



The Resilient Landscape

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The curators wish to thank the participating artists for their cooperation and enthusiasm for this exhibition. Many of the Lebanese participants have busy international touring schedules and yet they were unfailingly helpful and supportive for what must have seemed, from their perspective, a distant and relatively small-scale event.

Many of the artists included in the exhibition and in the accompanying film program have been made available through the good offices of *Ashkal Alwan. The Lebanese Association for Plastic Arts*. Christine Tohme and her staff will deserve a good deal of credit as Lebanese art continues to attract more international attention; their unflagging professionalism and dedication, (not to mention the hospitality they offered to two of the visiting curators) is exemplary. All emerging artists should be as well served.

Special thanks are extended to Jalal Toufic for permission to reproduce his essay *Martyrs* as well as to include his '*Āshûrâ*' photographs.

The curators also wish to thank the staff at Ivan Dougherty Gallery and Sally Robinson for her work on the catalogue and special thanks to Paula Abood for agreeing to open the show.

The Resilient Landscape

22 November - 22 December 2008

Ivan Dougherty Gallery

Exhibition curators Phillip George, David McNeill and
Khaled Sabsabi

All images courtesy and © the artists

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Hours Monday to Saturday 10am – 5pm closed Sundays and public holidays

**COFA
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PARTICIPATING ARTISTS

Exhibition includes:

Marian Abboud
Murmur Ahmed
Roukyh Akkawi
Mireille Astore
Ali Cherri
Farah Fayed
Zena el-Khalil
Phillip George
Tim Gregory
Mazen Kerbaj
Fatima Mawas
Eliane Raheb
John Rodsted
Khaled Sabsabi
Jalal Toufic

Film program includes:

Maher Abi Samra
Cherine Debs-Harfouche
Nadine Ghanem
Joanne Issa
Hisham Jaber
Rania Majed
Mirna Nassar
Wael Nourreddine
Rania Rafei
Halim Sabbagh
Rana Salem
Myriam Sassine
Corine Shaw

FOREWORD

The Resilient Landscape

The Resilient Landscape is an exhibition of photomedia and video art by Lebanese and Australian artists and by artists who are both Lebanese and Australian. It takes two distant events as its point of departure and then argues that their geographic remoteness should not divert us from an understanding of their cultural and political proximity. These events are the Cronulla 'riots' of December 2005 in Sydney and the Israeli Defense Forces invasion of Lebanon in July 2006. The show is an expression of concern about the level of ignorance of many Euro-Australians about the so-called 'Middle East' in general and about Lebanon in particular. It proposes that this ignorance, and the suspicion that it has engendered, are a direct consequence of our obsequious complicity with the bellicose foreign policy of the United States which was, in turn, responsible for the tacit authorization and prolongation of the invasion of Lebanon. The exhibition also directs its attention to the contentious issue of 'martyrdom' and the extent to which it is articulated in relation to both a long Shiite tradition, and the ultra-modern resistance strategies of Hezbollah. Finally, it offers a plea against the further use and deployment of cluster bombs such as those that still litter the Southern Lebanese landscape.

The Cronulla disturbance and the brutal havoc wreaked on Southern Lebanon are incomparable in their magnitude or their consequences. Linking them in the manner that this exhibition attempts is intended to suggest that the kinds of nationalist perspectives advocated by our more staunch champions of an essential 'Australian identity' prevent an adequate comprehension of our place in the world. Against this, it is proposed that we can reconceive our nation (and, by extension, others) as the dynamic and unstable effect of influences that were, and are, planetary in their extent. The true fears and doubts of any nation state, it is argued, become particularly and painfully visible at its borders rather than in some notional centre, and if this is true at the border of Lebanon and Israel (occupied Palestine) it is also true on the sand and surf of our eastern seaboard. These two distant events, both in their different ways, point to the urgency of imagining new forms of global exchange and compatriotism that can thrive outside the conceptual inhibitions, or boundaries, of nationalism.

The exhibition is curated by Phillip George, David McNeill and Khaled Sabsabi.

It is sponsored by the *Center for Contemporary Art and Politics*, UNSW.

SCHEDULE OF EVENTS Friday 23 November 2007

The exhibition will be accompanied by a workshop discussing the issue of racism in Australia, and a film program showing Lebanese filmmakers' responses to the IDF invasion.

Workshop	11am-2pm College of Fine Arts Lecture Theatre EGO2
Film program	2.30-5.30 pm College of Fine Arts Lecture Theatre EGO2
Exhibition opening	5.30-7.30pm Ivan Dougherty Gallery.

The exhibition will be opened by **Paula Abood**, a respected filmmaker, writer, community cultural development worker and activist. There will be an additional address by **Mirna Nassar**, a participating artist who was resident in Lebanon during the Israeli attack in 2006.



AUSTRALIA: AN UNRESOLVED PROBLEM

Dr. David McNeill

“The history of nations...is always already presented to us in the form of a narrative which attributes to these entities the continuity of a subject. The formation of the nation thus appears as the fulfilment of a ‘project’ stretching over centuries, in which there are different stages and moments of coming to self-awareness...Such a representation clearly constitutes a retrospective illusion, but it also expresses constraining institutional realities.” –Etienne Balibar.¹

“The State...is not founded on a social bond, of which it would be the expression, but rather on the dissolution, the unbinding it prohibits”. –Giorgio Agamben²

“War is global at the moment, with each city witnessing it, practicing it, differently” –Christine Tohme.³

The Resilient Landscape is an exhibition about two distant places and events. It presents the responses of a group of local, Lebanese and Lebanese-Australian artists to two political ‘incidents’ that took place seven months apart; the so-called Cronulla ‘race riots’ in December 2005 and the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 2006. The disturbance at Cronulla and the brutal havoc wreaked on Southern Lebanon are in no sense obviously related. Indeed they are incommensurable in their magnitude and in their consequences. They are linked in this exhibition, not in order to argue some spurious equivalence, but in order to animate a particular hypothesis, namely that:

It is not helpful to understand ‘Australia’ as some isolated sanctuary of a mystical and unchanging national identity, but rather, it is more useful to try and conceive it as an unstable product of global forces and exchange; as an incomplete project.

A farmer once described an axe that had been in his family for generations as the best he had ever used. “Mind you” he added, “it’s had twenty new handles and a dozen new blades”. Nations may be very much like that axe; none of their constituent parts have remained in place throughout their history and they are constantly transformed and renewed by resources (principally human) that are imported from elsewhere. It is the destiny of all nations that they are, finally, nothing other than the sum total of local effects produced at the intersection of shifting global currents. It is also their destiny, or so it would seem, to be governed by leaders who wish to deny this transnational constitution and to claim instead that their nation (at least) has evolved according to the dictates of some inner *logos* or spirit. Further to this, the exhibition raises the possibility that the true fears and doubts of any nation state become particularly and painfully visible at its borders rather than in some notional centre. This is clearly true at the volatile border of Lebanon and Israel (occupied Palestine) but it is also true on the sand and surf of our eastern seaboard.

In wake of the events of September 11, 2001 the Australian political landscape has been marked by a kind of intensified neo-nationalism that attempts to maintain the illusion of national autonomy by defining more and more narrowly and exclusively the characteristics of a putative Australian identity. It may appear ironic that nationalistic rhetoric is so rampant at a moment in history when so many commentators are predicting the decline of the nation state in a climate of rapidly increasing international economic, political and cultural exchange. However it would be surprising if a certain conception of the nation-state (as the inviolable and irreducible subject of global negotiation) were not defended tenaciously by its advocates at a moment when it is faced with its most profound challenge and negation. Of course nationalists become most aggressive when faced with their immanent subjugation to historical forces of a global kind.

¹ Balibar,E and Wallerstein,E, (eds.) *Race, Nation ,Class. Ambiguous Identities*. London 2005, p.86.

² Agamben,G. *The Coming Community*. Trans. M.Hardt. Minneapolis, 1993. P85

³ Tohme,C. in Sandra Dagher, Catherine David, Rasha Salti, Christine Thome and T.J. Demos. “Curating Beirut: A Conversation on the Politics of Representation” *Art Journal* 66 no.2 Summer 2007. p.107.

Nationalism has always been at best an ambiguous means of invoking or enforcing social coherence, precisely because it is always premised on exclusion. This is nowhere more true than in a semi-peripheral settler culture such as ours. As many writers have observed, nationalism is best invoked cautiously and judiciously and then only as an antidote to direct colonial occupation or threat. European Australians can hardly lay claim to living in such circumstances. I believe that nationalism in the form that we currently experience it (and will continue to experience it after our political parties play their game of musical chairs) differs in a number of important ways from earlier avatars. If we accept Benedict Anderson's well-known formulation that the national subject is one who feels her/himself to be part of an 'imagined community' then it is increasingly the case that this imagining is being done *for* us, rather than *by* us.⁴ There has never been a time in our history when the print and mainstream electronic media has been so unified in their support of a conservative and nationalistic political agenda. Right-wing columnists and talkback hosts have established a near monopoly of what is misleadingly called 'public opinion', and persistent government attacks on the independence of the ABC have further marginalised public debate and dissent. Where once the 'core values' that underwrite our particular species of 'imagined community' bore some relationship to our quotidian experience they are now manufactured and disseminated from the top down as if their consensual origins were uncontroversial. This managed, top down, nationalism is not necessarily more detestable than the populist nationalism of say, *One Nation*, but it is more insidious in the ways in which it naturalises perverse and brutal behaviour in the name of national consensus. It gains its sustenance I believe, from a kind of progressive alienation of lateral, or everyday, dialogue and exchange, and promotes instead a centralisation of the process of national imagining. Thus the War on Terror transforms civic responsibility into the ability to treat neighbours and strangers with suspicion, and in the arena of Tertiary education, web-based delivery, attacks on student unionism, the prioritising of vocational programs all serve to isolate students and to anaesthetise them against localised peer debate and criticism. As our social relationships ossify, and as we become more and more monadic, as dialogue and exchange progressively mutate into media genres like talkback radio, reality TV audience voting, and current affairs *vox populi* slots, it becomes ever easier for others to represent our interests and our opinions to us and for us. And there are so many self-appointed custodians of the "national spirit" who are keen to take on this role.

