the purported enaction of sovereign power. I will argue that the murals shift and

11   Compare this to Gruber's account of the Martyrs' Museum, an institution which revels in the realism of its memorialisation. See Christiane Gruber, "The Martyrs' Museum in Tehran: Visualizing Memory in Post-Revolutionary Iran," *Visual Anthropology* 25, no. 1 (2012).

12   Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 28; for something of the vitality debate about sovereignty within Iran see Milad Obadaei, "The Outside (*Kharij*) of Tradition in the Aftermath of the Revolution," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 39, no. 2 (2019).

13   For a very recent study of a large number of murals, see Bill Rolston, "When Everywhere is Karbala: Murals, Martyrdom and Propaganda in Iran," *Memory Studies* 13, no. 1 (2020).

14   See note 80.

destabilise the space within which sovereignty is exercised, even the space of sovereignty itself. I will show later how the broader tradition of Persian painting has used material and technique to draw attention to the issue of space and material itself. This will facilitate my reading of the murals as interventions in sovereign space. Central to this argument, therefore, is the apparently benign observation that sovereignty is spatial. Sovereignty, that is, has to do with the delineation and partitioning of space, with the "power of decision" over space.[15] This article's grounding in the concrete walls of the mural arts, and indeed the fields of dead martyrs, is already a gesture toward this. But consider also the following accounts of sovereignty. Hussein Ali Agrama has shown, in the context of the Egyptian state's encompassment of the Sharia, how contemporary sovereignty and the emergence of the rule of law has involved the ongoing delineation of public and private space.[16] The murals we might say, are both sovereign representations *and* possessory claims to public space. Talal Asad has long traced how the emergence of the modern state has involved the careful definition and circumscription of religion.[17] In our context we might say that the particular delineations of true and false religion represented even in the mural above is also an assertion of sovereign prerogative over religion. We might also think of the mural in terms of Carl Schmitt's definition of the political as the friend/enemy distinction, marking the mural with the Shia brand and sequestering this space for the Islamic Republic's particularist experiment in Islamic law. I note that the partitions of space noted here are at once aesthetic and legal acts. But is such space fully available to the sovereign? Can these murals, indexes of both legal and aesthetic power, be tamed by the sovereign? It is my contention that precisely as the murals problematise space through their own material ambivalences, just so they cast doubt upon the legal and aesthetic control of the sovereign. Where sovereignty assumes capacity to master visual and written language in order to delineate claim and arrange legal spaces, here these murals exceed these claims to possession by destabilising space itself.

SOVEREIGN REPRESENTATION IN THE IRANIAN MURAL ARTS

The background to Chelkowski and Dabashi's thesis is the prevalence of images in modernity generally, and in the Iranian revolutionary experience in particular, and their location as the literal and figural signage of the Iranian polity. The thesis of representational control is an important re-reading of the revolution not just as the takeover of political institutions, but as the wrestling of control over the maelstrom of available images. Out of the chaos

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15   This phrase I take from Agrama Hussein Ali Agrama, *Questioning Secularism: Islam, Sovereignty, and the Rule of Law in Modern Egypt* (Chicago, London: The University of Chicago Press, 2012). The idea, as I will discuss, draws much of its energy from Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Continuum, 2004).

16   Agrama, *Questioning Secularism*.

17   Asad and others have shown how the statist *partitioning* of the religious and the political, and the religious and the secular, is the essence of secular modernity, rather than the exclusion of the religious from the political. See generally Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993); Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

of the revolutionary moment, as street art initially indexed the demands of heterogenous opposition groups and individual artists it was finally the Islamist party that succeeded in taking "command," effecting a programme of "representational replacement," substituting the Shah's image with the regime's own image of the "Islamic man."[18] Thus Chelkowski and Dabashi argue that there was something particularly pictorial about the Iranian revolution. The Republic was born making images of itself; storming the United States embassy, falling beneath Iraqi tanks, banners dutifully translated into English for a global audience. Images were not merely utilitarian but were "produced by a nation mobilised to its highest sacred sensibilities, set on a course of self-revelation, exposing itself to the world, for the whole world to see. Imagine a nation that goes public, becomes transparent, reveals, discovers, unveils itself, puts itself on exhibition . . . "[19] Of course similar observations have been made about late modernity in general, about our world "saturated" with images.[20] It is as if the murals of Iran are the analogue forerunners of our own Instagram culture.

At stake here is not merely the economy of sovereign representation beginning with the control of the chaos of images described above. The latter works implicitly with an idea of a public sphere, where the sovereign is the one who controls the space, the making of images, and their distribution. Even more, I suggest that this is the "aesthetic" element, the *image* of the "city" that Pickstock describes as "spatialized," and as central to the constitution of modernity itself.[21] This city craves, as mentioned, a regime of "formal consistency" best achieved by a "single legislator." It reduces space to those objects available to the gaze of the subject. It institutionalises this "political architectonics" through its scientific, aesthetic, grammatical arrangements.[22] It relies, in short, on a particular account of space, an ontology that is, dominated by the state as political sovereign and the subject as epistemological sovereign. To be clear, descriptions also work critically of multiple and overlapping spheres in modernity, well beyond Iran: of the drive towards clarity and singularity in legal drafting, towards the mirage of "certainty" in economic and environmental policy, or towards the purity of government messaging in health and national security policy, all of which ought to free of "physical, mental and political pollutions."[23] What better way to read a second mural (fig. 2), also located in Qom? A kind of double-layer triptych, the upper left panel is again filled by Imam Khomeini, flanked by two lesser clerics. The massive figure of the current Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei

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18 Grigor Talinn, *Contemporary Iranian Art: From the Street to the Studio* (London: Reaktion Books, 2014), 22.

19 Chelkowski and Dabashi, *Staging a revolution*, 10. See also Roxanne Varzi, "Facing the Future: The Artistic and Diasporic Afterlife of the Iran-Iraq War," *Anthropology of the Middle East* 8, no. 1 (2013); Christiane Gruber, "The Message is On the Wall: Mural Arts in Post-Revolutionary Iran," *Persica* 22 (2008).

20 Chiara Bottici, *Imaginal Politics: Images Beyond Imagination and the Imaginary* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

21 Pickstock, *After Writing*, 48, 58–59; also Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life,* trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 94.

22 Pickstock, 48.

23 Certeau, *Practice,* 94.

FIG. 2
Mural on Shahid Montazeri Boulevard, 2018, Qom. Photo: the author.

fills the panel on the top right. Positioned on a thoroughfare leading to Qom's main shrine complex and senior seminary facilities, the Supreme Leaders' sternly oversee the thousands of seminarians, locals and pilgrims thronging down to the entrance. This is a visual version, then, of the Islamic Republic's takeover and modernisation, even of the seminary and the Shia Internationale whose vibrancy and resistance had been its original succour.

