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Kate Drazner Hoyt

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Zahra's Paradise: the virtual technics and political potential of subjective (dis)orientation

Kate Drazner Hoyt

Department of Communication, Pacific Lutheran University, Tacoma, Washington, USA


ABSTRACT

Zahra's Paradise is a webcomic-turned-graphic novel depicting the aftermath of Iran's Green Movement, where untold numbers of protesters were arrested, tortured and killed. The comic occupies matrices of liminality, both in its creation and in its impact on audiences. Through its modes of encounter with readers, or its virtual technics, *Zahra's Paradise* works to disorient audiences, unravelling the centrality of Western notions like the rational, individual subject. In this essay, I argue that the virtual technics of *Zahra's Paradise* poses political potential by enrapturing the attention of Western audiences while dismantling the dominance of the Western gaze.

Zahra's Paradise is a webcomic-turned-graphic novel depicting the aftermath of the Green Movement, where millions of demonstrators took to the streets to voice their dissent against the outcome of the 2009 presidential election – and where thousands were subsequently beaten, arrested, detained, tortured and killed by Iran's Revolutionary Guard. The comic's depiction weaves together fragments of documented reports, second-hand anecdotes, fictionalised narratives and both actual and imaginary visual details to illustrate the brutality of the government's crackdown, the terror gripping the families of the disappeared and the resilience of the hope that remains.

Zahra's Paradise is a work that occupies matrices of liminality or 'in-betweenness'. It is a printed artefact as well as a serially released process of virtual expression, now lost to the ephemera of the web.¹ Its story, according to its creators, is for both the living and the dead (Soltani and Bendib 2011a). It is both hauntingly detailed while transcending the singularity of an individual perspective through its composite treatment of events and characters. And, even while its narrative is told through poignant and haunting prose, it both defies and exceeds verbal description, with its meticulously detailed spreads of real and imaginary spaces.

This work is also liminal in its reach. Its author is an expatriated Iranian who fled the 1979 Iranian Revolution; its illustrator is Algerian, born in France and currently living in California. The project was taken on by a Jewish, French-American publisher who had the idea to first publish the comic on the web in 'real time', as each chapter was completed, and

CONTACT Kate Drazner Hoyt  hoytkl@plu.edu

¹Due to a lapse in domain ownership, the webcomic is no longer hosted online (Soltani, personal communication, 7 January 2019).

to culminate the work as a printed graphic novel ('Archive Interview' 2011). While initially conceived for an English-speaking audience, the webcomic's draw propelled it to global dissemination, reaching Western and non-Western audiences alike, including members of the Iranian diaspora, humanitarian activists, journalists and – despite the Iranian government's heavy Internet censorship – many Iranians still living within the country (Soltani, personal communication, 7 January 2019).

In both the representations and affective enactments of *Zahra's Paradise*, the comic subtly works to unravel the dominance of the Western gaze within global publics. Through both narrative and the aesthetic structuring of the reader's experience, *Zahra's Paradise* teases out and upends established Western binarisms such as living/dead, interior/exterior, past/present and individual/collective so that one concept or subject is folded into its corollary – what I call its process of 'enfolding'. In this way, *Zahra's Paradise* manipulates space and time so that remote and distant events, stories and mythologies become intimate and familiar to readers of various positionalities. It is not necessary to know the rich history of Iran's 'martyrologies' to get a sense that *Zahra's Paradise* evokes the uncanniness of history folding in upon itself. While much of this is achieved through the narrative's evocations of historical déjà vu, the intensity of this enfolding occurs through the technics of the work, shaping encounters with repetitions in – and stretches across – time and space.

In this essay, I analyse the 'technics' – Stiegler's (1994/1998) term for the way in which technology structures human experience – of *Zahra's Paradise* to understand how the comic works to decentre the Western individual subject through a process of disorientation. Such disorientation occurs through the work's yoking of a multiplicity of perspectives, the manipulation of time and space, and the remediation of historic, martyrological figures. In exploring the comic's subjective disorientation through its process of enfolding, I call on the political dynamics of orientation as theorised by Ahmed (2006), who explains: '[T]he orientations we have toward others shape the contours of space by affecting relations of proximity and distance between bodies' (3). By conceptualising *Zahra's Paradise* as a work that enacts subjective disorientation through the technical capacities, or technics, of its virtual presence, I extend Ahmed's notion of orientation as political by interrogating the work's impact within (dis/re)oriented audiences. In so doing, this essay explores the hypermediated nature of the webcomic-turned-graphic novel and exposes its potential to enfold readers into an orientation toward the resistance of dominant, oppressive powers.

