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What can a body do ? Answers from Arab cinema

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WHAT CAN A BODY DO ? ANSWERS FROM ARAB CINEMA

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Abstract | Baruch Spinoza's statement "We do not know what a body can do" argues that bodies learn their powers not from divinely imposed laws but through experience in the world. Thought must pass though the body, in a way that menaces both existing thoughts and the body as it is at present. Great works of contemporary independent cinema in Arabic-speaking countries express the body's forces of becoming in numerous ways, some of which this essay tracks: from not yet living to cultivating molecular forces, enfolding powers, expressing volatile passions, coming to life, and attaining adequate ideas. Some of these dynamics are common to all world cinema, while some address questions of the capacities of bodies and of thought specific to the present-day Arabic-speaking world. I use a method of embodied and affective analysis that experiences the Artaudian "cruelty" of these movies, by attempting to move through the body to thought.

Keywords | Embodiment – Spinoza – Artaud – Deleuze – Arab cinema – Enfoldment – Affect theory – Mai Al-Nakib – Samir Kassir – Farid Zahi – Rania Attieh and Daniel Garcia – Dima el-Horr – Hala Elkoussy – Akram Zaatari – Joanna Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige – Hala Lotfy – Narimane Mari – Hind Meddeb.

Abstract | L'affirmation de Baruch Spinoza, « personne, en effet, n'a déterminé encore ce dont le corps est capable », suggère que les corps apprennent leur pouvoir non par des lois divines imposées mais à travers l'expérience dans le monde. La pensée doit passer par le corps, d'une manière qui menace autant la pensée que le corps dans son état présent. Des œuvres notables du cinéma de langue arabe contemporain et indépendant expriment le devenir du corps de différentes manières qui vont servir d'exemples dans l'étude présente : du corps cultivant ses forces moléculaires, ses pouvoirs enveloppants, exprimant des passions volatiles et acquérant des idées adéquates. Certaines de ces dynamiques sont communes à tous les cinémas du monde, pendant que d'autres soulèvent des questions sur les capacités du corps et de la pensée, spécifiques au monde arabe contemporain. Je vais privilégier une analyse affective et « incarnée » en partant du concept de « cruauté » dans la pensée d'Artaud.

Mots-clés | Incarnation – Spinoza – Artaud – Deleuze – Arab cinema – Théorie de l'affect –Mai Al-Nakib – Samir Kassir – Farid Zahi – Rania Attieh and Daniel Garcia – Dima el-Horr – Hala Elkoussy – Akram Zaatari – Joanna Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige – Hala Lotfy – Narimane Mari – Hind Meddeb.

This essay[1] is inspired by Baruch Spinoza's provocative statement, "We do not know what a body can do." The bodies Spinoza discusses learn their powers not from divinely imposed laws but through experience in the world. They are like the fish in Antonin Artaud's "Petit poème des poissons de la mer" (1926), the epilogue to Narimane Mari's film *Loubia Hamra*. A "translation" of the poem Humpty Dumpty recites to Alice, Artaud's poem introduces his own reflection on the relationship between being and suffering.[2] The silvery little fish refuse to answer the question "Vaut-il mieux être que d'obéir?", Is it better to be than to obey?[3] Angered, the questioner kills the fish. The poem continues, disputing the dogma that only God has complete existence, and that other entities must obey God in order to gain existence.

> "Being is he who imagines himself to be / To be enough to spare himself / From learning what the sea wants… / But every little fish knows it!"[4]

God in His completeness need not care about the life of the sea. But the little fish live immanently to the ever-changing sea; they do not exist in the shadow of God. Artaud's poem, like his desire "To be done with the judgment of God," defends living over existing, if existing means to submit to the judgment of divine or human laws.

Artaud's defense of the body's capacity to become within its living milieu meets Spinoza's ethics, which contends that humans ensnared in abstract moralities will never know the powers immanent to the body. Artaud and Spinoza also meet in their recognition that thought must pass though the body, in a way that menaces both existing thoughts and the body as it is at present. As Kuniichi Uno puts it, "Thinking is cruel, because if we manage to think, this thought overwhelms us, penetrates into being, tears through the whole thickness of our vitality, the endless intertwining of our sensations and memories, everything that is recorded in the body. Thinking never happens without being accompanied by a form of power or violence, what Artaud would later call 'microbes of god'. But thinking is cruel above all because we are never able to think as we should."[5]

Great works of contemporary independent cinema in Arabic-speaking countries express the body's forces of becoming in numerous ways, some of which this essay tracks: from not yet living to cultivating molecular forces, enfolding powers, expressing volatile passions, coming to life, and attaining adequate ideas.. Some of these dynamics are common to all world cinema, while some address questions of the capacities of bodies and of thought specific to the

1- The essay is adapted from "What Can a Body Do?", chapter 15 of Laura U. Marks, *Hanan al-Cinema: Affections for the Moving Image,* Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 2015.

2- On the "cruel" and transformative character of this translation, see Alexandra Lukes, "The Asylum of Nonsense: Antonin Artaud's Translation of Lewis Carroll", *The Romanic Review*, 104: 1-2, 2013, pp.105-126.

3- Carroll's poem reads simply, "It would be better to obey."

4- « L'être est celui qui s'imagine être / être assez pour se dispenser / D'apprendre ce que veut la mer… / Mais tout petit poisson le sait ! » (My translation)

5- Kuniichi Uno, "Variations on Cruelty," *The Genesis of an Unknown Body*, trans. Melissa McMahon, Helsinki and São Paulo, n°1, 2012, p. 35.

present-day Arab world. I will use a method of embodied and affective analysis that experiences the cruelty of these by attempting to move through the body to thought.

Molecular and enfolded powers

First, films carry out different operations at the molar and molecular levels, which correspond to different levels of embodiment and body politics, as Elena del Rio argues.[6] The molar level deals with bodies as a whole and supports identity politics, struggle against constraints, and struggles for representation. These well-documented struggles in the Arab world include women's rights, gay rights, and rights of poor people and of migrant workers. Cinema represents the agonistic molar level of bodily forces at the scale of narrative and representation. Meanwhile, the molecular level deals with energies that are not yet captured by discourses of identity. The molecular level provides a source of energy for molar-scale struggles.

