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Tomorrow Girls: Sci-Fi, Other Worlds *and Geo-Politics in Media Art from the Middle East*

In the cyber garden of Babylon, the weather is more than wonderful.
Hassan Blasim[1]

If you can imagine—or imagine—yourself, you can image—or imagine—a being not-yourself; and you can also imagine how such a being may see the world, a world that includes you.
Margaret Atwood[2]

In his foreword to the collection of science-fiction stories on Iraq, *Iraq+100: Stories from a Century After the Invasion*, Iraqi writer Hassan Blasim laments that there is very little science-fiction writing or writing about the future in Arabic.[3] I would add to this that specifically there is very little Arabic science-fiction writing by women. In *Iraq+100* only two out of the ten featured authors are women. If science-fiction in Arab literature seems to remain—for now at least—the domain of men, then women are at the forefront with video and media art. Artists from Palestine such as Larissa Sansour, Mirna Bamieh and Noor Abed imaginatively rethink complex issues pertaining to the Palestinian condition. Whether they address territory, nationalism, the theft of resources, or dispossession within a context of temporal and political stasis, these artists not only reposition Palestine out of its uneasy post-Oslo *status quo*,[4] but also propel it into a speculative future. Cairo-based Maha Maamoun's video *2026* (2010) draws on urban class divisions, the rapid growth of gated communities and increasing polarisation between Cairo's have and have-nots. Similar concerns are raised in Ahmed Khaled Towfik's novel *Utopia* (2007) in which Egyptian society in 2023 has been fully segregated between the wealthy and the poor. Both Maamoun and Towfik's dystopian versions of Egypt veer not far away from reality. As is the case with much science-fiction, tomorrow is already here.

So only in the future will people learn that this civilisation ate from the finest porcelain.

Conversely, in the Gulf, tomorrow was yesterday. There, oil-wealth, a local version of hypermodernity and consumer capitalism on steroids, mix into a toxic futuristic cocktail. Today, Mike Davis' decade-old description of Dubai in which he asks whether you have ended up in "a new Margaret Atwood novel, Philip K. Dick's unpublished sequel to *Blade Runner* or Donald Trump on acid"[5] still resonates. Six years later Qatari and Kuwaiti artists Sophia Al-Maria and Fatima Al-Qadiri would echo much of Davis' observations and coin the term "Gulf Futurism" as a "subversive new aesthetic, which draws on the region's hypermodern infrastructure, globalised cultural kitsch and repressive societal norms to form a critique of a dystopian future-turned-reality."[6] A slick post-internet sensibility informs their work, often intertwining elements of conspicuous consumption with historical critique, as well as a good dose of juvenilia and teenage angst. Similar sensibilities can be found in the most recent work of Fatima Al-Qadiri's younger sister, Kuwaiti artist Monira Al Qadiri.

The above illustrates that the conceptualisation of futurities in the MENA (Middle East North Africa) region are as heterogeneous and diverse as the region itself. In this respect, context is everything. What makes the genre of science-fiction perhaps particularly attractive for artists from a region where the relation to the future is, and has been fraught, is the possibility to conjure an imaginary undone from nationalist and populist ideologies that are defined by nostalgia for a (mythical) past. One glaring example is ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant) and its ambitions to re-establish the Caliphate. Others include Pharaonic or Nasserite Egypt, Palestine before the 1948 *Nakba*, pre-Civil War Lebanon (1975-90), Sumerian and Akkadian Mesopotamia for Iraq. Thinking, let alone dreaming, of tomorrow in places where the pressures of the present weigh heavily, is no small feat. Events have taken a turn for the worse after the 2011 uprisings that started so hopefully and shifted the region's eye to the future instead of the past. With the exception of Tunisia, in much of the Middle East the Arab Spring is a spent force, blunted by the resurgence of the *ancien regime*, as in Egypt, or usurped by religious fundamentalists and bogged down in violence, as in Syria, Yemen and Libya. In the meantime the monarchies of the Gulf, hardly affected at the time, with exception of Bahrain, continue to suppress

anything that smacks of dissent. It is a far cry from the sense of possibility that was felt during the uprisings. As such, it is no coincidence that in the past few years there has been a surge in the use of science-fiction from artists of the region to, on the one hand, put forward viewpoints that demonstrate resistance and resilience towards hegemonic narratives and introduce an array of speculative and technologised fictions and subjectivities, while on the other, to recuperate—however faint—a sense of possibility. This is not to say that we are served up naive utopias. To the contrary, there is no lack of apocalyptic dystopia in these art projects. Their unifying force, I would argue, is a speculative open-endedness and the potential for stories to take a different turn, if not now then maybe in the future.

