

Introduction

A little more than a month after Covid-19 was declared a pandemic, sometime in late April 2020, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) in Iran claimed that its *basiji* scientists had invented an apparatus capable of detecting any person infected with the SARS-CoV-2 from a hundred-meter distance. Broadcast on state television, which started as per usual with the blessings on the Prophet Muḥammad, the device was showcased by Iranian top state officials. It looked like a medium-size saucepan equipped with an antenna of sorts. As they put it, this machine worked by emitting electromagnetic waves and was named Mostaʿān 110. The word *mostaʿān* means the one sought for help, which is used in the Qorʾān to refer to God. Also significant is that number 110 is the numerological equivalent of the *abjad* letters ‘-l-y, the name of the first Shiʿa Imam, ʿAli Ebn-e Abi Ṭāleb (d. 661). Virology, electromagnetism, a Qorʾānic word and Shiʿa symbolism come together in perhaps one of the rare moments of Islamic science-fictional imagination.

In the first decade of the twentieth century, an anecdote appeared in one of the first historical works in the Persian language, *The History of Iranians’ Awakening (Tārikh-e Bidāri-ye Irāniyān)*, in which a homology with the IRGC’s broadcast of Mostaʿān 110 can be detected. The story is recounted by Nāẓem al-Eslām Kermāni (d. 1919) decades after the unsuccessful military reforms began in Iran sometime in the early nineteenth century. It is about a late mullah known as Āqā Sheykh ʿAli (d. 1900), who claimed to have been the inventor of a few “wondrous” technical objects. The story centres on how the mullah had given one of his inventions – a breech-loader firearm (*tofang-e tah por*) which would be loaded from the rear of the barrel – to the Qājār monarch, Nāṣer al-Din Shāh (r. 1848-1896) in person.

When he gave the breech-loader to Nāṣer al-Din Shāh, the Shāh did not understand [what it was] at first. So, the late mullah himself took the gun, loaded the bullet, and fired. [Upon seeing this,] the Shāh went into raptures and said, “this man has gone beyond Ebn-e Sinā (Avicenna)”. Nāṣer al-Din Shāh took the firearm and sent it abroad. After a year, two firearms just like that one were brought back to Iran. The Shāh forwarded one to Āqā Sheykh ʿAli, which is now in the possession of his son. When he saw the firearm, he became

extremely dismayed and sobbingly proclaimed, “I wanted to serve Islam, but now it is evident that I gave the enemy a stick to beat us with”. Nāṣer al-Din Shāh realised that he did him wrong [in that he had not taken his invention seriously], hence tried to apologise.¹

Kermāni does not mention how and in what exact terms the Persian Emperor apologised to the Mullah. Nonetheless, as unimaginable as such an apology might have been, it assuaged the mullah’s bitter feelings such that he jubilantly announced, “now, I want to invent a clockwork carriage that can move one *farsang* (six kilometres), after which it stops for a few minutes, then its doors open to four directions firing several cannonballs to each direction, then its doors shut, and it returns to its original location”.² However, the mullah would make this object only if the Shāh agrees to wage war against at least one enemy state and take back some of the lost territories. The Shāh refuses to submit and disappoints him once again. The mullah retreats in a village and occupies himself with farming. During this time he allegedly invents a few other devices: a compass that pointed to the north, could also point to the *qeble* and show the time, and “had many other features”; an alarm clock that could also catch thieves; a versatile bed that could be used as a personal carriage, a chest, and a food container at the same time; and finally, a thermodynamic piping system that would “transfer the water in Tehran to the mountain top of Tawchāl, make it into ice, and deliver it back to the city”.³

Kermāni provides no evidence to corroborate this anecdote, yet he presents it as true as the rest of the historical narratives in his book. It might have been partly fabricated, although the events and characters surrounding it were real. The authenticity of this anecdote is, to say the least, not clear. One may think that it was perhaps a regretful imaginary portrayal by Kermāni himself of a highly literate Muslim whose genius inventions were unfairly neglected by the Shāh. Another may surmise that it was a pompous story told orally by the mullah himself or his pupils, and perhaps later exaggerated by Kermāni. Could it be possible that someone made this up to promote the role of Islamic scholars (*‘olamā*) in technological reforms in Iran? Or perhaps it was meant as a satire of the Shāh’s irresponsible handling of a genius Muslim scholar whose intellect surpassed that of Ebn-e Sinā (d. 1037), or even more generally, a satire of the technological backwardness in Iran.