Iran's martyrologies, the great cemetery and the Green Movement

Iran's Green Movement emerged following the announcement of the 2009 presidential election results. Despite a groundswell of support for opposition candidate Mir Hussein Mousavi, Iran's state news agency announced that incumbent President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad had been handily re-elected (Soltani and Bendib 2011a). Reported numbers also raised suspicions about election fraud, with reports issued of more than 100 per cent voter turnout in some cities (Secor 2009). Despite this, Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei – the country's highest-ranking political and religious leader and head of the armed forces, the judicial system, state media and all governmental organisations – confirmed Ahmadinejad's election as president.

Mousavi supporters took to the streets, wearing the candidate's signature green hue and shouting slogans such as 'Where is my vote?' to demand a recount. The protests have been described as the largest civil unrest since the 1979 Iranian Revolution, when the last Shah of the Persian monarchy was overthrown and replaced with an Islamic Republic (Soltani and Bendib 2011a). The protests swelled in numbers and intensity, with an estimated three million turning out in support of the opposition (Soltani and Bendib 2011a). The Basij, the volunteer militia arm of the Ayatollah's revolutionary guard, was sent to disperse the protests, wherein protesters were brutally beaten and killed (Jackson 2009; Soltani and Bendib 2011a). Thousands of protesters were subsequently arrested, surfacing reports of torture, rape and murder in prisons (Dareini 2009). Many of these events occurred in the notorious Evin Prison, known for the detention, torture and execution of political prisoners dating back to the 1979 Revolution (Soltani and Bendib 2011a). Further, the families of those killed were subjected to harassment, bureaucratic red tape and in some cases a fine, ostensibly for the bullet used to kill the deceased (Fassihi 2011).

Those who died in these clashes, when families were lucky enough to receive the body, were laid to rest in the 'martyr's section' of the great cemetery, Behesht-e Zahra – 'Zahra's Paradise' – as had been done for the fallen in previous political clashes throughout the country's history (Sciolino 2000). As such, the Green Movement contains echoes of the 1979 Islamic Revolution as well as the Iran-Iraq war, which lasted from 1980 until 1988. These historical clashes still reside within the collective memory of Iranians, who continue to remember and honour loved ones who died at the hands of state violence. As *Zahra's Paradise* author Amir Soltani describes of the scars that remain from the memories of such violence, 'These histories are written on my heart' (personal communication, 7 January 2019).

The webcomic, graphic novel and global perspectives on the Green Movement

Zahra's Paradise depicts a family's quest to find its missing son, Mehdi, who disappeared in the aftermath of the 2009 protests. The story follows Mehdi's brother, Hassan, a blogger, and his mother, Zahra, as they embark on a dizzying and disorienting search for Mehdi within the bureaucracy of the Islamic Republic. The creators, writer Amir Soltani and artist Khalil Bendib, were already collaborating on a satirical comic project when the 2009 protests broke out. '[W]ith the demonstrations and tragedies of June 2009, history somehow forced our hand, and we felt compelled to do a more serious work of testimony' ('Archive Interview' 2011). Very soon after the initial protests, Soltani and Bendib began gathering stories on which to base the comic's narrative. The first chapter of *Zahra's Paradise* was published on the web in February 2010, with the creators releasing each chapter upon completion at an exhausting pace of three chapters per week. Although the comic was always intended to culminate in a printed graphic novel, the comic's publisher, Mark Siegel, encouraged the initial online release 'to allow the virtual and the real to interpenetrate, so that art can intervene in contemporary history and become an intrinsic part of Iranian resistance' ('Archive Interview' 2011).

The narrative is a collage of real-life events that took place in the wake of the protests: Soltani and Bendib gathered reports from journalists, family and friends, human rights activists, artists and everyday Iranians circumventing Iran's internet firewall to share

their stories (Gallagher 2010), and wove them together to create a composite storyline with characters based on real people. Bendib explains, ‘I have drawn all of the bad guys (the head of the judiciary, the torturers, the Evin prison official) to look like some real-life infamous Iranian officials’ (*Zahra’s Paradise: Interview* 2011). Thus, the demanding pace of the webcomic’s production was intended to be a ‘real time’ reflection of events unfolding in Iran: as each chapter was released in 2010, reverberations of the initial wave of protests continued throughout the country, leading to further reports of families frantically searching for their loved ones, eventually giving way to a second wave in 2011.

Whether Soltani and Bendib did indeed achieve their vision of having their remediation of real-time events ‘become an intrinsic part of Iranian resistance’ (*Archive Interview* 2011) is unknown due to the heavy restrictions on news media and digital communication within Iran. However, what is clear is that by the time the printed graphic novel was released in September 2011, the opposition movement had expressed its desire to memorialise the events of 2009, along with the lives of the fallen, through the second wave of protests (Fahissi 2011). Further, due partly to Soltani’s connections within the international human rights community, the comic attracted the attention of activist networks from around the globe (Soltani, personal communication, 7 January 2019). Thus, although the graphic novel was initially released in English, translations in at least 11 subsequent languages, including Farsi, the official language of Iran, were lined up before the original version was even released (Soltani and Bendib 2011b).

