



NDE and Televisual Hegemony: An Ideological Analysis of *Life After Life*

Alireza Azeri Matin^(✉)

Faculty of Science and Arts, International University of Malaya-Wales, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
azeri_matin@yahoo.com

Abstract. The near-death experience (NDE) is an unusual out-of-body incident taking place on the brink of death which is recounted by a person on recovery. With globalization of media, the retellings of these personal experiences have become a commonplace phenomenon, fascinating many people around the world regardless of the nationality, religious orientation or any other living circumstances of both the experiencers and their audiences. Following this trend, in 2020 the channel 4 of Iranian television premiered *Life after Life* a TV series broadcast during Ramadan. Gaining popularity among Iranians, this reality TV series has reached its third season in 2022. Despite the apparent authenticity of the NDE accounts in *Life after Life*, this television program creatively combines a selection of these personal narratives with religious specialists' exegeses, transforming individuals' experiences into televisual hegemony. Using an ideological analysis, this study explains how the cultural foundation and powerful stories of Shi'ism are represented and reaffirmed as reality.

Keywords: Near-death Experience · Iranian Television · Hegemony · Representation

1 Introduction

A near-death experience (NDE) is generally defined as a profound personal experience associated with death or impending death which researchers claim share similar characteristics. Most of these near-death experiences result from serious injury that affects the vital organs of the body, especially the heart and brain. When positive, such experiences may encompass a variety of sensations including detachment from the body, feelings of levitation, total serenity, security, warmth, the experience of absolute dissolution, and the presence of a light [1]. When negative, such experiences may include sensations of anguish and distress.

NDE is also a controversial topic that has long been debated among researchers, physicians, and the general public. The debate is whether or not what people think they experience is real or not, and the extent to which it could be feasibly explained by science [2]. Some of the main questions arising from these debates are: Does the conscious require the brain, or is it a separate entity that can exist and function on its own? Is there really life after death? Although, sceptics answer these questions in the

negative way and possibly offer some scientific explanations for them, yet, there is not any convincing explanation that can account for many of the experiences people have during an NDE. Therefore, despite the prevalence of NDEs around the world, there is a great deal of scepticism about such self-experienced phenomenon. In the U.S. alone, an estimated 9 million people have reported an NDE, according to a 2011 study in *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*.

While there are many written accounts available in medical and scientific journals, which describe near-death experiences, the phenomenon still raises a number of questions; some think that they are merely dreams, while others believe that they are actual windows showing them of what is to come in the afterlife. In fact, the whys and wherefores of NDEs vary from religious to scientific explanations [3]. For instance, while NDE is considered taboo in some cultures, in many other cultures it is strongly believed that life goes on after people die, and NDEs are actually a glimpse of the afterlife. Alternatively, from the mainstream scientific perspective, many neuroscientists hypothesize that an NDE is a subjective phenomenon often resulted from some instabilities in one's multisensory integration and neurological system that happen during such life-threatening instances [4].

Against this brief background, the present study begins with some theoretical insights about why a time-honoured phenomenon like NDE had previously remained less talked about or at times silenced, up until last few decades when it became globally popular. This is then followed by laying out the entrance of NDE into Iranian media in the form of a reality TV program, called *Life after Life* (*Zendegi pas az Zendegi* زندگی پس از زندگی) which became a sensation overnight among Iranian audiences. Such event in itself is arguably quite rare, since supernatural phenomena like NDE are traditionally considered taboo in Iran. This ultimately leads to the main purpose of the study which is to examine the various construction aspects and other media language used in production of *Life after Life*, seeking to explain how this program transforms individuals' experiences into televisual hegemony.

