

Thinking with the Impersonal: an Ethnographic View from Iran

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Abstract

This essay approaches the impersonal as a set of concrete relational forms that cannot be made sense of through the dominant logic of personhood. Drawing on three ethnographic settings of my long-term fieldwork in Iran, I describe how the actions of managers in a teachers' training course, the operations of an optical mechanism that channels consumption practices, and the existential relationship poets have to their craft is best captured by paying attention to the impersonal forces that are unfolded in the process. This opens the way for a different interpretation of politics, consumption and poetry in Iran, but also for a different understanding of anthropology and, perhaps, life.

Keywords: Impersonal; Iran; Management; Consumption; Poetry; Desire

This essay contributes to anthropological reflections on the notion of the impersonal via an ethnographic analysis of three domains of its articulation in contemporary Iran. Usually, the term impersonal is used to describe abstract, distant, mass mediated and possibly "cold" relational forms. Used with a negative tinge, the term is juxtaposed to concrete, close, embodied, immediate and warm personal forms. In this scheme, personhood delineates a humanistic ideal and is opposed to the impersonal as good is to evil. My goal is not to critique personhood, but more modestly, to take note of its domination and elaborate an approach to what is left behind in its wake, a set of concrete relational forms that cannot be made sense of through the logic of personhood though they are related to it, and can be named impersonal. My effort is to explore this border notion to think again about political, familial and, yes, personal relationships and consider them from a different vantage point, one that does not see the self as the beginning and the end of the process.

All this is nothing new. The idea that human relationships are not just relationships among selves is at least as old as the social sciences, whether

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you want to think them with Marx, Durkheim, Weber or Freud who all were thinking with the impersonal. In turn, their social analyses were the secularized outcomes of a much longer theological trajectory in which the concept of the person was central in elaborating the relationship between human selves and divine interventions in the trinity. By working out other forms of the relationship between self and power, social sciences offered a renewed buffer against visions of self-mastery and transparent consciousness, in dialogue but also against Descartes and Locke.

But nowadays the metaphysical impersonal of social science has lost traction and the paradigm of the person seems to dominate the scene. In opposition to the dehumanizing effects of violence and automation, personhood appears as the ultimate human value. What Mauss had presented as a historical category has become a moral one, despite his warning (Mauss 1985, p. 22). According to Roberto Esposito, the paradigm of the person is predicated on a bifurcation between a volitional dimension of humans and an immediately biological body (Esposito 2012). In this theoretical and political formulation, the biological body is cast aside as a passive recipient, while humans are represented as either active or passive volitional selves, with not much in between. Revealing the grip of biopolitics, this bifurcation points to the difficulty of thinking humans beyond acts of domination and submission by others or oneself. The process of subject formation is absorbed into this self-centered conception, to the extent that subject, self, and person have become synonymous. This interchangeable use is parallel to the constant expansion of practices and discourses that place the self as sole existential matrix. My aim however is not to juxtapose to this domination a theory of the impersonal, or to argue for a return to a deployment of well-rehearsed impersonal categories (e.g. capital, society, reason, the unconscious). Rather I wish to underline how, in specific circumstances, passages into the impersonal open up a different dimension of existence. Passages into the impersonal cannot be conceptualized in isolation, but stand at a tangential angle to the process of subject formation. These passages work very differently depending on circumstances, and in my ethnography below I begin to sketch a typology of them, focusing on those that work by suspension, by intensification or by dislocation. These results are preliminary: more analytical and ethnographic work will be needed to specify them.

