Lost Futurities: Science Fiction in Contemporary Art from the Middle East

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ABSTRACT

Nathalie Muller

Lost Futurities
Science Fiction in Contemporary Art from the Middle East

(Supervisors: Anthony Downey and Anna Ball)

Lost Futurities examines science fiction (sf) in contemporary artistic practices from the Middle East. Focusing predominantly on works produced in the second decade of this century (2006-2020), when artists from the region started engaging more explicitly with sf, the study is transnational (including Palestine, Egypt, Lebanon, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Syria) and interdisciplinary, drawing on a variety of fields in the humanities (including sf studies, area studies, postcolonial studies, visual culture studies and the environmental humanities). It looks specifically at how sf signals loss while simultaneously operating as a recuperative device. Each chapter foregrounds a sf trope that facilitates this - imperfect - dynamic of loss and recuperation, creating a speculative and interpretative method that redresses issues of historicity, dispossession, violence, identity, belonging, and the nation state.

The first chapter, 'Lunar Dreams', focuses on the sf trope of space travel and pairs it with a discussion of nostalgia, modernity and lost dreams in relation to the nation state. In my second chapter, 'Apocalypse Now', I interrogate how trauma, memory and forgetfulness are played out in the wake of historical and ecological catastrophe. The third chapter discusses sf's significant Others – aliens, robots and superheroes – and explores how tactics of masquerade reframe and complicate identity and belonging, as well as individual and collective history. In the fourth chapter I propose ruin as a sf motif that can unlock the future, rather than being a manifestation of decay moored in the past. I focus on ruinous landscapes as a way to identify horizons of hope, renewal and social dreaming. In my final chapter, 'Liquid Monstrosities', I turn to the sf trope of the monster as a complex figure of

futurity and show how artists sound alarm bells over the extractivist practices of the Anthropocene through the lens of petro- and hydro-imaginaries.

Together these chapters aim to critically think with and through sf as an artistic and political project of speculative conjuring, imaging loss, opening possibility and worldbuilding. *Lost Futurities* wants to broaden the conversation on contemporary art and politics from the Middle East, extend the lexicon of sf tropes, and propose sf as a critical and speculative method of analysis for the humanities by studying the arts and politics of futurity.

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The topic for this PhD started percolating in my head long before I even seriously started contemplating pursuing a research degree. I want to thank all the artists and other cultural practitioners whose work has delighted me, provoked me and shaped my curatorial practice and my thinking about art for over two decades. The many conversations, collaborations and ideas shared —in some way or other — have all left a trace in this PhD. For this I am truly grateful, and I consider myself privileged to have worked with so many brilliant artists, who, often under challenging circumstances of violence, conflict and occupation, continue to produce critical and urgent work. In particular my thanks go to Larissa Sansour whose visionary work and friendship has been seminal to this project. Thank you so much for having me join you and Søren on your journeys through art and sf, for your trust, and for putting up with my incessant questions and image requests. To Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, your insistence on an imaginary has influenced me profoundly and continues to guide my thinking, writing and curating. All the artists in this dissertation have my gratitude for sharing their work with me, addressing my queries and being responsive to my ideas: Ammar Al-Beik, Sophia Al-Maria, Monira Al-Qadiri, Oreet Ashery, Fadi Baki, Ali Cherri, Wafa Hourani, Maha Maamoun, Jumana Manna and Ayman Zedani.

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it all and always being there for me. I also dedicate this dissertation to the memory of my father Fried Muller (1933-2019), who as an Indo-Dutch survivor of the Japanese concentration camps in Indonesia, and later as an unwelcome citizen in the Netherlands, always felt out of place and had a sense of unbelonging. My father was an imperfect and inscrutable man, and his absence leaves many questions unanswered. But his life, defined by a love for travel and adventure, was fuelled by dreaming of possibility. I hope that *Lost Futurities* conveys some of that aspirational possibility too.

The section in Chapter 1 on *A Space Exodus* and *The Lebanese Rocket Society* was published in an earlier form as "Lunar Dreams: Space Travel, Nostalgia, and Retrofuturism in *Space Exodus* and *The Lebanese Rocket Society*", *Science Fiction Studies*, Vol. 48, No. 1, SF and Nostalgia (March 2021), 124-138.

Material in Chapter 3 on *The Novel of Nonel and Vovel* was published in an earlier form as "Bordering the Frame: Superheroes, Art, and the Rethinking of Borders in Oreet Ashery and Larissa Sansour's *The Novel of Nonel and Vovel*", *SFRA Review*, Vol. 51, No. 1, (February 2021), 154-160.

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Cover Image: Larissa Sansour and Søren Lind, *In the Future They Ate From the Finest Porcelain*, 2016. Video still. Image courtesy the artists.

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Note on Arabic Transliteration and Translation

Occasional Arabic terminology and untranslated proper names have been transcribed using the transliteration system used by the *International Journal of Middle East Studies*. Arabic words appear without the *ayn* and *hamza* and diacritics have been removed for ease of reading. I have kept artist names as per their own transliteration.

Introduction: Lost Futurities

Science Fiction in Contemporary Art from the Middle East

Contemporary Art, Science Fiction and the Middle East

In 2020 Nadya Sbaiti, a social and cultural historian of the Middle East at the American University of Beirut, offered the first interdisciplinary course on science fiction (sf) in the region, titled 'Science Fiction in/and the Middle East'. It stemmed from her motivation to make sense of the rapid succession of cataclysms that had befallen Lebanon in the span of a few months, whilst still offering her students agential tools to look at the future and cherish hope for change. The Lebanese uprising in October 2019 unequivocally demanded social and political reform and initially held much promise, but rapidly deteriorated into violent clashes between the authorities and protestors. It resulted in a compromised security situation that still endures.[1] An economic and infrastructural collapse followed, while the devastating blast at Beirut port on 4 August 2020 added more hardship to an already challenging situation. Sbaiti writes defiantly:

> [W]e needed new ways to capture and process what we were witnessing and living [in Lebanon]. What I was really looking for was hope. *Something* to ground my desire for sustenance. Methods that I could offer students at the American University of Beirut, for whom the stakes of the protests resonated so personally, to help them imagine different possible futures. Long an avid reader of fantasy, science fiction and speculative fiction, all I could think about were the ways in which these literary genres were constituted by expansive imagination and world-making, through their play on time and space. Revolution, I thought, was not so different.[2]

Sbaiti's words encapsulate the crux of this dissertation: how can sf, and more specifically its tropes, be mobilised to dream possible futures in the Middle East? How can sf imaginaries take stock of the past, and acknowledge its losses, whilst simultaneously providing the critical tools with which to find hope in, and through, the darkness of the present? If sf is as an art of the contemporary moment, then how is contemporary art as a science fictional

[1] See https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2022/country-chapters/lebanon [last accessed 14.3.2022].

[2] Nadya Sbaiti, "Teaching Science Fiction While Living It in Lebanon," *Society and Space*, November 2, 2020, https://www.societyandspace.org/articles/teaching-science-fiction-while-living-it-in-lebanon [last accessed 8.3.2022].

proposition able to harness the spirit of potentiality Sbaiti evokes? And how can sf provide methods to think creatively, critically, politically and restoratively? These are the main questions I ask of the contemporary artworks presented in this thesis. The triumvirate of contemporary art, science fiction and the Middle East might seem strange, but it is specifically this estrangement that allows for *seeing* and *imagining* differently. I, too, felt the exhilaration Sbaiti and her students must have experienced when taking to the streets in Beirut in autumn 2019. Instead of making studio visits and seeing art exhibitions, I walked alongside my Lebanese friends and colleagues and sensed the thrill of change. It was a sentiment I had harboured a decade earlier when Cairo and Syria erupted in revolution, only for that electrifying spark of hope to dramatically wane under more repression. *Lost Futurities* explores the dynamic between loss and the creative and critical potential for speculative repair through the recent history, present and envisioned future of the region. Spanning seven countries (Lebanon, Syria, Egypt, Palestine, Qatar, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia) within the region broadly defined as the Middle East, *Lost Futurities* examines work produced in the past fifteen years (2006-2020) from thirteen artists from the Middle East and its diasporas. It traces patterns, tropes, concerns and aesthetics that together advance futurity and constitute a sf imaginary. This project, however, raises many complexities and unsettles, or makes strange, the very categories — be they geographical, social, political or historical — that it engages with.

While I pay considerable attention to historical and geopolitical context to address *why* artists from the Middle East use sf in their artistic practice, the main focus of this dissertation centres on *how* they use sf and the methodological and interpretive frameworks these interventions open up. I use the geopolitical category ‘Middle East’ throughout the dissertation reluctantly and am well aware of its colonial and Eurocentric origin. Despite its inadequacy ‘Middle East’ serves my intent more accurately than terms such as ‘Arab World’ or ‘West Asia’, which have their own polemical issues.[3] For the purpose of this dissertation I refer to the ‘Middle East’ when including Egypt, the Levant (in this dissertation Lebanon, Palestine, Syria) and the Gulf countries (in this dissertation Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Kuwait). I thus employ the term ‘Middle East’ with a degree of discomfort

[3] For a thorough discussion on the postcolonial Middle East, see Anna Ball and Karim Mattar, eds., "Horizons of Modernity in the Middle East: A Critical, Theoretical and Disciplinary Overview", *The Edinburgh Companion to The Postcolonial Middle East* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 3-22.

and am mindful of its implications. Its critical use also serves as a reminder to the reader that the colonial afterlives — and in the case of Palestine a still ongoing colonial occupation — continue to impact the present and future of the region. Many, though not all, of the artworks I examine here speak back to this context in a speculative and agential manner. In the past long decade artists from the region have engaged more actively with sf as a critical and imaginative tool in their practice and therefore I focus my analysis on works from 2006 onwards, with excursions to older works and examples where necessary and relevant.

Sf and art both have the capacity to defamiliarise temporal, spatial and ontological configurations and not only make us see anew what is in front of us but also look beyond it. In a way, this renders sf and art perfect partners. This widening science fictional embrace in art is not limited only to artists from the region. On a global level, artists have, in the second decade of the twenty-first century, turned more intensively to the worldbuilding and imaginary qualities of sf to articulate, and propose alternatives to, a time of growing social, political and identitarian unrest, polarisation and estrangement. This trend, if we can speak of one, is also recognised by art historian and sf scholar Dan Byrne-Smith who has edited one of the few publications tracing the influence of sf on contemporary art.[4] It is therefore curious that the affinities between sf and art as modes and methods of speculative practice remain understudied in the fields of sf studies and art history alike, and particularly because artistic practice, like transmedia storytelling in the genres of fantasy and sf, shares many crossovers in terms of operating across different media and platforms (from textual practices, screen-based work, sculpture, performance, mixed media, drawing, installation and comics to games, toys, comics and Cosplay).[5] Art and sf transmedia also have in common the participatory aspect, in which their audiences and fanbases interact with artwork and sf iterations, creating ample opportunity for these two fields, which have been unhelpfully pushed into categories of high/elite and low/popular culture, to feed into each other. Sf and art alike share in their worldbuilding a deferral of narrative closure. Scholarly discussions of sf seldom extend into contemporary art, while, conversely, critical debate on contemporary art seldom draws on the rich insights sf has to offer. In addition, Humanities

[4] See Dan Byrne-Smith, "Introduction// Sci-Fi," in *Science Fiction. Documents of Contemporary Art*, ed. Dan Byrne-Smith (London and Cambridge, Massachusetts: Whitechapel Gallery and MIT Press, 2020), 12–19.
[5] For a discussion of sf and transmedia worldbuilding, see Dan Hassler-Forest, *Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Politics. Transmedia World-Building beyond Capitalism* (London and New York: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2016), 4–6.

in the Global South tend to look at the Middle East via area studies, focussing on socio-politics and religion, and possibly Arabic literature. Art, however, receives little critical attention. In this dissertation I aim to redress this heuristic lacuna by amplifying the voices of artists from the region and their diasporas whose work deserves to be better known across the disciplines in the humanities.

Science fiction theorist Darko Suvin, one of the key figures who helped establish Science Fiction Studies as an academic field, defines science fiction as a genre of 'cognitive estrangement' in which a 'novum' or empirical novelty is introduced.[6] In Suvin's hypothesis 'cognition' is usually understood as the empirical part of sf, in other words what we know and is familiar to us. The 'novum' — in the form of, for example, a futuristic technology, alien life form, disaster, or new galaxy — is the disruptor. This rupture produces estrangement and upsets the cognitive order of things whilst simultaneously creating the fictional imaginary. John Rieder, for example, sees genre definitions of sf not as paradigmatic but primarily as a 'historical process' in which sf, at any given time, means 'the history of a shifting set of conventions and expectations successively laying their various claims to definition of the genre and exercising their influence over an intersecting but heterogeneous array of practices'.[7] Gerry Canavan and Eric Carl Link follow Rieder and point out that scholars continue to debate and argue over Suvin's influential definition, but ultimately it is only one of many theoretical categorisations of sf: 'The true, absolute essence of SF, that odd, unnameable thing we feel we recognize immediately when we see it, is always moving away from us at warp speed; its shields are up and its cloaking device is fully engaged.'[8] This is also true for academic arguments about sf falling into the 'hard' or 'soft' category. Proponents of 'hard' sf are committed to following scientific rationalism and 'to using real science to enhance the credibility of a fantastic storyline'.[9] 'Soft' sf is usually associated with sf's revolutionary New Wave of the 1960s and 1970s, which was

[6] For Darko Suvin's foundational essay, see Darko Suvin, "The State of the Art in Science Fiction Theory: Determining and Delimiting the Genre," *Science Fiction Studies* 6, no. 1 (1979): 32–45, http://www.depauw.edu/sfs/backissues/17/suvin17.htm.

[7] John Rieder, *Science Fiction and the Mass Cultural Genre System* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2017), 161.

[8] Gerry Canavan and Eric Carl Link, "On Not Defining Science Fiction: An Introduction," in *The Cambridge History of Science Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 7-8.

[9] Arthur B. Evans, "The Beginnings: Early Forms of Science Fiction," in *Science Fiction: A Literary History*, ed. Roger Luckhurst (London: The British Library, 2017), 33. Iconic writers of hard sf are, for example, Isaac Asimov, Arthur C. Clarke and Robert Heinlein.

experimental, staunchly political and concerned with social and ethical issues of the human condition.[10] While hard sf still has its fanbase, in most contemporary and global sf the lines between hard and soft blur. Moreover, conceptions of science have broadened beyond Eurowestern science, and practitioners of sf producing work from a decolonial perspective consider indigenous knowledges and literacies to be science.[11] Both Suvin's and Rieder's notions of sf loosely inform this thesis. The strange, novel, real and speculative aspects found in the artworks discussed in *Lost Futurities* produce sf that is neither hard nor soft, but, rather, to follow Pepe Rojo's characterisation of global sf, 'sharp'.[12]

Throughout the thesis I refer to sf as a mode rather than a genre, in order to allow for a more generous and elastic use of how science fictionality can be conceptualised in critical discourse without it being policed by constraints of genre boundaries.[13] Herein I follow scholars such as John Rieder, Mark Bould and Sherryl Vint, who all argue for more leeway when discussing this *thing* called sf.[14] Some artworks might not count therefore as sf at a first glance; however, reading them through a sf lens discloses speculative elements that might have otherwise been missed. I use the term 'mode' strategically in order to highlight its conceptual and methodological potential for disciplines across the humanities. The African American sf writer Samuel R. Delaney famously noted that sf is 'a set of questions we expect to be answered about the relation of the word and world, character and concept, fictive world and given world; and any given SF text can foil or fulfil these expectations in any number of ways.'[15] In this thesis I extend Delany's premise to visual practices and place particular emphasis on fleshing out the dynamic between the fictive world and the given, that is the *real*, world. Sf itself, then, becomes a method, as well as a

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[10] For more on sf's New Wave, see Rob Latham, "The New Wave 'Revolution', 1960-76," in *The Cambridge History of Science Fiction*, 2019, 157–80.

[11] For more on the dichotomy between Eurowestern techno-science and indigenous scientific knowledge and technology in sf see, Joy Sanchez-Taylor, "'Our Knowledge Is Not Primitive': Indigenous and Eurowestern Science," in *Diverse Futures. Science Fiction and Authors of Color* (Colombus: Ohio State Press, 2021), 118–46.

[12] Pepe Rojo, "Desperately Looking for Others," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, May 24, 2016, https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/desperately-looking-others/ [last accessed 17.5.2022].

[13] See also Damien Broderick, "Genre or Mode?," in *Reading by Starlight. Postmodern Science Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1995), 38–48.

[14] See John Rieder, "On Defining SF, or Not: Genre Theory, SF, and History," in *Science Fiction Criticism. An Anthology of Essential Writing*, ed. Rob Latham (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 87. See also Mark Bould and Sherryl Vint, "There Is No Such Thing as Science Fiction," in *Reading Science Fiction*, ed. James Gunn, Marleen S. Barr, and Matthew Candelaria (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 43–51.

[15] Samuel R. Delany, "Dichtung Und Science Fiction," in *Starboard Wine: More Notes on the Language of Science Fiction* (Pleasantville: Dragon Press, 1984), 182.

speculative practice, through which the research-based practice of the artists in this thesis is studied and dialogues with. Delany seems to use 'expect' and 'expectations' in a more assumptive manner in relation to how sf is supposed to tell us something about the world. He warns us that when we expect to be delighted, we might just as easily be disappointed. I propose to consider expectation in a more anticipatory temporal fashion. Expectation, then, is something to look out for, located in the future but which could also fold back into the present. As many of the works analysed here will point out, expectation often finds itself unmet in the past. As such, sf as a mode and practice of futurity always opens multiple windows across time, space and subjectivity. It is with this sensibility that I look at sf in contemporary art from the Middle East.

Art, like sf, affords ways to perform dissenting politics. But I would caution against viewing art, and in particular art from the Middle East, as a myopic illustration of this. This would put artistic production at risk of being fully subsumed by current affairs and politics, leaving little room for aesthetics, form, and, more importantly, the ambiguity of meaning. The anthropologist, and expert on modern Arab art, Kirsten Scheid offers an invitation to 'envision studies of Middle East society and politics that start with art. These would seek neither to separate art from politics nor to substitute for it, but rather to learn from art new ways of understanding the political generally.'[16] I therefore propose reading the reconfigurations of history, identity, political and other power not only *through* the artworks and the sf tropes they respectively underline but *with* them. Reading *through* would suggest the works operate on a singular allegorical level, while combining a reading *through* with a reading *with* allows for a dynamic that is restorative as well as speculative. Reading *with* specifically acknowledges the gaps, grey zones, inconsistencies and otherworldly imaginary qualities at the heart of artistic practice, and of sf. Reading *with* and *through* sf offers a method of considering the past, present and the future as a non-teleological sphere of possibility in which sf codes and recodes — amongst many things — ontology, alterity, absence, loss, hope and emancipatory agency.

[16] Kirsten Scheid, "Start with the Art: New Ways of Understanding the Political in the Middle East," in *Routledge Handbook of Middle East Politics*, ed. Larbi Sadiki (London: Routledge, 2020), 433.

Loss and the Recuperative Potential of Science Fiction

Throughout the thesis I show how sf signals loss while simultaneously operating as a recuperative device. Loss and recuperation might always 'ghost' each other, but I demonstrate how sf makes this explicit, albeit imperfectly – imperfect because what is lost is usually not what is recuperated. I expand on my selection of artists and artworks in more detail later, but what binds these practices is that these artists work from geo-political contexts where the political imagination as an emancipatory horizon for social dreaming is under pressure. This means that on an allegorical level the unrealised ambitions of political events are not only commemorated but also, from a concrete perspective, point to what *was* achieved, however minor – the resistance of the Palestinian *Intifadas*, for example, or the 2011 uprisings in the Arab world, and the withdrawal from the Syrian army from Lebanon in 2005 after almost three decades of Syrian tutelage (1976-2005). Beyond allegorisation these speculative works supply encouragement to keep on pushing for change in the present and to serve as a memory for the future. By unpacking how sf motifs operate in contemporary artworks I argue that the dynamic of loss and recuperation lies at the base of the production of futurity and possibility. I also show how this heuristic of loss and recuperation is flawed and imperfect. Despite these shortcomings, sf imaginaries manage to create oxygen in settings where there is deemed to be none. Sf in these works refracts the future and makes it strange. The imaginaries examined here are unstably bracketed by sf theorist Suvin's conceptualisation of sf's foundational dialectic as one of 'cognitive estrangement' and feminist scholar Aimee Bahng's understanding of futurity. Futurity, for Bahng, 'highlight[s] the construction of the future and denaturalize[s] its singularity, while maintaining an emphasis on how narrative constructions of the future play a significant role in materializing the present'.[17] Sf scholar Bodhisattva Chattopadhyay usefully introduces the notion of 'cofutures' to designate 'multiple futures or multiplicity of futures — of human, non-human and non-biological life — to which futurisms stake claim. […] *Co* represents complexity, coevalness and compossibility.'[18] I subscribe to this position, which seeks to relocate, overwrite, decolonise and change narrow canons of sf and perceptions of futurity,

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[17] Aimee Bahng, *Migrant Futures. Decolonizing Speculation in Financial Times* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 2. For a critical discussion of Suvin and other theories of sf, see: Adam Roberts, *Science Fiction. The New Critical Idiom.* (London: Routledge, 2000), 1–36.

[18] Bodhisattva Chattopadhyay, "Manifestos of Futurisms," *Foundation: The International Review of Science Fiction* 50:2, no. 139 Decolonizing Science Fiction (2021): 20–21.

and 'not be consumed by genre colonialism'.[19] If, according to Chattopadhyay, these futures 'do not seek cognitive estrangement: they seek cognitive reconstruction', then I hope *Lost Futurities* contributes to this repair.[20]

Both Bahng and Chattopadhyay note that thinking futurity differently and more inclusively means to allow for its temporal, spatial, imaginal, ontological and epistemological features to shift, twist and turn.[21] I follow in the slipstream of their argument and show how these notions are intertwined and build on each other. Time, as many artworks across my chapters exemplify, often escapes linearity and the progressive temporal order of past, present and future. This temporal scrambling sometimes expresses a resistance to Western theories of linear techno-science in a bid to offer different ways of understanding knowledge and science. In the artworks analysed here it is often caused by violent ruptures of traumatising historical events, which suspend the present and absent the future, hereby placing the past on a repetitive temporal loop. The 1948 *Nakba* (the Palestinian catastrophe and dispossession aligned with the foundation of the State of Israel), for example, is the most foundational and traumatising collective temporal marker for Palestinians and did not end in 1948. The dispossession and displacement are ongoing, rendering the *Nakba al mustamirrah* (continuous). This has, as Yara Hawari points out, made it difficult for Palestinians to think about futurity, particularly because future visions are so often written *for* Palestinians — by Israel, the international community, other Arab states — but seldom *by* them.[22] This is a double temporal disenfranchisement in which both the present and the future are taken hostage. The works examined here attempt to forge a way into the future, but never lose sight of the forgotten, erased and untold stories that still resonate in the

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[19] Chattopadhyay, 21.

[20] Chattopadhyay, 20.

[21] Masood A. Raja and Swaralipi Nandi have similarly made a case discussing the affinities between sf and postcolonial studies: 'The connection between science fiction and postcolonial studies is almost natural: both these fields are deeply concerned with questions of temporality, space, and existence. Central also […] are the questions of the "other" […] and the nature of multiple narratives of history and utopias and dystopias in the future.' Masood A. Raja and Swaralipi Nandi, "Introduction," in *The Postnational Fantasy. Essays on Postcolonialism, Cosmopolitics and Science Fiction*, ed. Masood A. Raja, Jason W. Ellis, and Swaralipi Nandi (Jefferson: Mcfarland & Company, 2011), 9.

[22] Yara Hawari, "Radical Futures: When Palestinians Imagine," *Al-Shabaka. The Palestinian Policy Network*, March 24, 2020, https://al-shabaka.org/commentaries/radical-futures-when-palestinians-imagine/ [last accessed 15.1.2022]. In Indigenous Futurisms a similar disastrous encounter with settler colonialism is typified as the 'Native Apocalypse' in which the apocalypse hints at the trauma and genocide indigenous peoples have suffered at the hand of settler colonisers. See Grace L. Dillon, "Imagining Indigenous Futurisms," in *Walking the Clouds: An Anthology of Indigenous Science Fiction* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2012), 8–10.

present. Time lapses forward and collapses backward; it is shrunk and stretched in the retrofuturism of yesterday's tomorrow, which I discuss in Chapter 1, and the oscillation between historical (human) and geological (non-human) time scales, which I return to in Chapter 2 and 5 and discuss from different angles. Thinking about time also means to critically evaluate what is remembered and forgotten, and how a desire to control time's flow and direction land us with ideological and technological fixes that deeply transform us and our environments, as well as those of other species. Acknowledging this temporal complicity and unpacking how it either hampers or forges a way forward — or, for that matter, charts a way back — is a thread running through all the chapters. In essence, the works here pose a question of how historicity is *thought*, but also, and fundamentally, how and when it materialises. As such, any futurity is as much about the past as it is about the future. Sf scholar Istvan Csicsery-Ronay holds that 'SF lacks the gravity of history, because it lacks the gravity of lived experience. It is weightless. Its represented futures incur no obligations.'[23] I argue the opposite and make a case that this assumption does not hold for the artworks I analyse. These works often stem from the very specific lived experiences of exile, dispossession, war and conflict and are thus far from being weightless; rather, they offer a speculative way to engage with the gravitas of political and personal histories in fraught contexts. These works intimate that there are indeed certain obligations to be met, however bumpy that path might be. The recovery of the past, for the future to inhabit or to discard, is a vital concern in this study.

Bahng typifies the future as a temporal geography, which by extension renders sf as much a mode of space as of time.[24] In my chapters space is configured as real and imagined, in which more often than not the borders between the two are blurred and their territories overlap. For example, the longing for a viable Palestinian homeland might at this point seem more fantastical than a Palestinian lunar colony in outer space as seen in Larissa Sansour's video *A Space Exodus*; or a post-apocalyptic, underground bunker that keeps survivors safe after an ecological catastrophe in Sansour's installation *In Vitro* more realistic than an end to the occupation of Palestine. As spatial representations morph from one carceral site to the next, from dystopian futuristic high-rises in Sansour's *Nation Estate* and policed and gated

[23] Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr, *The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2008), 83.
[24] See Bahng, *Migrant Futures. Decolonizing Speculation in Financial Times*, 12.

communities in Maha Maamoun's *2026* to Wafa Hourani's refugee camps, notions of home and of belonging to a geo-political and historical space are reconfigured and recalibrated. Edward Said famously wrote of exile as 'a discontinuous state of being'.[25] But exile is not only ontically or politically defined, it is spatially defined too. Exile is a geography; a locus on which belonging and unbelonging are mapped. The latter is forcefully articulated in the work of Larissa Sansour (Chapters 1-4), Jumana Manna (Chapter 2) and Fadi Baki (Chapter 3). Although many of the spaces considered here are sites of disparity, destruction and dispossession, this does not mean they are devoid of possibility. To the contrary, like the fields, deserts, oceans and pristine planets that feature as speculative sites in Chapters 2, 4 and 5, I argue that futurity and utopian thinking can be found in ruination too. Moreover, in the works discussed they seem to operate in tandem.

The nation state is perhaps the most contested spatial and political category destabilised in the artworks. If it does not figure specifically as a site of loss, it at least figures as a site that unsettles — both terrestrially and territorially. The countries the artists hail from (Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Qatar) all grapple with the aftermaths of imperial Ottoman and colonial Anglo-French extrication. Notably Lebanon, as a rentier/failing state, and Palestine, as an absent state under Israeli occupation, complicate notions of borders and sovereignty, while repressive and authoritarian regimes in Egypt and Syria, as well as the autocratic and exclusionary Gulf monarchies, continue a fractured interaction with their residents and citizens.[26] Postcolonial scholar Lindsey Moore observes that in the literatures of postcolonial Arab nations, 'the nation remains a salient horizon of expectation, even in work that pointedly criticizes the forms that Arab nationalism has taken in the last century'.[27] I claim that this is mostly true

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[25] Edward W. Said, "Reflections on Exile," in *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (London: Granta Books, 2001), 176.

[26] For a discussion on what the postcolonial in Arab nations means historically and politically, see Lindsey Moore, *Narrating Postcolonial Arab Nations. Egypt, Algeria, Lebanon, Palestine*, *Narrating Postcolonial Arab Nations* (New York and London: Routledge, 2018), 9–13. Lebanon is increasingly characterised by scholars, think tank analysts and human rights groups as a 'failed' or 'failing' state. See Frederick Betz, "Political Theory of Societal Association and Nation-Building: Case of the Failed State of Lebanon," *Open Journal of Social Sciences* 9 (2021): 333–84. See also "Lebanon: UN Expert Warns of 'Failing State' amid Widespread Poverty," *United Nations Office of High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)*, May 11, 2022, https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2022/05/lebanon-un-expert-warns-failing-state-amid-widespread-poverty; and Hrair Balian, "Lebanon Must Be Saved from Its Politicians," *Middle East Institute Blog*, March 15, 2022, https://www.mei.edu/publications/lebanon-must-be-saved-its-politicians. [last accessed 17.5.2022].

[27] Moore, *Narrating Postcolonial Arab Nations. Egypt, Algeria, Lebanon, Palestine*, 13.

for the region's science fictional endeavours too. As such, the nation state and conceptions of the national strangely endure in the future and remain a troubled category to reckon with. Here, sf cultural production from the region stands out from other postcolonial sf discourses such as Afrofuturism and Indigenous Futurisms, but also from that of Western sf, which are all predominantly postnational.[28]

In his research on late twentieth and early twenty-first century Japanese, Soviet/Russian and Euro-American sf Csicsery-Ronay points out that sf 'removes nations as agents or subjects of future history, and national cultures as historical forces through five basic strategies of displacement, world models in which national identity is disavowed: transgalacticism/transglobalism, corporate globalization, apocalyptic winnowing, biological displacement, and archaicization'.[29] However, as rarely as the nation state might manifest itself in other science fictions, its entanglements as the main political exponent of twentieth century modernity and teleological linear time clearly trouble the science fictions in this dissertation. Moreover, Csicsery-Ronay's five categories of displacement do not feature as an exclusionary mechanism to notions of the nation state and the national, but rather, as the works in this study demonstrate, they coexist. Global issues combine with specific geopolitical ones, and as such constitute both sf imaginaries *and* profound critiques of the region's political, and other, regimes. Many of the works discussed manage to be rooted in the fraught political realities of both the national past and present, while also projecting a futurity that is geopolitically specific but which can also transcend into more universal experiences. Loss seldom pertains to the individual only, but more often than not becomes collective.

Loss and recuperation also come to the fore in matters related to ontology, identity and (un)belonging. Sf is the prime terrain where alienation, estrangement, alterity, and the relation between the individual vis-à-vis the collective meet in complex ways. In the works discussed a plethora of subjectivities, which range from the human and the posthuman to

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[28] For the links between Afrofuturism, Pan-Africanism and Afropolitanism, see, for example, Lisa Yaszek, "Afrofuturism, Science Fiction, and the History of the Future," *Socialism and Democracy* 20, no. 3 (2006): 41–60; and Michael Janis, "The United States of Africa: Afrofuturistic Pasts and Afropolitan Futures," *Journal of African Cinemas* 5, no. 1 (2013): 33–54. Reynaldo Anderson, "Afrofuturism 2.0 &The Black Speculative Arts Movement: Notes on a Manifesto," *Obsidian* 42, no. 1/2 Speculating Futures: Black Imagination & the Arts (2016): 228–36.

[29] Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr., "Dis-Imagined Communities. Science Fiction and the Future of Nations," in *Edging into the Future. Science Fiction and Contemporary Cultural Transformation*, ed. Veronica Hollinger and Joan Gordon (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 223.

the non-human and non-life, inhabit hybrid and porous ontic realms. Oftentimes these works ponder what it means to speak (back) from a disempowered or compromised position and question by which means agency or accountability can — at least partially — be (re)claimed. Rarely is this achieved by becoming more human. In Chapter 2 in Jumana Manna's *Wild Relatives* the fate of Syrian refugees in Lebanon's Beqaa Valley is inextricably entangled with duplicated seeds from gene banks. In Chapter 3 and 5, becoming Other — alien, robot, mushroom, whale and monster — facilitates a fragile empowerment, as if an ontological transformation and a degree of human unbelonging is needed to admit to complicity in perpetuating the historical amnesia still structuring sectarian divisions in postwar Lebanon, as seen in Fadi Baki's *Manivelle: The Last Days of the Man of Tomorrow*. Or that becoming a nearly extinct cetacean in the Arabian Sea in Sophia Al-Maria's *A Whale Is a Whale Is a Whale* is the only way to call a halt to damaging extractivist practices hurting all life on the planet. Superheroes might be able to decolonise and liberate Palestine in Sansour and Oreet Ashery's *The Novel of Nonel and Vovel* where years of political dissent, resistance and diplomatic haggling could not. Becoming Other, then, underlines the limitations of human ability and does away with some of the hubris that techno-science will save us from ecological and other catastrophes — or, for that matter, that art has the capacity to solve systemic violence and put an end to political and social injustice. These works all betray a degree of scepticism when it comes to effectuating political and other types of change in the region and the world at large. However, they are not devoid of hope. More precisely, they point to possibility and the necessity to imaginatively think outside of the box and create unexpected alliances. Not only does this advocate Donna Haraway's plea for 'multispecies coexistence',[30] but it also brings in multi-material aspects — of how we deal with the life of objects, resources and other non-life entities.

Sf's Others and speculative ontologies critically engage with how normative, prescriptive and exclusionary identities are regulated and performed. For example, how are clones or duplicated seeds, with their copied DNA, to answer to questions of (national) origin or authenticity? Does a return to Palestine matter when Palestine as a place has been ravaged by a climate apocalypse and all markers of what made it Palestine have been

[30] See Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 58 and 98.

destroyed (Chapter 2)? Indeed, what does it mean to belong to a nation, a people, a community or a tribe, at the end of the world? In a time of a looming extinction event, humans have themselves become weird (Chapter 5). This weirdness is, however, unequally distributed. The works in this study hint at the structural inequalities at play. Sf affords to dream and to imagine, but equally to fear how humans and non-humans could be in the world. As the following chapters show, it is also an invitation to step out of the constraints of this world and become otherworldly. In times of polarisation sf provides a tool for diverse subjectivities to speak to, and next to, each other, which is perhaps its most restorative quality.

Motifs, Methods, Motivations, and Literature Review

I have developed the dynamic of loss and recuperation by focusing in each chapter on a specific sf trope. Here I have been led primarily by which tropes speak most loudly from the artworks and I have clustered the works accordingly. This study is not an exhaustive geographical survey of science fictional art practices in the region per country but is transnational and draws on shared and contrasting themes, without neglecting the geo-political specificities and artistic contexts that contribute to and in many cases shape each artistic practice. Such an approach aims, on the one hand, to point to regional connections and, on the other, allows specific practices to be evaluated in their own right. Nor does the study intend to offer a comprehensive overview of sf tropes that artists use. Rather, it focuses on a limited amount of conventional sf tropes and shows how artists make these tropes messy, ambiguous, and change them. I emphasise the verb *change* here: the sf megatext, the amalgamation of 'imaginary worlds, tropes, tools, lexicons […] borrowed from other textualities' has provided us with a plethora of motifs that function in a recognisable way.[31] However, they might work differently in conceptual and ideological terms as they pass between cultural frameworks. This is something to be mindful of, and I hope I have practised this sensitivity throughout the thesis. The Anishinaabe scholar of sf and indigenous futurisms Grace L. Dillon reminds us how indigenous science fictions 'intentionally experiment with, sometimes intentionally dislodge, sometimes merely accompany, but

[31] Damien Broderick, *Reading by Starlight. Postmodern Science Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1995), xiii.

invariably *change* the perimeters of sf' (emphasis in the original).[32] This also happens in the works I analyse. Art is a particularly productive vector for destabilising conventions, given artists' propensity to borrow irreverently and voraciously for their practice. For this reason, I have refrained from labelling the practices I examine by any name, and often use the monikers 'sf' and 'the speculative' interchangeably. This is not to say that there is no value in figuring out what Arab futurisms, Middle Eastern slipstream, Arabo punk, Mashreq-core or the Middle Eastern weird might be, but this is not what this thesis sets out to do.[33] Rather, this study examines a specific set of sf tropes in a specific set of case studies. While my findings shed light on how artists use sf in their works to create critical, and in some cases radical, imaginaries, and while themes and approaches resonate, this should not be read as representative of artistic practices in the region, or for artists working with sf.

In *Lost Futurities*, sf tropes perform the difficult task of signalling loss and engendering a recovery. As such the tropes are recognisable in the megatext, but their imperfect restorative quality redefines how they are positioned in it. The chapters are driven by interstellar travel, the apocalypse, aliens, superheroes, robots, monsters and utopian and dystopian ruins. I show how these tropes produce their own logic and aesthetics. By looking closely at them I map how they operate, how they extrapolate from the past and present, and what speculative futurities they imagine.[34] One of the reasons I foreground well-known sf tropes is to demonstrate how they change what sf *is*, and — because this study looks at visual art — how sf *looks*. Over the past decade Postcolonial sf, Afro- and Africanfuturism, Queer futurisms, Indigenous futurisms, Sinofuturism, Latinx sf, and Asian futurisms, to name a few, have enriched and diversified the scholarship of sf in Eurowestern academia.[35] *Lost Futurities* moves with these debates, but it is important to

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[32] Grace L. Dillon, "Imagining Indigenous Futurisms," in *Walking the Clouds: An Anthology of Indigenous Science Fiction* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2012), 3.

[33] Except for American writer Michael Muhammed Knight's novel *Taqwacores* (2003), which has been influential in defining an Islamic punk music scene, and Glasgow-based artist Sulaïman Majali's 'Arab Futurism Manifesto', in which he calls for Arab futurisms to be multi-discursive, beyond the logic of the state, counter-historical, anti-hegemonic and multi-identitarian, these other potential modes are all to be explored. See Sulaïman Majali, "Towards a Possible Manifesto; Proposing Arabfuturism(s) (ConversationA)," in *Cost of Freedom. A Collective Inquiry*, 2015, 173–76, http://costoffreedom.cc.

[34] For an insightful article on the blurry boundaries between extrapolation and speculation in sf, see Brooks Landon, "Extrapolation and Speculation," in *The Oxford Handbook of Science Fiction*, ed. Rob Latham (Oxford: Oxford Handbooks, 2014), 24–34.

[35] On Afrofuturism, Indigenous Futurisms, Latinx Futurisms, see, for example, Isiah Lavender III, ed., *Black and Brown Planets. The Politics of Race in Science Fiction* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2014). For Afrofuturism also see Ytasha L. Womack, *Afrofuturism. The World of Black Sci-fi and Fantasy Culture* (Chicago:

note that futurisms and the study of sf from the Arabic-speaking world are yet to find broader academic traction. With the exception of scholarly articles looking at Arabic speculative literature, courtesy of more Arabic work being translated, discussion of Middle Eastern sf in Eurowestern academia is scant and insufficiently theorised.[36] Given that Sbaiti's sf course in Beirut was a first of its kind, this is also true for scholarship in the region. This is not to say there is no engagement with this subject matter in the region and its diasporas — on the contrary. Blogs, notably the now obsolete *Sindbad Sci Fi*, edited by Yasmin Khan, and *Islam and Science Fiction*, edited by Muhammad Aurangzeb Ahmad, provide input from fanbases. Equally, in broadcast media attention to sf has been growing, as exemplified by journalist Rasha Elass's series of articles on sf for *New Lines Magazine*. Initiatives such as *Syria Untold* focus specifically on Arabic-language sf as a tool for change. In addition, cultural events on futurism at Art Dubai, the Sharjah Biennial, as well as the *Maskoon* (haunted) genre film festival organised in Beirut, all speak to the fact that thinking about, and imagining, the future is not a prerogative of the Eurowest.[37]

Lawrence Hill Books, 2013). For Indigenous Futurisms: Grace L. Dillon, ed., *Walking the Clouds: An Anthology of Indigenous Science Fiction* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2012). For Queer Futurisms: José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia. The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2009).

[36] For a critical article on the profile of dystopian works of Arabic literatures in translation, see Lina Mounzer, "Apocalypse Now: Why Arab Authors Are Really Writing about the End of the World," *Middle East Eye*, April 1, 2019, https://www.middleeasteye.net/discover/apocalypse-now-dystopia-why-arab-authors-are-really-writing-about-end-world-egypt. [last accessed 1.2.2022]. Mounzer lists works such as Nael El-Toukhy, *Women of Karantina* (2015); Basma Abdel Aziz, *The Queue* (2016); Mohammed Rabie, *Otared* (2016); Ibrahim Nasrallah, *The Second War of the Dog* (Arabic, 2016); Ahmed Naji, *Using Life* (2017); Ahmed Saadawi, *Frankenstein in Baghdad* (2018). To this should be added Emile Habibi, *The Secret Life of Saeed. The Pessoptimist* (1985); Ahmed Khaled Towfik, *Utopia* (2011); Ibrahim Abbas, *HJWN* (2013) and *Somewhere* (2013); Noura Noman's Arabic-only *Ajwan* (2012) and *Mandaan* (2014); Hassan Blasim's edited collection *Iraq +100. Stories from a Century after the Invasion* (2016); Fadi Zaghmout, *Heaven on Earth* (2017); Boualem Sansal, *2084: The End of the World* (2017); *Palestine +100. Stories from a Century after the Nakba* edited by Basma Ghalayini (2019); Ibtisam Azem, *The Book of Disappearance* (2019).

[37] See the blog Islam and Science Fiction: http://www.islamscifi.com/. For Rasha Elass, see https://newlinesmag.com/writers/rasha-elass/; Syria Untold, https://syriauntold.com/2021/04/26/science-fiction-in-mena-an-artistic-tool-for-change/. For Art Dubai's 2018 conference program *Global Art Forum 12; I am Not a Robot*, curated by Shumon Basar, Noah Raford and Marlies Wirth: [http://www.artdubai.ae/global-art-forum]; in 2016 *Global Art Forum 10: the Future Was* curated by Shumon Basar, Amal Khalaf and Uzma Z. Rizvi and explored the ways in which "artists, writers, technologists, historians, musicians and thinkers have imagined, and are shaping, the future" [http://www.artdubai.ae/global-art-forum-10/]. The 2018 Sharjah Biennial March Meetings hosted a panel titled *Futurism* [http://sharjahart.org/sharjah-art-foundation/events/mm-2018-you-send-me]; AFAC organised a forum titled *Imagining the Future: The Arab World in the Aftermath of Revolution* curated by Khaled Saghieh (Berlin, 9-10 June 2018) that explored "literary and artistic forms in the Arab world, in which "the future'' is represented or incarnated" [http://arabculturefund.org/resources/originals/1528366050-ImaginingtheFuture-Brochure.pdf]. For editions of the Maskoon Festival, see https://www.beirutdc.org/maskoon. [all last accessed 1.2.2022].

Arabic and comparative literature scholar Ian Campbell published the first English-language monograph of early Arabic sf (1965-1992) in 2018, building on the work of postcolonial sf theorists such as John Rieder, Jessica Langer, Patricia Kerslake, Ericka Hoagland and Reema Sarwal, and in particular on the work of Arabic literature scholar Ada Barbaro who published extensively on the topic, including her 2013 book *La Fantascienza nella Letteratura Araba* (*Science Fiction in Arabic Literature*).[38] An issue with Campbell's framing, which might have to do with his choice of hard sf texts, is his argument that Arabic-language sf 'takes a genre borrowed directly from the West, roots it in the Arabic cultural and literary heritage and creates works that are both recognizably SF and recognizably Arabic literature'.[39] In *Lost Futurities*, I make a case that the production of sf in the region expands Eurowestern sf and changes it. More contemporary engagements with Arabic sf can be found in *Arabic Literature in a Posthuman World* (2019), edited by Stephan Guth and Teresa Pepe, and *MOSF Journal of Science Fiction's* special issue on Middle Eastern Science Fiction (2021).[40] However, the majority of scholarship remains literary; visual practices are rarely considered. An exception is Gil Z. Hochberg's recently published *Becoming Palestine: Towards an Archival Imagination of the Future* (2021), which offers a close analysis of artistic interventions from Palestine that treat the archive as something speculative and future-oriented rather than located in the past, including works by Larissa Sansour and Jumana Manna. I also share Hochberg's conviction in this thesis that the speculative artworks are not escapist but attempt 'to generate new horizons of potential futures [that] do not bypass the violent history of colonialism, partition, military occupation and nationalism. […] [T]hese attempts all spring from a site of violence, and as a response to it.'[41]

Hochberg's approach underlines the specificity of these artistic practices and thus refutes Campbell's notion of imitation. Responding further to Campbell, I follow Sbaiti and Jörg Matthias Determann, author of *Islam, Science Fiction, and Extraterrestrial Life: The Culture of Astrobiology in the Muslim World* (2020), and their argument that there is a rich

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[38] For a critical review of Campbell's book, see Bodhisattva Chattopadhyay, "Book Reviews. Ian Campbell, Arabic Science Fiction," *Foundation: The International Review of Science Fiction* 49.3, no. 137 (2020): 111–14.
[39] Ian Campbell, *Arabic Science Fiction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 21.
[40] At the time of writing, Hosam A. Ibrahim Elzembely and Emad El-Din Aysha's edited volume *Arab and Muslim Science fiction* (McFarland, 2022) is still to be published.
[41] Gil Z. Hochberg, *Becoming Palestine. Towards an Archival Imagination of the Future* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2021), 29.

history of sf and fantasy rooted in, and inherent to, the region. Determann takes a historical and sweeping geographical approach, including Muslim majority countries like Turkey, Pakistan, Indonesia and Malaysia in his study, with excursions to the African American movement Nation of Islam. He shows how we can find the 'scientific imagination' from extraterrestrials in the Qur'an to intergalactic travel in computer games.[42] This is a refreshing take because it shifts the conversation away from sf being primarily a colonial Eurowestern genre, as theorised by scholars like John Rieder in his seminal study *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction*, and Eric D. Smith in *New Maps of Hope: Globalization, Utopia, and Postcolonial Science Fiction* (2012) who notes that sf was '[b]orn in the imperialist collision of cultural identities and taking as its formal and thematic substance the spatial dislocations that inhere in the imperial situation'.[43] As such, the works in *Lost Futurities* should not only be seen as *counter-futurisms* — a term media scholar Jussi Parikka uses to designate visual practices ranging from Afrofuturism, Gulf Futurism, Arab Futurism to Sinofuturism 'that articulate the productive disjunctive futurisms that investigate the conditions of existence of the contemporary moment' — but as futurisms in their own right that do not always have to stand in opposition to Eurowestern narratives.[44]

Afrofuturism, the most visible and most theorised counter-futurism, is often considered as the archetypal influence after which all other counter-futurisms model themselves. This has, amongst other factors, to do with the influx of scholarly publications and conference papers on the topic, as well as a growing interest in Black Studies. But it is also due to the success of commercial cinema blockbusters such as Marvel's 2018 hit *Black Panther*, pop music (George Clinton, Janelle Monáe), and the international visibility of contemporary artists activating Afrofuturist themes such as the British-Indian-Ghanaian collective The Otolith Group, British-Ghanaian artist John Akomfrah, African American artist Ellen Gallagher, Canadian artist Kapwani Kiwanga, and Kenyan-American artist Wangechi Mutu.[45] Parikka further clarifies: 'The audiovisual practices of counter-futurism, of situated

[42] For more on the scientific imagination, see Jörg Matthias Determann, *Islam, Science Fiction and Extraterrestrial Life. The Culture of Astrobiology in the Muslim World* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2020), 26–35.
[43] Eric D. Smith, *New Maps of Hope. Globalization, Utopia, and Postcolonial Science Fiction.* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 4.
[44] Jussi Parikka, "Middle East and Other Futurisms: Imaginary Temporalities in Contemporary Art and Visual Culture," *Culture, Theory and Critique* 59, no. 1 (2018): 41.
[45] For a discussion on artistic practices, see Ana Teixeira Pinto, "Alien Nations," *Mousse* 64 (2018): 166–75. For a forthcoming monograph on Janelle Monáe, see Dan Hassler-Forest, *Janelle Monáe's Queer Afrofuturism: Defying Every Label* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2022).

pasts and inventive futures that Afrofuturism laid out are also one key context through which to approach the Middle East and other Futurisms.'[46] There are limits to such a comparative approach because they do a disservice to the heterogenous specificities stemming from each context. In addition, caution should be exerted in attributing too much influence to Afrofuturism: in my conversations with artists for this study, Afrofuturism was rarely mentioned as a reference. Joy Sanchez-Taylor observes in her book *Diverse Futures: Science Fiction and Authors of Color* (2021) that '[t]he idea of utilizing the science fiction genres to question issues of racial futurity, particularly the modern versus the primitive binary which dominates Eurowestern narratives of colonization, is also a defining theme within the Latinx, Indigenous, and Asian futurisms movement'.[47] Sanchez-Taylor is primarily writing about authors of colour living in Eurowestern contexts, or authors who are indigenous inhabitants of settler colonial states such as Canada and the U.S. While there are certainly commonalities between artists in my study and the diverse futures Sanchez-Taylor sketches — her argument particularly sounds true for Palestinians living under the hardship of the Israeli Occupation — racialisation is not the primary mobilising factor in *Lost Futurities*. If anything, alterity and difference are articulated otherwise. The artists focus on themes specific to their home countries, even if they live in its diaspora. This is one of the reasons why I have refrained from taking a comparative counter-futurist approach and do not label the practices I examine as a movement. The sf tropes in each chapter connect and contrast thematically and transnationally, while also appealing to universal concerns. My close readings expand the canon of sf tropes and contribute to the remodelling and futureproofing of existing tropes. An aim of *Lost Futurities* is to establish sf and its mode of speculative analysis as a fruitful research method for cultural production beyond the works it addresses and beyond the field of the arts.

I have always approached this thesis as research into cultural production and its imaginaries as much as into factual politics. This study is thus by default an interdisciplinary endeavour, as it is a political one — interdisciplinary, since I draw on theoretical frameworks as far and wide as sf studies, postcolonial studies, Middle East area studies, visual and

[46] Parikka, "Middle East and Other Futurisms: Imaginary Temporalities in Contemporary Art and Visual Culture," 42.
[47] Joy Sanchez-Taylor, *Diverse Futures. Science Fiction and Authors of Color* (Colombus: Ohio State Press, 2021), 17.

cultural studies, memory studies, art criticism, film studies, feminist materialism, and the environmental humanities. Where possible I have incorporated work by scholars from the region, although I have been limited in this by my own linguistic shortcomings in Arabic fluency. Most artists included here exhibit locally, regionally and internationally, and as contemporary artists their influences are local, regional and international, too, which is something this study must contend with. This produces tensions on a variety of fronts — be they interpretative, political or cultural. I hope I have been sensitive to these tensions by not shying away from them and ultimately turning them productive. *Lost Futurities* is also a political project. Firstly, because these works are to be read with the urgency of today, so that we might think of a tomorrow; secondly, because in my more than twenty years as a practising curator and art writer — of which fifteen years have been spent writing and curating artistic practices from the Middle East — I hope the artists whose work is considered here have found in me an ally and a comrade, even if my readings contravene their artistic intent.[48] The works in this study *are* political: they critique dispossession, disenfranchisement, political oppression and injustice, historical erasure, thwarted potential, and exclusion, as much as they claim the right to dream, aspire and shape a vision for the future. How could a dissertation analysing these practices, then, not be politically invested and share the deeply speculative wish for change and possibility? I have had the privilege to work with, and write about, many of the artists in this dissertation. Sf has, on the one hand, given me tools to question my assumptions about that proximity, and, on the other, given me a lens to read familiar works from completely different and new vantage points. It has also pushed me to approach unfamiliar works with fresh eyes. In a way, the cognitive estranging qualities of sf have redefined a professional field of operations for me and have created additional layers of complexity and interpretation of how to engage with practice-led research.

Structure and Chapter Summaries

The five chapters are each structured according to a dominant sf trope and perform close readings of specific works as case studies. This study is not a geographical or chronological survey but is thematically organised, which I elaborate on below. I have had to

[48] For a selection of my curatorial projects, see http://www.natmuller.com/projects.html.

exclude many artists from this project, amongst them Walid Raad, Akram Zaatari, Rania Stephan, Anna Banout, Jessika Khazrik, Nadim Choufi, Mohamed Abdelkarim, Khalil Rabah, Mariam Mekiwi, Marwa Arsanios, Heba Y. Amin, Mirna Bamieh, Mona Benyamin, and Ruanne Abou-Rahme and Basel Abbas. My choice of works has been two-pronged: works that manifest a sf trope clearly and works by artists who have used sf or the speculative as a motif throughout their oeuvre. Larissa Sansour and Monira Al Qadiri feature across chapters, albeit with different works. This is not done to lend their work more importance than others, although Sansour is probably the artist from the region most well-known for her pioneering use of sf and her appearance throughout the thesis underlines this. In my long professional affiliation with Sansour as a curator and writer, I have been influenced by her innovative and critical approach to the stretching of science fictional tropes. In many ways, her practice operates as a case study by itself and guides the spirit of this thesis. While many of the works discussed are moving-image-based, I also look at sculpture, comics and mixed media installations. It falls outside of the scope of this study to answer why in the past two decades film and video have become an attractive medium for artists from the region. Scholars such as Laura U. Marks have amply addressed the geopolitical and funding contexts, conceptual outputs and infrastructural networks of experimental cinema and moving image practices across the region.[49] Suffice it to note that in a region where the movement of digital files is far easier than the mobility of artefacts, let alone people, the democratising and mobilising potential of video is an aspect to be taken into account. In addition, on a technical level, video and the possibilities of CGI, as well as other editing strategies, lend themselves well to the creation of new and sf worlds.

I have opted for a chapter structure that begins with a historical foundation of how sf relates to aspirations of progress and techno-scientific modernity in the Arab world. Then, in the second chapter, I zoom out in terms of timescale and connect human history to plant history and geological time. The third chapter loops my argument back to human subjectivity and history by extrapolating to sf Others, while my penultimate chapter forms a bridge between utopian and dystopian impulses by turning my attention to landscape and ruination. The final chapter comes full circle and returns to modernity, not as an aspiration of futurity but as a critique. Here, the human is decentralised, and the focus is on the non-

[49] See Laura U. Marks, *Hanan Al-Cinema. Affections for the Moving Image.* (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 2015).

human and posthuman in the context of planetary and post-planetary futures. Read together, the chapters twist from the human into the non-human, from historical time into geological time and back again. They aim to critically think with and through sf as an artistic and political project of speculative possibility in which the politics of futurity are intertwined with its imaginaries.

In a harrowing piece, the Syrian writer and political dissident Yassin al-Haj Saleh commemorates the ten-year anniversary of the Arab Spring and writes that now is the time 'to talk about *speicide*, murdering hope (from *spes*=hope, and -*cide*=killing in Latin), a neologism to represent politically manufactured situations of extreme hopelessness and promise-lessness'.[50] Hope in the region, al-Haj Saleh holds, lies in ruins, and by corollary, so does the future. This is a dire diagnosis. I would like to cautiously posit that in *Lost Futurities* looking at tomorrow cannot lie in the loss of hope, but a path through the darkness lies in the imperfect and flawed creation of possibility. Or, to quote sociologist Asef Bayat, 'hope is neither the same as naïve optimism that remains disengaged nor, of course, the blind despair that is entrapped in cynicism. Rather, it is an indispensable moral resource that can guide one toward imagining and working for alternative futures.'[51] The following chapters explicate and put this into practice.

Chapter 1, 'Lunar Dreams: Space Travel, Nostalgia and Retrofuturism in National Imaginaries', focuses on the sf trope of space travel and pairs it with a discussion of nostalgia, modernity and lost dreams in relation to the nation state. I examine Lebanese filmmakers and artists Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige's film *The Lebanese Rocket Society* (2012) and their installation *A Space Museum* (2018), Palestinian artist Larissa Sansour's video *Space Exodus* (2009), Lebanese artist Ali Cherri's *Pipe Dreams* (2012), and Syrian filmmaker and artist Ammar al-Beik's short film *La Dolce Siria* (2014). In this chapter space travel is conceptualised as a retrofuturist trope as yesterday's future. I argue that space travel, on the one hand, laments the broken promises of pan-Arabism and progressive techno-scientific modernity, and by corollary all the absences that have stemmed thereof, while, on the other, recuperates this loss as a site of mourning. This chapter also redresses

[50] Yassin al-Haj Saleh, "Syria: A Speicide Story," *Versopolis*, February 24, 2021, https://www.versopolis.com/festival-of-hope/festival-of-hope/1096/syria-a-speicide-story [last accessed 7.7.2021].
[51] Asef Bayat, *Revolution without Revolutionaries. Making Sense of the Arab Spring* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017), 223.

the often pejoratively viewed sentiment of nostalgia — in Middle Eastern contemporary art circles at least —and suggests it can operate productively when grieving loss.

In Chapter 2, 'Apocalypse Now: Memory and Forgetfulness at the World's End', the worlds of war and climate refugees meet respectively with that of seeds and clones. The sf trope of the apocalypse, more specifically that of an ecological extinction event, becomes the vehicle to analyse Palestinian artist Jumana Manna's film *Wild Relatives* (2018) and Larissa Sansour's video installation *In Vitro* and her sculpture *Monument for Lost Time* (both 2019). Here, notions of home, dispossession, identity and exile are at play with a lost world. By drawing on memory and trauma studies, I question the singularity of disaster and show how ecological and political catastrophe are intertwined. I argue that sometimes in order to salvage the present and safeguard the future of its memory, it is not remembering that should be privileged but forgetting.

Chapter 3, 'Masquerading Others: Transitioning through National and Other Belonging with Aliens, Automatons, and Superheroes', discusses sf's significant Others – the aliens, robots and superheroes – and explores how tactics of masquerade reframe and complicate identity and belonging as well as individual and collective history. I tease out the estranging specificities of the alien in Kuwaiti artist Monira Al Qadiri's video *The Craft* (2016) and her sculpture *The End* (2017); the abilities of superheroes in Larissa Sansour and Israeli-British artist Oreet Ashery's collaborative graphic novel *The Novel of Nonel and Vovel* (2009); and the allegiances of the robot/automaton in Fadi Baki's short mockumentary *Manivelle: The Last Days of the Man of Tomorrow* (2017). Masquerading as Other destabilises ontologies and crosses territorial, existential, political and artistic boundaries. I show how alterity, in the form of the alien, the superhero and the robot, becomes a way to reclaim agency, but also that there are limits to this dynamic of transformation in effectuating change through art.

In Chapter 4, 'Constructing Futurities: Building Possibilities through Landscapes of Ruin', I draw on the pre-Islamic Arabic poetic motif of *wuquf 'ala al-atlal* or 'stopping by the ruins' to examine Larissa Sansour's videos *In the Future They Ate from the Finest Porcelain* (2015) and *Nation Estate* (2012); Egyptian artist Maha Maamoun's video *2026* (2010); and Palestinian artist Wafa Hourani's installation *Qalandiya 2047-2067-2087* (2006-2009). Rather than being a manifestation of decay moored in the past, I propose ruin as a spatio-temporal sf motif of futurity. In this chapter, ruinous landscapes range from natural

landscapes to the built environment and include the desert, the high-rise, the gated community and the refugee camp. I argue that from ruination a horizon of hope can be reclaimed and the world remade differently. Moreover, these examples of ruin also gesture that social dreaming can engender historical repair, thus rendering the ruin a motif of construction rather than destruction.

The final chapter, 'Liquid Monstrosities: Futures beyond Extractivism in Hydro and Petro Imaginaries', foregrounds the trope of the monster, not as a figure of horror but as a recuperative figure of possibility and one of futurity and (post)planetary survival. This chapter is dedicated to the work of artists from the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC): Monira Al Qadiri's series of large public sculptures *Alien Technology* (2014-2019) and *Chimera* (2021); Saudi artist Ayman Zedani's video *the return of the old ones* (2020); and American-Qatari artist Sophia Al-Maria's videos *A Whale Is a Whale Is a Whale: Swan Song for the Arabian Humpback* (2014) and *The Future was Desert* (2016). I analyse how the ills of petro-modernity, which have produced much wealth in the Gulf, ooze into the sphere of water, causing both to mix monstrously. I make a distinction between the monstrosity of extractivist capitalism, in which humans are the actual monsters, and the speculative monsters who, with their liminal ontologies, inhabit the artworks. In this chapter the monster functions as a bridge between humans, non-humans and non-life, as well as a connector between historical and planetary time. The chapter is an encouragement for humans in the Anthropocene to become less monstrous and more monster, and, in a time of polarising identity politics, to embrace the speculative and aesthetic potential of fluidity.

Lost Futurities is an invitation to be in the world and think beyond it. It is a tentative proposition to acknowledge darkness and loss and still strive for what German Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch terms 'concrete utopia'. The latter is defined by an impulse that 'reaches forward to a real possible future, and involves not merely wishful but will-full thinking'.[52] This means that the chapters that follow are not only to be viewed as close readings and speculative analyses but also as calls to action. To be rooted in reality means, as all the case studies show, to be scarred by it. Injustice, violence and dispossession cannot

[52] Ernst Bloch, paraphrased in Ruth Levitas, "Educated Hope: Ernst Bloch on Abstract and Concrete Utopia," *Utopian Studies* 1, no. 2 (1990): 15. Tom Moylan underlines how the concrete utopia is the most privileged bearer of the future for Bloch. Concrete utopias are points in history where 'utopian possibilities are established in the concreteness and openness of the material of history.' Tom Moylan, "The Locus of Hope: Utopia versus Ideology," *Science Fiction Studies* 9, no. 2 (1982): 159.

just be wished away. But they can be acknowledged, mourned and taken as a point of departure to think and do differently. Seeing artistic production from the Middle East *with* and *through* the eyes of sf unsettles assumptions about the region and makes them strange. These slippages open up possibility — interpretive, creative, intellectual and political. Thinking futurity means daring to imagine it, and in the case of the artists discussed, image it so they can make others *see* it too. In this gesture lies an act of imaginary generosity in which the artists extend a hand to the viewer to imagine together with them. In some cases, echoing Sbaiti, this is nothing short of revolutionary. Sf in these works is the agential driver of possibility, and therefore, in the long run, of change. I hope that in the following chapters I do justice to this challenging, yet powerful, proposal of collective imagination and speculative repair. In this lies not only shared vulnerability but also shared responsibility.

First then, in Chapter 1, to the stars.

Chapter 1: Lunar Dreams

Space Travel, Nostalgia and Retrofuturism in National Imaginaries

The Sunbird has landed.
That's one small step for Palestinians, one giant leap for mankind.
—Larissa Sansour, *A Space Exodus*, 2009.

First, we saw the image of a rocket. Not just any rocket, a rocket with the colours of the Lebanese flag.
Did the Lebanese dream one day of conquering space?
Impossible to believe.
—Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, *The Lebanese Rocket Society. The Strange Tale of the Lebanese Space Adventure*, 2012.

In September 2019, with great media aplomb, Hazzaa al-Mansouri was celebrated as the first Emirati in space. During his eight-day mission on the International Space Station (ISS) he was tasked with carrying out scientific experiments. Reading between the lines though, his primary assignment would have been to give the nascent Emirati space program a big boost.[1] Space travel has always spoken to the (national) imaginary and is one of science fiction's prime, if arguably tired, tropes. As early as 1962, British sf novelist J. G. Ballard, for example, called the emphasis on space travel in sf an unfortunate by-product of the Russian-American space race and lamented that unless sf drastically rethinks how it deals with space travel and reinvigorates itself, the genre will suffer irreparably.[2] This is echoed by Gary Westfahl's observation that space travel, and more specifically the sub-genre of the space opera with its focus on the spaceship, the adventure yarn, and conflict, is what general audiences most commonly understand as sf, and is therefore sf's least respected form.[3]

There are at least two points from the above that need to be redressed in the context of the Arab world. First of all, not only the US and the USSR battled over hegemony and ideological spheres of influence in space during the Cold War. Many Arab countries,

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[1] See Alice Cuddy, "UAE in Space: Hazzaa Al Mansoori to Become First Emirati Astronaut," *BBC News*, September 22, 2019, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-49715269. and "Hazza Al Mansouri Is Back on Earth - but Historic Mission Goes On," *The National*, October 8, 2019, https://www.thenational.ae/uae/science/hazza-al-mansouri-is-back-on-earth-but-historic-mission-goes-on-1.921071. [last accessed 19.10.2019].
[2] J.G. Ballard, "Which Way to Inner Space," in *Science Fiction Criticism. An Anthology of Essential Writings*, ed. Rob Latham (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 101–3.
[3] Gary Westfahl, "Space Opera," in *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction*, ed. Edward James and Farah Mendlesohn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 197–98.

including Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Lebanon and Iraq had their own space projects.[4] The history of Arab space science is considerably underrepresented within accounts of space travel, as are the fantastical sf worlds connected to them. Secondly, in the 1960s, in the West and East alike, the idea of conquering space imbued nations with patriotic zeal and an imaginary for the future that combined a desire for progress and the pioneering of new frontiers — be they terrestrial or extra-terrestrial — with nationalist values.[5] In the Arab world these space programmes were conceived at the height of pan-Arabism and nationalist fervour, a time in which thinking about the future and modernity was inextricably bound to a utopian imaginary promoted by its main ideologue, Egypt's charismatic second president Gamal Abdel Nasser.[6] At the same time, the genre of Arabic sf has from its inception 'reflect[ed] Arab society in a distorting mirror'.[7] For example, the early sf film *Journey to the Moon* (1959) by Egyptian director Hamada Abdel Wahab tells the story of transnational collaboration between Egyptian and German scientists and therefore goes against Nasser's distrust of Western influence.[8] Nevertheless, the golden era of the space race lies half a century behind us, and in the meantime Arabs have travelled into space on board of international missions.[9] What, then, do these images and imaginaries of space travel mean today when they have been structurally underappreciated, or, as we will see, entirely forgotten? What reflection does space travel as a distorting mirror – to use Ian Campbell's phrase – offer when as Adam Roberts has pointed out sf's foundational trope of space flight has 'changed from being a thing of a gleamingly imagined future to being real, and then went on to pass that by and become, as it is nowadays, a thing of the past'?[10]

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[4] Jörg Matthias Determann, *Space Science and the Arab World: Astronauts, Observatories and Nationalism in the Middle East* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2018), 12.
[5] Determann, 12.
[6] Tarek El-Ariss, "Future Fiction. In the Shadow of Nasser.," *Ibraaz*, no. 26 June (2014), http://www.ibraaz.org/essays/95. Determann describes the space programmes of Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Libya, Algeria and the Gulf countries (including Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and UAE) in his chapter "The Arab Conquest of Space," as taking their first steps in the 1960s and 1970s. Determann, *Space Science and the Arab World: Astronauts, Observatories and Nationalism in the Middle East*, 1–16.
[7] Campbell, *Arabic Science Fiction*, 2.
[8] For more on *Journey to the Moon*, see Determann, *Space Science and the Arab World: Astronauts, Observatories and Nationalism in the Middle East*, 43.
[9] Arab astronauts include Saudi national Prince Sultan bin Salman who flew on the US space shuttle Discovery in 1985, the first Arab in space; he was followed by Syrian cosmonaut Mohammed Faris who flew with the Soviet crew aboard the Soyuz TM-3 to the MIR space station in 1987. For an overview, see Determann, 116–47.
[10] Roberts, *Science Fiction. The New Critical Idiom.*, 32.

In this chapter I trace how space travel —primarily thought of as a dream of the past — is imaged and imagined in Lebanese filmmaker and artist duo Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige's experimental documentary *The Lebanese Rocket Society. The Strange Tale of the Lebanese Space Adventure* (2012) and their site-specific installation *A Space Museum* (2018), Palestinian artist Larissa Sansour's video *A Space Exodus* (2009), Lebanese artist Ali Cherri's video installation *Pipe Dreams* (2012), and Syrian artist Ammar al-Beik's short film *La Dolce Siria* (2014). I offer close readings of individual artworks and analyse how conceptions of national belonging, individual and collective aspiration, and complex rapports with temporality, are fractured, rethought and grappled with. This chapter is informed by Svetlana Boym's compelling conceptualisation of nostalgia's 'utopian dimension, [that] is no longer directed toward the future […] not directed towards the past either, but rather sideways'.[11] For Boym, nostalgia in the twenty-first century is, in essence, about feeling out of time and out of place in a rapidly evolving world, and a desire to have something to cling on to, real or imaginary. What is refracted in the mirror of sf by way of nostalgia is not a naive yearning for times past, nor are its utopian qualities about catapulting something from the past into the future. Rather, nostalgia and its sf twin retrofuturism, defined usefully by Elizabeth Guffey and Kate C. Lemay as an imagined future that never came to pass and reveals 'a nostalgic longing, accompanied by a deep dissatisfaction with the present moment', operates as a foil to discourses of nationalism and modernity.[12]

The works discussed in this chapter move towards a future-oriented hankering for worldbuilding that cannot fully materialise because it is continuously disrupted by the failures of the past. Fanciful ambition and dreams of progress, whether scientific, socio-political or other, are pierced by narratives of hardship, even defeat. Under the shiny promise of the future lies a reality that is messy and painful, and which for now, to echo Boym, can be accessed only sideways. My analysis of the artworks in this chapter encourages a re-evaluation of nostalgia, a much-disliked notion within contemporary practices in the Arab world, as a productive and critical lens to work through issues of the past, present and future. Here I echo literary scholar Ihab Saloul's view that nostalgia can

[11] Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), xiv.
[12] Elizabeth Guffey and Kate C. Lemay, "Retrofuturism and Steampunk," in *The Oxford Handbook of Science Fiction*, ed. Rob Latham (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 437.

offer a positive cultural potential to 'reconstit[ute] injured subjectivities'.[13] I specifically look at how artists reconfigure imaginary and real visual representations of space travel, temporally as well as spatially, into commentaries on the nation state, and issues of nationalism, in their respective contexts.[14] Combined with how the artists tinge space travel with retrofuturism, these works remind us of Adam Roberts's observation that often 'the chief mode of science fiction is not prophecy, but *nostalgia*'.[15] In these works, space travel is not necessarily cast as an adventurous techno-scientific desire to be fulfilled in the future; rather, it is the lost potential it exercises over the past that is mourned.