Although the graphic novel remained faithful to the webcomic in narrative, it undertook another process of translation from its virtual presence into a printed artefact. Sometimes, readers played a role in such translation. The webcomic was designed in the style of a blog, with the panels arranged in a similar layout to the pages of the eventual graphic novel, and a comment section underneath each chapter:

People would have conversations with one another. And sometimes, in some instances, people would question the validity of something [in the comic] and another person would affirm it ... It was just beautiful to see how vibrant the community around Zahra’s Paradise was how really generous and elevated the tone of exchange was. (Soltani, personal communication, 7 January 2019)

In some instances, the readers’ comments were reflected in print publication. ‘I remember somebody saying to us that Zahra’s prayers, Zahra’s posture when she was praying, was the way the Sunni pray [rather than the Shia style of prayer] ... it’s very minor, but important details like that sometimes came through, (Soltani, personal communication, 7 January 2019).

Thus, the readership of *Zahra’s Paradise* traverses the boundaries of virtual and physical as well as West and non-West. Although the project itself was originally conceived of for an English-speaking audience, the comic decentres the Western gaze that global media outlets tended to adopt when reporting on the protests. Soltani expressed his frustration with the international media’s fixation on Iran’s nuclear status while Iranian citizens were being disappeared from their homes.

This is my way of saying that there’s another side to this that’s just as important. It’s great to be concerned about what the Iranian government might do ten, twenty years from now, but look at what it’s doing to the Iranian people now. (*Read This: Zahra’s Paradise* 2011)

Indeed, critics have noted the comic's critical treatment of Western dominance over Iran's geopolitical history:

[*Zahra's Paradise* is] a challenge to a much longer form of oppressive representation: a narrative imposed by Western players in the region ... Amir and Khalil thus use their novel's intermediality (a work that is both a blog and a text) to stage a form of contemporary protest that is at once transnational and locally rooted, challenging both a history of imperial encounters and the contemporary, oppressive, insular state. (Salmi 2011)

On the other hand, Soltani expresses equal concern over tendencies in liberal, Western circles to take up a non-interventionist stance driven by moral relativism, which 'allows [Westerners] to justify whatever [repressive governments] do in the name of religious or political beliefs' (Soltani, personal communication, 7 January 2019). Soltani and Bendib, therefore, used their role as artists 'to act as witnesses of struggle and pain without having to locate the story within a Western, or leftist, or any other prefabricated, ideological mould ... we really rejected this good versus evil thing' (Soltani, personal communication, 7 January 2019).

Throughout *Zahra's Paradise*, binarisms such as the discrete separation between the living and the dead are teased out and upended, as composite characters are constituted from both survivors and victims of the Revolutionary Guard's brutal backlash. Likewise, Behesht-e Zahra cemetery is articulated as a liminal space wherein the communion between the deceased and their loved ones takes shape. Further, these composites and gateways to historical 'martyrologies' that enfold history into contemporaneity challenge the individuation of the Western subject: characters become impregnated with the impassioned fury of Iran's lineage of martyrs as well as with the defiant grief of the country's growing sea of childless mothers.

This communion of discrete subjectivities reverberated well beyond the initially intended audience of Western English speakers. Members of the Iranian diaspora have spoken about the significance of both its presence and its treatment of the Green Movement's aftermath, with one reader declaring, 'For all the Iranians who are familiar with the conditions of human rights in Iran, this book keeps breaking your heart' (Namei 2013). Further, the creators have testified to the resonance of the comic within the Iranian opposition movement itself. Although Iran's censorship of online communication made it difficult to ascertain which comments were actually coming from within Iran, web analytics showed that readers in about 20 cities in Iran were regularly accessing the webcomic (Soltani, personal communication, 7 January 2019).

Though the webcomic form of *Zahra's Paradise* is no longer hosted online, some pages are still accessible through the internet archiving website Wayback Machine. A glimpse at the conversations taking place in the comment section of each chapter reveals a tapestry of perspectives, localities and languages. Many of the comments engage with other readers over the narrative of the story, reacting to turns in the plot or pointing out small details that stand out. Some give words of encouragement or translation requests; others connect the narrative to political developments within and outside of Iran (Soltani and Bendib 2011b). However, many also describe disorienting emotional states in their encounters with the webcomic: 'I am so shattered in my heart as I read every page that I have to pause and take deep breaths before I continue' ('professor' 2011); 'I have read every episode, I have cried, trembled, clenched my fists ...' ('johnwerneken' 2011);

'Your story telling [*sic*] often leaves me with an immense sense of sorrow for all the humanity lost' (Jasmine' 2011). Comments rarely reveal the nationalities or positionalities of the reader, often leaving language as the only distinguishing factor among commenters.

