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No Riddle but Time: Historical Consciousness in Two Islamicate Films

Abstract

This article explores ways in which film expresses “internal history” in the context of Muslim cultures. As such, it enquires how film can work as both Islamic art and historical contemplation. The films discussed here, Nacer Khemir’s *Wanderers in the Desert* and Muhammad Rasoulof’s *Iron Island*, inhabit and explore the borderline between imagination and reality. The films in question offer an imaginal interspace between “modern” and “traditional” worlds. As such they open up critical perspectives on the meaning of history. What follows is a discussion of how each film offers a window onto differing perceptions of time, and what may be glimpsed through this window.

Keywords

Islam, Sufism, surrealism, history, historiography, barzakh, time

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Introduction

At the very end of Nacer Khemir's *Wanderers in the Desert*, a blustering government officer complains loudly to a clerk about the citizens of the remote village he is leaving. He has found them irrational, their poetry-laced speech ambiguous. "I'm going back to civilization," he shouts. "I'm fed up with riddles!" The clerk replies, "Take it from me: The only riddle is that of time."

This paper began with my initial contemplation of this enigmatic line. Why would time be a riddle? For all the standardized measurement of time in the modern world, time is perceived differently across cultures and epochs. Gaps in perspective affecting contemporary relations between "Muslim" and "Western" societies¹ are rooted in perceptions of time and history. Difficulties in mutual understanding often seem to hinge in part on how humans interpret time, and time itself is a core concern of long standing within Muslim discourse.

In the following lines, after a brief introduction to theoretical questions, I explore how film-makers have contributed to critical interpretation of time in its relation to Muslim historical consciousness. The two films I discuss are Nacer Khemir's *Wanderers in the Desert* (Tunisia, 1984) and Muhammad Rasoulof's *Iron Island* (Iran, 2005).²

Time and the Realist Illusion

Modern rationalism proclaims a single standard for what constitutes an objective representation of time. Clock time conveys what is “realistic” to us. Yet storytelling, music, poetry and cinema are all created through alterations, distortions or enhancements of time. A film can condense many years into a few minutes, or expand one second into an hour. Its very nature allows freedom to play with time and its “realist” constraints, and thus it has the capacity to convey otherwise unexplainable meaning across cultural and psychological boundaries. Film invites the possibility of windows into other experiences of time. In the words of Andrei Tarkovsky, “what a person normally goes to the cinema for is time: for time lost or spent or not yet had. He goes there for living experience.”³

Robert Rosenstone has argued that “film is history as vision”.⁴ In his view, film provides a crucial alternative to written history, which,

especially in the last two centuries, has created an increasingly linear, scientific world on the page. Film changes the rules of the historical game, insisting on its own sort of truths, truths which arise from a visual and aural realm that is difficult to capture adequately in words.⁵

Modern standards of realism are tightly bound to the linear rationalism of written history. I would argue that much orthodoxy (whether religious or other) depends on an unexamined ideological framing of reality. It tends to marginalize non-rational kinds of intelligence.⁶ As such it limits the intellect from its full range

and capacity.⁷ The assumption of linear time is especially problematic if we recognize the diverse kinds of time represented in Islamic sources.⁸

Films become intellectually powerful to the extent that rather than claiming to objectively recreate the “facts” of the past, they, in Rosenstone’s words,

point to it and play with it, raising questions about the very evidence on which our knowledge of the past depends, creatively interacting with its traces.⁹

Creative elements of film allow a view outside the bounds of rationality. As William Guynn argues, the ability to rationally control language is only partial “and it is by means of the uncontrollable image that truth inadvertently speaks to the historian.”¹⁰ From this point of view, original historical interpretation requires the imaginative freedom to depart from realist norms.¹¹

Realism in history is linked to a reliance on written text, and the assumption that it provides an unambiguous access to truth. Likewise, as Viola Shafik points out, classical realism in film is rooted in the discourse of an

all-knowing narrator, who does not admit his subjectivity at any point in the text. This discourse produces *realist illusion* by denying itself as an utterance¹²

When non-realist elements are introduced this spell can be broken, allowing the audience to move into a more thoughtful and interpretive stance.¹³ The surrealist movement, in its responses to the absurd carnage of World War I, sought new vision by breaking the linear habits of perceiving time, creating films, poetry and visual art that promoted disorientation in the audience.¹⁴ The contemporary Arab poet

Adonis describes a continuum between surrealism and Sufism, the inner tradition of gnosis in Islam.¹⁵

Film in the Muslim World

Cinema entered the Muslim world in the era of colonialism and postcolonialism. Film technology arrived along with other signs of European advancement and dominance. Yet it also provided continuity with elements of Islamic art that have not often been duly recognized across the east-west divide.

Film emerged at a time when other forms of art in the Muslim world had diminished. Reasons for this decline include a.) the end of artistic patronage (as Muslim governments diverted resources in a race to “catch up” with the West), and b.) puritanical Sunni reform movements by whose standards many forms of art were seen as “superfluous at best and sinful at worst”¹⁶, that is, “un-Islamic”.

