

Runa Islam's *Emergence* (2011): Reproducing and Projecting Antoin Sevruguin's Negative in a Time of Uprisings

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Abstract

In 2011 Runa Islam first exhibited a subtle and beautiful film that appropriated an enigmatic colonial glass plate negative, operated with it for both fracturing and multiplying its indexicality, and displaced the negative from – and even against – the history it would be expected to depict. By means of a formal and conceptual analysis of Sevruguin's photographic work, one of the most important and idiosyncratic in the Middle East at the beginning of the 20th century, and analysis of both the enigmatic the negative Islam selected, and the film installation, the paper shows that *Emergence* must be regarded as a fine, conceptualist film that resists narrative, invites introspection, and stimulates a decolonial posture for opening a possible way of escape from the orientalist codifying gaze that persist in how Western Media records and communicates the 'East', and for confronting the cultural imaginary and colonialist gaze of a current process of crisis in 2011.

Keywords: Decolonialization; Colonial archives; Photography; Film; Orientalism.

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Bangladeshi-born and London-based artist and filmmaker Runa Islam (1970), one of the most promising British artists, who was actually nominated to the Turner Prize in 2008, was commissioned by MoMA in New York to produce for the Museum: the film-installation *Emergence* (2011, super 35mm, color, 3:40 min, loop), first shown in the exhibition “Projects 95: Runa Islam” (May 27–Sep 19, 2011) at the same institution, accompanied by three of her previous works. *Emergence* is also the result of a Smithsonian Artist Research Fellowship awarded in 2008 to explore “the central role of historical archives in capturing historic facts and narratives” (“Smithsonian Awards Fellowships”). Islam studied 800 photos and glasses plate negative from various Smithsonian archives, and in 2011, at the same time the ‘Arab Spring’ was starting to unfold, she selected a cracked and broken b&g glass plate negative from early 20th-century Tehran taken by Antoin Sevruguin. That plate is part of the large Orientalist collection formerly known as the “Islamic Archives” and established by Myron Bement Smith in 1951 who donated it to the Smithsonian. The glass negative records a group of dogs picking over the carcasses of three horses in the middle of the *Maydan-i Mashq* during the Persian Constitutional Revolution. Runa Islam later proceeded to record on film the broken glass and the developing process of the picture under the darkroom red light.

In what follows I argue *Emergence* is a fine, conceptualist film that resists narrative, invites introspection, and stimulates a decolonial posture for confronting the cultural imaginary and colonialist gaze of a current process of crisis in 2011. I have divided the paper into four short sections. In the first section I briefly discuss Sevruguin’s photographic work, one of the most important and idiosyncratic in the Middle East at the beginning of the 20th century, which brings together, in a very cohesive way, different and even contradictory possibilities of historical representation and interpretation. Later, I focus on the glass plate negative astutely selected by Islam which, as I argue, serves the artist as an enigmatic and ‘unstable’ index that reveals a virtual multifold of historic and historical tensions and materialize a historic and historical fracture in the index and the interpretation. In the third section, I discuss how Islam operated on the glass for creating a crystal of images and for opening a possible way of escape from the orientalist codifying gaze that persist in how Western Media records and communicates the ‘East’. The paper ends with a short section of closing remarks on how Islam’s operation shift the historical glass in order to generate a space for decolonialization.