Methodologically the maelstrom of images resolves into a scholarly focus on the state and the individual. We have already seen the image of Imam Khomeini as equivalent to the revolution itself. Khomeini won the revolution for Islam, and Islam for the revolution, as Chelkowski and Dabashi put it.[24] Henceforth there could be no revolution except the Islamic revolution, and no Islam but a revolutionary Islam. Images would remain as vehicles for persuasion and resistance. In the post-revolutionary context, murals had ongoing relevance for what Gruber calls "mobilisation"; the need for the state to catalyse individual action during the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), and in the broader project of state building.[25] Murals became a state appendage for the management of crowds.[26] They became the mechanisms in an ongoing culture war, where culture literally became the regime's programme of urban signage.[27] It is worth emphasising the obvious parallel between this appropriation of public space and the broader system of "Islamic governance" in Iran. The Islamic Republic's laws–codified and judicially administered and structured according to Western categories like "family" and "criminal" law–are characteristically "modern" in their form. Such is Hallaq's argument, as we have seen. Although structured as a hybrid democratic/oligarchic system with both elected representatives and supervision by the Shia clerical class, power over the state security apparatus, and the effective locus of sovereignty, culminates in the office of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the current *Vali-e Faqih* or Guardian Jurist.[28]

Thus for Chelkowski and Dabashi, as for Chehabi and Christia, murals serve the sovereign's function of "persuasion."[29] But if persuasion is the sovereign's intention, there is nevertheless an enduring methodological anxiety about the individual production and reception of images. There is a recognition of the problem of individual artists' intentions, a problem which I do not address in this article. Marzolph caveats his study with the admission that his "interpretation may or may not differ from that intended by the artists or the various institutions that ordered the murals."[30] Chelkowski and Dabashi deflect the problem of individual intention towards an analytical focus

24   Chelkowski and Dabashi, *Staging a Revolution,* 25.

25   Gruber, "Message On the Wall," 44.

26   Pamela Karimi, "Imagining Warfare, Imaging Welfare: Tehran's Post Iran-Iraq War Murals and their Legacy," *Persica* 22 (2008): 48.

27   Talinn, *Contemporary Iranian Art*, 39–41.

28   Ziba Mir-Hosseini, "Sharia and National Law in Iran," in *Sharia Incorporated: A Comparative Overview of the Legal Systems of Twelve Muslim Countries in Past and Present*, ed. Jan Michiel Otto (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2010).

29   H.E. Chehabi and Fotini Christia, "The Art of State Persuasion: Iran's Post-Revolutionary Murals," *Persica* 22 (2008).

30   Ulrich Marzolph, "The Martyr's Fading Body: Propaganda vs. Beautification in the Tehran Cityscape," in *Visual Culture in the Modern Middle East*, ed. Christiane Gruber and Sune Haugbolle (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2013), 167.

on the collective cultural construction of images of the revolution.[31] Gruber's study of a 2008 mural just off Modaress Highway in Tehran is a rare example of the benefits of scholarly access to the artist, although it is telling that the balance of her analysis concerns the history of the particular motifs that the mural employs.[32] Gruber also shows the complexity of state agency distributed across various quasi-state mural commissioning bodies.[33] Marzolph expresses anxiety about the methodological problem of assessing the Iranian public's reception of murals. He nevertheless asserts that the public dislikes the "dead" images of the older mural style.[34] Gruber admits the difficulty of the "extensive anthropological work" necessary to view "the exact effect(s) a particular mural may have on individuals moving through the cityscape."[35] Talinn asserts that "the people of the streets have censored these signs from their sights."[36] Note, however, that the basic architecture of the sovereign and the citizen sits unchanged beneath this discussion, and moreover, that the state retains effective representational control. Indeed the direction of the analysis here repeats the question of sovereign representation, focussing instead on the resistance of subjects rather than the power of the sovereign.[37]

What then do the murals represent? Or rather, what does the state represent through these art objects? The literature provides a rich account of the mural tradition after the revolution. Talinn, Gruber, Marzolph and Karimi all offer chronologies that chart the regime's adaption of subject matter, motif and technique.[38] To summarise, the state adapted to the changing political circumstances, with the immediate revolutionary polemic against the United States and the Shah soon giving way to the need for a national religious defence against the Iraqi attack on Iran in 1980. The pressures of the Iran-Iraq War, drawing on the existing tradition of pious martyrdom in the Shia imaginary, birthed a genre of portraiture in which martyr's faces were displayed on murals and posters throughout Iranian cities. I have already discussed the richness of martyrdom in the Shia imaginary, and in the political ideology of the Islamic Republic. Marzolph puts it like this: murals are the material evidence of "the popularization of martyrdom as a constitutive element of the Shiite creed in today's Iranian interpretation."[39] Varzi also shows the regime's encompassment of the stories and portraits of individual martyrs within the singular image of the Imam Khomeini.[40] Following the death of Imam Khomeini, the end of the war, and phases of relative economic

31   Chelkowski and Dabashi, *Staging a Revolution*, 41.
32   Gruber, "Images of the Prophet,"
33   Gruber, "Message On the Wall," 38–42. See also Christiane Gruber, "When Nubuvvat Encounters Valāyat: Safavid Paintings of the Prophet Mohammad's *Mi'rāj*, ca.1500–50," in *The Art and Material Culture of Iranian Shi'ism*, ed. Pedram Khosronejad (London: IB Tauris, 2012).
34   Marzolph, "The Martyr's Fading Body," 177.
35   Gruber, "Message On the Wall," 18.
36   Talinn, *Contemporary Iranian Art*, 91.
37   According to Agrama's critical reading of sovereignty in Egypt, "freedom" and "coercion" are the two possible legal categories. See Agrama, *Questioning Secularism*, 126.
38   Talinn, *Contemporary Iranian Art*, 47–48; Marzolph, "The Martyr's Fading Body," 164; Karimi, "Imagining Warfare," 149; Gruber, "Message On the Wall," 38.
39   Marzolph, "The Martyr's Way," 97.
40   See Roxanne Varzi, *Warring Souls: Youth, Media, and Martyrdom in Post-Revolution Iran* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

and political liberalisation under Presidents Rafsanjani and Khatami, each of the chronologies describes a softening or "beautification" of the pictorial programme from the 1990s onwards.

Three observations attaching to the final phases of the chronologies are pertinent to this article. First, the phase of "beautification" does not entail the end of the martyr as a key subject-matter (posters of local martyrs still line the boulevards of Iranian towns), but rather a softening or heightened attention to the presentation of that subject matter using pastels, symbols, and techniques more sensitive to the demands of a war-weary populace. The ultimate intention of the state does not change. It continues to use this more nuanced aesthetic "to both create and solidify identity."[41] Gruber's recourse to the "visual culture" literature to analyse the murals of Tehran concludes similarly, with the sovereign's "appropriation" of complex pictorial history for its sectarian purposes.[42] Second, there is nevertheless some expansion of mural subject matter in the later period, as artists and commissioning bodies turn to themes like Islamic mysticism,[43] and even to the breaking down of subject matter through abstraction and sheer optical 'play'.[44] Across these suggestions the picture of the sovereign's representational capacity and prerogative remains constant. The sovereign maintains possession of public space, and possession is, as they say, nine tenths of the law. Third, whereas Marzolph suggests that the regime has honed its technique to present old themes in a more "artistic" and appealing manner, Talinn suggest that the use of optical illusion represents something altogether more spatial.[45] I will return to this productive suggestion in the final part of this article.