One of the most creative areas of Arab experimentalism is the expression of molecular forces. Cinematically, this means movies cultivate affective energies and communicate them to viewers: an embodied, affective cinema. They operate a little below the radar of discourse and identity, because that's where they can be most creative. Many non-Arab audiences are keen to witness Arab "victims," since this is what they know about from mass media and a long history of Orientalist representations. They usually have good intentions to pity and sympathize with the constrained Arab body. Therefore, stories about individuals who struggle with constraints and sometimes triumph are very appealing. But the best of these movies succeed because they successfully deploy a dialectic between molecular and molar levels, as del Rio describes. For example, *Wadjda* (2013) by Haifaa Al-Mansour, celebrated as the first feature film by a Saudi woman, operates as an accessible narrative about Saudi women and girls struggling against constraints on their liberty, in ways that are sometimes rather clichéd. But the film is also powered by an molecular motor. In one scene Wadjda's unnamed mother, henceforth so thoroughly defined around her constraints as mother, wife, and employee, stands on the roof of their house smoking a cigarette in the hazy evening light. Next door the wedding party for her husband and his new wife is taking place. All her defenses have fallen; she has the complete relaxation of the utterly defeated; and so she smokes. Wisps of cigarette smoke merge with the hazy air. Her loose hair and the embroidery on her pretty blouse contribute small elements of independent liveliness. Defeated at the molar level, energies are gathering at the molecular level. Narratively, this is the moment at which the story changes direction: she recognizes how little her obedience has done for her and resolves something different for her daughter, namely that she shall ride a bicycle.

6- Elena del Rio, *Deleuze and the Cinemas of Performance: Powers of Affection*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2008, 27, pp. 114-116.

Molecular energies, or affects, need to be protected and cared for. My second hypothesis is that Arab cinema and media art, more than those from other places, cultivate strategies of protecting and enfolding bodies. This enfoldment create an elastic effect in which the body becomes less perceptible; it gets enfolded into the image, only to have more power when it finally springs forth. Rosi Braidotti articulates a Spinozan feminism of ethical sustainability that rests on an understanding of the subject as a radically immanent, intensive body, that is, an assemblage of forces and flows, intensities, and passions that converge in the "self."[7] Her argument responds to Deleuze and Guattari's caution that the body without organs must be constructed with great care: "Dismantling the organism has never meant killing yourself, but rather opening the body to connections that presuppose an entire assemblage, circuits, conjunctions, levels and thresholds, passages and distributions of intensity, and territories and deterritorializations measured with the craft of the surveyor."[8] The body can sustain only so much transformation at a time. In Spinozan fashion, Braidotti proposes that the goal of life is to encourage nondestructive flows and transformations that will give rise to joyful or positive affects and the transcendence of reactive affects. This approach informs an assiduous care to keep bodily energies enfolded in order to allow them to develop strength.

Here's another place that Arab experiments in the moving image have something to teach the rest of the world. For in the works I will discuss, the human body is cherished, and the stakes of revealing it and harming it remain high. They release bodily capacities only with care and circumspection, placing greater emphasis on each stage of potential unfolding of feeling and thought. What appears as lack of movement may actually be latency, a gathering of powers.[9]

From affects to adequate ideas

The contemporary affective turn in theory often isolates the body's experience as though affect were an end in itself. This theoretical tendency seems to be a response to the perceived "waning of affect" among some populations - a desire to be assured that we still have bodies (which some people in the world have never been in a position to forget) - coupled with a suspicion of thought as disembodied and discursively compromised. However, in a return to the Spinozan origins of the theory of affect, it's helpful to recall that feeling is the beginning point of thinking. Thus the third aspect of my argument not only values affects in themselves but also tries to determine whether those energies are sufficient to fuel an increase in the body's powers, supported by a parallel genesis of creative thought.

7- Rosi Braidotti, "Sustainable Ethics and the Body in Pain", *Nomadic Theory: The Portable Rosi Braidotti*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2011, pp. 302-303.

8- Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, "How Do You Make Yourself a Body Without Organs?", *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1987, p. 160.

9- See Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, "Latency," *Home Works: A Forum on Cultural Practices in the Region*, ed. Christine Tohme and Mona Abou Rayyan, Beirut: Ashkal Alwan, 2003, pp. 40-45.

Pleasure and pain are the first signs of life, but they are passions, or passive emotions; Spinoza argues that it is in understanding the sources of our joy and pain that we gain the power to have active emotions.[10] An adequate idea of something requires a knowledge of its cause; we have the power to act to the degree that we understand the chain of causes, of which God is the first cause. Spinoza demonstrates that thought and things align in adequate ideas: "the order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things."[11] A person's adequate idea of a given situation is equal to the power of action that can be realized in that situation: it constitutes a small segment of God's infinite power. Thus, adequate ideas align your powers with God's powers.[12] As Deleuze states it, an adequate idea is formally *explained* by our own power of knowing and materially *expresses* another idea as its cause. An adequate idea differs from a thought because it uniquely connects material circumstances and mental capacities for a given situation.[13] You can recognize an adequate idea because it describes your highest capacity to affect your current situation. As Mai Al-Nakib explains, "Freedom for Spinoza consists of adequately understanding our specific historical determinations of affects and existence and then maximizing encounters that increase our capacity to act and live."[14]

This need to gain a strongly causal understanding of one's situation that is simultaneously matched by a capacity to act resonates powerfully in many Arab countries where, as Samir Kassir points out, most people are abundantly aware of the causes of their everyday problems but not in a position to act. Kassir dates this affect of powerlessness to the first Iraq war. "Powerlessness to suppress the feeling that you are no more than a lowly pawn on the global chessboard even as the game is being played in your backyard."[15] A person can precisely track the connection from a specific situation that inhibits her capacities all the way to its causes in neo-imperialism, state capitalism, bureaucracy, political corruption, repressive fundamentalism, and other vast and complex causes. But unless she has adequate ideas that express the chain of their causes and explains them in terms of her capacity to act, she will remain passive. In order to avoid fatalism and keep thinking historically, it is necessary to be able to relate current causes to the effects that one is able to have.

