

Jalal Toufic  
**Middle Eastern  
Films Before  
Thy Gaze  
Returns to Thee  
– in Less than  
1/24 of a  
Second**

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Did the descent of the standard film camera lenses from Renaissance Western monocular perspective place early Muslim filmmakers at a disadvantage when it came to a genuine formal contribution in the medium of cinema, since these filmmakers came from a tradition that until only a century or so ago (the age of cinema) was, especially in its Arabic regions, still resistant to, rather than ignorant of, Renaissance perspective? Cinema would appear to disadvantage Muslim filmmakers steeped in their religion's tradition if one pays inordinate attention to the kind of space favored by the standard film camera lenses and disregards cinema's temporal atomicity facet, which makes cinema very close to the predominant Islamic conception of time but about which comparatively little has been written in works on the basic cinematographic apparatus. The notion of *renewed creation* in the kalām (theology) of the Ash'arites and in the Sufism of Ibn al-'Arabī provides a way of considering the world as subject to processes akin to those of cinema. For Ibn al-'Arabī, the things of the world, unlike God, do not have a necessity of existence, so when God gives actual existence to anything, it reverts instantly to inexistence, disappears.<sup>1</sup> God "then" gives existence to a similar thing the next moment. This process goes on indefinitely, making of the world an ever-renewed creation (Ibn al-'Arabī's gloss on the Qur'ān's "a new creation" [50:15]). In Paradjanov's *Ashik Kerib*, Ashik Kerib, a poor minstrel who promised his lover to become rich (in order to gain the approval of her wealthy father) and to return, from wherever his instrumental pursuit of riches might lead him, to marry her before a thousand days have passed, has to journey back in that period's remaining two days a distance of one hundred days' travel. He prays for help. It is jarring that the horse rider who appears in response to his prayer flies him to his native town in one day, presumably in a similar manner to the way the *jinn* in the Qur'ān story of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba would have transported her throne to Solomon's palace; I would have expected, in this film of jump cuts, the displacement to occur by a new creation, that is, by means of the disappearance of Ashik Kerib from the point of departure and the appearance of a very similar version of Ashik Kerib at his destination, especially since in Paradjanov's previous two films horses with their riders often suddenly disappear then suddenly appear again (in jump cuts). I would have regretted a missed opportunity here were it not (a) that the one-day miraculous trip that ostensibly covers with no discontinuities (as is implied by the revolving globe in the background) a distance that would have otherwise required a hundred days of travel

is introduced by Ashik Kerib's prayer presented in jump cuts and his repeated attempts to mount the supernatural horse also presented in jump cuts; (b) that Ashik Kerib's miraculous trip on the flying horse to his native town is anachronistically preceded by another visit that he makes from that distant land to his mother's ruined house and that does not happen by means of the flying horse; and (c) that Ashik Kerib's proof of his miraculous one-day trip on a flying horse deconstructs itself: through the miracle of healing his mother's blindness with dust from the horse's hoof, Ashik Kerib conjointly proves to his incredulous audience the supernatural power of the flying horse and thus his miraculous trip on it, and disproves that he covered the distance in one day since he was back *before the return of the gaze* of his mother – who became blind years earlier on being told that he died – in other words, in the twinkling of an eye.

If, with very rare exceptions, people are unaware of the universal and perpetual acts of appearance, disappearance, then appearance, it is both that the appearance, disappearance then appearance occur “before thy gaze returns to thee” (Qur’ān 27:40) and that the form that appears following the disappearance of an earlier one is very similar to it. Is this not reminiscent of cinema, where within the same shot the next frame replaces the largely similar earlier one “before thy gaze returns to thee”? With films as well as the world according to Ibn al-‘Arabī and the Ash‘arites, very similar frames/things replace each other before the eye can detect this. There are several ways to know of renewed creation. Extremely rare people become aware of it directly, through *kashf*, unveiling. A slightly larger number of people become aware of it indirectly, symptomatically, by sensing that the other person is not identical to himself or herself, but merely a similar person – are some of the cases of the Capgras syndrome to be attributed to sensing such renewed-creation substitutions? A still larger number resort to it to resolve certain paradoxes. By means of it the Ash‘arite theologians tried to maintain the absolute omnipotence of God despite the apparent causal linkages in the world. In my case, it has happened that while looking at a half-filled cup of coffee placed on a table, I had the clear impression that it cannot be moved, that no alterations were occurring in or to it, that it does not change. How can I explain then that I myself or someone else did displace the vase a short time later, and that the disjunction between the preceding certain impression of its immovability and its later motion was not strong enough to unsettle me, but induced instead merely a mild surprise? Since while looking at the vase on the table I was certain that I could

not gradually displace it, if I nonetheless ended up moving it and was only mildly surprised at my success in doing so, it must be another vase. Both I and the bottle returned back to the nothingness from which we arose (and, it could be argued by others, in relation to which each represents an imbalance, a fluctuation), and then were recreated, appearing again in a changed state, the vase no longer inducing the incontestable impression of immovability and I feeling that it can be moved or already moving it. Is the impression of a progression of time, of change, of movement – that of the cat that has just elegantly glided through the narrow door opening – more incontestable to me than the previous impression of the immovability and, more generally, unchangeability of the vase on the table? No. It is easier for me to reconcile, as a secondary, special effect of it, the ostensible sequential passage of time with this ultrafast recurrent appearance then disappearance then appearance of a largely similar entity than to reconcile the indefinite immovability of the vase with its induced motion a few moments later. From the perspective of ever-renewed creation, gradual change is as illusory in the world as it is in cinema: there is an impossibility (*istiḥāla*) of change of state (*istiḥāla*). Nobody and nothing changes: every thing is recurrently appearing then disappearing then being replaced by a largely similar thing. Peter Kubelka's *Arnulf Rainer* remains the best example of the conjunction of stasis and quick recurrent appearance then disappearance then appearance of largely similar entities since it exemplifies both modes: in its projection form as a 6 minutes 24 seconds long film, it instances the flicker of recurrent appearance-disappearance; in its installation form as 35mm filmstrips mounted on a wall, it instances immutability. Things, not having a necessity of existence, are directly related to the Being who created them and/or to the nothingness to which they are bound to instantly return, and only indirectly related to the ostensibly previous and subsequent chronological moments. We are constantly, ontologically distracted from the ostensibly chronological, mundane “action”: this is our aristocracy – is aristocratic what is detached from other things, other moments.<sup>2</sup> We are constantly returning to nothingness: this is our poverty. With its recurrent appearances-disappearances, Paradjanov's cinema presents a felicitous mixture of aristocracy and absolute dependency. While quick recurrent appearance then disappearance then appearance of a largely similar entity is discernible in pixilation films, as well as in the jump cuts and the discrete replacement of the young by the old in Paradjanov's films from *Sayat Nova* (1968)