1.1 NDEs and Spiral of Silence

NDEs have been recorded since antiquity, with the oldest known case of them going back to eighteenth century, a medical report written by a French military doctor, Pierre-Jean du Monchaux who described such phenomenon in his book *Anecdotes de Médecine*. However, it was not until 1970s that the topic was gradually brought into public. Among the reason for the high degree of reluctance among experiencers to come forward and share their extraordinary stories with the public has obviously been the fear of being ridiculed and labelled as insane, or at its best not taking their experiences seriously, disregarding them as delusions or attempts to gain fame. Such global phenomenon is undoubtedly the result of today's fairly established modernism, a science-driven dominant culture which rejects anything that cannot be scientifically observed and measured. This perhaps can be best explained by the 'spiral of silence' theory. Originally proposed by Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, a German political scientist who in mid-seventies proposed that people tend to remain silent when they feel that their views, beliefs and ideas are in contrast with the majority's perspective on a subject. Noelle-Neumann posited that the minorities remain silent for the fear of not only being isolated by the majority

groups or public, but also for possible facing with negative consequences which might go beyond the mere isolation [5].

In a similar manner, in the past or even today, depending on the individuals' culture, a great number of experiencers prefer to remain silent about their NDEs for the fear of being isolated from rest of the society, and possibly suffer from the resulting consequences. That is to say, the prevailing opinions in modern societies are generally based on science and rationalism (deductive reasoning) which shun subjectivities that might question the dominant ideologies and status quo. In this way, since so far there has not been any tangible evidence to scientifically support the credibility of the NDEs, such personal and spiritual experiences are deemed to be as fabricated and implausible accounts. This is in spite of the recent emergence of the academic field of near-death studies such as IANDS (International Association for Near-Death Studies) which began to exist since 1980s with an aim to provide information on NDE, and to create a global understanding of such phenomenon and similar experiences through research, education and support. Although the existence of this kind of academic organizations provides hope for understanding existentialism from different perspective, the mainstream natural science has so far shown little interest to support such alternative approaches to human life.

1.2 Global Reach and Reception of NDEs

As already pointed out, the recorded NDE accounts have long history which goes back to at least eighteenth century. However, it was not until 1970s that NDEs gradually began to be publicly shared by individuals through the available media of the time. The earliest of these accounts, just like historical ones, were mostly limited to print media like newspapers, journals, and books, despite the availability of electronic media. As such, the NDE reports rarely appeared in film or broadcast media, like radio and television, when these forms of mass communication technologies were the commonplace for every household. Perhaps the reason for this was the limitation of content production and distribution channels which were mostly reserved for those movies or programs which would ensure economic or political gains for their producers who did not see NDEs worthy of investing on for content production. Such conception, though, seems to be on the rationales that: 1) majority of people did not believe in any phenomenon that involved retelling of stories from invisible world, considering them as lies or invented stories to attract attention, 2) NDEs were not taken seriously as they were considered as self-reported fictions created mainly to entertain others, 3) NDEs were rejected by science, or at its best, explained as hallucinations under severe medical condition.

Since early 1990s and with the entrance into a new era of media globalization, however, there has been a surge in both the spread and reception of NDE accounts around the world through various digital communication channels and platforms. The globalization of NDEs, in this way, included the dissemination of personal experiences through new forms of digital media, such as audio/video podcasts, and YouTube channels, Facebook groups and other Websites dedicated for both sharing individuals' experiences as well as organizing online seminars. In addition, some individuals who had their experiences already published as books, were not only able to sell and ship their hard copies to people around the world through e-commerce companies (e.g., Amazon) but also had

the opportunity to convert them to digital formats like e-books and audio books and share them for free or at a price. Parallel to the increasing public acceptance of NDE, the motion picture industry maximized its capitalization on the concept and took advantage of its popularity that led to the production of various forms of media contents including movies such as *Flatliners* 2017, *Hereafter* 2010, *Miracle from Heaven* 2016, *90 min in Heaven* 2015, *The Lovely Bones* 2009, and *Ghost Town* 2008.

1.3 NDE in Iranian Media: Life After Life

For centuries, the subject of ordinary people's ability to see the life after death considered to be a taboo in Iran and perhaps many other predominantly religious nations [6]. The main reason for this is that such extraordinary powers are seen to be exclusive to only a few prophets and other divine figures who lived in the past. Not long after the globalization of NDE, in its many mediated forms and formats, for the first time in Iran an individual took the opportunity to turn such personal and spiritual phenomenon into a local television program. After a shaky and provisional beginning in 2020 with an uncertain prospect for its continuity, a television program called *Life after Life* appeared on national TV. *Life after Life* gradually gained large viewership among Iranians and other Farsi speaking audiences around the world, convincing the program's producers to actively engage in making new seasons for the years to come. Interestingly, it took the producers several years to get the broadcasters to approve their project, and indeed the first season was self-financed by the producers before it was authorized to be aired by channel 4. Ultimately, following the huge success of the season one, channel 4 was commissioned for production of second and third seasons.

