

# What Can a Body Do? Answers from Trablus, Cairo, Beirut and Algiers

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**Abstract:**

The essay examines contemporary Arab films that express the body's forces. One strategy, common with other world cinemas, is that films carry out different operations at the molar and molecular levels, which correspond to different levels of embodiment and body politics. Another, more unique to Arab cinema, is to cultivate strategies of protecting and enfolding bodies, similar to what Foucault termed *ars erotica*. Third, they enlist the audience in a struggle to attain what Spinoza called 'adequate ideas', ideas that arise immanently from the body's capacities.

**Keywords:** Arab cinema, embodiment, molecular, affect, adequate idea, enfoldment, Spinoza, Artaud, Foucault

This essay is inspired by Baruch Spinoza's provocative statement, 'We do not know what a body can do.' Spinozan thinking helps us to appreciate how, starting from the limitations that their circumstances impose, people can gather their powers and freely act. This is a freedom that comes not from an idea of what one should do but from material, specific circumstances, a freedom earned immanently.

The bodies Spinoza discusses learn their powers not from divinely imposed laws but through experience in the world. They are like the fish in Antonin Artaud's 'Petit poème des poissons de la mer' (1926), the epilogue to Narimane Mari's film *Loubia Hamra* (Algeria/France, 2013). A 'translation' of the poem Humpty Dumpty recites to Alice, Artaud's poem introduces his own reflection on the relationship between being and suffering.<sup>1</sup> The silvery little fish refuse to answer the question 'Vaut-il mieux être que d'obéir?' (Is it better to be than to

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obey?).<sup>2</sup> Angered, the questioner kills the fish. The poem continues, disputing the dogma that only God has complete existence, and that other entities must obey God in order to gain existence.

L'Être est celui qui s'imagine être	Being is he who imagines himself to be
Être assez pour se dispenser	To be enough to spare himself
D'apprendre ce que veut la mer ...	From learning what the sea wants ...
Mais tout petit poisson le sait!	But every little fish knows it! (my translation)

God in His completeness need not care about the life of the sea. But the little fish live immanently to the ever-changing sea; they do not exist in the shadow of God. Artaud's poem, like his desire 'To be done with the judgement of God', defends living over existing, if existing means to submit to the judgement of divine or human laws.

Artaud's defence of the body's capacity to become within its living milieu meets Spinoza's ethics, which contends that humans ensnared in abstract moralities will never know the powers immanent to the body. Artaud and Spinoza also meet in their recognition that thought must pass through the body, in a way that menaces both existing thoughts and the body as it is at present. As Kuniichi Uno puts it:

Thinking is cruel, because if we manage to think, this thought overwhelms us, penetrates into being, tears through the whole thickness of our vitality, the endless intertwining of our sensations and memories, everything that is recorded in the body. Thinking never happens without being accompanied by a form of power or violence, what Artaud would later call 'microbes of god'. But thinking is cruel above all because we are never able to think as we should.<sup>3</sup>

Contemporary Arab cinema expresses the body's forces of becoming in numerous ways, three of which this essay examines: in a tension between molar and molecular forces; in a dynamic of becoming-visible; and in a struggle to attain adequate ideas. Some of these dynamics are common to all world cinema, while some address questions of the capacities of bodies and of thought specific to the present-day Arab world. I will use a method of embodied and affective analysis that experiences the cruelty of these by attempting to move through the body to thought.

*Molecular and Enfolded Powers*

First, films carry out different operations at the molar and molecular levels, which correspond to different levels of embodiment and body politics, as Elena del Rio argues.<sup>4</sup> The molar level deals with bodies as a whole and supports identity politics, struggle against constraints, and struggles for representation. These well-documented struggles in the Arab world include women's rights, gay rights and rights of poor people and of migrant workers. Cinema represents the agonistic molar level of bodily forces at the scale of narrative and representation. Meanwhile, the molecular level deals with energies that are not yet captured by discourses of identity. The molecular level provides a source of energy for molar-scale struggles.

