

# Divine Annihilation

'We are nihilistic thoughts, suicidal thoughts in God's head' – Kafka

*I touched the ground, terra firma to confirm my pro-forma of being, of more than just a voice but a luminous figure of sound that comes round and round and round and round and is abound with deep swelling emotions, intellectual wells of rivers and oceans frozen into avalanches of dead matter, minerals and worms at every turn that burn within this urn and I yearn to stay grounded. Afloat in the majesty of granules of salt and sand that are always out of place, out of time, never arranged – they stultify. They start to fly and I bring them together in my double apple flavoured concoction and contraption of ma vie, mon ami, I see – roh alby, hayati, noor 'einy - my grief and pain that I hold with so much disdain. Slow, slow, slow. Flow, flow, flow in that clichéd water of denial, el Nil, katek el neela, where I bathed and got my immunity from currents of meningitis and typhoid to fill that void that is out of me but through me, I start to call on Rumi in incomprehensible rants and chants of fire that sensually trigger a desire for a higher, higher, higher...*

Head shaking, body vibrating, heart palpitating, soul elevating - the revolution is (in)complete. The figure of the dervish stands among the hubris of epicurean delights and debris. Intoxicating rhythms brush against the alarmed landscape in its deadly minutiae and life is breathed once again through a melodic *maqam* (improvisational tone). *Nafas, nafas*, - slow tranquil breaths revive distant memories that have been forgotten in the ruins of cyclical histories. These calligraphic inscriptions etched into geometric grounds write submerged histories into souls not born yet. The coarse veins of the solitary dancer beneath his flowing white garb map hidden geographies traversed and treaded by existential nomads in search of a cosmopolitan unity beyond this world. In his latest work, 99, visual and multimedia artist Khaled Sabsabi undoes eschatological and esoteric binaries of the sacred and profane, the secular and religious, the blasphemous and divine, the body and soul, through a technical brilliance infused with a theopolitical sensibility. Across 99 unevenly distributed television screens Sabsabi captures the embodied intricacies of a nameless dervish in his surging ontological transformation. He disrupts the linear teleology of time by

freezing a one-second (or even less) frame of the dervish in revolution and constantly repeating it. Each screen is a disruption endlessly re-presenting itself as a state of exception that stands outside of time. The background, where the dervish is centrally positioned within, is littered with what Michel Foucault terms heterotopias. Situated between the mythic and the real, heterotopias 'perform the task of creating a space of illusion that reveals how all of real space is more illusory, all the locations within which life is fragmented'<sup>1</sup>. Sabsabi masterfully presents this fragmentation through a searing collage of confusion and chaos in each screen where violence has been instituted as the norm of everyday life in various parts of the Middle East. These are places and faces that seem familiar because of their propensity to appear on TV screens and animate the numbness of viewers worldwide. They are devoid of individuality and are instead consigned to a mass of powerful visuality that is dissected by neo-orientalist experts as a form of social commentary. They are sacralised within viewers' psyches as locations and communities rooted in the immutability of carnage. However, Makdisi and Silverstein argue that 'as a region the Middle East and North Africa has been largely defined by the fractious legacy of Western colonialism. But the region has also been defined by a range of ostensibly precolonial identities and postcolonial conflicts that greatly complicate any unipolar explanations of causality for violence'<sup>2</sup>. In a sense, the images behind the dervish are hyper real because it is confounding how dead bodies continue to connect the geological with the genealogical. By this I am referring to how severed limbs seep persistently into the material history of the ground. These bombed territories, on which technologies of terror are unleashed, upon become paralysed ideological sites where mourning is experienced as a general quotidian emotion rather than an aberration. Makdisi and Silverstein intimate how 'territory in this respect comes to function as a repository of past violence, a landscape filled with anger, sorrow, and jubilation...today's martyrs quite literally walk in the footsteps of martyrs past'<sup>3</sup>. Their blood becomes the fertiliser of past generations and those to come and it is this repetition that parallels the dervish's undulating rhythm. *99* employs the dervish as a

---

<sup>1</sup> M. Foucault. 'Of Other Spaces' *Diacritics* vol. 16, no.1, spring, 1986, pp 22-27 (quote p.24).

<sup>2</sup> U. Makdisi and Paul A. Silverstein. *Memory and Violence in the Middle East and North Africa*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 2006, p.1

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p9

moral interrogator of facile political atavism that leads to these brutal scenes of human anguish and grief. The dervish stands as someone ‘in a sort of total breach of their traditional time’ who remains ensconced within the duplicitous movements of dance and dogma<sup>4</sup>. He is imbued with an ethical energy that cannot be contained or silenced. The dervish’s body is infected with ‘archive fever’ that spreads itself as ‘a compulsive, repetitive, and nostalgic desire...an irrepressible desire to return to the origin, a homesickness...for the return to the most archaic place of absolute commencement’<sup>5</sup>. With every *dhikr* (invocation of God), the unruly archivist marks, records, witnesses, enumerates, traces, documents and testifies to the sites and remnants where violence has taken place. Through his gyrating corporeality he explicitly points to the vehement state of suffering that has become a hallmark of the modern nation-state. He is that lone prophetic and sobering voice in the tradition of the great Sufi mystic Shams Tabrizi, crying amidst the wilderness of droning bickering of political elites. He is at once earthly and ethereal straddling nodes of nothingness with his entrancing reiterations. The earth revolves on the axis of his feet, always angling towards universality. He stands at the sight of ‘the loss of life and of that quasi-eternity [and]...he does not cease to dissolve and be erased’<sup>6</sup>.