Two murals, located in central Tehran (fig. 3) and the outskirts of Qom (fig. 4), stand as examples of "beautification." Of the four murals that are the focus of this article, to my knowledge only the former has been the subject of scholarly attention. Put briefly, Marzolph reads the mural as employing techniques, including that of perspective illusionism, for the beautification of martyrdom. The newer mural replaces an earlier mural, featuring a full-length portrait of the martyr, with the martyrial metaphor of the dove. The newer mural also includes two trompe l'oeil oculi understood to represent a gateway to heaven.[46] The oculi punctuates the perspective illusion of an industrial frame that traces the edge of the building itself. Again, the martyr ascends towards the gateway in the form of the dove, this time rising from an empty wheelchair. The mural in Qom (fig. 3) has the same oculus, also cut through a frame of concrete or steel. However, here the martyr has not been replaced by a metaphor. To the contrary, he is identified by name and described as *talabih khabarnegār* or "seminarian journalist," a vocation also alluded to by the film reel descending through the oculus. He stands half-in half-out of a second

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41 Marzolph, "The Martyr's Way," 97; see also Rolston, "Everywhere is Karbala"; Karimi, "Imagining Warfare."

42 Gruber, "Images of the Prophet," 14.

43 Karimi, "Imagining Warfare," 51. I prefer the term "mysticism" to the more commonly used "Sufism," as the former term covers the theory and practice of what the Shia usually call ʿirfan or gnosis, whereas the latter remains an essentially contested term within the Shia world.

44 Talinn, *Contemporary Iranian Art*, 85.

45 Talinn, 85–87, c.f. Karimi, "Imagining Warfare," 54–56.

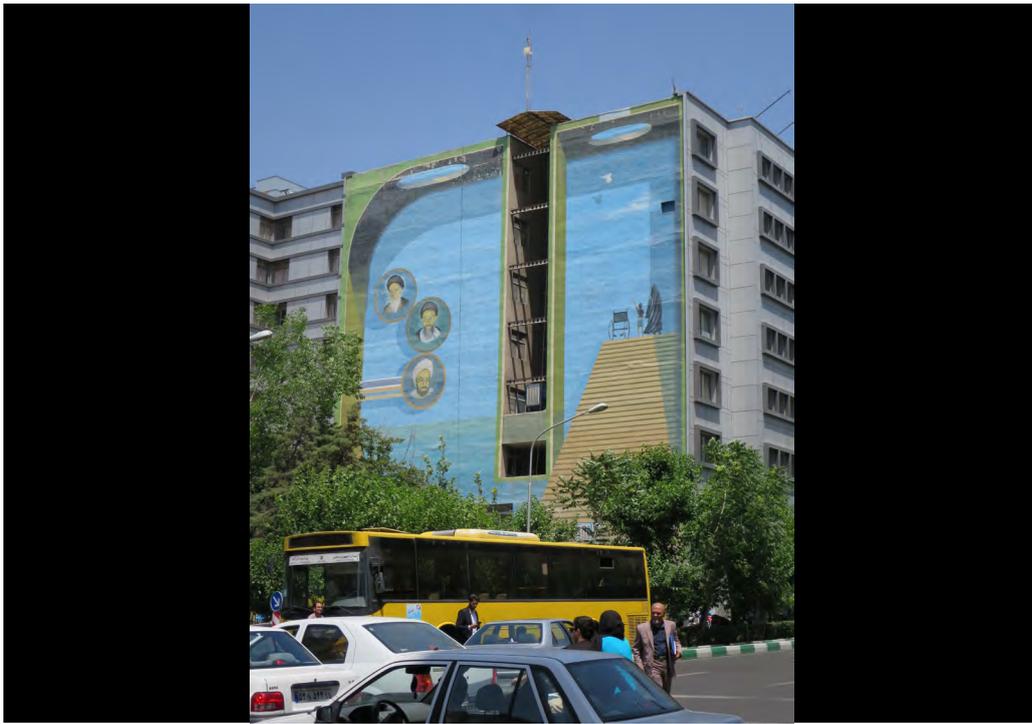46 Marzolph, "The Martyr's Fading Body," 180.

FIG. 3
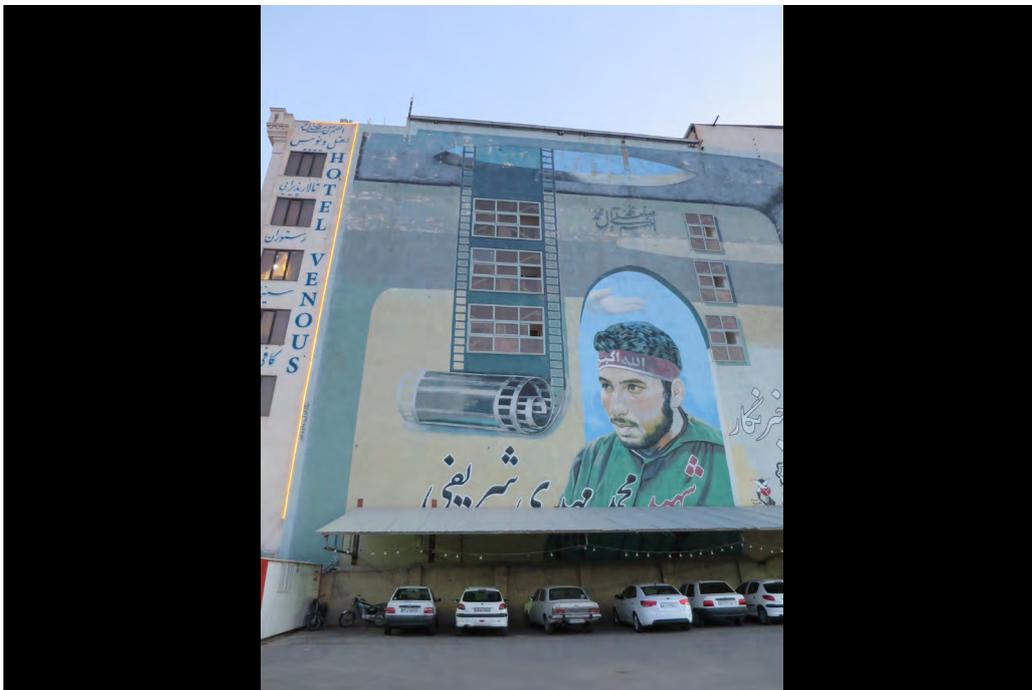Mural on Qarani Street, 2018, Tehran. Photo: the author.