Thus, the locality of *Zahra's Paradise* occupies a peculiar site of liminality. Since the comic was originally published in English, one must question whether, despite the comic's eventual translation into multiple languages, commenters posting in English were simply conforming to the norms of the virtual community. This question further complicates the inquiry of who was encountering the webcomic, and from where. However, as a Western scholar living in the United States, it is important to be wary of ascribing experiences and motivations onto readers that orient themselves outside of Western ideals. Therefore, in analysing how *Zahra's Paradise* works to unravel the dominance of Western-based notions of rational, individuated subjectivity, I ask the question: how is it that *Zahra's Paradise* has enraptured the attention of Western audiences while at the same time decentring the Western gaze?

I argue that the yoking effects of *Zahra's Paradise* extend beyond the discursivity of its narrative, as readers and critics alike marvel at the painstaking detail and breath-taking spreads of its illustration as well as how the 'liveness' of its serial web release is immanent even in its printed form (Gallagher 2010; 'Iranian Graphic Novel' 2010; Certo 2011). I advance the notion that the disorientation that the characters undergo in the narrative of *Zahra's Paradise* is also reflected in the comic's 'technics', or the ways in which it structures the experience of the reader, such that its affective intensity entangles subjects separated by time and space. In so doing, I engage with scholars theorising the political possibilities of subjective disorientation in order to understand how virtual technics may orient audiences toward a collective resistance against oppressive states both near and far.

The political dynamics of subjective disorientation

In a scene from *Zahra's Paradise* titled 'The Furies' which takes place in Behesht-e Zahra cemetery, Zahra, the titular character and mother of the slain Mehdi, undergoes a drastic change in temperament. Up until that scene, Zahra has been quiet, dignified and reserved as she searches for her son, Medhi. However, upon seeing the casket and the plot where her son is to be buried, a rage awakens within her. Almost as if by divine possession, she implores Mehdi to speak, to run, to live, her rage boiling over until it spreads to the surrounding mourners. The crowd joins Zahra in giving voice to this rage, eventually attracting the scrutiny of the Basij, who dispatch an officer to arrest the agente provocatrice. The officer, or basiji, is instead pushed into Mehdi's burial plot by the affected mass, who threaten to bury him.

The idea that various environments and encounters can change an embodied subject's sense of orientation – its sense of where the boundaries of the self are located – can be traced to Spinoza's (2001) observation that when bodies come into contact with other subjects or exterior terrains, they sense a transformation in their capacity to affect and be affected. Such is the basis of affect theory, wherein embodied states, which we typically think of as emotions, are theorised as shared affective forces that are transmitted through the intermixing of our bodies and their environments. Of import is the notion, advanced by affect scholars, that these bodily capacities, or affects, do not 'belong to'

individual bodies, but rather ‘pass through’ them as bodies comingle with their environments – a ‘radical exteriority’ (Shaviro 2009: 48) of what we may later interpret as emotion. What the individual subjects of *Behesht-e Zahra* may later reflect upon as a personal, emotional experience is, in the moment, experienced as the enhanced bodily capacities afforded by the space of the cemetery and encounters with other mourners – a momentary passage of shared affect swirling among the crowd that decentres the individual.

Affect theory particularly challenges the paradigm of Western thought based on rational individualism – or the idea of the reasoned, self-contained individual who is in total possession of her thoughts, behaviours, beliefs and emotions. As such, affect theory begins to unravel ‘the economy of property, sovereignty and ownership that justify the colonial and imperialist mission, that unfortunately is still operating today within the so-called global market’ (Oliver 2004: 69). Thus, the turn to affect also has political potential.

The idea that the internal compass of the self undergoes constant migration has not just been theorised by Western thinkers as a challenge to rational individualism. Vahdat (2003) describes the philosophical themes emanating from post-Iranian Revolution of 1979 as uniting around a concept of ‘mediated subjectivity’, or a subjectivity that is mediated by divine force. Similarly, Landry (2011) describes an ‘enfolded subjectivity’ (158) experienced in Islam’s conception of a divine presence that is both outside of and within human subjects. This mediation is seen as an ongoing and in-flux process that creates a sense of disorientation, ‘a constant oscillation between individual subjectivity and a collective notion of subjectivity’ (Vahdat 2003: 623). Such divine mediation is a constituting force for the formation of a pluralistic moral community called an *umma* (Hirschkind 2006; el-Nawawy and Khamis 2009), which decentres individuals through the surfacing of ‘fragments of buried experience’ (Hirschkind 2006: 122). The cemetery scene in *Zahra’s Paradise* is an attempt to confront public life with the constant death that checkers Iran’s recent and historical past. Indeed, reports from Iran’s recent political movements, from the Iranian Revolution to the Green Movement, reveal that many families never receive the bodies of their loved ones (Fassihi 2011). In such cases, these ‘fragments of buried experience’ have the potential to resurface over and over again as a result of such lack of closure.