The adroit nurturing of fear has also facilitated this top down nationalism. Imagine, if you can, if it is not too incredible, a government that goes out of its way to offer itself as a target of terrorism (by coat-tailing the foreign policy of the most belligerent nation in history, by promulgating imaginary threats posed by distant states and then assisting in their invasion and so on) and then uses this threat as a justification for abrogating to itself the role of sole arbiter of what it is to be a 'proper' citizen. Indeed, one might be tempted to argue that the commodification of fear was the greatest single economic by-product of 9/11. The 'fear industry', understood as the manufacture and marketing of everything from home security devices to military armaments, has profited enormously in the last several years, and indeed, these profits have more than offset the losses incurred by the travel and tourist industries in all but a few 'developed' countries. Viewers will no doubt notice the 'made in USA' label fixed to the side of the cluster bomb container dropped on Lebanon in the photograph by John Rodsted, but they may not know that the Australian military are currently negotiating with Israel for the purchase of a consignment of these nasty and indiscriminate little weapons. More importantly, though, fear offers itself as a compelling political tool. Populations are more willing to cede responsibilities that might normally devolve on them if they believe they are living in a climate of unusual threat. They are also more likely to view their neighbours with suspicion.

This exhibition, then, is about borders and boundaries, both physical and conceptual. More precisely, it is about the pressure imposed on borders in a world that becomes more fluid and interconnected day by day. To state the obvious, borders are an artifice designed to both include and exclude. To pick an example from the domain of art criticism; many writers have insisted on policing a border between art, on the one hand, and documentary on the other. It will be immediately clear that this exhibition (and the accompanying film screening) refuses this distinction. This is so because it is a distinction founded on the presumption that connection with real-world events on the one hand, and the experience of aesthetic delectation on the other, are in some real sense mutually exclusive; as if the process of ordering and making sense of the world in art is one from which aesthetic and formal decision

⁴ Anderson, B. *Imagined Communities* London 1991

making is somehow banished. There has always been art that obeys this injunction, but it has so often tended towards banality. One thinks of the Italian painter Morandi, painting delicate still lifes in the middle of World War Two. Members of the class of 'art lovers' who aspire to wear a Rolex Oyster and admire the dexterous use of an oyster fork studiously revere such artists. However, contemporary art is not for them, since their investment is resolutely in a world of certainty and stasis and the best art is always committed to a process of conceptual and perceptual *destabilisation*.

While it does contain some very sophisticated art this exhibition is not premised on any notion of quality and refinement. Rather it is about the fragility of borders of an altogether different kind. It takes as its point of departure the commonly expressed belief that in a global age demographic, ethnic and (in particular) national borders become sites of unprecedented controversy and intensity. The instability and porosity of borders, and hence the complex interdependency of seemingly bounded entities, is explored through an artistic survey of two distant border incidents whose geographical remoteness is belied by their political and cultural proximity. Australia and Lebanon are at opposite ends of the earth and yet their fortunes are as intimately enmeshed as those of any neighbours. That this intimacy is routinely denied and that non-Lebanese Australians wear their ignorance of Lebanon as a kind of badge of honour does nothing to disprove the basic assertion that Lebanon is part of what we are: that to be ignorant of Lebanon is to be imperfectly Australian and to be wary of Lebanon is to be anxious about ourselves.

If we accept that the contemporary condition of any nation state is best exposed at its hem, then it would appear that ours is beginning to fray a little. The debates over the rights of asylum seekers and the tensions that came to a head at Cronulla in 2005 both speak of a border that is a source of anxiety and instability rather than a comforting buffer against too proximate a connection with the threatening world at large. If we look to our borders for a sense of where 'we' end and others begin we shall find little solace, since all we discover is evidence of the futility of understanding ourselves *without* reference to that which lies well beyond any insular or bounded sense of Australia (that is, as a kind of Jurassic European outpost cast adrift to the south of Asia).

The Cronulla 'riots' make little sense without the understanding that Australia is currently enmeshed in the invasion and occupation of two Islamic countries. Nations at war always turn on migrant minorities who are thought to have allegiances or cultural ties with the presumptive enemy. While this tendency is disturbing enough in itself, it redoubles when overlaid on a civil society such as ours that is so ignorant of global histories, politics, and cultures that it can conflate Lebanon with Iraq and Afghanistan, thereby producing a vague and threatening spectre called, variously, the 'Middle East', 'global Islam', or in more hysterical moments, simply 'terrorism'.

Lebanon is a state that warrants and repays close attention and not only because we all have an obligation to understand something of the background of those who have chosen to settle here. More than this, Lebanon reveals *in extremis* the secret truth of all nation states; that they cannot be reduced to an essential set of values or practices and that they cannot be understood in isolation from the desires and behavior of neighbours, whether adjacent or distant. There is arguably no nation on earth that contains in such a small space, such a massively divergent aggregate of beliefs, traditions and practices. Nor is there any other state that reveals so clearly how unnatural and artificial are the things we call nations. Lebanon contains pretty much the whole world, and through the far-flung Lebanese Diaspora, it also occupies and helps to define that world.

Let's take a rather banal example; beach soccer. The practice of kicking a round ball on the beach was one of the most commonly cited offences of the Lebanese kids in the lead up to Cronulla. Frisbee throwing hippies copped criticism in the 'seventies and Bondi habitués were most upset by the encroachment of beach volleyball during the Sydney Olympics. Nowadays beach users have to deal with para surfers and even proselytizing fundamentalist Christian pamphleteers, but we cope. The Cronulla riots were therefore not about the protocols of leisure, they were about the expression of an irrational anger and fear, promulgated and licensed by a government that has demonstrated a predisposition to deploy racism as a smokescreen for deflecting attention from very real inequities of wealth and opportunity. Of course there are Australian kids that will think it is OK to vilify Lebanese (or

Somalis, or just about any one else who has recently arrived) when they have grown up in a world in which their government and media has characterized prejudice as a *bona fide* expression of Australian identity. Why has this come to pass? No doubt the answer is complex but I will venture one suggestion. The collapse of Warsaw Pact communism in 1990 was paralleled by a prolonged and, by and large, successful attack on Western Social Democracy. In countries such as ours neo-conservatism made significant inroads with its mantra of privatisation and deregulation. As our government enthusiastically handed over its responsibilities for essential services to the private sector (transport, education, telecommunications etc.) it had little to do other than to police national security as it conceived it. A government purportedly of facilitation has transformed itself in a very short time into a government of surveillance and interdiction.

Our second event demonstrates a more direct and catastrophic fall out from the 'war on terror'. On the July 12, 2006, the Israeli defence forces invaded Lebanon. They withdrew 34 days later leaving in their wake over 1200 Lebanese dead, a trashed southern landscape and upwards of half a million unexploded cluster bombs. The attack was a response to the Hezbollah capture of two Israeli soldiers that had followed, in turn, the Israeli gunboat attack on Palestinians picnicking on the *Beit Lahia* beach in Gaza a month earlier. During the war Hezbollah forces killed over 100 Israeli soldiers and about 40 civilians. Around 300 Hezbollah troops were killed and the remaining Lebanese casualties were civilians, of whom UNICEF has estimated 30% were children under the age of thirteen. The war was short and vicious; despite unchallenged control of Lebanese airspace, The I.D.F. was chased out of Lebanon with its self-proclaimed reputation for invincibility in shreds.

Meanwhile, Hezbollah is still considered a terrorist organization by our government and any defence of its reconstruction programs (which even its opponents recognise as remarkable) or praise for the tenacity and efficiency of the resistance which it led is still viewed as support for the clandestine forces of evil that threaten the very foundations of our civil society. If the intention of the invasion had been to drive a wedge between Hezbollah and other Lebanese groups then it clearly failed. Hezbollah, and its leader Hassan Nasrallah, immediately acquired a kind of legendary status, not just in Lebanon, and not just in the Islamic world. Their victory was celebrated on the streets of Dakar, Caracas, Mumbai and throughout what was once called the non-aligned world. This enthusiasm was not simply an expression of opposition to the brutality of the Israeli armed forces; it was, more extravagantly, an expression of disgust at the global policy and adventures of the United States, which was widely held to have encouraged and prolonged the Israeli attack. For a brief moment at least, Hezbollah inherited the heroic mantle of such earlier liberation organizations as the A.N.C., the *Sandinistas*, *Frelimo*, and the Viet Cong. For those who have limited contact with Shiite culture Hezbollah appears shrouded in mystery. The cult of martyrdom, the fanatical loyalty demanded and willingly given, the brilliant command of military tactics, the ecumenical compassion extended to such unlikely opponents as the S.L.A. and the sophisticated deployment of cutting edge media technologies all confound any attempt to consign the organization to some imaginary feudal past. In fact it is difficult to imagine an organization anywhere on the planet that is as completely of its time as Hezbollah. The following essay by Jalal Toufic, and his photographs of the *Ashura*, offer those of us with little knowledge of these matters a richer context for understanding the discipline of the Shiite resistance and of the centrality of the belief in Martyrdom which gives it coherence.

Sadly it is too early to dismiss the Israeli attack as a total failure. The damage done to Lebanon has been immense and it may yet collapse (again) into civil war. Unexploded cluster bombs have impeded the collection of southern harvests and tourists have avoided the country for the last two years, with devastating effects on the economy. Long-term resentment of Syrian interference at times rivals hatred for the Israelis and doctrinal differences continue to simmer between Sunnis, Shiites, Maronites, Druse and also Palestinian as they have throughout much of the history of this little country. However there is a broad pan-Arabic and pan-Islamic commitment to rebuild Lebanon and foreign money is transformed into concrete at a remarkable rate! The kind of optimism that is eloquently expressed in Ali Cherri's video *Slippage* may seem naïve at first, but in fact it is stoic; it is also a characteristic that one meets with often when travelling through Lebanon. It is a survivor's optimism borne by those who have been forged and tempered rather than broken by adversity. This is all the more remarkable since in so many respects Lebanon is barely a nation at all, if by this we mean an 'imagined community' with a commitment to a consensual understanding of its own history, a vision for future development and a strong non-partisan civil sphere. It is a colonial artefact serving as a kind of 'switching depot' for ambitions, rivalries and beliefs

formed beyond its borders and largely outside of its control. In order to survive Lebanon will have to negotiate a sense of itself as a community without those binding characteristics that were once felt to hold a nation together. For this reason, it might be argued that Lebanon embodies in exaggerated or condensed form what is in reality the condition of all contemporary nation states; that it is a kind of advanced laboratory for the development of a new vision of civility that moves beyond the glib and reductive language of old Twentieth Century nationalism. This is one reason why Lebanon should matter to us; it may one day show us ways in which people can live together without demanding of each other an agreed worldview mediated through the lens of nationality.

