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The Imaginal World and Modern Oblivion: Kiarostami's Zig-Zag¹

A zigzag path carved into a hill winds from base to crest, where it is crowned by a lushly-leaved tree standing solitary and upright like a kind of hieratic bouquet: this image recurs in three films – *Where Is the Friend's House?* (1987); *Life and Nothing More* (1992); and *Through the Olive Trees* (1994) – which critics refer to as “the Koker trilogy,” simply because they are all set in the same location, the village of Koker in Northern Iran. Easily mistaken for a “found” image, part of the natural geography of the films’ actual setting, the recurrence of the image would seem to raise no questions nor require explanation. And yet there can be no confusing this image with natural geography, for as we learn from interviews, the films’ director, Abbas Kiarostami, did not just stumble upon this peculiar landscape while scouting locations. He had his film crew carve the pronounced zigzag path into the hill.

An *artificial* landscape, then, inserted by Kiarostami into the natural setting, it replicates, as it turns out, a miniature found in a manuscript executed at Shiraz in southern Persia at the end of the fourteenth century.² In the miniature, just as in the Koker trilogy, a sinuous path curls up the side of a hill atop which sprouts a single, flowering tree. This miniature graces the cover of *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth*, a book on Islamic philosophy in which the book’s author, the influential Iranologist, Henry Corbin, praises the miniature as “the best illustration... which has come down to us today” of what he calls “visionary geography.”³ Distinct from natural geography or physically “situated space,” which is organized according to pre-established coordinates, visionary geography is, instead, “situative.” Neither purely abstract nor purely concrete and sensible, visionary geography is a “third” or intermediary realm between the abstract and

¹ An earlier version of this text, titled “The Fate of the Image in Church History and the Modern State,” appeared in the open access journal, *Politica Comun*, 1 (2/2012).

² Henry Corbin, *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth: From Mazdean Iran to Shi’ite Iran*, trans. Nancy Pearson, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1955, p. 31.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

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the sensible; it functions as a creative forecourt of sensible reality, as the origin of [actual] spatial references and [that which] determines their structure.”⁴ In this realm the sense-perceptible is raised and pure intelligibility lowered to the same level, matter is immaterialized and spirit corporealized or, “to use a term currently in favor,” Corbin adds, “an *anamorphosis* is produced.”⁵ In Arabic this intermediate space is called *alam-al-mithal*: Corbin translated it: *monde imaginal*, the imaginal world.

Theorized under different names by different philosophers or left unnamed, the imaginal world only became visible as a fundamental concept of Islamic philosophy thanks to Corbin’s decision to gather the disparate reflection under this one term. In the words of Christian Jambet, Corbin’s most famous follower, this felicitous translation “opened a new path” in the study of Islam and gave us “nothing less than a master signifier with which to decipher the meaning and destiny of [the] [Islamic] soul.”⁶

Corbin did more however than restore the concept to its central place in Islamic thought; he became its vigorous advocate and bemoaned the consequences, into the present, of its regrettable loss. In his estimation, the year 869 AD, i.e., the year of the Fourth Council of Constantinople, was a decisive turning point, for from this moment on the *mundus imaginalis* fell permanently under the penumbra of its anathematization. During the fourth century a series of Councils were convened to hammer out Church dogma in order to establish the Church as a central, unified authority. If it was specifically the Fourth Council that inspired Corbin’s lament, this is no doubt because it was at this Council that Photios I, the Great Patriarch of Constantinople, was deposed in retaliation for his condemnation of the *filioque* clause. A Latin addition to the earlier Greek creed, the *filioque* clause stated that the Holy Spirit proceeds from both God, the Father, and “from the Son.” That is, it accorded Christ equal divinity with the Father and thus “abolishe[d] once and for all the tripartite anthropology of spirit, soul, and body in favor of the simple duality of body and soul.” By deposing the most powerful critic of the *filioque*, the Council signaled its embrace of the double

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⁴ Ibid., p. 20.

⁵ Henry Corbin, *The Voyage and the Messenger: Iran and Philosophy*, trans. Joseph Rowe, North Atlantic Books, Berkeley 1998, p. 128.

⁶ Christian Jambet, *The Act of Being: The Philosophy of Revelation in Mulla Sadra*, trans. Jeff Fort, Zone Books, New York 2006, p. 284.

procession of the Holy Spirit and from this moment on, according to Corbin's stinging denunciation, "the way was open [to] the Cartesian dualism of thought and extension. For, from this moment it became impossible to conceive of Spiritual Forms in the *plastic* sense of the term [as having a capacity for change] or of true substances that were fully real and had extension even though they were separated from the dense matter of the world."⁷ In other words, what was at stake was a materialism that did not found itself in matter.

What was anathematized at this moment – and so thoroughly so that we have since come to associate its execration not just with the Church Council, but with the triumph of secularism – what was anathematized is the world of "subtle matter" (a matter that was neither purely spiritual nor purely material) and an organ of knowledge, the imagination, distinct from both the intellect and the senses. The impoverishment of the status of the prophetic imagination and the images formed there – which would henceforth come to be regarded as simply unreal, mere fantasy – went hand in glove with an impoverishment of reality itself, which, too, began to lose its dignity.⁸ The dualistic thinking of Western metaphysics is, then, in Corbin's estimation, the direct issue of *the* fundamental dogma of Christianity: God's incarnation in the person of Christ.

Ostentatio Corpus

What Corbin objected to was the Church's decision to view God's *appearance* as Christ as a unique historical occurrence located at a precise and irreversible moment of chronological time, rather than as an event that happens repeatedly at different moments in time and uniquely to each of the faithful. The latter position is the one adopted and collectively defended by the *falasifa*, ie the Islamic philosophers who took their inspiration from Avicenna and who taught that the soul expresses itself in an aspiration toward the still unrealized and not, as

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⁷ Christopher Bamford, "Introduction," *The Voyage and the Messenger*, xxi. Although he says that he is quoting Corbin directly, Bamford does not provide references to specific texts in this introduction.

⁸ A troubling, if humorous, illustration of this demotion of the imagination is given in Barry Mazur, *Imagining Numbers*, New York, Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 2003, which quotes an editor at McGraw-Hill: "We were told [while composing high school history textbooks] to avoid using the word 'imagine' because people in Texas felt it was too close to the word 'magic' and therefore might be considered anti-Christian," p. 15.

Averroes held, in an intellectual desire to know God.⁹ For the *falasifa*, the uncreated, the divine, had to be returned to repeatedly and ceaselessly created, for theirs was a world whose ends were not already given. It was this belief that set them in direct conflict with Church dogma, which maintained that the godhead passed over into, or became incarnated in, esoteric matter, in a single finite Being and that this fact was publicly and universally attestable.

Broadly construed, the dogma of Incarnation concerns a central paradox not just of Christianity, but of monotheism in general. Far more than a simple reduction of the polytheistic pantheon to a single God, monotheism was a “revolution of cosmic proportions” in that it introduced a new, previously unthinkable being into the world.¹⁰ Instead of merely reducing the many to one, monotheism – in order to make the One-God the God of all – radically *rethought* the One, conceiving it not as identical but as always more or less than itself. One and yet plural, one only through its plurality. Christ offered a perfect illustration of this conception, for he was at once God and not identical to Him, different but inseparable from Him, the second person of God.

Still, the precise statement of the paradox entailed a protracted debate, one that lasted centuries and began even before the First Council of Nicea (326 AD), when the doctrine was first asserted. It should be noted that Corbin aims at a specific, literal conception of the dogma of Incarnation, one that tended to congeal rather than multiply the One. We can approach his argument by clarifying a possible confusion that might result from his precise dating of the theo-philosophical disaster that dispensed with the imaginal world to embrace instead the human/divine duality. The synod of 869 is notable not only for having thrown

⁹ Henry Corbin, *Alone with the Alone: Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn ‘Arabi*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1969, p. 71.

¹⁰ Henry Corbin, *Le Paradoxe du Monotheisme*, Paris, L’Herne, 1981, consists of three essays that lay out the paradoxes of Islamic monotheism, the importance of its angelology, and the main tenets of its apophatic theology. In a conversation with Fethi Benslama titled “Tranductions des monotheismes,” in *Cliniques mediterraneennes*, 73 (2006), Jean-Luc Nancy represents monotheism as a mutation of cosmology; this essay was translated by Ed Pluth as “Translation of Monotheism” and published in the on-line journal, *S*, 2 (2009), in a special issue devoted to “Islam and Psychoanalysis,” ed. Sigi Jöttkandt and Joan Copjec. See also *Imago Dei. The Byzantine Apology for Icons*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London 1990, where Jaroslav Pelikan discusses the conception of Christ as the creation of a “new being.”

its support on the side of the *filioque* clause, but also for reaffirming support for the iconophiles, who had battled the iconoclasts in two long and bitter wars (between 730-787 and between 813 – 842 AD) over the status of the image. (While these bloody image wars have often been viewed as a doctrinal disguise for mundane struggles for political power, it has been shown that the reverse was true. We will return to this point later.) Now, that the Church embraced both the image and the *filioque* in the same breath would seem to cast doubt on Corbin's linkage of a reductive dualism with the devaluation of the image – but only if the questions is: “Who won the wars; the detractors or defenders of images?” The real question is, “Which definition of the image prevailed?” And the answer to this is: not the one for which the iconophiles fought.

The question the iconophiles had to confront was, “How can material, man-made images be conceived as images of a limitless, immaterial God?” St. John of Damascus (676 – 749) disarmed the iconoclast of their single most powerful weapon, the prohibition against “graven images,” by arguing that God himself suspended the prohibition when he instituted a new world order by incarnating himself in Christ, who is, significantly referred to, in 2 Corinthians 4:4, as “the image of the invisible God.” Violating/fulfilling His own law, God lifted its custodianship when He moved out of Himself, as it were, becoming Christ while remaining God at the same time. This act of procession, which defines the plural unity of God, makes Him an image of Himself, leads John continuously to pose questions about the nature of images and what it means to “depict” God. An image, he explains, is “a likeness and pattern and impression of something, showing itself in what is depicted; however...the image is one thing and what is depicted is another – and certainly a difference is seen between them, since they are not identical.”¹¹ It should be noted that John did not endorse the *filioque* clause, for he did not regard “Christ the image” as consubstantial with God. Immaterial, infinite, God is by definition without image in the material, finite sense. Images thus do not give us “direct knowledge” of what they depict but instead allow us to see that “the depicted” lay hidden.¹² For John and other iconophiles, the primary function of the image was to bore a hole, an opening, in the visible world through which the invisible could shine through. The Fourth

¹¹ St. John of Damascus, *Three Treatises on the Divine Images*, trans. and intro. Andrew Louth, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood 2003, *Treatise III*, p. 95.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 96.

