

**The Frame as Borderland: Secular Gazes and Believing Bodies in Bani Abidi's  
*The Distance From Here* (2010)**

ABSTRACT

Is it still possible to think of some contemporary art as belonging to a religious or a secular world, where 'world' is understood in Wittgenstein's sense as all that is the case? What purchase can these powerful concepts have on today's art, especially in the realm of video and photography with their peculiar relations to reality and subjectivity? Echoing Talal Asad's question, 'Is there a secular body?' I ask whether there is a 'secular' or 'religious' gaze that belongs to this body, how it describes its own boundaries and what lies outside it. Looking at Pakistani art allows me to investigate the longer duration of culture from which some recent video practices have emerged and found a place in globalised art circuits. I claim that Bani Abidi's video art, and specifically *The Distance From Here* (2010) can be seen as a sustained exploration of heterogeneous temporalities and subjective positions that are as yet not entirely taken up by their international presentation, audience and circulation, and derive from a space that is not understandable as simply divided between the secular and the religious. This remainder or intractability might indicate the possibility of encounter with forms of life that unsettle existing conceptual divisions between the secular and the religious or the local and the global. Seeing Abidi's work in relation to a powerful tradition of allegory and of narrative deriving from the philosophy of Ibn Sina, I argue that these currents persist in popular culture and in local literary or artistic forms, even when they are not explicitly referred to. This allows me to make a case for seeing

Abidi's work in a context that is not restricted to the history of (Euro-American) art and its philosophies.

#### KEYWORDS

Pakistani art

Bani Abidi

Talal Asad

Secularism

Globalisation

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It's important for our approach, that someone may feel concerning some people, that he will never know what goes on inside them. He will never understand them.

Wittgenstein (1998: 84)

If a lion could talk, we could not understand him.

Wittgenstein (2001: 206)

In Bani Abidi's video work *The Distance From Here* (2010) we see various stages of a group of people assembling to apply for travel visas in a nondescript outdoor space, moving within sharply demarcated lines, subjected to security scans, regimented queues, and endless waiting. If there is a particular conceit that has run through Abidi's video works over the last decade since *Reserved* in 2006, it is the exploration of suspended time in situations of boredom as a *habitus*, one that extends from the time of the framed scene to the time of the gallery, gripping both simultaneously. It is in these temporal suspensions that questions about the actors or performers, their subjectivities (individual and collective) and their affiliations begin to emerge without ever settling into the assurances that a documentary film would give. The question arises, what are the deeper implications of her peculiar exploration of the space between fiction and truthful document and can it be seen – as an attitude or ethical approach – to extend into a context that includes both its conceptual resources and its spaces of exhibition and circulation? These resources include the historical development of video art as a field of practice and study, and the history of European modernism and its non-European counterparts – but also the far less defined cultural background of Abidi's home country of Pakistan. In what follows I will attempt to demonstrate the possibility

of understanding Abidi's work in contexts that are not simply art historical, but also related to broader philosophical and cultural tendencies that persist in Pakistan, a country founded on a sharp divergence from the secular nationalism that characterised the global politics of much of the twentieth century. This is not to say that the work must be seen as being Islamic or 'religious' in any simple way, but that it can be seen as reflecting the constitutional in-between-ness of Pakistan and its complex relationship to secular modernity.

Abidi is one of the first Pakistani artists to have achieved a sustained engagement with video, one that extends from the late 1990s to the present day, and in many ways, her work has defined the medium and its conventions in Pakistan. It is difficult to imagine from the outside, just how strange and sometimes strangely familiar (in its exploration of specifically Pakistani themes, people and locations) her work first appeared in a context where video art and its history had no presence or purchase. The freedom to operate in this environment and its constraints also produced her particular sensibility; one that draws (often humorously) on documentary, the ethnographic field, performance, theatre and popular urban culture. Despite these broader points of reference, I contend that Abidi's work has remained unrelentingly committed to viewing the local, the particular and the untranslatable without conforming to a mysticism of 'untranslatability'...

I suggest an *allegorical* connection between the explicit 'content' of Abidi's work and the politics of its production and exhibition. I propose cultural specificity as an interpretive tool, indeed an oppositional one in relation to the hegemonic neutrality of secular modernity and its globalised spaces. This neutrality relates to what Marcus

Verhagen has called the ‘McDonaldization thesis’ (2017: 175), in which contemporary global art is an identifiable form that tends towards uniformity. Verhagen cites Hans Belting who regards video as the ‘prime vehicle’ of this global entity (quoted in Verhagen 2017:175). It is not hard to see why this might be the case; the ease of movement of digital art, its relative immateriality and the referentially recognisable aspect of the photographic image seem to obviate the need for transportation and translation that attend the display of art objects. My contention here is that these hegemonic tendencies of the medium are problematised within art such as Abidi’s, videos that otherwise seem to exemplify precisely a drift of the local (as narrative or content) towards the global (as form or language). This requires the expansion of a range of interpretive strategies brought to bear upon the artwork in a way that relocates it in a specific cultural environment, without entirely subtracting it from the global networks in which it circulates.

