

Ashura Online: Poetry, Technology, and Ritual in Iran

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Background

The tenth day of the Islamic month of Muharram is commemorated by Shia Muslims as the day that Hussein ibn Ali, grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, was martyred at the Battle of Karbala. This day is known as Ashura and is the most important holy day in Shia Islam, the official state religion of Iran. In Iran, the performance of *nouhe* elegies is a highly significant part of the mourning rituals performed during Ashura. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, these elegies are increasingly recorded, livestreamed, and shared online through social media platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, Telegram, and WhatsApp, in addition to a variety of Iranian based websites like Aparat, Tekye, and Heyatonline.

The Project

This research project analyzes the function and affective power — the symbolic efficacy — of online *nouhe* performances, especially during the first ten days of Muharram when they tend to be most intense. The project aims to explicate the interaction between poetry, technology, and ritual in the Iranian context through observation and examination of videos and livestreams across a variety of social media platforms, along with the individual and collective responses to these mourning ceremonies in virtual space. In analysis, the semiotics of the image, the interaction between sound and sensation, and the use of camera, sound work, lighting, mixing, and editing are taken into consideration.

Method and Conclusions

The phase of research carried out thus far has primarily consisted of digital ethnography and preliminary analysis of a small sample of videos. In the weeks and months leading up to Ashura (August 18-19), the most popular online platforms and accounts for sharing pre-recorded and live *nouhe* videos were identified in addition to their relevant auditory and visual qualities. Sound and video editing on pre-recorded videos tends to be heavy and live performances consistently prefer utilizing electronic over acoustic musical elements. During the first ten days of Muharram, we have collected and documented as many live performances as possible. The next phase of research will involve deeper analysis of these collected videos.