1 Sevruguin’s complex pictures

Antoin Sevruguin was born in Tehran sometime between 1830 and 1851 (Scheiwiller 2018: 150). His father was the Armenian Vassil de Sevruguin who worked for the Russian diplomatic mission in Persia and had “an enormous library of orientalist literature” (Vuurman and Martens 1999: 23). His mother’s name has been recorded as “Achin Khanoum”, and she has been assumed to be of Georgian extraction. Yet, he was probably Armenian since her ‘name’ may actually be “a polite form of address in Turki, the equivalent of Miss or Mrs. Ashin, and Ashin is the Turkicized pronunciation of the Armenian Ashkhen” (Melikian 2000). A. Sevruguin fled with his mother after his father’s accidental death to Tbilisi, where he continued to study painting and photography with the prominent Russian photographer Dmitri Ermakov (1845–1916), known for his pictures of monuments, landscapes and populations in the Caucasus and Persia. At around 1870, as has been commonly dated, Sevruguin returned to Persia with two of his brothers in order to produce, following his master’s teaching, a photographic survey of people, landscapes and architecture, eventually installing his studio there. Soon his work, specially his portraits, became well-known, and according to some sources Nasir al-Din Shah (1831–1896), or probable his son and future Sha (Scheiwiller 2018: 153), appointed him as *’akkasbashis* i.e., photographer of the Imperial Court.¹ This provided Sevruguin with the support of guards and assistants for traveling around Iran, “carrying a large format camera on a tripod, using glass negatives –both cumbersome and fragile equipment [transported ...] on horseback” (Navab 2002: 117), and resulted in an extensive survey of the land and its people, including royalty, courtiers, harem women, military officers, prisoners, the devout, ‘ethnic people’, dervishes, mosques, palaces, and scenes of rites, ceremonies, executions, daily activities, et cetera.

Being the son of an orientalist, and having part of his work commissioned by European diplomats, Sevruguin’s oeuvre is undoubtedly influenced by the hegemonic culture of Orientalism that makes eastern subjects “appear exotic and primitive” (Behdad 2016: 75) within representations characterized by “absence of a sense of

1. “[T]here are some 20,000 images by him in albums still in Tehran” (Raby 1999: 79).

history” and of the Western man (Nochlin 1983: 122). Some of the pictures attributed to Sevruguin in the Smithsonian archives seem to confirm this, for instance, one titled by The Smithsonian as *Group with Blankets, Children Sleeping Under Them; Man and Woman with Hookah (Pipe); All in Costume in Stone Courtyard Of Livery; Candleholder and Bowl Nearby* (Figure 1), and one just registered with the simple title of *Veiled Persian Woman*, both produced around 1896. Beyond the evident disparity in the way of describing and ‘naming’ the pictures, the Smithsonian understands both as ‘ethnographic’ records of who are apparently poor and anonymous peasants. Not by chance, these pictures were sent to the National Anthropological Archives, and the second picture has been also attributed to Hippolyte Arnoux, a French photographer who depicted veiled as well as nude women in Egypt.



Figure 1. Antoin Sevruguin (attributed), *Group with Blankets, Children Sleeping Under Them; Man and Woman with Hookah (Pipe); All in Costume in Stone Courtyard Of Livery; Candleholder and Bowl Nearby* 1896. Albumen print (9 in x 6 in). Presumably Iran. NAA INV 04048100. National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution.

<https://learninglab.si.edu/resources/view/177483#more-info>.

Nevertheless, it is also true that Sevruguin’s works are more complicated, since Persian life and culture were not foreign to him. He spent most of his lifetime in Persia, where he worked, married and had a family, experienced the social and political conflicts, and died. According to some scholars, he was awarded the Imperial Order by Nasir al-Din Shah, title on which Mohammadreza Tahmasbpour casts doubts (Scheiwiller 2018: 153). His Persian passport included, as last name, the title *Parvarde-ye-Iran* (nourished or nursed by Iran). He had a familiar, if not close relation with his many recorded subjects, themes and events, and his work also deviated from the monolithic canon of scopic control and cultural subjugation. In fact, a closer observation of many other of his pictures show that within the inheritance and framework of his apparent orientalism, his relation to sitters (and among subjects depicted) was often –but not always– “neither dominating nor aggressive”, and even “multi-directional” (Navab 2002: 142).

