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Trouble in the Archive: Of Counter-Memories, Breakable Memories and Other Proleptic Moves into the Past in Larissa Sansour's and Wael Shawky's Arts.

Abstract

This article focuses on the solo exhibitions of Larissa Sansour entitled “In the Future They Ate from the Finest Porcelain” and “Archeology: In Abstentia” (2016), along with Wael Shawky’s “Cabaret Crusades” trilogy (2010-2014). Their exhibitions offer fascinating reflections on the archive as construction and on the articulation of memory in traumatic contexts, whether these are the Nakba and the on-going colonisation of Palestine by Israel or the Christian Crusades to regain Jerusalem.

In their films and their creations of breakable objects, such as the porcelain plate and the glass puppet, they open up new possibilities to think and write about the past in modes that take ambivalence and subjectivity at face value. Furthermore, by articulating chronotopes that are fundamentally disjunctive, not only do the artists suggest alternative and counter-modes of remembering the past, they also draw our attention on the act of narrating the past as political process. Thus, not only do they create alternative narratives drawn from other perspectives – here the Arab one –, but they also debunk the myth of the archive as a factual and objective piece of literature and foreground perspectivism and precariousness instead.

In other words, Sansour and Shawky's artistic projects do not just aim at developing an Eastern historiography of traumatic times only, and certainly do not participate in a simplistic clash of civilisations narrative. Their works are eminently contextualised, but they also resonate well beyond the Middle-East and show what art can do with/to the archives, escaping adversarial narratives and using them to create dissonance, critical distance, personal and social transformations.

Keywords: Utopia/Dystopia, Civilizational/National Mythology, Archive, Dissonance, Precariousness.

“The question of the archive is not a question of the past. It is not the question of a concept dealing with the past that might *already* be at our disposal and not at our disposal, an *archivable concept of the archive*. It is a question of the future, the question of the future itself, the question of a response, of a promise and of a responsibility for tomorrow”

(Derrida 36).

“Who controls the past controls the future... Who controls the present controls the past”

(Orwell Part I, chap. 3, 88).

Larissa Sansour and Wael Shawky are two contemporary artists from the Middle East – Shawky is from Alexandria in Egypt and lives mostly there; Sansour was born in East Jerusalem and lives in London. Both have strong artistic connections with Europe,¹ their arts are exhibited internationally, and they work with a variety of media, including drawing, sculpture, photography, and film making. Both artists are fascinating to study comparatively not only because their trajectories are quite similar, both being connected with the Middle East and the West, but also, more importantly, because both engage with similar topics. Indeed, they interrogate human relations to memory, and in particular the past shared between Western Europe and the Middle East, and how it resonates in the present. They outline the politicisation of the archive and of archaeology, the role played by fiction and myth in history making, the elaboration of exclusionary national imaginaries. Sansour described the central theme of her work as exploring “the tug and pull of fiction and reality in a Middle-Eastern

context,” (Gabsi 117) and I would argue that this is equally relevant of Shawky’s work.

This article focuses on the latest solo exhibitions of both artists – Sansour’s *In the Future They Ate from the Finest Porcelain* and *Archaeology: In Absentia* (2015) and Shawky’s *Cabaret Crusades* trilogy (2010-2014). *In the Future*, exhibited at the Mosaic Rooms in London in 2016, functions as a triptych with one room dedicated to the screening of the sci-fi video essay, combining live motion and Computer-Generated Imagery, one room for the exhibition of photo-montages taken from the film, and one room where the space is shared between the installation of the porcelain plates on a production belt and *Archaeology: In Absentia*, described on the project website as “a sculptural installation of ten 20cm bronze munition replicas modelled on a small Cold War Russian nuclear bomb”. Each capsule is engraved with the coordinates of the location where the porcelain plates, hand-painted with *keffiyeh* pattern, are to be buried. These bombshells represent *in absentia* archaeological findings to be excavated in Palestine.

Shawky’s *Cabaret Crusades* is a trilogy that mixes marionette drama, stage designs, and filming. It recounts the history of the Crusades from an Arab perspective. The three films chart the various European campaigns in chronological order, starting with the first four years of the First Crusade, from 1096–1099, in “Cabaret Crusades: The Horror Show Files” (2010). The second film “Cabaret Crusades: The Path to Cairo” (2012) covers a period of about fifty years, picking up exactly where Part I ended, in 1099, and moving through to 1146. In the third film, entitled “Cabaret Crusades: The Secrets of Karbala” (2014), Shawky remaps episodes of the Second (1145-49), Third (1189-92), and Fourth Crusades.