Life after Life is a reality television program about NDEs in Iran. Each season of this program consist of about 33 episodes which are scheduled to cover the whole month of Ramadan each year. Premiered in 2020, *Life after Life* is produced and broadcast by Channel 4 of the IRIB (Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting), and has so far 3 seasons of this program has been aired. Each episode of the program lasts about 90 min, and is shown at prime time, with an encore in the next morning. Synonymous to *Life after Life* is Abbas Mozoun (Fig. 1), the director and host of the program. Mozoun has been introduced to the public as an active researcher, ambitiously searching for individuals



Fig. 1. Abbas Mozoun the Producer and Host



Fig. 2. Mozoun (left) as a Guest in *KetabBaz*

with NDEs who are willing to reveal their identities and publicly share their stories and experiences on national television.

The popularity of *Life after Life* also turned its creator and host Abbas Mozoun into a celebrity and a household name among Iranians. Apart from his key role in *Life after Life*, he has come to be renowned for his expertise in the subject of NDE through his recurrent presence as the guest in numerous other television programs. For example, he was invited to another popular reality TV show called *KetabBaz* (Fig. 2) where he talked at great length about his own background, works and projects. In this way, Mozoun's frequent appearance on national TV have built an outstanding and reliable image of him as: a researcher in social/Islamic studies, an expert in NDE who is well-versed in English, an enthusiast of various languages and dialects spoken in Iran, and so on. Mozoun and his program have also come to be known among many Iranians as well as other Farsi-speaking people outside the country through the reruns of the whole or shorter (edited or mixed) versions of the program on Internet and other online platforms.

Nonetheless, the reality television program *Life after Life* is, like any other media text, the result of processes of selection and construction. The reality television is not, therefore, a 'window on the world', no matter how much it may seem to be an impartial and neutral account of ordinary life [7]. This is just one of the myths that reality programs tend to generate about themselves: that they are simple, objective accounts of reality. Such a myth evades many critical issues, and hence this study tries to 'demythologize' the realness of this program by analyzing its signs, codes and conventions.

2 Method

This study employs ideological analysis to critically examine an episode of the TV series *Life after Life* in order to exemplify how this television program transforms individuals' personal and spiritual experiences into a televisual hegemony. The researchers who undertake ideological analysis draw on specific categories and guidelines in order to frame their studies. In particular, this study follows Cormack's approach to ideology and textual analysis which was based on British cultural studies. He posited that critically analyzing and assessing a textual content is a useful way to understand how a specific social reality is constructed. In his view such social reality is often formed through

mediation of ideas, beliefs, and values as well as various forms of judgments from stereotypes to promoting resolution for conflicts and other actions. Cormack's approach [8] focused on five key areas of the text: content, structure, absence, style and mode of address. In analyzing *Life after Life*, however, Cormack's 5 categories are reappropriated, reorganized and presented under 4 subheadings in the 'Findings and Discussion' section below.

3 Findings and Discussion

3.1 The Programming and Scheduling

Life after Life is formally introduced in the official website of the Channel 4 as "a different program about death and the world beyond". The website continues to describe the program and its schedule in the following words:

Life after Life is the story of those who have had near-death experience, left their bodies and understood the other side and returned. In this program, audiences witness the amazing stories of the valuable near-death experiences from the unseen world. Produced and hosted by Abbas Mozoun this ninety-minute program has so far been aired in 3 seasons each of which with 33 episodes. This program is specifically considered for the divine moments of breaking fast all throughout the holy month of Ramadan.