Al-Nakib underscores the usefulness of a Spinozan-Deleuzian approach for Arab feminism.[16] Dominant images of thought—such as the idea that women should be docile or that homosexuality is an aberration—indicate a collective affective desire to organize life in a particular way. Such images of thought

10- Baruch Spinoza, *Ethics*, part III, "On the Origin and Nature of the Emotions," Prop. LVI; Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, trans. Robert Hurley, San Francisco, City Lights Books, 1988, p. 88.

11- Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part II, "On the Nature and Origin of the Mind," Prop. VII.

12- In fact Spinoza's doctrine enjoins obedience to God, the very thing Artaud rejects. Yet this divine obedience is not blind servitude but a manner of discovering one's powers.

13- Deleuze, *Spinoza*, p. 74/85.

14- Mai Al-Nakib, "Disjunctive Synthesis: Deleuze and Arab Feminism," *Signs* 38:2, Winter 2013, p. 474.

15- Samir Kassir, *Being Arab*, trans. Will Hobson, London, Verso, 2006, p. 4.

16- Al-Nakib, "Disjunctive Synthesis."

restrict bodies' capacities for action and cause sad affects. If they can be budged a little, opportunities for new kinds of affective encounters are released. In turn, Al-Nakib writes, people can analyze their life situations in terms of their capacities for greater power to affect and be affected, and fight for collective practices that improve these opportunities for everybody.
Repressive ideas about bodies are entrenched in Arab political and cultural institutions, and people challenge them only at great risk. Again, as Al-Nakib emphasizes, joyful affects remain passions; but they can increase people's capacity to act and arrive at truly adequate thinking that will permit them to act freely. Therefore, affective experiments need to be made with care.

Toward an adequate analysis of moving images

Spinoza's invitation to understand life as a constant interaction between bodies that can augment or diminish our own body's powers translates well to encounters with moving images. Our bodies encounter human bodies, of course, as well as the body of the medium, and also micro-bodies—the Spinozan affects. The analysis of these encounters maps onto a range of theoretical approaches from psychoanalysis to phenomenology to theories of affect to neuroscience.
Movies that treat the body's pleasure and pain as the starting point for political change work through sad and joyful affects in order to get to thought. A movie may express embodied capacities this at a phenomenological level, by emphasizing the shared corporeality of characters on screen and viewers in the audience, or by eliciting embodied responses in viewers. Or, at an affective level, it may release affective energies that are less amenable to a human-scale resolution. Affection-images in the cinema reveal "the powerlessness at the heart of thought."[17] The viewer experiences affective states that reveal the limits of thought: cinema's moment of cruelty. Sometimes either the film or the viewer is able to struggle through this impasse to arrive at an adequate idea.
In analyzing a movie I take an embodied approach that works up from the molecular to the molar, deliberately suspending the intellectual response to the work in order first to account for affective responses, embodied responses, feelings, and emotions. I find that such an approach allows the intellectual analysis, when it finally emerges, to be substantial and well grounded. I try to allow non-cognitive thoughts, or affects, to flail about in the confrontation with the unthought. If a new thought arises that isn't a platitude or an image of thought, I grasp it. The result of this process may be an adequate idea, for it connects causality with bodily capacity.
Even though the affective encounter has the tang of truth, not everybody responds affectively to a movie in the same way. This can be especially the case with watching movies across cultures. So in the following analyses I listen to my body with circumspection and care.

17- Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1989, p. 166.

Bodies not yet living

Rania Attieh and Daniel Garcia's *Tayeb, Khalas, Yalla* (Okay, Enough, Let's Go) (2010), shot in an observational documentary style, captures the texture of daily life in Trablus, Lebanon, in seemingly banal anecdotes tingling with unexamined violence. Its characters, with the exception of a quick-witted and disobedient little boy named Walid, seem weighed with fatigue, in a characteristically Lebanese time-image in bodies that "contain the before and the after, tiredness and waiting"[18]; a quality amplified by observational shots of very long duration. I say this is characteristically Lebanese because the Lebanese political and economic situation is so chronically unstable that people can only get through a day by avoiding remembering the past or thinking about the long term.

Its main character, a hapless fellow whose name we never learn, his face muffled behind thick glasses and a beard, his bearing clumsy and gormless, is not a thinking man, nor does he seem able to feel much. He can't even peel an orange: he uses a knife to cut off little pieces of the peel, leaving the white stuff underneath. Selecting such an ill-equipped human being as its central character, *Tayeb, Khalas, Yalla* functions as a spiritual automaton: it sets out all the relations in which feeling, and thus thinking, might occur, but leaves it to the viewer to activate these relations. Many of its observational shots are unusually long, remaining on the scene even when the characters have left the shot, as though to invite us to make the connections its characters do not make.

The narrative parts of the movie drops hints about the causes of suffering: business is bad at the main character's pastry shop, and also at his friend's shop; little Walid is obsessed with guns; the struggling middle-class characters rely on an untenable system of importing foreign maids that seems like modern slavery. But they do not explain them: they are not adequate ideas. However, the film includes other kinds of footage that, while they do not constitute adequate ideas, give the viewer some of the tools they need to achieve them. One is a set of poignant documentary vignettes about Tripoli, voiced over by Attieh. The first introduces the city in an aerial shot of its dense forest of apartment buildings, as Attieh's voice describes the scent of orange flowers that once perfumed the city. Another surveys the detritus half-buried in the sand of the port of Trablus, once a great Mediterranean port, now a place that smells of death. And the third surveys the ruins of the once-magnificent world's-fair grounds designed by Oscar Niemayer and abandoned at the beginning of the civil war in 1975. These vignettes extend the sadness and inadequacy of the characters over the whole city. They express some of the causes of the fictional characters' malaise and invite the viewers to comprehend them; until we can achieve that, the scenes' sad affects flood our experience.