Whether in the case of Israel/Palestine, or in the case of the Crusades, both artists engage with the confrontation of perspectives between Western and Eastern historiographies and recognize how each historiographical tradition reinvests the same space and compete for “sites of memory”.² However, they do not use this confrontation to rehash a clash of civilisation argument. Sansour’s and Shawky’s art go beyond an investigation of the oppositional historiographical and geographical imaginary of West vs. East or past vs. present vs. future. Rather, their investment in utopian forms of art is what allows them to complicate narratives – the notions of competitive memories and national boundaries lose cogency and are replaced by what Michael Rothberg called “multidirectional memory”³ and what I would conceptualize as *entangled* space, which is different from shared space, where the self and the other may coexist without interacting with each other. Conversely, entangled space is constituted by and through the interactions, peaceful and violent, smooth and confrontational, between the self and the other, and it belongs to neither the one nor the other.

Utopian art is what allows them to mess with chronology and disrupt linear and teleological understanding of time, used in the past and in the present to justify colonialism. As the title of Sansour’s film suggests, future and past are fused – *in the future* they *ate* from porcelain plates. Her artistic intervention takes place in the present to create the past (the archives, the porcelain plates) in the future, when future generations excavate the remains of the broken plates. Shawky’s trilogy does respect chronology and indications of time and place are captioned with each new scene in the films. Yet, his art is not only a critical reflection of how we sample, conceptualise and authorize the past, it also intervenes in the present to suggest future alternative modes of narrating and reading the past – modes that would be demystified and

integrated, narratives that would be aware of their own limited perspectives and that would be read along other archives told from other points of view. In this configuration, it becomes harder and even impossible to claim domination of the past, since the majority voice cannot be interpreted without being read alongside what it considers to be the other minor voices.

It is crucial to note that their artistic interventions are woven on two main theoretical strands, one referring to Subaltern and Postcolonial studies and the other to what has been termed the “linguistic turn” in social sciences. To the Subaltern and Postcolonial studies they owe a new emphasis placed on the silenced voice and the obliterated presence of the colonised, and her/his decolonial resurrection. As Edouard Glissant wrote in *Carribean Discourse*: “For those whose history has been reduced to darkness and despair, the recovery of the near or distant past is imperative. To renew acquaintance with one’s history, obscured or obliterated by others, is to relish fully the present” (15-16). To the “hollow delights” of a past stripped of its roots in time, Glissant opposes the “prophetic vision of the past” as emerging from deep history. Sansour and Shawky offer alternative constructions of the future based on an understanding of the deep history of the other.

Additionally, the linguistic turn supported by some historians, sociologists, and philosophers of the 1970s and 1980s led to a profound revision of the distinction between history and fiction, which undermined the “factual” pretensions of the archive in creating national memory. History was presented as a mode of narrating and interpreting the past, as a regime of truth, amongst others, and not as *the* embodiment of truth. In 1971, Paul Veyne wrote in *Comment on écrit l’histoire*: “Les faits n’existent que dans et par les intrigues” (51) [“Facts only exist in and through plots” (my translation)]. In 1983, Paul Ricoeur was reflecting on the same issue but

from a philosophical perspective, and argued that history and fiction operate on the same level of configuration. Sociologist of visual culture, Marie-José Mondzain encapsulated this new configuration in a concise statement: “La vérité est image, mais il n’y a pas d’image de la vérité” (266) [“Truth is image but there is no image of truth” (my translation)]. In English, Hayden White’s analysis of rhetorical tropes in historical discourse and his considerations on history as “literary artefact” in *Metahistory* and in *The Content of the Form* proved both seminal and controversial. The same type of reflection pervaded the work of cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*.

In the following pages, I suggest that Sansour and Shawky’s productions of archival knowledge through art offer a reflection on the institutional archive as a form of power that operates through occlusion and repression. They also ruminate on disruptive modes of remembering that debunk the myth of the factual archive, prevent both dominant and subaltern fetishization of the past, and open up new possibilities for an ethical and politically engaged relation to it. In this respect, both of them are part of larger movement of contemporary Middle Eastern artists who “retrieve, explore, and critique orders of archival knowledge” and by doing so “underscore an inherent dissonance within the archive” (Downey 13, 16). I further contend that their use of breakable objects, such as porcelain plates or glass puppets, is innovative in that it unlocks new potentials to think and write about the past that take contingency, ambivalence, and subjectivity at face value. Instead of presenting monolingualism and cohesiveness as the ultimate horizon of expectation, their arts gesture towards a decolonial archive of the future based on precariousness and a “multi-versal” (Grosfoguel) understanding of the world.