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onward (for example, in *The Legend of Suram Fortress*, 1986, the actress Leila Alibegashvili playing Vardo as a youth steps behind the actress Sofiko Chiaureli playing her as an old woman, this indicating young Vardo's replacement by, not her growth into, the old Vardo), it finds its purest form in two films that are a sort of diagrammatic, abstract tracing of it: Tony Conrad's 30-minute *The Flicker*, 1966, and Peter Kubelka's *Arnulf Rainer*, 1958–60, with the filmstrip in both an alternation of dark frames and blank ones. Conrad's film is prefaced with a warning and disclaimer, which reads: "WARNING. The producer, distributor, and exhibitors waive all liability for physical or mental injury possibly caused by the motion picture *The Flicker*. Since this film may induce epileptic seizures or produce mild symptoms of shock treatment in certain persons, you are cautioned to remain in the theatre only at your own risk. A physician should be in attendance." Indeed, the exposure to the flicker effect may induce epileptic seizures in the spectator. In the world of Ibn al-'Arabī and the Ash'arites, the material camera projecting this flickering film would itself be flickering in and out of existence. Does the actual witnessing of the ever-renewed creation, of the ultrafast recurrent appearance then disappearance of one entity and its replacement by a largely similar one, induce a more basic kind of seizure, no longer merely "a transient occurrence of signs and/or symptoms due to abnormal excessive or synchronous neuronal activity in the brain,"<sup>3</sup> but an ontological seizure, a *fanā'*, an annihilation in God? The very rare people who actually witness recurrent creation doubly undergo *fanā'*, since, in addition to their recurrent disappearance on account of their not having a necessity of existence, witnessing the flicker of the ultrafast recurrent disappearance of entities itself produces a temporary disappearance of the consciousness of the witness. Were one to manage to accompany consciously this return to nothingness that occurs almost always outside awareness, then the chain of karma would be broken. From this perspective, animals are in the worst situation, since, unlike inorganic matter, which following each of its recurrent creations is limited to returning to God/nothingness, they evince some "attention" to the durational "action," albeit in the mode of being "*simply given over*" to it "*without being able to grasp*" it "*as such*,"<sup>4</sup> but, unlike humans, cannot accompany the return to Being/nothingness in an aware manner. Out of the clash of any two images, but even more clearly of any one image, does not arise, unlike in Sergei Eisenstein's films, any concept, but a *dhikr* (invocation, remembrance) of the one necessary Being (and then a heedful

absentmindedness regarding the "God" beyond concepts and memory?); or the notion of the absolute dependence of the myriad entities. The jump cut, "the sound of one hand [or image] clapping,"<sup>5</sup> is a silent *dhikr*. Forgetfulness of God is a macro illusion, since creatures, not having a necessity of existence, are always returning to that which alone endures, God. If one is enjoined not to forget God for an instant, it is that that is the maximum that one can possibly forget Him, since one instantly reverts to Him, thus remembering Him. From the standpoint of renewed creation, we are not forgetful of God, but of our return to, of our remembrance of, God. As in Buddhism, where though we are in Samsāra, ignorant and unenlightened, we have Buddha-nature (*busshō*) and Buddha face, in Islam, we – Muslims and non Muslims – are, through this renewed return to Being/*al-Haqq*, involved in a perpetual *dhikr*. The explicit *dhikr* in the form of the repetitive remembrance and invocation of the one necessary Reality echoes an implicit *dhikr* in the form of the recurrent reversion of the ontologically poor entity to the Reality. The disciple must have meditated enough temporal atomicity and the *dhikr* it implies that however much he reiterates the name of God during a *dhikr* ceremony, "Allāh, Allāh ..." he does become entranced, since trance would be a symptom of obliviousness to the ontological *dhikr*. Our as well as every other entity's (ontological) attention is drawn in the direction of change; if change is the reversion to nothingness/Being rather than continuous alteration then that is where our attention is basically drawn. This detachment from, clinamen in relation to the ostensible chronological change applies not only in the case of humans but also in the case of inanimate matter, including of atoms,<sup>6</sup> which as a result of this askew attentiveness in relation to the ostensible chronological change has a face.<sup>7</sup> "The seven heavens and the earth and all that is therein praise Him, and there is not a thing but hymneth His praise; but ye understand not their praise" (Qur'ān 17:44): the entities' constant going back, from moment to moment, to the Being is this praise. The snapshot, even the one in Harold Edgerton's stroboscopic works, does not capture the instant but is clearly an abstract arrest of the movement,<sup>8</sup> otherwise it would disclose to us a distraction from the apparent chronological "action"; to reach the instant is to reach the element where we see this ontological distraction, where humans are distracted ontologically from psychological distraction, ontologically turning away from any psychological turning away from the mundane "action." What we witness in Paradjanov's films from *Sayat Nova* onward is this askewness of the