According to Aphrodite Désirée Navab, this may be identified in two other pictures recording staged social scenes and dynamics. The first, entitled *Dr. Nur Mohammad and Dr. Nur Maknionde* (ca. 1880), and currently part of the Bosschart Collection, the main photographic collection of the Rijksmuseum voor volkenkunde in Leiden. It is worth reminding that this collection that includes folk art, zoological items, et cetera, was acquired by Willem Lodewijk Bosschart, Dutch chargé d’affaires in Tehran, and a person “who played an important role in encouraging Dutch colonial companies to invest in Iran in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries” (Behdad 2016: 96). In the picture, taken in an interior, there are two doctors and two men who seem to be their patients. The latter look at the doctors as if expecting advice, while these seem to be absorbed in their own thoughts. The picture creates a sense of suspended time of thought. Navab states: “The Oriental has thoughts? If the Oriental can think, then he can speak and interpret himself as well” (2002: 130).

The second picture is a more complex. The title actually given by scholar Shabnam Rahimi-Golkhandan, former curator at the Smithsonian, says *Barber Dyeing Nasir al-Din Shah’s Mustache* (ca. 1880) (Figure 2). The

Shah appears seated and accompanied by four standing men. Three of them are apparently his native servants, and the fourth seems to be a European. Regarding this picture Navab says:

The European barber, on the right side of the photograph, is bending forward towards Nasir al-Din Shah on the left. Although carefully and respectfully gesturing, the European advances nonetheless. In a similar manner, during Nasir al-Din Shah's reign and much of the late Qajar period (1785-1925), Britain and Russia were steadily advancing upon Iran [...] Sevruguin was able to use the camera as a means by which both he and his Iranian clients, the shah included, could represent both themselves and the intrusive presence of Europe and so counter the [orientalist] stereotype (2002: 127-128).

Interestingly, Ali Behdad read something different and titled the picture as *Nasir al-Din Shah treated by his Austrian dentist*. This difference is key if one assumes that the standing doctor, like *Dr. Nur Mohammad*, has a knowledge and control over his patient. In this sense, Behdad identifies an inversion of hierarchy. In addition, regarding the context of the late Qajar period, Behdad sees in this picture less the counteraction to colonialism, and rather a submissive recognition of the "the unequal relation between Iran and Europe" (2016: 78).

It is not the case to dwell here on this discussion. It is evident that both titles intend to describe what each scholar identifies in and reads into the picture. In the case of Navab there is an interest in understanding that Sevruguin, a resident photographer who described himself as Persian and was also an Armenian educated by the Russian Ermakov, depicted rather contradictory and complex power relations between the Shah and the European ("The European is stronger in some ways and weaker in others, while the same can be said of the shah" (2002: 128)). On his part, Behdad identifies in Navab's interpretation a postcolonial approach that uncritically "ascribe[s] an oppositional agency for resident professional photographers [like Sevruguin] in the Middle East by attending to aesthetic and stylistic differences" (2016: 74) that may help them to stand apart from orientalist photographers like Arnoux. While Navab suggests that Sevruguin's identity is hybrid and his work is ambivalent, Behdad's emphasis departs from the photographer's biography, and rather dwells on the circulation of pictures in the context of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Persia, including those who commissioned his work, and collections like the Smithsonian and Bosschart collections his pictures have been part of, this is to say, in the assumption of photography "as historical trace and valued for its indexical and evidentiary qualities" (Behdad 2016: 81) of the world and people 'in front' of the camera. According to Behdad, even against Sevruguin's wishes, his pictures perpetuated orientalism.

Be it either/both a picture where Sevruguin intended to depict the Shah's relative power on the European subject, or/and one showing the intrusive role and actions of European powers in Iran, be it a picture that may offer elements for breaking away from orientalism or actually continued it, I recognize Sevruguin's pictures as virtual spaces of multi-directional and jarring social and cultural relations, and as social and cultural virtual spaces in which identities of those recorded and the photographer are in both close relation and tension. Moreover, Sevruguin's pictures are also virtual records of staged social and historic(al) events and spaces, and themselves staged social and historic(al) spaces for and events of representation. I see them like a doubled-faced Janus affirming, first, a sort of "spatio-temporal contiguity to the occurrence of the entity signaled" in the (past) event, say the picture as index of the visit and work of barber or the dentist, and the (present) interpretation, say the postcolonial distancing from or the continuation of orientalism (Silverstein 1976: 27), and second, "an ambivalence within the category of indexicality" between presence and representation of the theme recorded (Nakassis 2018: 283). In the latter regard, in Sevruguin's pictures there is a double interpretative horizon of potential (re)presentation: they may be considered both as an effort to depict the social life and history of Persia, and/or his own social life and history as *Parvarde-ye-Iran* photographer. Most of his pictures, and this is a characteristic that makes them so attractive and rich, are multifold and hardly solve any possible tension among its aforementioned possibilities. Moreover, most of those pictures may be regarded as "individuations": each unifies and gives rise to the possibilities of contiguity, indexicality, and interpretation that may be even contradictory in their "differenciatio" (Deleuze 1997c: 146) i.e., in each actualization of interpretative horizon and contiguity as exemplified before with Navab and Behdad.