As reflected in Channel 4's official website, and by looking at the scheduling of the program alone, it comes to view the extent that *Life after Life* is linked to the month of Ramadan. This is mainly because of the fact that the program has been aired daily during this month for the past three years, becoming part of the rituals of this holy month. It is then quite reasonable to assume the oneness of the Islamic/Shi'ite values with the audiences' expectations of this program; that the representations in *Life after Life* add up to the value system that defines Shi'ism and its associated worldviews. Adding up to this temporal linkage, is the television time slot specified for *Life after Life*, that is right before *Iftar* (the evening meal with which Muslims end their daily Ramadan fast at sunset). In Iran and many other Muslim countries, one to two hours before *Iftar* (as well as an hour or two right after *Iftar*) has been traditionally considered as prime time, and the programs reserved for these time slots are those with the largest audiences. In authoritarian nations like Iran, where national media is owned by the state, the primetime programming is also used for contents that in one way or another promote the status quo.

3.2 The Construction Aspects

Just like other media texts, *Life after Life* is constructed using a media language (or codes) which convey certain cultural information. If we are to uncover something about the significance of this program, therefore, it is important to consider construction aspects of it [9], such as *mise-en-scène* and technical codes (computer and camera works). To begin with, each episode of *Life after Life* begins with a note that says: "This program is not merely a conversation in studio, you are viewing research" (Fig. 3). This rather commanding notification is an early signal to the viewers, making it clear beforehand



Fig. 3. A reminder at the beginning of the program

that the interviews and other elements are not made-up contents. By stating the word ‘research’, it also indicates the rigor and validity behind the information that had led to the production of the program; particularly those that emerge throughout the interviews as well as the interpretations of the religion experts that intermittently appear throughout the show.

Immediately after this initial reminder, a series of computer-generated imagery (CGI) zooming out from a blackhole in the center of the Milky way galaxy and then zooming in on the planet earth, Iran, and then (using Google Earth) the specific city district or village from which the NDEer of the day is chosen for sharing his or her experience in the program. These images while accompanying a melodramatic music and the voiceover of Mozoun himself, uttering some rhyming words about mysteriousness, remarkability and sacredness of NDE. The program’s dramatic opening in this way, hint at the extraordinary nature of this TV show. Next to this is the actual footage of the moment when Mozoun is shown together standing in the street or some other open air environment face to face with the NDEer or alternatively he is shown pressing the doorbell of the NDEer’s home, all of which implying the program’s firsthand information that are directly obtained from original sources, and not via somebody else. After setting the mood for audiences and preparing them for a real, serious and extraordinary program, these preliminary title images are then followed by an instant cut into a seemingly circular studio where Mozoun and the NDEer are seated face to face in the relatively big spotlight. There are, however, some minor changes in the prologue and *mise-en-scène* in each season. For example, the background of the studio in season one is pitch black and seats are in contrast pure white (Fig. 4), together with a round white table on which there is a decorative metal globe holder.

In season 2, however, the chairs are less stylish with less contrasting color, the table is removed. In this season, the background is a wide view of the cosmos, and a dark blue spiral with a circular black center resembling blackhole (or the tunnel frequently reported by the NDEers) from which tiny white rays of light emanating (Fig. 5).

The *mise-en-scène* continued to change in season 3; the view of the cosmos replaced with some bursts of blue light scattered around a dark blue background, and a large white-edged circular shape being placed directly above. As can be seen in Fig. 6, in season 3 a sign language presenter is also added to the right corner of the screen, certainly with



Fig. 4. The *mise-en-scène* the in Season 1



Fig. 5. The *mise-en-scène* the in Season 2

the aim of maximizing the viewership of *Life after Life* through enabling the hearing-impaired audiences to watch and understand the program.

It is worth noting that incorporating sign language presenter in programs within the national media productions is fairly rare; even though such extra features might seem insignificant for many media corporations around the world, they are rendered as costly and therefore, unnecessary for IRIB that is at the brink of insolvency. The exceptions, here, are those programs that prove to be popular and thus, capable of extending the dominant ideology to the wider spectatorship in Iran.