Council of Constantinople abandoned the terms of the original debate, however. Up to this point the debate had centered on the difficult question of *God's* image – how can there be an image of God? – but the more simple issue of *Christ's* image. Not Christ as an image of God (as He was formerly conceived), but Christ's image as a pedagogical tool. That is, in 869 a pedagogical imperative usurped the terms of the debate as it assumed the task of elevating the image to the status of the Word. Images of Christ were now revalued for their ability to depict for the skeptical illiterates who made up a large portion of the Church's membership, the historical events of Christ's life on earth, his *unique* status as the image of God. Not only did this shift dissolve the Trinitarian conception of the divine, it dissolved, too the entire tissue of relations between God and man which the image conceived as icon had opened. No longer epiphanized in the variegated likenesses of men, no longer a multiplier of images, the One-God now became congealed through His instantiation in the single image of Christ. Images began to be accepted by the Church on the grounds that they performed the function of representing the unique historical events of the life and death of Christ, as embodiment of God.

The effect of this was epoch-making; for all at once *images lost their translucency and became opaque*. Iconophiles distinguished icons from idolatrous images on the grounds that the former opened onto a dimension that would otherwise remain absolutely invisible. They valued icons for the way they allowed the light of the hidden, the withdrawn, to shine through them. What this light illuminated was our *intimate relation to the divine, not the divine itself*, whose privileged obscurity was preserved. Once images were revalued for their illustrative rather than illuminating function, they were no longer conceived as portals, passage-ways, between the invisible and the visible and came to be regarded instead as if they “were [themselves] the light that reveal[ed them] and [made them] visible.”¹³

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At the moment it ceased to shine through images from an invisible source, the meaning of light itself shifted. Once conceived as the phenomenon designated by the Latin *lumen*, light was at this point reconceived as *lux*.¹⁴ The general

¹³ Henry Corbin, “Theophanies and Mirrors. Idols or Icons?” *Spring*, 2 (1983), p. 2.

¹⁴ Relevant discussions of the widely observed distinction between *lumen* and *lux* can be found in Hans Blumenberg, “Light as a Metaphor for Truth: At the Preliminary Stage of Philosophical Conception Formation,” *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision*, ed. David Michael Levin, Berkeley and London, University of California Press, 1993, pp. 30 – 62; and

outline of this historical shift might be described thus: *lumen* was attributed to an invisible source; the dazzling brilliance with which it became manifest as each image-locus rendered that image unique, singular. In contrast, the point from which *lux* emanated was no longer *real* (understood here as the point of an encounter not with an ultimate but a withdrawn ground) but *abstract*.¹⁵ When Corbin complains that the dogma of incarnation commits a grievous error by turning God's appearance, his image, into a publicly and universally attestable fact instantiated in an object, or in "exoteric matter," he is objecting to the way that dogma "de-luminated" the world, bathing it in an abstract source of light that shined "indiscriminately on every object."¹⁶ *Lux* lights a world with no hidden dimensions, a world in which all can be revealed, for when no distance separates what is seen from the invisible source of illumination, then everything can come into the light or "become objective to itself in reflection."¹⁷ Islamic philosophy is a philosophy, then, precisely of *illumination*, that is to say, of *lumen*. The locus of illumination was called "soul," the inwardness unique to each individual who maintains a relation to another dimension. These terms will lead you astray, however, if the peculiar topology of the *falasifa*, according to which what is most "internal" or "esoteric" turns out to be *external* to the subject is not taken into account. We will come back to this later.

Now if these historical alterations of the conception of images and light did take place after the Fourth Council, we should be able to provide evidence of the shift and from there demonstrate what was lost. As it happens, we do not have far to look. We find it in the very place one would expect to: in the changing iconography of Christ. Art historians have long observed that while in the early centuries, Christ was usually depicted as a *puer aeternus*, an eternally youthful boy in whose form the light of divinity seemed to shine through, in later centuries, after the concept of the incarnation had been more fully established as the centerpiece of Christian orthodoxy, the earlier manner of depicting him was abandoned in

in Tom Cheetham, *After Prophecy. Imagination, Incarnation, and the Unity of the Prophetic Tradition*, Spring Books, New Orleans 2007, p. 90, p. 95.

¹⁵ William Chittick, *Ibn al-'Arabi's Metaphysics of Imagination. The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, SUNY Press, Albany 1989, p. 11.

¹⁶ Cheetham, p. 90.

¹⁷ Blumenberg, p. 50.

favor of images in which he was pictured – Corbin states the observation very discreetly – as a “mature man with signs of a differentiated virility.”¹⁸

This very point is made much less obliquely in a book-length study of representations of Christ in Renaissance art in which the art historian, Leo Steinberg, reproduces hundreds of images that persuasively show that Christ’s fully rendered genitalia were insistently placed on display in the art of the period.¹⁹ It seems that it had become necessary by about 1260, the time the broad movement of the Renaissance began, to demonstrate that the Son of God was “complete in all the parts of a man.” This meant that even when the subject of a woodcut or painting was not a man, but happened instead to be the infant Jesus, it was not his glowing heart, but the unmistakable and ostentatiously displayed presence of his penis, his publicly confessed “flesh,” that greeted the spectator’s eye.

Around the 246 figures reproduced in *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion*, Steinberg weaves a scholarly and visually astute argument that, among other things, covers much of the same ground as Corbin’s argument does. Steinberg, too, makes a point of distinguishing the Renaissance depiction of Christ from earlier Byzantine and medieval images of the Christ Child, in which Christ’s body disappears under ceremonial robes that come down to his feet and he “remains an ‘image,’ a Holy Icon, without any admixture of earthly realism.”²⁰ Like Corbin, Steinberg ascribes the distinctive gesture of these Renaissance representations – namely, the *ostentatio genitalium* – to the dogma of incarnation, which had become a dominant pictorial subject during the period. In brief, Steinberg clearly establishes that Renaissance art defined as one of its most important tasks the visualization and proof of the dogma of incarnation. The Iranologist, Corbin, and the art historian, Steinberg, both assert that the fervor behind these later representations of Christ was fueled by a need to quash a principled doubt that still threatened incarnationist theology. Here is Steinberg:

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¹⁸ Corbin, *Alone with the Alone*, p. 276.

¹⁹ Leo Steinberg, *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion*, New York, Pantheon, 1983; this book was originally published as a special issue of *October* 25 (Summer 1983). *The New York Times*, March 15, 2011, praised this book as “one of the most provocative art-historical studies of the 20th century.”

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

[S]ince the Incarnation draws its effectiveness from responsive faith, it would have forfeited that effectiveness, had it been open to legitimate doubt: without proof of blood, the flesh assumed by the godhead might have been thought merely simulated, phantom, deceptive. Such indeed w[as] the pestiferous doctrine advanced more than a thousand years earlier by Docetists [...], those who held Christ's assumed body to have been spiritual, not carnal, so that he only appeared to be suffering.²¹

Now, here precisely is where the art historian and the Iranologist part ways. For, as Corbin will tell you, the “pestiferous doctrine” against which the Quattrocento orators “discharge[d] the full spleen of their rhetoric” in order fervently to embrace the dogma that the godhead had incarnated Himself in the oozing, bleeding, suffering flesh of His son, this “pestiferous doctrine” was never anything more than a feature or tendency of a disorganized mass of Christologies that flourished before the great Church schism. Corbin, however, defends this tendency and transforms it into a resolute feature of the philosophy of illumination, which vigorously challenged the idea that the divinity made merely one appearance at one moment in time. From the Greek noun *dokhema*: a vision or fantasy, but also opinion or expectation; and the verb, *dokeo*, to appear or show itself, but also to think, imagine, credit, admit or expect, Docetism was denounced by the Church for the reasons Steinberg gives. Let us examine a passage from the *Qur'an* (4: 157), chosen by Corbin to demonstrate the “resolute docetism” that subtends it.²² The passage, which unequivocally denies that the Jews killed Christ Jesus, reads like this: “They neither killed nor crucified him, though it so appeared to them. Those who disagree in the matter are only lost in doubt. They have no knowledge of it other than conjecture.”

No matter that its doctrinal status and affiliation with a school are both disputed, this docetist assertion will still strike believers as pestiferous. For, that Christ could not have been killed nor crucified because he never actually existed, that what witnesses saw was not a divine reality but a mere “phantom,” “simulated,” is a claim that seems to touch on a core Christian belief and thus risks being

²¹ Ibid., p. 63.

²² Henry Corbin, “Comparative Spiritual Hermeneutics,” in *Swedenborg and Esoteric Islam*, West Chester, PA, Swedenborg Foundation, Albany 1999, p. 130.

read as a religious and political insult on a grand scale.²³ Fully aware that this passage and his defense of it have the capacity grievously to offend, Corbin nevertheless insists that it is not the passage but the monotonous and misguided derision of docetism that is the source of the problem, for this derision manufactures a misreading of the passage's intent. The *Qur'an* does not deny the existence of Christ, his divine reality, or the reality of his suffering. What it does forcefully deny is that 1) man has the capacity to kill or eradicate the divine; and 2) the divine enters into or incarnates itself in a body or a world, as in a container or tomb. In the docetic conception, the divine does not enter into the world, but comes to its level and thus displaces the world from itself. No longer an enclosure, a container, the world is now out of line with itself, spread out indefinitely without perimeter. This is to say, the Islamic philosophers who exhibit a docetic tendency adamantly maintain that "the other world *already exists in this world*."²⁴ A far cry from the "other world" of dogmatic religion, theirs "has no beginning or end," but is, instead, "perpetually engendered in this world."²⁵ While the world is "existentiated," or comes ceaselessly into existence, there is no Creator, solitary and outside of time, who brings it into existence out of nothing. From this it is possible to see that "far from degrading 'reality' by making it an 'appearance'; [as its detractors charge, docetism] on the contrary, transform[s] reality into 'appearance,' makes [it] transparent to the transcendent ... manifested in it. Thus docetism attaches *no value to a material fact unless it is appearance, that is, unless it is apparition*."²⁶ In brief: docetism argues for the existence of a *material apparition*. This means that it argues for the appearing or becoming of appearance, as the new, out of the existing world.