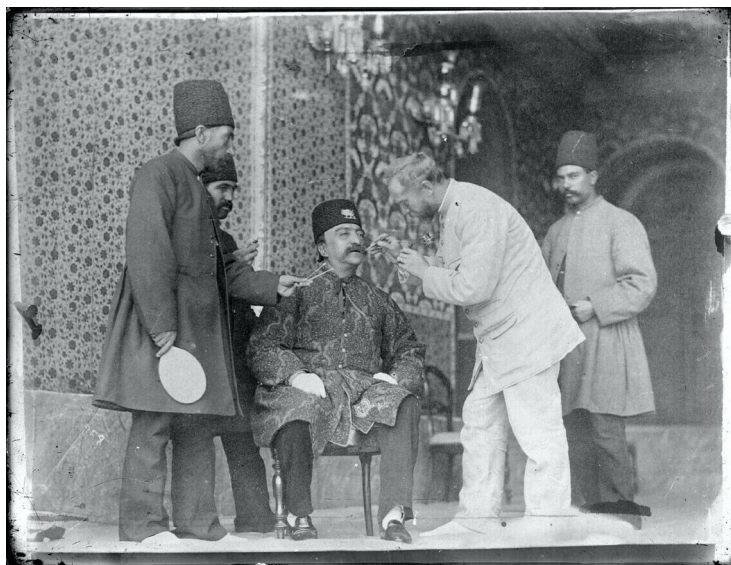


Figure 2. Antoin Sevruguin, *Barber Dyeing Nasir Al-Din Shah's Mustache*, b&w glass plate negative (23.8 cm x 17.8 cm), undated (ca.1890). Tehran. FSA A.4 2.12.GN.47.11. Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery Archives. Smithsonian Institute. <https://www.si.edu/object/archives/components/sova-fsa-a-04-ref10452>.

2 An enigmatic glass

Needless to say, thinking of most of Sevruguin's pictures as individuations not just points to the rather obvious idea of taking them as complex images that articulate, perform, or are ventriloquized by certain and at times contradictory historical narratives. It also and mostly invites to think most of his pictures as surfaces, objects, mediums, and images that may embody a virtual ensemble and reproductive matrix of narratives, revealing a fracture at the heart of such an ensemble.

In this regard, the undated glass plate carefully selected by Islam (Figure 3) is very interesting. It shows a part of the *Maydan-i Mashq*, the large and enclosed shooting range, also known as military training square, built during the reign of Fath Ali Shah Qajar, "expanded and renovated during Nasir al-Din Shah's reign" (Freer Gallery of Art 2015), and used as the headquarters of the Cossack Brigade created and modeled in 1879 after the Russian Cossacks. This place, commonly associated to Russian support and influence at least between 1980s and 1920s, was photographed by Sevruguin many times. Such is the case of a picture where Sevruguin records the monumental architecture of the *Qazaqkhana* (i.e., Military Center or headquarters) of the *Maydan-i Mashq*,² other showing the Brigade's cannon squad apparently practicing in the large square with cannons while being inspected by Abd al-Hussayn Khan, ministry of war³. A third famous picture depicts, in the background, the vast empty landscape presumably next to square, and in the foreground an ice-cream vendor surrounded by people, in what seems to be a picture of the genre *scènes et types* in nineteenth-century Iran (Behdad 2006, 89).⁴ Finally, a less commented picture shows a blood covered body of what seems to be an executed man laying on the dirt of the *Maydan-i Mashq*, and viewed by a large group of spectators, children included. Contrary to these pictures of the *Maydan-i Mashq* that evidently continue the idea of depicting people, landscape, and architecture, and hardly escape from the orientalist gaze denounced by Behdad, the glass selected by Islam is rather exceptional. It shows no people, the landscape is rather unclear, and the architecture takes on a secondary role in the far and blurred background. It shows in the foreground and middle ground a group of dogs picking over the carcasses of three horses.

