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University of Southampton

Faculty of Faculty of Arts and Humanities

Winchester School of Art

Palestinian Contemporary Art: Origin, Nationalism and Excess

by

Gordon Hon

Thesis for the degree of PhD (by publication)

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University of Southampton

Abstract

Faculty of Arts and Humanities

Winchester School of Art

Doctor of Philosophy

Contemporary Palestinian Art: Origin, Nationalism and Excess

by

Gordon Hon

This thesis provides a research overview of a submission for PhD by publication. A list of the submitted publications can be found at the end. It demonstrates how these publications have established a relationship between the continuing production of art by Palestinians and the creation of Palestinian national identity through an investigation of ideas of origin in nationalism and the ontology of the work of art. It is argued that ideas of origin in relation to the nation and national identity are characterised by their hollowness, but rather than this undermining the emergence of the nation, this emptiness is what allows the nation to emerge. This generative but problematic blind spot is explored in the specific context of Palestinian art and the Israeli/Palestinian conflict and the ways in which contemporary Palestinian artists critically address ideas of identity and nationalism at the level of process and form. The research identifies how these processes are developed to extend beyond their specific political and cultural contexts to provide insights into ontological questions of contemporary art.

The research further proposes links between ideas of non-human agency in the work of art, Freud's theory of the Death Drive and Bataille's ideas of excess, in accounting for the the phenomena that Palestinian art had undergone a Golden Age since the second intifada of 2001, despite the increasing constraints of ongoing political conflict and occupation. The research explored the possibility that it was not only despite these conditions but was, at least in part, because of them. It is argued that the humanist understanding alone, that artistic production is a necessity of spiritual, cultural and political survival, is not sufficient to explain its apparent excess in material loss. Through the use of the Death Drive and Bataille's accursed share it is shown that a confrontation and exploration of the relationships between art, excess and luxury can provide ways of addressing ontological and ethical questions in the production and dissemination of contemporary art.

Table of Contents

Declaration of Authorship	5
Introduction	6
1. Origin and the Empty Centre of Nationalism	9
2. Indeterminate Ontologies	15
3. The Death Drive and Non-human Agency	18
4. Excess	21
Details of submitted publications	24

Research Thesis: Declaration of Authorship

Print name: Gordon Hon

Title of thesis: Palestinian Contemporary Art: Origin, Nationalism and Excess

I declare that this thesis and the work presented in it are my own and has been generated by me as the result of my own original research.

I confirm that:

1. This work was done wholly or mainly while in candidature for a research degree at this University;
2. Where any part of this thesis has previously been submitted for a degree or any other qualification at this University or any other institution, this has been clearly stated;
3. Where I have consulted the published work of others, this is always clearly attributed;
4. Where I have quoted from the work of others, the source is always given. With the exception of such quotations, this thesis is entirely my own work;
5. I have acknowledged all main sources of help;
6. Where the thesis is based on work done by myself jointly with others, I have made clear exactly what was done by others and what I have contributed myself;
7. None of this work has been published before submission

Signature: Date:15/03/23

Introduction

The selected publications submitted for this PhD cover the period from 2012 to 2022, however this overview will also include some references to a few publications and projects before this period. This is to provide more information on the context of the research themes which have emerged from long-standing research interests and collaborative work, which has included my parallel practice as an artist. A central concern in the submitted work has been the problem of origin in terms of the ontology of the work of art and national identity, which took the position that origins are not historical beginnings but produced in the present. This position has informed the structure of this overview, which takes a synchronic approach to the research problems and themes covered over the publication period. However, the development of the research problems will also be broadly chronological and will be mapped and explained as I proceed. It would be disingenuous to claim that there were, from the outset, conscious over-arching aims and objectives for the submitted work as a whole, but by taking a lateral, thematic approach, in the present, I have aimed to retrospectively identify broader aims implied by those stated in the publications. I would describe these aims as an establishment of the relationship between the ontologies of the work of art in relation to the production of national identity and in relation to non-human agency. I have shown, in these publications the relationship between the production of art in Palestine and the creation of Palestinian national identity alongside an investigation into the ontology of the work of art as an encounter with non-human agency. These aims have been brought together towards the end of the submitted work in the curated exhibition, the Punishment of Luxury (2018) and in its accompanying catalogue. The main questions that have been addressed in the research can be summarised as:

- What is the relationship between the idea of origin and the emergence of national identity and the ontology of the work of art?
- How are contemporary Palestinian artists critically and generatively addressing ideas of identity and nationalism at the level of process and form?
- In what ways can these processes be developed to extend beyond their specific political and cultural contexts to provide insights into ontological questions of contemporary art?
- Can a conscious and deliberate confrontation and exploration of the relationships between art, excess and luxury provide ways of addressing ontological and ethical questions in the production and dissemination of contemporary art?

It is important to note that of the submitted publications, the book, *The Origins of Palestinian Art* (2013) and one of the book chapters, *From the Empty Grave to the Empty Cradle: Myths of Origin and Art in the Israel/Palestine Conflict* (2016), are co-authored with Bashir Makhoul. The included exhibitions, *Enter Ghost Exit Ghost* (2012) and *The Punishment of Luxury* (2018) were also a collaborative projects with Makhoul. They were a continuation of a long-standing collaborative research relationship. The projects emerge and develop dialogically and in the case of the included exhibitions, in which I curated work produced by Makhoul, the critical context and questions came out of discussions that took place before and during the production of the work. I have included a published conversation, *The Threat of Space: A Discussion between Bashir Makhoul and Gordon Hon* (2012)¹, to provide an insight into how this collaboration through dialogue works. The discussion revolves around the exhibition *Enter Ghost Exit Ghost* (2012).