Impersonal Iran

Often depicted as the epitome of alterity, Iran is no exception to the proliferation of selves, as contemporary anthropological researches on sexuality (Najmabadi 2014) mental health (Behrouzan 2016), poetry (Olszewska 2015) and political economy (Hashemi 2015) suggest. It is almost super-

fluous to mention the relevance of social media (Akhavan 2013) and the ever-growing self-help literature that occupies entire bookstore shelves in Iran. And yet, in underlying the relevance of discourses about the self in contemporary Iran, these researches also seem to reveal the limits of self and personhood, either as conceptual categories or as apt descriptors for the country's subjective articulations. The most sustained and exemplary discussion of these limitations can be found in Najmabadi's *Professing Selves* (2014), a brilliant ethnography of trans-sexuality. In the concluding chapter of the book, after reviewing the notion of "self-knowledge" in Iran, Najmabadi notes that the concept of an interiorized self has not become so dominant in Iran as one would expect given the conjuncture of Islamic thought and modern psychology. She concludes that the notion of a self as a stable sense of one's body and psyche is not very productive to understand her interlocutors' relationship with sexuality. Instead, a focus on conduct appears more productive in thinking about how specific spatial and temporal nodes define the self as contingent product (2014: 297-298). Najmabadi draws on conduct to theorize how it becomes possible for her interlocutors to carve spaces for livable and loving lives in the midst of the disambiguations which tend to reproduce bounded notions of self. In her concluding pages Najmabadi seems to suggest that selves do not exhaust the modalities of human existence.

Drawing on Najmabadi's conclusions, I aim to reflect on conduit in Iran and in particular on what is at stake in inhabiting a rule impersonally. While via personhood, one tends to conceptualize the relationship with rules from the point of view of either a willing or a forced subjection, my effort is to pay attention to the transversal relationships that passages into the impersonal imply. However, one should also remember that conduit might not be the endpoint of existence, and that practice, no matter how conceptualized, is not all there is to human destiny: the impersonal is not just a matter of conduit, but rather a landscape, an existential scenery, which when triggered makes one live things differently. Passages into the impersonal are theaters to think about the relationship between immanence and transcendence.

I look at three domains of action that are usually depicted as being about active/passive relationships of self-formation: relationships with the state, with the (extended) family, and with oneself.¹ I approach these three relational domains via the ethnographic analysis of specific settings, hoping to bring into focus different workings of the impersonal understood

1 The research was made possible thanks to a Standard Research Grant from the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada. Most of the fieldwork was carried out between 2011-2015. All names are pseudonyms. Persian transliteration follows the Encyclopedia Iranica system – save for Shirazi vernacular expressions which are vocalized following speech rather than writing.

as a dimension of human existence that bypasses personal concerns. First, I consider an educational setting as illustrative of political dynamics that are predicated on the suspension of personal concerns in view of “making things work.” Second, I analyze consumption rivalries as an intensification of personal investments that paradoxically makes consumption drives impersonal, and modulates family relationship. Third, I look at lyrical poetry, the most personal of all human expressions, as a site of impersonal desire, a way to work out life as it is, rather than how it should be.

Impersonal Management

Studies of both the Pahlavi monarchy and the Islamic Republic overemphasize the cohesiveness of the state in Iran and juxtapose it to society and the people (e.g. Keddie 1983). In response, historians and anthropologists have shown the state’s porousness, and underlined the diverse assemblages of public and private agencies, media, groups and individuals that coalesce to generate outcomes (among others Adelkhah 2009, Schayegh 2010, Najmabadi 2014, Behrouzan 2016). Highlighting state effects, these researches undo the overwhelming tendency to read everything that happens in Iran through the binary of domination and resistance.

Once the state is shown as a multiplicity, the question of management becomes pivotal to understand how power is articulated. A common adjective to describe managers positively, be they department chairs, municipal bureaucrats or public health officials, is *fā’al*: active, resourceful, effective. Managers get things done. To understand their efficacy, I find it useful to set aside the assumed polarity between the notion of a self-conscious autonomous agent, and that of an automaton executing clear orders from above.

In January 2012, I attended an intensive course for university instructors of Persian as a second language in an Iranian provincial university known for its language courses for international students. The course was part of an ongoing effort to promote the teaching of Persian language worldwide, at a time of international political tensions and a heightened sense of Iran’s isolation from the West –not unlike 2018 when I am writing. State cultural institutions were taking a leading role in language pedagogy, seen as an operation of cultural diplomacy.