Absented Dreams: Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige's *The Lebanese Rocket Society* (2012)

Figure 1.1. Joana Hadjthomas and Khalil Joreige. *The Lebanese Rocket Society. The Strange Tale of the Lebanese Space Adventure*, 2012. Documentary film, 95'. Film poster. Image courtesy the artists and The Third Line Gallery, Dubai.

[13] Ihab Saloul, *Telling Memories: Catastrophe and Exile in the Modern Palestinian Imagination*, 1st ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 10.

[14] Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, whose work is discussed below, have consistently refused that their work be read as nostalgic, although they admit that nostalgia, in particular that of the modernity of the 1960s, keeps haunting them. See Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, "On the Lebanese Rocket Society," *E-Flux Journal*, no. 43 (2013), http://www.e-flux.com/journal/43/60187/on-the-lebanese-rocket-society/. [last accessed 29.10.2019].

[15] Roberts, *Science Fiction. The New Critical Idiom.*, 33.

In their documentary film *The Lebanese Rocket Society. The Strange Tale of the Lebanese Space Adventure* (2012) (Fig.1.1), Lebanese artists and filmmakers Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige tell the extraordinary and true, yet completely forgotten, narrative of the Lebanese national space program of the 1960s. The film is principally an account of how, in 1960, the modest scientific experiments with rocket propellants of a young and ambitious mathematics professor named Manoug Manougian and his students at the Armenian Haigazian University in Beirut became a national project embraced by the Lebanese military. Yet, the film is equally about how Hadjithomas and Joreige as Lebanese artists of a specific generation that came of age during Lebanon's Civil War (1975-1990) grapple with a complex relationship to time: a past that is framed by ideas of Arab modernity of the 1950s and 1960s and the Lebanese Civil War vis-à-vis a present that scholar Judith Naeff describes as a 'suspended now', a temporality that is 'characterized by a protracted "presentness" with limited access to past and future'.[16] What the film eventually shows is a fraught relationship to the future. Artists like Hadjithomas and Joreige, the so-called 'war generation' of Lebanese artists —which includes, amongst others, Tony Chakar, Lamia Joreige, Lina Majdalanie (formerly Saneh), Rabih Mroué, Marwan Rechmaoui, Walid Raad and Akram Zaatari — struggle not only to imagine the future but particularly how to represent it visually.[17] This generation of artists spent much of the late 1990s and mid-2000s trying to make sense of the Civil War, in the absence of a state narrative. The 1989 Ta'if Agreements might have halted the hostilities in Lebanon, but its sectarian make-up is deeply engrained in Lebanese political structures and in society. Moreover, the policy of 'no victor no vanquished' and a general amnesty law following Ta'if meant that there has been no closure, no reconciliation and no place where individual and collective memories and narratives can meet.[18] The war lords who committed the atrocities of the past still head

[16] Judith Naeff, *Precarious Imaginaries of Beirut. A City's Suspended Now.* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 3.

[17] The artistic practices of the "war generation" or *jeel al-harb* is described by Chad Elias as being sensitive to 'recollection of the past and reimaginings of futures in a nation haunted by the spectre of failed leftist political project and the defeat of multicultural and secular forms of nationalism in the Arab world'. Chad Elias, *Posthumous Images. Contemporary Art and Memory Politics in Post-Civil War Lebanon.* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 4.

[18] The Ta'if agreement, signed on the 22 October 1989 in the Saudi Arabian city of Ta'if, brokered an end to Lebanon's fifteen-year Civil War and the dismantling and demilitarisation of all militias, excluding Hizbullah. It was an initiative by the Arab League and backed by the US. Its political reform perpetuates the sectarian make-up put forward in the 1943 National Pact that stipulates Lebanon's president to be Maronite, its Prime Minister Sunni, and the Speaker of Parliament Shia. One of the main national objectives of Ta'if was to

the major political parties and hold seats in government. Artists have picked up the role of what Sune Haugbolle calls 'memory makers'.[19] The practices of this generation are characterised by an inquiry into the politics of representation, a preoccupation with the archive and the archival, and the thin lines between fact and fiction.

For Hadjithomas and Joreige, the discovery of the Lebanese Rocket Society introduces a partial reconciliation with the past and their own experience of the war. It also shows that the recent past does not always have to be *seen* as violent but can also inspire hope, as well as scientific and national ambition. In many ways the film is an auto-critical journey of discovery**:** from their initial surprise when they first stumble on a photo of a stamp from 1964 with a rocket decked in the colours of the Lebanese flag, to the piecing together of the narrative of The Lebanese Rocket Society through interviews and other archival material.[20] In this whole narrative they are far from being distant observers, but, rather, have an active presence throughout the film. Very early on they establish their biographical background —both were both born in 1969 in Beirut, shortly after Neil Armstrong first walked on the moon. The voiceover alternates between the artists, interweaving our attention from their own subjectivities to the narrative of the Lebanese space adventure. Cinematically, the film slides effortlessly between different temporalities of past and present, transporting us via archival material of 1960s Beirut to the artists' present-day reality. In this crossover between past and present, the Civil War and its aftermath of political stagnation operates as a violent hiatus disrupting, if not thwarting, dreams of the future. Despite the upbeat tempo of the film, this project can be read as a site of mourning for what was actually lost: a dream, national unity, and pan-Arab modernity. Key to the documentary part of the film is the artists' difficulty in visually representing that loss and imagining something beyond it.

At the end of the film, a sf animation, in collaboration with artist Ghassan Halwani, depicts the continuation of the Lebanese Rocket Society in a future Lebanon. But here the

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eventually abolish all political sectarianism according to a phased plan. However, no timetable was set for this and after the cessation of hostilities in 1990 between the warring factions, Ta'if only further institutionalised sectarianism politically, socially and culturally in Lebanon, promoting many of the militias' leaders to posts of governance that created a system of confessional nepotism and corruption. See, for the full text: https://www.un.int/lebanon/sites/www.un.int/files/Lebanon/the_taif_agreement_english_version_.pdf [last accessed 29.10.2019]. Also, for the reproduction of sectarianism and Syria's role, see Fawwaz Traboulsi, *A History of Modern Lebanon* (London: Pluto Press, 2007), 240–46.

[19] Sune Haugbolle, *War and Memory in Lebanon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 8.

[20] Hadjithomas and Joreige, "On the Lebanese Rocket Society."

retrofuturist trope of space travel lands the artists in a tomorrow that is a nostalgic version of the 1960s idea of nationalist modernity.[21] It does not really propose emancipatory alternatives or speculative ways to reconceptualise the nation's politics, but rather, remains transfixed by innovative science as the solution to society's ills. Whereas markers such as national identity, shared history, memory and the idea of modernity as technological advancement are continuously troubled in the documentary part of the film, they manifest themselves less critically in the animation. This results in the animation feeling strangely technophilic and disconnected from the rest of the film in terms of aesthetics and temporality. The crude artificiality of the animation is set against the meticulously researched documentary. Sf — in this case, developments in science that trump the poetics of the imaginary — is pitted against the veracity of what is articulated in the rest of the film. It is as if the speculative nature of the documentary that propels the newly found narrative of the Lebanese Rocket Society into the artists' present comes undone in the future. For example, in the most performative moment of the documentary Hadjithomas and Joreige transport a scale replica of the Cedar IV rocket from Dbayeh, north of Beirut and the location of the rocket's original launching base, back to the Haigazian University, its scientific birthplace. Rockets in present-day Lebanon, even if they are artworks, can easily be interpreted as missiles. By corollary, such an endeavour had to happen under police convoy and with the permission of the army, the municipality, and the Ministries of Defence and of Foreign Affairs. The artists consider the gesture of placing this eight-metre sculpture, titled *Part I: Cedar IV, A Reconstitution. Elements for a Monument* (2011) (Fig.1.2.), in the garden of the university not only a way to underline the scientific nature of Manoug Manougian's project, but also to question the possibility for monuments in Lebanon in the absence of a shared history. For them, it becomes a means to give 'a materiality to that absent imaginary'.[22] The absent imaginary Hadjithomas and Joreige refer to draws on the absence of visual representation, such as the lost archive of the Lebanese Rocket Society and of so many archives, visual and other, that were lost in the violence of the Civil War and through neglect. This is demonstrated on numerous occasions throughout the film. But it is

[21] The artists contend that if the Lebanese Rocket Society would have continued it would have only been possible under the auspices and support of the nation state. In other words, as a national project. Skype interview with the artists 15.09.2019.
[22] Hadjithomas and Joreige, "On the Lebanese Rocket Society."

also the absence of a common historical and unifying narrative amongst the Lebanese, poignantly underlined by the white colour of the Cedar IV sculpture.[23] The cedar tree and the distinctive red and white national colours of the Lebanese flag have been taken out, suggesting that displays of national identity are inadequate to heal the wounds of the past.

Figure 1.2. Joana Hadjthomas and Khalil Joreige. *Part I: Cedar IV, A Reconstitution. Elements for a Monument*, 2011. Sculpture at Haigazian University Beirut. Iron, corian, 800 x 120 x 100 cm. Image courtesy the artists and The Third Line Gallery, Dubai.

The animation attempts to remedy national divisions by reactivating a national space project all Lebanese would rally behind; however, it does so by proposing a nostalgic return to Arab Modernity 2.0. The opening sequence of the animation treats us to a classic sf trope: a rocket launch in which the sculpture at the Haigazian University lifts off towards the future. The first view of Beirut in the future is that of the iconic Holiday Inn hotel on the city's seafront. It is not the bullet-ridden and shelled ruin that serves as an urban landmark and relic to the war, but a fully functioning hotel. The first suggestion is that the Civil War might not have happened. However, the first metro stop we encounter before stopping at the National Space Museum (Fig.1.3.) is the 'Bookstore of Peace'. Would there be such a bookstore without a war? Historical timelines are further scrambled during a visit to the museum where the history of the Lebanese Rocket Society is summarised. If the first Lebanese satellite was launched in 1969, it calls into question the 1967 *Naksa* or Arab

[23] For the artists, the withdrawal of the national colours means that the project becomes more ghostly but also opens up the project to a variety of interpretations. Interview with the artists 15.09.2019.

defeat in the war with Israel, which is seen as a rupture in the historical narrative of Arab progress and modernity.[24] The absence of the *Naksa* would mean a recalibration of the geopolitics of the region, but not necessarily on utopian and pacifist terms. In the museum, the Lebanese space project is framed as a military and scientific endeavour, which suggests that Hadjithomas and Joreige's desire to reinstate the space project as a scientific and artistic one has failed and *real politik* has taken over. As the camera angle traverses high-speed across Beirut it pauses and pivots around the Martyrs Monument in Martyrs Square in downtown Beirut. The statue created by Italian artist Marino Mazzacurati was inaugurated in 1960 by President Fouad Chehab – the same year Manougian began his rocket propellant experiments at Haigazian University. Like the Holiday Inn, this damaged statue has become a landmark and symbol of the Civil War in Beirut's postwar cityscape. In Halwani's animation the statue is still pockmarked by bullets and one of the figures still misses an arm.[25] The animation keeps giving conflicting signals as to whether the Civil War happened at all and keeps the viewer wondering whether this is a future of emancipated scientific vision, or a future that cannot shake off the ghosts of the past.

Figure 1.3. Joana Hadjthomas and Khalil Joreige. *The Lebanese Rocket Society*. *The Strange Tale of the Lebanese Space Adventure*, 2012. Animation still. Image courtesy the artists and The Third Line Gallery, Dubai.

[24] Tarek El-Ariss references Edward Said, who saw the 1967 *Naksa*, or defeat against Israel, as a rupture in the historical narrative of progress and modernity from the 19th century onwards (the *Nahda*, or enlightenment). El-Ariss cautions that it was not only colonialism undermining the project of Arab modernity but also the exclusion of those who never got a voice in the narrative of Arab modernity. Tarek El-Ariss, *Trials of Arab Modernity. Literary Affects and the New Political.* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 176.

[25] For an insightful discussion, see Elias, *Posthumous Images. Contemporary Art and Memory Politics in Post-Civil War Lebanon.*, 168–71.

Moreover, how does this particular commemorative statue, erected to remember those slain in the square by the Ottoman ruler Jamal Pasha in 1916, correspond to Hadjithomas and Joreige's own sculpture at Haigazian University? Both sculptures are imbued with loss and signal temporal ruptures. The former was meant to be a reminder of Lebanon's colonial past under Ottoman rule and inaugurate a new era of independence and modernity. In its current guise – and the animation suggests this is still the case in the future, too – it has become a memorial for the Civil War.[26] Hadjithomas and Joreige's Cedar IV rocket at Haigazian University is a tribute to the scientist-dreamers of modernity, but it simultaneously laments and sets in stone the loss of dreaming of the future in the current Lebanese context. The sculpture in the university's garden is ghostly white; however, in the animation every rocket and spaceship we see bears the colours of the Lebanese flag. When, in 2025, the Adonis space probe is launched into orbit this happens to huge crowds waving Lebanese flags. In divided Lebanon, where public rallies are usually dominated by party flags, this suggests some form of national unity. In and by itself this is a form of political progress, as the anti-government demonstrations which have swept across Lebanon since autumn 2019 have shown.[27]

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[26] Situated on Beirut's former Green Line, a no man's land that during the war divided the city into a predominantly Muslim western sector and predominantly Christian eastern sector, the statue keeps reminding passersby of the city's violent past, in particular since the damage wreaked on the statue during hostilities were mostly kept after restoration. The statue was removed and restored in 1996 but only returned to Martyrs Square in 2004. See Maya Abu Nasr, "Martyrs' Statue Returns to Original Site after 8-Year Absence," *The Daily Star Lebanon*, July 16, 2004, http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2004/Jul-16/4128-martyrs-statue-returns-to-original-site-after-8-year-absence.ashx. [last accessed 23 April 2019].

[27] I happened to be in Lebanon for fieldwork when the October-November 2019 demonstrations broke out. I witnessed first-hand how in the first few weeks of the uprising Lebanese from all walks of life, social class and sects stood shoulder to shoulder waving Lebanese flags only. The demonstrators called for political reform and an end to sectarian politics, nepotism and corruption. For a good overview, see Lydia Assouad, "Mass Protests Have Taken Place in Lebanon Against the Political Class and Its Economic Policies," *Diwan: Middle East Insights From Carnegie*, October 21, 2019, https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/80133?lang=en; and Michael Young, "After Saad Hariri Resignation, Any New Lebanese Government Would Be Severely Tested," *The National*, October 29, 2019, https://www.thenational.ae/opinion/comment/after-saad-hariri-resignation-any-new-lebanese-government-would-be-severely-tested-1.930415. [last accessed 5.11.2019]. Lebanese have continued to take to the streets following the August 4, 2020, blast at Beirut's port, one of the largest non-nuclear explosions recorded, with to-date no culprits arrested; the devaluation of the Lebanese Pound by 90% continues to plunge the population into poverty. For the port blast, see Michael Young, "A Year after the Beirut Port Blast, Lebanon's Struggle and Surrender," *The National*, August 3, 2021, https://www.thenationalnews.com/opinion/comment/2021/08/03/a-year-after-the-beirut-port-blast-lebanons-struggle-and-surrender/. For a background article on Lebanon's economic meltdown, see Edmund Blair, "Explainer: Lebanon's Financial Crisis and How It Happened," *Reuters*, January 23, 2022, https://www.reuters.com/markets/rates-bonds/lebanons-financial-crisis-how-it-happened-2022-01-23/. [last accessed 3.3.2022].

If it is the case that in current postwar Lebanon the role of the state is marginal, then the animation shows that in the Lebanese near future the nation state seems to have regained importance in defining belonging, social cohesion and shared memory.[28] Moreover, unlike the situation now, the state in the animation seems to provide services such as public transport infrastructure and dependable energy resources. Nevertheless, Stephen Sheehi reminds us that the coupling between nationalist ideology, the idea of progress and selfhood is very much a modernist idea, in the East and in the West alike.[29] On the one hand, Hadjithomas and Joreige are torn between a nostalgia for the modern utopia promised by the Pan-Arab dream, a nostalgia that in their own words they refuse to submit to, but which haunts them nonetheless; on the other hand, they struggle to represent an actual imaginary for the future.[30] Their film was released in the wake of the 2011 Arab uprisings, a moment of hope for the region that with the exception of Tunisia was brutally crushed. Perhaps answers to visions of — and for — the future, let alone the present, are not to be found in the animation but, rather, in the documentary, and specifically in the unresolved tension between the artist's contradictory desire for an image of the future that can be hopeful, but which, at the same time, can accommodate absence and loss and the violent ghosts of the past.

Ruins of Modernity: Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige's *A Space Museum* (2018)

If in Lebanon the aerial dream of space travel was supposed to bring a populace together under the rubric of nationalist modernity, science and progress, then the tried and tested model of the International Fair was supposed to do the same back on the ground. Maurice Roche has explained how 'mega-events' like International Fairs or International Expositions have been instrumental in the shaping of modern national public spheres.[31] In 1962 the Brazilian architect Oscar Niemeyer, well-known for his futurist modernism and in particular his planning of the new Brazilian capital Brasília, was tasked with designing the Rashid Karami International Fair in Tripoli, Lebanon's second largest city, north of Beirut.

[28] For an insightful discussion on the role of the state in postwar Lebanon, see Haugbolle, *War and Memory in Lebanon*, 2010, 5–28.
[29] For a detailed overview on Arab nationalism, identity and modernity, see Stephen Sheehi, *Foundations of Modern Arab Identity* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2004), 7–12.
[30] Hadjithomas and Joreige, "On the Lebanese Rocket Society."
[31] Maurice Roche, "Mega-events, Culture and Modernity: Expos and the Origins of Public Culture," *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 5, no. 1 (2009): 1–31.

Financial scandals and political infighting troubled the project from its inception and the outbreak of the Civil War in 1975 — and ensuing occupation by Syrian forces — put a halt to completing its construction.[32] To this day the fairgrounds lie abandoned, the concrete decaying and steel structures rusting.[33] Not only does this ruin point to the failure of an ambitious national and cosmopolitan modernist architectural experiment that was an exercise in nation building, but in a way it symbolises — if not monumentalises — the crumbling of a vision of modernity and the breakdown of the Lebanese nation state.[34] The Rashid Karami International Fair is a tale of unrealised potential as the exhibition grounds were never finished, no exhibitions ever realised and international tourism to Tripoli, together with trade, as one of the main objectives of the fair, never really took off.[35] Whereas the history of The Lebanese Rocket Society could still be reconstructed, its successes and eventual demise accounted for, the starting point for Hadjithomas and Joreige's site-specific project *A Space Museum* (2018) at the Rashid Karami International Fair is a ruin that has only been known as a site of loss and failure, and is therefore less susceptible to nostalgia.

In 2018, six years after the release of their film, the artists' conception of the future had grown more fragmented and speculative, and less nostalgic, reflecting a region and a world gone darker and more polarised.[36] Anticipating the future is no longer a matter of an identified *telos* — whether that is sending humans into space, a unified nation state, or peace and stability in the Middle East — but, rather, a multiple set of speculative and fragile prepositions. The ebullience at their discovery of Lebanon's space program in the film has made place for the more muted containment of a museological presentation in *A Space Museum*. Produced for the aptly titled exhibition *Cycles of Collapsing Progress*, Hadjithomas

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[32] Chloe Kattar, "Chronology and Facts on The Rashid Karami International Fair," in *Cycles of Collapsing Progress*, ed. Studiocur/art (Beirut: Beirut Museum of Art and Studiocur/art, 2018), 8–16.
[33] Lemma Shehadi, "Too Little, Too Late? The Battle to Save Tripoli's Futuristic Fairground.," *The Guardian*, January 3, 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2019/jan/03/too-little-too-late-the-battle-to-save-tripoli-futuristic-fairground-oscar-niemeyer. [last accessed 26 May 2019].
[34] Chloe Kattar explains how the International Fair in Tripoli set out to promote an outward-looking and progressive vision of the Lebanese republic and writes that 'it could be easily said that the Tripoli Fair was one of the most pioneering infrastructure projects of post-independence Lebanon, in view of the economic, political, international and ideological stakes involved.' Kattar, "Niemeyer - Lost in Translation," 21.
[35] Kattar, 19.
[36] The authoritarian and violent aftermaths of the 2011 uprisings in the region include at the time of writing the ongoing war in Syria, Sisi's authoritarian regime in Egypt, the Saudi war on Yemen and the Houthi rebellion, and violence in Libya. Outside of the region, Trump's election, a surge in right-wing and nationalist politics from Brazil and the Philippines to Europe, as well as Brexit continue to destabilise global politics.

and Joreige’s work was installed in the subterranean space originally envisioned by Niemeyer to be a space museum but never used as such. It lies beneath a helipad that bears an uncanny resemblance to a flying saucer (Fig.1.4). Rather than reactivating gestures of the past into the present as is the case with the earlier works related to the Lebanese Rocket Society, Hadjithomas and Joreige’s space museum is actually a first. Their space museum does not have a historical precedent that can be reconstituted as such. By corollary, it is one of the few instances that the present moment is tangibly felt precisely because the space museum manifests itself clearly as a conceptual contemporary art project that takes place for the first time.

Figure 1.4. Helipad at the Rashid Karami International Fair in Tripoli, exhibition site for Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, *A Space Museum*, 2018. Image courtesy the artists and The Third Line Gallery, Dubai.

This is not to say that the trope of retrofuturism is absent from this project, even if the ‘suspended now’ appears to be temporarily unsuspended. On the contrary, as Guffey

and Lemay note, ‘retrofuturism plays with ideas of temporality, blurring past and future [and] [a]t its most unsettling, retrofuturism disrupts our understanding of the nature of time, encouraging a kind of hybrid temporality’.[37] The individual artefacts in *A Space Museum* (Fig.1.5.) include older pieces from *The Lebanese Rocket Society* as well as newly commissioned works. The older pieces are the Cedar IV sculpture at the Haigazian University and *The Golden Record* (2011), a video projection of a spinning golden record accompanied by sounds of Lebanon from the 1960s. The latter is a take on NASA’s 1977 Voyager 1 and 2 missions, which carried golden records intended to communicate the story of humanity to extraterrestrials.[38] The hopeful glory days of international and Lebanese space science are echoed through these works, even if they also lament a lost era. Here the retrofuturistic references — the rocket and the golden record — are straightforward. In the new pieces, however, temporalities are scrambled and fragmented. For example, the six-channel video installation *Looping* (2018) shows primarily archival footage of rocket launches used for *The Lebanese Rocket Society* film, then there is a snippet from the film’s animation, and a short excerpt of a documentary on Niemeyer where the architect travels on a flying saucer. Past and future, fact and (science) fiction are edited in an endless loop that is only reinforced by the rockets shooting into space but never really taking off. In *Looping* the potential of the future is continuously broken.

The idea of temporal linear progression is interrupted in *A Space Museum* to the effect that one of the main pillars of modernity — progress — is called into question. The future, so it seems, has lost its pole position as a competitive temporality. This is best demonstrated in the work *Scenarios for a Space Museum* (2018) in which the artists propose three possible curatorial frameworks for an exhibition at the museum. These ‘scenarios’ or exhibition plans are three 3D-printed slabs cased separately in plexiglass, resembling steles and depicting, respectively, a scene from Ghassan Halwani’s sf animation cast in coagulated sand showing the space museum in a Beirut of the future; an installation overview of an exhibition about The Lebanese Rocket Society that could have been held at Haigazian University, the birth place of the Lebanese Rocket Society in 1965, produced in concrete; and a proposal for the 2018 project *A Space Museum* with the actual artworks by

[37] Guffey and Lemay, “Retrofuturism and Steampunk,” 437.
[38] Cfr. https://voyager.jpl.nasa.gov/golden-record/ [last accessed 27 May 2019].

Hadjithomas and Joreige executed in marble. Together these scenarios represent the (science) fictional future, the forgotten past and an actualised present. There is no hierarchy between all three temporalities as they are presented here: they exist next to each other and each have a different story to tell. [39] Yet, the 'scenario' including the artists' actual works accentuates, if not elevates, the contemporary moment because it is the only museum scenario that, for now, has been realised.[40] By creating this *mise en abyme*, an exhibition in an exhibition, the artists have captured the present tense and have muddled the chain of retrofuturist nostalgia that runs through the broken timeline of the exhibition.

Figure 1.5. Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, *A Space Museum*, 2018. Site-specific mixed media installation. Exhibition view, *Cycles of Collapsing Progress*, Tripoli, 22 September - 23 October 2018. Image courtesy the artists and The Third Line Gallery, Dubai.

The question remains, *what* is it that Hadjithomas and Joreige's space museum actually exhibits? It does not really offer a scientific or historical chronology of the Lebanese space project, nor does it shed much light on Niemeyer's plans for his own space museum. Should this exhibition, then, be read in essence as a catalogue of failure: failed modernity, the incapacity to remember the past, and an ineptitude of realising potential in the future? After all, their month-long intervention is shown in a ruin. Is the art and by corollary the imaginary Joreige and Hadjithomas put forward the only thing that succeeds here? Or, does the museumification of their own artworks in this (science) fictional construct, to an extent,

[39] This project is still ongoing and the idea is to produce all three scenarios in all three materials (sand, concrete and marble), as well as add a fourth scenario in all three materials that depicts the actual exhibition as realised at the Rashid Karami International Fair. For the artists, sand is a less precise material that evokes crumbling archaeological finds; concrete is the ultimate building material of modernity; and marble is a precious and more precise material, also used traditionally for sculpture. Interview with the artists 15.09.2019.
[40] As with any exhibition proposal there were tweaks to the third scenario: *Looping* and *Scenarios for a Space Museum* were missing and the floor piece *A Carpet* (2013) and photo series *Restaged* (2012) were not shown in Tripoli. Interview with the artists 15.09.2019.

numb their meaning? Indeed, *Cedar IV, A Reconstitution* loses its commemorative monumentality once denuded from the context of the Haigazian University and placed at the Niemeyer site. The replica of the Cedar IV rocket allows, then, for two possible readings that are not necessarily mutually exclusive: an artwork, on the one hand, and a relic of a forgotten space age, on the other. If a museum's core business is to collect artefacts and institutionalise the narratives that imbue them, then I suggest that what *A Space Museum*, as a whole, attempts is a speculative recuperation of time rather than a recuperation of objects. It does so only in part and in a fragmented manner. This begs the question whether the museum at all, however speculative in its form, can be an appropriate means to recuperate the time and the images the artists have identified as lost. Joreige and Hadjithomas's *A Space Museum* battles the failure of Niemeyer's space museum, but it also risks being entombed by it. In other words, the artefacts and ideas in the artists' space museum that are inspirational and claim a speculative futurity risk being seen as something that *was*, rather than something that *could be* or *could have been*. Perhaps the largest question that looms over this particular project is whether the ruins of a future past lend themselves to be exhibited at all in a suspended now.

It's Easier to Reach the Moon than Jerusalem: Larissa Sansour's *A Space Exodus* (2009)

If space travel and its science fictional iterations bring together national and scientific aspirations of progress and modernity, then how do these aspirations translate in the absence of a sovereign state, and more specifically in the absence of freedom of movement? Palestinian artist Larissa Sansour has worked for over a decade with science fictional tropes to articulate the Palestinian plight and explore issues that range from identity, belonging, memory and dispossession, to national iconography and statehood. Born in Jerusalem in 1973 and having spent her childhood in Bethlehem, Sansour currently resides in London and is barred by Israel from visiting the city of her birth.[41] She is therefore no stranger to Israel's punitive regime of permits, barriers, roadblocks and checkpoints.[42] In

[41] See Frances Bodomo, "Astral Projections," *The New Inquiry*, January 22, 2015, https://thenewinquiry.com/astral-projections/. [last accessed 25.08.2019].
[42] See United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), "Movement and Access in the West Bank," 2017, https://www.ochaopt.org/sites/default/files/movement_and_access_in_the_west_bank.pdf. [last accessed 19.09.2019].

her first science fiction video *A Space Exodus* (2009), which is a pastiche of Stanley Kubrick's 1968 cinematic cult classic *2001, A Space Odyssey*, as well as Neil Armstrong's equally iconic televised 1969 moon landing, the artist plays a Palestinian astronaut who plants a Palestinian flag on the moon (Fig.1.6.). While at first glance this gesture insinuates a way forward for the Palestinian people — substituting, as it does, an impossible nation state on Earth for a viable lunar one — I suggest that Sansour's film does more than extra-territorialise and reclaim Palestinian national dreams in a tongue-in-cheek fashion: it simultaneously displaces Palestinians once again, spatially as well as temporally.

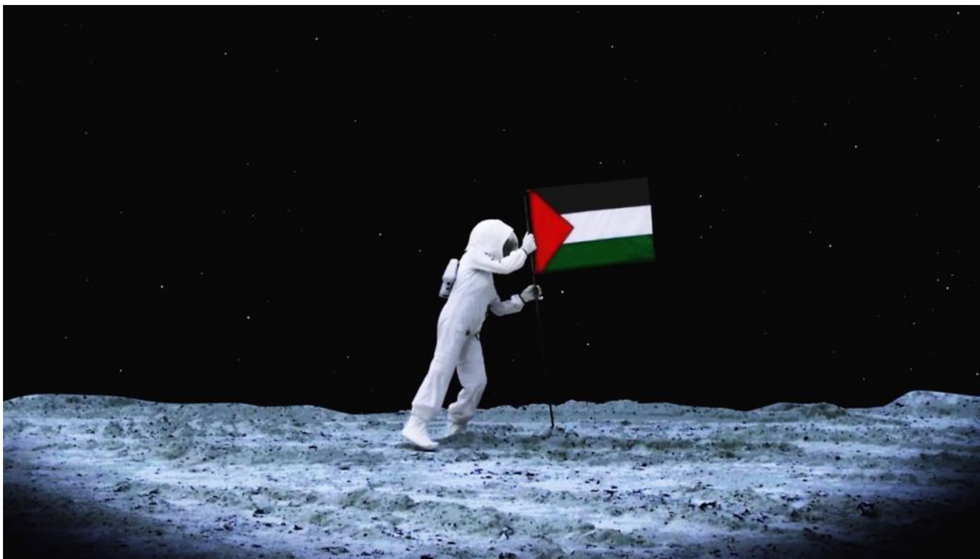

Figure 1.6. Larissa Sansour. *A Space Exodus*, 2009. HD Video, 5'. Video still. Image courtesy of the artist.

Sansour's referencing of Kubrick and Armstrong evokes a 1960s retrofuturist aesthetic that lands us in a future past, rather than in a future newly found. Pawel Frelik has written of retrofuturism that it 'functions predominantly as a worldbuilding mode […] that specifically exploits the tensions between ideas about the future from our historical past—either actual predictions or fictions of the time—and notions of futurity expressed in contemporary narratives'.[43] Sansour's tactical appropriation of both Kubrick and Armstrong's narrative of Western spaceflight and technological prowess unsettles stereotypical representations associated with Palestine, while playfully adhering to some orientalist iconographic features such as the turned-up noses of her boots, Palestinian traditional embroidery on her spacesuit, and an orientalised version of Kubrick's

[43] Pawel Frelik, "The Future of the Past: Science Fiction, Retro, and Retrofuturism," in *Parabolas of Science Fiction*, ed. Brian Attebery and Veronica Hollinger (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2013), 206-207.

soundtrack.[44] Pop cultural references aside, Sansour presents a Palestine that promotes all the promises and hubris of 1960s nationalist space exploration. While the video is meant to couple irony with defiance, Sansour's cosmic heroics remain moot. A closer analysis of the film reveals that *A Space Exodus* foregrounds exile and a loss of home rather than proposing an actual alternative. The work is primarily defined by what is absent — a viable Palestinian state and homeland — than by what is visually (re)presented: the unliveable dead rock of the moon. The gap between what is a promise of sovereignty and what is *de facto* on offer alludes to decades of unrealised peace initiatives, UN resolutions and politico-economic incentives that have not brought the Palestinian people any closer to an independent nation state.[45] Within the film's interplanetary make-up, Earth is still a preferred choice. This is evidenced by the visual hierarchy set up by the film's opening credits where we first see an image of Earth, followed by one of the moon, after which the camera pans to the artist in her spaceship. Another instance that emphasises the physical and ideological distance between the two planets is Sansour's wave (Fig1.7.) to Earth after planting a Palestinian flag on the moon. While this gesture celebrates her accomplishment – after all here is the first (Arab) woman on the moon – it can be interpreted as a farewell to the Palestinian Right of Return to historical Palestine.[46] It seems that space traveller Sansour will not be coming home –neither to Earth, nor Palestine.

It is precisely the disconnect between Palestinaut Sansour and her 'home base' that directs and propels the narrative arc of this short film. This is exemplified by the incorporation of the word 'exodus' in the title of the work, which already has a momentous departure scripted into it. From the start the protagonist's relationship to Jerusalem is deemed problematic: 'Jerusalem, we have a problem… No, everything is fine. We are back on track,' are the first words she utters.[47] Here the film becomes autobiographical and

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[44] For a thorough discussion on Sansour's oeuvre and her subversion of Palestinian iconography in *A Space Exodus*, see Chrisoula Lionis, *Laughter in Occupied Palestine. Comedy and Identity in Art and Film* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2016), 101–5.

[45] For an overview of UN resolutions and issues at stake concerning the Palestinian Question, see: https://www.un.org/unispal/permanent-status-issues/ [last accessed 20.09.2019].

[46] General Assembly UN Resolution 194 was adopted on 1 December 1948 and stipulates that 'refugees wishing to return to their homes and live at peace with their neighbours should be permitted to do so at the earliest practicable date, and that compensation should be paid for the property of those choosing not to return and for loss of or damage to property which, under principles of international law or equity, should be made good by the Governments or authorities responsible.' Cfr. https://www.unrwa.org/content/resolution-194 [last accessed 20.09.2019].

[47] Larissa Sansour, *A Space Exodus*, Beofilm, 2009.

extends into collective concerns many Palestinians barred from Jerusalem share.[48] It also employs what Chrisoula Lionis has referred to as a humour noir 'that draws together the tragedy of Palestinian exile and dispossession and our reply with laughter'.[49] It is no coincidence, then, that Mission Control in Jerusalem remains unresponsive for the whole duration of the film, signalling not only Jerusalem's contested and undefined status in the whole political equation but even worse, its loss. The closing sequence shows Sansour floating in space, divorced from her mothership, calling out in vain to Jerusalem. In *A Space Exodus* the conquering of lunar space comes at the expense of giving up a national home with Jerusalem as its capital on Earth. In this respect Sansour has taken Edward Said's characterisation of exile literally: 'The pathos of exile is in the loss of contact with the solidity and the satisfaction of earth: homecoming is out of the question.'[50] Loss of contact is indeed the driving principle in *A Space Exodus*, with the unravelling of the Right of Return as a historical, geographical and territorial claim, as well as the continuation of displacement — now extra-terrestrial — as its result.

Figure 1.7. Larissa Sansour. *A Space Exodus*, 2009. Video still. Image courtesy of the artist.

Sansour's open-ended spinning into the space void is a reminder of the protracted national and legal limbo Palestinians often find themselves in; a bitter product of the

[48] See, for example, https://www.ochaopt.org/location/east-jerusalem [last accessed 20.09.2019].
[49] Lionis, *Laughter in Occupied Palestine. Comedy and Identity in Art and Film*, 104.
[50] Edward W. Said, "Reflections on Exile," in *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (London: Granta Books, 2001), 178.

consecutive failures of countless peace processes and ever-slimming chances of a two-state solution.[51] How then should we read Sansour's futurist scenario in which potential terraforming on the moon replaces the notion of a terrestrial home in Palestine and Jerusalem? I contend that it is precisely Sansour's employment of retrofuturist tropes that, on the one hand, facilitates a critique of identitarian markers of 'Palestinianess' and 'Palestinianism', and, on the other, keeps her firmly anchored in Palestinian geography on Earth, preventing her from fully taking the logic of a new lunar home planet further. 'Palestinianess' is described by Lionis as using nostalgic motifs connected to pre-Nakba historical Palestine (for example, oranges, olive groves, agricultural landscapes, peasants), while 'Palestinianism' refers to the use of a militant aesthetics portraying Palestinians as revolutionaries and freedom fighters (for example, *keffiyehs*, guns, *fedayeen*).[52] In *A Space Exodus*, the former is articulated by the aforementioned embroidery stitched on the space suit and naming her space pod 'the sunbird', while the latter is demonstrated by the prominence of the Palestinian flag and the Palestinaut figuring as an astral reincarnation of a *fedayee*. However, she cannot fully abandon Earth because like so many space travellers before her – fictional or real — the implicit prospect, no matter how small, of returning home is what fuels her adventure. As such, the film remains firmly rooted in past conceptions of home and a nostalgic longing for an absent Palestine on planet Earth. Speaking of the relationship between SF and nostalgia, Sansour motivates her choice of working with SF as follows:

> [S]ci-fi tends to allow for a specific kind of almost nostalgic framing of the topic at hand. Sci-fi almost invariably carries within it a sense of retro, as ideas of the future tend to appear standard and cliché at the same time as they come across as visionary. In the case of Palestine, there is an eternal sense of foreshadowing statehood, independence, and the end of occupation. The ambitious ideas that we hope to achieve have long since become so repetitive that the odd mix of nostalgia

[51] Ilan Pappé details how the Oslo Accords of 1993 were doomed to fail because in essence it deepened Israeli control over the occupied Territories and resulted in the partitioning of the West Bank and Gaza Strip in areas A (under Palestinian Authority control), B (under joint Israeli and Palestinian Authority control), C (under Israeli control), while not making any mention of the refugee issue. Ilan Pappé, *The Biggest Prison on Earth: A History of the Occupied Territories* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2017), 198–212.
[52] Lionis, *Laughter in Occupied Palestine. Comedy and Identity in Art and Film*, 26–47.

> and accomplishment that the sci-fi genre often embodies lends itself well to the topic.[53]

Sansour describes a conflict at root: a nostalgic longing for a lost homeland that is in the past vis-à-vis a yearning for progress in the future.

Retrofuturism accommodates these two forces that pull in opposite directions with, as a result, an unresolved future past. Sharon Sharp underlines this ambiguity by noting that 'retro futurism can have progressive and regressive ideological implications'.[54] There is a reason why the control panel of Sansour's spaceship consists of old-fashioned switches without hi-tech digital displays or holograms. Sansour gives us spaceflight as imagined in the 1960s, including all its dreams and ambitions, but with a Palestinian twist. The film begins in *medias res*, meaning that there is no backstory or explanation as to why this lunar mission is being undertaken; nevertheless, the use of Palestinian iconography is a reminder that this space exodus is preceded by other exoduses, such as those of 1948 and 1967.[55] As such, the respective exoduses of the *Nakba* and the *Naksa* as defining historical events for the Palestinian experience are also here present through their absence. The absence of any concrete references or representations of a Palestine on the ground makes *A Space Exodus* all the more potent. In other words, the 'estrangement' element, so particular to the sf genre, is defined by that which is invisible and not there, turning the whole dynamic on its head. Here the concept of a homeland, one lost in the past and one desired in the future, becomes the sf 'novum' and source of estrangement. The familiar retrofuturist references are there to further highlight the loss of a homeland and the absurdity of having to imagine a new one. The fact that this dispossession is shrouded in humour and popular culture makes it no less tragic.

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[53] Khelil Bouarrouj, "'Bethlehem Bandolero,' Interview With Artist Larissa Sansour," *Palestine Square*, April 20, 2015, https://palestinesquare.com/2015/04/20/larissa-sansour-on-sci-fi-nostalgia-and-the-staging-of-myth/. [last accessed 4 September 2019].

[54] Sharon Sharp, "Nostalgia for the Future: Retrofuturism in Enterprise," *Science Fiction Film & Television* 4, no. 1 (2011): 26.

[55] Nur Masalha traces how as early as the 1930s Yishuv (Jewish community in Palestine) leaders, amongst them Israel's first Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion, were advocating a transfer of the Arab population of Palestine, and how in the 1948 war this policy was accelerated in order to transform the territory's demographic to as small an Arab population as possible. Nur Masalha, "A Critique on Benny Morris," in *The Israel/Palestine Question: Rewriting Histories*, ed. Ilan Pappé (London: Routledge, 1999), 211–20. Albert Hourani summarises how in the 1967 war Israel occupied what was left of historical Palestine: Gaza, Jerusalem, the West Bank and the South Syrian Golan Heights, which had as effect a second wave of refugees and internally displaced. Albert Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples* (London: Faber and Faber, 1991), 411–15.

The moon operates rather paradoxically as a site of reinvention and new beginnings, and at the same time as one of bereavement and mourning for loss on Earth. Gil Z. Hochberg notes that Sansour's floating in space in the closing scene of the film suggests a 'move into the future [that] cultivates an imagination unbound to any borders— temporal or geographic […] by liberating Palestine from its historical and geographical chains, its prosaic status and as a political entity and better yet a "problem to be solved," she allows it to flow into space.'[56] I argue that in this piece 'liberation' is a much more messy political and artistic project and that Sansour does not manage to fully unshackle herself, nor does she fully unshackle Palestine from historical and geographical ties. Rather than flowing freely and liberated into space, as argued by Hochberg, Palestine, like the video's protagonist, gets lost into it. There is a distinction here between being free and being lost or at a loss. While the former suggests a departure from a situation and past condition that was unfree and is therefore full of promise and aspiration, the latter implies no such thing. To be lost can be in and by itself confining and robs a subject from seeing and seizing opportunity.

Helga Tawil-Souri aptly argues that Palestinians live in spatial-temporal slipzones, and that, accordingly, Palestinian cinema transgresses fixed typologies of time and territory.[57] This territorial and geographic unmooring is further exemplified by Sansour's loss of gravity and her symbolic drift into space. There is no actual *terra firma* in Palestine's always shifting geography, this work seems to suggest, whether territory is grabbed and policed by the Israeli authorities and Jewish settlers, or, in this case, replaced by a lunar enclave. 'Space' is continuously unmapped throughout the film, as it continues to be unmapped on the ground in Palestine.[58] The infinity and possibility of space struggles with the spatial control of the Palestinian population. The notion of loss stretches into the temporal realm, in particular when viewed from a retrofuturist perspective: there is no forward-looking gaze here, but past, present and future flow into each other, to the extent that towards the end of the film these temporalities are flattened and cancel each other

[56] Gil Z. Hochberg, "'Jerusalem, We Have a Problem': Larissa Sansour's Sci-Fi Trilogy and the Impetus of Dystopic Imagination," *Arab Studies Journal* xvi, no. 1 (2018): 40.
[57] Helga Tawil-Souri, "Cinema as the Space to Transgress Palestine's Territorial Trap," *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication* 7, no. 2 (2014): 172 and 174.
[58] For a report on land confiscation in the West Bank (Area C), East Jerusalem, and Gaza Strip, see: BADIL Resource Center for Palestinian Residency and Refugee Rights, "Israeli Land Grab and Forced Population Transfer of Palestinians" (Bethlehem, 2013), https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/handbook2013.pdf.

out. The future past battles a future suspended, leaving us with a spatial and temporal void. Following Tawil-Souri, it is 'the feeling of im/mobility that constitutes Palestinianess'.[59] What is it, then, that actually 'slips' in *A Space Exodus*? It is true that primarily we find a narrative that privileges mobility and travel and 'shift[s] geographies beyond the confines of territoriality'.[60] However, that shift is always a precarious one, and in essence one that always wishes to shift back to Earth/Jerusalem and thus to some form of territoriality. It is the wriggle between Earth and moon, here and there, past and future, before and after, that keeps so much of the film in a spatial-temporal suspension. It is also Sansour's embrace of the clichéd tackiness of retrofuturist space travel that allows her to critique, as well as claim, some form of national pride.

Few readings of *A Space Exodus* have looked at the aspect of travel in favour of foregrounding its humour, its critique on national iconography and its approach to (de)territoriality.[61] Perhaps this is because we never actually see Sansour's departure from Earth and her launch into orbit, nor are we privy to other obstacles she may have encountered on her journey to the moon. However, this omission, which once again exemplifies absence, is telling: not only does this strategy enhance the suspension of futuristic disbelief, it also sets Sansour apart from a range of filmic practices focussing on travel that came out of Palestine in the early 2000s, during and shortly after the Second *Intifada* and the construction of Israel's Separation Wall.[62] Labelled 'roadblock movies' by Michel Khleifi and Nurith Gertz, these films, documentary and fictional, focus on the mundaneness of everyday individual life under occupation in which Palestinian space is fragmented as the result of borders and barriers. These movies are firmly set in the present; however, the past – whether traumatic or idealised — still has a stymying effect on the contemporary moment. The journeys these films trace bear witness to the ruin and

[59] Tawil-Souri, "Cinema as the Space to Transgress Palestine's Territorial Trap," 177.
[60] Tawil-Souri, 171.
[61] See, for example, Hochberg, "'Jerusalem, We Have a Problem': Larissa Sansour's Sci-Fi Trilogy and the Impetus of Dystopic Imagination"; Tawil-Souri, "Cinema as the Space to Transgress Palestine's Territorial Trap"; and Chrisoula Lionis, "Peasant, Revolutionary, Celebrity The Subversion of Popular Iconography in Contemporary Palestinian Art," *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication* 8, no. 1 (2015): 69–84.
[62] For an overview on the Second Intifada or Al Aqsa Intifada (2000-2005), see https://www.palestine-studies.org/resources/special-focus/second-intifada-then-and-now; and for a timeline of the Separation Wall: The Palestinian Initiative for the Promotion of Global Dialogue and Democracy (MIFTAH), "The Apartheid Wall" (Ramallah, 2010), http://www.miftah.org/Doc/Factsheets/Other/NewWallFactSheet.pdf. [last accessed 21.09.2019].

devastation wrought on the Palestinian landscape. Whatever the destination of the journey, it is always frustrated by roadblocks. It is important to point out that the objective of these films is to overcome fragmentation and express national and identitarian unity in the absence of a spatial one.[63] The films of Azza al-Hassan, Hany Abu Assad, Annemarie Jacir, Michel Khleifi, Rashid Masharawi and Elia Suleiman of that period are a case in point.[64] *A Space Exodus* can be seen as an antithesis to the roadblock film: there is nothing mundane about setting foot on the moon, nor is space shrunk and torn by frontiers and barriers. Sansour's trip to the moon and into the future is presented as obstacle-free. Whereas in 'roadblock films' destinations are known but more often than not out of reach, here Sansour leaves the destination part of her itinerary open, but her wish to return to Jerusalem is implied.

The speculative thrust of sf space travel allows Sansour to boldly go where no Palestinian has gone before, to invoke a Star Trek reference — not only in terms of interstellar mobility, but also in terms of conceptual filmmaking that decries the Palestinian reality on the ground. With Palestinian hardship growing and brutality against the Palestinian population ongoing, Sansour undoubtedly shares the concerns of the 'roadblock' filmmakers. However, in 2009 there might already have been a genre fatigue with this form, necessitating Sansour to turn to other tactics to highlight the Palestinian plight, or as she puts it: 'The minute you become the subject of documentary, the minute you lose the game.'[65] This can be viewed as a comment on French cineaste Jean-Luc Godard's infamous remark in his 2004 film *Notre Musique* that 'the Jews became the stuff of fiction, the Palestinians, of documentary', suggesting that, in a way, Palestinians have been robbed of their subjectivity in an imaginary of their own construction.[66] Sansour not only gives us fiction, but science fiction to counter the lens through which Palestinians are customarily seen. A surreal retrofuturist voyage to the moon, then, in which free floating in outer space

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[63] Nurith Gertz and George Khleifi, *Palestinian Cinema: Landscape, Trauma, Memory*, *Palestinian Cinema: Landscape, Trauma, Memory* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), 134–70.

[64] These films include, for example, Rashid Masharawi's *Ticket to Jerusalem* (2002), Subhi a-Zubeidi's *Crossing Kalandia (Roadblock)* (2002), Elia Suleiman's *Divine Intervention* (2002), Azza al-Hassan's *News Time* (2001), Najwa Najjar's *A Child Called Muhammad* (2002), Hani Abu-Assad's *Nazareth* (2000) and *Ford Transit* (2002), and Annemarie Jacir's *Like Twenty Impossibles* (2003).

[65] Larissa Sansour, quoted in Kay Dickinson, *Arab Cinema Travels: Transnational Syria, Palestine, Dubai and Beyond* (London: Palgrave, 2016), 90.

[66] Jean-Luc Godard, as quoted in Kamran Rastegar, *Surviving Images: Cinema, War, and Cultural Memory in the Middle East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 93.

contrasts sharply with Ilan Pappé's depiction of the Occupied Territories as 'the biggest prison on earth', serves to articulate the dire reality of living in Palestine and its diaspora.[67] Sansour has reverse-engineered the roadblock film into an sf short that is anti-testimonial and witnesses not through the chronicling of events but, rather, through their absence. Similar to Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*, it is in effect, as Adam Robert notes, 'a poem of *nostos*' (emphasis mine) in which *nostos*, or returning home, is undefined but nonetheless remains longed for.[68]

What, then, is this home Sansour journeys to, or, rather, in her case drifts towards? Similar to Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish's 1986 poem 'We Journey towards a Home', Sansour's longing and nostalgia for home is both the exile's abstract longing for an imaginary place that no longer exists and the actual alienation that she cannot return to, her city of birth, Jerusalem.[69] Sansour's space travel sharpens the tension between what Boym has termed 'restorative' and 'reflective' nostalgia in which the former 'ends up reconstructing emblems and rituals of home and homeland in an attempt to conquer and spatialize time, [and the latter] cherishes shattered fragments of memory and temporalizes space'.[70] In *A Space Exodus* these two forms of nostalgia coexist, albeit uncomfortably. Giving up on restorative nostalgia would be giving up on the Palestinian project of return and a sovereign nation state in historic Palestine, while fully giving in to reflective nostalgia would equally relegate the idea of Palestine as a thing of the past that is forever lost and to be mourned. However, there is an attempt to performatively ignore these two competing forms of nostalgia by a spatial and temporal dislocation of 'home' to the moon and 'past' to the future. In the film, Sansour cannot fully extract herself from either nostalgia, nor would such a break be fully desirable. After all, as Dennis Walder has rightly pointed out 'nostalgia [is] deeply implicated in the political life of people, it is a part of their historical sense of themselves'.[71] Retrofuturism allows her to acknowledge that both types of nostalgia are

[67] Pappé, *The Biggest Prison on Earth: A History of the Occupied Territories*.
[68] Adam Roberts, *The History of Science Fiction*, 2nd edition (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 390.
[69] Mahmoud Darwish piercingly captures the spirit of exile and dislocation in this poem: "We journey towards a home not of our flesh. Its chestnut trees are not of our bones […]/Of our home we only see the unseen." Mahmoud Darwish, "We Journey towards a Home," in *Unfortunately, It Was Paradise*, ed. Munir Akash et al. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 10.
[70] Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 49.
[71] Dennis Walder, *Postcolonial Nostalgias: Writing, Representation, and Memory*, *Postcolonial Nostalgias: Writing, Representation, and Memory* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 3.

foundational to the Palestinian experience, whilst also enabling a cautious contemplation of rejecting them.

Sansour's use of the sf trope of space travel unlocks a myriad of possibilities for addressing the Palestinian predicament of an absent sovereign state from an extraplanetary perspective. The genre allows for an engagement with the complexity of life under occupation, and in exile, in which forcefields of nostalgia, nationalism and alternative worldbuilding need not cancel each other out but can strangely coexist. To this end Sansour has inhabited the role of a scientist and space pioneer, underscoring, like Hadjithomas and Joreige's position in *The Lebanese Rocket Society*, that Arabs have a place in space science as much as they do in sf. Sansour might have presented the first Palestinian on the moon, however an often neglected fact is that a Palestinian space scientist, Jenin-born Issam El Nemer (1926-2005), was part of the NASA team responsible for launching Apollo 11 and Armstrong's moon landing in 1969.[72] Arab space science has, as Jörg Matthias Determann points out in his book on the history of space science in the Arab world, always been a cosmopolitan and transnational endeavour based on international collaboration.[73] This has not stopped Arab countries, like so many others, from using space travel for nationalist, if not propagandist, purposes. In 1987 the Syrians put their first man, Mohammed Faris, into space as part of a Soviet Soyuz TM-3 space mission to the MIR space station. Faris would go on to become a national hero and emblem of Syrian patriotism and progress. However, he would have never made it into space had he not been a card-carrying member of Syria's ruling Ba'ath party.[74] Although a celebrity and decorated hero in his home country and the USSR, Faris's career did not go as smoothly as one would expect. As a Sunni he suffered from discrimination and marginalisation by the Alawi-dominated regime led by the Assad family. In 2011, when the uprisings broke out in Syria, Faris became increasingly disillusioned with the regime he had once been loyal to and he fled the country in 2012 for Turkey.[75] Now one of the Syrian (and Russian) regime's most vocal critics, Faris is an

[72] Cfr. Space Generation Advisory Council's section on Palestine: https://spacegeneration.org/regions/middle-east/palestine [last accessed 18 September 209].
[73] Determann, *Space Science and the Arab World: Astronauts, Observatories and Nationalism in the Middle East*, 17–30.
[74] Determann, 19.
[75] Determann, 142–47. See also Rosie Garthwaite, "From Astronaut to Refugee: How the Syrian Spaceman Fell to Earth," *The Guardian*, March 1, 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/mar/01/from-astronaut-to-refugee-how-the-syrian-spaceman-fell-to-earth. [last accessed 18 September 2019].

example of how a symbol of nationalist unity and regime stability fractures at the seams. It is also an example of how images and the temporalities they convey — in Faris's case, futurity — lose their hegemonic sway. These tensions lie at the heart of Lebanese artist Ali Cherri's two-channel video installation *Pipe Dreams* (2012).

A Future Reversed: Ali Cherri's *Pipe Dreams* (2012) and Ammar al-Beik's *La Dolce Siria* (2014)

Figure 1.8. Ali Cherri. *Pipe Dreams*, 2012. Two-channel video installation, 5' loop. Installation view. Image courtesy the artist.

Lebanese artist Ali Cherri's early work (2005-2014) focuses on examining the geopolitics of the Middle East, often using his own body as a site of critique. Akin to the practices of his Lebanese war generation peers, Cherri's early artistic interests centred around image politics, the (truth) value of images, and their meaning and power in the context of violence.[76] In *Pipe Dreams* (2012) (Fig.1.8.) the nationalist images of space travel are dislocated by anti-government revolutionary images. Rather than celebrating a nationalist message and the authoritarian strength of the regime, the image of space travel becomes an image of regime failure. Cherri produced *Pipe Dreams* at the end of 2011, just before the Syrian uprising turned into a protracted and bloody civil war. On a small, old-fashioned monitor the artist creates suspense by showing us a digital countdown. A short

[76] See Sheyma Buali, "Image and Imagination. Ali Cherri in Conversation with Sheyma Buali," *Ibraaz*, November 6, 2013, https://www.ibraaz.org/interviews/111. [last accessed 11.11.2019].

text introduces the context of the work: a phone call broadcasted on 22 July 1987 between the late Syrian president Hafez al-Assad, father of the current president, Bashar al-Assad, and Syrian cosmonaut Mohammed Faris at the MIR space station. Cherri ends the epigraph with the rather finite words, 'It would be the last time an Arab flew in space.' This already sets the scene that *Pipe Dreams* inaugurates the end of an era. On the monitor we see Assad in his presidential office talking to the cosmonaut flying over the planet. While this is an instance of travel between Earth and space, it is also a power dynamic between two nationalist symbols: Assad, the self-proclaimed father of the nation and the embodiment of totalitarian state power; Faris an instrumentalised extension of the former and a heroic and hopeful articulation of the nation. Both are sides of the same nationalist coin of modernity. Cherri superimposes a larger projection on the monitor, showing a statue of Hafez al-Assad standing solitary in an ominous desert-like landscape and then follows it with YouTube footage of the removal of the Assad statue, a precautionary measure taken by the Syrian authorities in the early days of the uprising to pre-empt vandalism and the toppling of statues by protestors. The projection moves between past and present, between an official broadcast celebrating a moment of national pride that was to be seen by the whole nation, and grainy amateur footage of national defeat that was intended to be seen by none. Throughout the work Cherri mimics a tactic used by Syrian demonstrators in the early days of the uprising and described by Lina Khatib as a 'visual reversal'.[77] Demonstrators set out to deface the carefully choreographed image of the Assads (both father and son) as the personification of the nation and replace it by a different image, that of the people.[78] 'The internet', argues Khatib, 'became the hub for the circulation of videos documenting the erasure of Baath symbols'.[79] Cherri juxtaposes the erasure of the president's image – albeit carried out by the regime — with a historical moment in which national state power is exercised, but also deferred. In the end it is the cosmonaut Faris who has an omnipotent and extra-terrestrial gaze over Syria and not Hafez al-Assad sitting in his office on Earth.[80]

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[77] Lina Khatib, *Image Politics in the Middle East: The Role of the Visual in Political Struggle* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2013), 203–4.
[78] Khatib, 197–208.
[79] Khatib, 203.
[80] See also Nat Muller, "Voyage Voyage: The Politics of Travel and Mobility in Contemporary Visual Practices from Lebanon," Saradar Publication \ Essays, 2018, http://www.saradar.com/ContentFiles/1218PDFLink.pdf. [last accessed 20.09.2019].

In *Pipe Dreams* the association between space travel and retrofuturism resurfaces as follows: space travel is not an image of the future but an example of an outdated image of the past. In addition to a visual reversal, *Pipe Dreams* also proposes a temporal reversal. Cherri's video installation is on continuous loop, suggesting that al-Assad's future vision for Syria has come undone. Utilising an image of the Syrian space adventure from the 1980s that conveys the message of a strong state with a resolute leader who will take his people forward into the future has all the qualities of a retrofuturist image, albeit a grotesque one when placed in the light of the atrocities committed by Hafez al-Assad — such as, for example, the 1982 massacre in Hama in which thousands lost their lives, and those continued by his son.[81] Space travel is relegated to the realm of the past and it becomes therefore a nostalgic image of the restorative kind, to echo Boym. In other words, there is a paradoxical time loop at work in Cherri's installation that ruptures linear time and keeps halting what appears at first glance to be futurist but eventually collapses backwards. Rather than a future past, the clip with Mohammed Faris seems to indicate a past future. This idea is further emphasised in Cherri's *Heroes: The Rise and Fall* (2013), a copper plate, chrome and granite sculpture of a headless cosmonaut holding his helmet under his arm. The shiny silvery appearance of the cosmonaut with the Lenin insignia on the space suit evokes a distinctly retrofuturist sensibility. It screams retro with all its nostalgic references to the space age, and yet this sculpture, similar to Sansour's astronaut, cannot fully and seamlessly perform its retrofuturist function. Both are broken representations of what

[81] The conservative city of Hama had opposed Ba'athist rule for a long time. After a Syrian army unit fell into the opposition's ambush on the 2 February 1982 and the Islamic conservatives called the city's people to rise against the regime, the government in Damascus decided to root out what they saw as Islamic militancy and insubordination against their rule. Patrick Seale describes how Hama symbolised an old and multilayered hostility between Ba'athism and Islam, Sunni and the minority Alawi ruling class, urban and rural communities. See Patrick Seale, *Asad: The Struggle for the Middle East* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 332–34. From 2 February to 5 March 1982 civilians in Hama suffered shelling, the complete razing of districts and whole families were slaughtered. Human Rights Watch estimates between 5,000 and 10,000 citizens were killed and many mosques, churches and public facilities were demolished. Others, such as The Syrian Human Rights Committee, put the death count at 20,000-25,000. Cf. https://web.archive.org/web/20130522172157/http://www.shrc.org/data/aspx/d5/2535.aspx and https://www.hrw.org/report/2010/07/16/wasted-decade/human-rights-syria-during-bashar-al-asads-first-ten-years-power [last accessed 10.10.2019]. In Syria the Hama uprising became a synonym for massacre but also an example of how the regime responds to opposition. When the uprising started in 2011 the brutality of the government resonated with what had happened in Hama three decades earlier. The Syrian observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) and UNHCR estimated that from the beginning of the 2011 uprising until 2018, more than 511,000 people have lost their lives, with 6.6 million displaced internally and 5.6 million around the world. Cfr. https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2019/country-chapters/syria [last accessed 20.09.2019].

Elizabeth E. Guffey has referred to as 'yesterday's tomorrows'.[82] She notes that 'retro *implicitly* ruptures us from what came before' (emphasis mine).[83] In Sansour and Cherri's case the rupturing is *explicit*, namely Sansour's separation from Earth/Palestine/spaceship and Cherri's decapitated cosmonaut. Both Sansour and Cherri present a promise of the future that has not only been broken, but ideologically has now also become a lie.

Returning to *Pipe Dreams*, the temporal and visual rupture is further enhanced by the binary of the 2-channel installation and the difference in image quality and image content. Donatella Della Ratta convincingly sketches how in the early days of the Syrian revolution, low resolution, blurry and shaky images circulating on social media conveyed a sense of authenticity, truthfulness and immediacy. [84] However, as time wore on and the violence intensified these 'poor' and 'networked' images came to be seen as unreliable images and an inadequate means for communicating witness accounts.[85] This is largely due to the difficulty of verifying the veracity of digital images, but also to the fact that after producing thousands of hours of footage evidencing state-sponsored crimes committed against the Syrian population, Bashar al-Assad remains in power. To counter this, some Syrian image-makers have turned away from the poor image and back to the high-end aesthetics of the static shot and fixed cameras.[86] Cherri offsets the ambiguities of the poor and widely circulated networked image, produced hastily as a means to document political events, vis-à-vis the formal and authoritative, or, rather, in this case authoritarian, imaging

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[82] Elizabeth E. Guffey, *Retro: The Culture of Revival* (London: Reaktion Books, 2006), 133–59.
[83] Guffey, 28.
[84] Donatella Della Ratta, "The Unbearable Lightness of the Image: Unfinished Thoughts on Filming in Contemporary Syria," *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication* 10, no. 2–3 (2017): 109–32.
[85] Donatella Della Rata cites artist and researcher Hito Steyerl's definition of the 'poor image' as an image in opposition to highly produced and high resolution 'rich image' of cinema; the poor image is low in resolution, copied, circulated, degraded, networked and highly susceptible to manipulation. These are images seen by many rather than few and used as much for what Steyerl terms 'capital media assembly lines' to 'alternative audiovisual economies'. The poor image is thus always an ambivalent image that lacks an original and lends itself to exploitation and appropriation as much as it lends itself to defiance. See Hito Steyerl, "In Defense of the Poor Image," *E-Flux* 10, no. November (2009), https://www.e-flux.com/journal/10/61362/in-defense-of-the-poor-image/. [last accessed 30.09.2019]. Della Ratta defines 'networked images' as follows: 'Networked images are the offspring of the web 2.0—unlike images as evidence, they are not defined around an alleged truth-content, but rather by their power to circulate in networks and to establish multiple new connections between the maker and the viewer, and connect both with the surrounding environment "made not only by human interactions but also by the technical infrastructure supporting this very interaction—the interface, the database, the algorithm" (Della Ratta 2017b).' Ratta, "The Unbearable Lightness of the Image: Unfinished Thoughts on Filming in Contemporary Syria," 110–11.
[86] Ratta, "The Unbearable Lightness of the Image: Unfinished Thoughts on Filming in Contemporary Syria," 117 and 123.

of Syrian state television. We have to remember that *Pipe Dreams* was produced early on in the revolution when images circulated on social media were still viewed primarily as testimony of evidence. By corollary, what Cherri shows us is not only a difference in image quality, but also a difference in image reception: from the one-to-many medium of state-controlled media, to the many-to-many platforms of social media. Moreover, what *Pipe Dreams* teases out are two colliding images of the future that present two irreconcilable worldviews in the Syrian context: one that propagates a nationalist retrofuturist dream of space travel and enduring power of the Ba'athist regime made in the image of al-Assad; the other, a democratic reform in which the voice of the people is heard and seen through social media. By overlaying these images one on top of the other, Cherri creates a speculative imaginary in which the hypermobility of the networked image is not quite as mobile, and the authoritarian messaging of state television is not quite as static. Rather, the installation demonstrates the tension between an uncharted, forward-looking future that yet still lacks a representative image, and an autocratic future looking backwards.

The difficulty of representing a future image of Syria is further magnified in Syrian artist and filmmaker Ammar al-Beik's short film *La Dolce Siria* (2014). Produced more than three years into the Syrian civil war, this film is part of al-Beik's trilogy that also includes *The Sun's Incubator* (2011) and *Kaleidoscope* (2015), brutally personal films in which al-Beik zooms in on how war, trauma and exile impact family life, memory and the production of images. In *La Dolce Siria* al-Beik combines excerpts of Frederico Fellini's film *The Clowns* (1970), footage of an Italian circus performing in Damascus, with images of children he is related to playing with his 16mm camera, and grainy visuals of aerial combat. Al-Beik references Mohammed Faris's space mission towards the end of the film by first showing archival photos that include snapshots of the crew and vistas from space, and then moving to the broadcasted exchange between Faris and al-Assad, the same excerpt Cherri uses in his piece. Al-Beik distorts Faris's lyrical description of the Syrian landscape as seen from outer space with news images of utter devastation in Aleppo, courtesy of relentless air strikes by the Syrian and Russian air forces.[87] It is clear that the Syrian-Russian gaze from

[87] A 2017 World Bank report assesses that amongst the three most damaged cities in Syria (Aleppo, Idlib, Hama), Aleppo fares the worst with 65% of its damage due to destroyed housing. Aleppo also fares the worst when it comes to destroyed water, sanitation, health and transport infrastructure and accounts for 58% of damages the report covers. See http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/530541512657033401/Syria-damage-assessment-of-selected-cities-Aleppo-Hama-Idlib [last accessed 15.10.2019].

above is not one of space exploration, science and performative national unification, but a gaze that is set on destruction and safeguarding the position of the Syrian-Russian alliance. Faris's aerial view has now become fully weaponised. In the film al-Beik echoes Paul Virilio's point that military technology is always ocular and that the 'war machine' is by definition a 'watching machine'.[88] As such al-Beik equates Faris's space travel over the Syrian landscape in a Russian space station to a Russian Scud missile used by the Syrian military. In *The Lebanese Rocket Society*, Hadjithomas and Joreige voice a similar sentiment that in the region rockets can only be viewed as weapons and not as civil scientific endeavours. Hadjithomas and Joreige regret the loss of an image and dream of Arab, and specifically Lebanese, modernity, while al-Beik grieves for the lost image of a childhood dream to travel to space, a dream he shared with so many other Syrian kids watching Faris.[89]

Further contributing to this sense of depleted imagery is al-Beik's unorthodox incorporation of Cherri's piece in his own work. With only three years setting his and Cherri's piece apart, the citation of Cherri's installation in his own artwork illustrates how rapidly the status of images has changed in Syria. Whereas Cherri's work still affords a degree of speculation and anticipates a future image to emerge, al-Beik's film emphasises a complete breakdown of what can be imaged, let alone imagined in Syria's context of carnage and visual confusion. Della Ratta points out in her discussion of *La Dolce Siria* that it is 'perhaps the most poignant example of a rising awareness that images should not be understood in relation to their truth content, but employed as a sort of alchemical entry by which to investigate and penetrate the novel meanings and connections precisely shaped by them, i.e., the politics of the visible'.[90] It is telling that al-Beik laments that the government removed the al-Assad statues, the ultimate icon of Ba'athist power, before the demonstrators could, yet still concludes his film with two works of art: Cherri's and another excerpt from Fellini. The image of the future is, then, not to be found in evidence-based images that communicate the horrors and reality of war, nor in the temporal and visual

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[88] Paul Virilio explains how '[f]rom the original watch-tower through the anchored balloon to the reconnaissance aircraft and remote-sensing satellites, one and the same function has been indefinitely repeated, the eye's function being the function of a weapon.' Paul Virilio, *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception* (London: Verso Books, 1989), 4.
[89] Email interview with the artist 11.10.2019. See for this sentiment also Lebanese author Naji Bakhti's novel *From Beirut to the Moon* (2020).
[90] Ratta, "The Unbearable Lightness of the Image: Unfinished Thoughts on Filming in Contemporary Syria," 126.

rupture proposed by Cherri. It seems that in al-Beik's work the only kind of credible and speculative image can, for now, only exist within the realm of art.

In this al-Beik shares affinity with Lebanese artists Hadjithomas and Joreige's exploration in *A Space Museum* of what a contemporary speculative image could be. In *A Space Museum* the artists' approach shapeshifts between a retrofuturist imaginary spurred on by space travel and something so speculative it effectively lacks visual representation and is defined by omission rather than presence. Al-Beik does something similar in his radical choice to undo himself from evidence-based images: *La Dolce Siria* touches on the limitations — if not deficiencies — of the visual to convey a present moment, let alone a future. He touches on something so fragile that it cannot be imaged. In both projects the nostalgic and retrofuturist qualities of space travel underline a temporality that is neither yesterday's tomorrow, nor tomorrow's yesterday, but a deeply fragmented present that strives to surface and be known. In these two works the national is not reconfigured, in fact it is not really there at all. At the core lies a struggle to redefine belonging and subjectivity in the present moment in multiple ways, without reverting to national(ist) ideologies. If these works come across as somewhat unmoored, it is because to an extent they are. They have not found their footing yet and hence remain precarious.

