

Holding Time: On the Aesthetics of Survival

Tarek El-Ariss

In *The Landing* (2019), Akram Zaatari shows the desert encroaching on modern structures – skeletal buildings announcing a reversal in modernity’s quest for the domination of nature. Modernity, which brought about national and building projects, assemblies and city halls, might finally be admitting defeat. Likewise, the modern time, which has come to the Middle East through pocket watches and town clocks, wars and amorous encounters, might have surrendered to the time of sand and dunes, announcing the return of something outside of its linear and teleological narrative.

Today, modernity as a constellation of concepts and narratives – such as the nation, the subject, history, and time – is increasingly challenged. Portals to ancient structures and rituals have opened, revealing old as well as modern ruins (*atīlāl*), as depicted in Zaatari’s film. These portals are also reactivating writing codes and poetry on Twitter in addition to horrific forms of violence through encounters with monsters, both material and virtual. Deep-seated anxieties from pre-Islamic Arabia and elsewhere are re-emerging and encroaching on modern subjects and their dwelling spaces, communal narratives, and social orders. Yet perhaps these anxieties and the shape they take have always been there, never overcome, lurking, just waiting for the passing of modernity’s projects and secretly wishing they would fail.

Stepping outside of linear time, abandoning the commitment to the future, or admitting the failure of modernity as a historical and building project brings to mind the existentialist model about which Sartre and Camus wrote – the fixed span of time from which there is ‘no exit’.¹ In this span, one confronts monsters coming from all sides as in a video game. And in the absence of a clear future, a *telos* or a moment of salvation, all one can do is to hold time not by stopping it, but as one would hold one’s breath, terrified at the catastrophic scene flashing on screens and in nightmares. However, another holding is possible: the holding of a child or a lover, and the telling of stories and making of art in order to delay, to trick fate just a little longer.

Saint Augustine was one of the first to reflect on the question of time by turning to the story of creation. In his *Confessions*, he argues that God, though outside of time and thus eternal, created the world, in the beginning, through an act that inaugurated a temporal dimension.² Augustine calls attention to the collision between that which is outside of time and an event that brings time forwards, generating it. Therefore, time is not something that always existed, but was, in fact, created in the Book of Genesis, which ends with a period of rest on the seventh day. Time is the essential component of creation, and with it is created the human understanding of time.

Within this experience of time, trickling as in an hourglass, comes the creation of the subject. In Sophocles’s *Oedipus the King*, the eponymous lead subject is a tragic figure who faces beasts

and monsters in a race with time to save himself and others. After killing a man on his way to Thebes, Oedipus must solve the riddle of the Sphinx upon his arrival in order to save the city's inhabitants. After defeating the ghoulish antagonist with his wit, he is made king by marrying the recently widowed queen. Unbeknownst to Oedipus, however, is that he is the son of Laius and Jocasta, the King and Queen of Thebes, and that he was destined to kill his father and marry his mother. Thus, his victory against the Sphinx both enabled and delayed that which was predetermined: a plague that would strike Thebes and not spare the city until the truth about Oedipus's birth, patricide, and incest were revealed. Between the defeat of the Sphinx and the advent of the plague, there is a window of time in which Oedipus manages to delay the ultimate verdict. He does not know that he has killed his father and married his mother until the end.³ Oedipus acts as a trickster up to a point, yet he must ultimately accept retribution, which leads to his tragic downfall.

Sophocles's tale was fundamental to Sigmund Freud's Oedipus complex theory⁴; it raises questions about time – how the past affects the present, and whether salvation is possible. Freud thus inaugurates the modern subject haunted by the past, a past that he must confront, just like Oedipus. Psychoanalysis, for Freud, was a form of time travel, which allowed the subject to affect the present or the future by accounting for the past. Freud saw individuals as having a historical narrative with defining events that conditioned their development, very much mirroring that of communities and nations. The past, in order to be accessed, must first be imagined, and then narrated, over and over, in order for its wounds to appear and its trauma to register.

The nation, like the subject, has to imagine its past as it strives for salvation in the future. This salvation, as Benedict Anderson wrote in his 1983 book *Imagined Communities*, is not a transcendental form of salvation, but a political one, made possible through the building of modern institutions. Anderson discusses the rise of different reading practices starting in the eighteenth century with newspapers and print capitalism as well as an increase in writing in vernacular languages.⁵ Through these modern practices, people began to imagine themselves within secular time – no longer members of a dynastic or sacred community, but a national one. These national communities developed particular 'origin' stories, which affected new ideas of the present and developed a sense of a teleological future. Anti-colonial struggles in the Global South have also formed through this lens, relying on the concept that engendering the nation acts as a moment of salvation that breaks the bonds of colonial rule and liberates people through national projects, such as establishing an official language and schools, along with other modern institutions.

