



MOTION WITHIN MOTION

AZADEH EMADI





Motion Within Motion
by Azadeh Emadi

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Front page: Video still from *Floating Tiles*, 2017 3 mins 27 secs
Opposite: Video still from *Motion Within Motion*, 2014 13 mins
Back page: Video still from *Motion Within Motion*, 2014 13 mins

AZADEH EMADI TAKES PIXELS FOR A SPIN

Azadeh Emadi never met a pixel she didn't like. For sure, pixels are the proletariat of digital media, hard-working and unsung, supplying tiny pieces of colour to produce the video image. But I think Emadi's breakthrough came when she discovered that pixels inhabit a non-linear temporality that has a more profound reality than the movie on the video surface, a temporality closer to divine time.

In Emadi's installation *Motion Within Motion*, the large projection begins with sights and sounds around the Friday Mosque of Yazd, a dusty town in southern Iran. Yazd was a centre of the Zoroastrian religion, which believes in the cyclical nature of the universe. The Friday Mosque was built in 1119 on the remains of a Zoroastrian temple, rebuilt in the 14th century, and restored in later centuries. Now Yazd is home to many migrant workers from the south and across the border with Afghanistan. You could say the mosque complex is a monument to transformation while staying in place. Emadi chose a less spectacular part of the mosque to focus on, this tiled passage to the main prayer hall. The camera is captivated by the curvilinear pattern on a wall, made of expertly set tiles. Each tile supplies a small shape of the overall pattern. Their colours are an intense cobalt blue, pale blue, white, a cloudy green, mustard yellow. Hard and shiny, each one has its own bumps and pockmarks that deflect and absorb the light in different ways, but mostly they reflect, so the overall effect is of a limpid sheen that softly responds to the shades that pass by. Passive, the walls wait and reflect. At the end of the wall, tiny in perspective, people walk and linger in the mosque's central courtyard. Simultaneous calls to prayer echo into the space, the singers' voices pleasantly dissonant with one another.

On the smaller screen, a solid block of cloudy colour changes steadily with a breath-like beat. Usually the changes are subtle variations of a tone, but sometimes it changes suddenly: it blinks and becomes blue, blinks again and becomes yellow. You figure out that these blinks happen when there is movement in the larger video. If you look longer, you might figure out the exact spot in the video that corresponds to this changing colour. Yes! You are looking at one single pixel from the vast surface of the video. Emadi has isolated it with an application called Pixel Picker, enlarged it, and given it centre stage on its own screen.

Now we are inside the Sheikh Lutfollah Mosque in Isfahan. Voices and sounds echo under the gorgeous upturned bowl of its dome. A young woman takes a spin, head back, the ends of her scarf swirling. Emadi's camera looks up at the intricate concentric patterns of the dome, and she too begins to spin, as though captured by the spiraling movement of the dome. In the next scene, it's a peaceful winter afternoon; we can get a sense of the weather, the cool damp air; someone is burning leaves. As the smoke rises and drifts, the single-pixel screen glows grey and white.

The large video scenes, showing the skin of the perceptible world, drift by at their own speeds. We already get a sense of the ways different things experience time. There's the temporality of human life and the seasons. The colourful tiles seem to have their own experience of time. Their shiny surfaces have reflected everything and everyone that passed by them over the years: the people hurrying to worship or pausing to rest, the laughter and murmured conversations. You can imagine how the rain and shifts in temperature affected the tiles, and admire their sturdy strength.

Like those tiles, the pixels in the digital video faithfully reflect everything that passes them by. The large video shows the visible surface of the world, passing by in human time. Each pixel in that video contributes a single colour, changing 24 times per second, faithfully submitting to the algorithm that distributes responsibilities across the pixel matrix. Each pixel is a tiny flicker film. From that perspective, we can admire the pixel for its selflessness and hard work. From the inside, though, below the surface, the pixel is having its whole world changed 24 times per second, receiving, embodying, and reporting colors.