Through all of Lebanon's recent tribulations Lebanese art has not only prospered but has also established itself on the world stage. The period of comparative peace from 1990 up to the invasion last year witnessed the coming to maturity of a generation of artists with, in most cases, an inclination to work in photography, video and conceptual/documentary forms. Many had been trained overseas and chose to return to Lebanon after the signing of the *Taif Agreement*, the disbanding of the militias and the promise of economic recovery associated with the Hariri government. As with most modern artists, these cultural workers tended to embrace a secular and progressive outlook irrespective of their confessional backgrounds. They tend to be fully conversant in both European and Arabic *milieux* and frequently embrace a peripatetic or cosmopolitan life style, studying, lecturing and exhibiting in a global field. This generation of Lebanese artists were both strong and committed. During the 'nineties a number of important organizations developed and, together with support from European facilitators and funding bodies, the conditions of possibility for Lebanese contemporary media art were forged. *Ashkal Alwan*, the *Arab Image Foundation*, and later the gallery *Espace SD* were all founded and run by people who believed in something very like a Lebanese renaissance. They worked tirelessly and effectively on its behalf, both in the local context and internationally. The Lebanese art from this immediate post-civil war period is adroit and canny, and much of it seems to anticipate the heated debates surrounding the role of documentary in art that surfaced in response to the Documenta 11 exhibition of 2002. A well honed black humour born of the civil war informs such justifiably well known works as Walid Raad's *Bachar Tapes* or his *Fadl Fakhouri Files* and the extraordinary *Wonder Beirut* postcards 'discovered' by Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige. In these works the contestable and uncertain nature of public and personal recollection is wittily evoked by images that decay apace with their objects or by the deployment of ambiguous or fictive claims to authorship. One of the lessons here is that, far from liberating 'fine art' photography from the constraints of representing the world-and thus assisting it towards its 'rightful' destiny as the antithesis of documentary- the revolution in digital image manipulation of the early 'nineties actually propelled documentary into the realm of fine art, thereby registering any distinction between the two realms unsustainable. Under this dispensation art does not merely bear some kind of relationship to politics, art itself becomes a form of political activity performed from within an aesthetic discourse. The presentation of political events requires finely honed aesthetic skills just as aesthetic facility demands a subject matter worthy of representation. Thus, in *The Resilient Landscape* the cleverly manipulated images of George are hung with the 'documentary' photographs of John Rodsted and Jalal Toufic and unsurprisingly they cohabit quite comfortably (although 'comfort' is clearly not what they are about).

However, many of the younger artists represented in *The Resilient Landscape* and in the accompanying film screening do not treat history with the same suspicion and mistrust as their more seasoned colleagues. This is because they are responding rapidly and urgently to an historical event that offers little scope for interpretive ambiguity. The 2006 invasion is clearly and brutally etched in the landscape of Lebanon. The role of Syria, of the Hariri sponsored reconstruction, and of communalism could be debated (often very hotly) whereas the IDF invasion simply left the whole of Lebanon (and much of the world) aghast at the belligerence of their unpopular southern neighbour. Many of the relatively quick responses to the invasion employ a rapid narrative switching between accounts of the bombings and their effects, on the one hand, interspersed with personal anecdotes on the other. The effect is to personalise the war and give expression to the horror and bewilderment that it produced. This 'diaristic' tendency also operates at some remove from documentary as it has sometimes been simplistically conceived. So, too do Toufic's *Ashura* images. They are included, not to imply some connection between ritual self-flagellation and the bloodshed unleashed by invasion, but rather to underline the point that the Lebanese resistance, led by Hezbollah, is so profoundly steeped in their commitment to long-term struggle that there can be no possibility of a weakening of spirit. To the Israelis who appear to be wracked with self-doubt and recrimination in the wake of the ceasefire, this resolve must appear truly unnerving.

For at least a short time after the Israeli withdrawal, the majority of Lebanese were unanimous in their expressions of gratitude to their Shiite brethren. Lebanon being what it is, this could again dissolve into sectarian rivalry at any moment, but it is a fair bet that the artists in this show and all the members of one of history's greatest diasporas will see the 2006 invasion as a powerful reason to find ways to get along.

As for Australia, our inability to feel at home in a world that includes Islam, and our inability to accept Lebanese migrants of whatever faith as fully constituted citizens is, simply, irrefutable evidence of our failure as a nation. Thus both nations face a crisis. One is caused by the interference of powerful outside interests and the incapacity to even approach a consensual account of shared history and the other is caused by an insular attempt to imagine a nation that is fully in charge of its own destiny which appears, as Balibar puts it in the quote that opens this essay, "as the fulfilment of a 'project' stretching over centuries".

These two distant dilemmas appear as the recto and verso of the same incapacity; our reluctance or inability to imagine forms of exchange and comradeship that can thrive outside the conceptual inhibitions of nationalism.

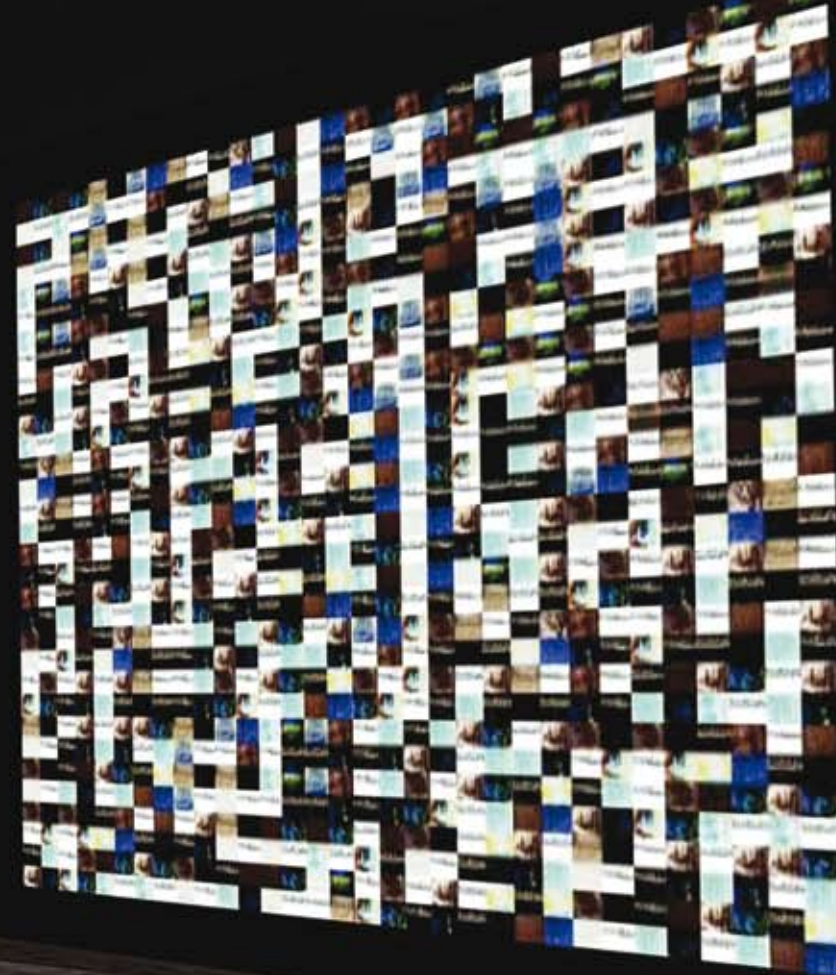
I wish to finish with a story about a Muslim Australian whose forebears predate (by at least 40,000 years) the arrival of European settlers. In the late 'nineties the Indigenous football player Anthony Mundine resigned from his team in order to follow a career in boxing. Returning from a trip to the US, he gave a press conference in which he scathingly condemned the racism that he saw as endemic to Australian society. He spoke in a kind of hybrid Austral-Ebonics and he proudly referred to his recent conversion to Islam. Shortly after the conference, a respected sports commentator announced that he would probably agree with much that Mundine had said but he wished he would say it "in an Australian way". For Mundine, of course, the language of black struggle in the US was empowering, it enabled him to say things in a manner, and with an authority, that he might not otherwise have been able to muster. He refused to allow his identity as an Indigenous Australian to be bounded by geography or by the constraints of local language. Instead he had adopted a quite precise and strategic global or transcultural persona, the better to articulate the issues confronting his people.

Such are the possibilities opened up in a globalised world. Mundine is particularly outspoken and articulate but, by and large, the Australian media has not accorded him the respect he deserves. Shortly after 9/11 he gave a television interview in which he said, simply, that the event could only be understood in the context of the history of American foreign policy in the Middle East. Although he in no way endorsed the attack he was vilified in the Australian press and a number of boxing organisations threatened to ban him from competition. Mundine's 'sin' was to situate Australian problems in a global context. We thus owe Mundine a debt of gratitude for offering us a model of subjectivity, and indeed citizenship, that is more ecumenical, broad and rich than the mean spirited alternative lauded by the custodians of some specious and bounded Australian identity.

It seems to me that the kind of refusal of boundaries implicit in Mundine's strategic use of gangsta rap, suggest to us how important it is pay very close attention to the more self-righteous advocates of national identity; not simply to disavow their particular portrait of responsible citizenship, in the name of some prior myth of fairplay and egalitarianism, but more radically, to suspect the very impossibility of any concept of 'Australia' that is consistent with humanist principles and a commitment to global justice. If being a good planetary citizen necessitates being a bad Australian then so be it.

Dr. David McNeill,
Center for Contemporary Art and Politics,
College of Fine Arts,
The University of New South Wales.





NIGHT OF 19 to 20
JULY 2006. I AM
ON THE PHONE WITH
AN AUSTRALIAN RADIO
TO DO A LIVE
INTERVIEW ABOUT THE
BLOG AND THE SITUATION
OUT HERE. THEY'RE NOT
LUCKY. NO BOMBS TONIGHT.

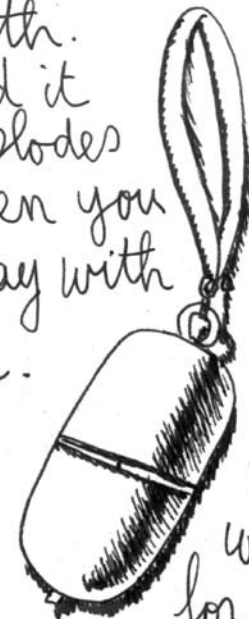
(THEY PUT ME ON HOLD)

Ah. HERE'S MY TURN!