2. <https://www.si.edu/object/archives/components/sova-fsa-a-04-ref10307>

3. <https://www.si.edu/object/archives/components/sova-fsa-a-04-ref10089>

4. <https://www.si.edu/object/archives/components/sova-fsa-a-04-ref9769>



Figure 3. Antoin Sevruguin, *Dead Horses*, glass plate negative (23.8 cm x 18.3 cm), undated. Tehran. FSA A.4 2.12.GN.44.01. Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery Archives. Smithsonian Institute. <https://www.si.edu/object/archives/components/sova-fsa-a-04-ref10403>.

As previously said, the glass plate negative is undated. Nonetheless, it was presumably produced at the time of the Constitutional Revolution, which erupted within the larger context of the economic and geostrategic confrontation between the British and Russian Empires for supremacy in Central Asia already referred to by Navab and Behdad in the picture of the barber/doctor. While at first glance some viewers may like to interpret the negative as a metaphorical record of revolutionary dogs eating the Shah's power having the horse as conventional representation of Royalty –which actually hints towards how the glass was titled and interpreted in the Smithsonian by giving protagonist role to Royal power–, it is also possible to identify, as Islam did, greater complexity at play. For instance, the dogs that probably belonged to the Cossack Brigade, may easily stand for the conservative supporters of the Shah, the military forces, or the Russian influence 'devouring' part of Persian society and, like the Constitutionals, wanting to keep the Royal institution while restricting the Shah's power. The glass astutely selected by Islam in her research on historic events and historical materials and narratives in the archives, is a somehow 'unstable' index. In fact, even if one assumes the glass plate negative as a record of the historic event of the Revolution that fractured patterned meanings of the collectivity, and announced the beginning of the complex modern era in Iran (Abrahamian 1982), nonetheless, it not only makes hard to identify what stands for what, what social and political actors and forces were supposedly registered by Sevruguin or he probably intended to depict. The glass reveals a virtual multifold of historic and historical tensions and a fracture within it, since one is basically confronted by the feeling of being at the brink of ventriloquizing the image and material, and of making it, as 'mute thing', perform almost any historical narrative.

In fact, in addition to the enigmatic character of the record, an equally significant fact is that the glass selected is cracked and broken. The cracks, Islam discovered, probably occurred when the Cossack Brigade plundered Sevruguin's studio, destroying about five thousand of a total of seven thousand glass plates (Behdad 2016: 81) kept in his archive.⁵ The damaged glass plate may not only denote censorship and military violence upon a cultural and historical archive of Persia –and the Caucasus–, but also materialize a historic and historical fracture in the index itself (be it either/both referred to presence or/and representation) and in interpretation. Moreover, beyond the mere idea of pointing to the limits of narratives and unmasking their constructed di-

5. It may be worth reminding that photography studios usually have an archive that includes the production of the studio as well as material inherited or bought from other studios. In fact, when Ermakov left Iran, many of his negatives were divided between 'Abdollah Mirza Qajar and Sevruguin (Schweiller 2019: 164).

mention, the broken and cracked glass is an “individuation” that offers a small revolution in the archive. This is particularly a point of interest for Islam.