In Iran, there is extensive experience in people’s management for education, tourism, pilgrimage and other aims. The organization of group activities constitutes a fundamental axis of biopolitics that cuts across the public/private divide. The state outsources some of its functions, while private institutions occupy the interstices or develop new initiatives to produce services and revenue (on pilgrimage see Adelkhah 2016). The teachers’ training course was one such unstable assemblage. Made more challenging

by the presence of foreigners, the course was the outcome of a collaboration between several institutions, each with its own goals and responsible for a different aspect of the course.

Participants were lodged in a 5-storey apartment building, five people per unit, women separated from men. Each morning we were given food for breakfast in our unit. A bus took us to the university for lectures, to a restaurant for lunch and dinner, and to sightseeing on occasion. During the weeks preceding the course and up to the day when it began, I received little information regarding its location and format. Once the course started, the day's program was often communicated to me and other participants at the very last minute. Plan changes were worked out on the spot. This does not mean that the course lacked structure and coordination, or that the organization chaotic, or communication deficient. On the contrary, the apparent absence of plans exhibited a specific modality of efficient action oriented at making things work via a set of continuous adjustments and ad-hoc solutions that reworked the available conditions on the ground in such a way as to achieve realistic functionality. The management of people and things did not proceed through an enunciation of rules, but through actions, which retrospectively were read as establishing a rule.

Functionaries belonging to different institutions were in charge of the course: some oversaw logistics, some addressed administrative matters, and some dealt with academic aspects. Mid-level state functionaries embody one of the most visible and ordinary forms of state management as everyday problem solvers: they make sure that things get done. So they did in the course. Making sure that things worked as smoothly as possible, managers steered the group of participants through constant adjustments and at times stern interventions. When problems arose, they dealt with them. While there was a hierarchy between managers belonging to the same institution, each organization pursued its own goal. As I was told by the contract teacher hired to supervise the academic side of the course, everything needed to be negotiated because different institutions had different priorities. The needs of logistics clashed with the academic schedule. The provincial university wanted to showcase its own teachers, while the institution responsible for the diffusion of Persian Language had its own methods and personnel. Even shared goals (visas, arrivals and departures) required a high degree of coordination not always easy to achieve. The outcome was a relative success. The course was completed, money was spent, students were given diplomas and paraded in public events with flags representing the participants' countries of citizenship.

Some of the managers told me that the course was the outcome of extensive planning and coordination, but at least from the point of view of participants, such planning did not translate into a clear and flawless pre-determined program. Managers had ideas and directives about what should

and should not be done, however, there was no substantive intent to turn us into docile subjects, if by this word one understands a process of subject formation oriented at interpellation: there was no effort in making us good followers of the state, or good Muslims. While there was a pedagogical investment in making us into good teachers, even this aspect appeared more as an abstract goal than a concrete objective. Regularly, to make things work, the needs of training were expediently adjusted to the situation at hand.

To the extent that the course management worked, and I think it did, its effectiveness depended on the mobile modality of managers who continuously devised more or less acceptable solutions to the situations they were confronted with. Efficacy was not achieved via a set of personal initiatives dependent on the good will or disposition of these managers. Instead of personalizing the implementation of their mandate, managers subtracted from the mandate any transcendental appeal to a higher order, any abstract rule, be it ideological or a personal, and turned their actions into sheer efficient practice. By modulating the situation that they were confronting, they delivered impersonal results that undid the consistency of the state apparatus, fragmenting it into a myriad of diverging initiatives, while relentlessly working to reproduce its efficiency. At the same time, participants depersonalized their investment in the course, in the institutions that run it, and in the Islamic Republic. While restless and often critical of the perceived lack of efficiency, most of them, me included, followed along and participated in pedagogical and touristic activities with disinvested engagement. The managers and participants' mutual suspension of investment, their undoing of rules, opened up a passage to inhabit an impersonal space of practice that allowed things to be accomplished, goals to be reached. Power here worked not by subject formation, but by the suspension of any "will" to govern conduct, which made possible to get things done in a way that would have been otherwise impossible.

Impersonal managing of people and things became most ethnographically visible in those situations in which the lack of explicit programming and explanation created confusion and frustration among participants:

- (a) "Can you tell us what is the plan for the whole day?"
- (b) "When will we go to Isfahan?"
- (c) "Since there is no activity planned, can I travel to Tehran during the weekend?"
- (d) "Tell us what the rule is and we will respect it."