1. Trouble in the Archive: Disrupting the Dominant Modes of Writing the Past

As presented in the art gallery Mosaic Rooms in London, Sansour's work *In the Future* is a triptych with photo-montage, sci-fi video essay, porcelain plates and bomb replicas. Each replica contains an engraved disk with coordinates, which correspond to specific locations in Palestine where the plates are to be buried and excavated by future generations. By creating archives and by choosing their locations to be in Palestine, Sansour intervenes into the course of history and directs future narratives of the past. As the film unfolds, the viewers are made to understand that Palestinians have been uprooted and their civilisation erased. The plate function as metonymy – they are made of porcelain, which is presented as a Palestinian craft, and are hand-painted with the *keffiyeh* design, which has become the trademark of Palestinian resistance since the first Arab revolt of 1936 against British domination.

The storyline of *In the Future*, co-written with Søren Lind, is constructed around an alternation between a black background and what looks like a lunar landscape. Objects (such as a miniature ice shield or a white table hanging in mid-air) and characters appear and fade out from the black backdrop. The deserted landscape is made of sand, earth, and pebbles. The sky is either dark and gloomy or intensely illuminated, as if burning. The whole setting offers the vision of a post-apocalyptic world, the aftermath of the “biblical plague” mentioned in the screenplay.

There are only two disembodied female voices in the film and they respond to one another in the form of a dialogue. One is the voice of a psychoanalyst (Voice 2) – or so she seems to be given the nature of her questions – and the other is the voice of the resistance leader (Voice 1). As acknowledged in the credits, the role of the resistance leader is played by Poojeh Haji Mohammadi but the voice is Sansour's. This split between voice and body creates indeterminacy in the identification process,

which is crucial to the artistic project in terms of opening, rather than foreclosing, interpretations. There is also a high level of probability that the little girls featured in the film represent Sansour at a younger age accompanied by her little sister. But the narrative, contrary to clear-cut ideologies, never provides definitive answers.

This unresolved hesitation complicates the reading-as-decoding process and is constitutive of a camouflage strategy on the part of the “narrative terrorist,”⁴ as Voice 1 calls herself. She endorses the figure of the terrorist but in displaced ironical manner. As Edward Said convincingly argued in *The Question of Palestine*, Palestinian resistance has been constantly described as a terrorism by the US and Israeli mass media so as to undermine the legitimacy of the Palestinian anti-colonial struggle. Thus, Voice 1/Sansour ironically reappropriates a name that was supposed to undermine the legitimacy of her resistance and turns it into a statement of regained agency. As “narrative terrorist,” she indicates that first her actions are violent and that her violence is not one backed by the state or by those in power, and second that her terrorism is discursive but cannot be reduced to an “academic exercise.”

As the film unfolds the viewer understands the nature of her intervention. Voice 1/Sansour explains: “We are depositing artefacts for future archaeologists to excavate... These facts will confirm the existence of this people we are positing. Creating facts in the ground,” to which Voice 2/psychologist replies: “And in turn support any descendants’ claims to the land, de facto creating a nation”. This scene and the following, where Voice 1 adds: “Our actions are historical interventions. I’m trespassing in the catacombs of the past, tagging each wall on my way,” are a comment on mythologizing tendency in Zionist historiography,⁵ on its tampering with archives, and concurrent erasure of Palestinian presence from off the ground: “Ever since I can remember, it was a time of disappearance. The bereavement, both material

and aesthetic. Smells, sounds, views, the very sense of motion. All gone.” This line echoes comments by Israeli revisionist historians on the ethnic cleansing of Palestine (Pappe).

Seen from the Palestinian perspective, Voice 1/Sansour’s act of narrative terrorism is in fact a form of restoration. It is intended to disrupt the Zionist narrative and is presented as an artificial intervention only to restore some level of historical truth to the experience of Palestinians and their relations to the land. Confronting what Leopold Lambert calls “Bulldozer’s politics,” that is Israel’s organised creation of the Palestinian ruin since 1948, Sansour is replanting archaeological artefacts, “adding new numbers, messing with their maths,” and thus profoundly troubling the archive.

The same move is perceptible in Shawky’s *Cabaret Crusades*, inspired by Amin Maalouf’s *The Crusades Through Arab Eyes*. The trilogy translates Shawky’s artistic response to the violence not only of the episodes recounted in the archives but also to the violence which is constitutive of the act of archiving itself. Revisiting the Crusades through Arab eyes and doing so in the West is an act of subversion both on the part of Maalouf the novelist and Shawky the artist. However, beyond the construction of a counter-narrative, Shawky’s art does draw the attention of the viewer on the fictive nature of all archiving attempts.