Emadi uses an unusual line of reasoning to argue that the pixel is more real than the image it bears. What does she mean by real? We media critics often point to the materiality of the medium to emphasize that digital images are not "virtual." Film, video, internet platforms, mobile devices, etc. require a physical platform to support them: not only the plastics, metals, and rare earths that compose the device but also electricity supply, remote servers (the so-called "cloud"), corporate ownership, and the government agreements that support them. In

this way we can argue that the physical platform of a moving image is materially, economically, and legally more real than the images that flutter across this surface.

To discover the material life of pixels, we could look at a digital video screen of a certain resolution, say 1440 x 900 on my computer screen: that's 1,296,000 pixels. That's a lot, but you can still detect those pixels by squinting at the screen. Then we could study how voltages are released to each pixel in the bitmap matrix 24 times per second (a standard frame rate) and translated into light values. We would see that each pixel undergoes a change every 1/24 of a second as voltage traverses its little body and it expresses that voltage on the three lozenges of color, red, green, and blue, that compose its outward-facing part. We can consider how a digital camera captured the visible world and translated it into strings of numbers in a pixel matrix. Compression algorithms impose their economies, averaging out the color values and using other tricks. Despite these algorithmic interventions, a slim thread of material causality stretches from the world all the way to the tiny rectangles on the screen that labor to represent it.

Emadi honours this view of pixels' physical being. Her works, shot on digital video cameras with varying resolutions and compressions, draw attention to the medium on which they were made. She has been known to study pixels under a microscope, the lozenges of colour brightening and dimming like fireflies. However, I think it's not exactly the materiality of pixels that interests her, but the pixel's experience: what it feels like to be a pixel. She writes, "Suppose we imagine all entities in the universe are turning inside out, and then inside again, while they are moving and wavering around in space. They touch and move each other. But, they also inhale each other as they open out. They are changed while changing each other, internally and externally."

Beings are constantly being undermined in their identity and, at the same time, invited or forced by their environment to experience themselves anew. At the human scale, this is especially true of immigrants, though most everyone can relate to this feeling of being constantly undone and remade. "I am placed on a frame that is constantly moving and shifting, on the edge of going inside and out, of the country, the frame of a video, the

pixel. This is a shifting frame and I am shifting with it. It could therefore be said that in this experience I am also a frame that is constantly moving and changing, expanding and contracting.”¹

Eventually, in the writing of 16th C Iranian process philosopher Sadr al-Dīn al-Shirāzī (1571-1650), Emadi found the language that describes this experience. Process philosophy emphasizes that flow is more real than substance—as Kanye West explained when he tweeted recently, “I don’t wish to be number one anymore, I wish to be water.” A long-standing but minor element of Western philosophy, process philosophy has been the central current of Eastern Islamic thought since the 16th century. Sadra’s writings emphasize that Being is a unified reality graded in degrees of intensity, which encompasses all things in a transformative flow (*al-saray n al-wujūd*, the flow of Being). To exist in this reality is to constantly modulate and transform from within. Citing Qur’an 56: 60-61, “We will exchange your likeness and recreate you in what you will not know,” Sadra argues that the divine source transforms individuals from within. Sadra argues that God is the most real and most intense being, but every being in the universe is animated by a divine desire to become more real and more intense.²

That is the longing Emadi sees in non-human entities like pixels, as well as us humans: an internal transformation occurring in non-chronological time. To Emadi, the pixel is like a whirling dervish, becoming more deeply connected to the world as it spins. In a way, her works invite human visitors to cultivate this pixel dervish within ourselves.