3 Islam's filmic revolution

Emergence may be first described as a montage of different records made under the darkroom red light (Figure 4). It for instance shows the cracked glass plate negative (2”), the developing process of the picture (3’10”) from the first appearance of black traces on the photographic paper until the burning is complete, and the stop bath's water moving in the tray (2”), all these records separated by a cuts to black (5” each). At first sight, *Emergence's* fixed frame and camera seems to announce this work as a straightforward record of a negative, and the development process of a photographic image. In other words, *Emergence* seems to be a minimalist documentary of part of the developing process of a picture.

In a sense, since it was produced at the time of the rather ubiquity of the digital pictures, the film appears to nostalgically recall the emergence of the photographic images and pictures in the dark room as well as the history of photography itself, even the emergence of such a medium ‘officially’ presented two centuries before in 1839. In fact, Sevruguin is regarded an interesting case that might throw light in such a universal(ized) history in an effort to open it to non-western histories and approaches, as Staci Scheiwiller correctly recognized (2019). One may also add to that nostalgic tone, the idea of a rather simple montage showing the fluid movement of the water and the emergence and disappearance of the photographic image. That is to say, *Emergence* seems to also recall black and white photography as a historical precedent of analog film, and film as document and archive of life (and of photography), and as moving image that historically attempted –as the Lumiere brothers and others did– to present world situations and unfolding actions (and the ‘unfolding’ development) that would be recognizable to the spectators.



Figure 4. Runa Islam, *Emergence* (super 35mm, color, 3:40 min, silent), 2011. Commissioned by MoMA New York. Credits: Runa Islam and White Cube. <https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/1136>.

Yet, exactly here things start to get complicated. The fixed camera ‘develops’ the development process of the photograph as a cinematic process by making the glass negative work like ‘film’ through which light passes and an image is projected on the semi-translucent screen. And at the same time, the cinematic projection of light is displaced to the photographic process of enlargement, since the film is projected on the screen as if the latter were both the photographic paper of the cinematographic ‘development’, and the plate on which light strikes. Both photographic register of a past as well as the cinematographic present projection, and the present reproduction of the photographic development as well as the past action indexically addressed by

and registered on the film/screen are connected and even assembled and conflated. Conflated much like the black and white photography usually related to the past, and the color film footage usually related to more contemporary 'times' as it actually was differentiated in Alain Resnais' *Night and Fog* (1953). Islam's clean work attempt to defamiliarize us (not very unlike Viktor Shklovsky proposed in poetry) of photography and film in order to enhance perception, in order to give public freedom to think for themselves.

In addition, reproduced in a loop, the film not only evokes cycles of life and death, the interrelated emergence of memories and oblivion, the birth and death of traces and images and narratives; where narratives may at best be regarded as a secondary effect arising from the montage and formal composition (This is usual in her work. I refer the reader to her *Be The First To See What You See As You See It* (2004) and *Time Lines* (2005) she presented for the Turner Prize). The film's loop also revolves around a difficulty and absence and fracture within this ensemble of photography and film, (neo)colonial history and memory. There is absence of characters and *types* whose actions and appearance we could recognize. Besides the reference to photographic development there is hardly elements of what, with Gilles Deleuze, one could call a movement-image (1997a). *Emergence* seems to rather echo the time-image that, as already mentioned, defamiliarizes and collides past and present (Deleuze 1997b: 109). Moreover, two short close-up shots of the trace on paper of the main cracks of the glass (2" each) interrupt the flow of the 'development process' (Figure 5). These shots evoke, in a way, Alfred Hitchcock's exemplary sequence-montages that make filmed muted 'objects', in this case the cracks, "jump into our [forgetful] memory of unforgettable images" (Fowler 2012: 35); that is to say, they recall Hitchcock's introduction of the mental image in cinema and the crisis in (hi)story and movement-image by pushing the latter to its limits (Deleuze 1997b: 203-204).



Figure 5. Runa Islam, *Emergence* (Detail), 2011. Commissioned by MoMA New York. Credits: Runa Islam and White Cube. <https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/1136>.