The collaborative approach to the book can be broadly divided according to the different approaches to the topic taken by the authors. My interests tend towards an ontological analysis of the work of art, which often involves seeking what cannot be seen or is hidden through an interrogation of the literal, manifest material. This includes all formal aspects of the work such as materials, medium, technique and process. This is analysed in relation to explicit and implicit subject matter and in turn related to the material, cultural and political conditions of its production. This strongly influenced the emphasis on the idea of origin in terms of the ontology of the work of art in relation to the creation of national identity as well as themes such as fragmentation. Makhoul's approach tends towards the opposite direction. From the beginning of the book project his area of expertise was in the historical and political context of Palestinian art. Therefore his analysis began with the broader context, with an emphasis on the political and social conditions of the artists and the institutions and organisations that supported them, involving a focus on the geographic, religious, political and social alliances and groupings of the artists. Examples of this would be the emphasis, in Chapter 5, *Inside the Line: Palestinians in Israel*, on the importance of the Communist party in the emergence of a Palestinian art scene in Israel or the generational differences between the early liberation artists and those brought up during the Intifada. As a Palestinian artist, he was also interested in the immediate, subjective conditions from which the works emerged. This approach to the object of study from opposite, and sometimes conflicting directions, was effectively the engine of the collaboration and the themes and arguments emerged from a dialogue with the shared aim of a critical understanding of the relationship between Palestinian art and nationalism. The book also incorporates a survey of contemporary Palestinian art and, as a Palestinian artist, Makhoul had access to knowledge and data that would not have been available to me, and my role was mainly in integrating the work of the artists into the main theoretical

¹ Bishop R, (ed) (2012) *The Threat of Space: A Discussion between Bashir Makhoul and Gordon Hon*, Theory, Culture & Society November 16,

arguments. The structure of the book was agreed between us in such a way as to distribute the work, as evenly as possible.

One of the main rationales for the synchronic structure of this research overview has been to isolate the themes in the book in which I had a particular interest and are developed in the other submitted publications. This means there is less emphasis on the survey element of the book as well as the historical context, although I contributed to those too. An updated and expanded version of the book in Arabic was also published in 2020, as *Contemporary Palestinian Art: Origins, Nationalism, Identity* by the Institute for Palestinian Studies. I have not included it in the submission partly because it is in Arabic, and partly because it has mostly expanded in terms of the breadth of its data towards an updated survey, to which I didn't contribute, although I was consulted on integrating the artists thematically. This translation is significant in terms of the book's contribution to the field in the middle east.

This overview and summary is structured in four sections according to the main research themes: 1. Origin and the Empty Centre of Nationalism. 2. Indeterminate Ontologies. 3. The Death Drive and Non-human Agency. 4. Excess. Under each heading I explain the context of the themes, the relationships between them, the part they play in the submitted publications and the development of the research.

1. Origin and the Empty Centre of Nationalism

In *The Origins of Palestinian Art* (2013), as the title suggests, the idea of origin in relation to Palestinian art and national identity is a central theme. It was impossible to consider the history of Palestinian art and the concerns of contemporary Palestinian art without addressing nationalism. Ideas of origin are central to understanding nationalism and are particularly relevant in the context of Palestine and Israel. The book takes as its starting point Edward Said's differentiation between beginnings and origin in which "origin centrally dominates what derives from it, the beginning (especially the modern beginning) encourages non-linear development, a logic giving rise to a multileveled coherence of dispersion we find in Freud's text, in the texts of modern writers, or in Foucault's archaeological investigations"². Said's 'beginning' is defined by its modernity, as opposed to the archaic 'origin' that can often be found in nationalist discourse. Said's use of beginning is rooted, ironically, in its own etymological origins as the action of cutting open or opening up. A narrative begins with an opening. In this sense, the beginning can be anywhere in time, and has the potential to develop in any direction or in a multiplicity of directions. The point of entry may be critical to the orientation of a narrative, also marking a possible point of return, but the narrative necessarily departs from it. The origin, by contrast, cannot be departed from and remains as a fixed centre. Said's idea of beginning is able to move in multiple non-linear directions, creating what he describes as a 'coherence of dispersion' and the implications of this paradoxical idea also inform the book's approach to the Palestinian Nakba as both a problematic origin myth and as a beginning, which opens a non-linear narrative of the cultural development and coherence of the fragmented Palestinian nation. These ideas of fragmentation are developed in later chapters of the book, chapter 3, *Origin and Disaster* and Chapter 6, *Al-Shataat: A Coherence of Dispersion*.

