

Attending to the Glitch: *Sand in the Eyes*

Rabih Mroué in Interview with Lynette Hunter

PART ONE: Digital Surprises

Rabih Mroué is a Lebanese performer who lives now in both Lebanon and Berlin, Germany. He has created intricate connections with audiences, often using video as a way to destabilize the performance context, and in doing so, destabilize what “video” is expected to do (Mroué 2013).¹ This article provides context, from an interview with Lynette Hunter that he gave for this collection, for the script of an “academic/non-academic” lecture, *Sand in the Eyes* (2017), about the different ways that film techniques are used to generate an effective political reaction to death and execution. Mroué is interested in how an alternative and unsettling performance technique is quickly co-opted by those in power, and in how to un-co-opt or de-co-opt the strategy and take it back from power, or to reduce the “maximum damage” that is done by those in power.² He is also a performer fascinated with how it feels when the camera makes us all look the same even when we are individually acting against systemic structures. This doubling of the complex reflection on a specific political strategy, with the self-observation of what happens to his own performing body when engaged in that strategy, is a hallmark of his work.

An early video Mroué made and that he talked about in the interview is “set” in 1973, and although the viewer is not told the date, a Lebanese person watching it at the time would likely have worked this out. The voiceover says about one blurry figure in a street demonstration, “That’s me, here,” while, as he comments later, “In fact we all looked the same.” Mroué commented that the video asks, “How can I prove to you that I am not as the others” when the video maker wants nevertheless to “act in a fair cause, and we have to go and make our voice heard?” The video maker goes on to question: “How can I participate with a collective?” How can we “be aware that we are all together but at the same time each one of us different from the others?” This is quite apart from the fact that at the time Mroué himself would have been a “little child,” and that the person pointed to “does not look like me” (Wilson-Goldie, 76). These elements of maintaining an integrity that can resist manipulation, and simultaneously acting collectively for a political cause, are troubled by the

Rabih Mroué is an actor, director, and playwright. His works, which deal with issues that have been ignored in the current political climate of Lebanon, examine how the performer relates to the audience within a non-traditional atmosphere. In addition to his work in theatre and performance, Mroué has shown exhibitions of film and visual art at galleries, museums, and biennials, including Galerie Tranzitdisplay, Prague (2011); dOCUMENTA-13, Kassel (2012); CA2M Centro de Arte Dos de Mayo, Madrid (2013); SALT, Istanbul (2014); MoMA New York (2015), and the Kunsthalle Munich (2016). His works are in the collections of the MoMA New York, Centre Pompidou Paris, SFMOMA, the Art Institute of Chicago, CA2M Madrid, MACBA Barcelona, and the Van Abbe Museum Rotterdam, among others. Mroué is a co-founder of the Beirut Art Center and a long-time collaborator with Ashkal Alwan. He is currently an associate director of Kammerspiele Munich.

Lynette Hunter is Distinguished Professor of the History of Rhetoric and Performance at the University of California Davis. Much of her research has related to the rhetoric of Western democratic politics and has included many textual forms, writing genres, and performance modes. More recently these research areas have led to *Disunified Aesthetics* (2014) and her research into training, practice, rehearsal and performance, including the book *A Politics of Practice* (2019), and her current exploration of performing as training in affect.

way the technology of the video camera can both undermine the integrity and call into question the political action as well as donate integrity to a political cause.

In a widely circulated later piece, *The Pixelated Revolution* (2011–16),³ Mroué begins to delve into the way video technology affects the body of the person holding the camera. This piece began when he noticed that the lack of journalists in Syria during the early stages of the civil war (from 2011) led to many individuals reporting on what was happening around them. Mroué also notes that the regime “was controlling the country very efficiently, so that it was difficult for journalists to report from the side of the protesters,” and he adds that online video posts “immediately turned out to be a kind of resistance in itself. The videos were uploaded online, so that everyone could access and work with them. There was no signature, which means that they were meant to be for everybody.” There were not only specific strategies being used—such as never taking an image of a person’s face—that Mroué began to list into a manifesto for this kind of filming (Mroué 2013b, 381–84), but also strange embodied affects emerging that he attributes to the need to learn the technology.

In *The Pixelated Revolution*, Mroué performs a critical lecture to begin to analyze these alternative effects and affects, and in doing so also incorporates video he has generated to perform the critique. The lecture talks about how the revolution plays out partly through the hundreds of younger people who use their phone cameras to record the deaths on the streets of Lebanon/Syria/Middle East—specifically through a group focused on recording snipers hidden in the urban landscape, one function of which is to warn people against these snipers. In Mroué’s video, there is the person holding the camera and seeing through the viewfinder, so the viewer of the video Mroué is making watches the technical process that conditions what we see. In other words, the person in the video uses the camera to record reality, but cannot escape the affective force of the camera as something that is creating a version of reality and is therefore fictive. The video is neither fiction nor nonfiction. So, as the holder of the camera, you record the sniper, but when the sniper aims at you, you don’t recognize that “you” are about to die, and you keep filming . . .

The film Mroué makes of this is shot through the screen of an iPhone, as if the camera is the person. Yet the viewer knows from the voiceover that someone is holding the camera. In a sense, the viewer “becomes” the person holding the camera but is more aware of the difference between the fiction and nonfiction and hence horrified when the actual person holding the camera cannot tell when the sniper is aiming at them. Yet when that actual person “dies,” the viewer cannot tell the difference, cannot tell if the person holding the camera has actually been aware of the difference and is acting, or whether they have been shot—as the camera keeps on recording. The camera does not die.