After his own mother deserts him, the main character seeks out female companionship, apparently not realizing that the woman he is courting is a prostitute—yet even she is not very interested in him. Then friends encourage

18- *Ibid*., p. 189.

him to hire a maid. At the agency, the contractor warns our man that the Ethiopian maid he has available has run away from former employers; he advises him to lock the maid in the apartment when he goes out and indicates it's fine to beat her. The maid speaks no Arabic and seems petrified. Back at the apartment the protagonist shows the Ethiopian woman around as though she were a houseguest, showing her bedroom and the contents of the refrigerator. Yet the woman remains immobile. Upset at her lack of appreciation of his hospitality, he leaves in a huff. When he returns from a failed rendezvous with the prostitute, he bears an assortment of cream puffs from his rarely frequented pastry shop. He pushes the box toward her—"Eat! They're good!"—but she shrinks away as though the soft pastries were a weapon.

To call this scene "funny and heartbreaking" elides the body's potential knowledge. Watching it, I am atwitch with frustration. If he were slightly more attuned to the woman's fear, he would manage to make the connections—as he failed to with the disdain of the prostitute and his own mother's mounting frustration with him. And if she were less numb she might be able to interpret his gestures.

Tayeb, Khalas, Yalla calls up all the ways laughter can feel on your face. "Not that the body thinks, but, obstinate and stubborn, it forces us to think, and forces us to think what is concealed from thought, life."[19] The protagonist's insensitive body—usually muffled in a sweater and an enormous yellow padded coat—protects his mind from affective encounter that might wound him into wakefulness. This encounter with the Ethiopian woman is his chance to finally be alive. But were he to do so, a cascade of unbearable thoughts would crash down, the institutionalized cruelty of the Lebanese maid system being only the first of these. So he does not feel, and therefore does not think.

However, the Ethiopian woman does. When the protagonist leaves her in the car while he does to buy her a falafel, she escapes, quick as a grasshopper.

The arriving body

Dima el-Horr's films tend to be strongly painterly, with blocs of saturated color, frontal compositions, and formal tableaus of bodies that call to mind Godard's *Le Mépris* and *Pierrot le fou*: this is certainly so in her narrative films *Prêt-à-porter Umm Ali* (2001) and *Every Day Is a Holiday* (2009). Her short experimental video *The Blue Sea In Your Eyes* (2006) also treats the body as a figure for composition, shifting disturbingly between vibrant life and intimated death. It begins with a text in English, a harrowing tale: A stepmother was secretly in love with her stepson, then confessed her love to him. When he scorned her, she hung herself, leaving a letter that accused him of dishonoring her. The father curses his son. When the son is lying on the seashore, a great wave dashes him against the rocks.

19- *Ibid*.

This text prepares us to interpret the following images of men peacefully sunbathing and diving into the shimmering water as sacrificial bodies. Shooting in close-up, the very slow-motion camera seems to memorialize these beautiful flowers of Lebanese youth. Very close shots frame a young man's sculptural bronzed torso, his prominent nipples casting shadows; a man's chest hairs capturing the white light; a man's dragon-tattooed back rippling as he stretches his shoulders. The caressing camera evokes an unrequited desire.

But this movie feels surprisingly sad, given its sensuality. I feel the disjunction between the way my eyes imaginatively enjoy the sun warming the men's skin and the salt water drying on it and their own inertia. The slowness, the metallic, echoing drone of Charbel Haber's soundscape, and the stillness of these beautiful bodies in contrast to the rippling blue water gives that desire a dark edge. Bodies float in the water. Some of the body parts framed by the camera are unrecognizable at first; they seem amputated, deformed. It feels like we viewers are somehow occupying the place of the cruel parents, unleashing first desire and then vengeance upon our innocent young.

And yet the sense of hot sun on the skin and cool salty water, the sunbathers' peaceful faces, and the sparkling blue of the Mediterranean—known to be the resting place of so many of the dead—resist this allegory. Like all Oedipal tales, the story el-Horr presents wants to prey on the living, but the living may defy it, if only by playing dead.

Better to live or to obey?

Many bodies in the Arab world labor under difficult constraints. Poverty, of course, constrains what a body can do. However, the first (and sometimes the only) image of the Arab world that comes to mind for outsiders is the Arab woman constrained by religious and cultural traditions. It would take pages to list all the feature films from the Arab world that address the social monitoring of women. I will describe one short video that condenses the analysis. Hala Elkoussy's *White Bra* (Egypt, 2006) diagrams the effect of these constraints on the body and soul. The short video consists of a pair of static shots of a woman and a man, each in white shirt and jeans, sitting on a hard chair and addressing the camera. They sit in the same posture as the viewer so it is easy to mirror their embodied and affective states on one's own body. The bottom half of a portrait of is Mubarak visible above them; like Raed Yassin's *The New Film* (2008), *White Bra* identifies, in the presiding figure of Mubarak, the entrenched Egyptian military government as the source of lawful violence and surveillance that justifies all other acts of violence and surveillance.

By turns the woman and the man tell the camera about their love story. At first you think they are speaking of each other, but their stories diverge: he is claiming her for his beloved, she fell in love with a colleague from work. Gradually you realize that they are not sweethearts and that in fact he has been spying on her from his window.

The woman relates that she fell in love; on a Friday morning "He came to me at the window, put his arms around me, and whispered, 'Let's get married.'" The other is livid as he relates his view of the same events. "She had a sick smile on her face." He says, "I made a little call." She tells how the police came to her place, asked for ID, grabbed her breast and may have sexually assaulted her further, and only left when she gave them all the money she had.
In the course of this parallel story, all kinds of feelings play the woman like a harp—caution, joy, anguish, and revulsion crease her brow and expand and crumple her small slim body. By contrast, the man's face and body compose a united front of moral outrage that matches his words. "We have traditions that need to be respected," he sputters. "She deserves to be burnt alive." Only one does his aggrieved countenance break into a shy smile, when he reveals, "My father gave it to me… it's German with Zeiss lenses." He's the sick one, of course, a Peeping Tom inventing a love story with the woman he spies on. But it is she who gets punished. No longer with her lover, she has fallen prey to dominant images of thought. "They are all sick … they have double standards." She never goes out, she keeps the windows closed and the phone turned off. And rather than angry, the woman becomes all uncertain—"Who's to say what is wrong and right?"
Thus with strict economy of means Elkoussy draws an affective diagram of power, the worst case in which the molecular potentials that traverse the woman are simply no match for the molar powers of a man backed by tradition and the state. Yet I test receiving each of the characters' postures and attitudes on my own body. Her expressive vulnerability gives way to a state of utter, crushed dejection. His poisonous resentment and self-righteousness hardens like a carapace. I would prefer to be the woman, for she is still able to feel. The man is as good as dead.