Instead of enunciating a general rule or plan, answers to these questions either addressed the specific situation at hand or enunciated a rule so generic that it coincided with its absence:

- (a) "We'll take you to the university in half an hour."
- (b) "You will go on a trip, at the end of the course."
- (c) "This weekend we will go sightseeing around the city."

(d) “You can do what you want, you are free.”

To be efficient, there can be no apriori rule. When unfolded, the impersonal appeared here as a constituent practice, a practice that fully subsumed onto itself any normative function (how things should be) and was therefore predicated on sheer effectuality: the power to produce effects. These effects appear disjointed and singular, but combined in a synthesis they orient people in order to make things work.

At the end of the course, in saying goodbye, the manager responsible for logistics thanked the participants, and in an ironic tone said that the course had been challenging to manage because teachers were harder than students to take care of. He concluded: “if you were unhappy, and if we did mistakes, *mârâ halâl konid*” absolve us, forgive us, make us *halâl*—which I take as suggesting: our mistakes were not personal, it was not about us as selves, it was about our mandate, our impersonal office.

Impersonal eyes

Doing fieldwork in Iran, I have often encountered the workings of an optical mechanism overseeing everyday relationships between one or more people: an eye (*çeshm*) is watching.² Either public or private, the situations when the mechanism is at play concern the way one is dressed, how one behaves, what one does or does not say, how one relates to family, friends, colleagues or business associates. While each setting is specific and generates different interpretations, the optical mechanism works across this variety to sanction the propriety of behaviors and words. People adjust their demeanor, their attitude, and habits in relation to a perceived gaze that oversees and evaluates their postures and practices. The optical mechanism sustains a field of visibility that is constructed in the process, to which appropriate/inappropriate behaviors and words respond. The perception of being in the gaze defines the activation of a force field in which one’s behavior, one’s dressing, but also for example one’s buying practices are more or less visible. The gaze sanctions the extent to which one should be visible, while also empowering acts of seeing and being seen.

One might describe this optical mechanism as a question of interpersonal relationships leading up to a mutual definition of I/you, we/they. However, this would reduce the actions in this force field to a matter of acceptance or transgression of rules. The argument would go something like this: some individuals decide to abide by social norms while others decide

2 This section is indebted to conversations with Saman Tabasinejad and to her research on clothing and class in Iran, which discusses in depth the entailments of “being in the eye” (Tabasinejad 2017); my view on the gaze is different from hers.

to refuse them, and each one is judged accordingly; relationships between you and I are ruled by such decisions. But, at least in my fieldwork, this has not really been the case. My interlocutors tended to describe the operations of the optical mechanism as a series of chain reactions in which individuals were carried by forces either than their own. To psychologize these forces as the projection of their own will or their social position as defined by the circumstances would elude some of the power of the eye at play here. While it might appear paradoxical, part of the effectiveness of this optical mechanism lies in how, by intensifying certain personal confrontations, it ends up neutralizing them via a passage into the impersonal: it is not just that people feel they are driven to certain acts or behaviors by chain reactions, but that there is something else, something impersonal that drives their family relationships.

To start with, one can examine the expressions used to describe the mechanism. The term *çeshm* designates both the organ and the act of seeing, the eye and the gaze (Dekhoda 1993, p. 7138).³ The combination of organ and function is such that *çeshm* stands on its own and is not the attribute of a person. *Çeshm* is not a part of a larger coordinated organism mediating the operation of seeing in relation to other body parts.⁴ *Çeshm* is an organ without a body, a mode of existence fully constituted around its function of vision, a force to which effects can be attributed. This does not mean that its effects reach subjects unrefracted, as if the eye was origin and source. *Çeshm* establishes expectations of a normative conduct but its rules cannot be abstracted from its field of operations. In this regard *çeshm* is tangential to processes of subject formation. As much as self and others participate in structuring the field of vision, they do not coincide with it. I describe three verbal expressions used to make sense of this optical mechanism.