Throughout this chapter I have tried to show how retrofuturist and nostalgic tropes of space travel operate to identify a quest for something lost in a context of fraught national realities. In *A Space Exodus* and *The Lebanese Rocket Society* these tropes narrate troubled pasts that continue to take hold of the future. Sansour and Hadjithomas and Joreige cannot extricate themselves from, respectively, the ongoing occupation and dispossession of Palestine and the sectarian splintering of the Lebanese state, however science fictional the new national scenarios they propose. This is not to say that these works do not exude some of that aspirational stardust associated with space travel: a dream for the future, a viable Palestinian state, and a unified Lebanon with science as its main resource. We can find resilience and ambition for the future in all these works, as well as a refusal to succumb to the unstable and harsh conditions of the present. Nevertheless, as much as these works continue to wrestle with, or even resist, fixed conceptions of the national, this chapter is an invitation to primarily read these works as sites of mourning in which lost dreams, lost homelands, lost time and lost images are deplored. Retrofuturism subtly recuperates the anguish these losses produce and offers something often overlooked in the discussions of

these works: namely that acknowledging loss and the flaws of the past is to be contemporary with all the impossibilities and insecurities of the present. Longing for what lies beyond the stars is not necessarily found in the future; sometimes it is found in the nostalgia of a future past.

Chapter 2: Apocalypse Now

Memory and Forgetfulness at the World's End

So long as there is agriculture, there is continuity of life.
We can be hopeful that there will be sustainable production for the earth and for us.
—Walid al Youssef in Jumana Manna's *Wild Relatives*, 2018.

In October 2019 massive wildfires carbonised vast swathes of forest in the mountainous Chouf and Metn regions of Lebanon. The fires were the worst to hit Lebanon in decades, destroying thousands of acres of trees in their wake and causing many inhabitants to flee. The devastation was exacerbated by the Lebanese Army's faulty equipment, the authorities' mismanagement in combatting the multiple blazes, and other forms of state negligence.[1] Wildfires around the Mediterranean have increased exponentially in recent years due to human-induced climate change turning the region in a wildfire hotspot.[2] It is a prime example of how the Anthropocene, a term coined by Nobel-prize winning chemist Paul J. Crutzen in 2000 for the geological age in which humans shift from being biological actors to geological actors — and since much debated in the humanities — is often mentioned in tandem with disaster.[3] This disaster is, as the Lebanese case points out, not solely ecological, nor is it singular. It is multiple in every way and demonstrates that social and political inequities are inextricably bound to climate injustice. In an effort to save its dwindling economy, and coinciding with the fires, the Lebanese government introduced an ill-conceived Whatsapp tax as an austerity measure in October 2019, which led to months of protests, social unrest and violence against the grift of

[1] See Timour Azhari, "'It Was like Judgment Day': Lebanese Devastated by Wildfires," *Al Jazeera*, October 19, 2019, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/10/judgment-day-lebanese-devastated-wildfires-191016170006745.html. [last accessed 06.02.2020].

[2] See Kate Abnett, "Mediterranean Has Become a 'Wildfire Hotspot', EU Scientists Say," *Reuters*, August 4, 2021, https://www.reuters.com/business/environment/mediterranean-has-become-wildfire-hotspot-eu-scientists-say-2021-08-04/. [last accessed 7.2.2022].

[3] See, for example, T.J. Demos suggesting the term Capitalocene to emphasise the role of global corporate capitalism in T.J. Demos, *Against the Anthropocene. Visual Culture and Environment Today* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2017). Donna J. Haraway more optimistically evokes Gaia and the tentacular human and nonhuman coexistence of the Chthulucene as a way forward: Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, 51–57. Mark Bould, in his most recent book, lists dozens of alternatives to the Anthropocene, citing how difference in perspective changes terminology: Mark Bould, *The Anthropocene Unconscious. Climate Catastrophe Culture* (London: Verso, 2021), 6–11.

Lebanese politicians.[4] The economic collapse, the COVID-19 pandemic and the 4 August Beirut blast, piled onto the ongoing environmental violence, all exacerbated the experience of a protracted apocalypse. For many on the wrong end of the divide, the Anthropocene manifests itself as an Accumulocene. Indeed, as this chapter points out, disaster does not accumulate evenly.[5] At the time of writing the world is still out of joint and grappling with the effects of the pandemic. COVID-19 altered the world as we knew it and will do so for the foreseeable future. As this crisis continues to unfold it has underlined the injustices and inequalities that define our damaged planet. In this context it is sobering and perhaps even comforting to engage with artistic practices that work through, and work with, the wreckage of broken worlds.

This chapter foregrounds the sf trope of the apocalypse. In her influential 1965 essay 'The Imagination of Disaster', Susan Sontag placed disaster at the driving heart of sf: 'Science fiction films are not about science. They are about disaster, which is one of the oldest subjects of art. […] And it is in the imagery of destruction that the core of a good science fiction film lies.'[6] In many ways, the secular apocalypse can be seen as the dark mirror-image of the previous chapter's dream of techno-modernity. Or, as sf scholar Gerry Canavan observes: 'the New Frontier of outer space [becomes] the No Frontier of a blank future, perhaps a Planet Earth devoid of human life entirely'.[7] Typically, world-ending scenarios of nuclear disaster in Eurowestern and Japanese sf of the 1950s and 1960s responded to the atomic bombing of Japan, as well as Cold War fears tied to the post-war arms race between the US and the USSR. Hostile alien invasions in which humanity is annihilated were a metaphor for possible Soviet invasions in which the 'Western' way of life was threatened and destroyed.[8] The AIDS crisis of the 1980s sparked sf in which viral outbreaks wipe out whole populations, while developments in biotechnology and bio-

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[4] For a background article, see Sahar Mandour, "Lebanon's October 2019 Protests Weren't Just about the 'WhatsApp Tax,'" *L'Orient-Le Jour*, October 17, 2021. [last accessed 7.2.2022].

[5] I have only come across the term 'Accumulocene' via Jean-Baptiste Fressoz, "L'anthropocène Est Un 'Accumulocène,'" *Regards Croisés Sur l'Économie* 26, no. 1 (2020): 31–40.

[6] Susan Sontag, "The Imagination of Disaster," *Commentary* October (1965): 44.

[7] Gerry Canavan, "New Paradigms, After 2001," in *Science Fiction: A Literary History*, ed. Roger Luckhurst (London: The British Library, 2017), 212.

[8] For a succinct overview of disaster in sf, see David Seed, *Science Fiction: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011) 113-15. For contextualisation of apocalyptic sf, see also Aris Mousoutzanis, "Apocalyptic SF," in *The Routledge Companion to Science Fiction*, ed. Mark Bould et al. (London: Routledge, 2009), 458–62.

medical engineering in the 1990s produced sf in which genetic mutations would decimate mankind and produce social collapse. As ecological awareness increases from the 1990s onwards, the nuclear doomsday scenarios gradually turn into ecological catastrophes in the form of storms, floods, fires, pollution, and earthquakes.[9] With climate breakdown on our doorstep Canavan suggests that the 'necrofuturological imaginings' of the early twenty-first century are responsible for the 'brutal shutting off of the possibilities of the future'.[10] As he aptly puts it: 'We live in an era of obsolete futures and junked dreams.'[11]

This chapter puts forward the idea that apocalypses come in many guises and destabilise our relation to the present. Climate catastrophe may be global, but its effects will be felt disproportionally by Indigenous communities and those in the Global South. In addition, for many who have suffered through the violence of (settler)colonial modernity, this is not the first apocalypse. Visual culture scholar T.J. Demos observes: 'For multitudes, the world's end — measured in the radical rupture of transgenerational cultural traditions, the termination of secure relations to the land, the overturning of stable systems of sovereignty, and the cancellation of self-determination — has occurred repeatedly over the centuries.'[12] As early as the 1970s, the renowned Syrian filmmaker Omar Amiralay documented the devastating effects of industrial agriculture on Syria's rural poor. For Palestinians, the foundational catastrophe of the *Nakba* is entangled with the demise of Palestinian agricultural heritage and biodiversity, while decades of political corruption in Lebanon have caused a waste, health and ecosystem crisis.[13] The end of the world, then, seems to be on repeat, with little possibility of accessing the future. In his oft-cited essay 'The Climate of History: Four Theses', historian Dipesh Chakrabarty stresses how the crisis of

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[9] For an overview of the apocalypse and environmentalism in sf, see Rebecca Evans, "New Wave Science Fiction and the Dawn of the Environmental Movement," in *The Cambridge History of Science Fiction*, ed. Gerry Canavan and Eric Carl Link (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 434–46.
[10] Canavan, "New Paradigms, After 2001,"211.
[11] Canavan, 212.
[12] T.J. Demos, *Beyond the World's End. Arts of Living at the Crossing* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2020), 10. This point is also made by writer Amitav Ghosh in his recent book in which he traces the origin of climate disaster back to European colonialism and its genocidal practices, Amitav Ghosh, *The Nutmeg's Curse. Parables for a Planet in Crisis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021).
[13] Omar Amiralay's most well-known work on the subject is his film *The Chickens* (1977). The Palestine Heirloom Seed Library by anthropologist Vivien Sansour (cousin of artist Larissa Sansour) is an effort to preserve Palestinian heirloom varieties and agricultural knowledge. See https://viviensansour.com/Palestine-Heirloom. On Lebanon's waste crisis, see Sophia Smith Galer, "Lebanon Is Drowning in Its Own Waste," *BBC News*, March 28, 2018, https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20180328-lebanon-is-drowning-in-its-own-waste. [last accessed 7.2.2022].

climate change is also a crisis of temporality: 'the current crisis can precipitate a sense of the present that disconnects the future from the past by putting such a future beyond the grasp of historical sensibility'.[14] The works in this chapter consider the role of historical sensibility, to use Chakrabarty's phrase, at the world's end. But more importantly, in the face of the future waning, they struggle to reclaim the present.

Artists from the Middle East, a region on the frontline of the climate emergency, have, in comparison with their international peers, been slower in engaging with environmental issues, with few notable exceptions.[15] But this is changing. I suggest that disasters, environmental and other, take on a particular resonance in this restive region and cannot be seen as separate from each other. In this light, I rethink theories of the apocalyptic, which tend to see catastrophe as a dynamic of beginnings and endings. I ask whether this logic still holds when an extinction event is on the horizon. Through a close reading of Jumana Manna's film *Wild Relatives* (2018) and Larissa Sansour's video installation *In Vitro* and sculpture *Monument for Lost Time* (both 2019), artworks that both collate ecological and political disaster, I argue that the apocalyptic is predicated on a dynamic of memory and forgetfulness. Moreover, the cumulative nature of these disasters produces multiple losses that leave the present, not the future, as the sole thing left to salvage. I draw on memory and trauma studies to make my case and show how the science fictional and estranging characteristics in these three works return us to the original etymology of the Greek word *apocalypsis*, which as Andrew Tate reminds us carries 'the *primary* valence of the term […] uncovering of what was previously hidden'.[16] In both *Wild Relatives* and *In Vitro*, the trope of the apocalypse reveals a recuperation of the present in

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[14] Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The Climate of History: Four Theses," *Critical Inquiry* 35, no. 2 (2009): 197.

[15] In Ein Kinya (Palestine), artist Nida Sinnokrot and architect Sahar Qawasmi launched the Sakiya Art/Science/Agriculture project in 2016 that merges the contemporary know-how of green technologies with traditional farming practices and artistic practices. In Lebanon, the Dictaphone Group, an art and research collective, have looked at the disappearing Lebanese coastline in the project *This Sea is Mine* (2012), https://dictaphonegroup.com/portfolio-item/this-sea-is-mine/. To my knowledge the exhibition *Let's Talk about the Weather: Art and Ecology in a Time of Crisis* (14.07.2016 - 24.10.2016) at the Sursock Museum in Beirut, curated by Nora Razian and Nataša Petrešin-Bachelez was the first exhibition of its kind in the region dealing with ecology and climate disaster, https://sursock.museum/content/lets-talk-about-weather-art-and-ecology-time-crisis. Curator Nora Razian has followed up with similar projects such as *I Will Return, and I Will Be Millions* at Beirut Art Center (17.10.2019-18.01.2020) focussing on human and non-human relationships and ecologies. Ashkal Alwan in Beirut and Jameel Art Centre have collaborated on the Digital Earth Project (2019-2020), a global network bringing together artists, designers and academics to discuss technological developments in the light of volatile geopolitics and the Anthropocene. See https://www.digitalearth.art/about-us [all links last accessed 26.04.2020].

[16] Andrew Tate, *Apocalyptic Fiction* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 12.

the context of lost worlds, and does so by, respectively, the act of remembering and the act of forgetting.

These lost worlds are read by combining the lens of sf with a framework of political ecology that eschews the 'neat analytical separation between the environment and human conceptualizations of it'.[17] My analysis embraces the spirit of political ecology by looking at how contemporary art based on lived experiences in Palestine, Lebanon and Syria images and imagines the Anthropogenic catastrophe of climate change and the apocalypses that preceded it. There is therefore no neat distinction between the splicing of DNA to (re)produce high-yielding seeds to avert doomsday, as seen in *Wild Relatives*, and the cloning of DNA to ensure a modicum of survival for a displaced and dispossessed people, as encountered in *In Vitro*. In other words, whether it is the salvaging and preservation of forgotten seeds and histories, or the rescue of a lost land and memory from extinction by technological reproduction, the binaries between natural and human worlds come undone. Throughout this chapter I demonstrate how (science) fictional and factional elements fold into each other and twist into a narrative that explores how ideologies and tactics of survival, rooted in the past and designed for the future, unfold in a quest for identity and belonging in the present.

Seeding the Apocalypse by Remembering the Present: Jumana Manna's *Wild Relatives* (2018)

Literary scholar Pieter Vermeulen uses the term 'depresentification' to describe how in the Anthropocene the present is continuously effaced; living in these times is 'to inhabit the present as always under erasure, as primarily the object of a future memory'.[18] The works examined in this chapter battle the idea of depresentification, but also ask who gets to decide which memories, stories and materials are worthwhile preserving for posterity. What does this curated version of the past and future memory mean for the remaking of worlds and the creation of possibility in the future? If these archival and commemorative practices, for humans and non-humans alike, are predicated on exclusion and erasure, then what potential can they hold for repair? Palestinian artist Jumana Manna speaks to these

[17] Harry Verhoeven, ed., *Environmental Politics in the Middle East. Local Struggles, Global Connections* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 15.
[18] Pieter Vermeulen, "Future Readers: Narrating the Human in the Anthropocene," *Textual Practice* 31, no. 5 (2017): 880.

questions in her first feature-length film made outside of Palestine, *Wild Relatives* (2018) (Fig2.1.). Manna was born in 1987 in New Jersey and grew up in East Jerusalem holding Israeli and American citizenship. Educated in Israel, Norway and the US, she is currently based between Berlin and Beirut. This transnational biography has led her to explore the history of place, its mythologies and power structures, be they (post)colonial or other. Over the years she has developed a practice in which lived experience, ethnography and whimsy are combined through the mediums of film and sculpture. In her films she often relies on documentary formats that incorporate imaginary and scripted elements, whereas in her sculptures she renders ideas found in her films into more abstract forms. Her experimental documentary *Wild Relatives* straddles the planetary challenges of the Anthropocene and the geo-political specificity of Syria's ongoing civil war, which since 2011 has claimed over 580,000 lives and has displaced more than twelve million people.[19] The film ponders uncertain futures in the wake of climate change and contemplates human and non-human heritage and survival in fragile ecologies, whether political or environmental. Perhaps more importantly, it questions the unevenness of existence and memory in the context of disaster.

Manna tells the story of ICARDA (International Centre for Agricultural Research in Dry Areas), a seed gene bank in Aleppo that was initially established in Lebanon in 1976 with as its mission the genetic improvement of crops. It was part of the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR), a network of research centres that were set up across the Global South in the 1970s in order to improve crop and food security in the world's most vulnerable regions.[20] In 1977, ICARDA had to be moved to Aleppo because of the outbreak of the Lebanese Civil War in 1975. Fast forward to 2011 and the fate of seeds

[19] These figures are provided as of 4 January 2020 by the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights. For a detailed breakdown of numbers, see: http://www.syriahr.com/en/?p=152189&__cf_chl_jschl_tk__=3e993ea63b0db34210befc04f9363a93b4bf0e71-1580991900-0-AV1Bu_nROQa26Yz4lyezE428Vcg1FxV1cSwG1mlihMi8ojgtKt18jonOxeCDz9Hk7k0oT3X4AIwoh2_B4asthrVF2OyDm6N9PKlqVzSTz6emFgenU1DBgcI2GyFaNEFiQXLkr3gzS0A2XyZtffvVdd_5shxc-WMe6N07LGEU6nVAjxtCmnEejyS0S-cEHtcLaSW_SYzM6PhnAJKl_ScwZLTCNXAKdn8D9mO-zcwynaTaPptuZT2APEVDelfhiSmAWZnx2Tn5_-XdoE0Mi5VfWbA [last accessed 06.02.2020].

[20] See https://www.cgiar.org/. Of note here is that when CGIAR was set up in 1971 its main funders were American donors such as the Ford Foundation and the Rockefeller Foundation. As they started to set up centres in the region, they were eyed with suspicion. For a critique, with India as a case study, see Vandana Shiva, *The Violence of the Green Revolution. Third World Agriculture, Ecology and Politics*, ed. Second Edition (London: Zed Books, 1991).

is again interlocked with violence; history repeats itself, this time in Syria with its civil war. ICARDA is forced to move back to Lebanon with some of its staff and equipment, but in its haste does not manage to save its gene bank. In order to duplicate its seeds ICARDA had to withdraw backup copies from its own seeds from the Svalbard Global Seed Vault in Norway. This was the first time in the vault's history that seeds were retrieved from storage to be duplicated *in situ* in Lebanon.[21] Nicknamed the Doomsday Vault, this project was set up in 2006, under the permafrost of the northernmost Norwegian archipelago of Svalbard in the arctic, as what artist-theorist Elaine Gan has called 'a curated modern-day Noah's Ark'.[22] The frozen seeds await disaster, 'induced into a state of incapacity and invisibility, until human error or environmental catastrophe somehow call for their return'.[23] Modern agriculture tends to focus on domesticated seeds rather than on species that evolve in the wild. The 'wild relatives' of the title are the often-undesired cousins, the traditional landraces pushed away wilfully to make room for improved seeds. The catastrophe of oblivion has thus already befallen these wild relatives that have been forgotten and erased from the fields; in the subterranean darkness of the vault they merely anticipate another one. So far this tells a story of how victims of disaster, whether war or otherwise, include both humans and non-humans – in this case seeds. I propose to take this a step further and read *Wild Relatives* as a film about extinction in which the role of science as the saviour and preserver of life, and of memory, is troubled on multiple levels.

Although a documentary, following people and seeds across the geographies of Norway and Lebanon for over a year, *Wild Relatives* can be described as a science fictional and post-apocalyptic work. Rebecca Evans makes a compelling argument when she views the Anthropocene and the era of climate change as an illustration of Suvin's classic categorisation of sf as 'cognitive estrangement'.[24] The Anthropocene, and by corollary its science fictionality, produce an estrangement from the world we thought we knew: 'it depicts our own world as something other than what we had thought it was […]

[21] For a more detailed account, see Jumana Manna, "A Small/Big Thing," *Tamawuj*, November 19, 2017, https://tamawuj.org:8453/tamawuj/internalPageTamawuj?id=3251. [last accessed 3 June 2019].
[22] Elaine Gan, "Seed Vault: Freezing Life for Doomsday," in *Elemental: An Arts and Ecology Reader*, ed. James Brady (Manchester: Gaia Project Press, 2016), 119. For the Svalbard Global Seed Vault, see https://www.croptrust.org/our-work/svalbard-global-seed-vault/ [last accessed 03.02.2020].
[23] Gan, 120.
[24] Rebecca Evans, "Nomenclature, Narrative, and Novum: 'The Anthropocene' and/as Science Fiction," *Science Fiction Studies* 45, no. 3 (2018): 484–87.

destabilize[ing] our present so dramatically that we can appreciate our own inability to imagine the future even as we maintain only a slippery historical consciousness of the present'.[25] If our world is made strange, or as eco-theorist Timothy Morton likes to call it 'weird', then in the Anthropocene documentaries may have become stranger than fiction.[26] Teasing out the post-apocalyptic elements in Manna's film is an exercise in how the work, on the one hand, embodies the post-apocalyptic, and, on the other, skirts around it. Discussions around the post-apocalyptic often return to literary scholar Frank Kermode's foundational 1967 text *The Sense of an Ending*. In this book Kermode considers fictions that imagine endings of the world with the understanding that the '[a]pocalypse depends on a concord of imaginatively recorded past and imaginatively predicted future, achieved on behalf of us, who remain "in the middest"'.[27] There are two things to reconsider here in the Anthropogenic context of *Wild Relatives*, namely the idea of fiction and that of 'the middest'.

Kermode was writing after the Second World War and at the height of the Cold War, and while the threat of nuclear war was real, global nuclear annihilation did not actually materialise. Moreover, the 1960s must have also felt as living in 'the middest' of the twentieth century and in a period of transition, with transition being Kermode's prime characteristic for the apocalyptic.[28] For Kermode, the end is to be viewed as immanent, '[s]ince we move from transition to transition'.[29] In other words, in the apocalyptic, there is a dynamic at play of beginnings and endings. David Seed channels Kermode when he writes that '[n]ot even the most pessimistic apocalyptist closes the door completely to some kind of continuity through rebirth'.[30] Writing in the 2020s during a climate emergency, with flash flooding and wildfires consuming the globe and news headlines, it feels to me that Seed's sentiment is in need of an update. Since he wrote those words in 2000 the immanent has decidedly turned to the imminent. No longer fiction, we find ourselves squarely in the realm of the real. Planetary destruction is at least for humanity, to put it crudely, an ending.

[25] Evans, 484 and 488.
[26] Timothy Morton, *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence* (New York: Colombia University Press, 2016), 5–8.
[27] Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending* (1967, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 8.
[28] Kermode, 100.
[29] Kermode, 101–2.
[30] David Seed, ed., *Imagining Apocalypse. Studies in Cultural Crisis* (Basingstoke: MacMillan Press, 2000), 7.

Figure 2.1. Jumana Manna. *Wild Relatives*, 2018. HD video, 64'. Film poster. Image courtesy the artist.

This is not to say that *Wild Relatives* eschews new beginnings, but the instances Manna chooses to show us are more attempts to redefine 'the middest' not as something bookended by beginnings and endings, but, rather, something that does not obsess with looking backward or forward. Manna's film is very much about salvaging the present. Although the micro-renewals encountered in the film pale in terms of scale with the enormity of climate disaster, *Wild Relatives* suggests that insisting *to remember* has value for the present, even when confronted with a battle that seems insurmountable. In a way, memory serves not to counter the apocalypse but to underline its severity. Take, for example, Walid al-Youssef, a Syrian organic farmer who fled Aleppo together with his young family at the beginning of the war and now lives in Saadnayel in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley. His first appearance in the film is introduced — significantly — by way of a memory. 'I have an image in my memory: my father would wake us up in the morning in order to go water the garden. The whole family would gather to pick the vegetables.'[31] Al-Youssef continues this family tradition with his own children and teaches them the ways of the land. He also runs a seed library, a bottom-up initiative in which organic farmers exchange varieties of heirloom seeds with the objective to multiply local seed varieties. This project is in and by itself an

[31] Jumana Manna, *Wild Relatives*, 2018, HD video. All subsequent film quotations follow this citation.

archival exercise in seed and organic agriculture memory-making; while it works against seed extinction and industrial farming, it equally underlines the seed apocalypse and loss of biodiversity. Manna attributes a large amount of agency and hope to al-Youssef; however, there is always a threatening undertone foretelling what he is up against in his struggle to remain in the middest. After seven years in Lebanon, he and his family still live in a makeshift shack and their legal and humanitarian rights as refugees, in an increasingly hostile environment, remain extremely precarious.[32] The war in Syria is still ongoing and consecutive droughts have ruined harvests even if in the year Manna is filming there is a respite due to rainfall.[33] In a telling scene, Youssef Amer, ICARDA's van driver who chauffeurs the seeds to and from the airport, and who also hails from a family of farmers, argues that it is much more lucrative to turn agricultural land into refugee camps than to cultivate it. What the artist manages to show convincingly is how seed life and political life are entangled and how political and agricultural revolutions are often intertwined.

In the light of the Syrian Civil War and its preceding uprising, al-Youssef's heirloom seed preservation project seems to have more political ramifications than is initially apparent. Many of the seeds of the Syrian revolution can be located in rural farming communities suffering from droughts, poorly planned agricultural policies and depleted groundwater reserves. It is therefore no coincidence that the 2011 protests started in Syria's agricultural breadbasket, Dara'a, before spreading to the urban centres of Damascus, Hama, Homs and Aleppo, cities with a large population of displaced rural climate and poverty refugees in their outskirts.[34] This is not to say that climate change triggered the uprising; rather, as Francesca De Châtel notes:

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[32] The 2018 annual Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon (VASyR) finds that 69% of Syrian families live below the poverty line. Debt, food insecurity, limited education provisions, substandard shelter and housing, as well as challenges with renewal or obtainment of residency permits and other documents, keep Syrian refugees in a precarious predicament. See https://www.unhcr.org/lb/12040-yearly-un-study-syrian-refugees-in-lebanon-accumulated-more-debt-in-2018-than-ever-before.html [last accessed 05.02.2020].

[33] Omar S. Dahi points out that Syria has been afflicted by serious droughts since 2003, resulting in a 30-50% shrinkage in wheat yields. Omar S. Dahi, "The Syrian Cataclysm," *Middle East Report Online*, April 3, 2013, https://merip.org/2013/03/the-syrian-cataclysm/. [last accessed 13.01.2020].

[34] For an early article connecting climate change to the Syrian uprising, see Shahrzad Mohtadi, "Climate Change and the Syrian Uprising," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, August 16, 2012. [last accessed 13.01.2020]. Harry Verhoeven also notes when 'the rains began to fail Syria in 2006, and aquifers around the country were rapidly depleted, the shaky foundations of the agrarian boom that ICARDA had helped to engineer became evident. Rural poverty and anger with belated government reforms soared in the years leading up to the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in March 2011, a combustible mix that explains some of the opposition to Baathist rule.' Verhoeven, *Environmental Politics in the Middle East. Local Struggles, Global Connections*, 9.

> 50 years of resource mismanagement and overexploitation caused the depletion of resources, which in turn led to growing disenfranchisement and discontent in Syria's rural communities. The 2006–10 drought exacerbated an already existing humanitarian crisis. The government's failure to adequately respond to this crisis was one of the triggers of the protests that started in March 2011, along with a host of political, economic and social grievances.[35]

In *Wild Relatives*, Manna's voiceover narrates how in the 1970s Syrian President Hafez al-Assad, spurred on by ideas of the Green Revolution, modernised Syria's traditional farming sector to an industrial scale. The Green Revolution has been much criticised over the past few decades: set out in the 1960s as a techno-political strategy driven mainly by the West to combat food scarcity in developing nations through high-yielding seeds, a range of intrusive irrigation methods and the use of chemical fertilisers and pesticides, with little regard for farmers' livelihoods and impact on soil health, it can be regarded as a prime example of colonial biopower.[36] As Demos points out, it has 'parallel[ed] the expansion of neoliberal agricultural governance worldwide'.[37] Not only did the Green Revolution lead to the elimination of local seed varieties and loss of traditional farming knowledge and methods, it was the *de facto* reason seed banks were created. As such, in many cases, the Green Revolution spells a story of extinction, in which not only the presence of seeds is erased and stashed away frozen in global seed banks but also agricultural knowledge and ways of life are laid to waste. For al-Assad, it was an effective strategy to create dependencies in the rural population and keep them under his thumb.[38] *Wild Relatives* unearths the underlying ideologies and control mechanisms in what at first sight appear to be benign and humanitarian initiatives.

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[35] Francesca De Châtel, "The Role of Drought and Climate Change in the Syrian Uprising: Untangling the Triggers of the Revolution," *Middle Eastern Studies* 50, no. 4 (2014): 532.

[36] Michel Foucault defines 'biopower' in terms of how populations are controlled and disciplined; however, translated to seeds, his definition still holds that bio-power is 'a right of seizure: of things, times, bodies, ultimately life itself […] this formidable power of death […] presents itself as the counterpart of a power that exerts a positive influence on life, that endeavors to administer, optimize, and multiply it, subjecting it to precise controls and comprehensive regulations.' Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. Volume 1: An Introduction* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 136 and 137. See also Shiva, *The Violence of the Green Revolution. Third World Agriculture, Ecology and Politics*.

[37] T.J. Demos, *Decolonising Nature: Contemporary Art and the Politics of Ecology* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016), 27.

[38] These dependencies include, amongst others, subsidies, high-yielding single use seeds, and water permits for irrigation.

Moreover, the role of science and technology in these projects is treated with caution, if not suspicion. When Manna films scientists at work in ICARDA's lab in the Bekaa Valley or the Global Seed Vault in Svalbard, her representations reflect methodical scientific processes in the controlled sterility of the lab. These scenes are all about scientific technology, data and terminology; storage and categorisation; and the boosting of seed purity and their duplication process. The life worlds of humans and seeds are very much segregated by techno-science. The scenes filmed with the organic farmer al-Youssef are, to the contrary, filmed with warmth. We see al-Youssef in his fields, digging in the dirt, treating his crops lovingly with an inoculating nettle leaf concoction, and waxing lyrical about earthworms. Here we see the kind of kinship Donna Haraway advocates when she speaks of 'multispecies alliances'.[39] This bond seems lacking in the human–non-human transactions of ICARDA and the Global Seed Vault. Not only does Manna invest in the indigenous knowledge and science al-Youssef brings into play, she destabilises the superiority of Eurowestern science, a tactic also used in Indigenous and African Futurisms.[40] *Wild Relatives* shows the divide between the techno-industrial complex of modern agrobusiness and the ways of small-scale organic farming. Here, the idea of techno-scientific progress that produces higher yields, resistant miracle seeds and aims to maximise profit is re-evaluated. An adversity to the project of modernity with ills ranging from industrialisation, urbanisation, imperialism and environmental degradation has been identified by Monica Germanà and Aris Mousoutzanis as a marker of the apocalyptic.[41] They claim that it is specifically 'the modern' that 'carries within it the seeds of the apocalypse'.[42]

In Manna's scenario, science is treated as a highly paradoxical preserver of life and of memory. On the role of seed banks and agricultural research centres, the artist comments:

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[39] See Donna J. Haraway, "Sowing Worlds. A Seed Bag for Terraforming with Earth Others," in *Staying with the Trouble. Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 117–25.
[40] See, for example, Grace L. Dillon, "Imagining Indigenous Futurisms," in *Walking the Clouds: An Anthology of Indigenous Science Fiction* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2012), 7–8; and Sanchez-Taylor, "'Our Knowledge Is Not Primitive': Indigenous and Eurowestern Science." Lebanese artist Marwa Arsanios's three-part film project *Who's Afraid of Ideology* (2017-2020), in which she looks at eco-feminist practices, indigenous agricultural practices, seed preservation and indigenous land rights in Northern Syria, Iraqi Kurdistan and Colombia, also comes to mind.
[41] Monica Germanà and Aris Mousoutzanis, eds., *Apocalyptic Discourse in Contemporary Culture. Post-Millennial Perspectives on the End of the World* (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2014), 4.
[42] Germanà and Mousoutzanis, 4.

> Seed banks are there as a gene pool for production, as much as for preservation. Research centers operating these seed portals often distribute or produce seed varieties that are not the heirloom seeds they protect in their banks. They serve a model of profit based industrial agriculture. They are another manifestation of this classical modernist contradiction of the urge to preserve the very thing being erased, and this has been a red thread in much of my work.[43]

The erasures Manna points to exceed those of only seeds and extend to the lives of the Syrian refugees she portrays. In other words, neither science nor memory can fully restore something that has forever been lost: a home, belonging, history. What further complicates *Wild Relatives'* unease with science in the service of (selective) preservation or selective memory, is that it is being enacted at the end of the world, when the apocalyptic has already set in.[44] In other words, at the core of the film is a tussle between human and non-human memories of the past that are under threat of being systematically erased, and memories for the future that are struggling to see the light. Ann E. Kaplan has looked at how dystopian climate fiction serves as a 'memory for the future', and this suggests, however bleak the odds might seem, that there is still a future to speak of for which a memory can be formed.[45] Stef Craps, however, perceptively spots the problem with cultural practices of anticipatory memory: 'In a sense, then, future-history approaches to climate change want to have their cake and eat it: they evoke the inhuman, the end of human existence, but they do so from the point of view of a human being (or human-like being) who can somehow look back on the present moment from beyond (or at least very close to) the end.'[46] Craps points out that theorists who have focussed on non-human agency like Timothy Morton, Jane Bennett, Bruno Latour and Tom Cohen, among others, 'threaten[…] to discount the human subject altogether'.[47] Instead, he offers that in the Anthropocene, human and non-human scales need to be reconciled. Moreover, memory

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[43] Hakim Bishara, "Wild Relatives: Jumana Manna Interviewed by Hakim Bishara," *Bomb Magazine*, January 25, 2019, https://bombmagazine.org/articles/wild-relatives-jumana-manna-interviewed/. [last accessed 11.01.2020].

[44] From the perspective of climate apocalypse, Timothy Morton contends that '[t]he end of the world has already occurred […] It was April 1784, when James Watt patented the steam engine, an act that commenced the depositing of carbon in the Earth's crust – namely, the inception of humanity as a geophysical force on a planetary scale.' Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology at the End of the World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 7.

[45] Ann E. Kaplan, *Climate Trauma. Foreseeing the Future in Dystopian Film and Fiction* (New Brunswick, New Jersey, and London: Rutgers University Press, 2016), 19.

[46] Stef Craps, "Climate Change and the Art of Anticipatory Memory," *Parallax* 23, no. 4 (2017): 484.

[47] Craps, 485.

studies, too, have to move 'beyond human parameters, thinking along geological lines, and scaling up remembrance without, however, losing sight of the smaller picture. After all, memory risks becoming a mere metaphor when conceived in strictly non-human terms, outside of human modes of experience and representation.'[48] To a large extent, *Wild Relatives* illustrates how human and non-human scales, histories and survival are all entangled in the present. And while there is a lot of insistence on memory and remembering, it is unclear whether Manna proposes anything outside of the present and into the future. In this sense, *Wild Relatives* is perhaps not so much concerned with a memory for the future, but, rather, calls for a memory of the present.

Figure 2.2. Jumana Manna. *Wild Relatives*, 2018. HD video, 64'. Film still. Image courtesy the artist.

Even if at first sight *Wild Relatives* seems concerned with the preservation of memory for the future, I propose that it is precisely its documentary format that allows Manna to focus on being in the present, rather than the future. The work is, in many ways, a speculative documentary that facilitates her to operate on the scale of human and non-human reality (Fig.2.2.), while still employing the use of metaphors: seeds are, after all, in the words of Manna 'small big things'.[49] They encompass worlds, unlock life, and are seen as a beginning. The framing of the film, however, makes it clear that we find ourselves now in a

[48] Craps, 485.

[49] Jumana Manna uses the term 'a small big thing' to reference seeds in the title of her piece in *Tamawuj*, cited in this chapter, as well as for the title for a solo exhibition at Henie Onstad Kunstsenter in Høvikodden, Norway (28.09.2018 – 06.01.2019) and the exhibition's publication.

moment of disaster and that there is no exit from it. The film's opening sequence starts with a close-up of smouldering coal slag, a by-product of coal mining. With fossil fuels being the largest culprit of climate change, it is no small irony that the world's largest seed vault is housed in a former Svalbard coal mine. The travelling point of view shot in the mine tunnel with glistening slag is accompanied by a thumping energetic soundtrack. The scene's sensibility is suspenseful, dark, claustrophobic, but also laborious. It reflects an aesthetic found in many steampunk novels and films in which steam and coal open up a world of machinic and engineering possibility. It is also reminiscent of a dominant sf trope, rooted in colonialism, in which we see one species pillaging another species' resources.[50] *Wild Relatives* has humanity's geological footprint written all over it. As such, the film *de facto* opens by introducing the beginning of the end: fossil fuels.[51] The film's ending is an impressive shot of the Arctic's barren icy plains accompanied by a 1950s nostalgic pop song in Arabic, 'Baadna' (After us), performed by Lebanese singer Aida Chalhoub. 'After us', Chalhoub croons, 'who would water the grapevines? Who would fill the baskets? Who would pick the grape leaves?' Media Farzin points out how to an Arab listener the song 'intimates displacement, leaving a lovingly tended home behind. But, in *Wild Relatives*, the song becomes a cheerful portent of climate disaster.'[52] To this I would add that the love song has turned into a requiem, commemorating the loss of the world as we know it. The song, then, does not simply lament the loss of the future, but equally, the loss of the present.

The film's closing image of an infinite horizon in which a pristine icy landscape is hugged by a blue sea and equally blue sky would usually herald possibility and potential. But at the end of the world there is no tomorrow and the event horizon for environmental catastrophe has, according to some scientists, already been reached.[53] In a way this vista

[50] For the dark and (post)industrial aesthetics of steampunk, see, for example, Rebecca Onion, "Reclaiming the Machine: An Introductory Look at Steampunk in Everyday Practice," *Neo-Victorian Studies* 1, no. 1 (2008): 138–63; and Martin Danahay, "Steampunk as a Postindustrial Aesthetic: 'All That Is Solid Melts in Air,''' *Neo-Victorian Studies* 8, no. 2 (2016): 28–56.

[51] According to The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), emissions from fossil fuels are to blame as the dominant cause of global warming. Cfr. https://report.ipcc.ch/sr15/pdf/sr15_spm_final.pdf [last accessed 05.02.2020].

[52] Media Farzin, "Jumana Manna : The Violence of Beautiful Things," *Frieze*, August 18, 2018, https://frieze.com/article/jumana-manna-violence-beautiful-things. [last accessed 22.01.2020].

[53] Some scientists believe that a cascade of interrelated tipping points, rather than a singular one, will cause a point of no return in which the climate system of the Earth will collapse. See Fred Pearce, "As Climate Change Worsens, A Cascade of Tipping Points Looms," *Yale Environment 360*, December 5, 2019,

signals that there can only be today. Manna further reinforces the encroaching apocalyptic present by peppering her film with catastrophic occurrences that touch on the confluence of political and environmental violence. One such example is a scene in ICARDA's lab showing the scientists at work listening to the radio: a news item on the radio about the garbage crisis in Beirut flashes by. This radio snippet is almost too casual, but it strategically emphasises how environmental, political and social injustices fold into each other. The garbage crisis has plagued the Lebanese capital since the summer of 2015, leading to large civic protests.[54] Seen by many Lebanese as a *pars pro toto* for the dysfunctionality of the Lebanese state and its incapacity to provide its citizens with public services such as sustainable waste management, potable water, electricity and dependable internet, it exemplifies how decades of protracted sectarian tension, corruption and grift have, since the end of the Civil War in 1990, not only led to a political deadlock but also an environmental one.[55] Civil society campaigns such as You Stink! have planted the seeds, so to speak, for the protests that have engulfed Lebanon since October 2019, mentioned in this chapter's introduction. While causal relationships between climate emergency and political upheaval have been treated warily, scholars of the region do agree that climate vulnerability 'is always as much a product of social, political and economic factors as exposure to natural hazards'.[56] In the film, the brief introduction of waste serves another purpose, too. It flittingly, but emphatically, establishes the film's apocalyptic discourse. James Berger observes that waste is emblematic in post-apocalyptic representations: '[w]aste, refuse, excrement [are] the ultimate most worthless remainders. What is there left after the end? Paradise or shit.'[57]

https://e360.yale.edu/features/as-climate-changes-worsens-a-cascade-of-tipping-points-looms. [last accessed 06.02.2020].

[54] See Adham Saouli, "Lebanon: Contesting Trash Politics," *LSE Blogs*, August 9, 2015, http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/eurocrisispress/2015/09/08/lebanon-contesting-trash-politics/. [last accessed 15.01.2020].

[55] See Marwan M. Kraidy, "Trashing the Sectarian System? Lebanon's 'You Stink' Movement and the Making of Affective Publics," *Communication and the Public* 1, no. 1 (2016): 19–26.

[56] Jeannie Sowers, "Understanding Climate Vulnerability in the Middle East and North Arica," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 51, no. 4 (2019): 622. See also Michael Mason, "Climate Change and Conflict in the Middle East," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 51, no. 4 (2019): 626–28.

[57] James Berger, *After the End. Representations of Post-Apocalypse* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 14 and 16.

Figure 2.3. Jumana Manna. *Wild Relatives*, 2018. HD video, 64'. Film still. Meeting between scientist and priest at Svalbard mineshaft. Image courtesy the artist.

Refuse is articulated in more ways than one. Regrettably, refugees are often viewed as the collateral damage of war. In Lebanon, which is entrenched in the aftermath of its own civil war and still reeling from decades of Syrian tutelage and influence, Syrians are more often than not unwelcome guests.[58] Who gets asylum, who can claim refuge, whose story counts to be narrated and remembered are the harsh questions asked at the heart of any refugee and migrant crisis. Manna places Syrian refugees and seeds in a symbiotic relationship that incarnates reality and metaphor at the same time. She shows how power structures govern the life worlds of refugees and that of seeds, and what happens when the two come together. This is demonstrated by a rather surreal exchange between a scientist and a priest who meet at the entrance of a Svalbard mineshaft to discuss climate change and doomsday (Fig.2.3.). They ponder an invasive plant species that has appeared in Svalbard and had to be pulled out by the roots because '[i]t didn't belong'. The priest

[58] In the introduction to his book, Andrew Arsan provides a short history of Lebanon in the twenty-first century. I paraphrase his summary with regards to Syria as follows: the Syrians were present in Lebanon since 1976 and had *de facto* ruled the country since 1990. The assassination by car bomb of Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri on 14 February 2005 set in motion a train of events that started with demonstrations on Martyrs' Square with crowds blaming the Syrian Baathist regime for his death and growing Syrian resentment over the Syrian hegemony in Lebanon. On 26 April 2005 the last Syrian troupes left Lebanon, but Syrian influence did not come to an end. Hizbullah, Syria's Shia ally, was unhappy with this arrangement and the divide between pro- and anti-Syrian forces in Lebanon continues to this day. Syrian agricultural labourers and construction workers have worked in Lebanon since the 1950s and often had to deal with discrimination. The effects of the war in Syria have since 2011 spilled over into Lebanon with more than a million refugees putting more pressure on Lebanon's dysfunctional infrastructure and crumbling economy. Andrew Arsan, *Lebanon: A Country in Fragments* (London: Hurst & Company, 2018), 5–12.

comments that it was: 'An invasive species that will force away other species.' While this is undeniably linked to the changes in biodiversity due to warming temperatures, it is also to be read in the light of a polarised world in which populist nationalism and xenophobia is on the rise across the globe. It is not farfetched to view the artificial hierarchies imposed on seed collections — from genetic tampering to which seeds are to be preserved and which not — against the stringent requirements and rules placed by governments and supranational agencies on those displaced by conflict seeking shelter. In *Wild Relatives*, this notion of shelter, for humans and seeds alike, is reassessed. If sanctuaries are to provide safe havens, then who determines access to them and on what terms? For the Syrian refugees eking out an existence in the Bekaa Valley, security has become a relative term. It seems that seeds and refugees are only afforded certain rights if they play according to very specific rules. This is echoed by Shela Sheikh, who notes that 'the political stakes in the conservation of biodiversity and heritage are in fact often as high as in the world of international diplomacy and peace-making'.[59] Sheikh eloquently locates the main political and environmental tension in the film:

> Does maintaining the 'authentic' have to entail modes of identity, belonging and self-determination that are premised upon the exclusion of others, or indeed of otherness in general? In other words, what if both inheritance and identity entailed a necessary betrayal instigated through an opening to alterity, be this technical modification or, more generally, diversity and plurality.[60]

In Sheikh's reprise lurks a question of origin, which is something the film continuously muddles. What do national identities mean in a region that has been carved up by external powers, sectarian troubles and war?[61] How pure are seeds when they have been duplicated, modified and engineered into high-yielding and resistant versions of themselves? The

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[59] Shela Sheikh, "'Planting Seeds/the Fires of War': The Geopolitics of Seed Saving in Jumana Manna's Wild Relatives," *Third Text*, Vol. 32, Nos. 2–3 (2018): 14.
[60] Sheikh, 16.
[61] I am not only considering here how sectarian troubles and power struggles directing politics in Lebanon and Syria for the past decades involve external players such as Iran, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the USA, but also how these divisions have been created historically by the Sykes-Picot agreement of 1916 that partitioned the region in accordance with French and British interests. As historian Fawwaz Traboulsi points out: 'Lebanon, in the frontiers defined on 1 September 1920, had never existed before in history. It was a product of the Franco-British colonial partition of the Middle East […] it is no more nor less artificial than any of the other eastern Arab states (Syria, Jordan, Palestine or Iraq) created by the partition process.' Traboulsi, *A History of Modern Lebanon*, 75.

ideological pursuit of purity and desire for an authentic origin, whether rooted in agriculture or politics, holds a recipe for disaster.

Endings are artificially postponed but always tangibly present in the Svalbard Global Seed Vault. There is a reason the facility is nicknamed the Doomsday Vault. Approximately a million seeds have been collected from across the world and are frozen at a constant temperature of -18°C.[62] This takes the seeds out of time and out of place. They are dislocated, or 'in exile', as Sheikh aptly puts it, but they are also stunted, stopped in their tracks, kept from germinating.[63] They cannot move through time and are thus entombed in an eternal frosty middest. At least, that is the theory. The permafrost in Svalbard is starting to melt. When permafrost thaws it releases carbon dioxide and methane and accelerates global warming. The eternal middest is compromised by climate change. 'Exiles', Edward Said writes, 'are cut off from their roots, their land, their past.'[64] This is true for seeds and refugees alike. To this should be added that in Svalbard the past is being preserved at the expense of the present: '*in situ* practices, such as the Terbol ICARDA branch, work through time in continuing to produce new forms of agrobiodiversity, *ex situ* conservation vaults – for instance Svalbard's global "insurance policy" – maintain older diversity, holding this in abeyance for the future.'[65] If memory cannot endure at the end of the world and the past and present are evacuated with life suspended, then what are we left with exactly? What purpose do these conservation efforts serve, other than an exercise in proleptic memory? *Wild Relatives* does not ask us to turn to the future and remember it, but, rather, to the present, which it quietly suggests is lost. The fate of the seeds echoes the plight of refugees languishing in overflowing camps in Lebanon, Greece and Turkey, whose lives have been upended as well as put on hold in a protracted state of transit.[66] Yet, this ontic suspension is

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[62] Cfr. https://www.croptrust.org/our-work/svalbard-global-seed-vault/ [last accessed 29.01.2020].
[63] Sheikh, "'Planting Seeds/the Fires of War': The Geopolitics of Seed Saving in Jumana Manna's Wild Relatives," 4.
[64] Edward W. Said, "Reflections on Exile," in *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (London: Granta Books, 2001), 176.
[65] Sheikh, "'Planting Seeds/the Fires of War': The Geopolitics of Seed Saving in Jumana Manna's Wild Relatives," 25.
[66] Alessandra Von Burg draws on Marc Augé's notion of non-places in the context of refugee camps in the Mediterranean and defines the latter as following: 'Nonplaces are marked by the absence of what citizens of most Western nations may take for granted: basic legal protections, access to education and health care, even with large disparity, access to political rights that guarantee agency and participation in the democratic and deliberative practices.' Alessandra Von Burg, "Citizenship Islands: The Ongoing Emergency in the Mediterranean Sea," *Media and Communication* 7, no. 2 (2019): 218–19.

very different from the seeds' slumber in the Global Seed Vault (Fig.2.4.). Whereas transnational mobility is afforded to seeds, it is often not to Syrian refugees. Manna's cinematic foregrounding of the seeds' journey as a precious cargo travelling by road and air emphasises this point. The latter is offset by what is explicitly not shown in the film: the often-perilous journeys refugees undertake in search of safety. Therefore, not all exiles are created equal. If Said's earlier cited thoughts on exile and identity focus mainly on erasure of the past, then I would offer that exile as a 'crippling sorrow of estrangement' is performed here, at the end of the world, as a theft of the present.[67]

Figure 2.4. Jumana Manna. *Wild Relatives*, 2018. HD video, 64'. Film still. Seeds at ICARDA gene bank, Lebanon. Image courtesy the artist.

Wild Relatives shows that the present is, indeed, in danger of slipping away on a political and environmental level. But memory, however unequally distributed, cannot be something postponed for the future. It has, Manna seems to insist, to persevere and live through the present to be meaningful. Seeds, then, embody much more than the plant memory of the planet; they are also the Cassandras of climate change and witnesses to human and non-human history. They unlock geological memory but also the trauma of the Syrian Civil War and the Lebanese Civil War, the latter being the very reason of ICARDA's move and return to Lebanon. Seeds are the 'small big things' that symbolise life, yet here they have also come to mean death. They are origin and end at once. In a way they are the

[67] Said, "Reflections on Exile," 173.

kernels of the apocalypse in the Kermodian sense; they travel between beginnings and endings, even if we learn from the film that their new beginnings are continuously frustrated. James Berger's claim, then, that '[t]he end is never the end [and in] nearly every apocalyptic presentation, something remains after the end' (emphasis original), does not hold.[68] This is perhaps best expressed when we return to the scene with the priest and the scientist. Asked by the priest about his take on doomsday, the scientist deadpans: 'the Earth's lifetime is limited […] the sun will expand and explode the Earth'. In Manna's apocalypse there is no moment of revelation – in the sublime gist of the word – there is just hard scientific fact. Once again this is a juncture at which the documentary becomes highly science fictional; this is a moment when Suvin's idea of cognitive estrangement rings true. Factual science has turned strange because it presents us with the unfathomable idea of an absolute ending. If *Wild Relatives* is a eulogy to a lost or disappearing world, it has few sentiments about what will happen tomorrow; for indeed, why be concerned with an aftermath that will not exist. It is all about today and recouping memory to salvage the present. Memory here is not necessarily about the past, nor is it about the future. This makes Manna's film a highly radical, speculative, and as I have argued earlier, science fictional work of art. But it also frees us from this idea that we are floating aimlessly towards an apocalyptic ending. There is no doubt that we are brazenly speeding towards extinction. But in the meantime, life is not to be found in eschatological rapture, or in a seed's artificially induced stupor imprisoned in an undefined middest. Life, Manna urges, is now.

Reading Through a Double Helix: Disasters, Memory and Forgetfulness in Larissa Sansour's *In Vitro* (2019)

Survival in the post-apocalypse requires negotiating a temporal rupture as much as a spatial and ontological one. Catastrophes, whether of the environmental or the political kind, dispossess and unhome. Thus, they rob more than one's possibility to think of a future; they also dramatically destabilise one's sense of self. In the case of multiple apocalypses, temporalities —past, present, future — break down into each other. It hence becomes difficult to mark a time before and after disaster or even distinguish between disasters. Memories of the past are confused with speculative memories for the future, obstructing a

[68] Berger, *After the End. Representations of Post-Apocalypse*, 5–6.

meaningful existence in the present to unfold. If in *Wild Relatives* memory is used to recuperate the present, then in Palestinian artist Larissa Sansour's two-channel black and white video installation *In Vitro* (2019) forgetfulness takes centre stage.[69] Similar to Manna's film, here, too, disasters are cumulative rather than singular and the political and environmental are twisted together. However, the distinctions between apocalypses and their respective chronologies have grown fuzzier, although the moment of climate catastrophe is sharply punctuated. The film starts with a viscous black tide of oil coursing through Bethlehem, the West Bank city of Sansour's childhood. In a gesture that can be described as iconoclastic, all signifiers of place, religion and history, such as the Church of the Nativity and Manger Square, are erased. Nothing is left standing in its wake. From the onset Sansour has conflated the personal and the biographical with the collective and universal. Her hometown is engulfed by the black wave, but so is the whole world. Writing about fiction in the Anthropocene, Adam Trexler differentiates between deluge and flood narratives. The former is used 'to understand the limits of humanity, its ethical boundaries, and our ultimate dependence on the land since the beginnings of civilization', while the latter is located in a 'specific, local place'.[70] In *In Vitro* disaster is both specific and universal at the same time. The distinct experience of being a Palestinian who has lost her homeland due to the 1948 *Nakba* is unspoken but haunts the narrative. It does not compete with the global loss of Earth to humanity, nor are these disasters conflated; rather, they co-exist in their respective devastation.[71]

Created in collaboration with creative (and life) partner Søren Lind, *In Vitro* shows us a world gone underground after ecological disaster. Set in a bunker beneath the city of

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[69] Full disclosure: *In Vitro* was commissioned for *Heirloom*, the Danish Pavilion for the 59th Venice Biennale (11.05.-24.11.2019), which I curated.

[70] Adam Trexler, *Anthropocene Fictions: The Novel in a Time of Climate Change* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2015), 84.

[71] In the introduction to their edited volume *Nakba: Palestine, 1948, and the Claims of Memory*, Ahmad H. Sai'di and Lila Abu-Lughod note the importance of the Nakba as a point of reference for events past and future. Ahmad H. Sa'idi and Lila Abu-Lughod, eds., *Nakba: Palestine, 1948, and the Claims of Memory* (New York: Colombia University Press, 2007), 5. These disastrous events include, amongst others, the 1917 Balfour Declaration; the 1967 *Naksa* or setback; the 1982 massacre at the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps on the outskirts of Beirut; the First and Second Intifadas (1987-1993 and 2000-2005); the Gaza Wars (2008-2009 and 2014); the killings at the Land Day Protests in 2018; American President Donald Trump's recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital (2017); and the US government's so-called peace plan (2020) that greenlights Israel's annexation of its Jordan Valley and West Bank settlements. The list goes on, but to all these historical events should be added the quotidian humiliation and trampling on human rights by the ongoing occupation of Palestine.

Bethlehem, an ailing elder woman (Dunia) and a younger one (Alia) debate memory, identity and survival (Fig.2.5.). As the video progresses it becomes clear that Alia is a clone engineered from the genetic material of those who perished. Not only has she inherited her townspeople's DNA, turning her into a living archive of the dead, but she has also inherited their memories. Like Manna's seeds, Alia embodies the apocalypse. Her beginning in the world is literally facilitated through the endings of others. Yet, she is not an entirely new beginning: we learn that many generations of clones came before her and did not make it.[72] Her genetic and emotional coding has been stored, copied and reproduced, not for the present moment but for posterity, when she can return above ground. Alia is the manifestation of Kaplan's 'memory for the future'; she is the seed in the Svalbard Global Seed Vault awoken out of its state of latency post-Doomsday. In Dunia's view, Alia's very existence and mission in life is to engender a new beginning that is situated in the future and above ground; specifically, when the toxic ruin Bethlehem has become is safe enough to return to. This is a role Alia is uncomfortable with and refuses. 'It won't be long before you return', Dunia says; 'This place is your exile, not mine […] All I will see is a ghost town', Alia bites back.[73] Dunia's apocalyptic worldview is Kermodian in the sense that there are clear beginnings and endings that an evacuated present ought to facilitate. What is lacking is an actual 'middest'; there is only a void. Alia 'despise[s] the idea of the present as nothing but a void', and with this rejects Vermeulen's notion of 'depresentification' and the postponement of her own subjectivity. Unlike Dunia whose identity is tied to her memories and a pre-apocalyptic past, Alia does not want to live in the past for the future. She wants to live in the present, unburdened by a past and memories that are not her own, yet she struggles because she cannot fully undo herself from what has been artificially grafted into her. Palestinian poet and historian Elias Sanbar elegantly frames the Palestinian predicament with the present:

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[72] 1992 saw the first successful intracytoplasmic sperm injection (ICSI) in which an egg is injected with a single sperm (an image Sansour uses in *In Vitro*), while cloning entered the public imagination in 1996 with Dolly the Sheep, taking the powerful sf motif of clones out into the 'real' world. Within scientific development and sf alike, cloning raises bio-ethical questions around natural reproduction, identity and uniqueness. For more on cloning in sf, see Sherryl Vint, *Science Fiction* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: M.I.T. Press, 2021), 108-110.

[73] Larissa Sansour and Søren Lind, *In Vitro*, 2019, 2-channel HD video. All following quotes from the film follow this citation.

> By departing from space [Palestine], the Palestinians, about whom the whole world agreed to say ‘they do not exist’, also departed from time. Their history and their past were denied. Their aspirations and their future were forbidden. Hence they found themselves trapped in an ephemeral dimension […] they would live in limbo, achieving a very special relationship with the concept of duration. Since the present was forbidden to them, they would occupy a temporal space made up of both a past preserved by a memory afflicted by madness [the Nakba] and a dreamt-of future which aspired to restore time.[74]

Figure 2.5. Larissa Sansour and Søren Lind. *In Vitro*, 2019. 2-channel HD video. Video still. Image courtesy the artists.

This crisis of the present is also echoed by the film and cultural theorist Greg Burris, who draws on Edward Said’s lexicon of the Palestinian Idea as an emancipatory ‘vision for the future [in which] men and women should neither be defined nor confined by race or religion [and] based not on exclusivism and rejection, but upon coexistence, mutuality, sharing and vision’, to be brought into the present.[75] He argues that Said’s ‘Palestinian Idea is located in the unattainable distance, and it is not clear how we can ever bridge the temporal gap dividing these two incompatible worlds [as] long as it remains focused on the future’.[76] Burris insists that the present has to be acknowledged. Alia does so, too, but she takes this a step further and radically rejects any form of identitarian affiliation and historical or national belonging: ‘I don’t care about your nations, their stories, their rituals,

[74] Elias Sanbar, “Out of Place, out of Time,” *Mediterranean Historical Review* 16, no. 1 (2001): 90.
[75] Greg Burris, *The Palestinian Idea. Film, Media, and the Radical Imagination* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2019), 16.
[76] Burris, 17.

their repetition of imagery. This struggle, this land, these seasons. Memory channelled by a handful of tropes. These scents, this fabric, this history reduced to symbols and iconography. A liturgy chronicling our losses. These plagues...these disasters. This exodus.' Alia seems to suggest that the only way to recuperate the loss of the present is through forgetting.

Alia's position appears diametrically opposed to Dunia's. These oppositions are further emphasised stylistically and conceptually by the formalism of black and white film, the split screen, the depiction of life underground versus life above ground, whether before or after the catastrophe, as well as the intergenerational dynamic between the able-bodied, younger Alia and the older Dunia languishing in her sickbed.[77] Dunia's death is imminent but Alia's emergence in the present is unsure. Nevertheless, this apocalyptic world should not be read as one of oppositions only. Rather, its logic is akin to that of the DNA strands in a double helix: twisting into each other and then standing opposite each other. This play of distance and proximity is expressed by the ways temporality and apocalyptic time are articulated throughout the film; the continuous knotting and unknotting of memory and forgetfulness, and the unfolding of an Anthropogenic and a Palestinian narrative. Apocalyptic time in *In Vitro* is the temporal limbo of the bunker where a 'single switch turns day into night'. It is also the enduring rupture of the multiple disasters of the past — the *Nakba* and climate disaster — and that of the present. For Dunia, the latter means being marooned in a subterranean bunker under her home; for Alia, it is the inability to forge a way into the present, let alone the future. The bunker signifies a time in which past, present and future dissolve, disallowing both Dunia and Alia from working through their respective traumas. Worse, the bunker becomes the space where trauma is acted out incessantly.[78] Dunia's trauma is shown through flashbacks, one of cinema's main devices to indicate trauma.[79] There are the happy memories before the apocalypse, showing Dunia with her daughter, and then scenes after the cataclysm, suggesting Dunia has lost her child. I have argued elsewhere how the dreamy and bucolic depictions of the Bethlehem landscape in

[77] See Nat Muller, *Heirloom* (Venice: Danish Arts Foundation, 2019), Exhibition brochure.

[78] In trauma studies the idea of 'working-through' indicates the 'process of coming to terms with trauma and moving beyond it. It enables one to distinguish between past and present, to relegate traumatic memories to the past and to realize that one is living here and now with openings to the future. Working-through is seen as a salutary alternative to its conceptual counterpart acting-out, which traps one in the past.' Lucy Bond and Stef Craps, *Trauma (The New Critical Idiom)* (London: Routledge, 2020), 151.

[79] See Roger Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question* (London: Routledge, 2008), 179–85.

the video reference a major visual trope in Palestinian art that signifies a connection to the land via agrarian motifs such as olive groves and orchards; an idealisation of a time pre-Nakba.[80] While Sansour pays tribute to this art historical legacy, in *In Vitro* she also relegates it to the past. This Palestinian landscape motif is folded back into the subterranean orchard that Dunia has grown in the bunker and transforms from a Palestinian symbol into a universal marker of the post-apocalyptic (Fig.2.6.). Although plentiful, this orchard has been stripped of all its geographical, national and emotional iconography. Olive trees crowd a designated patch, herbs are grown under glaring artificial light behind protective glass, hothouses vertically line the bunker's shaft, and a console of screens monitors the whole operation. Everything here is functional and geared towards survival. Dunia desperately tries to preserve memory, however the bunker's orchard is testimony to how these efforts can only be limited. If anything, the orchard manifests what has already been forgotten and forever lost.

Figure 2.6. Larissa Sansour and Søren Lind. *In Vitro*, 2019. 2-channel HD video. Video stills. Underground orchard and Bethlehem orchard. Image courtesy the artists.

Sansour shows the orchard at the beginning and the end of the video, and only for a few fleeting seconds. Nevertheless, these scenes are significant as they serve as a reminder

[80] Nat Muller, "Before and After a Disaster: Unsettling Representation in Larissa Sansour's *Heirloom,*" in *Larissa Sansour: Heirloom. Research/Practice 03*, ed. Anthony Downey (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2019), 11. See also Bashir Makhoul and Gordon Hon: '[i]mages of the land and metaphors of rootedness are everywhere in Palestinian art, from conventional landscapes and the ubiquitous olive tree to the use of actual earth in the making of the work.' Bashir Makhoul and Gordon Hon, *The Origins of Palestinian Art* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013), 79.

of the apocalyptic. 'I only escape the reality of our entombment when they switch on the orchard lights, and I hear the birds, bees and butterflies', notes Dunia. This phrase encapsulates the end of one world, but not necessarily the beginning of another. While the birds, bees and butterflies help propagate plant life and the orchard's produce ensures human survival, it is still more of a gravesite than a place of life. Once again, the double helix curls into a single point: life is death and endings are endings, not beginnings. Rebirth is hampered, or as Dunia tells Alia: 'You were born, but you are still trapped in the womb.' The orchard will always be a memorial to, and a reminder of, a lost world. While in many post-apocalyptic narratives the natural world post-disaster is portrayed as either Edenic or as a toxic ruin, here it is neither. We understand 'the weeds have been back for years, the waterways are restored', but this is as much as Sansour gives away. There is no nature to be found underground; it is all cultivated artificially and scientifically sustained. The alienation produced by the severance between human and eco-system is indicative of the genre of eco-apocalypse, only here it is further amplified by the alienation Palestinians in exile experience when they are barred from their homeland.[81] The orchard scenes thus signify a moment in which Palestinian subjectivity dissolves and melts into the hyperobject of planetary catastrophe.[82] Paradoxically it is the only moment an actual lived present is given form. In other words, through erasure the present is made real.

Frederick Buell remarks that in environmental apocalypses 'the future will bring no novel apocalypse, but an immensely heightened version of old woes getting worse and still worse'.[83] This holds, to an extent, in *In Vitro*. However, the difference is that those woes are placed squarely in Alia and Dunia's present, and their worsening is not, say, an increase in toxic particles in the air, flash flooding or heat waves. The worsening woes are to be seen in the continuous reproduction of trauma through memory and their impossibility to be in the

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[81] See Samantha Drake, "Surviving the Eco-Apocalypse : Losing the Natural World and the Self in Post-Apocalyptic and Dystopian Literature" (Honor's Thesis, Longwood University, 2012), 4–5. http://digitalcommons.longwood.edu/ [last accessed 25.02.2020].

[82] Timothy Morton defines hyperobjects as follows: 'things that are massively distributed in time and space relative to humans. […] they involve profoundly different temporalities than the human-scale ones we are used to. […] Hyperobjects have already had a significant impact on human social and psychic space. Hyperobjects are directly responsible for what I call the *end of the world*, rendering both denialism and apocalyptic environmentalism obsolete.' Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology at the End of the World*, 1–2.

[83] Frederick Buell, "A Short History of Environmental Apocalypse," in *Future Ethics: Climate Change and Apocalyptic Imagination*, ed. Stefan Skrimshire (London: Continuum Books, 2012), 29.

present. The latter is not only acted out in Dunia's reliving of disaster, but most potently in how she, as a scientist, artificially recreates traumatic memory. If trauma can be defined as a crisis of knowledge in which '[t]he repetition of traumatic experience is […] not only an attempt to understand one had nearly died, but also an attempt to comprehend the improbable fact of one's own survival', then the specific role of science in *In Vitro* warrants further examination.[84] The work's title *In Vitro* (Latin for 'in glass') already suggests experiments in a closed and controlled environment. The work's title in Arabic, المختبر (The Laboratory), stresses this point even more. To a large degree both Dunia and Alia are trying to figure out what survival is and what it means, with the main difference that for Dunia this is life *in vitro*, outside of her natural habitat, while for Alia this is life *in vivo* (Latin for 'within the living') – this *is* her natural habitat. In a way, Dunia adheres diligently to scientific process and does what any skilled scientist would do: perform a test over and over so as not to rely on one single result. But here scientific repetition and the repetitive re-enaction of trauma become one and the same, with Alia as its living proof. The replication of DNA and the replication of memory have come full circle.

While Alia incarnates the above, there is another entity that adds to the discussion around the reproduction of memory. A technological contraption that also operates like a metaphor: it is simultaneously a void and a presence. We sometimes see Alia interacting with a large black sphere (Fig.2.7.), a repository of memory that I have described elsewhere as 'an iconic and hermetic representation of history, trauma and lost life that has been stored and black-boxed'.[85] For Alia, it is as much a source of attraction as one of anxiety. The sphere brings together what in trauma theory is called 'postmemory' and 'prosthetic memory'. The concept of postmemory was first introduced by Marianne Hirsch in 1992 as a way to describe the transmission of trauma between generations. In other words, 'the imprint of trauma can be passed down through generations as the children of survivors inherit memories of catastrophic events they did not themselves live through'.[86] Building on Hirsch's concept, in 2004 Alison Landberg developed a theory of 'prosthetic memory', where she argues that through technologies of mass culture, including cultural artefacts such as literature, films, visual art and museum exhibits – I would also add social media –

[84] Bond and Craps, *Trauma (The New Critical Idiom)*, 75.
[85] Muller, "Before and After a Disaster: Unsettling Representation in Larissa Sansour's *Heirloom*," 17.
[86] Bond and Craps, *Trauma (The New Critical Idiom)*, 85. Also see Bond and Craps, 83–87 and 147.

individuals and groups can acquire memories of which they have no lived experience.[87] Postmemory and prosthetic memory are both at play in Alia: she is the live experiment in which memory has been transplanted; but she has also herself become an example of prosthetic memory in the flesh. The sphere operates on three interconnected levels: conceptually, it is the literal and physical representation of prosthetic memory; scientifically, the sphere is the actual sf technology that makes Alia's postmemory possible. And lastly, memorially, its impenetrable blackness and weight stand for the void and absence Alia is supposed to feel, and to a large degree does feel, at the loss of a world that is not hers. This again ties in with the universal eco-narrative shifting back to a Palestinian narrative in which loss of a (national) homeland and loss of identity, culture and history are always threatened. The sphere is a constant reminder of the burden of exile and by corollary of the multiple apocalypses and the loss of the present.

Figure 2.7. Larissa Sansour and Søren Lind. *In Vitro*, 2019. 2-channel HD video. Video still. Alia and sphere. Image courtesy the artists.

In Vitro is occasionally shown in conjunction with *Monument for Lost Time* (2019), a five-metre diameter fibreglass and steel sculpture of the black sphere with a whirring and rumbling soundscape.[88] Denuded from its filmic context, the sphere becomes an empty signifier; a placeholder devoid of content. Translated into concepts of trauma studies, this

[87] Bond and Craps, *Trauma (The New Critical Idiom)*, 87–90 and 148–49.
[88] At the time of writing, this was the case for the Danish Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, *Heirloom* (11.05.2019 - 24.11.2019) and *Heirloom*'s iteration at Copenhagen Contemporary in Denmark (13.12.2019 – 10.05.2020).

sculpture can be seen as the visual representation of prosthetic memory, but unlike the sphere in the film, it does not mediate anything. It is a prosthesis on which a memorial function is bestowed, as is the case with most monuments; however, it fails to deliver and thus in a semantic sense becomes the apocalyptic ending where meaning abruptly stops. Outside of the realm of the film the sphere becomes the petrified and unarticulated materialisation of forgetfulness and loss, and in this sense can only be a failed object, incapable of transmitting any clear meaning. This is not to say that *Monument for Lost Time* does not make a bold statement — it does. However, it remains difficult to glean any information from the work, which is exactly its point. The viewer is primarily confronted with the sculpture's voluminous presence and the title of the work hints that the loss of time effectuates a loss of meaning. To understand this dynamic better it makes sense to explore the relationship between time, ontology and identity in the Palestinian context a little further. Amal Jamal has insightfully described how in asymmetrical conflicts, with Israel-Palestine as his prime case study, the dominant party delegitimises the other party's place in historical time and renders their timeframe as temporary: 'Hegemonic nations in conflicts seek to empty or suspend the time flow of their enemies. The emptying of time relates to the erasure of events and occasions that substantiate the historical consciousness and the collective memory of their enemies and the suspension of the latter's time relates to the halting of movement in space, reflected best by waiting.'[89] This emptying or suspension of time is articulated in the time Palestinians spend obtaining travel permits, the time squandered in front of checkpoints, and time lost circumventing roadblocks and closures. On a different scale, lost and unfulfilled time is spent waiting for a sovereign state and for Palestinian refugees and the internally displaced to return home. Lost time is time spent devoid of meaning. Moreover, it is time that precludes a place, national or other, in the past, present and future. As such, it can only be represented by a great black nothingness, as represented by *Monument for Lost Time*. The sculpture does not attempt to reclaim time, which sets it apart from the majority of Palestinian art that either roots Palestinians in historical time or demonstrates the structurally uneven distribution of time

[89] I am indebted to Chrisoula Lionis for pointing me to this reference: Amal Jamal, "Conflict Theory, Temporality, and Transformative Temporariness: Lessons from Israel and Palestine," *Constellations* 23, no. 3 (2016): 366.

and the temporal hierarchies under occupation.[90] Rather, *Monument for Lost Time* amasses the meaninglessness of all that lost time and thus turns the work into a proverbial marker of the end of time.