In the next sections I attempt to complicate what we understand by a ‘meaningful’ context in which to appreciate a work of art. If a religious/cultural or theological background is chosen as part of an interpretive framework, this allows us to extend the connections of a given artwork into a deeper ecology than that of the art world. Islam is one such background, being caught up today in a moment of resistance to global imperialism that should make it a natural ally of other anti-imperialist criticalities (instead of a rival hegemonic movement, which is the form it has taken most prominently in recent years). In what follows I will show how a culturally specific reading might illuminate the figure of the migrant in Abidi’s works, and will connect the formal devices she uses to certain techniques in Islamic literature and philosophy. I look at the tropes of vision/visibility, pain and migration as recognisable moments

within a broad but identifiable cultural tradition. Further, I will consider allegory as a key feature of Abidi's work, one that draws, in part, on a continuum that is (in an expanded sense) Islamic. I will preface this exploration by noting that 'Islamic', in this usage, means a certain recognisable set of practices, ideas, beliefs and formations (as well as their negations and disavowals) with very fuzzy boundaries and no determinable essence. At the same time, this life-world cannot be wished away. For all its lack of essence or boundaries, it exists as both an epistemic limit and as a resource for speculative thought that stretches or corrupts its own boundaries. It is this resource that I am bringing into contact with a contemporary, secular, international art world that seems at odds with it, to produce not just a 'weird' reading, but to make the case for strangeness as a way of thinking about video and photographic art.<sup>1</sup>

In looking more closely at the figures in Abidi's work, the question arises, who are these would-be migrants and how is their time or their boredom of concern to us, viewers of art in a gallery in Karachi, Mumbai or Berlin? I recognise in them something of my own experience and that of many others who share my ethnicity, class and language. I recognise too that, in a moment of possibly misguided empathy, I have assumed that these people are Pakistani, and therefore in all likelihood some of them are Muslim. This is a forgivable association. In the present state of the world, the difficulty of travel offers a unique kind of coalescence of experience to people with Muslim names, or from Muslim majority countries.

The people in Abidi's videos move between the yellow lines and advance through the proscenium arch of the metal detector. They shuffle towards a waiting room clasping

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<sup>1</sup> My notion of strangeness derives from Wittgenstein's, cited at the beginning of this essay, and refers to the radical strange-ness of cultural life worlds.

plastic folders containing proof of their existence and their right to travel. What strikes me immediately is the willing and fatalist subordination of the self to a procedure of evaluation. We might, in their submission to authority, recognise our own post-colonial condition: the nervous hands, the veiling of expression, the muting of a natural gait and swagger are bodily re-compositions that many of us are familiar with. Is that man in the waiting room, anxiously listening for his number to be called on the PA system, the same body and self as the man in his house or on the street in his everyday environment? Evidently not. This transformation, temporary and fraught, is perhaps enabled by the vestiges of a feudal or a courtly or colonial/bureaucratic culture, where shows of humility, fear and exaggerated deference are part of the daily life of the ordinary person.<sup>2</sup>

Can we confidently identify these people in the waiting room and determine why they are here? As the applicants wait and we, the viewers, wait with them, we have time to reconsider whom we first took them to be. Their ethnicity, their clothing and their gestures lead me to assume that this is taking place somewhere in the Indian subcontinent and that the footage represents some reality of the migrant condition. As the video unfolds, it becomes clearer that this is not a real visa application office but a simulacrum constructed from remembered and observed experiences of many such places. The yellow lines on the road, the metal detecting security archway, the clear stretch of space without the clutter of reality are far too staged to be anything but a concentrated dream-form. Abidi's videos are indeed carefully staged and populated with a mixture of friends, professional actors and crowds gathered for the purpose of

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<sup>2</sup> An inhabitant of a city, town or village would perhaps not as yet be entirely assimilated into the modern category of 'citizen'. In India, it is always the inhabitants of towns and villages who exercise their franchise with more seriousness, and also the communities who are wooed more intensely by politicians.

filming. This is also the case in the artist's other works such as *I Love You* (2016), a flipbook of fellow artists mouthing the title phrase and *Reserved* (2006), a video that ostensibly documents the assembly and dispersal of people gathered for the arrival of a V.I.P. who never turns up. The ironic distancing from reality, the separation from the scene of actual waiting, and the discovery that the representation is not 'real' but simulated, both amuses and unsettles in spite of the fact that it is a familiar tactic.