All these hypotheses aside, I cannot help but notice a homology between the state-backed broadcast of Mostaān 110 and the story of this Muslim inventor. I use the word homology with an etymological sensitivity. I do not see a resemblance nor any essential uniformity between them. There are very different personas behaving in very different ways and in significantly different contexts. However, there is one logic repeating in both, hence a homology. Surely, the images of Islam

that these irrationalities conjure up differ. One is a highly politicised abuse of Shi'a Islam in the context of the twenty-first-century Islamic Republic, whereas the other is a clerical fantasy in the context of nineteenth-century modernity. Nonetheless, something works homologously in both despite the contextual differences between them. There is a logic that repeats and resonates in both cases, which sublimates *non-existent objects* into tokens of Muslim power and control. This book feels an urgency to mark and engage with this recurrent irrational logic. How can this absurdist logic be explained? How can it be historicised without losing sight of the differences between the Islams of different times and places, and without reducing it to an essentialisation of Islam?

This book dissects, interrogates, and *reconceptualises* the absurd in nineteenth-century Iranian Shi'a culture.⁴ In so doing, it practises a philosophical experiment in history, rather than a history proper. It is philosophical to the extent that it “creates concepts”,⁵ insofar as a past cultural landscape is approached through first a conceptual and only then a contextual lens. This concept-oriented study seeks to open a perspective on the intersections between Iranian Shi'a thought and praxis, on one hand, and nineteenth-century technologies on the other. The book argues that the absurd should be considered a principal mode of cultural production at this intersection.⁶

Absurd signs point to no existing object. They are signifiers without referents. They are, to borrow from Claude Lévi Strauss, “floating signifiers” that do not refer to a real thing in the world, yet they circulate between people effectuating sense in their collective imagination.⁷ They are most likely false, yet they have a power over people. No semiological analysis can sufficiently explain this power of the absurd. Not only syntax and semantics but also pragmatics would be inadequate. Even discursive analysis would not do justice to their complexity. This is because they disrupt the flow of signification and sever the connection between the signifier and the signified while holding on to the signifier. They lack a real physical and/or abstract referent – a condition more aptly captured in one possible equivalent of the word absurd in Persian, *puch* which literally means hollow and empty. To draw from Gilles Deleuze's philosophy of sense, which I will elaborate later below, these hollow signifiers should not be confused with meaninglessness and nonsense. Rather, absurd signs make sense beyond and irrespective of signification, “they are of extra being ... unable to be realised in a state of affairs”, that is, unable to stand for an external referent.⁸

I take Kermāni's story and its contemporary resonance in the context of the Covid pandemic as inspiration for this book to further think about absurdism in the Muslim Iranian approach to modern sciences. I anchor my inquiries and investigation to the invocation of a few non-existent objects described in the reforming nineteenth century in Iran. My focus lies on the past, the early period of reforms

between 1850 and 1910, though I do comment on the present time in occasional footnotes. These are the cases:

1. A lithographed technical manual titled *Resurrectional Photography* (*Ketāb-e 'Aksiye-ye Ḥashriye*), which in non-metaphoric terms equates Divine Creation with the technical act of photography. I discuss this impossible Divine Device in the first chapter.
2. A manuscript describing the death of the third Shiā Imām Ḥoseyn Ebn-e 'Ali (d. 680) in Karbala, in which the author claims that the historical day of *'Ashurā* lasted for seventy-two hours. I begin the second chapter by referencing this impossible day.
3. A medical treatise titled *The Cure of Cholera* (*'Elāj al-Wabā'*), which represents a talismanic diagram that allegedly cures cholera. I elaborate on the working of this non-existent object in the third chapter.
4. An oneiromantic story by one of the nineteenth-century ministers of science in Iran, which conjoins telegraphy and Islam. I begin the fourth chapter with how this story makes sense of the then-new media by resorting to Islamic occultism.

I show how each of these non-existent objects/absurd signs are represented meaningfully in their respective historical context. In these cases, I think about the selected absurd objects in relation to the issue of mediation and mediated processes of meaning-making – whether they take place in a narrative, a theory, or an image. An extensive theoretical exposition on how I use the term mediation will be given below. The question is, how are these objects meaningfully mediated? What intellectual genealogies can be traced in their formation? What do they do for the ones who think of them? Pursuing these inquiries, I closely analyse these objects through the lens of the absurd and mediation, then move away from them and toward the historical contexts in which they occurred, and hence write a philosophical history of how nineteenth-century Iranian Muslims appropriated the new sciences.

