Cloud Memories, Desert Dreams: After a Destruction in Pakistan

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"I am told, however, I should not respect the cultivated soil and despise the desert. I am told, the desert is willing to wait for the work of her children; she no longer recognizes us, burdened with civilization, as her children. The desert inspires me with awe; but I do not believe in her absolute resistance, for I believe in the great marriage between man (adam) and earth (adamah). This land recognizes us, for it is fruitful through us: and precisely because it bears fruit for us, it recognizes us."

– Martin Buber, Open Letter to Gandhi (1939)

1. WHY SAVE ANYTHING AT ALL?

The 16 February 2017 attack on the shrine of Lal Shahbaz Qalandar at Sehwan Sharif in Pakistan brought to the surface several oppositions and conflicted allegiances—individual, religious, and political—that have marked this theocratic country's relationship with modernity, secularism, history, and science. At the same time, the outraged response to the attack in the media, in opinion pieces in newspapers and through the liberal academy in general points to a solidifying of positions against the virulent anti-plurality of radical Islam, against the bleakness of its anti-iconic vision—in favour of an Islam of multiplicity, where the term designates not a dogma but a more or less historico-philosophical entity that must be reclaimed as an inheritance. In the simplest terms, this means valorising the syncretism or the neo-Platonism of the Sufi tradition as experienced in what Shahab Ahmed calls the Balkans-to-Bengal complex,[1] over against the Wahhabism spawned more recently in the Arabian Peninsula. Lal Shahbaz, Jhulelal, the twice-named wanderer, provides an ideal standard for this opposition, claimed by Muslims and Hindus alike.

Sharing in the horror of this destruction, I want to set it alongside urgent theoretical questions that are raised by world forming processes that might have particular (but not exclusive) significance for the Muslim world today, connecting these to the possibility of imagining new forms of aesthetic and political life that are commensurate with the planetary shifts in technology and structures of belief that we are in the midst of. This means, perhaps, first coming to terms with the formations of destruction and protection that characterise our present precarious landscape—divided between dreams of the desert as an originary zero point

on the one hand and the poetry of pleasure gardens, groves, and nightingales on the other. Modern Muslim megacities from Karachi to Jakarta, being neither desert nor garden, yet still programmed by this language, demand their own dreams—and we have yet to grasp the form of the landscape being produced by contemporary forms of capitalism in our midst.

The last century has seen an exponential increase in our human ability to radically change the environment, at the planetary level, at the sub-atomic scale, and potentially at a galactic or cosmic scale as well. This ability to convert, translate, and transcribe—at human speed—those processes that have hitherto developed at their own temporality (*aeons*, infinitesimally small periods and so on) is paralleled and, to a certain extent, preceded by the ability to *view* these environments, particularly, as objects in relation to the human subject. This viewing is not "neutral" (whatever that might mean), but is in fact symptomatic of the deep *ocularism* of modernity, i.e. its reliance on techniques of visualising, mapping, representing, and archiving the world. *What* precisely is recorded and represented, naturally depends on the imaging/archiving technologies available at any given time. These technologies both draw on or service an existing field of vision—what we want to see (be it stars, movie stars or bacteria)—as well as produce the possibility of desiring new things to see, photograph, capture, and save for posterity.

To reiterate: why save anything and *what needs saving*?

Consider for a second the devastation of Hiroshima, the bombing of Dresden, the attacks on the World Trade Centre, the razing of Palmyra, and the daily bombing/drone attacks on a geographical area that stretches across the Middle East to the North West of Pakistan. Can we easily speak of these radical interventions without using the word "destruction" or its cognates, with all its loaded and genuine revulsion at the fact of the sudden removal from the landscape of multiple lives, histories, artefacts, and objects each of which require us to attend to them with an ethics of care? What makes these acts "destructive" as opposed to, say, the "erosion" of a cliff face over centuries by the action of the sea, or the changing of a river's course over millennia? Perhaps destruction is characterised by a certain speed of occurrence, relative to the temporality of a system: we can speak, for example, of cosmic events as "bangs" or "collisions" even though the time-scales involved are unimaginable to the human durational sensibility. Certainly, in the earth-bound context "destruction" is a term generally reserved for the actions of humanity on its environment, man-made or "natural". But what purpose does this distinction serve and what values does it uphold? Can we try to think, as a kind of bracketed thought experiment, the two kinds of destruction (human and natural) together in a framework that provokes us to ask what specifically characterises or stigmatises human acts of destructive behaviour such as those associated today with warfare, terrorism, or fundamentalist erasures of historical archives? After all, looking at the *longue durée* might allow us to see any of these calamities as simply non-catastrophic *changes* or alterations to a system that nevertheless survives (as the Mediterranean Sea might be thought of as surviving its poisoning with chemicals, its stripping of life, its displacement by the bodies of drowned migrants).

