

Can Cinema Slow the Flow of Blood?

***Noble Sacrifice*. Lebanon. Rebus Film. Boulghorjian, Vatche, dir. 2002.**

***Ashura: This Blood Spilled in My Veins*. Lebanon. Toufic, Jalal, dir. 2002**

Laura U. Marks



Ritual implicates the body in both remembrance and forgetting, contemplation and catharsis. This essay examines an experimental documentary from Lebanon that extends and deflects these purposes in *Ashura*, the Shi'i Muslim commemoration of the martyrdom of Imam Hussein. *Noble Sacrifice* by Lebanese filmmaker Vatche Boulghorjian (2002) begins with the Ashura celebration in Nabatiyeh in southern Lebanon. As practiced in Nabatiyeh it is a famously bloody ritual. Boulghorjian's documentary conveys the embodiment of ritual, and witnesses its realignment with mass action. Boulghorjian, who won third prize at Cannes in 2010 in the student film category, is a filmmaker enormously sensitive to the nuances

Laura U. Marks is Dena Wosk University Professor in Art and Culture Studies School for the Contemporary Arts Simon Fraser University.
lmarks@sfu.ca

of the audiovisual medium and its capacity both to convey affect and to make argument. *Noble Sacrifice* critiques the realignment of affect with political action – martyrdom, or suicide bombing.

The documentary's title refers to the logic of sacrifice that is fundamental to all three religions of the book. The Qur'an reiterates the story of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac, and God's approval of this willingness to make a "noble sacrifice." *Noble Sacrifice* is filmed on the tenth and culminating day of Ashura. On this day, southern Lebanese Shi'ite participants collectively beat themselves to make the blood flow while invoking the martyrs 'Ali and Hussein. The camera roams in among the celebrants, showing the fields of red blood but also the camaraderie and ordinariness of this event. The video shows how individuals become a collective, and how a collective becomes a crowd. It conveys the feeling of being there, of shared embodiment. In its goriness, the film is intolerable to watch, in ways that mimic the experience of Ashura. Its aggressive approach pre-empts easy consumption of the documentary and make judgment difficult or impossible.

Several layers of context inform and obscure our contact with the object itself. The Western fascination with "political Islam" has fed a flood of documentaries asserting connections between Islam in general, Shi'i Islam in particular, the ritual of Ashura, and suicide bombings by groups such as Hizbollah, Amal, and Hamas. These include an inflammatory documentary sponsored by the BBC, *In The Name of God: Scenes from the Extreme* by Israeli filmmaker Dan Setton; and *Human Weapon*, by the Israeli filmmaker Ilan Ziv, which suggests that violence is endemic to Islam. Practically no representation of Ashura is available in the West that does not assert a timeless and ahistorical relationship between Islam and violence. Conversely, and as usual, the embattled Western left attempts to come up with an appeasing, nice image of Islam. And meanwhile, Arabs and Muslims are acutely aware of how their images will be taken up in the West. The result for critics of Western imperialism is self-censorship and censorship of others. So as usual, the images that circulate the most are the most bigoted ones; next is the liberal apology. Both of these categories are uninteresting as art. The smart, reflexive, inassimilable images, which *are* interesting as art, circulate the least. I include *Noble Sacrifice* in this last group, and also *Ashura: This Blood Spilled in My Veins* by Jalal Toufic.

Shi'i Islam is a tragic religion, as its teleology was thwarted at the very beginning. The Shi'a (etymologically, *shi'at 'Ali*, party of 'Ali, the son-in-law of Mohammed) differ from the Sunnis in that they believe that the Muslim imamate should pass among descendants of the Prophet, for which reason they refused to recognize the Umayyad caliphate in the year 661. But not only was 'Ali killed that year by a political opponent; worse, his son Hussein, who succeeded him, was murdered, making succession impossible. Ashura commemorates the martyrdom of Hussein at Karbala in 680 on the tenth day of the

month of Muharram. Shi'i Muslims believe that from this day, Islam, lacking a righteous leader, took a wrong course.