A short overview of early reforms through the lens of Dār al-Fonun

The nineteenth century was a time when the literate Muslim communities in Iran confronted the new sciences (*'olum-e jadid*) in a relatively short time and experienced those sciences as outlandishly empowering. They associated them

with the increasing strength of European states and thus sought to adapt them for their own use. In so doing, this society, at least its growing literate communities, appropriated and assimilated the oddities of telegraphy, photography, new medico-pharmacological methods, and new military techniques. In effect, they gave shape to a different technical domain. This changing technical domain came to be known as reforms, also termed *tanẓimāt* resonating with the contemporaneous Ottoman efforts to modernise their state.⁹ This reforming domain particularly gained more momentum with the foundation of the first polytechnic institution of higher learning, the Dār al-Fonun (*The Abode of Techniques*), in 1851. Patronised by Nāṣer al-Din Shāh, the institute promoted a newly emerging technical sphere by offering diverse science-based courses, such as clinical anatomy, chemistry, physics as well as fine arts. Each of the absurd cases studied in this book associates directly or indirectly with this institute. Even in Kermāni's account about Āqā Sheykh 'Ali, this educational centre figures: the mullah asks the Shāh to pay him so that he can "establish a school such that in each chamber of that school one technical science (*'elm-e ṣan'ati*) would be taught" so that techniques (*al-ṣanā'ye*) would become scientific like Islam.¹⁰ It is not clear if this request was made before or after the establishment of Dār al-Fonun.

This modern college was the most concrete moment in the struggles carried out by many intellectuals, politicians, entrepreneurs, and military officers to reform. Resonating with the parallel reform projects in the neighbouring and rival Ottoman Empire, military improvement was at the top of the institute's agenda.¹¹ However, the military reforms proved to be largely unsuccessful. The army acquired a new skin for the same internal organisation.¹² In a sense, the story of Āqā Sheykh 'Ali can also be read as a response to this failure. Recounted by Kermāni decades after the establishment of the Dār al-Fonun, the mullah's unacknowledged invention of the breech-loader firearm may be seen as a remorseful concern with the Persian army's abject condition. Ineffective as those military reforms might have seemed, the Dār al-Fonun served nonetheless as a pretext for broader changes. If it did not improve the army as intended, it surely set the scene for developments in other fields: in medicine, chemistry, metallurgy, and communication, to name a few.

Enough has been said about this institute in the historical scholarship, and I do not wish to reproduce yet another history of it. What I want is to look at this institute as a conduit for different forms of media that were for the first time infra-structurally installed *and* theorised within the physical location of this college. I propose that four forms of media, namely, print, photography, telegraphy, and military sounds were key in the formation of the modern techniques in Iran. Within the confines of the polytechnics, each of these media fed into the functioning of and developments in different courses in their own specific way. Printing media provided the instructional books for the students. Telegraphy necessitated

the teaching of electrical engineering. Photography required the introduction of chemistry and mineralogy, and military sounds were used as concrete and effective tools for disciplining and training the new army. It was thanks to this technical locus that the infrastructural developments of these media and their associated intellectual discourses converged. From this standpoint, I approach these media as proactive context-making assemblages, rather than products of already existing external contexts, be them political, economic, religious and whatnot. Below I outline a brief sketch of each of these media and point to their significance in reforming the technical domain in Iran.

Print media

The medium of print was the ground zero for the reforms that were initiated in and through the Dār al-Fonun. As Maryam Ekhtiar writes in her extensive study of the institute, the establishment of the State Printing Press (*Dār al-ṭebā'a-ye dawlati*) very close to the school in Tehran in 1854, “was of key importance in promoting the gradual development of an intellectual class acquainted with ideas associated with the” new sciences.¹³ Although not the first and only one in Iran, this printing house provided the means to publish and make accessible the course books written and/or translated by the European staff at the school.¹⁴ It was also used regularly for the printing of the most important newspaper of the time in Iran, *Vaqāye' Newspaper* (*Ruznāma-ye Vaqāye'-e Ettefāqiye*), henceforth *Vaqāye'*, and later used to publish instructional manuals of photography, telegraphy, physics, books of anatomy, and European history and fiction, and can therefore be seen as a precursor to the emergence and developments of other media.¹⁵

This medium was especially important in the early years of teaching medical sciences. In these early years, the language barrier between the European instructors and the Iranian students was a serious problem. Students knew very little French and German, which were the main languages of instruction. The teachers in turn knew next to nothing of Persian and Arabic. The course books were therefore the main form of mediation between them. They were translated by a few Iranians, who knew enough German or French, from the instructors' own books or from their lectures.¹⁶ More significant was the anatomical diagrams in these course books. It must be understood that the Persian language at the time was very new to the complex scientific terminologies developed over centuries in European languages. This meant that the early medical course books were not adequate for conveying modern medical knowledge to students.¹⁷ They were not particularly comprehensible to them, and therefore anatomical diagrams had to fill this gap. As Ekhtiar observes, Jacob Polak, the first and most important physician and medical trainer in the Dār al-Fonun, “within six months was able to give an intelligible lecture with