The suppression or diminishment of oral and artistic culture is arguably essential to internal conflicts within and around the Muslim world. Indigenous art forms, such as shadow play, were first suppressed internally as *bid'a* (potentially heretical “innovation”) by some Muslim reformers. Then they were repressed by European colonial powers.¹⁷ When film emerged within Muslim societies, it was considered by some Muslims to be a product of hegemonic colonial interests.

Under certain circumstances, Sufi cultural heritage became activated in the post-colonial era and in response to the failure of political Islam to create a society that reflected the spectrum of Muslim perspectives and values. Sufism is in fact essential to traditions of Islamic art that have influenced these films, as well as to the “healing fiction”¹⁸ they potentially create as works of beauty. In these films, what I call the *barzakhi* or imaginal departures from realism are key to their historical meanings. In Arabic, the word *barzakh* means “something that stands between and separates two other things, yet combines the attributes of both.”¹⁹ A *barzakh* is a middle ground that both joins together two (often opposite) things and separates them. Ambiguity is a feature of the *barzakh* between the seen and the unseen, the known and the unknown. The *barzakhi* nature of expressions allows the audience to take them on more than one level.²⁰

The Village in Film

The setting of a film is one of the primary means of establishing its relationship to time and the past. Since “history” is seen in many eyes as a unilinear story of “progress” told through cities, conquests, literacy, and “great men”, it often does not focus on what happens in villages. Yet a look at films made in majority Muslim societies reveals a plethora of village settings.²¹

The image of the village is a sensitive one with many historical associations. It has been employed in a variety of strategies.²² Gönül Dönmez-Colin has written about what she calls “village films.”

Their exotic qualities seem to appeal to Western audiences and hence attract foreign finance. Some of these films are, no doubt, of exceptional quality, whereas others try to bank on a tried-and-tested formula and do not go further than reinforcing Orientalist thinking that assumes the East as the ‘other’ of the West, an ‘othering’ that underpins stereotypes and reduces whole cultures to one dimension...Naturally, the historical and social ambiguity of *‘village films’* that position their narrative outside history and outside time allow them to fall more easily within the abstraction of humanism implying that humanity is the same everywhere, which is an attractive notion in an age of globalization.²³

Dönmez-Colin is undoubtedly correct in suggesting that the village may attract orientalist projections in Western viewers, and her observation that it draws Western crowds seems accurate. I agree that there is often an element of anachronism and abstraction associated with the village as a symbol in films from the Muslim world. It is also likely that at some level, films portraying village life do get their own unstated category in the global marketplace, raising the possibility of genre formulae and clichés.

However, far from romanticizing it, the films I want to discuss *problematize* the village, particularly in relation to history and precisely through their surreal, rather than realistic, elements.

Do urban settings lend themselves to a more realist and “historical” presentation? Certainly the city, such as the Cairo of *The Yacoubian Building*, the

Tehran of *A Separation* or the Istanbul of *Distant*, inhabits a particular historical time that has its own character and cannot be generalized. The village, however, presents a world that, from the outsider's point of view, may seem outside of history. (This is as true of for example the small towns featured in *Nebraska* as it is for the films discussed here.) The general audience cannot be assumed to differentiate in real terms between the history of one village versus another. The particular history of a village seemingly cannot enter the story in a realistic fashion.

Are these films indigenous visual poetry or globalized fantasies for an outside audience? Dönmez-Colin claims with good reason that when films detach from the particulars of historical realism they embrace abstractions and fail to problematize the historical dimensions of the world. It follows that any notion that “humanity is the same everywhere” is potentially a ploy to cover up historical reality. Popular anachronistic settings thus may encourage audiences to turn a blind eye to exploitation that is inherent in economic globalization. Accordingly, a “village film” both projects and invites an essentializing, idyllic gaze that is counter to historical reality.

The two films I explore here, however, do the opposite. It is precisely their ambiguous and unreal elements that provoke critical thought into the complexities of “real” history. The imaginal departures from realism are key to the historical meanings in these films, and they are consistent with distinctive elements in traditions of Islamic art. Thus they offer an indigenous historical critique.

If we consider the un-realistic elements in the settings of these films, it is clear that in spite of their great differences in style, narrative, and the cultural background of their directors²⁴, they are constellated around similar archetypal elements: the place of the individual in a lost village (as an image of larger society), the nature of its lostness, and village's relation to time and authority.

Khemir and Rasoulof have each created images of a village that exists nowhere, and simultaneously everywhere, full of people who bear a tragic relation to history. Their lives are circumscribed by their isolation and the impossibility of reconnecting with the larger world.

The films create unique meeting places between history and imagination. Each setting is characterized by isolation and remoteness, with a population inhabiting a ruined environment. One village is lost in an ocean of sand, the other in a desert-like sea. In each case, the villagers are separated from the larger, interconnected world—by their poverty, the erosion of their cultural traditions, and in some cases by those who purport to govern them. This disconnect is shown through visual shards of the past, or the inaccessible present. Each village contains remnants of a lost world, or rather, a lost connection to the larger world. The people live in the shell of what was once a prosperous environment.