In a later interview about *The Pixelated Revolution*, Mroué notes:

When the protesters use their mobile phones, put them in front of their eyes and look through the lens to see what is happening there, I believe the eye is not yet used to understanding what it is watching on that tiny screen in order to give the brain the signals to react immediately. This is why the protesters were not running away when they watched the gun aiming towards them. I think we should train ourselves to use technologies. It needs time. (Mroué 2018a)

Yet simultaneous with the time needed to learn the technology, the regime learns to use these videos against the protesters. Unlike various attempts to control the media that have been associated with earlier revolutions, such as the Romanian, Mroué suggests:

Digital data is so spread out, so dispersed, especially for the protesters, it is something that you cannot control. We can use it, but immediately the state power can re-appropriate it and use it against us. It is not like in a television studio, which is a physical thing, a building you can occupy. Digital material is full of surprises. Sometimes it is broken and you see only half of it, in other cases it freezes or it simply disappears. It is something virtual that you cannot grasp. It is fragile, rootless and lies somewhere in the cables. (Mroué 2018a)

These digital surprises, or glitches, are a way that the technology makes present its materiality, no longer mere materials or just an object, but a thing which the people using it can never fully know.

In the interview for this collection focused on *Sand in the Eyes*, Mroué pointed out the direct similarity with the way that governments co-opt alternative strategies generated by artists, so that much artmaking either has to create techniques difficult to co-opt, or build in a process by which they can be un-co-opted, or indeed that the whole of the history of making art in whatever medium is a process of de-co-opting. This may be one key reason that he builds research structures around his practice, or rather that his practice is to build creative research structures that resist the co-optation of his practices with film.

In selected comments from this interview, we focus on the form that his critical analysis takes—the glitched “lecture.” Performers are usually aware of the ease with which the materiality of their work becomes appropriated and reduced to predictable material, and loses its ability to unsettle social, aesthetic and political conventions. Mroué’s comments on his lecture form unfold how it incorporates a critical analysis of the artwork that is made into the artwork itself, and can delay, re-direct, elude, and glitch attempts to normalize its political impact—can insist on its materiality.

The Script: *Sand in the Eyes*

Rabih Mroué / Translated from Arabic to English by Ziad Nurfal

All images are from the live performance by Rabih Mroué, “Sand in the Eyes.”⁴

The story starts with this USB stick I found in my mailbox.



In a white envelope without any markings on it. Photo: Rabih Mroué.

No sender's address, no destination, nothing. I opened it and all I found inside was a USB stick. There was nothing else inside the envelope. No papers, no inscriptions of any sort. I figured it was certainly not addressed to me, and must have landed in my mailbox by mistake. So I decided to put it back on top of the mailbox, convinced that its owner would certainly find it and take it back.



Mailbox. Photo: Rabih Mroué.

The next day, there was nothing on top of the mailbox. So, I concluded that the owner of the USB stick must have gotten it back. I opened my mailbox and to my surprise there it was again, this time without the envelope. Something strange was happening. It seems the USB stick was addressed to me. I took it and of course the first thing I did was put it in my computer to see what was on it. To my surprise, it contained a large collection of promotional films and clips produced by the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and the Sham, also known as ISIS. Films that I've always refused to watch, and always refused to possess.



USB contents. Photo: Rabih Mroué.

Like many people, I am convinced that no one should watch these films. And if necessary, they should only be viewed by people who are specialists in this subject, in addition to those who belong to the fields of the military, police and security services, and maybe some intellectuals as well. But watching them for the sake of watching them, that is exactly what ISIS would want. They want a large and widespread audience to witness their crimes and horrific terrorism in order to instil horror in the hearts of people, spread fear and hate towards migrants, strangers, refugees, foreigners, in other words towards the “other.” . . . In order to create, little by little, a sharp cut between something called the Islamic world and something else called “the Western world.” And the second reason why we should not watch these videos has to do with our contribution to the crime, since every time we watch a hostage getting his head decapitated or being burned or executed by bullets, we are contributing to the crime happening all over again. It is as if by watching, we are the ones operating their killing machine.

This is why we should refuse watching them. But with this USB stick, I felt that someone wanted me to watch these videos and work on them. But why? And who is this unknown person? Definitely not someone from ISIS. There was no threat or any invitation to join their organization. In any case there is no way they would ask an atheist and infidel such as me to join them. Actually, the surprise came when I noticed an engraving on the external cover of the USB stick. Very strange. Here it is: www.lfv.hessen.de. I Googled it immediately, and got the answer at once: LFV is short for Landesamt für Verfassungsschutz.



USB stick. Photo: Rabih Mroué.

The English translation means State Office for Constitutional Protection. In other words, this USB stick belonged to the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution in Hessen, Germany. It is one of the branches of Germany's secret service. Strange. Why would the Security Office of this state send me copies of ISIS films? Is it possible that they need my help to solve some mystery found in the videos, decipher their codes? But I am not a specialist of images. What does this have to do with me?

In Germany, like many other countries in the world, the constitution was modified after the declaration of War on Terrorism, and security institutions adopted a proactive role. One of the decisions was to list ISIS as a highly dangerous, illegal, and prohibited organization.

It is for this reason that strong censorship was applied to ISIS. And a serious Internet operation was launched against ISIS's propaganda apparatus, aiming to delete and block all their web accounts and videos. Yet, every time a video would be deleted, ISIS would find new ways to upload it again. Almost as if ISIS had a large army of technicians working day and night on creating self-regenerating programs that would spawn and upload new content on various websites. You remove something here, and something else gets created there, one time, two times, ten times even, and so on and so forth. Like a virus that is spreading and no one is able to control it, contain it, and get rid of it.