Here I point to montage in a wider sense, including the design of the shots and the role of the camera. Influenced by the tradition of structuralist film, rather than just being a 'documentary' of the development process, *Emergence* underlines a subtle "disjuncture between what we [just] see and what we [somehow] know we are seeing" (Jankowicz 2012), multiplying the images from the virtual difference the artist smartly identified within. This means that Islam's film not only lets Sevruguin's picture emerge as a virtual site of contested encounters, resisting the Orientalist and neocolonialist collection to which it belongs (Behdad 2016: 96), and complicating its interpretations within that very archive. It also means that Islam takes the glass/picture and reproduces/projects it outside of the archive as part of a thoughtful cinematic montage and film installation understood as 'archives' (Foster 2004) that in its loop and revolving evidences "numerous surfaces layered in the same moment each simultaneously qualifying as images" (Jankowicz 2012).

There is the trace on glass plate negative, the rectangle of photographic paper, the image projected on the paper, the image captured on film, the image projected on the screen, the image-screen, and the image that forms on our retinas, as Mia Jankowicz recognized. All these images interrelated like latent images created in a crystal in which, when focusing in one image, other image, even if opposite to the first, might 'jump in'. All these images, as the filmmaker recognized, should be assumed in conjunction (Islam and Fortnum 2007: 134). Yet, all the commentators⁶ of *Emergence* have neglected two important images when dealing with cinema in a postcolonial and current conditions, especially regarding a film that appropriates Sevruguin's work. I am talking of the images that, like the striking cracks, are inscribed in memory and re-produced –filtered and codified, as it were– by socioculturally gazes, be the latter those of Western film critics who neglected their own located and educated gaze, be it the gaze of 'the ordinary man of cinema' (as Jean-Louis Schefer would

6. Unfortunately, I have not been able to secure a copy and read the book: Runa Islam, *Dogs Devouring Dead Horses*, edited by Manuel Raeder. Berlin: Bom Dia Boa Tarde Boa Noite, 2013.

say) wandering in the museum, be it also that of the non-western visiting the city, museum, and the exhibition, and so on.

If I underline this neglect or disrepair, it is not just to point to how early photography, and in particular Servuguin's pictures as Behdad stressed, have been instruments in perpetuating ideologies of Orientalism. It is to actually point out that the orientalist gaze is here played with –by Islam– as 'axiomatic' basis for further inference. It is also to point out that in Islam's film is an approach that intersects with and differs from that of a historian like Behdad, offering a small 'revolution' and "slight and apparently inconsequential shift" (Holland 2012: 21) regarding orientalism in a fragile and 'unstable' index. Let me explain these ideas.

As example of the historian's approach I would also like to refer the reader to Carmen Pérez González's argument according to which, since Iranians read Persian from right to left, Qajar-era portraits are usually hierarchically arranged from right to left (2012). In this sense, each picture may be regarded not only as an end of a historical development (in this case of a cultural system of writing, or of writing as cultural system), but also as an actualization of a particular virtual set of cultural conditions of interpretation and organization of the images assumed as 'texts' or documents. In this order of ideas, the historian's task and challenge regarding photography may be regarded as that of asking, among many other things, for the kind of history and inscription (i.e., photography as if it were historiography) at play, and whose history is inscribed in the wide number of documents. In this sense, photography may also serve as "a reflexive medium that exposes the stakes of historical study by revealing the constructed nature of what constitutes historical evidence" (Tucker and Camp 2009: 3).

On her part, Islam's task is different, closer to that of the philosopher. Instead of identifying the contemporary artist's work as one of producing and (de)constructing representations as 'texts' or documents, Islam –who first studied philosophy and art before becoming a filmmaker– enacts operations. She takes an enigmatic cracked historical glass negative that Pérez and Behdad would intent to assume as embodiment and end of a process of historical development of seeing-producing, and conceptually operates on it using photography's and cinema's historic-technical operations (development, montage, projection, narration breaks, etc.) that have served to construct images and historical evidences. Her operations on the negative intends, like she did in many other of her works, to resort to a "negation to establish something in place of what's questioned" (Islam and Farronato 2013). And this negation is conceptually related not only to the fact of using a negative of the past –instead of a positive–, and of developing the image *and* letting it disappear in the burned paper in order to not let it freeze into a ruin of Orientalism –as Servuguin's plates have mostly been assumed in the Smithsonian archive. In addition, her negation is also affirmative in the sense of negating the axiomatic gaze by making function the glass as 'genesis' –in the sense of an opening but not in the sense of a primeval source or Ur-sprung– of something like a potentially-revolutionary de-codification (no deconstruction) of the past, in order to give it its "virtual potential to become-otherwise" and "counter-actualize the present" (Holland 2012: 26). She transforms the glass plate negative in an opening for attempting an escape from the axiomatic orientalist codifying gaze that, it would be naive to deny, is still strong in how the East and Middle East in particular are constructed by Western Media, social media included, and globally spread.

