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# **TRANSPOSING THE VERNACULAR**

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# **MOVING IMAGES IN THE WORK OF AKRAM ZAATARI**

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AN ESSAY BY ANTHONY DOWNEY



# **Transposing the Vernacular: Moving Images in the Work of Akram Zaatari**

The internet has effected an unprecedented historical instance of accelerated image production that has fundamentally realigned the way we view, understand, and disseminate moving images.

This may appear to be a truism of sorts but it is currently estimated that over 400 hours of video is uploaded to YouTube every minute. Although it is the second most popular website in the world, this still needs to be put into perspective: if we extrapolate, this means that 24,000 hours of video is uploaded to YouTube every hour which is the equivalent of over half a million hours of footage being uploaded every day.<sup>1</sup> In terms of reception, or viewing figures, the most reliable estimates suggest that over 5 billion videos are watched daily on YouTube alone and, by the company's own reckoning, they have over 1 billion users in total.<sup>2</sup> Needless to say, the quality of images produced,

in terms of resolution, editing, and overall production, varies greatly and the majority tend to be improvised and brief — brevity being one of the core attractions for producers and consumers alike. This exceptional proliferation of digital images has generated multiple concerns about the reliability of the information being circulated and the algorithmic biases deployed by YouTube and other websites.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, in the field of cultural production, the internet has also provided a fertile platform for those who want to investigate the status of image production in the digital age and how, crucially, we perceive and absorb videos in the dematerialised, constantly shifting, and invariably impressionable, if not acutely vulnerable, environs of the internet.

From 2016 onwards, and building on previous research into the aesthetics and distribution of digital imagery, Akram Zaatari explored YouTube deploying relatively neutral and abstract terms, including the phrase “father and son”.<sup>4</sup> Searching in Arabic, which yields different results to a search in English, he scanned videos that led him to a sub-genre of sorts that involved fathers and sons praying. These videos tend to follow a broad narrative — a father and son involved in a devotional act, often at the behest of the father — and impromptu aesthetic: hand-held devices, diegetic sound, informal conversations, and the absence of editing are all key features in these

clips. Depending on the age of the son, and his willingness to engage in prayer, the videos are often about fathers attempting to either pray in spite of the distractions of family life and noise, or teach — with varying degrees of success — a child how to pray.

Footage of fathers praying with their children, and in some cases using recitations to lull them asleep, display an intrinsic intimacy not just to the act of prayer but to the bestowal of faith, custom and history from one generation to another. The act of uploading these videos takes us from the relatively private space of individual supplication and devotion to the decentralised and largely indeterminate sphere — in geographical terms, for example — of a broader digital community. What, we may ask, brings viewers to these videos: are they extended family members, or possibly fellow Muslims with a mutual interest in a community of prayer?<sup>5</sup> Zaatari's interest in these videos, however, would appear to have more to do with the accumulative effect of their inherent gestures, the characteristics of their setting, and the intrinsic similarities in their narrative trajectories. For *The Script* (2018), he referenced a selection of these videos as source material and subsequently developed a storyboard that distilled the essential actions and prevalent gestures into one work. In the first section of *The Script*, we see a young man fulfilling his duty of *salāh* — the five daily prayers



undertaken at specific times throughout the day by practicing Muslims — in a domestic setting.<sup>6</sup> The lighting is uniform and tranquil, and we move from a close-up shot of the face of the devotee in the apartment to a wide-angle shot in which we see his sons playing in the background. One of the sons clings to his father's neck, making prayer somewhat awkward for him but indisputably more fun for the boy. In the second section of the film, the act of prayer has been transposed to a theatrical setting — the Ishbilia Theatre in Saida, Lebanon — but the accoutrements remain largely the same, including the children's toys, the prayer mat and, of course, the two boys who, again, do their best to distract their father from prayer. In his prostrate position, the supplicant is effectively the perfect climbing frame, and his devotions conclude with him giving his energetic son an improvised piggy-back ride. The film ends with an image of



an empty theatre that resonates, exuberantly and fittingly, with the sound of children playing.

