Asphalt Nomadism: The new desert in Arab independent cinema

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> When Almighty God created things He made for each of them a partner. Intellect said, 'I am setting out for Syria;' and Discord said, 'And I go with you.' Fertility said, 'I am setting out for Egypt;' and Disgrace said, 'And I go with you.' Hardship said, 'I am setting out for the desert;' and Salubrity said, 'And I go with you.'[1]

The odes of the pre-Islamic nomads do not *begin* as such. They are just marked with an abrupt call to fellow riders to stop at the site of ruins. The great ode of Imru' l-Qays (500-540) begins "Halt, friends both! Let us weep, recalling a love[r] and a lodging."[2] The odes do not end, but are broken off just as abruptly, the ruins exhausted for memories, and the riders move on.

The nomadic odes, or *mu'allaqat*, establish a certain understanding of the passage of time and hence the meaning of story. There is no teleology in the desert, they say. Blowing sand effaces markers, erasing time and memory. A landscape that pre-exists us, outlives us, and unlike other landscapes, forgets us, the desert makes us aware of the limitations of human perception and memory. The desert is not empty, but it can only be navigated by close attention to the wind, the dunes, the oases and plant life. The desert is not chaotic, but it is best understood locally; it asks for embodied presence, not abstract order.

As much as this writer wishes to roll down dunes both physical and conceptual, to embrace the smooth space of the desert, her thoughts are necessarily disciplined by the striating forces of settlement, industry,

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[1] A tale related by Ka'b al-Ahbar to 'Umar ibn al-Khattab, in al-Maqrizi, *al-Mawai'iz wa-l-i'tibar bi-dhikr al-khitat wa-l-athar* (Cairo, 1324); quoted in Jibrail S. Jabbur, *The Bedouins and the Desert: Aspects of Nomadic Life in the Arab East*, trans. Lawrence I. Conrad (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995), 48.

[2] Mohammed A. Bamyeh, *The Social Origins of Islam: Mind, Economy, Discourse* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 7.

geopolitics—that force her to be something more than an orientalist looking to get lost in somebody else's landscape. The seductive concept of smooth space, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari reminded us, lives only in interchange with the disciplining concept of striation.[3] Smooth space seems always to be elsewhere. Once you explore it, it springs into complex life on scales micro and macro. In the desert, acacia trees and thorny shrubs spread their limbs to protect the soil from the predations of the blowing wind, so that other plants may grow there. In the desert, nomadic people are constantly enjoined, by means subtle and forceful, to submit themselves to the civilizing forces of religion and the soporific of a daily wage. The desert is never really "smooth," for that is death. The pitiless desert is an outsider's fantasy; nomads themselves work to find succor in the desert. The more we examine the relationships between the smooth and the striated in desert space, and the relations of life and death that their movement describes, the more difficult it is to distinguish them. A true cinema of the desert sees the desert in relation to the outside forces that shape it.

Deleuze and Guattari wrote with sympathetic acuity about the smooth spaces of sand, snow, and sea and the nomadic people who draw their knowledge and sustenance from them. I do not intend to fault the philosophers for romanticizing the desert. We who inherit their thinking need to stay on the ground: both in thought, moving close to the surfaces of concepts, and literally, remaining alert to signs of life in the sand and scrub of the desert. In this essay I will be staying close to a third element as well, the cinema; in particular, independent cinema from the Arab world.[4] "Independent" indexes an emergent cinematic practice, relatively outside the film and media industries and close to

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[3] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, "1440: The Smooth and the Striated," *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 500.

[4] Arab cinema, for the purposes of this essay, is cinema in Arabic. The linguistic commonality helps to bypass more complicated issues of ethnicity (not all Arab filmmakers think of themselves as "Arabs") and religion (though Islam is the dominant religion in the Arab world and Arab culture is inextricable from it, not all Arab filmmakers are Muslim) and to establish a common body of practice. It also distinguishes this body of work from Iranian cinema.

the surface of events. The filmmakers and videomakers whose work I discuss here are themselves nomadic thinkers, in that their practice stays close to the material and conceptual reality of life in the Arab world. Even if, as we shall see, it strays away from the sand…

My invitation to contribute this essay asked me to write about the cinema of the desert, and I chose the deserts of the Arab world: the Arabian Desert and the Rub al-Khali (empty quarter) in the southern part of the Arabian peninsula, the Syrian desert, the Sahara, the Libyan, and the Nubian deserts. My initial thesis is that the cinema of the desert would share the properties of the *mu'allaqat*: nomadic, non-teleological, self-organized, embodied, and concrete. However, the social relation of Arab peoples to the desert has evidently changed since the time of the *mu'allaqat*. Early Islam enjoined a unity that surpassed tribal unity and facilitated urbanization and migration. As Islam replaced the nomadic worldview with its promise of a justice that surpassed life and tribe, the odes had an "ontological irrelevance" for the faithful. Pan-Arabism and transcendence both carried Arabs' allegiance beyond local territory. And while the bedouin have continued to embody Arab ideals, the social relation of Arab peoples to the desert in the past century has been increasingly one of leaving the desert behind; of leaving smooth space and local organization for striated space and abstract order. Thus, films set in the desert either tell the story of a regretted but necessary departure or use the desert as a setting for historical glory or timeless fantasy. There are few Arab films about the desert itself; most films set in the deserts of the Arab world approach them from the outside, and particularly from Europe.

The new cinema of the desert, as I will explain, is set on the asphalt. The new self-organized, non-teleological narrative from these parts of the world is the Arab road movie. A history of practices of striating the desert, more or less continuous with the history of the cinema, pushes the nomad onto the open road—and the road into ruin.

The Arab road movie is a latecomer to the road movie genre, typically a genre of existential self-seeking. The celebration of individuality is a relatively

new thing in the Arab cinema. Many of the nomadic poets, the authors of odes to traces of ruins in the sand, were outcasts and misfits. Their difference from their society gave rise to art. In concluding I will ask, is there a similar process whereby the Arab filmmaker, or Arab cinema, arises from ruins? Is there a nomadic cinema that might inherit the properties of the *mu'allaqat*?

What might a nomadic cinema look like?

A cinema modeled on the nomadic odes would surely lack teleology. It would commence and end seemingly at random. It would devote several scenes to mournful recollection of some lost beloved who can only be recognized by the traces of his or her abandoned camp; that is, it would linger at the ruins. It would devote many more scenes to attentive description of the camel or like vehicle that permitted the nomadic filmmaker to finally ride away from this scene of destruction. It would respect no organizing principle save that of poetry, or cinema.[5]

Interestingly, the nonorganic life of sand provides another model for the non-teleological character of the desert narrative. Nature is full of emergent patterns. The desert is not a chaos, but organized according to local properties of the territory, sand and wind. For example, physics shows that in sculpted dunes, the amplitude of the wave forms is an emergent property of the amplitude of the wavelength of the wind and the size of individual grains of sand.[6] The self-organizing character of sand dunes might be only a metaphor for the self-organizing character of nomadic life. But people become like the things they spend time with; and, as Manuel De Landa observes, sometimes human history

[5] This typical desert cinema is modeled on the discussion of the nomadic odes in Bamyeh, *The Social Origin of Islam.*

[6] Stephen Morris, "Structure from Instability," talk at the conference Subtle Technologies: Blurring the Boundaries Between Art and Science conference, May 11, 2002. See also Philip Ball, *The Self-Made Tapestry: Pattern Formation in Nature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

is best explained by geological principles.[7] Desert narratives, like the forms of the desert itself, emerge from local conditions rather than universals. We might say that the human storytelling drive and the desert occupy two different scales, two different wavelengths; the story, physics suggests, emerges from the interaction between the two.