Thus in a profound sense, Shi'i Islam rejects the world as it is. A radical negation of what is, and a becoming of what might be, characterize Shi'i theology (esoteric) and politics (of resistance). Jalal Toufic argues that decidedly Nietzschean aspects underlie Ashura, and Shi'i theology in general, for Nietzsche (1967 [1887]) upholds "a Yes-saying without reservation, even to suffering, even to guilt." It is crucial to consider that the ontology of Shi'i Islam is negation, not violence.

This radical negation has historically been a powerful source for political action. Because if Islamic history has been tragically misdirected from almost the very beginning, and injustice continues to hold sway, then this world makes no sense. It motivated resistance in Iran during the time of the Shah, and in Iraq during the era of Saddam Hussein, who prohibited the celebration of Ashura. And the Shi'i tradition of resistance was mobilized against the Israeli oppression of the Palestinians and occupation of southern Lebanon in the 1980s and 1990s. While refuting the claim that Islam is inherently violent, Boulghourjian shows that Shi'i theology has been used to justify contemporary "martyrdom operations" or suicide bombings. "If life does not prove to be fair," Boulghourjian's informant Sheikh Shafik Jerade cautiously explains, "then death is better. Life without honor, without human rights, is meaningless." More forthright in making the connections is Sayyed Hussein Nasrallah, secretary-general of Hizbollah, who in a rousing speech makes the connections between Ashura, resistance and self-sacrifice abundantly clear.¹ It is important to note that Hizbollah formally renounced suicide operations as part of its rehabilitation from a militia to a Lebanese political party.

Ashura commemorates the assassination at Karbala, and the wrong turn taken by history since then. The contemporary "martyr" commemorates with his or her body the original martyrs, Ali and Hussein. Interestingly, the grief and suffering evoked in Ashura are always on *the part of the other*, as we can hear in emotional Ashura sermons, both live and on cassette. Zeynab grieves for her brother Hussein; a captured Muslim, presaging Hussein's death, says "I do not weep for myself, I weep for the coming caravan"; and contemporary listeners weep for all of them. The very grief that informs Ashura is a grief for the suffering of others, often at two or three removes.

Yet as the lamentation repeats the tragic events from different points of view, and the sheikh's voice rises in sobs, we sense the intensification of private emotion that leads to collective affect. It is like when, as a child, you cried and fed your grief by remembering the painful event from different angles. Brian Massumi observes that affect gains its autonomy from narrative through this kind of feedback loop, which gives affect a non-linear or atemporal quality (Massumi 2002). The lamentation of Ashura puts grief into a feedback loop,

intensifying it, yet perhaps also detaching it somewhat from the narrative of that day at Karbala. Over the course of the ten days of prayer that constitute Ashura, there is a gradual shift from spiritual meditation to intense, embodied ritual, accompanied by a gradual intensification of affect. And this is where Boulghourjian's film takes up the story.

Between Spiritual Experience and Action: Ritual

To what degree can a mere human bleed and suffer physically on behalf of a religious martyr? Mentally we can sympathize, emotionally we can feel another person's grief as our own. But physically? What is going on in these moments? Is the affect of lamentation released, in catharsis, or mobilized, in action?

The ritual of Ashura performs a connection with the suffering of past martyrs, through the self-flagellation of present mourners. But it is hubris to compare one's own body with the revered and transcendent bodies of religious history. Boulghorjian condemns it through the words of Sheikh Jerade, who says that people who inflict pain on themselves in memory of Imam Hussein's pain are making a selfish error. "They may believe this lessens Imam Hussein's pain ... but we reject this. It is a perversion, unacceptable to religion." Hizbollah forbids its adherents to participate in Ashura, for it cheapens the sacrifice of Imam Hussein by suggesting a comparison to contemporary suffering bodies. (And also perhaps because, rather than sharpen the political will for resistance, it softens and diffuses it.)