We will need to say more, however, to elucidate this notion of "material apparition," of a materialism that challenges much of what goes by that name. We can begin by noting what is at issue for Steinberg stands in stark contrast to apparition: the visualization of the material fact of Christ's body, or, as he says much too precipitously, the *sexuality* of Christ. "By harnessing its theological impulse to the attestation of the utter carnality of God's humanation [Steinberg avows], Renaissance artists confronted the incarnation entire, upper and lower body to-

²³ For an extensive discussion of this issue, see Todd Lawson, *The Crucifixion and the Qur'an*, One World Press, Oxford, 2009.

²⁴ Corbin, *Alone with the Alone*, p. 207.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 203.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 244.

gether, not excluding even the Body's sexual component."²⁷ Is it correct to say, however, that by exposing Christ's genitalia, his "sexual parts," Renaissance artists exposed his sexuality? Did they not, rather, inadvertently bring into focus a crucial distinction between the body in its material density and the body as "material apparition," that is to say: the sexualized body? Corbin described the doctrine of incarnation as "the great sin of literalist theologians," and nothing justifies his claim better than the work of these Renaissance artists who attempted to give visual proof of the doctrine. The sin of the literalists consisted in their "assimilation of... *dissimulation* to what it *dissimulates*."²⁸

"Dissimulation" refers to the "epiphanic form" or "apparition" or "image" through which God is manifest, but if the image dissimulates it cannot be by pretending to be what it is not. For, how can that which has no image be assimilated to its image; how can that which is withdrawn from the world be incarnated there? The error of assimilation is equivalent to that of conflating an object that appears in a mirror with the mirror's substrate. In this case the object is no longer suspended in the place of its appearance but collapsed with it. Assimilation reduces, destroys, that which it *manifests as hidden* by claiming to *unveil* it.

Again the question comes back to the meaning of "epiphanic form," "material apparition," "image." What can it mean to say that the divine appears in the world without being collapsible with it, that divine being is "suspended" in the world as image? How can something be fully real and have extension without being reducible to the dense matter of the world? What appears in the world, without being of the same substance, is a radical elsewhere, an other scene, which turns our heads, orients or magnetizes us such that we turn away from the world. What suspends itself in the finite world is not flimsy fantasy but precisely the fully real extension of the ego through its relation to this other place. Extension in this sense characterizes not some thing (*res extensa*) but *relation*; ego extends itself beyond itself and towards what is other to it. Docetism maintains that God appears in the world as our singular relation to Him. *He* is not made flesh, not incarnated in a finite body, as the literalists would have it. Rather, it is the finite bodies of individual beings that are "made flesh," though in a different sense

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²⁷ Steinberg, p. 72.

²⁸ Henry Corbin, "Divine Epiphany and Spiritual Birth in Ismailian Gnosis," in *Cyclical Time and Ismailian Gnosis*, Routledge, New York 1983, p. 106.

now. Through their relation to the unliquidatable otherness of the Divine, they are “subtilized,” rendered capable of an infinity of real acts and irreducible to their vulnerabilities, diseases and death. Since the term, *flesh*, strikes us as too irrevocably tainted by the dogma of incarnation to take on the new meaning we want to give it, we prefer, instead, to speak not of the finite subject’s *becoming flesh*, but rather of its *sexualization*. But this will require that we continue to stress the impropriety of Steinberg’s linking sexuality to incarnation. As developed by Freud, and the discourse he founded, sexuality is, we would argue, resolutely anti-incarnationist. It is no coincidence that a docetic concept of the image survived in notions such as *imago* and *archetype* to play a role in the theorization of sexuality, even though the notions were often poorly understood.

Although we cannot fully this line of argument here, we can sketch its parameters by reflecting a bit on the response of later artists to Renaissance representations of Christ’s sexual organ. We have not yet taken account of the full title of Steinberg’s study, which goes on to take note of the subsequent consignment of the sexuality of Christ to *modern oblivion*. Post-Renaissance artists abruptly reversed course by refraining – even recoiling – from picturing the private parts of the Savior, going so far as to over-paint earlier representations of Christ’s genitalia in order to veil their indecent exposure in Renaissance paintings. Steinberg draws attention to the unique nature of the Renaissance period, which would enjoy no sequel, in stark terms: “Renaissance artists, committed for the first time since the birth of Christ to naturalistic modes of representation, were the *only* group within Christendom whose *métier* required them to plot every inch of Christ’s body.”²⁹ He attributes this explicit mapping of Christ’s body to the historically isolated synthesis of the Christological dogma of incarnation and a naturalistic mode of representation and accounts for the recoil of later artists and audiences from this pictorial fusion of nature and divinity only briefly and in a flat, historicist way. Characterizing the style of Renaissance artists as “incarnational realism,” Steinberg implies that the time would come when realist representation would divest itself of the dogma to which it sought during the Renaissance to give visual proof and would become realism simple. In a later moment the fusion of realism and religion would come to seem distasteful and realism would no longer seem an appropriate style for rendering images of Christ, whose corporality ceased to be considered a proper subject of representation.

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²⁹ Steinberg, p. 16.

In short, outside of a few scandal-provoking works by modern artists, the practice of depicting Christ's genitals was abandoned after the Renaissance because it came to be seen as *pornographic*. I state this more bluntly than Steinberg partially to insert Kiarostami into the discussion of the phenomenon of "modern oblivion." Kiarostami has several times insisted that showing too much, or giving too much information, is "pornographic." How to understand this? In Steinberg's argument the phrase, "modern oblivion," designates the effacement of any representation of Christ's genitalia not only from artistic practice but also from post-Renaissance, or modern, consciousness. We would argue, however, that rather than abandoning or betraying the doctrine of incarnation, a certain "naturalistic mode of representation" *continues in modern consciousness to instantiate the doctrine*, even though the subject of Christ's incarnated body is no longer the subject of most art. That is, it was precisely through the *effacement* of epiphanic forms, or appearance in the strong sense, and the *depiction* of Christ's genitals that a "modern oblivion" began to manifest itself; and the later recoil from this depiction was itself proof of this effacement/oblivion. That is, contra Steinberg, what we see in the reactive reluctance of post-Renaissance artists to merge Christ with the human order is evidence of their continued – if compensatory – adherence to the tenets of incarnational realism.

Recall that Corbin's attacks on the doctrine of incarnation focus on its reduction of the tripartite division of divinity in favor of a simple duality: divine versus finite being, pure spirit versus matter. The problem with simple dualities is the inevitability with which one of the terms usurps the other to produce a hierarchy. Officially the doctrine of incarnation was supposed to benefit humanity, the utter carnality of God's humanation in Christ was said to save man by elevating him above other creatures. Corbin argues that this doctrine resulted, on the contrary, in the demotion of man, and the finite world generally, to the status of opaque matter. In support of Corbin's argument we might enlist an observation of Hegel's regarding a modern form of the opposition between faith and knowledge. He claims that it was for fear of "reducing the sacred Grove to mere timber," that modern subjectivity denied itself God intellectually in order that it might still pine for Him in sighs and prayers.³⁰ Translating this into our terms, we would say that if later artists refused to render the Son of God realistically (as

³⁰ Quoted by Catherine Malabou in *The Future of Hegel: Plasticity, Temporality and Dialectic*, trans., Lisabeth During, Routledge, London and New York 2005, p. 110.

fully incarnate), it was for fear of losing the real God of their faith. Hegel calls attention to the very paradox on which Corbin insists: modern consciousness ended up “build[ing] a rigid and insurmountable opposition between subjectivity in its urge toward the eternal and the eternal itself.” This rigid opposition is the result of a modern obliviousness to, or total obliteration of, all mediation between God and empirical reality, which in turn threatened empirical reality with utter “ineffectuality” and “absolute solitude and aloneness.”³¹

Nietzsche offers an account of the depreciation of finite existence by modern consciousness similar to that of Hegel – despite the fact that his account is mounted as an attack on the Hegel dialectic. Nietzsche complains that by replacing God with a fully incarnated man-God, Hegel reactively demoted this man-god and the terrain He inhabits. “The pitiful cry, ‘God is dead!’ Nietzsche famously claims, does not get rid of God but, on the contrary, gives Him absolute power over us. The synthesis of God with time, becoming, history, and man turns God into an object of synthetic knowledge, at which point death enters God and the ‘centre of gravity’ is thereby shifted ‘out of life into the ‘Beyond.’”³² Put otherwise: that which dissimulates has here so thoroughly assimilated what it dissimulates that God disappears completely from earthly reality and emerges elsewhere, absolutely transcendent and simply apophatic, without relation to the world. This argument does not figure in the account Steinberg gives of the rejection of incarnational realism by post-Renaissance artists, yet the validity of the argument is nevertheless made plain in an observation he makes regarding the actual depiction of Christ’s genitalia in Renaissance art: “the sexual member exhibited by the Christ Child, so far from asserting aggressive virility, conceded instead God’s assumption of human weakness; it is an affirmation not of superior prowess but of... the Creator’s self-abasement to his creature’s condition. And instead of symbolizing... the generative power of nature, Christ’s sexual organ... yields... not seed, but... the first fruits of [his] growing death.”³³

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³¹ Ibid., p. 30.

³² Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale, New York, Penguin Books, 1961, p. 273 This passage is quoted in Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson, Athlone Press, London 1983, p. 152.

³³ Steinberg, pp. 46-47.