The striated desert

Nomads themselves do not live in the high desert but move through it. Jibrail S. Jabbur, in his ardently detailed catalogue of the life of the Syrian Bedouins, explains that nomad life is organized around the search for water and pasturage and a return to the fringes of settlements to wait out the summers. He attentively describes the delicate ecosystem of the desert, devoting chapters to its multitude of indigenous plants and animals. "Desertification," usually the result of settlement and overgrazing of cattle, destroys water sources and plant and animal life: thus the desert as limitless expanse of sand is a human artifact, a place of greater interest to mad dogs and Englishmen than to nomads.

Socially, the smooth space of the desert has always interacted with striating forces. Bedouin-sedentary (*badawah*-*hadarah*) relations once possessed a healthy hydraulics (in De Landa's term) whereby the properties of each were refined and stimulated in interaction with the other. For example, trade relations between settled people and Bedouin nomads and semi-nomads (i.e. herders) maintained a flow of goods and contact between desert and settlement. Similarly, the Bedouin practice of raiding forced Arab emirs to consolidate their powers in order to defend settlements and caravans from Bedouin depredations. Arab people trace many cultural values to the Bedouin, such as kinship solidarity, honor, and hospitality. Yet these values are misted with guarded nostalgia, for example in the writing of the great Andalusian historian Ibn Khaldoun, who expressed a sense that the Bedouin are somehow purer than settled people (in a

[7] Manuel De Landa, "Geological History: 1000-1700 A.D.," *A Thousand Years of Nonlinear History* (New York: Zone, 1997), 55 and *passim*.

noble-savage paradigm) but deplored their practices of raiding and pillage and seemed to wish them firmly in the past.

Nomadic life cannot tolerate abstraction. Close attention to the senses' relay with the subtle life of the desert is necessary for the survival of one's animals, one's tribe, and oneself. This is clear. It is not difficult to argue the obverse, as Mohammed Bamyeh does: that sedentarization is concomitant with embrace of abstract system of value. The broken narratives of the *mu'allaqat* were supplanted rather abruptly by the teleological organization of the Qu'ran, Bamyeh writes, and the abstract orders of language, commerce, and spirituality that made Islam possible. Though he cracks not a reference to nomad philosophers Deleuze and Guattari, Bamyeh corroborates their argument that nomadic thought embraces immanent meaning and has no truck with overarching schemes of value. Drawing on Georg Simmel, he shows that the money system, necessitated by trade and centered around Mecca, standardized the value of objects quasi-linguistically, in that their value depended upon what others would pay for them.[8] Such value systems are meaningless to people who have little to trade, like the Bedouin. But they are essential for the establishment of a greater system of abstract order, such as Islam. The Qur'an says that the return to God is more valuable than any valued thing, thereby, Bamyeh argues, actually confirming the emerging abstract system of value.

Monotheism cannot tolerate nomads. Its transcendental absolutism abhors the persistent immanence of nomadic life. And Bedouins seem to have little use for the postponed fulfillment of the Muslim afterlife. The British explorer William Gifford Palgrave, writing in 1866, recounts that he asked a Bedouin whether, after a life of raiding and pillaging, he expected to be welcomed in Paradise. The Bedouin replied, "We will go up to God and salute him, and if he proves hospitable (gives us meat and tobacco), we will stay with him; if otherwise, we will mount our horses and ride off."[9] Jabbur's survey of Muslim

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[8] Bamyeh, 18-22.

[9] William Gifford Palgrave, *Narrative of a Year's Journey Through Central and Eastern Arabia, 1862-1863*; quoted in Jabbur, 377.

chronicles shows that Bedouins had no compunction about raiding pilgrimage caravans to Mecca.

Emerging governments used many enticements to settle the Bedouin. Ibn Saud, according to a biography written by his granddaughter, "realized the bedouin cannot be educated and changed unless he settles. He cannot have discipline unless he has a house. The mobile bedouin without a house becomes the enemy of stable government. The king introduced *tawtin*, sedentarisation, to replace tribal custom and tradition with holy *sharia*."[10] Note how this flattering account attributes to the founder of Saudi Arabia a double act of striation, the deft linkage of sedentary life with correct Islamic practice. Confirming this association, in the early days of the Saudi state, the 1930s, Bedouin also served as religious police (Ikhwan, predecessors to present-day Islamic fundamentalists) having "'migrated' from a nomadic life and settled in the belief that settlement facilitated proper religious practice."[11]

Youssef Chahine's epic *The Emigrant* (1994) leaves no doubt as to the relative virtues of nomadism or settlement, polytheism or monotheism.[12] It is an Egyptian reworking of the biblical story of Joseph. Ram, the youngest brother in a semi-nomadic family, best-loved by their father and keenly aware of the ways of plant life in the desert, ardently desires to emigrate to Egypt and learn to farm. Ram's goal is attained in a roundabout way when, having survived his jealous brothers' attempt to drown him at sea, he is sold as a slave into the court of ??. By dint of wit and faith Ram gets himself freed, and is given a plot of unarable land in the sandy desert. If he can successfully farm it, it will be his. Meanwhile he has begun to preach against the "death cult" of the Egyptians and to admonish listeners that there is only one god and that one need not be embalmed to reach the afterlife.

[10] M. 'Abd el-'Aziz, 1993, quoted in Madawi Al Rasheed, A History of Saudi Arabia (Cambridge University Press, 2002), 154.
[11] Daryl Champion, *The Paradoxical Kingdom: Saudi Arabia and the Momentum of Reform* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 49.
[12] I thank Haidar Sadek for pointing out the double striation at work in this film.

Water governs *The Emigrant*, as the search for water rules nomadic travels in general. Amid a general tone of Chahinian high camp, one of the film's loveliest scenes is when Ram and his small group of allies leap awake to the sound of the first rains and joyously sow barley by midnight. Later Ram discovers fresh water flowing nearby and fashions an aqueduct of reeds to divert it to the land. Meanwhile, discord reigns in Egypt between worshippers of competing deities, and in an act of revenge the evil monarch has the peasants' crops burnt. Emigrating en masse, they come upon a peaceful agricultural kingdom over which Ram rules clemently. He permits them to stay: "Let the soldiers farm." Later still, Ram's murderous brothers throw themselves onto the mercy of this wise agricultural ruler, not recognizing him as their brother. He forgives them and the film concludes with his long-awaited reunion with his father. In *The Emigrant* the patriarchal family, the monotheistic tribe, the agricultural settlement and rational town planning triumph over the wasteful, backward practices of superstition, venality, and herding.