IT IS VERY DIFFICULT TO ANSWER THE
QUESTION: WHY DON'T YOU LEAVE THE
COUNTRY IF YOU HAVE THE OCCASION?"

it's small.
it has a white
ribbon.
there's plenty
of it in the
south.
and it
explodes
when you
play with
it.

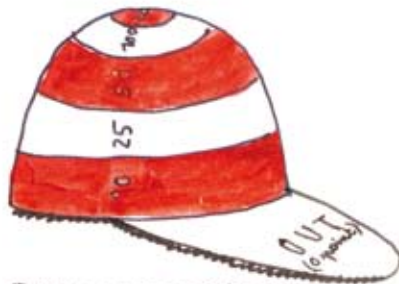


for you
and me
it looks like
a hand
grenade
with a stupid
white ribbon.
for a kid it
is a KINDER SURPRISE®

MAZEN⁰⁶

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 PRESENT THE SUMMER
 2006 BEST SELLER

ARABIC
 CAP[®]



YES! I AM AN ARAB
 AND I HAVE A
 BEARD. CAN YOU SEND
 ME ONE ARABIC CAP
 SO I CAN FEEL FREE
 WHEN I WALK IN THE STREET.

Mazen⁰⁶



BREAKING NEWS

THE ISRAELI ARMY IDENTIFIED
 ONE MORE BEARDED TERRORIST
 AND HIS VEILED TERRORIST MOTHER



WA
THIS ITEM WARRANTS
WARRANTY TERMINATES 6/14
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Martyrs

Jalal Toufic

Dedicated to mountain Tûr (aka Mount Sinai), one of the first martyrs¹

We urgently need many more *shuhadâ*’ in the contemporary Muslim world!

In order not to cheapen acts and states, we have to make sure that we don’t cheapen the words we use to describe them.² In both the English *martyr* and the Arabic *shahîd* there is a conjunction of witnessing and death. “*Shâhid* and *Shahîd*: One who tells, or gives information of, what he has witnessed, or seen or beheld with his eye: one who declares what he knows: a witness, as meaning one who gives testimony, or evidence... [one who gives decisive information]. *Shahîd*: A martyr who is slain in the cause of God’s religion... *al-Shahîd* as a name of God means *The Faithful*, or *Trusty*, in his testimony. *Shahâda*: Information of what one has witnessed, or seen or beheld with his eye: this is the primary signification... *Martyrdom in the cause of God’s religion*.”³ And *martyr*, which comes from late Greek *martur*, meaning “witness,” also means “one who chooses to suffer death rather than renounce religious principles.”⁴ Is this conjunction of witnessing and death accidental? No; does not the Qur’ân state: “And the agony of death cometh in truth... (And unto the evil-doer it is said): Thou wast in heedlessness of this. Now We have removed from thee thy covering, and piercing is thy sight this day” (Qur’ân 50:19-22)? Notwithstanding the banners one sees in Lebanon during the Twelver Shi‘ite yearly ten-day commemoration ‘Âshûrâ’, not *everyday* is ‘Âshûrâ’, and not *every land* is *Karbalâ*’, but we will all be martyrs sooner or later. “Some men are born posthumously,” writes Nietzsche in *The Antichrist*; I would add, most men and women die posthumously, i.e. are posthumous martyrs.⁵ Do evil-doers die in order to have piercing sight, they whom “God has set a seal upon their hearts and ears; their sight is dimmed and grievous punishment awaits them” (Qur’ân 2:6-8)? Is it then out of His mercy, which “embraces everything” (Qur’ân 7:156), that God makes them die? Do the dead feel guilty and encounter “wrathful deities” because they were evil-doers while physically alive? Isn’t it rather the case that in the death realm one feels insidious and unexplainable guilt and encounters wrathful deities whatever one did while physically alive? In which case it is only the one who dies before dying physically, achieving thus piercing sight and consequently not having to undergo the death realm, who is de jure not an evil-doer beyond his physical death. The prophet Muhammad, who would say on waking up, “Praise be to God, who hath revived us after putting us to death, and to Whom is the

¹ “And when Moses came to Our appointed tryst and his Lord had spoken unto him, he said: My Lord! Show me (Thy Self), that I may gaze upon Thee. He said: Thou wilt not see Me, but gaze upon the mountain! If it stand still in its place, then thou wilt see Me. And when his Lord revealed (His) glory to the mountain He sent it crashing down” (Qur’ân 7:143, trans. Pickthall).

² There are two sorts of people I distrust and with whom I feel no affinity whatsoever: those who acquiesce to low interpretations and those who artificially, without rigor and honesty, pushed by no necessity emanating from them or the object, try to enrich the object, in the process cheapening the act of enriching itself.

³ Edward William Lane, *An Arabic-English Lexicon*, 8 volumes (Beirut, Lebanon: Librairie du Liban, 1980), entry *shîn hâ’ dâl*.

⁴ *The American Heritage Talking Dictionary*.

⁵ I have already posed the question whether all humans are mortal in the strong sense in my book *Forthcoming* (2000), where I wrote in the section “Oedipus in Egypt”: “Endless death is so exemplarily embodied in the ancient Egyptian anthropoid coffins, sculptures, and reliefs, that I almost find it impossible to believe what I know: the diminutive people walking around in the Egyptian Museum of Antiquities—obviously I include myself among them—are themselves always already dead; and that I almost believe, as did the Egyptians of the Ancient Kingdom, that death is the prerogative of only the few, and that the people walking around in the museum are wholly within life... that they encounter death only as an external event...” I elaborated in the footnote: “Is it possible that indeed only a few die? To die, to be an undead, is already a form of courage: owing to over-turns in the undeath realm, even turning back is forging ahead. (Un)death is not for cowards. Cowardice applies only in situations from which one can escape; there is no cowardice past the point of no-return. A coward can enter or find himself or herself neither in a labyrinth, nor in undeath, nor in the orthodox Christian or Moslem hell—he or she can find himself or herself in the hell concocted by mind-projections in the bardo of becoming, since he or she can escape from the latter by rebirth... If we rather discover that we all die, that is become undead, then that would mean that we are all fundamentally courageous.”

Resurrection,”⁶ died before dying physically every night, more specifically at the onset of his night journey (*isrâʾ*) from the sanctuary in Mecca to Jerusalem and thenceforth, beyond (sublunar) night and day, to Heaven (*miʾrâj*): “Mâlik b. Saʿsaʿa... said that God’s Prophet, may God bless him, spoke to them about his Night Journey, ‘While I was lying at the Hatîm [the curved wall that encompasses the Kaʿba on the north-west side]... suddenly someone came to me and slit me... from here to here.’ — I said to al-Jârûd, who was by my side, ‘What does he mean by that?’ He said, ‘He means from where the windpipe commences in the uppermost part of the breast to the place of growth of the hair beneath the navel,’ or said, ‘From the breastbone to the pubes.’ — ‘He then took out my heart. Then a gold tray filled with belief was brought to me and my heart was washed and was filled [with belief]. Then a white animal that’s smaller than a mule and bigger than a donkey... and that places its foot at the farthest extent of its vision with each new step was brought to me, and I was carried over it. Gabriel set out with me until we reached the nearest heaven”⁷ then the six other heavens, then the threshold beyond which Gabriel could not proceed. Then the prophet Muhammad “drew close, so He [God] came down, and he was two bows’ length away, or closer” (Qurʾân 53:8-9). If the purpose of death is to give one piercing sight,⁸ then, being already a *shahîd* in the fullest sense during his physical life, having experienced a Heavenly Ascension, the prophet Muhammad did not need to be part of the death realm past his physical demise. “When the news [of the Prophet’s death] reached Abû Bakr [the future first Caliph]... he went [straight] to the Messenger of God in ‘Â’ishah’s house where he was lying in a corner... then said, ‘... Indeed, you have tasted the death which God had decreed for you. No [other] death will ever overtake you.”⁹ These words apply also to the first Shiʿite imâm, ‘Alî b. Abî Tâlib, who is reported to have said, “Were the covering unveiled, I would not increase in certainty,” and who while praying was fatally wounded by the Khârîjî ‘Abd al-Rahmân ibn Muljam on 27 January 661, dying two days later (Ibn Muljam, who was soon after executed by ‘Alî’s followers, is no martyr). If imâm Husayn, the grandson of a *shahîd*, the messenger of God Muhammad, and the son of a *shahîd*, imâm ‘Alî, is also a martyr, indeed the Master of Martyrs according to Twelver Shiʿites, this should not be only in the sense that his dying in the way of God in Karbalâʾ on 10 Muharram AH 61 (10 October 680) was exemplary, but also and basically because he saw with a piercing sight, and not only his coming death: “I know the day and hour, and the spot wherein I shall be killed. I know the place whereon I shall fall, and the spot in which I shall be buried, as I know you [Umm Salama].” Those who proclaim him the Master of Martyrs should try to show others, possibly at the risk of their lives,¹⁰ the theophanic, visionary dimension of imâm Husayn. The Sûfî Husayn ibn Mansûr al-Hallâj (d. 922) is a *shahîd*, for he saw with a piercing sight and was executed for declaring what he witnessed, for instance: “I am the True Reality (God)” (*Anâ al-Haqq*). “They led him from the prison... (to the esplanade) where they cut off his hands and feet, after having flogged him with 500 lashes of the whip. Then he was hoisted up onto the cross (*sulîba*).... Abû Bakr Shiblî... said to him: ‘What is Sûfism?’ He answered: ‘The lowest degree one needs for attaining it is the one that you behold.’ Shiblî asked further: ‘What is the highest degree?’ Hallâj responded: ‘It is out of reach for you; but tomorrow you will see; for it is part of the (divine) mercy that I have seen it and that it remains hidden to you.’ At the time of the evening prayer (*ishâʾ*), the authorization by the Caliph to decapitate Hallâj came. But it was declared: ‘It is too late; we shall

⁶ Al-imâm an-Nawawî, *Gardens of the Righteous*.

⁷ *Sahîh al-Bukhârî*, 2nd ed., no. 3887 (Beirut, Lebanon: Dâr al-Kutub al-ʿilmiyya, 2002); cf. *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, new ed., volume VII, entry *Miʾrâdj* (Leiden: Brill, 1993), p. 98 for another account: “When they [Gabriel, Michael and a third angel] found him [the Prophet] sleeping, they laid him on his back, opened his body, brought water from the Zamzam well and washed away all that they found within his body of doubt, idolatry, paganism and error. They then brought a golden vessel which was filled with wisdom and belief. Thereupon he was taken up to the lowest heaven.”