The space between reality and simulation is already well theorised and a familiar trope in the contemporary art-world, especially in the work of artists of Abidi's generation. From The Atlas Group to Pierre Huyghe, various versions of staged historical artefacts and events have alerted us to an ongoing artistic/political project that sets itself, sometimes humorously or parodically, against the certitudes of canonical accounts of historical events. Abidi also represents this tendency, fitting into the mould of the cosmopolitan, international artist interrogating ideas of the 'local', or of relations to a homeland that are always-already mediated or prosthetic, exemplified in her split-screen videos, *Mangoes* (1999) and *Anthems* (2000). In both of these works, she plays an Indian and a Pakistani sharing a screen, each celebrating the joys of their 'own' mangoes and popular music respectively. These two early works already point to the genesis of a singular set of concerns centred on belonging and un-belonging. The absence of Abidi herself as a performer in subsequent works is due to the increased availability of resources (such as actors), but it also represents a move towards a specific kind of fictional turn and ironic distancing. The space opened by Abidi's fictions – I claim – is also one that has to be read in the broad philosophical context of the intercultural encounters of several hundred years of Islamic globalisation, variously referred to as the culture of the Islamicate or what Shahab Ahmed has called 'the



Balkans-to-Bengal complex' (Ahmed 2015). Abidi herself, born in Karachi, educated in Lahore and Chicago, resident of Delhi and now Berlin is an artist who negotiates her way in and out of multiple cultural contexts.

What might it mean to suggest that a work exists in multiple contexts? Does this suggest a restless, shifting sensibility that ceaselessly moves between the multiple subjectivities generated by these contexts, or do we locate instead something like a hybridised subjectivity, in between cultures and world-views? The task of locating such an artistic subject might be easier in work that explicitly foregrounds a signature style, or a dominant authorial presence; or in work that might pastiche cultural or artistic tropes to suggest an underlying fluidity of position. Abidi's videos, however, are often marked by their stillness and by the uncomfortable absence of any explicit subjective position to guide the viewer through the aesthetic or ethical framework of the narrative. Although Abidi as the author is still very much the directorial voice of these narratives, she is absent as a phenomenal voice or presence in the later works that rely on an extraordinary tightness of framing and produce an effect of impassivity. There is indeed, an almost complete absence of any cinematic moving, tracking or panning shots: her scenes are framed and rigidly set, bodies move through and across them and don't linger at the edges.

The video technology, the occasional glitchy frame or digital artefact that threaten to disrupt its lossless journey to the screen, signal nothing more than a forced neutrality that is almost devastatingly bland, even cruelly so in the way it confronts the faces and gestures of these would-be migrants. In Abidi's typology, the architectural signifies oppressive or constructive power, while figures inhabit it. This opposition is doubled

up by the architectural stillness of her own camera's gaze, which mirrors the surveillance of the visa office, making the spectators voyeurs of a higher order, surveillants of surveillance. Importantly, this surveillance is not parodied or designed to set into motion a familiar chain of disturbances in signification, reality effects or historical truth. Instead, there are two parallel gazes operating within the one work that hold together in a single narrative moment a world view that is not reducible to the pure contemporaneity or the secular modernity of the art world within which it is generally exhibited, circulated and interpreted. Indeed surveillance and its vision, including Abidi's own performance as absent, disinterested observer, can be seen as an extended metaphor for the art-world itself, for the cultural non-specificity of its mediums and accompanying theory: the surveilled remain as an unruly surplus.

I want to suggest some ways of thinking here, about the co-existence of these subjectivities in a single work, and why this conjunction might matter. First, it is important, in my view, to place Abidi's work in a context that adds to the density of its language and techniques, rather than in one that reduces its interpretability. Especially important are the artistic devices and representational tools that might no longer be a visible part of a certain contemporary landscape of art, but which might linger in the ways in which contemporary technologies are used to construct a view of the world (and this persistence might be conscious or unconscious, in the way of inheritances). So Abidi's work beyond the immediate circumstances of its exhibition and the fact of Abidi's cosmopolitan life in Europe, must be seen as part of a continuum of narrative and artistic traditions in Pakistan, India and the Islamic world. (This is not to read away the Buddhist, Christian, Jain or Hindu worlds, which might produce equally productive or resistant readings). An artist like Abidi, who was raised in Karachi

amidst the abiding heritage of Urdu and Persian literary culture, derives as much from these sources as from an art school training in America. This heritage is found in the deep structures of her work, in its allegorical drive and narrative dimension in particular. *The Speech Writer* (2011), for example, about an imagined, retired political speechwriter takes the form of a narrative, the extreme artifice of which is highlighted by its presentation as a fictional video documentary, re-presented as photographic stills composed as ten (physical) flip-books. Here, the destabilisation of the boundary between fiction and reality is intensified by the destabilisation of form, the video significantly mutating into a book. Such storytelling frames were a dominant narrative form in South Asia and the Middle East and played an important role in the work of Muslim philosophers such as Ibn Sina. These are not accidental connections either: Ibn Sina's reading of the prophet Muhammad's physical/spiritual journey (or *mi'iraj*) as allegorical, provides a touchstone for Islamic philosophy and its relation of the literal with the metaphysical (Heath 1992: 8).