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gaze in relation to the apparent chronological “action.” The direction of the gaze in Paradjanov’s films from *Sayat Nova* onward is not toward the spectator (whether to trigger or enhance distantiation or in an interactive manner), but, ontologically, toward the nothingness to which the figure instantly reverts. If the characters in Paradjanov’s films face the camera, it is because he, intuitively, places it in the non-spatial direction in which the return to nothingness/Being happens. When in *The Legend of Suram Fortress* Osman Aga interpellates Durmishkhan, and the latter looks in the direction of the camera, the film spectator is witnessing the resultant spatial turning of the character toward his interlocutor, but also the facing of the character away from his interlocutor toward the non-spatial direction of his reversion back to nothingness/Being/the camera. Like Muslims in general, during their explicit prayer Osman Aga and his companions turn toward the Kaaba in Mecca, this locus of orientation in exoteric Islam. But this should not mask from the film spectator what *Ashik Kerib* intimates: since Ashik Kerib’s prayer is shot in jump cuts, hence in appearances-disappearances, and since the disappearances back to Being are remembrances of the latter, hence a form of prayer, the exoteric prayer is itself full of these other, esoteric prayers. We should thus be aware with regard to the prayer of Osman Aga and his companions that since every entity’s disappearance is a turning aside from apparent chronology to the one Being, God, thus a facing toward Him, at that more fundamental level “whithersoever you turn, there is the face of God” (Qur’ān 2:115). Paradjanov’s world evinces a different kind of aside than the conventional one in traditional theater. While in the latter the thoughts made manifest in the aside remain related to the progression conflict-climax-resolution, in Paradjanov’s films from *Sayat Nova* onward the aside is the turning away from the apparent chronological “action” toward the real action, that is, toward the reversion to nothingness/Being or, in *Ashik Kerib*, to the camera. Moreover, while the conventional theatrical aside manifests various intimate thoughts of the character, the Muslim aside manifests, when in the form of jump cuts, a silent *dhikr* of the only self-subsistent, true ontological reality; or, when in the form of words and thoughts of the character in voice-over, a *ḥadīth qudsī*’s assertion: “I [God] am ... his tongue through which he speaks” (indeed in *Ashik Kerib*, the diegetic songs and music are not fully synchronous with the movement of the lips and of the hands on the musical instrument of the one purportedly singing and playing, Ashik Kerib); or, more frequently, both: Paradjanov’s

cinema makes clear that there is a correlation of the jump cut, as a symptom of renewed creation, with the voice-over, the “I [God] am ... his tongue through which he speaks.” What interpellates the film spectator is not the frontally looking diegetic character but the latter’s recurrent disappearance in jump cuts. Unlike the interpellation Althusser conceptualized, this interpellation does not transform each individual into a subject through the always-already attempted turn around he or she makes to answer the structural “Hey, you there!” but alerts the film spectator to his or her substitution by another, similar entity, and to his or her subsumption in the one and only Subject, Who is “his hearing, and his sight, and his tongue through which he speaks.” Whether such a cinema is popular or not, it has no audience, since it basically recalls the spectator to his or her fundamental nonexistence. Even ghosts and revenants – who ostensibly cannot disappear for good until they settle some outstanding symbolic debt<sup>9</sup> – vanish definitively then are recreated again by God, to haunt.<sup>10</sup> Paradjanov’s cinema is an ontological cinema not really because of the stasis of the shots at the chronological level – shots thus ostensibly connected to being rather than to becoming – but because its entities are constantly returning to the only necessary, self-subsistent Being. In temporally atomic artworks and films there is little urge or temptation to return to a chronological source (whether it is assumed to be a golden age, a certain kind of chaos ...), because everything at every moment is reverting back to the more basic and immediate source, Being/nothingness. That is partly why in the case of his films from *Sayat Nova* onward, and despite his pre-twentieth century characters (in *Sayat Nova*, the Armenian troubadour Sayat Nova [1712–1795] ...) and his folkloric references (*The Legend of Suram Fortress* is based on a Georgian folk tale about a fortress whose walls keep crumbling however many times they are restored – until a young man is bricked up alive in them ...), Paradjanov cannot be legitimately accused of making retro works.

A view of reality where what seems to be one enduring entity is considered to be actually myriad very similar entities recurring in atomic time is apt to produce at the spatial level if not the arabesque then something akin to it. A sense of recognition occurs to me in front of an arabesque (one that lasts an instant, to be seamlessly replaced by another sense of recognition the next instant), for the person in front of the arabesque is himself or herself a temporal arabesque, myriad very similar versions of himself or herself. The arabesque is a rendition of temporal atomicity at the level of extension. A Muslim who subscribes to atomism

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knows, if not perceives, that whenever he looks at any entity he is seeing an arabesque – a temporal one. The flower that I see in the courtyard of a mosque whose walls are lined with floral arabesques is itself in reality myriad very similar flowers that momentarily replace each other – the Muslim floral scroll is a bouquet of one flower. The arabesque, especially the one where the figures are juxtaposed rather than interlaced, is doubly my mirror: the multiplication of its basic figure gives me a spatial rendition of my temporal multiplication; the abstraction of its unit figure reminds me of my own abstraction, my being without a nature and proper characteristics. He had seen in museums centuries-old ornamented silver mirrors that belonged to Muslim rulers: in their silver side, which certainly did not reflect as well as modern glass mirrors, he saw that he was one and that he had features, but in their reverse side, ornamented with floral arabesques, he had the inkling that he was myriad entities and that he had no nature and no proper characteristics. Looking in such a mirror, day after day one side showed him that he was aging, while the other intimated to him that he was always one instant old. In a worldview of renewed creation, the flowers of the arabesque of some mirror decorated by a Muslim craftsman can be accurate reflections of the ostensibly much longer-lived human being, since the latter really is as ephemeral, lasts one instant only, and has no nature and proper characteristics. From a temporal atomicity viewpoint, what seems to us even for a moment to be one enduring plant is in actuality myriad ones that replace each other from (atomic) time to (atomic) time; from the related occasionalism viewpoint, what seems to us to be rich in characteristics and possessing a nature is in actuality without them (it is not intrinsic to a flower to have the scent and color we associate with it given its chemistry [and our sense organs and brains]). T. E. Lawrence: “A first knowledge of their sense of the purity of rarefaction was given me in early years, when we had ridden far out over the rolling plains of North Syria to a ruin of the Roman period which the Arabs believed was made by a prince of the border as a desert-palace for his queen. The clay of its building was said to have been kneaded for greater richness, not with water, but with the precious essential oils of flowers. My guides, sniffing the air like dogs, led me from crumbling room to room, saying, ‘This is jessamine, this violet, this rose.’ But at last Dahoum drew me: ‘Come and smell the very sweetest scent of all,’ and we went into the main lodging, to the gaping window sockets of its eastern face, and there drank with open mouths of the effortless, empty, eddyless wind of the desert ... ‘This,’ they told