the help of his fingers, signs and diagrams".¹⁸ It can therefore be said that medical knowledge, and in extrapolation, knowledge in other fields was mediated through the teaching course books, and relied on the visual diagrammatic aspects as much as, and perhaps even more than, language. Printed diagrams appeared in almost all the other course books as well. In military sciences, regimental movements, battle formations, and artillery logistics were depicted diagrammatically in the very first military instructional manuals printed in the State Printing Press.¹⁹ Similarly, course books on geography contained maps of countries and places that most Iranians did not know existed. In books of physics, themes of statics, hydraulics, refraction, magnetism, and thermodynamics were explained using diagrams. Electric circuitries necessary for the installation of telegraphy were depicted in course books on electricity, and the list goes on.

Curiously, the story of Āqā Sheykh 'Ali was in a way connected to this printing infrastructure at the Dār al-Fonun. Next to his alleged inventions, we read in Kermāni's account that he was also involved in the writing of perhaps the first book of modern Islamic law in Iran, known as *The Nāṣerian Law (Qānūn-e Nāṣeri)*. The making of this book was ordered by Nāṣer al-Dīn Shāh to his then foreign minister, Mirzā Saīd Khān Anṣārī (d. 1884) sometime in the early 1860s, or the late 1850s. This book of the law was meant to promote Shari'ā as the basis for the reformed modern state. According to Kermāni, several 'olamā collaborated in writing this book, among them the only one who is named is Āqā Sheykh 'Ali.²⁰ In this way, the mullah inventor was not represented as modern only in a technological sense, but also in a legal and judicial sense. Moreover, he was not the only clerical figure associated with print media. Around the same period, major works of Shi'a scholarship appeared in Iran's printing landscape, some of which in many ways responded or reacted to the knowledge propagated through the course books printed at the Dār al-Fonun.²¹

Photography

Perhaps no other media became nearly as popular as photography in Iran. This popularity would have been unimaginable were it not for the Dār al-Fonun. Although the very first experience with photography in Iran dated a decade before the idea of the Dār al-Fonun took shape, it was only through the Dār al-Fonun that it became ubiquitous enough to be considered a significant factor in shaping the new media culture in Iran. The path toward this ubiquity began as early as the 1840s. Only five years after the invention of the daguerreotype in 1842 in France, this first prototype of the photographic camera was brought to Iran by a Russian diplomat and produced quite a few plates.²² Jules Richard, who was later appointed as the French instructor at the polytechnic, used the device in 1844 to photograph

Muḥammad Shāh and his son Nāṣer al-Din Shāh. When the college was built, other teachers began to experiment with newer photographic techniques.²³

As one of the most influential prime ministers of Nāṣer al-Din Shāh, Etemād al-Saltāne, reported in his journal *Mirrors of Countries* (*Mer'āt al-Boldān-e Nāṣeri*), the Austrian instructor August Krziz and the Italian Domenico Focchetti were among those who produced a number of images on paper and silver plate between 1851 and 1856.²⁴ Luigi Pesce was later commissioned to produce the first photograph of Persepolis in 1857.²⁵ These early practices raised the interest and curiosity of the public, the rising middle class, the state officials and the monarch himself. As a result, photography courses were appended to the curriculum and were taught regularly under the chemistry programme.²⁶

In 1858, a team of students from the polytechnic was sent to study photography in France under the supervision of the French photographer Francis Carlihan and was subsequently invited to Iran. There the team was recruited to teach photography at the school.²⁷ Upon their return to Iran, these photographers further popularised the craft and contributed to its institutionalisation at the Dār al-Fonun. Among these students, Āqā Reḡā 'Akkāsbāshi along with his master Carlihan were ordered to teach photography to Nāṣer al-Din Shāh, who became one of the most ardent photographers of his time.²⁸ Other students became professional photographers, and some were recruited by the polytechnic to teach photography. Steadily, pamphlets and manuals of photography were written, translated, and lithographed in great numbers while amateur photographers and off-campus public photographic studios began to flourish in the large cities by 1870. In the first chapter, I discuss in more detail how the introduction of this medium was perceived and experienced through examining one absurd case, namely, a technical *and* theological manual of photography written in the second half of the nineteenth century.