Corbin says something strikingly similar: “Incarnated, [Christ] is buried in the flesh until the time comes for him to be buried in the grave.”³⁴ And in terms that echo and significantly alter Hegel’s, he warns that, “The Burning Bush is only a brushwood fire if it is merely perceived by the sensory organs. In order that Moses may perceive the Burning Bush and hear the Voice [of God] calling him,” we must suppose an organ of trans-sensory perception, the creative imagination, and credit the existence of an imaginal world.³⁵ While the sacred Grove rises up, fully transcendent and inaccessible, to offer false hope to the pining world it abandons, the Burning Bush provides radiant testimony of the incorruptibility of finite existence. The insurmountable duality, which tilts in favor of the transcendent Grove, is transformed, becomes passable, by the non-simple addition of the imaginal world, which is nothing other than the inexistent topos of relation. The imaginal topos is populated not by incarnate beings, but by bodily organs that cannot be located *within* any individual body because they are, rather, positioned alongside bodies. If these organs can be said to disincarnate or “incorporealize” the bodies, it is not by negating corporeality but by extending it. They do not tilt a corporeal-spiritual duality in favor of a superiority of the spiritual, but tilt or dislocate corporeality in the direction of surplus. The organs of *trans-sensory perception* – the “trans” marking the movement of extension of the body’s going beyond its reductive localization – *precede and direct* the merely sensory organs. These organs render the body irreducible to its morbid destiny insofar as they relieve the body of its exclusive reliance on and preoccupation with impressions received from the external, empirical world. The organs of trans-sensory perception are, rather, actively affected by the otherness of a non-existing reality, a “suspended” or “latent” reality referred to as *esoteric* because its origin is not to be found in the external world or empirical reality. This nomenclature is, however, deceptive, since esoteric reality is by virtue of its inexistence more profoundly distant or external to the subject than is empirical reality.

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The problematic nature of the genital organs represented by Renaissance artists – which even in Steinberg’s telling, display signs of Christ’s incarnate weakness and exclusive dependence on an already actualized and decaying reality – is clarified by this discussion: attesting to the full carnality of Christ, they lack any trans-sensory dimension. We are not done elaborating the logic and con-

³⁴ Corbin, “Divine Epiphany...,” p. 149.

³⁵ Corbin, *Alone with the Alone*, p. 80.

sequences of this dimension. For the moment, however, we want to insist that when Kiarostami bemoans the pornographic impulse to show too much, he is not sanctioning a taboo of sexuality from representation but bemoaning the effacement, or burial, of sexuality in incarnate substance.

Docetic Realism

The cinema of Kiarostami is a realist cinema often compared to that of post-war Italian neorealism or, because several of his films are (simulated or semi-simulated) documentaries, to *cinema vérité*. I will continue to propose that the realist or documentary impulse behind the work is docetic, that what Kiarostami tries to make appear or show itself in his films is an *illuminated reality*. It is a gamble, I realize, to state my thesis in esoteric terms since it runs the risk of blocking recognition of the contemporary significance of the arguments they once and still serve. Fortunately, Kiarostami has preceded us in the translation of these terms into the language of everyday, contemporary reality and we will thus rely on these translations to bring home our arguments. Adopting an unconventional itinerary we will introduce the work of Kiarostami through the only apparently slight 1983 film, *Fellow Citizen*. Set in an area of Tehran that has recently been closed to traffic, it consists entirely of a string of special pleadings, convoluted excuses, and (most likely) outright lies with which desperate motorists hope to be able to convince the traffic officer on duty to allow them to pass through the barrier. None of the motorists displays any disrespect for the officer or the law, indeed what is striking is the way a kind of respect or at least a faith in her pact with the law seems to invite the endearing ingenuity with which each attempts to skirt it. The consistency of the responses – not one fails to engage in ruse – in combination with the demeanor of the drivers leads us to understand that what we are witnessing does not go under the name of exception. None of these citizens (the title defines them as such and thus links them to the law and to state power) considers him or herself to be above or outside the law; rather, each seems to take it for granted that the law does not cover all circumstances, that there is in the law itself something that is not decided by law and that this emancipates those subject to it from rote conduct. One by one the cars pull up from the back of the screen to the foreground where the traffic official stands guard, and one by one each driver spins some simple or elaborate tale to persuade the guard to let her pass through, before being finally turned back, obliged to find another route. The fellowship of the motorists depends not on their being able

to enter an inner sanctum, but precisely in their displays of guile – and their ultimate dispersal in different directions. Is this entire film not a reinscription of Kiarostami's signature image, the solitary tree here replaced by a law that plants its sinuous root in the very real world of traffic and construction, only to send each of its subjects off on her own path?

Recall a point briefly made earlier regarding the long drawn-out Byzantine wars, fought with enormous historical consequences, over the nature of the image: the warring factions, we insisted, sought not simply to grab political power but, more fundamentally, to determine what constituted it. That is, the wars were a bloody struggle over the very definition of the symbolic function of political authority. The iconoclasts held a position known as *akribeia*, which is basically what we think of as strict constructionism; it favors exactitude, the rigorous application of the “original intent” of laws without concern for changing circumstances. The iconophiles took a different view: they held that there was an *economy* of political power, where *economy* referred to an act of dispensation, of arranging or ordering wherein divine authority disposed or distributed itself in history, in relation to the whole of creation, including the Church and its fathers. Economy concerns thus the nature of the link between spiritual and temporal power, law and everyday reality, the visible and the invisible. Among the many meanings of the term, *economy-dispensation*, *plan*, *arrangement*, *providence* – others just as fundamental stick out in the context of our discussion: *guile*, *lie*, *ruse*.³⁶

Throughout his films and in several published statements, Kiarostami has insisted on the importance of the lie, which is, he claims, the only means we have of getting at the truth. But what meaning can truth have if lies are our only access to it? And what can truth mean in the (after all) realist film world of Kiarostami, which makes no reference to an “other world” in the dogmatic, hierarchical sense, no reference to a first principle or final cause to which this world would be subservient? Without these there can be no measure of truth and thus, it would seem, no truth. But if the realist principle subtending his films obliges Kiarostami to admit of no world but this finite one here, it does not

³⁶ Marie-José Mondzain, *Image, Icon, Economy, the Byzantine Origins of the Contemporary Imaginary*, trans. Rico Franses, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2005, p. 13. Mondzain refers in her introduction to the economy as a “universe of guile, which should remind us of what Islamic tradition knew and developed under the name *hila*,” p. 6.

oblige him to embrace the nominalist contention that this world consists only of finite things in themselves and disqualifies absolutely notions such as infinity and truth. Kiarostami would be the first to admit that there *are* only things in themselves, *except* – he would want to clarify – there is the imaginal world, hence: truths. In this context *except* clearly does not mean to say that the imaginal world is set outside and above this one; the imaginal world names the “other world” *within this one*. But although it appears among the things of this world, it is not one of them for, simply put, the imaginal world does not exist. It is not another existing thing, but what inexists between them. It is conceived, above all, as the power of constraint and separation. Through the intervention of the imaginal world law is constrained or held back from unfolding all at once and the things of this world are separated such that they are prevented from forming a continuous block, one phenomenon becoming the cause of another which in turn causes another, inexorably. This last is the definition of determinism, law that is applied irrespective of the reality it confronts. It is also the definition of iconoclasm, which, in being a rejection of the icon, was at the same time a rejection of the *economy* of power.³⁷

Kiarostami’s films constitute reflections on the ontological status of the image; they reintroduce us to the power of the imaginal dimension. In a world increasingly controlled by imaging techniques, where images proliferate and command a growing share of our attention, his films are remarkable for diagnosing the problem confronting the modern world as a *dearth* of images.³⁸ A glut of images distracts from the scarcity of icons. One of the main maladies of his frenetic characters is their want of an image. The extraordinary 1990 film, *Close-Up*, is the clearest illustration of the problem. In the film, Hossein Sabzian, a mostly unemployed printer and Turkish-speaking member of the *mostazafin* – the downtrodden class which the Islamic Revolution was supposed to have lifted up, but did not, the dispossessed betrayed yet again, this time by the regime that replaced the Shah – finds himself in an intolerable situation. Having fallen through all the cracks in the system into near-total obscurity, Sabzian longs to have an image, to gain some foothold in the visible world. And yet, because he seems to have a less than clear sense of how to acquire an image, he commits a crime that has no chance of succeeding: image theft. To have an image means

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³⁷ Ibid., p. 14.

³⁸ Ibid.

to be singular, or – as we argued earlier – to have a *unique relation* to that “elsewhere” to which we are all exposed. Sabzian does, however, seem to be clear on one point: an image is something primary. To have an image is to have a capacity, it is a fundamental corporeal and not merely abstract matter. Thus he decides to snatch not the image of some matinee *idol*, a movie star, but that of a movie or *image maker*. In an act of desperation he tries to pass himself off as Makhmalbaf, the famous Iranian filmmaker beloved for his film, *The Cyclist*, which is about a similarly dispossessed person, this time an Afghani refugee. Momentarily mistaken for Makhmalbaf by a woman sitting next to him on a bus, Sabzian slips into the role of famous director and is eventually caught trying to dupe this woman and her family, the equally film-struck Ahankhas. He has been thrown in jail and is awaiting trial when Kiarostami reads about the case in a newspaper and decides to film the trial and a reenactment of the crime in which the principle characters are all persuaded to play themselves. *Close-Up*, the film, does not spring *ex-nihilo* from the head of its director, but from reality itself; yet neither does the film attempt merely to replicate the pre-existing reality of the situation. Not content to lag behind the story reported in the newspaper, to permit reality to continue to preexist it, the film, rather, catches up with and eventually outdistances the actual situation. In the end it intervenes in and brings about an alteration of the real life circumstances: the procedure and outcome of the trial are positively affected by the very filming of Kiarostami’s film.

The primary function of the opening sequence is manifestly one of delay. This is not to suggest that the film has not yet “caught up” with reality, as I put it just now, but that it has already found its place alongside it. In this first sequence the police and reporter from the newspaper that broke the story pull up at the home of the Ahankhahs in order to arrest Sabzian. While we in the audience fully expect to enter the home along with the police and to witness the arrest, we are denied access both to the home and the scene. We remain outside with the camera in the cul-de-sac of a street in front of the home, where there is nothing to see other than the ill-equipped reporter, who has forgotten to bring a tape recorder, running around from door to door trying to borrow one from the neighbors and the taxi driver, biding his time as he waits for his fare by picking flowers out of a dump and inadvertently dislodging an aerosol that rolls down the street.