And the issue is that, the virus is here, inside this USB stick, which was sent to me from Hessen. Why Hessen? Anyway . . .

Since I have taken a clear decision not to watch any ISIS films, and yet at the same time feel a certain responsibility towards this USB stick and its contents, I decided to ask a friend of mine to watch them for me. This way I would keep and preserve my decision while not running away from my responsibility. So I asked this friend to watch all the films on the USB stick and give me a detailed report on each one. I also asked him to tell me if he saw something unusual in any of the videos, in which case I would watch it. He agreed.

And like a scientist working in some laboratory, he carefully placed the USB stick inside a nylon bag, sealed it with tape and left.

I confess that I felt relief when I got rid of that USB stick. It almost felt like revenge; instead of allowing it to take words out of my mouth, I sold it to someone who would take words out of its own mouth.

Two days later, my friend sent me an excerpt from one of the ISIS videos, saying that one of the terrorists looked exactly like me. He said, “The resemblance in the eyes is frightening, you have to watch the video.”



The eyes. Photo: Rabih Mroué.

What is the probability of someone appearing in someone else’s pictures without knowing? And what does this feel like? In today’s digital age, with the proliferation of miniature cameras and smart phones, it is quite possible, if not certain. Human beings are constantly taking pictures. Every minute there are millions of photos being taken around the world and stored in various places located on the Internet.

I am convinced that my face appears in the photos of many people whom I do not know and whom I’ve never seen, and vice-versa. For instance, you could be crossing Alexanderplatz while someone is taking a picture of his or her friend, and click, you’re in the photo. When we appear accidentally in other people’s photos without knowing, we are secondary characters, like extras in a scene, part of

the background. Honestly, I don't think there's any problem in appearing in unknown people's pictures, as long as these photos remain private. But the fear is to suddenly find out that your face appeared in some advertisement or propaganda for a political party or organization, like the video my friend told me about. Although I assure you that this is not me in the video but someone who looks a lot like me. But perhaps it is me because I find it particularly disturbing, unnerving, unsettling.

Is there any way one can control appearing in someone else's pictures unintentionally, even if he or she appears in the background?

In 2003, I was invited to audition for the role of Saladin in *Kingdom of Heaven* by Ridley Scott. I was very excited. And since I couldn't go to London for the casting, they asked me to record myself in Beirut.

I practised for the role of Saladin and recorded the last scene with Balian, when they agree on handing Jerusalem over to the Muslims.

After I sent the recording, I received a polite e-mail saying that my age did not correspond to the role, and my facial features did not have the required roughness for the role of Saladin. They thanked me for my effort and suggested that I contribute to the film by appearing in a crowd scene. In other words, the proposal went from me starring as one of the film's main characters to being an extra; to being one of the many Arab soldiers in Saladin's army fighting against the Crusaders. They said that although they are extras, they still hold an important role in the film. The extras are the real heroes. They said that I am important because they need extras who speak Arabic. As compensation, they offered to give me one line during the battle. I pictured myself in the battle of Hattin shouting: "Onward, onward to Jerusalem!" with the Arab armies behind me, and Saladin in front of me.

And so I travelled from Beirut to Marrakesh, where an air-conditioned bus drove us to the city of Ouarzazate. There I joined the Arab armies under the leadership of Syrian actor Ghassan Massoud, who played the role of Saladin. There, I discovered that the phrase I was supposed to shout in the battle was "Allahu Akbar" (God is great). I agreed reluctantly. But luckily the phrase was cut during the editing process and only the battle remained.

This is another photo from the movie. And that's me. I can tell from this flag.



The flag. Photo: Rabih Mroué.

When I watch this scene, I don't understand how I accepted to be in such a film. To be one among many, to be an extra, to be or not be, that is not anymore the question, and it's all the same in the end.

My question is: If I agreed of my own free will and choice to be an extra in this scene, how did this scene become part of an ISIS film?

This excerpt sent me by my friend is from a film produced by ISIS where they use shots from the Ridley Scott movie, and more precisely, the scene in which I appear.

How did I end up in an ISIS film? Why does the way the camera seems to capture me leave me so powerless?

Who recruited us to join ISIS and their likes? How does this happen? Did they pay money to the producer and distributor to obtain the legal rights to use the scenes? Or were they pirated? In either case, I wonder how thousands of people go from one place to another and suddenly end up with ISIS one day, and the day after with some other organization or party or occupation, against their will. Is this what it means to be an extra?

In all Arabic dictionaries, extra or background actor means:

An "additional" actor, from the Italian "comparsa" which means "**extra actor,**" an **ordinary citizen recruited for a fee** to play a **simple role** in an artistic, cinematographic or televised scene, **with no major or noticeable importance.** Extras are **secondary** characters that are **not directly related to the plot**, but they

add a natural atmosphere to the scene **when needed**. Often they **help to create natural surroundings** for the story.

This definition seems to relate to a larger understanding of the concept of citizen/individual in Arab countries, and the relationship between the citizens/individuals and those ruling over them. The definition specifies that the extra is an **ordinary citizen**, meaning there are non-ordinary citizens, and he is not one of them. Ordinary also implies there are first-class citizens, second and third-class citizens, and so on and so forth. Ordinary citizen means the vast majority of people, the crowds or masses, the people who are powerless, meaning a crowd of extras, “**extra citizens.**” Additional. Excessive numbers, purposeless and hence useless. By definition, the role of the extra is **secondary**, in the same manner that the roles of Arab societies are secondary and **tend to go unnoticed**. Consequently the part they play is ineffective . . . and should it become effective one day, such as was the case with what is referred to as “the Arab Spring,” it will be described as a riot or in the best of cases as an uprising, a revolution, a civil war . . . etc.