The first chapter of the book, *The Problem of the Origin* addresses the problem of origins in national identity and nationalist discourse that, despite being mythical or invented, are nevertheless present and influence discourses on Palestine and Israel. It takes the position from the main theories of nationalism in Benedict Anderson (1983), Ernest Gellner (1983), Eric Hobsbawm (1990), Homi Bhabha (1990) and P. Chatterjee (1993) that the nation is a modern invention. There are three main reasons given for this approach. The first is that the Israeli/Palestinian conflict is partly characterised by a rhetoric of primordial and essentialist nationalism that, for Palestinians, is also a reaction to the negation of their existence as 'a

² Edward Said, *Beginnings: Intention and Method* (1974): Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, MD, p. 3

people'. To approach this conflict of nationalisms with the assumption that both nation and national identity are constructed helps to avoid the symptomatic discourses of immediacy produced by it. The second reason is that the book's focus is art. It is concerned with visual culture produced by Palestinian artists and the part played by them in the production of origin and Palestinian national identity. It is argued that if the nation is regarded as being constructed through invented traditions and imagined communities, and if art is not only a reflection or expression of a culture but also a producer of culture, then there is a relationship between the production of art and the production of a nation. The third reason given is that the history of Palestinian art almost exactly shares that of the formation of Palestine as a nation, along with its aspirations for statehood, and that they are both, in turn, inextricably linked to modernity. It argues that the existence of Palestinian art is, in itself, evidence of the relative novelty and modernity of the nation. This contradicts notions of archaic origins in nationalist discourse, while raising ontological questions of the act of creation, whether of works of art or of a nation.

To this end the book gives weight to Benedict Anderson's, *Imagined Communities*, and its influence on theorists such as Bhabha and Chatterjee. It uses Anderson's three theoretical paradoxes of nationalism as a template for its approach to the ontological problem of origins in Palestinian art. Anderson presents them as: "(1) The objective modernity of nations to the Historian's eye vs. their subjective antiquity in the eyes of nationalists. (2) The formal universality of nationality as a socio-cultural concept – in the modern world everyone shall 'have' a nationality as he or she 'has' a gender – vs. the irremediable particularity of its concrete manifestations [...] (3) The 'political' power of nationalisms vs. their philosophical poverty or even their incoherence".⁷ The book identifies the problem of the origin that runs through them: First, the *subjective antiquity*, which in the context of Israel/Palestine, expresses itself in terms archaic origins and in the idea of a return. In the second paradox, the simultaneous universality and uniqueness as a birth right assigned to the subject at their point of origin, and at which gender or nationality is always already there, to become incorporated into the subject's identity. It is in response to Anderson's third paradox that the book diverges. It is argued that it is not the political power of nationalism versus, *but because of* their philosophical emptiness or incoherence. It is this philosophical impossibility of origin that allows for the emergence of the nation.

The title of the book was not intended to simply describe the various sources of Palestinian art, along with the conception of Palestine as a nation, but as its simultaneous reverse meaning, turning on the axis of the *of*, as the origins produced by Palestinian art. This double genitive was prompted by Derrida's claim in *Memoirs of the Blind* that a "drawing of the *blind* is a drawing *of* the blind"³ as exemplified by the self-portrait as a drawing of the act of drawing – of its origin. The paradox or impossibility of this is in the blind

³ Jacques Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self Portrait and Other Ruins*, (1993), University of Chicago Press pp65

spot, which is, both figuratively and literally, the point at which the pencil touches the paper – the mark or trait comes into being at the precise point at which it cannot be seen. The aim was to present the idea of origin as an ontological problem, both in the work of art and in the work of the nation and the production of national identity.

The book applied Derrida's idea of origin as an aporia or blind spot, on which the emergence of the work of art depends, to Anderson's 'philosophical emptiness or incoherence' to argue that it was this very emptiness on which the emergence of nationalism depended. It is also argued in the book that the reverse of this position, which would be the insistence on a primordial origin of a nation, not only presents the greatest threat to others, but ultimately to itself. I return to this idea in the recent publication *Facts in the Ground: Atefacts, Fictions and National Identities in Contemporary Palestinian Art* (2022),⁴ exploring the cult of archaeology in Israel, in which origins are quite literally sought in the land, and the ways in which Palestinian artists have subverted this political instrumentalisation, while at the same time producing new Palestinian myths of future origins using speculative science fiction. The chapter argues that the work of artists such as Larissa Sansour and Jumana Manna expose the claimed facts of Israel's origins, dug up by nationalist archaeologists, as both literally and figuratively fragile. The 'facts' in the ground, reflect the political facts on the ground, such as settlements and the infrastructure that connect them, in that despite their clear statements of power, they are still, ultimately, just as fragile as the archaeological shards. The only way that this assertion of power can be maintained is through increasing oppression, which is simultaneously an admission of the political weakness of an occupation. This was initially pursued in the chapter *Blessed Oblivion: Palestinian Video Art and the Avant-doc* (2013)⁵ which discusses Sansour's work as a response to the challenge of Jean-Luc Goddard's statement in *Notre Musique* (2004), regarding 1948, "The Jews become the stuff of fiction. The Palestinians, of documentary." Her response is speculative science fiction in works such as *In the Future they Ate from the Finest Porcelain* (2016), in which she incorporates myth, history and speculative futures, and resists the imposition of being the subject of documentary while exposing the artifice of nationhood. Similar approaches can be found throughout contemporary Palestinian art, by artists who create a speculative future, or more often a speculative present, in which an imagined Palestinian state exists. Artists such as Khalil Rabah who created imaginary state institutions such as the newspaper *The United States of Palestine Times* (2005), *The United States of Palestine Airline* (2007) and his various iterations of *The Palestinian Museum of natural History and Humankind* (2006-) some manifestations of which had no exhibits at all. His ironic take on the empty museum was to be enacted in real life in 2016 when the prestigious Palestinian Museum in Birzeit,

⁴ This chapter was written and submitted to the editor of the book four years before its publication date.