This tactic of delay has the effect of putting off the appearance of Sabzian, as if to emphasize the problem of his image *deficit*. But this is not all. It will be the

task of the film to allow him to acquire an image, not the pilfered image of a look-alike, but his own self-likeness. To accomplish this task the film will have to turn us into witnesses to his appearing, to his emergence in the visible. The first sequence partially empties the screen so that the here of what is visible to us will be able to resonate in a there that is not. To forestall misunderstanding, we must again stress that the creative work of imagination implied by the film's task does not produce "images free of all sensible restraint."³⁹ Imagination does not create something from nothing. The active imagination has, rather, first of all, a negative aspect; "it puts an end to the privation of being that holds things in their occultation."⁴⁰ We will have to chew carefully on this mouthful of negation if we wish to read the opening of the film as an exemplary illustration of the work of imagination. "Putting an end to" designates, of course, the negative work of limitation. But how does one put an end to "the privation of being that holds things in their occultation"? If being were all there was, we would be forever cut off from what is not; what does not exist would remain permanently occulted, unavailable to us. The law of being would in this case be a law of *necessary* being, that is to say, of "that which does not stop writing itself" over and over again and it would completely cut off access to what is *impossible*, which is to say that it would occult "that which does not stop *not* writing itself." The negative work of imagination, then, must put an end or put a stop to – what? To what is not written, to what is not. Of imagination we can thus say that it "stops *not* writing," or opens the world to contingency. Contingent being is neither (necessary) actual being or (impossible) nonbeing, but what can be or not be.⁴¹

For this reason we can say that the negative work of imagination constitutes a *positive* act. It puts an end to the expulsion of non-existence from the world, it

³⁹ Christian Jambet, *La logique des Orentaux. Henry Corbin et la science des forms*, Seuil, Paris 1983, p. 189.

⁴⁰ Corbin, *Alone with the Alone*, p. 186.

⁴¹ I am here borrowing the formulations Lacan uses for the necessary ("that which does not stop writing itself") as opposed to the impossible ("that which does not stop not being written"). The formulation of the contingent or conditional most often attributed to him is "that which stops not writing." See, Jacques Lacan, *Encore: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book XX*, trans. Bruce Fink, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, Norton, New York and London 1998, pp. 58–60. Compare Chittick's explanation, "According to the principles of Peripatetic philosophy, the 'impossible'...cannot come into existence, in contrast to the 'possible,' which may or may not come into existence, and the Necessary, which cannot not exist. But 'imagination' is a domain in which contraries meet and impossible things take place," p. 123.

triumphs over and conquers *for this world* the nothing from which an Almighty power supposedly created ours as a necessary one. Imagination does not create new, unfounded visions (which distinguishes it from illusion or mere fantasy); rather, it *imagines nothing* or, put differently: it “gives form to absolute non-existence, to that which, according to rational demonstration, can’t possibly have form.”⁴² This implies that there is a difference between the absolute nothing out of which an absolute Creator fashions the world, and what we might call the “relative nothing” fashioned by imagination. Without creating illusions or fantasies, imagination puts an end to absolute non-existence by creating or giving form to non-existence. Alternatively, it is possible to say that imagination *creates the uncreated* in our finite, or sublunary, world. Creation is thus no longer the province of some primary cause outside the finite world, but takes place within the world.

In addition to being a power of limitation, the imagination is also defined as a power of linkage. But if imagination imagines or creates nothing, what can linkage link? Ordinarily we speak of linking two or more things to create some sort of composite. We are obliged in this case, however, to think linkage without being able to designate the terms linked, or without being able to designate them as things since the space of linkage is empty. It cannot therefore be filled with things, let alone densified by their fusion. Lacan somewhere describes the real as “teeming with emptiness.” This phrase suggests a way of thinking the linkage at stake in the imaginal space as an articulation of movements: as a vibration, teetering, or oscillation – as, perhaps, an empty instability. The flutter of a heart or an eyelash, a sigh or breath: do not these movements, which manifest a passion, suggest relation, articulation, linkage? In fact these sorts of movements – paramount among them – are significant concepts of Islamic philosophy; they name the “vibration of [divine Being] in [our] being.”⁴³ Passionate sites of relation, they transform what would otherwise be a negative theology, in which God remains totally unknown, into a unique, personal one, in which human being has access to divine pathos and God is relieved of the solitude of his unknowness. Imagination empties the human soul of the things of this world not in order to submit it to divine being, but to submit it to *what is not*. Not to submit it to Being but to the passionate wavering of “being-in-suspense.”

⁴² Chittick, p. 123.

⁴³ Corbin, *Alone with the Alone*, p. 152.

With this we are brought back to *Close-Up* and Sabzian's specific, self-declared passion for cinema. While this passion places cinema at the film's center, *Close-Up* does not become a film about cinema, in the self-reflexive modern sense, but remains focused on reality. More precisely, it is a film about reality's current state of impoverishment and the role the cinematic image might play in restoring its luminous dimension. In order to accomplish this task, Kiarostami sets out to fulfill the request of Sabzian that the filmmaker make a film that shows his passion. The film has to feed the *lust of the eye*. More: *Close-Up* gives evidence of the link, posited earlier, between the icon and the economy. That Sabzian's image deficit is connected to a deficit of political economy is apparent in the film's opening, for the delay inserted by the imaginary serves a double role. It does not only prevent us from witnessing the arrest, but also gives us an opportunity to observe a malignancy of the political function. The active force of delay exposes a kind of laxity or informality that turns out to be much less benign than it might first appear. Before meeting Sabzian or hearing his complaint, we learn from the first sequence that his suffering is not isolated: it is revealed that the taxi driver is a former airplane pilot in the army who lost his job when the Iran-Iraq war ended; the police drive up not in an official van but in a taxi; and we will learn later that the sons of the well-to-do Ahankhahs are, like Sabzian and taxi driver, under-employed. These are all signs of the failed revolution and of the retreat of the state, which has abandoned its citizens, leaving them alone to improvise as best they can without the aid of formal structures of support. As we know, the laxity of the law does not mean that it is not still in force, that it has no consequences for its citizens. To say, however, that the law still maintains a relation to its citizens is to misuse the term *relation*; the retreat of the state is accomplished by *retiring* its relations to its citizens.

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The primary function of the opening delay is, however – as we began to argue – one of disoccultation. The narrative is stalled in order to give time to what would have been occulted – that is, suspended being – to appear. To understand this strategy, one need only ask oneself the following question: had Sabzian's arrest been filmed at this point, in what light would the scene have been lit? *Lumen* or *lux*? As noted earlier, *lumen* is the light that illuminates the threshold where the unique, passionate encounter between each subject and Divine otherness takes place. *Lux*, on the other hand, is associated not with passion but with abstract reason; it spreads itself homogenously over all that is known and appears not as a *threshold* but as a *medium* of vision and understanding, that is, of rational

clarity. While *lumen* reveals itself at the point of encounter with another dimension, *lux* is thought to be solely at the disposal of rational man, who reveals the truth by its means. In recent years, however, Hans Blumenberg has argued that the rationalist conception of light has undergone modification. The process of elucidation now takes place less and less in the general, public light of reason and more and more against a background of darkness into which a sharply focused, directed light is cast. Vision is less often permitted to roam freely in the clean, well-lighted space of reason and is increasingly coerced by a beam of light that picks objects out of the darkness. In short, the possibilities for the sovereign “manipulation of light” by man, originally introduced by the shift from *lumen* to *lux*, has reached a new level of violence in which, Blumenberg claims, the modern, “technological light of ‘lighting’ has imposed [on man] an ‘optics’ that goes against his will” and his very freedom.⁴⁴

Rather than a space of unfreedom, however, I will argue that this new space of light is more usefully described, and especially in the context of our discussion, as *forensic*. Had the opening sequence included the scene of arrest, the first appearance of Sabzian would have been a mug shot, the shot of a suspect who had been nabbed, a fraud who had been unmasked. *Lux*, the light of scientific and juridical exactitude, by switching off the translucent light that comes to us from elsewhere, sequesters us in a totally opaque world. And yet, viewed in its own terms, *lux* is driven by a principle of transparency. According to this principle everything can and must be made visible by means of light’s penetrating rays, which are able to see through and disperse the mist of illusions, lies, and obfuscation. This principle knows no limit; it regards whatever is not or cannot be made visible as simply nonexistent. If the violence of this principle of transparency has intensified, as per Blumenberg’s claim, this is because it is now in the hands of a state that exercises its powers through retreat. What we mean when we speak of a retreat of the state is that it has defaulted on its duty to provide the protections it is called upon to grant its citizens. To protect them from what, exactly? The intrusions of an all-seeing Other, and thus the destruction of the *sens intime* necessary for subjectivity itself.⁴⁵ At one time the all-seeing gaze belonged to the God of dogmatic religion, but in modernity it has come into the

⁴⁴ Blumenberg, p. 54.

⁴⁵ For a superlative development of this thesis, see Gerard Wajcman, “Intimate Extorted, Intimate Exposed,” trans. Ron Estes, Jr. in *Umbr(a)* 2007, pp. 37-57.

possession of the abstract principle of *lux*, the immanent, unsleeping, 24/7, eye of *lux*, which reduces everything to the opacity of a visible object, which sees everything and eviscerates singularity. The obligations of the state are commonly viewed as the protection of the privacy, freedom, and the right to assembly of its citizens, but these notions have been so thoroughly corrupted by the principle of *lux*, which reduces its citizens to their visibility, that we now need to unearth the primary obligation, which underwrites the others: the protection of each citizen's self-intimacy, her secrecy or modesty.