In addition to being an ordinary and extra citizen, the extra is furthermore **recruited**. . . . But the definition does not specify who recruits him. We can assume however that he is recruited by the powers in charge. They recruit him to play **a simple role**, a secondary role. . . . They pay **him a fee**, they don’t say how much is this fee, but I assume it is as usual a low and a cheap one. And his essential role is to **create natural surroundings when needed**. As if the presence of the extra adds legitimacy and credibility to something that is unnatural, such as a totalitarian regime, a dictatorship or a corrupt government, or as in the case of a military coup d’état. The gathered masses and crowds are there to convey this “credibility and legitimacy.” And when the ruler/hero does not need them anymore, they cease to be useful . . .

I think there is no need to go on and on regarding the ways in which Arab governments transformed their people into extras. What I am talking about essentially is fiction films. Not “reality.” And when I suddenly found myself appearing in a nonfiction film, such as a propaganda video from ISIS, I remember that for many years now the new technologies had had us playing the role of extras as if non-fiction is fiction. We have become used to the situation and forgotten about it. But whenever a new shock occurs, such as the ISIS one, we are reminded of this situation.

This scene reminds me of our failure as active citizens of our societies. We always play the role of the angry population, the gathered masses, the fighters in the name of God/the nation/the ruler, the guards, the witnesses, the victims, the innocents, those who rejoice and hail the divine victory, the banished, the exiled, the refugees, the prisoners, the weak, the deprived, etc. . . . Those are the roles that are given to us, and we agree or are forced to play these parts, accepting them in exchange for the bare minimum.

For many years there was a consensus in the world that the monster called ISIS must be fought, this monster also called “terrorism.” . . . Everyone, allies and enemies alike, united in the fight against one common enemy. Among them, those that used to support terrorism; and those that pretend to fight terrorism; and those that have a special interest in prolonging this war until the balance of power turns to their benefit; and those countries that already terrorize their people and citizens. All together, they are going to fight this malignant disease.

Each country is hiding its real interests in this war, and under this pretext, a large numbers of people turn into extras, while death, exile and destruction become mere details in a minor scene from a

larger film entitled “The war on terrorism.” This film is rolling and each one of its main players has written the ending that suits him, although the ending of the film will most probably upset all expectations.



Terrorism and the war on terrorism.

This is a still photo from a video concerned with terrorism.



Photo: Rabih Mroué.

And this is a still photo from a video concerned with the war on terrorism.



Photo: Rabih Mroué.

In principle, I wouldn't allow myself to play the first film for you and let you watch the terrorist slit the throat of his hostage. Ethically and morally speaking, such a thing is not feasible. Besides, there is probably a law that forbids me from playing such a film in a public space in front of an audience, even if the audience is over eighteen.

As for the second film, which was shot from a flying drone and shows a missile being fired, hitting its target and killing people, there would be no problem in showing it; I can do so without any embarrassment and any moral, ethical or even legal issues.

Is it the nature of the event that draws the red lines of restrictions and limits, so we know what we are and what we are not allowed to show? **Or is it the physical distance** from the event that forbids or allows the act of watching? **Is it the obscenity of the act of killing** that prevents us from watching the video of the beheading, and forbids us from screening it publicly? **Or is it the side committing the act** of killing that draws the red lines, allowing at times and forbidding at others, depending on the circumstances, facts and results?

Both films are documenting killing, yet each one is doing so in its own way. It seems that the objection is not against killing or documenting it, but either on the manner of killing and/or on the manner of documenting it.

In the particular case of the beheading, the killing takes place in an obscene manner where the camera is close to the scene, allowing the viewer to see clearly the cruelty of this barbaric act. The camera footage is also used with conventional Hollywood techniques to claim reality, a real event.

While in the drone video, the killing happens from afar, in a clean manner since there is no physical involvement by the executors, moreover the camera is very far, which prevents us from seeing and

understanding. There is no difference between a tall or a short building, between a man or woman, old or young. . . . Nothing, everything looks like an abstract painting. . . . Blurred.

Moreover, in the more abstract drone video, there is no proof that the killing took place. And even if we make sure that these moving white dots are human beings, we still do not know anything about their identity, exactly the same as the soldier who executed the operation and fired the deadly missile. He remains unknown to us (the viewers). We do not know his name, nor do we see his face. And after the missile has been fired and the target is eliminated, and even though the manner of the filming claims a kind of non-fictional reality, it's still possible to say that everything we've seen is a fabrication.

The first video uses fiction film techniques so that we know that the knife is real, the knife penetrating the neck is real, and the death is real. There is no artifice and no fabrication in fictional reality.

The knife *here* is going to cut the body in two pieces, placing them next to each other. This is why we can't bear the death.

Yet with the drone missile *there* is going to cut the body in thousands of pieces and blow it into the air thus concealing it as if it did not perish, and therefore it is obviously not going to appear in the images. The blurring of its non-fictional reality means that none of it is real, and this is why we can bear the death.

However, the issue is not whether one prefers to have the body cut off into two pieces or the body blown into thousands of tiny pieces.

The issue is elsewhere.