According to Sloterdijk (2010 [2006]), a parallel phenomenon has occurred around the eschewing of rage from public life. Rage in ancient Greek society was seen as a channelling of the gods not unlike the enfolded subjectivity described in post-Revolution Iranian philosophy. As modern advancements in governmentality have come to regulate the expression of public affect, there become fewer opportunities to give voice to rage, resulting in the formation of ‘rage banks’ (65). These reservoirs of spirited resistance become particularly reactive in societies where the expression of dissent is suppressed. Protevi (2009) similarly describes the disorientating capacities of rage: ‘[I]ndividuals are entrained within an enraged ... collective agent without individuated self-consciousness or consideration of the social context’ (47). In *Zahra’s Paradise’s* cemetery scene, it is Zahra’s rage that subsumes her fellow mourners in a joint, collective action against the Basij – a rage shared by all who have lost loved ones due to state violence. Her rage enacts a disorientation of individual subjects, such that actions that may rationally seem risky or dangerous, such as taking on members of Iran’s Revolutionary Guard, are executed without hesitation or forethought.

So far, I have explicated the theoretical underpinnings of subjective disorientation in *Zahra's Paradise* through the webcomic's use of narrative – an explicitly discursive technique. However, as Hicks and Langsdorf (2011) describe, the adaptive work of orienting occurs below the fold of consciousness, 'which may not be accessible to any verbal articulation more precise than a "feeling"' (131) as the body responds to external stimuli. For the reader of *Zahra's Paradise*, the milieu to which the body responds is constituted via a process of mediation.

Hansen (2004) argues that the virtual affords unique disorienting capabilities. By 'deprivileging our modalities of understanding' (58), or removing our sensemaking capacities from their rooting in the physical world, virtual mediation has a particular capacity to engender a 'perceptual flexibility' (66) – the ability to perceive experience from varying viewpoints. Thus, when our bodies become digitised, they are poised to come into being with their virtual, affective environments, creating new collectivities and orientations.

Stiegler (1994), through his theorisation of technics, understands media's structuring of human experience as part of our adaptive capacities for sensemaking. Technics refers to the ways in which media technologies structure human experience. The technology of writing, for example, changed the way humans engaged with the recall of information: previous to the advent of writing, humans had to rely on storing information internally through memory, whereas writing allowed that storage to occur outside the body, extending the volume and timeline of recall. A parallel phenomenon has occurred through our use of mobile phones: whereas before this invention, we were able to recall the phone numbers of friends and family by memory, now, most of this recall is done through our contact lists. Hansen (2012) points out that technics not only structure our conscious life through cognitive processing patterns – or forms of attention, as Stiegler calls it – but, increasingly in today's digital ecology wherein technology plays an enhanced, embedded and intimate role in our lives, technics shapes our experience below the fold of consciousness. Thus, our experience of time and space, as well as our relationality with others, may be unconsciously shaped by our encounters with technology, broadening the potential for subjective disorientation.

Such disorientation of the self is politically potent in the way it challenges the self-interest of the rational, autonomous individual. Manning (2014) describes the disorientation engendered by an embodied state of wondering, 'Where am I?' as 'participat[ing] in an enfolding that challenges the centrality of the I' (167). This enfolding occurs when the bounds of the intimate are forced to recalibrate upon an encounter with otherness. The ability to adapt one's perception, particularly to those perspectives that are deprivileged within the dominant social order, is what constitutes Ahmed's (2006) political project of 'queer phenomenology' – a mode of sensemaking that is attentive to those pushed to the margins, thereby upending the centre of power. 'A queer phenomenology, perhaps, might start by redirecting our attention toward different objects, those that are "less proximate" or even those that deviate or are deviant' (3).

It is this 'adaptive work of orientating' (Hicks and Langsdorf 2011: 133), where 'orientation' functions as a verb rather than a noun, that constitutes the political action of *Zahra's Paradise*. By disorienting readers within the technics of its virtual space, the webcomic-turned-graphic novel provokes alternative ways of being in the world and of understanding subjectivity and relationality. In interrogating the comic's disorienting impacts

on a global readership dominated by Western discourse, I submit that the act of orienting introduces the potential for real political change and for ‘moving the social’ (Foust 2017). I turn now to the contours of affectivity present in *Zahra’s Paradise* through its entanglement of media forms, creative techniques and symbolic storytelling – or the interaction between the comic’s affective and representational forms.