⁵ Hon, Gordon, (2013) *Blessed Oblivion: Palestinian Video Art and the Avant-Doc* in Makhoul, B, *Palestinian Video Art: Constellations of the Moving Image*, Palestinian Art Court Al-Hoash, Jerusalem, pp 172-189

Palestine, opened despite having no exhibits. Its opening was a successful celebration of an empty building as an idea of Palestine. This was also an apt enactment of the relationship between origin, the nation and art revolving around an empty centre. This was put forward in *The Origins of Palestinian Art* and in the book chapter *From the Empty Grave to the Empty Cradle: Myths of Origin and Art in the Israel/Palestine Conflict* (2016), which argued that the idea of origin conflates the beginning and end, in which both birth and death share the same empty space. This takes Anderson's use of the cenotaph (literally *empty tomb*); a site in which the idea of the nation is symbolised and memorialised by an empty space, as the emblematic site of the performance of nationalism – the place where the national subject is urged to remember while being obliged to forget. What Anderson described as the 'philosophical poverty' or 'incoherence' of nationalism versus its real political power can also be seen as its philosophical excess exemplified in the power of the empty tomb. I argued that this hollow centre in the national imaginary is powerful precisely because it carries the problem of the origin within it.

From the perspective of visual art, this empty space and the idea of the nation as an imaginary community raises interesting questions of what is being imagined. Anderson regards this imagining as an act of 'creation', which implies a communal willing into being and a tacit collective understanding of what is being created. Anderson's model for this is the development of newspapers, which I compare to Renan's idea of the willing into being of the nation as "a daily plebiscite, just as an individual's existence is a perpetual affirmation of life."⁶ The daily national newspaper, read in the privacy of the skull of each member of the community. Whether or not the nation exists because it is imagined or willed, as Bhabha points out, it also depends on an act of forgetting; "a minus in the origin – that constitutes the beginning of the nation's narrative".⁷ The homogenous, empty space of the national imaginary is formed partly by 'forgetting to remember.' Bhabha calls this the 'minus in the origin,' and which is necessary in allowing a national narrative to emerge.

The book argued that this 'minus at the origin' characterised by an obligation to forget evoked Anderson's use of the empty grave of the cenotaph as emblematic of nationalism – the site at which, the subject is urged to remember while being obliged to forget. The book argued that the negation implied in the obligation to forget or the 'minus at the origin' can be understood from a psychoanalytic perspective as repression. The integrity of the nation depends on negation, on an act of forgetting incorporated within memorialisation. Around an empty tomb, an unknown soldier is remembered and mourned while the

⁶ Ernest Renan, 'What is a Nation?', trans. Martin Thom, in Bhabha (ed.) (1990), *Nation and Narration*, Routledge, London and New York p. 19.

⁷ Homi K. Bhabha (ed.) (1990) *Nation and Narration* Routledge, London and New York p. 310

death of the other is, taking Freud's idea of the 'un' of unheimlich as the 'token of repression,' *unknown*. The national act of mourning the mortality of an 'unknown soldier' along with an assertion of the immortality of the nation is also an act of unknowing, and for colonial powers a great deal of unknowing is being done. The book chapter, *From the Empty Grave to the Empty Cradle*, ends in the cemeteries of Palestinian refugee camps in southern Lebanon, where there are many graves of men killed during the Lebanese civil war. Although these were mostly young men born and raised in the camps, their gravestones give as their place of birth that of their families' villages in Palestine.⁸ The idea of national origin transcends the actual place of origin. Their symbolic return is through death, inscribed on tangible, irremediable evidence of continuing exile. These are not empty tombs but they speak of empty cradles in a land in which they were not born.

The book further explores these ideas of the emergence of national identity around an empty centre in chapter 4, *Jerusalem as the Navel and the Blind Spot*. It begins with highlighting Jerusalem as the political and symbolic epicentre of both Palestinian and Israeli nationalism as well as the mythical status of the 'navel of the world'. The chapter considers the idea of the navel in relation to Freud's famous footnote in the interpretation of dreams in which he refers to the uninterpretable kernel of a dream as its navel, "the spot where it reaches down into the unknown."⁹ The navel is the point at which the dream is connected to the unconscious and the point at which it comes into being, analogous to Merleau-Ponty's characterisation of the blind spot of the eye, where it is connected to the optic nerve, as the point at which it comes into being as a seeing organ; "the flesh wherein the object is born."¹⁰ What these statements have in common is the disavowal of the navel as a point of rupture rather than connection. The navel is a scar, a wound of disconnection that allows us to live. This disavowal also operates in the symbolic status of Jerusalem as the navel of the world in which it is regarded as a point of connection between the earthly and divine realms.

It is the site of lack, of a flaw in being, in the myths of origin, of identity and of nations, which is accompanied by a desire for 'touchstones', sacred sites, temples and monuments. There is an omphalos in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, that also houses an empty tomb. Beneath the Dome of Al Aqsa there is also a kind of omphalos, a hollow rock with a circular hole cut in its roof. The book argues that the central importance of Jerusalem in relation to nationalism and origin for Palestinians and Israelis is represented by

⁸ Laleh Khalili (2005) *Places of Memory and Mourning: Palestinian Commemoration in the Refugee Camps of Lebanon*, *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 25 (1) 30–45

⁹ Sigmund Freud, 1963 [1900] 'The Interpretation of Dreams', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. J. Strachey, Hogarth Press London V, p. 525.