### **1. Visibility: God's eye and disobedient bodies**

Why explore a *Muslim* context, among all the others that could be brought to bear upon Bani Abidi's work? As I have indicated, her life, like many successful contemporary artists, has been lived across continents and cultures while her work has been exhibited largely in institutional and biennial circuits. It appears that the precise context her work demands is that of the international network itself, returning her work to an original impulse of un-rootedness and shifting identities. In addition, most bland contemporary moving images of film and video cannot easily be read in terms of style and signature

in an art-historical sense, since style and signature are notionally tied to an individual or national genius from within the canon. However, I contend that Abidi's work is deeply rooted in depictions of life in a Muslim majority theocratic state, and its often violently chauvinistic enforcement of Islamic values in public and private spaces. Most obviously, her work depicts members of minority ethnic/religious communities in Karachi streets, for instance, a Parsi woman pretending to do her ironing in public, in the orange glow of a street light in the early evening from the *Karachi* (2009) series of photographs or in *Funland* (2014), scenes of the remains of Nishat Cinema, burned down by angry religious mobs in misdirected revenge against blasphemous cartoons in Denmark.<sup>3</sup> There are also the elegant diagrams of security barricades in *Security barriers A-L* (2008), entry-phones in *Intercommunication Devices* (2008), *minbars* (pulpits) in Sunni mosques in an as yet un-exhibited project. In this world, religion is not only the oppressive force that controls the public space (and restricts the presence of women and non-Muslims) but it is also the creative force that gives shape to the lives of those who oppose the hegemony of the state religion and its many instruments.

Certain typologies emerge in the formal properties of Abidi's work: as I have suggested, the diagrammatic and architectural is often associated with control and power over the human body placed in situations of artificial and sometimes comical external control, speaking of a repressed and perhaps unspeakable minoritarianism.<sup>4</sup>

Examples of the first are the digital prints of *Security Barriers* and *Intercommunication Devices* mentioned earlier. The controlled body turns up, not just in the patient crowds

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<sup>3</sup> The *Jyllands-Posten* Muhammad cartoons controversy arose internationally in response to Danish newspaper (of this name) publishing these cartoons on 30 September 2005, transgressing Islam's strong tradition of aniconism.

<sup>4</sup> This minoritarianism is, in the sense of Deleuze and Guattari's reading of Kafka's work as a 'minor literature': '[...] Kafka marks the impasse that bars access to writing for the Jews of Prague and turns their literature into something impossible – the impossibility of not writing, the impossibility of writing in German, the impossibility of writing otherwise' (Deleuze and Guattari 1986:16).

of *Reserved* and in the waiting room of *The Distance From Here*, but it is already present in *Mangoes* and *Anthems* where sheer physical enjoyment (taste, music and dance) are seen as the product of deep cultural conditioning. The ironic framing of culture in these works serves to reveal its mechanisms, absurdities and ultimate destructiveness and might be referring to an emancipated subject, one unencumbered by fictions of power; or it could be seen to be unconcerned with anything external to its own ironic sensibility, in the sense of an art for its own sense.

It is precisely these possibilities that I am seeking to refuse, by looking *outside* the frame of Abidi's work to the cultural context from which the work emerged. The 'work itself' cannot account entirely for the meaning that it carries, and must be grafted on to a structure of thought and value that activates it. In this instance, Abidi's background – as a Shi'a Pakistani woman amongst other things – can be used to activate the work in ways that offer interpretive and political possibilities that might otherwise be invisible in a global or international exhibitionary environment. While the Shi'a political narrative and the allegory of the events of Karbala (the battle that is the founding tragic event of the major sectarian schism in Islam), for example, is not explicitly depicted in her work, it can perhaps be traced in the continuously staged relation to power and its structures, pointing to something other than an underlying western subject of a particular conception of freedom. It signals a politics that gestures towards a specific and historical notion of emancipation that is yet to be outlined. The point here is not to demonstrate that Abidi's work is *about* Karbala, or about Shi'a Islam, or that it relies on it in some evident way; but rather, to insist that to speak of power or politics in any way at all, is already culturally loaded.

It is, in this sense as a politically diagonal approach, or frictional background that I claim a place for the religious in the space of the contemporary, exemplified by Abidi's position as an exponent of a 'global' art-form. This means continually questioning the violent relationship of the modern to tradition and to traditional temporalities; a violence that is foundational to much of the culture that we consider contemporary. It also means that we attempt to read artworks from outside their own immediate material presence or framing (the museum in Berlin, the projection technology and so on), by positing the presence of something as yet untranslated or untranslatable that can make its presence felt in moments of recognition or misrecognition, such as the specificity of Muslim migration mentioned earlier – even where this information is not evident.