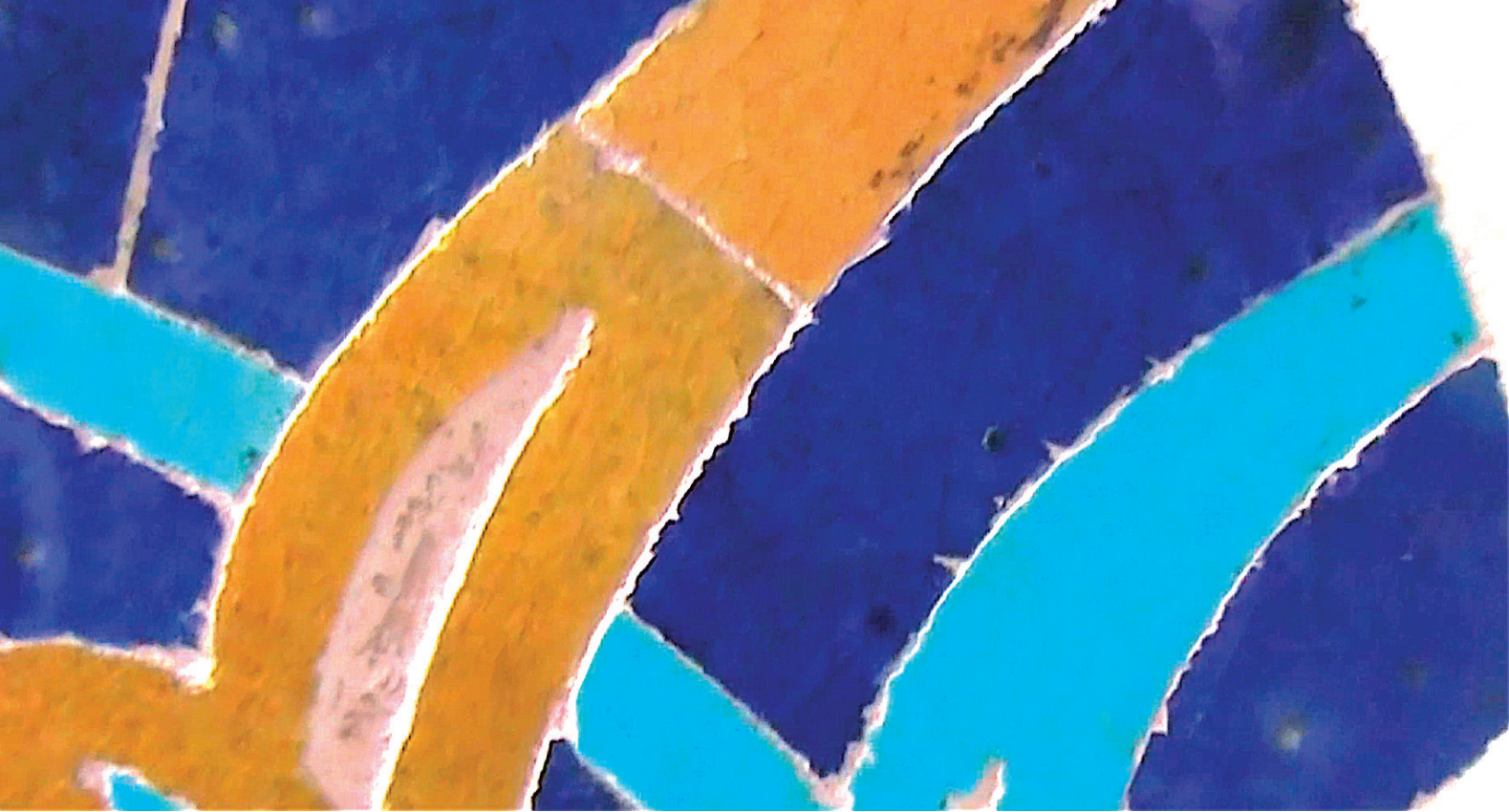
¹ Azadeh Emadi, *Motion Within Motion: Investigating Digital Video in light of Substantial Motion*. PhD thesis, AUT University, Auckland (2015).

² Sadr al-Dīn al-Shirāzī, *Elixir of the Gnostics*, translation and commentary by William C. Chittick (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2003).