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me, ‘is the best: it has no taste.’”<sup>11</sup> Many of the Muslim artists who produced floral arabesques would be delighted with tastelessness not only, like the Arabs mentioned by T. E. Lawrence and like Walt Whitman (“The atmosphere is not a perfume, it has no taste of the distillation, it is odorless, / It is for my mouth forever, I am in love with it” [*Leaves of Grass*]), in the case of the air, but also in the case of the most particular smells, those that for others are most likely to evoke and sometimes reactivate the past. Many of these artists could have told Whitman and the Arabs mentioned by T. E. Lawrence that the very sweetest scent of all, the one they are in love with, is that of a flower for the latter, intrinsically, “is odorless,” “has no taste.” Indeed even the desert air in a non-occasionalist view of reality, where objects have natures and therefore characteristics, is, despite its ostensible tastelessness, still an approximation of the absence of any intrinsic scent of flowers in an occasionalist worldview. From a standpoint alien to occasionalism, one can speak about a procedure of abstraction in Islamic art aiming at eluding the possible accusation of usurping God’s prerogative of creation; but judged from the standpoint of the *mutakallimīn*’s occasionalist denial of nature, one cannot legitimately speak about a proper and basic abstraction of Muslim art in relation to everyday reality, for that would imply that the objects outside the artwork have certain qualities and characteristics, when actually they are as devoid of these as the figures in Muslim art. The Muslim floral arabesque does not manifest any abstraction in relation to the flower in the world, since there are, basically, no nature and proper characteristics of the latter. Primarily and fundamentally, in Islam abstraction applies before the Muslim artist plans an artwork and touches his tools; the primary abstractionists of Islam are the atomistic occasionalists. Islamic art abstracts only secondarily, merely accentuates that primary abstraction advanced and argued by occasionalism, through pushing toward a geometrization of the shapes of animals and plants. The incredible colors in Muslim miniatures, for instance the blue, turquoise, green, mauve or white of rocks and the rose or sky-blue of grass, are not used necessarily to avoid verisimilitude in order to avert the condemnation of the ‘ulamā’, but are there in many cases because they are allowed by or a result of the occasionalist denial of nature – for a custom of God – and consequent separation of accidents<sup>12:13</sup> for the *mutakallimīn*, when a black die touches a white object, the latter is then black not because it was causally changed by its contact with the black die, but because God chose to give it a black color when He

recreated it anew – God could possibly have given it a red color. Deploying an amazing practical ingenuity, Muslim artists managed to validly inscribe the same motifs and designs across different media, scales and materials. This is most probably and cogently a consequence of the absence of nature and proper characteristics of the various media and materials according to the majority of Muslim theologians. Muslim abstraction in the arts is thus double: it is an abstraction not only within a given medium, in the form of arabesques or, in miniatures, human and animal figures with no perspective, shadows or modulation and with unworldly colors; but also at the level of the media and materials: by creating the same designs across various media and materials, they abstracted such media and materials, intimating that none of the latter has a proper nature,<sup>14</sup> that nothing intrinsically distinguishes textiles, jade, ivory, metalwork, glass, wood, ceramics, bricks, and paper.<sup>15</sup> Undecorated objects are rare in Islamic art, but in Islam one decorates with what has no proper nature, one enriches with what is implied to be poor in characteristics, one clothes with what hints to us its fundamental inexistence – luxurious poverty, in other words, poor luxury. For the perceptive person, the world itself, with its recurrent creation and its absence of nature, of characteristics, is a vast arabesque that ornaments Allāh. The same way that in copies of the Qur’ān arabesques surround many of the words, especially the sūras’ titles, the world itself surrounds (while also being surrounded by) the eternal God (or, in Ismā’īlism, one or more of the divine emanations), Who alone has essential attributes.

Even when full with figures and objects, a successful Islamic miniature does not give the impression of overcrowding. Even with figures filling the entire space, leaving no gaps, the Muslim arabesque does not induce the sense of suffocation one experiences in the *regular division of the plane* works of M. C. Escher, an admirer of Muslim arabesques. The void in Muslim miniatures and Muslim art in general, while not seen in the frame, is implied in it: the Muslim miniature breathes not so much through some space left empty in it but by the recurrent return to the void, and thus disappearance, of the figures and objects, and this even if there is no temporal interval between their disappearances and appearances<sup>16, 17</sup> Now you see it – and now you see it. Muslim miniatures and Muslim art in general are virtually as linked to the void as Chinese art, but in a different manner and to a different kind of void. What strikes me as paradoxical about the contorted rocks in many Persian miniatures, which rocks appeared first during the Mongol dynasty of the

Ilkhanids, are not their unworldly colors but that they are anomalously connected to two different, virtually antithetical kinds of void, evincing a valid coexistence of the discrete modality of the breath of the all-Merciful (*nafas al-Rahmān*) that recurrently gives existence to the entities that instantly revert back to God/nothingness, punctuating even the seemingly continuous line; and the continuity of Taoism, where the continuous breath-energy (*chi*) underlies even the seemingly discontinuous brushstroke (Li Jih-Hua: “This means that the movements of the painter’s brush must be interrupted [without interruption of the breath that is animating them]”<sup>18</sup>). These rocks most probably belong to ‘*alam al-khayāl*, the Imaginal World, which, according to Ibn al-‘Arabī, “brings together all opposites (*al-jam‘ bayn al-aḍḍād*).”<sup>19</sup> How different is the subtle fullness of many a Muslim miniature from the present crowding of the majority-Muslim city of Cairo! The constant meditation on the notion of renewed creation, with its recurrent disappearances, affects the quality of the presence of the people who practice it: their presence is subtle. I recommend placing signs that would indicate the differential capacity of a particular space: “The capacity of this room is ten Ibn al-‘Arabī disciples but only six persons who are oblivious to recurrent creation although they too are recurrently created.”