FROM PALESTINE TO THE MOON AND BACK: TERRITORY AND TIME

One of the most popular tropes in science-fiction is time travel. The ability to travel back and forward in time is simultaneously an extreme encounter with promise and disillusion, as it is with a past or future Other, which might seem familiar but still remains to an extent alien. Since the Oslo Accords Palestine has been stymied by political paralysis, stuck in a temporal limbo of violence, statelessness and suspended self-determination. The deferral of change has become symptomatic to the Palestinian condition. Palestinian sociologist Salim Tamari once quipped that Palestinian society is pickled. While this provides fertile ground for artists to represent stasis, it also engages them to imagine a way out, and rupture what is besides an occupation of Palestinian land, also an occupation of Palestinian time. Indeed, the time squandered in queuing up at checkpoints, waiting for permits, making detours from point A to point B because of closures and roadblocks, anticipating the next incursion or war, followed by the next ceasefire and useless peace process, and on a more fundamental level, awaiting a sovereign Palestinian state, Palestinians are forced in a position in which they have unwillingly become experts at wasting time. What better way then of challenging the tyranny of time than attempting to hack it?

This is exactly what Larissa Sansour does in her most recent video *In the Future they Ate from the Finest Porcelain* (2016), co-directed with Søren Lind. Sansour is no stranger to using science-fiction in her work in order to depict the absurdity of Palestinian life under the Israeli occupation. For example, in her much celebrated 2009 video *A Space Exodus*, a riff on Stanley Kubrick's 1968 cult classic *2001: A Space Odyssey*, the idea of a viable Palestinian state on planet earth is abandoned altogether and a cosmic solution is found by colonising the moon for a Palestinian homeland. Palestinaut Sansour, kitted out in a space suit including space boots with Oriental-style upturned caps, defiantly plants a Palestinian flag on the Moon. This ironic act of reverse colonisation re-appropriates the Zionist dictum that Palestine for the Jews was "A land without a people for a people without a land." Here the unpopulated moon is declared fit for Palestinian settlement. In *Nation Estate* (2012) Palestine and its entire population are concentrated into a prime real estate location, a colossal high-rise that soars into the clouds. From the top floor of this luxurious prison the glistening monumental Dome of the Rock and its golden cupola can be seen in the Old City of Jerusalem. However, the inhabitants of this gated community can only consume Jerusalem by proxy—the real estate development is divorced from Jerusalem by the separation wall. Control towers and a whole array of military surveillance technology are its most immediate neighbours. In both films territory, the key symbolic signifier in the Palestinian pursuit of sovereignty, is dislocated and uprooted to an elsewhere that is disconnected from Jerusalem, the capital of historical Palestine, and transposed to either outer space or a skyscraper on the outskirts of Jerusalem.[7] In other words, the threat of population transfer or forced migration is countered in *Space Exodus* by an extra-terrestrial move, and in *Nation Estate* by one that is extra-territorial. Both 'solutions' are extremely far-fetched and otherworldly, but such is the reality of the Palestinian experience.

In the video *In the Future They Ate from the Finest Porcelain*, time and the control over time —specifically the past affecting the present and the future—rather than land takes centre stage. Like territory, time is a scarce resource and a coveted instrument of power in the dynamics of nation-building that informs all three videos. What sets *In the Future They Ate from the Finest Porcelain* apart from the previous videos is the actualisation of the national dream is deferred until an unspecified time in the future. Moreover, the words "Israel", "Palestine" and "Occupation" are never mentioned, making the work more universally about dispossession and colonisation. We never actually *see* Palestine in the future. We can only try to imagine it, akin to Sansour's unnamed female protagonist, who calls herself a "narrative terrorist". Her weapon of choice is archaeology, a discipline heavily instrumentalised by Israel to 'prove' a historical claim to the land. The protagonist, who we hear in voice-over talking to a female interlocutor (a therapist, a journalist, a jailer?), tampers retro-actively with history by creating hard 'facts on the ground'. From spaceships she and her comrades bomb the post-apocalyptic landscape with beautiful *keffiyeh*-patterned crockery that is to be excavated by archaeologists in the future, like this, a fictitious insert in the past, will become historical fact in the future. An artificially planted piece of evidence becomes scientific truth: in the future they will discover that in the past they indeed ate from the finest porcelain. As such Sansour's leading lady not only establishes the historical presence of her community, but insists it is sophisticated as well. The main takeaway of the video is that timelines, like territories, can be stretched, come undone and be re-occupied. At the same time we are asked to proceed with caution and remember that the outcome of any activist act, even that of a time hacker, is a speculative one. The video's opening and closing lines are the same, suggesting that somehow we too seem locked in a time loop, or a recording that is played over and over again. The latter echoes the repetitive political choreography of the post-Oslo era. Whether Sansour's protagonist succeeds to break out of these temporal confines is unknown.