There is an ingrained suspicion against religious or culturally rooted interpretation in favour of a more collective political stance that can be universalised, but one must be wary of taking at face value the politics of political art, or the critical positions of artistic criticality. What mediates between the intention of the author or artist (to critique a tendency, to further the cause of some bid for freedom, to increase the flow of certain desires, to politicise in general) and the idea in the world, is the form and the object itself: semiotically loaded, stupidly resistant, unpredictably volatile. In other words, I am staking my argument on the belief that there continues to be value in the engagement between form and content and that this combination, in each instance, requires a critical apparatus that is peculiar to its circumstances. This claim means that if the allegedly neutral institutional space is home to a particular theoretical vocabulary (including my own), then the most urgent critical task is to delegitimise any underlying strong assumptions of a-historical universality or an un-rooted God's-eye view.

In the case of Abidi's work, then, the combination of form (narrative video), style (irony, humour) and content (Pakistani public culture) can be seen to speak not just to a particular sensibility, but *from* an environment that is marked as different in some important but undefined sense from its global audience. The people who are part of the crowd in *Reserved* (2006), the man breaking a world record for continuous clapping in *The Man Who Clapped for 97 Hours* (2015), are representative of a not entirely translatable habitus, a life-world that finds its limits when viewed from outside, and its own extension as it looks outwards.

It is this particular God's-eye view that Jean-Luc Nancy seeks to disconnect from the notion of value in the chapter, 'Urbi et Orbi' in *The Creation of the World, or Globalization*. Nancy says:

A world 'viewed', a represented world, is a world dependent on the gaze of a subject of the world [*sujet du monde*]. A subject of the world (that is to say as well a subject of history) cannot itself be within the world [*être dans le monde*]. Even without a religious representation, such a subject, implicit or explicit, perpetuates the position of the creating, organizing, and addressing God (if not the addressee) of the world. (Nancy 2007: 40)

This is a development of Nancy's well-known anti-ocularism and one of the more compact statements of his complex examination of the relationship between religion, secularism, sovereignty and globalisation. The main idea, as I see it, is that the classical 'subject of the world' or *cosmotheoros*, could exist in an episteme or life-

world where there was a clear link between the sovereignty of God above, and the contingency of the merely temporal world; from the position of the outside, the subject could then judge, evaluate or critique the existing order. As Nancy points out, however, in the contemporary world, we have not only lost this connection to an outside (secularism), but this process has also (seemingly paradoxically) accompanied the extension of the Christian West across the world to the point where it ceases to be itself as an identity (Nancy 2013: 31).

## **2. Pain: formations of belief and communities of oppression**

More attentive to the Islamic context in his reading of the contemporary secular/religious divide is Talal Asad. Asad's writing stays close to a philosophical or meta-anthropological stance that is at heart Wittgensteinian and fundamentally suspicious of concepts. For Asad, the secular is in no way simply the *obverse* of the religious, or its absence from the public sphere, nor is it an extension of a detheologised Christianity. Instead, the privileged site for an examination of concepts such as secularism, religion and contemporaneity – if there is any – is the *body* that accepts, deploys and constitutes the cultural narratives within which it finds itself. Taking the example of 'pain', Asad states that the understanding of pathologies (such as hypochondria, hysteria, sadism and masochism) is already immersed in a powerful world view that sees the response to unattributable pain, (or the desire for the 'needless' consumption/affliction of pain) as symptoms of a mental disease. Asad claims, however, that the connection between Christianity and the culture that produces this pathologising impulse, is purely contingent:



If I am sceptical of the claim made for secularism's essential roots in Christianity this is not because I argue that its real historical roots lie elsewhere, that secularism has no connection with Christianity whatever, but because I don't think we are entirely clear about what we are seeking to explain with such confidence – or for that matter, why that explanation has become so urgent. (Asad 2011: 673)

To return to Abidi's *The Distance from Here*, I have remarked already how familiar the submissive body language of the waiting applicants appears on first encountering this work. I have also found this obedience embarrassing, revealing situations in which the examined or surveilled body retreats or transforms according to expectation, if only temporarily. Can this embarrassment be *felt* by someone who has not experienced exactly this relation to aggressively enforced boundaries, precarious border crossings, futile questionings? It can be described, certainly: Abidi stages it and I am describing it here. The question remains, can it be experienced by anyone at all from anywhere in a *bodily* way as fear, or one stage removed as embarrassment? If not – and we must take this possibility seriously – we can posit the formation of a community of those excluded or included by the affective scene of this work (and by extension, to other works as well). This recognised emotional community who share a corporeal experience of oppression should further be distinguished from seemingly similar formations around shared backgrounds, language and ethnicity and as these latter are primarily chauvinistic, majoritarian, conglomerative or nationalistic in impulse; whereas the kind of community I am indicating is subtractive, scattered, abject in disposition and 'idiorrhhythmic', to use Barthes's phrase (2013:7).