The poetic can take the form of:

– the absence of metaphors through the literalization of figurative expressions in altered states of body and consciousness. During his traumatic stay at Count Dracula’s castle in Transylvania, how many times did the vampire’s victim Harker witness “the mountains ... move like clouds”<sup>20</sup> (a time-lapse allowed by the freezing of the vampire in the coffin)? Talking about Harker, who traveled from Bremen to Transylvania ostensibly a few weeks earlier, his yearning fiancée Mina says to her friend Lucy: “I haven’t seen him in ages.” A few weeks after she says these words, Harker appears in Bremen, his hair now totally white.

– the universal extension of the metaphorical. In the Qur’ān, Solomon declared that he wished to have the throne of Bilqīs, the Queen of Sheba, in his court. Someone “who had knowledge from the Scripture” (27:40), Āṣif b. Barkhayā (?),<sup>21</sup> responded: “I will bring it to thee before thy gaze returns to thee” (27:40). According to Ibn al-‘Arabī, he accomplished this by invoking God’s renewed creation. The throne was at the court of the Queen of Sheba, then the cosmos disappeared, and when the cosmos appeared again before the gazes of (very similar versions of) Solomon and his guests had time to return to them (in less than 1/24 of a second), the

throne – not the identical throne but an extremely similar one – was at Solomon’s court. “Aṣaf’s only merit in the matter was that he effected the renewal [of Bilqīs’ throne] in the court of Solomon.”<sup>22</sup> Was Solomon aware at that point of renewed creation? No; consequently, he was unaware of the full measure of his fitting response: “This is of the bounty of my Lord ...” (27:40). One would have expected that Solomon would have then presented the throne to Bilqīs as a proof of the omnipotence of God, thus inducing her, who “was from a disbelieving people” (27:43), to become a Muslim. Instead – I would imagine to the surprise of those present – Solomon said: “Let the throne be altered, so that we may see whether or not she will recognize it” (27:41). When Bilqīs arrived, she was bidden to enter the palace. She experienced then an encounter with the figurative in its most manifest guise; mistaking the floor made of transparent glass for a pool, she bared her legs. Solomon was quick to inform her of her error. She was introduced in the palace and presented with what appeared to be her throne. She examined it carefully then she said: “It is as though (*ka’annahu*) it were my throne” (27:42). I imagine that on hearing these words, Solomon underwent a kind of satori (“on a soil very unlike” Japan), a sudden knowledge, becoming aware that the throne that was presently in his court wasn’t strictly speaking Bilqīs’ throne but as though it (*ka’annahu*), actually its recreation by God. Thus had God favored Solomon over His newest believing slave, Bilqīs, who too received knowledge (“My Lord! Lo! I have wronged myself, and I surrender with Solomon unto Allāh, the Lord of the Worlds” [27:44]), but not of renewed creation – which she might have received had Solomon not altered what looked very much like her throne at his court (“And We had certainly given to David and Solomon knowledge, and they said, ‘Praise [is due] to Allāh, who has favored us over many of His believing slaves’” [27:15]). When the hoopoe said to Solomon, who had “been taught the language of birds” (27:16), “I have found out (a thing) that thou apprehendest not, and I come unto thee from Sheba with sure tidings” (27:22), are these tidings to be limited to what he went on to tell him? I would think that they included also the sure knowledge of renewed creation. In Islam, the task of a human is not to be himself or herself (in Islam he or she – who has no necessity of existence – is basically nothing) but to become cognizant that he or she is in the likeness of himself or herself, by becoming aware of God’s renewed creation, and in the likeness of God – notwithstanding that “there is nothing whatever like unto Him” (Qur’ān 42:11) – since he or she is at each moment one of the infinite Self-Disclosures of God. Taking into

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consideration how the poetic function stresses selection over combination (Roman Jakobson),<sup>23</sup> there is a basic poetic modality to an atomistic occasionalist universe, where entities are recurrently replaced by what appears to be them, where we are not ourselves, but rather metaphors of ourselves: *ka’annanā*. It is thus felicitous that this atomistic occasionalistic view was the one prevalent among the Arab Muslim theologians, since Arabs were known to exalt poetry already in the pre-Islamic period. From *Sayat Nova* onward, Paradjanov’s cinema, with its atomistic occasionalist world and thus with its jump cuts, is one of the main instantiations of the metaphoric in cinema, since everything is in the image of itself in the jump cuts showing apparently the same entity. Paradjanov’s films from *Sayat Nova* onward are cinematic prose poems since the substitution of a term is not by another but by a very similar variant of itself. One can easily remark that the poet Sayat Nova made extensive use of substitution in the production of the poems included in Paradjanov’s *Sayat Nova*; but the spectator can also clearly see the substitution of the poet by very similar variants of himself in jump cuts in Paradjanov’s poetic film. *Sayat Nova* starts with a voice-over reciting these words from the Bible: “Then God said, ‘Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness ...’” (Genesis 1:26). In the Bible these words are followed almost immediately by: “So God created mankind in his own image, / in the image of God he created them” (Genesis 1:27). Which is more basic, determinant: that mankind is made by God or that they are in the image of God? Is the second half of the quote from Genesis 1:27, where likeness precedes creation and being, a clarification of the first part? In case it is, man would be fundamentally related less to being than to likeness, characterized more as like himself than as being himself. Metaphor is usually based on ontology, derives from it (a poor kind of metaphor); but in Paradjanov’s films from *Sayat Nova* onward, metaphor precedes ontology, is more basic. Paradjanov’s cinema from *Sayat Nova* onward is doubly a cinema of the image: because of its arresting images, but also and basically because the world it shows is in the image of itself. In comparison with Paradjanov’s *Ashik Kerib*, no other film has shown so much love not for the irreplaceable,<sup>24</sup> but for the singularity of the replaceable.<sup>25</sup> In such a universe, that which is extremely similar but not identical to itself does not induce the kind of anxiety encountered in Capgras syndrome, undeath, and, as an unworldly entity, in radical closures. At the outset of *Ashik Kerib*, his rival tricks him into entrusting him with his clothes while crossing the river, returns to town,