Khemir's Lost Village

Wanderers in the Desert begins as the young Abd as-Salam arrives by bus in a remote area to start his job as the government-appointed teacher. As the bus passes vehicles half buried in sand, the driver adamantly denies that any village exists in the area. Yet Abd as-Salam persists and encounters a strange community dressed in the colorful turbans and robes of a pre-modern past.²⁵ They dwell in what seems a ghost town of crumbling walls and sand-filled streets that echo a happier time. The village headman, referred to as the shaykh, welcomes the teacher with words evoking a sense of loss.

Here's the village... or what's left of it. They say everything that you see over there used to be green. An oasis! A jewel of the desert. It had almond, fig and pomegranate, medlar and date trees... We live in a very remote and forgotten place.

The villagers seem to have no conception of the “country” or nation in any modern sense, only their sense of a geography of the past. They speak wistfully of “the garden”, the legendary city of Cordoba, the mythic journeys of Sindbad, and the elusive beloved of classical Arabic poetic odes. The crumbling walls of the village bear evocative reminders of the past, including the phrase *la ghaliba illa Allah* (“God is the only winner”) inscribed on the walls. (The phrase is taken from its mantra-like repetition thousands of times on the walls of the Alhambra in Granada.²⁶) More than merely a pious affirmation, the phrase acts as a meditation on history.

Abd al-Salam encounters an orphaned boy named Husayn, who wants to know what he has come to teach. Among other subjects, he explains, he will teach them history. The boy seems puzzled by the standard scholastic idea of history, as the narrative of nation-states.

--“(Do you mean the) history of the garden?”

--“The garden? No, history of the country!”

---“History of our village?”

--“No, of the entire country!”

The boy Husayn is obsessed with learning what a garden is. He has heard about them, but never seen one. He asks an elderly villager “what’s a garden like?” All of this suggests that the garden is not a literal place, but an image of something that has been lost. The desert acts not as a pathway but a prison, locking the people into dry ruins, in which memories alone sustain their vision of the world, and the meaning of their existence within it. In quest of that vision, many of the village’s young men have left to become the “wanderers” (*al-ha’imun*) of the film’s title. They appear, phantom-like, throughout the movie, trudging in the distance against sand and wind, singing a mournful song. Those who remain in the village are bitter about the “curse” that has caused their loved ones to depart forever.²⁷

The central mystery in *Wanderers in the Desert* is the nature of this curse. In his commentary, Khemir explains why the Arabic word *ha’imun* (wanderers) was chosen. The root word, *hiyam*, has multiple shades of meaning. On the one hand, it is one of the Arabic words for love. It also refers to a sickness of

disorientation that afflicts camels, causing them to leave the road. These meanings intertwine to form the picture of someone madly in love, but lost, and unable to find a path back to the symbolic source of life: the garden.²⁸ Khemir states that this word in his film indicates the “lost generations” who are in love with the traces of “this culture, this civilization”

They are in love with this impossible garden or this impossible road,
which drives them mad...And condemns them to wandering.²⁹

Verses throughout the Qur'an suggest that the garden is a place of connection between God and creation, in which God's unity is ecstatically discovered through the experience of diverse species.³⁰ It is both the paradise of the next world and the ecological “signs of God” in this one, a unity-in-diversity reflected also in cultural connections between distant lands. Thus, as Muslims remember the advice of the Prophet Muhammad to “seek knowledge even unto China”, the sea is connected with both the desert and the garden. It is the pathway, symbolized in folklore by Sindbad's sea-faring ship, whereon the traveler could depart from the familiar, find the other, and more importantly, find a connection to God in the other. The inexplicable appearance of a sailboat in the middle of the desert is a key image³¹ of the film. The name of its bewildered captain is revealed to be none other than “Sinbad”. As retold toward the end of the film, the man had entrusted the villagers to care for his stranded vessel before he departed to find the sea. In his absence, and unable to find any treasure or practical use for the boat,

they take it apart and divide it its components up among themselves. Its transformative potential has been destroyed.

The boy Husayn is focused on finding out “what a garden is”. Husayn has only known the crumbling village, though it is permeated with memories of its lush past and connections to the larger world. He and his friends try to “make a garden” by breaking all the mirrors in the village and assembling the shards in a geometric pattern, the mirrors symbolizing self-regard, as Khemir comments. Similarly, surrealist writers evoked the sense of a lost paradise that could only be restored by derailing the realist norms of linear time that had accumulated into the collective mindset of the modern world.³²

Khemir is not describing any single literal moment in the past, but the nostalgic vision of a culture that nurtured varying perspectives of truth, just as diverse species are essential to a garden. His film suggests that a life lived longing for the ecstatic experience of unity in diversity is one of wandering, of spontaneity. It is not one of seeking power. As the story of Husayn Ibn Mansur Al-Hallaj (a controversial 9th Century sufi mystic executed for heresy after publicly proclaiming *ana al-haq* (“I am the Truth”).³³ shows, one who is committed to this vision may face opposition. This explains why, in the film, when a youth departs to become a wanderer, he leaves behind Hallaj’s verses painted on the wall under the cloth image of al-Buraq (the winged steed who conveyed the Prophet through the seven heavens in his Night Journey to the divine realm).

The mystic Hallaj's ecstatic love is identified with the garden. In a vision, Abd al-Salam encounters a strange old woman in a dream vision who leads him by the hand out of the village "to the garden of his beloved". Has he been spirited away by an illusion, or is he on the path of the mystics himself? Later in the film, a preening, bad-tempered officer arrives at the village in *Wanderers*, to investigate the disappearance of the teacher. He berates the villagers for being backward.