FIG. 4
Mural on Al-Ghadir Boulevard, 2018, Qom. Photo: the author.

gateway through which beckon the same blue sky and fluffy clouds. His red bandana and military fatigues indicate his revolutionary credentials and fate in the Iran-Iraq War.

In the chronologies above these murals index a story of abstraction, a history described by Chehabi and Christia as a "liberal wave of murals . . . moving from primary colours to pastels, from realism to abstraction."[47] Figure 4 is therefore a transitionary image, like the martyr standing half-in half-out of his liberation of form. Murals are representational points in an aesthetic chronology. There is an important question here about the expectations we bring to these murals, and the way those expectations subtly parallel the regime's apparent control over images. As a chronology represents itself as a historical guide, here guiding us through history of the regime's favourite subject-matter, so too it presents knowledge as essentially historicised. The Islamic Republic's apparent representational control consists not just in the content of its mural arts, but also in the ability to adapt that content to the demands of history. Even the more recent perspective illusionism is a historicisation, where floating disconnected blocks and levitating trees represent the postmodern condition, a pictorial end of history. Thus, the Islamic Republic's representational control entails a power over history. Power over the art object *is* power over history.[48] I note that this account precisely parallels the Islamic Republic's own story about the Islamic governance; the Islamic revolution is in "progress," it has required the development of systems of justice, economy and technology ex nihilo.[49] The Islamic Republic, that is, has historicised the Sharia. However, the more critical point is that the form of scholarly knowledge represented here replicates this power over history. One could, with a little care, construct a chronology not made of words but of images. It would *precisely* translate the knowledge presented above. It could be "read" for the same content, the only variable being the form of "literacy" required.[50] What this kind of knowledge does not allow for, and what an aestheticised politics would purport to foreclose, is the idea of an image involving something other than representation.

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47 Chehabi and Christia, *Art of State*, 12.

48 Benjamin observes that the sovereign prince is supposed to be master of history, that "he holds the course of history in his hand like a sceptre." See Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London: NLB, 1977), 65.

49 For an example of this historicised narrative see Ayatollah Khamenei's 2019 statement on the "Second Phase" of the revolution: "The 'Second Phase of the Revolution' Statement Addressed to the Iranian Nation," Khamenei.ir, updated 11 February, 2019, https://english.khamenei.ir/news/6415/The-Second-Phase-of-the-Revolution-Statement-addressed-to-the. Indeed, for the same reason, my own interlocutors in the transnational Shia community would absolutely reject Hallaq's thesis about the contemporary Sharia's disfigurement.

50 I note the dominance of the language of "reading" and the visual "literacy" required for murals in the literature, see Marzolph "The Martyr's Fading Body," 169; Varzi, "Facing the Future," 50; Gruber, "Message On the Wall," 35–36; Gruber, "Images of the Prophet," 15–17; Talinn, *Contemporary Iranian Art*, 49; Chelkowski and Dabashi, *Staging a Revolution*, 41. Given the apparent consensus on the need to "read" it is a shame to have so little discussion of what a more critical hermeneutic might look like.

SPATIAL PLAY IN PERSIAN PAINTING

At what point does Chelkowski and Dabashi's thesis of representational control become vulnerable? One particular vulnerability would stem the sovereign's inability or a lack of will to control its messaging.[51] Consider again the mural on the outskirts of Qom in this light (fig. 3). During my own fieldwork in 2018, the seminarian martyr had gained a renewed relevance in the context of the Iranian state's involvement in the conflict in Syria and Iraq. Many of the seminarians in Qom were returnee volunteers from this conflict, from Pakistan, India, Lebanon and elsewhere, sometimes cared for in Iranian hospitals and now studying in Qom with the beneficent support of the regime. Many would pass this mural every day on their way to the free accommodation provided by the seminary up the road in Pardisan. Yet despite its apparent ideological poignancy, the mural was curiously obscured by the ubiquity of images around it, not least by the garish neo-classical faux stucco façade of its own building, which also houses a cinema, a restaurant, and the improbably named Hotel Venous. The martyr himself looms over a dusty parking lot, along which the proprietors have erected a corrugated iron roof cutting off the base of the mural, mostly obscuring the martyr's name. Coloured neon lights are strung out beneath the corrugations, and more fall down the side of the building, detracting further from the fading paint of the mural. It seems that the zeal of the revolutionary class, even in this town at the ideological heart of the revolution, cannot resist the banality of global faux culture.

  Mistakes or the artist's lack of skill, or the artist's ability to build in a visual resistance through what Talinn calls optical "play" would also be vulnerabilities for the state's programme of representation.[52] These interpretations remain implicitly alive throughout this section. It is my proposal, however, to focus on the problems that emerge in the images; as these images play on space, in their claim to re-order and re-partition space itself. That is, rather than looking from within the terms of the representational economy, I contend that these images contain elements problematic to the representational economy. With Rancière I contend that these murals are "litigious," that they effect a challenge to our primary experience of space. Litigiousness here does not denote resistance at the level of the content or intent of sovereign representation. It evokes a basic discomfort about the sovereign's possession of space, as it were about the sovereign's legal and representational standing given the waywardness of that space. I move therefore from Benjamin's aestheticization of politics towards Rancière's political aesthetics. Rancière argues that a true aesthetics is political in the sense that it re-orders the most basic spatial arrangements, even the arrangements that make it possible to think the "community" is *this* set of persons, *this* place, *this* categorical separation of sovereign and image.[53]

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51 This is the fate of the sovereign in Benjamin's account of the German baroque, where a pessimistic Protestant anthropology produces princes incapable of decision, and so unable to control history. See Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 70–71, 81.

52 Talinn, *Contemporary Iranian Art*, 86.

53 "[Politics] consists in re-figuring space, that is in what is to be done, to be seen and to be named in it. It is the instituting of a dispute over the distribution of the sensible . . . ": from Jacques Rancière,

The murals are litigious, then, in so far as they destabilise the spatialised arrangements described above. So rather than searching for a deeper "reading," we ought for a moment to simply permit the illegibilities and impurities of the mural to disrupt the state's otherwise seamless folding up of the lives and deaths of its population within its aesthetic embrace.

Yet I do want to say a little more about the murals' play upon and contortion of space, that is, about the particular character of the murals' litigiousness. To prepare for this, I want to mention the interest in alternative traditions of sight and vision that has occupied some of the best recent scholarship on Islamic art, and indeed Persian painting's capacity to embody such differences within the materiality of its own artistic production. I will then comment, briefly, on space and materiality in the Twelver Shia tradition of mysticism. This will allow an encounter with murals that offer a different arrangement of both sight and of space itself.