One of the most creative areas of Arab experimentalism is the expression of molecular forces. Cinematically, this means that movies cultivate affective energies and communicate them to viewers: an embodied, affective cinema. They operate a little below the radar of discourse and identity, because that is where they can be most creative. Many non-Arab audiences are keen to witness Arab 'victims', since this is what they know about from mass media and a long history of Orientalist representations. They usually have good intentions to pity and sympathize with the constrained Arab body. Therefore, stories about individuals who struggle with constraints and sometimes triumph are very appealing. But the best of these movies succeed because they successfully deploy a dialectic between molecular and molar levels, as del Rio describes. I find that the encounter between film and audience is most fruitful when the discursive is held off a bit longer and affects operate in the movie and with the viewer in a subtle way that operates, for a strategic while, in an enfolded and relatively non-discursive way. If and when they do unfold, it is often in the body of the viewer.<sup>5</sup>

Molecular energies, or affects, need to be protected and cared for. My second hypothesis is that Arab cinema and media art, more than those from other places, cultivate strategies of protecting and enfolding bodies. This enfolding creates an elastic effect in which the body becomes less perceptible; it gets enfolded into the image, only to have more power when it finally springs forth. Rosi Braidotti articulates a Spinozan feminism of ethical sustainability that rests on an understanding of the subject as a radically immanent, intensive body, that is, as an assemblage of forces and flows, intensities and passions that converge in the 'self'.<sup>6</sup> Her argument responds to Gilles Deleuze's

and Félix Guattari's caution that the body without organs must be constructed with great care: 'Dismantling the organism has never meant killing yourself, but rather opening the body to connections that presuppose an entire assemblage, circuits, conjunctions, levels and thresholds, passages and distributions of intensity, and territories and deterritorializations measured with the craft of the surveyor.'<sup>7</sup> The body can sustain only so much transformation at a time. In Spinozan fashion, Braidotti proposes that the goal of life is to encourage non-destructive flows and transformations that will give rise to joyful or positive affects and the transcendence of reactive affects. This approach informs an assiduous care to keep bodily energies enfolded in order to allow them to develop strength.

Here is another place that Arab experiments in the moving image have something to teach the rest of the world. For, in the works I will discuss, the human body is cherished, and the stakes of revealing it and harming it remain high. They release bodily capacities only with care and circumspection, placing greater emphasis on each stage of potential unfolding of feeling and thought. What appears as lack of movement may actually be latency, a gathering of powers.<sup>8</sup>

### *From Affects to Adequate Ideas*

The contemporary affective turn in theory often isolates the body's experience as though affect were an end in itself. This theoretical tendency seems to be a response to the perceived 'waning of affect' among some populations — a desire to be assured that we still have bodies (which some people in the world have never been in a position to forget) — coupled with a suspicion of thought as disembodied and discursively compromised. However, in a return to the Spinozan origins of the theory of affect, it is helpful to recall that feeling is the beginning point of thinking. Thus, the third aspect of my argument not only values affects in themselves but also tries to determine whether those energies are sufficient to fuel an increase in the body's powers, supported by a parallel genesis of creative thought.

Pleasure and pain are the first signs of life, but they are passions, or passive emotions; Spinoza argues that it is in understanding the sources of our joy and pain that we gain the power to have active emotions.<sup>9</sup> An adequate idea of something requires knowledge of its cause; we have the power to act to the degree that we understand the chain of causes, of which God is the first cause. Spinoza demonstrates that

thought and things align in adequate ideas: ‘the order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things’.<sup>10</sup> A person’s adequate idea of a given situation is equal to the power of action that can be realized in that situation: it constitutes a small segment of God’s infinite power. Thus, adequate ideas align your powers with God’s powers.<sup>11</sup> As Deleuze states it, an adequate idea is formally *explained* by our own power of knowing and materially *expresses* another idea as its cause. An adequate idea differs from a thought because it uniquely connects material circumstances and mental capacities for a given situation.<sup>12</sup> You can recognize an adequate idea because it describes your highest capacity to affect your current situation. As Mai Al-Nakib explains: ‘Freedom for Spinoza consists of adequately understanding our specific historical determinations of affects and existence and then maximizing encounters that increase our capacity to act and live.’<sup>13</sup>

This need to gain a strongly causal understanding of one’s situation that is simultaneously matched by a capacity to act resonates powerfully in many Arab countries where, as Samir Kassir points out, most people are abundantly aware of the causes of their everyday problems but not in a position to act. Kassir dates this affect of powerlessness to the First Iraq War: ‘Powerlessness to suppress the feeling that you are no more than a lowly pawn on the global chessboard even as the game is being played in your backyard.’<sup>14</sup> A person can precisely track the connection from a specific situation that inhibits her capacities all the way to its causes in neo-imperialism, state capitalism, bureaucracy, political corruption, repressive fundamentalism and other vast and complex causes. But unless she has adequate ideas that express the chain of their causes and explain them in terms of her capacity to act, she will remain passive. In order to avoid fatalism and keep thinking historically, it is necessary to be able to relate current causes to the effects that one is able to have.