announces that Ashik Kerib drowned and exhibits the clothes as proof. The universe of *Ashik Kerib*, a film dedicated to the memory of Tarkovsky (the filmmaker of, among other films, *Solaris* [1972]), not only can be melancholic but actually has an affinity with such a state, because in such a universe the state of death of someone is not a final one, a once and for all occurrence, but is an accident momentarily attached to the person and that has to be recreated by God from instant to instant if it is to appear to last (the Ash'arites' view). While melancholic, this kind of universe does not require the selfsame beloved, but wholly accepts his or her or its replacement by a very similar entity! What would heal Ashik Kerib's lover turned melancholic, and his mother become blind on hearing the convincing report of his death? It is the return not necessarily of Ashik Kerib, but of someone very much like him. Were the temporality of the universe of Paradjanov's *Ashik Kerib* not an atomic one, I would be surprised and somewhat disappointed by the absence of any symptoms that Ashik Kerib was marked by death: even setting aside that, at least in art and literature, episodes of feigned or falsely reported death can be, and frequently are, indicative of dying before dying, the film spectator knows that while Ashik Kerib did not actually drown at the start of his journey, he was nonetheless, prior to his return, and unbeknownst to both his mother and his lover, beheaded at the court of Sultan Aziz. Notwithstanding that he was reported to be dead, Ashik Kerib's mother and his beloved end up wholly accepting him when he appears again after an absence of several years, justifiably at no point feeling any suspicion that he is Ashik Kerib's double or an imposter: once the accident of death is no longer recreated by God, Ashik Kerib is not merely no longer dead, he is not marked by death at all.

We who have no necessity of existence have one passion: to return back to nonexistence. The one act of creatures is facing toward the reversion back to nonexistence rather than toward the seeming chronological change. All other "actions" are actually occasions for the Reality, God, to act. To God and to those who are aware of His renewed creation of the world ("surely He begins the creation in the first instance, then He reproduces it" [Qur'ān 10:4; cf. Qur'ān 50:15]), we, who, lacking any necessity of existence, revert to nonexistence instantly, are portraits; to God, and to those who are aware of renewed creation, there is nothing but portraits. Taking into account the occasionalism of the Ash'arite Muslim theologians, each of these portraits is that of *the man without qualities* (to borrow the title of a Robert Musil novel). Like

other things ("The seven heavens and the earth and all that is therein praise Him, and there is not a thing but hymneth His praise; but ye understand not their praise" [Qur'ān 17:44]), the face is praising God – but, if it is not beautiful, it is additionally (irrespective of whether it is laughing, sneering, or that of the dead body of a man or woman) imploring to be saved. That is why we feel that a beautiful face (but not necessarily the man or woman to whom it apparently belongs) is closer to God: it is just praising God (a face that while praising God is not also imploring others to save it is beautiful). While one of the tasks of other portraitists is to manifest the implicit imploration by the face that is not beautiful to be saved, the Muslim portraitist's task is to manifest that the face (but not necessarily the man or woman to whom it apparently belongs) is praising God, whose face is the only thing that is not perishing ("Each thing is perishing except His face" [Qur'ān 28:88]); and to treat it and show it as a mask, as something that does not change, since, not having an intrinsic necessity of existence, it *instantly* goes back to nonexistence/God.

Paradjanov's ostensibly static *Sayat Nova* (as well as his subsequent feature films) is not an abrupt departure from his hectic preceding film, *Shadows of Our Forgotten Ancestors* (1965), with its pervasive camera motion, but pushes the motion in the latter to a more basic level. To someone who senses the universal and perpetual appearances, disappearances then appearances in Paradjanov's later films, even the exacerbated camera motion in *Shadows of Our Forgotten Ancestors* seems tame. How slow are the most frenetic MTV music videos in comparison to Paradjanov's *Sayat Nova* or *The Legend of Suram Fortress*!

Reaffirming their Islamic faith, during the early 1990s a large number of Egyptian actresses went back to the veil. One is not to expect much from mere actresses, especially ones working in the Egyptian film industry. But one should expect and demand much from Muslim filmmakers, even ones who have not had a tradition of investigating the medium of the art form in which they are working: they could and in a way ought to have indirectly reached this investigation simply by taking into account the kind of temporality most characteristic of orthodox Islam: atomism. Is this atomicity the only temporality to be found in Islam? No: to the highly Hellenized Muslim philosophers, the *falāsifa*, time is continuous; to the *Ismā'īlīs*, time is cyclical ... Nonetheless, it certainly is the one most akin to the basic cinematographic apparatus. Cinema is the first medium adequate to represent and reflect the world according to the Ash'arite view because it functions at the

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level of the basic cinematographic apparatus in terms of both recurrent appearance and disappearance of entities, and absence of causality between the separate still frames. From *Sayat Nova* onward, rather than being a capitulation of the cinematic to painting, Paradjanov's films manifest, on the contrary, the revolving of the film around a diegetic world akin to cinema, since subject to recurrent appearance and disappearance.<sup>26</sup> Cinema is the first adequate medium to represent and reflect the world according to the Ash'arite view also because the *mutakallimīn* denied there being a fast or slow movement, the perception of slowness being a result of the recreation of the ostensibly moving object at the same indivisible spatial unit in several "subsequent" moments – a sort of double-framing – so that the more frequent such recreation of the object at the same indivisible spatial unit in "subsequent" moments the slower the object is perceived to be. Here's my Islamic (more specifically, Ash'arite) version of the bet – whether a trotting horse has all four feet off the ground at one time – which reportedly was behind Muybridge's setting up of his cameras, ropes and diagrams in May 1872 at a race-course in Sacramento, California: a future rich Muslim patron commissions someone to prove his contention that at certain points the same stage/frame of the horse's trot is repeated. It is unfortunate that Muslim filmmakers have produced very few pixilation films, and that pixilation films are rarely screened in the Islamic world, for pixilation is the kind of filmmaking closest to the *kalām's* view, where the movement is both atomic and an accident added to the thing that is shown moving, and is slower or quicker according to whether one repeats certain frames or not. With the exception of the films of Paradjanov (who was not a Muslim) from *Sayat Nova* onward, up to now Islamic *cinematography* can be located only in the atomistic temporality of Islam and not in the numerous films and TV programs on Islamic themes, motifs and figures,<sup>27</sup> which are content with parading Islamic tradition's arabesques, calligraphy, architecture, and music (accompanied by a commentary), and/or, when the film includes among its characters one of the Qur'ānic prophets (Muhammad [Moustapha Akkad's *The Message*], Joseph [Youssef Chahine's *The Emigrant*] ...) or the first four caliphs (Salah Abouseif's *al-Qādisiyya*), trying to tackle the thoughtless prohibition in mainstream Sunni Islam on the representation of not only the prophet Muhammad but also all the aforementioned personages associated with Islam.<sup>28</sup> Youssef Chahine's *Saladin*, Abouseif's *Al-Qādisiyya*, and Moustapha Akkad's *The*