Coming into the eye

Tu çeshm âmadan defines the process of coming into the eye. Entering the field of vision can refer to being in a place where one is visible, on a street, at a family gathering, a work meeting, or to entering in a relationship, as for example when one begins or is drawn into a friendship, a business partnership, a marriage. Though entering into a relational field triggers normative expectations about what one is supposed to do in such situations, *tu çeshm âmadan* is an expression that denotes a state of fact rather than an ethical demand. A

4 In spoken and written Persian the singular is often used for plural: *çeshm* can refer to both eyes. This being said, the singular amplifies the stand-alone character of the eye, especially when used with the indefinite article. Many literary quotes in Dekhoda (1993) show how *çeshm* acts as a standalone active agent.

less literal translation could be “entering the frame,” thinking of the frame as a conceptual device that defines entrance into signification (Goffman 1974). Coming into view in itself can be either positive or negative, it is an event, a matter of circumstances, and does not necessarily imply a judgment. Once one enters the frame, one can be under the gaze in different degrees. But even this quantitative aspect is not a matter of evaluation in and of itself, since all depends on what one does in relation to the field one has entered. The more one is visible, the higher the stakes as well as the scrutiny of their actions and words, but also higher the chances of having an impact.

An acquaintance told me that a typical situation of *tu çeshm âmadan* happens when a family member scores well in the university entrance exam and is admitted to a good university. Some parents hide the good news about their children not to “come into view” and generate envy, while others go around telling everyone to create difficulties and shame for others. They will leverage the coming into view to show that their children are better than those of others and consequently that as parents of a successful child they deserve more respect among the extended family. In many instances coming into view happens because one behaves in ways that stand out for one reason or another. During a conversation about the difficult economic situation of Iran, Hasan told me: “I am not like that, I do not waste money, my mother and father always told me ‘don’t be in the gaze’ (*tu did nabâshi*), do your work in silence.” Both accounts highlight how, once one is “in the eye,” a relationship of visibility ensues in which both showing and hiding matters.

The optical frame is neither subjective nor objective. Even if Hasan reflects on his behavior in moral terms (what one should or should not do), and considers the consequences of being in the eye for his own person, his and his parents’ words also highlight how aware they are of the inevitable consequences of being in the eye, to the extent that one has to make an effort not to enter the frame while engaging nevertheless in family or business relationships. Being in the eye is not about making oneself into a good Muslim, citizen, wife, husband, neighbor, customer, seller. Being in the eye is a mobile play, almost a dance.

Our eye into their eye

The Shirazi expression *çeshemun tu çesh-eshe* describes the optical tension that is instituted once one has come into view: our eyes are into their eyes. Mutual observation. Sometimes the expression is accompanied by a hand gesture --index and middle finger divaricated pointing first to one’s own pair of eyes and then to the eyes that one would have in front. The possessive pronouns seem to contradict the impersonal quality of the eye. Once eyes determine the field, they are also its autonomous operatives, maintaining its

force via intertwined gazes. At the same time, as much as *çeshm* generate this field of tension, they cannot be said to stand for something that supersedes their operations in the name of a totalizing controlling agency that would shape appearances and behaviors and that could be eventually be named as God, Islam, society, the state, the people. While these entities operate in adjacent and tangential fields, the resilience of *çeshemun tu çesh-eshe* is related to the intensification of optical activity to the extent that it is not me or you that are looking into each other's eyes, but rather the eyes themselves that are forcing us to be who we are but also who we are not, taking us outside or beyond ourselves: they are forcing us to have a relationship. The intensification of the eye/gaze works to undo a discussion about selves and others and to focus instead on a domain of impersonal action of which selves are part of but are neither the active makers, nor the passive recipients.

A friend told me that *çeshemun tu çesh-eshe* is the kind of relationship one has with a work colleague. You see them everyday, so you respect certain things. By contrast: "with people you do not know, people you do not have a relationship with, you do things you would not do if you were *çeshemun tu çesh-eshe* with them." He went on to relate these relationships to respect and honor. For example, someone lent money to an acquaintance or a family member, and received a postdated check from them indicating the date when the money needs to be returned. When the stipulated time arrives, the lender does not go to the bank, even if she or he would be entitled to, because they know that the other party does not have money in the account. If lenders go to the bank, they would put the borrower in trouble, forcing him to declare insolvency and possibly go to jail. "This would mean breaking the *çeshm* [where the term means relationship of mutual *çeshm*]."

