



A timeless conversation

Does each frame/image in the film *Sleep*, despite its apparent repetition, embody a renewed fragment of the present, creating a sense of time that is simultaneously continuous and discontinuous?

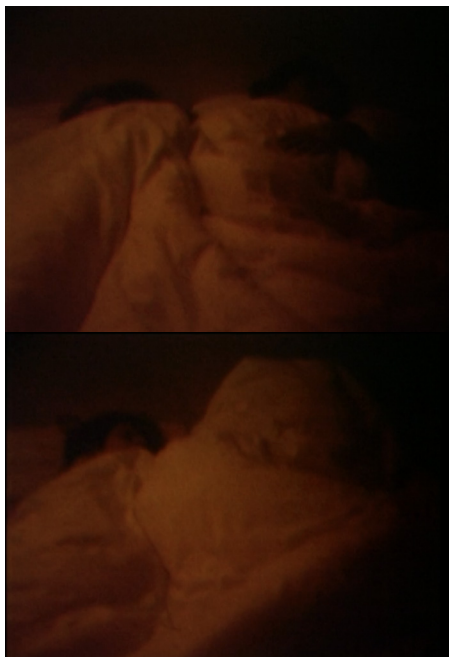
I filmed *Sleep* in 2001 and edited it in 2004. At that time, I hadn't yet come across Jalal Toufic's essay, *Middle Eastern Films Before Thy Gaze Returns to Thee—in Less than 1/24 of a Second*. Upon reading it, I realized a profound connection between my film and Toufic's text, like a timeless conversation.

Lamia Joreige

**An intervention by
Lamia Joreige on the
essay by Jalal Toufic:
*Middle Eastern Films
Before Thy Gaze
Returns to Thee—in
Less than 1/24 of a
Second***

Did the descent of the standard film-camera lenses from Renaissance Western monocular perspective place early Muslim filmmakers at a disadvantage when it came to a genuine formal contribution in the medium of cinema, since these filmmakers came from a tradition that until only a century or so ago (the age of cinema) was, especially in its Arabic regions, still resistant to, rather than ignorant of, Renaissance perspective? Cinema would appear to disadvantage Muslim filmmakers steeped in their religion's tradition if one pays inordinate attention to the kind of space favored by the standard film-camera lenses and disregards cinema's temporal atomicity facet, which makes cinema very close to the predominant Islamic conception of time but about which comparatively little has been written in works on the basic cinematographic apparatus. The notion of *renewed creation* in the kalām (theology) of the Ash'arites and in the Sufism of Ibn al-'Arabī provides a way of considering the world as subject to processes akin to those of cinema. For

Ibn al-'Arabī, the things of the world, unlike God, do not have a necessity of existence, so when God gives actual existence to anything, it reverts instantly to inexistence, disappears.¹²² God "then" gives existence to a similar thing the next moment. This process goes on indefinitely, making of the world an ever-renewed creation [...]



If, with very rare exceptions, people are unaware of the universal and perpetual acts of appearance, disappearance, then appearance, it is both that the appearance, disappearance, then appearance occur "before thy gaze returns to thee" (Qur'ān 27:40) and that the form that appears following the disappearance of an earlier one is very similar to it. Is this not reminiscent of cinema, where within the same shot the next frame replaces the largely similar earlier one

“before thy gaze returns to thee”? With films as well as the world according to Ibn al-‘Arabī and the Ash‘arites, very similar frames/ things replace each other before the eye can detect this. There are several ways to know of renewed creation. Extremely rare people become aware of it directly, through *kashf*, unveiling. A slightly larger number of people become aware of it indirectly, symptomatically, by sensing that the other person is not identical to himself or herself, but merely a similar person—are some of the cases of the Capgras syndrome to be attributed to sensing such renewed- creation substitutions? A still larger number resort to it to resolve certain paradoxes. By means of it the Ash‘arite theologians tried to maintain the absolute omnipotence of God despite the apparent causal linkages in the world. [...]

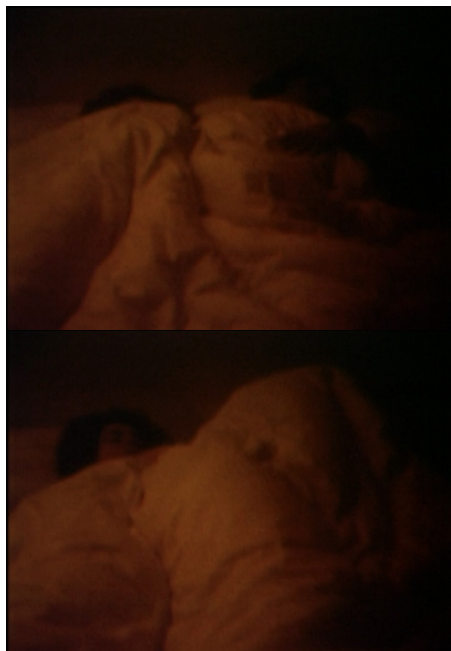


From the perspective of ever-renewed creation, gradual change is as illusory in the world as it is in cinema: there is an impossibility (*istiḥāla*) of change of state (*istiḥāla*). Nobody and nothing changes: everything is recurrently appearing then disappearing then being replaced by a largely similar thing. Peter Kubelka’s *Arnulf Rainer* remains the best example of the conjunction of stasis and quick recurrent appearance then disappearance then appearance of largely similar entities since it exemplifies both modes: in its projection form as a film of six minutes and twenty- four seconds, it instances the flicker of recurrent appearance-disappearance; in its installation form as 35 mm filmstrips mounted on a wall, it instances immutability. [...]