The enfolded body

In Islam, Farid Zahi writes, the body is the site of a permanent dialectic between sacred and profane, as many of the Qur'an's prohibitions revolve around the body: thus the universal concept of taboo is anchored within the specific Islamic concept of *haram*, meaning both forbidden and sacred. Zahi writes that the body's "polysemic status places it between the real and the irreal, between speech and silence, between the permitted and the forbidden."[20] Unlike Christianity, which considers the body purely profane, Islam includes the body within the sacred; therefore, the body, like all sensible things, is linked to the extra-sensible.
A tacit Islamic aniconism, then, informs the enfoldment of bodies from view in contemporary visual art and cinema. Zahi notes that Moroccan modern painting gets around the problem by showing bodies but not faces. A number of movies from the Arab world experiment with aniconism in something like

20- Farid Zahi, "Art, islam et modernité: le corps dans la peinture marocaine," in *D'un regard, l'autre: L'art et ses médiations au Maroc*, Rabat, Éditions Marsam, 2006, p. 78 (my translation).

the Islamic tradition, protecting valued and beloved bodies from view. The most literal enactment of cinematic aniconism is perhaps *The Message* (1976) by Egyptian filmmaker Moustapha Akkad, a pious retelling of the life of the Prophet Mohammed that manages, in a conventional narrative style, never to show the protagonist (nor his revered nephew 'Ali).

Michel Foucault posited a sexuality outside of discourse, that he termed *ars erotica*: unlike the sexuality that differentiates by being named, categorized, medicalized, and otherwise discursively cultivated, *ars erotica* is a kind of eroticism in disavowal. Foucault associated it specifically with "Oriental" sexual practices. Scholars have abundantly disputed the applicability of Foucault's division of West and East according to *scientia sexualis* and *ars erotica*, pointing out that it is historically inaccurate, attributes modernity solely to the West, and tends to attribute a timelessness to the sexual practices of the Orient.[21] Historical research shows that both religious and civil law regulated sexuality throughout recorded history in the Arab and Muslim world. Zahi points out that pre-Islamic law condoned only marital sexuality (*nikâh*); he also summarizes the detailed regulations around homosexuals and hermaphrodites in the time of the Prophet and the first caliphs,[22] which reveal that the Foucauldian *scientia sexualis* was already in practice, and also that early Muslim discourse on what was permitted and forbidden went through many iterations, never reaching a fixed form. Leslie Pierce details the introduction of vice codes in Ottoman law and the surveillant and self-surveillant subjectivities that it produced.[23]

Yet there remains a fruitful way to deploy Foucault's concept of *ars erotica* as a kind of erotic knowledge that survives by not being recorded. Same-sex sexual relations are illegalized or regulated by vice laws in almost every Arab country. Safety necessitates that same-sex practices take place in an atmosphere of disavowal. Men who desire men, and to a lesser degree, women who desire women, are able to gain some degree of erotic freedom and creativity by avoiding naming or revealing their desire. Needless to say, by valuing an enfolded sexuality I am not at all celebrating the fact that same-sex sexuality is illegal and homosexuals are persecuted in most Arab countries.

Protecting and cherishing bodies by rendering them beyond visibility occurs in art and films that deal with sexuality, especially male-male desire. As Joseph Pearson notes, artists in the Arab world cannot openly make work that reflects on same-sex desire. Their tactics include "a vocabulary of juxtaposition, deletion of material whose absence is felt, the relegation of vital material to the margins,

21- See Joseph Massad, *Desiring Arabs*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2007; Valerie Traub, "The Past Is a Foreign Country? The Time and Place of Islamicate Sexuality Studies," in *Islamicate Sexualities: Translations Across Temporal Geographies of Desire*, ed. Kathryn Babayan and Afsanhe Najmabadi, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2008, p. 17-20; and Tarek El-Ariss, *Trials of Arab Modernity: Literary Affects and the New Political*, New York, Fordham University Press, 2013, pp. 117-120.

22- Zahi, *op. cit.*, pp. 14-15.

23- Leslie Pierce, Morality Tales: Law and Gender in the Ottoman Court of Aintab, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2003.

the effacement of meaning and the strategic use of ambiguity."[24] This work constitutes a kind of "shadow archive" that protects things by eliding them.[25] By enfolding same-sex desire and rendering it enigmatic, artists are able to gain some degree of erotic freedom and creativity. Moreover, they pass to the viewer the responsibility to make connections and to feel the desires that they allude to but never name outright.

Zaatari's *Tomorrow Everything Will Be All Right* (Lebanon, 2010) shows male erotic desire at its most acute. The video is able to do this because it is completely aniconic. Most of the video consists of a text-message exchange between two former lovers; it is initiated by the one who, we gradually learn, broke the other's heart ten years earlier. The viewer also learns that both lovers are men, but only after experiencing the vivid longing the spurned man still feels for his lover and is able to reproduce from the merest traces: when the other types ":-)", he responds, "The smile I loved." Zaatari renders the text conversation with a manual typewriter, the caller in red ink, the receiver in black, painstakingly pressing one letter at a time into the paper. The typed letters imprint the paper, like the caresses that the heartbroken one still feels on his skin; the periods almost puncture the paper.

They agree to meet at the beach at sunset, where ten years earlier they had together witnessed the *rayon vert*, sign of true love in Eric Rohmer's film of that title. After a drive through Beirut's tunnel road accompanied by a text whose direct sexual references embarrassed me, *Tomorrow Everything Will Be All Right* cuts to a video date-stamped December 31, 1999. In it the sun sets slowly over the Mediterranean, and as it disappears into the horizon the video flashes white, the camera blinded by the *rayon vert*. The date stamp and the white flash constitute two indexical proofs of a love between men that marked their bodies, and the body of the camera.

Zaatari's aniconic strategy compounds the feeling of eroticism and longing by asking that the viewer unfold them on his or her own body, inhabiting the arousal and yearning in his or her own way.