Al-Nakib underscores the usefulness of a Spinozan–Deleuzian approach for Arab feminism.<sup>15</sup> Dominant images of thought — such as the idea that women should be docile or that homosexuality is an aberration — indicate a collective affective desire to organize life in a particular way. Such images of thought restrict bodies’ capacities for action and cause sad affects. If they can be budged a little, opportunities for new kinds of affective encounters are released. In turn, Al-Nakib writes, people can analyse their life situations in terms of their capacities for greater power to affect and be affected, and fight for collective practices that improve these opportunities for everybody.

Repressive ideas about bodies are entrenched in Arab political and cultural institutions, and people challenge them only at great risk. Again, as Al-Nakib emphasizes, joyful affects remain passions; but they can increase people's capacity to act and arrive at truly adequate thinking that will permit them to act freely. Therefore, affective experiments need to be made with care.

*Towards an Adequate Analysis of Moving Images*

Spinoza's invitation to understand life as a constant interaction between bodies that can augment or diminish our own body's powers translates well to encounters with moving images. Our bodies encounter human bodies, of course, as well as the body of the medium, and also micro-bodies — the Spinozan affects. The analysis of these encounters maps on to a range of theoretical approaches from psychoanalysis to phenomenology to theories of affect to neuroscience.

Movies that treat the body's pleasure and pain as the starting point for political change work through sad and joyful affects in order to get to thought. A movie may express embodied capacities at a phenomenological level, by emphasizing the shared corporeality of characters on screen and viewers in the audience, or by eliciting embodied responses in viewers. Or, at an affective level, it may release affective energies that are less amenable to a human-scale resolution. Affection-images in the cinema reveal 'the powerlessness at the heart of thought'.<sup>16</sup> The viewer experiences affective states that reveal the limits of thought: cinema's moment of cruelty. Sometimes either the film or the viewer is able to struggle through this impasse to arrive at an adequate idea.

In analysing a movie I take an embodied approach that works up from the molecular to the molar, deliberately suspending the intellectual response to the work in order first to account for affective responses, embodied responses, feelings and emotions. I find that such an approach allows the intellectual analysis, when it finally emerges, to be substantial and well grounded. I try to allow non-cognitive thoughts, or affects, to flail about in the confrontation with the unthought. If a new thought arises that isn't a platitude or an image of thought, I grasp it. The result of this process may be an adequate idea, for it connects causality with bodily capacity.

Even though the affective encounter has the tang of truth, not everybody responds affectively to a movie in the same way. This can

be especially the case with watching movies across cultures. So in the following analyses I listen to my body with circumspection and care.

### *Bodies Not Yet Living*

Rania Attieh and Daniel Garcia's *Tayeb, Khalas, Yalla* (Okay, Enough, Let's Go) (Lebanon, 2010), shot in an observational documentary style, captures the texture of daily life in Trablus, Lebanon, in seemingly banal anecdotes tingling with unexamined violence. Its characters, with the exception of a quick-witted and disobedient little boy named Walid, seem weighed with fatigue, in a characteristically Lebanese time-image, in bodies that 'contain the before and the after, tiredness and waiting';<sup>17</sup> a quality amplified by observational shots of very long duration. I say this is characteristically Lebanese because the Lebanese political and economic situation is so chronically unstable that people can only get through a day by avoiding remembering the past or thinking about the long term.

Its main character, a hapless fellow whose name we never learn, his face muffled behind thick glasses and a beard, his bearing clumsy and gormless, is not a thinking man, nor does he seem able to feel much. He can't even peel an orange: he uses a knife to cut off little pieces of the peel, leaving the white pith underneath. Selecting such an ill-equipped human being as its central character, *Tayeb, Khalas, Yalla* functions as a spiritual automaton: it sets out all the relations in which feeling, and thus thinking, might occur, but leaves it to the viewer to activate these relations. Many of its observational shots are unusually long, remaining on the scene even when the characters have left the shot, as though to invite us to make the connections its characters do not make.

The narrative parts of the movie drop hints about the causes of suffering: business is bad at the main character's pastry shop, and also at his friend's shop; little Walid is obsessed with guns; the struggling middle-class characters rely on an untenable system of importing foreign maids that seems like modern slavery. But they do not explain them: they are not adequate ideas. However, the film includes other kinds of footage that, while they do not constitute adequate ideas, give the viewer some of the tools they need to achieve them. One is a set of poignant documentary vignettes about Tripoli, voiced over by Attieh. The first introduces the city in an aerial shot of its dense forest of apartment buildings, as Attieh's voice describes the scent of orange

flowers that once perfumed the city. Another surveys the detritus half-buried in the sand of the port of Trablus, once a great Mediterranean port, now a place that smells of death. And the third surveys the ruins of the once-magnificent International Fairgrounds designed by Oscar Niemeyer and abandoned at the beginning of the civil war in 1975. These vignettes extend the sadness and inadequacy of the characters over the whole city. They express some of the causes of the fictional characters' malaise and invite the viewers to comprehend them; until we can achieve that, the scenes' sad affects flood our experience.