The technics of *Zahra’s Paradise*: space, time and orientation

Turning to the technics of the *Zahra’s Paradise* webcomic requires an attention to how its mediation – and subsequent remediation into a graphic novel – shapes the embodied experience of its readership. How does *Zahra’s Paradise* create the disorienting enfolding of self and other through extra-discursive means, which reaches the reader below the fold of consciousness? Stern (2010), like Hicks and Langsdorf, argues that the (trans)formative experiences of our lives are defined not by the content of what happened, but by our bodies’ responses to how it happened; these various dynamics of experience he calls vitality forms. Stern outlines a pentad of five vitality forms that contour an experience independent of its content: movement, time, space, force and direction (2010). Each of these vitality forms creates a different dynamic for the ‘how’ of mediated experience: how our bodies move toward or away from various mediated phenomena, how these encounters shape our experience of time, how they orient our bodies in space, and how our bodies experience the force of such encounters.

Of specific import to the technics of *Zahra’s Paradise* are the vitality forms of space, time and direction, for it is necessary to understand how the comic works to uproot readers from the terrain of the familiar in order to engender a shift in its orientation. Time also allows the body to register changes to intensities, affects and energies, while direction allows the body to find its way through these shifts, finding its rooting again within spaces of otherness. In other words, time and orientation work together to allow the body to ‘make sense’ of its changing environment.

The genre of the comic has been theorised as a media form that relies on the interplay between artist and reader to construct meaning. In comic parlance, individual frames are called panels and the space in between each panel is known as the gutter. Adler (2011) suggests that in the gutter, readers are invited to perform additional sense-making. Indeed, as a panel moves from one perspective to a different perspective, the reader intuits the transition, filling in the space between not only from the imagination of the mind but also from the intuition of the body, in a manner parallel to how the movie viewer interprets the swivelling of the camera as a turning of her own head.

Zahra’s Paradise opens with a prologue that is seemingly unrelated to the narrative of Hassan and Zahra’s search for Mehdi. At the end of the prologue, a towering figure of a man approaches a dog and her puppies. The man kicks the mother dog aside, scoops up the puppies and throws them into a sack. After beating the sack with a shovel, he then throws it into a river. The scene depicts the sack’s movement using four panels, each showing it from a different perspective – two differently angled closeups, a long shot and one overhead shot – before finally ending in a long, vertical panel that depicts the sack sinking to the river’s floor.

As readers, we follow the sack of puppies down the river using embodied intuition to connect the panels, creating twists and turns in our perspective to fill in the space of the

gutter. The body intuits this journey, experiencing rising anxiety and terror as the puppies, who are only depicted from the outside of the sack, slowly drown. The response that ensues is due to the body's adaptive positioning within the varying perspectives of the panels: we are outside observers, following the flow of the river with an imaginary camera that connects the discrete panels, yet our body intuits another perspective inside the sack, fully immersed in the river with the puppies as they struggle for their last breaths. That which is not shown creates a stirring within the body, an affective overflow.

Arguably, the body's impulse to expand and orient to varying perspectives is amplified by the virtual medium that first introduced the world to *Zahra's Paradise*. Because the work originated as a webcomic, the body is already affectively primed for remediation – Bolter and Grusin's (2000) concept for the ways in which one medium is translated into another. A relevant example of remediation is the webcomic itself, which translates the paper comics of the twentieth century into the digital milieu of a blog. Kember and Zylinska (2012) argue that the body's response to digital mediation is not dependent on whether the remediation of a media form is currently taking place, but rather is due to 'the possibility of the emergence of forms always new, or its potentiality to generate unprecedented connections and unexpected events' (24). Thus, the body is differently primed to experience a printed graphic novel than it is a webcomic.

As a webcomic, *Zahra's Paradise* was published online one 'page' at a time, three times per week. Digital theorists have described the web's temporal dimensions as frantic, dizzying and fragmentary – Hansen (2004) describes the non-contiguous time of the digital, or even merely computational, as existing from one function to the next, with periods in between experienced by computers as non-time, an abyss. The reader's experience of the *Zahra's Paradise* webcomic mimics this temporal contour – periods of intense speed and intensity as the reader rushes to discover Mehdi's fate, followed by a longer, interstitial pause between 'episodes'. Kember and Zylinska (2012) describe the centrality of these pauses to the vital flow of human life: 'Arguably it is precisely the dialectical relationship between flux and stasis, between duration and the cut that organises the conceptual and affective universe for us' (79). The interplay between the slices of time we implement in order to mentally process experience, and the body's continuous, durational impression of it mimics the constant process of orientation our subjectivities undergo as they expand and contract, orienting and adapting to the flux.

This ebb and flow of temporality is also experienced within the chapters themselves. In describing the webcomic's temporal dimensions, Certo (2011) references both frenetic speed and stilled contemplation, as both the narrative and the illustrations are equally compelling, such that one is torn between pressing on to discover the Mehdi's fate and pausing to admire the detail of the intricate spreads scattered throughout. Indeed, readers describe returning to the comic multiple times:

I began reading many months ago, but didn't comment until later. I guess I wasn't sure what to say. I am coming back to read all the panels again ... The artwork and storyline drew me in instantly, and they are having the same effect on me once again. ('Desme' 2011)

Critics similarly note how these spreads structure the reader's temporal experience: 'The reader skips eagerly across the pages to discover the fate of the characters and their desperate search, returning only later to appreciate the sometimes stunning imagery' (Certo 2011).