If in *Monument for Lost Time* the sculpture discloses no information, then the sphere in the film exudes too much of it. Alia and the sphere are both Dunia's creations. Only, Alia is the experiment that speaks back. She is the DNA strand that refuses to fold back into the double helix. Between her and the sphere there is a palpable separation that cannot be bridged. Alia has no actual access to the sphere, a situation that only aggravates her sense of alienation. The sphere is the root cause of Alia's exile and stands between her current sense of self, which is broken and unfulfilled, and her wished-for sense of self, which is a subjectivity defined on her own terms, not one based on a past that has been instilled in her. Layla AlAmmar calls this 'postmemorial absence', in which the 'repeated activation of traumatic histories, and refusal to fully work through them, can lead to a state of transhistorical absence and suspended identity formation'.[91] The notion of *ghurba*, estrangement in Arabic, comes to mind here, too. While it is most often used interchangeably with the notion of exile, I would like to dwell on its literal translation – estrangement – and how it underlines the science fictional aspects of *In Vitro*. Sansour's combination of *ghurba* as exile and *ghurba* as estrangement are cleverly articulated, albeit meted out differently to Alia and Dunia. Dunia is *away* and displaced of and from her home; Alia is *estranged* from her home but not away from it. Yet both women are denied a home and experience a loss of selfhood.[92] To understand this dynamic it is useful to turn to Ihab Saloul's understanding of *ghurba*.

[90] Examples of Palestinian artists centring their oeuvre around the reclamation of historical time include, in general, an older generation of artists such as Laila Shawa (b.1940), Sliman Mansour (b. 1947), Nabil Anani (b.1943), Vera Tamari (b.1945), Tayseer Barakat (b.1954), Khalil Rabah (b.1961), Raeda Saadeh (b.1977) and Sama Alshaibi (b.1974); while artists addressing the uneven distribution of time include Sharif Waked (b.1964), Taysir Batniji (b.1966), Emily Jacir (b.1972), Steve Sabella (b.1974), Ruanne Abou-Rahme and Basel Abbas (b.1983), Yazan Khalili (b.1983) and Basma Al Sharif (b.1983).

[91] Layla AlAmmar, "Palestinian Postmemory: Melancholia and the Absent Subject in Larissa Sansour's *In Vitro* , Saleem Haddad's 'Song of the Birds,' and Adania Shibli's *Touch*," *Journal of Literature and Trauma Studies* 8, no. 1 (2021): 2.

[92] Ihab Saloul refers to this in the Palestinian context as a 'denial of access to selfhood' in which Palestinian exile is defined as 'an emphatically contemporary condition of a past subjective loss of home and also crucially of an everyday denial of access. Within this condition, the subject is constantly denied of his or her cultural space of selfhood.' See Saloul, *Telling Memories: Catastrophe and Exile in the Modern Palestinian Imagination*, 100.

> *Ghurba*, thus, is a suggestive term for *al-Nakba* as an experiential category precisely because it refers to the experience of displacement of and from home. And it does this in terms of a different mode of being, a temporal and an existential circumstance, and a spatial geopolitical process of forced removal in which the Palestinian subject, to borrow Edward Said's terminology, is continually put 'out of place' in the present. This violent condition does not only lead to a loss of the homeland but also to a breaking up, an undesired detachment that is permanent in some cases, of one's family and community. The geo-political significations of *ghurba*, then, stress both the experiential and the material dimensions of the condition of estrangement and enclosure of exile, both temporally and spatially yet without subsuming one to the other. This equality of the different elements lies at the heart of Palestinian exile.[93]

Dunia experiences *ghurba* as a textbook example of Saloul's outline: a temporal and spatial displacement of and from home. Within this context, Dunia can still rely on spatio-temporal identifiers that are known to her: her home in Bethlehem before the time of disaster, in contrast to her predicament underground. Dunia's estrangement stems from the enduring absence of, and longing for, the home that is no more. Alia feels estranged from the artificially implanted memories that are not hers; however, the main part of her *ghurba* is generated by the erasure of her own spatio-temporal identifiers – respectively, the underground lab and the present. Alia is denied her own references and thus is barred from producing her own memories through her own lived experience. This makes Alia's condition a unique, if not confusing, case of *ghurba* since she is not *de facto* temporally and spatially displaced from her actual home. Rather, she is not supposed to view the lab as her home in the first place. In addition, her desire to exist in the present — and not be defined by the past or an imagined the future — is thwarted. While Dunia's catastrophes or *Nakbas* are known and articulated, Alia's remain unknown and unarticulated. As such, Alia is bereft of what Saloul identifies as the main markers of what binds Palestinian identity: a shared sense of exile and the capacity to image loss through an equally shared set of symbolic identifiers.[94]

Science-fictionally speaking, Dunia represents the cognitive order of things: her *Nakbas* are known and Sansour makes sure that they are visualised. Apart from the collective trauma Dunia shares with other exiles, there is her personal narrative to contend

[93] Saloul, 66–67.
[94] Saloul, 2.

with, too. This is shown by a scene of Dunia fleeing a burning Bethlehem with her daughter (Fig.2.8.), followed by a haunting shot of a weeping Dunia standing by herself on a hilltop overlooking the city aflame. Not only has she lost her home, she has also lost her daughter. However traumatic, Dunia possesses the knowledge to situate her loss in time and space. The actual 'novum' that disrupts cognition and thus underscores the science fictional aspect of *In Vitro* is Alia. As a clone, Alia symbolises the scientific novelty in this sf universe; she is the result of Dunia's ingenuity. But Alia is much more than that. Throughout *In Vitro'*s narrative it is Alia who continuously reproduces estrangement, not only by being who she is (a clone) but by disturbing Dunia's worldview. Dunia's *ghurba* is predicated on her memories of loss situated in the past, while Alia's is predicated on her loss of memory for the future and her inability to remember anything authentic. Put differently, Dunia and Alia symbolise the two DNA strands that drive *In Vitro*'s plot. When they meet, they produce a science fictional moment in which Sansour can critically interrogate charged topics such as exile, (collective) identity and belonging. But something else happens within this science fictional *punctum* too. The more universalising traits of loss surface and we are subtly reminded that these two women find themselves in their different exiles and absented presents, battling their respective *Nakbas*, because of a planetary climate catastrophe.

Figure 2.8. Larissa Sansour and Søren Lind. *In Vitro*, 2019. 2-channel HD video. Video still. Alia and Dunia fleeing Bethlehem. Image courtesy the artists.

The Anthropogenic creeps up intermittently in *In Vitro* but is offset by Sansour's inclusion of grainy archival footage that documents life in and around Bethlehem from the

early twentieth century up to 1967. Throughout the film we see short clips of pilgrims and nuns walking across Manger Square and merchants toting their goods; priests enter the Church of the Nativity, its bells tolling. But there are also soldiers marching through Bethlehem's alleys during the British Mandate period; children picking up allotted bundles of flatbreads; milk being dispensed to the needy; and refugees crossing the Allenby Bridge into Jordan in 1967 during the *Naksa*, that other Palestinian disaster. On the one hand, the archival images anchor *In Vitro's* narrative in the history and geopolitics of Palestine; they provide the temporal and spatial identifiers that mark Dunia and Alia's world as Palestinian and exilic. On the other hand, the footage emphasises that climate catastrophe is only one of the many disasters that have befallen the Palestinian people. It is a prime example of what Alia calls '[a] liturgy chronicling our losses', or what Lindsey Moore and Ahmed Qabaha have described as the 'chronic trauma' that typifies Palestinian consciousness because it is a serial and ongoing trauma that is 'mundane, material, quotidian, repeated and eminently repeatable'.[95] This places Dunia and Alia's reality in a context in which they have suffered disaster in the past, are living through disaster in the present, and are most likely to experience disaster in the future. Scholars like Saloul and the political historian Nur Masalha have shown how the 1948 *Nakba* is the formative Palestinian trauma that endures over time while equally figuring as a collective historical, cultural and political memory within Palestinian society and its diasporas.[96] In his discussion of the *Nakba* and memory, Masalha incorporates 'memoricide' and 'toponymicide': the systemic destruction of Palestinian memory, and the erasure of Palestinian place by Zionist settlers before 1948 and later, and ongoing, by the state of Israel.[97] In this context, Sansour's introduction of archival footage serves to resist the memoricide and toponymicide cited by Masalha; it is another example of visual proof that Palestinian presence in the city of Bethlehem has been a fact on the

[95] Lindsey Moore and Ahmad Qabaha, "Chronic Trauma, (Post)Colonial Chronotopes and Palestinian Lives: Omar Robert Hamilton's Though I Know the River Is Dry/Ma'a Anni A'rif Anna Al- Nahr Qad Jaf," in *Postcolonial Traumas: Memory, Narrative, Resistance*, ed. Abigail Ward (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 19.
[96] See Nur Masalha, *The Palestine Nakba. Decolonising History, Narrating the Subaltern, Reclaiming Memory* (London and New York: Zed Books, 2012).
[97] In Masalha's words, 'memoricide' and 'toponymicide' are described respectively as follows: 'the systematic erasure of the expelled Palestinians and their mini-holocaust from Israeli collective memory and the excision of their history and deeply rooted heritage in the land, and their destroyed villages and towns from Israeli official and popular history. One of the key tools of the de-Arabisation of the land has been toponymicide: the erasure of ancient Palestinian place names and their replacement by newly coined Zionist Hebrew toponymy.' Masalha, 4.

ground for aeons. At the same time, these images have a commemorative function and point to a Palestine lost. This loss is, as Moore and Qabaha have indicated, repeated over and over. Lena Jayyusi has called this dynamic the 'cumulative iterability' of the *Nakba*: 'It was to become obvious that the *Nakba* was not the last collective site of trauma, but what came later to be seen, through the prism of repeated dispossessions and upheavals, as the foundational station in an unfolding and continuing saga of dispossession, negations, and erasure.'[98]

Apart from displaying resistance and having a commemorative function, as mentioned, the archival footage is also mobilised to mark catastrophic time. An apocalypse that repeats itself in different iterations. Sansour's use of this footage provides references from Palestinian historical discourse, hence turning the futuristic context of *In Vitro* all the more estranging and science fictional. At the same time, it also renders it familiar. The film not only calls into question the iterability of disaster but also its longevity. Alia is the prime example of an iterative scientific experiment in which DNA and memory have been copied and reproduced. She wants to put a stop to the cycle of 'cumulative iterability', but the only way she can do this, it seems, is through forgetfulness. However, forgetfulness need not mean erasure; under certain circumstances, such as planetary disaster, forgetfulness might provide the key to sustainable survival. Alia has to find a way to exist in the present. As such, Alia turns the whole idea of counter-memory as an emancipatory force on its head. Ahmad H. Sa'idi and Lila Abu-Lughod explain how remembrance of the *Nakba* offers counterpoints to Israeli narratives of national mythmaking, as well as 'hope for a reconstituted or refigured Palestine and a claim to rights'.[99] Alia suggests that a new kind of memory must be forged in order to break the stalemate and the repeating trauma of the past. This memory would need to acknowledge the reality of life underground; it would need to be a memory that, like Alia, can only be hybrid, messy and strange. While the archival footage provides historical lineage and demonstrates that Sansour is not prepared to distance herself from its gravitas, it also functions as a critique of how 'canonized memory' — the stories and symbols that make up collective memory – are institutionalised.[100] For Alia this canon is

[98] Lena Jayyusi, "Iterability, Cumulativity, and Presence: The Relational Figures of Palestinian Memory," in *Nakba: Palestine, 1948, and the Claims of Memory*, ed. Ahmad H. Sa'idi and Lila Abu-Lughod (New York: Colombia University Press, 2007), 109–10.
[99] Sa'idi and Abu-Lughod, *Nakba: Palestine, 1948, and the Claims of Memory*, 7.
[100] See Sa'idi and Abu-Lughod, 7.

alienating as there is neither room for memories of her own lived experience, nor for her experience of the present: 'They nurse us on memories formed before us…and raise us for times to come.' This brings us back to the question of what acting for the times to come might mean when there may be no such thing on the horizon. At the end of the world, having a modicum of agency in the precarious present supersedes any type of agency in a future that may never be.

In this chapter I have attempted to make a case that the sf trope of the apocalypse pivots on the present. Both Manna's *Wild Relatives* and Sansour's *In Vitro* seek to reclaim this temporality and point to its validity rather than remain caught in a time before (the past) or a time after (the future) disaster. Both works do not avert the multiple apocalypses at the heart of their narratives; rather, they show how environmental disaster and historical and political injustices are intertwined. I argue that in these two films the apocalypse allows for the present, in all its precariousness, to be reclaimed, albeit imperfectly. Veering between documentary, the speculative and the science fictional, *Wild Relatives* and *In Vitro* urge us to focus on the present moment and contemplate life *in* catastrophe, rather than life *after* catastrophe. As such, they capture and bring to the fore a fragile equilibrium between a wretched contemporary moment and its imaginaries. Stopping short of offering a way *out*, these works in fact offer a way back *in* and make us ask the critical question: amongst all this loss, what is worthwhile preserving and what is not? What is of value and what not? And to whom? Perhaps most compellingly, they urge a necessary re-evaluation of the notion of the future and call instead for a focus on the present. Memory as a survival strategy in, and for, the present is forcefully put forward in *Wild Relatives*, while in *In Vitro* a rejection of memory not only defines the conflict and the fundamental opposition between Dunia and Alia but also safeguards existential continuance. Sai'idi and Abu-Lughod have argued convincingly that 'at its heart, [memory is] political'.[101] *Wild Relatives* and *In Vitro* do not dispute this at all, but in fact add nuance. If remembering is political, then so, too, must be forgetfulness.

[101] Sa'idi and Abu-Lughod, 8.

Chapter 3: Masquerading Others

Transitioning through National and Other Belonging with Aliens, Automatons and Superheroes

In November 1978, UFOs were spotted flying over Kuwait. Multiple sightings were reported of a flying saucer landing silently for a few minutes in an oil field in Umm al-Aish, briefly disrupting telecommunications. The event was widely covered in the local media. After all, Kuwait was the first Arab state to signal an encounter with a UFO. In the meantime, a revolution was brewing in neighbouring Iran, resulting in the 1979 overthrowing of the Shah and the installation of the Islamic Republic of Iran under Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. Fearing the export of revolutionary Islamic ideas from Iran to Iraq, Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein invaded Iran in 1980 and a war ensued that would drag on for more than eight years, and cause over half a million casualties. The Umm al-Aish oil installation, the site of the first alien visitation, was bombed by Iran in 1981, but in the years that followed UFOs would continue to be seen over Kuwait. Was it a coincidence that aliens came to the Gulf during a period of geopolitical upheaval that would significantly recalibrate the power dynamics in the region to this day? [1] Or was their presence indicative of something else and Other? This chapter wants to tease out how moments of political transition are intertwined with how 'the else and the Other' are imagined and negotiated. How does alterity operate during those moments when geopolitical frameworks are shifting, and (national) subjectivities oscillate between being produced and disrupted? What does science fictional Otherness mask that lies underneath? This 'masquerade' is a political and imaginary tactic I will be returning to throughout the chapter. What does it reveal about how events of the past and those of the future are told or untold? And how stable are identities, national or other, in postcolonial and contested geographies when offset against human and non-human figures of Otherness? I attempt to shed light on these complex

[1] For the alien visitation in Kuwait, see Jörg Matthias Determann, *Islam, Science Fiction and Extraterrestrial Life. The Culture of Astrobiology in the Muslim World* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2020), 106, 110–11; and Jill Crystal, *Oil and Politics in the Gulf. Rulers and Merchants in Kuwait and Qatar*, 1995 Repri (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 100. For analysis on current perceptions of the Iraq-Iran war, see, for example, Narges Bajoghli and Amir Moosavi, eds., *Debating the Iran-Iraq War in Contemporary Iran* (Oxon: Routledge, 2018). For how the Iraq-Iran War reshaped the Middle East and specifically the Gulf, see Pierre Razoux, *The Iran-Iraq War* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2015).

questions by examining the figure of the alien, the superhero and the automaton/robot, sf's primary Others, in contemporary artworks from, respectively, Kuwait, Israel/Palestine and Lebanon.

In this chapter I trace political shifts and histories of belonging and unbelonging by navigating a threatened state (Kuwait), an absent state (Palestine) and a failed state (Lebanon), through the work of Kuwaiti artist Monira Al Qadiri, a collaboration between Palestinian artist Larissa Sansour and Israeli artist Oreet Ashery, and Lebanese filmmaker Fadi Baki.[2] From shrugging off the colonial yoke to national independence, suffering invasions, wars, ongoing occupations and the unrealised potential of revolutions, I hint throughout my analysis that the nation state might be too limited a category, and perhaps too ossified and compromised, for finding significance in what is absent and falls through the cracks of geopolitics. The works discussed do not necessarily offer political alternatives to the nation state or other forms of political and social organisation, but, rather, point to what is lost and what struggles to find a place, meaning or representation, whether in the realm of history or in the realm of the imaginary. Here, I follow in the slipstream of a critique levelled against the traditional way of doing area studies, which often fails 'to recognize the nature and degree of dissenting forms of politics above and below the state'.[3] The aliens, automatons and superheroes all operate above, below and in-between the state. Their alterity mobilises ontological masking, which turns them into liminal figures who can step in and out of their roles. They are therefore natural 'transgressors' who can cross in and out of historical, national and political boundaries and use this ability, as I will show throughout the chapter, in an agential way.

This chapter is divided into three main sections, each of which discusses one work and focuses on the defining characteristics of the sf Others and how they operate in the respective artworks. Aliens, automatons/robots and superheroes function separately from each other and articulate difference in their own distinct ways; however, there are convergences tying these figures together. A main similarity between these figures is their

[2] In previous chapters I have described the failure of the Lebanese state and the absence of a sovereign Palestinian state. Kuwait is threatened politically by its powerful neighbours Iran and Iraq; however, recently, its oil revenues have started to dwindle due to low oil prices, causing an economic crisis. See "Oil-Rich Kuwait Facing Looming Debt Crisis," *Aljazeera*, November 24, 2020, https://www.aljazeera.com/economy/2020/11/24/when-kuwait-emerged-from-a-monthslong-coronavirus-lockdown-hundr. [last accessed 24.01.2021].

[3] Larbi Sadiki, ed., *Routledge Handbook of Middle East Politics* (London: Routledge, 2020), 9.

hybridity, which answers to the Bhabhian theorisation of the term as a 'difference "within", a subject that inhabits the rim of an "in-between" reality [and] revaluate[es] the assumption of colonial identity through the repetition of discriminatory identity effects'.[4] Yet, their hybridity is continuously destabilised, making it difficult to identify which identity effects are precisely Othered. Writing on global sf, Istvan Csicsery-Ronay warns that in a globalised world, with a dominant culture of hybridity in which 'enlightened cyborgs' reproduce the values of global hypercapitalism and transnational plutonomy, cultural identities risk being 'temporary, easily changed, and tactical', with ties to historical community, kinship groups and the place of one's ancestors severed as a result.[5] The aliens, automatons and superheroes in this chapter all walk a tightrope between the Bhabhian concept of hybridity as a transformative source of agency and Csicsery-Ronay's caveat about the loss of diversity and kinship. None of these figures' identities, and Otherness for that matter, is cast in stone. Nor is their relation to the human and the non-human. Rather, they move in an ontological borderland of belonging and unbelonging, in grey zones of transition and, at times, even of transgression. Geographical, territorial, political, temporal, personal and artistic boundaries are tested and stretched, with the sf Other at the centre.

Borderlands, the Chicana feminist theorist Gloria Anzaldúa reminds us, are places that are vague and undetermined, always in a constant state of transition, created by 'the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary'.[6] How unnatural these boundaries are between self and other, between friend and foe, between fact and fiction, between history and the present, is negotiated throughout the artworks in this chapter. Aliens, in Monira Al Qadiri's video *The Craft* (2017), are cast simultaneously as entities most familiar and most Other, their intentions varying in degrees of enmity and malevolence. In Larissa Sansour and Oreet Ashery's graphic novel *The Novel of Nonel and Vovel* (2009), superheroes are reluctant heroes who defy national borders and upturn political *status quos*. The last work discussed is Fadi Baki's short film *Manivelle: The Last Days of the Man of Tomorrow* (2017), in which the automaton features as an unreliable and compromised narrator of history, battling its own demons and loyalties. These figures all perform strangeness in a time of

[4] Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 13 and 112.
[5] Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, "What Do We Mean When We Say 'Global Science Fiction'? Reflections on a New Nexus," *Science Fiction Studies* 39, no. 3 (2012): 480.
[6] Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: aunt lute books, 1987), 4.

change through a strategy of masquerade, and they do so both overtly and covertly. In *The Craft*, masquerade becomes a guiding principle for describing the volatility of historical perception and of identity politics, whereas in *The Novel of Nonel and Vovel* masquerade facilitates agency and effectuates powerful change that would have been impossible without the mask. Conversely, in *Manivelle* the mere possibility of donning a mask of one's own and choosing a different path, devoid of affiliative pressures, remains largely an unmet desire. Masquerade, however, does not necessarily conceal a true 'authentic' face or reality behind the mask; rather, the act of masking facilitates a bridge between loss and recuperation, akin to how sf tropes operate throughout this thesis.[7]

This chapter shows that notwithstanding the losses these sf Others accrue, what is primarily recuperated through these Others is a place for art, however contested. Anzaldúa notes that '[l]iving in a state of psychic unrest, in a Borderland, is what makes poets write and artists create'.[8] *The Craft*, *The Novel of Nonel and Vovel* and *Manivelle* all work from a subtext that questions how artistic expression sits with, or against, political action and historicism. In *The Craft*, there is a debate around truth value and how art (drawing and installation art) might challenge the representation of reality; in *The Novel of Nonel and Vovel*, artistic agency is pitted against political agency via popular culture and one of its prime expressions, the comic book; in *Manivelle*, the celluloid dreams of cinema are folded into an ongoing narrative of ambition, political strife and amnesia. The examples featured in this chapter fall in and out of art, quite similar to how the aliens, automatons and superheroes starring in these works slip in and out of Otherness. But in these interstices and with these broken, flawed and oftentimes confused figures, narratives unfold that not only question how politics are produced and performed but also how history is *seen*.

Masquerading Meaning: Aliens and Alienation in Monira Al Qadiri's *The Craft* (2017)

This chapter's opening paragraph described the excitement around Kuwait being the first site of alien contact in the Arab world, but it is worth noting that extraterrestrials are

[7] The notion of masquerade has been examined from feminist and gender-critical perspectives, in particular Judith Butler's critique on the heteronormativity of Joan Riviere's 1929 essay "Womanliness as Masquerade", and Lacan's interpretation of femininity as phallic masquerade. While such a queer analysis falls outside of the scope of this thesis, it opens up interesting avenues for future research. See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 46–54.
[8] Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, 73.

not foreign to the region. Jörg Matthias Determann goes as far as tracing alien presence back to the Qu'ran, in which part of the scripture mentions the realms of humans, angels and *jinns*, and hints at the plurality of worlds. The search for multiple worlds and extraterrestrial life can be found in the work of medieval Islamic scholars, modern and contemporary novelists, playwrights, filmmakers, artists and astrobiologists alike. However, the employment of sf and its tropes of alien life as a political thermometer measuring conflict or political transition in the region still receives scarce critical attention; and this while, in 1970s Egypt, several theatre plays were staged that imagined alien Islamic worlds as an alternative to Nasser's Egypt and Cold War politics. Syria's Hafez Al-Assad also encouraged the production of sf as a propagandist tool to showcase science and modernity as national achievements.[9] Both are examples of how national identity and counter-identity seem intertwined with the alien. This dynamic, and the new insights it provides for scholarship, is under-researched and it is against this backdrop that Kuwaiti artist Monira Al Qadiri's autobiographical video installation *The Craft* (2017) should be assessed (Fig.3.1.).

'Aliens are our shadows, and we are theirs', writes Csicsery-Ronay.[10] This suggests aliens reveal something profound about human nature and subjectivity, and it is in this light that alien-human relationships are usually cast. 'Aliens enter the world through the portal of the lack. […] It is a matter of indifference whether they inspire fear or love, just so long as they keep the portals open to *the more*.'[11] In other words, aliens give meaning to human existence. In *The Craft*, however, alien masquerade and trickery not only result in a destabilisation of personal and human boundaries but also in the unsettling of national, historical, personal, cultural and aesthetic frameworks. Paradoxically, the alien, then, becomes a category defying categorisation. While alien narratives often look at instances of 'us' (humans) becoming 'them' (non-human aliens), 'them' becoming 'us', or 'us' being very different to 'them', these distinctions fall apart.[12] Al Qadiri's earlier oeuvre looks at the aesthetics of sadness and how this is articulated in the Gulf in terms of masculinity via a

[9] See Determann, *Islam, Science Fiction and Extraterrestrial Life. The Culture of Astrobiology in the Muslim World*, 1–25 and 85–90.

[10] Csicsery-Ronay, "Some Things We Know about Aliens," *The Yearbook of English Studies* 37, no. 2 (2007), 1.

[11] Csicsery-Ronay, "Some Things We Know about Aliens," 3.

[12] Neil Badmington theorises that alien hatred and alien love are positioned on the same continuum, and proposes as an alternative concept 'alien chic,' influenced by Tom Wolfe's 1970 cult essay "Radical Chic", in which difference and (white) racial privilege is underlined rather than eroded: 'Alien chic […] like Radical Chic […] quietly reaffirms a traditional border between "them" and "us."' Neil Badmington, *Alien Chic. Posthumanism and the Other Within* (London: Routledge, 2004), 6.

series of gender bending and crossdressing performances and videos. Her current work, which I discuss in Chapter 5, draws on the paradigmatic shifts in lifestyle that petro-modernity and petro-capitalism have produced in the Gulf. Through her videos, sculptures and performances, she teases out the ontological rifts between heritage and identity, between her generation and that of her grandparents, with oil as a viscous and slippery connector between past and future.[13] The alienating aspects of these vastly different worlds form the crux of her practice. In many ways, *The Craft* brings together these aspects and is set up as a *Bildungsroman*, based on a similar childhood dream the artist and her sister, musician Fatima Al Qadiri, had in 1988. *The Craft* is narrated in first person by the artist herself and takes the viewer on a journey from the artist/protagonist's childhood in Dakar, Senegal, where she was born in 1983 and her parents worked as diplomats, to experiencing the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in the First Gulf War (1990-91) and ends with her living in Beirut as an adult. Composed primarily of VHS footage from her family archive, and childhood drawings the artist and her sister made in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the aesthetics of *The Craft* have a nostalgic and childlike otherworldly quality to them, as does the synthesiser-heavy soundtrack that is composed by the artist's sister. In the following section, I analyse how consecutive tactics of masquerade are employed throughout the work via the motif of the alien, and how the alien manifests itself as a hybrid figure — other, but the same — and operates as a descriptor of the loss of meaning, which in turn produces a sense of alienation. What becomes apparent throughout *The Craft* is not so much that the alien is a foreign entity, but that the encounter with this form of alterity remains to a large extent unintelligible.

Literary scholar Elena Gomel distinguishes between three main scenarios of alien encounters: confrontation, assimilation and transformation, in which all three scenarios require a different level of engagement with alterity.[14] Confrontation, often in the form of alien invasion, is the most violent encounter and one of the most popular alien sf plots, going on the sheer volume of global literary and filmic productions drawing on the topic. A salient example in visual art is the work of the Syrian artist Ayham Jabr, who makes collages

[13] For an introduction to Al Qadiri's practice, see Tomke Braun, ed., *Empire Dye* (Bielefeld: Kerber Verlag, 2019). And the artist's website http://www.moniraalqadiri.com/ [last accessed 14.2.2022].
[14] See Elana Gomel, *Science Fiction, Alien Encounters, and the Ethics of Posthumanism. Beyond the Golden Rule.* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 6–7.

that depict a Damascus besieged by alien spaceships.[15] Assimilation, Gomel contends, is the trope of choice for postcolonial and feminist narratives, as in the work of Octavia Butler and Ursula K. Le Guin. In the latter, a more peaceful merger with the alien is suggested, often through a narrative of personal growth or a *Bildungsroman* trajectory. The Egyptian sf writer Nihad Sharif (1932-2011), for example, peppered his novels with romantic human-alien plots that also pushed a nationalist and Islamic agenda.[16] Finally, transformation is perhaps the most radical instance of encounter; here the alien is so profoundly Other that it is cognitively inaccessible to humans and demands an ontological and ethical shift on part of the human. Gomel admits that this particular category is rather rare in the sf multiverse and cites the work of the Jewish Polish sf writer Stanislaw Lem as an example.[17] It is not unusual for these tropes to manifest themselves together in one text: assimilation might be the result of an invasion. However, these categories of encounter still operate largely as identifiable and stable tropes. To an extent, *The Craft* draws on all these categories; however, Al Qadiri never allows them to be played out in full. This is not so much because the categories blur into each other, but, rather, because they mask each other to the effect that the logic of each category — whether it is the exertion of power and control, the pursuit of scientific knowledge, or species hybridity — collapses.

In the world of *The Craft* not all masquerades operate equally. One of the most challenging questions Al Qadiri puts to the viewer is figuring out who or what the alien constitutes. At first glance the dichotomy of aliens (them) and humans (us) seems clear. Throughout the video, the narrative voiceover, performed by the artist herself, makes a point to identify alien presence vis-à-vis human presence. However, the soundscape, narration and image also function as alternating masking devices, muddling and mismatching attributions of alterity and of reality. The video commences with footage of Al Qadiri's father driving through the streets of Dakar in 1982, a year before she was born. As Kuwaiti diplomats posted to the Kuwaiti embassy in Senegal, her parents were legal aliens.

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[15] See Ayham Jabr's artist portfolio: https://en.syriaartasso.com/artists/ayham-jabr/ [last accessed 13.11.2020].

[16] For more on assimilation and postcolonial and feminist literature, see Gomel, *Science Fiction, Alien Encounters, and the Ethics of Posthumanism. Beyond the Golden Rule.*, 117–46. For more on Nihad Sharif, see Determann, *Islam, Science Fiction and Extraterrestrial Life. The Culture of Astrobiology in the Muslim World*, 149–57.

[17] See Gomel, *Science Fiction, Alien Encounters, and the Ethics of Posthumanism. Beyond the Golden Rule.*, 187–210.

Much of the work is an exploration of how distant or proximate the alien as a cognitive entity is. Al Qadiri provides a prime caveat in the opening sequence: 'You start to notice something's not quite right here. Everything is not as it seems. You start to question reality, the world as a whole. Are we really *where* we think we are? Are we really there? Are *we* really *us*?' (emphasis mine).[18] This provides the first of many layers of alterity that not only frame the work in terms of family history but also in terms of geolocation, national identity and perception. It sets the stage for how representations of the nation state through the construction of physical and conceptual borders are debunked as a reliable source for telling history.

Figure 3.1. Monira Al Qadiri. *The Craft*, 2017. Video installation, 16'. Image courtesy the artist and Gasworks, London.

In *The Craft*, notions like the nation state, national borders and national belonging are discarded, but so, too, is species loyalty to the human race. Allegiances, whether they are of a national, species-related or parental nature, are continuously broken. The viewer learns through the voiceover that all embassies worldwide are actually extra-terrestrial spacecraft and landing pods in disguise, with international diplomacy serving as a smokescreen to hide an intergalactic conspiracy aiming to subsume the human race. This

[18] Monira Al Qadiri, *The Craft*, 2016, video. All subsequent quotations from the video follow this citation.

grand masquerade – or lie, as Al Qadiri refers to it – ruptures the main organising principles of international relations. If diplomats should act in their countries' best interests, but are in fact accomplices in an intergalactic plot, then the functioning of the nation state with its territorial borders, international treaties and national security is rendered void. Diplomats are no longer *legal* aliens but become *enemy* aliens, not only threatening their host country but also their country of origin. Cast in imperial terms, then, diplomats are the *comprador* class par excellence, selling out to an alien empire at the expense of humanity.[19] The question the work leaves unanswered is what they receive in exchange for their services. Diplomatic trade, or craft, in this video not only corrodes the distinction between *us* and *them* but suggests that its prime trade-off is getting to perform the masquerade of world order conducted by nation states, some of which are at peace and some at war. In the process, the whole logic of the nation state and national sovereignty comes undone because diplomats answer to aliens and not to their governments. Here, the cover-up is the reward.

In his 2004 book *Alien Chic* Neil Badmington makes a case that in the early twenty-first century the opposition between *us* versus *them* has eroded.[20] He argues that 'the signifiers "human" and "alien" are rearticulated until the relationship between them is no longer one of absolute difference. Neither the human nor the alien is ever entirely revealed in the plenitude of opposition.'[21] This suggests a masking of identity on both parts towards what could be construed as a posthuman existence. This point may have been easier to uphold at the height of transnational globalisation, before the economic downturn, before a refugee crisis and a wave of rightwing populist nationalism engulfed the globe and brought the 'versus' in the us/them binary back with a vengeance. In Kuwait, however, this fluctuation of difference between self and Other never really happened. Since independence from Britain in 1961, Kuwaiti citizenship has been predicated on a dynamic of exclusion and rigid nationality laws: Kuwaitis only make up around 30% of the population and are thus a minority in their own state. However, this minority enjoys all civic and political privileges and rights; the remainder of the population, non-nationals consisting of

[19] Hamid Dabashi usefully extends the notion of the comprador as the 'native informer' in colonial times, derived from the Spanish and Portuguese *comprar* 'to buy', to a figure that shores up the relation from commerce to (capitalist) power regardless of birthplace, creed, colour or nationality. See Hamid Dabashi, *Brown Skin. White Masks* (London: Pluto Press, 2011), 38–46.
[20] Badmington, *Alien Chic. Posthumanism and the Other Within*, 25–30.
[21] Badmington, 134.

expatriates, migrant labourers and *bidoun jinsiyya* (stateless, in Arabic 'without nationality') have no access to welfare or other benefits.[22] *The Craft*, therefore, calls into question a system of exclusionary identity politics and privilege by calling out the artificiality of the modern nation state.

The ontological confusion between human and aliens, indigenous population and foreigners, self and Other, is also expressed in the video's visual hierarchy. The grainy VHS footage from Al Qadiri's family archive is overlaid with children's drawings showing flying saucers, aliens and otherworldly monsters. While the home videos and family snapshots of the artist's childhood in Senegal and Kuwait should be adding veracity, they do the opposite. Paradoxically, Al Qadiri and her sister's drawings purport the truth and show the real face of reality. This, too, can be considered a visual cover-up, in which one series of documents (family archive, filmed by a parent, supposedly authentic and true) is pitted against another (infant fantasy, supposedly imaginary and untrue). *The Craft* calls into question the bond between parent and child. Al Qadiri's parents work in the embassy/spaceship and fraternise with aliens. How, then, can she be sure that her parents are not aliens, and more gravely, how can she be sure she is not an alien herself? This produces a double anxiety in the narrator that first destabilises the relationship with her parents and uproots questions of family and species origin, and secondly, unmoors a sense of self and of reality. As such, the Saidian twinning between 'filiation', referring to the realm of biological procreation and nature, and 'affiliation', referring to the realm of identification through culture and society, breaks down. Edward Said argued that filiation (family, heritage, descent) produces affiliation (the latter's representation in culture and society).[23] For Said, focussing on the affiliative enabled a way to look at texts as being part of the world; as products of complex political, historical, social and cultural factors. In colonised societies, where empire subjects the colonised to its culture, ideology and values, and hence forces affiliation, the opposite also holds true: affiliation structures filiation.[24] *The Craft* shows how Al Qadiri's parents' affiliation with aliens betrays the filiation with the artist and her sister. In addition, Al

[22] See Crystal, *Oil and Politics in the Gulf. Rulers and Merchants in Kuwait and Qatar*, 189; and Farah Al-Nakib, *Kuwait Transformed. A History of Oil and Urban Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016), 201.
[23] Edward W. Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1983), 20–23.
[24] Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *Post-Colonial Studies. The Key Concepts*, Second edition (London: Routledge, 2007), 96–97.

Qadiri's refusal to reproduce her parents' cover-up leaves her without a frame of reference to call on. As such, she cuts radically with the networks of filiation and affiliation available to her. This withdrawal from what is familiar — parents, home, Senegal, Kuwait, the world of humans, reality — describes a process of alienation. With the undoing of the world around her, she, ironically, becomes alien herself.

Figure 3.2. Monira Al Qadiri. *The Craft*, 2017. Installation view. Image courtesy the artist and Gasworks, London.

Al Qadiri's alienness is, however, always an in-flux and hybrid category, simultaneously accommodating her to cross from Dakar to Kuwait and into Beirut, as well as allowing her to slip in and out of alterity. Of note is how Americana, particularly the institution of the American diner and American fast food, serves to facilitate these crossings. *The Craft* is usually shown as a video installation in an exhibition space transformed into a neon-lit American diner (Fig.3.2.), complete with black and white chequered flooring, bright-coloured seating booths, napkin dispensers, salt and pepper shakers, and squeeze bottles for mustard and ketchup on the Formica tables. Here the diner-cum-exhibition space functions as a *faux* décor, pulling the viewer in with something that is recognisable and affable only to reveal an artwork that is far more disturbing. The exhibition space diner mimics the diner in the video piece. The interior of the embassy/spaceship, entered by Al

Qadiri's mother, is designed as a diner and is the locale where aliens and humans commune under the enjoyment of hamburgers and coke. Since its inception in the nineteenth century, the American diner has become a national symbol of the United States in visual culture, veering from the bleak loneliness of Edward Hopper's iconic painting *Nighthawks (*1942) to William Eggleston's 1980s cheerful photographs of bygone kitsch.[25] In *The Craft,* the diner represents the locus of alien-human assimilation, to use Gomel's terminology, and Saidian affiliation. Moreover, not only is it the place where difference between self and (enemy) Other is dissolved but it is the place where it is consumed. In interviews Al Qadiri has described the disconnect, or rather cultural alienation, between the 'Westernised' lifestyle of her generation of Kuwaitis who enjoyed unprecedented wealth due to the oil boom and that of her grandparents, who still worked in the harsh conditions of the pearl fishing industry.

> I went to a British school in Kuwait at a time when this kind of thing was prestigious […] We were actually called 'chicken nuggets'. This was our name. […] We were brown on the outside, white on the inside. We're very westernised. We speak English better than Arabic. As someone from Kuwait, it's kind of taboo to admit to your own westernisation […] but I want to kind of confront it now. […] It's always easy to critique the American influence on the world […] imperialism and things like that. But I want to also show that I am complicit in it – and we all are. We took part in this junk food frenzy of capitalism. We were all a part of it.[26]

Al Qadiri might be more proficient in English than Arabic, but in the video the issue of language is also used deliberately and strategically. Her American-inflected English adds an additional layer of estrangement and cultural confusion, yet it fits perfectly with the exchange English of the contemporary art world and the aesthetics of the diner and super-imposed child's drawings of hamburgers, submarine sandwiches and hotdogs that crowd the screen. The idea that ingesting American food will make her American is testimony to how consumer capitalism works. Indeed, the export of American fast food franchises like Hardees (first established in Kuwait in 1981), McDonald's (first established in Kuwait in 1994), and Burger King (first established in Kuwait in 1997) points to how the global

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[25] See Louise Benson, "The Seductive Allure of the Diner," *Elephant*, July 2, 2019, https://elephant.art/seductive-allure-diner/ [last accessed 25.11.2020].

[26] Robert Barry, "Remembering The Future : An Interview with Monira," *The Quietus*, July 22, 2017, https://thequietus.com/articles/22891-monira-al-qadiri-gcc-gasworks-london-interview. [last accessed 25.11.2020].

influence sphere of American culture goes hand in hand with its aggressive capitalist prowess.[27] However, there is also some confusion here on Al Qadiri's part. Big American fast food franchises, the epitome of globalisation and consumer capitalism, might serve generic fast food but they are not to be equated with the idea of the American diner, which apart from typical burgers, milkshakes, hotdogs and fries, might also serve TexMex, Italian pastas, Southern-style soul food and other foods that represent the diversity of the population in the US. In addition, with the advent of fast food joints in the Arab world, franchises made their own local modifications to suit local tastes. For example, at Taco Bells in Kuwait you can order chicken and beef shawarma burritos. When KFC opened in Beirut after the Civil War, cups of garlic sauce were sold under the counter.[28] Is this an example of fast food mimicry? And are these fast food joints, including the American diners in the video, as per Bhabha, then 'almost the same, but not quite?' According to Bhabha, '[m]imicry conceals no presence or identity behind its mask'.[29] While Al Qadiri's experience of identity, and being in her own words a 'chicken nugget', might suggest this, the diners tell a more speculative story. The aliens are the colonising force in this narrative, but they do not seek to coerce humans into their alien culture. In fact, there is no mention of this at all. Behind the camouflage of the spaceship masking as embassy masking as diner, lies an alien essence that cannot be articulated. In fact, the repetition of serial masking in which disguise is layered upon disguise does not reveal anything at all. Robbing humanity from any form of identification, alien or human, by an endless string of camouflage, leads, like playing with Russian dolls, to nothing at all. Conversely, it might be the most ingenious strategy to subsume the human race.

The Craft continuously defers meaning by deferring and interrogating its means of representation. The exhibition space replicates as a diner, but does it camouflage as a spaceship too? And if that is the case, what would this suggest about contemporary art? Is it all a ruse that covers up an intergalactic scheme, or is the viewer lured to take out all the proverbial Russian dolls and end up with nothing? This question is highly provocative and

[27] See "The Evolution of the Hamburger Business in Kuwait," *Global Markets*, 18 November 2014, http://globalmarkets.com.kw/evolution-hamburger-business-kuwait/. [last accessed 25.11.2020].
[28] Keith M. Booker and Isra Daraiseh, *Consumerist Orientalism. The Convergence of Arab and American Popular Culture in the Age of Global Capitalism* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2019), 213. See also Maher Kassar and Ziad Halawani, "My Lebanese Sandwich," in *Transit Beirut. New Writings and Images*, ed. Malu Halasa and Roseanne Saad Khallaf (London: Saqi Books, 2004), 10–23.
[29] Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 89 and 88.

returns us to the video's opening words that 'everything is not as it seems'. The presentation of *The Craft* as artwork suggests that it is not to be trusted. Art as a means to convey national history, personal experience, or meaning of any kind, is not to be trusted either. This is perhaps best exemplified by the retro-kitschy neon lettering spelling out *The Craft* that is placed prominently in the exhibition space/diner. The neon sign announces the main video work in the exhibition but it also hints that the craft might be a spacecraft. The work's title, *Omen* (2017) (Fig.3.3.), doubles as a warning to the viewer that they may well be entering a spaceship for transporting them to another realm. The 'craft', as statecraft throughout the work, accrues an additional connation, namely the craft of making art. Diplomats, aliens, Al Qadiri's parents, and Al Qadiri herself, are united in their artistry, or craft, of deception and tricking dichotomies of alterity. Distinctions between human and alien, embassy and spaceship, gallery space and diner, truth and fiction, witnessing and fabrication all collapse. What Al Qadiri leaves the viewer with is a sense of speculative unresolvedness that is only ruptured when she recalls the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait.

Figure 3.3. Monira Al Qadiri. *Omen*, 2017. Neon sign. Image courtesy the artist and Gasworks, London.

Al Qadiri was seven years old when Iraqi forces invaded Kuwait on 2 August 1990. Unlike alien invasions that seem to happen abruptly, often with UFOs appearing in the skies, Saddam Hussein's occupation of Kuwait until 26 February 1991 was the culmination of a historical tussle over borders and petro-resources that had been in the making since the first oil well was discovered in Kuwait in 1938.[30] Iraq's claim to annex Kuwait in, respectively, 1938, 1960 and 1961, just before its independence was proclaimed, and again in 1990, exemplifies how Kuwait, as a small and weak yet oil-rich state, is dependent on its neighbours and allies for survival. With the Iraqi threat constantly looming, non-national Others, particularly those with divergent allegiances, are by default suspicious. Xenophobia in Kuwait was exacerbated by the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988), when, of necessity, Kuwait sided with its larger neighbour Iraq as the lesser of two evils, despite the repeated threats to its sovereignty. Moreover, Kuwait had footed the cost of Iraq's war machine through billions of dollars' worth of loans, and at the end of the Iran-Iraq war Saddam Hussein had no intention of settling his debt to Kuwait. This made an invasion, solving Iraq's debt and controlling the profitable oil fields, an attractive option.[31] I am outlining the complexities and fickleness of friend/foe dynamics in Kuwait here because it helps to understand the Kuwaiti government's psychology behind its exclusionary citizenship policies and highly exclusive identity politics. As Jill Crystal observes: '[b]ecause of the large number and placement of non-nationals, foreigners, even Arabs, were seen by many Kuwaitis as potential enemies, not allies. It was easier to galvanize a crowd with xenophobia, offering the expatriates as scapegoats, than as Arab allies. […] This contradiction is basic to Kuwaiti politics.'[32] The only moment in *The Craft* when the speculative narrative fully falls along the lines of political allegory is when Al Qadiri recounts the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and casts the Iraqi soldiers as aliens. Iraq's occupation of Kuwait was brutal and ruthless, marked by extensive looting, torture and severe damage to (oil) infrastructure. To this day, the image of oil fields set ablaze with the billowing black plumes of smoke and the ensuing black rains continue to haunt, and make ill, generations. It is therefore unsurprising that Al Qadiri chose

[30] For a detailed discussion of the chain of events, from the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and the occupation and liberation by the coalition forces led by the U.S. through Operation Desert Storm, see Michael S. Casey, *The History of Kuwait* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2007), 85–115.
[31] See Casey, 87.
[32] Crystal, *Oil and Politics in the Gulf. Rulers and Merchants in Kuwait and Qatar*, 86.

to depict these traumatic events by vilifying Iraqi soldiers to such a degree that they become terrifying Others, aliens:

> Even the war in 1990, we knew it wasn't as they told us it was. All those green lights flashing in the sky were definitely alien spaceships flying around us. They tried desperately to make it look like human conflict, but it was too late. We already knew it was part of the alien invasion. We knew those soldiers weren't human. They were so terrifying and had big fake-looking moustaches, like they were wearing costumes.

The artist resorts to the classic sf trope of alien invasion as a modality of war, which in Gomel's analysis assumes 'the ontological and epistemological transparency of the enemy. Alien invasion as a form of sf necessarily partakes in the genre's cognitive estrangement and sense of wonder which hinges on the radical alterity of the Other.'[33] *The Craft* checks the box of radical alterity; there is indeed an 'us versus them' scenario at play here. However, there is no ontological or epistemological transparency. Aliens are masquerading as Iraqi soldiers, confusing enemy subjectivities, on the one hand, and knowledge of the enemy, on the other. Al Qadiri is convinced the Iraqi soldiers are aliens and that her drawings of shelling, tanks, fighter jets and checkpoints, mixed with UFOs and monstrous alien-looking soldiers, are proof of this (Fig.3.4.). In a situation of war, alterity is sharpened. Whereas in the beginning of the video there is confusion over who is alien or not, in war time matters become more polarised. The part-coveted, part-rejected alienness of Americana and the craft of trickery has been subsumed by a full, if not violent, refusal of the alien enemy/Iraqi Other. For example, one drawing shows an Iraqi soldier squashed in a giant hamburger as a means of elimination. 'Maybe if we poured mustard and ketchup on him, he would show us his real face.' However, what would this unmasking effectuate? It is ironic that the alien would show itself by being treated to the very condiments that make it a foreign entity (mustard and ketchup). This part in the work reveals that there are degrees of difference and kind in being alien, and by corollary, there are degrees of difference and kind in experiencing alienation. Depending on circumstance and context — familial, expatriate or belligerent — there is a spectrum in which the alien slides from transgressive (m)Other resembling 'us', to a hostile non-human foe.

[33] Gomel, *Science Fiction, Alien Encounters, and the Ethics of Posthumanism. Beyond the Golden Rule*, 40.

Figure 3.4. Monira Al Qadiri. *The Craft*, 2017. Video installation, 16'. Image courtesy the artist and Gasworks, London.

Perhaps it is not so much the figure of the alien driving the narrative in *The Craft*, but, rather, Al Qadiri's serial encounters with alterity that signify an instance of personal and collective crisis. These are instances of potential loss, and the alien becomes a mechanism to resolve or fend off that specific disparity or hazard. Each alien encounter, whether this is the witnessing of the spaceship/diner in Dakar or encountering Iraqi soldiers/aliens during the invasion of Kuwait, betrays the artist's own anxiety with feeling out of place. This identitarian rupture invokes a sense of estrangement that is externalised and mapped onto the alien, only to be subsequently rejected. But reading this project as a psychological or political allegory only is too limited; the sf and speculative aspects of the alien encounter are equally important. The latter comes into full force at the end of the video when, in 2011, Al Qadiri encounters the alien again in Beirut, its spaceship concealed as a ruin from the Civil War and the diner in a state of shambles and accumulating dust, 'a shadow of its former self'. The artist enters the spacecraft/war ruin in the hope that 'the truth is finally going to reveal itself to me.' But it never does, and the dishevelled and exhausted alien only replies feebly: 'It's all over now. We're out of business. The plan failed. Go away.' If this is a moment when the masks come off, it exposes first and foremost an epistemological crisis, but one that suggests a speculative way forward if read against the grain.

The alien lives in a ruin, a broken material signifier of defeat and decay. In a city like Beirut, to which Al Qadiri moved in 2011, ruins of the Civil War still scar the cityscape, operating as landmarks, sites of memory, and in some cases as 'admonitions of the future, relating this unresolvedness [of the past] to the volatile horizon of expectation'.[34] As I will demonstrate in Chapter 4, I am interested in the futuristic and speculative aspects of the ruin, rather than its form in the past or the present. While many postwar Lebanese artists revert to the ruin as a site taking on an excess of meaning, Al Qadiri strips it of meaning.[35] The encounter with the alien suggests that this ruin means an end to the conspiracy, to alien dominance, but what if this is the alien's most successful masquerade to date? The loss and erasure constituting the violence of Lebanese wars past, and perhaps of Lebanese wars to come, offer the alien a semantic opening. As Judith Naeff observes, 'the ruin [in Beirut is] a concept that in its material porosity, slippage and decomposition allows for the indefinite postponement of closure and wholeness of meaning in general'.[36] It is in this semantic slippage that the alien survives and wears different masks to ensure a presence in the future. In other words, the alien *is* the ruin, or as Lebanese artist and theorist Walid Sadek puts it: 'The present wreck, when framed as a ruin, is no longer the site of catastrophe. Rather, it merely *dons its form*' (emphasis mine).[37] The shapeshifting alien haunts the production of meaning, keeping it in a perpetual state of estrangement. This is underlined by the visuals of the closing scene showing shaky footage of a cityscape filmed from a car with drawings overlaying the image. Here, the drawings have ceased to represent anything discernible; they are merely there to increase the sense of alienation and blur meaning. But the filmic footage, contrary to the rest of the video, now does this too. For a viewer familiar with Beirut, the architecture and street signs betray that this is not Beirut. In fact, it is Kuwait in the 1980s. The notion that 'everything is not as it seems', with which Al Qadiri opened the video, comes full circle. Beirut is not Beirut. The ruin is not a ruin, nor is it

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[34] Judith Naeff, *Precarious Imaginaries of Beirut. A City's Suspended Now.* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 92.

[35] Postwar Lebanese artists such as Walid Sadek, Jalal Toufic, Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, Ali Cherri, and filmmakers like Ghassan Salhab have engaged with and conceptualised the ruin in their oeuvre, specifically through image and image-based practices. A younger generation of Lebanese artists, including Stéphanie Saadé, Charbel-Joseph H. Boutros and Sirine Fattouh also draw on the ruin, often reverting to a more sculptural or material-based practice.

[36] Naeff, *Precarious Imaginaries of Beirut. A City's Suspended Now*, 90.

[37] Walid Sadek, "The Ruin to Come," in *The Ruin to Come: Essays from a Protracted War* (Pully: Motto Books, 2016), 176.

a landmark, a monument of war or a piece of real estate devoid of use value. Here the ruin is (an) alien.

Al Qadiri designates her move to Beirut in 2011 as one of the most alienating experiences of her life, even more so than spending a decade in Japan from her mid-teens to mid-twenties. Her perception of the cityscape and of postwar Lebanon felt distinctly foreign. She particularly recalls the structure in downtown Beirut known as 'the egg', a former cinema with a pronounced domed architecture and now one of the city's most iconic urban ruins and landmarks, as resembling a spaceship.[38] In his graphic novel *Lettre à la Mère* (2013), the Lebanese artist Mazen Kerbaj similarly refers to 'the egg' as a UFO and an alien mother, a *pars pro toto* for the city of Beirut.[39] But while, for Kerbaj, the familiarity of Beirut produces alienness, for Al Qadiri it is its novelty: 'Beirut is an alien landscape that I don't understand. I've never felt so foreign in my life. It's a different universe, a different history, a different way of life. Everything is a novelty.'[40] The city and its architecture constitute the Suvian 'novum', and therefore mark this particular alien encounter as the video's most science fictional one. The culmination of semantic and epistemological collapse is entangled with the architectural experience of the Beiruti cityscape and is further amplified in a separate artwork, a levitating polystyrene sculpture in the shape of a giant cheeseburger, titled *The End* (2017). The work is accompanied by a soundscape of Al Qadiri's voice, digitally manipulated to sound like a man's, reciting a script based on excerpts from Palestinian architect Saba George Shiber's influential work *The Kuwait Urbanization* (1964). Shiber was considered Kuwait City's main urban planner during the 1960s oil boom. At a time when newly independent Kuwait was trying to articulate its national identity, Shiber felt alienated by the outlandish-looking buildings, often designed by foreign architects, which had started to dominate the capital's skyline and were very different from Kuwait's pre-boom traditional architecture. He describes them as invasive alien structures from outer space, unbefitting their surroundings:

> A strange new architecture — if it can be called that — has been forcibly produced in Kuwait that does *not* fit Kuwait, or for that matter, anywhere. […] It has been rare to find lines anchored to the earth. Instead, they all seem pivoted to point restively to

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[38] Interview with the artist 12.12.2020.

[39] For a discussion on *Lettre à la Mère*, see Naeff, *Precarious Imaginaries of Beirut. A City's Suspended Now.*, 98–100.

[40] Interview with the artist 12.12.2020.

outer space. […] Such a strange type of architecture spread with haste over the Kuwait landscape like a bushfire. (emphasis original).[41]

Figure 3.5. Monira Al Qadiri. *The End*, 2017. Polystyrene levitating module and soundscape. Image courtesy the artist and Gasworks, London.

It becomes clear that Al Qadiri brings together multiple, often contradictory narratives in *The End* (Fig.3.5.), in which, once more, representation is not what it seems. The work references endings and new beginnings in Kuwait's national timeline: from becoming a sovereign nation state, indicated by Shiber's discomfort with the country's newfangled architecture, and the American influence in the Gulf prior to and after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, to what Al Qadiri sees as the diminished role of the US on the global world stage. 'Cultural and political influence of America is waning, like a decay. It's still there

[41] Saba George Shiber, *The Kuwait Urbanization* (Kuwait: Kuwait Government Printing Press, 1964), 304, 306, 312.

but falling apart.'[42] Most critical reviews of *The End* stress its political aspects and how it implies the (wishful) end of American imperialism, the hamburger being perhaps the most iconic expression of global consumer capitalism.[43] Read together with the video's closing scene and the disillusioned alien lamenting failure, *The End* suggests the role of Americana and (alien) conspiracy might indeed have come to an end. This interpretation presumes the floating hamburger is primarily read as a symbol of American cultural and political influence, and that the work's title is declarative. The levitating burger monumentalises the end of the American dream in the Gulf, and the end of all the Westernised aspirations tied into it. However, *The Craft* is a deeply speculative work in which the critical properties of sf and art are enmeshed. If this were to be the actual 'end', little room would be left for speculation.

The speculative aspect is a refusal to accept the end as an ending, precisely by pulling the artistic and sf features of the project to the forefront. *The End* is a sculptural sound piece and its title could also be an invitation to the viewer to put an end to the ambiguous metaphorical masquerade that has operated so strongly throughout the whole work. The levitating hamburger in the darkened exhibition space, with a spotlight trained on it, can also be just that: an art object that need not necessarily be a metaphor. The work's title, then, only refers to the object as such, and to nothing outside of it. In fact, it *ends* any form of allegorical representation, which in the making of politically engaged art is a quite radical position to take. The loss of meaning that structurally informs this project, from the collapse of the nuclear family unit, the search for a national identity post-oil boom and Iraqi invasion, to the alienation the artist feels in postwar Beirut, and, not unimportantly, the destruction of hope following the initial democratising promise of the 2011 Arab uprisings, is recuperated indirectly through art. Art means something in a destabilised world when a unifying sense of meaning, or identity, is lost.[44] But we do not necessarily have to understand fully what it means. As stressed in this thesis's introduction, art making and sf are both practices of speculative worldbuilding and can be restorative, specifically in

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[42] Interview with the artist 12.12.2020.

[43] See Jim Quilty, "Ode to the Extraterrestrial Modern," *The Daily Star Lebanon*, January 23, 2018. And also see Ella Plevin, "Resident Aliens," *Texte Zur Kunst* September, no. 107 Identity Politics Now (2017): 218–20.

[44] Although Al Qadiri does not refer directly to the aftermath of the Arab Spring in both works, the loss of its promise was strongly felt by the artist and informs her thinking: 'The Arab spring, that was the moment of loss. In 2011 so many things were destroyed. What is the meaning of how nation states are constructed in the Arab world? So many of them have collapsed or have become instable. The Arab Spring was such a unifying dream moment, and nothing came out of it. It's very tragic. Through this work I was trying to go through the motions of all these different phases that this collapse took.' Interview with the artist 12.12.2020.

contexts such as Al Qadiri's, when loss of family structure, national identity, borders, and of hope, engender a loss of meaning. Masquerade, in Al Qadiri's works, reveals that the creation of meaning need not always lie in what is underneath the mask, but that masquerading, as a performative act, can be quite meaningful itself.[45]

Bordering the Frame: Superheroes, Art and the Rethinking of Boundaries in Oreet Ashery and Larissa Sansour's *The Novel of Nonel and Vovel* (2009)

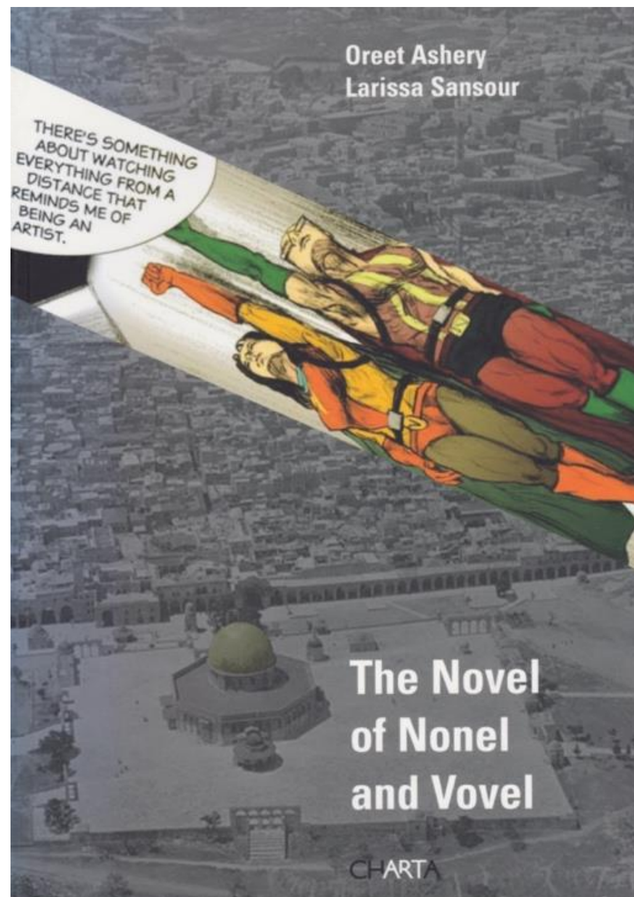

Figure 3.6. Oreet Ashery and Larissa Sansour. *The Novel of Nonel and Vovel* (Milan: Edizioni Charta, 2009). Cover image. Image courtesy the artists.

In Al Qadiri's practice, then, masquerade produces meaning, but simultaneously indicates where meaning is lost elsewhere and signals identitarian and other crises. In the following section on Palestinian artist Larissa Sansour and Israeli artist Oreet Ashery's collaborative publication project *The Novel of Nonel and Vovel* (2009) (Fig.3.6.), masquerade

[45] This idea resonates strongly with Judith Butler's notion of gender performativity and that 'gender proves to be performative, that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be […] there is no gender identity behind the expression of gender.' Butler, *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 24–25. A similar claim can be staked about alien masquerade: it brings performative alterity into being as an ontological status; there need not be an identity behind the expression of being alien.

becomes the motor of transformation and exudes an excess of meaning by exploring art's ability to effectuate social or political change through a figure with hyper-agency: the superhero. Superheroes have been enjoying a revival in Western popular culture since their first appearance in American comic books of the late 1930s to the late 1940s, in which iconic characters such as Batman, Superman and Wonder Woman save the day. This period is thought of as the superhero Golden Age and is followed by the superhero Silver Age, dating roughly from the mid-1950s to the early 1970s, when many new titles hit the market, such as *The Incredible Hulk* (1962), and known characters of the Golden Age like, for example, Captain America, are reintroduced with new storylines.[46] Undoubtedly the current omnipresence of the superhero has to do with the blockbuster films of the expanding X-men, DC Extended Universe and Marvel franchises. Paradoxically, in dark and uncertain times, where existential purpose and hope are in short supply, the notion of the besieged superhero, doubtful about the causes they stand up to and confronted by the meaninglessness of their actions, is increasingly gaining traction.[47] Rather than embody virtue and fight injustice, superheroes seem as much at a loss as the rest of humanity, or even more so, as new TV series released by streaming services such as Netflix and Amazon Prime demonstrate. In *The Umbrella Academy* (2019-2022) and *The Boys* (2019-2022), respectively, the superhero protagonists are not exactly role models to aspire to, but troubled and narcissistic individuals with anxieties, insecurities and unresolved issues of adolescent angst. Driven by vindictiveness, blind ambition and incompetence, they destabilise the idea of the superhero as a serial archetype of moral, ethical and just superiority. The contention that superheroes provide permanence in a world of transience is turned upside-down.[48] In a world prone to catastrophe, manmade or otherwise, revisionist superheroes have, at least in the Eurowestern imagination, become emblematic and cynical markers of political, social and cultural impotence.

[46] See Charles Hatfield, Jeet Heer, and Kent Worcester, eds., *The Superhero Reader* (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 2013), 100–101.
[47] See Tem Frank Andersen and Jørgen Riber Chirstensen, "We Don't Need Another Hero, Do We? Researching Heroism from a Cultural Perspective," *Academic Quarter* 20 (2020): 11–14, https://journals.aau.dk/index.php/ak/article/view/5845/5153.
[48] For a discussion on the paradox between the serial recognisability of the superhero and keeping plots interesting enough for readers and viewers, see Stephanie Lethbridge, "'It Wasn't so Long Ago . We Had Heroes': Superheroes and Catastrophe in the Early 21st Century," *Helden. Heroes. Héros. Heroes and Catastrophes* 5, no. 1 (2017): 33–34.

Conversely, in the Arab world superheroes of a different kind have been on the rise. Muslim superheroes are not a novelty. As early as 1944, the Elliot Publishing Company introduced Kismet - Man of Fate, a devout superhero of Algerian origin who sported a Fez and wore balloon pants. Other Muslim superheroes created by the Marvel and DC Franchises include, for example: Arabian Knight (1981); Kahina Eskandari/Iron Butterfly (1993); Sooraya Qadir/Dust (2002); Dr. Faiza Hussein/Excalibur (2008); Bilal Asselah/Nightrunner (2011); the popular character Kamala Khan/Ms. Marvel (2013); and the Pakistani animated TV character Jiya/Burka Avenger (2013-2016).[49] Early characters such as Kismet and Arabian Knight are Orientalist stereotypes, exotic Others that answer to clichéd ideas of the 'Orient' without much of a backstory. Kismet mutters stock phrases like 'by the beard of the Prophet' and Arabian Knight's secret weapons are a flying carpet and a magic scimitar. Later characters, such as Bilal Asselah/Nightrunner and Kamala Khan/Ms. Marvel, are more complex and express hyphenated identities, and are, respectively, Algerian-French and Pakistani-American. Bilal Asselah/Nightrunner grew up in a Parisian banlieue, rife with police violence and racial tensions, while Jersey girl Kamala Khan/Ms. Marvel has to negotiate her parents' religious conservatism and being a teenager in the present-day US. These migrant backstories place these characters simultaneously inside and outside of Eurowestern society: they are part of France and America, but also remain socially marginalised. As such, they not only move between their superhero personas and their daily alter egos but also between different cultures and social strata.

Muslim or Arab superheroes created by Arab authors, whose actions do not take place in Europe or America but in the Middle East, operate differently. For example, *The 99* (2006-2014), created by Naif Al-Mutawa, founder and C.E.O. of the Kuwaiti Teshkeel Media Group, present a group of wholesome, international teenage superheroes based on the 99 names or attributes of Allah who spread Islamic virtues. Although the comics were sanctioned by the Kuwaiti Ministry of Information and were found Sharia-compliant by religious authorities, and thus fit for publication in Saudi Arabia, a *fatwa* was issued against

[49] See Sophia Rose Arjana and Kim Fox, *Veiled Superheroes: Islam, Feminism, and Popular Culture* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2018), 10–14. Also see Nour Sheety, "10 Muslim Superheroes That Totally Beat Superman," *StepFeed*, March 17, 2017, https://stepfeed.com/10-muslim-superheroes-that-totally-own-superman-7496. [last accessed 1.10.2020].

Al-Mutawa by the Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia in 2014, declaring the publication evil.[50] In the Arab world, the popular comic is a far cry from the besieged superheroes in the West. More tongue-in-cheek is the swashbuckling *hijabi* superhero Qahera, who not only takes to task misogyny and sexual harassment in Egypt but also confronts the feminist activist group Femen for its alleged white saviour complex and belief that Muslim women are by default oppressed.[51] Created online in 2013 by then student Deena Mohamed, Qahera, whose name refers to the city of Cairo in Arabic and also means conqueror or vanquisher, responded to the manifest increase in sexual violence in Egypt post-2011, and in particular during the short-lived presidency of the Muslim Brotherhood's Mohamed Morsi (2012-2013).[52] All these superheroes, whether created in the Eurowest or in the Middle East, are marked by Orientalist (Kismet, Arabian Night) or Islam-inspired (The 99, Qahera, Burka Avenger) tropes. In the case of Nightrunner and Ms. Marvel, their identity is defined by their specific relation to the Eurowest and their diasporic and minority identity. Sophia Rose Arjana observes that the wearing of the veil (*hijab* or *Niqab* or *Burqa*) offers Muslimah superheroes, such as Qahera and Burka Avenger, agency.[53] Without opening a discussion on the politics of the veil, its presence allows Muslimah superheroes to perform under the ethos of Islam, thus making them acceptable role models in the Muslim world.[54] As such, all of the abovementioned superhero characters, whether adhering to Islamic morals or secular principles, operate in frameworks that are culturally, nationally and socially pre-determined and seldom transgressed. None of them flip any ideological scripts.

In Larissa Sansour and Oreet Ashery's project *The Novel of Nonel and Vovel* (2009), ideological scripts are, however, continuously interrogated and turn the superhero not only into a figure of transformation but also into one of transgression who crosses a myriad of geo-political and other borders. In my analysis, I am particularly interested in how the artists

[50] See Naif Al-Mutawa, "The Latest Challenge of 'The 99' Is Tackling a Fatwa," *The National*, April 26, 2014, https://www.thenationalnews.com/the-latest-challenge-of-the-99-superheroes-is-tackling-a-fatwa-1.262154. [last accessed 20.01.2021].

[51] See https://qaherathesuperhero.com/, and for a comic critiquing the feminist activist group Femen, see https://qaherathesuperhero.com/post/61173083361. [last accessed 1.10.2020].

[52] See Dina Guirguis, "Sexual Assault and the Fall of Morsi," *Middle East Institute*, July 8, 2013, https://www.mei.edu/publications/sexual-assault-and-fall-morsi. [last accessed 1.10.2020].

[53] See Arjana and Fox, *Veiled Superheroes: Islam, Feminism, and Popular Culture*, 28–33 and 71-89.