After his own mother deserts him, the main character seeks out female companionship, apparently not realizing that the woman he is courting is a prostitute — yet even she is not very interested in him. Then friends encourage him to hire a maid. At the agency, the contractor warns our man that the Ethiopian maid he has available has run away from former employers; he advises him to lock the maid in the apartment when he goes out and indicates it is fine to beat her. The maid speaks no Arabic and seems petrified. Back at the apartment the protagonist shows the Ethiopian woman around as though she were a houseguest, showing her bedroom and the contents of the refrigerator. Yet the woman remains immobile. Upset at her lack of appreciation of his hospitality, he leaves in a huff. When he returns from a failed rendezvous with the prostitute, he bears an assortment of cream puffs from his rarely frequented pastry shop. He pushes the box towards her — 'Eat! They're good!' — but she shrinks away as though the soft pastries were a weapon.

To call this scene 'funny and heart-breaking' elides the body's potential knowledge. Watching it, I am atwiltch with frustration. If he were slightly more attuned to the woman's fear, he would manage to make the connections — as he failed to with the disdain of the prostitute and his own mother's mounting frustration with him. And if she were less numb, she might be able to interpret his gestures.

*Tayeb, Khalas, Yalla* calls up all the ways laughter can feel on your face. 'Not that the body thinks, but, obstinate and stubborn, it forces us to think, and forces us to think what is concealed from thought, life.'<sup>18</sup> The protagonist's insensitive body — usually muffled in a sweater and an enormous yellow padded coat — protects his mind from affective encounter that might wound him into wakefulness. This encounter with the Ethiopian woman is his chance to finally be alive. But were he to do so, a cascade of unbearable thoughts would crash down, the institutionalized cruelty of the Lebanese maid system being only the first of these. So he does not feel, and therefore does not think.

However, the Ethiopian woman does. When the protagonist leaves her in the car while he goes to buy her a falafel, she escapes, quick as a grasshopper.

### *The Arriving Body*

Dima el-Horr's films tend to be strongly painterly, with blocks of saturated colour, frontal compositions, and formal tableaux of bodies that call to mind Jean-Luc Godard's *Le Mépris* (France, 1963) and *Pierrot le fou* (France, 1965); this is certainly so in her narrative films *Prêt-à-porter Umm Ali* (Lebanon, 2001) and *Every Day Is a Holiday* (Lebanon, 2009). Her short experimental video *The Blue Sea in Your Eyes* (Lebanon, 2006) also treats the body as a figure for composition, shifting disturbingly between vibrant life and intimated death. It begins with a text in English, a harrowing legend: a stepmother was secretly in love with her stepson, then confessed her love to him. When he scorned her, she hanged herself, leaving a letter that accused him of dishonouring her. The father curses his son. While the son is lying on the seashore, a great wave dashes him against the rocks.

This text prepares us to interpret the following images of men peacefully sunbathing and diving into the shimmering water as sacrificial bodies. Shooting in close-up, the very slow-motion camera seems to memorialize these beautiful flowers of Lebanese youth. Very close shots frame a young man's sculptural bronzed torso, his prominent nipples casting shadows; a man's chest hairs capturing the white light; a man's dragon-tattooed back rippling as he stretches his shoulders. The caressing camera evokes an unrequited desire.

But this movie feels surprisingly sad, given its sensuality. I feel the disjunction between the way my eyes imaginatively enjoy the sun warming the men's skin and the salt water drying on it and their own inertia. The slowness, the metallic, echoing drone of Charbel Haber's soundscape, and the stillness of these beautiful bodies in contrast to the rippling blue water gives that desire a dark edge. Bodies float in the water. Some of the body parts framed by the camera are unrecognizable at first; they seem amputated, deformed. It feels as though we viewers are somehow occupying the place of the cruel parents, unleashing first desire and then vengeance upon our innocent young.

And yet the sense of hot sun on the skin and cool salty water, the sunbathers' peaceful faces, and the sparkling blue of the Mediterranean — known to be the resting place of so many of the dead — resist this

allegory. Like all Oedipal tales, the story el-Horr presents wants to prey on the living, but the living may defy it. The languid sunbathers are not dead, just playing dead.

