Writing with Pictures
Narrative and Narrativity in the Work of Shirin Neshat

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Shirin Neshat describes herself as a restless artist, as disinclined to linger for any great length of time within a given framework.[1] And it is true that a cursory glance at her oeuvre, as it has evolved over the past decade, is sufficient to recognize that, for all the continuities in symbolism, tropes and themes, her practice is peripatetic and probing. Looking back we can trace her trajectory from the black-and-white photographs of *Women of Allah* (1993-1997) that brought her international renown in the 1990s to her video installations such as *The Shadow under the Web* (1997), to *Turbulent* (1998), *Rapture* (1999) and *Fervor* (2000), a series which, retrospectively conceived as a trilogy, transplanted her interrogation of the interface between gender and culture, the exploration of cultural displacement and exile, into the realm of expanded cinema. Most recently – and ambitiously – she has turned her attention to feature filmmaking, which is where we find her now: At the stage of having just completed part two of a five-part feature film based on the novel *Women without Men* by Shahrnush Parsipur.

The stark, arresting imagery with which Shirin Neshat has come to be associated – weapons and writing, the body and the veil – coupled with the explosive terrain of women and Islam that she assiduously traverses, has invariably provoked visceral reactions from her audiences, yielding as many affirmations as invectives: Across the board she has been praised for her authenticity and subversiveness and criticized at the same for reproducing stereotypes and invoking a new Orientalism.[2] So caught up with such questions of cultural authenticity and validity as both sides of the critical spectrum tend to be, however, the relatively swift changes in medium and form characterizing Neshat's work, or what she calls her "restlessness", have widely been taken as given, or as of secondary or no importance by comparison to the charged and intriguing symbolism she foregrounds. Whereas a more or less permanent shift in medium from photography to video to film in the practice of another artist would most likely be the object of considerable discussion, the emotive, associative power of women in veils, as it were, has meant that precisely such a shift in Neshat's work has taken a back seat to the supposed "content" of the respective pieces and has yet to be adequately explored.

While it would no doubt be both interesting and important to examine this shift *per se*, in the context of the present analysis there is another issue at stake beyond redressing critical deficits, an issue which, we will argue, is central to Shirin Neshat's latest films, as indeed it is to her practice on the whole, and, most importantly, to our understanding of its complexity.[3] It was touched upon by Gerald Matt in conversation with Shirin Neshat in 2000 and put forward as an explanation by Neshat on most of the occasions she has been questioned about her one-directional, almost utilitarian changes in media. It is a phenomenon that has accompanied Persian art from its beginnings, that has shaped most of international art and

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[1] Cf. Valentina Vitali, "Between Art and Cinema: A Conversation with Shirin Neshat," in: *N.Paradoxa*, vol. 12 (2003), pp. 33-43, here p. 39 or Graham Reid, "Interview: Shirin Neshat, photographer and film maker," in: *New Zealand Herald*, 25 August 2004.

[2] See for example Lindsey Moore, "Frayed Connections, Fraught Connections: The Troubling Work of Shirin Neshat," in: *Women: A Cultural Review*, vol. 13, no. 1 (2002), pp. 1-17.

[3] For an excellent analysis of critical shortcomings in coming to terms with this complexity see Valentina Vitali, "Corporate Art and Critical Theory: On Shirin Neshat," in: *Women: A Cultural Review*, vol. 15, no. 1 (2004), pp. 1-18.

media history, that has informed Shirin Neshat's early staged photographs as much as her multi-screen video and film installations and that, with the emergence of her most recent body of cinematic work, can no longer go unnoticed: It is the phenomenon of storytelling, of the inherently complex structures of narrative and narrativity. As we will see, Shirin Neshat is first and foremost concerned with finding a way to tell stories, stories that consciously balance between the subjective and the universal, stories whose reception, as Neshat herself concedes, tends to be overlooked "because everything is so symbolic that it demands a lot from an audience's imagination."[4] It is an almost linguistic project that was quickly frustrated by the stasis and formal limitations of photography, and that, at the latest since *Fervor* (2000), has seen her consciously and unabashedly approach the boundaries between art and cinema in search and appreciation of narrative, one of the most problematized and even stigmatized topoi of the visual arts in the twentieth century.