¹⁰ M. Merleau-Ponty, (1968), *The Visible and the Invisible*, Northwest University Press, Evanston, IL p. 248

its hollow centre and as an ancient site has become a modern site of nationalist fantasies of primordial origin. Like the empty tomb of the modern cenotaph it is its emptiness that gives it its symbolic power.

The Origins of Palestinian Art established the significance of origin in the formation of the nation and national identity as a generative force in its emergence, while at the same time presenting the dangers it presented in the nationalist myths and settler colonialism. One of the aims of the book was to recognise the importance of national identity in the Palestinian struggle for self-determination and the role that Palestinian art had played, while at the same time to critique nationalism and nationalist myths. We found that many contemporary Palestinian artists, particularly among the younger generation were involved in diverse critical practices in relation to their identity, which was, in part, a form of resistance to the monolithic, messianic nationalism of Zionism. A remarkable finding of the book was that not only has contemporary art managed to sustain over decades of military and political conflict, but it has in fact flourished. This raised the difficult question of whether the growth and diversity of Palestinian art was not just despite the hostile conditions but was, at least in part, because of them; that the brutal dialectics of the occupation, which seems intent on erasing Palestinian identity and culture, has had the opposite effect. This led me to back to questions of the ontology of the artwork and that this dialectic in which an attempt at erasure leads to an emergence, is the ruin at the origin.

2. Indeterminate Ontologies

Towards the completion of the book, Makhoul and I developed the exhibition *Enter Ghost Exit Ghost* (2012). It was a much extended and ambitious development of Makhoul's previous use of lenticular images, which I had written about in a book chapter, *Return and the Spectres of Occupation* (2007. Not included in the submission), and in which I had initially developed my ideas on indeterminate ontologies in the context of the Israeli occupation of Palestine. In that chapter I explored ideas of exile and return in contemporary Palestinian literature, as a form of haunting and made a connection between this and the version of 'return' in Zionism and the spectral presence of the occupation overlaying its physical presence. The chapter discussed Makhoul's series of lenticulars, *Return* (2007) in this context. I used Derrida's idea of hauntology from *Spectres of Marx* (1994) in relation to return, and it was a reference made by Derrida, and quoted in the chapter, to the stage directions from *Hamlet* that the title for the exhibition was derived: (*Marcellus*: "What, ha's this thing appear'd againe tonight?" Then: *Enter the Ghost, Exit The Ghost, Enter the Ghost, as before*). A question of repetition: a spectre is always a *revenant*. One cannot control its comings and goings because it *begins by coming back*."¹¹

The installation *Enter Ghost, Exit Ghost* consisted of a 100m maze, the walls of which were clad entirely by lenticular panels. Lenticulars are made with multiple, interlaced printed images laminated with a refracting lens surface that allows the different images to appear and disappear in relation to the position of the viewer. Each image is given an equal portion of the surface. Rather than multiple exposures the various images are split into thousands of strips, which are then equally and regularly interspersed. There are no stable, fixed points of view, which is emphasised by the defining feature of the lenticular: the illusion of movement. The images in the lenticulars used by Makhoul were of historic and contemporary photographs of the buildings and streets of East Jerusalem, Hebron, some refugee camps, a 'mock Arab village' used by the Israeli military for training purposes. The images also included occasional photographs of cardboard houses – simple cardboard packing boxes with rudimentary windows and doors cut into them. At the end of the maze there was an installation consisting of hundreds of these boxes, irregularly stacked into a corner to evoke the image of a chaotic refugee camp or favella.

The maze was, by definition, deliberately disorienting not only in its confusing route through, and division of, the huge open factory space in which it was installed, but also in the effect of the immersive lenticular images. These images of other spaces in other times, including real and mock places and buildings, gave the viewer no fixed point of view or stable figure and ground. They moved as the viewer moved through the

¹¹ Jacques Derrida, (1994) *Spectres of Marx*, Routledge, London and New York pp 11

space but not in relation to other objects, and this absence of parallax reinforced their flatness against the illusion of depth and the real space of the maze. The ideas and intentions behind this deliberate disorientation were, multi-levelled and complex but in our discussions for its development, which had taken place during the completion of the book, the over-riding idea was of exploring indeterminate ontologies between the viewer and the object in a broader context of colonial occupation. To some extent this was an experiment, through practice, of ideas that had emerged from the book, in particular the problem of origin and national identity, colonial disorientation and return. We had wanted the viewer to question, from the title of the installation, who or what the ghost was that was perpetually returning, with the implication that it could be the viewer themselves. The affective intention was an identification of the viewer with the uncertain ontology of the object and to look for something in the work that could not be seen and in this way the maze was also intended as a trap for the gaze.