In this context the matter takes on an additional layer of complexity, given that the authoritarian state of the Islamic Republic of Iran bills itself as the enforcer of the subject's modesty. The question then comes back to this: do its laws' countless prohibitions function to protect what is truly invisible, as they should, or do they sacrifice it by chaining citizens to their utter carnality? This becomes, once again, a question of sexuality, that is: of subjects' relations to the others. Kiarostami eventually interpolates into the trial proceedings at the film's center a scene in which Sabzian's arrest is reenacted; this delayed reenactment has, however, a dramatically different effect than it would have had it been filmed during the opening sequence. Rather than entering the house alongside the police and intruding on a scene already in process, the camera is this time positioned inside from the start, present before the police arrive. This will not be a scene of forensics in which the culprit is surprised and caught, exposed to the penetrating and defining gaze of an abstract authority. The image of Sabzian with which we are presented is not a frozen mug shot but a moving image in the most fundamental sense, the scene one of pathos. Sabzian plays himself once again, but this time something is visibly askew. It is not that he seems to be acting less naturally, but some displacement is visible. He appears to be out of sync with his role, which is to say: with himself. As we watch the reenactment, we are aware that Sabzian is aware that he is being filmed; he knows that he is being looked at. The "fourth wall" is not broken, however, as is in the modernist gesture of self-reflexive cinema. We are not being asked to feel that we occupy the same space as Sabzian, who does not directly acknowledge our presence; nor does his knowledge of being looked at cause him to sense that he is absorbed by vision, captured by another gaze. In fact, the opposite is true. The scene is tilted, slightly off center, as though Sabzian were listening a little less to what is being said, focused a little less on what is going on around him, distracted by an elsewhere invisible except for the magnetic pull it exerts on him. He seems

to regard himself with a kind of hesitancy, as if he were unfamiliar with his own motivations, visibly affected by himself. Rather than being turned into a passive object of vision, Sabzian is agitated as though he had become both patient and agent of his being seen.⁴⁶

The postponement of the scene of arrest created a space for the trial to begin and it is this that sets the stage for that scene's ultimately iconic representation of Sabzian. To film the trial Kiarostami adopted a novel technological strategy; he used two different cameras, one a distance and the second a close-up camera. The first recorded what was admissible as evidence by the court, the second what was inadmissible, Sabzian's passion. The temptation, to be avoided at all cost, is to see the first as objective, the second as offering access to the inner core of Sabzian's being, to the solitary truth of its posturing, public façade. Kiarostami once made a general remark that is especially relevant to *Close-Up*: "We have a saying in Persian, when somebody is looking at something with real intensity: 'he had two eyes and he borrowed two more.' Those borrowed eyes are what I want to capture – the eyes that will be borrowed by the viewer to see what's outside the scene he's looking at."⁴⁷ What is "outside the scene" is so in a radical sense: it is invisible not merely temporarily but by virtue of *not* being, or of its being a suspension of being. This second pair of eyes is the esoteric pair; they "document" what is invisible while safeguarding its invisibility.

The Persian saying Kiarostami invokes is less quaint than it sounds; for behind it lies the distinctive economy of Islamic philosophy, the elaborate theophany by means of which it rigorously opposed every form of "unilateral monotheism."⁴⁸ This theophany begins with the retreat of God, which operates – as we want to show – in marked contrast to the retreat of the modern State. To begin drawing this contrast, we turn to the hadith that is perhaps the most intensely contemplated by Islamic philosophers, foremost among them, the great Ibn 'Arabi: "I was a hidden Treasure and I yearned to be known. Then I created creatures

⁴⁶ Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan, ed., Jacques-Alain Miller, London, Hogarth Press and Institute of Psycho-analysis, 1977, pp. 194-195.

⁴⁷ "Taste of Kiarostami," interview with Kiarostami by David Sterritt, www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/00/9/kiarostami.html (accessed 12/22/2003), 5. For Ibn' Arabi on the concept of "seeing with two eyes," see Chittick, pp. 356-381.

⁴⁸ Corbin, *Alone with the Alone*, p. 199.

in order to be known by them.”⁴⁹ The subject of this yearning is God Himself, an emphatically apophatic God, as the phrase “hidden Treasure” indicates. An apophatic or negative theology posits a God who is non-delimited, indeterminate and incomprehensible, without feature or image. It is for such a theology that the problem of the image is particularly acute, for as we have seen, the stumbling block is the seeming impossibility of conceiving how there can be an image of that which is incorporeal, invisible, immaterial, without form or limit. We have seen how intensely this question was debated during the Byzantine period. What strikes one as new in this hadith, however, is how profoundly this question of the image concerns God Himself, who without one would remain hidden, forever unknown, *not least of all to Himself*. In declaring that He has an image, this theophany bears witness to the utter lack of self-enclosure of God or, stated more affirmatively, it attests to the radical relatedness of God to His creatures. Imageless, He is unable to create creatures in – or, as is said, *after* – His image. This is so even though a different hadith seems to suggest otherwise, “God created Adam according to His own Form.”⁵⁰ If there is a Form of God, it cannot exist prior to Adam, but must come about through him.

Islamic philosophy knows itself not as a philosophy of the multiple, but as a philosophy of the One. Its first principle is that of the Oneness of God, who is the only *necessary* being in the universe, the only one who *cannot not be*.⁵¹ And yet the One could not be designated or counted as such if He were left to Himself. This will lead the Muslim mystics, and most notably Ibn ‘Arabi, “the great expositor of ‘Unity,’ [to] devote most of his attention to affirming the reality of the principle of multiplicity and explaining its relationship to the Oneness of God.[...] God in His Essence is absolutely one from every point of view. But as soon as this is said, someone has said it, so in effect the reality of the other has to be affirmed.”⁵² More precisely, it is the multiplicity of others, their plural reality, that is affirmed by attestations of God’s oneness. This is, as we have stressed, the crux of the difference between docetism and the incarnationism: Christ cannot be *the* image of God; God cannot appear “in person,” in any universally

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⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 184.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 245.

⁵¹ Chittick, p. 356.

⁵² Ibid.

attestable form. Rather, God manifests Himself in a multiplicity of forms, none of which can claim to be *the* image of God.

It begins to be clear from this account of the position taken by Islamic philosophers that the commonplace “Orientalist” assumption, which regards non-Western societies as having a less developed sense of the individual than societies in the West, is grounded on a gross metaphysical misunderstanding. For, far from conceiving individuation as a “secondary deviation,” as is often the case in the West, the “Iranian metaphysicians of the Avicennian tradition,” regarded individuation as the *positing of a being* and not as a mere negativity.⁵³ While Western thinkers have often opposed the individual to the universal, the *falasifa* did not conceive individuation, the profusion of the multiple, in a dialectical way, that is: as occurring in a second stage through the negation of the One, but rather as taking place initially *within the One*. Individuals proceed out of but do not exit the One and thereby attest to His oneness. Still, Ibn ‘Arabi, author of *The Book of Unity*, did not hesitate to insist: “Unity ignores and refuses you.”⁵⁴ Why? Because while it remains true that the One is that which is common to the multiplicity of beings, it is also true that it *eludes* each and every one of them. The One escapes capture by each of the multiplicity.

Corbin’s warnings against the “literalist sin” of assimilating the dissimulation to what it dissimulates is here graspable from another angle. The multiplicity of images that manifest God do not expose the “Hidden treasure”; on the contrary, they permit Him to remain hidden. The icon-image attests not to His presence but to His *withdrawal*, to the *retreat* of His oppressive, all-seeing presence in favor of His *relation* to us. Rather than leaving individual beings bereft, abandoned, His retreat opens a salutary separation from Him and sets a limit to His necessity. Thus, while Ibn ‘Arabi constantly emphasized the solitary nature of human existence – solitary precisely because of God’s withdrawal from us – he repeatedly linked his notion of the *solitary* with that of *proximity*.⁵⁵ In the wake of Divine withdrawal, we acquire a feeling of proximity – of being “alone with” a lonely, retreated God –

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⁵³ Henry Corbin, “Apoophatic Theology as Antidote to Nihilism,” trans. Roland Vegso, *Umbr(a)* 2007, pp. 64-65; this essay is a translation of an essay from Corbin, *Le Paradoxe du Monotheism*.

⁵⁴ Michel Chodkiewicz, *An Ocean without Shore: Ibn ‘Arabi, the Bookd and the Law*, trans. David Streight, SUNY Press, Albany 1993, p. 40.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

far stronger than any such feeling we may have with an actual neighbor. A sense of closeness to something closer to us than our “jugular vein” follows on the heels of God’s abandonment of us.⁵⁶ Unlike the feeling of intimacy experienced between “two heterogeneous beings,” this feeling of proximity, of superlative intimacy, is of “*one* being encountering himself (at once one and two, a bi-unity).”⁵⁷ What seems to be indicated here is a separation that is not pushed all the way to a division into two. That which is brought close is not conceived as another fully present being, but rather a being that is held back, suspended: potential being. The feeling of intimacy, obtains not between two heterogeneous persons or things, therefore, but between two distinct modes of existence.

Ironically, in his otherwise useful essay on light’s historical relations to truth, Blumenberg assimilates the cinematic close-up to the penetrating light of *lux*, particularly as its logic has been transformed by modern lighting technology, which spotlights specific objects and features, picking them out of the darkness as if to indict them. The contrast between this view of the close-up and that proposed by Deleuze could not be sharper. Deleuze reads the close-up not as a technique for extracting a detail from a scene in order to enlarge and scrutinize it, as if under a microscope, but as a *luminous* technique that “*abstracts [what it shows] from all spatio-temporal co-ordinates.*” The close-up, says Deleuze quoting Bela Balzs, “opens a dimension of another order.”⁵⁸ We have tried to show that this other dimension corresponds to that of the imaginal world in which suspended or virtual being “resides.” This other “situative” space has no place in the “situated world” of actual being. One of the ethical questions haunting Kiarostami’s cinema concerns the “proper distance” to be taken by a filmmaker toward his subjects. In this context his fondness for long shots is often said to be the measure of that distance, to be an indication of the principled reluctance of Kiarostami to trespass the barrier of intimacy. Without disputing this reading of his long shots, I would argue that the close-up addresses this question of proper distance no less clearly. For, when it comes to intimacy, the distance fundamentally at issue is that minimal one which separates a subject from herself, the distance within which her passionate attachment to her own otherness, her

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⁵⁶ Corbin, *Alone with the Alone*, p. 156; the phrase is from Ibn ‘Arabi, “Love is closer to the lover than his jugular vein.”

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 145.

⁵⁸ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1986, p. 96.

own “radical diversity,” lodges itself. The close-up aims at showing “what... is not there, *qua* represented,” at suspended being; or – to cite Deleuze, again, this time as he quotes Eisenstein’s views on the close-up, – the close-up aims at “the ‘pathetic’ which... is apprehended in... affect.”⁵⁹ Far from transgressing a barrier, the close-up exposes a threshold, an opening, through which the light of an invisible world shines. This threshold is the very abode of intimacy.