The layouts of each page structure the pacing for the reader: smaller panels depict action and snappy dialogue as the plot moves along, while spreads – ‘pages’ that eschew panels altogether and depict one sprawling scene (Eisner 1985) – contain painstaking details that stop the reader in her tracks. Readers describe their encounters with such detailed spreads as overwhelming and awe-inspiring:

I love how there are a multitude of distinguishable faces in the lovely curve across the page. Again, so much is represented and said here. The countless graves as small rows and rows and in actual life would be very intimidating at the sheer number. (‘Desme’ 2011)

A scattering of spreads in *Zahra’s Paradise* engenders a temporal disjuncture as the reader’s narrative journey is suddenly frozen within them. Exemplary standouts of such technics include the various spreads that depict the nightmarish and disorienting inner-workings of Iran’s authoritarian bureaucracy. In one, Hassan’s nightmare is illustrated as he wanders through an Escher-esque maze of stairs, his figure appearing in multiple places within the spread. In another, the government bureaucracy is represented as a complex conveyor-belt system, as inmate after inmate is carried along the many diverging pathways, leading into the gigantic open mouths of the Ayatollahs, as a dazzling display of shifting gears grinds in the background.

Through the repetition of forms and flourishes, seen in the circular gears that appear as remediations of the Ayatollahs’ panoptical heads as well as the Escher-esque staircases that lead only to dizzying twists in the laws of physics, the webcomic plays into the ‘perspectival flexibility’ of the disoriented, virtual body.

Such repetition of forms helps to ground the subject within the unfamiliar space of remediation and hypermediation. The premise of the story is a remediation in itself: ‘Zahra’s Paradise’ is also the name of Hassan’s blog, whose ‘compose’ window greets us at the beginning of each chapter. From the start, the reader perceives the incorporation of one media form into another, thereby severing the process of sensemaking from any particular perspective.

The figure of the Ayatollahs – Ayatollah Khomeini, founder and first Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran, and Ayatollah Khamenei, Iran’s second and current Supreme Leader – are also constantly remediated, their faces appearing within sometimes unexpected contexts. The Ayatollahs appear first as scarecrows, standing at the ready to chase away the watchful gaze of the national and international public; speaking to an obedient crowd in the aftermath of the election; as God and Adam in a parody rendering of the Michaelangelo oeuvre; and displayed prominently on the walls of every administrative building and city square. These repetitions serve as reminders of what is at stake as the body responds to the repetitions of the Ayatollahs’ heavy, menacing eyebrows and large, round eyeglasses.

Similarly, the image of the fallen martyr – a reference to the sea of graves residing within the ‘martyr’s section’ of the great cemetery, Behesht-e Zahra – resurfaces again and again in vertically-oriented panels. It is repeated through the form that first introduced us to the profound vulnerability of life: the sack of young puppies sinking to the bottom of a river. This form is repeated at several points in the story, sometimes in a manner that is merely suggested, and sometimes with an explicit nod to the story’s prologue. This vertical panelling is seen again in the depiction of protesters being hanged from construction cranes, with the pulley and the hanging body creating the same descending line as the sinking puppies. Additionally, upon confirming that Mehdi has

indeed been killed in prison, the original prologue image flashes before our eyes, recalling the drowning puppies sinking to the bottom of the river.

Such vertical panelling ‘reinforces the illusion of height’ (Eisner 1985), while the falling or sinking trajectory suggested in the illustrations triggers a bodily response as it adjusts to the disorientation of ‘removing experience from its bodily anchoring in ... physical space’ (Hansen, 2004: 160). Readers have commented on the affective response such imagery engenders: ‘I shudder to see the crane looming behind her’ (‘Roland_09’ 2011), one reader commented when such imagery was repeated in a later chapter. The repetition of imagery allows the body, in its reorientation, to commune with the various figures depicted as reinstatements of Iranian martyrology.

Finally, the figure of Zahra is itself a remediation, both in name and in enactment. Zahra is the name of the daughter of the Prophet Muhammad, who also lost a son, Hosayn, in a great battle against oppressive powers (Soltani and Bendib 2011a; Yarbakhsh 2014). A symbol of ‘purity, dignity, generosity and grace’ (Soltani and Bendib 2011a: 236), she is said to preside over Iran’s great cemetery, ‘Zahra’s Paradise,’ where ‘burying the dead in the womb of [her] cemetery ... would lead to their rebirth in Paradise’ (236). Thus, she is the passage between the living and the dead, between the political clashes of modernity and antiquity.