Indeed, the scene in Maalouf which fascinated Shawky is the Council of Clermont, where Pope Urban II addressed a congregation of 300 French clerics and laymen and which is said to have triggered the first Crusade, because there is not just one version of the scene but at least five extant (Hirsch, interview with Shawky). More than any clear statement of the Pope, these archives, written sometimes ten years after the event, reveal the chroniclers’ views regarding the role of the papacy

and Islam more than anything else. As Georg Strack argued, amongst the five main sources, only three emanate from chroniclers who attended the event (Fulcher of Chartres, Robert the Monk, and Baldric, archbishop of Dol), and even these do not entirely dovetail. His conclusions are that Robert the Monk and Baudri narrated the events more than ten years after the synod of Clermont in order to support a new campaign backed up by the French court to the Holy Land and “in order to provide other writers and preachers with a wide range of rhetorical devices and arguments” (Strack 44-45). On the other hand, Fulcher’s eyewitness account, written five years after Clermont, uses the simplicity of style of papal oratory and is not part of a propagandist effort.

What emerges from this episode and from Shawky’s screenplay is the notion that archive means reconstruction and it requires strategy. Shawky places the archive on the same level as other types of narration but recognizes the aura of truth bestowed on it. Shawky’s art unveils the mechanics and politics of the archive; it emphasizes the need to recognize that historical narratives can only be political reconstructions of the past, for better and for worse, and that as such they can only purvey partial versions. Shawky’s call is not to dismiss the archive but to dispel belief in the archive, in its purity, in its solidity, in its uniformity. This point is crucial to understand in what ways Shawky’s art differs from projects, such as that of Maalouf. Shawky brings trouble in the Western archive of the Crusades not simply by shifting perspectives but by showcasing perspectivism itself.

The trilogy complicates a strictly adversarial use of the archives and highlights both the secular motivations of the European Crusaders and the competition and violence among Arab leaders, who plot against each other and use assassination to get rid of factional enemies. Furthermore, marionettes play more than one role and shift

between the Arab and the European sides, indicating a shared history of violence. Finally, it is crucial to underline that Shawky rewrites the history of these violent encounters not from outside Europe but that trouble occurs from inside. Part I corresponds to the period when Shawky was an artist in residence at the Fondazione Pistoletto in Biella, Italy, and the marionettes he used for “The Horror Show File” belong to the Lupi Collection in Turin. Part II was produced in Aubagne, France, where Shawky had *santon* figurine designers produce the marionettes for the film-performance (Sapiega 17). Finally, “The Secrets of Karbala” was created in Murano (Venice), where the glass figurines were created, and Düsseldorf, in Germany. Part III constitutes a further turn of the screw, with a renewed emphasis on the breakability of narratives, from wood, to clay, and then transparent glass. Shawky’s films bring together local craft with Eastern cartography and retell the story of the Crusades not from a strictly Eastern perspective but, to borrow the concept from Mary Louise Pratt, from an unstable “contact zone” or, in Homi Bhabha’s terms, an “in-between” space, where East and West intersect and cross-feed.

Creating trouble in the archive means explaining how the archive is not a fact picked up from the ground but an institutionalised object at best constructed by the state and by the historian and at worst instrumentalised by them. Shawky’s trilogy is organised in a series of *tableaux* thus highlighting the fact that the history of the Crusade is always the result of a selection. Each *tableau* is interrupted by a black screen, the purpose of which is not only, as has been argued, to let visitors come in and out of the room easily, but also to underscore the cuts and mark them in black, as in official documents which are redacted to obliterate the names of people. Furthermore, elements of theatricality are emphasised by showing the strings attached

to the marionettes,⁶ and by alternating chorus with recitatives, which creates an intertextual reference to ancient Greek tragedy.

Thus, Sansour and Shawky's works are not just about turning the tables and creating oppositional narratives to the dominant archive. The risk with contra-discourses, as exemplified with Maalouf,⁷ is to reproduce the very Manichean vision of the world one was trying to initially escape from. Rather, Sansour and Shawky are preoccupied with the idea of control and manipulation of the past and construction of archives as regimes of truth. To them, cohesiveness and homogeneity are suspicious, and interpreted not as a given but as the result of an authoritative gesture powerful enough to silence other disjunctive memorial forms and contents. Their artistic works question "the laws of what can be said" (Foucault 129) and how it is said or, to paraphrase Foucault again, the discursive modes of the laws' enunciability (129). By doing so, they establish ontology and hermeneutic of the archive based on precariousness, and foreground that which pertains to its contingent nature and the selective memory it establishes.

2. Precariousness in the Archive and Consequences for Present and Future

Generations

Refusing simplistic representations and Manichean readings of the past and present, both Sansour and Shawky bring to the fore elements of hybridity, permutation and ambivalence. Their artistic projects define new modes of interaction with history and with identity that are based not on deprivation but on precariousness, with the acute notion of the fragility, instability, and plurality that constitutes identities, both at individual and national levels. Precariousness has the word "care" as its root. Realising that identities are precarious, and if maintained then precariously so, means

that there is no such thing as a given identity, that constructing one's identity requires tending, nurturing, care, and presupposes a relinquishing of any sense of entitlement.