In the course of her development as an artist, Shirin Neshat has progressed from producing black-and-white photographs – whose imagery the artist views in hindsight as being dangerously close to didactic[5] – telling the story of her very personal confrontation with a radically altered, post-revolutionary Iran after a period of extended absence to telling her (filmic) version of an already existing narrative: Shahrnush Parsipur's provocative allegory of life, sexuality, violence and transcendence in contemporary Iran, a novel that was blacklisted almost immediately after its publication and its author imprisoned. Tracing the lives of five women "without men" who find themselves in a garden of ephemeral paradise – the paradisial garden embodying one of the central metaphors of Islam, Judaism and Christianity – having followed fraught and laborious paths to arrive there, Neshat's newest poetic vision takes her even closer to her objective of telling "a complete story" in a manner free "of reductive conclusions."[6] Although the "complete story" is, in this case, yet to be completed, let us take this opportunity to consider the story Shirin Neshat has chosen to tell in her ever-evolving visual language, situating our enquiry in the context of Parsipur's polyphonic text, of Neshat's previous work, and contemporary art and film history, with a view to unfolding the complex identity of the artistic practice of "an Iranian artist with an Iranian background working in New York within the 'western' institution of 'fine art.'"[7]

The first of Neshat's film installations to utilize three screens, *Mahdokht* (2004) signals an immediate formal departure from the overtly dualistic approach characterizing her earlier installative approach. Although her dualisms of black and white, male and female, collective and individual, order and chaos have assiduously presented a more complex reality than a straightforward binary reading allows,[8] this opening chapter of Parsipur's book, of Neshat's film project and the new story, this first new "voice" takes an unmistakable step towards an overtly multi-layered narrative complexity. Opening up the discursive space between the screens accordingly, she exposes the viewer simultaneously to the three temporal strata of Mahdokht's life as it races through her mind, thus reproducing the non-linear structure underlying Mahdokht's interior monologue in the novel. We see Mahdokht as a child playing

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[4] Cf. Valentina Vitali, "Between Art and Cinema: A Conversation with Shirin Neshat," op. cit., p. 38.

[5] Cf. Octavio Zaya, "Shirin Neshat – Artist – Interview", in: *Interview Magazine*, September (1999), here http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1285/is_9_29/ai_55683962 (accessed 1 August 2005).

[6] Cf. Octavio Zaya, "Shirin Neshat – Artist – Interview," op. cit., and Gerald Matt, "Im Gespräch mit Shirin Neshat/In Conversation with Shirin Neshat," in: *Shirin Neshat*, ed. Gerald Matt & Julia Peyton-Jones, exh. cat., Kunsthalle Wien, Vienna & Serpentine Gallery, London, pp. 10-29, here p. 23.

[7] Valentina Vitali, "Corporate Art and Critical Theory: On Shirin Neshat," p. 15.

[8] Cf. Ruth Noack's discussion of "the fissures and contradictions that arise out of intercultural practice" in Noack, "Produktive Dualismen/Productive Dualisms," in: *Shirin Neshat*, ed. Gerald Matt & Julia Peyton-Jones, op. cit., p. 30-41, here p. 33.

hide-and-seek with other children in an olive grove, an outsider dressed in white while the other children all wear yellow, as a psychotically knitting adult woman, muttering while she manically tries to knit enough garments in yellow wool to clothe all the needy children of her country, and as a sublimely drifting corpse, a fallen angel, a virgin bride and suicide.

Taking up images of madness and alienation inscribed upon the landscape as envisioned in earlier films such as *Possessed* (2001), in which she explored the relationship between "madness and creative freedom,"[9] her hermetic visualization of an already hermetic story nevertheless dispenses with her familiar symbolism and iconography. In an opening sequence redolent of the long single misty take leading into Andrei Tarkovsky's films *Solaris* (1972) and *Stalker* (1979), we enter the garden, a dialectically utopian world and site of illusory redemption, which will no doubt be a central place in the future *denouement* of the full-length feature film. The anticipated filmic vocabulary of urban architectonics and vast expanses, veiled women and men in black trousers, the ritualized behaviors of prayer and wailing are substituted here by visions of hazy obscurity counterposed with the orchard's geometry.

The reduced narrative of Parsipur's "Mahdokht" episode, which describes the social and political disillusionment of a lonely teacher, is reduced even further by Neshat. In another Tarkovskian echo, in this truncated, elliptical version of the story the establishing shots of standard cinema and their narrative correlatives are missing. We are not told why Mahdokht is dead, that she has committed suicide, why she is knitting, why she has become insane. It is up to the viewer to imagine the connections between the images, to construct the narrative. By choosing as her central symbols a mythical garden and skein upon skein of yellow wool, as opposed to an image as ideologically charged as the veil, the artist confronts the viewer with the difficulty and contingency of reading signs and constructing meaning *per se*.