Sound is critical in 99 as Sabsabi coalesces the sirens of ambulances, screams of bereaved women and Sufi *madayih* (hymns) in an unsettling and haunting melody of life and death, captivating the audience’s auditory senses and sensibilities. Our acoustic tuning is challenged as the muffled sounds get louder, less distinct and we feel them as atomised vibrations pulsating within the ventricles of our hearts and eventually spreading throughout our bodies. The contradictory and converging sounds form the narrative of this installation, the lyricism of this narrative which is found in the interplay of the holistic edifice of this torrential aggregated noise and its many unique and authentic parts. Visually, the narrative takes form through the asymmetrical arrangement of 99 televisions of different sizes, shapes and technologies. Sabsabi intentionally evokes the Islamic motif of the ninety nine most beautiful names of God. The names are characteristics and adjectives that describe the

---

<sup>4</sup> Foucault, op. cit, p. 26

<sup>5</sup> J. Derrida. *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1996, p 91.

<sup>6</sup> Foucault, op. cit, p. 26

multifaceted and amorphous nature of an omnipotent being. As the Prophet Muhammad (Peace be Upon Him) elucidates in the *hadith* (Sayings of the Prophet) ‘Verily, there are ninety-nine names of God, one hundred minus one. He who enumerates [and believes in them and the one God behind] them would get into Paradise’<sup>7</sup>. It is this minus one (*wahid*) that becomes the spectral variable in this divine equation. ‘One’, in this context, signifies more than just an algebraic value. In Arabic, *Wahid* is the etymological root to *wahda* (solitude) and *wahdaniya* (uniqueness). These ontological states are all connected by their manifest relationships to *tawhid* (oneness/unity)<sup>8</sup>. The sovereignty of each member of the audience in *99* is already (meta)physically intertwined with the sovereignty of the affective state incited through the mediated cadences and visions of the spinning dervish and the present and absent bodies lurking in the background. These sovereign singularities are alive only in their permutated and multiplied existence. In essence, *99* generates its own sacred heterotopia, which is dependent on the affective irregularities and irreconcilabilities attendant in its formation. Sabsabi creates an aesthetic paradise rich in improvisational calibrations and visual and aural constellations engendering an implosion of sensory activities. He juxtaposes a series of negations but does not create a harmonious synthesis that seeks a pretentious notion of a transcendental illusion. Rather, Sabsabi demands of the audience a fractured subjectivity, including its wrinkled disfigurations that assert the powerlessness and finite humility of the human in the face of the sheer magnanimity of catastrophe. *99* propounds an ethics of listening that is brilliantly reflected on by the magisterial Sufi philosopher Maulana Jalal al Din al Rumi:

‘Come to me for you are the soul of the soul of the soul of listening...  
Come - not even the eyes of listening have seen anyone like you...  
You are beyond both worlds when you enter listening...  
We all enter into dancing in the midst of listening’<sup>9</sup>.

---

<sup>7</sup> Sahih Muslim, vol. 4, no. 1410.

<sup>8</sup> S. Akkach, *Cosmology and Architecture in Premodern Islam: An Architectural Reading of Mystical Ideas*, SUNY Press, New York, 2005, p. 65.

<sup>9</sup> Cited in C.W. Ernst ‘Rumi on the Sound of the Human Voice’, *Keşkül: Sufi Gelenek ve Hayat*, 2007, viewed 30 November 2009 at <http://www.unc.edu/~cernst/pdf/voice.pdf> (quote, p. 3).

These words conjure antithetical imaginations, unreconciled dualities and simultaneous realities that can only be experienced in *99* as a dervish does - through an immolated engagement. The body becomes a meditative medium compelled to listen with all of its senses. It is only through this complete corporeal commitment to each subjugated shriek, to each iridescent screen, to each itinerant intonation, that the beatified and recurrent soundtrack of melancholic amalgamations becomes a polyphonic mantra of soulful ecstasy. To conclude my discursive revolution on these pages I turn to Junayd Al Baghdadi, a ninth century Sufi teacher renowned for his eloquent meditations on Islamic doctrines and law. Junayd sublimely captures Khaled Sabsabi's aesthetic and artistic revolution through *99*. He dialectically pronounces that the believer has to unconsciously pass through three stages of *fanaa'* (annihilation) in order to achieve *tawhid* (oneness/unity). The ultimate stage of annihilation entails an arrest of the bodily while at the same time being fully aware of its convoluted fleshiness. It necessitates a sacrificial suspension of the self to allow the other to dwell within the indentations and inflections of the ego. It demands an existential exile. It requires a diasporic disposition. It exacts a profane poetics. This laborious lilt of the dervish must keep on spinning. Tears of sweat and blood must pour from pores. The revolution in all of its theological and political implications must soar through wounded souls and sores. It has to be done. It has to be one.