⁸ Contrariwise, for Leibniz, “what we call death is envelopment and diminution” (*Monadology* 73); cf. Deleuze’s 29 April 1980 Vincennes lecture on Leibniz: “In other words, death is nothing other than an envelopment; perceptions cease being developed into conscious perceptions, they are enveloped in an infinity of minute perceptions. Or yet again, he [Leibniz] says, [death is] sleep without dreaming in which there are lots of minute perceptions.”

⁹ Tabarî, *The History of al-Tabarî (Taʾrîkh al-rusul waʾl-mulûk)*, vol. IX, *The Last Years of the Prophet*, translated and annotated by Ismail K. Poonawala (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), p. 185.

¹⁰ From a poem written by ‘Alî Zayn al-ʿÂbidîn (d. 95/714), the fourth Shiʿite Imâm, a survivor of the massacre of much of the family and many of the companions of the prophet Muhammad at Karbalâʾ: “I conceal the jewels of my knowledge—For fear that some ignorant man, on seeing the truth, should crush us... O Lord! If I were to reveal one pearl of my gnosis—They would say to me: are you then a worshipper of idols?—And there would be Muslims who would see justice in the shedding of my blood!—They find abominable the most beautiful thing they are offered” (quoted in Henry Corbin, *History of Islamic Philosophy*, trans. Liadain Sherrard with the assistance of Philip Sherrard [London; New York: Kegan Paul International, 1993], p. 38).

put it off until tomorrow.' When morning came, they took him down from the gibbet.... His head was cut off, then his trunk was rolled up in a straw mat, doused with fuel, and burned. Later, they carried his ashes to Ra's al-Manâra, to disperse them to the wind."¹¹ The Nizârî Hasan 'ala dhikrihi'l-salâm (on his mention be peace), who proclaimed the Great Resurrection in 'Alamût on 8 August 1164, ushering the unveiling of all that was occulted, and making exoteric all that was previously, in the cycles of occultation, esoteric, and who was shortly after viewed as the awaited *Qâ'im* (Resurrector), thus the epiphany of the *Haqîqa* (Truth/God), and who was assassinated in 1166 by a brother-in-law, is one of Islam's greatest martyrs (his assassin, Hasan b. Nâmâwar, who was put to death by Hasan 'ala dhikrihi'l-salâm's great successor, his son the imâm Nûr al-Dîn Muhammad II, is not a martyr). Marco Polo writes of another leader of the Nizârîs: "In a beautiful valley enclosed between two lofty mountains, he had formed a luxurious garden.... at certain times he caused opium to be administered to ten or a dozen of the youths; and when half dead with sleep he had them conveyed to the several apartments of the palaces in the garden. Upon awakening from the state of lethargy... each perceived himself surrounded by lovely damsels, singing, playing, and attracting his regards by the most fascinating caresses, serving him also with delicate viands and exquisite wines; until intoxicated with excess of enjoyment amidst actual rivulets of milk and wine, he believed himself assuredly in Paradise... When four or five days had thus been passed, they were thrown once more into a state of somnolency, and carried out of the garden. Upon their being introduced to his presence, and questioned by him as to where they had been, their answer was, 'In Paradise...'... The chief thereupon addressing them, said: 'We have the assurances of our prophet that he who defends his lord shall inherit Paradise, and if you show yourselves devoted to the obedience of my orders, that happy lot awaits you.' The consequence of this system was, that when any of the neighbouring princes, or others, gave umbrage to this chief, they were put to death by these his disciplined assassins..."¹² Notwithstanding the inclusion in this bigoted account of many of the falsifications and misunderstandings found in numerous Christian medieval legends concerning the Nizârî Ismâ'îlîs,¹³ it is valuable because it symptomatically implies correctly that the (Nizârî) *shahîd* is a visionary. In principle, it is not only the Nizârîs who died physically in assassination attempts against their enemies during the period of the Great Resurrection who are martyrs; any Nizârî who died physically in 'Alamût or any of the other Nizârî strongholds that proclaimed the Great Resurrection is a *shahîd*. When I used the expression "martyring operations" in my essay "I Am the Martyr Sanâ' Yûsif Muhaydlî" on the uncanny prerecorded introductory statement with which many of the Lebanese resistance fighters used to announce their bombing operations in south Lebanon against the Israeli army and/or the now-defunct South Lebanon Army (SLA), I was merely translating literally the Arabic expression "*'amaliyyât istishhâdiyya*," rather than indicating my own view of such operations; since to die before witnessing with a piercing sight is to commit suicide, I consider that the majority if not all of the aforementioned operations are actually suicidal operations (from another perspective, they can [also] be considered ransoming operations [*'amaliyyât fidâ'iyya*]). Following the death of four Israelis in the suicide bombing carried out by Rîm al-Riâshî, the mother of a three-year-old son and a one-year-old daughter, at the Erez border crossing between the Gaza Strip and Israel, Ze'ev Boim, Israel's deputy defence minister, told Israeli army radio on 16 January 2004: "Sheikh [Ahmad] Yassin [founder and ideological leader of the Palestinian Islamic movement Hamâs] is marked for death, and he should hide himself deep underground where he won't know the difference between day and night" (*The Independent*, 17 January 2004). In response, shaykh Ahmad Yâsîn declared: "Death threats do not frighten us, we are in search of martyrdom." (Ibid.) The quadriplegic man was assassinated on 22 March by missiles, fired from Israeli helicopter gunships, on leaving from dawn prayers in Gaza City. His obituary in *Al-Ahram Weekly*'s 25 - 31 March 2004 issue was titled: "The Martyr Sheikh." Palestinian President Yâsir 'Arafât's response to threats by Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon was: 'All of us are martyrs-in-the-waiting'" (*Guardian*, 25 April 2004). At a rally "in defense of the religious holy Shi'ite sites in Karbalâ' and Najaf against the US-led occupying forces in Iraq" that was attended by over a hundred thousand

¹¹ From Ibn Bâkûyâ's *Hallâj's Life as Recounted by His Son Hamd* (the only memorial excluded from the transmission ban decreed in 922 and enforced till the end of the 'Abbasid Caliphate), quoted in Louis Massignon, *The Passion of al-Hallâj: Mystic and Martyr of Islam*, trans. Herbert Mason, vol. 1 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), pp. 16-18. The act of giving witness can be so unbearable to watch or even to hear or read about that it breaks the receiver's sensory-motor link, turning him or her into a witness, a martyr. Did this happen to one or more of those who witnessed Hallâj's ordeal on the gibbet or even heard about it? Yes, it happened at least to his disciple Shakir, who returned from Khurasân to Baghdâd, where his master was excommunicated and executed, only to be himself executed there.

¹² *The Travels of Marco Polo*, introduction by John Masefield (London: J.M. Dent & sons; New York: E.P. Dutton & co., 1954), pp. 74-76.

¹³ See Farhad Daftary, *The Assassin Legends: Myths of the Isma'ilis*. London; New York: I.B. Tauris, 2001.

people covered in white shrouds in Beirut's predominantly Shi'ite southern suburb on 21 May 2004, Hasan Nasr Allâh, the secretary general of the Party of God (Hizb Allâh), said: "This time we march symbolically in shrouds, the next time, when our oppressed brethren call upon us for help, we shall dress in shrouds and arms" (*The Daily Star*, 22 May 2004). On Friday 7 May 2004, the 31-year-old Shi'ite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, the most ignorant, inarticulate and inelegant of post-Saddâm Husayn Iraq's Shi'ite leaders, who led a counterproductive insurgency against the occupying Coalition Forces in Iraq in 2004,¹⁴ gave his sermon at the main mosque in Kûfa with his shoulders draped with a white coffin shroud symbolizing his readiness for martyrdom, and said a short while later: "I wish to be a martyr, and I don't fear death."¹⁵ Can one legitimately say: unable to give anything else, I can still (at most) give my life? No, since one cannot give life unless He is the one who created it in the first place (Allâh/God the Father) or he is life (Jesus Christ, the Son of God: "I am the resurrection and the life" [John 11:25]). In a lesser sense, since at a lower level, only the one who has achieved piercing sight by dying before dying physically can give his life in a battle (consequently neither Rîm al-Riâshî nor shaykh Ahmad Yâsin gave their lives for Palestine),¹⁶ since to him, a *shahîd* prior to his physical demise, apply the words of

¹⁴ Muqtada al-Sadr has had the degrading hubris of calling the slovenly, badly trained militia he assembled "The Army of the Mahdî." It is to the dishonor of contemporary Usûlî Twelver Shi'ites that such a demeaning misnaming was not condemned outright. Establishing the army of the Mahdî during the latter's occultation, when in principle it should be contemporaneous with his appearance, is a way of *forcing the* [messianic] *end*, and that has, as in Judaism, to be censored. Unlike Nizârî Ismâ'îlism of the era of the Great Resurrection (*al-qiyâma al-kubra*), which performed the immediate worldly enactment of the Resurrection, and which exemplifies within the context of Islam the second of Messianism's two paradigmatic tendencies, Twelver Shi'ism's main task in the worldly absence of the Mahdî is to take to the limit the experience of and thinking about waiting and the promise (why was it not a Twelver Shi'ite or a Jew who came up with *Waiting for Godot*?). Therefore, anything that tends to weaken waiting and the promise, such as *wilâyat al faqîh* (governance by the jurist), implemented by Khumaynî in Iran, undermines one of the main reasons of the continued existence of this sect. Past the Lesser Occultation, during which the twelfth imâm still conveyed his instructions to his followers through his four consecutive special representatives, in principle the following prerogatives of the twelfth imâm have been, since his Greater Occultation, in abeyance until his return: proclaiming and leading the Holy War (*jihâd*)—thus shaykh Ja'far Kâshifûl-Ghitâ's *fatwâ* (legal decision) of Holy War against the Russians during the first Russo-Iranian war (1804-1813) is illegitimate; leading the congregational Friday prayer; administering the Qur'ânic legal punishments (*hudûd*); and receiving the religious taxes of *zakât* and *khums* ("One Fifth," a twenty per cent tax on a Shi'ite's excess annual profits)—at least the half of the *khums* due to him—as well as the land tax (*kharâj*). I disagree with the delegation of these functions to the 'ulamâ as the self-appointed "general representative" (*nâ'ib 'âmm*) of the imâm, considering it a usurpation of his prerogatives. Even more than the ignorance and bad training of Muqtada al-Sadr's armed followers, what made Muqtada al-Sadr's misnaming his militia "The Army of the Mahdî" the epitome of the derisory is how frequently he and his spokesmen reneged on their agreements with others, repeatedly breaking their promises, including concerning evacuating the shrine of imâm 'Alî in Najaf, which his militia had desecrated by making it a military base. Here's a nightmarishly derisory messianic scenario that befits Muqtada al-Sadr and his rabble: a Mahdî who keeps his word, reappearing on the Earth notwithstanding the passage of over a millennium since his Greater Occultation, only then to break a new promise over an insignificant matter! This would add another paradoxical and stupefying kind of messiah to the three ones I listed in my book *Undying Love, or Love Dies* (Post-Apollo Press, 2002): a crucified messiah (Jesus Christ); an apostate one (Sabbatai Zevi, *alias* Mehemed Kapici Bashi); and an Antichrist, a messiah in hell ("Jesus said, 'Whoever is near me is near the fire, and whoever is far from me is far from the kingdom'" [*The Gospel of Thomas* #82]) "to show that hell, which is not a locus of suffering for debased humans but the unbearable suffering of being banished away from God, can be endured (at the highest spiritual level), and thus spare Iblîs succumbing to the temptation of trying to forget, and consequently do away with the need for the continuing existence of the debased states as a manner of forgetting the disaster of being banished away from the Beloved, God."