In fiction films, to kill is acceptable. Obscenity is acceptable. Everything is acceptable. But these two types of films are not fictional but true. And real documented killing is a scandal. It is as if the clarity of the first one is meant to convince us beyond doubt that the film belongs to the documentary world, and aims to create a loud scandal. And the second one, with its blurriness and lack of clarity, wants to convince us that it belongs to the world of fiction, thus concealing the scandal and obscuring it. But in reality, both films document the real.

The blurriness of the drone images represents the war against the terrorists. As Bilal Khbeiz says, the blurriness of these photos can be interpreted as "Images of the future, like the blurred readings of fortune tellers," "connected to the mysterious future." Yet they hold within them a "promise of bringing a peaceful world devoid of terrorism." In this sense the blurriness "turns war into a continuation of politics." The opposite of ISIS films that cut all ties from politics, in the same manner that they cut heads, "irrevocably turning the war into mere terrorism that produces clear images of a past with no future . . . of a past full of death . . ."

But today and since the war against terrorism was declared many years ago, these promises turned out to be disappointing, bringing wars and not a single instance of peace. Well, what future awaits people who are caught between terrorism and a war against terrorism?

However, what also differentiates the ISIS film from the drone film is the gaze. In the ISIS film, the gaze is present and direct, while in the drone film, the gaze is absent and absented.

In the ISIS film, the killer looks straight at the camera. His gaze intends to pierce right through the lens towards the viewer. The killer wants to establish eye contact with the whole world as he commits the act of killing with obscenity. It is a gaze to which we as viewers cannot remain indifferent, because it is aimed directly at us. With this gaze we become involved and cannot stay partial. We have to take a stand right away, without hesitation, decide rapidly if we are for or against, if we should stop watching, etc. As for the victim, the gaze shifts between looking directly towards the lens (eye contact) and looking away at the ground, making us feel as viewers the responsibility of what will happen to him, on the one hand, and our weakness and incapability on the other, because when we look at him and his desperate need for help, we know that we are powerless.

The people in the drone video, whether they are innocent victims or terrorists, are unable to look straight into the lens because the camera is far away in the sky and moving all the time. Even if their eyes were looking directly into the lens, we wouldn't be able to see them because of the distance; consequently, there is no eye contact between the victims and us/the viewers.

And contrary to the ISIS video, the perpetrator's gaze in the drone video does not exist, because his presence is always hidden somewhere outside the image. And since the act is taking place independently from us, thus we remain indifferent and do not feel involved with it unravelling in front of our eyes.

However, in the two videos, whether the gazes are involving us as viewers or not, whether the act is clear or blurred, death is still happening inside the two videos, inside the images. But what is happening is another death, which takes place outside the image: it is our own death as viewers. A death that happens every time we view one of these films.

In the ISIS film, what matters is not the victim who is executed. Most of the time, we do not know who the victim is or their name, unless they are American or European citizens or the like, and even in these cases, the killing is not addressed to this specific victim but to us, the viewers. This person who is about to be executed represents all of us, and this knife that the perpetrator is pointing toward us is the knife that slits our throats every day. Our death in the ISIS film is a direct and actual death, and that is why we cannot bear to watch it.

In the other film, where both killing and filming are conducted from a far distance, with no eye contact, no identification, no proof, and the events are taking place independently from us, our death is indirect and diluted, as if it were happening in small doses to be swallowed easily over an extended period of time, and that is why we are able to bear it and watch it. Our death is actually happening by giving up our privacy and public spaces little by little in exchange for safety and security, and also by accepting to live under the so-called "state of emergency" that is most often used as a pretext for suspending our rights and freedom guaranteed by laws and constitutions.

In the drone films, everything looks soft. A long grey and blurred shot. The only cinematographic effect used is the digital zoom, plus scanning: left, right, up and down. Technically, it looks very simple, but in reality, it consists of a complex set of highly sophisticated techniques where the act of killing is happening through the collaboration between hidden elements, in different times and places working together in an amazing synchrony, thus making death happen indirectly and obliquely.



The question that poses itself here is: if this is the shot, then what could be its counter-shot? Is it the drone itself, which fired the missile? Or the location of the hit, a shot from the ground? Or is it a shot of the soldier sitting in the control room, his hand on the joystick, his finger pressing on the trigger? Or the military headquarters where the commander-in-chief is leading the entirety of the operation? Or is it a shot of the American president sitting behind his desk and signing the order to invade Afghanistan or Iraq? Or . . . or . . . or . . .

Of course, it's neither this nor that. And at the same time, it's all of these elements working all at once and in coordination with one another, via remote control.

But what if we say that the ISIS film itself is the counter-shot of the drone one and vice-versa?

In ISIS's HD films and the drone films, the war looks like an action movie, a war between the good guys and the bad guys. The good guys are coming from the sky like angels sent by God to fight the bad guys who are coming from hell below like monsters sent by Satan, to destroy the earth and human beings. They must be beaten before they succeed in destroying all of humanity.

But in this scenario, the monsters know how to use modern technology and advanced methods and one of their main weapons is the image itself.

In this war between images, between killing and counter-killing inside the image, the two sides seem to be at equality. But in reality, the battle is different. ISIS does not have, and did not have, the possibility to wage war with the same weapons as the rest of the world. For this reason, the equal fight between the drones and the ISIS fighters can only take place in a fictional scenario. And in fiction films, the hero will not allow the battle to be uneven, and he will face the bad guy with similar weapons, in order for the battle to be fair.