The sacral and the secular come together in *The Script*, with the everyday supplications of the father being in part mimicked by the sons but also readily capitalised upon as a form of play. The act of *salāh* is very much a physical, mental, and spiritual act of worship, and to break off from one's prayer is generally frowned upon; however, it is notable that, in the father's second set of prayers — as he is just about to complete his devotions — he adds an unorthodox fifth set of movements for the benefit of his lively son.<sup>7</sup> The intimacy and tenderness displayed in *The Script*, which is a feature of many of the online videos that depict similar events, is here distilled and choreographed into a moving evocation of fatherhood and devotion. The ease with which the



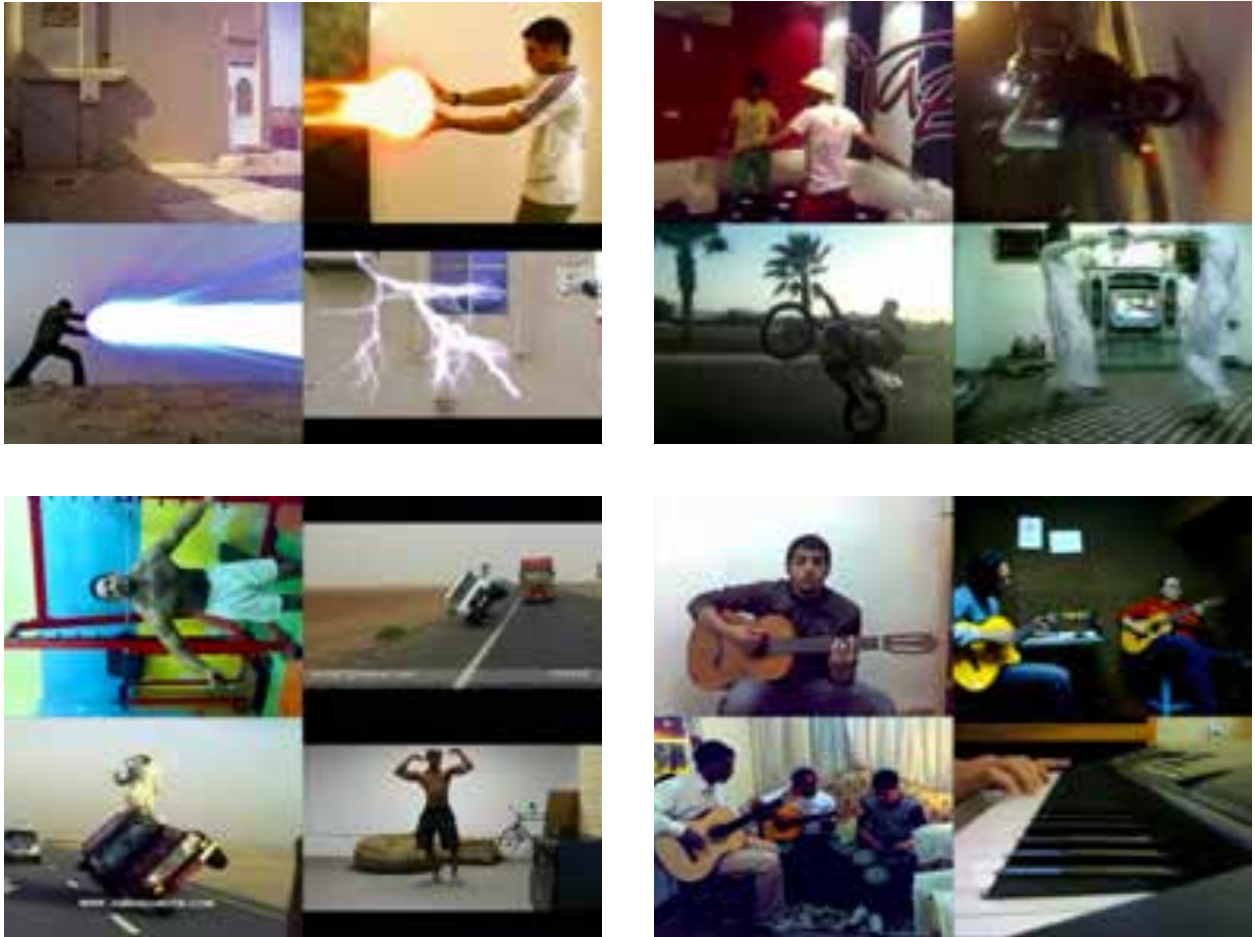
occasion of prayer is integrated into the routine of a father's commitment to his children's well-being is poignantly portrayed alongside the fact that the worshipful act of prayer can be transposed from one location to another without affecting its reverential intent.