Marzolph's study of the oculus in Tehran does not mention the presence of this motif in Persian manuscript painting. Ernst Grube describes just such a painting from a 1505 manuscript of Nizami's *Khamsa*, executed during the reign of the Safavid Shah Ismail (fig. 5). "Immense and original in conception but tiny in scale," it represents the Prophet's *miʿraj* or night journey to the heavens.[54] The Prophet rides *Buraq*, his human-headed horse through clouds above Mecca en route to Heaven. It includes an oculus probably borrowed from contemporary Florentine examples: "a circular opening at the upper left of the picture, like a gateway to Heaven in the dense cloud formation, is encircled by angels peering down through the precariously tipped oculus to gaze upon the Prophet and his galloping steed."[55] Ernst Grube describes the spatial movement facilitated by the oculus: it is "an exceptional picture that ties together the earth and the heavens, and then punctuates the celestial regions with an oculus."[56] Christine Gruber's study is the most thorough. She observes the oculus "[splitting] open the fabric of the sky and [rendered] in a daring and experimental perspective," and links it with what the text of the *Khamsa* calls a breach in the curtain (*hijab*) between the natural world and oneness with God (*tawhid*).[57] Gruber sees the image as an instance of "visual *tafsir*" or commentary, speaking both to the Prophet's ascent and to the claim to quasi-divinity by Shah Ismail, who considered himself "God incarnate . . . and the essence of Ali."[58] Yet the literature on the murals has steered away from treating the oculus and similar devices as cosmological or mystical, reading them simply in soteriological and political terms.

Such visual enactments of spatial proximity to God are not an anomaly. Classic studies of Persian painting witness their carriage of different spatial and epistemological orders. Ettinghausen's account of a seventeenth century

Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics, ed. and trans. Steven Corcoran (London: Bloomsbury, 2010), 37.

54   Ernst J. Grube, "Religious Painting in the Islamic Period," in *Peerless Images: Persian Painting and its Sources*, ed. Eleanor Sims (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2002), 151.

55   Grube. On the trans-cultural movement of the motif see Maria Vittoria Fontana, "A Perspective Illusion or a View from the Clouds? Detail of an Early 16th-Century Miniature Painting Produced in Tabriz (Iran)," *Mantua Humanistic Studies* v (2019).

56   Grube, "Religious Painting," 151.

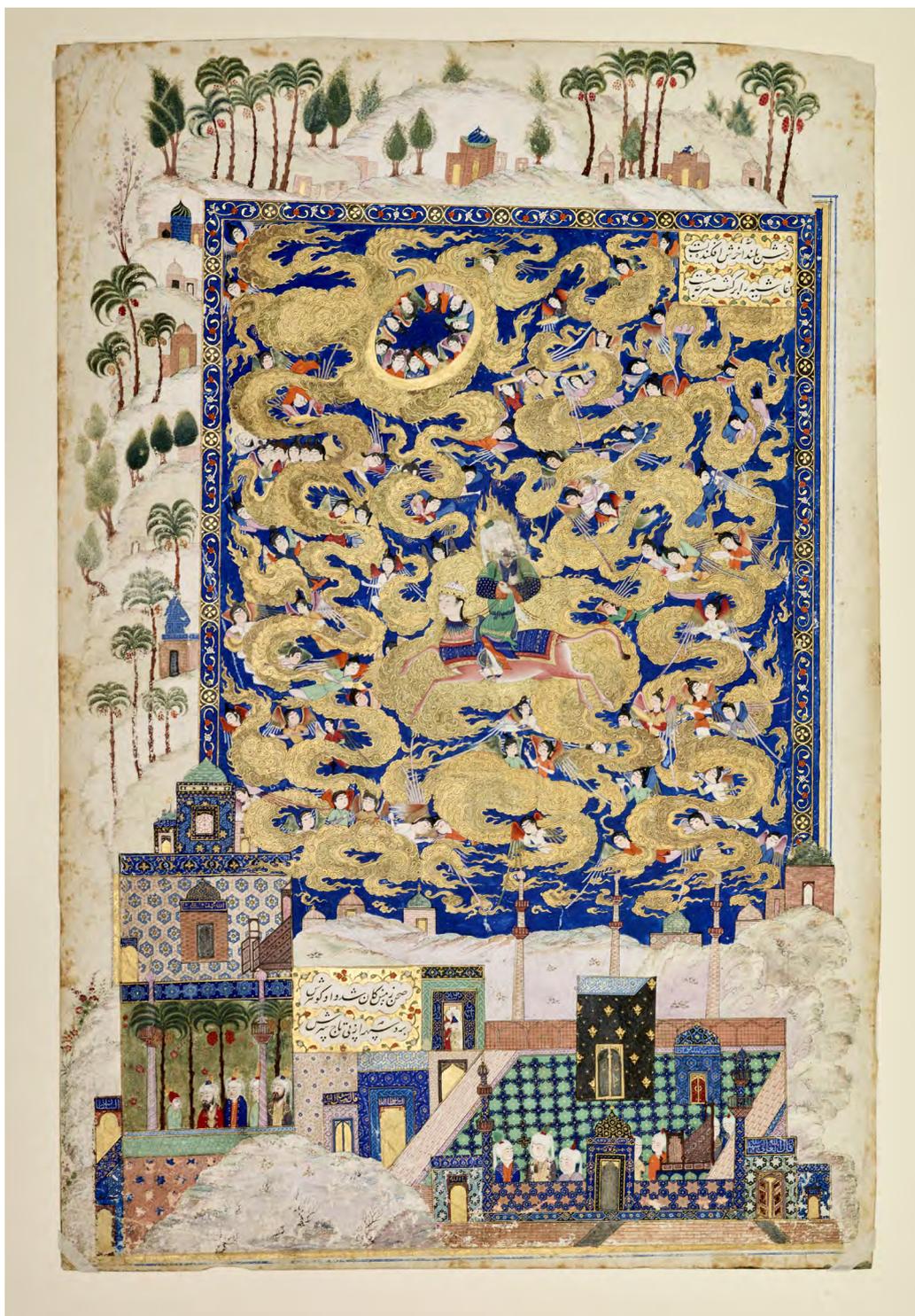57   Gruber, "Nubuvvat," 53.