Let's imagine a film that brings these two sides together in one scene. In American movies and in order for the battle between the allies and ISIS to be fair and just, it has to take place like this:

Of course the criminal dies and the hero is victorious.

In this movie, the hero is the American cowboy. But the hero could also be this one, or this one or this one . . . or this one . . . or . . . and the list is long.

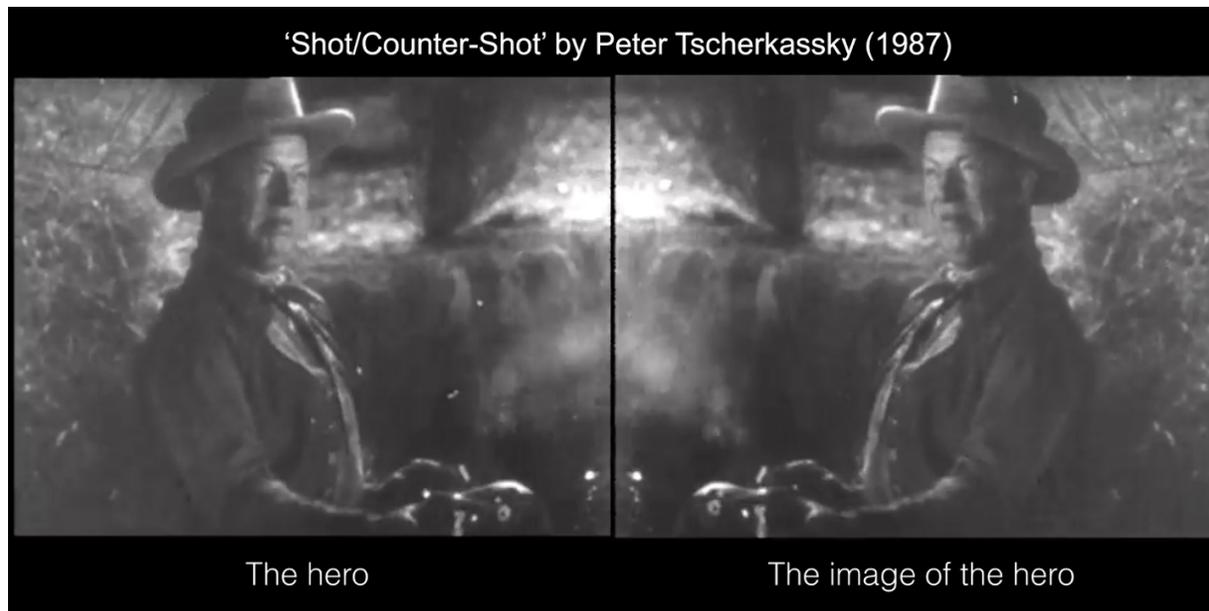
But for now, let's assume the hero is the cowboy. Okay, imagine a scenario where all the gangsters and all the criminals are dead and there are no enemies left on the face of the planet or outside the planet. . . . Hmm, what will the hero do in this case? Will he stop being a hero? Is this it? But then what will happen to all the weapons? Will they be thrown away? Destroyed? Is it that simple?

In the good/evil equation, I believe that the hero does not stop fighting, even if there's no one left to fight with.

What is the outcome in this case? Let us take the short film by Peter Tscherkassky from 1987, *Shot/Counter-Shot*, and see what it suggests to us.

This shot contains everything: established shot, shot/counter-shot, long shot, medium, shot and close-up. Everything is here; there is no need for editing, no need for visual or sound effects, even no need for dialogue or soundtrack. The hero is everything and there is no space for anyone else in the picture. No enemy, no extra, no victim to defend, nothing. . . . He is alone in the shot, playing all the roles. Everything can be found in this short film. Even death is present in it. Do we need to ask who he was shooting at? Who is this hidden enemy whom he was trying to kill? Where is the bullet flying to? Where did the bullet that killed him come from? And why does the hero die at the end of the film?

Maybe the title of the movie *Shot/Counter-Shot* holds all the answers to these questions. The explanation is that the hero is confronted with his own image, and consequently there is no difference between the shot and the counter-shot. . . . The hero and his image are identical to the degree that when we turn to the counter-shot, there is no difference in the picture. It looks like a mirror image. It is likely that his image has the same speed as him, the hero. Consequently, the hero kills his image at the same time that his image kills him. The two deaths take place at the same time. For a moment we might believe that it was a suicide, but in reality it's not; what took place was a mutual killing. The death of the hero is different from the death of the hero's image. In the film both of them die; but if the human being dies, does the image die as well? Of course it does. Everything dies in the end.



Shot/Counter-Shot. Photo: Rabih Mroué.

Tscherkassky's short film muddles the endings of Hollywood movies, which are usually either happy or sad. Although it makes us laugh, we cannot really decide if this film is a comedy or a tragedy. As for me, after watching the ISIS films, all I can say is that the ending of this film is neither happy nor sad. It is both and neither at the same time. It is hope and despair at once, blended together, without competition or difference between them. Just like our situation today, we are watching with our hands covering our eyes, we want to see, but at the same time, we don't.

We try to go on with our lives, while fantasizing about a revolution without hope and without despair.



In a world that is overloaded with cameras (everywhere we go there are cameras switched on), is there any way to escape from the curse/spell of appearing in someone else's pictures/videos, whether it is intentionally or unintentionally, whether it belongs to the state authority, to an institution such as banks, or to an individual?