Reminiscent of the shift toward mainstream cinematic narrative that occurred between the more experimental film *Rapture* (1999) and *Fervor* is the transition that takes place between *Mahdokht* and the second film in the series, *Zarin* (2005). To the same degree that *Mahdokht* is surreal and enigmatic, the single-screen projection *Zarin* is linear and straightforward in its dramaturgy. Zarin is a prostitute, cast by Neshat as a vulnerable, extraordinarily emaciated girl, whom we encounter in a state of disaffection which metamorphoses in the course of the film into a state of self-loathing and destruction. Like Mahdokht, her social alienation among her peers is emphasized by Neshat – whereas the other prostitutes indolently linger about in the brothel's reception area, Neshat's Zarin confines herself to her room upstairs. It is a separation underscored by the upstairs/downstairs situation and reproduced by the angle of the camera which in this opening sequence is invariably focused either downwards or upwards. Her initial ambivalence in receiving clients, where affection, desire and disgust are difficult to distinguish from one another, is irrevocably altered when she opens her eyes to the sight of a faceless man. Her departure from the confined interior space of her room, which is drenched in the green associated throughout the Middle East with the Iranian child martyr of Karbala, Hazret-e-Ali Al-Asghar, and entry into the urban realm effects a return to the familiar iconography of Neshat's earlier films, to the collective rituals of men – all of them faceless – and women.

Wherever Zarin goes, she is an interloper; she is as alienated by the ritual of men praying, of traditional women commemorating the martyrs of Karbala, as she is scrubbing herself in an act of violent ablution among the serene group of women and children bathing at the

[9] Adrian Dannatt, "Shirin Neshat: Where Madness is the Greatest Freedom," in: *The Art Newspaper*, June (2001).

hamam. Recalling the famous scene of self-mutilation in Valie Export's film *Remote … Remote* (1973), in which a woman relentlessly cuts away at the skin beneath her fingertips until they begin to bleed, Zarin's extreme corporeality, the prominence of her skeleton within the gaunt, deprived flesh of her exterior, elicits a response from the viewer oscillating between extraordinary pity and discomfort, between fascination and repulsion. Neshat's decision to depict an "abnormal" body serves to prevent the audience from identifying with the figure, such that meaning is produced in the formal construction of the film as a whole instead of within the character or narrative. Not only does Zarin's "double" nakedness, which is enacted by her lack of clothes and flesh, serve to break the taboo of female nakedness – an act whose radicalism is largely contingent on its Iranian context – but also viscerally confronts us with the "unveiled" body as a complex, compromised incarnation of women's suffering, oppression and fractured identity. Zarin's overriding sense of her own impurity leaves her as scarred as Mahdokht's purity leaves her, thus both radically subverting the sanctity of feminine virginity and purity and representing the female body as a profoundly contested site.

The film concludes with a symbol of passage or transition, a scene whose liminality – a state of being typical of the exilic experience, or, to use Hamid Naficy's terminology, of "accented cinema"[10] that runs throughout Shirin Neshat's filmography – recalls the scene with which Mahdokht opens: In *Zarin* the protagonist withdraws from the city of her delusions and suffering through a tunnel; and in *Mahdokht* we are drawn into the garden – where Zarin's journey will eventually take her – through a tunnel of similar promise. The tunnel as a vision of transition, of a journey between two physical or psychic places – in this case sanity and delusion – refers to one of the central tropes of Parsipur's work that is taken up and radically intensified in Shirin Neshat's visual narrative: the proximity and interrelationship of insanity and liberation. Feminist theory and gender studies have devoted much attention to the age-old association between female corporeality and madness. Whereas earlier discourse tended to view madness as a socially constructed category deployed to marginalize non-conformist female behavior associated with the "untamed" female body, a category which can be turned around to rebel against or subvert patriarchal gender roles, more recently it has been argued that "madness," while undoubtedly socially inscribed, is a real affliction that cannot be simply instrumentalized for the dismantling of oppressive social orders. Shirin Neshat's enquiry centers on precisely this tension between experiencing and deploying madness as an escape, or between suffering and profiting from the social and emotional isolation that madness brings with it.