Order, security...don't they mean anything to you? What century do you live in?---[*Ma ta'rafoush antum fi ayyi qarn ha'isheen*—you have no clue what generation you live in—]...You're preaching anarchy!

The officer becomes fed up with the villagers and demands gasoline in order to leave the area. All the villagers can provide, however, is a pair of donkeys. He and the village clerk ride them, trying to cross the dunes at night. Their conversation ends the film.

Officer: These delinquents, these dogs!...Soon they'll have a taste of modern discipline. I'll clean up this village.

Clerk: Be lenient, officer, with those who are wounded by their fate (*al-zaman*, "the times")

Officer: What? Think of it as setting an example. Think of the state's authority!

Clerk: An example, in this ocean of sand? Leave them to the pain of their endlessly wandering children...

Officer: I'm fed up with these riddles.

Clerk: Riddle...the only riddle is that of time. (*La lughza illa al-dahr*, repeated 4 times).

The tragedy of the wanderers is that they set out to find the garden, and have only succeeded in an endless walk through the desert, “this ocean of sand”—the absence of visionary, inclusive culture.

Rasoulof’s *Iron Island*

In this film, we again find ourselves in a village occupying a strange place: a decaying oil tanker anchored offshore in the Persian Gulf. The film was shot on location, immersing us in an unfamiliar but intensely “realistic” sense of place. We see actors move and hear them speak within dim passageways, surrounded by rust, peeling paint, and the metallic scrapes and groans of the ship. Yet the “impossible” intrudes as we also see donkeys tethered and gardens planted on the deck. We hear chickens and the mooing of cows. Impoverished families who have found a refuge on the wreck live under the watchful care of a patriarch named “Captain” Nemat.

The “iron island” of the title of Rasoulof’s film is a once-powerful vessel that is never going anywhere again. Built and used as a means of the global transfer of resources, it undoubtedly took much Middle Eastern oil to market in the developed world. As a castaway of that world, it has become a temporary home, *qua* village, for the poorest of the poor. Rather than a connecting medium full of endless pathways, the sea is another desert encasing them in remoteness. As in Khemir’s film, the setting evokes a distant memory of unrestricted travel. By

comparison, the present is a prison of homogeneity and isolation. Again, a “lost garden” image evokes a vision of a diverse world that for many has vanished.

Yet village life goes on: bread is baked, weddings and funerals are celebrated, families seek to preserve their honor through tight control of male-female interactions, women wear *hijab* as well as mask-like face coverings referred to in the film as *burqas*. They give birth to and raise children in the absence of their men, most of whom, evoking the wanderers in the other film, are economic migrants forced to seek work far away.

The ship’s scrap metal and dregs of an oil cargo still offer a meager financial resource. Villagers queue up to pay for the privilege of borrowing a single cell phone, allowing brief, public conversations with relatives. In one poignant scene, young men who have survived a harrowing swim to shore (each pushing a half-full oil drum for the market) return to the ship and furtively pay money to sit in a dark room in front of an old television set. Drawing on a battered satellite dish and the intermittent electricity supplied by the ship’s generator, the TV catches some stray signals. The youths sit solemnly as fragments of random broadcasts lurch onto the screen. They watch intently as a few seconds from a German shopping network turn into garbled voices and colors from a children’s cartoon. Their picture of the larger world is no more than the earth’s digital dust, yet they face it with rapt attention.

Again as in Khemir's film, a teacher on the ship struggles to teach the village children under surreal conditions. A balding, middle aged man named Abdolkarim, he uses the steel wall of the compartment as a chalkboard and fills empty bullets casings with plaster in order to make his own chalk. When the Captain arrives with the gift of a yellowed newspaper for teaching the kids to read, Abdolkarim objects that it is old. (Captain Nemat replies with an expansive gesture, "What's the difference? Read it for fun.") Nevertheless, students respond eagerly to his lessons, in which he hides messages within obvious-sounding reading dictations. Each of them can be seen to carry more than one level of meaning. "What do all animals need in order to breathe? They need air."

The old newspapers carry talk of "the enemy", likely a reference to Iran's long war with Iraq in the 1980's. In one scene, Abdolkarim tries to update the students on what lies beyond these outdated fragments. "The war has long ended", he says. A boy with missing fingers asks, "You mean there'll be no more wars?" Abdolkarim replies, "Pay attention, students. War isn't a good thing. May there never be another war anywhere in the world." At this point, a girl asks, "Uncle, where is the world?" Dialogue in this scene reveals depths of disconnect resulting from cultural loss. He replies, "Where we are now is part of the world. So we're in the world."

Pay attention, students. We're inside the ship, the ship is in the sea, the sea is in the world. So we're in the world. Understand?

The teacher Abdolkarim has proven with a simple device that the deck is getting closer to the water all the time: the ship is slowly sinking. Captain Nemat denies this, proudly chanting to the people under his care that the ship “stands like a rock”. Abdolkarim knows the truth is subversive, so he slips hints into his seemingly pedantic dictation lessons. He has the students write, “the ship sinks more in the sea every day.” When he notices the Captain eavesdropping outside the classroom, he changes back to an approved message: “life in the ship is beautiful”. All this suggests the ship is an image of a “regime of truth”, to use Foucault’s term, held together by repeating a set of accepted propositions.