*Message*, three (tasteless and thoughtless) "epics" revolving around major Muslim figures and events, convey far less of Islam than do three consecutive jump cuts in a Paradjanov film.<sup>29</sup>

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Jalal Toufic is a thinker and a mortal to death. He was born in 1962 in Beirut or Baghdad and died before dying in 1989 in Evanston, Illinois. Many of his books, most of which were published by Forthcoming Books, are available for download as PDF files on his website: <http://www.jalaltoufic.com>. He was most recently a participant in the Sharjah Biennial 11, the 9th Shanghai Biennale, Documenta 13, *Art in the Auditorium III* (Whitechapel Gallery ...) and *Six Lines of Flight* (San Francisco Museum of Modern Art). In 2011, he was a guest of the Artists-in-Berlin Program of the DAAD.

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1  
An Ash'arite theologian or an Ibn al-Arabi disciple, who believed in the ever-renewed creation of a world that is not self-sufficient, could, indeed might have said the same words through which, for different reasons, the woman of Duras' film *Le Camion* avers the end of the ostensibly continuing world: "Look at the end of the world, all the time, at every second, everywhere."

2  
Discontinuity, whether stylistic or thematic, is encountered throughout my books. In *Distracted*, it is encountered in the form of aphorisms separated by blanks. In *(Vampires): An Uneasy Essay on the Undead in Film*, it is encountered in the manner of the (quantum) tunneling of the undead and teleportation, as well as the "counterintuitive" side effect of these, motionlessness in the absence of any discernable barrier ("One of the tolls for tunneling or teleportation, by means of which one moves through [or finds oneself to the other side of] perceptible barriers, is that unexpected, invisible obstacles will spring up everywhere, resulting in motionlessness where there is no discernable barrier. Many of these barriers will be objects that for no apparent reason cannot be removed, objects that put one in a trance, depriving one of one's motor ability"); over-turns; and the empty space-time zones of the labyrinth, which produce lapses not merely of consciousness but also, more radically, of being. In *Over-Sensitivity*, it is encountered in the guise of the ahistorical fully-formed unworldly entities that irrupt in radical closures, and the empty space-time zones in the realm of altered movement, body, silence, music, space and time into which dance projects a subtle version of the dancer. And here, it is encountered mainly in the mode of the atomistic temporality of Islam according to the theology of the Ash'arites and the sufism of Ibn al-'Arabi.

3  
Robert S. Fisher, Walter van Emde Boas, Warren Blume, Christian Elger, Pierre Genton, Phillip Lee, and Jerome Engel, Jr., "Epileptic Seizures and Epilepsy: Definitions Proposed by the International League Against Epilepsy (ILAE) and the International Bureau for Epilepsy (IBE)," *Epilepsia* 46, no. 4 (2005): 470-472.

4  
Martin Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude*, trans. William McNeill and Nicholas Walker (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 242-247: "It has been observed that if its [the bee's] abdomen is carefully cut away while it is sucking, a bee will simply carry on regardless

even while the honey runs out of the bee from behind.... the bee is simply taken [*hingenommen*] by its food.... When the bee flies out of the hive to find food it registers the direction in which it stands in relation to the sun.... If we ... take the box in which the bee has been imprisoned back to the hive and place it some distance behind the hive, then the newly freed bee flies in the direction in which it would have to fly in order to find the hive from the feeding place, even though the hive is relatively nearby, and it does so for the appropriate distance once again.... [the bee] flies back in a pre-established direction over a pre-established distance without regard to the position of the hive. It does not strike out in a given direction prescribed for it by the place in which it has found itself. Rather it is absorbed by a direction, is driven to produce this direction out of itself – without regard to the destination. The bee does not at all comport itself toward particular things, like the hive, the feeding place and so on. The bee is *simply given over* to the sun and to the period of its flight *without being able to grasp either of these as such ...* the animal ... is taken [*hingenommen*], taken and captivated [*benommen*] by things."

5  
Zen master Hakuin Zenji: "What is the sound of one hand clapping?"

6  
In Ash'arite atomism, atoms revert back to nothingness because the accident of duration (*baqa'*) imparted to them by God does not subsist for longer than an instant.

7  
While for Bergson, the philosopher of duration, an atom, like whatever "is not a center of indetermination," is subject to a necessity "which obliges it to act through every one of its points upon all the points of all other images, to transmit the whole of what it receives, to oppose to every action an equal and contrary reaction, to be, in short, merely a road by which pass, in every direction, the modifications propagated throughout the immensity of the universe" (Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, trans. Nancy Margaret Paul and William Scott Palmer [New York: Zone Books, 1988], 36), in a conception of recurrent appearance, disappearance, then appearance of entities, including atoms, the atom recurrently faces away from the linear "action" toward nothingness/the Being who recurrently creates it.

8  
According to quantum physics, the indivisible unit of time should be reached at the Planck time: 5.391 06 (32) x 10<sup>-44</sup> s.

Revenants: creatures who have the presumption to themselves settle an outstanding symbolic debt, not leaving it to (the exoteric) God to do that on the Day of Judgment.

10

Why is it that nowhere in the New Testament is there an incident where Christ – who heals the possessed and resurrects the dead – meets a revenant and commands him or her either to come back fully to life or to die until the Day of Judgment?

11

T. E. Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, with an introduction by Angus Calder (London: Wordsworth Editions, 1997), 22–23.

12

In some other Muslim miniatures, what may appear, color-wise, to be an unrealistic depiction of an earthly body is actually either a realistic presentation of an Imaginal World (*‘alam al-khayāl*) embodied spirit or Intelligence or a realistic depiction of an earthly body tinged by the various colored photisms that Sufis perceive in a suprasensuous manner as they progress along the spiritual path (to the state in which they perceive the *black light* [*nūr-e siyahī*]).

