Contemporary Art from the Middle East: Regional Interactions with Global Art Discourses

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Deconstruction and the Contemporary Arts of Iran: Reversal of the Hierarchy[1]

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*I do not know of any other way of associating with great tasks than play:
as a sign of greatness this is an essential presupposition.*

Friedrich Nietzsche[2]

I cannot think of a more exciting moment in the arts of twentieth-century Iran than today. The Nietzschean concept of play[3] or open-ended meditation is a central facet of contemporary Iranian art and carries these works beyond the horizon of art's historical platitudes and conventions. This state in contemporary

Iranian art is surprisingly complex, labyrinthine, and often filled with allusion to multiple conjoined concepts. Moreover, the new arts – even when related to other styles, whether Iranian or foreign – are not, as in the mid twentieth century, desiring aesthetic acculturation or affirming national identity.[4] In contrast, they are thoughtful or subliminal reinterpretations and transformations of various ontological and philosophical perspectives in which deeper intellectual structures are hardly transparent. Indeed, upon scrutiny, they are often seen to reach beyond what is politically and socially associated with contemporary Iran.

To embark on this path of extraordinary poetics, one needs to consider a surprising and unexpected feature of contemporary Iranian art – namely, deconstruction.[5] Deconstructive features are often not consciously designed and seem to arise from an intersubjective core. Let me start with the most salient feature of deconstruction in these works – namely, reversal of the hierarchy, or more specifically, metaphysical – physical reversal.

What is reversal of hierarchy, and what does it aim to achieve? It is one tactic or strategy, among the many others, within the philosophical strategies of deconstruction. Given that, within any philosophical opposition (for example, man/woman, man/animal, art/junk, original/derivative, creator/created), one term dominates the other and is thus assigned a higher value. A reversal of the hierarchy undermines the notion of the mastery of one term over another and thereby shows what the dominating argument is concealing in order to maintain its ascendant position.[6] The reversal shows that within the very folds of any truth-statement lies the key to its collapse. Perhaps in more traditional wording, as William Ray put it, the reversal of hierarchy is a paradox in which the received opinion supports its own antithesis.[7] Reversal, by un-concealing what the privileged position has dissembled in order to assume its powerful status, undermines the logic of the privileged reading. Although reversing the hierarchy often readily shows that

one's truth is no more than a perspective or a bias, the reversal also makes for play that widens the field of vision, understanding, and interpretation. Above all, it allows the reader to leave the narrow procrustean bed of conventional interpretation and view various previously not considered options.

Reversal of hierarchy as a play to disrupt and deconstruct metaphysics

In short, metaphysics is that reflection upon the world that leads to absolute truth and knowledge. The claim of absolute knowledge leads to the claim of ever-present, originary, pure and genuine concepts. Derrida in *Limited Inc* describes it fittingly for our present task:

> [Metaphysics is] the enterprise of returning 'strategically', ideally, to an origin or to a 'priority' held to be simple, intact, normal, pure, standard, self-identical, in order then to think in terms of derivation, complication, deterioration, accident, etc. All metaphysicians from Plato to Rousseau, Descartes to Husserl, have proceeded in this way, conceiving good to be before evil, the positive before the negative, the pure before the impure, the simple before the complex, the essential before the accidental, the imitated before the imitation, etc. And this is not just *one* metaphysical gesture among others, it is *the* metaphysical exigency, that which has been the most constant, most profound and most potent.[8]

For example, the belief that the pure, the positive, and the essential precede the impure and the negative led to the Socratic requirement that arriving at absolute knowledge requires one to clear the mind of knowing anything at all, from which would then spring forth true knowledge. Plato believed that access to the first principle would lead to truth.[9] In fact, one identifying sign of metaphysics is that

it fails to relate knowledge of the world to the knower, and views knowledge as pure reflection of the world itself. This concept of a pure, essential, permanent, ever-present and immutable truth led Nietzsche to view metaphysics as mummification and stagnation and, above all, as the rejection of flux in time and space. Nietzsche, though often called the last metaphysician,[10] in such works as *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, *Beyond Good and Evil*, *The Twilight of Idols* and *Ecce Homo*, among others,[11] continually undermined metaphysics. One succinct phrase of his, 'Only ideas won by walking have any value',[12] acknowledges the physical earth as the source of great thoughts, and devalues ideas that arise from abstractions rather than experience in the world of flux and change.[13] For Derrida, all metaphysics is the 'metaphysics of presence', and in fact, as William Ray pointed out, 'His goal is nothing less than to deconstruct the entire tradition of western metaphysics…'[14]

It is fascinating that so much of contemporary Iranian art constitutes a path to undermining metaphysics and its frozen ideals. More often than not, the arts represent a force disrupting the notion of the stability of signs. And, like the Nietzschean concept of the affirmation of becoming,[15] they are an acknowledgement of flux and of the sign's metamorphosis and changing values – especially as disseminated in varying contexts and within the individual's ontological praxis and applications.

