

Bilal Khbeiz

# Modernity's Obsession with Systems of Preservation

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## The Products of Fragility

Modernity, the mother of many democracies, has given a great deal of attention to developing means of preservation and conservation. It has taught us to care for all that is frail and delicate. Charles Baudelaire, speaking about one of his contemporaries, the photographer Miron, said: "He photographed Paris because it is ephemeral."<sup>1</sup> Perhaps then it should come as no surprise that such an image, itself made up of only smooth paper and some ink, outlasts the cathedrals of Paris. This is not something we should attribute simply to a photograph's status as an art object – the lasting quality of an image is not a matter of poetry, but of irrefutable reality.

In other words, as modernity has taken the utmost care in ensuring optimal conditions for preservation, conservation, and safekeeping, it has bound itself to a system that will only continue to grow until our entire universe consists of fragile monuments that cannot survive without daily care. The most noteworthy aspect of this system is how the instruments of preservation are transformed before us into insatiable monsters, forever in search of nourishment, devouring books, paintings, and old manuscripts before moving onto bodies, buildings, and ecosystems. These instruments have developed to such an extent that it is difficult to predict either their future paths or requirements.

What we do know is that the size of the Google archive today is unprecedented, with no apparent limits to the amount of data it can contain, making the books we keep on our shelves seem more and more like artworks according to Michel Hermes' definition – beautiful, useless objects.<sup>2</sup> Why would we bother to book a plane to Berlin in order to study some old manuscripts held in its museums, when those same documents can be downloaded from numerous sites on the Internet, unless of course we wanted to examine the curves and bends of the calligrapher's script at close range in order to speculate on the author's mood.

## Manufacturing Care

In *L'amour en plus*, Elisabeth Badinter advances the notion that parental care, whether maternal or paternal, is not a given factor of human society.<sup>3</sup> In the pre-Enlightenment era, the French aristocracy left the care of their children to wet nurses who, even without this added burden, lived a life of hardship and destitution, attaining only the lowest standards of physical and mental health. Infant mortality rates in France during this era reached disturbing levels, leading philosophers like Jean-Jacques Rousseau to express concern for the future of a French nation that allows its infants to die of

hunger and neglect. It was rare for parents who used the services of these women to ask about the health of the children in their care. After many years, when they returned to claim their offspring from the nurse, they could not recognize them nor tell them apart from others. Consequently, many chose the healthiest among them without verifying their lineage.

The aristocrat who handed an infant over to be reared in such circumstances was effectively freed from the burden of childcare, having placed it firmly on the shoulders of those of lower rank. Indeed, a typical day in the life of an aristocratic lady of this epoch usually involved a leisurely breakfast in bed, followed by hours of grooming, dressing, and other preparations. Only then, at the end of this long beauty regime, would the servant then be asked to bring forth the lady's daughter, who lived in the cellar and the kitchen with the hired help. Taking extreme care not to disturb the meticulous arrangement of hair and make-up, and holding her nose closed so as not to smell the acrid odor emitted by her daughter's body, the noble lady would place a kiss on the little girl's forehead. Soon after the stolen kiss, the girl would be whisked back to the cellar or the kitchen to remain with the servants.

What concerned a thinker like Rousseau was precisely this life of hardship that children faced regardless of their lineage. Rousseau's appeal for the care of children was directed at France itself, as drastically rising infant mortality rates threatened the future of France. The picture of the pre-Enlightenment aristocracy drawn by Badinter would certainly have called for an urgent condemnation from the likes of Rousseau, and a demand that the nobility rear their offspring in line with what their economic and social circumstances permitted. It is as if what was needed was a call for parents to spend more of the time that they would normally spend getting dressed, grooming themselves, attending balls, and in frivolous conversations with their peers, looking after their offspring. Nonetheless, the ethical measures espoused by Rousseau would change nothing in the lives of merchants, craftsmen, and the poor in the France of that era.

Indeed, the improvement in living standards for *all* French children was not a demand that could be made at that time; or, to be more accurate, a reading of Badinter's account today reveals a notable urgency with regard to the improvement in the circumstances of children of noble birth whose parents had the means to raise them differently from the offspring of the general populace. It was upon the distinguished upbringing, education, and care of this minority that Jean-Jacques Rousseau placed his hopes for the future of France. If the French nation could invest in this specimen for the sake of its

future, would not an improvement in the lives of *all* French children be an investment with greater returns than one in a small sample of them? Today the answer to such a proposition is beyond dispute from the perspective of our philosophical, political, and social ethics, so it is hardly surprising that France would eventually become committed to the care of all children regardless of their social class. In addition, this view would come to be championed in the European ethical philosophy that followed, from Karl Marx to Alexis de Tocqueville, to Nietzsche.