*Better to Live or to Obey?*

Many bodies in the Arab world labour under difficult constraints. Poverty, of course, constrains what a body can do. However, the first (and sometimes the only) image of the Arab world that comes to mind for outsiders is the Arab woman constrained by religious and cultural traditions. It would take pages to list all the feature films from the Arab world that address the social monitoring of women. I will describe one short video that condenses the analysis. Hala Elkoussy's *White Bra* (Egypt, 2006) diagrams the effect of these constraints on the body and soul. The short video consists of a pair of static shots of a woman and a man, each in white shirt and jeans, sitting on a hard chair and addressing the camera. They sit in the same posture as the viewer so it is easy to mirror their embodied and affective states on one's own body. The bottom half of a portrait of Hosni Mubarak is visible above them; like Raed Yassin's *The New Film* (Lebanon, 2008), *White Bra* identifies, in the presiding figure of Mubarak, the entrenched Egyptian military government as the source of lawful violence and surveillance that justifies all other acts of violence and surveillance.

By turns the woman and the man tell the camera about their love story. At first you think they are speaking of each other, but their stories diverge: he is claiming her as his beloved; she fell in love with a colleague from work. Gradually you realize that they are not sweethearts and that in fact he has been spying on her from his window.

The woman relates that she fell in love; on a Friday morning, 'He came to me at the window, put his arms around me, and whispered, "Let's get married."' The other is livid as he relates his view of the same events. 'She had a sick smile on her face,' he says. 'I made a little call.' She tells how the police came to her place, asked for ID, grabbed her breast and may have sexually assaulted her further, and only left when she gave them all the money she had.

In the course of this parallel story, all kinds of feelings play the woman like a harp — caution, joy, anguish and revulsion crease her brow and expand and crumple her small slim body. By contrast, the man's face and body compose a united front of moral outrage that matches his words. 'We have traditions that need to be respected,' he

sputters. ‘She deserves to be burnt alive.’ Only once does his aggrieved countenance break into a shy smile, when he reveals, ‘My father gave it to me . . . it’s German with Zeiss lenses.’ He’s the sick one, of course, a peeping Tom inventing a love story with the woman he spies on. But it is she who gets punished. No longer with her lover, she has fallen prey to dominant images of thought. ‘They are all sick . . . they have double standards.’ She never goes out, she keeps the windows closed and the phone turned off. And rather than angry, the woman becomes all uncertain — ‘Who’s to say what is wrong and right?’

Thus, with strict economy of means Elkoussy draws an affective diagram of power, the worst case in which the molecular potentials that traverse the woman are simply no match for the molar powers of a man backed by tradition and the state. Yet I test receiving each of the characters’ postures and attitudes on my own body. Her expressive vulnerability gives way to a state of utter, crushed dejection. His poisonous resentment and self-righteousness hardens like a carapace. I would prefer to be the woman, for she is still able to feel. The man is as good as dead.

### *The Enfolded Body*

Michel Foucault posited a sexuality outside of discourse, that he termed *ars erotica*: unlike the sexuality that differentiates by being named, categorized, medicalized and otherwise discursively cultivated, *ars erotica* is a kind of eroticism in disavowal. Foucault associated it specifically with ‘Oriental’ sexual practices. Scholars have abundantly disputed the applicability of Foucault’s division of West and East according to *scientia sexualis* and *ars erotica*, pointing out that it is historically inaccurate, attributes modernity solely to the West, and tends to attribute a timelessness to the sexual practices of the Orient.<sup>19</sup> Yet there remains a fruitful way to deploy Foucault’s concept of *ars erotica* as a kind of erotic knowledge that survives by not being recorded.

Same-sex sexual relations are illegalized or regulated by vice laws in every Arab country. Safety necessitates that same-sex practices take place in an atmosphere of disavowal. Men who desire men and, to a lesser degree, women who desire women are able to gain some degree of erotic freedom and creativity by avoiding naming or revealing their desire. Needless to say, by valuing an enfolded sexuality I am not at all

celebrating the fact that same-sex sexuality is illegal and homosexuals are persecuted in most Arab countries.

Protecting and cherishing bodies by rendering them beyond visibility occurs in art and films that deal with sexuality, especially male–male desire. As Joseph Pearson notes, artists in the Arab world cannot openly make work that reflects on same-sex desire. Their tactics include ‘a vocabulary of juxtaposition, deletion of material whose absence is felt, the relegation of vital material to the margins, the effacement of meaning and the strategic use of ambiguity’.<sup>20</sup> This work constitutes a kind of shadow archive that protects things by eliding them.<sup>21</sup> By enfolding same-sex desire and rendering it enigmatic, artists are able to gain some degree of erotic freedom and creativity. Moreover, they pass to the viewer the responsibility to make connections and to feel the desires that they allude to but never name outright.