In the world of Ibn al-‘Arabī and the Ash‘arites, the material camera projecting this flickering film would itself be flickering in and out of existence. Does the actual witnessing of the ever-renewed creation, of the ultrafast recurrent appearance then disappearance of one entity and its replacement by a largely similar one, induce a more basic kind of seizure, no longer merely “a transient occurrence of signs and/ or symptoms due to abnormal excessive or synchronous neuronal activity in the brain,”¹²⁴ but an onto- logical seizure, a *fanā’*, an annihilation in God? The very rare people who actually witness recurrent creation doubly undergo *fanā’*, since, in addition to their recurrent disappearance on account of their not having a necessity of existence, witnessing the flicker of the ultrafast recurrent disappearance of entities itself produces a temporary disappearance of the consciousness of the witness. Were one to manage to accompany consciously this return to nothingness that occurs almost always outside awareness, then the chain of karma would be broken. From this perspective, animals are in the worst situation, since, unlike inorganic matter, which following each of its recurrent creations is limited to returning to God/nothingness, they evince some “attention” to the “dura- tional” “action,” albeit in the mode of being “*simply given over*” to it “*without being able to grasp*” it “*as such*,”¹²⁵ but, unlike humans, cannot accompany the return to Being/ nothingness in an aware manner. Out of the clash of any two images, but even more clearly of any one image, does not arise, unlike in

Sergei Eisenstein’s films, any concept, but a *dhikr* (invocation, remembrance) of the one necessary Being (and then a heedful absentmindedness regarding the “God” beyond concepts and memory?); or the notion of the absolute dependence of the myriad entities. The jump cut, “the sound of one hand [or image] clapping,”¹²⁶ is a silent *dhikr*. [...]



What we witness in Paradjanov’s films from *Sayat Nova* onward is this askewness of the gaze in relation to the apparent chronological “action.” The direction of the gaze in Paradjanov’s films from *Sayat Nova* onward is not toward the spectator (whether to trigger or enhance distantiation or in an interactive manner), but, ontologically, toward the nothingness to which the figure instantly reverts. If the characters in Paradjanov’s films face the camera, it is because he,

intuitively, places it in the non-spatial direction in which the return to nothingness/ Being happens. [...]



In Islam, the task of a human is not to be himself or herself (in Islam he or she—who has no necessity of existence—is basically nothing) but to become cognizant that he or she is in the likeness of himself or herself, by becoming aware of God’s renewed creation, and in the likeness of God—notwithstanding that “there is nothing whatever like unto Him” (Qur’ān 42:11)—since he or she is at each moment one of the infinite Self-Disclosures of God. Taking into consideration how the poetic function stresses selection over combination (Roman Jakobson),¹⁴⁴ there is a basic poetic modality to an atomistic occasionalist universe, where entities are

recurrently replaced by what appears to be them, where we are not ourselves, but rather metaphors of ourselves: *ka’annanā*. It is thus felicitous that this atomistic occasionalistic view was the one prevalent among the Arab Muslim theologians, since Arabs were known to exalt poetry already in the pre-Islamic period. From *Sayat Nova* onward, Paradjanov’s cinema, with its atomistic occasionalist world and thus with its jump cuts, is one of the main instantiations of the metaphoric in cinema, since everything is in the image of itself in the jump cuts showing apparently the same entity. Paradjanov’s films from *Sayat Nova* onward are cinematic prose poems since the substitution of a term is not by another but by a very similar variant of itself. [...]



Is this atomicity the only temporality to be found in Islam? No: to the highly Hellenized Muslim philosophers, the *falāsifa*, time is continuous; to the *Ismā‘īlīs*, time is cyclical ... Nonetheless, it certainly is the one most akin to the basic cinematographic apparatus. Cinema is the first medium adequate to represent and reflect the world according to the Ash‘arite view because it

functions at the level of the basic cinematographic apparatus in terms of both recurrent appearance and disappearance of entities, and absence of causality between the separate still frames. From *Sayat Nova* onward, rather than being a capitulation of the cinematic to painting, Paradjanov's films manifest, on the contrary, the revolving of the film around a diegetic world akin to cinema, since subject to recurrent appearance and disappearance.¹⁴ [...]



Sleep

A film by Lamia Joreige

2004. Super 8 film transferred to video. 7' Original soundtrack : Charbel Haber

The film *Sleep* which is part of *Time and the Other* (exhibition and book), is a succession of photograms (taken with the help of a camera with a programmed intervalometer), each of them a fragment of actual sleeping time.

This sequence repeats itself expanding at each replay and transforming its content as well as the rhythm of its images every time. The bodies in motion of the couple become abstract, blurring the border with reality.

Sleep is the place of total separation, a unique moment of solitude to which the other has no access. In this video, sounds and images are worked to create a kind of lyricism haunted by anxiety and to express the swing between discord and harmony that lies in the relationship to the loved *other*.

Time and the Other is the story of love and separation of a couple, viewed from the subjective angle of one of the lovers. That experience is expressed in the absence of the other. It includes 3 chapters: *Embrace, Sleep & Lost Chords*.



Scan this code to read the full essay

Jalal Toufic - *Middle Eastern
Films Before Thy Gaze Returns to Thee in
Less than 1/24 of a Second*



Scan this code to watch

Sleep

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This intervention is part of the public
program of the exhibition
**FIVE HITCHCOCK FILMS AS YOU'VE
NEVER SEEN THEM BEFORE**
by Jalal Toufic