<u>The desert is seen from a distance</u>

Since the desert has first been represented in art in the Arab world, it has been shown over the shoulder of someone leaving. Regretfully, with a sense of descent from grace, but leaving nonetheless. Imru' l-Qays composed his ode in exile, having been ostracized by his father, the king of the Kinda tribe.[13] Contemporary North African desert movies are about leaving the desert behind. The Egyptian *Arak al-balah* (Date wine; Radwan El-Kashef, 1998), the Algerian *Desert Rose* (Mohamed Rachid Benhadj, 1989),[14] and the Sudanese short *Insan* (Human Being; Ibrahim Shaddad, 1988) all suggest that modernity means leaving the desert and the village. Men leave, emigrating to work; women and children stay behind. To do otherwise, like the bewitched settlers in Nacir

[13] Bamyeh, 51, 176-177.
[14] Mouny Berrah, "Algerian Cinema and National Identity," in *Screens of Life*, 74-75.

Khémir's *The Wanderers of the Desert* (1986), is to plunge backwards into history.

Only since European colonization has the desert been represented as a place people go *to*. Until the second half of the twentieth century, Jabbur writes, most of the writing on the desert and on Bedouin life, in any language, was the work of European explorers.[15] These men explored the desert and lived with nomadic people, sending their accounts back home in English, French, and German. The desert has become a place of nostalgia for and fantasy about a time when social life could be locally organized in harmony with the sand and the winds. The campy popular Bedouin films, a staple of the Egyptian film industry in the 1920s-40s, fed urban fantasies about nomad life. They were in fact inspired by American desert movies like *The Sheik* (1926), in which Rudolph Valentino plays the Bedouin.[16] Hady Zaccak points out that desert movies like *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962) and *Three Kings* (1999) comprise an "eastern" genre, an orientalist adaptation of American cowboy movies with Arabs standing in for the Indians.[17] Recent foreign films, such as *The Sheltering Sky* (1990) and *The English Patient* (1996) are drawn to the desert as though to an enveloping, maternal/destructive force and to the noble, ascetic qualities of nomadic people. These movies tend not to perceive the emergent order of the desert, though they seem to be aware that Tuareg people, for example, have such knowledge.Now the desert is seen in the Arab world, in the occasional love story and video clip, with a romantic view similar to that of the European colonials. A place to be simple again, to get lost, to revert to a fantasy life, on the weekends. Travel to the desert is time travel.

For some filmmakers, the non-teleological space of the desert serves as a setting for powerful historical re-imaginings that differ from fantasy because they do not confirm the present. The Tunisian filmmaker Nacir Khemir uses the desert

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[15] Jabbur, 14.
[16] Ali Abu Shadi, "Genres in Egyptian Cinema," in *Screens of Life: Critical Film Writing from the Arab World*, ed. Alia Arasoughly (Québec: World Heritage Press, 1996), 103.

as a time-travel device in *Wanderers in the Desert*, where the space of the depopulated desert town comes to resemble the past of the Islamic golden age in Andalusia—except that it is disturbingly unlively.[18] Khemir, who lives in Paris, has said that he constructs these fantasies of the classical Arab past in order to escape from the present of poverty and global colonization: "I cultivate my absence from home by advancing further into a fantasy world."[19] In an Africanization of the Bible similar to Chahine's *The Emigrant*, the Malian Cheick Oumar Sissoko sets the book of Genesis in the arid plateaus of northeastern Mali, the harsh landscape explaining the self-organization of the earliest tribes into sedentary and nomadic. Sissoko's *Genesis* (1997) is a history of striation that emerges from local organization, a pointed parallel to contemporary African civil wars.

Aside from fantasy and historical films, the desert itself is rarely a subject of Arab cinema. Fewer people live in the desert now, and those who do, do not have time to make movies about it. The cinema of the desert is really a cinema of abandoning the desert. The movement toward sedentary life, encouraged by trade and by Islam, accelerated under the pressures of erosion, urbanization, nationalization, and industrialization. Talking about the desert, even in these contexts internal to the Arab world, forces a focus on issues that are already past. For the desert has been striated for good by pressures from outside the Arab world. These include Islam, colonialism, capitalism, and the search for an essential ingredient of modern social organization that you can surely guess. Any work of cinema that seeks respite in the desert from the complexity of modern life—well, it has its head stuck in the sand.

One of a few recent Arab films that presents seductive images of the desert and Bedouin life is *Alamein—A Moment of Life* (2002) by the Egyptian Ezz

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[17] Hady Zaccak, "Les Arabes dans 'le western,'" *Regards*, annual publication of the Institut des Études Scéniques, Audiovisuelles et Cinématographiques (IESAV), Université St. Joseph, Beirut, 5 (January 2003): 53-58.

[18] Viola Shafik, *Arab Cinema: History and Cultural Identity* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 1998), 53, 197.

[19] Quoted in Shafik, ibid.

El-Din Said. This short made-for-TV film begins with an erotic exchange of glances between a doe-eyed woman tending her goats in the desert, and a man who eagerly climbs the dunes to approach her. He nears the lovely woman—she looks toward him expectantly—and the man blows up. In this film the desert is poisoned. Land mines planted during Egypt's hostilities with Israel have never been defused. Here the Bedouin are as glamorized as in any Hollywood fantasy, but the wars of other people's nations haunt nomadic life. The global military economy literally occupies the sand.

Asphalt nomadism

A survey of contemporary Arab cinema reveals few deserts, and a lot of driving. Driving, and getting nowhere. The goal is not reached; the map becomes useless. Smooth space prevails, as in the desert of sand, but something is deeply different in these new works of asphalt nomadism. The new desert is the Arab highway. The new self-organizing, non-teleological narrative is the Arab road movie.

Emblematic of the Arab failed road movie is *Baalbeck* (2001), a triptych by the Lebanese videomakers Ghassan Salhab, Akram Zaatari, and Mohamad Soueid. Each 20-minute sections re-tells the same story, about a writer and photographer who set off from Beirut to Baalbeck, the ancient Phoenician/Roman ruin converted to an amphitheater, to cover a concert by the Syrian singer Sabah Fakhri. Each of the three trips gets hijacked by something "trivial."