Despite the many thematic and symbolic parallels between the two films their narrative construction, their visual repertory, their approach to language could not be more disparate. Language and translation have always played an important part in Shirin Neshat's works, from the revolutionary voices of Persian woman poets inscribed by the artist on her own face and hands – where the inability of the majority of her audience to read the words suggests that the act of inscription is prior to that of direct communication – to Neshat's experimentation with music and song in collaboration with Sussan Deyhim, as, for example, in *Turbulent*. In *Zarin* the linear, monostratal storyline projected on a single screen is complemented by another first: a prosaic screenplay with dialogue written by the artist. Only partially subtitled, however, speech takes its place in the film alongside other forms of syntax and language such as music, space, body language, ritual associations and so on. It is a device that, similar to her physical and emotional difference as expressed in her discomfort

[10] Cf. Hamid Naficy, *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking*, Princeton University Press, Princeton NJ, 2001.

inside her own skin, further removes Zarin from her surroundings: Whereas the spoken word and vocal sounds remain the reserve of the "other characters" – the madam, the wailing women –Neshat's Zarin is speechless.

With only two of the five stories complete, and where the completion of the second film inspired Neshat to go back and re-edit the first film, we are very much confronted here with a work in progress. The considerable shift in narrative structure and imagery between the two films presents an extreme form of the open-endedness characterizing all of Shirin Neshat's work. It is an open-endedness that equally pertains to her place among her contemporaries and predecessors. Consciously looking to the formal stringency, "poetry and visual language" of contemporary Iranian film,[11] which is commonly viewed as a strange but altogether positive by-product of the Iranian theocracy's strict censorship laws,[12] the most famous of which include works directed by Abbas Kiarostami, Mohsen Makhmalbaf and Marzieh Meshkini, Shirin Neshat's films similarly bear traces of the 1960s and 1970s interrogation of cinema's mediacy, cinematic spectatorship and spatiality as initially inspired by Andy Warhol's *Outer and Inner Space* (1965), the first of his films to use multiple projection, and in particular by the vision of expanded cinema extensively articulated and investigated by women artists such as Valie Export, Carole Schneeman and Chantal Akerman.

Yet here "traces" is the operative word, for Neshat is anything but iconoclastic, or programmatic in her approach; and her interest in media in general and cinema in particular has little to do with deconstruction of self-reflexivity for its own sake: "I am experimenting," she explained in 2000, "with a fusion of cinema and visual art where I can apply those qualities of the cinema that I am interested in, such as its narrative nature, its entertainment character, and most of all its ties to popular culture, yet maintain photographic and sculptural effects."[13] By speaking of application, as opposed to problematization or interrogation, Neshat dispenses with the media-related meta-level typical of contemporary art practice at the boundaries of visual art and cinema, thus establishing something of a unique position for herself among her contemporaries. Indeed, she seems neither troubled nor perplexed by the medium of film *per se*, by its aesthetics, its purported "masculinity" or its proximity to popular culture. Rather, she is hungry for the narrative possibilities it embodies, pragmatically using the installation space to immerse the viewer, and the camera – as Susan Sontag says of Godard's film *Vivre sa vie* – as an "instrument of contemplation."[14] The ideas she is grappling with, which range from the social to the philosophical, from prostitution to redemption, from societal alienation to transubstantiation, as it were, carry considerable weight. Like Godard – in Susan Sontag's estimation of his work – Shirin Neshat might be thought of as an artist, or a director, able "to fully grasp the fact that, in order to deal seriously with ideas, one must create a new film language for expressing them."[15] In her latest projects, *Mahdokht* and *Zarin*, both of which engage in a self-conscious plundering of literature, photography, sculpture, avant-garde and mainstream cinema in the name of telling stories, she seems to be in the process – and the concept of *process* is key – of doing precisely that.

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[11] Gerald Matt, "Im Gespräch mit Shirin Neshat/In Conversation with Shirin Neshat," op. cit., p. 23.

[12] Cf. Hamid Dabashi,

[13] Gerald Matt, "Im Gespräch mit Shirin Neshat/In Conversation with Shirin Neshat," op. cit., p. 19.

[14] Susan Sontag, "Godard's Vivre sa vie," in: *Against* Interpretation, Vintage, London, 2001, pp. 196-207,

[15] Susan Sontag, "Godard's Vivre sa vie," in: *Against* Interpretation, Vintage, London, 2001, pp. 196-207, p. 207.