[54] For a discussion on *hijab* and superheroes, specifically in *The 99*, see Rachel Miszei-Ward, "Fighting for Truth, Justice, and the Islamic Way: The 99, Global Superheroes from the Post 9/11 World," in *Superheroes on World Screens*, ed. Raya Denison and Rachel Miszei-Ward (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2015), 156–62.

introduce the genre of the superhero to probe the contested spatial politics of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and, also, how the spatial politics of comics and the graphic novel, their medium of choice and the traditional home of superheroes, create what design scholar Mohamad Hafeda calls 'a bordering practice'. In his research, Hafeda looks primarily at how visible material and invisible immaterial borders are produced and how they direct residents to negotiate, narrate and transform the divided and contested cityscape of Beirut.[55] I am borrowing his idea that the negotiation, or crossing, of borders can be seen as a passive and active mode of resistance. Hafeda contends that 'bordering practices' aim 'to transform certain border positions. […] [I]n times of conflict, the critical bordering practices of research and art can operate as sites of resistance in everyday life by negotiating the bordering practices of political conflict.'[56] Can the superhero genre in Sansour and Ashery's *The Novel of Nonel and Vovel* be read as a spatial genre of transgression? And how does this fold into both artists' thematic interests? Sansour works predominantly with video and Ashery with live performance. Both artists' practices were, at the time of the project, defined by the broadening of identitarian and cultural roles bestowed on them, either by their own societies or from the outside. In her early work, Larissa Sansour critiqued the terrorist/victim dichotomy attributed to Palestinians by tapping into, and appropriating, Western popular culture and recasting herself as a Mexican gunslinger in *Bethlehem Bandolero* (2005) fighting the separation wall, or as seen in Chapter 1, as a Palestinian astronaut planting a Palestinian flag on the moon in *A Space Exodus*. Oreet Ashery, in her earlier performances, has resorted to the alter ego of Markus Fisher, an Orthodox Jewish man, as well as the seventeenth-century Jewish mystic and Messianic figure of Shabtai Zvi who converted to Islam. These characters have afforded Ashery to cross historical, gender and religious boundaries and inhabit roles unavailable to her as a (Jewish) woman. The performance of alter egos and other identities is thus not strange to both Sansour and Ashery's artistic practices. However, whereas in their other work identities are expanded, troubled and complicated in the service of the artwork, in *The Novel of Nonel and Vovel*, there is an attempt at simplifying, rather than complicating, the alter ego in the service of political action rather than art.

[55] Mohamad Hafeda, *Negotiating Conflict in Lebanon: Bordering Practices in a Divided Beirut* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2019), 14–35.
[56] Hafeda, 21.

The Novel of Nonel and Vovel is a hybrid publication, part institutional critique of the art world and how it deals with Arab artists and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, part autobiography in which the artists' respective backgrounds are described, and part graphic novel illustrated by seven commissioned artists. In the graphic novel part, Ashery and Sansour become infected with a virus, lose their artistic abilities and become superheroes, respectively named Nonel and Vovel, who liberate Palestine. The occupation of Palestine turns out to be an intergalactic plot by an alien overlord commanding the Fifth Planet, who wants to turn Earth into an intergalactic vegetable garden and wipe out humanity. The separation wall surrounding the occupied Palestinian Territories will serve as a basin for fertiliser. The superhero genre is marked by origin stories and by the process of transformation. The origin story is 'a bedrock account of the transformative events that set the protagonist apart from ordinary humanity […] the superhero genre is about transformation, about identity, about difference, and about the tension between psychological rigidity and a flexible and fluid sense of human nature'.[57] In the *Novel of Nonel and Vovel* the reader encounters not one, but two, origin stories in which the latter erodes the former. The first origin story is a national one, identifying Ashery as Israeli and Sansour as Palestinian. While care is taken to establish commonalities rather than difference — both women left home at a young age to move to the UK, both felt estranged, and both ended up studying art and becoming artists —in terms of national representation they remain in opposing camps. Cultural collaboration between Israelis and Palestinians, particularly since the Boycott Divestment and Sanctions movement (BDS) gained traction in 2005, is frowned upon from the Palestinian side. In fact, this collaborative project became politically toxic for both artists as they were both accused of betraying their respective communities.[58]

The second origin story, in which both protagonists become superheroes, functions two-fold: it lifts Ashery and Sansour out of their respective national contexts and facilitates a collaboration that has a political mission rather than an artistic one, hence diluting the first origin story. It also places the narrative in which the story unfolds into a fantastical realm of possibility in which the lives of Nonel and Vovel are, to a limited extent, divorced

[57] Charles Hatfield, Jeet Heer, and kent Worcester, *The Superhero Reader*, (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 2013), 3.

[58] See https://bdsmovement.net/what-is-bds. Interview with the artists 9.9.2020.

from the historical and political realities of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Dan Hassler-Forest suggests that:

> Superhero narratives […] creat[e] an alternate world that in many ways follows the familiar trajectory of human history, while in others presenting its stories as entirely fantastical and explicitly unhistorical. […] The genre provides metaphorical representations of historical conflicts as part of a battle that takes classical narrative categories as its basic components and presents catastrophe as an attractive form of spectacle to be safely consumed by passive spectators.[59]

The difference with this particular narrative, however, is that catastrophe in the form of the 1948 *Nakba* and the ongoing occupation of Palestine is real and continues to pull the superheroes out of their own fantastical narrative. For example, in the chapter titled 'Intergalactic Palestine', scripted by writer Søren Lind and illustrated by artist Hiro Enoki, Nonel's (Ashery's) credibility is questioned because she is Israeli. Origin stories are therefore compromised and challenged in various ways in *The Novel of Nonel and Vovel*. In the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, 'origin' is formative on both sides. For Palestinians, memory accounts of their village or cities of origin preceding the 1948 Nakba have become key to forging a sense of belonging and identity, and, as Nur Masalha points out, 'the important provider of "legitimacy" for the internally displaced persons and for their struggle for return'.[60] Conversely, for Israelis, Zionist ideology promotes an origin story of the 'biblical narrative […] as a mobilising myth and as a "historical account" of Jews' [en]title[ment] to the land'.[61] In one panel (Fig.3.7.), Nonel (Ashery) sporting her superhero costume, but with her Markus Fisher face on, concedes that she 'know[s] [her]national make-up is a bit tricky'.[62] Make-up is the key word here and suggests that national identity might perhaps function as masquerade. If, in the superhero genre, costume 'functions […] as a uniform that by its very definition robs the individual subject of [their]unique identity', then which constraints does the performance of national identity put on individuals?[63] It could be argued that even though Ashery and Sansour have lost their artistic abilities, which in many ways is what

[59] Dan Hassler-Forest, *Capitalist Superheroes: Caped Crusaders in the Neoliberal Age*, E-pub (London: Zero Books, 2012), 47–48.
[60] Masalha, *The Palestine Nakba. Decolonising History, Narrating the Subaltern, Reclaiming Memory*, 246.
[61] Masalha, 29.
[62] Oreet Ashery and Larissa Sansour, *The Novel of Nonel and Vovel* (Milan: Edizioni Charta, 2009), 153.
[63] Hassler-Forest, *Capitalist Superheroes: Caped Crusaders in the Neoliberal Age*, 510.

defines their unique identity, the donning of superhero costumes for Nonel and Vovel has allowed them to break out of the confines of performative nationalism and literally facilitates a 'collaboration with the enemy'. As such, the costume becomes a cloak of transgression and makes possible what would otherwise be politically highly problematic. The costume, then, is not only protective but also adds a layer of duplicity. Throughout the publication slippages of identity, national allegiance, artistic signature, and perhaps rather strangely for superheroes, heroic mission, are negotiated.

Figure 3.7. Oreet Ashery and Larissa Sansour. *The Novel of Nonel and Vovel* (Milan: Edizioni Charta, 2009), 153. Image courtesy the artists.

Barbara Brown and Danny Graydon have pointed out that usually the superhero costume differentiates 'between two vastly different personas: one ordinary, and one extraordinary […] The civilian wardrobe denies extraordinariness, while the superhero

costume denies ordinariness.'[64] But this is not exactly the case for two artists who have based their artistic practice on inhabiting performative and multiple roles. Moreover, Nonel and Vovel's newly acquired superidentity does not necessarily turn them into fearless Others. This only happens in the last part of the book once they have fully relinquished authorship to a writer who writes the script and an artist who draws the panels, and even then it all happens reluctantly. In a previous chapter they at first reject their superpowers, and later on, once they make it to Palestine, they run from the Israeli soldiers instead of confronting and fighting them.[65] In other words, the ideological binaries that direct superhero personas — ordinary versus extraordinary, good versus evil, civilian versus hero, violence versus pacificism, order versus chaos, power versus impotence, confidence versus doubt, loyalty versus betrayal — are continuously shifting. An example of the difficulty both artists are grappling with politically and conceptually is exemplified in a panel rich in discomfort and intertextual references that attempts to acknowledge both the subject of antisemitism and the plight of the Palestinians. Once they arrive in Palestine, Vovel (Sansour) is disappointed there are no Israeli soldiers around to harass her, an experience she usually would be subjected to when crossing from Jordan into the West Bank. 'It's just not Maus enough', she claims, her persona drawn as a cat in the style of Art Spiegelman's famous Holocaust graphic novel *Maus* (1980-91), in which Nazi Germans are represented as cats and Jews as mice. Nonel (Ashery) stresses the danger of the reference, which not only evokes the Holocaust but also compares Israelis to Nazis. In this frame (Fig.3.8.), however, the Palestinian is depicted as a cat (Nazi). Both protagonists dance around the subject of antisemitism but admit they cannot really broach it. It all ends with Vovel's character being drawn in the style of Joe Sacco's graphic novel *Palestine* (2001), an eye-witness account of Sacco spending two months in 1991-2 in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, documenting the human rights violations and abuse Palestinians suffer at the hands of the Occupation. In this conversation, both Spiegelman and Sacco indicate the complexity of the politics. This exchange is an example of how masquerade can interchange complicated and even contradictory subjectivities, whether that is the donning of a costume or being drawn in different styles that respectively identify with Jewish or Palestinian subject positions.

[64] Barbara Brownie and Danny Graydon, *The Superhero Costume: Identity and Disguise in Fact and Fiction* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 2.
[65] Ashery and Sansour, *The Novel of Nonel and Vovel*, 110 and 135.

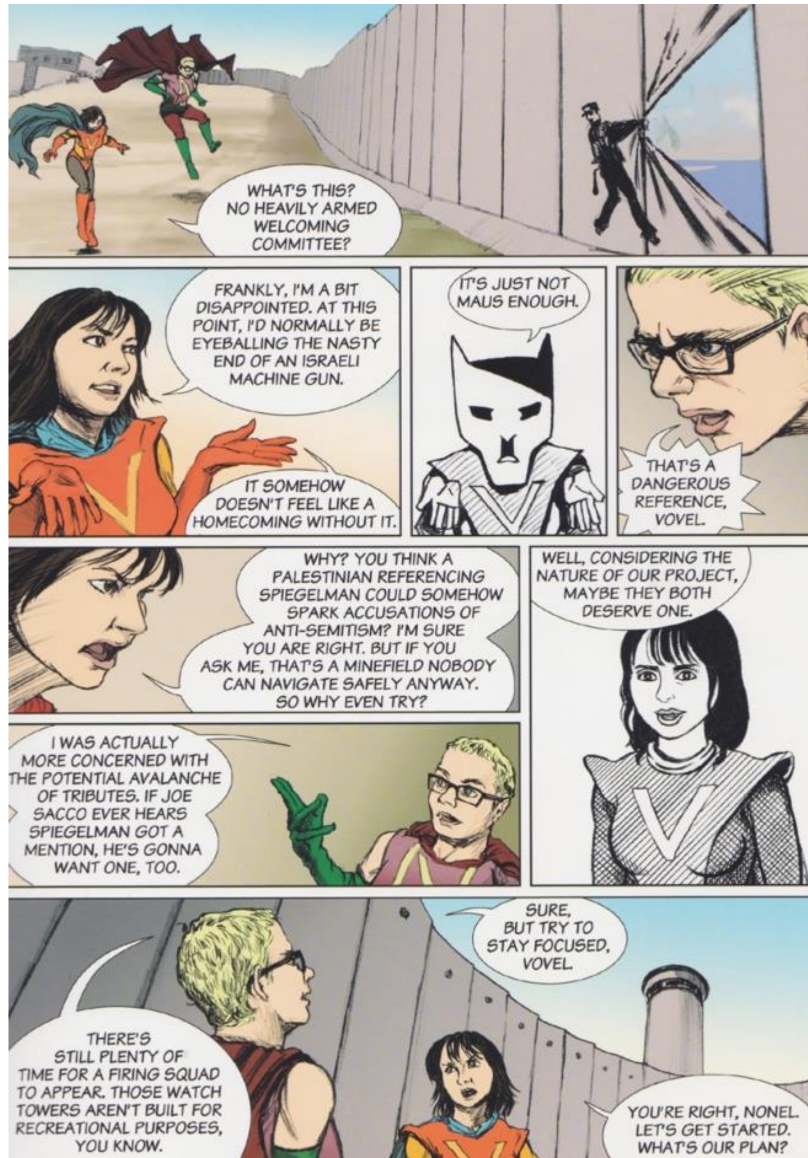

Figure 3.8. Oreet Ashery and Larissa Sansour. *The Novel of Nonel and Vovel* (Milan: Edizioni Charta, 2009), 131. Image courtesy the artists.

Intertextuality itself can be seen as a form of masquerade: the citation of artistic and other influences gives Ashery and Sansour the possibility to complicate subjectivities, but also provides them with political agency and poetic licence otherwise unafforded to them. This is best demonstrated when Nonel and Vovel are saved from Israeli soldiers by a gang of Ninjas, a panel highly reminiscent of an iconic fight scene in Palestinian Filmmaker Elia Suleiman's feature film *Divine Intervention* (2002). At Nonel's request, they step out of the frame and become Ashery and Sansour again. Ashery expresses discomfort with instrumentalising Suleiman's film scene for their own purposes: 'I don't know, Larissa. As much as I enjoy seeing our characters bailed out martial arts style, isn't a ninja a little too much Elia Suleiman?' To which Sansour replies: 'So graphic novelists are fine, but a

filmmaker is all of a sudden bad etiquette? I say we just roll with it.' [66] In this instance, masquerade, veiling, intertextuality, and the disruption of gendered subject positions and cultural agency, coincide forcefully.[67] Suleiman's Ninja is the protagonist's fiancée who lives on the other side of the separation wall and fights off a bunch of Israeli soldiers engaged in target practice on a firing range. As a superhero Ninja she is veiled in a *Keffiyeh* and uses a shield in the shape of historic Palestine to ward off bullets. Following Sophie Rose Arjana, the veil/*Keffiyeh*, then, lends her agency and with the addition of the shield professes her national affiliation.[68] When Ashery and Sansour introduce a female Palestinian Ninja to their story and cite Suleiman, the superhero and national framework of the Ninja as a figure of Palestinian resistance and agency is therefore already clearly established. Unlike Suleiman's silent Ninja who is all action and no talk, Ashery and Sansour's Ninja is both action and talk. Moreover, she is incredibly foulmouthed, as her first encounter with Nonel and Vovel proves: 'The name is Aida, bitches. And what's with the fucked-up outfits? You think it's West Bank fucking carnival week?'[69] This first meeting underlines two leading aspects in Ashery and Sansour's project and their practice at large: firstly, the complex and confusing practice of masquerade; secondly, the notion of giving a voice to hitherto silenced subjects or subject matters in unexpected ways. Aida's colourful language is the result of her being stung by a fly that makes her curse uncontrollably. This suggests that language, or any kind of (ideological) discourse for that matter, can be viewed as an additional layer of masquerade. The many artistic voices in the project, including the commissioned illustrators, story writers and other contributors, operate as a pluriform smokescreen that provide Ashery and Sansour the cover to save Palestine and the world from an evil mastermind. Nevertheless, this comes at a price. Their superheroism comes at the cost of losing their artistic abilities, to the extent that other artists and practitioners have to provide the content for the publication. Perhaps more egregious is the loss of the precarious identities so foundational to their sense of self and professional practice: artist, queer, woman, Palestinian and anti-Zionist Jew.

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[66] Ashery and Sansour, 137–38.

[67] Here, Judith Butler's central point in their 1997 book *The Psychic Life of Power* resonates particularly strongly: 'Agency lies in giving up any claim to self-coherence, while risking one's ontological status may constitute a means of successful revolt.' Sarah Salih, *Judith Butler* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 135.

[68] See footnote 53 of this chapter.

[69] Ashery and Sansour, *The Novel of Nonel and Vovel*, 139.

Political geographer and border studies researcher Henk van Houtum considers national identity to be a mask that 'covers the emptiness, the void, the eternal shortage in us [and] gives a sense of belonging, a sense of rootedness; it gives one a face in the crowd'.[70] In the *Novel of Nonel and Vovel* the act of masking works entirely differently. Rather than becoming an expression of identity, it strips identity bare, exposing the mechanics of belonging and national iconography. Masking becomes an essential prop in the act of unbelonging and therefore, unlike van Houtum suggests, does not cover up loss but is its manifestation. In other words, Nonel and Vovel are deracinated by the mask and are undone of their identities and individual subject positions. As a result, they are, rather, generic superheroes and have become estranged from themselves. For Nonel and Vovel the gesture of donning a mask is one of self-othering and not one of belonging.[71] By uncoupling themselves from the complexities of filiation (heritage, Israeliness, Palestinianess) and affiliation (the world of art, progressive and emancipatory politics, diasporic identities) they are left with a single-issue objective: the liberation of Palestine. The territorial loss of Palestine is the reason why they undertake action and become active as empowered superheroes. However, becoming Other (superheroes) masks who they really are and this equally engenders a sense of loss. In the *Novel of Nonel and Vovel* identitarian and spatial loss are intricately and ambiguously intertwined.

Scholars such as Scott Bukatman have theorised how the superhero genre is *par excellence* one of urban mobility: 'Through the superhero, we gain a freedom of movement not constrained by the ground-level order imposed by the urban grid. The city becomes legible through signage and captions and the hero's panoramic and panoptic gaze.'[72] Extended to the spatial politics of Israel and Palestine, in which mobility for Palestinians is severely hampered through a regime of checkpoints, curfews, permits, roadblocks and the separation wall, and in which Israel's panoramic and panoptic military gaze controls the Palestinian population, the superhero genre becomes one of transgressive national border

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[70] Henk van Houtum, "The Mask of the Border," in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Border Studies*, ed. Doris Wastl-Walter (Fanham: Ashgate Publishing, 2011), 55.

[71] A similar dynamic can be discerned in Syrian artist Omar Imam's artwork *Space Refugee* (2019), a sculpture accompanied by a comic book panel printed in poster-size, which tells the story of the Syrian Civil War and how both protagonists (Imam and his daughter) acquire superhero identities, allowing them to flee their predicament and travel across time and space by relinquishing their Syrian roots.

[72] Scott Bukatman, "A Song of the Urban Superhero," in *The Superhero Reader*, ed. Charles Hatfield, Jeet Heer, and Kent Worcester (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 2013), 173.

crossings while simultaneously pointing to spatial injustices. Now that Vovel (Sansour) can fly into Tel Aviv by her own means (Fig.3.9), instead of travelling a lengthy journey through Jordan, and cross into the West Bank without all kinds of checks, part of her superhero power has already translated into eroding some of the occupation's mechanics. Moreover, by appropriating a panoramic view of the territory, the superheroes inverse the weaponised panoptic military gaze and as such disrupt the visual dynamic of the occupation. It also challenges the vertical perspective of Israeli settlement design. Eyal Weizmann and Rafi Segal have detailed how the 'optical-planning' of Israeli settlements on the hilltops of the West Bank combine security concerns, tactical strength and a panoramic view in order to exercise maximum surveillance and control. The urban and spatial planning of the Zionist project in the early twentieth century was very much one of inhabiting the plains, as, for example, coastal cities like Tel-Aviv exemplify, rather than the hills. This resulted, as Segal and Weizman point out, in a 'reversing [of] the settlement geography of biblical times [located in the Judean hills]'.[73] This changes after 1967 when Israel occupies the West Bank and the first settlers start building dwellings, actively encouraged by the Labour government.[74] This policy is amplified even further after the hawkish Likud party replaced the Labour party for the first time in the late 1970s, and the political thinking around settlements becomes increasingly and, much more in the mainstream, infused with biblical and messianic belief in the Land of Israel (Eretz Israel), in which 'the long and steady climb to the mountains […] cultivate[s] nothing but "holiness"'.[75] In other words, the mastering views from above are as much about managing and dominating the landscape, as they are about forging a religious identity based on territory. It is useful to quote Segal and Weizman in full:

> The hilltop environment, isolated, overseeing and hard to reach, lent itself to the development of this newly conceived form of 'utopia.' The community settlements create cul-de-sac envelopes, closed off from their surroundings, utopian in their

[73] Rafi Segal and Eyal Weizman, "The Mountain. Principles of Building in Heights," in *A Civilian Occupation. The Politics of Israeli Architecture*, ed. Rafi Segal and Eyal Weizman (London: Verso Books, 2003), 80.
[74] Known as the 1967 Alon Plan, named after Israeli Labour politician Yigal Alon (1918-1980), Israel pursued a policy of Jewish colonisation of the mountains of the West Bank and Jordan Valley, with as its main purposes territorial expansionism. It remains until today the informal blueprint for illegal settlements. See Pappé, *The Biggest Prison on Earth: A History of the Occupied Territories*, 90–98.
[75] Segal and Weizman, "The Mountain. Principles of Building in Heights," 81 and 81–93.

> concentric organization, promoting a mythic communal coherence in a shared formal identity.[76]

Utopia is carved into the landscape and the settlements' architecture. It resonates eerily with Bukatman's take that the superhero genre is one of (American) urban modernity in which the utopian aspirations of the city are articulated.[77] Here, the ideology of Zionist settler colonialism as a utopian project and its actual spatial and territorial execution are unpacked. The horizontal gaze of the superheroes flying over the territory battles with the vertical architecture of the Israeli settlements and challenges its doctrine. The creation of hilltop settlements as utopian gated communities means that Palestinian communities are physically fenced off, relegated to the valleys, but also that they are visually and ideologically bereft of seeing across the landscape into a future. Nonel and Vovel literally provide a different decolonising viewpoint that privileges possibility and the imaginary. This is illustrated by the panel where Vovel, flying over the Separation Wall, comments: '[i]t's a fine piece of architecture. An efficient combo of land grab and aesthetic bereavement'.[78]

Lina Khatib points out that '[m]uch of the political debate in the Middle East revolves around space. Space, both physical and imagined, is not only part of the identity of people, but also a dynamic tool often utilised to define the identity of nations.'[79] This is specifically true for Israel and Palestine where territory is both currency and simultaneously foundational for the formation of identity.[80] It is therefore no accident that the print medium Ashery and Sansour have chosen to work in, namely comics and the graphic novel, spatialises narrative in a distinct way. Hillary Chute has demonstrated how the architectural qualities of graphic novels, with their panels, grids and gutters, are composed to develop a narrative that turns 'time into space on the page'. She explains how this architecture 'place[s] pressure on traditional notions of chronology, linearity, and causality—as well as on the idea that "history" can ever be a closed discourse, or a simply progressive one.'[81] In a

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[76] Segal and Weizman, 83–84.
[77] See Bukatman, "A Song of the Urban Superhero."
[78] Ashery and Sansour, *The Novel of Nonel and Vovel*, 128.
[79] Lina Khatib, *Filming the Modern Middle East. Politics in the Cinemas of Hollywood and the Arab World* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006), 15.
[80] For a foundational text on Palestinian identity see, Rashid Khalidi, *Palestinian Identity. The Construction of Modern National Consciousness*, 2nd ed. (New York: Colombia University Press, 2010).
[81] Hillary L. Chute, *Disaster Drawn. Visual Witness, Comics, and Documentary Form* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2016), 4.

Palestinian context where history has been denied and space robbed, the comics' gutter, that is the space between the frames, not only keeps reminding the reader of the fragmentation of Palestinian territory but this empty white space also points to the spatial and historical erasures of Palestinian presence.

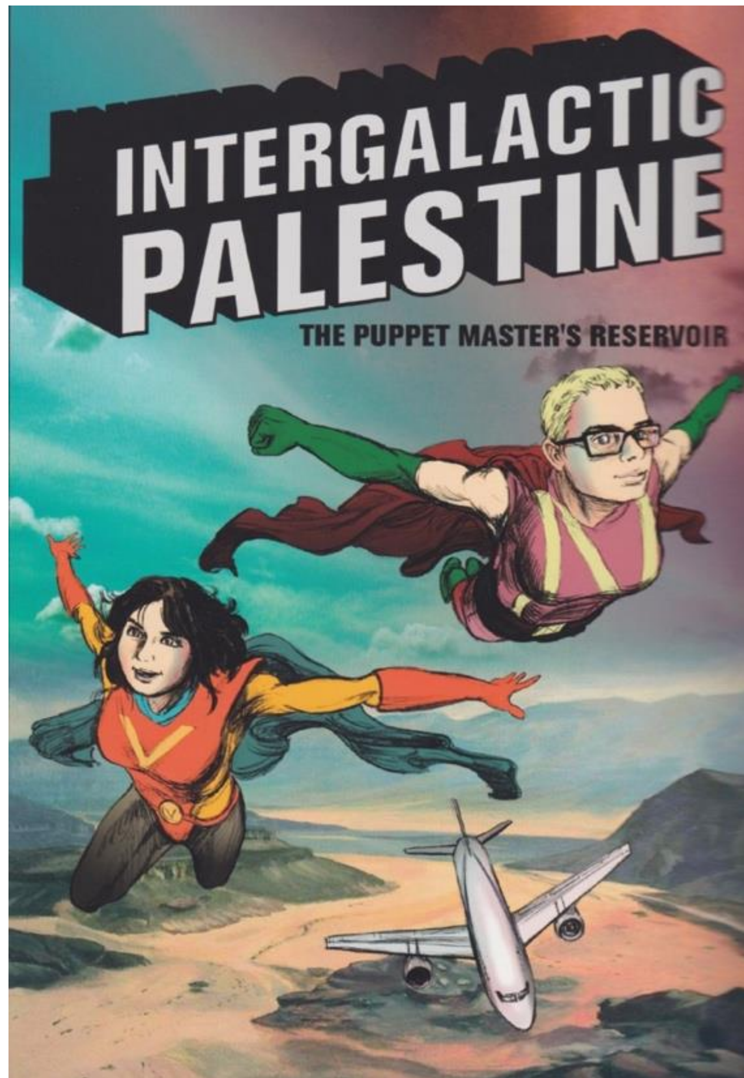

Figure 3.9. Oreet Ashery and Larissa Sansour. *The Novel of Nonel and Vovel* (Milan: Edizioni Charta, 2009), 126. Image courtesy the artists.

In the *Novel of Nonel and Vovel*, there is an estranging tension between resisting the memoricide and toponymicide of Palestine and reckoning with the limitations of the political change that art can effectuate. Nonel and Vovel liberate Palestine by destroying the Fifth Planet with a giant slingshot, but they can only do so as their superhero alter egos, not as artists Oreet Ashery and Larissa Sansour. The explicit deployment, rather than interrogation, of nationalist Palestinian iconography central to Sansour's practice and detailed in previous chapters, takes centre stage here. Vovel (Sansour) comments on the

use of the slingshot to destroy the Fifth Planet as follows: 'Hmmm. Our creativity really does seem impaired. As an artist, I used to hate symbolism in any shape or form. But that's obviously changed. Simple as it may be, this idea of a slingshot really appeals to me.'[82] Sansour allows herself to step out of her habitual artistic zone of visual critique and as a superhero (Vovel) instrumentalises Palestinian symbolism of resistance to save Palestine, and by corollary the world. Equally, Nonel and Vovel resist being confined to the frames the graphic novel subjects them to. However, these moments are more reality checks, pondering the degree of agency they have over the narrative and their own roles in their artistic practice and this complex collaboration, than a rebellious refusal to conform to the rules of the graphic novel. In the instances they step out of the frame and shed their superhero personas in the graphic narrative, they primarily express doubt about their mission, method and newly gained powers. The design of the whole publication is such that chapters of the graphic novel are alternated with other types of content, such as critical material that playfully confronts issues around orientalism, art and politics, colonialism and national identity. In fact, these intermezzos outside of the frame provide the necessary critical, contextualising and conceptual framework to understand the graphic novel chapters.

I suggest that this space between crossing in and out of the frame, between the magical realm of fantasy and real life, between authorship and the giving up of authorship, between Other and self, between artist and superhero, between the donning and the shedding of masks, between Palestine and Israel, are the type of bordering practices that Mohamad Hafeda, whose writing I reference at the outset of this section, refers to. These practices divide and connect but I like to think of them as efforts towards worldbuilding, however imperfect they may be. Nonel and Vovel's agency is defined by its fallibility – that is, they can only be politically effective at the cost of being symbolically and artistically ineffective. They largely renounce their artistic authorship in this project in order to reclaim a broader and perhaps more urgent question on artistic positioning in antagonistic times. Like the alien in the previous section, and in the following section, the automaton, the protagonist superheroes are troubled characters whose personal loss of home, belonging and power to effectuate change translates into a collective loss. Still, they underscore a

[82] Ashery and Sansour, *The Novel of Nonel and Vovel*, 157.

place for art. As such, Ashery and Sansour's *The Novel of Nonel and Vovel* does not claim art or sf can rectify injustice, whether that be social, political or historical. Rather, it holds that the imaginal realm offers something different and Other, which in this case approximates empowerment. As the closing panels demonstrate (Fig.3.10.), both Ashery and Sansour are aware that as politicised artists their leverage is limited: '[i]t would seem a bit odd if we had actually managed to solve the Palestinian problem just by dressing up in cape and suits. Exactly, although it would have been tremendously gratifying to see vital change brought about. Fiction or no fiction.'[83] Here is an admission that art will only take them this far, but, simultaneously, there is an understanding that by drawing on the masquerading shapeshifting qualities of sf, and particularly the superhero genre, boundaries can be crossed, transgressed and re-spatialised. While in *The Craft*, masquerade and the alien Other signify a deficiency of meaning, in *The Novel of Nonel and Vovel* the superhero masquerade signifies a confusing, yet empowering plethora of non-identitarian possibility. This dynamic returns us to the question of where these figures sit between Bhabhian hybridity as a strategic decolonial strategy, or lean towards Csicsery-Ronay's worry of hybridity as a loss of filiation and affiliation. Perhaps there is an alternative way of looking at this by placing these figures not as poles on a spectrum, but in a different and speculative dimension that produces an unsettling estrangement, whether this is driven by lack as in *The Craft*, or by opportunity as in *The Novel of Nonel and Vovel*. The alien and the superhero are united in how they break down or challenge national and representational borders and constraints, but they are also united in how they achieve the latter through artifice – in other words, through masquerade. In the alien's case, this translates in cunning and crafty manoeuvres of state invasion and assimilation; in the superheroes' case, going back to Gomel's trinity, this is through transformation. In the final section of this chapter, I show how the most artificial of sf Others, the automaton/robot, fails its own masquerading artifice and becomes entrapped in a web of filiation and affiliation of its own and of France and Lebanon's making.

[83] Ashery and Sansour, 168.

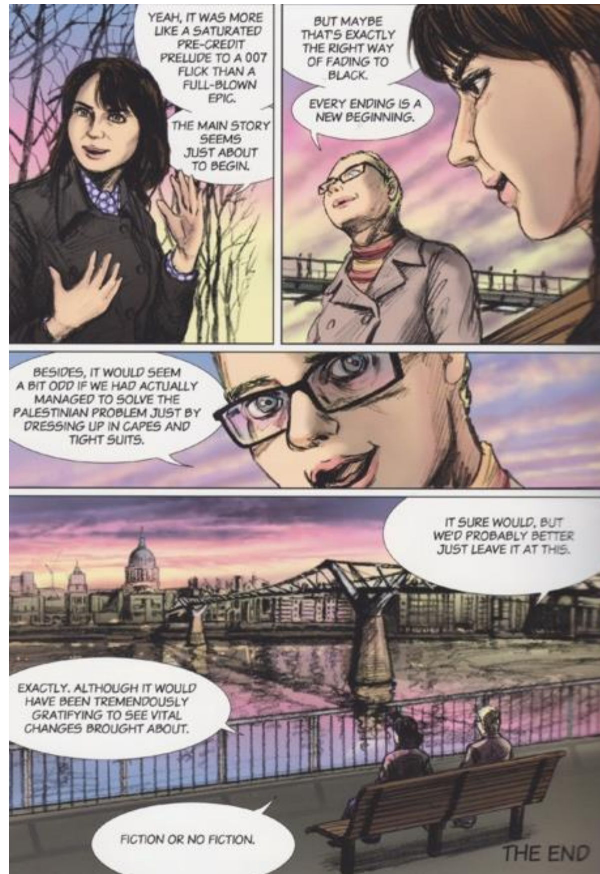

Figure 3.10. Oreet Ashery and Larissa Sansour. *The Novel of Nonel and Vovel* (Milan: Edizioni Charta, 2009), 168. Image courtesy the artists.

A Tale of Automated and Other Loyalties: Fadi Baki's *Manivelle: The Last Days of the Man of Tomorrow* (2017)

Artificial persons, including automatons and their more recent incarnation, robots, have a chequered history that moves between popular and scientific imaginaries and actual technological developments. From Prometheus's Pandora, golems in Jewish mythology and mechanical entertainers playing music in the Enlightenment, to the androids of Hollywood blockbusters, artificial Others have inspired narratives that pit the human against the non-human and nature against artifice.[84] These narratives seamlessly combine scientific ingenuity with unbridled creativity, and yet they are often laced with a tinge of fear that these scientific creations might run amok and carve out roles for themselves other than their creator originally intended. Mary Shelley's Frankenstein's monster is but one of the salient examples that comes to mind here. Automatons and robots are, in many ways, the

[84] For an overview, see Raya Jones, "Archaic Man Meets a Marvellous Automaton: Posthumanism, Social Robots, Archetypes," *Journal of Analytical Psychology* 62, no. 3 (2017): 338–55.

quintessential non-human Others because they are designed to resemble humans yet uncomfortably remind us of our flaws, and, not least, our mortality. Unlike humans, they are not made from flesh and blood but are born into adulthood and operate as our uneasy doubles, who call into question what subjectivity, individuality and agency mean. In sf studies there is a growing body of theoretical work looking at how artificial beings like robots, androids and cyborgs reframe racial politics and figure in human and non-human alliances or feuds. Issues of selfhood, inclusion and exclusion, and identity play an important role here. More often than not these narratives unfold in postnational settings and the issue at stake is usually how, from the margins, the robot protagonists fit or pass in human society, or, conversely, rebel against it.[85] The motif of the robot is, however, rarely discussed in a postcolonial setting that is explicitly national. Rather than viewing the automaton or robot primarily as a corporate or scientific product of progress that points to deep-seated human anxieties, this section proposes to read the robot as a historical *pars pro toto* for the function and performativity of the nation state, imbued with all its desires and failures.

Figure 3.11. Fadi Baki. *Manivelle: The Last Days of the Man of Tomorrow*, 2017. HD video, 29'. Video still. Image courtesy the artist.

[85] The work of Isaiah Lavender III is exemplary here, in particular his analysis of human-robot relations through the framework of slavery; see Isiah Lavender III, *Race in American Science Fiction*, *Race in American Science Fiction* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2011).

Despina Kakoudaki notes that ‘the most intense cultural deployments of artificial people occur in periods that radically change the meanings of the categories of person and object in political, technological, and philosophical contexts’.[86] Lebanon’s exit from under French tutelage to sovereignty is such a period. The story of Manivelle, an automaton of French make, begins at the juncture of two births: Lebanese independence from the French Mandate in Lebanon and Syria (1920-1943), and Manivelle’s transformation from an inanimate mechanical device to an animate and self-operating one. In Lebanese filmmaker Fadi Baki’s short film *Manivelle: The Last Days of the Man of Tomorrow* (2017), the birth and biography of its protagonist Manivelle and the birth and subsequent annals of the Lebanese nation state intertwine. More specifically, this section shows how Manivelle’s adventures mimic the performance of the nation state. The film is crafted as a mockumentary, led by an unnamed female film director who tries to piece together the forgotten story of Manivelle. The first scene opens with black and white archival footage of a crowded public ceremony celebrating Lebanon’s newly won independence and the withdrawal of French troops from the country in 1946. The use of black and white archival material adds historical weight, authenticity and credibility to the narrative, as does the featuring of leading Lebanese historian Fawwaz Traboulsi as a talking head. Lebanon declared independence in 1943, after a British-French tussle in which the British pushed for independence following their growing influence in the region and the French stalled because of fear of losing their colonial privilege.[87] When, in 1946, French General Charles de Gaulle gifts Manivelle (*le nouvel homme*) to the First President of the Lebanese Republic (Fig.3.11.), Bechara Khoury (in office 1943-1952), to publicly mark the transfer of power from French control to Lebanese sovereignty, de Gaulle’s gesture is first and foremost meant to solidify and guarantee the protection of French political, cultural and economic interests in Lebanon. Manivelle is a technological novelty that embodies the spirit of postcolonial national modernity as the self-declared ‘*nouvel homme*’, the new man. He is supposed to symbolise a clean break from French governance and inaugurate a new era of Lebanese self-rule and autonomy. However, at this point in the film the automaton comes across as an ambiguous figure, rather than a revolutionary one. In essence, he still is a French puppet, albeit a mechanised

[86] Despina Kakoudaki, *Anatomy of a Robot. Literature, Cinema, and the Cultural Work of Artificial People* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2014), 28.
[87] See Traboulsi, *A History of Modern Lebanon*, 104–8.

one, who can only utter pre-programmed French phrases. In other words, his French filiation is clear and linguistically performed. The grand spectacle of his presentation to the Lebanese people disguises the actual transaction taking place, namely that Lebanese independence comes with strings attached. Manivelle hands over the Lebanese flag from de Gaulle to Khoury; with this exchange the Lebanese President has accepted responsibility to lead the new republic, but has simultaneously also validated Franco-Lebanese allegiance. Manivelle serves as a reminder, if not the reinforcer, of the latter. Neither a real 'new' man, nor fully sentient, Manivelle incarnates both the anxieties and the excitement enfolding the young Lebanese nation.

The automaton, then, is to be seen as a figure of transition. The public might be fascinated with him, but is also apprehensive. This mistrust stems not so much from his novelty but, rather, from his artificiality. At a time when Lebanon is redefining its collective national identity in the region, and in the world, as a pluralistic Mediterranean state with an Arab heritage, Manivelle lacks authenticity.[88] What or who is this '*nouvel homme*' exactly? Is he a French lackey, or does he act in the interest of the citizens of the new republic? Worse, is he a spy or an *agent provocateur* who might derail the Lebanese national project? Manivelle wears a *tarboosh* (fez), balloon pants and a vest. This attire harks back to the bygone era of the Ottoman Empire, even if the *tarboosh* was worn well into the 1950s as 'a distinctive marker of upper and middle class men (*effendiya*) in the Arab Middle East'.[89] Manivelle's dress is therefore recognisable to his audience, but it is not necessarily from tomorrow and associated with a new national identity. To the contrary, the automaton straddles two historical eras: the colonial period of Ottoman and French rule, and the modern era of national independence, respectively. Strangely, Manivelle seems to fall between the cracks, and in more ways than one. His dress can also be read as a reference to Wolfgang von Kempelen's eighteenth-century Chess Player, better known as the 'The [Mechanical] Turk', the most famous automaton in history. A marvel to its audiences, the chess-playing automaton was later discovered to be a hoax because it was humanly

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[88] This view is seen as 'constitutionalism', and was propagated by Bechara Khoury and his brother-in-law Michel Chiha, one of his main advisors and instrumental in drafting the Lebanese constitution. For more on Lebanese national identity, see Samir Khalaf, *Civil and Uncivil Violence in Lebanon. A History of the Internationalization of Communal Conflict* (New York: Colombia University Press, 2002), 174 and 178–79.
[89] Ahmet S. Aktürk, "Fez, Brimmed Hat, and Kum û Destmal: Evolution of Kurdish National Identity from the Late Ottoman Empire to Modern Turkey and Syria," *Journal of the Ottoman and Turkish Studies Association* 4, no. 1 (2017): 175.

operated.[90] However, von Kempelen always called his contraption an illusion and the chess-playing machine's Orientalist dress was intended to further enhance a sense of mystery and magic.[91] The performance of illusion, whether on a national political scale or on Manivelle's individual level, drives the plot in Baki's film. Kakoudaki identifies ontological and political hybridity, and in-betweenness, as the main traits of artificial persons.[92] They might resemble humans in look and behaviour, but ultimately they are not human. Automatons and robots are so alluring to us, yet also threatening, precisely because of the illusion they embody. I would add to this that Manivelle's in-betweenness is also temporal. He is not really the new 'man of tomorrow', but, rather, as the film's narrator offers, 'a man who fell out of time'.[93] The combination of political, ontological and temporal in-betweenness will, as shown later in this section, come to haunt Manivelle and Lebanon in equal measure.

In artificial person narratives, the 'jolt of life' forms a strong transformative motif in which a lifeless object is startled into life.[94] For example, the golem, a clay effigy in Jewish mythology, is animated by magic. One of the most iconic passages in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) occurs when Victor Frankenstein sparks his creation to life with an electrical current. In Fritz Lang's 1927 classic sf film *Metropolis*, the life energy of a young woman called Maria is transferred to her robotic double, whereas in Paul Verhoeven's 1987 film *RoboCop* a computer programme reboots Murphy's consciousness into the body of a machine. In Iraqi novelist Ahmed Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad* (2014), the nameless creature (*shesma* or Whatsitsname), assembled from the dismembered body parts of civilian victims of car and suicide bombs in post-2003 Baghdad, is brought to life by loss: the deep grief of a mother who lost her son during the Iran-Iraq War. The jolt of life, as the above shows, comes in various guises and can be a ritual, a substance, computational, or, as in the case of Saadawi, an emotional procedure. What binds these diverse processes together, with the exception of Saadawi, is that they are mediated and there is a *techne*, or

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[90] See, for example, Tom Standage, *The Turk. The Life and Times of the Famous Eighteenth-Century Chess-Playing Machine* (New York: Walker & Company, 2002).
[91] See Standage, 23; and Gaby Wood, *Living Dolls. A Magical History of the Quest for Mechanical Life* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), 58.
[92] Kakoudaki, *Anatomy of a Robot. Literature, Cinema, and the Cultural Work of Artificial People*, 9.
[93] Fadi Baki, *Manivelle: The Last Days of the Man of Tomorrow*, 2017, HD film. All subsequent film quotations follow this citation.
[94] See Kakoudaki, *Anatomy of a Robot. Literature, Cinema, and the Cultural Work of Artificial People*, 29–68. Also see Marianne Kac-Vergne, *Masculinity in Contemporary Science Fiction Cinema. Cyborgs, Troopers and Other Men of the Future* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2018), 9–42.

craft, involved in their administration. Manivelle is animated by the cheers and claps of the crowds witnessing a new chapter in Lebanon's national history. As such, Manivelle establishes himself early on as a showman in need of an audience and of performance to sustain him. Or put differently, in order to be himself he needs to performatively masquerade and enact a role; without the latter, he pines away and loses his sense of self. Perhaps more than the audience's presence, it is their suspension of disbelief that keeps Manivelle going. When the documentary maker meets Manivelle, he is a recluse, living in a dilapidated building, his body a malfunctioning heap of scrap metal. Asked about his first memory, Manivelle recalls: 'a cheering crowd… It's the first sound I ever heard. A sound familiar to me throughout my life. I'll never tire of it.' Without a distinct role to perform, there is no raison d'être for Manivelle. And yet, throughout his existence he struggles with which role to perform and for whom, recalibrating allegiances depending on geopolitical circumstance. Things quieten down around Manivelle after his initial unveiling to the Lebanese people in 1946. He disappears out of the public eye and has become a mechanical butler at the presidential palace. This role of '*le nouvel homme*' as a domestic servant is curious; if he is supposed to symbolise the dreams and ambitions of the new nation and articulate civic consciousness, then surely this role cannot be performed if he is tucked away in the palace.

In this context, it is useful to return to Czech playwright Karel Čapek's original introduction of the word 'robot' in his 1920 play *R.U.R.* (*Rossum's Universal Robots)*. In Czech, the word *rabota* means worker and *rabotnik* means serf.[95] Čapek's play presents a future world in which robots are mass-produced skilled and unskilled labourers who are 'manufactured workmen, living automats, without souls, desires or feelings'.[96] The play critiques mechanised labour, exploitation and capitalism's obsession with productivity and profit. Jennifer Rhee employs the term 'the robotic imaginary' to 'reference the shifting inscriptions of humanness and dehumanizing erasures evoked by robots'[97] – in other words, the tension between human subjectivity and dehumanisation. In *R.U.R*, robots have become

[95] For the origins of the robot and an insightful summary of Čapeks's play, see Jennifer Rhee, *The Robotic Imaginary: The Price of Dehumanized Labor* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2018), 18 and 17-24.
[96] Karel Čapek, *R.U.R. (Rossum's Universal Robots). A Fantastic Melodrama in Three Acts and an Epilogue*, trans. Nigel Playfair and Paul Selves (New York: Samuel French Inc., 1923), https://www.gutenberg.org/files/59112/59112-h/59112-h.htm.
[97] Rhee, *The Robotic Imaginary: The Price of Dehumanized Labor*, 5.

so cost-effective and good at their jobs that humans have become superfluous and human births have ceased. Put differently, humans do not have a role anymore. For humans and robots alike, pre-programmed or not, a sense of purpose is key. Rhee locates this purpose at the site of labour. For Manivelle this role is distinctly troubled from the onset, and it is perhaps not so much the type of work that humanises or dehumanises Manivelle but, rather, the external validation of it by an audience. This poses interesting questions on the level of the nation state and the degree of public support for, and trust in, national governance. Manivelle's decade-long absence from the public realm hints at the trouble afoot in Lebanon, and at the political discord that has been brimming for years but which erupts violently in 1958. The factors leading to the crisis in 1958 reconfigure Lebanon as a state and contribute to its unravelling in the future; moreover, they also shape the conditions for Manivelle's rebirth.

Figure 3.12. Fadi Baki. *Manivelle: The Last Days of the Man of Tomorrow*, 2017. HD video, 29'. Video still, nouvel homme stamp. Image courtesy the artist.

Sociologist Samir Khalaf describes Lebanon's armed insurrection of 1958 as 'a significant watershed in Lebanon's political history'.[98] It is at this juncture that Manivelle re-enters public life and is reborn for the second time, only this time the man of tomorrow truly becomes a man of the people (Fig.3.12.). In 1958, Lebanon is torn between a surge in Pan-Arab nationalist sentiments inspired by Nasserism and the founding of the United Arab Republic (the political union between Egypt and Syria), and growing dissatisfaction with Lebanese President Camille Chamoun's (1952-1958) pro-western foreign policies and his government's cronyism and corruption. The 1958 conflict was as much about redefining Lebanon's national identity as it was about addressing the populace's grievances against inequity, social injustice and political favouritism. Khalaf details how the crisis serves as an ominous warning and prelude to the sectarian strife, which, two decades onwards, would plunge Lebanon into a violent Civil War (1975-1990). According to Khalaf, the Lebanese formula of 'no victor, no vanquished', which was introduced at the end of the hostilities in 1958 and continued in the aftermath of the Civil War, is the country's main culprit for the continuing political paralysis and unrest. The political elite's refusal to take stock of the past, offer accountability and responsibility for its actions have mired, and continue to entrench, Lebanon in an untenable *status quo* with most of its pressing social, political, economic and sectarian issues unaddressed.[99] Lebanon's economic meltdown and the government's refusal to investigate the Port of Beirut blast are a sad testimony to this.[100] Throughout Fadi Baki's film, editorial choices such as structural omissions, temporal gaps, and Manivelle's bouts of strategic silence, point deliberately at Lebanon's losses and fragmented history. In fact, Baki treats the events of 1958 rather succinctly by incorporating only a few short clips of the violence and chaos in the streets of Beirut. Nevertheless, it marks a pivotal point in the film, as well as in Lebanon's and Manivelle's history. The political order breaks down and so does Manivelle when a scuffle breaks out between leaders of the warring factions in the palace and President Chamoun knocks over a tray of coffee, spilling the beverage all over him. The automaton mirrors the condition of the Lebanese state: both are malfunctioning

[98] Khalaf, *Civil and Uncivil Violence in Lebanon. A History of the Internationalization of Communal Conflict*, 105.
[99] For an insightful analysis of the events of 1958, see Khalaf, 101–50.
[100] For background on how Lebanon's decades-long systemic income inequality and political clientelism has led to the events of 2019, see Lydia Assouad, "Lebanon's Political Economy: From Predatory to Self-Devouring," *Diwan: Middle East Insights From Carnegie Middle East Center*, January 14, 2021, https://carnegie-mec.org/2021/01/14/lebanon-s-political-economy-from-predatory-to-self-devouring-pub-83631. [last accessed 22.01.2021].

and performing poorly. The Lebanese government lacks public trust and Manivelle lacks his audience's suspension of disbelief. Both are in need of repair and new beginnings.

In the film, Othering becomes a vehicle that foregrounds the diversity of Lebanon's multi-ethnic make-up and its communitarian alterity. At the same time, it underscores how much this determines Lebanese social dynamics and, by corollary, its tensions and divisions.[101] Manivelle's rebirth is the result of the ingenuity of an Armenian mechanic called Vartan Ohanian who patches him up with spare parts. After this, Manivelle starts speaking Arabic, becomes sentient and experiences emotion. His further integration in Lebanese society and his ascent to citizenship is completed when President Fouad Chehab (1958-64) naturalises him, turning him into a living, or, rather, automated, example for the Chehabist programme of social reform and national unity. Following the violence of 1958, Chehab's version of Lebanese nationalism was one of egalitarianism, claiming that 'in being Lebanese there is no discrimination nor privilege'.[102] It was an attempt to place Lebanon's 'house of many mansions', to borrow historian Kamal Salibi's phrase, under the roof of a common identity.[103] Manivelle's Lebanisation extends this gesture from human to automaton. His transformation from a French-speaking underling to an Arabic-speaking Lebanese national should therefore not be underestimated. But citizenship of the Lebanese republic did not guarantee that the gap between social and political disparities would close. Nor did it truly unite the Lebanese in terms of belonging: the confessionalist stipulations of the National Pact scripts — to this day — Otherness in the Lebanese political system.[104] Moving forward, the film lionises the glitz and glamour of Lebanon's roaring '60s, but the ghosts of the Civil War hover ominously over the narrative. Nevertheless, it is precisely at the moment when the country tries to settle into a new and shared identity that Manivelle, forever the

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[101] In the 1960s Lebanon's poverty and other problems were blamed on Others. As Fawwaz Traboulsi notes: 'poverty was attributed to strangers and social problems seen as manifestations of a "foreign" conspiracy aiming at destabilising the economy!' Traboulsi, *A History of Modern Lebanon*, 148.

[102] Fouad Chehab, quoted in Traboulsi, 139.

[103] Kamal Salibi's book traces how confessional and sectarian divisions have persisted in Lebanon from the onset, its foundations going back centuries. See Kamal Salibi, *A House of Many Mansions. The History of Lebanon Reconsidered* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

[104] The National Pact or *Mithaq al Watani* (1943) is Lebanon's (unwritten) agreement, brokered by the British, that lays its foundations as a multi-confessional state. The President of the Republic and Commander of the Armed Forces should always be Maronite; the Prime Minister, Sunni; the Speaker of Parliament, Shia; the Deputy Speaker of Parliament, Greek Orthodox; and the Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces is Druze. See Khalaf, *Civil and Uncivil Violence in Lebanon. A History of the Internationalization of Communal Conflict*, 285–86.

outsider, can carve out a new role for himself and weave himself into the social fabric. To do this he has to perform a double role: he has to pass as Lebanese and thus cement his affiliation, as well as embody the spirit of the age. Both roles demand delving into a world of make belief, or performative masking, and in the Beirut of the 1960s this world is cinema.

Baki's film chronicles Lebanon's turbulent, and to an extent unaccounted for, history. It functions as a *j'accuse* and posits an artificial Other who has chronicled every minute detail of Lebanon's past but cannot muster the courage to come to terms with the violent glitches in Lebanon's timeline, including his own responsibility. However, the film also lauds Arab cinema. In fact, there is a longer history between automata and cinema, as pointed out by Gaby Wood. Wood traces a correlation between the single mechanised figure of the automaton and the mechanised frames of celluloid that bring film to life: 'Cinema was a direct descendant from the androids of the Enlightenment.'[105] While Fawwaz Traboulsi frames the historical strand of the film, its cinematic counterpart is backed by Lebanese film director Mohamed Soueid. Soueid is considered an influential figure in postwar Lebanese cinema and visual art. His oeuvre shows a propensity for experimental documentary — often relating to history, the Civil War, and his native city of Beirut and its inhabitants — combined with a love of film history.[106] Soueid's presence in the film is an homage to Soueid's lifework, as well as an ode to cinema. But it also invites us to view the film beyond the genre of a sf mockumentary and see it as a document critical of the representation of Lebanese history. Baki follows a long lineage of postwar Lebanese filmmakers and artists who insist fiction can reveal (a) truth. Chad Elias notes how artists from the postwar generation, in 'respeaking testimonies and reenacting events can provide grounds for the radical remembering of the past and the reimagining of futures in a present haunted by the spectre of failed leftist political projects and the defeat of multicultural and secular forms of nationalisms in the region'.[107] *Manivelle: The Last days of the Man of Tomorrow* does all of this, and its protagonist indeed respeaks, reenacts and remembers the past. However, I suggest that, within this context, Manivelle serves as a compromised witness, and, in fact, points to the limitations of art and cinema to radically remember the past and anchor the

[105] Wood, *Living Dolls. A Magical History of the Quest for Mechanical Life*, 160.
[106] See Marks, *Hanan Al-Cinema. Affections for the Moving Image.*, 87–95 and 117–21. Also see Kaelen Wilson-Goldie, "Mohamed Soueid: Beirut's Fist Video Artist," *Bidoun* 21, no. Bazaar II (2010), https://www.bidoun.org/articles/mohamed-souied. [last accessed 19.06.2020].
[107] Elias, *Posthumous Images. Contemporary Art and Memory Politics in Post-Civil War Lebanon.*, 18.

sentiments, cited by Elias, in the present. There is an uneasy tension in the film between Manivelle's non-human subjectivity — after all, can his machinic logic and fantasies be trusted — and his desire and subsequent failure at performing the quintessential role he imagines for himself, namely that of a movie star (Fig.3.13.). Like Al Qadiri's diplomats who are cast as the *comprador* class and are not believable, so Manivelle suffers the effects of his own continuous role-play. In other words, if Manivelle's core business is performing in fictional worlds, then how credible can he be as a witness of historical and political events?

Figure 3.13. Fadi Baki. *Manivelle: The Last Days of the Man of Tomorrow*, 2017. HD video, 29'. Video still. Image courtesy the artist.

The above conundrum drives much of Baki's film. It points to how, on the one hand, the film honours the region's filmography, but, on the other, ponders whether cinema can convey, let alone rectify the interpretation of historical ills. We see footage of 1960s Downtown Beirut with its many movie houses, including the celebrated Cinema Rivoli, where Manivelle sees his first film – not without irony, this is the Arab world's first sf film featuring a robot, Hamada Abdel Wahab's *Journey to the Moon* (1958). Here, Baki nods to and makes explicit the Arab world's heritage of Arab sf genre cinema. A host of Arab celebrities, such as Egyptian actor Omar Sharif and Lebanese diva Sabah, make up Manivelle's inner circle and he frequents all the swanky parties of Beirut's cosmopolitan *beau monde*. The image he depicts is of somebody who, as the narrator states, 'came to

embody the hope and fortune of his age'. Although Lebanon's Golden Age brought cultural experimentation and prosperity, and its outward-looking *laissez-faire* economy benefitted the country and improved public services and infrastructure, this wealth was far from evenly spread. The era was, as Khalaf notes, perhaps more gilded than golden.[108] It harboured the seeds of discontent, which, in 1975, would lead to war. These are unmentioned in the film, but their spectres are present. For example, the Intra Bank crash of 1966; the effect of the 1967 war and the increase in the Palestinian armed presence in Lebanon; the agricultural crisis, in which small farmers were swallowed up by agrobusiness; the growing cost of living; and growing sectarian divisions.[109] The picture-perfect illusion of the Golden Age begins to fray, and this is signified in the film by Manivelle's life project never coming to fruition. In 1972, he starts filming the action film *Men without Hearts*, in which he plays the starring role. The project drags on and is delayed, but is finally set to premier on 13 April 1975. This date, however, is marked as the outbreak of the Civil War, and Manivelle's film is never screened. It is at this point that the work turns significantly darker. Manivelle's movie never becomes the visual symbol of this date; rather, the iconic photo of the bullet-ridden bus in Ain al-Rammaneh, considered to have been the spark for the Civil War, takes up the role of commemorative image.[110] Lacking a cinema audience, Manivelle seeks an audience elsewhere and joins a militia, the Mani Maniacs. It is here that the loss at the centre of the film is revealed: the Mani Maniacs force Vartan to modify Manivelle into a killing machine. He refuses, and is harmed. Manivelle, his best friend, does not intervene and Vartan loses his right arm. Loss is articulated two-fold here: on the level of the body, Vartan is an amputee, and Manivelle's body is in disarray. In a way, he has become Vartan's double with the loss of his left arm. Yet, the greatest loss is Manivelle's betrayal of Vartan's friendship. Following the 1991 amnesty law, he tries to make amends and sends Vartan a letter every month, but they remain unanswered. Just like the Lebanese state forsakes its duty to protect its citizens and has made little to no effort to bring the war lords to justice,

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[108] See Khalaf, *Civil and Uncivil Violence in Lebanon. A History of the Internationalization of Communal Conflict*, 151–203.

[109] See Traboulsi, *A History of Modern Lebanon*, 154–64.

[110] The bus massacre is seen as the catalyst leading to fifteen years of internecine strife, but violence had already been brewing for many months prior to the incident. A car with unidentified assailants shot at *Kata'ib* (or Phalange, a Christian militia) partisans congregating at a church, killing four. Later that day, the *Kata'ib*, set on revenge, guns down a bus carrying predominantly Palestinian *fedayee,* killing twenty-one. See Traboulsi, 183. And Khalaf, *Civil and Uncivil Violence in Lebanon. A History of the Internationalization of Communal Conflict*, 229.

Manivelle breached his best friend's trust. Like the state, he is weak, in ruins, and inconsequential. The magic of the suspension of disbelief is broken for good. Manivelle has failed as a performer and as a friend. By corollary, he fails on the ontological level as a 'good' robot.

Sf writer Isaac Asimov published his influential Three Laws of Robotics in 1942, and then in 1985 added a fourth, or Zeroth Law, which supersedes all Three Laws. These laws have found their way into the sf megatext and even into real-world robotics, although not without disagreements with Asimov's top-down approach.[111] It lies beyond the scope of this section to discuss critiques of Asimov's moral code for robots, but suffice it to say that critics quarrel mainly with the idea that ethics can be coded into a machine and that robots remain in full submission to humans.[112] For clarity's sake, I quote the laws in full here:

> 1. A robot may not injure a human being, or, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm.
> 2. A robot must obey orders given it by human beings except where such orders would conflict with the First Law.
> 3. A robot must protect its own existence as long as such protection does not conflict with the First or Second Law.
> Zeroth Law: A robot may not harm humanity, or, by inaction, allow humanity to come to harm.[113]

Following the above, the power dynamics scripted in these laws are, indeed, designed to keep robots subservient to humans, but, I would stress, also to emphatically Other them. The insistence on Othering resonates deeply in the context of Lebanon's sectarianism, in which confessional and other groups structurally marginalise other communities. If 'a robot' is substituted by 'the state' in the above laws, then Lebanon has indeed performed poorly and brought its citizens to harm. Manivelle himself does not fare any better; he has broken all robotic laws. During his time as a militia member, he has inadvertently carried out orders

[111] For robots in the mega-text, see Sherryl Vint, *Science Fiction: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 58–62.
[112] See Asli Kemiksiz, "Materials of Imagination. On the Limits and the Potentials of the Humanoid Robot," *NatureCulture* 5, no. Anthropology and Science Fiction: Experiments in Thinking Across Worlds (2019): 69–94; and Judith A. Markowitz, *Robots That Kill. Deadly Machines and Their Precursors in Myth, Folklore, Literature, Popular Culture and Reality* (Jefferson: Mcfarland & Company, 2019), 119–23.
[113] Isaac Asimov, *I, Robot. The Classic Collection of Robot Stories*, 24th ed. (London: Harper Collins Publishers, 1996), 8. For the Zeroth Law, see Isaac Asimov, "The Inevitable Conflict," in *The Complete Robot. The Definitive Collection of Robot Stories*, 8th ed. (London: Harper Collins Publishers, 1995), 546–74.

that have injured humans. After becoming Lebanese, he is primarily driven by self-interest, articulated by his existential hankering for an audience, no matter the consequences. This has caused irreparable grief and damage, with Vartan being the prime example. Perhaps most egregious is Manivelle's flaunting of the Zeroth Law. His inaction in admitting to his own complicity in the war perpetuates the patterns of collective and state-sanctioned amnesia prevalent in postwar Lebanon. In the period of postwar reconstruction, discourses of selective amnesia and forgetfulness were pushed by the state in order to create 'a sustainable sense of nationhood'.[114] However, this oblivion helped little in mending the torn social fabric and tackling the root causes of the conflict. Worse, it allowed — and, to an extent, continues to allow — violence to flare up and for the conflict to reproduce itself. In many ways, the war never ended because its issues were never properly addressed. Although Manivelle is built to record and remember everything, he breaks down every time when asked to confess to his role in the war and what he did to Vartan. This willed amnesia is a systemic failure that transcends Manivelle's machinery and extends into Lebanon's body politic. 'Without a debate about the war, social practices of sectarian affiliation structuring interpretations of the war were allowed to reproduce simplified antagonistic discourses of the "other."'[115] The idea of 'a war of others on our soil' (*harb al-akhirin 'ala 'ardina*) became, on the one hand, a convenient idiom to blame American, Israeli, Soviet, Iranian and Arab powers of using Lebanon as a playground to settle their proxy wars; on the other hand, it 'externalise[d] a common sense of guilt or shame over the war'.[116] This brings me to the point that Manivelle can only fail to convey Lebanon's political storyline, because as an automaton he will always be an outsider and an artificial Other. However, at the same time, perhaps it is precisely because of his questionable filiative and affiliative allegiances that he tells and embodies the story most accurately. As long as Lebanon's debilitating dynamics of Othering sectarianism persist, and continue to shape social, political and cultural life, reconciliation of any kind remains difficult, if not impossible.

[114] Sune Haugbolle, *War and Memory in Lebanon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 78.
[115] Haugbolle, 69.
[116] Haugbolle, 14. Lebanese journalist Ghassan Tueni first introduced the notion of 'a war of others' in his 1985 eponymous book. The phrase became shorthand for glossing over a complex and long civil conflict that had local, regional and international ramifications. For a detailed analysis, see Haugbolle's section "A War of the Others," 13-20.

As an artificial Other and a compromised narrator, Manivelle flounders in shedding new light on historical events because he walks into the same pitfalls as the Lebanese state (Fig.3.14.). Manivelle is a strong example of a sf Other who forces us to read *through* and *with* him. This means that *Manivelle: The Last Days of the Man of Tomorrow* projects new tomorrows for Lebanon as distinctly dyschronotopic, 'a future collapsing backwards into a nightmarish present reality rather than functioning as a cautionary horizon'.[117] In looking at Lebanon's current economic and political meltdown, a horizon is not immediately in view. Manivelle becomes simultaneously the emblem and the quaint messenger of a broken history, not unlike Walter Benjamin's Angel of History.[118] But while Benjamin's angel is hurled into the future while looking at the wreckage of history, Manivelle remains captive to an unresolved past and unarticulated present and is not going anywhere. Worse, he cannot even recognise the wreckage he is responsible for; his eyes remain shut. Benjamin famously began his 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' with von Kempelen's chess-playing automaton as an analogy for a view on history that was in need of reframing. Writing on sf and future history, Csicsery-Ronay notes that '[h]istory cannot be imagined without a conception of the past having a future'.[119] In Lebanon, as mentioned in my first chapter, drawing on Judith Naeff's work, the very idea of the present is suspended, let alone the future. Fadi Baki's film debates not just whether art can bridge the many societal schisms the war and its aftermath have left, but whether it is possible at all for art to offer a different kind of historiography and bring movement to a stalled present and future. In other words, can art safeguard itself from falling out of time like Manivelle. In the current crisis, this is one of the most difficult, yet most pressing, questions confronting the Lebanese art community. Initial responses to harnessing the present can be found in the statements put out by the directors of the Lebanese art organisations, who collectively paused their programming during the 2019 demonstrations.[120] Rather than searching for answers in the

[117] Lindsey Moore, "'What Happens after Saying No?' Egyptian Uprisings and Afterwords in Basma Abdel Aziz's The Queue and Omar Robert Hamilton's The City Always Wins," *CounterText* 4, no. 2 (2018): 195–96.
[118] See Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations*, 2nd ed. (London: Fontana Press, 1992), 249.
[119] Csicsery-Ronay Jr, *The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction*, 79.
[120] See, for example, Ashkal Alwan's statement on the indefinite postponement of HomeWorks Forum 8, which was supposed to take place 19-27 October 2019. https://ashkalalwan.org/program.php?category=2&id=392 And the collective "Statement on Open Strike in the Cultural Sector in Lebanon", published 25 October 2019 on the website of the Arab Fund for Arts and Culture https://www.arabculturefund.org/News/59 [both sites last accessed 04.07.2020].

exhibits in the galleries, these statements alluded that for now, meaning will most likely have to be found in the streets.

Figure 3.14. Fadi Baki. *Manivelle: The Last Days of the Man of Tomorrow*, 2017. HD video, 29'. Video still. Image courtesy the artist.

Circling back to the idea that these sf Others dwell in failed (Lebanon), threatened (Kuwait) and absent (Palestine) states, the sense of acute and chronic crisis oftentimes seems too overbearing for an imaginary. But as these figures have all negotiated — to remain with Gomel's *troika* — invasion, assimilation and transformation in some form or other, and have experienced loss of meaning, of self, of belonging and a loss of relevance,

they have also crossed from the imaginary back into the streets and vice versa. In those borderlands and voids they have recuperated some agency, some craftiness, and in the case of Manivelle, some place in history, however compromised. Lina Attalah, editor-in-chief of *Mada Masr*, one of the few independent and critical media outlets left in Egypt, looks back on the tenth anniversary of the 2011 Egyptian revolution and writes poignantly of how Benjamin calls for capturing fragments of the past so they can intersect with the present. 'These fragments appear to us in moments of need, moments of crisis, and this is when the intersection between past and present becomes an intensified moment in time, a political moment.'[121] In a way, the alien, the superhero and the automaton magnify these moments that Attalah refers to. And it is not despite of, but precisely because of, their alterity, lack of authenticity, and being out of time and out of place that the capturing of these historical and political moments is facilitated. In other words, it is their performative and masquerading alterity that allows them to salvage something out of individual and historical loss.

[121] Lina Attalah, "How Not to Remember the Revolution," *Al-Jumhuriyah*, January 25, 2021, https://aljumhuriya.net/en/2021/01/25/how-not-to-remember-the-revolution/. [last accessed 27.01.2021].

Chapter 4: Constructing Futurities

Building Possibility through Landscapes of Ruin

Each Palestinian structure presents itself as a potential ruin.
—Edward W. Said, *After the Last Sky.*[1]

Some ruins are loved more than others.
—Ann Laura Stoler, *Imperial Debris.*[2]

Ruins: places haunted by the living who inhabit them.
—Jalal Toufic, *Ruins.*[3]

The would-be Parliament of the Palestinian Authority stands forlorn in the West Bank town of Abu Dis. When construction started in 1996, it encapsulated a moment of hope and was believed to be a step towards self-determination for the Palestinian people following the Oslo Accords. Now its unfinished, delipidated concrete structure is overgrown with weeds and symbolises the failure of the Accords and drives home the increasingly bleak prospects for a viable Palestinian state. Abu Dis is located on the outskirts of Jerusalem and belongs administratively to the Governate of Jerusalem. The site of the Parliament was originally chosen by Ahmad Qurai (Abu Alaa), one of the chief negotiators of the Oslo Accords and former Prime Minister of the Palestinian National Authority (2003-2006), because of its sweeping views of Jerusalem's iconic Dome of the Rock. Construction was halted during the Second Intifada in 2000 and today the view from the derelict building shows the separation wall snaking through Abu Dis, severing its population from Jerusalem rather than offering visual and geographical proximity and connection to it. The Palestinian Parliament is a white elephant that lies in ruins materially, but it also signifies the ruin of a Palestinian future that did not materialise.[4] It is 'a massive relic and a testimony to the

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[1] Edward W. Said, *After the Last Sky. Palestinian Lives* (London: Vintage Books, 1986), 38.
[2] Ann Laura Stoler, "Introduction 'The Rot Remains': From Ruins to Ruination," in *Imperial Debris. On Ruins and Ruination*, ed. Ann Laura Stoler (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 27.
[3] Matthew Gumpert and Jalal Toufic, eds., *Thinking: The Ruin* (Istanbul: Istanbul Studies Center, 2010), 36.
[4] See Ilene Prusher, "Palestine's Abandoned Parliament – a History of Cities in 50 Buildings, Day 46," *The Guardian*, 2015, https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2015/may/29/palestine-abandoned-parliament-history-cities-50-buildings. Also see, for a revival of Abu Dis as the Palestinian capital in Trump's Middle East Peace Plan of 2020, Stephen Farrell and Rami Ayyub, "Abu Dis, an Unlikely Capital for a Future Palestinian State," *Reuters*, January 29, 2020, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-israel-palestinians-plan-abu-dis-idUSKBN1ZS2GL [last accessed 18.2.22].

failure of political negotiations'.[5] However DAAR (Decolonizing Art Architecture Research), the collective founded by Palestinian-Italian architects Sandi Hilal and Alessandro Petti, also see the abandoned site as a possibility for new political imaginaries and one of speculation.[6] In this chapter, I am interested in exploring the potential of ruin as future-oriented possibility in which paradoxical landscapes of utopian and dystopian impulses rub against each other. I propose that ruin, rather than signifying a teleological end point devoid of prospect and constituting a marker of the past, becomes a means to negotiate possibility and futurity. In other words, this clearly demonstrates how losses of the past need not be sealed in dust-collecting boxes of history, but, as many works in this thesis demonstrate, can be retrieved and recouped for something more emancipatory and imaginary in the future.