58   Gruber, 46, 54.

FIG. 5
The Prophet Travels over Mecca and Medina on his Night Journey, folio from a
manuscript of the *Khamsa* (Quintet) of Nizami, ca. 1505; Tabriz, Iran; ink, pigment, and
gold on paper; sheet dimensions: 11 5/16 × 7 1/2 in. (28.7 × 19 cm); The Keir Collection of
Islamic Art on loan to the Dallas Museum of Art, K.1.2014.737.

painting from the Persianate Mughal courts of the Emperor Jahangir notes the artist Bichitr utilising the convention of portraying figures that are more important in larger scale.[59] The Emperor Jahangir or "world seizer" is therefore the largest, followed by a Sufi dervish, the Ottoman Sultan, and finally James I of England. Ettinghausen notes the Emperor's status as *nur-i din* or "light of Religion," suggested by the golden orb behind the Emperor's dais, the luminescence of his jewels, and "ethereal" fall of his clothing. But light is no mere "metaphor." Rather, the "splendid manifestation of the imperial glory suggests even a theophany." Similarly, Hillenbrand surveys the masterful utilisation of margins, empty space, and blocks of colour to suggest spatial and temporal complexity in Timurid painting.[60] Deploying broken frames and panels, which figures of sheep "dive" behind, Timurid artists were able to invoke "several conflicting notions of reality." In an illustration of the mystic poet Attar's *Mantiq al-Tair*, a tree breaks the top border, "escaping from the sombre mortality of the main scene," and its envelopment in a margin "thickly dusted with flecks of gold" suggests a "play on reality" involving a passage from spiritual death to life. Both studies demonstrate Persian painting's capacity to manifest alternative "spatial" arrangements not just through the legible content of their motifs but in the forms and practices of painting itself, in flecks of gold and in the luminosity of watercolour and the blurring of figuration.

Fontana offers a different analysis of the *Khamsa* oculus (fig. 5). She notices the angels looking out from the oculus, including one that looks out of the frame upon the viewer. Thus the painting offers not just a "perspective illusionism" deriving from the European structural oculus, but also an "inverse" perspective where sight is reversed.[61] Fontana here joins some of the most interesting recent scholarship on the history of Islamic art, concerned with what Necipoğlu calls the "gaze." Beyond the formalist methods of some older studies, and paying attention to the cultural history of artefacts, scholars have turned their attention to how the disciplines of Islamic art have interacted with different ways of looking and seeing.[62] Necipoğlu insists on other epistemological and aesthetic traditions allowing for the co-mingling of inner and outer senses, of the intuitive and the visual.[63] Nizami recounts the parable of a competition between Greek and Chinese painters. The former was superior in his figural powers, but the latter, who had polished his wall to reveal the Greek painting all the better, was superior in "polishing." For al-Ghazali the latter displayed mystical insight, for it was he who like the mystic

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59 See Richard Ettinghausen, "The Emperor's Choice," in *Essays in Honor of Erwin Panofsky*, ed. Millard Meiss (New York: New York University Press, 1961), 100–02.

60 Robert Hillenbrand, "The Uses of Space in Timurid Painting," in *Timurid Art and Culture: Iran and Central Asia in the Fifteenth Century*, ed. Lisa Golombek and Maria Subtelny (Leiden; New York: Brill, 1992), 87–92.

61 Fontana, "Perspective Illusion," 178.

62 See for example Valérie Gonzalez, *Beauty and Islam: Aesthetics in Islamic Art and Architecture* (London; New York: I.B.Tauris; Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2001); Gülru Necipoğlu, "The Scrutinizing Gaze in the Aesthetics of Islamic Visual Cultures: Sight, Insight, and Desire," *Muqarnas* 32 (2015); Laura U. Marks, *Enfoldment and Infinity: an Islamic Genealogy of New Media Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010).

63 Necipoğlu, "The Scrutinizing Gaze," 29–33.

"polishes his heart until divine radiance shines in it."[64]

Necipoğlu emphasises the "mix of Aristotelian and Neoplatonic concepts" that have fed traditions of Islamic art.[65] But dominated to this day by the seventeenth century philosopher and mystic Sadr ad-Din Muḥammad Shirazi (or "Mulla Sadra," d.1636),[66] the Neoplatonic legacy takes on a very particular hue within the Shia world. Against Suhrawardi (d.1191) whose philosophy of "lights" involved what we can crudely call an idealist tone, Sadra's is far more attendant to materiality. Sadra begins and ends with Being or Existence (*al-wujud*). Wujud is primary, foundational. It is "the most manifest of all things in its presence" (*ajli al-ashiaʾ hudhuran*) and it "comprises all things'' (*fi kaifia shumulihi al-ashiaʾ*).[67] That is, all that follows in Sadra–space, time, things, even the intellect of the philosopher–is derivative of Being.[68] Quiddities or *mahia* are secondary. They are a "shadow" of the act of being, or existence itself, as Jambet puts it.[69] Nevertheless quiddities–like books, persons, and murals–are what Sadra understands to be "modulations" of Being. The "modulation of being," Rizvi's translation of the Sadrian *tashkik* in the context of Being, conveys the latter's "sense of unity with gradation and most importantly, intensity."[70] So there is a generalisation of the mystical notion of theophany here, where not just a Shah or Emperor, but the whole unfolding of prosaic reality participates with the Oneness of Being (*wahdat al-wujud*). All things are greater or lesser emanations of the One, according to their intensity. Finally, modulation of being extends also to cognition and perception. The idea of essences emerges in the mind as a description of a reality consisting of modes within a singular modulating existing. True knowledge, however, is an illuminative realisation of being "immediately present to one another" within the unfolding of the One. "True knowledge resides in the direct experience of objects of knowledge."[71]

AFTER REPRESENTATION

Let me underline what I take to be two key implications of the above for how we approach the Iranian mural scene. My suggestion is that we allow ourselves to be struck by these murals as pictorial exercises in "modulating" space. I emphasise caution at the outset. With Didi-Huberman, we ought to come to

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64 Necipoğlu, 46. For a contemporary example of an alternative ethical practice enacted through painting, see Kenneth George, "Ethical Pleasure, Visual *dzikir*, and Artistic Subjectivity in Contemporary Indonesia," *Material Religion* 4, no. 2 (2008).

65 Necipoğlu, 23.

66 See Sajjad H. Rizvi, *Mulla Sadra and Metaphysics: Modulation of Being* (London: Routledge, 2009); Christian Jambet, *The Act of Being: The Philosophy of Revelation in Mulla Sadra,* trans. Jeff Fort (New York: Zone, 2006). I directly observed Sadr being taught as the key theoretical figure at the Islamic School of Art, an interdisciplinary school for research and studio arts attached to the religious seminary in Qom.

67 Mullā Ṣadrā, *The Book of Metaphysical Penetrations (Kitāb al-Mashāʿir): A Parallel English-Arabic Text* trans. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, ed. Ibrahim Kalin (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University press, 2014), 6, 9. I have slightly modified S.H. Nasr's translation.