Ritual Action's Embodied Nature – and How Film Shows it

Boulghourjian's strategy is not to invite sympathy with the theological tenets of Ashura, but to enjoin a bodily engagement with the practitioners. I find this is a demystifying strategy – though many viewers seem to disagree. *Noble Sacrifice* gets close to the celebrants on the climactic tenth day of Ashura, when Boulghourjian shows them in their profane ordinariness. It is both a humane and a desacralizing technique. We move into the crowd with the camera, at face and torso-level of the men.

The celebrants are presented as ordinary people, "guys," so immersed in their exertion that the blood streaming down their faces seems not so different from sweat. They support each other, throw their arms about each other's shoulders. Evidently used to being photographed, they either ignore the camera or mug for it. The ritual seems not so different from a soccer match or American football. All this makes the practice less shocking, less strange. I especially respond to the shots of individuals, such as a tired young man, face caked with dried blood, sitting on the curb and smoking a cigarette. All of us have lived periods of such intensity that the intensity became its own consistency, it becomes ordinary. Boulghourjian shows that Ashura can be such a moment.

Intense experiences are hard to remember, and the problem for cinema is that they are hard to symbolize, to put into language. Visual images push affective experiences, which are not mainly visual, into the symbolic. Cinema can easily flatten experiences into representations that subtract their complexity; pornography usually does this. *Noble Sacrifice* uses several techniques to add the non-symbolic aspects back in. One of these is the mobile steadicam that moves fluidly among the participants, bringing us close to them and giving a sense of being in the stream of events (though not exactly of being another body among them, due to the non-human fluidity of the steadicam's movement). Another is the use of haptic shots, where a plethora of detail fills the screen in several close planes, including, later on in the film, spots of blood on the lens of the camera; these fill the space between the pro-filmic events and the audience. Dense montage makes it difficult for the viewer to get distance on the event. And a richly layered sound track intensifies what is conveyed visually.

Yet *Noble Sacrifice* is not only a genial documentary of the boys next door beating themselves bloody. It also emphasizes the strangeness and ecstatic intensity of the ritual, by using techniques of abstraction. Non-diegetic sound, especially, not only intensifies the experience but abstracts and reflects upon it. In the dense sound collage, sometimes the diegetic sound gives way to archaic-sounding horns, low booming, and growling sounds.

It is important to the film's politics that *Noble Sacrifice* only invites a shared embodiment between participants and viewer when there are one, two, or just a few people in the frame. All the crowd scenes are heavily degraded, so the effect of many people moving in unison is caricatured, the crowd becoming an awful, headless beast. This effect is rather didactic, but it effectively interrupts the thrilling identification with crowds in motion that cinema facilitates so easily. No will triumphs here – we are invited to sympathize with individuals, but the crowd is presented as alien.

Similarly, there are many archival shots (mostly courtesy of Hizbollah Information Services) of fighting on the Lebanese–Israeli border and of suicide operations. This footage is degraded, and the effect, I believe, is again to prevent a visceral identification with violence.

The affective shape of *Noble Sacrifice* seems to parallel the affective shape of the ritual of the tenth day of Muharram itself. Beginning in the middle of the action, it heightens, ebbs, and heightens again in intensity as one might move in and out of consciousness over the course of the ritual. Moments that might be climactic are interrupted with those dreadful shots of the faceless crowd. Also, the reasonable words of Sheikh Jerade continue almost throughout, in voice-over and small subtitles.

But it may be that the subtitles are too small for non-Arabic speakers; the words do not manage to tame the images. This may

be a reason for critics' squeamishness that *Noble Sacrifice* does not do enough to pull viewers out of the bloody spectacle.² While the so-called war on terror wants to comprehend radical Islam in order to dismiss it, *Noble Sacrifice* invites a bodily empathy with Ashura practitioners. Yet it prevents "sympathy" or fetishistic comprehension.