Modernity's institutions, temporalities, and imagined communities are increasingly challenged today. Concepts of time that were once necessary for the formation of the modern subject and the modern nation seem to be changing radically in the age of wars and reconstruction projects, especially in the Arab region. For example, when the Lebanese Civil War ended in 1990, the late prime minister Rafiq al-Hariri called on the Lebanese to exit war and to enter into the future.⁶ Unlike the Freudian subject who must deal with past trauma in order to potentially move into the future, this new model of time depends on forgetting the past and suppressing its experiences. Given this model, the new subject and nation no longer have to deal with the past as Freud identified and theorised it. This new model informs many reconstruction projects in the region,

and it serves as a way to exit the constraints of the ‘developmental’ model (psychological, political, social, etc.), either by entering directly into the future or never entering it at all.

The 1990s marked the end of the Lebanese Civil War (1990), the fall of the Berlin Wall (1989) and the collapse of the Soviet Union (1991), and announced the advent of neo-liberalism. These events served a blow to a certain Left, which had – up to this point – centred on national liberation, anti-colonial struggle, and secularism. The decade also brought about satellite television and the internet, which led to new experiences of simultaneity that propelled humanity through space-time at warp speeds. Thus, historical, ideological, and technological developments coincided; this altered the subject’s experience of time and, in particular, of the secular time of the nation. Compounded by seemingly inevitable climate collapse, these radical changes in the constitution of the subject and its environment require that we turn to premodern models of resistance, in which tricking and hacking are necessary in order to defer what seems like an ultimate verdict.

Though Oedipus managed to delay fate up to a certain point, one other trickster succeeded in doing so indefinitely; her name was Scheherazade. In *The 1,001 Arabian Nights*, King Shahryar, allegedly traumatised by the infidelity of his first wife, gets revenge by marrying a different virgin every night and having her executed at dawn.⁷ By choosing to marry the king, Scheherazade, like Oedipus in Thebes, answers the people’s call. In so doing, she saves the virgins of the kingdom from certain death. She does this through trickery and storytelling, confronting the beasts and monsters in fiction as a way of taming the monsters around her, in her bed, awaiting to decapitate her at dawn.

The Arabian Nights divides time into small segments, each marked by a story or a part of a story. Storytelling thus holds time as Scheherazade holds her husband in bed, deferring an inalterable retribution by one night, and then another, and another. Each night offers one increment of time that keeps Scheherazade alive. In the absence of salvation or an absolute victory over fate, *The Arabian Nights* offers a model of deferral and delay akin to what Gilles Deleuze calls ‘the virtual’⁸ or what Henri Bergson refers to as ‘the duration’⁹ – spaces of becoming that break with Hegelian dialectics and the denouement and syntheses that have structured modernity’s march towards the future. Bergson developed the concept of *la durée* (the duration) by looking at movement and physics, and positing that time is not measurable, but rather something that must be imagined. Just as in physics, speed is measured by dividing the space traversed into small segments and then adding them together. The virtual therefore involves a different understanding of time that cannot be fully captured. There is something that remains outside of time and needs to be imagined. Imagining time must acknowledge the uncertainty of the future and the inability to escape the time span that has set in. Modernity’s version of the subject is affected by these different speeds and imagined times, and ultimately requires new conceptualisations.

Abdallah al-Ghadhdhami’s book *Thaqāfat Twitter (Twitter Culture)* serves both as a manual for civility in online communication and as a philosophical reflection on the effects of this communication on the public sphere, the subject, and time. His work reflects a fascination with the virtual and expresses terror in the face of its far-reaching transformations. He describes an experience of radical self-exposure: ‘Twitter is a formidable cultural tool that performs dual yet

complementary functions of unveiled unveiling (*makshūfa al-kāshifa*). It is unveiled because the account holder becomes unveiled (*makshūf*) as if he were bathing in a glass house'.¹⁰ As al-Ghadhdhami expresses his anxiety about cyberspace, he repeats the concept of unveiling (*kāshif*), presenting a naked, vulnerable, and fragile subject, susceptible to fascination and terror, regression and attack.