¹⁵ See Nir Rosen, "Shiite Contender Eyes Iraq's Big Prize," *Time*, 3 May 2003; and Rory McCarthy, "Shia gunmen clash with US troops," *The Guardian*, 8 May 2004.

¹⁶ On returning from one of his military expeditions, the messenger of God Muhammad said to his companions: "We have returned from *al-jihâd al-asghar* (the Lesser Holy War) to *al-jihâd al-akbar* (the Greater Holy War)." Some companions asked: "What is the Greater Holy War, O Messenger of God?" He replied: "The Holy War against the *nafs* ('those attributes of the servant that are infirm' [Ibn al-'Arabî, *Istilâhât al-sûfiyya*])." Have not many Sûfis waged such a Holy War (against the thoughts from the devil and from the self)? And have not many of them died (before dying physically) in the way of God while engaged in this Holy War, enduring *fanâ* (obliteration in God)? And is it not the case that with many of them, one should not call them dead, but alive, since they have acceded to *baqâ* (subsistence in God)? Since only a prophet or a messenger of God, who is in charge mainly and exoterically of the exoteric (esoterically, each messenger [*rasûl*] of God, who receives through an Angel a new law [*sharî'a*], which he proclaims, inaugurating a new religious period, is also an imâm), can legitimately lead into the Lesser Holy War some of his followers who had not already fully engaged in the Greater Holy War, thus who have not already achieved the removal of the cover and therefore who are not yet truly alive, were a Twelver Shi'ite imâm or a Sûfî shaykh, who are in charge of *ta'wîl*, i.e. of carrying the exoteric sense of the religious law back to its esoteric sense, thus of removing the cover, to do so, they are bound to be viewed by some of their followers as prophets or messengers of God. This happened in the case of 'Alî b. Abî Tâlib, the fourth caliph and the first Shi'ite imâm, who was viewed by some Shi'ite so-called extremist sects (*ghulât*) as a prophet. Were the nine Twelver Shi'ite imâms who came after slaughtered imâm Husayn "quietists," or were it rather the case that, being in charge of the esoteric sense, they knew that their followers must engage in the Lesser Holy War only after engaging successfully in the Greater Holy War, i.e. only after they have achieved the removal of the cover and became truly alive? While a number of Twelver Shi'ite traditions and reports indicate, when read exoterically, that the long-dead previous imâms, who according to Twelver Shi'ites were all treacherously killed (by poisoning...), will return along with their long-dead

Qur'ân 3:169: "Call not those who are slain in the way of Allah 'dead.' Nay, they are living..." As long as one has not achieved piercing sight, i.e. as long as one belongs to those who "though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand" (Matthew 13:13),¹⁷ i.e. as long as one is not truly alive, and therefore cannot give one's "life,"¹⁸ one

supporters during the reappearance of the Mahdî to take revenge on their enemies, who will also be resurrected for that reason; I believe that, read esoterically, these traditions about such a return (*raj'a*) intimate that these imâms and their supporters had seen with a piercing sight and are therefore still alive and will be still alive when the Mahdî reappears. They, along with all those who are truly alive, paradigmatically "the resurrection and the life," Jesus Christ, will be part of the Army of the Mahdî. I wager that al-Hallâj will be one of them, while his contemporary Twelver Shi'ite accusers will not. The Mahdî's army will consist of martyrs. Of all of Muqtada al-Sadr's followers who died during the pointless insurrections he led, *none* will return and be a member of the Army of the Mahdî during the latter's reappearance.

¹⁷ Cf. Jeremiah 5:21 and Ezekiel 12:2.

¹⁸ The latter can only be bought and sold by others, as in the case of the ancient tribal custom of the payment of blood money to settle disputes and end feuds (this custom is still practiced in rural areas in Egypt and it is, unfortunately, regaining currency in presently regressed Iraq); or else stolen, at both its beginning and its end: Artaud, "Now, the hideous history of the Demiurge / is well known. / It is the history of the body / ... which, in order to go first and be born, / projected itself across my body / and / was born / through the disemboweling of my body / of which he kept a piece / in order to / pass himself off / as me...." and "besides, one does not commit suicide by oneself. / No one has ever been born by oneself. / No one dies by oneself either. / ... And I believe that there is always someone else, at the extreme moment of death, to strip us of our own life" (*Van Gogh, the Man Suicided by Society*, 1947). Was the death of Jesus Christ, who twice predicted it, the second time on his way to Jerusalem, saying to his twelve disciples, "the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will turn him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified" (Matthew 20:17-19); and that of al-Hallâj, who told the people gathered at the Mansûr Mosque, "'Know that God most high has made my blood licit for you, so kill me.... Kill me, you will be rewarded, and I will find rest,'" then said to the reporter of this tradition: "There is no duty in the world more important for Muslims than killing me," and then recited, "Between me and You [God] there's an 'I am' that's crowding me. Ah! Remove with Your 'I am' my 'I am' from between us," purloined from them? Were both actually crucified? Or was it the case that, for the protracted duration of the Passion, it was another who was substituted for each of the two? When "the Mu'tazilite Abû'l-Hâshim Balkhî came to insult him [Husayn ibn Mansûr al-Hallâj on the gibbet]: 'Praise be to God, Who has put you on view there, an example to men and to angels, as a warning for spectators' ... he felt Husayn himself behind him, his hand was resting on his shoulder blade and he was reciting the verse (Qur'ân 4:156): 'no they (the Jews: here the Muslims) did not kill him (Christ: here Hallâj) and they did not crucify him; rather they were deluded (*shubbiha lahum*: by a *sosia*)?'" (Louis Massignon, *The Passion of al-Hallâj: Mystic and Martyr of Islam*, vol. 1, p. 595. How fitting that on Hallâj's way from prison to the esplanade where he was to be executed, "the crowd formed into a mob; the commissioner, afraid of being killed [or: lest someone kill Hallâj], said: 'this is not he, Hallâj; Hallâj is still in the *Dâr al-Wazîr* [the vizir's mansion]'" [from the Official Testimony of the Clerk of Court, Zanjî, quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 569]). If someone else was substituted for Jesus Christ during the Passion, this would be either because God responded affirmatively to His Son's imploration: "Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done" (Luke 22:42); or else because someone managed to rob Jesus of his crucifixion and die in place of the one who had come to die in place of humans. Had not Jesus Christ himself intimated an uncanny structural correspondence between the thief and the Son of Man when he said: "If the owner of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have let his house be broken into. You also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him" (Luke 12:39-40)?! If there was a substitution, it must have taken place by the time the accused who was brought before the Sanhedrin said: "But *from now on*, the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the mighty God" (Luke 22:69, my italics). Was this partly why the Apostle Peter denied thrice that he knows him? And if Peter sensed that the accused was not the Christ, it must be through the same kind of revelation that had allowed him earlier to answer Jesus' question to his disciples, "Who do you say I am?" with: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God"—Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven" (Matthew 16:15-17). But how would the other onlookers have been able to discern whether they were in the presence of the Son of Man or an imposter if "no one knows who the Son is except the Father" (Luke 10:22)? If he did not respond to the passers by who hurled insults at him, shaking their heads and saying, "You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! Come down from the cross, if you are the Son of God!" (Matthew 27:39-40), it was possibly not because his crucifixion was part of the divine plan, but because the one who was crucified with the written notice "This is Jesus, The King of the Jews" above his head was not the Son of God, but either a substitute or an imposter. In which case it is fitting that two robbers were crucified alongside him. In case he was a substitute, these words said on the cross take on quite a different meaning: "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34; some early manuscripts do not have this sentence). In case the one who was crucified was an imposter, it is possible that this imposter was none other than the antichrist—the one who, among other things, *steals the name* "Christ" (there is always an imposter to try to usurp witnessing and martyrdom, an anti-witness, an anti-martyr: in the case of al-Hallâj, the eighty-four cosigners of the *mahdar* of condemnation, called the "upright witnesses" (*shuhûd 'udûl*), who were present at the execution in order to hear and repeat the judge's standard "his blood on my neck," thus jointly taking responsibility for the carrying out of the sentence). At the onset of his psychosis, of his dying before his physical death, Nietzsche, the author of *The Antichrist* (September 1888), signed with *The Crucified* his missives to August Strindberg (early January 1889), Meta von Salis (3 January 1889), Georg Brandes (4 January), Heinrich Koselitz (5 January), Malwida von Meysenbug (around 4 January), "the illustrious Polonese" (around 4 January), Cardinal Mariani (around 4 January), and Umberto I, King of Italy (around 4 January). There would be no contradiction between the title of his book and his signature if the one who was crucified was not the Christ but possibly the antichrist. And if the one who was crucified was a substitute, might this substitute not have been, across chronological time, a certain Friedrich Nietzsche?