The project also led to further independent research. During this time I had begun to experiment with short narrative film and had become very interested in edits and transitions as a way of producing affect beyond or in parallel to the narrative. One of the things I had noted about the lenticulars was their similarity to the effect of 'scrubbing' back and forwards over a few frames of film to find the precise point for an edit. It struck me, retrospectively, that the maze created by Makhoul was effectively sending the viewer through a physical manifestation of a video transition, consisting of multiple lap dissolves and jump cuts. I attempted to apply some of these ideas to a video essay and accompanying text, *Getting lost in the Form: On Vertigo and Dissolution* (2014). The video essay consisted of a continuous sequence of all the substantial dissolves from Hitchcock's, *Vertigo*. The dissolves were taken from after the transition had begun to before it ended to create a sequence of unresolved superimposed images. They were also slowed down so that they could be seen more clearly. The accompanying text discusses Victor Burgin's¹² observations regarding the long dissolves of *La Jetee* (Marker 1962), which Marker claimed was his 'remake' of *Vertigo*. Burgin cites Reda Bensmaïa (1990)¹³ who refers to Roger Odin's (1981)¹⁴ description of the dissolves as 'holes in perception' and as of an 'indeterminate continuum.' My aim in the video essay was partly to construct an 'indeterminate continuum' out of these 'holes in perception.' I was interested in particular, in the dissolve not only as a part of the process by which a narrative emerges but also as a point at which this process produces distinct forms of images that produce their own affect in parallel to the narrative. As a video

¹² Victor Burgin (2004), *The Remembered Film*, Reaktion Books London

¹³ Reda Bensmaïa, (1990) "From the Photogram to the Pictogram: On Chris Marker's *La Jetée*," *camera obscura* 24 (Sept. 1990): 138-161

¹⁴ Roger Odin, (1981) *Le film de fiction menace par la photographie et sauve par la bande-son (a propos de La Jetee de Chris Marker)*, Cinemas de la modernite, Films, Theories, Cerisy Colloquium, Editions Klincksieck, Paris.

constructed of 'holes in perception' I regarded it as a form of ruin with a possible relation to the ontology of the film.

The accompanying text also discussed the use of dissolves in *The Shining* (Kubrick 1980) and their relationship to the deliberately confusing set design and the hedge maze. This was compared to the long sequences in *Vertigo* in which the streets of San Francisco, dissolving into one another via the protagonists' faces, also become a maze reflecting the psychological confusion of the characters and labyrinthine plot. I argued that the dissolves merged the characters' interior states of mind with the sets and locations and with the form of the film, produces a distinct and uncanny affect. An affect that appears to be related not only to an indeterminate continuum but an indeterminate ontology. In the film the version of Madeleine with whom Scotty becomes obsessed, and who he is paid to stalk, is already a kind of ghost, an undead object of desire for the impotent Scotty. This spectre haunts the film and enters and exits through the dissolves.

3. The Death Drive and Non-Human Agency

I explored these ideas of indeterminate ontologies and affect further in *The Work of Death in Burgin's Belledonne* (2018) which was an analysis of one of Victor Burgin's video projection installations. I was particularly interested in Burgin's idea of the 'kernel of affect' in his work, which he compared to the 'indescribable feeling' referred to by Alice Munro in describing her stories as houses which contain a 'black room'. It evoked the idea of Freud's 'navel of the dream' as its uninterpretable blind spot, that is also its point of origin in the unconscious. This raised an ontological question in relation to his 'kernel of affect' as the point at which the work comes into being and set the challenge of trying to identify it in *Belledonne*. Burgin's work is highly complex and necessarily resistant to interpretation, which is to some extent the point of this 'kernel of affect,' and although the manifest content of the work presents clues and arrests the attention of the viewer, it was in the form and structure of the work that I looked for its affect. This was reinforced by Burgin's fascination with Munro's idea of her stories as an architectural structure for the imagined reader to wander around. She builds this structure around an 'indescribable feeling' which she describes as being already there rather than invented and from which the work emerges. The story as a virtual space that can be entered rather than a linear journey with a beginning and end, also removes the idea of the end being a return to the beginning, in which Peter Brooks saw, in 'Freud's Master Plot,'¹⁵ the operation of the death drive. If the death drive is present in Munro's structure then, I argue, it is in this 'indescribable feeling' which was already there, at its origin. This led me to consider Burgin's 'kernel of affect' as also being the 'already there' of the death drive, embedded within its structure.

Where I found this is in the structure of the video loop, which is not only present in *Belledonne*, but all of Burgin's video projection installations. The various sequences within *Belledonne* are edited as a loop around a 'kernel of affect' which is also the blind spot and the navel of the work, which I place, not in the looped sequences but at the empty centre of the loop itself, the virtual axis around which, and because of which it moves. In terms of the manifest content of the work it is indicated by a virtual loop within the sequence, which is a 360 degree, slow panorama of a computer generated sky. Burgin has described the point of view of his virtual panoramas as 'turning upon a mathematical point of zero dimensions,' in other words a literal nowhere, an impossible place, which nevertheless feels like a place. The embodied viewer,

¹⁵ Peter Brooks, (1985) *Reading for the Plot Design and Intention in Narrative*, Vintage, New York, p.91

standing in the installation is projected into this impossible point of view. In part, this accounts for the kernel of affect, but it is also in the perpetual movement of the loop. In my own previous practice using film loops I have thought of the navel of the work as the physical edit in the film, at which the beginning is spliced to the end of the film strip, and I thought of the loop structure as a pathological, vicious circle, and, in the manner of the death drive, auto-destructive, which is also literally the case with film. However, Burgin's view of the video loop and its perpetual returns is that of an unravelling spiral that produces new meanings and associations on each turn. This generative view of the loop is particularly interesting in relation to *Belledonne*, which is centred around the sanatorium in which Roland Barthes was treated for tuberculosis as a young man. A site of illness and death is represented in a loop which speaks to a perpetual state of becoming and the generation of fantasy and meaning. I argued that it is not in the content of the piece or in repetition but in this perpetual and generative turning that the death drive can be identified. This follows Lacan's understanding of the death drive as the drive behind all drives and Freud's placing it at the origin of life itself. The living organism emerges alongside the death drive which lies behind the organism's movement forwards, towards its return to its inorganic state.