An impoverished teenager named Ahmed works for the Captain, and is not-so-secretly in love with an unnamed young woman on the ship. His relationship with the girl infuriates his boss, who has arranged a lucrative marriage between her and an older stranger. In the Captain’s rational world, a lover without money is just another “penniless punk”. The film manifests the archetype of the lost or forbidden beloved, present in poetic tradition since pre-Islamic times³⁴.

The lovers find discrete ways to pursue their chaste but dangerous relationship in the confines of the ship. In one scene, they exchange gifts wordlessly at night by means of a string lowered between decks. Ahmed lets down his prized radio to the girl as it plays a love song, and she sends up her necklace, tugging the string when it is ready for him to pull up. He takes off his shirt, ties it into a bundle and lowers it to her, whereupon she sends up her face mask, one of

the “burqas” that women on the ship wear to hide their brows, cheeks, nose and upper lip. He puts the mask to his own face and looks through the eyeholes, seeing the world from her perspective, then takes it off and kisses it. The scene conveys a tenderness and intimacy that contrast with the film’s abundant evidence of women’s repression, accentuated by the girl’s namelessness, silence and invisibility behind her mask, and the mortal danger of an unmarried relationship.

Nemat learns of this tryst and warns Ahmed that if he continues to show interest in the girl, “I’ll kill you and the seagulls will fly over your grave”. The girl’s wedding to the stranger goes ahead as planned, and as men play music and dance, Ahmed can no longer bear to stay on the ship. He gets on a launch and speeds away. He is brought back the next day, hands and feet bound, and placed on the lift that is raised and lowered electronically between the water and the deck. Captain Nemat accuses him of stealing the boat and demands a confession and apology. The boy remains silent, whereupon Nemat lowers the lift till the boy is under water. In an excruciating scene of torture, the boy is repeatedly dunked and held under water. When the teacher tries to intervene, Nemat exclaims, “If I let him go there’ll be chaos on this ship.”

Apparently, independent expressions of love threaten the system of power. Significantly a very similar refrain was heard from the vizier addressing the Caliph at the time of al-Hallaj:

Prince of the True Believers, said the Vizier, if this man is left to live, he will corrupt the Law and make apostates of your subjects. That will be the end of your dynasty.³⁵

A young boy nicknamed “Baby Fish” spends his days in the bowels of the ship trying to net fish that have swum into cracks in the hull and cannot escape. Ahmed discovers him one day when he runs below to hide from the enraged father of his beloved. He thinks the boy is simply trying to “catch fish”, but Baby Fish’s project is to carry the fish in a bucket up to the deck and release them back into the ocean. His aim is to rescue the fish.

An old man named Uncle Sadegh is also identified with a single, seemingly irrational activity: staring continuously into the sun, protected by sunglasses. His behavior is accepted into the fabric of village life aboard the ship, with no explanation. Ahmed asks him, “What do you see in the sun, Old Man?” His response implies a long-term search for something that must be seen for oneself and is impossible to explain in words. “I’ve been looking for years in vain, and you want to see something in five minutes!” Uncle Sadegh’s sun-gazing seems to be an allusion to the visionary methods of some noted Sufis in Islamic history.³⁶

Things go from bad to worse for the villagers, but Captain Nemat hustles them along as if it is all according to plan. And in fact it may all be according to his plan, for he has orchestrated a heightened effort to dismantle the ship and sell its remaining oil before everyone is evicted from it. He arranges for everyone

aboard to give him power of attorney, so he can use their “earnings” to buy a plot of land in which to collectively resettle.

Everyone leaves the ship. The entire village makes a devotional visit to a saint’s shrine on their way to these promised “lands”. Ahmed, after his water torture, is unconscious and carried on a blanket. He is brought to the shrine where he lies in the sacred enclosure. The villagers say prayers for him and touch the tomb of the saint, then leave Ahmed sleeping there as they head to the “lands”.

The last two to leave the ship are Captain Nemat and Baby Fish, who Nemat is surprised to find carrying up a bucket of rescued fish from the hold. Nemat speaks in a gentle but condescending tone as he dumps the fish back down into the hold. “Poor fish! We will come back when they are bigger and eat them!” He expresses the adult rationality/realism of which he is master, yet, as with all his other actions in the film, it does nothing to veil his apparently cannibalistic attitude. The boy runs away from Nemat, like an escaping fish himself, when they arrive on the beach. Nemat curses him, abandoning him in his rush to join the villagers. He comes to where they sit and wait helplessly in a desolate patch of desert, while Uncle Sadegh stands as usual staring at the setting sun. Gesturing with jovial pride, Nemat describes the improbable features of the future village, including a school “for our dear teacher” and a playground.