In this chapter, I situate ruin in science fictional landscapes by drawing on an expanded reading of the traditional poetic motif in Arabic literature, *wuquf 'ala al-atlal*, or 'stopping by the ruins'. Originally a pre-Islamic and Bedouin elegiac symbol lamenting desolate sites and the transitoriness of the world, Hillary Kilpatrick has shown how *al-atlal* 'can be employed in a new way, that is, to mark not only the natural changes brought about by the passage of time, but also the mutations resulting from new economic and cultural conditions. […] [T]he *atlal* motif becomes linked to the reflection on modernisation in the Arab world […] it can be used to convey political and civilisational change.'[7] For my purposes, I am interested in the fact that the notion of *al-atlal* has site-specificity and memory scripted into it and marries it with loss. It therefore provides a rich and evocative lens through which change, be it utopian or dystopian, can be viewed in sf. Ken Seigneurie builds on Kilpatrick's contemporary reading of *al-atlal* in his analysis of Lebanese (post)war novels and films. For Seigneurie, *al-atlal* is intrinsically a nostalgic and utopian motif, characterised by a yearning for an idealised time before the ruin and by a longing for human dignity.[8] The latter conjures hope, but also offers 'an aesthetic of resistance against a

[5] "Parliament Building," Decolonizing Architecture Art Research, n.d., http://www.decolonizing.ps/site/parliament-building/[last accessed 18.2.22].
[6] See Alessandro Petti et al., "Introduction Common Assembly," Decolonizing Architecture Art Research, n.d., http://www.decolonizing.ps/site/planning-the-common-introduction/ [last accessed 18.2.22].
[7] Hilary Kilpatrick, "Literary Creativity and the Cultural Heritage: The Atlal in Modern Arabic Fiction," in *Tradition, Modernity, and Postmodernity in Arabic Literature: Essays in Honor of Professor Issa J. Boullata*, ed. Kamal Abdel-Malek and Wael Hallaq (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 31 and 34.
[8] See Ken Seigneurie, "Anointing with Rubble : Ruins in the Lebanese War Novel," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 28, no. 1 (2008): 54–56.

dominant war ethos'.[9] I follow Seigneurie in his argument that the ruins topos 'can be memory's—and art's—point of contact with historical experience'.[10] However, I depart from his premise that ruin 'tr[ies] but never succeed[s] in achieving closure because loss in this aesthetic is irrecuperable'.[11] Rather, in this chapter I show that the topos of ruin need not necessarily look back to a time before the ruin, but can look forward and facilitate social dreaming, however modestly articulated.[12]

In what follows I trace ruin, or what Ann Laura Stoler refers to more inclusively as 'imperial debris' – that is, 'what people are left with […] blocking livelihoods and health, to the aftershocks of imperial assault, to the social afterlife of structures, sensibilities, and things, [which] reside in the corroded hollows of landscapes, in the gutted infrastructures of segregated cityscapes and in the micro-ecologies of matter and mind'.[13] Many of the artworks in this chapter portray sf landscapes as broken, bleak and dystopian sites.[14] Sf is a mode replete with ruins — from the remains of destroyed worlds and ailing alien civilisations, to the urban ruins typifying cyberpunk and Japanese sf, and Soviet filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky's haunted depictions of the remains of Soviet industrial expansion.[15] There is, however, little formal engagement with the aesthetic and conceptual properties of the ruin as an explicit sf trope or motif of futurity. What sets the works in this chapter apart is a departure from the notion of 'sublime ruins', which, according to John Timberlake, is a

[9] Ken Seigneurie, *Standing by the Ruins. Elegiac Humanism in Wartime and Postwar Lebanon* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011), 1.
[10] Seigneurie, 18.
[11] Seigneurie, 30.
[12] Lyman Tower Sargent argues that social dreaming lies at the base of utopianism; that is, 'the dreams and nightmares that concern the ways in which groups of people arrange their lives and which usually envision a radically different society than the one in which the dreamers live. But not all are radical, for some people at any time dream of something basically familiar.' Lyman Tower Sargent, "The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited," *Utopian Studies* 5, no. 1 (1994): 3.
[13] Stoler, "Introduction 'The Rot Remains': From Ruins to Ruination," 10. Stoler views the 'imperial' in an expanded form in colonial histories past and present and how that is deposited and embodied racially, through gender and spatially. See Stoler, 16.
[14] Sf scholar Lyman Tower Sargent defines dystopia as 'a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as considerably worse than the society in which that reader lived.' Sargent, "The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited," 9.
[15] For a historical overview of the ruin in Eurowestern sf, see John Clute and David Langford, "Ruins and Futurity," *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, 2022, https://sf-encyclopedia.com/entry/ruins_and_futurity. [last accessed 9.5.2022]. For ruinous cityscapes in cyberpunk, see Claire Sponsler, "Beyond the Ruins: The Geopolitics of Urban Decay and Cybernetic Play," *Science Fiction Studies* 20, no. 2 (1993): 251–65. For ruins in Tarkovsky, see John A. Riley, "Hauntology, Ruins, and the Failure of the Future in Andrei Tarkovsky's *Stalker*," *Journal of Film and Video* 69, no. 1 (2017): 18–26.

propensity common to the Western sf imaginary.[16] Instead, I suggest that the most estranging quality of these works lies in their capacity to construe the landscape of ruin as a topography of future potentiality and repair. This veers from the most extravagant example in Larissa Sansour's video *In the Future They Ate from the Finest Porcelain* (2016), where the topos of the desert is no longer one rooted in an ancient past but, rather, becomes the site of malleable civilisational futurity, to its most modest example in Palestinian artist Wafa Hourani's installation *Qalandiya 2047-2067-2087* (2006-2009), where introducing banal architectural improvements in a refugee camp affects the extraordinary living conditions and future of camp life. These two works bookend this chapter and therefore provide a spectrum of topographical ruination and its possible futurities. Egyptian artist Maha Maamoun's video *2026* (2010) and Larissa Sansour's video *Nation Estate* (2012) sit in the middle, with Maamoun's work narrating how the destructive urban development of the Pyramid plateau of Giza holds revolutionary sway, while in Sansour's work the Palestinian future does not reside in the emblematic verticality of the sf high-rise, a marker of hypermodernity, but elsewhere. All four of these works express ruination, which, following Stoler, is a 'political project that lays waste to certain peoples, relations, and things that accumulate in specific places'.[17] However, they equally demonstrate that through *al-atlal* bids for more evenly distributed futures, as well as more equitable pasts, can be unearthed. These bids should be treated in and by themselves as utopian gestures.

Desert Ruins and an Archaeology of the Future: Larissa Sansour's *In the Future They Ate from the Finest Porcelain* (2016)

The unearthing of the future is concretised in Larissa Sansour and Søren Lind's video *In the Future They Ate from the Finest Porcelain* (2016), in which the trope of the desert as a site of ruination — and equally a site of reclamation — takes centre stage. Of all Sansour's projects discussed in this dissertation, *In the Future* might be her most utopian: it actively puts into practice Frederic Jameson's notion that the utopian form can produce a radical rupture in entrenched or closed systems. Moreover, it is precisely this utopian break that allows for imagining a different future with alternative political, and other, possibilities.[18] *In*

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[16] See John Timberlake, *Landscape and the Science Fiction Imaginary* (Bristol: Intellect, 2018), 115–16.
[17] Stoler, "Introduction 'The Rot Remains': From Ruins to Ruination," 11.
[18] See Fredric Jameson, "The Future as Disruption," in *Archaeologies of the Future. The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London: Verso Books, 2005), 211–33.

the Future focuses on the creation and implementation of the utopian rupture so that the future not so much disrupts the present, but mainly disrupts the past.[19] In addition, the complex and contested notion of the Palestinian landscape in Zionist ideology as a Biblical Holy Land devoid of indigenous inhabitants is turned on its head in this video.[20] As a result, not only history but also the landscape is reclaimed. *In the Future* opens with a squadron of locust-like spaceships taking off from a barren and apocalyptic landscape (Fig.4.1.). There is no vegetation or any other markers of life to be seen, just dark and dusty clouds shrouding the spacecraft's departure. It sets the tone for a desert(ed) landscape shaped by absence, loss and ruin. Palestine, or other nominations of place, are never mentioned, yet the artists' employment of biblical motifs throughout the work, as well as Palestinian iconography, signals that Palestine remains at the heart of this narrative. Yet the argument propelled in the work is not so much about claiming a nation state but, rather, about acknowledging and restoring historical presence by undoing systemic erasure.

Figure 4.1. Larissa Sansour and Søren Lind, *In the Future They Ate from the Finest Porcelain*, 2016. HD video, 29'. Video still. Image courtesy the artists.

Nur Masalha observes how 'Zionist methods have not only dispossessed the Palestinians of their own land; they have also attempted to deprive Palestinians of their voice and their knowledge of their own history'.[21] Not only does *In the Future* attempt to

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[19] In his essay "The Future as Disruption", Jameson cites Habermas's concept of 'the future as *disruption* (*Beunruhigung*) of the present'; Jameson, 228. In Sansour's work, the present disrupts the past for the future.
[20] For a discussion on Zionist ideology of a Biblical Holy Land, see for a seminal text, W.J.T. Mitchell, "Holy Landscape: Israel, Palestine, and the American Wilderness," *Critical Inquiry* 26, no. 2 (2000): 193–222. Also see, Eyal Weizman, *Hollow Land. Israel's Architecture of Occupation* (London: Verso Books, 2007), 136–37; Basem L. Ra'ad, *Hidden Histories: Palestine and the Eastern Mediterranean* (London: Pluto Press, 2010), 15–67; Nur Masalha, *The Palestine Nakba. Decolonising History, Narrating the Subaltern, Reclaiming Memory* (London and New York: Zed Books, 2012), 88–134;
[21] Masalha, *The Palestine Nakba. Decolonising History, Narrating the Subaltern, Reclaiming Memory*, 89.

repair this historical lacuna, it also shows that the history of Palestine and its inhabitants has been one of continuous colonisation, with Ottoman, British and now Israeli rule as the most recent examples.[22] Throughout the course of the video, Sansour and Lind populate the desolate landscape with archival images from the Library of Congress and UNRWA, which show, amongst others, Ottoman soldiers, British Mandate soldiers, Jewish Hagana soldiers, Israeli soldiers, Palestinian Bedouin, a Samaritan from the turn of the previous century, Palestinians in traditional dress from the early 1900s, Palestinian middle class men and women, religious figures and Palestinian refugees (Fig.4.2.). While this establishes a colonial timeline, it equally visualises and establishes Palestinian habitation and identity, something Zionist biblical archaeology has sought to counter in the interest of establishing an exclusive national inheritance for Jews in Palestine and thus legitimising a Jewish 'return' to an ancestral homeland.[23] The protagonist of *In the Future*, who calls herself a 'narrative terrorist', wants to reverse this cultural, geographical and topographical exclusivity by burying *keffiyeh*-patterned crockery in the landscape, so that future archaeologists will study the presence of her people. 'We are depositing facts in the ground for future archaeologists to excavate. These facts will confirm the existence of this people we are positing. And in turn support any descendants' claims to the land, de facto creating a nation.'[24] In a way, it is the *ou-topos*, the indistinct no-place of the landscape, allowing Sansour and Lind to remake it. Simultaneously, the dark and ominous scenery, with its outstretched desert plains and gathering clouds, takes the site out of time, so that it speculatively speaks to what came before and has been effaced, as well as to what is to come. The ruin, then, becomes an archive of place and of history of the past and of the future —a premonition of what is yet to be. For Gil Z. Hochberg, 'the archive' is imprinted on every frame of the film, causing a visual anachronism that 'coupled with the futuristic

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[22] Basem Ra'ad notes in this context: '[b]oth the land and the people have been subjected to continuous colonization from ancient times to the present, from rule by ancient Egypt and other later empires to the more recent Ottoman, then British, and now Zionist occupation.' Ra'ad, *Hidden Histories: Palestine and the Eastern Mediterranean*, 10.
[23] See Masalha, *The Palestine Nakba. Decolonising History, Narrating the Subaltern, Reclaiming Memory*, 91.
[24] Larissa Sansour and Søren Lind, *In the Future They Ate from the Finest Porcelain* (2015), HD video. All subsequent quotations from the video follow this citation.

aesthetics of sci-fi, is responsible for the sense of temporal and spatial disorientation the film generates'.[25]

Traditionally, the motif of *al-atlal* evokes longing and remembers former people and places. In the words of Seigneurie, '[t]o yearn for what is absent generates parameters for action in the present and hope for the future'.[26] In the video, history is indeed remembered, and the resistance leader's yearning for restorative justice drives the work – but the issue at hand is first and foremost the protagonist's action to artificially create a utopia in the past so there can be a possibility for reparation in the future. That this is done through the weaponisation of archaeology and a landscape of ruin is highly symbolic. For more than a century, and particularly since the foundation of the state of Israel, biblical archaeology has been intertwined with colonial overtones and should be viewed as a contentious field of study rather than an impartial scientific one. The ambition to prove Jews as the original and sole inheritors of Palestine has resulted in the erasure of Palestinian toponymy. As Eyal Weizman observes, '[d]igging for the ruins of ancient Jewish archaeology thus produce[s] a layer of contemporary Palestinian ruin'.[27] The 'contemporary Palestinian ruin' Weizman refers to encompasses a denial of history, presence and place, and is perhaps most emphatically illustrated by the renaming of Palestinian natural geography such as rivers, mountains, springs and valleys, and the built environment of villages, towns and cities, with Hebrew and often biblical-sounding names. Since the late Ottoman period, Palestinian place names have been disappearing from the map and Hebraised, a practice of remapping that accelerated from the 1920s onwards with the establishment of the Jewish National Fund and which has been continued since 1949 by the Israeli Government Names Committee.[28] *In the Future* flips this dynamic by completely omitting any references to individual place names, therefore tactically unmapping the territory and creating the opportunity to shape

[25] Gil Z. Hochberg, "Suspended between Past and Future: Larissa Sansour's Sci-Fi Archaeological Archive in the Past-Future Tense," in *Becoming Palestine. Toward an Archival Imagination of the Future* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2021), 79–80.
[26] Seigneurie, "Anointing with Rubble : Ruins in the Lebanese War Novel," 54.
[27] Eyal Weizman, "The Vertical Apartheid," *Open Democracy*, July 13, 2017, https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/north-africa-west-asia/vertical-apartheid/ [last accessed 26.6.01].
[28] See Nur Masalha, "Settler-Colonialism, Memoricide and Indigenous Toponymic Memory: The Appropriation of Palestinian Place Names by the Israeli State," *Journal of Holy Land and Palestine Studies* 14, no. 1 (2015): 3–57. Also see Ilan Pappé, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2007), 225–34. The renaming and unmapping of Palestinian sites is also one of the subjects of Israeli filmmaker Eyal Sivan and Palestinian filmmaker Michel Khleifi's iconic 2003 documentary *Route 181*.

and control a new narrative. The spaceships drop their cargo of crockery from the air for the protagonist and her team to inter, causing a flood of crockery that rains down ‘like a porcelain monsoon, like a biblical plague’. The landscape is strewn with shards of crockery amidst the pebbles and rocks. This constitutes a painful reminder of loss, but also an ironic reversal of one of Israel’s founding myths of ‘making the desert bloom’.[29] Here, the crockery bombs are not intended to green the desert; rather, they are there to change the narrative from the ground up. Instead of establishing a sacred geography or mythologised (biblical) homeland, the artists keep the story modestly pedestrian: refined tableware is the defining feature of this fictional civilisation. The fact that this narrative literally needs digging up underlines that not only is the excavation of the landscape weaponised as a narrative tool but fiction itself is weaponised in order to create an imaginary in the past for the future.

Figure 4.2. Larissa Sansour and Søren Lind, *In the Future They Ate from the Finest Porcelain*, 2016. HD video, 29’. Video still. Image courtesy the artists.

Fiction, and more specifically sf, is used to advance a narrative recuperation from the ruin of an erased past. In this process the past is commemorated, but it is also reinvented. The video’s audio is structured as a dialogue between the resistance leader and her therapist/interrogator, in which certain sequences seem on repeat and the lines between reality and fantasy seem blurred. ‘Have we had this conversation before?’ the protagonist keeps asking. The conversation with the therapist addresses the planting of artefacts underground and how fiction affects history and political reality. The death of the protagonist’s sister, killed at the age of nine by the authorities, forms a narrative and visual

[29] See Masalha, *The Palestine Nakba. Decolonising History, Narrating the Subaltern, Reclaiming Memory*, 149.

thread throughout the work and offers a personal twist to a collective plight. We see flashbacks of the protagonist and her sister as little girls, dressed in Palestinian national dress or in similar light blue outfits. When dressed in Palestinian garb they are always positioned in the desert landscape in order to emphasise a connection to place. In her detailed study of the desert as a symbolic landscape in Zionist thought and Israeli culture, Yael Zerubavel traces how the desert embodies a host of fluid meanings: a desolate Biblical counter-space that needs to be greened, conquered and settled (by Jews); a primordial site outside of modernity, invested with Orientalist desert mystique; and a natural commodity slated for eco-friendly tourism.[30] The place of Bedouin/Palestinians is either erased or Orientalised, in line with a colonial discourse that if it already acknowledges the native inhabitants can only see them as a dehistoricised part of the natural landscape. In *In the Future*, the unnamed 'rulers' have removed the protagonist and her people from their foundational national narrative and by corollary have severed their bond with the land. As a 'narrative terrorist' her actions are geared towards reclaiming her people's story, paradoxically by offering a fictional one, and securing their place territorially. As such, she counters the rulers' narrative of erasure and atavism, proposing a narrative of sophisticated presence, culture and history instead. The dystopic wasteland she burrows her fiction in therefore has to be seen as a site of trauma, but equally as one of imaginary possibility and a site of utopian future-oriented transformation.

While, for Jameson, the ability to *imagine* possibility encapsulates the transformative utopian impulse, utopian sociologist Ruth Levitas takes this a step further and insists on seeing this imaginary as a hermeneutic to *make* the world otherwise.[31] Drawing on Ernst Bloch, Levitas proposes to 'move from the purely fantastic to the genuinely possible. It is also a move from the potentially fragmentary expression of desire to social holism, a move from speculation to praxis and to the social and political pursuit of a better world.'[32] In their project *Archaeology in Absentia (*2016), which expands on *In the Future*, Sansour and Lind enact such a move and transition from the imaginary to the real. Part sculptural installation, part photography project and part *in situ* archaeological

[30] See Yael Zerubavel, *Desert in the Promised Land* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019).
[31] See Ruth Levitas, *Utopia as Method: The Imaginary Reconstitution of Society* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), xiii. See also Tom Moylan, *Becoming Utopian. The Culture and Politics of Radical Transformation* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), 190–94.
[32] Levitas, *Utopia as Method: The Imaginary Reconstitution of Society*, 6.

intervention, *Archaeology in Absentia* shows, in its photographic part, the documentation of porcelain plates ornamented with a *keffiyeh* pattern, like those in the video, being buried across historical Palestine. This action was undertaken by Lind, who courtesy of his Danish passport could travel without restriction between Israel and the West Bank, a freedom not afforded to Sansour. The sculptural part displays fifteen 20 cm bronze 'crockery bombs' (Fig.4.3.), fashioned after those in the video, resembling opened Fabergé eggs with their cargo — the plates — missing. Engraved on the inside of each bomb capsule are the geographical coordinates, the longitude and latitude, of where the plates have been deposited – ranging from Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Ramallah, Acre, Haifa, Jericho and Jaffa, to Nazareth and the Red Sea. The plates become 'present absentees' (the Israeli legal terminology used for internal refugees after 1948) that have returned home and are awaiting excavation of their presence.[33] Sansour and Lind's direct intervention in the landscape documents the ruin and displacement of the *Nakba*, but also looks past it and into the future. The black and white quality of the photographs and their focus on timeless topographical features such as the sea in Haifa, Jaffa and Tiberias, tie these artefacts to the geography, but also demonstrate how fictions can dissolve into fact (Fig.4.4). A simple map of historical Palestine with red dots indicating the burial locations accompanies the photographs and serves as a reminder of the past when there was no Palestinian archipelago in area A, B or C carving up the West Bank, and Gaza was not sealed off. Other than acknowledging a past in which other histories are at play, this map also looks hopefully to the future towards a day that the divisive territorial lines cutting through the territory might fade and new narratives emerge. Contrary to Robert Duggan's reading of *In the Future*, which concludes that images of the past are blinked out of existence, and the 'apocalyptic tone and vision of destruction weakens the hope that time might provide some sort of redemption, or posthumous vindication,' I propose a less defeatist interpretation.[34] While admittedly rising from dystopia, *In the Future* performs the Jamesonian temporal

[33] As Masalha notes: 'Today almost a quarter of all Palestinian citizens inside Israel are "internal refugees" or "present absentees" (*nifkadim nokhahim* in Hebrew). Inside Israel, after the Nakba, the key stipulation was (as it still is) that it was a state created for Jews; non-Jews, both present and "present absentees", were treated as foreigners in their own homeland, despite being the indigenous inhabitants and formerly resident in the country.' Masalha, *The Palestine Nakba. Decolonising History, Narrating the Subaltern, Reclaiming Memory*, 231.
[34] Robert Duggan, "Larissa Sansour and the Palestinian Ruins of the Future," *Journal for Cultural Research* 24, no. 1 (2020): 81.

rupture and the worldbuilding agency of Levitas, allowing it to reclaim an imaginary for the future as well as for a utopian charge to spark.

Figure 4.3. Larissa Sansour and Søren Lind, *Archaeology in Absentia*, 2016. 15 bronze and brushed steel munition replicas. 20 cm x 10 cm. Installation detail. Image courtesy the artists.

Figure 4.4. Larissa Sansour and Søren Lind, *Archaeology in Absentia*, Jaffa 5, 2016. Digital print on baryta paper. 30 cm x 40 cm. Image courtesy the artists.

Premonitions and Ruins of a Revolution: Maha Maamoun's *2026* (2010)

In the Future transforms the desert from a site of erasure to one of possibility. Egyptian artist Maha Maamoun's dystopian sf video *2026* (2010) turns this around. It deals with Egypt's aggressive urban development outside its existing urban centres, in which the ruination of the desert plains around Giza signals a theft of the future. In Maamoun's work, revolutionary potential has to be sought outside of the work and away from a defined topography. According to sociologist Asef Bayat, contemporary Cairo is a neoliberal city driven by market-oriented urbanity: 'it is a city shaped more by the logic of market than the needs of its inhabitants, responding more to individual or corporate interests than public concerns. It is marked by an increasing deregulation and privatization of production, collective consumption, and urban space.'[35] This is echoed by Ali Alraouf, who notes that for the past forty years the Egyptian government has focused its urban and housing policy on the elites, leaving seventy percent of the Cairenes to live in illegally built slums known as *ashwa'iyyat*.[36] '[A]rchitecture and urban planning [are] tools for making and shaping political identity', writes Alraouf.[37] In this context, President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi's recent move to bring four sphinxes from the Karnak Temple in Luxor and a 3,500-year-old obelisk from the Nile Delta Egyptian to adorn Tahrir Square, the emblematic site of the 2011 revolution, is as much proof of al-Sisi solidifying his rule as it is an attempt to undo the site of its contemporary revolutionary history. In addition, the multi-million-dollar spectacle al-Sisi orchestrated to transport twenty-two ancient royal mummies across Cairo, from the Egyptian Museum to the newly built National Museum of Egyptian Civilisation, further anchors al-Sisi's vision for a new Egyptian identity in an ancient and glorified past, rather than in one of political and urban dissent. Ancient antiquities can be mined for internationally funded heritage projects, neoliberal real estate development projects, and tourism. Revolution, however, is seen as a source of instability.[38]

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[35] Bayat, *Revolution without Revolutionaries. Making Sense of the Arab Spring*, 94.

[36] See Ali Alraouf, "Phantasmagoric Urbanism: Exploiting the Culture of Image in Post-Revolution Egypt," *Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review* 31, no. 1 (2019): 76–77.

[37] Alraouf, 72.

[38] Coats of paint have erased all revolutionary graffiti around Tahrir Square, which now can easily be sealed off from any type of traffic; pedestrians are regularly stopped for 'security reasons'. See Ruth Michaelson, "Egyptologists attach transfer of sphinxes to Tahrir Square," *The Guardian*, 7 May, 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/may/07/egyptologists-pan-transfer-of-sphinxes-to-tahrir-square. For the parade held on 3 April 2021, see https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/4/3/egypt-parades-royal-mummies-in-show-of-pharaonic-heritage. [last accessed 26.06.2021]. President al-Sisi has promoted an official

W.J.T. Mitchell writes how the 'empty spaces' of the 2011 uprisings and the Occupy movement — the squares, plazas and open urban spaces — became monuments to the revolution. He cautions that nothing, however, guarantees those spaces will remain democratic or revolutionary.[39] Al-Sisi's efforts to undo the monumental revolutionary image of Tahrir Square, or the Bahraini government's demolition of Pearl Roundabout, the site of the Bahraini uprising, are cases in point.[40] These empty spaces might now have been transformed into spaces of defeat, but can they still be read as 'a sign of potentiality, possibility, and plenitude, a democracy not yet realized'?[41] With this in mind I turn to Maha Maamoun's video *2026*. Cairo-based Maamoun combines her artistic work with curatorial projects and a publishing practice.[42] In her photographic and video-based work, she is predominantly interested in exploring the circulation of images in Egyptian popular culture and the role of national symbols and iconography. For over a decade she has looked at how the Pyramids of Giza operate as a visual and literary trope in Egyptian cultural production, and her short black and white video *2026* is no exception. Significant for my discussion here, however, is how, on the one hand, the work anticipates the 2011 uprising and identifies its underlying causes, and, on the other, informed by the hindsight of the past post-revolutionary decade, Egypt's current socio-political predicament and al-Sisi's aggressive urban mega-projects, it also predicts Egypt's ongoing spatial and ideological ruination.

In *2026* Maamoun unites two dystopian texts: she restages the laboratory scenes of French writer and media artist Chris Marker's iconic 1962 sf film *La Jetée* and combines this with an Arabic-spoken voiceover based on an excerpt of Mahmoud Othman's Egyptian sf novel *Revolution 2053, the Beginning* (2007). Prior to 2011, a handful of Egyptian dystopian sf novels were published, appearing to have prophesied the Arab Spring; these include Mahmoud Othman's novel and its sequel *Revolution 2053, the Beginning…Another Time*

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campaign for a 'new Egyptian identity', which is Pharaonic, Greco-Roman, Coptic, Islamic, Arab, Mediterranean and African. It goes against the Islamist identity linked with the Muslim Brotherhood and Mohammed Morsi's short presidency after Mubarak's ousting. See Ofir Winter and Assaf Shiloah, "Egypt's Identity during the El-Sisi Era: Profile of the 'New Egyptian,'" *Strategic Assessment* | 21, no. 4 (2019): 65–78.

[39] W. J.T. Mitchell, "Image, Space, Revolution: The Arts of Occupation," *Critical Inquiry* 39, no. 1 (2012): 17–21.

[40] For a detailed analysis of the destruction of Pearl Roundabout in Bahrain during the Arab Spring, see Amal Khalaf, "The Many Afterlives of Lulu: The Story of Bahrain's Pearl Roundabout," *Ibraaz*, 28 February, 2013, https://www.ibraaz.org/essays/56/ [last accessed 1.7.2021].

[41] Mitchell, "Image, Space, Revolution: The Arts of Occupation," 21.

[42] Maamoun served as a curator for PhotoCairo3 (2005), Meeting Points 5 (2007), and, since 2017, is co-curator of Forum Expanded of the Berlin International Film Festival. Together with Jordanian artist Alaa Younis, she founded the Arabic publishing project *Kayfa-ta* in 2012, see https://kayfa-ta.com/.

(2009*)*, Ahmed Khaled Towfik's *Utopia* (2008)*,* and Mustafa al-Husayni's *2025. The Last Call* (2011).[43] Without going into much detail here, suffice to say that the spatial politics in these novels depict an Egypt rife with class divisions and segregation, in which the gated communities of the few stand in stark contrast to the destitution of the many. The inhabitants of the luxurious compounds on the outskirts of Cairo enjoy protection and civic rights, while the hungry masses in the crumbling, decrepit capital live in privation and are disciplined by a brutal apparatus of surveillance and oppression. The dystopias described in these texts are not terribly far-fetched when looking at Egypt's urban development policy of the past decades. Since President Anwar Sadat's 1970s 'open door' policy (*infitah*), which marked Egypt's entry into neoliberalism by encouraging foreign and private investment and international trade, urban development shifted away from the overcrowded existing urban centres and towards new desert cities. While originally these new desert cities were intended to house the urban poor, since the 1990s, under President Hosni Mubarak, the desert cities outside of Cairo have been developed as prime real estate by private investment companies to service the wealthy elites, leaving the majority of Egyptians to dwell in the overcrowded inner city and informal housing.[44]

Figure 4.5. Maha Maamoun, *2026*, 2010. Black and white video, 9'. Video still. Image courtesy the artist.

[43] For a discussion on the novels of Towfik and al-Husayni, see Marek M. Dziekan, "Egypt: Revolution 2011 / 2025. Dystopia, Utopia, and Political Fiction in Mustafa Al-Husayni's Novel 2025 An-Nida Al-Akhir," *International Studies. Interdisciplinary Political and Cultural Journal* 21, no. 1 (2018): 99–112.
[44] See Deena Khalil, "Egypt's Conflicting Urbanism. Informality versus New Desert Developments," in *Routledge Handbook on Contemporary Egypt*, ed. Robert Springborg et al. (London and New York: Routledge, 2021), 348–72.

The extent to which political power and urban planning were, and continue to be, emphatically intertwined in Egypt is perhaps best exemplified by Gamal Mubarak and his business partners' involvement with Cairo 2050, the urban masterplan for Cairo launched in 2008. Gamal Mubarak was slated to succeed his father and envisioned Cairo becoming a new Dubai with high-rises dotting the skyline and an abundance of high-end hotels and shopping malls that would maximise profit. This would have necessitated the expropriation of large areas of the *ashwa'iyyat* and the relocation of its inhabitants.[45] An architect by training, Mahmoud Othman was horrified by this and other urban plans, and in his novel *Revolution 2053* he extrapolates the regime's vision for Greater Cairo, foreseeing a revolution in 2053 and an end to a hereditary presidential dynasty, a thinly veiled reference to the Mubarak family. For Othman, situating part of his novel around the Giza Pyramids reiterates how these great feats of ancient architecture are also 'signs of extreme totalitarianism'.[46]

The 2011 Egyptian revolution was marked by an incessant stream of images of protestors in the square, broadcast on news channels and shared on social media platforms. *2026*, however, is defined by its visual sparseness. The loss of the image signifies a greater loss here, namely the loss of space and by corollary the loss of a horizon of possibility. Only a few still image montages drive Maamoun's video (Fig.4.5.), in keeping with the original aesthetic of Marker's *La Jetée*, which is almost entirely composed of still black and white images. *La Jetée* tells the dramatic story of a man who, after the nuclear apocalypse of World War III, is tasked with time travelling to the past and the future to save humanity.[47] As he traverses back and forth in time, his uninhabitable present, where he survives in an underground camp, is superseded by the past and the future. The present seems to be an *ou-topos*, a no place, characterised by the painful time travel experiments scientists carry out on the camp prisoners. The protagonist is haunted by an image that has accompanied him since childhood – only, towards the end of the film we learn that this image is the witnessing of his own death. Echoes of World War II and the Holocaust ring strongly

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[45] See Frederick Deknatel, "The Revolution Added Two Years: On Cairo," *The Nation*, 31 December, 2012, https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/revolution-added-two-years-cairo/ and "Cairo 2050 Revisited: A Planning Logic," *Tadamun*, 14 July, 2014, http://www.tadamun.co/introduction-cairo-2050-planning-logic/?lang=en#.YNnM70gzbaY [last accessed 28.06.2021].

[46] Mahmoud Othman, "Egypt's Square Epic Tale. From Antiquity to 2053," *The Funambulist. Politics of Space and Bodies* 24, no. Futurisms (2019): 36.

[47] Chris Marker, *La Jetée*, Argos Films, 1962, film. All subsequent quotations from the film follow this citation.

throughout *La Jetée*: the camp prisoners inhabit what Giorgio Agamben has theorised as the 'state of exception', in which the rule of law is suspended. The inmates are expendable lab rats stripped to 'bare life', devoid of any legal or political rights, at the service and mercy of the camp's scientists.[48] This stands in stark contrast to how Marker treats the viewer to a catalogue of images of Paris before the war, in which bustling city life in parks and museums, as well as the intimate photos of the love story propelling the plot, suggest a 'qualified life' or good life (*eu zēn*).[49] Nevertheless, this is all presented as precarious and offset by images showing the debris and ruin of the war. The viewer never gets too comfortable. 'Images pass in time, as it were, but they also come back.'[50] There is none of that in *2026*. Nor is there a backstory to Maamoun's protagonist; rather, his function seems solely to open a portal in time and offer the viewer a glimpse into a highly technologised and exclusionary future.

Maamoun only restages the underground time travel experiments with the leading character drugged out in the laboratory. Here, 'bare life' seems to be relayed to what the protagonist witnesses in the future, rather than what he experiences himself. Marker's protagonist finds a better place, a *eu-topia*, when time travelling to a Paris of the past.[51] 'A peacetime bedroom, a real bedroom. Real children. Real birds. Real cats. Real graves.' Maamoun's protagonist, however, encounters a future around the Pyramid plains where little is real, and everything seems artificial and fabricated. This meticulously constructed artifice constitutes the sf 'novum', not only because it has an estranging otherworldly

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[48] Agamben identifies 'bare life' as life reduced to *zoë*, that is 'the simple fact of living, common to all living beings', which is different from *bios*, which indicates 'the form or way of living proper to an individual or group'; in other words, political existence in a social structure. See Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer. Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), i. Agamben has, since the COVID-19 pandemic, fallen into disrepute following his questionable stance on vaccine mandates and the propagation of populist conspiracy theories, including labelling COVID a hoax. This sheds a new — and dark — light on his theories of biopolitics. For a compelling riposte, see Benjamin Bratton, "Agamben WTF, or How Philosophy Failed the Pandemic," *Verso Books Blog*, July 28, 2021, https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/5125-agamben-wtf-or-how-philosophy-failed-the-pandemic. For a detailed account of how Agamben's treatment of the pandemic and distrust in medical authorities taints his intellectual legacy, see Adam Kotsko, "What Happened to Giorgio Agamben?," *Slate*, February 20, 2022, https://slate.com/human-interest/2022/02/giorgio-agamben-covid-holocaust-comparison-right-wing-protest.html [both last accessed 21.2.2022].

[49] See Agamben, *Homo Sacer. Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, 3 and 66.

[50] Janet Harbord, *La Jetée* (London: Afterall Books, 2009), 62.

[51] Lyman Tower Sargent defines *eu-topia*, or positive eutopia, as a 'non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as considerably better than the society in which that reader lived.' Sargent, "The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited," 9.

quality but also because it turns this ancient landscape into something highly futuristic. Yet simultaneously, and crucially for this discussion, it also points to the ruin:

> Something's not right. The background of the Pyramids looks natural but the side opposite the Pyramids doesn't look natural. There's a strange line in the ground. A Wall. A thin wall surrounds the whole area. It's not a normal wall, it's a gigantic screen projecting a virtual image of the extension of the Pyramid plateau and hiding the view of the crumbling old city.[52]

Of significance is that the simulated green expanses around the Pyramids are not only meant to block the gated community from viewing the squalor of Cairo but, perhaps more importantly, they are also there to prevent any other visual signification for this empty space. The Pyramid plateau can therefore not become Mitchell's sign of potentiality or possibility. The virtual greenwashing of the space has subsumed, if not pre-empted, any other form of oppositional image production, which in and by itself should be viewed as an instance of ruination. Maamoun's protagonist witnesses: 'There's nothing but green expanses, immaculately designed. There's no trace of informal settlements [*ashwa'iyyat*], like they've been wiped out of existence. Endless expanses of green for as far as the eye can see.' If, as Mitchell holds, '[i]mages can only come alive against a background. Every figure requires a ground, a landscape, or an environment in which it can appear and move', then here the landscape has excluded any type of movement.[53] A landscape devoid of imagery seems a contradiction, in particular when in most of sf the representation of landscape is, as Timberlake notes, excessive — whether this is through copious description in its literary form or through CGI in its visual form.[54] However, it is precisely in the disconnect between Othman's detailed description of hi-tech glass architectural marvel and luxury, and the loss of the image, manifested in the 'crumbling old city', where ruination can be located.

The Pyramid plateau of *2026* is, as the narrator describes, geared exclusively towards leisure: its clean and shiny shopping malls, restaurants, hotels, celebration halls and nightclubs are untouched by the dust from the plateau. Moreover, these venues are frequented by patrons who look European or Asian, but not Arab or Egyptian. In other words, the Pyramids and the Sphinx feature merely as background props for conspicuous

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[52] Maha Maamoun, *2026*, 2010, video. All subsequent quotations from the film follow this citation.
[53] Mitchell, "Image, Space, Revolution: The Arts of Occupation," 17.
[54] Timberlake, *Landscape and the Science Fiction Imaginary*, 15–16.

consumption; their historical and national significance comes undone. Wealth is accumulated and flaunted in these expat compounds, while the indigenous population is shut out. The sf trope of the racialised colony in which whiteness is privileged is invoked, creating a hierarchy between populations.[55] Othman's narrative echoes the blueprints of the mega-projects planned in the desert, such as the one-billion-dollar Grand Egyptian Museum (also known as the Giza Museum), which is to be the largest archaeological museum in the world, and other endeavours like Egypt's multi-billion-dollar new administrative capital east of Cairo. Similar to what Maamoun's protagonist narrates, most promotional films of these mega-projects only show blonde visitors and city dwellers; Egyptians are simply scripted out.[56] If *2026* tells a story of bleak and exclusionary futurity, dispossession, rampant gentrification and corporatisation of the state, then how can the work be considered as both a premonition for the 2011 uprising as well as, reading retrospectively, a critical dystopia that offers a horizon of hope post-2011?[57] Answers can be found in the closing scene and in the credit roll.

The video's final scene is one in which the simulacrum of the projected green image is shattered: an armoured car speeds towards the gated community, chased by a group of emaciated children dressed in rags. The carefully designed and policed image of the utopian Pyramid plains cracks. Moreover, the surveillance towers and control rooms that manage and maintain this airbrushed green image come into the fore and further underline the image's construct. Despite the desperation and echoes of 'bare life' that accompany this scene, it still carves out a visible presence for those who have been forcibly excluded from this empty space and the state's ideation of it. These famished children have no place in the pristine and polished scenery, and yet they break through the image, making the inequity between them and the rich expats all the starker. Moreover, it sets up a binary between the simulated utopian green expanses of the Pyramids and the dystopic living conditions in the decaying city. This opposition is now *seen*, and the suspension of disbelief of the landscape

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[55] Scholars such as John Rieder and Sherryl Vint have pointed to the constitutive relationship between colonialism and sf. See John Rieder, *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2008); and Vint, *Science Fiction*, 57–74.
[56] See Alraouf, "Phantasmagoric Urbanism: Exploiting the Culture of Image in Post-Revolution Egypt," 81. The Grand Egyptian Museum is set to open in November 2022, see https://grandegyptianmuseum.org/.
[57] Tom Moylan and Rafaella Baccolini consider 'critical dystopias' texts that 'maintain a utopian impulse.' Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan, eds., *Dark Horizons. Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination* (London: Routledge, 2003), 7.

simulation fractures because of it: 'A finely dressed man and woman step out of the car. The wall facing them is glass, opening onto the Pyramids plateau. As for the other three walls, they are like the other wall: screening images of fabulous natural landscapes.'

2026 demonstrates how destructive gentrification policies, sanctioned and put forward by the state, co-opt utopian discourse to the effect that the capitalist 'process by which people and cultural forms are made into commodities has destroyed the ability of humanity to distinguish the real from the unreal, the rational from the irrational'.[58] The explicit ruin this effectuates is not exceptional to Egypt and is common in an era in which neoliberal states, and their visions of the future, cater to an elite and forsake most of their population. In postcolonial contexts, and in Egypt's totalitarian regime, this is exacerbated. *2026*'s paucity of images reinforces what the state wishes to be hidden and unseen (poverty, misery, suffering) because once something is made visible and noticed, counter-images, counter-ideologies and counter-subjectivities beyond the state of exception might be formulated. To put it in Lefebvrian spatial terms, once the 'conceived space' – that is, in this case, the space as originally planned by the state and real estate developers for specific use by specific groups – becomes a 'counter-space', in other words a space used differently than intended, a political and social transformation can occur.[59] Moreover, a revolution is only successful in Henri Lefebvre's view 'if it results, through its counter-space, in the production of a new conceived space'.[60] Put differently, social dreaming is spatial dreaming. For a totalitarian state, keen on curating the future in its own image, as well as remaking the past, any form of dissent is perceived as a threat. Al-Sisi's clampdown on public/empty space, on media and image production, is again illustrative and shows how spatial politics, national ambition and futurity are inextricably intertwined. Stoler observes how national mega-projects tend to erase certain histories and make futurity a matter of privilege:

> Large-scale ruin-making takes resources and planning that may involve forced removal of populations and new zones of uninhabitable space, reassigning inhabitable space and dictating how people are supposed to live in them. As such, these ruin-making endeavours are typically state projects, ones that are often

[58] Moylan, "The Locus of Hope: Utopia versus Ideology," 163.
[59] For a discussion of Henri Lefebvre's conception of conceived space, counter-space, perceived space and lived space vis-à-vis the Arab Spring, see Wladimir Riphagen and Robbert A. F. L. Woltering, "Tales of a Square: The Production and Transformation of Political Space in the Egyptian (Counter)Revolution," *Arab Studies Quarterly* 40, no. 2 (2018): 117–33.
[60] Riphagen and Woltering, 119.

> strategic, nation building, and politically charged. […] Ruins draw on residual pasts to make claims on futures. But they can also create a sense of irretrievability or of futures lost.[61]

As such, the children's piercing of the picture-perfect image propagated by the state is a first step towards acknowledging injustice and a future lost. This creates an opening for imaging and imagining empty space otherwise, and willing a need for change. Curiously, the project's horizon of hope lies outside the actual work, in the end credits. Here, Maamoun dedicates a full frame to citing the sources of the two dystopian texts in Arabic and English, and it is here that Othman's dystopian excerpt also becomes revolutionary once the novel's full title is mentioned: *The Revolution of 2053: The Beginning*. In 2010, given the restive political situation in Egypt, a revolution could have taken place in the future, though Othman admits he never imagined something he had predicted for 2053 would happen in 2011.[62] Now, a decade after a failed revolution, Maamoun's video still holds potential as a revolutionary text that, through ruination, projects towards the future. Whereas in Sansour's *In the Future*, the revolutionary gesture lies in the protagonist/activist embedding a version of the future in the landscape, there to be dug up and — hopefully — interpreted according to its pre-constructed framework, Maamoun's work leaves matters more open-ended. Although *La Jetée* ends in death and Othmans' textual excerpt in disaster, *2026* seems to ask the viewer to stand by the ruins, acknowledge the wreckage unfolding, and then look beyond it. In a sense, the emphasis on the end credits in *2026* is a quest to seek a horizon of possibility where at first glance there seems none. This quest for potential also forms the backbone of Larissa Sansour's video, *Nation Estate* (2012).

Ruins of Verticality in Larissa Sansour's *Nation Estate* (2012)

In Larissa Sansour's video *Nation Estate*, the pursuit of a different emancipatory future intertwines with ruination and is writ across a science fictional Israeli/Palestinian landscape that simultaneously looks recognisably iconic and strangely otherworldly. This interplay between the familiar and unfamiliar is mainly found in how Sansour treats dystopic spatial elements of the Israeli Occupation, such as its optical planning and politics

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[61] Stoler, "Introduction 'The Rot Remains': From Ruins to Ruination," 21.

[62] See Mahmoud Othman, "The Revolution Will Not Be Fictionalized," *Bidoun* 25, no. Summer (2011), https://www.bidoun.org/articles/the-revolution-will-not-be-fictionalized [last accessed 7.7.2021].

of systemic spatial segregation, and offsets it with utopian desires of a Palestinian nation state and geo-social freedom of movement. The video relies heavily on tropes of architectural verticality and mobility, bringing together, on the one hand, a sf tradition that highlights social and class inequalities through verticalised cityscapes, with J.G. Ballard's *Highrise* (1975) an oft-cited example, and, on the other hand, the colonial and spatial realities of Palestine's fragmented and occupied landscape, which Eyal Weizman has conceptualised as 'the politics of verticality'.[63] I touch briefly on the latter in the previous chapter, in the section on *The Novel of Nonel and Vovel*. Israeli settlements are organised as segregated enclaves perched on Palestinian hilltops and accessible to settlers by a system of bypass roads that break up the contiguity of Palestinian territory through barriers, walls and checkpoints. Water, ores and other valuable resources are thus placed directly under Israel's control. For Weizman, this 'territorial architecture has hardened into a permanent mechanism of separation and control. Verticality has become a form of apartheid. The word should in fact be synonymous with it.'[64] In *Nation Estate*, the whole Palestinian population is housed in a luxury skyscraper on the West Bank side of the Separation Wall. In the opening scene, the protagonist, played by Sansour, travels on the Amman Express bullet train to the Nation Estate. Checkpoints and the arduous Israeli-controlled, Jordanian-Palestinian border crossings, as between Allenby Bridge and the West Bank, seem a thing of the past as she effortlessly passes through the train terminal and checks into the building via biometric verification: a fingerprint and an iris scan. The whole of Palestine is only an elevator ride away, with each floor home to a different Palestinian town or city, as well as other amenities such as a *souq*, museums, diplomatic missions, NGOs, hospitals, schools and universities, and a department for vertical urban planning. Other scholars have observed

[63] See Lucy Hewitt and Stephen Graham, "Vertical Cities: Representations of Urban Verticality in 20th-Century Science Fiction Literature," *Urban Studies* 52, no. 5 (2015): 923–37. And Stephen Graham, "Vertical Noir: Histories of the Future in Urban Science Fiction," *City* 20, no. 3 (2016): 389–406.

[64] Weizman, "The Vertical Apartheid." The recent reports of Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International condemning Israel as an apartheid state reinforce this. See "A Threshold Crossed. Israeli Authorities and the Crimes of Apartheid and Persecution," *Human Rights Watch*, April 27, 2021, https://www.hrw.org/report/2021/04/27/threshold-crossed/israeli-authorities-and-crimes-apartheid-and-persecution. And "Israel's Apartheid against Palestinians: A Cruel System of Domination and a Crime against Humanity," *Amnesty International*, February 1, 2022, https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/02/israels-apartheid-against-palestinians-a-cruel-system-of-domination-and-a-crime-against-humanity/ [last accessed 1.2.2022]. For more on the analogies between apartheid in South Africa and Israel, see Jon Soske and Sean Jacobs, eds., *Apartheid Israel: The Politics of an Analogy* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2015).

how *Nation Estate* embodies the failures of the Post-Oslo neoliberal state-building project: similar to the Palestinian Authority (PA), the estate provides institutions without an operative sovereign state. Worse, it mimics Israel's management and control of Palestinian bodies via highly technologised border biopolitics.[65] As Chrisoula Lionis's reading of the work points out, '[t]he homeland has in effect been reduced to a simulation of real places, reflecting the current reality of the denial of the Right of Return, increasing land confiscation and restrictions imposed on movement'.[66] Within this context, Sansour looks down from her window onto Jerusalem, and although out of reach — as is the case for most Palestinians today — the politics of verticality are pierced. Rather than being held captive by the scale and commanding presence of the homeland simulacrum, her gaze is directed outwards. Similar to the dynamics in *2026*, there seems to be a reckoning with ruin and a determination to move beyond it.

Contrary to the postcolonial scholar Bill Ashcroft, who considers the Nation Estate a restorative symbol, in which 'the vertical state, is the metaphor for a different, but possible, way of inhabiting Palestine', I argue the opposite and see the Nation Estate as the encapsulation of the spatial and historical ruin of Palestine.[67] This vertical state incarcerates a whole population, severing it from territorial and historical ties, and therefore cannot be interpreted, as Ashcroft does, as a utopian concept. Rather, the high-rise is a prime example of *al-atlal* and the protagonist's engagement with the building an instance of 'standing by the ruins'. The utopian impulse cannot therefore be found within the locus of the building itself, but necessarily has to be located outside of it. This tension is illustrated by the video's opening sequence, in which we find Sansour seated in the train on her way home. Classical utopian narratives usually centre around a visitor who journeys to an elsewhere and experiences a eutopia, or 'good place'. Nation Estate is presented as a 'good' place and as 'home', when in fact it is neither. The defining feature of the opening sequence is the absence of landscape, foregrounding the loss of historical Palestine. Here, too, there are instances of the politics of verticality being fractured: the horizontal movement of the

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[65] See Mary Irene Morrison, "Decolonizing Utopia: Indigenous Knowledge and Dystopian Speculative Fiction," PhD Dissertation, (University of California, Riverside, 2017), https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0f0152f9. And Carol Que, "Mechanisms of a Settler Colonial Architecture in Larissa Sansour 's Nation Estate," *Jerusalem Quarterly* 73 (2017): 124–39. [last accessed 26.6.21].
[66] Lionis, *Laughter in Occupied Palestine. Comedy and Identity in Art and Film*, 106.
[67] Bill Ashcroft, *Utopianism in Postcolonial Literatures* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 60 and 61.

underground train echoes the narrow Palestinian underpasses that have to compete with the Israeli multi-laned bypass highways that connect settlements to each other in the West Bank, as well as the underground tunnel economy of Gaza with Egypt, which accelerated during the Second Intifada (2000-2005) when the Gaza Strip began to be cut off from the outside world.[68] Conversely, Sansour's vertical ascendance using the escalator in the terminal and the elevator upon arrival both wryly recall the utopian Zionist concept of *aliya* (ascendance in Hebrew), the immigration of diaspora Jews to Israel. Sansour plays with the utopian concept of a return to a homeland, only hers turns out to be a hollow ersatz homeland. Jerusalem is in close proximity, and even visible from the Nation Estate, but remains inaccessible because of the Separation Wall. This is not a return to historical Palestine with Jerusalem as its capital, but rather a darkly ironic detour, which establishes the Nation Estate as the ruin of the homeland.

Figure 4.6. Larissa Sansour, *Nation Estate*, 2012. HD video, 9'. Video still. Image courtesy the artist.

Going on the visual cues in the film (Fig.4.6.), a most logical conclusion would be to situate the recuperation of the ruin in Jerusalem, which from the protagonist's window is coveted but never attained. Moreover, the Nation Estate is always defined in opposition to Jerusalem: the towering presence of the high-rise dwarfs the low-rise and horizontal aesthetic of the city; the latter's almost atavistic and timeless presence stands in stark contrast to the hyper-modernity of the skyscraper. The uniform, steel and monochromatic

[68] See Weizman, *Hollow Land. Israel's Architecture of Occupation*, 12 and 254–58.

facade of the estate with its sterile interior geared towards efficiency are very different to Jerusalem's spatial lay-out in the video: organic, sprawled out, surrounded by greenery, with the Dome of the Rock exuberantly piercing the vista with its golden dome. Jerusalem blends in with its environment and is bathed in celestial light. The Nation Estate, however, is enveloped by ominous clouds and stands desolate and disconnected in a non-descript landscape; its polished exterior reflects the cityscape of Jerusalem but it is clearly not part of it. This deliberate deterritorialising and unhoming of the skyscraper from its surroundings is akin to how Israeli settlers push Palestinians from their homes and land. In both *2026* and *Nation Estate*, the severing of ties between the indigenous population and the landscape — between Cairenes and the Pyramid Plateau, and between Palestinians and Jerusalem, respectively — signifies ruin. In *Nation Estate*, the opposition between desired, utopic and authentic landscape and a landscape that is imposed, dystopic and simulated is clearly visualised. Similar to the orchard scenes in *In Vitro*, Sansour plays with Palestinian art historical tropes of landscape, which depict the 'good' place, in this case Jerusalem, as an idyllic, often rural, pre-Nakba Palestine. Art historian Tina Sherwell has noted that the tradition of utopian representations of the homeland in Palestinian art culminated towards the end of the First Intifada in the early 1990s, spearheaded by artists such as Nabil Anani, Sliman Mansour and Vera Tamari: 'The future Palestine was cast in the image of an imaginary past that served to elide the present in a discursive response to the alienation and estrangement of occupation.'[69] Sansour offers two seemingly clashing timelines: an idealised and utopian Palestine of the past symbolised by Jerusalem, versus an artificial and dystopian Palestine of the future signified by the high-rise. While this suggests a temporal and spatial binary, I propose an alternative reading that also frames Jerusalem as a ruin and as such does not place Jerusalem and the high-rise in full opposition to each other, but, rather, as each other's extension.

[69] Tina Sherwell, "Topographies of Identity, Soliloquies of Place," *Third Text*, Vol 20, Issue 3–4 (2006): 432.

Figure 4.7. Larissa Sansour, *Nation Estate – Living the High Life and Nation Estate*, 2012. Poster. 150 cm x 100 cm. HD video, 9'. Installation view. Image courtesy Eye Filmmuseum and the artist.

When exhibiting the video, Sansour often shows a poster alongside the projection (Fig.4.7.), a riff on Franz Krausz's iconic 1936 'Visit Palestine' advertisement, commissioned by the Tourist Development Association of Palestine to encourage Jewish tourism and immigration to Palestine. A glimpse of the poster can also be seen early on in the video in the Nation Estate lobby. Krausz is often seen as one of the founding fathers of graphic design in Israel, but it was not until 1995 when Israeli graphic designer and political activist David Tartakover rediscovered Krausz's poster and reissued it that it began to gain more currency. Later on, when after the Oslo Accords relations between Israelis and Palestinians deteriorated further, versions of the poster started appearing in East Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza as a sign of resistance to the Israeli occupation and as an affirmation of Palestinian identity.[70] Krausz's original design focuses on the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount and the Dome of the Rock. An olive tree prominently frames the image and Jerusalem is surrounded by a pastoral landscape. Signs of modernity, or of people for that matter, are

[70] See Rochelle Davis and Dan Walsh, "'Visit Palestine': A Brief Study of Palestine Posters," *Jerusalem Quarterly*, no. 61 (2015): 47–52. And see for more details on Krausz's original poster: https://www.palestineposterproject.org/poster/visit-palestine-original [last accessed 17.04.2021].

completely left out. While this poster has been reclaimed by Palestinians in recent years, its visual language is firmly rooted, however, within the utopian Zionist lexicon of presenting Palestine as a land without a people and a Biblical homeland for Jews.[71] Sansour keeps Krausz's layout but replaces the 'Visit Palestine' slogan with 'Living the High Life', and instead of the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount there is a view of the Separation Wall and the Nation Estate with only part of the Old City visible.[72] Palestine and Jerusalem are no longer stuck in a sacred Biblical time, but placed in a dystopic future. Rather than viewing Jerusalem as the eternal utopian symbol of Palestinian return, *Nation Estate* invites a reading in which Jerusalem, too, can be considered a ruin. As such, the representation of Jerusalem in Zionist and Palestinian representations alike, with their emphasis on the pastoral and the sacral, portray a utopian simulacrum, which could be interpreted in the vein of the Nation Estate. Jerusalem's skyline has been significantly altered in recent years by a building boom in tower blocks, and its future urban masterplans envision a Jewish city evicted of Palestinians and a destination for Jewish tourism, high-tech and higher education.[73] The reality of Jerusalem for Palestinians, after decades of land expropriation, lacking infrastructure and with discriminatory laws, has been dystopian indeed. Ramallah-based architectural scholar and curator Yazid Anani views Jerusalem as a site of ruination:

> I saw a city of considerable helplessness, a society of internal communal divisions, grounded in distrust, predatory behaviour, and visible aggression. […] I came to understand that Jerusalem to us as Palestinians has been reduced to its historic religious buildings: the Church of Holy Sepulchre, the Dome of the Rock, and al-Aqsa Mosque – so many people I know still mix up the latter two. The history of society and its cultural production is diminished and rendered unimportant against the empty architectural shells of these monumental edifices. We have reached a point of representing Jerusalem in media, posters, art, and political rhetoric as a lifeless

[71] See also Masalha, "Settler-Colonialism, Memoricide and Indigenous Toponymic Memory: The Appropriation of Palestinian Place Names by the Israeli State."

[72] Sansour is not the first artist to reinterpret Krausz's poster. Palestinian artist Amer Shomali designed a 2009 version in which the Separation Wall block most of the view of the Old City of Jerusalem. See http://www.amershomali.info/post-visit-palestine/ [last accessed 19.04.2021].

[73] See Naama Riba, "Tower Boom Threatens to Render City Unrecognizable," *Haaretz*, May 21, 2020, https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium.MAGAZINE-towers-boom-threatens-to-render-jerusalem-unrecognizable-1.8863248. And Nir Hasson and Naama Riba, "Jerusalem to Transform Appearance With Dozens of New Skyscrapers," *Haaretz*, December 18, 2016, https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium.MAGAZINE-jlem-to-transform-appearance-with-dozens-of-new-skyscrapers-1.5474656. For an overview of Israel's urban masterplans for Jerusalem, its use of urban planning as a geopolitical tool, and discriminatory legislation, see Nur Arafeh, "Which Jerusalem? Israel's Little-Known Masterplans, "*Al-Shabaka: The Palestinian Policy Network*, May 31, 2016, https://al-shabaka.org/briefs/jerusalem-israels-little-known-master-plans/ [last accessed 19.04.2020].

place, a set of icons and symbols that purge life from the city and render it empty. Whenever I think about our contemporary representation of Jerusalem, I can't help but recall the work of the Scottish Orientalist painter David Roberts depicting Jerusalem lifeless within a vacant landscape.[74]

Sansour taps into Anani's concerns by explicitly touching on the depletion of Palestinian national symbols in the video. For example, the Palestinian flag is presented ostentatiously and larger than life in the tower's lobby; the key card to her apartment is also a flag, suggesting a (simulated) return to a homeland. The crockery on which she serves her traditional Palestinian dishes, such as *mloukhieh*, *kibbeh* and *marmaon*, is decorated in the *keffiyeh* pattern, the traditional Palestinian headdress and iconic symbol of resistance. Even the olive tree, which grows from her concrete floor, has literally been deracinated from Palestinian soil. All these national symbols have lost their meaning without a viable and sovereign Palestinian state. Palestinian statehood has, as Carol Que aptly notes, been reduced to the state of a relic.[75] To this I would add that these signifiers possess what Renee M. Conray has termed 'ruin resonance', an aesthetic property facilitating the magnetic attraction attributed to ruins in which the emotional and conceptual collide and where the ruin can be accessed in multiple ways (physically, contemplatively, imaginatively) as a result of its incompleteness.[76] The incompleteness here is the lack of a referent: there is no actual geographical and historical Palestine or utopian Jerusalem for these symbols to represent. The Nation Estate can only offer replicas to be consumed by its inhabitants and is therefore a 'compensatory imaginary', which lulls the Nation Estate dwellers into quiescence, rather than spurring them on to dream.[77]

Where, then, to locate a horizon of emancipatory hope in *Nation Estate*? In order to answer this question, it warrants looking more closely at how the actual horizon in the landscape is spatially conceptualised throughout the work. Horizons function as framing devices that open and close the video, albeit in a fragmented way. Upon entering the

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[74] Yazid Anani, "Al-Atlal: Ruins & Recollections," *Jerusalem Quarterly* Spring, no. 69 (2017): 4–5.
[75] Que, "Mechanisms of a Settler Colonial Architecture in Larissa Sansour 's Nation Estate," 135.
[76] Renee M. Conray, "Rust Belt Ruins," in *Philosophical Perspectives on Ruins, Monuments, and Memorials*, ed. Jeanette Bicknell, Jennifer Judkins, and Carolyn Korsmeyer (New York: Routledge, 2020), 123.
[77] Tom Moylan links 'compensatory imaginaries' in uncritical utopias to hyper-capitalist modes of consumption that lock people in unending cycles of purchases, debt and free market mobility. Critical utopias will somehow have to produce an imaginary that will be able to lure people away from this social and capitalist order of consumption. Tom Moylan, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky. Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2000), 29–30.

gargantuan lobby of the building, multiple floor-to-ceiling windows give a view on the Separation Wall and Jerusalem. Here, the horizon is disrupted through the window frames and a fireball sun bursts into beams across the vista. Reading this scene as a sunrise could allude to a new dawn breaking through on the horizon for the Palestinian people in the form of the Nation Estate, but a more dystopian take, and one I veer towards, would hint that with this housing project the sun sets on the horizon of hope for a viable future Palestinian State. Towards the end of the video, Sansour pulls up the blinds in her apartment and peers out on the same scenery while rubbing her pregnant belly.[78] In this scene, the sun looks even more explosive. Dramatically, the image of Sansour looking out of the window and the landscape in front of her dissolve into each other, creating a spectral and palimpsestic effect. The video closes with a full view of the colossal high-rise penetrating the sky. The horizon of hope is not entirely absent in these instances; rather, it is diffracted through a landscape of dispossession and ruin. The loss of Palestine is incorporated with the promise of something new, symbolised by the new life growing in the protagonist's womb. Sansour does, indeed, 'stand by the ruins' while simultaneously inhabiting them. She looks out onto the ruins from ruins.

Figure 4.8. Larissa Sansour, *Nation Estate - Window*, 2012. C-print. 60 cm x 120 cm. Image courtesy the artist.

[78] Mary Irene Morrison discusses the politics of pregnancy in relationship to surveillance, demographics and labour in *Nation Estate*. While a rich topic, a detailed discussion falls outside of the scope of this section. Morrison, "Decolonizing Utopia: Indigenous Knowledge and Dystopian Speculative Fiction," 155.

Yet I suggest that this closing image is hopeful, even if uneasily so. While the birth of a baby is anticipated, the delivery of other new beginnings might not be as straightforward. Nevertheless, the video's ending creates speculation for possibility. This is further articulated in a C-print belonging to the *Nation Estate* photo series that is also part of the project. Titled *Nation Estate – Window* (2012) (Fig.4.8.), it shows an image similar to the closing scene with Sansour looking out of her window onto Jerusalem. However, now it is at night and the window's glass is shattered and cracked, distorting the reflection of the Separation Wall and the Old City. This highlights the weakness of the Nation Estate as a national structure, but also shows the simulacrum of the building and of a utopian Jerusalem coming apart. The image here is literally in ruins and demonstrates Hillary Kilpatrick's point on *al-atlal* that ruins mark a time of transition, as well as foreground the role of memory.[79] The building blocks of hope are acutely fragile on this torn horizon, but from this landscape of ruin a new imaginary must be born; one that can reconcile history with the future and propose new and other signifiers of belonging. In *In Vitro* this conclusion is taken to a radical extreme by proposing to take history and the past out of the equation. *Nation Estate*, however, actively participates in one of the most salient markers of a critical dystopia, namely 'the recovery of history [a]s an important element for the survival of hope'.[80] The vertical formation in *Nation Estate* characterises communal segregation and the loss of historical Palestine; it robs the Palestinian people of their national ambition, replacing the desire for a homeland with a chimera. Acknowledging this loss and restoring it to its rightful historical place creates an opening for new political and topographical imaginaries. The dark and splintered horizon at the heart of the *Window* photograph thus creates what Tom Moylan describes as the 'prismatic utopian optic that can break through this provincial temporality and open people to a range of possibilities out of which critical and transformative visions and practices can emerge'.[81]

In the final section of this chapter, I turn from the futuristic imaginaries of Sansour and Maamoun to one of the most harrowing topographical examples of ruin of our time: the refugee camp. Rather than viewing the refugee camp solely within an Agambian

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[79] Kilpatrick, "Literary Creativity and the Cultural Heritage: The Atlal in Modern Arabic Fiction," 42–44.
[80] Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan, eds., *Dark Horizons. Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination* (London: Routledge, 2003), 115.
[81] Moylan, *Becoming Utopian. The Culture and Politics of Radical Transformation*, 3.

framework as a space of exception where the rule of law is suspended and camp inhabitants are devoid of agency and reduced to biopolitical subjects living bare life, this section suggests that within all the ruin encapsulated in the refugee camp, there are also recuperative agential, political, spatial and cultural processes at play.[82] From these practices, however minor they may be, futurities outside of the purview of the nation state can be forged. Moreover, as Palestinian artist Wafa Hourani's project *Qalandiya 2047 – 2067- 2087* (2009-2009) demonstrates, engendering change and insisting on the unexceptional in the context of protracted suspension is in and by itself an active gesture of dissent against the state of exception. Not only do these changes constitute the 'novum' in the restricted possibilities of camp life, they also produce estrangement and position the camp as a place, a topos, rather than a delocalised non-place.

From Ruins of the Camp to the (Extra)ordinary in the State of Exception: Wafa Hourani's *Qalandiya 2047 – 2067- 2087* (2006-2009)

According to DAAR (Decolonising Architecture Art Research), refugee camps are places that should not exist in the first place because they are testimony to a crime and to political failure.[83] 'To inhabit a refugee camp is to inhabit ruins, to live in a space whose origins lie in a forced displacement. […] Camps are established with the intention of being demolished. They are meant to have no history and no future; they are meant to be forgotten.'[84] In other words, camps are not only exemplary of a political crisis but also manifest a spatial one. While the image of white UNHCR tents and improvised shacks crowding the landscape often accompany news articles as the result of acute disaster, the temporary character of the camps is increasingly challenged. UNHCR admits that many camps have grown to be fully-fledged cities, with their own economies, governance and institutions.[85] This does not take away from the dire circumstances of destitution, which include over-population, impoverishment and the lack of basic infrastructure. Nowhere is this so blatant as in Palestinian refugee camps, where residents have been kept in a state of 'permanent temporariness' for over seven decades since the *Nakba*. In particular, when

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[82] See Agamben, *Homo Sacer. Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, 168–71.
[83] See Sandi Hilal and Alessandro Petti, *Permanent Temporariness* (Stockholm: Art and Theory Publishing, 2018), 261.
[84] Hilal and Petti, 261.
[85] See, for example, "Inside the World's 100 Largest refugee Camps," 2016, https://storymaps.esri.com/stories/2016/refugee-camps/ [last accessed 30.4.2021].

camps are located in the Occupied Territories of the West Bank and Gaza, rather than in neighbouring Jordan or Lebanon, their locus serves, as Hilal and Petti eloquently put it, as 'evidence of the formative act of ruination and dispossession; a twisted mirror image of a lost geography'.[86] Living in a refugee camp in Palestine conveys a similar sentiment to dwelling in the Nation Estate: standing by the ruins of a Palestine lost, whilst living in the ruination of the camp that is a continuous reminder of the loss of the homeland. Another similarity shared with Larissa Sansour's video *Nation Estate* is that ruination in the camp is located in its verticality: refugee camps in Palestine cannot expand horizontally due to the lack of space, and therefore have to grow vertically, further alienating Palestinians from their land of origin.

For Agamben, nation states (in crisis) increasingly draw on the model of the camp to control and discipline certain populations by suspending the juridico-political order and applying spatial arrangements based on forms of incarceration. As such, the camp has become 'the political space of modernity itself'.[87] Yet, in this context, it is important to recognise that 'camps are [also] spaces of longing and belonging, of meaning and memory, and of production and reproduction'.[88] A measure of radical speculation opens up when the emphasis is shifted from how nation states police their borders and govern their populace as if they were camp residents, to the postnational potentialities that might arise from the political and spatial practices within the camp. This is not to idealise camp life in any way, but as Hilal and Petti provocatively put it, 'Palestinian refugee camps are the only space through which we can start to imagine and practice a political community beyond the idea of the nation state. Refugee camps are by definition exceptional spaces, carved out from state sovereignty.'[89] Palestinian refugee camps in Palestine exist in a double outside — there is no Palestinian nation state and camps fall outside of the Palestinian Authority's jurisdiction. Camp residents therefore negotiate a geopolitical reality that is postnational, while still longing for the sovereignty of a viable Palestinian nation state. With refugee

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[86] Hilal and Petti, *Permanent Temporariness*, 172.
[87] Agamben, *Homo Sacer. Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, 174. For a discussion, see also Anthony Downey, "Exemplary Subjects Camps and the Politics of Representation," in *Giorgio Agamben. Legal, Political and Philosophical Perspectives*, ed. Tom Frost (London: Routledge, 2013), 119–40.
[88] Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, "Memories and Meanings of Refugee Camps (and More-than-Camps)," in *Refugee Imaginaries. Research Across the Humanities*, ed. Emma Cox et al. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), 192.
[89] DAAR, Sandi Hilal, and Alessandro Petti, eds., *Refugee Heritage. World Heritage Nomination Dossier* (Stockholm: Art and Theory Publishing, 2021), 109.

populations swelling globally, whether through political strife, climate catastrophe, or a confluence of the two — such a postnational condition seems a likely prospect for many. In these precarious postnational futures, which models of 'survivance' might be gleaned from Palestinian camps and what kind of spatial contingencies do these models hold?[90]

Before turning to a close reading of Wafa Hourani's *Qalandiya 2047-2067-2087*, it is useful to position the importance of the refugee camp in Palestinian collective memory, and the role it plays in political and cultural production. The Palestinian refugee camp is a place in which space and national identity are continuously made and unmade. Inhabitants recreate their place of origin and kinship structures by configuring the camp into specific neighbourhoods that reflect where they came from. Through this tactic, dispossessed communities can still retain a sense of communal cohesion, but this practice also functions as a way to reproduce memory spatially. As the architect and anthropologist Khaldun Bshara observes: 'Space becomes not only a resource that helps refugees live the absurd, but also the medium for creative configurations that lend themselves to steadfastness against forgetfulness.'[91] Put differently, the camp is simultaneously the ruin and the archive of what was lost, and through which (some) history can be recovered. Hilal and Petti see existence in the camp as life in exile and therefore historically meaningful: 'refugeehood [is] not only as a passive production of an absolute form of state violence, but also as a way of recognizing refugees as subjects of history, as makers of history, and not simply victims of it'.[92] The tension between the agency of camp dwellers that Hilal and Petti point to, and the reality of inhabiting ruination and displacement have been richly visualised in Palestinian film and visual art. Revolutionary Palestinian cinema of the late 1960s and 1970s tends to portray the camp as a place of militant, and often armed, resistance in which the figure of the *fedayee* (freedom fighter) or *shahid* (martyr) replaces that of the refugee. But despite all the

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[90] Survivance is a concept developed by Native American writer Gerald Vizenor, which combines the terms 'survival' and 'resistance'. To Vizenor, 'survivance' is a subaltern strategy of storytelling that insists on presence over absence, nihilism and victimhood. Gerald Vizenor, "Aesthetics of Survivance: Literary Theory and Practice," in *Survivance: Narratives of Native Presence*, ed. Gerald Vizenor (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), 1–24.
[91] Khaldun Bshara, "Spatial Memories: The Palestinian Refugee Camps as Time Machine," *Jerusalem Quarterly* 59 (2014): 24.
[92] Hilal and Petti, *Permanent Temporariness*, 247.

hardship and deprivation, these camps are also shown to be places of community and home to their inhabitants.[93]

Camps were at the centre of the Palestinian national struggle. Painter Ismail Shammout (1930-2006), for example, was eighteen when he fled from his hometown of Lydda to Gaza Refugee Camp. His paintings show the destitution of refugee life in the camps, but also depict steadfastness (*sumud*) through revolutionary figures.[94] Historically, refugee camps feature strongly in Palestinian collective memory as sites of trauma, not only as persistent reminders of the *Nakba*, but also of other disasters: 1976 (Tal al-Za'atar), 1982 (Sabra and Shatila), 2002 (Jenin), 2007 (Nahr al-Bared). All these dates reference key events in Palestinian history in which refugee camps are the memory spaces of massacres, destruction, erasures and sieges.[95] These events have hauntingly been put on film in the documentary work of, amongst others, Adnan Madanat, Mustafa Abu Ali, Nabihah Lutfi,

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[93] This is particularly true for the work of the Palestinian Film Unit (PFU), founded in Amman in 1968 by Palestinian filmmakers Mustafa Abu Ali, Sulafah Jad Allah and Hani Jawhariyeh. They were tasked by Fatah, the largest faction of the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) to document, inform and distribute material about the Palestinian cause. Their work radically changed how Palestinians were visually represented. By 1970, the PFU resettled in Beirut and became the Palestinian Cinema Institute; they continued their work until the PLO was expelled from Lebanon in 1982 to Tunis. Most of the PFU/PCI's archive was lost in the Israeli siege of West Beirut in summer 1982. For the depiction of the refugee camp in revolutionary Palestinian film, see Nadia Yaqub, *Palestinian Cinema in the Days of Revolution* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2018), 53–83. Also see Nurith Gertz and George Khleifi, "From Bleeding Memories to Fertile Memories. Palestinian Cinema in the 1970s," *Third Text* 20, no. 3–4 (2006): 465–74.