If there is, however, something like a Muslim or an Indian or subaltern experience that can be shared in contemporary art, we must also recognise that it must be shared in the language, form and manner of the universalising (and presumably secular) exhibitionary complex of white cubes, anti-white cubes, university lecture rooms, museums, public spaces. It is in this context that Abidi's staging of a scene, rather than capturing it in its 'original' event, must be seen as a cautionary distancing from the idea that the world and the art world are *one and the same thing*. Despite their deliberate blurring of boundaries, it remains crucial to the experience of contemporary art in the secular world that the border space is patrolled in ever more invisible but powerful ways. The attentive eye, reading the most 'real' of artworks through a cultural or religious difference, will perhaps pick up more readily on this border police. A powerful example of this kind of reading is found when Talal Asad, in his analysis of a review of a performance by the artist Ron Athey, is drawn to the reviewer's reference to the performance (which involved, amongst other bloody things, the piercing of Athey's skin above his eyebrow by six-inch needles to make a kind of medicalised crown of thorns) as a 'sketch' (in inverted commas in the original), while speaking of the obvious echoes of martyrdom with no such cautionary indication. What does this caution say about secular society? Asad remarks:

What is remarkable about these opening paragraphs is that the writer of this account, finds herself having to put the familiar theatrical word 'sketch' in quotation marks – but not so the equally familiar theological word, martyrdom. The reader is given to understand that this is a real tribute to the power of Christian iconography, a *real* exploration of the

nature of (Christian) martyrdom, but that it only ‘appears’ to be a form of theatre, an ‘imitation.’ It is a mistake to see it as an illusion. (Asad 2003: 120)

For Asad, this instance exemplifies the complex attitudes towards public and private pain that make up the secular domain (rather than a pure absence of religion, as I have already indicated). On the one hand, modern secularism seeks to abolish pain absolutely whilst at the same time, performances of pain flourish under the banner of individual autonomy. Yet there is no provision for individual autonomy in other forms of repression, such as slavery; I cannot choose to sell myself into slavery, no matter how much I may desire it. Similarly, and as certain grotesque scandals in recent memory have proved, there is no comfortable way of accepting the autonomy of someone who wishes to be killed and cannibalised. What is especially instructive to our present field of inquiry, however, is the observation that the theatre of art must be seen to breach the realm of reality. It must have its theatricality placed in quotation marks if it is to allow a certain kind of performance of subjectivity (such as that of the sadist or masochist) to take place with any effect at all. In this way,

[...] it is the difference between ‘the real’ and ‘the mimetic’ – like the difference between ‘pain’ and ‘pleasure’ – that is available to modern self-fashioning. And that consequently the tension between ‘real’ and ‘pretend’ bondage is itself aestheticized, and the clarity with which consent can be distinguished from coercion becomes problematic. (Asad 2003:121)

Where Asad sees a problematic aestheticisation that muddies the distinction between consent and coercion I regard this aestheticisation as the site of an interrogation of the secular and the formations, separations and attitudes that constitute a life-world.

### **3. Migration: real and allegorical crossings**

The bodies moving between the lines, towards a desk and a decision, waiting for their judgment: why have I read them as migrants rather than travellers in Abidi's *The Distance From Here?* The traveller sees the surface of the earth as a place to be explored, where the migrant sees a route: a way to better oneself. We are in an age where migration and its effects have greatly intensified, and war, economic inequality and climate change continue to drive people beyond the borders of their native lands. The histories and documents of migration in the Muslim world show how migration has been figured differently in the past, and how it might be reconceived in the present moment, not as a supplication to enter a foreign space, but as a redrawing of communities of belonging, to reflect the continuum of migrants that stretch between a 'homeland' and their present 'home'. The extensive tradition of travel writing in the Muslim world reflected the relative ease of movement and communication within the vast and culturally differentiated collective body known as the *ummah*; that national imaginary contiguous with what I have earlier described, following Shahab Ahmed as the Balkans-to-Bengal Complex (2015). Within this world, that included a tremendous range of ethnicities, languages and artistic cultures, there nevertheless persisted a certain recognisable fact of Islamic identity (which is not the same thing as being a Muslim. It is to belong to the wider world of Islam). Ahmed's major accomplishment

is to show that the so-called middle period of Islam did not evolve as an etiolated, melancholic descendant of a presumed originary Meccan period; but that, in these heterogeneous middle years until the advent of modernity, Islam became an entity, a cultural continuum that we recognise to this day through its literary, artistic and philosophical achievements. This view allows us to see poetry, wine drinking and sexuality, for example, as part of the extensively developed and popularly accepted para-nomian aspect of Islam,<sup>5</sup> rather than standing in absolute opposition to a punitive, legal code. The acceptance of this world-view and its ultimate unity, Ahmed argues, was the result of a complex *paedia* based on philosophical and literary texts in several languages, of which all educated people were supposed to have an understanding. In addition, as those of us from the Indian subcontinent can attest, even the larger mass of illiterate people were versed in the most dizzying theological notions through the media of song and *Sufi* poetry.