### Manufacturing Hope

It is not particularly difficult to make the connection between hope, an attribute and instrument of the future, and childcare. Hope itself requires care and education, and the future, if it is to avoid the pitfalls of the past and the present, requires the same attention. It is not as though the generations that preceded documented history lived without hope, yet theirs was of a divine nature and mere mortals were helpless to influence outcomes. The Greek mythological hero Hercules was created by the gods, and the pre-ordained destiny of this immortal figure, his life and death, lay solely in the hands of Zeus. The mortals among whom he lived were unable to influence his path in any way, but they were also helpless to impede his influence over their lives and futures. Under these circumstances, the manufacture of hope was merely the human anticipation of the desires of the deities.

By the same token, when God sent down his prophets, their remarkable deeds inevitably became an inescapable destiny, so much so that no human effort could have possibly stopped the crucifixion of Christ, even had a thousand Pontius Pilates washed their hands of his righteous blood. Similarly, no power, however fierce, could have prevented the Prophet Mohammad from delivering his message. Hope, as it existed in these prophetic ages, was of a different kind to the one we know today; it was more akin to surrender, an acknowledgment of human feebleness in the face of natural, social or political factors that governed lives and livelihoods. Whatever may come, divine action, whether in the form of a deluge that sweeps away life as we know it, a prophetic message of compassion such as the one delivered by Jesus Christ, or the establishment of a system to organize the lives of mortals such as those conveyed by the Prophet Mohammad and by the Prophet Moses, cannot be reversed. The only consolation for these generations in the face of calamity was patience and the anticipation of the arrival of the Savior.

When life is confined to mere anticipation of

the Savior, people are compassionate towards one another, counseling patience and helping one another as they pass the time waiting. Under these circumstances, a mother may pity her suckling infant and a husband may care for his pregnant wife and his elderly parents, but this does not mean that the level of parental care is not in line with that apparently obtaining in pre-Enlightenment France. Bertrand Russell argues that human instinct compels parents to care for their young because human infants are the weakest among all creatures and display the least degree of self-sufficiency, making the care of offspring necessary in order to preserve the species.<sup>4</sup> However, the state of affairs described in Badinter's *L'amour en plus* could not have been possible had society not reached a complex juncture in its social hierarchy that gave birth to *surplus value*.

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in any modern society today might return results similar to those in Badinter's study: children are left in the charge of stern educators, burdened with more responsibility than they can bear; from a young age they toil and struggle for long hours, far longer than what is permissible for an average adult worker; they are not asked their opinion nor are their desires considered with regard to what we want them to learn.

Nonetheless, the desperate situation of children today does not invalidate Rousseau's observations on the subject, because in essence his conviction is not bound to encumbering children with more than what it is just, fair, or reasonable to expect of them, but rather, with parental neglect. It is enough to spend time and effort on youth education in order to reassure ourselves that we have expertly invested in the future, that of the family, or of the nation. We fulfill our obligations by not leaving our children defenseless against the twists of fate and in return we charge them with creating our future. With the grueling endeavors that we force upon our children, we guarantee the realization of a mechanism devoted to progress, development, and change. And this mechanism effectively functions as a historical substitution for the unending anticipation of the Savior, since the

**The Enslavement of Expectation**

Though today there are few who would question the notion that the care and education of children is a worthwhile investment in the future of any society, it seems that exorbitant demands for profitable returns from this venture have lead to the subjugation of children in modern societies. A sociological study of child education



An image from the Magnum Photos exhibition *Bitter Fruit: Pictures from Afghanistan*. Its caption reads: "Christopher Anderson AFGHANISTAN. Kunduz. 2001. Taliban fighter seen through the windshield of a Toyota HiLux that has been smeared with mud as camouflage from American bombers surrenders to Northern Alliance troops outside of Kunduz. Copyright Christopher Anderson/Magnum Photos."

saviors of contemporary times are those members of society who are the most fragile and the most prone to injury. It is upon this fragility and frailty that we place our hope in the future, since we have exchanged the gods of the immemorial past with our children. The conspicuous distinction between the two is a result of our catastrophic choice of the deities that are the most prone to damage and the least able to resist.