Let me begin to set the stage for this discussion with the works of Mohammad Ghazali (b. 1980). His photographs of 'Where the Heads of the Renowned Rest' (Plates 14–15) reverse the hierarchy of the viewer and the viewed, the sentient and nonsentient. Now those who look at civic monuments and idolise them are themselves viewed by the civic monuments.[16] It is, first and foremost, imperative to note that, were it not for the title, these works would have remained quotidian views of Iranian urban spaces. The fact that language is the key to the reading of these images privileges hearing over seeing. This fact alone sets up the metaphysical condition *par excellence* in

these works, for as Emmanuel Levinas has put it, 'the movement of metaphysics is … the transcendence of hearing in relation to seeing'.[17] The heads of the renowned, the nonsentient sculptures, are codes or signs through which the notion of a culture's desired essence and its *doxa* are communicated. As we look up at them, we are clearly to be moved and elevated by the Apollonian and ideal structures of the presented signs. Clearly, our views of the civic monuments represent our majestic and heroic imagination, the enchanted landscape of a higher plateau of life and being. Their poetry, though ambiguous, is of dreams that are often codified in epic narratives. And yet, as Ghazali illustrates, the view from the heads of the renowned is the most prosaic and quotidian of perspectives possible. The heads of the renowned offer from their high perch of idealism a view of mundane daily life. They offer from their metaphysical-heroic, cultural and mythic visions the banality of real life. The way in which we see Abu Sa'id Abul Khayr, Sheikh Farid ad-din 'Attar, and Sa'adi is radically different from how they see us. The contrast from the perspective of metaphysics is pitifully mundane, even hopeless. Ghazali has shown how we, through these ideals, have so brutally placed ourselves outside the real. These works also reveal that the real unrelentingly persists behind the masks of our dreams.

But there is another element, one of profound significance in these works – namely, that our view of the heads of the renowned, our metaphysical perspectives, our notions of the so-called ever-present Truth (the metaphysics of presence), are always regressive, and are dredged up from the memory of a culture and opportunistically reconfigured by cultural and political forces. But the view from the cold and objective angle of the nonsentient monuments is of the contemporaneous life. While the metaphysical visions remain static and immutable, physical reality is in a state of flux and change. Clearly, as Nietzsche asserted, the constancy of metaphysics is made possible by means of the mummification of ideas, or as a reification of ideas in the nonsentient state – in fact, here as sculptural form. The physical world and its ever-changing face make the metaphysical

appear as a deluding narrative construct – and yet, we must admit, an indispensable one.

Now, we who have created the nonsentient idols to rise above ourselves are forced through this reversal of hierarchy to recognise the limits of our world as defined only by the physical. Ghazali's works have shown that within the very folds of the ideal lies the key to its subversion and theoretical collapse. The view from the heads of the renowned undermines the surface logic of the ideal symbol for the sake of the mundane sign, the metaphor of truth for the sake of the shifting metonym. Here, the distance between the ideal and real, the origin and derivative, the past and present, the truth and flux is reduced to such a degree that the first term in the binary – namely, the primary condition – is, through praxis, reinscribed as nonessential, or functions as pure decoration.

ENDNOTES

1   Reversal of the hierarchy is one strategy, among a few others – for example, dissemination, grafting, mimetic perversion, parergon – that allows for a critical and yet unconventional reading of a text.

2   Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, in *The Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, transl. and ed. with commentary by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Modern Library, 1992), p. 714.

3   Derrida also believed in play. For example, he wrote that 'the conceptual determination of the end, limits the free play of imagination'. See Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, transl. Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 104.

4   Though the claim has been made that contemporary Iranian art owes a great deal to *Saqqa-khaneh*, the fact is that this style remained within a procrustean bed of either ancient Iranian or Shiite religious signs concomitant with a European vocabulary of colour and abstraction. For a discussion of these points and numerous references, see Hamid Keshmirshekan, 'Neo-Traditionalism and Modern Iranian Painting: The *Saqqa-khaneh* School in the 1960s', *Iranian Studies* 36: 4 (2005), pp. 607-30. See also Abbas Daneshvari, 'Seismic Shifts Across Political Zones in Contemporary Iranian Art', in Staci Gem Scheiwiller, ed., *Performing the State: Visual Culture and Representations of Iranian Identity* (New York/London: Anthem, 2013), pp. 101-20. Keshmirshekan's work offers a full list of references.