Once the space of mutual observation is recognized and taken into account --we are in each other eyes-- the spectrum of actions and reactions is conjectural and in need of readjustments. These are the endless events in which *çeshemun tu çesh-eshe* is called into play to justify, explain, approve or condemn one's own (both individual and group) actions and those of others. This is also the threshold at which the relationship becomes personalized and introspective: but by intensifying personal exchanges the optical mechanism makes them impersonal (one could add, livable). Many family and workplace conversations are devoted to discussing what is appropriate when your eyes are in the eyes of others. As an experienced manager put it: "a classical situation is when, after taking a certain initiative, one questions oneself or others: '[before doing what you did] didn't you ask yourself: are you *çeshemun tu çesh-eshe*? And therefore should I, or shouldn't I, do something given the relationship we have?'"

Eye against eye

Çeshm hamçeshmi describes a direct confrontation between eyes. Here intensification reaches its peak. Highlighted here is the competition between concerned parties: a rivalry generated by a sense that if you do not have (do not show as having) what others have, you are (represented as having) less than them. Fighting ensues. These confrontations are described as mostly taking place between members of extended families, between neighbors or friends. Contrary to other expressions with the term *çeshm*, *çeshm hamçeshmi* has a negative connotation. It is lamented in conversations, and condemned in the media as a social problem causing distress (for example Hawzah 2018). Despite the lexical presence of the term *çeshm*, my interlocutors were less immediately prone to relate *çeshm hamçeshmi* to the eye and its functions, to the extent that the expression was seen as a synonym for envy (*hesâdat*). Nevertheless, syntax and semantics of the expression offer important clues. As a noun prefix, *ham-* refers to the coming together of two into one, for example *hamsar*, meaning spouse, is literally “same-head,” suggesting that two people become one. Likewise, *hamçeshmi* is two coming together in the same eye/gaze, and indicates having the same wish, aiming at the same thing.⁵ But the composite *çeshm hamçeshmi* inserts a third eye opposite to the two eyes coming together in one. An eye wants what other two eyes want. Whose eye? It’s an impersonal intersection in an otherwise intense personal dialectic. While “envy” could be described as a dyad (I want what you have), the triangle of gazes points to something that cannot be reconciled as a struggle between selves. The third gaze highlights what in Lacanian parlance would constitute the site of a split in the subject.

Çeshm hamçeshmi is a gendered expression. The initiators and enforcers of eye competitions are mostly said to be women engaging other women, while husbands are described (and describe themselves) as having to pay the material and relational price of such rivalries. This does not mean that on occasion men are not also described as being eye to eye, and often it is groups rather than individuals that are described as engaging in competitions.

While eye competitions can touch several domains of life, *çeshm hamçeshmi* events nowadays revolve mostly around consumption practices. What is at stake is the quantity and quality of purchases one displays in the eyes of others, and the counter-displays these commodities trigger: clothes, cars, appliances, houses. Moral discourses that stigmatize *çeshm hamçeshmi* link it with the escalation of consumption patterns and the circulation of commodities, directly or indirectly imputing capitalism, while not necessarily being critical of it. These ostentatory practices and its attendant discourses suggest that *çeshm*

5 I thank Hashem Sedqamiz for this explanation and for extensive discussions on *çeshm* without which my tentative understandings would be even poorer.

hamçeshmi involves conspicuous consumption (Veblen 1934, Trigg 2001). More than other expressions, *çeshm hamçeshmi*, is related to class, and could be seen as the verbalization of a mechanism of both class rivalry and mobility. Being eye to eye implies a horizontal relationship, or at least a relationship that entails competition over commensurable items, hence *çeshm hamçeshmi* delimits the internal boundaries of a certain class spectrum.