Salhab's section is an Antonioniesque dérive. At one point, inspired by something, the writer says "Stop a minute" and they park by a field. There he composes a poem. "As far as we can go / the days carry us / As far as we can go." Dissatisfied, he crosses out the last line. It is funny that writing a poem about the voyage is more seductive than the voyage itself. There is an implicit dread that the journey will prove no more than a string of clichés, especially as, to the photographer's annoyance, the writer appears never to have heard of Fakri. They take a detour in search of one Abu Elias, who supposedly makes the best *labneh*

sandwiches in Lebanon. Later the writer becomes fascinated by a mountain spring. But when he fetches the photographer to come see it, it has disappeared. These momentary diversions take their toll on the 20 minute time allotment, and our explorers never get to Baalbeck.

In Zaatari's section, writer and photographer take up pursuit of a beautiful and mysterious youth. Abandoning their assigned route, they follow the car that picks him up hitch-hiking. Following from a distance as he travels into increasingly inhospitable territory, they carefully obtain all the things he discards— a used tissue, a lip balm, a Kinderegg chocolate wrapper. Finally, when the youth strips to go for a swim, they take advantage to go through all his things. They carefully note the size of his underwear but not the name written on his driver's license. Nomad-style, they ignore the standard forms of evidence and search for other artifacts that might be more immediately meaningful—especially the things that touched the youth's body. Homoeroticism becomes a self-organizing principle in a country, Lebanon, where homosexuality is illegal. For same-sex desire, teleology is impossible. Desire can only be a perpetual motor, terminally creative. They never get to Baalbeck.

Soueid's section, the most evidently political critique, is harshly absurdist. As the writer drives to pick up his companion, the radio announces, "The director-general of Syrian Radio and Television said that peace with Israel is possible … if Lebanon agrees to fully withdraw from the Golan Heights [the Syrian territory cooupied by Israel]." The announcer adds that the pop star Céline Dion will be performing with Sabah Fakhri to celebrate the liberation of the South (referring to Israel's withdrawal from most of Southern Lebanon in May 2000). The concert, their journalistic prospect and sign of a healthy pan-Arab cultural life, has become just a pawn in a crazy game of politics and global pop culture. "Fairouz [the diva whose name is synonymous with Lebanon] was here and we're going to cover a concert by the vulgar Celine Dion." Soueid's section concludes with the journalist pissing in a river, and his voice saying, over a melancholy shot of water bugs skating on the golden pool: "I wanted to be a filmmaker…now I'm only a journalist." They never get to Baalbeck.

The road traveled also becomes a crazy dérive in *Baghdad On/Off* (2002) by the Iraqi filmmaker Saad Salman. At first it appears to be a conventional documentary by an Iraqi filmmaker, Salman, exiled for 25 years and attempting to return to Baghdad to visit his ailing mother. He hires a driver who skirts every route toward the Iraqi border from Iraqi Kurdistan. The journey is potholed with delays and wrong turns: one road is blocked, another infested with Iraqi soldiers shooting at smugglers, another, along the seemingly endless concrete wall of a military installation, seems too dangerous to continue along. On the map Salman keeps pulling out to consult, the roads to Baghdad become so many dead ends. His mysterious driver, who refuses to be photographed, intones “You can count on me, tomorrow we’ll be in Baghdad, inshallah”; yet his schemes to get to Baghdad become increasingly complicated. In the immiserated, drought-ridden refugee camps, Salman is met with warm hospitality and also unremitting anger and contempt toward Saddam Hussein’s regime, no less than toward the U.N. embargo. We hear the horrifying stories of Kurdish and other displaced people, former prisoners, a women whose son was shot in front of her, the 500 people who died when a cigarette factory was bombed. Salman learns a new verb for genocide, to Anfal—a derivation of the name of the Kurdish city where the regime killed thousands of people. A scholar shows the flattened hole where his ear used to be, admitting that he is lucky because many people mutilated this way died of gangrene. “It’s depressing. I need glasses, but how can they stay on my head?”

The film also witnesses the ingenuity and survival skills of the Iraqi people, like the recyclers who use spent grenades to weigh vegetables, and their propulsion toward freedom even at the highest cost. A refugee woman who has lost her children still says, “Being free is better than having a house, better than life.” A man who was imprisoned in Kasr el-Nahayr takes the filmmaker on a tour of the deathly jail, now empty, and points out a high, narrow window where once the prisoners piled up 40 blankets so they could put their hands and faces in the sun. “Tomorrow we’ll be in Baghdad, inshallah,” becomes the refrain of this circuitous, dead-end trip. Finally, as every route to the capital becomes

exhausted, the tattered map becomes a useless lie. They never make it to Baghdad.

As a documentary *Baghdad On/Off* is stunning: beautiful cinematography and exquisite image and sound editing honor the people who are its subject. As a meta-documentary it is also powerful, for, as we realize that the invisible driver spouting wise aphorisms is an invention, recorded in the editing suite, we recognize that truth sometimes only arises from fiction. But needless to say, the film has been very controversial in the Arab world. In the year it was made, t was refused at every Arab film festival except Beirut Cinema Days, and rejected by the Institute du Monde Arabe in Paris.[20] When *Baghdad On/Off* screened in Beirut, the audience ignored its artistry and focused their anger on its anti-Saddam, pro-American message. Yet the film is a work of nomad epistemology. Unable to pursue official routes, it makes use of the material immediately at hand—as the Iraqi people do themselves. Salman's exquisite sense for audiovisual montage gives rise to such emergent meaning, for example, in a scene that begins with the loud buzzing of bees. A shot of bees crawling in and around some oddly shaped canisters gradually makes sense when we meet the beekeeper, who explains that spent rocket shells make good beehives.

<u>Why did the desert give way to the highway?</u>

This question is complicated to answer. It has in part to do with the urbanizing and and homogenizing tendency of Islam since the late sixth century. But the reader can surely guess that in recent times the first answer is, Oil. The sedentary-Bedouin dialectic, though increasingly challenged by consolidations of power in the Arab world, was sustainable until oil was discovered in the desert. This new and decisive striation of the desert is not entirely a result of colonialism, nor of the depredations of foreign capital, though these are involved. The final destruction of the nomadic way of life, and the source of the new asphalt

[20] Interview with Saad Salman, October 9, 2002.

nomadism, lay in a series of transactions that irreversibly translated the local into the generic.[21]

What one thing do nomads refuse to sell? Their camels, their "ships in the desert." In the *mu'allaqat*, loved ones and prized possessions may perish, but the camel, "the highest and most stable form of value…, is conceived of not as a means of exchange but, rather, as an enabler of life, itself often being on the verge of perishing. It is the means by which the wanderer moves perpetually away from the possibilities of discerning values in abstract themes."[22] The camel is what grounds nomadic life and the last thing a Bedouin will sell. Abdelrahmane Munif's novel *Cities of Salt* chronicles the lives of Saudi Bedouins who go to work for the American company come to extract the oil from under their sand, Aramco. It is a gripping scene in which the workers receive their first salary payment. They are strongly enjoined to sell their camels, since why will they need them now that they are oil workers? The decision is wrenching.[23] Selling the camels means relinquishing their nomadic identity and becoming beholden to an abstract value system represented by the oil company. The Bedouins translate their nomadic subsistence into the liquid capital that will guarantee their dependence.