has to flee “life”-threatening situations, more precisely embark on a (Deleuze and Guattari) *line of flight*,¹⁹ as some of prophet Muhammad’s persecuted followers did by emigrating from Mecca to Abyssinia. Did Moses lead the Hebrews into an armed rebellion against the Pharaoh? This would have been premature, suicidal. He rather led them into one of the great lines of flight, out of Egypt across Sinai. Some of the Jews who embarked on this line of flight became martyrs: “And when ye said: O Moses! We will not believe in thee till we see Allah plainly; and even while ye gazed the lightning seized you. Then We revived you after your extinction, that ye might give thanks” (Qur’ân 2:55-56). With the exception of Moses and Aaron, were the contemporaries of these Jews aware that the latter were alive (“Call not those who are slain in the way of Allah ‘dead.’ Nay, they are living, only ye perceive not” [Qur’ân 3:169])? I very much doubt it. The 1980s Belfast graffito **IS THERE LIFE BEFORE DEATH?** is one of the major questions that the “contemporary” Middle East, a region both seemingly largely convinced that there is life after death and wallowing in nihilism, should confront. Could Rîm al-Riâshî, shaykh Ahmad Yâsîn, or former Lebanese prime minister Rafiq al-Harîrî have answered this question with a definitive “Yes!”? No, only *shuhadâ* /martyrs can do so (being—like the vast majority of humans, who deferred dying until their physical demise and thus are appropriately called the late—merely posthumous martyrs, Rîm al-Riâshî, shaykh Ahmad Yâsîn, and assassinated former Lebanese prime minister Rafiq al-Harîrî can only answer the question “Is there life after death?”). It is symptomatic of how intensely alive is the real witness, the one who has piercing sight, that there are bound to be some discerning people who, at least transiently, do not believe in his or her physical death. When the Messenger of God died physically, ‘Umar b. al-Khattâb, the future second caliph, stood up saying, “Some of the hypocrites allege that the Messenger of God is dead. By God, he is not dead, but has gone to his Lord as Moses b. ‘Imrân went and remained hidden from his people for forty days. Moses returned after it was said that he had died. By God, the Messenger of God will [also] return...”²⁰ Notwithstanding the assassination of ‘Alî b. Abî Tâlib, Abdu’llâh ibn Sabâ al-Himyarî and his followers, the Sabâi’iyya, denied that ‘Alî had died, affirming that he would return to fill the Earth with justice.²¹ Jesus Christ, the son of Mary but not of God, this great visionary who opened the eyes of a number of blind people (“I heal him who was born blind... by Allah’s leave” [Qur’ân 3:49]),²² and who is one of the greatest martyrs of Islam (“Allah took him up unto Himself... and on the Day of Resurrection he will be a witness against them [because of their saying: We slew the Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, Allah’s messenger]” [Qur’ân 4:157-159]), did not die on the cross according to Moslems (“They slew him [the Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, Allah’s messenger] not nor crucified him, but it appeared so unto them...” [Qur’ân 4:157]).²³ Many of Hallâj’s supporters and disciples denied that he had died, and “began to make preparations for his return after forty days.... And one of Hallâj’s disciples maintained that the one who had been executed was an enemy of Hallâj, changed to look like him (Ibn Sinân: just as in the case of Jesus, son of Mary). Some of them claimed that they had seen him the very next day... mounted on a donkey...”²⁴ So, a year after Hallâj’s execution, his head was dispatched by the authorities in Baghdad to Khurasan and carried around from district to district to convince his supporters there of his execution.²⁵

¹⁹ One of the greatest *lines of flight* is *al-hijra*, the migration of the prophet Muhammad and his followers from Mecca, his native town, to Yathrib (subsequently renamed *madînat al-nabî* [the city of the Prophet], for short: *Madîna*) in 622, thenceforth year 1 of the Muslim calendar.

²⁰ Tabarî, *The History of al-Tabarî*, vol. IX, *The Last Years of the Prophet*, p. 185. Is ‘Umar b. al-Khattâb right or wrong in proclaiming this? If the prophet Muhammad is infallible (*ma’sûm*), then he cannot die since to die is to be guilty, thus fallible, if not for any specific act then for feeling guilty as such.

²¹ See *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, new ed., volume II, entry *ghulât* (Leiden: Brill, 1965), p. 1094; and Muhammad Ben ‘abd Al-Karîm Al-Shahrastânî, *Kitâb al-milal: les dissidences de l’islam*, presentation and traduction par Jean-Claude Vadet (Paris: Librairie Orientaliste Paul Geuthner, 1984), p. 292.

²² Who but a great visionary who has healed many a blind man would behave in the following manner: “Jesus saw a person committing theft. Jesus asked, ‘Did you commit theft?’ The man answered, ‘Never! I swear by Him than whom there is none worthier of worship.’ Jesus said, ‘I believe God and falsify my eye.’” (Hammâm ibn Munabbih, *Sahîfat Hammâm ibn Munabbih*, no. 41, quoted in *The Muslim Jesus: Sayings and Stories in Islamic Literature*, ed. and trans. Tarif Khalidî [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001], p. 51; Cf. *Sahîh al-Bukhârî*, 2nd ed., no. 3444 [Beirut, Lebanon: Dâr al-Kutub al-‘ilmiyya, 2002])? Cf. Ludwig Wittgenstein: “If a blind man were to ask me ‘Have you got two hands?’ I should not make sure by looking. If I were to have any doubt of it, then I don’t know why I should trust my eyes. For why shouldn’t I test my eyes by looking to find out whether I see my two hands? What is to be tested by what? (Who decides what stands fast?)” (*On Certainty*, ed. G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright; trans. Denis Paul and G. E. M. Anscombe [Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1979], #125).

²³ It is amazing that there was no outcry from those Muslims who sued Youssef Chahine over his weak kitschy film *The Emigrant*, 1994, whose protagonist is modeled on the prophet Joseph, concerning Mel Gibson’s excruciating film *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) about one of the main prophets of Islam.

²⁴ From the Official Testimony of the Clerk of Court, Zanjî, quoted in Louis Massignon, *The Passion of al-Hallâj: Mystic and Martyr of Islam*, vol. 1, p. 571.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 624.

The Writing Is on the Wall²⁶

Given the many unjust and humiliating conditions that are the daily experience of Palestinians in the Occupied Territories, what is the moment that suddenly felt unbearable for one or more Palestinians, that stopped the interior monologue, that broke the sensory-motor link?²⁷ From June 2002, he, a Palestinian living in the West Bank, followed with apprehension the news about the construction by the Israeli government of Ariel Sharon of a “Security Fence” ostensibly to block terrorist attacks. He saw the “Security Fence” progress day after day, discovering that it was actually an 8-meter-tall wall with razor-fringed fencing, watchtowers every few hundred meters, and buffer zones on either side, and that it encroached on substantial areas of the West Bank. Remembering Nietzsche’s characterization of Jesus of Nazareth as “the peaceful preacher of the mount, the sea-shore and the fields, who appears like a new Buddha on a soil very unlike India’s...” (*The Antichrist*), he wondered whether one could be a Taoist on a soil very unlike China’s, namely the West Bank;²⁸ and whether, as in Taoism, where “the movements of the painter’s brush must be interrupted [without interruption of the breath that is animating them]” (Li Jih-Hua),²⁹ a Palestinian could maintain the *chi* (vital breath/original energy) without a break despite some 700 checkpoints operational in the West Bank and Gaza in December 2003, which often closed for good for weeks, and which even when open often took hours to cross—and now despite the Wall of Separation. For a period of several weeks, he was obsessed by Borges’ “The Wall and the Books”: “I read, a few days ago, that the man who ordered the building of the almost infinite Chinese Wall was that first Emperor, Shih Huang Ti, who also decreed the burning of all the books that had been written before his time.³⁰ That these two vast undertakings—the five or six hundred leagues of stone against the barbarians, and the rigorous abolition of history, that is, of the past—were the work of the same person and were, in a sense, his attributes, inexplicably satisfied and, at the same time, disturbed me.... Herbert Allen Giles recounts that anyone who concealed books was... condemned to work on the endless wall until the day of his death.”³¹ He thought that one could paraphrase Borges’ words thus within the context of Israeli politics: the man who ordered the building of the Wall of Separation was that Israeli prime minister, Ariel Sharon, who also decreed the burning of all the books relating to the Palestinians: during the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, when Sharon was Israel’s defense minister, the Israeli army seized and possibly destroyed the archives of the Palestine Research Center in Beirut, and during the Israeli reoccupation of the Gaza strip beginning in late March 2002, Israeli military forces destroyed or seized the computers, books, audio recordings, videos, institutional archives and records housed in many Palestinian cultural resources. That these two vast undertakings—the 788 kilometers of stone against “the barbarians,” and the rigorous abolition of history, that is, of the past of the Palestinian people—were the work of the same person and were, in a sense, his attributes inexplicably satisfied and, at the same time, disturbed him. He thought that sooner or later the destruction of books in an Israel that was turning increasingly right-wing, militaristic, and chauvinistic, and whose initial racism was becoming even more exacerbated, would apply not only to those that refer to and/or document the Palestinian past but also to those, archaeological or otherwise, that contradict the Bible, and then to all books other than the Bible, its orthodox interpretation(“s”) and the scientific and technological publications presenting the latest advances in certain cutting edge fields where Israeli scientists are making a significant contribution, for example nanotechnology.³² At that point any Israeli who concealed books other than the aforementioned allowed ones would be condemned to work, until the day of his or her death, on the Wall of Separation, which would be constantly in need of repair since

²⁶ This is the title I chose for the publication of the essay’s second segment in *Naked Punch* 8 (London, England), October 2006, pp. 73-77.

²⁷ On the break of the sensory-motor link, see Chapter 1 of Gilles Deleuze’s *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).

²⁸ The one really beautiful shot in Mel Gibson’s excruciating *The Passion of the Christ*, 2004, occurs in the film’s last scene: suddenly, the crucified Christ is filmed from a heavenly perspective, with the sort of detachment, colors, rocks, haze, and, most importantly, (“third fullness, two-thirds”) emptiness that one encounters most characteristically in traditional Chinese painting, so that we move from a Semitic to a Chinese atmosphere and culture. It would seem that high up, there is no God but a sort of Taoist Way of Heaven.

²⁹ François Cheng, *Empty and Full: The Language of Chinese Painting*, trans. Michael H. Kohn (Boston: Shambhala, 1994), pp. 76-77.

³⁰ Actually in 213 BC, in the China of Shih Huang-ti, “all books not dealing with agriculture, medicine, or prognostication were burned, except historical records of Ch’in and books in the imperial library” (*Encyclopedia Britannica*).

³¹ Jorge Luis Borges, *The Total Library: Non-Fiction 1922-1986*, ed. Eliot Weinberger; trans. Esther Allen, Suzanne Jill Levine and Eliot Weinberger (London; New York: Penguin, 2001), pp. 344-345.