If we follow Ahmed in this argument, we see that until very recently it would have made little sense to think of the world within the sphere of influence of the Islamicate in terms other than the ones available to it, and certainly this would present no restriction, given the philosophically diverse and international nature of Islamic philosophy. My argument here is this. The *paedia* identified by Ahmed proliferated in forms such as the *Dars-e-Nizami* syllabus taught across the Indian subcontinent, but having an influence far beyond the seminaries and the *Dar-ul-Uloom*. It has been largely replaced by a European model of liberal education in much of the world (including Pakistan), however, the cultural habits, cosmologies, ethical systems and configurations of the just-vanished world continue to speak through the most

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<sup>5</sup> I use 'para-nomian' following Shahab Ahmed's reference to aspects of Muslim life that exist side by side with the juridical, often in conflict with the law, and never subservient to the revealed or textual dimension of religion.

neutralised of contemporary forms. Where this is not in the pictorial frame itself, then it is at its margins or in the relation of the artist (as her subjectivity) to the broader, conceptual frame.

Where does this relationship to the just vanished reside, and how can we identify it?

The Abidi video belongs to no particular genre in terms of its style; there is no identifiable historical position inhabited by the person behind the camera producing this slice of staged reality. Fake documents, ‘mockumentary’ style footage and re-enactments tend to bear the mark of a recognisable irony which operates by sending up the conventions within which ‘reality’ is produced as a genuine and evidentiary image. From shaky camerawork, to *verité* techniques, intruding equipment or breaking the fourth wall, there exists a well-established repertoire of gestures that allow us to see the frame as constitutive of the content. These are as much a part of popular television culture and cinema today as of the art-world, to the point of being worn thin from use. Art that mimics archives and historical photographs, for example, works through a fundamental anachronism that adopts the mannerisms and techniques of a bygone age, often just unsuccessfully enough to let on that there is something beyond sincerity to be seen here even if that something is just more sincerity. In a different register, Pierre Huyghe’s work, such as the video *The Third Memory* (1999), which examines the recollections of John Wojtowicz, the bank robber, played by Al Pacino in the 1975 film, *Dog Day Afternoon*, demonstrates the complex slippage between fiction and fact: Wojtowicz elides real events in his life with those depicted in the Sidney Lumet film. *The Host and the Cloud* (2009-2010) further extends the space of fiction into reality with the use of sculptural elements, masks and puppetry in a film that includes a re-enactment of the trial of the radical group, Action Directe, and audio essays on

capitalism. Huyghe's work moves incessantly across the borderlands of fact and fiction using the space of fiction as a clearly demarcated geography, a film set or an invented ritual or a fantastic expedition that is brought across the borders of 'real' life, into the space of the *verité* document. Here, the constant appearance of mythological and fantastic elements, indicate clearly an artistic subjectivity that holds these elements together in unresolved tension.

So far I have attempted to demonstrate a broad and *negative* conception of the cultural specificity of Abidi's work. In other words, I have outlined the more general case that, if we are to take a philosophical notion of 'world' as marking something like an epistemic horizon for the individual as well as for entire cultures, then there might be some value in emphasising the points where these cultures seem to break off from each other. In this article, I have argued that Abidi's relationship to Pakistan, a country founded on the principle of religious distinction, raises the stakes in the search for such a break. Further, I have argued following Asad (who himself broadly follows Wittgenstein), that the language of theory that Abidi's work, or contemporary art in general, finds itself located in is itself culturally and historically as specific as other world-views (such as the 'religious') that might be seen as non-contemporary within the dominant paradigm of secular modernity. The aim thus far has not been to replace the modern with the traditional, or the secular frame with a religious frame, but to experiment with the possibilities of a vocabulary and terms of reference that are as yet unfamiliar to western theory. I do not seek to broaden and universalise the field, but to allow art to *reflect* the tensions and convergences between disparate world-views. While terms like 'Karbala' or religious narrative techniques might be unfamiliar in the context of global exhibitions and theory, demanding explanation and translation, they

are part of the everyday intellectual life and discourse of much of Pakistan. My reading stresses this disparity: the ease with which contemporary visual art is circulated globally, while certain ideas that inform the philosophical particularity of that art encounter resistance.