5   Deconstruction is a philosophical strategy and a kind of scrupulous reading that subverts the seemingly apparent message of any text and

communicates the impossibility of a centred and systematic reading, and thus of knowledge altogether. The strategies of deconstruction are varied, but in simple terms involve reversal of the hierarchy of any philosophical opposition, such as grafting, dissemination, and so on. For some excellent readings of deconstruction, see Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism After Structuralism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989); Christopher Norris, *Deconstruction: Theory and Practice*, 3rd edn (New York/London: Routledge, 2003); Rudolph Gasché, 'Deconstruction as Criticism', *Glyph* 6 (1979), pp. 177-216; J. Claude Evans, *Strategies of Deconstruction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).

6   On this point, Derrida wrote: 'In a classical philosophical opposition we are not dealing with a peaceful vis-à-vis (coexistence of facing terms) but rather with a violent hierarchy. One of the two terms governs the other (axiologically, logically, etc.), or has the upper hand. To deconstruct the opposition, first of all, is to overturn (reverse) the hierarchy at a given moment. To overlook this phase of overturning (reversal) is to forget the conflictual and subordinating structure of the opposition.' Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, transl. and annotated by Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 41. See also Culler, *On Deconstruction*, p. 85; or, 'An opposition of metaphysical concepts (e.g., speech/writing, presence/absence, etc.) is never the confrontation of two terms, but a hierarchy and an order of subordination. Deconstruction … must [take place] through a double gesture, a double science, a double writing – [must] put into practice a reversal of classical opposition and a general displacement of the system.' See Jacques Derrida, 'Signature Event Context', in *Margins of Philosophy*, transl. with additional notes by Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 329.

7   William Ray, *Literary Meaning: From Phenomenology to Deconstruction* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984), p. 173.

8   Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1993), p. 93.

9   Plato, *The Republic*. See his discussion of 'dialectic' in any edition.

10   Heidegger calls Nietzsche the last metaphysician because of Nietzsche's theory of the Will to Power and the Eternal Recurrence of the Same: 'The whole of Western thinking from the Greeks through Nietzsche is metaphysical thinking. Each age of Western history is grounded in its respective metaphysics. Nietzsche anticipates the consummation of metaphysics … Nietzsche, the thinker of the will to power, is the last metaphysician of the West.' Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche: The Will to Power as Knowledge and as Metaphysics*, vol. 3 (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), pp. 7-8.

11   Nietzsche, criticising philosophy and its metaphysical search for truth, compared philosophers to dwellers on the rigid ice dreaming of the high plateaus of truth: 'Philosophy, as I have so far understood and lived it, means living voluntarily among ice and high mountains'. Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, p. 674.

12   Nietzsche's comment comes when rejecting an aphorism by Gustave Flaubert, who had stated, 'On ne peut penser et écrire qu'assis' ('One can think and write only when sitting down'). Nietzsche replied, 'Now I have you, nihilist! Assiduity [*das Sitzfleisch*] is the sin against the Holy Spirit. Only ideas won by walking have any value.' Friedrich Nietzsche, 'Maxims and Arrows', no. 34, *The Twilight of Idols*, in *The Twilight of Idols and the Anti-Christ*, transl. R. J. Hollingdale, Introduction by Michael Tanner (New York: Penguin, 2003), p. 36.

13   And yet, from the view of physics, this flux, as Heidegger defines the Nietzschean concept of change, 'cannot simply mean waste confusion, but the secrecy of the unsubdued domain of becoming'. See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Translator's Preface', in Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, transl. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), p. xxxiv.

14   Ray, *Literary Meaning*, p. 144. For a wonderful study of metaphysics, see Martin Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, a new translation by Gregory Fried and Richard Polt (New Haven, CT/London: Yale University Press, 2000).

15   Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, vol. 3, pp. 64-67.

16   In an interview, Ghazali mentions that the project was a by-product of his idealisation of these figures. See vimeo.com/24270944 (accessed on 25 November 2013).

17   The quote is from Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, transl. with an introduction and additional notes by Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 100. See also Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 2007), pp. 33ff.

18   See Daneshvari, 'Parastou Forouhar', in *Amazingly Original: Contemporary Iranian Art at a Crossroads* (Costa Mesa: Mazda, 2014).