68 Jambet, *Act of Being,* 22.

69 Jambet, 77.

70 Rizvi, *Mulla Sadra,* 40.

71 Rizvi, 89–90. See also Jambet, *Act of Being,* 39.

these murals with a "gaze that would not draw close only to discern and recognise, to name what is grasps at any cost." Instead, with a "suspended attention," we "abstain from clarifying everything immediately."[72] This then is my first point: *the murals insist that what we see of them is not equivalent to insight*. By playing not just with perception but with space, the murals refuse attempts to make them available. My second point follows from this: we encounter these murals as *things that participate in Neoplatonic space, and therefore as mediums for our own participation*. Didi-Huberman's project sought to allow for paradox in the image, the paradox of the invisible God made flesh and the foolishness of rendering such an impossibility in paint.[73] Yet if the paradox of the Incarnation imprints itself on the history of the Western art tradition, the same cannot be said of the Islamic tradition.[74] In place of a constitutive paradox, my suggestion is we allow the murals to participate in the unfolding of Being as a kind of grand theophany. Clearly, I cannot substantiate such a claim sociologically or historically at this point. The test will be whether my account of the "modulation of being" can hold our gaze and elicit an appropriate response as we approach the murals. But these implications go to sovereignty itself. If possession is nine tenths of the law, then here we have cement surfaces—the erstwhile billboards of the sovereign—whose wiggling and precipitous rising-up disputes against their own availability.

I introduced earlier a triptych mural dominated in its two top panels by the figures of Iran's former and current Supreme Leaders (fig. 2). Standing above the street, the figures monitored the passing seminarians and pilgrims as synecdoches of a spatialised sovereignty. Yet as one disembarks from a taxi, or crosses the nearby bridge, it is the lower panel that catches the eye. Significantly smaller than the other murals, a trompe l'oeil anteroom recedes at eye level, its marble floor just a short step off the pavement. Blue skies and fluffy clouds again tempt us through a door and two side windows. Again, there are doves perched on a small bench within the anteroom, upon which a pair of crutches have been haphazardly abandoned. In his rapture the martyr has also left behind a single slipper at the threshold of the door left invitingly ajar. It is an effective illusion; the anteroom recedes wonderfully just above street level. Yet trompe l'oeil devices do more than tricking us with their perspective, as if the viewer might safely see through the ruse to the real representational purpose. As Manderson puts it, trompe l'oeil devices cause an "aesthetic vertigo" through games of "cat and mouse" that cause "disorientation, distrust, and distance."[75] Moreover, is not this effect only increased by the Iranian murals self-effacement of their own trompe l'oeil

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72   Georges Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images: Questioning the Ends of a Certain History of Art*, trans. John Goodman (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005), 16.

73   Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images*, 23–26. More expansively see Georges Didi-Huberman, *Fra Angelico: Dissemblance and Figuration,* trans. Jane Marie Todd (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1995).

74   For one synthetic comparison see the introduction to Erica Cruikshank Dodd and Shereen Khairallah, *The Image of the Word: A Study of Quranic Verses in Islamic Architecture*, vol. 1 (Beirut: American University of Beirut, 1981).

75   Desmond Manderson, *Danse Macabre: Temporalities of Law in the Visual Arts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 213.

devices? The trompe l'oeil device in the oculus mural in Tehran (fig. 3) follows the shape of the building, curving perfectly around the corner as a three-dimensional frame to the sea, pier and human figures. Yet the illusory device throws a painted shadow upon all of these, as if the illusion itself was primary. Similarly, in Qom (fig. 4), the trompe l'oeil archway through which the martyr himself protrudes has a problem of "representational" accuracy. The right side of the archway is in the foreground of the martyr, whereas the left side of the archway is behind him, creating the effect of either an imperceptible warp in the wall or a crude rendition of one of Escher's impossible objects. Standing at a twenty-five-degree angle, the oblique staging of the martyr's shoulders only increases the representational absurdity of the arch.

In a highly suggestive passage differing from much of the literature, Talinn points to the expansive possibilities of trompe l'oeil in the Iranian mural scene.

> The use of the trompe l'oeil technique prevails as if to critique or subvert the realism of the earlier murals and to open up—as trompe l'oeil does—the space of the street into somewhere else; perhaps a total reform(ulation).[76]

Talinn hints at the murals' contortion of the space that the sovereign would purport to possess, even upon the sovereign's own cement canvases. Unfortunately, Talinn does not pursue this opportunity, concluding that murals remain "instrumental to representational transformation."[77] So let me extend Talinn's point, if a little speculatively. The trompe l'oeil devices, I have suggested, work to subvert the certainty with which our eyes would grip them. They refuse to allow our sight to be the same as insight. However, this should *not* be understood as a critique reducible to the Cartesian moment of radical doubt. This should be contrasted with Benjamin's understanding of baroque extravagance as technique emerging from the "triumph of subjectivity."[78] The murals, I contend, are not a trick of the eye or perspective, but a play on space. This is an apophatic moment, not an Enlightenment one. This is a moment of theological humility as we come across the face of the object. We can only say this wall is not exactly solid, this gateway is not fully available, this paint is not a decoration. The illusory technique amounts to what Damisch calls a "negation"; of the building, of its concrete render, of our knowledge.[79]

Consider the evasiveness of the mural materials, the way that the

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76 Talinn, *Contemporary Iranian Art*, 87.
77 Talinn, 89.
78 Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 234–5.
79 Hubert Damisch, *A Theory of /Cloud/: Toward a History of Painting*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2002), 1. Damisch has illusionistic technique tracing the challenge to Aristotelian metaphysics presented by Galilean astronomy bland associated developments. I am suggesting that mural techniques in Iran can do the reverse, by challenging modern sovereignty through a neo-Aristotelian Shia idiom. Damisch, I think, would allow for this, as figures he argues can act as either "integrators'' or "disintegrators" operating to "[guarantee] the unity of the representation" or "to call into question . . . the coherence and consistency of a syntactical ordering." Damisch, *A Theory of /Cloud/,* 185.

boundaries between ornament, figure and material are blurred to the point of breaking. Shades of paint are indistinguishable from the render of concrete beneath them. Where does the colour of the concrete begin and its painted cover begin? Patterns scrawl over the brickwork above the gateway anteroom, but do they adorn the trompe l'oeil or the bricks that surround it? Does the epigraph on the crown of the buildings (a common feature on Iranian apartment buildings) mark the illusory wall or the building itself? Elevator and service shafts, the formwork of bricks, protrusions of built concrete, and windows, all of these lend their form to the illusion of the frames nestled inside them. Yet on the road to Pardisan (fig. 4) the artist has added texture by co-opting three sets of windows as the exposure panels on the film reel. But matching the reel's descent down the left hand third of the mural, a matching set of windows has been painted on the right side, including the illusion of a shadow and a slight overlap of the represented archway. What then is building material and what is ornament? Beyond even the built environment, the murals even integrate the space around them into their vortex of perceptual instability. As we gaze through three of the paradise gateways, our eyes do not meet some other worldly space . . . but in fact blue sky, the same relentless Iranian sky above and painted blue sky below.

It is my contention that the visual and material instability of the murals decreases their availability to both the sovereign and the observer. They are materials that pivot, dodging our attempt to make them objects. I further suggest that their instability rehearses the "intensity" and "modulation" of Being itself, the unstable participation of all things in the One. I noted earlier the scratchings of *nastaliq* around the archway behind the giant figure of Khomeini (fig. 1). Taken together with the red patch or "whack" of inexplicable ochre behind Khomeini,[80] and the grey rubbing around his fingers, these disfigurations of the wall's colour call attention to the wall itself, its wall-ness as it were, and just so to the *problem* of the representation of a wall. Like a chip in a pane of glass, the murals call attention to the fragility of the shimmering material in which they participate.