Military sounds

The courtyard of the Dār al-Fonun was a noisy environment. At noon, the sound of the call to prayer (*adhān*) echoed in between the chambers, and early in the morning the students were vocally ordered to place themselves in the classrooms. Especially important was the introduction of military sounds and music in the 1860s, which added a new sonic layer to the soundscape of the school, and later to the whole urban landscape in Tehran. This is the time when after a few years of preliminary training in military musical performance, the Frenchman Alfred Lemaire (d. 1907) was recruited and introduced the first course on, and later the first department of, music in the school.²⁹ From this time onwards, the courtyard of the school became a new sound space, where the Shāh would be regularly greeted with a Western style musical band. The courtyard also hosted several concerts

for the public.³⁰ As I will examine in detail in chapter two, the sound techniques that gradually found their way into the city – which were also theorised in the printed course books and military manuals – had a very palpable effect on Iranian performance culture, especially on *ta'ziye*.

Telegraphy

Parallel to these developments in medicine and chemistry, programmes in physics and engineering were preparing the campus scene for the introduction of yet another medium, telegraphy. Having been informed of this invention in the Western world, Nāṣer al-Din Shāh ordered his minister to purchase and install this “strange invention” in the capital. We read in one *Vaqāye'* issue on 18 March 1858 that

in view of the fact that obtaining of and inquiry about this strange invention cannot be carried out for the mere purpose of listening without inspection and observation, as per the revered command of his majesty, may his reign last long, it was arranged that under the supervision of the prince Ali Qoli Mirzā Itiḍad al-Salṭana and the reverend monsieur Krziz, the cavalry instructor, the necessary equipment for this affair be procured.³¹

The same newspaper article continues that the very first telegraphic wire was installed between two rooms in the school to test the equipment, and when all seemed to be in good order, the Shāh ordered a line to be installed between his palace and the school. The first official telegraph line was therefore installed in 1858 with the help of August Krziz between one of the rooms in the college and the Golestān Palace, and another one between the Golestān Palace and Lālezār Palace.³² The very first message communicated via this line reads “*mennat khodāy rā 'azza wa-jalla ke ṭa'atash mawjeb-e qorbat ast o be-shokr andarash mazid-e ne'mat*”, which can be roughly translated as “praise to the almighty God. Worshipping Him brings us closer to His realm and being grateful to Him brings prosperity and wealth”.³³ This sentence is taken from one of the most influential works in Persian prose by the poet and prose writer Abu Muḥammad Moṣṭafā al-Din Ebn 'Abdollāh Shirāzi (d. 1292), better known as Sa'di. It is telling how this message is technically addressed to the Shāh, while its content is addressed to God. It is also interesting to compare this with the very first telegraphic message ever sent by Samuel F. B. Morse in the United States, which is taken from the Bible and reads “What hath God Wrought?”³⁴

Although the courtly fascination with telegraphy proved instrumental in bringing telegraphy to Iran, the proliferation of its technologies around the country was mainly due to the interest of the British colonial power, which needed efficient communication between Europe and India. To this end, towards the close of the

century telegraphy had radically changed the ways the government managed its affairs across the country and plugged into the global scene. Furthermore, the religious scholars and the leading *'ulamā*, though at first suspicious of this “satanic wire”,³⁵ made telegraphy an integral part of their political activism and socioreligious power amidst the anti-state and anti-colonial tobacco movement towards the end of the century and later during the early twentieth century when the constitutional revolution was gaining momentum. In the fourth chapter, I will elaborate further on the ways in which this medium was appropriated in the Shīa Islamic milieu.

Absurd as the limit to mediation

I use the concept of media in a broad and fundamental sense. In the words of one of the most articulate media historians of our time, John Durham Peters, media “are vessels and environments, containers of possibility that anchor our existence and make what we are doing possible”.³⁶ They are an “ensemble of natural elements and human craft”,³⁷ “infrastructures of being, the habitats and materials through which we act and are”.³⁸ From this philosophical perspective, media are not merely carriers of meaning but rather, to echo the familiar aphorism by the Canadian media theorist Marshal McLuhan, media *are* constitutive of the meanings they seem to be carrying.³⁹ As “vessels and environments” made up of both “natural elements and human craft”, to further borrow from Durham Peters, media are the “infrastructures” for all kinds of signs to create meaning.⁴⁰ In a sense, their material logics are as important for, and as consequential to, meaning-making. From this viewpoint, I further understand mediation as the process by which media create and transmit meaning.

Also important to note is that although the concept of media points to this foundational infrastructural aspect of representation and communication, it should not be conceived of as too general a notion. This view would lead to inflating the concept so much so that it extends to everything material and corporeal. Such is the extent Durham, for instance, explores in his recent works. However, my take is that despite this apparent generality in the concept of the medium, it can be used as an analytic lens to capture very particular processes, which we would be unable to see without. This lens allows us to examine and understand the process of mediation by including, at the same time, both the semiotic and material aspects of meaning-making. Media enables us to speak of the signifying interplay between different signs and the infrastructural logics that make that interplay possible: the logic of signs *and* of materiality. This is the notion I subscribe to and will rigorously pursue in the chapters of this book.