I really don't want to appear in other people's images without my permission, whether as part of the background, an extra, or the main figure. And it seems to me that there is no way to solve this problem, unless I stay inside my room and never go out at all. And if I decide to go out on the streets, then I have to disguise myself, wearing camouflage and hiding my face. But all these solutions seem ridiculous and nonsensical. So what can be done to solve this problem?

For me, the only way to solve it is to be a glitch in a photo. Let me explain. "Glitch" is a technical term used widely in electronic and digital fields. It is sufficient to know that in digital moving images, a glitch means an unpredictable change in the system's behaviour that causes a short-lived error in a system or machine; it means that something obviously goes wrong. (For more, read Olga Goriunova and Alexei Shulgin, *Glitch*, and Laura Marks, *Arab Glitch*).

Here are some photos of glitches showing the defects they cause to images.

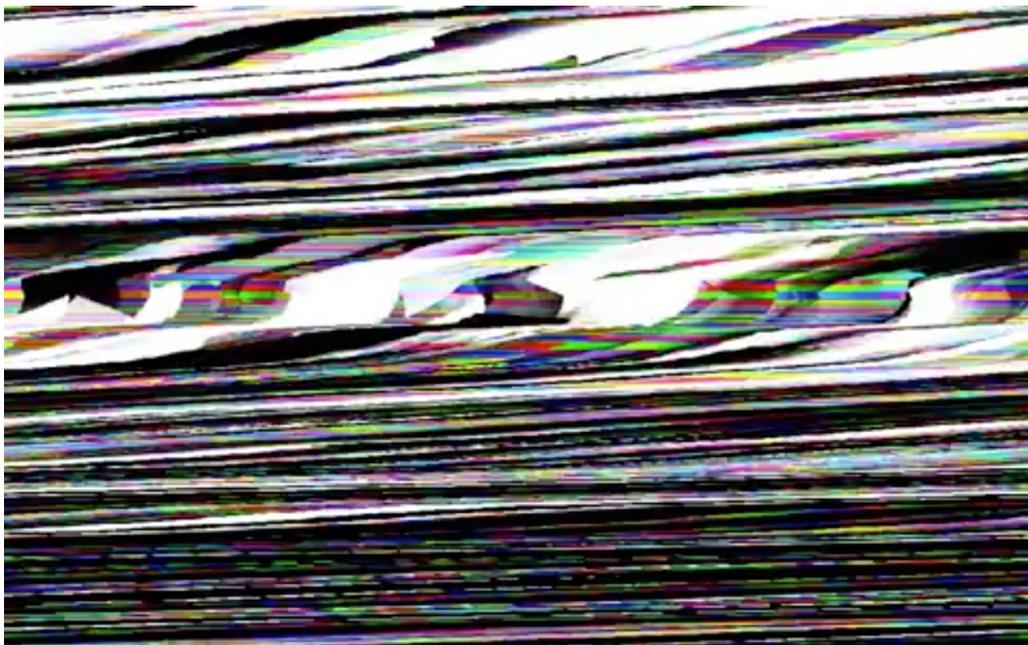


Photo: Rabih Mroué.



Photo: Rabih Mroué.

So imagine yourself like a glitch, or as one of the causes of the glitch, so whenever someone takes a photo of you, then that image is broken and destroyed. I think this is the best way for us to escape from being in images. We will be like an error inside the system; we appear as a scratch and not as human beings. That's the only way to take the revenge against images; especially the "High Definition" images produced by ISIS or those produced by the drones and security cameras planted everywhere. I want to be a glitch, a digital bug that will claw at images and damage them. So, whenever you see a glitch, know that this is my ghost or the ghost of someone who refuses to be in images.

But how can we transform ourselves into glitches?

Imagine a small device that can transform its holder into a glitch. Whenever you turn it on, then it will interrupt the camera's signals and cause a short-lived error in it. And it will make an obvious glitch on the photo, thus you won't appear in it. And if you appear, then it will be your ghost but not you.

Something like this.

So let's assume this is the device that I am talking about.

Now, let's try it.

I will turn it on, you take a photo of me, and then you will see that your photos will be damaged with glitches.

But before we do this try out, I just want to say that this whole presentation started with a USB stick that come to me from Hessen from an unknown person, maybe by chance and maybe on purpose.

Nevertheless it taught me something very important: for someone to be sensitive, to be cautious, to be aware, to refuse as part of a resistance is something, and to be in a total denial is something else.

Well, let's try it now. I will count till three and then turn the device on you [and] take a photo.

one, two, three

(Dark)

End of Script

PART TWO: From the Interview

Sand in the Eye is a lecture about war, and terrorism, and the war on terrorism, and the use of film techniques as part of this war. In the interview, it became clear that Mroué's choice of the lecture genre to talk about the effects generated by these techniques is precise. The academic/non-academic distinctions that surround the genre are analogous to the fiction/non-fiction distinctions that beset the video materials that circulate in the name of terrorism and in the name of the war on terrorism. As a member of an audience, in whatever medium, we tend to think ourselves able to distinguish between what is real and what is not, what is factual and what is not. For example, he says, the non-academic lecture is less "scientific" and more subjective than the academic—but is it? He asks, do we really think that Derrida is not being subjective? We tend to think that the academic lecture leaves a record that can be checked, but does evidence of preparation really mean that we are not being manipulated? Or is it a sign that that is exactly what is happening? If a non-academic lecture does not have a responsibility to sincerity, let alone veracity, and can lie to an audience guilt-free, does this mean that the academic lecture is always guilty? Or that the lack of responsibility guarantees a lack of guilt? And how do these questions relate to the ethics of the videos that circulate in the name of terrorism?