The film concludes in a calm cleansing sequence. To the sound of a quiet prayer, two men rinse themselves at a fountain. An almost abstract color panel of green and red gradually changes to green and white as the blood is sluiced away. Overlaid on these images is a shot from 1982 of Israeli bombs falling onto Beirut – but you might think they were huge snowflakes floating down.

Cinema, Embodiment, and Affect

The limits of embodiment might be found in Derrida's critique of presence: that we are most absent to ourselves during performative acts, such as ritual. Because the performative act precedes us, our conscious and intentional presence is not really required; our bodily action is enough. Ritual liberates people to be not quite conscious, yet not quite embodied either; to be out of body or ecstatic. So the feeling that accompanies ritual is not exactly personal emotion, but the relatively free-floating intensiveness of experience that characterizes what Massumi calls "the autonomy of affect." Affect is different from emotion in that it is only loosely connected to individual psyche and history. This is why we do things in a crowd that we would never do alone. Affect can be harnessed for a variety of ends, hence its power and danger. Boulghourjian's documentary captures some of that free-floating affect and communicates it to the audience. I am sure his techniques of closing the distance are why so many viewers respond with dismay, or in some cases exhilaration (as when it was a favorite at the new York Underground Film Festival) – it is difficult to pull back, to keep a cool head, watching this movie.

To account for the effect of both Ashura and this video about Ashura gravely tests the recent "embodied turn" (or "sensuous" or "affective" turn) in humanities scholarship – the recent embrace of all that is sensuous, embodied, haptic, synaesthetic, affective, physiologically material rather than psychically deep, etc. Of course this new direction in thought, in which I have taken part, is important because it offers an alternative to the dualism that still limits cultural analysis. Some of the concepts associated with the embodied turn do permit a kind of existential intimacy with the films and their subjects. However, it troubles me that filmmakers and theorists are newly embracing sensuous, embodied cinema practices that close the gap between film and audience at the same time that commercial and heavily ideological media are doing it, and often better.

Embodied response makes a viewer vulnerable to ideological messages, and this of course is why critical thought, especially since the Frankfurt School, has sought to demystify the relationship. I have been appalled at some of the applications of my own work

on embodiment to films that use embodied techniques, together with ideological messages, in order to overwhelm critical judgment. Movies like the fascistic *The Passion of the Christ* (which was extremely popular in the Arab world) push the viewer's face in the wounds of their protagonists and disable all critical thought. They capture affect for political ends.

More moderately, my concern is that the new embodied scholarship sometimes too quickly closes the distance between the bodies of self and other – it hastens the flow of blood perhaps. Subjectivity is not only embodied but also abstract, and the gap between bodies needs to remain large enough to allow a subject to pass.

We need to be able to take a distance from the body, both in order to critique and in order to understand the ecstatic state that is worship. Hence I find *Noble Sacrifice* intervenes thoughtfully in the contemporary discourse on embodiment. Boulghourjian conveys the experience of an embodied state as terrifying, overwhelming, and also *normal*, and then critiques the capture of embodied affect for political ends.

Can cinema slow the flow of blood? Maybe. It can also speed it up. Maybe my optimism is excessive that audiences can respond to such “difficult” work. I would like to cultivate the conditions of respect for both cinema and audiences, including our capacity to both respond with our bodies and to feel and think.

Notes

1. This understanding is used to justify the suicide or martyrdom operations of Hizbollah and Amal against the Israeli occupiers of Southern Lebanon before Israel's withdrawal in 2000.
2. Boulghourjian was invited to submit his film to the Full Frame documentary festival in Durham, North Carolina in 2002, where it featured prominently in their program. After the United States went to war on Iraq, festival organizers became anxious about the film. They consulted two local scholars, who opined that the film exaggerated the bloodiness of Ashura in a sensationalist manner, and that the connection it makes between Ashura and suicide bombing was “reprehensible.” Fearing the film would fuel anti-Muslim sentiment, the festival canceled the screening. See Fellerath (2003).

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