Zaatari’s *Tomorrow Everything Will Be All Right* (Lebanon, 2010) shows male erotic desire at its most acute. The video is able to do this because it is completely aniconic. Most of the video consists of a text-message exchange between two former lovers; it is initiated by the one who, we gradually learn, broke the other’s heart ten years earlier. The viewer also learns that both lovers are men, but only after experiencing the vivid longing the spurned man still feels for his lover and is able to reproduce from the merest traces: when the other types ‘:-)’, he responds, ‘The smile I loved.’ Zaatari renders the text conversation with a manual typewriter, the caller in red ink, the receiver in black, painstakingly pressing one letter at a time into the paper. The typed letters imprint the paper, like the caresses that the heartbroken one still feels on his skin; the periods almost puncture the paper.

They agree to meet at the beach at sunset, where ten years earlier they had together witnessed the *rayon vert*, sign of true love in Eric Rohmer’s film of that title (1986). After a drive through Beirut’s tunnel road accompanied by a text whose direct sexual references embarrassed me, *Tomorrow Everything Will Be All Right* cuts to a video date-stamped 31 December 1999. In it the sun sets slowly over the Mediterranean, and as it disappears into the horizon the video flashes white, the camera blinded by the *rayon vert*. The date stamp and the white flash constitute two indexical proofs of a love between men that marked their bodies, and the body of the camera.

Zaatari's aniconic strategy compounds the feeling of eroticism and longing by asking that the viewer unfold them on his or her own body, inhabiting the arousal and yearning in his or her own way.

### *Cinema of Cruelty*

Sherif El Azma often chooses non-actors or actors from improvised theatre, people who perhaps have not rehearsed certain gestures as shorthand for emotion but are willing to go through the struggle of letting feelings arise from the body. He works for long periods with his performers in order to cultivate 'micro-situations: eccentricities, human drives (...). How do you work with the human drive, the carnal impulse?'<sup>22</sup>

Such micro-situations prickle in *Television Pilot for an Egyptian Air Hostess Soap Opera* (Egypt, 2003), a 58-minute video with exaggeratedly minimal settings and overexposed lighting. *Television Pilot* enacts the micro-politics of territoriality, alliance, cruelty and consolation that characterizes many a workplace. In the first half of the movie, four young women who are studying to be air hostesses endure a series of demeaning HR-devised exercises, which El Azma learned from the writings of former flight attendant Nadia Crema. During lunch break the four aspirants sit in a row as though facing a firing squad. Two, the sneering Doa and the slacker-like Farah, whisper and giggle about the others, who studiously ignore them, in ways that will call up excruciating memories for every female who was ever teased. As Kaelen Wilson-Goldie writes, 'Azma is almost preternaturally attuned to the bitchiness that can characterize relations among female colleagues.'<sup>23</sup> Towards the end of the first section, a tender complicity seems to grow between Farah and the sweet and sincere Leila, as they stand on the office balcony in light rain.

These scenes engender an affective roller-coaster of ever-changing increases and decreases in capacities to affect and be affected. Director of photography Nancy Abdel Fattah's close-up mobile camera moves through the air crackling between the girls, witnessing the catalogue of Spinoza's passions play across the girls' faces and bodies: jealousy, rivalry, derision, scorn, revenge. The delicacy of the music — breathy and glassy synthesizer sounds, gently strummed guitar — intensifies these variations. I watch this part of *Television Pilot* on the edge of my seat, body tense, mouth twitching, and a dozen unformed emotions contorting my face.

The fact that almost all the affects that traverse the young women are passive affects reflects their lack of power. Their teacher, a woman in her fifties, explains the ascetic self-mastery necessary to excel as a flight attendant, whose strongest weapon is a disinterested, mask-like smile: the adequate idea of the air hostess. The second part of the movie shows Leila and Farah on the job, not yet in possession of this weapon.

Here too a multitude of affects vibrate, in a larger and more mysterious register, and the music adds more uneasy tones. Clichés menace them at every turn — the sexy flight attendant, the flight attendant looking for a husband. Farah sasses a customer who is a sexist jerk but weeps with frustration anyway: ‘He thinks I would even look at him, the pitiful fuck.’ Unpredictable energies release around a character who seems to have dropped in from a melodrama: a despotic and foppish ‘count’ (played by Federico Di Wardal, who later appears in El Azma’s *Rice City*) with a strangely rubbery face and a moustache that seems to be drawn on with a ballpoint pen. The count’s hairdresser suddenly throws up on him. Leila comforts the woman in the tiny kitchen, caressing her face. Farah barks at them angrily. Farah and Leila suddenly become interchangeable. Leila’s nose keeps bleeding. The count’s handsome assistant is delighted as a child when Farah/Leila gives him an airplane kit complete with eye mask and folding toothbrush. Leila falls abruptly out of character in a fawning flirtation with the count.