We noted earlier the simple fact that Sabzian chose to adopt as his own the image of a filmmaker rather than a film star. This fact becomes more interesting when considered in light of the early religious opposition to cinema in Iran. Among the list of reasons for this opposition is “the religious belief that any act of creation which simulates the original creation of God is blasphemous.”⁶⁰ Because God was supposed to be the sole maker of images, the creation of human images by man was deemed a usurpation of His divine power. But if this reason could be overcome and cinema allowed to flourish in Iran, it may be in part because this reading of God’s powers was spectacularly challenged within Islamic philosophy. This challenge is centered on an interpretation of an important Qur’anic verse that reads thus: “It is not you who killed them, but God did so. You did not throw what you threw [sand in the eyes of the enemy at Badr], but God [did]” (8: 17). At times Corbin interprets this verse by drawing a parallel to Luther’s flash of insight regarding a Psalm with a similar structure. In contrast to Aristotle’s Unmoved Mover, which works *through* us to guide us toward a final cause, Luther contends that the Psalm did not define our relation to God unilaterally, as His appropriation of our will, but as a matter of mutual passion.⁶¹ At other times, however, Corbin contrasts the reading of this verse offered by the *falasifa* with that offered by their philosophical contemporaries, the Ash’arites. The Ash’arites argued that the Qur’anic verse identified God as the secret agent of all our acts, which means that all the organs of our bodies are mere instruments of His will. While the *falasifa* agreed that there was a secret behind our acts, something unknowable to us, they insisted further that there was a secret of this secret. More paradoxically still, Ibn Arabi insisted that the secret of the secret was that there was no secret. We can presume that he wanted in this way

⁵⁹ The first quotation is from Lacan, p. 63; the second from Deleuze, p. 96.

⁶⁰ Hamid Dabashi, *Close Up: Iranian Cinema. Past, Present, and Future*, Verso Press, London and New York 2001, p. 14.

⁶¹ Corbin, *Alone with the Alone*, p. 300, fn. 25.

to forestall an infinitely regressive search for a cause of our actions, which could never be found because the secret of our acts could never be unveiled in some final instance. There was simply nothing there to be unveiled.

Thus the result of any supposed unveiling would amount to a de-mondalization of the world; what would be lost by the gesture is becoming, potentiality, contingency. Finite being would be stripped of its plasticity. The secret of the secret is that neither God in sovereign isolation from us, nor we in our self-enclosed isolation from Him (and others) is capable of any real change. God, alone, is necessary, but alone he is also without capacity, for capacity emerges only as a *bi-lateral* or *joint* affair. Latency or potentiality is *being that is suspended in the relation between divine and human existence, between one being and another; it depends on relation and is thus at the disposal of no one alone*. In opposition to the Ash'arites, then, the mystics conceived the organs of the body not as tools or instruments of God, but as bodily organs that belonged neither to God or man in isolation. The hand that throws cannot be exposed as belonging to God or man. When we thus read that “the soul gains awareness that it ‘sees’ God not *through* itself, but *through* Him;... it contemplates God in all other beings not *through* its own gaze, but because it is the same gaze by which God sees them,” we must not make the mistake of understanding this in the perverse sense, as stating that we identify with and see through the gaze of the Other.⁶² These trans-sensory organs belong to – or are incarnated in – nobody.

Psychoanalysts have observed a phenomenon they call “hospital phenomenon,” which sometimes plagues young children who, upon experiencing even a momentary absence of their mothers, are menaced by a profound sense of destitution. Overcome by a feeling of total abandonment, these children behave as if they had been stranded on the precipice of an absolute void. It is against the background of this phenomenon that the little game of *fort-da*, famously witnessed by Freud, takes on meaning; for Freud associates the game with the avoidance by his grandson (the game’s inventor) of the debilitating experience of the void or of that “the ever-open gap,” or “ditch,” as Lacan refers to it, left by his mother’s exit.⁶³ It is noteworthy that in his discussion of the repetition constituting this *game of throwing*, Lacan tells us that we must look for the game’s

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⁶² Ibid., p. 151.

⁶³ Lacan, p. 62.

“*true secret*,” without however uncovering any easy answer.⁶⁴ He rejects the proposal that the game is one of mastery in which the boy, through his own agency, takes control of his mother’s comings and goings rather than being passively submitted to them; he also rejects the notion that the bobbin that is thrown back and forth represents the mother, for the game, he claims, *precedes* representation. The secret turns out to be nothing resembling an object or person. Rather, the secret resides in the “radical diversity” captured by the repetition, the repeated linkage, of the primitively opposed terms, *fort* and *da*. It resides in the vibrating opposition by which the one constantly conjures the other in an irresolvable instability.

We need not belabor the comparison much longer; the interpretation of the *fort/da* game corresponds quite closely to the interpretation of the Qu’ranic verse we have been examining. There is no stand-alone agent of the bobbin’s throw; capacity is located rather in a trans-sensory organ that belongs neither to the mother nor the boy, but emerges out of the incalculability, the sheer unpredictability, that results from their mutual entanglement, their relation. A later variation of the game, in which the boy leaps up to see his image reflected in a mirror, then dives below it to disappear, demonstrates that the radical diversity captured by the game concerns his own division as subject. Ernst, Freud’s young grandson, acquires as a consequence of his relation to his mother, a sense of himself we may describe as intimate inasmuch as it is not limited to any concrete or ideal image projected outward. His being is extended, or prolonged, by the *fort!*, an elsewhere that can be located nowhere – in no meaning, idea, or place – but in the “o-o-o-o” with which he expresses his exorbitant pleasure. Impenetrable by any all-seeing eye, the intimate image of self resides not in any content or form, but in the capacity of formation, which only relation enables. The game detaches from the subject “a small part” that still remains his, inalienable while alien. This “small part” or in Lacan’s vocabulary “object a” is what Corbin speaks of as a trans-sensory organ and is distinguished from organs of perception by the fact that it is a formative faculty and need not wait for representation to give it an object to apprehend.

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My purpose in turning to the *fort/da* game was not only to draw attention to the correspondences between it and the enigmatic throw at the center of the Qur’

⁶⁴ Ibid.

anic passage we were examining, but also to begin to formulate the difference between the withdrawal of the Divine and the retreat of the modern State. At stake in Ernst's little game, Lacan argues, is the transformation of the "ditch," the "edge of his cradle" – or, as we referred to it: the "absolute void" – created by his mother's withdrawal, not into some object, but into "*not nothing*."⁶⁵ Again, this reading is consistent with the position of the *falasia* as outlined earlier: the Divine withdraws in order to emerge in the world not as incarnated in some actual being, but as incorporeal "being-in-suspense." The retreat of the State removes the conditions under which the absolute void is staved off by the formative capacity of trans-sensory organs. The insistence of the void prevents the uneasy relation between corporeality and meaning from taking place and disturbs as well the relation of the subject to others.

This situation will have to remain the subject of a separate inquiry, only partially because it is not a primary concern of Kiarostami's *Close-Up*. The stubborn insistence of this void does, however, leave its mark on the film, in the laxity and informality of its first sequence. A tension-annulling de-temporalization defines the opening, the film seemingly unable to get off the ground. It is only because Kiarostami's camera eventually supplies what the State, through the abrogation of its responsibilities withdraws, that we come to see what was missing from at the start: the tension and primitive temporality of being-in-suspense, the unripeness of the "not nothing" that holds the absolute nothing at bay. We identify the retreat of the State, we are tempted to say, less by its refusal to take the existence of its citizens into account than by its disavowal of their inexistence, which they maintain in abeyance.

The Body and the Barzakh

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"This is the place to say, in imitation of Aristotle, that man thinks with his object."⁶⁶ Lacan drops this sentence into the middle of his reinterpretation of the

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 61, p. 63.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 62. Here, for convenience sake, is the passage: "This reel is not the mother reduced to a little ball...it is a small part of the subject that detaches itself from him while still remaining his, still retained. This is the place to say, in imitation of Aristotle, that man thinks with his object. It is with this object that the child leaps the frontiers of his domain, transformed into a well, and begins the incantation.[...] To this object we will...give the name...the *petit a*."

fort/da game, without further elaboration. We are thus left to figure out why. “Object” seems to refer to the small part of Ernst that detaches itself from him while remaining inalienable. More specifically, the object is the Lacanian “object a,” which functions very much like the “trans-sensory organ” theorized by the *falasifa*. With this object/organ the boy “leaps the frontiers of his domain,” (that is: the gap or absolute nothing introduced by his mother’s absence),” which is thereby “transformed into a well” (the absolute nothing now transformed into the unthinkable *source* of thought).⁶⁷ But where Aristotle makes such a claim, Lacan does not bother to tell us. Not to worry; a return to the discussion of the image and the imaginal world will lead us quickly to the site.

The concept of the image is indissoluble from that of the limit. But if the limit ceases to be thought as that which circumscribes or defines a perimeter, the objection of the iconoclasts to the image no longer holds weight. The iconophiles, we said, redefined the limit as that which cuts through, divides and links, rather than that which circumscribes and isolates things. We find this other limit in the following, well-known Qur’anic verses (55: 19-20): “He has set two seas in motion that flow side by side together/ With an interstice between them which they cannot cross.” The term *interstice* translates the Arabic term *barzakh*, which is not only a fundamental concept for the followers of Avicenna, but also – significantly – another name for the imaginal world. Listen first to Ibn ‘Arabi’s definition:

A *barzakh* is something that separates... two things while never going to one side..., as for example, the line that separates shadow from sunlight. [In the Qur’anic verses about the two seas] the one sea does not mix with the other. [...] Any two adjacent things are in need of a *barzakh*, which is neither the one nor the other but possesses the power of both. The *barzakh*... separates a known from an unknown, an existent from a nonexistent, a negated from an affirmed, an intelligible from a nonintelligible.”⁶⁸

The *barzakh* is a limit that, rather than circumscribing an object to create a bounded whole, divides, separates, disjoins one side from the other. It is precisely because the *barzakh* does not circumscribe what it limits that Ibn ‘Arabi moves immediately from speaking of a separation between things to speaking of

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Chittick, pp. 117-118.

a separation between a known and an unknown, an existent and a nonexistent, and so on. The limit separates a thing from an indeterminate surplus, a thing from what is scarcely separable from it. This is what is meant by “never going to one side”: never producing a contradictory term. The concept of the “Supreme *Barzakh*” names the specific separation of God from Himself, the separation of the nothing He is as nondelimited from His theophanic forms. Yet the *barzakh*, or imaginal world, also separates the intelligible from the sensible in the sub-lunary world. It is the *barzakh* that raises the principled objection to the dogma of incarnation inasmuch as it denies to the flesh of Christ any toleration of admixture. Human and divine do not meet in the flesh; they do not flow or “leak” into each other to consolidate themselves in a single substance as they do in the dogmatic conception of *homoousia*. The *barzakh* is above all a membrane of division; it guarantees the separation of adjacent terms and refuses their synthesis in the figure of Christ.