Mroué's performances nearly always place him directly in front of an audience, he says, so that he is challenged to provoke and risk himself in the face of the representations of himself in the script, for example, in the text above, as a potential Saladin. Considering whether or not this story actually happened is the moment the audience member begins to work on the possibilities for glitch. When the viewer of the lecture or the video begins to unsettle the generic distinctions that promise us ethical certitude, they enter glitch-mode. On the one hand, when we watch an execution video, the conventions of Hollywood set up expectations of the "real" and therefore the "true." A viewer could be thinking not only that they are more involved through the use of those conventions, but also that "this is a real occurrence of terrorism, and the death makes me feel bad." The effect generated makes us confident that we know how to respond. On the other hand, when we watch the drone footage, not only are we safely "at a distance," but the conventions of documentary can also lead us to think, "this is a real occurrence of the war against terrorism, and so, while it is horrible watching the deaths, it is a good thing to know the fight is going on." The effect generated again makes us confident that we know how to respond. Yet . . . the use of the kinds of techniques that Hollywood uses for realism should alert us to the manipulative quality of the execution video, which calls into question the effect that occurs. Just so, the drone footage comes from government sources with a vested interest in the fight should generate a concern with how far we can trust its effect on our responses.

When we try to maintain the effects of realist film and/or documented footage, we become highly susceptible to manipulation. In this state, Mroué suggests that another death happens. He says:

There is another death that is happening outside the image that we don't see: it is actually our death as viewers—when we watch these images we die a little bit, each time we die a little. Every time we click on the video and watch it then we are doing the crime again, so it happens in the time of watching. It's not the past time, it's not the representation. It's actually this way: as if we the viewers, we are making the killing machine, we're making the killing machines every time we watch. This is why we should we should refuse to watch them because we don't want to participate. These videos are not meant to document, they are meant to be watched at one time or ten times. Whether it is the execution video or the drone "footage," they want to spread [their claim on reality] as a rumour everywhere. This way you cannot anymore avoid watching it or the temptation to peak, to be voyeur, yes? And by watching it then you are you making the killing machine go on. (Mroué 2018b)

The distinctions we thought we could make that guaranteed that we could trust the effects we felt to guide us to a responsible ethical position have been erased by this critical lecture, which glitches the academic/non-academic. Not that Mroué wants us to resolve that erasure. The work on glitching that erases distinctions makes us aware of the materiality of the technology, that it cannot be controlled by us, and that we need to learn it in as many of its contexts as are relevant to our ongoing lives. "Glitch" becomes here the practice of calling, under its name, diverse and massively complex sets of indefinable breakdowns at the electronic, software, hardware levels, so that each glitch is both a general category and a particular material unsettling. The distinctions we could make render us a de-individualized mass of people, manipulated by predictable effects, so these videos of death eliminate the power of affect at the heart of resistance. To sustain affect, the lecture is filled with vestiges of signs that hover around what is real and what is not, what is fictional and what is not, what is material and what is not. It makes present the way we might deal with being part of a mass audience for a technology that has the political effect of inactivating us and of voiding ethical response by claiming clarity for these distinctions. Instead, we are invited to work as collaborative individuals, to resist the voiding and its distinctions by retaining an attention to the glitch. The glitch happens because the materialities of the technologies at play are beyond our understandings of them, and outside the seamless readings of any distinctions: there is no shot/countershot.

The collaborative individual has a self that cannot be pinned down. To act collaboratively is to recognize that we can never know "other" people, let alone "other" things. This is the work of glitching, to be in the process of meeting the impossible-to-know and engaging with it. That process of enabling glitching can also be a refusal to watch these videos in the first place. Mroué notes:

This is what I argue at the end of my script, to refuse as part of a resistance is something. And to be in a denial and an ignorance is something else. If you know what they are about and you refuse, but you know and you are conscious about what they are about and you are working . . . this is fine. But if you just make a denial, you don't want to know, then this is something else. (Mroué 2018b)

Working on erasure in filmmaking, working on enabling the glitch, is a choice to unsettle the conventions that bind us to normative ethical responses and allow the materiality of our interactions

with technology to generate affect and event. Glitching is a way of learning how a film technology can respond to emergent political structures, and how those structures can be shaped by emergent film practices.

~

Rabih Mroué has had final editorial control of the script of this interview.

Notes

1. Several of Rabih Mroué's scripts are brought together in Mroué (2013). See in particular "Theater in Oblique," trans. Ziad Nawfal (250–57), an introduction to the performance "Looking for a Missing Employee" presented at Al-Madina Theater, Beirut, November 2003; and "Three Posters: Reflections on a Video-Performance" trans. Mona Abou Rayyan (302–15), initially performed with Elias Khoury, Ayloul Festival, Beirut, September 2000.
2. Mroué (2013c) says: "My early experiments with video came out of my experience working in a Lebanese television station in the early 1990s. The position I had at Future Television required me to perform a number of jobs including filming, editing and directing. This showed me how the media manipulates images to construct a particular image of reality. So I started to think about how to translate this technical expertise into a multimedia theatrical practice that would question the ideological roles assigned to images."
3. *The Pixelated Revolution* was co-produced by DOCUMENTA (13) in 2010 and won the Spalding Grey Award when performed in New York. The translated text by Ziad Nawfal, "The Pixelated Revolution," is found in Mroué (2013b, 387–93).
4. *Sand in the Eyes* was first produced by Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, as part of the project "100 Years of Present", funded by the Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media in Germany. Co-production with the Hessisches Staatstheater Wiesbaden.

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