BIOS

Azadeh Emadi is a video maker and media artist who experiments with alternative approaches to image making process and technologies of perception. In applying and developing aspects of classical Persian Islamic culture and concepts, her work aims to stimulate dialogue between Western and Middle Eastern cultures. Her videos and installations explore the intersection between reality, perception, technology and time, as an investigation for finding new ways of seeing that innovatively address some of the current socio-cultural and environmental issues. She is also a lecturer and researcher at the School of Culture and Creative Arts (Film and Television Studies Department), The University of Glasgow.

Laura U. Marks is a scholar and programmer who works on media art and philosophy. Her most recent book is *Hanan al-Cinema: Affections for the Moving Image* (MIT, 2015). She teaches in the School for the Contemporary Arts at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver.



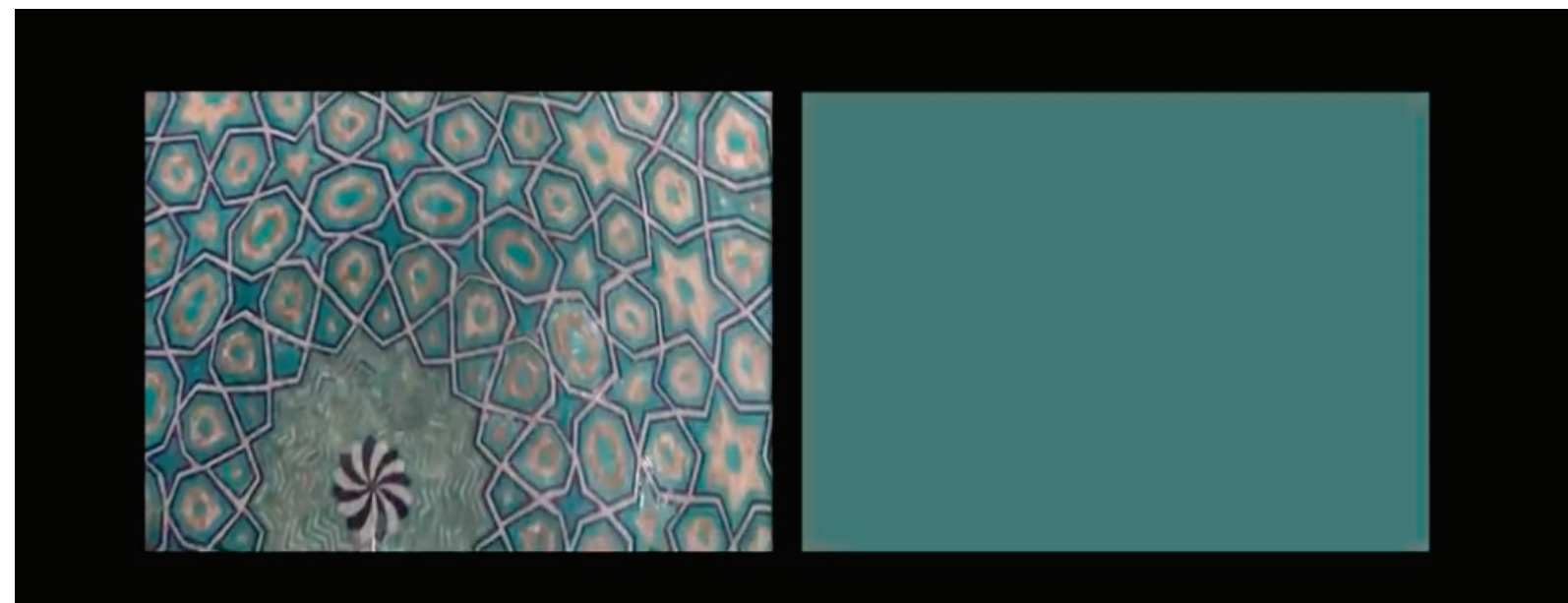
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Floating Tiles
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3 mins 27 secs