19   In an interview for *Deutsche Bank Magazine*, commenting on her 2002 show, 'Shule Auszeichen' ('Take Off Your Shoes'), she said: 'At the present moment I am more involved with politics than with art.' Russel Harris, 'A Cultural Predicament', in Issa, *Parastou Forouhar* (London: Saqi Books, 2010), p. 13.

20   See also Britta Schmitz, 'Tausendundeine Macht', in *Tausend und ein Tag*, (Berlin: Reiter Druck, 2003), pp. 17ff.

21   I am using the term in the Hegelian sense of *Aufhebung* or abstract-negative-concrete, wherein the inherent flaws of any abstract idea lead to its dismantling and the formation of new ideas.

22   The idea of covering structures with religious banners is, of course, a throw-back to the covering of so-called holy structures with *kiswa*s (textiles bearing religious signs) to ascertain the presence of the divine principle. The covering aims to hide and mystify a physical construct whose pretensions to the unseen and the invisible would, without the rituals of concealment, be easily revealed as mundane. Though the covers need covers too, however, the first stage of mystification, the first wrapping, entraps the believer and silences doubts.

23   Rose Issa, 'Foreword', in *Parastou Forouhar*, p. 6. Her father Dariush Forouhar was minister of labour in Bazargan's government, and advocated the separation of Church and State.

24   Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, transl. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin, 1966), p. 86.

25   Spivak, 'Translator's Preface', p. lxxv.

26   'To deconstruct philosophy would be to think, in the most faithful interior way, about the structured genealogy of philosophy's concepts, but at the same time to determine, from a certain exterior that is unqualifiable or unnameable by philosophy, what this history has been able to dissimulate or forbid, making itself into a history by means of this somewhat motivated repression.' Derrida, *Positions*, p. 6.

27   Spivak, 'Translator's Preface', p. lxxvii.

28   Karl Reinhardt, *Sophocles*, transl. H. Harvey and D. Harvey (Oxford: Blackwell, 1979), Chapter 4.

29   Martin Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, p. 82.

30   Abbas Daneshvari, *Of Serpents and Dragons in Islamic Art: An Iconographical Study* (Costa Mesa: Mazda, 2011), pp. 107-26; A. J. Wensinck, 'The Ideas of Western Semites Concerning the Navel of the Earth', in *Studies of A. J. Wensinck* (New York: Arno Press), pp. 1-65.

31   Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 33.

32   Daneshvari, *Amazingly Original*.

33   John D. Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction and the Hermeneutic Project* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press), pp. 268-78.

34   J. Claude Evans, *Strategies of Deconstruction*, p. 18.

35   Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics*, p. 269.

36   Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, in *Basic Writings*, p. 419.

37   Parergon is an issue of profound significance in the works of Golkar, to which I have referred elsewhere. See 'Babak Golkar', in Daneshvari, *Amazingly Original*.

38   Ibid.

39   See 'Barbad Golshiri', in Daneshvari, *Amazingly Original*.

40   Spivak, 'Translator's Preface', p. xii.

41   Ibid.

42   Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics*, p. 148.

43   Spivak, 'Translator's Preface', p. xi; see also note. 8.

44   Ibid., see note 3.

45   As for the photograph taken by Golkar, whose ancestral origin is readily known as Derrida's concept of *différance* once again deprives the work of the notion of purity and of the metaphysic of presence. This is so because the meaning of the art is suspended between differences with other entities and temporal deferral, which causes it to shift. As a result, meaning is never stable, and it lies across an unmapped topography. For a succinct introduction to Derrida's *différance*, see Norris, *Deconstruction*, pp. 24-31.

46   Spivak, 'Translator's Preface', p. lxxvii.

47   For the ethics of *Glassenheit*, see Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics*, pp. 264–78.

48   Ibid., pp. 268–78.

49   Ibid.

50   Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, p. 135.

51   On Derrida's difference and *différance* see ibid., pp. 1–28. For full references and a succinct discussion, see Culler, *On Deconstruction*, pp. 89ff.

52   Spivak, 'Translator's Preface', p. xxix. See also Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, pp. 3–27.

53   Culler, *On Deconstruction*, p. 156.

54   See Ferdinand de Saussure's *Cours de linguistique générale* (Paris: Payot, 1973), pp. 45ff, wherein utterances (*paroles*) are made possible by the system of *langue* (the structure or grammar of language).

55   Derrida, *Positions*, pp. 17, 18-19.

56   Spivak, 'Translator's Preface', p. lxxvii.

57   K. Malcolm Richards, *Derrida Reframed* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2008), p. 32.

58   Spivak, 'Translator's Preface', pp. lxxv and lxxvi.

59   Ibid., p. lxxv.

60   Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, p. 100; Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, Chapters 1–3.