I explored these ideas further via the subject matter of *Belledonne*, in particular the fact that Barthes claims to have read Mann's *The Magic Mountain* during his stay in the sanatorium. Mann's interest in psychoanalysis is well known and the book was published in 1924, not long after Freud's *Uncanny* (1919) and *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920). I discussed some remarkable similarities between Freud's ideas at this time and those of Mann's young protagonist, Castorp. I was particularly struck by his account of why he finds his heart palpitations so disquieting; 'a person ordinarily has palpitation of the heart when he is frightened, or when he is looking forward to some great joy. But when it palpitates all by itself, without any reason, senselessly, of its own accord, so to speak, I feel that's uncanny, you understand, as if the body was going its own gait without any reference to the soul, like a dead body, only it is not really dead – there isn't any such thing, of course – but leading a very active existence all on its own account, growing hair and nails and doing a lively business in the physical and chemical line'. Castorp's undead body actively conducts its business independently of his ego; it has its own agency unconnected to the human soul or psyche. In fact, the description is closer to a Lacanian formulation of the death drive as a kind of excess of life or as an uncanny, inner automaton. It is this un-dead, non-human agency that Castorp recognises in his own body that I recognise in the work of art, which actively conducts its business independently of the artist or the viewer – the video loop keeps 'going its own gait without any reference' to the viewer or whether or not we are in the room. I took the term 'non-human agency' from Bazin (194)¹⁶ in which he assigns it to the camera as the produce of the image as opposed to the human painter. I extend this to apply to

¹⁶ Andre Bazin, Hugh Gray (1960) *Ontology of the Photographic Image*, *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 13, No. 4 (Summer, 1960), pp. 4-9

technologies and apparatus of reproduction in general. In concluding the chapter I argue that encountering a work of art is also an encounter between these non-human agencies, and our proximity to this encounter is also a brush with the real, which is in turn a constituent of the kernel of affect, that essential part of the experience of a work of art that cannot be accounted for.

4. Excess

The idea for the exhibition, *The Punishment of Luxury (2018)*, and the accompanying catalogue essay, *Productive Preoccupations and other Luxuries*, took as its starting point the phenomena that was revealed in *The Origins of Palestinian Art* and subsequent research, the general perception of artists in the region that Palestinian art had undergone a Golden Age since the second intifada of 2001. This despite the ongoing political conflict and increasing constraints of the occupation and lack of resources. In particular I wished to explore the possibility that it was not only despite these conditions but was, at least in part, because of them. The humanist conventional wisdom that artistic production was a necessity of spiritual, cultural and political survival did not seem sufficient to explain its apparent excess in material loss.

The title and positioning of the exhibition within ideas of luxury was developed through discussions and planning during which I was primarily responding critically to works produced by Makhoul and a joint exploration of the impossibility of separating necessity and excess, in which identity is simultaneously an essential component of the human subject and an extravagant luxury. In this way we were able to use the intersecting roles of curator and artist, at a critical point *in the production of the work*, for the exhibition to extend and focus the research. The particular focal point was the central piece, 'Shift', a large scale installation, produced by Makhoul for the exhibition. This piece featured thousands of small gold houses, which have been a recurring theme in Makhoul's work, and rendered in this case in the form of 'luxury' containers for Za'atar (a herb mix used in most Palestinian homes and strongly associated with the region). The utilitarian value of these 'houses' as containers is destroyed by the holes cut into them to represent doors and windows. The failed containers and spilled Za'atar form a shifting mound of houses and unusable food with an overwhelming, luxurious smell of the homeland. For a Palestinian audience in particular, the use of Za'atar, in this context, is an unavoidable reference to the Tel al Za'atar (the hill of Za'atar) massacre and its association with martyrdom and, in Bataillian terms, of human sacrifice as the ultimate form of expenditure or 'luxury'. This was the organising theme of the exhibition, which also included rich tapestries based on stylised versions of the houses and hanging carpets depicting the holes in homes shelled during the Lebanese war. The stated curatorial aim was to present the viewers, no matter what their political, cultural or religious allegiances with an ambivalent representation of national identity, as a kind of failed container, which, nevertheless, leads to an overflowing, luxurious, sensory experience.

Underpinning the research collaboration was my interest in ideas of origin and the death drive in relation to politics and the production of art. Makhoul's interests are primarily as an artist and writer working from the specific position of a Palestinian artist in a globalised art context. As such, my independent research

extends these ideas in his critical work, whereas Makhoul is more directly engaged in the production of artworks. *The Punishment of Luxury* exhibition and its subsequent dissemination provided an opportunity for us to combine our different positions in a focused critical practice.