Bodies coming to life

Now I turn to two films that test the capacities of the living in the undramatic presence of death. *Ramad* (Ashes, 2003), by Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, and Hala Lotfy's *Coming Forth by Day* (2012).

The short film *Ramad* looks at one level like a suspense movie, turning as it does around a missing body. At another level, it asks how individuation occurs in a milieu. Nabil returns to Beirut to bury his father, who died overseas and whose

24- Joseph Pearson, "Limits of Discussion: The Rhetoric of Homosexuality and Gender in Middle Eastern Video Art," in *Indicated by Signs: Contested Public Space, Gendered Bodies, and Hidden Sites of Trauma in Contemporary Visual Art Practices*, ed. Aleya Hamza and Edit Molnar, Bonn and Cairo, Bonner Kunstverein and Goethe-Instituk Kairo, 2010, p. 104.

25- Akira Mizuta Lippit, "The Shadow Archive: A Secret Light," *Atomic Light (Shadow Optics)*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2005, pp. 13-34.

body he is supposed to have brought with him in a coffin. But instead he bears a funerary urn—to the horror of his relatives, and in defiance of Lebanese religious laws.[26] In a last act of individualism, Nabil's father wanted his ashes scattered at the famous Pigeon Rock in the waters off Beirut. The family compels a male relative to lie in the coffin under a cloth so that people can pay their last respects. Meanwhile, Nabil is almost comically awkward in his inability to fit in.

The extraordinary scene of the wake contrasts Nabil's separateness with the living being of the group. A Lebanese wake requires the family to host many visitors who drop in over the course of several days. Like many rituals, wakes are boring. A score of soberly dressed mourners sit around a formal sitting room. With choreographic ritual, they stand for the arrivals, shake hands, sit down, exchange muted remarks, sip coffee, stand for the departures, and repeat. The camera closely regards the mourners' minutest gestures. Little actions involving cigarettes, tissues, coffee cups. Two old men take each other's hands, tenderly kiss each other's cheeks. People doze off leaning on each other. A woman slips off her shoe and rubs her foot. A man plays with the silky hair of the woman beside him. Five handsome young people lean across each other to talk and look this way and that, becoming a kind of multi-limbed group creature.

For me, this susurration of small acts begins to feel like a non-conscious, animal life of the body: self-care, grooming, soothing. Watching these scenes I feel like a puppy tumbled together with my siblings, climbing over each other, a rough tongue licking our fur. It feels really good: sensuous, instinctive, and non-discursive. The bodily dimension of the wake scene contrasts greatly with the sad emotions of the narrative: disappointment, shame, self-righteousness, resentment. The simple gestures testify that even under the weight of traditions, life endures.

But *Ramad* subtly suggests that it is an "unthinking," collective life. Hadjithomas and Joreige say they chose nonprofessional actors and did not direct them; at times they filmed them without their knowledge. "They made the proper gestures naturally, they found themselves directly immersed in an often accomplished, familiar rite."[27] In a blurring of fiction and documentary, the actors do what comes naturally, and in so doing they bear along the weight of tradition. At a couple of points one of the rank of mourners glances at Nabil peeking in through the doors, and there is a cut to a shot of the salon from his point of view, emphasizing his separation from this scene of mutual comfort. Nabil is rejected from the pack. When at the end he casts his father's ashes into the water at Pigeon Rock (as we know from the lantern light accompanying his descent in the dark), there is a hint of Spinoza's adequate idea: you can get comfort from the group, but to make the group evolve there are some things you must do uncomfortably alone.

26- Lacking *habeas corpus*, the family find themselves in the situation of thousands of Lebanese whose relatives disappeared during the civil war of 1975-1991: without the proof that their husband, brother, or father is dead, they are unable properly to mourn. This is also a central issue in Hadjithomas and Joreige's feature A *Perfect Day* of 2006.

27- http://hadjithomasjoreige.com/ramad-ashes/; consulted April 1, 2014.

Hala Lotfy's *Coming Forth by Day* is especially striking for the way it quietly yet tenaciously insists on the fragility and tenacity of human life. A very few events take place in *Coming Forth by Day*. The film relates a day in the lives of a Cairo family, in which the unnamed man of the house has been incapacitated, apparently by a stroke, and the women, his wife Hayat and their adult daughter Soad, devote themselves to caring for him while the question of his mortality hovers unaddressed. The man at the center of their attention is conscious but barely speaks; he rests in his wheelchair like a sage, head on his hand, eyes half-shut but alert, the shape of his soft penis visible in his pajamas. We could summarize the plot by saying that Soad asserts her right to go out; meanwhile her father has a fall; the women meet at the hospital; Soad is forced to stay out all night, having been refused by the last microbus; the women meet again at home the next morning. *Coming Forth by Day* was made during the Tahrir Revolution, but the film's only reference to it is when Soad takes a microbus in the direction of Tahrir. Instead it turns its focus to questions of everyday life and death, survival and thriving.

The film, for all that it stays so close to the three main characters, does not psychologize them. Subtle camerawork, long takes, and the near-absence of dialogue instead give a sense that the film is accompanying the characters, in a way that recalls Trinh T. Minh-ha's wish, in her ethnographic film *Re:Assemblage* (1982) to "speak not about, but nearby." The mobile regard of Mahmoud Lotfy's camera, sometimes mounted, sometimes hand-held, floats around the characters, never prying, continually and discreetly adjusting its attention just a little bit beyond them. It takes in the stained mattress, around which the characters' indecisive actions will turn, in a tactful glance. The film's most compassionate scenes play without sentimentality, as when Soad, in efficient gestures that seem born of long practice, raises her father's legs to change his diaper (her own body blocks these actions from the view of the camera), and when he wraps his weak arms around the young woman so that she can lift him into his wheelchair, carefully adjusting his feet on the footrests. While Soad is away from home, the camera moves around her from a distance as she leaves the hospital and breaks up with her useless boyfriend over the phone. Another impressively long mobile shot roves along a lively street full of people talking and flirting in cafés, then casts its gaze down, takes in a damp expanse of asphalt, and finally finds Soad sitting alone at the curb.