With the discovery of oil in the desert, the Arab world was incorporated into the global economy at expense of place. We know well enough the history of wars fought to establish striating lines, national boundaries and pipelines, across countries some of whose borders were colonial fabrications. Geopolitics moved into the desert. Ibn Khaldoun had already remarked the contrast between the self-sufficiency of the nomad and the pampered sedentary life, 600 years before the Saudi-style welfare state. But oil exacerbated this contrast. Some Bedouins got air-conditioned cars and become sedentary and fat; others simply became

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[21] Donald P. Cole, "Where Have the Bedouin Gone?", argues that "Bedouin" now designates less a way of life than a cultural identity, as a result of the intertwining forces of colonization, commercialization of pasturage, new occupations, and sedentarization. *Anthropological Quarterly* 76.2 (2003): 235-267.
[22] Bamyeh, 24.
[23] Abdelrahmane Munif, *Cities of Salt*, trans. Peter Theroux (New York: Vintage International, 1987), 185-186.

immiserated.[24] ARAMCO's oil extraction drained water from the lands, and the resulting drought destroyed the lands where Bedouin grazed their animals.[25] A new desert came into being: the rootlessness, not of the citified Bedouin, but of the Arab in a global oil economy with its attendant neoimperialism.

Adieu Salubrity

Now, given the economic decline in the oil-producing countries, the richest Arab people suddenly find themselves living on reduced means. There is precious little cinema produced in the Gulf countries, but I was surprised to come across some works recently that deal with this very topic. Beirut Cinema Days festival last fall showed a program of student videos from the United Arab Emirates. These were not excellent works, but sociologically they were fascinating, as two themes kept recurring: the ruinous cost of maintaining status, and the seduction of driving on the smooth highways. A video by Shereela Abdullah, *Crazy (Women) Drivers* (2002) is about women who like to drive fast. *The Car or the Wife* (2000) by Rehab Omar Ateeq dramatizes a man's struggle to choose between, well, his car and his wife. *All That Glitters Is Not Gold* (2000) a documentary on snobbism by Zainab Al Ashoor, interviews young people on the importance of maintaining new cars, new mobile phones, and the bank loans to cover them. Also from the Emirates, Hani el Shibani's *A Warm Winter Night* (2002) is a short drama about an unhappy married couple taking an evening drive on the endless smooth roads. He confesses that he's broke and can no longer support her expensive lifestyle; they rediscover their love.

Desert suicide is a startling recent phenomenon in the Gulf countries. People who can't face their debts drive as far as they can into the desert, then

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[24] The disenfranchised people of Saudi Arabia, for example, are the most recently sedentarized Bedouins; the oasis peasantry, primarily Shi'a Muslims who face extreme discrimination in Saudi Arabia, and the people who lack connections to powerful families. (Many of these are also the people who turned to religious fundamentalism.) Al-Rasheed, 154.
[25] Cole, 243.

abandon their cars and walk, until they die of exhaustion and dehydration.[26] *When?* (2001) a beautiful short video by Abdallah al Junaibi made for the Sharjah satellite channel in the Emirates, eulogizes these people. In the desert, the camera circles around a man digging a hole as though for his own grave. His harried voice-over reveals that he is desperate about the bills he cannot pay and the punishing cost of status. “My neighbors have a Land Cruiser and I only have a Maxima.” By some magic the video saves the would-be suicide. He sings a wistful song—What happened to you, my pigeon?—and somehow, regaining the will to live, he fills the grave with sand again.

In Lebanon, driving is a passionate topic. In Beirut during wartime, luck, élan, and driving as fast as possible to to cross roadblocks and avoid being killed. Driving was great during the war, admits the driver (Rabih Mroué) of *Rounds* (2001) by Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joriege. “During the war, the bombings, the streets were deserted. I took advantage of the situation to drive. It was incredible—I flew, I was like a phantom.” Driving in the war was like traveling in the desert: one had to rely on one’s own knowledge of the landmarks, one’s own instinct for danger. Now, the driver recounts as he deftly weaves through traffic, since the (highly selective) postwar reconstruction, Beirut is crossed with new highways and marked with traffic lights people are unaccustomed to obeying. Shot entirely inside the car Mroué is driving, *Rondes* is overexposed to make the world outside the car fade away, preserving a little island of nomadic freedom in the increasingly striated city. This little film is an inquiry relations of smoothing and striation. “A highway was built on the sea after the war. They packed the ruins and debris [in landfills] and pushed back the sea for two kilometers.” Under the highways lie mass graves and cindered remains of swathes of the city. Highways forget, they turn space into time, particular place into distance to be traversed. “Don’t be too moved! There are seven civilizations buried under Beirut.”

Beirutis are not so quickly willing to give up the smooth space of wartime driving. They still drive as fast as they can.

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[26] I am indebted to Mohamad Soueid for this information.

Roadblock movies

Asphalt nomadism has a powerful subgenre of films in which travel is impossible, and not just because of third-world highway maintenance. As well as *Baghdad On/Off*, where roads are blocked for specifically political reasons, these include, as you would expect, a majority of Palestinian films. The important progenitor of the roadblock movies is *The Duped* (1972) by Egyptian director Taufik Salih, based on the novel by the Palestinian Ghassan Khanafani. Three Palestinians, desperate to find work in Kuwait to support their refugee families, travel as far as they can until the desert, glimmering with heat, rises up against them. They pay a Palestinian driver to smuggle them across the border from Iraq, hidden in a water tank. At the border, bored Kuwaiti officials detain the driver with flippant gossip. Outside, under the blazing sun, the temperature inside the tank becomes unbearable. The men's cries go unheard and they suffocate to death. Geographically they were minutes from freedom, but geopolitically, the fact of a checkpoint was murderous. This film, a Syrian production, was emblematic of pan-Arab concern about the Palestinian people;[27] yet its conclusion is also emblematic of the paralysis of the Arab world vis-à-vis the Palestinians' struggle.

Two intifadas later, the checkpoints have multiplied and the frustration and death escalated. On December 12, 2000, Israel passed a law forbidding Palestinians to drive cars between cities. Elia Suleiman's *Divine Intervention* (2002) is a document of Palestinian immobility in the grip of the Israeli occupation. Two lovers, he from Jerusalem, she from Ramallah, can only meet in a parking lot adjacent to an Israeli roadblock. The scenes where, sitting in a parked car, they tenderly caress each other's hands might be slightly erotic, but they also express the intense sexual frustration that is just one of the blocked energies resulting from the occupation. This frustration also manifests in the casual hostility of Palestinian neighbors toward each other. In *Divine Intervention* free movement exists only in fantasy, when the woman transforms into a

*kefiya*ed ninja who can kill half a dozen Israeli soldiers with no more than quick reflexes and a well-aimed dart or two.