13

The separation and independence of dance, music and design, but also of the dance phrases performed by the different dancers or groups of dancers, that is, of what would traditionally be viewed as the components of an organic artwork of dance, in the collaborative work of Cage and Cunningham; as well as the separation and independence of words and images in the work of a number of avant-garde filmmakers and theater artists, for instance in Robert Wilson's theater production of *Hamletmachine* and in Duras' film *Agatha*, should in principle not be difficult to appreciate for someone who has an affinity with or subscribes to the occasionalist standpoint of the Ash'arites or indeed of the *mutakallimīn* in general, where the different accidents that adhere to the bodies and atoms are independent of each other and of the latter.

14

Here's a suggested question to some future interviewer: "If so, Jalal, why are at least some Muslim filmmakers to explore and experiment with this mode of temporality and linkage that is akin to the medium of cinema at the level of the basic apparatus, if the occasionalism connected to this temporality and mode of linking, with its denial of a nature in favor of a custom of God, is alien to reflexivity?"

15

The differentiation between the Kūfīc script, which with its rectilinear and angular forms and its monumentality was up to the twelfth century the only script utilized in epigraphic decoration, and the cursive Naskhī script, especially the thuluth variant, which, except for certain titles, replaced Kūfīc almost completely from the eleventh and twelfth centuries, shows that Muslim artists were at one level quite sensitive to the different characteristics and properties of various styles, media and materials. But this discernment of the difference of the various styles, media, and materials – and who could possibly be more sensitive than artists to the difference of styles and materials? – had to yield to their implicit more basic view of the lack of proper nature and characteristics of entities.

16

"The moment of its [the Queen of Sheba's throne's] disappearance from its place is the same as its presence with Solomon, by virtue of the renewal of creation .... Therefore do not say 'then,' which implies a lapse of time, for the word *thumma* in Arabic implies a process of cause and effect in specific situations, as the poet says, 'Like the quivering of the spear, then it shook.' Now the time of its quivering is the same as that of its shaking. He says 'then,' although there is no lapse of time. Similarly with the renewal of creation ... the moment of the nonexistence of a thing is the very moment of the existence of its like ..." Ibn Al 'Arabi, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, translated and introduced by R. W. Austin, preface by Titus Burckhardt (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), 193.

17

In Robbe-Grillet's *L'Immortelle*, whose events take place in Turkey, there is a resonance between two sorts of appearances out of nothing: one in the set radical closure, that of Lale; and one implied by the arabesques, that of ever-renewed creation.

18

François Cheng, *Empty and Full: The Language of Chinese Painting*, trans. Michael H. Kohn (Boston: Shambhala, 1994), 76–77.

19

"The imaginal faculty (*al-quwwat al-mutakhayyila*) and the World of Imagination ... is the closest thing to a denotation (*dalāla*) of the Real. For the Real is 'the First and the Last, the Manifest and the Nonmanifest' (Koran 57:3). Abū Sa'īd al-Kharrāz was asked, 'Through what have you known God?' He answered, 'Through the fact that He brings opposites together.' Then he recited this Koranic verse." William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-'Arabi's Metaphysics of*

*Imagination* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1989), 115.

20

Qur'ān 27:90: "You see the mountains – you think them firm, yet they move like clouds."

21

Or was it really Khadir, or else the angel Gabriel assuming the form of Aṣīf b. Barkhayā?

22

Ibn Al 'Arabi, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, 193.

23

Roman Jakobson, *Language in Literature*, ed. Krystyna Pomorska and Stephen Rudy (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 71.

24

Can one say: is unique what can be replaced only by itself? One should go further: is unique, and thus irreplaceable, that which cannot be replaced even by himself/herself.

25

What is itself can afford associations away from itself, for example, metaphors; but what is ontologically not itself but only like itself cannot afford such associations, since its singularity consists in this: that the creaturely association it induces is first and foremost to itself.

26

Sohrab Shahid Saless' *Still Life* (1974) is another film that should not, for other reasons, be viewed as a capitulation of the cinematic to painting. It is rather, along with Paradjanov's *Sayat Nova*, one of the greatest films of the Middle East and Transcaucasia; one could give it an alternate, cinematic title derived from Beckett: *Stirrings Still – Life*.

27

Cf. Sergei Eisenstein: "It is a weird and wonderful feat to have written a pamphlet on something that in reality does not exist. There is, for example, no such thing as a cinema without cinematography. And yet the author [Naum Kaufman] of the pamphlet [*Japanese Cinema* (Moscow, 1929)] preceding this essay has contrived to write a book about the *cinema* of a country that has no *cinematography*. About the cinema of a country that has, in its culture, an infinite number of cinematographic traits, strewn everywhere with the sole exception of – its cinema. This essay is on the cinematographic traits of Japanese culture that lie outside the Japanese cinema.... Cinematography is, first and foremost, montage.... The Japanese cinema is completely unaware of montage. Nevertheless the principle of montage can be identified as the basic element of Japanese representational culture." *Film Form and The Film Sense*, ed.

and trans. Jay Leyda (New York, Meridian Books, 1957), 28.

28

Al-Azhar University objected to Youssef Chahine's first version of the script of *The Emigrant* because the protagonist was ostensibly modeled on and represented the prophet Joseph. When Chahine filmed an apparently insufficiently revised version and screened it in Egypt, he was soon taken to court and his film was pulled from theaters pending the court's decision. The film was subsequently rereleased after Chahine won his appeal (given the widespread degeneracy in Egyptian culture around the time of the release of the film, I was not that surprised that the uproar in certain Egyptian circles was all about the possible transgression of the prohibition of the representation of a Qur'ānic prophet, in other words, that none of it was over the crassness with which ancient Egypt was shown).

29

In this bigoted age of religious and ethnic civil wars, whether in Transcaucasia, between Armenia and Azerbaijan, or elsewhere, it is salutary to have the example of Paradjanov, this Armenian born in Tbilisi, Georgia, who, from *Sayat Nova* onward, created the films to which (many) Muslim filmmakers, including Azerbaijani ones, feel most affined.

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