In the very last moments of the film, three threads come together in three short scenes in quick succession. Ahmed’s unnamed beloved, whose wedding to

Nemat's "dependable" stranger he could not endure, has arrived late to the shrine and enters the building that her driver believes is empty. Lying on the floor, Ahmed seems to regain consciousness, opening his eyes and closing them again just as the young woman enters. Not only are the lovers finally alone together, they have been reunited in a space made sacred by the presence of a saint. At the same moment, the camera cuts to Uncle Sadegh, staring into the sun, who begins to smile and utter sounds of wonder, as if his long-hoped for vision has begun. Finally, the camera returns to Baby Fish alone on the beach at sunset.

He picks up a small fish from a shallow tide-pool on the shore, and returns it into the sea. He turns as if to walk back toward land, then suddenly pivots. Up to the very last frame, he plunges in slow motion into the sea. The one who wants to help other beings escape, escapes into the sea himself, where he is free, though his survival is far from guaranteed.

Conclusion

In his director's commentary, Nacer Khemir expresses his view that modern views of time and progress have eroded the cultural fabric of his society. Teachers within this rational model

enabled a rupture between generations, and, in fact, an anthropological death. The children might find it easier to inhabit today's world, but they carry a death of emotions that is very difficult to fill in, difficult to heal. ... We are no longer a society

with a 1500 year old past. Societies with depth and history. But societies which are in fact only 50 years old.

Khemir suggests a complex combination of events and ideologies has intervened to break connections with the past. The past becomes an empty wasteland, no longer a garden or a pathway to larger perspectives nourished by interaction with others.

I would argue that the films are not ultimately pessimistic. Hope is not directly indicated through any outward resolution or the victory of a protagonist.³⁷ However, each film features dream-like melting points that hint at unforeseen possibilities, because the imagination has been opened up. These stories of seemingly helpless people represent the power of the imagination to reconnect us with diverse other beings, with the power to love and to help, and with the mysteries of creation.

These films create a picture of the real and then break it. This apophatic, surrealist strategy contrasts with history as “objective” narrative, which involves the construction of the image but not its breaking. The resulting realist illusion is touted as a mirror in which truth can be directly seen. The breaking of the mirror, like the crushing of the grape, is an image of ecstasy. The audience is challenged to withstand the shattering of the image, and stay alert and present through the aesthetic atmosphere of the film, in the hope of a spontaneous realization.

If we stop insisting that time is straightforward, linear and homogenous, we might be released from other illusions as well. The world presented by history may not be complete illusion, but neither is it an objective mirror of truth. It can now return to what it more properly is: a play of shadows and light, like film itself. If we observe our narratives of historical progress as if projected on a screen, then time itself can be freed from its subjection to these narratives.³⁸ This resonates with core Islamicate view of time as the *waqt*—the “moment”—untethered to cause-and-effect, simultaneously revealing the spectrum of all God’s attributes.

Cinema is one avenue in which Islamicate culture has not only survived but grown and developed and communicated with others, both beyond and within itself. The films described above have subverted the “realist illusion” and broken the “unconditional identification of the audience with the narration”. In this process, the Sufi, surreal and otherwise fantastic elements in these films play an extremely important role. Such playful forms of intellect were the first things rejected by the secular post-colonial regimes as well by puritanical movements attempting to lay claim to global “Islamic” leadership. They preserve ludic dimensions of knowledge and understanding.

To enter the world of the story—the poem, the film, the puppet show, the dream—is dangerous, as it can take you away down the rabbit hole into itself. How much more dangerous is the dream of “history”, when it is not understood as a dream?

These films, far from being simplifications of history, “are” history, and more importantly, nourish an indigenous culture of history. What remains of prophetic vision in a society that is being drained of its traditions? That is, one pressured toward standardization from all directions, whether by takfiris, jihadis, imperialism, global consumerism, patriarchs, despots, preachers of regurgitated theologies or economic models, or bigots, internal or external?

Answers to this question, and to the deeper question “what is Islam?” are suggested in these films, in such a hushed tone and so quietly as to almost go unheard.

¹ I use these words cautiously to refer to diverse and complex human realities, acknowledging that they each risk implying an essential or objective meaning, which I do not intend. Similarly, my use of the term “Islamicate” follows Marshall Hodgson, who coined it to refer “not directly to the religion...but to the social and cultural complex historically associated with Islam and the Muslims.” See Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam, Vol. I: The Classical Age of Islam*, (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 59. I also respect and refer readers to Shahab Ahmed’s nuanced embrace of the term “Islamic”. See his *What is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), 157-175.

² Nacer Khemir is a Tunisian whose other films include *L’Ogresse* (1977), *The Dove’s Lost Necklace* (1991), *Bab ‘Aziz*, *The Prince Who Contemplated His Soul* (2005), *Sheherezade* (2011), *Looking for Muhyiddin* (2014), *Where to Start?* (2014), and *Whispering Sands* (2018). Rasoulof is an Iranian, director of *The Twilight* (2002), *The White Meadows* (2009), *Goodbye* (2011), *Manuscripts Don’t Burn* (2013), *A Man of Integrity* (2017), and *There is No Evil* (2020).

³ Andrei Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time: The Great Russian Filmmaker Discusses His Art*, trans. Kitty Hunter-Blair, (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1989), 63.

⁴ Robert A. Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 15.

⁵ Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past*, 15.