The temptation through all of this has been to read the murals soteriologically, their trompe l'oeil gateways as symbols pointing to the heavenly fate of the martyrs. Yet the Shia mystical tradition is very much concerned with the immanence of the eschaton in everyday practice and piety.[81] In this light it is worth noting that doves do not only represent martyrs in the Persian tradition but can also function as intermediaries between worlds. Thus the Imams, the saint-figures of the Shia tradition, already at the highest mystical station themselves, were able to communicate with birds.[82]

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80 Didi-Huberman describes the "pigmentary white of the background, which comes to possess us" as we enter the cell containing Fra Angelico's *Annunciation*. "It strikes our eye," he says, it is "a very concrete *'whack'* [pan] *of white.*" The translator notes that *pan* also connotes a wall or patch. See Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images*, 11, 17.

81 See for example Henry Corbin, *En Islam Iranien: Aspects Spirituels et Philosophiques. Tome 1.*, 4 vols., vol. 1 (Paris: Gallimard, 1972); Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, *The Spirituality of Shi'i Islam: Beliefs and Practices* (London: I.B. Tauris; Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2011).

82 I thank my interlocutors in Qom for pointing out the polyvalence of the dove motifs. On the mystical capacities of the Imams, see Muhammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, *The Silent Qur'an and the Speaking Qur'an: Scriptural Sources of Islam Between History and Fervor* (New York:

Furthermore, the ability to "see" the inner character of other persons is considered a chief attribute of Shia mystics, to whom the evil person will be seen as he really is, for example as a wolf. I note also that the doves in the murals do not occupy heavenly space. Rather they fly towards or even perch ambivalently outside. Recalling Sadra's account of a modulating but singular reality, the point here is that we ought to allow for motifs like doves to participate in this reality as something more than representations.

Instead of reading symbols of martyrdom, then, the idea is to encounter in murals their own participation in Being. I suggest that the motifs in our murals, and indeed the materiality of the murals themselves, rehearse their status as participants in a theophany. That is, they function to mediate the material and spatial approximation to God insisted upon by Mulla Sadra. And "seeing" the dove as not merely a symbol but as a participant in the One, or striking upon the insight that we are "immediately present to one another," is to encounter in Rizvi's terms "true knowledge" itself. This is what the Shia tradition calls "presential knowledge" (*'ilm al-hudhuri*), where knowledge subsists not in the copying of the form of objects into the mind, but in the direct experience and achievement of unity with erstwhile objects. Is this not rehearsed in the prosaic elements of the murals themselves? Like the doves, the things in the murals stand across worlds. Crutches lie on the threshold in the anteroom. One slipper has entered the gate already. The film reel extends downwards, *from* the other side into the material of cement and paint, and like a carnivorous plant, it sits poised ready to snap back. The pier extends upwards, and the boy reaches further, perhaps to say goodbye to the martyr, but perhaps too as an aspiration. And does not the mural itself invite participation? The gateway may refer to the fate of the martyr. Just so, for the one with the insight to doubt the finality of the paint that he sees, the mural *is* a gateway.

Is this space available to the sovereign? Given the excess of semiotics embedded in these images, in their spatial shifting and instability, what are the implications for a theory of sovereignty as semiotic mastery? And what precisely is the relationship between the representational function of the Iranian mural arts, a function so extensively accounted by Karimi, Gruber, Rolston, Talinn and others, and the limits in the representational economy that I have discussed here? Significant sociological and ethnographic work would be needed to uncover the spatial polyvalences in Iranian public space, including the implications of Ayatollah Khomeini's role and image as a mystic.[83] What kind of availability might these murals have if they are not available to the sovereign subject? At the very least the problem of these images is a reminder of the political and aesthetic dynamism of the Shia tradition. What is interesting is that this dynamism shows up even on canvases where the Iranian Republic has all the apparent representational initiative, even where an aestheticised politics aims precisely to encompass the whole of

Columbia University Press, 2016), 113.

83   Flaskerud has studied at depth the pietistic use of smaller devotional images in Iranian communities. But to properly consider the issues I have raised here it would not be sufficient to assume or presuppose, like Flaskerud, the semiotic functioning of art. See Ingvild Flaskerud, *Visualizing Belief and Piety in Iranian Shiism* (London; New York: Continuum, 2010).

Shia history with its own image. Yet this speaks, as I have argued, not so much to the weakness of the sovereign, but to the stubbornness of images. It would seem that the aura is neither lost in modernity nor entirely captured with the aestheticizing programmes of the state.[84]

CONCLUSION

Chelkowski and Dabashi recount the Iranian regime's guidance for the production of murals. I quote from their translation at length.

> Under all circumstances the effectiveness of the revolutionary mural must be kept clearly in mind. Vague, indirect and superfluous paintings should be avoided at all costs . . . The location of the murals must be selected carefully so that a passerby can clearly see the complete picture. But the ultimate objective should be brevity of message, deliberate and emphatic brush strokes, clear cut shapes and brilliant colors. Every mural should be framed by solid colors, selected from one of the dominant colours of the picture.[85]

A regime with such a representational mastery of itself as envisaged here would be a formidable edifice indeed. Substituting the terms "mural" and "painting" for "legislation" and "law," we could not find a better account of the modern nation-state's legal positivist mechanisms of governance. Both law and images are representations of the sovereign, pictures capable of carrying clear and stable referents. But in Benjamin's account of the German baroque, the sovereign prince is stripped of his power of decision through an anthropology and a history devoid of redeemer or telos. Baroque allegory, herein, is an ostentatious façade paradoxically calling attention to the "bare state of creation" wherein subsists newly empowered subjects.[86] I have suggested that the murals call attention not to the subject, but to the instability of space itself. And if there were imperfections in the façade of the image of the nation-state, imperfections performed by techniques of perspective illusionism, what would this say about the sovereign itself? One would have to wonder, finally with Benjamin, whether there might be no sovereign at all.[87]

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84 See Georges Didi-Huberman, "The Supposition of the Aura: The Now, the Then, and Modernity," in *Walter Benjamin and History*, ed. Andrew Benjamin (London; New York: Continuum, 2005).

85 Translation by Chelkowski and Dabashi, quoted in Chehabi and Christia, *Art of State*, 4.

86 Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 70–71, 81, 234–35.

87 See Samuel Weber, "Taking Exception to Decision: Walter Benjamin and Carl Schmitt," *Diacritics* 22, no. 3/4 (1992). Or perhaps Benjamin is more ambivalent here, suggesting that power has been annexed by another figure in the spirit of Nietzche and Machiavelli, the "sovereign intriguer . . . all intellect and will-power." See Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 95–104.

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