The gallery for which the exhibition was planned is in the Palestinian city of Umm el Fahem next to the border wall in the north eastern Wadi district of Israel. The city is notable for being geographically and officially inside Israel but feeling much like a Palestinian West Bank city. It has been unilaterally proposed by some Israeli politicians as a possible site for a territory and population exchange in any proposed Palestinian state. The political and economic status of the town is, therefore, under constant question. It is overcrowded, underfunded and with a high level of unemployment and, more typical of Palestinian cities in the occupied territories, has a generally young demographic with a pressurised and barely containable energy. It is a place in which necessity and excess are in close proximity. It was with this context in mind that the central installation 'Shift' was developed with the idea of luxury, excess and necessity as the structuring concepts for the exhibition as a whole. I was particularly interested in Bataille's (1991) idea that 'it is not necessity but its contrary, "luxury" that presents living matter and mankind with their fundamental problem.'¹⁷ According to Bataille the necessities of life, such as food and shelter are relatively easy to achieve by organised societies, but almost every aspect of human activity and production is far in excess of these necessities. His economic theory is based on this excess and on the structural necessity of useless expenditure. Artistic activity is therefore always already a luxury, originating in excess.

I recognised in this idea of art originating in excess, the argument I developed in my chapter on *Belledonne*, that the Death Drive operates at the origin of the work of art and exceeds its materiality and meaning. I develop upon the connection Featherstone (2016) makes between Freud's Death Drive and Bataille's idea of luxury. Featherstone conceives of 'a kind of Neronian ethics of the luxurious'¹⁸ in which the connection made by Bataille between luxury and death as the ultimate expenditure, regarding luxury as that which, ultimately, exceeds life and base matter. I take this connection between Freud's Death Drive and Bataille's 'general economy' of luxury further. Based on Freud's and Lacan's insistence that the death drive is the original drive behind all drives, I argue that it has a similar position as the 'sun' in Bataille's economics of excess, as the original and continuous excessive expenditure of energy.

According to Bataille all life is ultimately unified towards its own expenditure in death. Art as luxury shares this original drive towards exceeding its materiality and the use of Bataillan economics of excess offers another approach to the ontology of the work of art and understanding its relationship to its immediate

¹⁷ Bataille, G. (1991). *The Accursed Share, Volume I: Consumption*. Zone Books New York.

¹⁸ Featherstone M. (2016) 'LUXUS: A Thanatology of Luxury from Nero to Bataille', *Cultural Politics*, Vol. 12, Issue 1, pp.66-82

context. Previous iterations of the works exhibited in *The Punishment of Luxury* have been written about in terms of their significance in relation to Palestinian identity and the Israel/Palestine conflict. However their use of luxurious materials, such as tapestries and gold plating to render images of war and precarious life, have not been properly explored and the re-contextualising of the work within these ideas of luxury was the main aim of this exhibition. The central, site specific installation 'Shift', was developed with this theoretical framing in mind and together with the other selected works formed a conscious and deliberate confrontation and exploration of the relationships between art, excess and luxury in the specific context of Palestine. In this way the exhibition attempted to address the ways in which the works exceed their materiality as well as exceeding their interpretable content in terms of the specific cultural and political context of the Israel/Palestine conflict and Palestinian identity.

I found that the combined use of Freud's death drive as the original drive with Bataille's economic theory of excess have led to the insight that art as luxury is also driven towards exceeding its materiality. In terms of the work produced for the exhibition and the exhibition itself in Umm el-Fahem, this insight offers a way of understanding contemporary Palestinian art within the specific context of its political and cultural production and dissemination that also exceeds this context. This has implications for understanding the relationship between contemporary art and luxury beyond this context. Current ideas of luxury tend to be determined by its place in advanced globalised capitalism, often focussed on particular forms of commodities and brands. This understanding also tends to be extended to art as a form of luxury, focussing on the excesses of the global art market, despite this only accounting for a tiny proportion of artistic production. The understanding of the relationship between art and luxury developed in this project would regard a small painting produced by an unknown artist in Gaza as much of a luxury as a Jeff Koons' Rabbit. A different amount of energy has been expended in their production and, although the Jeff Koons is at a disadvantage because of its value as a tool of capital accumulation, ultimately the expenditure of energy has been equally useless. Reconceiving luxury beyond the debilitating constraints of capitalism, as Bataille did, opens up philosophical and ethical possibilities in our understanding of contemporary art.

Through this exhibition and accompanying essay I was able to combine and expand upon the themes and questions in my previous research. It was founded on the considerable research undertaken for *The Origins of Palestinian Art* into the idea of origin, nationalism and national identity in relation to the diverse practices of widely dispersed artists without a nation-state. It is worth noting that W J T Mitchell (2014), in his review of the book for *Critical Inquiry*, described it as 'the most important point of departure for all future writing on this subject' and that the chapter, *The Problem of the Origin*, 'should be required reading for anyone who wants to think freshly about contemporary nationalism, for which the case of Palestine

serves as both a central case and a deep anomaly'.¹⁹ The book was also a departure point for our further collaborative research projects, which have critically developed ideas of identity and nationalism at the level of process and form. In my analysis of Belledonne and in the collaborative exhibition, The Punishment of Luxury these processes were developed and extended beyond their specific political and cultural contexts to provide insights into ontological questions of contemporary art.

¹⁹ Mitchell, W.J.T. (2014) Critical Inquiry, online; Book Review of The Origins of Palestinian Art <https://criticalinquiry.uchicago.edu/w.j.t.mitchell-reviews-the-origins-of-palestinian-art>

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2. Hon G, and Makhoul B, (2016) 'From the Empty Grave to the Empty Cradle: Myths of Origin and Art in the Israel/Palestine Conflict', in Makhoul, B. & Mitha, A. (eds.). *Conflict and Compassion: A Paradox of Difference in Contemporary Asian Art*. Manchester: HOME, pp. 117-141
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