Roadblock love has more success in *Rana's Wedding* (2002) a fiction film by the Palestinian Hany Abu Assad. The movie's slapstick premise—Rana has 12 hours to get married if she is not to be shipped off to Cairo by her father—fades in the dusty drudgery of the protagonist's struggle. Her labyrinthine journey around Ramallah and East Jerusalem in search of her betrothed is absolutely deromanticized, and it is a cruel irony that the marriage must take place at a roadblock, because the judge was not able to cross. This film, like *Divine Intervention*, suggests, perhaps despite itself, how the constant trouble at checkpoints and roadblocks drains away life energy, including sexual energy. *Rana's Wedding* suggests that for a Palestinian in the occupied territories, accomplishing a marriage is like managing to get one's tomatoes across the border to market. Each is a triumph, but daily life is such a demoralizing struggle that it is hard to distinguish a major and minor life event. Rana loves Khalil, but her purpose in marrying him is short-term. Who has the optimism to imagine his or her life over the course of decades?

Abu Assad was so impressed with the abilities of the driver for this film, Rajai Khatib, that he devoted a documentary to his daily grind. The result, *Ford Transit* (2002), a documentary by the brings on claustrophobia in the viewer. The majority of the film takes place in the confined space of the minivan of the title as it carries passengers on the tortuous daily journey, ridden with roadblocks, between Ramallah and Jerusalem. "I long to drive for an hour without stopping," says Rajai, "but there's always a roadblock." At checkpoints the Transit waits in interminable lines of identical minivans: the Americans had given them to the Israeli police, who handed them down to Palestinians.

At first the film gives a sense of the patience and good humor of the passengers, just trying to get home from work, attend a wedding, or smuggle a few cucumbers. Jokes, flirtation, and advice pass between the seats and the charismatic Rajai lets flow a stream of opinions. The lively sound track is like a

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[27] Shafik, 155.

love song to the passengers: Egyptian pop music playfully eroticizes the close space of the minivan, a soulful rap song indexes the similarity between Palestinians and “we niggers,” a lonely cowboy tune reminds us that this *is* the desert after all, the new desert of broken roads. But the pressure of the confined space begins to be felt. The triumph of this seemingly artless film is that it makes palpable, through the confined space of the minivan, the escalating feelings of frustration, helplessness and rage among the Palestinians in the tightening vice-grip of the Israeli occupation. Learning that a fellow passenger is a lawyer, a man from Ramallah asks how much the paperwork would cost to reunite him with his wife, who lives in Jerusalem. He learns that it would be cheaper to divorce and remarry. Tired passengers vent their frustration on each other—“You’re so fat you’d fill three roadblocks.” Rajai solicits passengers for the pathetic short journey with fantasy destinations: “Kandahar! Tora Bora!”

Even before the advent of the apartheid wall, the Israeli roadblock system has caused untold hardship for the Palestinian workers and farmers who cannot travel to work or to sell their produce and lose their livelihood; the divided families living in different cities; the patients whose ambulances wait in vain for permission to cross to hospitals. Thus the film’s secondary subject, Palestinian suicide attacks upon Israelis, unfolds naturally from the sense of confinement that it so effectively communicates. The roadblocks exacerbate resentment so directly that they are “a factory for suicide bombings,” Rajai asserts. Many people are interviewed in the back of the Ford Transit on the subject of the suicide bombings: from famous people like Hanan Ashrawi to a woman whose daughter became a martyr. “Our fear for death is dead. It doesn’t matter,” Rajai says, changing a punctured tire on the dusty road.

The affect of a road movie usually moves forward, with the direction of the vehicle on the highway. In the roadblock movies that affect spirals inward, concentrates, and becomes explosive. As in *Baalbeck* and *Baghdad On/Off*, the only alternative seems to be fiction; the film’s most optimistic sign is the driver’s creativity when the usual routes do not function. He detours onto dirt roads (a driver passing the other way warns, “Be careful going down. They tried to

shoot"); he speeds on the wrong side of the road, cheerfully paying the fine. These limited practices restore the desert to the highway and reward fast, nomadic thinking. But moments of liberty are seized only temporarily in the face of the implacable roadblock system. The film ends abruptly when Rajai, unable to repair the punctured tire, disappears up the dusty road, leaving behind his small clutch of silent, patient, immobilized travelers.

"Halt, friends both, and let us weep…"

Beirut is a city that profoundly lives its ruin despite the glittering postwar reconstructions. In Ghassan Salhab's *Terra Incognita* (2002), the city becomes a *paysage quelconque*,[28] peopled with asphalt nomads. The characters seem to spend half their time driving the city streets, the traveling shots following their wan gazes through the windshield.

Terra Incognita is structured somewhat like the *mu'allaqat*, an arbitrary-seeming extract from the endless series of unrolling events. Both the film and its principal character are characterized by mournfulness and sharply focused desire. Soraya (Carole Abboud) appears to have no psychology, no "depth," no soul or morality to be tortured. It is her wanderings that define her. A tour guide to the remains of those seven civilizations that sprinkle the surface of Lebanon, Soraya is a professional halter at ruins. In carnal matters too she is nomadic, taking on lovers with indiscriminate hunger. Then if she sees the man after the encounter, she ignores him utterly.

The discarded lovers do not understand. Soraya orients herself by landmarks that are constantly changing, by differences that arise from no law but from local conditions.[29] She lives Beirut as smooth space. The lovers are sedentary types. In the film's troubling conclusion, one of them assaults Soraya

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[28] Deleuze's term for a place that has been stripped of its specificity, in *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), xi.
[29] Deleuze and Guattari, "1440: The Smooth and the Striated," 493.

brutally, in an attempt “to bring her back under the law of men,”[30]—as settled people attempt to impose their laws and religion on the nomads. He fails, and the film’s final shot witnesses Soraya, with one eye blackened, again roaming her city with her wild dignity.

Soraya moves among a group of people each of whom also carries a burden of grief, but none so lightly as she. One, Tarek, emigrated during the war and has returned to woo Soraya. It turns out that she holds several visas and could easily emigrate, as so many Lebanese young people do in the bleak postwar economy. She stays because she has the energy to live on the trajectory of her own desire and depthless (i.e. without depth) grief.

The film’s perception moves on the surface of Beirut as on a shifting sand, observing details of the audiovisual environment with singular devotion. It is a story without a narrative, where meaning arises from minutely local events. In one scene, after a late night at the club, the friends step out of their cars onto the seaside Corniche to eat *manaeesh*, the big flat bread, hot from the oven, seasoned with thyme and sesame. “Lebanese food is the best in the world,” somebody exclaims through a mouthful, taunting Tarek, the émigré; “How could you leave such pleasure behind?” Food can’t give you a job, he retorts. But *Terra Incognita* chooses the *manaeesh* over the job.