To puppeteers and historians of art, there is a symbolic reading of the marionette that has to do with ambivalence, hybridity, and permutation. Jacques Sapiega commented on this aspect when he wrote: "La marionette hante la frontière entre la vie et la mort. Son formage à partir de l'argile ne fait qu'ajouter à cette dimension :il accentue la rêverie et le trouble qui s'y rattachent" (41) ["The marionette is a haunting presence at the frontier between life and death. The fact that it is shaped out of clay only adds to this dimension: it accentuates dreaming and the uncanny aspect related to it" (my translation)]. The marionettes created for the trilogy partake of a "hauntology" (Derrida 4, 7, 99-101) and occupy a space between the world of animate and inanimate beings, between animal and human life. They are made of earth and air and defy the force of gravity: "Like elves, the puppets need only to touch upon the ground, and the soaring of their limbs is newly animated through this momentary hesitation; we dancers need the ground to rest upon and recover from the exertion of the dance" (von Kleist 24).

The marionette lends itself to a fascinating reflection not only on the question of control and the mechanics of historiography, with the hidden presence of the puppeteer handling the control bars from behind and the visibility of the strings attached to the puppets, but also on the question of gravity, balance, and grace. Indeed, the marionette is controlled by the puppeteer but that control requires precision and acute concentration. As Irène Lentini comments, the puppeteer, who cannot see the feet of the marionette touching the ground from the platform on which s/he is perched, has to work "à la sensation" ("by feel"; Sapiega 47).

The presence of the strings reveals not only a form of control but also entails an awareness on the part of the one who handles the bars and pulls the strings of the very precariousness of that control. In other words, the puppeteer operates but is also up to a certain extent operated by the marionette, which acts as an extension of his/her body. The line that the puppets follows is equated by von Kleist to “the path to the soul of the dancer,” and this cannot be found unless “the puppeteer placed himself in the centre of gravity of the marionette; that is to say, in other words, that the puppeteer danced” (23). These permutations destabilise the ontology of being based on a clear distinction between self and other, man and nature, the animate and the inanimate worlds.

Similarly, the length of strings and the hooks placed on the marionettes are chosen with precision because any mistakes at this stage have consequences for the ways in which the marionette will be able to move. The business of attaching the strings and adjusting their length, tension, and control bars is called in French “ensecrètement,” from the word “secret,” because traditionally the puppet makers had to swear not to reveal the secrets of his/her calculations (*Encyclopédie mondiale des arts de la marionnette* 238, 273, 184). In this configuration, knowledge is understood as rare and contingent, not accessible to everyone and from everywhere, also not everlasting.

Precariousness also affects the frontier between history and fiction. Shawky emphasises this point when he accounts for the title of *Cabaret Crusades*: “Le cabaret, c’est la scène du spectacle de l’Histoire. L’ambiguïté dans tout cela c’est qu’il y a une part de réalité et une part de spectacle. Mais pour moi qui ne peut croire à une seule version de l’Histoire, c’est fondamental d’être dans cette incertitude” (Sapiega 34) [“The cabaret is the stage on which History takes place. The ambiguity in all this is

that it is part reality and part spectacle. But for me who cannot believe in only one version of history, it is crucial to remain in that state of indeterminacy” (my translation)].

Shawky’s point is to assert that history is not all fiction and fiction not all history but to accept to live in and with ambiguities and uncertainties about the versions of the past we use and the interpretation of the present or prospect for the future we provide, and about the capacity of these modes to translate elsewhere. In Shawky’s films, there is no attempt to maintain an illusion of reality. In that sense, his performances borrow from Brechtian theatre, which conceives of drama as the deployment of alienation effects. For instance, the systematic use of Arabic for both Arabs and Crusaders, including Pope Urban II, creates *Entfremdung* with regard to narration and defamiliarise the relation of the viewer to language itself.

Similarly, the de-naturalisation of setting and the systematic use of two-dimensional backgrounds further undermine the *effet de réel* otherwise used in historiography. The setting for Part II is modelled on the Turkish miniatures found in Matrakçı Nasuh’s *Beyan-i Menazil*, which do not comply with the one-point perspective but with the global perspective, offering views of buildings from a multiplicity of angles. This type of perspective is also called simultaneous as it allows the viewer to see the unseen parts of buildings too. As Philippe Comar reminds us in *La perspective en jeu*: “Choisir une perspective suppose une véritable philosophie de l’espace. Une image ne représente pas seulement le monde, elle dévoile la conception qu’on en a” (83) [“Choosing a perspective presupposes a genuine philosophy of space. An image does not simply represent the world. It unveils the conception that we have of it” (my translation)]. In Part III of *Cabaret Crusades*, the stage has changed to revolving platforms, thus linking up the movements of history with the

movements of the planets. It invites viewers to take a step back and replace this historical episode of the Crusades in a much wider frame. It also sets history in motion and implies a refusal of fixed interpretations and one-sided visions.