To position this book in a wider academic discourse, I should duly note that this theoretical insight has been adapted widely in religious studies over the past few decades. The field has opened productive conceptual possibilities whereby scholars across different fields in the humanities, from anthropologists to art historians, can think about religious phenomena, materiality, and mediation together. The main impetus in this field comes from the idea that religion should be understood *as media*.⁴¹ As the leading scholars in this field such as Hent De Vries, Jeremy Stolow, Birgit Meyer and Brian Larkin have proposed, religion and media should be understood as cultural phenomena that are inextricably interconnected and have evolved together. Communication and representational media have always been part of religious experience, and religions necessarily include and pragmatically rely on techniques and logics of mediation.⁴² For a religion to be actualised and historically realised, it is not enough to have an inventory of axioms, rules, and doctrines. As Meyer argues, the primary function of a religion is to create “sensational forms”, which, depending on the specificities of the adapted medium(s), make the ideational repertoires of that religion materially meaningful. These technically grounded sensational forms are not primarily representational, but rather material, in that they contain and operationalise not only signs of different kinds, but also material and corporeal contents. It is ultimately this material aspect of media that makes the existence of a religion possible.⁴³ That media are “intrinsic to religion”, as Meyer has it,⁴⁴ or even necessary for religion to exist, as Stolow argues, implies that any analytic approach to religious axioms, ideas and narratives should also take into account the techno-material logic of mediation.

As another conceptual note, I should mention that my understanding of the notion of the absurd is informed by Deleuze’s philosophy, especially his *Logic of Sense*.⁴⁵ In line with his thought, I distinguish between absurd and nonsense. With Deleuze, there is a clear distinction between “signification” and “sense”, both of which are often rendered in English as meaning. The difference is exactly what we need in order to talk about the meaningfulness of the absurd:

the propositions which designate contradictory objects themselves have a sense. Their denotation, however, cannot at all be fulfilled; nor do they have a signification ... that is, they are absurd. Nevertheless, they have a sense, and the two notions of absurdity and nonsense must not be confused.⁴⁶

Elsewhere, he states that “the logical value of signification ... is no longer the truth ... but rather the *condition of truth*, the aggregate of conditions under which the proposition would be true” (emphasis by Deleuze).⁴⁷ The use of “the condition of truth”, enables Deleuze to sidestep the dichotomy of truth-falsehood in regard

to the absurd and account for its meaningfulness: Truth becomes a correlate of signification but remains external, even redundant to, sense. It is with this philosophy that Shi'a absurdism may be better understood. In this view, non-existent objects, such as the foregoing absurd inventions, are meaningful – they belong to the logic of sense – although they fail to denote a referent truthfully – they have no signification. They make sense although they cannot be said to be true, whether theologically or technologically. In this book, I follow Deleuze's distinction between sense and signification. Thus, the term meaning should always be read as the equivalent to both sense and signification. In case it is used to qualify an absurd instance, it would then be without signification.

Having this distinction in mind, it can be said that as *non-signifying* signs, absurd objects are a limit to mediation.⁴⁸ A sign is said to be absurd when mediation aims for a referent but fails to arrive at it. With an absurd sign, signification is never reached, the target is never hit; or to allude to Samuel Beckett's theatre of the absurd, Godot never arrives. However, this failure does not dismantle the sign system that embeds that absurd instance but rather pushes that system to its limit. The system continues to function and live on, though on a limit-point where signification is suspended while meaning is maintained. This co-existence of non-referentiality and meaningfulness is precisely what constitutes the absurdism that I would like to address in this book. This absurdism has to do with the fact that notwithstanding the failure to signify in the absurd mode, mediation still produces meaning, sustains the sign system, and because it does, it can incite emotions, or mobilise the mass public to participate in collective actions.

Meaning, paradox, and the absurd in Islam: Pushing Shahab Ahmed to the limit

In his widely appreciated book, *What Is Islam?*, Shahab Ahmed proffers a complex thesis on how to understand Islam without losing or reducing the contradictions and paradoxes expressed in the “Bangal-to-Balkan complex”. Ahmed feels an urgency and necessity to explain why and how Islam can accommodate actions and expressions that are contradictory, and sometimes even heretical from the orthodox standpoint – drinking wine being the most recurring example. A condensed version of this thesis reads, “something is Islamic to the extent that it is made meaningful in terms of hermeneutical engagement with Revelation to Muḥammad as one or more of Pre-Text, Text, and Con-Text”.⁴⁹ Ahmed understands the three terms of Pre-Text, Text, and Con-Text as “different spatial dimensions” of the Revelation to Muḥammad. The reason why he develops these concepts is to make sure that understanding Islam together with its “internal contradictions” is not restricted to

the scriptural sources such as the Qorʾān, and includes experiences, or actions, as well as “different epistemologies”.⁵⁰