A video on Aparat, the Persian language equivalent of YouTube, theatricalizes the stereotypical, derogatory and gendered representation of *çeshm hamçeshmi* (Aparat 2016). The (male gaze) video belongs to a sprawling genre of satire in which young men impersonate young or older women with exaggerate local accents (in its Shiraz version, the genre is known as *mâdar-e omid*). Two women meet in an automobile. The one in the driver's seat notices that the other has manicured nails. Driver: "what are these? Oh manicured nails! How much did you pay for them?"

Passenger: "a hundred touman."

Driver (sarcastically): "good price! (*khub-et hesâb karde*)."

Black screen with the heading: two days after. The same driver shows to the same passenger her 10 cm long pink nails [made of cardboard].

D.: "don't touch my hands! I just had them done. Do you like them? Two fifty [touman]. I can even blow wind on my face with them."

Black screen: two days after. While the driver still has the 10 cm pink nails, the passenger shows her new 20 cm long [cardboard] nails.

D.: "are these nail extensions?"

P.: "yes they are! I can blow wind with these."

D.: "no! With these you rather put up airs!"

Black screen: two days after. The driver has now 50 cm long [cardboard] nails.

P.: "oh did you apply new nails? Driver angrily screams: "yes I did, and I cannot do anything anymore with these on, and it is all your fault..." Fighting ensues.

Sometimes men are depicted as no less involved in the practice. Defying the usual gendered distribution of responsibility, an acquaintance offered this to me: "take Mohsen, he has a good job and a good house. The other day he asked me to go see with him an apartment near the Eram Garden [a prestigious location in Shiraz]. The apartment is very expensive, but he's considering buying it. I told him that with the same money he could buy a house in a location that's much better from the point of view of security, transportation and building quality. But he insists saying: 'if they accept my offer, I will buy it' Why? Because it's Eram, it's prestige. He does it to impress people and wants to change houses all the time: this is *çeshm hamçeshmi*." Since at the time my acquaintance was himself looking to buy a house, even if he depicted himself as an external counselor, one can surmise that he was also among the people Mohsen wanted to impress.

Discussions around *çeshm hamçeshmi* depict it as a mechanism of both control and escalation. Being *çeshm hamçeshmi* indicates that two or more people are checking each other out, either via mutual restraint or unleashed excess. Between these poles there is a spectrum of behaviors aimed at modulating what is perceived to be the possible escalation of competition. Given the challenging economic times in contemporary Iran, *çeshm hamçeshmi* is also a sign of the efforts invested in staying “in the middle” as Tabasinejad (2017) describes the performance of middle class affiliation.

Several women and men explained to me that family members repeatedly intervene to discourage or even prevent one from purchasing a TV set, a car, a house or other commodities, so that this person would not outdo them. Fatemeh and Farhad, a couple in their forties, told me that when they wanted to buy a new fridge, her niece Noushin and Noushin’s husband Mohammad—who owned a fridge considered of higher quality than the one Farhad and Fatemeh had—kept discouraging them from purchasing a new one. They argued that Fatemeh and Farhad’s current fridge was functioning well and that this superfluous investment would have worsened Fatemeh and Farhad’s debt. In what was only apparently a contradictory move, Mohammad, who Farhad and Fatemeh described as obsessed with consumption, volunteered to help them out with the purchase, suggesting they go to the appliance store of one of his acquaintances. Farhad and Fatemeh’s visit to this store did not end well. Despite Mohammad’s repeated calls, the storeowner showed contempt for the couple and, doubting their purchasing power, did not offer them a favorable schedule for payments. Eventually Farhad and Fatemeh bought an expensive Korean fridge with icemaker from another store, and kept the news secret from Noushin and Mohammad for several months, until the niece visited their home. Entering the kitchen, Noushin was surprised to notice the new fridge: Fatemeh described to me the look of bewilderment on her niece’s face and, laughing with gusto, suggested that she expected Noushin and Mohammad to purchase a new fridge in the next few months. Farhad and Fatemeh wanted to make clear to me that they were not driven by *çeshm hamçeshmi*, while instead Noushin and Muhammad were: they felt they were just defending themselves from Noushin and Mohammad’s eye attacks.