More unresolvedness and stretching of time are found in Noor Abed's media installation *The Air Was Too Thin to Return the Gaze* (2016). Abed's project deals with the alledged sighting of a UFO on 8 August 2015 over the West Bank village of Bir Nabala, northwest of Jerusalem. Here a science-fiction fantasy is merged with the political reality of the separation wall. An event that occurred in the past is willed to re-occur in the future in order to make sense from it. The wait for the return of a UFO in a village hemmed in by the wall can be read as messianic: perhaps this UFO will break the political stalemate and liberate Palestine, or inaugurate the Palestinian return to their homeland. The truth is that whatever this alien body might bring is unidentified. The UFO could be as much a harbinger of independence as it could be of war, or something entirely different. In a sense the UFO is marked, like so many unrealised hopes and promises in Palestine, by its 'absent presence' and as such underlines its volatile political situation.

In Abed's laboratory-like installation we find a poster inviting the people of Bir Nabala back to the site where the UFO was first allegedly sighted. A series of photographs document this gathering, depicting villagers on rooftops with their gaze firmly pointed towards the sky. The main exhibit is a video in which the artist, like a forensic scientist with only her white-gloved hands visible, pieces together a memory device and other debris found at the site. There is also a light box with an image of a clear blue sky as described to Abed by the main witness of the event. Similar to Sansour's video the act of witnessing takes place in the past and is propelled into the future. In *The Air Was too Thin to Return the Gaze* the anticipation remains unmet. Indeed, the title of the project already hints that the act of seeing and witnessing is not reciprocated. Moreover, the grainy footage the UFO left behind on the memory device is not very different from drone surveillance: the wall, some buildings, perhaps some farmland.
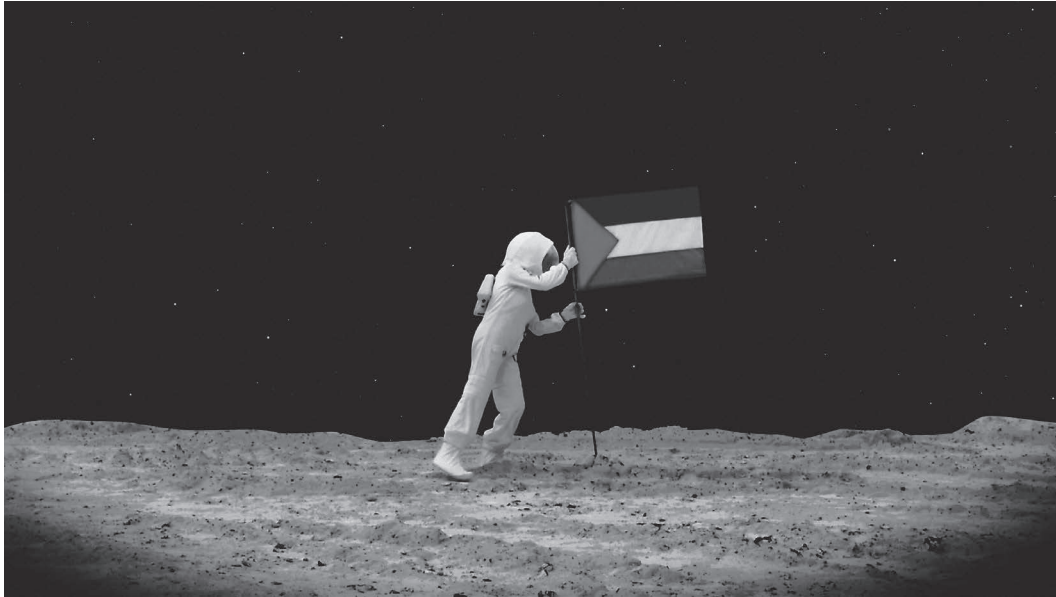
It does not make us see anything new. This might precisely be Abed's point: in times of protracted violence and injustice, we become blind, even if through the eyes of an alien. Noor Abed seems to ask how to represent something when the act of seeing—whether a homeland, peace, or the occupation —has been perpetually postponed.