[94] See Kamal Boullata, *Palestinian Art. From 1850 to the Present* (London: Saqi, 2009), 128–32.

[95] Between 1975 and 1976, the Lebanese Christian Kata'ib militia (Phalange) was responsible for the siege and massacre in the Maslakh-Karantina neighbourhood of East Beirut, which comprised the Palestinian refugee camps of Tal al-Za'atar and Jisr al-Basha. More than 4,000 perished and the camps were razed to the ground. From 16-18 September 1982, the Kata'ib, facilitated by the Israeli Defence forces (IDF), killed between 762 and 3,500 civilians, mostly Palestinians and Lebanese Shiites, to avenge the assassination of their leader, Bashir Gemayel on 14 September. In truth, Gemayel was assassinated by a member of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP). The Battle of Jenin was part of Operation Defensive Shield (March – May 2002), a large-scale operation staged by the IDF during the Second Intifadah to curb suicide bombings. The fighting took place 1-11 April 2002 in the refugee camp of Jenin in the West Bank between the IDF and Palestinian combatants. The Israeli incursion resulted in more than 140 buildings in the camp being bulldozed and more than 200 made uninhabitable, rendering over 4,000 people homeless. Water and sewage infrastructure were also severely damaged. The Nahr al-Bared refugee camp, close to the Lebanese city of Tripoli, became the battle site between the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) and the radical Sunni Islamist group Fatah-al Islam (May-September 2007). The camp sustained heavy shelling, which lead to a severe humanitarian crisis and 27,000 displaced Palestinian refugees. For details on the Tal al-Za'atar and Sabra and Shatila massacres, see Laleh Khalili, "Commemorating Battles and Massacres in the Palestinian Refugee Camps of Lebanon," *American Behavioral Scientist* 51, no. 11 (2008): 1562–74. For the Battle of Jenin, see "Jenin: IDF Military Operations," *Human Rights Watch*, May, 2002, https://www.hrw.org/reports/2002/israel3/. For details on the Battle of Nahr al-Bared and reconstruction of the camp, see "Lebanon's Palestinian Dilemma: The Struggle over Nahr al-Bared," International Crisis Group, March 1, 2012, https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/eastern-mediterranean/lebanon/lebanon-s-palestinian-dilemma-struggle-over-nahr-al-bared [last accessed 4.5.2021].

Mohammed Malas, Mai Masri and Mohammed Bakri. More recently, filmmakers such as Maher Abi Samra and Mahdi Fleifel, who grew up in the refugee camp of Ein al-Hilweh in Lebanon, and the oeuvre of visual artist Jawad al-Malhi, who was born in the Shuafat Refugee Camp in Jerusalem, have portrayed the overcrowdedness, limited prospects, ennui and claustrophobia of the camps in their work. Conversely, working on the actual reconstruction of the Nahr al-Bared camp triggered Palestinian-Jordanian architect and artist Saba Innab to consider the (utopian) possibilities of building and dwelling in temporariness in her practice.[96] Therefore, thinking of refugee camps in the Palestinian context means to contend with an array of complex historical, communal and cultural motifs and tensions, which twist around impulses of ruination and reclamation. It is in this vein that Wafa Hourani's *Qalandiya 2047-2067-2087* (2006-2009) should be approached.

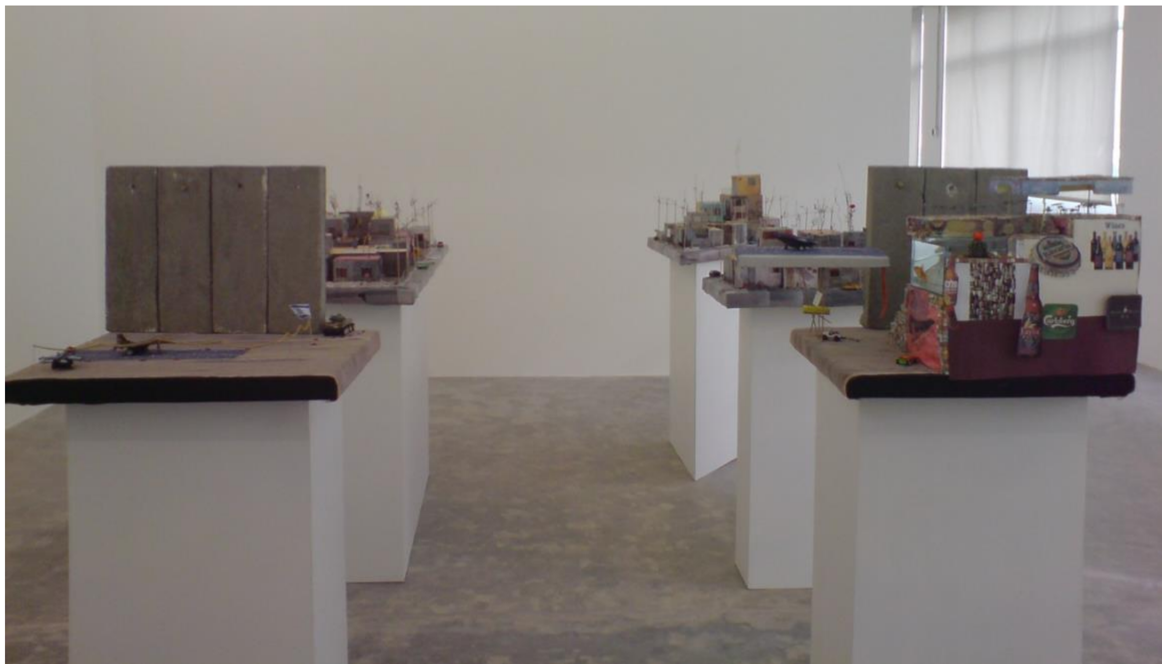

Figure 4.9. Wafa Hourani, *Qalandiya 2047*, 2006. Mixed media installation in five parts. Size variable. Installation view. Image courtesy the artist.

[96] For life in the camps after siege and massacre, see Palestinian film director and film critic Adnan Madanat's *News of Tall al-Zaʿtar, Hill of Steadfastness* (1976); Mutafa Abu Ali, Jean Chamoun, and Adriano Pino's *Tall el Zaatar* (1977); Lebanese-Egyptian filmmaker Nabihah Lutfi's *Because Roots Will Not Die* (1977); Syrian filmmaker Mohammed Malas's *The Dream* (1987); Palestinian filmmaker Mai Masri's *War Generation* (1989) and *Children of Shatila* (1998); Palestinian actor Mohammed Bakri's *Jenin, Jenin* (2002). For films highlighting the lack of prospects in the camps and boredom, see Lebanese filmmaker Maher Abi Samra's *Roundabout Shatila* (2005); Danish-Palestinian filmmaker Mahdi Fleifel's *A World Not Ours* (2012), *A Man Returned* (2016), *Xenos* (2017), *A Drowning Man* (2018) and *3 Logical Exits* (2020).

Originally trained as a filmmaker, Hourani, born in Hebron in 1976, began working on the *Qalandiya* project with the idea to use photography in an expanded way. The experience of curfew and lockdown during the Second Intifada sparked an interest in how the stasis of photography, combined with audio and olfactory components, could be used to create environments of affect.[97] By 2006, the Separation Wall had hemmed in all of the territory around Qalandiya and the Qalandiya Checkpoint, profoundly changing the Palestinian landscape not only in terms of spatial outlook, but also in terms of mobility, economic and other prospects. Without access to the Israeli labour market since the Wall's expansion, camp residents became increasingly isolated and incarcerated, resulting in a dramatic economic deterioration.[98] *Qalandiya 2047-2067-2087* are mixed media (Fig.4.9.), architectural models of Qalandiya Refugee Camp set at the centenary of milestones in Palestinian history: the *Nakba* in 1948, the *Naksa* in 1967, and the outbreak of the First Intifada in 1987. Hourani's models are divided in five sections and presented on plinths, focusing on five sites that are either sites of constraint or of latitude: Qalandiya airport, the Checkpoint/Wall, and three imaginary public gardens that convey a communal element. Hourani spent days studying the layout of the camp and documenting its buildings, architectural details and graffiti, as well as making field recordings. These photographs wrap the facades of his ramshackle and miniature 3-D structures; the sound files, played from within the foam and cardboard houses, relay the din and conversations of the camp. Toy cars, figurines, tiny flowerpots dot the scenography; antennas fashioned out of metal wire and colourful thread, each in a sculpturally different form, are perched on the rooftops. Playing with scale — either miniaturised or outsized — is a common sf tactic to render the landscape extraordinary or fantastical.[99] A historical timeline relating factual and fictional milestones related to Qalandiya accompanies the piece either as a wall text or audio guide. Qalandiya in the future, however, looks very much as Qalandiya now. The 'novum', and by extension futurity, in this work is not located in a hypermodern landscape. Qalandiya

[97] Hourani calls his concept of expanded photography 'Photolife'. His intention is for viewers to be able to see, smell and hear the 'atmospheric' environments he creates. Interview with the artist on 6.5.2021.
[98] See Helga Tawil-Souri, "Qalandia Checkpoint: The Historical Geography of a Non-Place," *Jerusalem Quarterly* 42, no. Summer (2010): 26–48, https://www.palestine-studies.org/en/node/78360. And "Profile: Kalandia Camp," *UNWRA*, https://www.unrwa.org/sites/default/files/kalandia_refugee_camp.pdf [last accessed 5.5.2021].
[99] See Timberlake, *Landscape and the Science Fiction Imaginary*, 25.

remains very recognisable. Estrangement lies elsewhere, rather, in the everyday that through, and within, ruin endures.

Figure 4.10. Wafa Hourani, *Qalandiya 2087*, 2009. Mixed media installation in six parts. Size variable. Installation view. Image courtesy the artist.

This radical mundaneness is best expressed by the three public gardens Hourani has created. Introducing public gardens in a place devoid of greenery and free space, where inhabitants can meet and socialise, not only offers socially transformative agency but also exemplifies how in a ruined future something might be salvaged from loss. For example, there is the Fish Garden dug by Abu Jamil, originally from Yafa, who missed the sea so much that he dug a pool for goldfish in order to bring the Mediterranean Sea to the camp. Hourani always incorporates an aquarium with live fish as a standard part of the installation. In 2037, camp residents pay tribute to the fifty-year anniversary of the First Intifada and build the Stone Garden. An additional garden, the Flower Garden is built in 2047 as a romantic place for lovers to meet, but this falls on the centenary of the *Nakba*. All gardens are thus sites of commemoration and exemplify what Bshara terms the 'sophisticated micro-spatial practices' of camp life, in which historical and political processes are

articulated topographically by quotidian gestures.[100] In the *Qalandiya* series, Hourani recuperates Palestinian history spatially in his future timeline by highlighting everyday life and a sense of community in the camp. The artist has simultaneously created a historic document of the camp through his photographic archive and hence invites the audience to 'stop by the ruins' of Palestinian history as they explore the camp. Ruination, in the form of the occupation of Palestine, continues in Hourani's timeline until 2087, marking the first two iterations of the project. Only in the final iteration, *Qalandiya 2087* (Fig.4.10.), is the Qalandiya checkpoint removed by the Israeli government and the land occupied since 1967 returned to the Palestinians. The Right of Return for 1948 Palestinians is also honoured, rendering the refugees in the camp no longer refugees. Yet the notion of a Palestinian state is absent, and Qalandiya remains a postnational site. In the following section, I look more closely at how ruin manifests itself across spaces of confinement vis-à-vis spaces of mobility, and how this encapsulates the tension of the camp being in a double outside.

The two most imposing sites in the *Qalandiya* series are the former Qalandiya airport and the Qalandiya Checkpoint/Wall. Both loci evidence the systemic shrinkage of space and disciplining of the Palestinian landscape. They also demonstrate how Palestinians' window on the world has been forcibly reduced due to a punishing regime of travel restrictions and absence of territorial contiguity. The fragmentation of Palestinian space is replicated in *Qalandiya 2047-2067-2087* through the five disconnected sections of the installation. Herein, Qalandiya airport, which Hourani represents with landing strips and fighter jets on the Israeli side of the Separation Wall, and the Qalandiya Checkpoint are juxtaposed as key signifiers indicating how a continuous loss of mobility is entangled with an unceasing loss of territory. Established in 1924 during the British Mandate, Qalandiya airport, also known as Jerusalem Airport, connected Jerusalem to Amman, Beirut, Cairo, Kuwait and Jeddah. This form of regional connectivity is nowadays unthinkable with Palestinians in the West Bank dependent on Amman's Queen Alia International Airport for air travel, and Gazans enclosed in a *de facto* open-air prison.[101] In 1969, as part of the annexation of East Jerusalem and the West Bank, Israel renamed the airport Atarot after the neighbouring *moshav*, and operated it as a domestic airport until the outbreak of the Second Intifada in 2000, after which the

[100] See Bshara, "Spatial Memories: The Palestinian Refugee Camps as Time Machine," 24 and 28.
[101] For more on Israel's incarcerating tactics in the Gaza Strip, see Pappé, *The Biggest Prison on Earth: A History of the Occupied Territories*, 213–29.

airport was shuttered and turned into an IDF base.[102] Today there are plans to build a new Israeli settlement on the grounds of the airport.[103] The transformation from Palestine's gateway to the world, to an Israeli domestic airport, to a military base, and then a settlement, illustrates how the systemic erasure of Palestinian place and memory establishes facts on the ground and increases Palestinians' isolation from each other and the wider region. Increasingly bereft of an outside, for Palestinians Qalandiya airport is a painful scar evoking past possibility and ruin. By using Qalandiya Airport and the Checkpoint/Wall as his primary framing devices, Hourani shows how dystopian topographical creep wraps itself around the Palestinian landscape, even if in his 2087 iteration the Occupation ends and the airport reverts back to becoming a civilian airport accessible to both Israelis and Palestinians. Helga Tawil-Souri has perceptively noted how checkpoints like airports are spaces of transition: 'checkpoints force Palestinians to confront questions of (bureaucratic) identity, common in airports too. […] Checkpoints, unlike airports, are spaces that enforce localization, stasis and sedentariness.' [104]

The above point of stasis is further enforced in the installation by Hourani's rendition of the Separation Wall, which he has clad in mirrors on the Palestinian side, courtesy of the Palestinian Mirror Party (PMP) that, in his future timeline, covered the wall in mirrors so as to, at least visually, enlarge the cramped space of the camp. Qalandiya in the future only reflects back onto itself as a ruin, which is looking onto a ruin. The Wall blocks the view, materially and symbolically, and camp dwellers are continuously confronted with how small their physical surroundings are. The Wall has robbed Palestinians of a horizon, but the mirror conceals the cause of that violence. The refugees are imprisoned in a world that is self-referential because it literally cannot see outwards and only sees itself. Similar dynamics of containment and blocked horizons are at play in Maamoun's *2026* and Sansour's *Nation Estate*. The refugee camp as an extra-territorial space is further emphasised in Hourani's project because, like the Nation Estate, it cannot fully integrate itself in the territory that surrounds it; in Agambian terms, the trinity that makes up the

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[102] For the history of Qalandiya Airport, see Tawil-Souri, "Qalandia Checkpoint: The Historical Geography of a Non-Place," 26-27; and Nahed Awwad, "In Search of Jerusalem Airport," *Jerusalem Quarterly*, no. 35 (2008): 51–63, http://www.palestine-studies.org/sites/default/files/jq-articles/35_airport_0.pdf.

[103] See "Israel Starts Turning Jerusalem International Airport into Settlement," *Middle East Monitor*, 10 December, 2020, https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20201210-israel-starts-turning-jerusalem-international-airport-into-settlement/ [last accessed 14.5.2021].

[104] Tawil-Souri, "Qalandia Checkpoint: The Historical Geography of a Non-Place," 39 and 42.

nation state – land (localisation), (jurido-political) order and birth – is now disrupted, rendering the camp a 'dislocating localisation'.[105] Qalandiya is in Area C and therefore within Jerusalem's municipal boundaries; under the Oslo Accords it is officially under Israeli control, with the PA barred from entering it. Like so many other villages on the Palestinian side of the Wall, it does not receive any municipal services from Jerusalem, rendering it 'an extraterritorial, extrajuridical, and permanently temporary space'.[106] Refugees are suspended between their current exile and their desire to return to their place of origin. This further shows how extraterritoriality and postnationality are structured in a spatio-temporal way. 'Refugee life,' Hilal and Petti note, 'is thus suspended between these two ungrounded sites, always doubled.'[107]

Figure 4.11. Wafa Hourani, *Qalandiya 2087*, 2009. Mixed media installation in six parts. Size variable. Installation detail. Image courtesy the artist.

This doubling is amplified by turning the Wall into a mirror (Fig.4.11.): the mirror image reflects the incarceration of time, space and national identity. Moreover, if Palestinians can only see themselves, then who is looking at them on the other side of the

[105] Agamben, *Homo Sacer. Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, 175.
[106] Ahmed Alaqra, "To Subvert, To Deconstruct : Agency in Qalandiya Refugee Camp," *Jerusalem Quarterly* 79 (2018): 66.
[107] Hilal and Petti, *Permanent Temporariness*, 174.

mirrored wall? In this respect, Weizman's analysis of the architecture of checkpoint terminals and their system of one-way mirrors is particularly pertinent. Other than being an apparatus of control and observation, the mirror also functions as a border that renders the Israeli presence invisible and hence relieves Israel from its responsibilities as an occupying force.[108] In *Qalandiya 2047-2067-2087*, the mirror also evokes the Foucauldian notion of heterotopia. This is especially true for the 2087 iteration, in which the Occupation ends and the concrete slabs of the Wall are removed. Instead, mirrors are also fixed on the Israeli side, creating a double-sided mirror and an opportunity for self-reflection. Rather than showing us a prospering futuristic Qalandiya, Hourani offers a slightly more sanitised version with a few more high-rises and more luxury toy cars. In this context, the mirror still operates as a segregating border and monumentalises ruin on either side of the mirror. Foucault conceptualised heterotopia as the opposite of utopia, which he views as a good but unreal place. Heterotopias, per contrast, are unstable counter-spaces that encapsulate many different places at once, which might be incompatible with each other.[109]

While refugee camps would qualify to be such a space, the last model of Hourani's series, *Qalandiya 2087*, certainly fits the description. In Foucault's theorisation, the mirror functions as both a utopic and heterotopic space: utopic, because the reflection is in a way unreal and you see yourself where you are not physically; heterotopic, because the mirror is real and the absence of the place from where you are standing is countered by the presence of your reflection in the mirror.[110] This tension between presence and absence marks the Palestinian condition and Hourani's mirrors serve as a forceful reminder. Hochberg notes that 'ruins highlight an unobservable tension that disturbs, haunts, and taunts the Zionist national narrative from within'.[111] I would proffer that in *Qalandiya 2047-2067-2087*, and specifically through the device of the mirror, Hourani has materialised that tension and made it palpable and observable. It also brings us back to Hilal and Petti's point, introduced at the beginning of this section, that the Palestinian camp's permanent temporariness is a twisted mirror image of a lost geography. Through his project, Hourani has historicised that

[108] See Weizman, *Hollow Land. Israel's Architecture of Occupation*, 139–59.
[109] For the English translation of the original 1967 text, see Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias," *Diacritics* 16, no. 1 (1986): 22–27.
[110] Foucault, 24–25.
[111] Gil Z. Hochberg, *Visual Occupations. Violence and Visibility in a Conflict Zone.* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 41.

loss, but, more relevant to this discussion, he has shown how in a state of exception, the unexceptional can constitute a radical and speculative imaginary.

The projects analysed in this chapter all rehabilitate something out of landscapes of ruin, but faultily. In the Palestinian works, the desire for a viable and independently functioning nation state and collective narrative is never met, while in Maha Maamoun's *2026* the neoliberal nation state has abandoned its duty of care and thus forgoes its primary responsibility to its citizens. In all these works, social dreaming is heavily compromised, but this does not mean that agency and the utopian charge is fully lost. Standing by the ruins of these broken societies means 'turning to ruins as epicentres of renewed collective claims, as history in a spirited voice, as sites that animate both despair and new possibilities, bids for entitlement, and unexpected collaborative political projects'.[112] In the case of Sansour's *In the Future*, this means laying claim on the future by an act of narrative rebellion dug deep in the landscape and a refusal to be written out of history. In her *Nation Estate*, the mere possibility to think alternative horizons and configurations of belonging becomes a freeing principle in a context of confinement; while in Hourani's *Qalandiya 2047-2067-2087* minor interventions like building communal spaces of beauty, history and shared identity upset bare life and the space of exception. Sometimes, as in Maamoun's *2026*, revolution can only be written past the ruin in which ruins are not seen 'as monuments but as ecologies of remains [that] open[…] to wider social topographies'.[113]

The works examined in this chapter propose the ruin as a sf trope that opens a door to the future, instead of being locked in the past. Considering the ruin as a sf trope of possibility not only expands the repertoire of the sf lexicon imaginatively but also extends the ruin's temporal life as an entity that looks to the past as well as forward. In the works discussed, the latter is a radical as well as a restorative position to take because it wrestles the future away from the chokehold of an oppressive past whilst still acknowledging the losses produced by its injustices. I have argued throughout this chapter that the ruin should not be viewed solely as the spatial manifestation of destruction and decay, or as a space of defeat, but, rather, as a space of potential from which something new can be built. If this chapter is Palestine-heavy, then this is partly because Palestine — as a geographical,

[112] Stoler, "Introduction 'The Rot Remains': From Ruins to Ruination," 13.
[113] Stoler, 22.

historical, and also imaginary place — holds so much loss and ruination. However, like the Parliament in Abu Dis, it also holds promise and possibility. This is not to say that speculative ruins are not to be found elsewhere. In fact, in a region that has faced its unfair share of violence and war, there are plenty of ruins to contend with. Quite a few are strewn throughout this thesis. For example, in Chapter 1 the unfinished Rachid Karami International Fair in Tripoli is a ruin of the future that in many ways symbolises a rupture in Lebanon's conception of modernity. Yet, Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige have turned this ruin around and transformed it into a space of futurity with *A Space Museum*. In the previous chapter, Monira Al Qadiri and Mazen Kerbaj both draw on downtown Beirut's 'Dome' or 'Egg' and reimagine this ruin as an alien spaceship. These examples all harbour the scars of the past but introduce speculative elements so that these ruins can also become motifs of future construction. These ruins, then, signify loss but also operate simultaneously as estranging sf 'novums' that produce possibility and futurity.

Chapter 5: Liquid Monstrosities

Futures beyond Extractivism in Hydro and Petro Imaginaries

At the COP26 climate summit in Glasgow in November 2021**,** Saudi Arabia pledged carbon neutrality by 2060. This was met with the necessary scepticism and accusations of greenwashing, as the country, one of the world's largest exporters of oil, did not, paradoxically, promise to divest from lucrative fossil fuel production. If anything, Saudi Arabia, along with other producers of crude oil in the Persian Gulf, such as the U.A.E., have only increased their production of oil in the past decade. Aramco, the Saudi Arabian Oil Company, is the world's single largest producer of carbon emissions since 1965 and — not coincidentally — the world's most profitable company, beating the likes of tech giants Google and Apple.[1] Aramco gives the country its economic leverage and global political clout. In the twenty-first century and in the midst of a climate emergency, fossil fuels continue to lubricate the geo-political and capitalist machinations of the world. But oil is not the only liquid at the centre of a world in crisis. If, in the GCC, oil has been emblematic in defining the modern nation state, so has water. Naturally a water scarce region, oil wealth in GCC countries has managed to provide access to potable water through costly — and polluting — desalination plants, dams, extensive irrigation systems and pumping infrastructure. In many ways, petro wealth 'turned oil into water'.[2] In this context, both oil and water tell a story in which two liquids, obtained through extractivist processes with monstrously devastating effects on the environment, serve as strategic resources for governments to maintain their political stronghold over their populations.[3] Scholars such as Toby Craig Jones, Laura Hindelang and Gökçe Günel have shown how in, respectively, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the U.A.E., the provision of water as a seemingly 'infinite' resource has

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[1] See Associated Press, "Saudi Arabia sets targets of net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2060," *The Guardian*, 23 October, 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/oct/23/saudi-arabia-sets-target-of-net-zero-greenhouse-gas-emissions-by-2060 and Michael Safi, "How real is Saudi Arabia's interest in renewable energy?," *The Guardian*, 12 October, 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/oct/12/how-real-saudi-arabia-interest-renewable-energy. [last accessed 13.12.2021].

[2] Toby Craig Jones, *Desert Kingdom. How Oil and Water Forged Modern Saudi Arabia* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2010), 3.

[3] See Tariq Al-Olaimy, "Climate Change Impacts in the GCC," *EcoMENA*, 25 May, 2021, https://www.ecomena.org/climate-change-gcc/ [last accessed 13.12.2021].

aided governments to further entrench their authoritarian nationalist regimes and secure their political authority over those they rule.[4] Water consumption per capita in the GCC is two to three times the world's average.[5] The technological and economic power of the state, derived from oil wealth, is exemplified by its 'ability to manufacture and consume water at these excessive rates'.[6] Other than the scarcity of freshwater and the rising water levels of the Gulf's low-lying coastlines, the region, as historically seafaring and pearl diving, has deep cultural ties to water. As such, water and oil continue to define current and future imaginaries of the Gulf: 'the petroleum(scape) and water(scape) intersect and form a palimpsestic relationship'.[7] In a time of climate breakdown, this relationship produces different types of oil and water-related monsters and monstrosities, which flow through these imaginaries and guide the analysis below.

In this final chapter, I return to ideas of modernity and progress with which I began this dissertation. Rather than mourning the lost dreams and potential of modernity as demonstrated in the first chapter, this chapter explores the nightmares that have sprung from it. Petroleum, the substance most celebrated for propelling late capitalist modernity, and the substance most blamed for its ills, thickly connects the works in this chapter. It is no accident, then, that all projects examined here are from artists from the GCC, where oil has transformed ways of life in the past half-century in an accelerated fashion. These artists have lived experience of how oil has been foundational in the formation of national, social, political and economic infrastructures. This includes, but is not limited to, the creation of predominantly autocratic, independent nation states with exclusive control over national identity and citizenship, to the building boom and production of even more exclusive luxury lifestyles created by, and for, oil wealth.[8] Water, a resource central to life on the planet,

[4] For Saudi Arabia, see Toby Craig Jones, "State of Nature: The Politics of Water in the Making of Saudi Arabia," in *Water on Sand. Environmental Histories of the Middle East and North Africa*, ed. Alan Mikhail (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 231–50. For Kuwait, see Laura Hindelang, "Precious Property: Water and Oil in Twentieth-Century Kuwait," in *Oil Spaces: Exploring the Global Petroleumscape*, ed. Carola Hein (London and New York: Routledge, 2021), 159–75. For the U.A.E., see Gökçe Günel, "The Infinity of Water: Climate Change Adaptation in the Arabian Peninsula," *Public Culture* 28, no. 2 (2016): 291–315.
[5] Gökçe Günel, "The Infinity of Water: Climate Change Adaptation in the Arabian Peninsula," *Public Culture* 28, no. 2 (2016): 295.
[6] Günel, 296.
[7] Hindelang, "Precious Property: Water and Oil in Twentieth-Century Kuwait," 160.
[8] Mike Davis's scathing critique of the neoliberal excesses of Dubai is a case in point. See Mike Davis, "Fear and Money in Dubai, *New Left Review* Sept/Oct, no. 41, 2006, https://newleftreview.org/issues/ii41/articles/mike-davis-fear-and-money-in-dubai. [last accessed 12.12.2021]. With the exception of Saudi Arabia, which became independent in 1932, all other GCC countries gained independence in the 1960s and 1970s. The exploitative

forms a wet foil to oil. I draw on the figure of the monster to mix oil with water and show that these liquids do not always have to separate but can emulsify in something new. The monster is employed as a conceptual motif to analyse how unbridled consumerism and extractivist capitalism have produced their own monstrosities. In this chapter, the monster embodies a figure of horror, but, as I will argue, also one of future possibility. More importantly, it invites us to think through complex and hybrid futures and ontologies.

The Gothic mode of fiction, with its topoi of monstrous, undead, vampires, and werewolves, is considered a precursor of sf.[9] In sf, monsters take shape as terrifying aliens, murderous cyborgs, radioactive mutants, or experiments escaped from a scientist's lab. They disrupt the order of things and are 'stuck between the current human condition and some new artificial ontology made possible by technoscientific control over, or interference with, natural laws'.[10] The boom in giant monster films in the 1950s, best exemplified by the 1954 Japanese cult classic *Gojira* (Godzilla), expressed a Cold War anxiety over the effects of radiation following the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.[11] The textual and cinematic rise of the zombie in the 1950s and then again in the 2000s, as a cannibalistic and contagious reanimated corpse — a figure associated primarily with the horror genre and apocalyptic sf — is emblematic for embodying, respectively, Cold War fears of a nuclear holocaust as well as an array of social and racial ills caused by hypercapitalism.[12] Monsters are, however, as old as the ages and embedded in every culture's fabric, whether they are terrestrial, extra-terrestrial, manmade, or emerge from the natural or supernatural world. In Arab folklore *jinn*, shapeshifting spirits from another dimension, appear in a myriad of monstrous forms. There are evil *afreets, marids* and *shaytans* (devils); the ghostlike *qareen*

kafala system and the impossibility of gaining GCC citizenship for long-time residents keep non-nationals in check. In his book *Carbon Democracy*, Timothy Mitchell traces the ways Western states managed the production and export of oil in the Middle East until the oil-producing countries gained autonomy over oil production and profits themselves. Supplementing petrodollars, Western nations have rewarded lucrative arms deals to the region, thus exercising a different kind of regime control and significantly contributing to the region's weaponisation and its style of autocratic governance. See Timothy Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy. Political Power in the Age of Oil* (London: Verso Books, 2011), 5–86 and 142–59.

[9] For more on the gothic as sf's precursor, see Roberts, *Science Fiction. The New Critical Idiom*, 193.

[10] Csicsery-Ronay, *The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction, 197*.

[11] For a historical overview of giant monster films in sf, see M. Keith Booker, *Historical Dictionary of Science Fiction Cinema* (Lanham: The Scarecrow Press, 2010) 196-99.

[12] For an overview article on the genealogy of the zombie, see Sarah Juliet Lauro and Christina Connor, "Zombies in Print," Oxford Research Encyclopedias, Literature, 2022, https://oxfordre.com/literature/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.001.0001/acrefore-9780190201098-e-1357. [last accessed 9.5.2022].

or spirit-double operates as a person's demon familiar, shadowing them through life in an attempt to turn them to evil. The *qareen*'s female counterpart, the *qareenah*, is a demonic seductress, related to Lilith, who kills children and renders men impotent. Ghouls are hideous-looking diabolical *jinn* that dwell in burial grounds and devour human flesh; they are undead and reminiscent of vampires and zombies. In Morocco an aquatic monster called Aisha Qandisha, with the torso of a woman and hoofed feet, lives in the Sebou river and causes women to miscarry and men to become insane.[13] Ahmed Gamal observes that in contemporary Arabic literary fiction, which draws on motifs of the Gothic, such as the vampiric ghoul, postcolonial and Gothic sensibilities intermesh: 'the dominance of Gothic motifs in postcolonial fiction has been critically surveyed with special regard to the prevalence of otherness, reverse-colonization, and the issue of identity politics'.[14] Of note for my discussion on monstrous extractivism, is Gamal's observation that in Arab postcolonial Gothic writing, the fantastical is inextricably bound to the contradictions of postcolonial societies and that it facilitates a 'potential crossing of cultural borders, and with the forms that hybrid repositioning can take'.[15] In other words, the postcolonial Gothic in Arabic fiction reworks Eurowestern Gothic motifs. I argue that the artworks in this chapter rework and complicate motifs of the monster.

Whereas traditional Gothic monsters may have articulated anxieties that have come to supernaturally haunt the present from an uneasy past, and, like Dracula and Frankenstein's monster, express fears of the possibilities of technology and modernity, late twentieth and early twenty first century monsters, particularly in modes such as The New Weird and Gothic Science Fiction, firmly inhabit the future. Concerned with the estranging entanglements of climate change, global capital, technology, the fluctuating role of the nation state and the category of the human, the use of monsters in contemporary sf blurs the by now unhelpful genre divisions between fantasy and sf.[16] The monster is always a

[13] For an overview on *jinn* in the Arab and Islamic world, see Robert W Lebling, *Legends of the Fire Spirits : Jinn and Genies from Arabia to Zanzibar* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2010).
[14] Ahmed Gamal, "Postcolonial Recycling of the Oriental Vampire: Habiby's Saraya, The Ghoul's Daughter and Mukherjee's Jasmine," *South Asian Review* 33, no. 2 (2012): 140.
[15] Gamal, 142.
[16] For an overview on Gothic Science Fiction and the New Weird, see Sara Wasson and Emily Alder, "Introduction," in *Gothic Science Fiction 1980 – 2010*, ed. Sara Wasson and Emily Alder (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2011), 1–18. For an argument against genre divisions between fantasy and sf, see Roger Luckhurst, "In the Zone: Topologies of Genre Weirdness," in *Gothic Science Fiction 1980 – 2010*, ed. Sara Wasson and Emily Alder (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2011), 21–35.

hybrid figure onto which ontologies pile on, and therefore will always, to an extent, be unintelligible and fluid. This fluid quality, which translates metaphorically, as well as aesthetically and materially in this chapter, is what in essence makes the monster a speculative figure and its mutable form an apt descriptor to navigate the slipperiness of petro and hydro imaginaries. While my third chapter looks at alien, superhero and robotic Others who transpose alterity and operate in specific national contexts, they never really shed their human subjectivity. This chapter, by contrast, moves beyond the national and the human. It considers plant, animal and other material encounters of the monster as future ontologies to reckon with in a postnational, posthuman, even post-planetary, setting. To articulate my monsters, I lean via sf on thinking from the energy and blue humanities, as well as on feminist new materialism, but most heavily on the conviction that '[o]ur continued survival demands that we learn something about how best to live and die within the entanglements we have. We need both senses of monstrosity: entanglement as life and as danger.'[17]

This chapter examines the work of Kuwaiti artist Monira Al Qadiri, Saudi artist Ayman Zedani, and American-Qatari artist and writer Sophia Al-Maria. In their projects, the monster embodies a liquid and liminal ontological space but is not necessarily equated to the monstrous, which more often than not is the consequence of unchecked extractivist human behaviour. The wet slippages of hydro and petro imaginaries allow monsters to become figures of the future, as well as figures of recuperation. This fluidity is translated in the liquid aesthetics and approaches that manifest themselves in these artworks. Another distinct trait uniting these works is the time-travelling capacity of monsters. Monsters are not out of time; rather, they bridge different temporalities in strange and material ways. More specifically, they break with the linear time of modernity and bring in other timelines from the human and geological realm. In Monira Al Qadiri's sculptures, for example, there is a monstrous reconciliation between the lost but increasingly nationalist-mythologised past of the Gulf's pearl industry and the uncertainties of a petro-slicked future. In Ayman Zedani and Sophia Al-Maria's videos, non-human (plant and animal) and non-life (ocean, oil and desert) subjectivities are privileged over human ones. These non-human and non-life

[17] Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing et al., eds., *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet. Ghosts and Monsters of the Anthropocene* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), M4.

entities are perhaps monsters in their own right, but they also relegate humans to the realm of the Other and turn them monstrous. These monsters refocus our view on how extractivist practices have hurt the planet and have actively been the cause of the enormous loss in biodiversity. At the same time, these works ask the sobering and hypothetical question whether the end of human life would necessarily mean the end of the future, or whether in a geological sense it just means the beginning of a new geological era. Together these works offer a speculative, postnational — and in the case of Zedani and Al-Maria, post-planetary — take on what it would mean to be and think with monsters. Monsters are, as political philosophers Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri have posited, creative figures with the power to bridge what they see as an unproductive opposition between modernity and antimodernity.[18] In the works analysed below monsters operate as critics of extractivist modernity, but also open portals of possibility and transformation. 'Revolution', Hardt and Negri write, 'is not for the faint of heart. It is for monsters. You have to lose who you are to discover what you can become.'[19] The monsters in this chapter facilitate this recuperative loss, albeit in more modest fashions than revolutionary.

Pearls, Oil and Monsters: Petro and Sea Ontologies in Monira Al Qadiri's *Alien Technology* (2014-2019) and *Chimera* (2021)

Gulf pearls can be seen as objects of empire. The human and non-human cost involved in harvesting them was significant. Pearling dominated the littoral Gulf's economy for hundreds of years and thrived from the late seventeenth century until the early twentieth century, with as its main centres the coastal towns of Basra, Kuwait, Bahrain, Dubai, Sharjah and Muscat.[20] The Gulf's pearls were the region's entry into a global capitalist economy, and by the late nineteenth century the Gulf was the world's main supplier of pearls. As pearls had little intrinsic domestic value — locally they were not

[18] Hardt and Negri do not see the antimodern as reactionary, but, rather, acknowledge its liberatory potential to subvert power structures and hierarchies and expand freedoms, in particular in (post)colonial settings. See Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Commonwealth* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009), 95–100.
[19] Hardt and Negri, 339–40.
[20] See Robert Carter, "Pearl Fishing, Migrations and Globalization in the Persian Gulf, Eighteenth to Twentieth Centuries," in *Pearls, People and Power: Pearling in Indian Ocean Worlds*, ed. Pedro Machado, Steve Mullins, and Joseph Christensen (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2019), 233. And Fahad Ahmad Bishara et al., "The Economic Transformation of the Gulf," in *The Emergence of the Gulf States*, ed. J.E. Peterson (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 190.

traditionally used as gemstones — their main worth rested in their trade value. Although, for five hundred years imperial powers controlled parts of the Gulf — including the Portuguese (sixteenth century), the Dutch (seventeenth to eighteenth century), the Ottomans (sixteenth to twentieth century) — only the British governed the entire region as one unit (nineteenth to twentieth century).[21] Pearls were usually shipped to Bombay (Mumbai) in India and then distributed to the world, predominantly to Western markets, where the British Empire, Europe and the U.S. were avid consumers.[22] As Frauke Heard-Bey notes: 'Victorian Britain and the rest of Europe saw in pearls a tangible symbol of the romantic Orient. This predilection was taken up by society in the United States, and during the first two decades of the 20th century New York became the second biggest market for Gulf pearls after Bombay.'[23] Kuwaiti artist Monira Al Qadiri's grandfather, whom she never knew, was a singer (*nahham*) on board a pearling boat.[24] His role was to encourage the crew during dives and entertain them in the evening. Life on board was dangerous and harsh during the pearling season, which ran from May to September, with few returns to the shore. Disease, malnutrition and loss of life at sea were common, but equally egregious was the exploitative system of bonded slavery, which kept divers indebted to their captains, sometimes for life.[25] In imperial and capitalist contexts, human labour is a prime extractivist resource, there to be mined for profit. With the advent of the oil era, the legacy of debt bondage continues in the Gulf to this day under the *kafala* system. Migrant workers from South Asia who first came to the Gulf to work in the oil industry are now exploited in order to build the luxury shopping malls, hotels and skyscrapers from the imperial spoils of petro-wealth.[26]

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[21] Lawrence G. Potter, "Society in the Persian Gulf: Before and After Oil," *CIRS Occasional Papers* 18 (2017): 5.
[22] See Victoria Penziner Hightower, "The Tyranny of the Pearl: Desire, Oppression, and Nostalgia in the Lower Gulf," *Arts and Archaeology of the Islamic World*, no. 6 (2020): 47–50. And Carter, "Pearl Fishing, Migrations and Globalization in the Persian Gulf, Eighteenth to Twentieth Centuries," 233–34.
[23] Frauke Heard-Bey, *From Trucial States to United Arab Emirates: A Society in Transition* (London: Longman Group, 1982), 182.
[24] See Monira Al Qadiri, "Choreography with Alien Technology," *The Happy Hyprocrite* Fresh Hell, no. 8 (2015): 40.
[25] Divers were not directly involved in the selling of pearls and relied entirely on their captains for their share at the end of the diving season. Often captains would underpay their crew, obliging them to take out loans, and keep them indebted. For more on the system of debt bondage and conditions on a pearling boat, see Bishara et al., "The Economic Transformation of the Gulf," 192–93 and 202–4; and Carter, "Pearl Fishing, Migrations and Globalization in the Persian Gulf, Eighteenth to Twentieth Centuries," 241.
[26] See Bishara et al., "The Economic Transformation of the Gulf," 210.

Figure 5.1. Monira Al Qadiri, *Alien Technology*, 2014-19. Fiberglass sculpture, automotive paint. 300 x 250 x 250 cm. Installation view at Shindagha Heritage Village, Dubai, 2014. Image courtesy the artist.

In Al Qadiri's series of large public sculptures, *Alien Technology* (2014-2019) (Fig.5.1.) and *Chimera* (2021), water and oil mix through the practices of pearl and oil extraction. The sculptures suggest a new ontology that is hybrid, liquid and monstrous. If the monster is always born at a metaphoric crossroads, 'as an embodiment of a certain cultural moment — of a time, a feeling, and a place', then Al Qadiri's sculptures incorporate the 'fear, desire, anxiety, and fantasy' of the current moment.[27] The monster is characterised by its 'ontological liminality [and] notoriously appears at times of crisis as a kind of third term'.[28] At a time of Anthropogenic crisis these works bring together two extractivist practices, pearling and oil exploitation, respectively — which have come to define the historical and contemporary economy and culture of the Gulf.[29] Al Qadiri's sculptures are fashioned after oil drill bits and are coated with iridescent automotive paint, giving them the dichroic lustre — that is the reflection of multiple colours — found in pearls and oil.[30] While the shimmering spikey sculptures look like aquatic sea monsters that have surfaced from the deep, there is also a distinct technological and bio-synthetic feel to them. In a way, these

[27] Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)," in *The Monster Theory Reader*, ed. Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 38.
[28] Cohen, 40.
[29] For background on the economic transition from pearling to oil industry in the Gulf, see Fahad Ahmad Bishara et al., "The Economic Transformation of the Gulf," in *The Emergence of the Gulf States*, ed. J.E. Peterson (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 187–222.
[30] For the artist's discussion of discovering dichroism between pearls and oil, see Al Qadiri, "Choreography with Alien Technology," 40.

sculptures cannot fully escape being utilitarian; they are put to work to express a double demise, one located in the past, the other anticipated in the future. This tension is, on the one hand, articulated through the work's monumentality — the sculptures are three to five metres in size and displayed in public space. As monuments, these objects take on a commemorative function and scramble linear timelines: they hark back to the past as much as they look to the future by remembering a world of pearl diving *before* oil and memorialising a world in the future *after* oil. On the other hand, countering the sculptures' heavy material presence is the slipperiness of the slow — and not so slow — violence associated with these extractivist practices and their role in lubricating modernity.[31]

Before turning to the thick viscosity of petroleum, it warrants to dwell briefly on the extractivist assault on the non-human actors in this narrative, the pearl-producing oysters. Before oil, the Gulf was home to one of the most diverse marine eco-systems in the world; its lush coral reefs and warm shallow waters provided the perfect conditions for oysters to flourish. As Iain Simpson observes, 'pearl oysters are very sensitive to water quality and depend on pollution-free marine habitats. […] So, in contrast to oil as pollutant, pearl oysters serve as environmental signifiers and have in fact been used in environmental monitoring.'[32] Today, due to pollution from the petro-industry, climate change, and urban development of the coastal areas, the reefs suffer the highest degree of bleaching and mortality in the world.[33] Yet, even if practised in unpolluted habitats that could replenish themselves, the growing and harvesting of natural pearls remains rather brutal on several fronts. Shells are removed from the seabed or torn from coral reefs and then pried open to check if they carry a pearl. The value of the oyster is solely reduced to the pearl, which is itself an alien invader of sorts and not inherently part of the animal. Pearls are formed when an irritant enters the shell, for example a grain of sand, and the mollusc starts secreting

[31] In his book, Rob Nixon cites, amongst others, climate change, radiation, pollution and deforestation as examples of slow violence, by which he means 'a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space […] a violence that is neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales.' Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2011), 2.

[32] Ian R. Simpson, "Concern Amid the Oysters as Pearling Is Honoured: Nature and the Environment in Heritage Practice," in *Cultural Heritage in the Arabian Peninsula: Debates, Discourses and Practices*, ed. Karen Exell and Trinidad Rico (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2014), 36.

[33] Haïfa Ben-Romdhan et al., "Coral Reefs of Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates: Analysis of Management Approaches in Light of International Best Practices and a Changing Climate," *Frontiers in Marine Science* 7 (2020), https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fmars.2020.00541/full. [last accessed 2.11.2021].

nacre (mother-of-pearl) to coat it with. Pearl formation is thus triggered by the oyster's defence mechanism as it fends off an intruder. Paradoxically, oyster beds can be viewed as production machines for the cultivation of something prized, yet alien to the oyster. This renders a pearl-carrying oyster into a hybrid — monstrous — entity, and further complicates Al Qadiri's *Alien Technology*. The 'alien' in the title refers to the alienation the oil encounter produced for indigenous communities in the Arabian Peninsula, in particular the alienating presence of foreigners setting up camp in the desert with their instruments and machinery tearing open the landscape in search of the black prize.[34] This monstrous dynamic of violence and alienation was forcefully captured in Saudi-Jordanian author Abdelrahman Munif's 1987 novel *Cities of Salt*.[35] As such, the alien also points to the alienness of the pearl, and the violence used to break open the shell. Both pearls and oil are prized commodities, extracted through skill and technology, their fates inextricably intertwined and stained by capitalist modernity.

In this respect, Al Qadiri's sculptures cannot seem to escape what Macarena Gómez-Barris refers to as the 'extractive zone', by which she means 'the colonial paradigm, worldview and technologies that mark out regions of "high biodiversity" in order to reduce life to capitalist resource conversion'.[36] Once the pearling industry of the Gulf collapsed in the 1930s because of the development of cultured pearl farming in Japan, the Great Depression of the 1930s, which significantly reduced demand, and the discovery of oil, oil became the pearl's substitute, albeit far more ruinous to the planet.[37] To put it in Al Qadiri's words: 'Oil our Pride. Oil our Pearl.'[38] Oil was discovered in Kuwait in 1938; however, it was not until after the oil shock of 1973 that Kuwait, together with other OPEC countries in the Gulf, gained control over taxation, pricing and the operational production of oil. Prior to this, Western companies kept a firm imperial foothold in the region by not only managing

[34] A foundational work on global oil history is Daniel Yergin, *The Prize. The Epic Quest for Oil, Money, and Power* (New York: A Touchstone Book, 1991).
[35] Amitav Ghosh famously coined the term 'petrofiction' in his 1992 review of Munif's work; see Amitav Ghosh, "Petrofiction. The Oil Encounter and the Novel," *The New Republic*, March 2, 1992.
[36] Macarena Gómez-Barris, *The Extractive Zone. Social Ecologies and Decolonial Perspectives*, *The Extractive Zone* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), xvi.
[37] See Jill Crystal, *Kuwait: The Transformation of an Oil State* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1992), 2. And Bishara et al., "The Economic Transformation of the Gulf," 187.
[38] Al Qadiri, "Choreography with Alien Technology," 40.

the flow of oil, but also its taxation, pricing, and by corollary its profit.[39] Nationalist tendencies also fed into GCC countries, strengthening their grip over oil production and distribution. Most GCC states gained independence between the 1960s and 1970s and their new-minted national identity required national narratives. The pearling heritage provided a link to the past, while oil, the poisonous motor of modernity, signified, and continues to signify, progress and the future. Often these narratives were exclusionary, downplaying the Gulf's historical transnational and cosmopolitan past in favour of a tribal and nationalist identity, which privileges the Bedouin heritage of its leaders.[40] Al Qadiri's sculptures tell a transnational story of the region rooted in pearling as much as a national(ist) story of oil. However, the two do not quite seem to add up. If anything, national specificity comes undone, geographies shift and teleological visions of time blur.

In an essay on oil, retrofuturism and petrofuturity, sf scholar Gerry Canavan laments: 'In the absence of some sufficient substitute for oil's energy miracle — in the absence, that is, of a future that is both prosperous and possible — the only solution for the imagination seems to be to cast itself back into the past in search of the secret of what's to come.'[41] In this context it is possible to read works like *Alien Technology* and *Chimera* solely as the petrified representations of a fossil-fuelled past and future. However, reading these works through the liminal ontology of the monster widens the conversation in a speculative direction. *Chimera* was commissioned as a permanent public artwork for the world fair *Expo 2020* in Dubai, yet it sits uncomfortably on its site. World expos, as pointed out in the first chapter via the work of Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, are exercises in nationalist modernity and aim to put forward visions of the future. With its slogan 'Connecting Minds, Creating the Future,' Expo 2020 in Dubai was no different. Apart from being a large PR-boost for the U.A.E., the green initiatives and sustainability pavilions fell slightly moot. The 'better tomorrow for all humanity' motto envisioned technological fixes to energy transition, which will allow humanity to carry on its destructive consumerist behaviour of

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[39] See Timothy Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy. Political Power in the Age of Oil* (London: Verso Books, 2011), 144–72.

[40] As a seafaring region, the Gulf was multi-ethnic and multi-racial (including Arabs, Persians, Indians, Africans, Baluchs), as well as a mix of religions. While most GCC countries have small national populations and the majority of the population consists of expats and migrant workers, narrow definitions of citizenship, and the political and social power that comes with it, prevail. See also Potter, "Society in the Persian Gulf: Before and After Oil," 1–5.

[41] Gerry Canavan, "Retrofutures and Petrofutures: Oil, Scarcity, Limit," in *Oil Culture*, ed. Ross Barrett and Daniel Worden (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2014), 343.

the fossil fuel economy.[42] It does not address the systemic change needed 'to make the collective decisions for a more just, more equal future, to insist on a guided energy transition that, at the same time, moves towards a future not only after oil, but after capital as well'.[43] In that sense, tomorrow's world sounds very much like today's, deeply retrofuturist, but in the case of the U.A.E., one of the world's largest oil exporters and a country with one of the largest carbon footprints per capita, also deeply ironic.[44] Unintentionally, this becomes part of *Chimera*'s monstrosity (Fig.5.2.). Oil and the desire for oil as the 'personal unconscious of modernity', are grafted into the global economy's DNA, even if it were to transition to more sustainable forms of energy.[45] The monstrous, then, is located in the refusal to change and the insistence on reinforcing a neoliberal and consumerist prospect of the future in which everything remains business-as-usual, with dire planetary consequences. *Chimera*, keeping in line with the Latin etymology of monster, *monstrum* (portent), and how monsters have always been exhibited in public spaces, displays this extractivist violence.[46]

Figure 5.2. Monira Al Qadiri, *Chimera*, 2021. Aluminium sculpture, automotive paint. 450 x 470 x 490 cm. Commissioned by and collection of Expo 2020 Dubai. Photographer: Roman Mensing. Image courtesy the artist.

[42] See https://www.expo2020dubai.com/ [last accessed 6.11.2021].
[43] Petrocultures Research Group, *After Oil* (Edmonton:University of Alberta, 2016), 56.
[44] See https://www.worldstopexports.com/worlds-top-oil-exports-country/ and https://www.worldometers.info/co2-emissions/co2-emissions-per-capita/ [last accessed 6.11.2021].
[45] Petrocultures Research Group, *After Oil*, 47.
[46] See Rosi Braidotti, "Signs of Wonder and Traces of Doubt: On Teratology and Embodied Differences," in *Between Monsters, Goddesses and Cyborgs: Feminist Confrontations with Science, Medicine and Cyberspace*, ed. Nina Lykke and Rosi Braidotti (London: Zed Books, 1996), 135.

I would like to push for an additional interpretation to the above, and one that opens up an imaginary of possibility, much in the spirit of the concluding words of Gerry Canavan's essay: 'The end of oil, as we have seen, fuels at once both Utopia and Dystopia: it is the crisis that breaks the world into ruin but also the opportunity out of which the possibility of another world might emerge.'[47] With her sculptures, Al Qadiri offers a worldview that is both ruinous and fantastical, a postnational other world that creeps up between and beyond the ruin of extractivism and which embraces its own monstrosity. As shown in the previous chapter, ruin can facilitate a prospect for the future. Within the monstrous, something new and hybrid can open up. After all, a chimera is a hybrid mythical beast composed of different animal parts; it is a fanciful creature of the imagination that inspires horror and awe. This monstrous being encapsulates the terrible legacy of the extractivist zone, yet also suggests that in order to mitigate the effects of the Capitalocene mess, a different way of thinking and imagining is necessary.[48] As the feminist theorist Rosi Braidotti points out, 'to signify potentially contradictory meanings is precisely what the monster is supposed to do'.[49] In many ways, the sculpture lives up to its title and to this task, allowing different, and seemingly contradictory, wet ontologies of oil and water to emulsify and create the potential for something new. Petroculture scholar Imre Szeman describes oil as the 'ontology, the structuring "Real" of our contemporary sociopolitical imaginary'.[50] Szeman and other scholars point to the difficulty of representing oil as a substance, given its ubiquity and the opacity of most oil infrastructure with its hidden pipelines and offshore facilities.[51] Conversely, the postcolonial environmental theorist Elizabeth DeLoughrey speaks of 'sea ontologies' as a term that might 'characterize the connection between ancestry, history, and non-Western knowledge systems in submarine

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47 Canavan, "Retrofutures and Petrofutures: Oil, Scarcity, Limit," 345.

48 The term 'Capitalocene' might be more appropriate to use here as a geological descriptor than the Anthropocene. T.J. Demos summarises the Capitalocene as 'the geological epoch created by corporate globalization, and has the advantage [over the Anthropocene] of naming the culprit behind climate change, thereby gathering political traction around itself.' Demos, *Against the Anthropocene. Visual Culture and Environment Today*, 54.

49 Braidotti, "Signs of Wonder and Traces of Doubt: On Teratology and Embodied Differences," 135.

50 Imre Szeman, "The Cultural Politics of Oil: On *Lessons of Darkness* and *Black Sea Files*," in *On Petrocultures: Globalization, Culture, and Energy* (Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 2019), 137.

51 See Imre Szeman, *On Petrocultures: Globalization, Culture, and Energy* (Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 2019), 5; and Graeme Macdonald, "Containing Oil: The Pipeline in Petroculture," in *Petrocultures: Oil, Politics, Culture*, ed. Sheena Wilson, Adam Carlson, and Imre Szeman (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017), 38.

aesthetics […] [T]he ocean as medium can symbolize the simultaneity or even collapse of linear time, reflecting lost lives of the past and memorializing — as an act of anticipatory mourning — the multi- species lives of the future of the Anthropocene.'[52] Conceptually, *Chimera* and *Alien Technology* oscillate between the tension of the unrepresentable of things petroleum and the submarine aesthetics DeLoughrey cites. Moreover, the sculptures also translate this dynamic materially.

Alien Technology and *Chimera* are constructed, respectively, from fibreglass and aluminium. Both are coated in iridescent automotive paint, a paint used specifically on automobiles. The car, that gasoline-guzzling machine of modernity, is perhaps the most individualistic and visible marker of fossil fuel consumption. In the Gulf, where public transport infrastructure is underdeveloped, the car still reigns as a mode of transport for those who can afford it. As Lindsey Green-Simms observes:

> [N]either the individual nor the automobile is unencumbered. […] [A]utomobility obscures the fact that mobility is always dialectically related to immobility and that autonomous movement is always dependent on something else […] the privilege of the few who depend on both the labor of the many and the energy that has caused social and environmental degradation in in places like the Niger Delta, the Persian Gulf, and the Louisiana coast.[53]

In other words, automotive paint can be seen as the metaphorical liquid slathered on the car's surface to cover up and beautify the environmental and extractivist hazards that lurk underneath. The nacreous automotive paint covering Al Qadiri's sculptures operates on multiple symbolic levels, too: it creates a mesmerising visual layer that renders the monstrosity — to an extent — opaque, while also mirroring its surroundings through its light-reflecting iridescence. Visual cultures scholar Laura Hindelang writes compellingly about Al Qadiri's work and how it 'monumentalizes iridescence as the elusive and endlessly mutating spectrum of blessing and curse, cure and poison that results from petroleum and its anthropogenic usage'.[54] Oil and pearl swirl into each other and cannot be distinguished

[52] Elizabeth DeLoughrey, "Submarine Futures of the Anthropocene," *Comparative Literature* 69, no. 1 (2017): 36.
[53] Lindsey Green-Simms, "Automobility," in *Fueling Culture. 101 Words for Energy and Environment*, ed. Imre Szeman, Jennifer Wenzel, and Patricia Yaeger (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), 59.
[54] Laura Hindelang, *Iridescent Kuwait. Petro-Modernity and Urban Visual Culture since the Mid-Twentieth Century*, *Iridescent Kuwait*, E-publicat (Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2022), 239.

from one another as such. The monster is tamed into a thing of beauty, immersing spectators through its reflective surface and absorbing them in it. This has the effect that the viewer becomes implicated and part of the monster, but consequently also part of the magical, the otherworldly and the fantastical. The monster, then, is not an entity removed from us but one that decidedly resides within us. The sculptures pull us into a human–non-human assemblage, part techno-fossil of the future, part what Donna Haraway so visionarily labelled three decades ago as 'the promises of monsters', which she explains as the 'possibility for changing maps of the world, for building new collectives out of what is not quite a plethora of human and unhuman actors'.[55] These sculptures hint at an episteme of how we might look at the future after oil, in a world wherein culpability cannot be shaken off but must be monstrously inhabited.

Extractivist Genealogies and the Future: Ayman Zedani's *the return of the old ones* (2020)

The monstrous, then, forces us to be accountable, not only for what was in the past but also for what is now and might be in the future. It might also act as a counterforce to water, which washes things away, or oil that stains and blots things out. Astrida Neimanis writes of water as a solvent that remembers but also forgets. While oil motors the linear progression of extractivist modernity, 'water can help us appreciate and navigate a "counterhegemonic" time as a response to the progressive and unrelenting time of global capital. […] With the help of oil-hungry microbes, water might eventually forget petroleum.'[56] However, Riyadh-based Saudi artist Ayman Zedani reminds us in his video *the return of the old ones* (2020) that petroleum, too, once started out as water. Crude oil is a hydrocarbon formed by the remains of plankton, algae and other marine organisms on the ocean floor millions of years ago. Originally trained in biomedicine, Zedani fuses his scientific background with a speculative artistic practice. Having grown up in the mountainous and greener Asir region of Saudi Arabia, he became acquainted with the desert at a later age, and its biodiversity and vastness play an important role in his projects as a speculative site that is not necessarily hospitable to humans. Unlike his parents he grew

[55] Donna Haraway, "The Promises of Monsters: A Regenerative Politics for Inappropriate/d Others," in *Cultural Studies*, ed. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula Treichler (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), 327.
[56] Astrida Neimanis, "Water, a Queer Archive of Feeling," in *Tidalectics. Imagining an Oceanic Worldview through Art and Science*, ed. Stefanie Hessler (Cambridge, Massachusetts: M.I.T. Press, 2018), 194 and 195.

up with the comforts of petro-wealth and much of his work looks at what it means to live with oil.[57] His speculative mixed media installations, videos and microbial and material experimentations probe the past and future of the planet, with particular attention to how oil and water, the organic and inorganic, the human and non-human have shaped the natural and unnatural ecologies of the Arabian Peninsula.[58] His projects are informed by pre-Islamic animism and the political theorist Jane Bennett's notion of 'vibrant matter', which considers 'the agentic contributions of nonhuman forces (operating in nature, in the human body, and in human artifacts) in an attempt to counter the narcissistic reflex of human language and thought'.[59] Bennett's is a green materialist answer to the imperial logic of Anthropogenic extractivism. She calls for a degree of anthropomorphisation as a tactical manoeuvre to bridge ontological divides between human and non-human entities as a means to mitigate the violence of anthropocentrism.[60] Zedani draws on this strategy, as well as on the Iranian writer and philosopher Reza Negarestani's theoretical-fiction novel *Cyclonopedia: Complicity with Anonymous Materials* (2008). *Cyclonopedia* blends Islamic occultism with continental philosophy, science fiction and horror by attributing geological consciousness to the Middle East, and sentient political agency to oil.[61] *the return of the old ones* offers a critical genealogy of the liquid transformation of water and organic matter, into oil. In Zedani's film — an assemblage of otherworldly science fictional time travelling, nature documentary and spiritual scripture — prototaxites, prehistoric giant fossil fungi, form the anthropomorphised narrative conduit. Found in Saudi Arabia, the U.S. and the U.K., the prototaxites in the video become paleontologists on their own terms. They tell the story of the aquatic and fishy beginnings of planetary life, in which the thirst for water with the advent of humans slowly evolves into a thirst for oil. The video suggests that although the destruction coupled to Anthropogenic extractivist actions might end human existence, it need not necessarily mean the end of the planet. On the contrary, this death might inaugurate the beginning of new, albeit posthuman, life.

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[57] Interview with the artist 19.11.2021.

[58] See https://www.aymanzedani.com/; and for a profile on Zedani, see Rahel Aima, "'To My Ancestors, Human and Not Human': The Art of Ayman Zedani," *ArtReview Asia*, July 21, 2021, https://artreview.com/to-my-ancestors-human-and-not-human-ayman-zedani-art/[last accessed 10.11.2021].

[59] Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter. A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010), xvi.

[60] Bennett, 119–20.

[61] For a discussion on *Cyclonopedia*, see Paul Piatkowski, "War of the Worlds: Geologic Consciousness in Reza Negarestani's *Cyclonopedia*," *MOSF Journal of Science Fiction* 4, no. 2 (2021): 79–94.

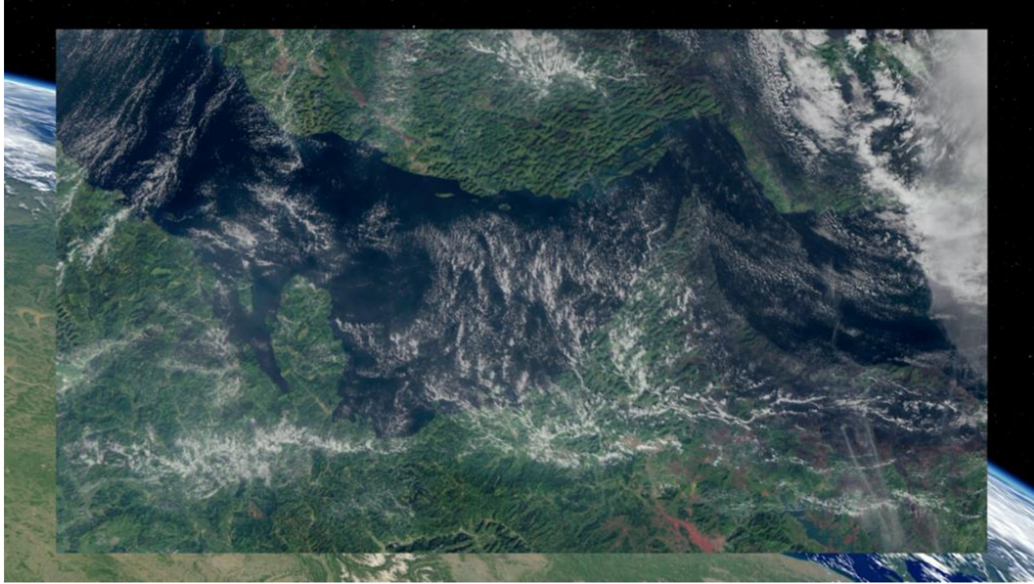

Figure 5.3. Ayman Zedani, *the return of the old ones*, 2020. Single channel video installation, 14’. Video still. Image courtesy the artist.

In *the return of the old ones*, Zedani enacts a cycle of life and death in which complex temporal and existential issues are continuously played out against each other. The prototaxites, fossilised for millions of years, are brought back to life to tell the story of the Big Bang and their own genesis. Sf and fungi have a curious interrelationship: they are the carnivorous vegetable monsters of pulp sf; they are humanoid mushrooms from other planets; or the inhabitants of alien fungi kingdoms with infectious killer spores. The work of H.P. Lovecraft and Thomas Ligotti are perhaps the most established examples in sf. Besides inspiring horror, fungi also inspire awe and fascination; they thrive in disrupted ecosystems but do so always in symbiosis with other life forms. Sf writer Jeff VanderMeer’s novel *Annihilation* (2014) of human-fungal mutation is a case in point.[62] Fungi possess their own kind of knowledge and interconnectedness with the universe. In the recent *Star Trek: Discovery* series (2017-ongoing), using a spore drive to warp via the mycelium network, a kind of mycelial intergalactic superhighway, demonstrates this distinctly. Moreover, *Discovery*’s astro-mycologist grows *prototaxites stellaviatori*, star-travelling prototaxites for research and navigational purposes.[63] While the slightly monotonous Attenboroughesque

[62] See T.S. Miller, “Lives of the Monster Plants: The Revenge of the Vegetable in the Age of Animal Studies,” *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 23, no. 3 (2012): 460–79. And Marijeta Bradić, “Towards a Poetics of Weird Biology: Strange Lives of Nonhuman Organisms in Literature,” *Pulse — the Journal of Science and Culture* 6 (2019), https://www.pulse-journal.org/copy-of-vol-6-2019 [last accessed 23.11.2021].
[63] See Evelyn Koch, “Weird Fungi in Space – The Mycelium Network as the Other in *Star Trek: Discovery*” (paper presented at Fantastic Beasts, Monstrous Cyborgs, Aliens and Other Spectres: Alterity in Fantasy and Science Fiction Conference, Freiburg, 19-20 October 2018).

English voiceover lends Zedani's video and its fungal narrator scientific authority and nods to current nature documentaries' reinforcement of the gravitas of climate breakdown, it also chimes with the fungi of science fictions past.[64] The camera time travels and pans across the curve of the Earth when everything was blue with water and green with vegetation (Fig.5.3.). 'This lush green land you see before you, abundant with water, buzzing with life, is what used to be here.'[65] The image of an untainted Earth before humankind reframing the future as something that is already lost is to be read as an image that establishes an 'extractivist viewpoint'. Gómez-Barris defines the latter as a complicit way of seeing, characterised by looking from an aerial perspective on nature that 'reduces the representation of living things and entities to commodities'.[66] This gaze is offset by the dreamy, indeed liquid, CGI representation of the prototaxites as lush, otherworldly giants of 'green flesh, fluid tissue, [who are] spore-baring'. Zedani shows them towering high in a verdant landscape, their tops grazing the clouds, which lends the whole scenery a mythical and fantastical quality (Fig.5.4.). Their world is magical, sensuous, mycelial, and set on a planet that is not yet ours. They are presented as the majestic custodians of the primordial world they rule over. Theirs is the *good* empire, with water as a source of spiritual and organic life that 'carried an ancient blueprint that taught flora and fauna how to dream, copulate, defend, rejoice, pry, die'. Indeed, the prototaxites operate in a non-ideological, non-human universe where 'there was no love, no hate, we helped the living live, and the dying die'. In this universe death means the composting of organic matter, so new life and species can feed on it. It goes on for millions of years until this temporal cycle is ruptured and the empire of prototaxites makes places for other life and then the regime of the Anthropocentric. 'We were all here, waiting, working, evolving, so that *you* may rise.' This emphatic 'you' is directed at multiple species, but most prominently at humankind, and comments on how short a time humans have been around on the planetary scale. But it does something else, too: by privileging a non-human perspective, the human is Othered and becomes strange. This sets up the stage for the human to gradually turn monstrous,

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[64] Of note here are David Attenborough's BBC documentaries *Climate Change — The Facts* (2019) and *Extinction — The Facts* (2020), as well as his narration for the Netflix documentary series *Our Planet* (2019).
[65] Ayman Zedani, *the return of the old ones* (2020), video. All subsequent quotations from the video follow this citation.
[66] Macarena Gómez-Barris, "Inverted Visuality: Against the Flow of Extractivism," *Journal of Visual Culture* 15, no. 1 (2015): 30.

while simultaneously anticipating that this monstrosity — in the future — could be incorporated into something new.