Besides these important concepts, which I do not wish to unpack here, the terms “meaning” and “truth” are also important to Ahmed’s thesis. Accordingly, meaning is ultimately “a truth which is of consequence to and for the subject engaging (in) it”.⁵¹ From this point of view, meaning for Ahmed does not only rely on semiology. It is not enough for a sign to be syntactically, semantically and/or pragmatically meaningful; it should also do something to the subject for whom it is meaningful, or as he puts it, “consequential”. I fully subscribe to this understanding, especially given that Ahmed is also sensitive to issues of mediation, that is, to how meaning is made as well as to the “infrastructure” of meaning-making processes.⁵² However, I find his insistence on the concept of truth restrictive in dealing with the complexities of and in Islam.

I agree with Ahmed that meaning is consequential for the subject but disagree that it is only truth that can have consequences for the subject and that it is only truth that should be included in understanding Islam and Islamic. In Ahmed’s Islamic universe, every subject, even every object, is seeking truth, which would become meaningful if it has subjective consequences.⁵³ In Ahmed’s world, Muslims are “cognisant” of truth, always inclined towards it, whether “exploratively” or “prescriptively” engaged in “the Pre-Text, Text, or Con-Text of Revelation”.⁵⁴ If madly in love, as in the case of Majnun and the path of love (*madhhab-e ‘eshq*), that madness too gravitates towards truth.⁵⁵ Even paradoxes are “truth-telling”.⁵⁶ I would particularly like to focus on Ahmed’s invocation of the concept of paradox as it relates more closely to the theme of this book. The following is a necessary digression as I foreground precisely what my philosophical history does by drawing attention to an error in Ahmed’s reasoning.

He draws from the American logician Willard Van Orman Quine (d. 2000) to support his claim that Islamic contradictions and paradoxes are “arguments for truth”.⁵⁷ He takes up Quine’s understanding of paradoxical absurdity and traces them in a few examples. A verse from a work by a Javanese author, *The Gift Addressed to The Spirit of The Prophet* is one case in point. I reproduce Ahmed’s quote to show an interesting conceptual problem with his (mis)understanding of Quine’s paradox. The verse he quotes is as follows:

When there is manifest in you
the Being of God
then you must understand
you are not God
but are not other than [He]
– this is difficult to accept.⁵⁸

Borrowing from Quine, Ahmed claims that such paradoxical locutions are “veridical paradoxes”. He quotes Quine’s definition of this kind of paradox, which reads, “a paradox is just any conclusion that at first sounds absurd but that has an argument to sustain it”.⁵⁹ Let me formulate the above verse in formal logic to unpack how Ahmed misses something very important in Quine’s theory of paradoxes: if there is a y (God) in x (you), then x is neither y nor other than y . Misappropriating Quine, Ahmed considers this paradoxical poetic articulation a “veridical paradox”, that is, a “truth-telling device”: it expresses a meaningful, or a consequential truth, “in terms of paradox”.⁶⁰ According to Ahmed’s view, the paradox remains so without being resolved into truth or falsehood. Rather, a truth inherent in the “Pre-Text, Text and Con-Text of Revelation”, makes the paradoxical locution truthful on a meta-level. But according to Quine’s definition, if these couplets are taken as a veridical paradox, the actual truth they are proving is that there is no y in x , that is, there is no God in you.⁶¹ Read as a logical argument, the poem above is a form of *reductio ad absurdum*, meaning that since the conclusion is untenable, it follows that the assumption must have been false.⁶² In other words, since the conclusion that x is neither y nor other than y is unsound, it follows that the assumption that there is a y in x was false to begin with, ergo there is *not* “manifest in you the being of God”. Quine would say that this poem-argument shows that the assumption must be false. *This* is the truth it proves and hence resolves the initial absurdity/contradiction. This truth does not sustain the contradiction in the paradox, as Ahmed would like to think, but it eradicates it. The same problem is applicable to Ahmed’s personal anecdote about a Muslim’s paradoxical opinion on Ebn-e ‘Arabi.⁶³ By misappropriating the notion of veridical paradox, Ahmed explains Muslims’ truth-centric compulsion to accommodate paradox and contradiction meaningfully. Ahmed misunderstands Quine. But there is still another problem with his misunderstanding. The question we can and should ask Ahmed is what if falsehood, and not just truth, can also have consequences? What if the false can also be meaningful? This brings us back to the case of the absurd.