³² “A functional electronic nano-device has been manufactured using biological self-assembly for the first time.... A team of Israeli scientists [at the Technion-Israel Institute of Technology] harnessed the construction capabilities of DNA and the electronic properties of carbon nanotubes to create the self-assembling nano-transistor.” *New Scientist*, 20 November 2003.

repeatedly sabotaged at various points by its victims, the Palestinians. Elsewhere in the same text, Borges writes: “Perhaps Shih Huang Ti condemned those who adored the past to a work as vast as the past, as stupid and as useless.”³³ Similarly, perhaps Ariel Sharon is unwittingly condemning those in Israel who adore the past, namely the settlers in the Occupied Territories, who base their territorial claims on the Bible, to “a work as vast as the past, as stupid and as useless.” He wondered whether, as with the Great Wall of China (aka 10,000 Li Long Wall), which was added to the UNESCO World Heritage List in 1987, the Security Wall (aka the Security Fence) will, if completed, be added one day to the same list. It may in the short term become a wailing wall for the Palestinians, but it is likely in the long term to become another Wailing Wall for the Israeli Jews, coming to rival and possibly to supplant the 50 meters long Wailing Wall in the Old City of Jerusalem (aka the Western Wall), the only remains of the Second Temple destroyed in 70, and which dates back to about the 2nd century BC (its upper sections were added later). On 23 February 2004, as the International Court of Justice in The Hague began hearings on the legality of Israel’s Wall of Separation, he along with thousands of other Palestinians as well as international peace activists marched in protest against this Wall of Separation in various towns and villages in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.³⁴ In rare cases, one’s disconnecting of the Wall of Separation from the mendacious justifications for its construction leads to the disconnection of the sensory functions from the motor ones in a breakdown of the sensory-motor link; more frequently, it is the breakdown of the sensory-motor link that leads to a concomitant disconnection of the Wall of Separation from not only the mendacious and mystifying justifications for its construction, but also from all the real reasons for its presence (encroaching on Palestinian territories; contributing toward rendering a viable Palestinian state on the Occupied Territories impossible; minimizing terrorist attacks against Israeli civilians; gaining political votes, since, according to many polls, over 70% of Israelis are in favor of the Wall of Separation, etc.). The Wall of Separation was so unbearable to him that it broke his sensory-motor link,³⁵ i.e. disconnected the sensory functions from the motor ones, and suspended his interior monologue, with voices and hallucinations coming to insert themselves in the gap between the sensory functions and the motor ones. Indeed, one not so fine day, while going to visit a friend, something anomalous obstructed his vision. It seemed to have suddenly appeared from one day to the next. He approached it with much trepidation. Was it a wall (for certainly it was not a fence)? Yes! It seemed never to end! Did it reach China and envelop its Great Wall? Did it circle the Earth? Was he losing his mind and hallucinating it? Or was he still sleeping and dreaming it? And if he was dreaming even when he thought he was awake, then how to wake up? He thought that this could be achieved only by death, for didn’t the prophet Muhammad say: “People are asleep, and when they die, they awake”? A few days later,

³³ Jorge Luis Borges, *The Total Library: Non-Fiction 1922-1986*, p. 345.

³⁴ I encourage the readers of this book to sign the online petition “Stop the Wall Immediately” initiated by French philosopher Etienne Balibar: <http://www.petitiononline.com/stw/petition.html>

³⁵ The unbearable can be borne by a Muslim not by committing a veiled suicide, which is prohibited in Islam and which anyway will lead him or her to death where one has piercing sight, but by reaching a stage of *fanâ*’ (obliteration in God), in which it is God who is “his sight through which he sees,” and God, Who created the universe in which such a thing can occur, can certainly bear it.

It is only God (the Father) Who, in his infinite compassion, magnanimity, etc., can withstand to be insulted, tortured and then crucified (in the person of the Son). A (great) human should not be able to withstand that this should happen to God. The ordeal on the cross could have lasted much longer, indeed until the end of the world, had not Jesus of Nazareth succumbed, and he succumbed so quickly not because of the torture he suffered and the flagellation and the crucifixion, but from not being able to tolerate that (the Son of) God, who had incarnated in him, should be treated thus by low-lives (it is reported that on viewing an advanced screening of Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ* [2004], the Pope said: “It is as it was”; I would like to believe that he meant by that not that Gibson’s film shows the events as they happened then, but that the film itself is a reenactment, by a low-life, of the torture and crucifixion of Christ). It is with the resurrection that Jesus partook of God. Had they tried to crucify the resurrected body of Jesus Christ, then he would not have succumbed until the end of the world. So along with being the becoming human of God (Jesus Christ), Christianity could not but be the becoming God of men and women so that they would not perish from considering what happened to God on the cross.

In films dealing with monotheistic religions, the filmmaker has no right, unless he wants to assume the status of God, to film the events from an “objective” point of view, but has to show the events from the subjective points of view of various “historical” witnesses, with the consequence that he will end up showing only certain parts of what happened, a fragmentary rendering. For a filmmaker to narrate his film’s events from a perspective that is both omnipresent (through parallel montage) and omniscient is to implicitly assume the point of view of God. We see this explicitly and naively in Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ* in a symptomatic shot in the scene of the crucifixion: when Jesus gives up his spirit, the scene is suddenly filmed from a heavenly perspective, from God’s view. A filmmaker can legitimately do so only if he has progressed so far on the spiritual path as to have attained the mystical station of obliteration in God (the Sûfis’ *fanâ*’), for then his camera shows events from the perspective of God not because the filmmaker knows what God is seeing but because he is absent and God has become “his hearing through which he hears, his sight through which he sees” (“My servant draws near to Me through nothing I love more than that which I have made obligatory for him. My servant never ceases drawing near to Me through supererogatory works until I love him. Then, when I love him, I am his hearing through which he hears, his sight through which he sees, his hand through which he grasps, and his foot through which he walks” [a *hadîth qudsî*]).

like others before him, he recorded a video testimony³⁶—the task in the prerecorded video testimony of the one soon to embark on a bombing operation is to tell or intimate to his or her addressees what he or she has seen. Later that day, he blew himself up in a crowded bus, killing along with himself a number of Israelis (did the scene of the horrifying carnage in turn produce a breakdown of the sensory-motor link of some Israeli who happened to be passing there?).³⁷ It is both incumbent upon, and relevant for an Arab to condemn in no uncertain terms the indiscriminate killing by Palestinian suicide bombers of Israeli civilians living within Israel's 1967 borders (as well as both the indiscriminate slaughter of civilians and the targeted mass killings of Shi'ites in Iraq by suicide bombers from other Arab countries, many of whom are Wahhâbis)³⁸ as long as these bombings are still *reactions*, whether political or revengeful or mimetic, or all of these conjointly. It is irrelevant to condemn such bombings—but not the unbearable conditions that give rise to them in the case of the Palestinians—when they are no longer reactions but an unpredictable by-product of the breakdown of the sensory-motor link, since while one can prevent a reaction, one cannot prevent an event.

André Bazin writes in “The Ontology of the Photographic Image”: “If the plastic arts were put under psychoanalysis, the practice of embalming the dead might turn out to be a fundamental factor in their creation. The process might reveal that at the origin of painting and sculpture there lies a mummy complex...” Photographs are a way of preservation against death, but what would that way of preservation matter if in order to see them with a piercing sight, one that goes through so many veils, one would have to be already dead (“And the agony of death cometh in truth.... Thou wast in heedlessness of this. Now We have removed from thee thy covering, and piercing is thy sight this day” [Qur’ân 50:19-22])? Is the meeting of object and its (re)viewing with a piercing sight (is there a clear-cut difference between viewing and reviewing in death, where what one encounters has often the feel of something that is familiar while strange, or strange while familiar, *unheimlich*, uncanny?) necessarily missed? Not if we managed to die before dying, i.e. to become martyrs, *shuhadâ’*. Five paragraphs into Rilke’s *The Notebook of Malte Laurids Brigge*, their twenty-eight-year-old eponymous diegetic author, who has just arrived in Paris, notes in his journal’s fourth entry: “I am learning to see.” On reading these words, I suspect that the notebooks will trace the vicissitudes of his martyrdom. A few entries later, he again writes: “Have I said it before? I am learning to see.” My suspicion is heightened by this reiteration, becoming virtually a certainty. And indeed, I suddenly recall the book’s ominous beginning words: “People come here [Paris], then, to live? I should rather have thought that they came here to die.”

Jalal Toufic, *‘Āshūrâ’: This Blood Spilled in My Veins* (Beirut, Lebanon: Forthcoming Books, 2005), pp. 57-70.

³⁶ The statement “I am the *shahîd(a)* [martyr] (name of speaker),” with which, starting with the Lebanese Sanâ’ Yûsif Muhaydlî, a number of guerrilla fighters introduced their prerecorded video testimonies, is paradoxical whether said by a secular person or by a Muslim. For when a secular resistance fighter, for instance a communist, says it, he or she is telling us that he or she is dead! (See my essay “I Am the Martyr Sanâ’ Yûsif Muhaydlî” in the revised and expanded edition of my book (*Vampires: An Uneasy Essay on the Undead in Film* [Sausalito, CA: The Post-Apollo Press, 2003]). And when a Muslim resistance fighter says it, he or she is telling us that past the bombing operation in which he or she died physically he or she is a living witness!

³⁷ If martyrdom, whether secular or Islamic, is related to death, it is because being a witness, the primary sense of both *martyr* and *shahîd*, is related to death: Islamic martyrdom is related to death because it is through death that one has piercing sight; and secular martyrdom is related to death because it is through some sort of breakdown of the sensory-motor link that one has a visionary view of reality, which vision may in unfortunate cases be so unbearable that the one who undergoes it attempts or at least entertains suicide.

³⁸ In the first half of 2005, at least 213 suicide attacks—172 by vehicle and 41 by bombers on foot—took place in Iraq, according to an Associated Press count. It is estimated that less than 10% of the more than 500 suicide attacks that have taken place in Iraq since 2003 have been carried out by Iraqis.

'Âshûrâ': This Blood Spilled in My Veins

Jalal Toufic





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it is not us who
invaded PALESTINE
it is not us who did
the HOLOCAUST
it is not us who killed
the ARMENIANS
it is not us who did
the 11th SEPTEMBER
it is not us who did
the ISLAMIC REVOLUTION
it is not us who
invented NUCLEAR BOMBS
it is not us who
poisoned SNOW WHITE
Can't you leave us
ALONE for a while?

MAZEN 28.06