This space for speculative possibility is cleverly conceptualised by shifting perspectives from the reign of the mycelial networks of the prototaxites to the hungry extractivist machine of human consumerism. Temporal rhythms and scales bounce off each other through the artist's copious use of a zooming in-and-out technique. We move from the prototaxite's cellular level, which in itself is an extra-planetary microcosm as it contains 'the suns and moons of every visible universe', to an aerial map of the Gulf. The green vistas of the prototaxites' world have now been replaced by terracotta deserts. The desert here embodies Zedani's lived experience of it as well as Negarastani's concept of geologic consciousness, but there are also echoes of Frank Herbert's desert planet Arrakis in *Dune* (1965).[67] The camera smoothly hovers over rolling sand dunes and then dives underground until the screen turns black. This oil encounter marks the moment the prototaxite's narrative of biological evolution, with climates, continents and species evolving over long stretches of time, starts to fray. This is 'not just any kind of black. It is a thick, slick, moving, alive kind of darkness. It is the compressed weight of the dead that has morphed into new life: oil.' Zedani explicitly negates the unrepresentability of oil by visualising it as a sensuous, viscous, alive substance that bubbles and whirls thickly across the screen. As such, he reminds us of oil's organic origin and that it belongs to nature. This complicates oil's current pejorative association with death. In this particular scene, oil is not framed as an extractivist substance with as its sole *raison d'être* the burning of the furnaces of a hypercapitalist consumerist economy. On the contrary, here, oil is matter with an agency of its own. Bart H. Welling makes a useful distinction between two types of dominant petro-imageries found in the arts: the petro-apocalyptic, which he associates with doom, and the petro-gothic, which he connects to gloom. Petro-apocalyptic imagery, according to Welling, focuses on images of spectacular and infernal destruction on a total scale. Think burning Kuwaiti oil wells and thick billows of black smoke during the Gulf War. In contrast, the petro-gothic deals with the

[67] Frank Herbert's *Dune* is often thought of as a novel about climate change and imperial extractivism because of its arid desert setting. Arrakis's coveted resource 'spice' is seen as a metaphor for oil. Sherryl Vint notes how contemporary readings underscore 'how ecological issues are bound up with colonial ones'. Vint, *Science Fiction*, 128. David Lynch was the first director to adapt Herbert's bestselling novel to the screen in his feature film *Dune* (1984), to little critical acclaim. In 2000 a mini-series directed by John Harrison was broadcast on America's Sci Fi Channel; it won two Emmy Awards. For criticism on Denis Villeneuve's 2021 feature film *Dune*, see my conclusion.

pollution of oil on a smaller and slower visual scale by framing petroleum and its infrastructures as monstrous – for example, abandoned oil rigs, oil spills in the ocean, or oil-covered birds and sea life.[68] Zedani refuses these types of representations of oil and instead allows us to 'critically and self-consciously peer *through* it' (emphasis original).[69] This intimate encounter with the substance of oil is strangely compelling and seductive. Following Welling, it opens 'up space for new ways of viewing petroculture from within'.[70] In other words, this type of oil encounter produces a different way of seeing oil and of thinking and living with it. With Saudi Arabia being the largest exporter of oil in the world, Zedani has unlocked a portal to an alternative reality that *could* have been. Unless we only want to find ourselves mired in the calamitous fatalism of the petro-apocalyptic or petro-gothic, these alternative ways of seeing broaden perspectives for the future.

Figure 5.4. Ayman Zedani, *the return of the old ones*, 2020. Single channel video installation, 14'. Video still. Image courtesy the artist.

The prototaxan empire, crushed into carbon with other dead organisms, speaks back and hurtles itself into the present. Moreover, it also lays claim on the future. *the return of the old ones* erodes divisions between living and dead matter, human and non-human hierarchies, as well as linear conceptions of time and therefore produces a sensibility that posits the future, whichever form it may take, as monstrous. The video's insistence on the

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[68] Bart H. Welling, "Beyond Doom and Gloom in Petroaesthetics: Facing Oil, Making Energy Matter," *MediaTropes* 7, no. 2 (2020): 148–52.
[69] Welling, 158.
[70] Welling, 155.

naturalness of crude as something from the earth that is 'awake and alive' underscores this. Oil is water and carbon combined and brought to life. It channels Bennett's notion of vibrant matter in which she bestows a subjective ontology onto things that are outside of the realm of human knowledge, such as inanimate things and objects. Matter is infused with a vitality that she terms 'thing-power'. This not only means that matter is alive but also that it has a life story.[71] This is something the video attempts to capture. If the biography of fossils and oil is put on a par with that of humans, it disturbs the logic of anthrocentric epistemologies. While this might produce existential discombobulation on the part of humans, it opens up a necessary space for monstrous symbiosis:

> Against the conceit of the Individual, monsters highlight symbiosis, the enfolding of bodies within bodies in evolution and in every ecological niche. In dialectical fashion […] monsters unsettle anthropos, the Greek term for 'human,' from its presumed center stage in the Anthropocene by highlighting the webs of histories and bodies from which all life, including human life, emerges.[72]

All life, non-human and human, emerges from water. Therefore, all life is entangled symbiotically across bodies and time. Modern life and science, however, have severed this connection.[73] *the return of the old ones* reminds us of our and other watery beginnings. Here, the materialist scholar's Stacy Alaimo's concept of transcorporeality is useful in pointing to how humans embody planetary history beyond evolutionary kinship through its own aquatic and animal origins. She writes that transcorporeality 'traces the material interchanges across human bodies, animal bodies, and the wider material world. […] [T]he human [is] substantially and perpetually interconnected with the flows of substances and the agencies of environments.'[74] This liquid genealogy and flow of entangled life is exemplified by a sequence showing two overlaid images: the back image shows oil sloshing across the screen and pooling towards the centre until it morphs into the front image, an oil drop (Fig.5.5). The drop rotates around its axis, leaking little droplets, and as the sequence

[71] Bennett, *Vibrant Matter. A Political Ecology of Things*, 1–19.
[72] Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing et al., "Introduction: Bodies Tumbled into Bodies," in *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet. Ghosts and Monsters of the Anthropocene*, ed. Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing et al. (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2017), M3.
[73] See also Tsing et al., M2 and M5-M6.
[74] Stacy Alaimo, "States of Suspension: Trans-Corporeality at Sea," *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 19, no. 3 (2012): 476.

moves on it becomes more translucent and starts to look more like water than the opaque thickness of oil. From this image a prototaxite emerges, not set in its green primordial habitat but solitary, and completely covered in oil. Once again, oil and water mix, and this is rendered seamlessly by the video's liquid aesthetics. However, this does not send us back to where the work started. Quite the opposite, the element of human extractivist greed is introduced as a destructive force. The human is turned monster again: 'All of you, all over the Earth, you dream the same, you fear the same. You want the same. Yes, most strongly, you want the same. Your want brought you back to us. You clawed into the ground with bare hands and you didn't stop until you found us.' This is a very different kind of oil encounter, and the liquid aesthetics and muddled ontologies and temporalities that have until now determined the sensibility of the video come to an end. What follows is not a symbiosis of human and non-human alliances, but the monstrosities of the Anthropocene, caused by man as the ultimate monster.[75] In the video, there is a continuous crossing back and forth from the speculative narrative of the film to the factual catastrophe of climate change.

Figure 5.5. Ayman Zedani, *the return of the old ones*, 2020. Single channel video installation, 14'. Video still. Image courtesy the artist.

[75] Sian MacArthur notes the human as monster trope in sf: 'Science fiction, particularly Gothic science fiction, has its roots buried firmly within the concept of man as ultimate monster.' Sian MacArthur, *Gothic Science Fiction: 1818 to the Present* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 79.

The conceptual and visual shift from geological to human, to non-human and speculative scales produces different types of alienation. The latter is, again, conceptually introduced by a black screen, followed by images of, respectively, the petro-apocalyptic and the petro-gothic. There is no ontological or visual confusion here: matter seems no longer vibrant; rather, it is angered, then subjugated, consumed and burned. A scene of a red-hot inferno with ash twirling down fills the screen: 'You cut through your planet, burning, pillaging, obliterating, to get to us. This was our eternal sleep. And we awaken enraged but as slaves.' The tone is decidedly accusatory, the image catastrophic. But it is also anticipatory, even prophetic in decentring the human: 'We fuel your existence, burn your furnaces, fill your insatiable bellies. But nothing is endless.' While the latter refers to the fact that resources are finite, it also suggests that the geological stratum of the Anthropocene will come to an end: 'Maybe this is what you and I were meant for: to bring about another change, to hasten the end of time as you know it. But first you will rise, higher and more powerful than you ever imagined.' The last sentence is coupled with a sequence showing an oil refinery gas flare (Fig.5.6.), which shoots flames and black smoke up into the sky. It is a distinctly ruinous and petro-gothic image in which petro-infrastructure comes across as monstrous. While the monstrous petro-images of doom and gloom predict a future even more terrible — at least for humans — *the return of the old ones* calls on us to shift perspective from an earthly one to an extra-planetary one and from a rationalised linear teleology to something more cosmological. It suggests, quite provocatively, accepting our own species' demise and relaying the future away from human subjectivity and from planet Earth.

In her book *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, the anthropologist Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing muses along similar lines when considering the shapeshifting and adaptable qualities of fungi: 'What if our indeterminate life form was not the shape of our bodies but rather the shape of our motions over time? Such indeterminacy expands our concept of human life, showing us how we are transformed by encounter.'[76] The video's closing scene takes the transcorporeal into the extracorporeal realm as the viewer is taken through a nebulous wormhole: 'One day you may have no choice but to find a new home.

[76] Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World. On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 47.

Somewhere far away, somewhere back in the sky from whence we all came.' Human bodies are no longer human and bound to Earth in this future scenario. Rather, a planetary extinction event — most likely of our own doing — has dissolved us into matter that travels extraterrestrially again. Humans, in whichever extracorporeal form they might occur, have become alien again, deracinated without a home planet. We have become, to keep with mycological parlance, more spore-like, drifting on intergalactic winds. While this transubstantiation and stretching of human life has religious and scientific overtones — from the afterlife to the theory of panspermia, and the idea that life exists across the universe, distributed by space dust — the speculative potential of fully becoming Other, not as a metaphor but on an atomic level as matter, generates ontologies and epistemologies beyond human comprehension.

Figure 5.6. Ayman Zedani, *the return of the old ones*, 2020. Single channel video installation, 14'. Video still. Image courtesy the artist.

This is a monstrous thought indeed, because we lack the cognitive tools to fathom what this means. But this lack of comprehension opens up a space of total speculation, urging us to unlearn structures like the nation state, the capitalist obsession with (finite) resource extraction, philosophical conceptions of human subjectivity/embodiment, as well as geocentric thinking. If the human as we know it is abandoned, and this by corollary means that the end of life as we know it is abandoned, then what kind of futures spring from this? The ending of *the return of the old ones* returns us to the video's beginning, when

life on Earth formed from particles from outer space. The conclusion suggests that matter, previously known as human, can repeat this evolutionary cycle and voyage through the cosmos and reworld other planets. The question is, however, whether this new life form will be more mushroom or more human. If mushrooms, like their forebears the prototaxites, are worldbuilders, and we, humans of the Capitalocene, have turned into world destroyers, then what worlds will this future species create? Will they, like humans, terraform their habitat, exhaust its resources and through their insatiable greed, destroy their own and others' worlds? Or will they, like fungi, through encounter and intimate association with other species continue to 'shap[e] environments for themselves and others'.[77] Tsing writes compellingly of how 'the uncontrolled lives of mushrooms are a gift— and a guide— when the controlled world we thought we had fails'.[78] This is an invitation to be more speculative, more fluid, more mushroom, more monster, in how we, as humans, relate to our human and non-human others and environments.

Oceanic and Desert Futures in Sophia Al-Maria's *A Whale is A Whale is a Whale* (2014) and *The Future was Desert* (2016)

Figure 5.7. Sophia Al-Maria, *A Whale Is a Whale Is a Whale*, 2014. HD video, 2'40''. Video stills. Images courtesy the artist and The Third Line Gallery, Dubai.

[77] Tsing, 138.
[78] Tsing, 2.

Petro-modernity has profoundly impacted the natural environment — in particular the oceans and deserts — in the Arabian Peninsula and has shifted agriculture-based societies and seafaring and maritime-based economies (such as pearling and fishing) to petro-based, cradle-to-grave welfare states, at least for the minority of the population who are national citizens.[79] Climate breakdown and the prospect of peak oil imperil these 'controlled worlds', to use Tsing's phrasing. American-Qatari (screen)writer, artist and filmmaker Sophia Al-Maria's videos, *A Whale Is a Whale Is a Whale: Swan Song for the Arabian Humpback* (2014) and *The Future was Desert* (2016), speculatively underline the urgency to move away from the ravage of petro-dependent lifestyles and monstrous extractivism. Both videos urge humans to listen to their non-human counterparts — respectively, endangered whales, and deserts threatened by increasing aridification — and ask humans to reposition themselves vis-à-vis an impending monstrous future. Al-Maria is perhaps best known for coining the term 'Gulf Futurism' in her blog *The Gaze of the Sci-Fi Wahabi* (2007-2008), and then further developing the concept with Kuwaiti musician Fatima Al Qadiri in a series of pieces for *Dazed Magazine* in 2012.[80] Gulf Futurism describes a cultural moment of temporal dissonance specific to the GCC, caused by the effect of oil wealth, which has facilitated rapidly accelerated consumerism, hypermodern architecture and environmental destruction. Typified as an extreme version of the future, it produces a break with histories and ways of life pre-oil; its most salient features are the ubiquity of shopping malls, futuristic high-rises and mobile phones. Karen Orton summarises it as a 'subversive new aesthetic, which draws on the region's hypermodern infrastructure, globalised cultural kitsch and repressive societal norms to form a critique of a dystopian future-turned-reality'.[81] The concept was quickly picked up by cyberpunk writer Bruce

[79] See for Saudi Arabia's transition from an agriculture-based economy to a petro-based one, Jones, *Desert Kingdom. How Oil and Water Forged Modern Saudi Arabia*, 5–20. See for Kuwait's transition to oil from a maritime economy, Crystal, *Kuwait: The Transformation of an Oil State*, 20–44.
[80] See Sophia Al-Maria, "The Gaze of the Sci-Fi Wahabi," 2008, http://scifiwahabi.blogspot.com/[last acessed 3.3.2022]. For further discussion of gulf futurism, see these foundational articles: Karen Orton, "The Desert of the Unreal," *Dazed*, November 9, 2012, http://www.dazeddigital.com/artsandculture/article/15040/1/the-desert-of-the-unreal; and Fatima Al Qadiri and Sophia Al-Maria, "Al Qadiri & Al-Maria on Gulf Futurism," *Dazed*, November 14, 2012, https://www.dazeddigital.com/music/article/15037/1/al-qadiri-al-maria-on-gulf-futurism. [last accessed 27.11.2021].
[81] Orton, "The Desert of the Unreal."

Sterling for *Wired Magazine*, undoubtedly contributing to its popularisation and global spread.[82]

Gulf Futurism is often too easily used as exotic shorthand to describe the Gulf, or incorrectly portrayed as a futurist movement that has heavily influenced all sf practices or futurisms in the Arab world. It is important to keep in mind that Al Qadiri and Al-Maria's theorisation stems from the lived experience of a generation growing up in the Gulf, with oil, in the 1980s and 1990s. Al-Maria, for example, the daughter of an American mother and Bedouin father of the Al-Dafira tribe, who live between Saudi Arabia and Qatar, experienced this firsthand as a teenager growing up in Doha.[83] While in recent years Al-Maria has distanced herself from Gulf Futurism and her work has taken a turn towards more performative practices that consider issues around sexual and gender fluidity, sf and dystopian aspects continue to inform her practice. Gulf Futurism, however, as a global diagnosis that finds a more accelerated manifestation in the Gulf, cogently encapsulates the monstrosity of our present and near future. This monstrosity is effectively articulated in both *A Whale Is a Whale Is a Whale* (2014) and *The Future was Desert* (2016).

A Whale Is a Whale Is a Whale operates as a prologue to *The Future was Desert* because not only do both works draw on a similar aesthetic of fast-paced edited found footage, trashy visual effects and distorted voice-over manipulations, but they can also be viewed as each other's extension by taking us on a journey from the slow and acute violence in the ocean to desertification as a consequence of climate catastrophe. Both works resonate particularly strongly when read from Gomez-Barris's extractivist point of view. *A Whale Is a Whale* opens with a satellite view on the Persian Gulf that gradually zooms in on Qatar (Fig.5.7.). Al-Maria's eerily whispered and reverbed spoken word poem tells the story of how Arabian humpback whales are a unique species of cetaceans because they are non-migratory and have their own language. Central to this piece is the confusion of whale and human subjectivity:

> The Arabian humpback whale is unique in all the ocean.
> They do not migrate.

[82] See Bruce Sterling, "Gulf Futurism," *Wired*, November 11, 2012, https://www.wired.com/2012/11/gulf-futurism/; and Bruce Sterling, "Some Cogent Examples of 'Gulf Futurism,'" *Wired*, November 15, 2012, https://www.wired.com/2012/11/some-cogent-examples-of-gulf-futurism/. [last accessed 27.11.2021].

[83] For a comprehensive account of this experience, see Al-Maria's memoir: Sophia Al-Maria, *The Girl Who Fell to Earth. A Memoir* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2012).

They are a remnant population.
Belonging to a lost tribe.
They. Have. Language. All. Their own.
Listen.
Oh. They hears us.
Oh. They eyes us.
They knows us.
The ones who burn.
The ones who build.
They who believe there is no end.
We. Are. Alone.
And. This. Is. The. Last. We. Will. Hear. From. Of. Them.[84]

Al-Maria's utterance of the word 'Listen' is followed by a black screen and then a 2002 sound file recording of Arabian humpback whale song by cetologist Robert Baldwin. Unlike Zedani's editorial tactic, the black screen does not indicate a rupture in temporality, but, rather, one in subjectivity. Al-Maria's human point of view has anthropomorphised in a whale's, leaving more than enough room for existential discomfort. 'They' here sounds very similar to Zedani's 'you', and points to 'us' humans. Al-Maria qualifies this by graphically illustrating what is meant by 'The ones who burn/The ones who build'. A catalogue of (petro-)apocalyptic images, including fighter jets dropping bombs over the desert, oil wells ablaze and oil infrastructure on fire is rapidly followed by images of Dubai's landmark luxury hotel on the water, the Burj Al Arab. The environmental impact of the Gulf Wars on marine life is well-documented, as is the ecological degradation as a result of aggressive building on the Arabian Peninsula's shoreline that caters to the lifestyle demands coming with petro-wealth. Arabian humpback whales are an endangered species, threatened by pollution, maritime traffic, and oil and gas exploration.[85] In this short sequence, Al-Maria drives home the point that sea and marine animals constitute another frontline in the story of climate collapse and suffer a slow death through exploitative consumerism. As Filippo Menozi

[84] Sophia Al-Maria, "A Whale Is a Whale Is a Whale: Swan Song for the Arabian Humpback," in *Sad Sack. Collected Writing* (London: Book Works, 2019), 43. All subsequent quotations from the video follow this video transcript citation.

[85] For ecological degradation due to the Gulf War, see Olof Linden, Anne Jerneloev, and Johanna Egerup, "The Environmental Impacts of the Gulf War 1991," *IIASA Interim Report* (2004), http://pure.iiasa.ac.at/id/eprint/7427.
For endangerment of the Arabian humpback whale, see https://www.wwfpak.org/our_work_/wildlife_2/arabian_humpback_whale/ [last accessed 12.12.2021].

states: 'The sea has been a central component in the origins and history of capitalism.'[86] Indeed, the sea was, and to a large extent remains, at the centre of mercantile trading and imperial expansionism, whether we think of cargo ships traversing the oceans, or political rifts over fishing rights and oil and gas exploration. The confluence of the sea as an impenetrable, wet planetary expanse, or blue sublime, cannot be unseen from the sea as an increasingly depleted resource, transportation vector and 'the setting where the violence of capitalism vividly surfaces'.[87] In this context, the sea is already coded as monstrous. However, what also surfaces, or rather resurfaces in Al-Maria's work is the sea as a fluid and speculative place in which human and aquatic ontologies can merge, and as such can become monstrous differently (Fig.5.8.).

Figure 5.8. Sophia Al-Maria, *A Whale Is a Whale Is a Whale*, 2014. HD video, 2'40''. Video stills. Images courtesy the artist and The Third Line Gallery, Dubai.

Sea monsters often encapsulate that estranging moment when humans meet other non-human 'bodies of water'.[88] Whales, in particular, feature strongly in scripture, folklore and literature as mythological sea beasts/monsters and as signifiers of the speculative

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[86] Filippo Menozzi, "Blue Sublime and the Time of Capital," *Humanities* 9, no. 3 World Literature and the Blue Humanities (2020), https://www.mdpi.com/2076-0787/9/3/73/htm. [last accessed 28.11.2021].
[87] Menozzi.
[88] I borrow this term from Astrida Neimanis, who takes a feminist phenomenologist approach and conceptualises 'bodies of water' as a figuration that underscores 'the human is always also more-than-human. Our wateriness verifies this, both materially and conceptually. […] Figuring ourselves specifically as bodies of water emphasizes a particular set of planetary assemblages that asks for our response *right now*.' Astrida Neimanis, *Bodies of Water. Posthumanist Feminist Phenomenology* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 2 and 6.

imaginary. The *Book of Jonah* in which Jonah is swallowed by the whale and stays in its belly for three days — becoming a symbiotic, if not monstrous, entity with the whale — is known both in the Old Testament and the Qu'ran. The whale as a floating island, symbolising an unreachable place of joy or place of doom, features as a motif of maritime lore across cultures. In *One Thousand and One Nights*, Sindbad the Sailor encounters a whale on his first voyage, while Herman Melville's 1851 novel *Moby Dick* and its many filmic adaptations remain an iconic cultural reference in the West.[89] Al-Maria studied comparative literature at the American University in Cairo, and these references must have resonated. In Sherryl Vint's study of animals in sf, various creatures, including whales and other cetaceans, make an appearance. She notes that 'sf animals help us to see connections between the discourse of animality and the material history of disenfranchisement of both human and animal others, at times reinforcing this ideology and at other times critiquing its logic'.[90] In other words, by sharpening, shifting or blurring human and animal subjectivity, as Al-Maria does in this short video, humans are asked to imagine their own future as an extinction event and to see animals 'as a warning that we can be displaced if we do not find ways to transcend our self-destructive qualities'.[91] It is an exercise in monstrous future forecasting, and mirroring ourselves as an endangered species. This caveat comes forcefully into to play in the closing sequence of *A Whale Is a Whale*. As the whale song becomes more fragmented and distorted, we see footage of the animal swimming in the ocean; the camera as a predator following the whale in its path. 'And. This. Is. The. Last. We. Will. Hear. From. Of. Them.' Here, 'we' and 'them' are ontologically confused again, and results in this ending applying to whales as much as to humans. The fate of whales and that of humans are intertwined. Plastic seas and toxic waste will not only destroy marine life but will make that of other species, including humans, impossible too. This requires a fundamental rethink of Anthro-centric history and subjectivity for 'the oceanic contours of the planet, including its submarine creatures, are no longer outside of the history of the human'.[92]

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[89] See Christa A. Tuczay, "Motifs in the Arabian Nights and in Ancient and Medieval European Literature: A Comparison," *Folklore* 116, no. 3 (2005): 284–85.
[90] Sherryl Vint, *Animal Alterity. Science Fiction and the Question of the Animal* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2010), 209.
[91] Vint, 225.
[92] DeLoughrey, "Submarine Futures of the Anthropocene," 42.

The *longue durée* of planetary history, and the position of the human therein, is further developed in *The Future was Desert*, a two-part video piece based on found footage and material filmed by Al-Maria while flying over the Qatari desert. Here, it is not the ocean that becomes a marker of monstrosity and non-human time but the desert. The grammatically odd construction of the work's title in which the future is set in the past, 'the future *was* desert', suggests that we already find ourselves in this future. Both parts of the project open with rapid sequences of aerial images of desert plains (Fig.5.9.). This suggests that the extractivist view can be seen as a forensic view because it surveys what has been plundered from the Earth in the past, but, in addition, this view is in essence anticipatory and futuristic because it screens what resources can further be extracted in the future. As such, it balances a strange temporal and forensic space that collapses past and future crimes against the planet. Al-Maria inserts more temporal confusion by introducing each part with a quote. Part One commences with an old Sumerian proverb: 'Mankind's days are numbered, all their activities will be nothing but wind.' While Part Two begins with a quote from sf writer J.G. Ballard's 1970s experimental collection of stories, *The Atrocity Exhibition*: 'Deserts possess a particular magic, since they have exhausted their own futures, and are thus free of time.' These citations are some six millennia apart and by placing them in close temporal and conceptual proximity, Al-Maria has created a causal dynamic between these two quotes, in which the finite agency of human actions, destructive and other, falls flat in comparison with the timelessness of the desert. In *The Atrocity Exhibition*, Ballard sees deserts as non-spaces that are out of time, but which also hold a mystical quality with the capacity to produce great beauty, or, conversely, great horror. The latter is underlined in the last sentence of the below quote:

> Anything erected there, a city, a pyramid, a motel, stands outside time. It's no coincidence that religious leaders emerge from the desert. Modern shopping malls have much the same function. A future Rimbaud, Van Gogh or Adolf Hitler will emerge from their timeless wastes. Given that there is no time past and no future, the idea of death and retribution has a doubly threatening force.[93]

It is curious that Al-Maria draws on this particular excerpt, given her family's history and that of other Bedouin tribes who have historicised desert life. In a strange way, this

[93] J.G. Ballard, *The Atrocity Exhibition*, E-book (Miami: Flamingo Modern Classic, 2001), 257.

temporal erasure loops back to Gulf Futurism where the desert and the shopping mall are held in a pre- and post-oil dialectic in which both accrue specific cultural meaning. By singling out this one sentence to open Part Two, the artist renders the desert not so timeless after all. If anything, *The Future was Desert* knits human and planetary, or desert, history together, binding their fates, for a very short human moment in geological deep time, together.

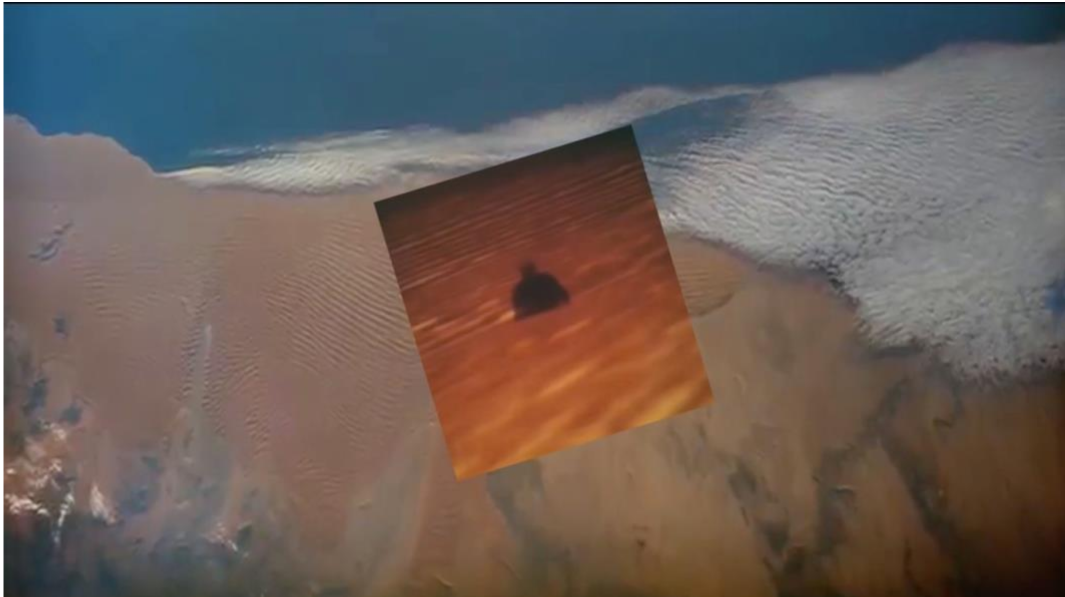

Figure 5.9. Sophia Al-Maria, *The Future was Desert – Part I*, 2016. Video with found footage, sound, 5'23". Video still. Image courtesy the artist and The Third Line Gallery, Dubai.

Both parts of the video are an apt illustration of what anthropologist Elizabeth A. Povinelli has called 'geontologies', summarised by DeLoughrey as 'a mutually constitutive relationship between biography and geology, drawn from Indigenous contexts that destabilize Western binaries between figures of life and nonlife'.[94] Povinelli defines the crumbling distinction between *bios* (life) and *geos* (non-life) as a crisis of the geontopower of late capitalist governance. Geontopower is 'a set of discourse, affects, and tactics used in late liberalism to maintain or shape the coming relationship of the distinction between Life and Nonlife'.[95] In other words, geontopower makes ongoing extractivism possible; it directs the depletion of the Earth from its resources, the acidification of the oceans, the melting of the ice caps and the pollution of the atmosphere. Geontopower tries very hard to prevent

[94] DeLoughrey, "Submarine Futures of the Anthropocene," 35.
[95] Elizabeth A. Povinelli, *Geontologies. A Requiem to Late Liberalism*, E-book (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

geontologies in which life and non-life forms blend together from happening. Geontopower tries to assert human dominance over other life and non-life forms at all cost, and by its own logic combats monstrous entanglements of life and non-life forms. The works analysed in this chapter, however, call for the human, the non-human, life and non-life to monstrously assemble by necessity. Geontologies are therefore monstrous, in the sense that they inhabit a liminal ontology that signifies 'the harbinger of category crisis. [And a] refusal to participate in the classificatory "order of things".'[96] The order of things being, in this case, geontopower. Povinelli uses the figure of the desert — along with the virus and the animist — to exemplify the workings of the 'now trembling architectures of geontological governance'.[97] The desert, then, as also noted in Zedani's video, becomes a space of temporal and ontological transition, 'the pulsing scarred region between Life and Nonlife'.[98] In Povinelli's words, the figure of the desert 'huddle[s] just inside the door between given governance [geontopower] and its otherwises'.[99] It is the 'otherwises' Al-Maria is trying to speculatively capture, but does not quite succeed in articulating yet. Oil, in a way the ultimate embodiment of the scar that keeps on bleeding, is not discussed in Povinelli's theorisation, while water as a resource essential to planetary life does find some purchase. *The Future was Desert* picks at the scabs of the geontological scar and tells a messy story of how blood, oil, water and time coagulate around this wound.

While in Part One of the video the human still looms large at the centre of the scar that polices distinctions between life and non-life, Part Two moves further away from the anthro-centric and introduces more blurred temporalities and ways of being. By using satellite images that picture the globe and then zoom in through the cloud deck, Part One narrates, similar to Zedani, Earth's aquatic genesis: a planet that started from water with a supercontinent that broke apart and drifted away in pieces. But Al-Maria's actual story begins with the petroglyphs (rock engravings) and petrographs (rock paintings) found in the desert caves of Namibia, Oman, Australia and Tassili n'Ajjer in Algiers. Rock bookends human presence on the planet, from the prehistoric rock art to the rock oil (petroleum)

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[96] Cohen, "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)," 40.
[97] Elizabeth A. Povinelli, "Geontologies: The Concept and Its Territories," *E-Flux Journal*, no. 81 (2017), https://www.e-flux.com/journal/81/123372/geontologies-the-concept-and-its-territories/ [last accessed 6.12.2021].
[98] Povinelli, *Geontologies. A Requiem to Late Liberalism*.
[99] Povinelli, "Geontologies: The Concept and Its Territories."

motoring modern life. Al-Maria illustrates this further by juxtaposing the stone slabs of the Apollo 11 Cave found in Namibia with the 1969 Apollo 11 moon landing. The former is an example of the oldest mobile art ever discovered, its site named in honour of the Apollo 11 crew; the latter, the future as dreamed up in the mid-twentieth century, seems further away than the almost thirty millennia since the stone slabs. Al-Maria then cuts to a satellite view of the planet before turning to what is no longer the dream of the future but its nightmare. This is a dystopian future borrowed from the Mad Max series in which there is mainly desert and resources are scarce. Al-Maria shows the desert backdrop and then parades a selection of monstrous-looking, armoured Mad Max vehicles. Interestingly, post-apocalypse, they still run on 'guzzoline', the Mad Maxian version of gasoline. This is not a future post-oil; rather, this is an extreme version of the extractivist present, and it is terrifying. Life and non-life have never been further apart. As Al-Maria tells it in the video:

> This is the human future as seen from the early twenty first century: a horror show of blood bags and guzzoline; where the Earth is sour and the green place is nothing but a single petrified tree. In this story popular imagining makes rare coupling with unpopular fact. We have committed planetary suicide. Earth is really dying. Once upon a time, we did not exist. And some day, we will cease to again. The absence of us, is the only thing that can define the future with any certainty. All that we will leave behind are crude drawing scoured by sand and a tangled knot of fibreoptic wire at the bottom of the sea.[100]

The closing sequence of this first part is an excerpt from disco band Boney M's 1981 music video 'We Kill the World (Don't Kill the World)', which shows all band members performing atop cars in a junkyard. The cars' silvery, metal-sprayed exteriors give the whole clip a futuristic post-apocalyptic feel, as do the red hazmat suits the band wears.[101] Here, cars feature once again as the prime emblems of modernity's petroculture that have turned into its worst nightmare. Oil, according to Canavan, once 'synonymous with progress, even with the future itself', has now largely been replaced 'with the creeping terror that technological modernity, and its consumer lifestyle, may in fact have no future at all'.[102] Oil is the substance robbing humans and other species of a viable future. Aspirational modernity and

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[100] Sophia Al-Maria, *The Future was Desert* (2016), video. All subsequent quotations from the video follow this citation.
[101] See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gITyEiddaxo [last accessed 7.12.2021].
[102] Canavan, "Retrofutures and Petrofutures: Oil, Scarcity, Limit," 334 and 333.

dreams of progress have now traded importance with questions of survival, or at least they should have. As Al-Maria writes in an editorial elsewhere, stressing the monstrosity of our times: 'Fossil fuel — that paralytic drug – has leeched into our collective blood stream. It's destroyed all rational thought. Numbing us with venom we lope on in a consumptive daze. It's difficult to recognise the *beasts* that are eating us at this very moment' (emphasis mine).[103]

Part Two departs from the oil narrative and the heavy focus on the Anthropocene nightmare by demonstrating a more fluid treatment of aesthetics and time, thus blurring set categories between life and non-life, between anthropogenic and geological time. Al-Maria's fondness of using pop culture in her work continues here: the quote from Ballard and the succession of desert images are accompanied by Led Zeppelin's 1971 version of 'When the Levee Breaks', originally a 1929 blues song about the Great Mississippi Flood of 1927, one of the most destructive floods in U.S. history. Placed in the current context of climate change, the song accrues an urgent and anticipatory meaning. Watery references enter this part of the work in other ways, too: anthro-centric time and the linear teleological time of late capitalism are challenged. A series of psychedelic landscapes, reminiscent of Mac OS screensavers, are distorted and liquified; they seem like melting, otherworldly sceneries, stretched and pulled across the screen. Al-Maria's voiceover explains how in Neolithic times the deserts of the Gulf were savannah and lush with cedar forests; these deserts were green oases through which four rivers ran. One of the landscapes includes a drawing of a blurry purple vista populated by giant lilac mushrooms, which suggests that once the sand dunes were the habitat of an ancient and rather alien vegetation. These landscapes are all out of human time and there are no divisions between life and non-life here; there is no scar of the desert yet. Slowly Al-Maria opens the wound of the desert, showing footage of the desert plains with a looped clip of a cactus flower blooming superimposed on top of it. Here, life is superimposed on non-life. The latter can be seen as a geontological representation in which life and non-life converge. The question Part Two started with, 'What if to enter the desert was to exit time', seems rhetorical because it can only refer to anthro-centric time. Throughout its duration, *The Future was Desert* shows an exit from anthro-centric extractivist time to a different geontological temporality. This is a

[103] Sophia Al-Maria, "Editor's Note," *The Happy Hyprocrite* Fresh Hell, no. 8 (2015): 14.

time that does not course forward. Rather, as the image of the large clock running backwards (Fig.5.10.), which Al-Maria has inserted throughout Part Two of the video, demonstrates, this is a time that breaks with linearity.

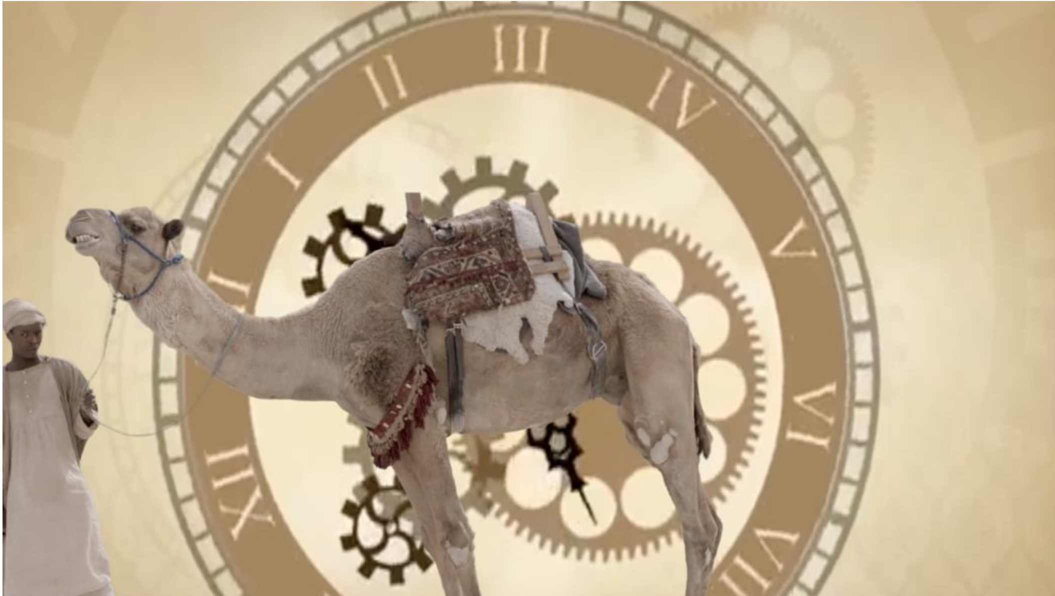

Figure 5.10. Sophia Al-Maria, *The Future was Desert – Part II*, 2016. Video with found footage, sound, 4'35". Video still. Image courtesy the artist and The Third Line Gallery, Dubai.

On this note, both Al-Maria and Zedani have cited the influence of sf writer Ursula K. Le Guin's short 1986 essay, 'The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction'.[104] In this, Le Guin offers a feminist heuristic to the masculine way of looking at history and storytelling. Rather than defining prehistoric man by a phallic weapon, the spear used for hunting prey or fighting peers, Le Guin offers to emphasise the foraging qualities of our hunter-gatherer forebears. As such, the accumulative and jumbled possibilities of carrier bags should be privileged over the linear and deadly technology of spears. Similarly, Le Guin proposes that fiction, instead of focussing on Man the Hero, should also consider small and untold stories.[105] Particularly of interest to the works analysed in this chapter is Le Guin's call to rethink linear time:

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[104] For Sophia Al-Maria's discussion of Le Guin, see Erika Balsom, "Sophia Al-Maria on Dystopias, Gulf Futurism, and Sad Sacks," *Art in America*, April 7, 2020, https://www.artnews.com/art-in-america/interviews/sophia-al-maria-erika-balsom-gulf-futurism-sad-sacks-julia-stoschek-interview-1202683264/. For Ayman Zedani, see his collaboration with writer and cultural worker Wided Khadraoui and their *Sha'ba'kah* art book project (2019), https://www.shabakahproject.com/. [last accessed 7.12.2021].

[105] See Ursula K. Le Guin, "The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction," in *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literacy Ecology*, ed. Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (Athens, Georgia: The University of Georgia Press, 1996), 149–54.

> If, however, one avoids the linear, progressive, Time's-(killing)-arrow mode of the Techno-Heroic, and redefines technology and science as primarily cultural carrier bag rather than weapon of domination, one pleasant side effect is that science fiction can be seen as a far less rigid, narrow field, not necessarily Promethean or apocalyptic at all, and in fact less a mythological genre than a realistic one.[106]

Le Guin's comment on time can be read as a call for an inclusive approach to time, one that also encompasses the temporal rhythms of the non-human and non-life entities placed in the carrier bag. The works discussed in this chapter trouble linear conceptions of time: Zedani draws on posthuman and post-planetary conceptions of life, while Al-Maria takes a more declensionist approach — her clock ticks backwards. In addition, these works bring into play a point of view that is not so much from the person carrying the bag, the individual who collects things and puts them in the bag and then takes them out again, but, rather, from the bag itself. The bag itself and the items it holds have thing power and together with their human carrier they might heal the geontological scar. This point of view is akin to what Gómez-Barris has called 'submerged perspectives' from within extractive zones, by which she means 'transitional and intangible spaces […] that cannot be fully contained by the ethnocentricism of speciesism, scientific objectification, or by extractive technocracies that advance oil fields, construct pipelines, divert and diminish rivers, or cave-in mountains through mining'.[107] Seen from a perspective of today's oceans, Le Guin's carrier bag, more often than not, will be the plastic bag — itself a petro-derivative — that chokes seabirds and suffocates marine life. The bag itself, then, has become monstrous and so are many of the stories it holds.

By showing the monstrosities of extractivist capitalism, Al Qadiri, Al-Maria and Zedani's projects critique petro-modernity's destructive addiction to oil. These artists call for more inclusive and hybrid, indeed more liquid, more monster human–non-human and life–non-life co-ontologies. Their submerged perspectives kindle points of view that see through oil and water by comingling human and geological time. This emphasis on deep time, as well as on posthuman and post-planetary responsibilities and futures, is not without risk of obfuscating the racial, social and political injustices that underwrite the production of monstrosities of the Anthropocene in the first place. Indeed, the discussed

[106] Le Guin, 153–54.

[107] Gómez-Barris, *The Extractive Zone. Social Ecologies and Decolonial Perspectives*, 11–12.

works hold an unresolved tension between the totalising catastrophe that climate change wreaks onto the planet and the Global South having to bear the heaviest brunt of this. This generation of GCC artists was raised with oil and with the modern nation-building capacity of the 'petroleum promise'.[108] In offering imaginaries 'after oil', a postnational outlook that uncouples the nation state from oil, and, conversely, oil from the nation state, seems a logical tactic. However, this universal approach might also erase existing differences and disparities. In her 2019 book, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes*, the geographer Kathryn Yusoff reminds us of the racialised violence inherent to extractivist practices, as exercised through the exploitation of human bodies that facilitate the extraction of fossil and mineral matter:

> The rendering of nonbeings in colonial extractive practices through the designation of inhuman or geologic life, its exchange and circulation, demonstrates what Christina Sharpe (2009) calls the 'monstrous intimacy' of the subjective powers of geology, where gold shows up as bodies and bodies are the surplus of mineralogical extraction.[109]

This subtext should be kept in mind when reading the artworks discussed in this chapter, even if not explicitly articulated in the works conceptually and thematically. In expunging oil, oil runs the risk of behaving more like water — like a solvent washing away the inequalities at the base of extractivist practices. As such, becoming monster always implies loss: while it may effectuate (post)planetary survival – monster ontologies, in their quest of becoming something new, and in their fluid liminality, might also erase difference and produce forgetfulness. The monster as a speculative figure of the future that attempts to present a new way of being in the world, then, by default embodies double losses: that of lost identities and of lost worlds.

In the works analysed, this vulnerability is perhaps best manifested in Al Qadiri's monster monuments. However, Al-Maria's *The Future was Desert* and Zedani's *the return of the old ones* both suggest that if we want to recuperate anything in and for the future, we

[108] See Mona Damluji, "Petroleum's Promise: The Neo-Colonial Imaginary of Oil Cities in the Modern Arabian Gulf," PhD dissertation, (University of California, Berkeley, 2013), 109–32, https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7qk5c7kj [last accessed 3.3.2022].

[109] Kathryn Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*, E-book (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018). Christina Sharpe defines 'monstrous intimacy' in the context of slavery as 'as a set of known and unknown performances and inhabited horrors, desires and positions produced, reproduced, circulated, and transmitted, that are breathed in like air and often unacknowledged to be monstrous.' Christina Sharpe, *Monstrous Intimacies: Making Post-Slavery Subjects* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 3.

might have to admit complicity, lose some of our humanity and become more monster by necessity. The Anthropogenic future is by default already monstrous. The speculative petro- and hydro-imaginaries these works express show that the monster and the monstrous operate on a variety of fluid ontological and temporal registers. In a region synonymous with oil and on the forefront of becoming the hottest region on Earth due to fossil fuel-induced global warming, the GCC artists in this chapter grapple with the difficult question of how to untie themselves from their countries' petro-pasts, without absolving them, and imagining post-monstrous futures.[110] This requires radical transformation and the works analysed here show first responses towards such a recuperative endeavour. Monira Al Qadiri's fantastical sculptures encapsulate the societal changes oil has brought to the Gulf region. As monuments to the past and to the future, her pieces convey that the history of the Gulf is one that combines pearl diving waters with oil and that within the alluring monstrosity of these sculptures lies extractivist accountability, but also ontological possibility. Ayman Zedani pulls oil out of its demonised zone and lends it geo-historical subjectivity by anthropomorphising it. Non-human entities such as oil, water and mushrooms are the knowledgeable agents of a liquid planetary consciousness in which humans are cast as monstrous destructive Others. Zedani's work turns away from the human and from Earth and suggests that the Anthropocene coming to an end need not be the end of life, even if it is the end of life as we know it. This non-linear approach to time and shifting of subjectivities from the human to the non-human continue in Sophia Al-Maria's videos in which deserts and oceans constitute a future that is devastatingly monstrous. In all these works, the oil encounter facilitates other different types of encounters, even assemblages, with the human, the non-human, life and non-life. These encounters can be bewildering, but they do offer possibilities in charting a way forward, whether this includes the human or not. The leverage to negotiate which kind of monster humans might turn out to be is rapidly shrinking. What has become clear is that anthro-centrism is an untenable position to keep on claiming. As such, humans will have to adapt, become more monster with all the losses this might entail, or die. The works discussed in this chapter issue a fateful warning: 'Monsters ask us to consider the wonders and terrors of

[110] See "Oil-Rich Gulf Faces Prospect of Unlivable Heat as Planet Warms," *France 24*, August 31, 2021, https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20210831-oil-rich-gulf-faces-prospect-of-unlivable-heat-as-planet-warms [last acessed 3.3.2022].

symbiotic entanglement in the Anthropocene.'[111] This makes them the prime, yet imperfect, restorative figures of the future to carry us forward. We would do well to listen to them attentively.

[111] Tsing et al., *Arts Living a Damaged Planet. Ghosts Monsters Anthr.*, M2.

Conclusion

This dissertation started with the question what it means to imagine — and, not unimportantly, *image* — future possibilities from a context of loss. Along with the artists in this dissertation, I have turned to sf in a bid to articulate the restorative potential of the speculative form through artworks that are as varied in medium as they are in concept. The artworks in this study underscore that there is a thin and jagged line between the identification of loss and the project of recovering something from it. One of the aims of *Lost Futurities* is to make that dynamic tangible and attribute agency to it. This requires the viewer to *see* sf as a political mode of imagination and worldbuilding in which the recovery of the past — and by corollary of the present — is vital. Another aim is to actively work against orientalist preconceptions of the Middle East that cast the region in a temporal limbo, or more egregiously, stymied by the past. Rather, I show that the sf interventions in *Lost Futurities* break with linear notions of temporality, and that in visualising the future equal attention is paid to recovering the past and reclaiming the present. Thus, sf and futurity activate the whole spectrum of temporality and, as I have shown, can inhabit it speculatively, too. This is of particular relevance for groups like the Palestinians whose history has been systemically erased and denied, or for communities who have suffered state-imposed amnesia to safeguard a fragile political *status quo*, like the Lebanese. A concern with examining 'memory for the future', and, conversely, the future of memory, resonates throughout my discussions of the works. Zainab Bahrani, a scholar of art history and archaeology in antique Mesopotamia, describes the ancient Mesopotamian ritual of burying sculptural artefacts in the ground 'as a temporal projection, for discovery by the people of a future time'.[1] There is a direct lineage between Larissa Sansour's protagonist in her video *In the Future* planting crockery in the ground for future archaeologists to find and the Mesopotamian forward-looking practice of depositing artefacts for posterity. Both think

[1] Zainab Bahrani, *The Infinite Image. Art, Time and the Aesthetic Dimension in Antiquity* (London: Reaktion Books, 2014), 11.

of the preservation of memory and both think of futurity. This tension along timescales moves much of my thinking in the thesis.

Lost Futurities is in essence a project of repair. Focussing on sf tropes as devices that signal loss and facilitate an imperfect recuperation not only adds complexity to the putative tropes of sf but also opens the door to new ones. Ruins as the manifestations of destruction and decay, usually locked in the past, can transform into potentialities for the future. Monsters, the ultimate embodiment of the abject and horror, become speculative hybrid figures whose co-ontological status provide a bridge to survival. No longer is the apocalypse a trope of an undefined middle, designating a time before and after disaster; instead, it becomes a motivation to insist on the present. Robot, alien and superhero alterity not so much questions subjectivity per se, but how ontological difference can reinstate agency, up to a degree. The artworks in *Lost Futurities* advance conceptions of futurity, but most actively scramble the idea of linear teleological time. As such, retrofuturist tropes of modernity like space travel are recast differently. The loss of both belonging and aspirational dreams is not compensated by more progress-oriented techno-scientific prowess. The nostalgia tied to space travel, rather than space travel itself, produces a site where loss can be mourned and the process of healing can begin. As I have argued throughout *Lost Futurities*, the mechanism of recuperation is flawed, but it is precisely through this deficiency that we learn most meaningfully about what is at stake in these works. As loss reveals itself through the lens of sf, so does possibility. This dissertation reads *through* and *with* the tropes of sf as a method of speculative repair. Going forward, it is my hope that other disciplines beyond the arts will draw from sf's toolbox as a method to examine political, social, historical and environmental concerns. This toolbox can also serve to develop new models.

The artworks in this study undermine the idea that sf is solely about an imaginary future; rather, the works blur boundaries between past, present and future, as well as fact and fiction. The undoing of linear time is mobilised to reclaim erasures of the past. Sf, then, becomes a means not only to retrieve history but also to safeguard it. As the world moves closer to climate disaster, human historical time is complicated and non-human and planetary time must fold into the temporal mix. Artists from the region are beginning to engage more intensely with the complex intertwining between political disaster and cataclysmic ecological events. My second and fifth chapters demonstrate how the two are

connected. In these chapters, I draw on a growing body of work in the environmental humanities that looks at human and non-human concerns in the context of the Anthropocene and how this is framed by contemporary art. The Middle East, while at the forefront of climate catastrophe, remains a blind spot in these studies.[2] Future research will find rich and urgent purchase in looking at how artists speculatively respond to environmental issues. In particular, artists like Jessica Khazrik and Dala Nasser forcefully address the oozing and slimy horrors of accumulating waste and toxic waterways in Beirut, while new work by Jumana Manna, the practice of Nida Sinnokrot and that of artist duo Ruanne Abou-Rahme and Basel Abbas are rooted in the indigenous seeds, weeds and agriculture of the Palestinian context. In Saudi Arabia, Muhannad Shono contemplates post-oil futures with his estranging site-specific PVC installations and his sand-related works, which merge human and non-human subjectivities. He also considers petro-culture's relation to the desert, something I touch on in Chapter 5. Many of these practices chime with the notion of the 'weird' in which fantastical elements, hybrid ontologies and blended temporalities meet the estranging entanglements of climate change, global techno-capital and shifting categories of the human.

Estrangement, to return to Suvin's primary marker of sf — from the spatio-temporal condition of *ghurba* expressing the alienation of exile, the ontological slippages of alterity in human and non-human Others, to the 'weird' hyperobjects of climate change — lies at the heart of the projects discussed. In many of these projects, estrangement — strangely — turns agential. As Nadya Sbaiti, whom I started my thesis introduction with, notes: 'Science fiction rests within the interstices of the familiar and the unfamiliar. It melds the most marvellous and terrible aspects of uncertainty — for example, by exposing the fear that often lies at the heart of hope. And therein lies the core of science fiction's immense methodological potential.'[3] For sf to navigate the choppy waters of uncertain times and the *terra infirma* of a changing world, it has to be seen as a spatial mode as much as a temporal mode. The examples in *Lost Futurity* show that estrangement operates across time and

[2] A case in point is the newly published *The Routledge Companion to Contemporary Art, Visual Culture, and Climate Change* (New York and London: Routledge, 2021), edited by T. J. Demos, Emily Eliza Scott and Subhankar Banerjee. Of all forty contributions, which cover practices from across the globe, not one discusses those from the Middle East.

[3] Nadya Sbaiti, "Teaching Science Fiction While Living It in Lebanon," *Society and Space*, November 2, 2020, https://www.societyandspace.org/articles/teaching-science-fiction-while-living-it-in-lebanon [last acessed 8.3.2022].

across space, many of them, as beforementioned, disrupting the geo-political category of modernity's conception of belonging: the nation state. Motifs like the ruin, the high-rise, the refugee camp, outer space, the desert, as well as other sites of extraction, all reframe space-time configurations and notions of futurity. This makes clear that futurity is as much defined by a politics of time, as it is by a politics of space. In the context of the Middle East, a region carved up by French and British colonial powers and still dealing with the aftershocks, notions of 'speculative space' and speculative 'territory' open up a plethora of questions that deserve further critical attention. In this regard, 'terrestrocentric' approaches in which space is conceived as land — contested, absent or imagined — can be further enriched by expanding into aquatic and other expanses.[4] The water and oceans flowing through Chapter 5 are such spaces, as are the sites deep underground in Sansour's *In Vitro* and Ayman Zedani's *the return of the old ones*. What these sites might mean for thinking about restorative and emancipatory futures is yet to be charted and critically mapped.

The desert in particular is an environment that conjures orientalist classifications and imaginaries; its representations are still dominated by Anglo-European imperialism that saw the desert as out of time, 'alien, exotic, fantastic or "abnormal," and frequently as degraded in some way' when compared to the verdant landscapes of home.[5] Diana K. Davis explains how in the context of French imperialism in North Africa the term 'desertification' was coined in 1927 by French colonial forester Louis Lavauden. The colonial project was intent on foresting drylands to increase agricultural land and so augment pastoral production and the volume of livestock. In doing so, unique ecosystems were destroyed and Nomadic lifestyles and indigenous knowledges, adapt at living and surviving in the desert, undone.[6] In Eurowestern sf the desert figures as an oft-used trope signalling alienation or an atavistic rupture in techno-futurity. The scenes of the desert planet Tatooine in the *Star Wars* franchise were filmed in Tunisia and their orientalist framing are a case in point. Similarly, Denis Villeneuve's 2021 filmic adaptation of Frank Herbert's *Dune* (1965), mostly filmed in

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[4] Writing about the Palestinian-Israeli context, Hannah Boast calls for more research that includes studies of water in Israeli and Palestinian literature as environmental writing. The same is applicable to much of the region and also extends to visual art. See Hannah Boast, *Hydrofictions. Water, Power and Politics in Israel and Palestinian Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020).

[5] Diana K. Davis and Edmund Burke, *Environmental Imaginaries of the Middle East and North Africa*, *Environmental Imaginaries of the Middle East and North Africa*, 2011, 3.

[6] See Diana K. Davis, "Deserts and Drylands Before the Age of Desertification," in *The End of Desertification? Disputing Environmental Change in the Drylands*, ed. Roy H. Behnke and Michael Mortimore (Berlin: Springer Verlag, 2016), 203–23.

Jordan and Abu Dhabi, received a flurry of critique from Arab and Muslim critics decrying its orientalist depiction of desert planet Arrakis and its inhabitants, the Fremen, as well as its lack of an Arab cast.[7] In sf, the desert is posited, as John Timberlake asserts, 'as a landscape of reductive extremes in which things — in this case sentient beings — are tested to breaking point'.[8] Artists from the region take these assumptions to task, unpacking the weaponised, orientalist and often masculinist gazes in which the desert is represented, and instead offer speculative ripostes that complicate and open up the interpretation of landscape. For example, in her project *The Earth is an Imperfect Ellipsoid* (2016), Egyptian artist Heba Y. Amin critiques how historical and present-day narratives exercise a predatory and sexualised view on Saharan geography and women's bodies. By confronting gendered and imperial gazes, she flips visual regimes and puts forward novel viewpoints.[9] Likewise, Monira Al Qadiri's most recent video *Holy Quarter* (2020), filmed in the Empty Quarter region of Saudi Arabia, merges narratives of colonial extractivism with tales of alien visitation, turning the desert into a site where life originates, rather than where it dies.[10] These works put forward representations of the desert that mess with stubborn Eurowestern colonial discourses of the last century, and propose critical reappraisals.

Amin and Al Qadiri's considerations feed into critiques, often spearheaded by women artists, of how visual regimes direct the perception of time and space and, by corollary, futurity. Indeed, many of the artists featured in *Lost Futurities* identify as female, and while I have not focused explicitly on gendered readings of the works, there is much fertile ground to do so. I wanted to do the groundwork of fleshing out broadly how sf tropes operate in the presented works. As someone trained in gender and queer studies, I believe much is to be gained by examining art through a speculative gender-critical lens. Feminist art history of the Middle East has made strides through translocal and transnational scholarship, thankfully rendering passé the international art world's obsession with 'the veil' as the only qualifier to analyse gender and other power relations in the region.[11] Instead,

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[7] See Roxana Hadadi, "*Dune* Has a Desert Problem," *Vulture*, October 29, 2021, https://www.vulture.com/2021/10/dune-has-a-desert-problem.html. And Siddhant Adlakha, "'Dune' Is a Sprawling Orientalist Fever Dream," *Observer*, August 10, 2021, https://observer.com/2021/10/dune-review-timothee-chalamet-zendaya-oscar-isaac/ [last accessed 9.3.2022].
[8] Timberlake, *Landscape and the Science Fiction Imaginary*, 154.
[9] See https://www.hebaamin.com/works/the-earth-is-an-imperfect-ellipsoid/ [last accessed 8.3.2022].
[10] See https://www.moniraalqadiri.com/holy-quarter/ [last accessed 8.3.2022].
[11] See, for example, the 2009 group show of Arab artists at the London-based Saatchi Gallery, *Unveiled: New Art from the Middle East*, https://www.saatchigallery.com/exhibition/unveiled [last accessed 8.3.2022]. A

recent studies focus on decolonial and intersectional approaches, addressing how art responds to topics including: 'gender and sexuality, ethnicity/race, religion, tradition, modernity and contemporaneity, and local and global politics'.[12] While engagement with sf or futurity is scant, I see productive crossovers. In the field of sf, feminist and queer methodologies and epistemologies are increasingly used to produce critical takes on 'science' and equally on 'social practices and norms regarding sex, gender, sexuality, race, and class'.[13] It makes sense to combine the methods of feminist sf with those of feminist art histories because of their 'fluid and strategic lines of commonality' when looking at artistic production from the Middle East.[14] The artworks in this dissertation alone give much material for fruitful discussion. For example, in Sansour's *In Vitro* and *Nation Estate* and Manna's *Wild Relatives*, issues around reproduction are raised, ranging from human cloning and the copying of seeds to the manual crosspollination of plants by young female Syrian refugees. In Al Qadiri's *The Craft*, like in *In Vitro*, mother-daughter relationships are put to the test. The 'can-do' and 'kick-ass' feminist agency of Nonel and Vovel in Sansour and Ashery's graphic novel also show that in these works the protagonists are mainly women, and they take on a multitude of complex roles. But there is also Fadi Baki's Manivelle, who moves between toxic and defeated masculinity. The growing interdisciplinary practice of queer ecology, which is gaining traction in the humanities, would also open new dimensions between environment, nature, landscape, human–non-human relationships, and other types of kinships and their futurities.[15]

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decade ago, the cover art of coffee table books and scholarly volumes on art in the Middle East often featured veiled women as an identarian signifier. While this might say more about the sales departments of the publishers than the authors themselves, these types of representations are important to note. *Contemporary Art in the Middle East* (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2009) features a photograph of a veiled woman by Shadi Ghadirian; *New Visions: Arab Contemporary Art in the 21st Century* (Thames & Hudson, 2009)'s cover is a photograph of a veiled woman by Halim al-Karim; *Light from the Middle East: New Photography* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2012) also shows a photograph of a veiled woman by Shadi Ghadirian; *Contemporary Art from the Middle East: Regional Interactions with Global Art Discourses* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015) shows a well-known work by Boushra Almutawakel in which a series of photographs of a woman and her daughters in *hijab* gradually disappear under a full face-veiled *niqab*.

[12] Ceren Özpinar and Mary Kelly, eds., *Under the Skin. Feminist Art and Art Histories from the Middle East and North Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 4.

[13] Ritch Calvin, *Feminist Science Fiction and Feminist Epistemology. Four Modes*, E-Book (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 6.

[14] I am borrowing Ritch Calvin's formulation in her discussion of feminist sf and the methodological potentialities it offers, Calvin, 226.

[15] For an overview of queer ecology, see Catriona Sandilands, "Queer Ecology," in *Keywords for Environmental Studies*, ed. Joni Adamson, William A. Gleason, and David N. Pellow, Website (New York: New York University

Lost Futurities builds on the premise that its scholarly research is informed by research-based artistic practice. In many ways, its findings could also operate as a speculative manual for curatorial practice. Curatorial practice is, in a sense, the creation of memories for the future. Therefore, any exhibition, performance, screening or other type of artistic intervention is speculative in nature, not only in terms of audience reception but also in the traces of meaning it leaves for future readers to excavate. As such, any curatorial gesture, to a lesser or greater degree, speculatively commemorates something. The kind of curatorial practice I am personally invested in would explicitly include considering the implications of how curatorial actions in the present might resonate with perceptions and possibility in the future. This requires a looseness of touch and an unlearning of curatorial rigidity. In fact, it requires art to speak in its many confusing tongues. As an art professional I understand the need for situating artistic practices for audiences, but the institutional tendency in the Eurowest to over-explain and over-contextualise contemporary art from the Middle East is eventually reductive and robs art of its capacity for the imaginary. It treats art from the region as if it were far removed from Eurowestern experiences, or as if it has value predominantly as an instrument of real-time rolling commentary on current affairs.[16] Things will always get lost in translation, but it is precisely in these slippages of meaning that art's restorative quality and its potential to connect also lie. The latter is an aspect to be emphasised for the future, so that in the future, too, this generosity can be continued. The thematic strands in *Lost Futurities* can be taken as curatorial leads and opportunities to develop exhibitions or other types of discursive events, and in doing so grow the roster of works. It is exciting to think of curatorial projects along the lines of the chapters, in which modernity is seen as a site of future mourning; where the apocalypse spurs us on to reclaim the present; Othering becomes a performative and agential practice; ruin is reformulated as a spatial and architectural motif of futurity and possibility; and the fluid and monstrous ontologies of oil comingling with water produce novel liquid aesthetics.

Press, 2016), https://keywords.nyupress.org/environmental-studies/essay/queer-ecology/ [last accessed 8.3.2022].

[16] For context, see Kaelen Wilson-Goldie, "On Bandwagons: The Problems of Funding Art during Times of Revolution," *Frieze*, October 1, 2011, https://www.frieze.com/article/bandwagons. And Negar Azimi, "Radical Bleak: Art's Conflicted Relationship with the Arab Spring," *Frieze*, January 2012. [both last accessed 8.3.2022]. For more on how Eurowestern curatorial approaches to Middle Eastern artistic practices often echo imperial notions in their focus on conflict and revolution (violent elsewheres) and identity (othering), see Anthony Downey and Alan Cruickshank, "Future Imperfect: Focus on Visual Culture in the Middle East," *Di'van | A Journal of Accounts*, no. 1 (2016), 214.

With its interdisciplinary sensibility, this thesis invites application to closely related fields such as film, architecture and design that offer overlaps and are themselves indeed proposing new directions for exploration. Applied practices such as 'speculative design' already address future challenges using design. More specifically, it 'thrives on imagination and aims to open up new perspectives on what are sometimes called *wicked problems,* to create spaces for discussion and debate about alternative ways of being' (emphasis original).[17] DAAR, mentioned in Chapter 4, the Saudi collective Bricklab, the Palestinian collective AAU Anastas, the Lebanese collective Febrik and the glass designs of Dima Srouji embed heritage and socio-political issues in their work and offer links to future imaginaries.[18] Although I have incorporated screen-based media such as video and experimental documentary in the dissertation, sf genealogies of Arab narrative cinema still need to be written. Antoine Waked, the director of the Beirut-based Maskoon genre film festival, recently wrote how '[g]enre (Horror, Fantasy, Science Fiction) has been a rarity in the landscape of Arab cinema, despite the fact that the region is filled with folkloric fantasy stories of Jinns, Ifrits, Shaitans, and Ghouls'.[19] Waked himself is surprised that Arab filmmakers, with the exception of a few Egyptian directors, have not embraced genre film more. For Waked, genre film offers a boundless scope in cinematic language, and he sees in horror, science fiction and fantasy a 'disguised instrument' to discuss social and political subjects.[20] A younger generation of filmmakers from the region is starting to rise to the occasion. In particular, filmmakers from North Africa, including Talal Selhami, Sofia Aloui, Amin Sidi-Boumédiène and Damien Ounouri are making films that, according to Waked, are akin to a new wave that will 'redefine Arab cinema'.[21] Their voices need to be amplified and their films need to be studied.

In the preceding chapters, I have tried to show how sf tropes trouble and productively destabilise categories of time, space and ontology. This allows them to pry open a wormhole into different worlds and possibilities. In particular, the category of the

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[17] Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby, *Speculative Everything Design, Fiction, and Social Dreaming* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: M.I.T. Press, 2013), 2.
[18] For DAAR, see http://www.decolonizing.ps/; for Bricklab, https://www.brick-lab.com/; for AAU Anastas, http://aauanastas.com/; for febrik, http://aauanastas.com/; for Dima Srouji, https://www.dimasrouji.com/ [all last accessed 8.3.2022].
[19] Antoine Waked, "Rise of the Arab Genre," *Aflamuna*, 2021, https://www.aflamuna.online/en/page/rise-of-the-arab-genre-essay-by-antoine-waked/ [last accessed 8.3.2022].
[20] Waked.
[21] Waked.

nation state is undercut in the context of the region's states being failed (Lebanon), absent (Palestine) or repressive (Egypt, Syria, and the nations of the GCC). The case studies I discuss do not speak in isolation from each other; rather, they speak to each other and in a larger historico-political context in which individual concerns with regard to loss and injustice seep into collective ones. This comes at a time when, globally, the functioning of the nation state, as well as ideas around nationhood, hang in the balance. What is pertinent in *Lost Futurities* is the artists' profound disappointment with the national project in the Arab world and how they channel this frustration into something transformative that does the political work of demanding accountability and imagining things otherwise. This reverberates beyond the region and certainly resonates beyond the fields of art and sf. In a recent conversation with the journalist Ezra Klein, historian Timothy Snyder, an expert in Central and Eastern Europe and the Holocaust, opined: 'if we're going to make it in the 21st century, it's going to have to be with national identities or some kind of identities which are a little bit more ramshackle, a little bit less homogenizing'.[22] This calls for the co-futures and co-ontologies dispersed throughout the thesis, but what is most encouraging about Snyder's statement is its anticipatory sensibility – indeed, the sense that something has to come undone and become more inclusive before forging ahead. This is the reason why *Lost Futurities* is transnational, transdisciplinary, and its output must carry beyond regional and disciplinary boundaries. This is also why its breadth in regional and thematic scope is, ultimately, strategic. With all the caveats attributed to the limitations of what art can or cannot do, *Lost Futurities* suggests that speculative critical practice is not only necessary because it 'critiques' but also because it is 'critical', in the sense that it is urgent to bring forth new models of how we — and I mean 'we' in the broadest sense of the word — want to be in the world. In this instance, art can transcend the artistic realm and truly become a speculative trigger for repair. This requires all the imagination and courage that 'we' can muster, yet, looking at the state of the world, it is imperative.

As our screens and social media feeds are inundated by violence and carnage from the war in Ukraine — images that come rushing back from similar scenes in Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Yemen and Palestine — it becomes all the more important to seek lines of

[22] Ezra Klein, "Transcript: Ezra Klein Interviews Timothy Snyder," *The New York Times*, March 15, 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/15/podcasts/transcript-ezra-klein-interviews-timothy-snyder.html [last accessed 16.3.2022].

commonality and solidarity. The works in *Lost Futurities* point out that, however modest, sf and art can offer outlooks that disrupt the spiral of destruction with a horizon of hope. In a turbulent world that is dancing on too many precipices, from climate catastrophe to global political instability, speculatively recuperating something out of loss for the future is not frivolous. Far from it. It is the imaginative survival skill that allows us to reach not only for the future but also for change. Sifting through the wreckage of what already feels like a ruined century, the political, creative and intellectual task that lies before us is daunting, but it demands we try to see possibility, and at the very least image and imagine it for the sake of futurity. *Lost Futurities* is a forceful invitation to start doing so.

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