“There my companions halted their beasts awhile over me / saying, ‘Don’t perish of weeping; restrain yourself decently!’”[31] So Imru’ l-Qays concluded his bout of mourning. Get over it already! Collective life, together with the necessity to keep moving, protected the Bedouin. In the ruin of Beirut, its people lack the *esprit de corps* that for Ibn Khaldoun defined the nomads.[32] Beirut’s ruins are less to be found in the bullet-ridden buildings that remain from the civil war than in the glassy towers and Potemkin townlets that intimate that the war never happened. Most of all, Beirut’s ruins are internal. Beirut does not know how to

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[30] E.C., “Beyrouth au crible,” *L’Humanité*, February 12, 2003.
[31] Quoted in Bamyeh, 147.
[32] Deleuze and Guattari write, “Ibn Khaldoun defines the war machine by: families or lineages PLUS esprit de corps.” “1227: Treatise on Nomadology: The War Machine,” in *A Thousand Plateaus*, 366.

invent its future, but it has no choice but to try. The exhausted city needs energy; not the striating power of foreign investors, but the vector of the nomad.

<u>The double ruin</u>

Recall that a couple of these Arab road movies, *Baalbeck* and *Baghdad On/Off*, are falsified documentaries. This form, a favorite way to tell stories that diverge from official histories, is especially popular among Lebanese filmmakers. The falsified documentary, deeply suspicious of the truth-telling function, allows something deeper than mere facts to come into existence.[33] The prevalence of this form begins to describe a double ruin: externally, in the dreams of modern Arab self-determination, and internally, in the cinematic enterprise itself.

The Lost Film (2003) by Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joriege, another failed road movie, becomes a document of the status of cinema in the Arab world. The two Lebanese filmmakers set off to Yemen in search of a print of their feature, *Around the Pink House*, that disappeared after a screening commemorating the tenth anniversary of Yemen's reunification. Their quest is met with almost total indifference. Movie houses are few in Yemen these days, and moviegoing frowned upon. Still, they decide to retrace the bus journey north, from Aden to Sana'a, that their precious 35mm is thought to have taken. You can guess the ending: they never retrieve the film. What Hadjithomas and Joriege do find on this desolate journey is a particular cultural attitude toward the image.

The filmmakers pay a visit the Yemen Film Archive, where film canisters lie seemingly haphazardly on shelves, yet the small staff is terribly proud of its efforts to maintain the collection. They solemnly unfold posters of Egyptian thrillers and Jackie Chan and hold them up to the camera. The archive's director,

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[33] See my essay "Signs of the Time: Deleuze, Peirce and the Documentary Image," in *The Brain Is the Screen: Gilles Deleuze's Cinematic Philosophy*, ed. Gregory Flaxman. (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2000), 193-214. Films from Beirut, including works by Walid Ra'ad, Jalal Toufic, and the Lebanese-Canadian Jayce Salloum, provide my central examples of the falsified documentary.

Hussein Chaibane, explains that all he hopes to do is maintain these films, as production has halted since the Islamist north gained influence after reunification. He treats the filmmakers to a trailer for a Lebanese film, *The Beauty and the Giants* (Samir el Ghoussayneh, 1980). Faded to pink, the trailer still boasts a hero resplendent in mustachios and aviator sunglasses to the sound of Gloria Gaynor's "I Will Survive." The disco anthem unfolds surreally in the dusty cavern of the Archive.

Although the filmmakers insist that they wish to retrace exactly the route of their precious film, their driver makes a detour to a wedding party, where men shoot celebratory volleys on guns and cameras. A photographer named Al-Sima shows them his matte technique that allows his subjects to appear to be in Istanbul, in New York, or double-exposed. When Hadjithomas and Joriege learn that he gives away the negatives with the photographs, something clicks into place: Yemen is not a country where people cherish images. When the photographer reminds his father, now blind, of the contents of a photograph and the elder al-Sima recalls in a flash, this view is modified: Yemen is a country where images are not externalized. This is confirmed in the very next scene, which consists of Joreige's voice over black leader describing a graveyard they saw that had no tombstones, no plaques, only large stones to mark the body, small stones to mark the head.

The climax of this modest film takes place in the scrap metal market of the Sana'a souk. Hadjithomas sees film canisters among the ghee tins and other reusable metal. The conclusion finally comes home: it was not their film that interested the thieves of Yemen, it was its container.

These two ruins, that of modern politics and that of the valued image, are complexly implicated in each other in the Arab world. In this writing I have relied on Jibrail Jabbur's wonderfully detailed account of Bedouin life in the Syrian desert. His book, richly illustrated with his own photographs, attests that the nomadic life remains at the heart of Arab identity, disavowed and disappearing though it may be. This book captured the attention of Akram Zaatari and forms the center of Zaatari's video *This Day* (2003). The video begins with the voice of

Jibrail Jabbur's granddaughter describing one of his 1950s-vintage photographs, while we see a digital pan of the same photograph. It's a rather ironic image of an Arab man lying under a Jeep to repair it, out in the desert, while two men in Western dress look on. Camels stand around. The photographer's shadow is visible in the lower edge.

As the digital editor pans geometrically around Jabbur's photograph, we begin to sense the staginess of the photograph. This is a major theme of *This Day*. Zaatari, retracing Jabbur's travels to photograph nomadic life in the Syrian desert, fifty years later, reveals and exploits the degree to which these photographs were staged, shots of Bedouins playing themselves. The reliability of Jabbur's archive comes into question. "Taking photographs of the desert and of the camels is looking at an eastern object with a western optic, a camera," Norma Jabbur says. "The spirit to document such a thing is a western idea"—a notion that corroborates the Yemenis' disdain for the Lost Film. The archive is something that matters terribly to Zaatari, as does the indexical evidence so intently pursued in *Baalbeck*. He is a founder of the Arab Image Foundation, one of whose aims is to collect amateur photographs of the Lebanese and Arab past. This archive is assembled in the knowledge that official histories tend to rewrite the past, and also that photography is a witness to experiences that otherwise submerge completely.

Zaatari and his small crew travel "further toward the East," as an intertitle says, to see the camels so beloved of Jabbur and so foundational to nomadic identity. The camels are real, but the shot is digitally edited, two frames forward, one frame back, so the beautiful animals shimmer like an object of desire just out of reach. The effect is disturbing and enchanting.

This Day begins to be a video in search of the real. Or rather, in nomadic fashion, in search of the ruin. What becomes apparent is that the photograph is a ruin, at which we mourn as at the traces of our beloved's campsite. The ruin is in the camera, the apparatus (of capture). Norma Jabbur's statement that it's Western even to take photographs is an exaggeration; but there is something imperial about staking down nomadic life with the vertical axis of significance, of

representation. Representation is striation, as it strips the appearance off an event in order to mobilize it for another purpose. It's not nomadic to photograph nomads.

It *is* nomadic to alter photographs of nomads. In the editing suite, Zaatari exploits the photographic wish-fulfillment that Jabbur initiated in his sincere journey of documentation. An epic digital composite brings together all Jabbur's lovingly photographed Bedouins, camels, Jeep-repairing Arab, family members in Bedouin costume, and all the rest in an impossible group portrait. Without attempting to disguise the artifice of the composite, the editor creates a rough animation where identical camels float through the uncertain space.