### **The Artist's Disdain for his Subject Matter**

The rapid progress of everything, from the body to architecture, industry, and commerce, along the path towards complete fragility, and the consequent urgency of preservation, necessitate some scrutiny. This is even more crucial when one considers the state of contemporary art and the concerns of its audience. While nothing in the world of art intrinsically negates hope, there is nonetheless a discrepancy between the pretensions of form and the philosophical reflection it embodies.

For an artist to photograph an impoverished district of Los Angeles and assume that in publishing these images he demonstrates solidarity with its inhabitants, implies that the artist no longer lives there. However intensely and passionately he may have lived through the transitions of this neighborhood in the past, he now merely *remembers* those for whom luck and hard work were insufficient, those who have not escaped. In the reproduction of these photographs, an intimacy is revealed with an image of the place rather than with its materiality. Given art's propensity for deception, the image of the destitute quarter could resemble the décor of one of Emir Kusturica's films in the same way that a vagabond might resemble Michelangelo's statue of the Prophet Moses. Yet in these photographs, the vagabond loses his identity without becoming a prophet.

The tendency of artistically-minded audiences to concern themselves with these works suggests that they assume that an image can show solidarity with a group of people, but that it cannot harm or kill them. This is because the solidarity of the audience is with the survivors of the inexplicable and unacceptable poverty of this district. The survivors are those who have escaped to the pure space of art, furnished with all the implements of preservation, from the scented soap that expunges bad odors to refrigerators that conserve food to photographic implements that capture loved ones before old age and death. Given these circumstances, it is altogether unlikely that an artist stands in solidarity with those who live without residency papers and work permits, those who are subjected to police

brutality, those who are without legal rights which would permit them, at least in theory, to leave the dump where they live for the opulent air of the city. There is no doubt that an audience concerned with this type of art implicitly calls for the integration and legalization of these communities and urges the political and legal authorities to take necessary measures to improve their circumstances.

We know, however, that art itself cannot save these communities. Rather, art's predicament resembles that of the solitary refugee who is characterized by his singularity far more than the capacity of the law to feign equality. The inhabitants of these impoverished places are destined to suffer the same fate as the rest of the community in awaiting comprehensive solutions from the political and legal authorities. The art domain has always accommodated individuals who arise from these communities and encouraged them to exhibit their causes, insofar as their acceptance has been as refugees or exiles from societies in which life is impossible.

### **Jamming Axiomatics**

While the mention of Los Angeles transfers us directly to its sunny shores, international fare, and vibrant nightlife, the mention of Baghdad, Kabul or Gaza cannot but evoke fear, hunger, disease, and gushing blood. Nonetheless, the productivity of artistic representation, whether in cinema or in contemporary art, is not obscured by what such representation blurs in the enduring images of these places. Just as an artist can film a mixed dance party in Tehran, another can film violent riots in New York or Los Angeles. As the artist in both instances is transformed into a survivor, he also succeeds in jamming the image of the city promulgated by its authorities. It is for this reason that Taliban authorities sought photographs and accounts of the executions of women on football fields in order to turn Kabul into an image, much like New York or Los Angeles.<sup>5</sup>

However, jamming the official image of the city has never been effective. It is more likely to confront us with two prickly issues. The first is that unlawful activity in Los Angeles, to a large extent, resembles the lawful society of Tehran or Kabul, given that a dance party in Kabul lies outside the realm of legal activity and is subject to prosecution. As an art audience, we sympathize with the dancers of Kabul, whom we take to represent an example of a courageous society desiring freedom from oppression. To an extent, we want to liberate the image of unlawful activity in Los Angeles from any resemblance to Tehran as much as we want to liberate Kabul and Tehran. We assume that all people envision a life

like that sought by the dancers in Tehran.