*Television Pilot* concludes with a very long shot of Leila gazing at herself in the airplane bathroom’s mirror, desperately practising a smile as she wipes the blood streaming from her nose. The volatile performances, an almost nauseating mobile camera, and the unnerving soundscape send affects flying around like shrapnel and striking the viewer. These feelings release an enormous amount of life in what might seem an everyday demeaning situation. The way the young women become interchangeable might be a critique of the anonymous face of in-flight service. But it feels like something more primitive, especially with all the body fluids flowing: like the Artaudian violence where ‘thinking tears through the whole thickness of our vitality, the endless intertwining of our sensations and memories, everything that is recorded in the body’.<sup>24</sup> I leave the movie feeling quite undone, yet trembling with a kind of queasy giddiness, like someone who just stepped off a roller-coaster.

Narimane Mari's *Loubia Hamra* (2013) revisits French colonialism and the French-Algerian war in the mode of an exorcism. The film tosses out explanations and historical contexts of colonial and internal power struggles, leaving only bodies that feel and act. It begins and ends with children swimming in the sea, light and shadows of the waves playing on their smooth bodies through the clear water. The boys dive and flip from the rocks into the cool briny water (the girls, swimming in their dresses, just watch). The children float, treading water, bodies linked in a web of small strong limbs. Music by the French band Zombie Zombie, using analogue and early digital electronic synthesizers and a raft of percussion instruments, accompanies much of the film; its insistent rhythms, strong bass and burbling analogue electronics drive the action with frenzied, slightly satanic gusto.

The story, loosely set during the French occupation of Algeria, involves a bunch of kids who, tired of eating nothing but beans, resolve to steal food from the French barracks. They manage to do so by recourse to magical realism: by night, their faces painted and masked, they creep up on the soldier on duty, meowing. He reports to his commander, 'They're only cats.' They take the young soldier hostage somehow and debate whether to torture him. Each event takes place in a swirl of motion, childish bodies swimming into and out of the light, childish voices laughing, taunting, arguing.

Eighteen children, moving not exactly as one but weaving among one other like a school of gleaming fish. Lighting and camerawork heighten the feeling of being surrounded by a force field of youthful energy. This barely contained energy leads to the film's most sublime and most terrifying scenes. At one point the kids have frightened away a European man (wearing a pig mask) who has been beating a Spanish woman (played by Mari). She sits in a corner weeping, her dress torn, and the kids press around her, loudly debating what they should do to cheer her up: offer her a cake, clap raucously as one boy sings a tune from Abdel Halim Hafez. If you inhabit the position of the woman snared in the forest of their legs, not comprehending their shouts, you can imagine how easily youthful kindness tips into terror; but the camera is with the children, not her. Similarly, the scene in which they have taken their hostage back to the beach at night, though he seems willing enough, terrified me; the children are all shouting, each something different, and moving in different directions at different speeds. This morass of noise and movement is lit by a bright spot so that

their limbs dart in and out of shadow, and the handheld camera reacts to their movements, weaving like a firefly. The children's volatility, alarming as well as disarming, recalls Spinoza's observation that children, lacking both mastery of their bodies and the power to reason that comes with experience, are especially vulnerable to outside forces.<sup>25</sup>

But *Loubia Hamra* emphasizes the sweetness as well as the volatile potentiality of youth. It is a movie about children who caress with clumsy tenderness, children gravely intent on their games, children who spread out blankets and sleep all together on the beach like angels on some forgotten cloud. The population of Algeria, like that of most Arab countries, is very young. To generate adequate ideas for the future, Algerians will need the creative sensitivity of their bodies. The film ends with shots of the children floating in the sparkling water, joyful and alive (so different from the floating men of El Horr's *The Blue Sea in Your Eyes*), while their voices repeat lines from Artaud's poem, in which the silvery little fish refuse to answer the question 'Is it better to be than to obey?'

The angered questioner kills the fish. But this is not in the movie, which clearly responds 'Yes!'