⁶ A comprehensive philosophical discussion of time is beyond the scope of this paper, but I give credence to Wendy Doniger's assertion that, "the chronological framework is largely imperialistic". (*The Hindus: An Alternative History*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009, 19) Linear time can also be seen to form a basis of what Janette Habashi calls a "colonized way of knowing" that permeates contemporary discourse in Arab societies. See her article, "Arab Indigenous Discourse: Social Imaginary Alternative to Decolonizing Methodology," *International Review of Qualitative Research*, 8, No. 4, Winter 2015, 493-508 (493), accessed February 14, 2020.

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/290493050_Arab_Indigenous_Discourse_Social_Imaginary_Alternative_to_Decolonizing_Methodology/citation/download

⁷ In classical Islamic discussion of the intellect ('*aql*), a distinction was drawn between the "full", transpersonal intellect ('*aql kulliy*) and the "partial" intellect ('*aql juz'iy*) seeming to belong to the individual. See Mehdi Aminrazavi, *Suhrawardi and the School of Illumination*, (Richmond, UK: Curzon, 1997), 21.

⁸ Shahzad Bashir describes "Islamic time" as full of diverse constructions, indeed "an extensive web with multiple veins, conjunctions, contradictions, and crossovers." See his article, "On Islamic Time: Rethinking Chronology in the Historiography of Muslim Societies", *History and Theory* 53, 4 (2014), 519-544 (522), accessed February 14, 2020, <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=99906902&site=ehost-live>

⁹ Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past*, 12.

¹⁰ William Guynn, *Writing History in Film*, (NY: Routledge, 2006), 9.

¹¹ In Oleg Grabar's words, "liturgical" art is where "the outcome is always known in advance" (cited in Laura U. Marks, *Enfoldment and Infinity: An Islamic Genealogy of New Media Art*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010, 48). Grabar contrasts such art with what he calls "ludic" art that invites the viewer to participate in choosing how to interpret the work.

¹² Viola Shafik, *Arab Cinema: History and Cultural Identity, New Revised Edition*, (NY: American University in Cairo Press, 2007), 127, emphasis added.

¹³ Shafik goes on to quote Berthold Brecht: "true insight into reality can only be achieved when the unconditional identification of the audience with the narration is abolished." (Shafik, *Arab Cinema*, 128). Such a break can be achieved in film through what Gilles Deleuze called the "time-image" or "crystal-image", in which actual and virtual, present and past, come together, "distinct but indiscernible" and "in continual exchange." See Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (London, UK: Continuum, 1989), 68. Such images subvert any simplified notion that a film replicates some objectively "actual" truth of the past. See my discussion of the *barzakh* below.

¹⁴ See Lauren E. Fretz, “Surréalisme Sous-l’Eau: Science and Surrealism in the Early Films and Writings of Jean Painlevé”, *Film & History*, Volume 40.2 (Fall 2010), 45-65 (46), accessed February 14, 2020.
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¹⁵ See Adonis, *Sufism and Surrealism*, trans. Judith Cumberbatch, (London, UK: SAQI, 2005).

¹⁶ Vernon O. Egger, *A History of the Muslim World Since 1260: The Making of a Global Community*, (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2008), 311.

¹⁷ Viola Shafik describes the complicity of some colonial powers in the development of a fundamentalist mindset promoting shallow and uncontested instruction in the Qur’an as the only indigenous cultural production allowed:

“In the French colonies the hindering of native efforts to produce was part of a general framework of cultural and economic politics. In Algeria indigenous culture was excluded by strict measures and regulations. Already in the middle of the last century authorities prohibited the traditional and popular shadow plays. Arab culture was not furthered in schools. Pupils were taught only in French and the communication of Arab culture was confined to traditional Qur’an schools.” (Shafik, 15-16) In the meantime, Arab and other Muslim audiences were on the receiving end of a steady stream of colonial or imperial cinema that represented direct propaganda, in which indigenous culture was stylized as primitive, barbaric, and violent, or a forced diet of Western consumer culture. (See Shafik, 16-18.)

¹⁸ See James Hillman, *Healing Fiction*, (Putnam, CT: Spring Publications, Inc., 1994).

¹⁹ This word is mentioned in the Qur’an in relation to “two seas”. The seas are both joined and separated by what comes between them. (Qur’an 55:19-20). The human imagination is such a *barzakh* between the eternal infinite and the finite moment in time. On the one hand is God and on the other is absolute nothingness. Existence is their *barzakh*. As the 12th Century Spanish sufi Muhyiddin Ibn al-‘Arabi said, “There is nothing in existence but *barzakhs*”. (Quoted in William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-‘Arabi’s Metaphysics of Imagination*, (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1989), 14.)

²⁰ “This led to an ambiguous cinematic stylistics whose medium is the image/seen, but whose main emphasis is on the substance that is unseen.” (Khatereh Sheibani, *The Poetics of Iranian Cinema: Aesthetics, Modernity and Film after the Revolution*, (London, UK: I.B. Tauris, 2011), 178). Sheibani traces Iranian cinematic heritage to the thought of the Iranian mystic philosopher Suhrawardi, who is known for his philosophy of *Ishraq*, or illuminationism. Suhrawardi challenged the basis of rationalism in Aristotle’s philosophy. In his view, “essence is more important than existence, and intuitive knowledge more significant than representational knowledge reliant on cognitive reason. Instead of an absolute reality, illuminationism validates a ‘continuum’ of reality consisting of intellect, soul, matter and a fourth realm called *alam al-khiyal* or *alam al-mithal*” i.e., the “imaginal world”. (Sheibani, 178.)