This limit is not, however, an impassable fault. Far from it. As we have repeatedly insisted, the imaginal is a domain of linkage, a zone in which an encounter between the divine and man is manifest as images (or theophanies) or as trans-sensory organs. While Ibn ‘Arabi describes the relation that takes place in the imaginal as one of “com-passion,” it is clear that what is implied by this is not a morality – the prescription of a demeanor to be adopted toward an unfortunate other – but a metaphysics of *active relating toward what escapes comprehension*. *Barzakh* is the minimal separation that is the very condition and site of the passionate encounter. This encounter is distinct from contact, and corresponds rather to what Lacan refers to as a “missed encounter.” For, how could one come into contact with that which is *not* here, with what is *unknown*, *nonexistent*, to what is in each case a *negative of existence*? Simply put, the passionate encounter is a run-in with nothing but our own self-displacement.

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I inserted an ellipsis into Ibn ‘Arabi’s definition in order to reserve the elided passage for separate inspection. Here is the passage I left out: “Though sense perception might be incapable of separating the two things, the rational faculty judges that there is a barrier... between them that separates them. The intelligible barrier is the *barzakh*. If it is perceived by the senses, it is one of the two things, not the *barzakh*.”⁶⁹ We have seen that sense perception was generally

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 118.

distinguished by Islamic philosophers from another kind of perception made available through trans-sensory organs. Ibn 'Arabi's distinction between the senses and the rational faculty seems to associate the latter to the trans-sensory organ insofar as it detects what sense perception cannot. This emphasis on the *imperceptibility* of the barrier catches our attention; it rings a bell. All at once it becomes clear that the concept the *barzakh* Ibn 'Arabi is articulating has an illustrious philosophical precedent – in Aristotle. In the latter's celebrated text, "On the Soul" – specifically the section devoted to the organ of touch – one finds an insistence on the imperceptible nature of the limit strikingly similar to Ibn 'Arabi's. It is surely here that Aristotle can be said to have said "man thinks with his object."

Aristotle begins axiomatically by stating that all senses sense across a medium or interval and that this interval separates a particular organ from a sensible object. For example: the organ of the eye sees a visible object across a medium of transparency. As he begins to examine the case of touch, however, the axiom comes to seem unsustainable, for no separating membrane can be detected; the membrane is imperceptible, it "escapes our notice," Aristotle says twice, as if perturbed by a dawning awareness of the inadequacy of mere sense perception. He refuses to back down however in face of this lack of evidence, insisting, rather, that with touch the membrane or medium that separates organ from object must be placed at a *lesser, more intimate, distance* than in the other senses.⁷⁰ In the case of touch there must be a membrane (or, translating into Arabic, why not?: a *barzakh*) that we are incapable of divining because the object it senses is too close to us (jugular-vein close) for us to take its measure. The unique closeness of its medium causes Aristotle further to distinguish the sense of touch from the other senses; for, he writes, when we see or hear, "we perceive because the medium produces a certain effect on us, whereas in the perception of objects of touch we are affected not *by* but *along with* the medium: it is as if a man were struck through his shield, where the shock is not first given to the shield and passed to the man, but the concussion of both is simultaneous."⁷¹

⁷⁰ Aristotle, *De anima*, 2:11, 423b, translated as "On the Soul" in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon, The Modern Classics Library, New York 2001, p. 7.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

Prior to this, Aristotle had imagined a fine mesh tightly stretched over a finger only, in the end, to deny that this thin material could figure the ultra-thin separation of organ from object at stake in the sense of touch. What then is the difference between the mesh and the shield? The mesh seems too clearly separable from the body; it seems to connote an external lining of the body, even an outlining. Aristotle is certain, however, that “the power of perceiving the tangible is seated *inside*.”⁷² This point bears repeating: *the organ of touch is internal to the body, not on its periphery*. Aristotle’s imagined shield, unlike any actual one, behaves not like an exterior lining of the body but like an inalienable part of it. If it receives the blow along with the man, this is because it is a part of him. But this is too quick. Aristotle conceives the shield not as the organ but as the *medium* of touch; it is this medium or distance that is first posited as internal to the body. The medium is the *internal distance of the body from itself*. Aristotle nevertheless also positions the *organ* of touch within the body, “farther inward,” as if it were dependent on this very distance.⁷³ The enigmatic inner distance Aristotle attributes to touch sows havoc, as we begin to see, among the terms of his original distinction: the organ, medium, and object of the senses. When it comes to the question of touch’s proper object, he simply throws up his hands: “we are unable clearly to detect.”⁷⁴ Ibn ‘Arabi has shown us why; the object of touch is always a negative object, something withdrawn, suspended. For this reason, we might add, the *medium* of touch is inconceivable as transparency.

To say, in imitation of Aristotle and Lacan, that man “thinks with his object” is to say that our thoughts are not molded by impressions passively received from an actual outside, by sense perception. We think because we have access to what comes before the world, to the opening or threshold from which things of the world appear. Perhaps it is better to say that we have access to the fact that the world does not enter the frame of the existing world, but remains, rather, withdrawn from it. This last point leads us to insist that while we owe to Aristotle the idea that the sense of touch is necessary to thought, necessary even to *our very sense of being*, his concept of the Prime Mover blocked the insight of the *falasifa* that radicalized it.⁷⁵ It was they who conceived the inner distance that

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⁷² Ibid., 2: 11, 423b, pp. 23-24; my emphasis.

⁷³ Ibid., 2: 11, 423b, p. 23.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 2: 11 423a, p. 32.

⁷⁵ “Without touch there can be no other sense [...for] all the other senses are necessary...not for their being, but [only for] their well-being,” *ibid.*, 3: 13, 435b,1, pp. 20-21.

was constitutive of the subject as dependent on the individual's unique relation to the One, that is, to the Other who was withdrawn from each.

In his defense of divine images, John of Damascus states that while human nature was once under a curse that enjoined us from touching bodies of the dead, lest we be reckoned unclean, "our nature has [now] been truly glorified and its very elements changed into incorruption."⁷⁶ Released from the custody of the law that pronounced the former curse, our bodies have been elevated to a new status of "incorruptibility." Might we not say then that our release from the taboo was the result of a new notion of touch, which became available at that historical moment when, as John claims, "divinity [was] united without confusion to our nature"? As we argued, union without confusion, without commingling or synthesis is not an idea that can be sustainable within an incarnationist frame. The *barzakh* is necessary to prevent death, time, and the outside from seeping into the body, only to expose it to rot. We touch and that which we touch eats into our bodies, corrupting it. The *barzakh*, however, *reconceives time and the outside as internal to the body and the no-long-tabooed touch renders us incorruptible*. This does not mean that the body is able to escape eventual death (we are not looking for miracles), but that it resists being taken over, infected by the outside. The rot of corruption gives way to the unripeness of potentiality.

As he attempts to explicate what is "essential and original in Freud's thought" concerning the body of the subject, Lacan proceeds by contrasting that thought with an age-old dream lyrically recomposed by Walt Whitman. This is the dream of "total, complete, epidermic contact between one's body and a world that [is] itself open and quivering."⁷⁷ What is clear is that this dream relies on the superseded sense of touch as a phenomenon of the periphery, of touch as contact along an epidermic surface. The "electric" body Whitman "sings" expresses a pastoral optimism: that the "perpetual, insinuating presence of the oppressive feeling of some original curse" will finally, somehow, disappear.⁷⁸ If Whitman's wistful dream of dispelling the curse is doomed, it is because it is premised on

⁷⁶ John of Damascus, p. 91.

⁷⁷ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Dennis Porter, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, Tavistock/Routledge, London and New York 1992, p. 93.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

the very idea that elicits the curse in the first place: that the body has a periphery and that it thus constitutes a whole.

Now, I bring up this old dream for a variety of reasons, the least significant being the fact that *some* of the work now being written on the subject of touch demonstrates that the dream is still alive. A giddy sense of universal relatedness, of being in touch with the world in its entirety characterized this work, which never thinks to question the wholeness of the body. Why should it be questioned; what raises the question? We have said over and over every body defined as whole, is encased; every frame serves as a coffin. Fully incarnate, it awaits only death. For psychoanalysis the question was raised by clinical observation. From the first, the bodies that walked through Freud's door arrived in pieces; they seemed to be cut up, to be missing parts. Sometimes the hysterics could not move an arm or leg, or could not control them as they flailed about, because they had no idea of them. It was by trying to figure out why this was so that Freud was led (to cut a long story very short) to his theories of sexuality and the drive. In contrast to Whitman, Freud was led to "emphasize [that the] point[s] of insertion" of the subject into the world were "limit point[s]... at the level of what we might call the *Triebe*." The subject is inserted not along the periphery but at any of an infinite number of limit points; thresholds through which the light of another, suspended, dimension shines. *Triebe*, drive, is like *barzakh*, both a limit and a zone of linkage. And here – as I have been broadly hinting – the analogy does not end. This is not the place, however, to take the analogy further and so I will merely point out that Freud's disdain for the idea that we possess an "oceanic feeling" of oneness with the world acknowledges the fact that the passion which invests these points of insertion is always singular. The singularity of that passion is degraded by the proposal that it is extendable to all. *Jouissance* founds dissensus.

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That Kiarostami undertakes a reinstatement of the imaginal world – along with its attendant phenomena: the image, touch, the *barzakh* – within a cinema still affected by the taboo against touch, specifically between unrelated men and women, is a point that hovers in the background. This taboo reposes on the idea that sex is a surface phenomenon that places men at risk of corruption by women. One might speculate that Kiarostami's intention is to lift once again the curse of corruptibility from which Islamic philosophy released us long ago.