Fig. 6. The *mise-en-scène* the in Season 3

The in-studio conversation always begins with Mozoun who without hesitation asks the NDEer: “So, please tell us what happened.” From this point, the interview begins: the NDEer gives a background of the incident that led to his or her NDE, then a detailed story of the out of body experience itself, and finally the impacts or consequences of the NDEers visits to the realm of the afterlife. Throughout these, a relatively high degree of montage takes place whereby extensive use of cuts, camera movements, and changes of camera position and various CGI works come together, all with the objective to set up particular meanings that are not easily conveyed by what is said by the NDEers during the interviews. What is important here, is that these season-by-season redecorations and face-lifts, as well as inclusion of superfluous features (excessive use of CGI, editing techniques, etc.) incur additional cost to the program’s reportedly limited production budget. Yet, such costly features remain in place, obviously because the program have rapidly shown some major improvements in attracting more audiences which is, in one way or another, an indication of the program’s success in extending the dominant ideology in an authoritarian country where national media is financed and controlled by the state.

Another even more critical aspect of the program, however, is the frequent insertions of the scenes in which different religious experts are shown interpreting some of the experiences of each NDEer in the show (Fig. 7). These are a series of strategic moments when the interviews are cut into the scenes where a Shia mullah or a Muslim scholar of some kind (and even occasionally experts from different faiths and countries) is shown explaining what a specific part of the concerning NDEer’s experience means in the light of Quranic text, Hadith and some other Shia traditions (or Torah, Bible, etc., in the case of non-Islamic experts). Nevertheless, from the reception standpoint, what such intentional inclusions do to the audience is that it restricts their readings range through directly interrupting the meaning-making process, and leading them into a preferred reading mode of authoritative, undisputed and ready-made meanings. It is also important to note that the occasional presence of non-Shi’ite experts in the show is just another crafty maneuver to establish the illusion of objectivity and tolerance towards other religions, even Judaism which is systematically renounced by the government [10].



Fig. 7. A mullah interpreting a NDEer’s experience

3.3 The Narrative Aspect

Narrative is something so fundamental to television that it is easy to overlook its significance [11]. When people watch a television program of any type, they are presented with a series of events that appear commonsense and natural, but indeed they are the result of the program's narrative. Here, the concerning narrative in *Life after Life* is the one that consists of NDEers' story: an individual's biography, a background of the incident leading to the NDE, the out of body experience, and the life after returning to the body. These are indeed the pieces of the stories that are chronologically put together in order to make it easy to follow and meaningful for the audiences. The biography of each NDEer always starts right after the program's title, and in the form of his or her voiceover on various edited images such drone shots from high above when the person talking to Mozoun in an open-air space, street views of the city or village where the subject lives, and so on. In this way, the person begins with a self-introduction (name, age, marital status, the family, job, etc.) and then move on to tell the viewers about his or her present-time routines and hobbies. This is one of the preliminary stages where particular ideologically charged values are subtly added to the biographical content. These include everyday practices such as praying, participating in religious activities as well as other practices which are perfectly agreeable with the dominant Shi'ism dogma and culture in Iran.

The next part of the narrative is set at the beginning of the in-studio interview where the individuals lay out the backgrounds which led to their NDEs. These sometimes include brief stories of their lives long before the incident, the family they were born into, their upbringings, their personalities and attitudes before the incident, and so on. Here, one of the key cornerstones of the narrative is set as the majority of NDEers reflect on the darker side of their lives prior to the incident, as they confess, for instance, how they were irreligious, ignorant, brash and malefic in the past. This pre-NDE period of the individuals' lives is where the first (evil) part of the evil vs good binary opposition is established as part of these story lines.

Following this, is the NDE itself, the pinnacle of the narrative, and the point that the viewers eagerly wait for in order to learn about the unseen world. In this phase, other than few exceptions, the majority of the experiences are gloomy, disturbing and even sometimes agonizing and horrific. This amount of imbalance becomes even more surprising particularly if we make a cursory comparison with NDEs from around the world that are easily accessible through the digital world of the Internet. One of the most popular ways to disseminate such accounts is through programs made available in digital format over the Internet, known as podcast. There are large number of these podcasts available in YouTube and other social media platforms through which the users can freely get access to and learn about details of different NDEs. There are also literally thousands of books each of which is about a single NDE account, while some others are either a collection of few accounts or general writings that reflect their authors' research, findings and overall views on the phenomenon.