Crystallising key features and themes in what has become a sub-genre of YouTube videos, *The Script* both divulges the principal elements integral to the original footage and yet unmoors them from their geographical loci and interior specificities. While the central act of devotion remains constant, the generic features of the original videos have been scripted and produced, complete with multiple angles of viewing and a discrete narrative trajectory. The mimetic impulse here, the desire to concentrate a digitised reality into the conventions of film, emphasizes the actions, gestures and





invocations that are widespread if not habitual elements in the original videos; however, the event of revealing these through filmic means draws us closer to the commonality of gestures that were the primary feature of the original footage. The prototype images, so to speak, go through a process not only of technological enhancement but distillation, and *The Script* further foregrounds the representational apparatus of filmmaking, complete with its production values, modalities of dissemination, and means of reception. In a digital age, these production values may appear to stand in contrast to the *ad hoc* excess associated with contemporary image production, and this relatively short film signifies the extent to which images are imbricated in broader economies of exchange and ecologies of production, meaning, and usage. This transposition and concentration of material also prompts a far from simple question about Zaatari's



overall practice: is this process an act of candid appropriation — which implies, to a certain extent, a non-transformative re-representation of an already existing image or object — or are we looking at a method that extrudes the particular from the generalised, if not generic, surplus of footage produced for the internet?

The original context of YouTube videos, specifically their tendency towards repetitive gesture and similarities in setting and narrative impulse, was previously explored in *Dance to the End of Love*, an earlier work by Zaatari that was realised as a four-channel installation film in 2011. The short clips in *Dance to the End of Love* were gleaned from

videos that were uploaded, almost exclusively by men it would seem, in countries as diverse as Libya, Yemen, Palestine, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE. In terms of attitudes, techniques, and the methods used we see a commonality of filming practices and approaches emerging in these clips; a recurrence of imagery and styles that Zaatari utilises for visual continuity. The resulting montage shows men displaying “super powers”, flexing their muscles, staging dances and fights, performing perilous stunts in cars and on motor-bikes, and bonding together. The combination of violent fantasy, homo-social gatherings, and balletic poses in *Dance to the End of Love* raises a question not just about the testosterone-driven macho performance of maleness and generalized braggadocio, but also a potential crisis in Arab masculinity that is centred, to a certain extent, on routines of performative, decontextualised power. The fact that these videos come from a wide range of countries, but also display very similar aesthetics, subject matter, and framing devices, would likewise suggest — as was the case in *The Script* — that the authors of these videos are adopting similar techniques from the multiple videos they see online. This mise-en-abyme of visualisation proposes, in part at least, a closed system of production that reflects upon the short-circuiting of the traditional division between the producer of images and the consumer, insofar as the producers of these images *are* the consumers.

The videos used in *Dance to the End of Love* relate events to a broad audience that is brought together by a simple but complex detail: they all have access to the internet as a means of both producing and downloading information about the world. The fact that these videos have been uploaded to a public domain suggests a tacit acceptance on behalf of the producer that anyone can now see them and, indeed, use them as they see fit. However, this tacitness was not a feature of earlier image production in photographic studios, for example, where the images were often produced for local circulation and, customarily, the homes of those portrayed in the photographs. The exponential rise of the internet as a preferred medium for uploading and disseminating images brings these issues to the fore but with different emphases and questions: how susceptible are moving images, under these conditions, to subversion and re-inscription within alter or counter-narratives? This reveals a core distinction between images that reside on the internet and images maintained in a photographic archive and how they circulate as signifiers of meaning.

The issue of circulation was central to Zaatari's earlier explorations of the materiality of photography as a physical entity, in particular his critical examination of how a photograph exists as a material, as opposed to virtual or digitised, image. In earlier works by Zaatari, specifically



his projects with the Hashem El Madani's photography practice in Saida, he explored how portrait photographs produced in a studio are not just images as such, but artefacts that are indelibly affected by and associated with the means of their production, reproduction and distribution.<sup>8</sup> The social and political economy in which images circulate permeates the very fabric and content of a photograph, just as the economy in which uploaded videos — the fact of their “digital watermark” — comes complete with the trace of their production and circulation as images over time and in virtual space. In these earlier projects, which Zaatari developed under the archival auspices of the Arab Image Foundation

(AIF), he analytically considered the originality of images *within* their social, economic, and political ecologies and the changing nature of photography as a practice across the region.<sup>9</sup> The source videos for *The Script*, likewise, exist in an economy of value, one focused on their co-option as artefacts with a commercial value to attract advertisers — with the more popular videos on YouTube carrying adverts before and indeed during the videos — and their appeal to current and, crucially, future users of the digital platform.

The reframing and distillation of videos from YouTube into the context of a film also gives cultural value to images that seem, on the face of it at least, to have little denominative worth other than to those who made and view them. These chains of cultural and financial value can be likewise seen to accrue to images from photographic archives, which circulate as commercial objects and as physical objects with a material presence. This is not to rehearse the high and low art debate, nor is it to suggest that artistic practices somehow redeem the mundane; rather, it is to note how Zaatari's practice reveals an apparatus at work in the realisation and circulation of images, be they material or digital. The use of videos from the internet reveals a doubling presence — one of the integral functions of mimeticism — that is related to the image as found online and thereafter how it is reused and

repurposed. The vernacular practices that interest Zaatari — from photographic archives to online repositories of videos — are transformed through transmission, circulation and viewing, and this is what makes them interesting as embedded artefacts in a dematerialised digital age. For Zaatari, finally, the essence of this, as seen in *The Script*, can be approached and investigated through a filmic distillation of countless videos that does not so much usurp the original images as it deconstructs, compliments, and further complicates the nature of their pluralised realities of production and reception.