Creating her new art installation and film around broken pieces of porcelain plates, Sansour reveals the same acute sense of the fragmentary and fragile nature of our relationships with time and space. *In the Future* precariously hinges on a series of disjunctions, for instance between diegesis and setting, when voice continues uninterrupted while settings abruptly change from black background to post-apocalyptic landscape and vice versa. The film constantly shifts ground, from personal to historical narrative, from localized to utopian spaces, and the images mix time periods. Indeed, it is both and at the same time the voice of a woman trying to come to terms with the death of a sister and the story of a country dispossessed and bereaved. The personal dream morphs into civilizational allegory with mythological and Biblical undertones when Voice 1/Sansour avers: “I often picture myself draped in cloth on my deathbed... feverish and sweating, my body making imprints in the fabric... becoming my own civilisation’s Shroud of Turin”. The shrouded body of the female resistance leader performs as the allegory of the Arab civilisation, and of the Palestinian nation, planting archives in its name.

The line between identifiable and unidentifiable locations is also porous. The hills and the desert, the motif of the *keffiyeh*, the dresses women wear on the photographs, the constant reference to Jesus of Nazareth and early Christianity, are clues that all converge on Palestine. And identifying the location is politically crucial, given the destruction of Palestinian villages during the Nakba⁸ and the on-going erasure of Palestine until this day, eaten away by Israeli settlements. Yet this heightened sense of location is at the same time a u-topia, a no-place zone. When

Voice 1 says: “It gets dark early out here in the desert. There’s no artificial lighting for miles,” Voice 2 immediately rejoins: “But you are no longer in the desert, remember?”.

The film mixes the personal and the historical levels, *topos* and *u-topos*, but also time periods. It is both the utopian project of an intervention into the future and a traumatic return into the past. The closing words of the film repeat the first ones in a loop and do not bring outcomes and clear-cut solutions to the situation: “Sometimes I dream of porcelain falling from the sky, like ceramic rain. At first it’s only a few pieces, falling slowly like autumn leaves. I’m in it, silently enjoying it. But then the volume increases, and soon it’s a porcelain monsoon, like a biblical plague.”

Furthermore, the line separating states of being is often crossed. The elements belonging to the setting are a strange mix of animate bodies that stand, walk, and breathe and inanimate pictures from the Ottoman period, the Second World War, and of old bearded men resembling Biblical patriarchs. In the film, the hooded woman is often represented walking among these pictures. Conversely, Sansour uses CGI to animate the photographs, like the sepia picture of a Palestinian woman in traditional dress holding the tube of a long pipe from which loops of smoke emanate. The picture contains both kinesis and stasis – from something absolutely inert, life and movement appear, just as living bodies are often pictured in static postures with eyes closed or wide open, talking but with their lips not moving.

Finally, interpretation is destabilized by the insertion of irony. The option put forward by the Palestinian resistance leader of creating archives and scattering them on a massive scale is both a denunciation of Zionist historiography but also a reproduction of its *modus operandi*. Similarly, Sansour undermines their reliability by comparing the plates to other holy objects, such the Shroud of Turin, which was

proved by three radiocarbon dating tests to date back to the Middle Ages and not from the time of Jesus Christ. She also articulates a critical comment on contemporary recyclings of the Palestinian struggle, reduced to the symbol of the *keffiyeh* and marketed into plates lined up on a production belt. Irony is what fundamentally destabilises discursive positions and puts narratives on the edge.

3. Art as Archive.

The potency of Sansour's and Shawky's artistic performances stems not only from the fact that they produce counter-discourses to dominant readings of the past. It also lies in the articulation of *other* regimes of truth and *other* archives for the future, a future where the West tells its own story also in Arabic.

Many remarks in Sansour's film may be heard meta-reflexively. The interventions planned by Voice 1 *in* the film are what Sansour hopes to achieve *with* her film – i.e. remapping Palestinian presence in a Western collective imaginary which has been colonized by the Israeli map. When the voice of the psychoanalyst says: "Isn't what you're envisioning just a polemic utopia?" Voice 1 answers: "This isn't just an academic exercise. I'm not defending a thesis here", implying that her intervention is not just idealistic but one with immediate practical consequences.