As *Terra Incognita* incorporated nomadism into cinema's way of perceiving the world, so *This Day* incorporates nomadism into the digital apparatus itself. A certain virtual nomadism is required to survey the ruin of the cinematic enterprise.

There is another ruin to which *This Day* travels to mourn, embodied in the activist pro-Palestine e-mails Zaatari receives every day. Photographs of Palestinians being beaten by Israeli soldiers, of Palestinian children menaced by tanks, accompany accounts of ongoing Israeli violence and, sometimes, requests for donations. Some of these seem legitimate, some do not. This volley of pleas from small organizations reflects Arabs' frustration and rage at their own governments' lip service to the Palestinians, yet bad faith when it comes to concrete action: this is the external ruin. Uncaptioned, recombined, and re-sent again and again, like pornography, these mails do violence to the idea of documentary witness. They come to represent nothing. This is the internal ruin.

This Day visits another archive of militant photographs. To the rousing strains of a resistance anthem, we see a photographic parade of the rebels who posed in the studio of photographer Hathem Al Madani in 1970 in Saida, southern Lebanon. Young men and boys stand confidently, wielding semi-automatic weapons and whiskers as luxuriant as they can muster. Precursors to the pre-martyrdom portrait or video common now among expectant suicide bombers, these portraits do not make us doubt the existence of these young

rebels, but they tie their existence to their representation. Documentary stakes down down the meaning of an event, so that its image can serve other functions. A photograph is a surface, a document insists on depth. The CD playing the militant song begins to skip.

In the face of all these uncertainly indexical photographs, Zaatari's wartime diary is perhaps the most reliable document of all. The history of the Lebanese civil war is impossible to write, at least as long as its protagonists are still alive and holding political office. Zaatari's diary skims the surface of wartime actuality. Its pages, filled with neat writing and glued-in pictures, recount matter-of-factly the day's mix of military, political, meterological, and personal events. "February 2nd, 1984. This afternoon we heard the sound of violent explosions. It turned out later that they had come from the southern suburbs. The film that I had been planning to watch was cancelled for security reasons. It was *La Bête Humaine*." This modest written document is only a trace of past events, like ashes of a fire. It too shifts and shimmers delicately in the digital ether; it seems to breathe.

Whither wander?

The asphalt nomads retain some qualities of their sand-based forebears: To continue to move, in attention to the immediate and the surface. To avoid depth, hierarchy, roots, causality. To invent according to local needs. To respect ruins and leave them behind.

The asphalt nomads are lacking in one quality of their sandy forebears: the energy necessary for decisive motion. The nomads of contemporary Arab cinema have not yet gathered up enough potential energy. The many frustrations have been borne for so long—since the 1947 occupation of Palestine, the Six Days War, the first war on Iraq, the second war on Iraq...—that the energy keeps running out.

Can this intensity be rediscovered on an inward journey? The Western road movie is motored by individualism, an inward turn in the face of social

alienation. Its heyday was arguably in the 1960s and 1970s, around the time of the relapse of the Hollywood system, when individuality was a newly hot commodity. Independent cinema arrived later in the Arab world, and it might be that, in the Arab cinema in 2000, a newly discovered individuality will provide the motor of a cinema that has outgrown its creaky, inadequate institutions. This is the argument of Tunisian film historian Khémais Khayati. He holds that Arab cinema can only mature when the voices of individual *auteurs* are heard. Further, this can only occur against the grain of official culture; in exile, whether physical or psychic, from the overbearing weight of Arab social institutions. “En libérant son Ego, le cinéaste a libéré son héros, a libéré le langage, a libéré ses propres representations du monde proche et du monde éloigné.”[34] As the nomadic poet comes into being in exile, this argument would have it, so does the Arab independent filmmaker.

But this argument makes me uneasy, for it casts the Arab world, yet again, as a belated version of Western modernity. Arab filmmakers are emerging as *auteurs*; this is a short-term good insofar as they destabilize the dead weight of social institutions (moribund descendants of the nomadic tribe) of family and religion. But it is no good if they inherit the disenchanted, empty individualism of the West. Individuality is a trap; it carves us all into the same dull grid. A nomadic cinema has to invent its own trajectory. The greatest strength of independent cinema in the Arab world is that it does not follow Western models.

What the asphalt nomads accomplish, and what Arab cinema is presently in a position to offer, is another strategy. An activist or pedagogical cinema engages with striating forces, for example the discourse of non-governmental organizations; and this too is part of how change comes about. But the nomadic strategy in cinema is to draw energy from the space it inhabits, and this requires disengagement from institutions. “The nomad distributes himself in smooth space; he occupies, inhabits, holds that space; that is his territorial principle. It is

[34] “In liberating his ego, the filmmaker has liberated his hero, has liberated language, has liberated his own representations from the world both near and

therefore false to define the nomad by movement."[35] We glimpse this strategy when Salhab, Zaatari, and Soueid abandon the failed project of Lebanese nation-building in favor of a labneh sandwich, a beautiful boy, a good piss. When Salman witnesses the devastation of the Iraqi people yet lingers at an ingeniously constructed beehive. When Soraya, living lightly among the ruins, follows the trajectory of her desire. When Abou Assad hears, from the humanity in the back seats of the Ford Transit, the articulation of despair into the lethal energy of the suicide bomber. When Zaatari in the quiet space of editing suite traces an index of potential, virtual life, among the dead and dying images. Blocked movement intensifies energy.

Historically the nomadic way of life was made obsolete by Islam, a social order that transcends tribe and nation and organizes the faithful in cities. But Arabs needed the Bedouin to persist to uphold an ideal of noble independence. The nomads' hearty loyalty to the local and suspicion of abstraction seemed to offer an implicit critique of modern ideals, both Arab and imported, of technological advancement, large-scale social organization, and sweeping intercultural exchange. No less did Orientalists of the West, the philosophers of nomadology among them, draw inspiration from the people who navigated close to the shifting lands with no more possessions than their camels could carry. Yet meanwhile the desert itself has been translated into capital, and the lofty structures that nomadism opposed have broken on the shifting sand. Now the nomadic way of life returns not as an ideal but as the only viable option.

Thus it is not triumphantly but with regret that I reiterate the maxims proclaimed in the ancient nomadic odes. Identify the ruins, weep, and ride on. If it is not possible to ride on, cultivate your trajectory. Above all, stay close to the surface.[36]

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distant." Khémais Khayati, *Cinémas arabes: topographie d'une image éclatée* (Paris and Montréal: L'Harmattan, 1996), 207.

[35] Deleuze and Guattari, "1227: Treatise on Nomadology: The War Machine," *A Thousand Plateaus*, 381.

[36] Warm thanks to Haidar Sadek, Akram Zaatari, and Mohamad Soueid for fruitful conversations in the course of this writing. This research was supported by

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