In Abdel Rahman Mahmoud's sound design, sounds of neighbors' voices, cars, birdsong, and morning roosters float into the apartment, subtly indicating the wide world outside while also, over a medium shot of the sick man, seeming to cradle him. A grimy luminosity pervades the interior scenes. The big old apartment is dim, but daylight traverses the rooms from a balcony in the rear of the shot, like the modulated light of Dutch 17th-century interiors. Hayat, Soad, and the father are often separated by walls in the big apartment, but the light and sound join them in their solitudes. And it seems to be light that seduces Soad outside: as she sorts rice, listening to a cassette of Abdel Halim Hafiz, the camera

follows her look toward the window, then travels out, gazing at the rooftops and white satellite dishes, dazzled by the bright daylight. The mobile shots, together with sound and light, create what Pasolini called "free indirect discourse," a point of view that is neither objective nor subjective. As Deleuze elaborates (synthesizing Pasolini with Bakhtin), "It is rather an assemblage of enunciation, carrying out two inseparable acts of subjectivation simultaneously, one of which constitutes a character in the first person, but the other of which is present at his birth and brings him onto the scene."[28]

Present at his, at her birth. "Coming Forth by Day" is a translation of *Per em hru*, the common title of the Egyptian Book of the Dead. Egyptologists have debated whether it refers to a dead person's desire for release from the tomb, a deceased person's passage to the next life in reincarnation, or another meaning.[29] This ambiguity corresponds to the film's compassionate regard for Soad's timid struggles to free herself from the demands, dangers, and mediocrity (the loser boyfriend) of her life. I find the film suggests a gradual awakening of capacities for life, not exactly from within the young woman, but both within and without her, as though it is present at her birth. After escaping the microbus driver—first it looks like he is planning to rape her, then he abandons her—Soad survives a night in the open, falling asleep by the river. Returning home, she brusquely informs her mother that they need to prepare for the father's death; and just as brusquely, the film ends.

Joyful passions

Narimane Mari's *Loubia Hamra* (2013) revisits French colonialism and the French-Algerian war in the mode of an exorcism. The film tosses out explanations and historical contexts of colonial and internal power struggles, leaving only bodies that feel and act. It begins and ends with children swimming in the sea, light and shadows of the waves playing on their smooth bodies through the clear water. The boys dive and flip from the rocks into the cool briny water (the girls, swimming in their dresses, just watch). The children float, treading water, bodies linked in a web of small strong limbs. Music by the French band Zombie Zombie, using analog and early digital electronic synthesizers and a raft of percussion instruments, accompanies much of the film: its insistent rhythms, strong bass, and burbling analog electronics drive the action with frenzied, slightly satanic gusto.

The story, loosely set during the French occupation of Algeria, involves a bunch of kids who, tired of eating nothing but beans, resolve to steal food from the French barracks. They manage to do so by recourse to magical realism: by night, their faces painted and masked, they creep up on the soldier on duty, meowing.

28- Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image, trans.* Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1986, p. 73.

29- Edouard Naville, introduction, *The Book of the Dead*, trans. Helen Mary Tirard, New York, E.S. Gorham, 1910, pp. 48-49.

He reports to his commander "They're only cats." They take the young soldier hostage somehow and debate whether to torture him. Each event takes place in a swirl of motion, childish bodies swimming into and out of the light, childish voices laughing, taunting, arguing.

Eighteen children, moving not exactly as one but weaving among each other like a school of gleaming fish. Lighting and camerawork heighten the feeling of being surrounded by a forcefield of youthful energy. This barely contained energy leads to the film's most sublime and most terrifying scenes. At one point the kids have frightened away a European man (wearing a pig mask) who has been beating a Spanish woman (played by Mari). She sits in a corner weeping, her dress torn, and the kids press around her, loudly debating what they should do to cheer her up: offer her a cake, clap raucously as one boy sings a tune from Abdel Halim Hafez. If you inhabit the position of the woman snared in the forest of their legs, not comprehending their shouts, you can imagine how easily youthful kindness tips into terror: but the camera is with the children, not her. Similarly the scene in which they have taken their hostage back to the beach at night, though he seems willing enough, terrified me: the children are all shouting, each something different, and moving in different directions at different speeds. This morass of noise and movement is lit by a bright spot so their limbs dart in and out of shadow, and the handheld camera reacts to their movements, weaving like a firefly. The children's volatility, alarming as well as disarming, recalls Spinoza's observation that children, lacking both mastery of their bodies and the power to reason that comes with experience, are especially vulnerable to outside forces.[30]

But *Loubia Hamra* emphasizes the sweetness as well as the volatile potentiality of youth. it's a movie about children who caress with clumsy tenderness, children gravely intent on their games, children who spread out blankets and sleep all together on the beach like angels on some forgotten cloud. The population of Algeria, like that of most Arab countries, is very young. To generate adequate ideas for the future, Algerians will need the creative sensitivity of their bodies. The film ends with shots of the children floating in the sparkling water, joyful and alive (so different from the floating men of El Horr's *The Blue Sea in Your Eyes*), while their voices repeat lines from Artaud's "Petit poème des poissons de la mer" (1926) in which the silvery little fish refuse to answer the question "Vaut-il mieux être que d'obéir?"—Is it better to be than to obey?

The angered questioner kills the fish. But this is not in the movie, which clearly responds "Yes!"

Adequate ideas dancing

Since cheap audiocassettes became available in Egypt in the 1970s, *sha'bi* musicians have interpreted the experiences of Cairo's poor neighborhoods. This energetic, outspoken music, banned from the radio because of its supposed

30- Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part III, Prop. XXXIX: "He, who possesses a body capable of the greatest number of activities, possesses a mind whereof the greatest part is eternal."

vulgarity, circulates through alternative networks of street stalls, parties, taxi and *tuk-tuk* drivers, and no the internet.[31] The musicians of Hind Meddeb's documentary *Electro Chaabi* (2013) play *mahragan*, a loud, infectious synthesis of *sha'bi* music with techno, rap, and dub, using bootleg software they study in YouTube tutorials. *Mahragan* distills the people's vitality and their discontent into something they can dance to. The DJs rap about everything—kids smoking weed, parents who corrupt their children, the stolen revolution. DJ Figo sings, "A mosque, a church in the land of the Nile. Muslims, Christians, we are all Egyptians." He sings of the martyrs of Tahrir who died, it now seems, for nothing. "You stole the revolution in the end. Sowing discord among religions, you set fire between us."