ALIEN (M)OTHERS

Abed casts her protagonist as an alien, a foreign body. Not only does she by doing this underline the increasing alienation, if not demonisation, between Palestinian and Israeli populations since the building of the wall, but in times of growing populism, conservatism, xenophobia and nationalism, points to polarisation on a global scale. Our *zeitgeist* increasingly resembles a cheap spy novel, ridden by paranoia, fear of foreign agents and conspiracy theories. Or, as a science-fiction story in which the alien is the quintessential Other, the embodiment of what we fear most. Both Palestinian artist Mirna Bamieh and Kuwaiti artist Monira Al Qadiri use the figure of the alien in their video works, albeit very differently. Bamieh's *The Pessoptimist* (2015) takes as its starting point the first chapter of Palestinian author Emile Habibi's well-known satirical novel *The Secret Life of Saeed: The Pessoptimist* (1974). Habibi's novel describes the life and hardships of Saeed, a Palestinian with Israeli citizenship accused of being a collaborator. Saeed is an innocent, an anti-hero who is abducted by aliens and looks down from outer space on his life below. Bamieh, making her film more than four decades after Habibi's novel—two intifadas, a failed Oslo Accord, three Gaza wars, countless Israeli settlements, a separation wall and much blood and violence later—shows that like Habibi's Saeed, her protagonist does not understand the world he is living in. Indeed, Habibi's Saeed living in 1974 and Bamieh's living in 2015 both struggle to adjust to the rapid pace of geo-political change and how to carve out an existential space for themselves. As an anti-hero Saeed is the antithesis to the powerful revolutionary figure of the *fedayeen*,[8] the stone-throwing youth of the intifadas, or even the non-violent resistance of *sumud*[9] (perseverance). It seems that Saaed has lost agency in most aspects of his life, in many ways turning him as a *pars pro toto* for much of the Palestinian population.

However, both Habibi's book and Bamieh's video are in and by themselves instances of agency and resistance. Both works illustrate how under occupation the reality of life is stranger than fiction. An additional layer to Bamieh's narrative is the complex relationship between urban Palestinian real estate development, expanding Israeli settlements, and the segregating function of the wall in the West Bank. The video is peppered with scenes of traffic in, and views looking from Ramallah at the Israeli settlements on the surrounding hilltops. It is a confusing territorial, political and existential landscape. No wonder Saeed is befuddled and at loss. Saeed himself is viewed as an alien in his own society. First he is shunned by his community with no one talking to him for over fifteen years, later he is put on display as an exhibit in the National Museum as (the voice-over imparts), "the only person never to have seen the wall in his life." The video ends with Bamieh herself hugging a deflated plastic toy: the head of a unicorn, very much a metaphor for Saeed. Bamieh somehow redeems Saeed by turning him, albeit symbolically, into that rare mythological animal of fantasy. However, taking a more cynical view, it might also be a comment on the prospect for a Palestinian State.

Monira Al Qadiri's video *The Craft* (2017) is a rapid-paced science-fiction *Bildungsroman* in which the viewer is taken back to the artist's childhood spent respectively in Senegal and Kuwait in the 1980s. Sentiments of nostalgia for Kuwait's golden oil boom era of the 1960s and 1970s, the glamour and conspiratorial wheeling and dealing of international diplomacy, and consumer capitalism are merged with the loss of childhood innocence and geo-political changes in the region. However,

more than anything else, *The Craft* interrogates identity and allegiance in a volatile region in an equally volatile time. The video's opening scene shows the artist's father, at that time the Kuwaiti ambassador in Dakar, exiting the gates of their home and driving to work. Qadiri's voice-over cautions, "everything is not as it seems. You start to question reality, the world as a whole. Are we really where we think we are? Are we there? Are we really us?" A few minutes later we learn that the embassy is not really that but a spacecraft in which malevolent aliens plot to subsume the human race and plunder the planet. It is a typical science-fiction scenario, but Qadiri adds the component of parental betrayal into the mix.