Here, it is worth mentioning that unlike negative experiences that are said to be filled with feelings of shame, pain and torment, positive experiences (in both *Life after Life* and NDEs around the world) are described by NDEers using terms such as absolute peace, freedom, unconditional love, total acceptance, and no judgement. What is

notable, though, is that even by a cursory look into the contents of the reported cases, it becomes apparent that the great majority of the NDEs reflected in these non-Iranian accounts are positive experiences. A handful negative experiences in this regard, however, are generally related to the NDEers with failed suicide attempts or those with drug or alcohol abuse/overdose who almost died. Indeed, it is rather easy to find out about the disproportionateness between positive and negative accounts; one could simply choose to look into a weblog, YouTube channel or podcast and spend some time to learn about the nature of each NDE report. For instance, only 12 out of 450 (2.67%) NDE interviews in the Jeff Mara podcast (www.youtube.com/c/JeffMaraPodcast) are, for the most part, negative experiences. In comparison, 60 out of 80 NDE interviews throughout 99 episodes of *Life after Life* (some episodes consist of 2 short NDE cases and some longer interviews are extended into 2 episodes) were either negative or had some undesirable elements (about 75%). This alone, raise serious questions about selection and representativeness of the NDE cases in *Life after Life*, especially if we are to rightly recognize this phenomenon as a universal human experience.

Nevertheless, perhaps the most ideology-laden segment of the narrative in *Life after Life* at this point is the NDEers' encounter with either some Shi'ite figures, or their own deceased family members, friends or relatives. In either case, the NDEers' encounters are filled with emotions and thoughts that is remarkably reminiscence of Shi'i mythologies that shapes the dominant ideology in Iran and pervades the country's mainstream media. The retellings of these otherworldly encounters are often rife with dramatic and sensationalized tales that describe the NDEers' interactions with holy figures and/or other entities where they are given some moral advices or religious instructions to follow after their return to the physical world. This part of the NDEers' journey into the unseen world also includes a life review where the person rapidly sees much or the totality of his or her life history and the ways in which their life affected other people. Typically, this is where the person realizes the consequences of the person's actions and thoughts during their lives, and the various forms of punishments (and rarely the rewards) that await them after their deaths. As the NDEers' unearthly experiences suggest, the punishments/rewards that they witnessed follows the value system and theological teachings and virtues of Shi'ism. This pivotal scenario also presents the 'grand narrative' of *Life after Life*, and marks the juncture that separates NDEs represented within the framework of the Islamic regime and those from the rest of the world.

The final segment of the narrative, is the stories that follow the NDEers' return to the physical world. This is often explained by individuals as a new era of a great change in behavior and attitude as well as a period of repentance and making up for the wrongdoings in the past. The general theme of the narrative at this point, particularly in the case of the negative NDEs, indirectly recommends audiences a series of moral instructions to follow. Even though such instructions initially seemed to be commonsensical and humanistic from the universal moral/ethical perspective, yet, they are characteristically religious in nature and follow the Shi'i tradition and principles; taking religious teachings and instructions more seriously, praying more and participating in spiritual communities and other rituals events, and more importantly, consecrating imams, symbols and legacies of Shi'ism. When closely looking at this segment of the narrative, then, it becomes clear that, first and foremost, the religiosity aspect of an individual is emphasized. This

perspectival unanimity, in itself is simply an indication that narrative in *Life after Life* seeks submission and conformity to the established rules of the theocratic regime in Iran where the masses need to be as passive as possible so that a few governing ecclesiastics can remain in power [12].