## Endnotes

1 The entire business model of YouTube was developed on the basis of how it enabled consumers and producers alike to upload, view, rate, share, add to favourites, report, comment, and subscribe to other users' video uploads. The first video uploaded to the site, in 2005, is a 19 second clip of a man standing in front of elephant enclosure marvelling at the fact that they have long trunks. As of June 26, 2018, this one video has had 51,680,634 views and 608,797 comments. YouTube, since November 2006, has been owned by Google, which is the world's most viewed website.

2 The statistics quoted here, which unsurprisingly seem to vary, were sourced from <https://www.youtube.com/yt/about/press/> [accessed 25 June, 2018].

3 In an era of so-called "post-truth" and "fake news", YouTube has been criticized for its use of an algorithm that encourages readers to visit sites that promote conspiracy theories and extremist material. See Jack Nicas, "How YouTube Drives People to the Internet's Darkest Corners", *The Wall Street Journal*, February 7, 2018. [https://www.wsj.com/articles/how-youtube-drives-viewers-to-the-internets-darkest-corners-1518020478?utm\\_content=bufferf25b7&utm\\_medium=social&utm\\_source=twitter.com&utm\\_campaign=buffer](https://www.wsj.com/articles/how-youtube-drives-viewers-to-the-internets-darkest-corners-1518020478?utm_content=bufferf25b7&utm_medium=social&utm_source=twitter.com&utm_campaign=buffer) [Accessed 25 June, 2018].

4 Zaatari's interest in the "father and son" paradigm relates to associated research on the so-called Tabnit sarcophagus. Unearthed in Saida in 1887, it was the last resting



place of Tabnit of Sidon (c. 490 BCE), a Phoenician King and the father of King Eshmunazar II. The sarcophagus is now housed in Istanbul. Unearthed in 1855, the sarcophagus of his son Eshmunazar II was subsequently relocated to the Louvre in Paris where it is now on display.

5           The context of a supranational community of believers — defined as *ummat al-mu'minīn*, or “commonwealth of the Believers” — is key to the Islamic ideal of *ummah*, a term that relates to ethical, linguistic, and religious notions of commonality and collectivity. The act of announcing prayer, of course, is the preserve of muezzin and a common feature in Muslim societies. That the internet should perform similar roles of decentralization and centralization, at one and the same time, has a fitting contemporary resonance in the context of prayer, worship, and community.

6           Given the regularity associated with prayer in the Muslim faith, it is permissible for devotees to perform it anywhere, with the mosque nevertheless being preferred venue because of its associations with notions of community (*ummah*) and fraternity.

7           There are a number of videos online showing fathers persevering in the face of the ongoing, and frankly endearing, distractions of their offspring; see here, for example: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5PGIs9KIJKM> [Accessed 2 July, 2018]

8           The portraits were shot by Hashem El Madani in his studio Shehrazade and in the surrounding urban area of Saida, in Lebanon, between 1953 and the 1970s. The studio situation gave

him more leeway to catch people off guard in staged “intimate” moments, and to create something of a collective physiognomy of the city of Saida.

9           The AIF is a non-profit organization established in Beirut in 1997 and co-founded by Fouad Elkoury, Samer Mohdad, and Akram Zaatari.

## **Author's Notes**

Anthony Downey is Professor of Visual Culture in the Middle East and North Africa, within the Faculty of Arts, Design and Media at Birmingham City University. Recent and upcoming publications include *Zones of Indistinction: Contemporary Art and the Cultural Logic of Late Modernity* (forthcoming, Sternberg Press, 2019); *Don't Shrink Me to the Size of a Bullet: The Works of Hiwa K* (Walther König Books, 2017); *Future Imperfect: Contemporary Art Practices and Cultural Institutions in the Middle East* (Sternberg Press, 2016); and *Art and Politics Now* (Thames and Hudson, 2014). He is currently researching a book on digital media, political activism, and human rights after the Arab Spring (forthcoming, 2020).

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### Turner Contemporary

Rendezvous, Margate CT9 1HG  
19 October 2018 – 6 January 2019

### Modern Art Oxford

30 Pembroke St, Oxford OX1 1BP  
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