I want to pay special attention as well to the way in which this word "destruction" is tied to our way of looking at our environment (man harming or protecting something called nature), indeed to the way in which we separate our "selves" from our environment and its natural entropy, and the kinds of notions of "care" that develop alongside this mobilisation. It is from this intersectionality of concepts that something like an idea of "*saving*" can emerge, and we can begin to answer the primary provocation of this essay. But to trace the root of this concept I want to start by thinking of "saving" in the most practical and everyday sense—one that precedes a theoretical understanding—before returning it to the conceptual network within which it develops on another related register. After all, the word is eminently pre-theoretical—much more so than "care" or "destruction": I know what I have to save, instinctively: to save a life, to save yourself, to save your soul etc., but at the same time to save a date, to save a space, to save time. The first set involves protecting oneself or an object or a loved one from death, the second involves preparation, preparing for example for the arrival of something desired (but also protecting *against* the arrival of something undesirable, someone who takes a space reserved for a friend, something that takes up time that could be used to do something better.)

Another sense of "saving" is the idea of hoarding. For example, to save money means to keep it in store, rather than seeing it circulate and leave the security of the vault or the bank account. Economic saving of this kind is related to entropy as well, through an unspecified but immediately graspable relationship to expenditure, to the instinctive knowledge that one needs to expend a certain amount (of money, energy, love, anger) to achieve certain results (survival, enrichment, achievement). To this instinctive economy, "saving", adds the perverse hack, i.e. by reducing one's desires in the *world* of circulation, one can save a quantity of the *tokens* of circulation. The tokens themselves and the act of saving can then become pleasurable and desirable objects in themselves.

Each of these modes of saving or storing forms a vast cloud of related usages connected by a family resemblance and having some bearing on the idea of the archive as it presents itself to us in the field of modern understandings of history, science, and even warfare. The most well known account of this relationship of (something called) "the archive" to the constitution of the sciences and humanities is Derrida's classic 1995 text, *Archive Fever*.[2] While bracketing or interrogating others, this essay will be deriving certain concepts from *Archive Fever*, therefore, a (very) short summary follows.

2. CTRL-S

Derrida's central claim, that archival technologies produce the very form of the archivable content is bold, but does not stray too far from a familiar technological determinism in relation to creative forms. In the same vein, as has often been repeated, photographic technologies and developments in chemicals, allowed oil painting to transform utterly in the late 19th century, giving rise to Modernism. Note that this kind of artistic modernism then becomes not simply an expression of an underlying modern outlook but also a concomitant result of the very processes that give rise to the modern, as such, inseparable from the modern subject. To put it another way, Modern art is an analogue of modern man, produced by the technologies of the cotton industry as much as by the writings of Baudelaire.

Derrida's claim differentiates itself crucially from mere technological determinism in the accompanying claim developed in his reading of Freud's death drive, i.e. the archive as a technological tool, a store of impressions and traces, is deeply connected with the very idea of *memory* on the philosophical level. Following Catherine Malabou, we might speculate on the neuro-biological level as well.[3] Derrida developed a complex relationship to the archive as a support (against death, for survival), as an inaugural moment, and as that which must be guarded (by an *archon*) in a localized space (the domicile, the 'ark') to show that the nature of the archive is not simply to conserve that which is inside it—since the *inside* is thoroughly interpenetrated by its outside, in the recognizably Derridean gesture—but to open up the possibility of that which might transform it, the technologies and future accidents that might reshape its contours.

I will take away from this radical summary of a provocative and complex text some key points and questions to pursue in the present context:

1. Archival technologies determine (at least partially) the very form of the content they conserve. If, Derrida asks, Freud had access to e-mail wouldn't the very form of psychoanalysis be different from the course it did indeed take? We must extend this question, in fact, from the time of Derrida's text to the present with the near ubiquity of archivable communication technology in contemporary urban life, and the tremendous changes in storage capacity allowed by the "cloud". Would Derrida's deconstruction, his traces, his spectrality be fundamentally different if he wrote and saved his writings in the cloud?
2. We cannot speak of archives without simultaneously thinking of the death drive, of the place of destruction in those cultures, which are based on the idea of progress as accumulation of information and iterable abilities in an inhuman memory. If Modernity is the accelerated drive of this archiving tendency (an archive fever), then does it bring forth specific and accelerated forms of destruction? How do we account for these?
3. Finally, can we extend Derrida's concept of the archive as a space of interiority/exteriority at the confluence of biological memory and technological capacity to the planet at large? That is, can we think of the *geospace*—to use the term as deployed by Benjamin Bratton[4]—of the globalising world as an archive?

In what follows I will suggest—again following Bratton and to some extent Malabou and Virilio—that this archiving has already taken place through satellite imagery and drone surveillance and warfare, producing the earth as archivable content. The implications of this can only be drawn out very tentatively at this time.