²¹ A brief and incomplete glance at films focused on villages, or on the gap between village and urban reality, reveals a list diverse in time and culture: *The Cow* (Iran, 1969), *The Color of Paradise* (Iran, 1999) *The Wild Pear Tree* (Turkey, 2018), *Bliss* (Turkey, 2007), *Times and Winds* (Turkey, 2006), *Bedwin Hacker* (Tunisia, 2003), *Finzan* (Mali, 1989), *The Clay Bird* (Bangladesh, 2002), and *Al-Mumiya* (Egypt, 1969).

²² From one vantage point, the “village” motif in Arab culture/Islamicate film often has been coopted to make local or indigenous traditions appear inferior to modernity. Representations of the village in the Nasser era Egyptian films *Cairo Station* (1958) and *Al-Mumiya* (1969) reflect this. Habashi argues that “to restructure the ‘primitive’ resonated among the colonized intellectual elites as part of the neoliberal practices of power and knowledge.” (2015, 495).

²³Gönül Dönmez-Colin, “Introduction,” in *The Cinema of North Africa and the Middle East*, ed. Gönül Dönmez-Colin, (London, UK: Wallflower Press, 2007), 10. Emphasis added.

²⁴ Khemir is Tunisian, while Rasoulof is Iranian.

²⁵ The film’s enigmatic and dream-like setting continually brings the present and the remembered past together. This is strongly resonant of Deleuze’s category of filmic images as “time crystals” in which are fused the actual and the virtual. (See Deleuze, 67-69.)

²⁶ The Alhambra is famous for its gardens and its fountains. The city-state of Granada is remembered as an island of Muslim civilization that was eventually consumed by the Catholic Reconquista and the eventual conversion or expulsion of non-Christians. See Ira Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies*, (NY: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 388-389.

²⁷ Of course, since the making of the film the region has seen tragedies befall countless migrants fleeing war and poverty.

²⁸Khemir suggests the importance of the garden as a symbol in cultures connected with Islam. “For Arabs, the Garden is Heaven. It’s the only garden. And here is a culture which comes from the desert, whose sole desire is to enter this garden. At the center of the garden, there is water, and water is a sign of femininity.” Nacer Khemir, commentary on his trilogy in the short film *Nacer Khemir’s Desert Trilogy*, included with the DVD version of *Bab ‘Aziz: The Prince Who Contemplated His Soul*.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ See for example, Qur’an, 6:141 and 55:46-54.

³¹ Or in Deleuzian terms, “image crystal.”

³² The Second Manifesto of Surrealism mentions “a certain spiritual plane on which life and death, the real and the imaginary, the past and the future, the communicable and the incommunicable, the high and the low, are not conceived of as opposites.” (Cited in David Gascoyne, *A Short Survey of Surrealism*, (London, UK: Enitharmon Press, 2003), 70.) “Among the tasks of the poet is to

make it possible for others to attain this lost paradise that is sur-realism.” (Adonis, *Sufism and Surrealism*, 104). Of course, Deleuze also employs many examples of the use of mirrors to create “image crystals” combining the actual (present) and the virtual (past). (See Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 67-68.)

³³ This is not as self-aggrandizing a statement as it may seem. The context generally understood was that Al-Hallaj was in a state of annihilation, so that his phrase implies that only God exists, and is speaking through the surrendered person. See Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1975), 62-77.

³⁴ See Michael Sells (trans.), *Desert Tracings: Six Classic Arabian Odes*, (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1989).

³⁵ “Al-Hallaj: The Crucifixion of a Mystic,” trans. Eric Schroeder, in *Anthology of Islamic Literature: From the Rise of Islam to Modern Times*, ed. James Kritzeck (NY: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964), 101.

³⁶ See Fariduddin Attar, *Muslim Saints and Mystics*, A.J. Arberry, (trans.), (NY: Arkana, 1966). The scene also calls to mind William Blake’s visionary perception of the sun: “What it will be Questiond When the Sun rises do you not see a round Disk of fire somewhat like a Guinea O no no I see an Innumerable company of the Heavenly host crying Holy Holy Holy is the Lord God Almighty.” From William Blake’s “A Vision of the Last Judgment”, in David V. Erdman, ed., *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, (NY: Anchor Books, 1988), 566.

³⁷ In Khemir’s films, in keeping with Islamic traditions of art, the characters are “not individuals who develop and change, but types...who are multiplied to create a richer narrative world.” Roy Armes, “The Poetic Vision of Nacer Khemir”, *Third Text*, vol. 24, issue 1, January 2010, 69-82 (81), accessed February 14, 2020, <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=47804217&site=ehost-live>

³⁸ Thus film may help the audience shed the strict assumptions of linearity, so that in Bashir’s words, “Islamic time” can appear as “an extensive web with multiple veins, conjunctions, contradictions, and crossovers” (Bashir, “On Islamic Time,” 522.)

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