Indeed, in the presentation of her project *Archeology in Absentia*, Sansour explains: "The coordinates of each porcelain deposit are established during a real-life entombment performance taking place in Palestine. Ten deposits will be buried strategically across Palestine/Israel, in collaboration with local art institutions." In other words, Sansour, through the figure of the resistance leader, is preparing archaeological ammunitions for others to complete her Palestinian mission:

Voice 2: Why did you decide to make archaeology your battleground?

Voice 1: It was already a frontline. Our rulers built a nation on archaeology. It's no longer about history. It's an epistemology, a tool for shaping minds, aiming to produce a cohesive national imagination. Projecting a state into the past supports the idea of historical entitlement. It's really clever.

Voice 2: But scientifically unsound.

Voice 1: Scientific rigor is irrelevant.

Voice 2: I'm just trying to understand.

Voice 1: In its most perverted form, archaeology galvanises public sentiment, confirms myths of the past and defends them against scrutiny. Now we are part of that game, too.

Voice 2: Why porcelain?

Voice 1: Crockery resonates with our idea of the past. Every civilisation has crockery. Porcelain happens to be the trademark of this people. Every civilisation also has skeletons, but so far we haven't buried any people....

Voice 2: How did you manipulate the age of the porcelain?

Voice 1: It's not exactly child's play, but it's not alchemy either. A buried ceramic object absorbs water and radiation at a steady rate. Ceramic dating simply measures the amounts. By saturating our porcelain with high doses of both, we add hundreds of years to its age.

Voice 2: And the carbon dating?

Voice 1: Our method is not yet reliable, but we will do further tests as corpses become available, and eventually scatter them across the ages.

Voice 2: You might have a hard time finding volunteers for that.

Voice 1: Feel free to sign up.

Part of this conversation could actually be read as an interview with the artist. However, the moment when a political interpretation is reached, the voice of Sansour as resistance leader closes the debate: “Have we had this conversation before?” By blocking off further discussion, Sansour underlines that art speaks for itself. In a context where Arab writers and artists are constantly asked to comment on Middle-Eastern politics, racism, and Islamophobia, her boycott is crucial. It represents a refusal to be tagged, marketed and recycled as forensic evidence in a political game.

Similarly, Shawky acknowledges: “I can’t imagine myself detached from society, neither as an individual, nor as an artist preoccupied with ongoing social change. I am very much part of all that” (Krystof 29). But he also clearly stated that his art resists readings that are primarily and directly political: “it was not meant to be a translation of what was happening now. It just became clear that things in *Cabaret Crusades* remind you a lot of what is happening today. I did not mean to do it this way at all. I try not to do this – even now. But you cannot escape the reality that are things in history that are repeating” (Krystof 147). Of course, Shawky is well aware of the resonances of the medieval Crusades today and of history repeating itself, after 9/11 and the revival of the crusading spirit under Bush’s administration. However, he also believes that his contribution as a committed artist lies elsewhere, not in mirroring dichotomies but in transcending them. Even if his art resonates with what has occupied the news since 9/11, his intervention is much more general: “I am fascinated by the text as a human creation. For it is a form of human creation. This is what I am really trying to do. Partly I can see that what I am trying to do is criticism, but it is also criticism of the way we believe in history – in written history” (Krystof 147).

Sansour also escapes straightforward recuperation of her work. Indeed, she plants archives not for the present but for the future. When Voice 2 guesses that “only in the future will people learn that this civilisation ate from the finest porcelain,” her voice confirms: “Yes, only then. Very few raptures are instantaneous.” This very strong statement comes at the end of the film and it shows that her art is not about producing immediate reactions to urgent situations but about directing postponed responses. By doing so, art does think in advance of politics, it can intercept the logic of power, and revert it.

A conclusion is perhaps not the most appropriate place to open up a full discussion on utopias and utopianism. Yet, I contend that the concept, as elaborated by Ernst Bloch, Louis Marin, and later reworked by Fredric Jameson, help us understand a key dimension of Sansour’s and Shawky’s projects. It is true that Sansour’s film belongs to the genre of science-fiction and represents a utopia, or rather dystopia, in the sense of an alternative, in the distant future, to the world as we know it. Shawky does not really imagine brave new worlds but rather revisits the past from a different perspective. However, if we understand utopianism not as a mode of representation but as an “impulse” (Bloch) and a “praxis”(Jameson), we reach a most stimulating interpretation of Sansour’s and Shawky’s interventions. Their artistic projects are driven by a utopian impulse that dislodges dominant ideology, reveals perspectives buried and repressed, and “neutralizes” (Jameson, “Of Islands and Trenches” 10) reality in order to critique, rearrange, and hopefully fix it. Sansour and Shawky certainly do not represent utopian (in the sense of better) societies, they do not engage in social dreaming, and do not presuppose that the alternative offered by the other is necessarily a better and less violent one. Yet, by unpacking the mechanics

and politics of the archive, they do give their audiences the tools necessary to rethink notions of belonging and entitlement, to decentre perspectives, and to experiment with social transformation.