The words are dark, but all the musicians Meddeb interviews affirm that they feel a new freedom to speak out since the first Tahrir revolution in 2011. DJ Wiza says, "Before the revolution we had no voice. *Mahragan*'s a way of expressing what I see… as right, as wrong. That's freedom of speech (*hurriyat al-ta'bir*). My voice can reach people through the music." DJ Sadat says, "Before, a police officer would be untouchable. Now they're slightly broken." Islam Chipsy says, "The people have learned to say No.… This is freedom, like what they have in Europe. If you have something you want to say you say it." The documentary was made during Mohammed Morsi's short presidency in 2013. Since then, the military forced Morsi out of office, brutally suppressed his supporters, killing over a thousand demonstrators, and installed the new president Abdel Fattah el-Sisi who rules with a heavy new iron fist. As of November 2014, public protest without security-forces clearance is illegal in Egypt and civilians can be tried in military courts. As a number of Egyptian artists and intellectuals endorse the new military regime, it may be that protest will need to take more covert forms in that country, such as music and the music-like affects of the moving image.

And yet – the musicians in *Electro Chaabi* are strong evidence that the people will not be silenced again. Like many others they testify to the increase of the people's knowledge, thanks to satellite television and the internet, which means the government can no longer keep them in the dark. The music celebrates the people's new consciousness by moving their bodies, in a feedback loop that draws energy from the people and gives it back in a purer form. The rappers and their backups have perfected insistent rhythms that don't let up, making the raw poetry contagious. Chipsy scrubs his keyboard, his hands a blur. The young men dancing to the music in street parties seem about to burst from their bodies: they bounce and kick the air, arms reaching upward; they dance in circles with arms around each other; they show off practiced, deft moves. The girls—not so much. At one street wedding, young women in party clothes watch the dancing from the side, sullenly swigging sodas. Meddeb includes a scene of some teenaged girls who set up loudspeakers on a car one morning so they can dance in a trash-

31- Nicolas Puig, "Egypt's Pop-Music Clashes and the 'World-Crossing' Destinies of Muhammad 'Ali Street Musicians," in Cairo Cosmopolitan: *Politics, Culture, and Space in the New Globalized Middle East* ed. Diane Singerman and Paul Amar, Cairo, American University in Cairo Press, 2006, pp. 528-531.

strewn lot, circled by mothers and grandmas and little kids. They swirl their hips, spiral their wrists, add saucy twitches: it's a little tentative, but they are having fun. Pressed by Meddeb, Oka of the duo 8% explains: "In our traditions, the girls are alone and the guys are alone.… I don't know, they must be afraid of guys harassing them." Oka doesn't acknowledge the double standard, but Meddeb pieces it together: a fight breaks out at a party, DJ Fifty sings about rubbing up against a girl on the street, DJ Sadat sings about young women whose parents don't keep them at home.

As usual, music-industry politics come in. DJ Oka's grandmother explains the economics of bootlegging: "They steal your songs and put them on CDs and sell them. All the *tuk-tuks* play their songs and they can't even record a tape." Rich people love the *mahragan* too and invite a select few musicians to perform at weddings and hotels. Some musicians get famous and abandon their old friends. But this does not diminish the power of the music, which is precisely the power of adequate ideas: ideas that express the body's newfound capacity to act. In the loveliest scenes in the film, three or four musicians play and sing by a rooftop pigeon coop, the dancers, graceful in the awareness of their power, rising against a clear blue sky.

Watching *Electro Chaaabi*, getting rocked by the infectious music, you feel in your own body some of the ecstatic self-knowledge of the people who make it and dance to it. They defy the new government, and they promise to defy the fundamentalists: "Mahragan is like drugs in the blood of all Egyptians," DJ Diesel says with a satisfied grin. "If they decide this music is blasphemous, then all music is."

What can a body do?

Contemporary Arab cinema and media art is alive with bodies testing their powers to live against commands to obey. My analyses suggest that the process of discovering that you have a body, suffering passive affects, struggling to obtain just one or two active powers, and achieving adequate ideas that will increase you capacity to live is extremely fraught at every point. However, the cinema has a unique way to extend this process into a mutual effort that crosses the pro-filmic bodies, the body of the medium, and the body of the viewer. Affects of the movie may possibly develop into adequate ideas of the viewer. But she must first wholly lend her body to the movie and undergo the powerlessness at the heart of thought.

ملخص | بيان باروخ سبينوزا «لا أحد، في الواقع، حدد بعد ما يمكن ان يفعله الجسم » يوحي بأننا لا نستطيع ان نعرف قوته من خلال القوانين ألإلهية المفروضة ولكن من خلال الخبرة في العالم. الفكر يجب ان يمر عبر الجسم، بطريقة تهدد كلاً من الفكر والجسم في حالتهما الراهنة. اعمال بارزة في السينما المعاصرة والمستقلة باللغة العربية تعبر عن مستقبل الجسم بطرقٍ مختلفة ستكون بمثابة امثلة في الدراسة الحالية: الجسم الذي يزرع قواه الجزيئية ، قواه المغلّفة، يعبر عن العواطف المتقلبة ويحصل على الأفكار المناسبة. بعض هذه الديناميكيات مشتركه بين جميع الأفلام في العالم، في حين ان البعض الآخر يثير تساؤلات حول قدرات الجسم والفكر، خاصه بالعالم العربي المعاصر. وسوف استخدم التحليل العاطفي و«المتجسد» القائم على مفهوم «القسوة» في فكر ارتو.

كلمات مفتاحية | تجسيد – السينما العربية – ماي النقيب – سبينوزا – أرتو – دولوز – أكرم الزعتري – جوانا هادجيتوما وخليل جريج – هاله لطفي – نارامانى ماري – هند مدديب – سمير قصير – فريد زاهي – رانيا عطية ودانيال غارسيا – ديما الحر – هلا الكسي.

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