Ahmed’s truth-centred understanding of meaning falls short of the complexity of meaning-making in Islamic traditions. I have shown how his borrowing from Quine is problematic. Next to and in relation to this objection, it should also be said that paradoxes are only one possible locution of an absurd sign – Ahmed’s verse from the anonymous Javanese author is an example. But there are absurdities that are not necessarily paradoxical, which Ahmed strategically avoids in his book. The non-existent objects in Mosta‘ān 110 and Āqā Sheykh ‘Ali’s inventions fit into this category. The kind of absurdism that these non-existent objects give expression to does not constitute a paradox, whether “veridical”, “falsidical”, or “antinomial” in Quine’s theory.⁶⁴ Nonetheless, as I have sketchily shown earlier and will show in more detail in the chapters to come, such absurd signs recur homologously in

various Islamic traditions. These objects do not contradict any physical law, nor do they oppose any Islamic theological ideas. They are in fact very much in line with laws of physics and thermodynamics and pose no logical threat to notions such as God's oneness (*tawhīd*), the Resurrection (*ma'ād*) and Prophecy (*nabowwa*). They are, however, absurd in a different sense, for which we need different philosophers, not Quine.

These non-existent inventions are absurd insofar as they make sense despite their incapacity to meaningfully signify an existent referent. This is the notion of the absurd according to Deleuze, and also powerfully captured in the performance tradition that came to be known as the theatre of the absurd as I hinted earlier.⁶⁵ Without getting into too many details on this, for the purpose of my theoretical positioning it is enough to say summarily that with Quine, paradoxes are resolved by means of logical methods that retain the concept of truth at the expense of meaningfulness. Whereas with Deleuze, the relation between truth and meaning is turned on its head: the concept of truth is abandoned while meaningfulness is retained.⁶⁶

Notes on methods

On a methodological note, I should indicate that the way I choose, approach, and analyse my objects takes certain elements from both (art) historical methods and cultural analysis. The historiographical aspect of my methods can be seen in the creation and elaboration of the contexts. These contexts are developed according to the necessity of each chapter. In the first chapter, for instance, the contextualisation is informed by art history, in which I map out a historical backdrop where the photographic image was perceived and understood. In the third chapter, I contextualise medical knowledge and therefore come close to medical history. In the fourth chapter, as another example, the context becomes an aspect of Islamic demonology, which then necessitates me to speak more closely with historians of Islam.

On the other hand, the cultural analytic side can be seen, above all, in my emphasis on concepts. The way I analyse each individual object, the way I make connections between different historical elements, and ultimately the new objects that result from these approaches are embedded in concepts that I have developed during my research. In this sense, my study is a philosophical concept-oriented experiment between a few disciplines in the humanities. The concepts that I develop, moreover, are not ready-made ahistorical and universal terms taken directly from the materials I read. They are rather the result of thinking critically and analysing them in their relevant contexts. In this sense, they are concepts that

I derive and develop in working with my sources rather than terms that those sources might explicitly mention.

Each chapter of this book frames the historical period from the point of view of one technical domain. Each of these domains becomes a locus where a discourse on a certain media logic and a religious issue intersects. In each chapter, I start with an object that most concretely and concisely reflects the complications between that technical domain and Shi'a thought/praxis. Starting from this central object, I then proceed to examine other similar objects and the context in which they were formed. This kind of thinking and writing can be found abundantly in the field of cultural analysis, particularly the concept-oriented tradition that Mieke Bal has promoted in her work.⁶⁷ More sensitive to historical issues and methods, Michael Pickering has been most productive in stretching the methodological frameworks in cultural studies to history.⁶⁸ Even the works of many historians come very close to this academic tradition, though not explicitly promoted as cultural analysis. Among them, for instance, Fahmy's study of anatomy in nineteenth-century Egypt can be mentioned, in which the concept of the body becomes the focal point of his historical study.⁶⁹ Jeremy Stolow and Brian Larkin's works are also great examples of concept-oriented methods in the study of religions. Christian Lange and Simon O'Meara are other accomplished scholars in Islamic studies, whose works show both conceptual and contextual sensibilities. With Lange, the contexts are given more attention, while with O'Meara, it is the conceptual aspects that receive more attention.⁷⁰

To recollect, considering the above methodological positioning, this book should be labelled a work of interdisciplinary scholarship, in the sense that in conversation with different fields of knowledge, it ultimately eludes them but stands, though at times precariously, between them. In the following pages, I work with historians of Islam and Iran, but then produce a knowledge that eludes history. I interrogate Islamic jurisprudential texts but ultimately evade theology. I analyse artefacts, poems, and narratives but do not land in archaeology, art history, or literary studies. By analytically moving in between, this study can be read as an experiment to push the limits of these fields in order to produce non-essentialist knowledge.