She laments that as children they were often left to their own devices by their busy diplomat parents. This is further supported by the many family photos of the artist and her sister pictured together, but primarily by themselves. Qadiri shares a particularly traumatic episode of maternal abandonment in which her mother goes—supposedly—to an embassy party, but ends up entering a spaceship. The inside of the spaceship is modelled on an American diner. As child's drawings of American junk food—burgers, hot dogs and double-decker sandwiches—begin to fill the screen, we are subtly

reminded that in the 1980s the Cold War still divides the world in East and West. The Gulf, like so many other places in the American sphere of influence, aspires to become more like America, still seen as the ultimate signifier of modernity, more often than not by blatant consumer capitalism: drinking Coca-Cola, eating fast food and wearing jeans.

The First Gulf War in 1990 and the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait bring all dreams of becoming America crashing down. Perhaps this is the Al Qadiri sisters' realisation that they do not live in a make-believe America but in the Arab world with as its neighbours Wahabi Saudi Arabia, Ba'athist Iraq under Saddam Hussein and the Islamic Republic of Iran. This is the moment when the masks come off and identity forcefully manifests itself. Similar to the other video works discussed here, ambiguity and open-endedness inform *The Craft*. Qadiri cleverly combines several conceptual strands, veering from a child's coping mechanism for an absent parent that casts the mother as an alien, to the presence of the Iraqi soldiers in Kuwait as an alien invasion. Whereas Bamieh's protagonist Saeed finds agency, however limited, in his refusal to make sense of a surreal situation, Qadiri attempts to find solace in hers by turning it into an extra-terrestrial scheme. Both works exude an air of defeat, whether it is Saeed, trapped in his and Palestine's existential crisis, or Qadiri who in the closing sequence of the video meets the exhausted and demoralised alien in Beirut, its spaceship camouflaged as a ruin from Lebanon's Civil War. "It's all over now. The plan failed. Go away," the alien replies to her in a feeble voice. But by doing that it opens up an opportunity to image and imagine a new and different future. In times when we might feel bogged down by pessimistic resignation at the state of the world, this is an important promise.

Notes

[1] Hassan Blasim, 'The Gardens of Babylon' in *Iraq +100. Stories from a century after the invasion,* Hassan Blasim (ed.), London: Comma Press, 2016

[2] Margaret Atwood, 'Flying Rabbits' in *In Other Worlds: SF and the Human Imagination*, London: Anchor Books, 2011, p. 21

[3] Hassan Blasim, 'Introduction', *Iraq +100. Stories from a century after the invasion*, op cit., v-x

[4] The Oslo Accords signed in 1993 between the Palestine Liberation Organisation and Israel were a set of agreements aimed at achieving a peace treaty between Israel and the Palestinians, working towards the final aim of achieving a viable two-state solution. It resulted in the Palestinian Authority (PA) and limited self-governance in parts of the West Bank and Gaza

[5] Mike Davis, 'Fear and Money in Dubai', *New Left Review* 41, September-October 2006; https://newleftreview.org/II/41/mike-davis-fear-and-money-in-dubai; last accessed 1 December 2017

[6] 'Fatima Al Qadiri and Sophia Al-Maria on the starkly avant garde culture of the Middle East', *Dazed Magazine*, 14 November 2012; http://www.dazeddigital.com/music/article/15037/1/al-qadiri-al-maria-on-gulf-futurism; last accessed 1 December 2017

[7] At the time of writing USA President Trump declared on 6 December 2017 Jerusalem the capital of Israel and his intent to move the USA Embassy from Tel-Aviv, thereby breaking with international policy since 1948. His move was followed by international outcry and condemnation. See for a good opinion piece Rashid Khalidi, 'Trump's error on Jerusalem is a disaster for the Arab world… and for the US too', *The Guardian*, 6 December 2017; https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/dec/06/trump-jerusalem-disaster-arab-world-israel?CMP=share_btn_tw; last accessed 6 December 2017

[8] Fedayeen, literally meaning "those who sacrifice themselves" was a term used predominantly from 1948-80 for Palestinian guerrilla fighters, in their struggle for national liberation

[9] Cfr. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sumud; last accessed 4 December 2017