The fragile subject emerging in cyberspace must confront trolls and ghouls, both virtual and material. This characterisation announces the collapse of a symbolic order and the Freudian subject with interiority, or the sutured subject of modernity and of Arab modernity (*nahda*) in particular. Going even further, al-Ghadhdhami claims that cyberspace is 'the glass house [and] he who enters is not safe'.¹¹ Not only is modernity upended in cyberspace, but concepts of safety and security, or *amān*, in the Islamic context are unsettled. When the Prophet entered Mecca in AD 629 / AH 8, he told the city's inhabitants who had fought him that he would provide them with *amān*, or security, and that he would not seek revenge. This is the Islamic covenant, which marked a shift from the tribal logic of retribution and war to a new model of patience (*hilm*) and security (*amān*). Al-Ghadhdhami's subject constitutes a break not only with modernity but also with this Islamic covenant.

The exposed and fragmented subject emerging in cyberspace is forced to confront trolls and ghouls lurking online and arriving through portals from pre-Islamic Arabia and Norse mythology, devouring travellers and browsers alike. These creatures inhabit virtual and real caves and wildernesses, eroding the security of modernity in both its European and Islamic contexts. This state is characterised by fascination, terror and bewilderment. Facing screens, this new subject accepts devices as bodily ports and portals through which it experiences its own corporeality, the other, the world. To be in this state is to confront a new time of monsters, coming from the tales of the 1,001 nights or attacking online. This is a space and time of marvel (*'ajab*), magic (*sihr*), and death. This terrifying space of vulnerability is also what Bergson and Deleuze read as the virtual, the space of potentiality and duration, where things could be actualised. It's also the space of tending towards madness, where an extra step closer, further into the territory of the ghoul, could mean the difference between life and death.

As sand encroaches on modern structures in Akram Zaatar's *The Landing*, and as the awareness of the current collapse intensifies, the need to make new time and to develop strategies of confrontation becomes more urgent. It is said that the only people who could trick the ghoul were the *ṣa'ālīk*, or brigand poets of pre-Islamic Arabia. Poets such as al-Shanfara and Ta'abat Sharran were also ghoul-like, as they were excluded from the tribe and used to live in the wilderness, relating more to hyenas and vultures than to the horses of Umru' al-Qays. Perhaps because of their marginalisation or queerness, these poets were able to understand the logic of the ghoul – to defeat it, survive, and delay a tragic fate of starvation and death in the wilderness. Other tricksters include Oedipus, who vanquished the Sphinx, and Scheherazade, who tricked King Shahryar and his monsters to keep her alive one more night, and then another, and another. These figures understood the logic of the monster and were able to delay its retribution, holding time, making new time. As poets and storytellers, brigands and heroes, they confronted their tragic fates with art and literature, deploying marvel and bewilderment through personal exploits and aesthetics of survival. It is to them that we must turn as we seek to create new time.

¹ See Albert Camus, *L'Étranger* (Paris: Gallimard, 1942) and Jean-Paul Sartre, *Huis Clos* (Paris: Gallimard, 1947). This idea was referenced in curator Omar Kholeif's opening remarks for March Meeting 2019, organized in conjunction with the Sharjah Biennial 14. See "A Poem, a Context, or a Dream," https://vimeo.com/328382670?fbclid=IwAR0HHqKPAFB6siL2z95Qd0_P87_JmdkwxjdvS7nTz-703nQBI9tQ5QBY2pQ

² Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin (New York: Penguin Classics, 1961).

³ Sophocles, *The Three Theban Plays: Antigone; Oedipus the King; Oedipus at Colonus*, trans. Robert Fagles (New York: Penguin Classics, 1984).

⁴ Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Basic Books, 2000).

⁵ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991).

⁶ Rafiq al-Hariri, *Al-Hukm wal-Mas'ūliyya: al-Khurūj min-al-Ḥarb wal-Dukhūl fil-Mustaqbal (Governance and Responsibility: Exiting the War and Entering the Future)* (Beirut: al-Sharika al-'Arabiyya al-Muttaḥida lil-Ṣaḥāfa, 1999).

⁷ *The Arabian Nights*, trans. Husain Haddawy and Muhsin Mahdi, eds. (New York: Norton 1995), 11.

⁸ Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (London: Duke University Press, 2002).

⁹ Henri Bergson, *Durée et Simultanéité: À Propos de la Théorie d'Einstein* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1922).

¹⁰ Abdallah al-Ghadhdhami, *Thaqāfat Twitter* (Beirut: al-Markaz al-Thaqāfī al-'Arabī, 2016), 48. The author's translation.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 2.