Fig. 1. Larissa Sansour, *Archaeology in Absentia*, 20cm bronze sculpture, 2015. 20 Dec. 2016
<http://www.larissasansour.com/Archaeology.html>



Fig. 2. Larissa Sansour, *Revisionist Production Line*, porcelain plates and installation, 2015. 20 Dec. 2016
<http://www.lawrieshabibi.com/exhibitions/45/works/image719/slide/>



Fig. 3. Larissa Sansour, *In the Future, They Ate From the Finest Porcelain*, photomontage, 2015. 20 Dec. 2016
<http://www.lawrieshabibi.com/exhibitions/45/works/artworks2134/slide/>



Fig. 4. Larissa Sansour, *In the Future, They Ate From the Finest Porcelain*, photomontage, 2015. 20 Dec. 2016
<http://www.lawrieshabibi.com/exhibitions/45/works/artworks2133/slide/>



Fig. 5. Wael Shawky, still from *Cabaret Crusades II: The Path to Cairo*, HD film, 2012. 20 Dec. 2016
<http://www.lissongallery.com/artists/wael-shawky/gallery/7496>



Fig. 6. Wael Shawky, still from *Cabaret Crusades III: The Secrets of Karbala*, HD film, 2014. 20 Dec. 2016
<http://www.lissongallery.com/artists/wael-shawky/gallery/7493>

Fig. 7. Wael Shawky, Marionette from *Cabaret Crusades III: The Secrets of Karbala*, Murano glass, 55 x 10 x 17 cm / 21 5/8 x 4 x 6 5/8 in, 2014. 20 Dec. 2016
<http://www.lissongallery.com/artists/wael-shawky/gallery/7502>



Fig. 8. Wael Shawky, Picture of a marionette from *Cabaret Crusades II: The Path to Cairo*, Inkjet print on Crane Museo Max paper 62x42 cm (paper size), 2012. 20 Dec. 2016
<http://www.blouinartinfo.com/photo-galleries/slideshow-wael-shawky-at-londons-serpentine-galleries?image=5>



Recommended video clips/trailers:

Larissa Sansour

<https://vimeo.com/148158228>

<https://www.ibraaz.org/channel/157>

Wael Shawky

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r7U-pqjdHIY>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-Lf5WaeW0Ow>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VORQ60cw5NQ>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XnUHKmfNxEG>

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¹Larissa Sansour studied Fine Arts in Copenhagen, London, and New York. WaelShawky studied Fine Arts in Alexandria and at the University of Pennsylvania. The trilogy *Cabaret Crusades* was conceived between Italy, France, and Germany. *In the Future* was created between London and Copenhagen with Søren Lind.

² "un lieu de mémoire dans tous les sens du mot va de l'objet le plus matériel et concret, éventuellement géographiquement situé, à l'objet le plus abstrait et intellectuellement construit. Il peut donc s'agir d'un monument, d'un personnage important, d'un muse, des archives, tout autant que d'un symbole, d'une devise, d'une évenement ou d'une institution" (Nora 1: xvii).

³ "Against the framework that understands collective memory as competitive memory – a zero-sum struggle over scarce resources – I suggest that we consider memory as multidirectional: as subject to on-going negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing, as productive and not privative" (Rothberg 3).

⁴ I am quoting here from the beginning of the movie when Voice 2 (psychoanalyst) asks Voice 1 (Sansour): “You call yourself a narrative terrorist. Aren’t you asking for trouble?” to which Sansour replies: “Of course.”

⁵ See Gelber, Likhovski, Morris, Ram, Sand, Shapira and Penslar for insightful analyses of this tendency.

⁶ Introducing the exhibition *Cabaret Crusades* at MoMA PS1, Shawky made his intent clear: “The puppets’ strings clearly refer to the idea of control. The work also implies a criticism of the way history has been written and manipulated” (Wael Shawky).

⁷ Historians have censured Amin Maalouf for failing to use his own sources with the critical distance required of the discipline and for producing a mirror version of Orientalism. See in French, <http://www.histoire-pour-tous.fr/livres/67-essais/684-qlorient-au-temps-des-croisadesq.html>.

⁸ The Nakba, meaning catastrophe in Arabic, refers to the displacement of an approximated 700,000 Palestinians in the period that preceded and followed the Israeli Declaration of Independence in 1948. See Kalidi (1992) and Morris (2003) for further information on the exodus.