3.4 The Audiences of Life After Life

The idea that a media text cannot be reduced to a single, fixed and coherent ‘meaning’, is a well-established theme in media and communication studies particularly after the major shift in ‘media effects’ paradigm and the emergence of ‘active audience’ theories in 1970s and 1980s [13]. This suggests that the media texts are not only constructed out of certain media languages, but are also read by audiences whose readings might vary depending on their race, gender, education, social class, as well as political and religious views and beliefs. Although it is beyond the scope of this study to examine reception dimension of this television program, what it can do in this regard, is to reflect on issues, such as the nature of the target audience, the audience positioning strategy, and the addressing mode of the audiences. So, to begin with, it is important to consider that the media texts are not just aimed at anyone who cares to look at them, they are produced with a particular audience in mind. In the case of *Life after Life*, however, this can be a large segment of the population, regardless of many aspects of their demographic characteristics, albeit other than ‘education’ and ‘social class’, particularly, in terms of access to global media and foreign language capability. The reason for this, is that the preferred reading of *Life after Life* is only possible as long as there is no (or limited) access to an alternative source of information; those who can access and understand other NDEs from around the world are likely to resist to the dominant meanings in *Life after Life*.

In regard to audience positioning, we need to examine what the audience is being encouraged to think and feel about *Life after Life*. The primary thing we can consider here is that this television program is the first of its kind that introduced and popularized the topic of NDE in Iran. This alone, makes *Life after Life* the pioneer of the topic and sets it as the myopic gold standard for those who for the first time encountering such an out of ordinary subject. Backed with some form of science and through a reality format, it provides audiences with a new concept and gives them some answers about the biggest mystery of the humanity: the purpose of life, the afterlife and the aftermath of our actions. In this way, knowledge is the power, and it lies in the hand of *Life after Life*, hence, placing the eager audiences at the position of submissiveness and conformity with what it has to offer them as undisputable information. What adds to the audience’s powerlessness in this asymmetrical equation, is the medium itself; television is traditionally has found its place among Iranian families as a trusted medium, particularly those who support the Islamic regime or at least optimistic about the ways the government doing its job. This enables *Life after Life* to effortlessly take advantage of such trust, especially since it carries the notions of a science-based, universal and more importantly innocent and apolitical program that only seems to be there to reflect the accounts of lives of the ordinary people.

In terms of mode of address, *Life after Life* takes a relatively complex stance towards the audience. Naturally people tend to make an unconscious connection between the NDE

and the voices involved in telling us about it, and therefore, how audiences are addressed and the tones used play a big part in creating the right impression. As already noted, in *Life after Life*, two main addressing modes, namely scientific and religious discourses, are employed in a reality TV format. Both the scientific and religious discourses are powerful ways of imparting knowledge and meanings [14], not only about ourselves and the world we live in, but also the unseen world of the afterlife. These are then further authenticated through the reality format of the show, as it presents tangible real-life accounts of ordinary people in the context of everyday life. Consequently, by more critically looking at 'media industry-content-audience' relations involved in *Life after Life*, we come to an understanding that the meanings of the contents of this program are largely produced by the audiences. This is so, given the fact that the media industries draw on public taste and cultural knowledge of the audiences in their production of content and programming.

4 Conclusion

This study began with the ambition to demystify the reality presented in *Life after Life*, and to show that how an unconventional concept like NDE which was previously considered taboo by the state, not only almost overnight became acceptable, but also was gradually revered as an ideological device. In so doing, the study adopted the Cormack's holistic approach to media text in order to reflect on the ideologies at work in production of *Life after Life*. As such, it was revealed that to produce certain dominant meanings, this program used the media language which involved several aspects: 1) the programming and scheduling: the way these aspects of broadcast television were associated with religious values, 2) the construction aspect: the key roles of audio/visual elements which contributed to both sensationalizing the content, and facilitating the impart of specific meanings, 3) the narrative: perhaps the most important aspect of the show in terms of laying out a fixed pattern for guiding humans' actions and their inevitable consequences, and 4) the audience: it is the viewers who ultimately make their own meanings of the program, albeit through the constraints of their cultural limitations. Hence, more than the program's audio/visual techniques, it is the audiences' cultural limitations that are systematically taken advantage of by the state for the televisual hegemony. This, highlights the significance of any investigation of the aforementioned media aspects, since it is easy to be blind to the forces that shape and mold the programs we routinely and sometimes mindlessly watch. Ultimately, this study underscores the key role of the national media in keeping the authoritarian governments in power. It also argues that the national media in such undemocratic contexts strive to make the most out of the new, unusual or even taboo concepts (e.g., NDE) to create contents as long as they prove to abet the state in exploitation of the masses and 'manufacturing consent' [15].

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