One can certainly interpret *çeshm hamçeshmi* as simply conflicts between persons, but this would obscure the degree to which the intensification of these personal conflicts between selves and others triggers a passage into a “third gaze” that drives people’s actions and reactions. Mobile and effective, these passages do not coincide with trajectories of subjectification: they stand at an oblique angle, pushing people to engage with them while keeping them under control: an unleashed eye is beyond oneself and others.

The objective/ subjective or social/ individual interpretations do not fully account for the extent to which *çeshm* is both while being neither.

Whether described as an effect on people and things, or as an act of surveillance, the impersonal stare defies any process of subjectification as usually understood. The impersonal force of the gaze is at once public and private, coincides with the social, but in such a way that it cannot be reduced to a codified social norm. Anonymous while not being totalizing, strategic while not being haphazard, neither generated by distinct, identifiable others, nor just a projection of one's own self, this mechanism captures something of desire in the age of consumerism.

Impersonal poems

While, the essay focuses on impersonal events in the everyday, it is essential to at least mention how impersonal singularities also partake in the making of existential states. In Iran, poetic traditions are relevant in constructing an existential ground for recognition. Beyond political and religious differences, Iranians habitually recur to poetry when existential matters are at play. While poetry acquires this existential power in contemporary Iran thanks to its relationship with personhood (Olzewska 2015), it is the impersonal force of poetry that structures a mode of existence in which form and life become inseparable. Shirazi poet Mansur Âwji's accounts of his life and poetry intersect to the degree that it is impossible to distinguish one from the other (Âwji 2005). Echoing the opinion of other local poets and a centuries old tradition (Landau 2013), he explained to me that while a poet needs an equal measure of effort and inspiration to compose verses, one cannot control the combination of circumstances in which poetry comes, if it comes at all. These poetic occurrences are neither active movements from the inside towards the outside, a sovereign self-expression, nor passive receptions of messages from the outside to the self. As the multiple impersonal grammatical forms in Persian exemplify (Haig 2008, pp. 105-112), poetic moments stand at a tangential angle to the subject. The verse *Hâl i st mârâ* (Âwji 1989) "a mood/circumstance/state is to me," captures such relationship: the indefinite article *i* points to the undeterminable singularities that compose such circumstances and states, while the syntactical construction articulates a movement of affection which locates the "I" as neither a subject nor an object (neither active or passive) but a term in a transversal (dative) relationship. This is a passage into the impersonal which, without working against the self, dislocates it onto a different plane: by putting the relationship with the self in the dative, making it indirect, something opens up that would be otherwise impossible. Rather than a self-contained, aestheticized form of life, these impersonal poetic trajectories exemplify a specific relationship "to" life that unsettles processes of interpellation be they political, moral or therapeutic.

Thinking with the impersonal

At a moment in which the vocabulary of subject formation has substituted that of either society or culture as the paradigmatic articulation of anthropology, and the notion of self has become the dominant explanatory trope in recent research on Iran and possibly elsewhere, this essay suggested to think with the impersonal. Deliberately presenting a disparate ethnographic archive, the essay aimed at showing the irreducible multiplicity of impersonal events while underlining their force as either constitutive practices, relational mechanisms or existential imbrications. Working by suspending any notion of a rule and hence of one's relationship with it, or by intensifying the relationships between selves and others to the extent that they become impossible to appropriate by the subjects who nevertheless perform them, or by establishing an indirect relationship between self and world, passages into the impersonal open up ways to think otherwise.

Accounting for the resilience of impersonal forces and their productivity beyond positive or negative judgements is an ethnographic posture that is concerned with striving to write descriptions of relationships as they are, rather than as they should be. This is urgent in relation to Iran, a country that is often at the center of facile deductions. Thinking with the impersonal, I have offered no comprehensive picture of the country and its people but focused on a variety of relational fields that underline how ultimately desire is not a personal affair, but a set of impersonal passages one finds oneself in an undetermined but forceful relationship with. This is also what anthropology is, at least as I came to understand it in my many conversations with Ugo Fabietti.

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