Yet, more telling than the significance afforded by her name is the illustrative treatment of her figure within the panels of *Zahra’s Paradise*. In the scene wherein we witness Zahra’s rage spill over beyond her physical form, she herself becomes a multitudinous being, her subject appearing as three overlapping figures - two full shots and one closeup. In her soliloquy at Mehdi’s funeral, she is at once depicted as young, vibrating with rage and full of vitality, and – within the same frame – old, weary and overcome with grief. In this space, she is not just Zahra, mother of the slain Mehdi, she is also Fatima Zahra, mother of Hosayn, and the confluence of all mothers who have lost children to an untimely death in the name of a higher order, whether political or religious.

Reinforcing the remediative multiplicity of Zahra is the fury that attracts the attention of the Basij. Here, Zahra beseeches her late son to carry the rage against injustice with him to the afterlife. Her words intensify to the point of poeticism, yet it is also the repetition of forms and figures that heighten the affective state of the reader. The flames invoked by her words are carried throughout the panel itself, spreading over the encapsulated scene, wherein Zahra’s sharp-tongued words tumble from her mouth against an intricately detailed tableau of imagery in the background. Here, the return of the mother dog and her puppies comingles with evocative, yet interpretively ambiguous, vignettes in which mothers embrace, surrender and lose children while ancient stone statues witness their ordeal, frozen. The sensation of history folding in on itself is evoked in the painstaking details of the scene – a sensation that only grows when the reader returns to it later for a closer look.

The ‘liveness’ of the webcomic, with its real-time updates and discussion sections, is countered by the weight of the printed graphic novel, and readers describe two different yet complementary desires in their consumption of each form: ‘It’s been really wonderful following this story as it develops, or at least having that sensation, but I am very much looking forward to having a physical copy, too’ (‘Heather’ 2011); ‘I look forward to a published version I can hold in my hands and pass physically to family and friends’ (‘Desme’ 2011). These articulated desires testify to an overlap in the readership of webcomic and graphic novel, and the desire of webcomic fans to retain a more lasting form of the work. The published graphic novel can be viewed as a process of mediation that continues

from its serialisation on the web. It acts as a follow-up to the intensive experience of the webcomic, which may perhaps parallel the body's response after experiencing a shift to its subjective orientation: though perhaps more finite than the original 'live' experience, the book is a memento that one keeps, ready at hand to remind of its experience, and enfold the reader, once again, into its affective flows.

The intensive attachment that readers describe in their comments within the last few chapters of the graphic novel suggest that many had at last found a sense of familiar grounding within this fantastical, yet not entirely fictitious, rendering of actual events.

I am touched and saddened by Mehdi's mothers [sic] heartbroken grief but doubly saddened to know the September 13 end date for your story. It is like knowing the departure date of a friend who is moving to a far away [sic] place. ('Barry' 2011)

Many comments that appear in the final chapters of *Zahra's Paradise* articulate a renewed commitment to the struggle against tyranny both within and beyond Iran: 'I have ... sworn that the fight for justice ... shall NEVER END until all peoples everywhere know Justice as everyone's GOD clearly intended!' ('johnwerneken' 2011). In enfolding readers into its disorienting use of virtual technics – technics that include the yoking of a multiplicity of perspectives, the manipulation of time and space and the remediation of historic, martyrological figures – *Zahra's Paradise* reorients readers to a sensibility for the political struggle against oppressive states, whether at home or in distant lands.

Conclusion

Through the encounter with technics, this essay has focused on the affective means by which mediation shapes human experience. By illuminating the ways that the reader encounters *Zahra's Paradise*, this analysis understands the intensive pull of a comic over its vast readership, an understanding beyond narrative technique and artistic aesthetics. While aesthetics might be seem an appropriate lens through which to address the work's layout, panelling and illustrative techniques, it implies a distanced occularcentrism that alludes to encounters with mediation as pertaining to mere appearance. Instead, this essay advances an understanding of the body's encounter with mediation as immersive, intimate and transportive.

Further, by focusing on the body's responses to such (re)mediated stimuli, this analysis extends the theoretical conversations on subjective orientation advanced by Ahmed, Manning and others. *Zahra's Paradise* offers a prism through which the intensive and embodied experiences of networked mediation may yoke together affectivities, orientations and teleologies to shake the very foundations that contribute to the formation of our subjectivity. The current political moment is rife with mediated forms of resistance, inviting questions about the efficacy of resistance movements. *Zahra's Paradise* illustrates the political potential of engendering shared orientations to difference and marginality by subverting imperialist notions of individualism, history and finality.

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Notes on contributor

Kate Drazner Hoyt is Assistant Professor of Communication in Film and Media at Pacific Lutheran University. Her research interests lie at the intersection of critical rhetoric, media and technology studies, and affect. Through her work, she explores the materiality of the virtual – how virtual worlds come to impact our physical worlds and how these virtual-physical entanglements intersect with varying systems of power and marginality. Specifically, she is interested in how the virtual implicates the physical body, through both representation and the affective register.

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