It is worth reminding that while her research in the Smithsonian took place sometime between late 2008 and 2009, her decision of working with that very particular glass and the production of the film actually took place during the emergence of the so-called "Arab Uprisings" in late 2010 and early 2011. Equally important is that as many of us criticize(d) and experience(d) at the time and today, Western media opted to take the figure of the young, middle-class, 'westernized' social-media user as their hero, while in reality many of the individuals who took part in the uprising belonged to the subaltern classes (El-Mahdi 2011). In other words, as Cairo-based scholar Rabab El-Mahdi correctly pointed out, in the media was and still is a persistence of the orientalist gaze that not only makes or expects eastern subjects "appear exotic and primitive" within representations characterized by "absence of a sense of history", but also, when a history and democracy are taking place in the East, the latter are taken to be or expected to emerge mostly in Western terms and codes (Dabashi 2012).

4 Closing remarks

When I visited this film installation at MoMA in New York, I was sincerely taken by the subtleties of this work, and celebrated Islam did not use any of the omnipresent pictures of the uprisings spread by Western media in 2011. With her silent film (and note that silence, as Mahatma Gandhi and others did, may be another form of negation of the axiomatic order and status quo), she rather invited to introspection, to question how one is “shaping others through those representations [found in the glass and the contemporary –social– media] so as to reinforce the images and fantasies of the [neo]colonial as well as the not-yet-decolonized imaginary” (Cornell 2010: 100) for understanding the unfolding transformation and revolution of history of the ‘East’.

Emergence is a silent film installation that invites the public to elaborate a consciousness of past and present, in such a way that neither the early 20th-century glass is freeze into a ruin of Orientalism, nor the early 21st-century uprisings –visually absent in the film but present everywhere in Western media at the moment– are retained as reflection of Western’s narcissism. Paraphrasing the idea of photography as ‘mirror with a memory’, one may say that Islam offer neither a picture as remembrance nor as remonstrance of the Western narcissism in a problematic and historic(al) institution for Modern art like MoMA, which founders are the Rockefeller family and their ‘philanthropic’ imperialistic social, health, and cultural policies of the US in the Global South (Mello 2017; Abt 1997).

Rather than confronting such axiomatic and deeply internalized (neo)colonialist gaze as if intending to ‘dethrone’ it, Islam opts for subtly opening a virtual multiplicity of confrontation as well as for alternative means of both reproducing and “crafting novel relation and intensities” (Reyes 2020: 151) with the ‘East’ in her film installation as ‘archive’. Relations and intensities with which the potential for transformation is not a undefined and chaotic openness, but actually the determinate even if contingent (i.e., unexpected and out of one’s control) events and problems –like the uprisings and the ongoing even-if-now-apparently-relented transformation of the history of the ‘East’– we witness and experience through the media. This is how Islam smartly shifts the apparent initial significance of a glass kept and catalogued in a colonial-laden archive, and operating on the glass creates a sort of decolonial epistemology of images and the archive. How effective this decolonialization of the images of the mind and small revolution in the archive is does not depend on the artist’s mastery on the ‘documents’ and the “consecration” of a particular way of escape and emancipation (Siddiqi 2007: 73), but on the public’s “contingent skills of reflexive social agents” (Cornell 2010: 100) to both assume and bear witness to those contingent events and problems.

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