### *What Can a Body Do?*

Contemporary Arab cinema and media art is alive with bodies testing their powers to live against commands to obey. My analyses suggest that the process of discovering that you have a body, suffering passive affects, struggling to obtain just one or two active powers, and achieving adequate ideas that will increase your capacity to live is extremely fraught at every point. However, the cinema has a unique way to extend this process into a mutual effort that crosses the pro-filmic bodies, the body of the medium, and the body of the viewer. Affects of the movie may possibly develop into adequate ideas of the viewer. But she must first wholly lend her body to the movie and undergo the powerlessness at the heart of thought.

### NOTES

A longer version of this piece appears in Laura U. Marks, *Hanan al-Cinema: Affections for the Moving Image* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015).

- 1 On the 'cruel' and transformative character of this translation, see Alexandra Lukes, 'The Asylum of Nonsense: Antonin Artaud's Translation of Lewis Carroll', *The Romanic Review* 104:1–2 (2013), 105–26.

- 2 Carroll's poem reads simply, 'It would be better to obey.'
- 3 Kuniichi Uno, 'Variations on Cruelty' in *The Genesis of an Unknown Body*, translated by Melissa McMahon (Helsinki and São Paulo: n-1 Publications, 2012), 35.
- 4 Elena del Rio, *Deleuze and the Cinemas of Performance: Powers of Affection* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), 27, 114–16.
- 5 On the affect of unfolding, see Laura U. Marks, *Enfoldment and Infinity: An Islamic Genealogy of New Media Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010), 249–51, and 'Trying to Get in Touch: Palestinian Video from Haptic Image to Networked Space' in *Palestinian Video Art: Constellation of the Moving Image*, edited by Bashir Makhoul (Jerusalem: Palestinian Art Court, 2013).
- 6 Rosi Braidotti, 'Sustainable Ethics and the Body in Pain' in *Nomadic Theory: The Portable Rosi Braidotti* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 299–324 (302–3).
- 7 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, 'How Do You Make Yourself a Body without Organs?' in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, translated by Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 160.
- 8 See Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, 'Latency' in *Home Works: A Forum on Cultural Practices in the Region*, edited by Christine Tohme and Mona Abou Rayyan (Beirut: Ashkal Alwan, 2003), 40–5.
- 9 Baruch Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part III, 'On the Origin and Nature of the Emotions', Prop. LVI; Gilles Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, translated by Robert Hurley (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1988), 88.
- 10 Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part II, 'On the Nature and Origin of the Mind', Prop. VII.
- 11 In fact, Spinoza's doctrine enjoins obedience to God, the very thing Artaud rejects. Yet this divine obedience is not blind servitude but a manner of discovering one's powers.
- 12 Deleuze, *Spinoza*, 74, 85.
- 13 Mai Al-Nakib, 'Disjunctive Synthesis: Deleuze and Arab Feminism', *Signs* 38:2 (Winter 2013), 474.
- 14 Samir Kassir, *Being Arab*, translated by Will Hobson (London: Verso, 2006), 4.
- 15 Al-Nakib, 'Disjunctive Synthesis'.
- 16 Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, translated by Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 166.
- 17 Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 189.
- 18 Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 189.
- 19 See Joseph Massad, *Desiring Arabs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007); Valerie Traub, 'The Past Is a Foreign Country? The Time and Place of Islamicate Sexuality Studies' in *Islamicate Sexualities: Translations across Temporal Geographies of Desire*, edited by Kathryn Babayan and Afsanhe Najmabadi (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2008), 17–20; and Tarek Al-Ariss, *Trials*

- of Arab Modernity: Literary Affects and the New Political* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 117–20.
- 20 Joseph Pearson, 'Limits of Discussion: The Rhetoric of Homosexuality and Gender in Middle Eastern Video Art' in *Indicated by Signs: Contested Public Space, Gendered Bodies, and Hidden Sites of Trauma in Contemporary Visual Art Practices*, edited by Aleya Hamza and Edit Molnar (Bonn and Cairo: Bonner Kunstverein and Goethe-Institut Kairo, 2010), 104.
  - 21 Akira Mizuta Lippit, 'The Shadow Archive: A Secret Light' in *Atomic Light (Shadow Optics)* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 13–34.
  - 22 Sherif El-Azma, interview with the author, 10 June 2012.
  - 23 Kaelen Wilson-Goldie, 'Sherif El-Azma', *Bidoun* 17 (Spring 2009). <http://www.bidoun.org/magazine/17-flowers/sherif-el-azma-by-by-kaelen-wilson-goldie/>
  - 24 Uno, 'Variations on Cruelty', 35.
  - 25 Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part III, Prop. XXXIX: 'He, who possesses a body capable of the greatest number of activities, possesses a mind whereof the greatest part is eternal.'

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