This brings us directly to the second issue, namely, the impossibility of lasting solutions, given that once any artist born and raised outside of a network of politically stable places like New York accepts the welcome of the art world, he or she becomes an escapee fleeing the inferno of unjust rule in Tehran and Gaza. Art becomes part of a breathtaking plan that resembles those of Mao Zedong, entailing the singular acceptance of police authority and the acquiescence to the jurisdiction of law. In the process, we exchange a living society for an image of a living society. We desire the persistence and endurance of the image while hoping that the society itself will wither and fade away. Nobody wants the rundown suburbs of Los Angeles to remain as they are, and, it seems, no one wants Gaza to stay as it is today. It is not this that is objectionable. Rather, what is unacceptable and intolerable is the acceptance of images of these communities as indisputable works of art.

### Fading Cities

The pilots who took charge of the four planes on September 11, 2001 were acquainted with contemporaneity, yet they chose life in Kabul under the Taliban. In making this choice, they were able to destroy firmly established symbols of modernity. Works of art have also alluded to such events as consequences of modernity. In a lecture given at Julia Meltzer and David Thorne's studios in Los Angeles, Daniel Flaming showed an image of Wilshire Boulevard in Los Angeles taken from Google Earth. The tall buildings of the street were surrounded on both sides by neighborhoods inhabited by illegal immigrants. Rather than the tall buildings of Wilshire Boulevard exercising authority over their surroundings, it was the surrounding areas that appeared to threaten the affluent street. Modern cities expend immense energy to remain within the parameters of what is comprehensible and acceptable. The neighborhoods that encircle Wilshire could, were they not subject to constant surveillance, destroy the functions of the tall buildings and contribute to their depreciation. The image would remain, but the street itself would be reduced in an instant to a pile of rubble.

In other places, far from Los Angeles, there is a pervasive awareness of the difficulty of reconciling such neighborhoods with the operative laws of modernity. In Beirut, Damascus, Tehran, and pre-occupation Baghdad, authorities place their confidence in imposing images of leaders that occupy the streets. These images spawn countless victims when armed disputes erupt between opposing factions. Yet in that part of the world, it is well

known that images endure longer than cities, and that even if Gaza and south Beirut are obliterated in the blink of an eye or reduced to a dust heap, their images remain – as do the images of their leaders.

Responsibility for this discrepancy between the image of the place and the place itself does not lie with the artist, but with modernity. Despite modernity's obsession with fragility and its aspiration to produce instruments of preservation, it is unable to preserve bodies – so it resorts to preserving images. Ava Gardner remains an enduring image, even as Ava Gardner the person grows old. Since modernity cannot bring those societies drowning in violence and tragedy under its control, it confines them to an image that, from the instance of capture, assigns itself to the past. And the artistic merit of such images derives from their claim to be authentic documents of pre-modernity, whatever their temporality.

The instant the picture catches the eye of the art world, the temporal disparity between audience and image is palpable. Artists are always photographing old cars and domestic appliances that belong to the past of modernity. They are very capable of utilizing the temporal disparity of such images. In a sense, what they photograph is the absence of the Apple computer on the shelf, increasing the authority of the historical discrepancy between the audience and the run-down districts of Los Angeles or the neighborhoods of Gaza. It is like an anthropologist uncovering the gullibility of a society yet to attain the comforts of modernity. Insofar as they have become artifacts, these images belong to the past of the audience. Given the implausibility of retaining these neighborhoods as they are, art resorts to the preservation of what it is possible to preserve.

Since Mario Ybarra Jr. exhibited his images of the districts of Los Angeles that are home to those without residency papers and work permits, it became clear to me that this city was fading and that nothing would remain of it, save perhaps its museums, or its images of celebrities hanging out at traffic intersections. This type of art extols impermanence. In all likelihood, modernity privileges this aspect and even compels it, since modernity never stops declaring: preserve images insofar as they are more delicate and accessible than bodies, buildings, and trees, and enjoin cities to die.

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Translated from the Arabic by Nour Dados.

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1  
Charles Baudelaire, *Le peintre de la vie moderne* (The Painter of Modern Life), 1863.

2  
Nicole Avril, *Le Roman du visage* (Paris: Plon, 2000).

3  
*L'Amour en plus : histoire de l'amour maternel (XVIIe-XXe siècle)* (Paris: Flammarion, 1980).

4  
Bertrand Russell, *Religion and Science* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

5  
This image was published in *Malaly* newspaper, Kabul, fall 1999. No one was certain at the time whether the Taliban sought to propagate these types of images or not. But after a short time, during the war in Iraq, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi was proud to be responsible for them. For him, these images became a means of making an example of his victims as a warning to his enemies.

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