But what would a culturally specific reading of work such as Abidi's look like? Firstly, a reading of her approach to video work as primarily allegorical would follow from a recognition that allegory has informed a major artistic and literary tradition of the Islamic world. The fiction/documentary tension in Abidi's work can be seen as deriving equally from the philosophical apparatuses of European theory – in the same vein as Pierre Huyghe – and the history of storytelling that emphasises the artificiality of its forms, in order to point to a truth outside the frame of the story. The most famous examples of such storytelling include the multiple versions the *Dastan-e-Amir Hamza*, or of *Alif Laylah wa-Laylah* or the *One Thousand and One Nights*, where the story of the vizier's daughter Scherezade, who attempts to stay her execution at the hands of the fictional king Shahryar by spinning fantastic stories, allows a dizzying number of folk stories, adventures and mythical fables to proliferate and coexist despite their generic differences. Here, the realism of the frame story is needed to hold together stories that are more obviously fantastic, magical and loaded with allusions to mystical or religious matters. The importance of the Islamic background to these otherwise syncretic and variant texts is most famously demonstrated by Muhsin J. Al-Musawi in the magisterial *The Islamic Context of the Thousand and One Nights*. Al-Musawi argues here that the universal appeal and influence of this set of fables must not dilute its close relationship to:



[...the] Islamic factor, including institutionalized religion, state institutions, and faith or mass religion as a religious sentiment that can constitute and operate strongly on structures of feeling [...]. (Al-Musawi 2009:4)

It is important, then, to see this cultural product (the *Dastan-e-Amir Hamza*) as reflecting certain aspects of Islamic sentiment, despite or even *because* it is the result of a globalisation that includes its partial borrowing from an older Indo-Persian context to Baghdad in the Islamic Golden Age. To extend this tradition to Abidi's work would be to ask, what does her frame device of the documentary-based video contain? In *The Distance From Here*, as well as in other works discussed above, the storyteller or *Dastan-go* takes on the role of a neutral *transmitter* of a story through certain conventional devices that highlight the artifice and the humour of the situation being described; it is not 'real' but designed to indicate a recognisable sentiment within a community of listeners, and to point to something beyond that could not itself be adequately expressed in literal terms. Ibn Sina, as I have mentioned here, saw allegory as fundamental to the structure of universal truth (as mediated through metaphor and fable), extending allegorical reading to the Quran itself. Abidi's waiting characters in their lines for visas, with their dreams of travel crushed or approved in the grim non-places of modernity (to use Augé's phrase), do not point to an external moral or wisdom rooted in Islamic theology, but what persists is the structure of the frame device and its narrative function. This is especially when the narrative is deliberately sabotaged, emptied or delayed in ways that frustrate our very expectations of narrative. Here again, we can relate *The Distance From Here* to Abidi's earlier work *Reserved*, both works about waiting that require the viewer to wait for a resolution that never arrives, an ending that is a non-event or non-arrival.

This is not to say that such frame-fictions and allegorical devices are unknown outside of Islamic culture. Let us assume that most narrative and literary traditions have their own versions of these. However, following the example of Al-Musawi, we can place certain artworks in cultural contexts that illuminate something of the *function* of these works in a particular environment. Since Abidi's work uses the frame-fiction familiar to a certain tradition without pointing to some obvious allegorical truth, one can see this as an example of a kind of displacement of the allegorical. This means that the allegorical truth is that indicated by the *very difficulty* of articulating the tension between the local and the global, between the viewpoint of the fully modern western subject and the would-be migrant stuck in a waiting room just this side of modernity. That this tension is not resolved or given an ending (both *The Distance From Here* and *Reserved* simply wrap up, their sites clear out, the cameras stop recording in a symmetry that does not concern itself with the afterlives or psychologies of the characters) is not simply an accident. It is a refusal to dialectically resolve contradictions, which parallels that of the Arabian, Persian and Indian Islamic narrative tradition discussed here.

An appropriate context, such as the allegorical (when considering Abidi's work) is not only historically accurate but is productive of *resistances* to interpretations that place art primarily in the contexts of the cultures where they circulate most efficiently. Here, the nexus is between global art exhibitions and the predominantly Euro-American theoretical tools that inform, interpret and critique them. We can further begin to locate these resistant or dense moments in the extraneous details of the video: the hands clutching a plastic envelope full of documents perhaps, or the hands doodling on the

cover of a book (titled *Tips for a Successful Interview!*) or the feet dangling below a pair of crossed legs of a woman in a skirt, next to a tote bag full of personal belongings. These moments are extraneous and do not have an *immediate* interpretable content, even if they can eventually be submitted to interpretation; they just ‘feel’ unimportant in some important sense that goes beyond the whimsical.

It is important then to read the two gazes in Abidi’s work as ironic without being parodic, gesturing towards the allegorical and its multiple subjectivities. The flat neutrality of Abidi’s gaze is not her own, it is the gaze of an-other that is not entirely other. The artist as frame holds together both the cool eye of the coloniser, the archivist or the scientist as *cosmotheoros* as well as the returned, submissive look of the supplicant, the plaintiff or the would-be migrant. These are not held together in simple opposition, but reflect in analogic form (as allegories must) the complex levels of incommensurability, double-consciousness and experience (signalled repeatedly by the extraneous detail) – simultaneously secular and religious, coloniser and colonised – that are ungraspable by mere representation, or by a single vision.

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