3. DESTROYING ART TO SAVE ART

In the preceding sections, I have tried to establish a connection between destruction and modernity, and claimed that the demand to save something can only be understood in the context of the threats that object confronts. In the simplest terms, every act of destruction is also a creative act and needs to be understood as such. We cannot imagine a destruction that is not accompanied by a mission to clear out, an imaginary future where something takes the place of something else: this is destruction as clearing, and in fact as design. To think of destructive acts merely as the obverse of a civilised secular world where we all care for everything and all objects is to ignore that even the most "advanced" archive fevered economies must choose to build over historical ruins, to raze graveyards, to re-emerge from catastrophic accidents. No civilisational archive can survive without forgetting, erasing, reformatting (and Borges reminds us of precisely this in the story of "Funes the Memorious"[5]). What we are arguing over—as in the controversy surrounding the erasure of the Bamiyan Buddha carvings in Afghanistan in 2001—is something more specific, and related to the intention behind the act itself, the kind of future design vision this explosive gesture betrayed.

Indeed, Modern art has a continuous tradition of explicit destructiveness at its very heart, accompanying all the major formal and technical innovations that we associate with it. The origins of Dada in the ferment of the First World War are well known, as an anti-aesthetics that was itself aesthetics of irrationality, chaos and negation, produced as a weapon against the processes that ultimately led to the demolition and resedimentation of the European political landscape. More explicitly, if we discount this tradition of negation or perversion, art has maintained a historic attachment to destruction as a guiding concept. I believe there are two modes of destruction here that sometimes overlap in practice but embody slightly different

ambitions: one that deals in the active destruction of objects (destructiveness as such, or as a cosmic and creative principle), and the other that seeks to temporarily or permanently negate art historical narratives and aesthetic paradigms of value (effecting what Fredric Jameson might call a "dialectical reversal" of valences[6]).

The Destruction in Art Symposium (1966) held in London was a landmark event that brought together several of these tendencies in a series of happenings and artworks, including prominent artists such as Gustav Metzger and John Latham, both of whom developed throughout their careers highly individual practices of art-making premised on destruction. At the symposium itself, Latham constructed then burned down a tower of books (*Skoob Tower*), which he dubbed "the laws of England", outside the British Museum. For Latham this burning down of history physically embodied the frustration of radical art with academic and social forms of control, while leaving unanswered the matter of what constitutes radicalism in the first instance, outside these structures of power. Latham's next action, perhaps his most retold and celebrated, involved inviting his students at Central St. Martins College of Art & Design to a feast at which he served Clement Greenberg's *Art and Culture*, chewed up page by page by the artist, dissolved and placed into glass vials. Greenberg's enormous intellectual achievement, his Hegelian synthesising of art history into something like a philosophical enterprise, has to be seen as the oppressive limit to a certain idea of freedom espoused by Latham in his anti-historical programme (which he came to replace, perhaps, with notions of deep or cosmic time).

The point here is, that these acts required a particular target, one that was in no way chosen at random, and were meant to mobilise or call into existence an alternative future, radically different from the one contained within the selected archives and their history.

In an installation work in Lahore in 2009 titled, "People's Art Historical Garden Centre", David Alesworth and I repeated this gesture while shifting it in relation to our own less "natural" view of freedom, specifically from art historical narratives. We used Akbar Naqvi's *Image and Identity*, an idiosyncratic, often illuminating, and sometimes vitriolic text on Pakistani art, which at the time was the only major historical survey of the nation's art history. But instead of dissolving the text or transforming it enzymatically, we worked with a bookbinder who worked in the markets of Lahore, to repurpose the book page by page into "art-historical packets" that contained live vegetable seeds. As our part-parodic statement said:

> The P.A.H.G.C. aims to create a new and green space for supra-critical reappraisal of the use-value of art history (as written from the point of view of colonial and postcolonial governmentality), by converting the plastic objects of art history into objects of everyday fetish use for the subjects of history. The dissemination of alter-knowledge and the insemination of alter-culture are the short, medium and long term goals of this project, which conforms closely to the will of the people while correspondingly attempting to shape the contours of that will and its future forms.[7]

The shift here from Latham's work is not just one towards ironic self-awareness, itself possibly regrettable, but to an idea of repurposing, hacking existing archives to expose them plastically to what remains outside them. This is not an attack, then, but a kind of post-punk DIY entry into an archive, that looks to not extend it (which is the goal of the politics of representation) but to fundamentally transform or plasticise the very basis of the law, i.e. the archivable content.

(I am not citing this work to exemplify a successful aesthetic/political strategy, but to illustrate instead where some of the abstract ideas discussed here have found very concrete forms across a range of platforms and periods, and where they might be seen as becoming obsolete today.)

Gustav Metzger's writings on auto-destructive art provide further insight into the shape of this tendency in the latter half of the 20th century. In *Auto-Destructive Art* (1959), he says:

> Auto-destructive art is primarily a form of public art for industrial societies.
> Self-destructive painting, sculpture and construction is a total unity of idea, site, form, colour, method and timing of the disintegrative process.[8]

Importantly, for Metzger it is not enough to destroy but to create works that self-destroy: thus participating in an ontological condition rather than negating an existing one. In other words, the form of destruction that the art work takes mirrors the processes at place in the world at large, instead of simply critiquing some values or clearing them away (as in Latham's work, which is thoroughly tied to his person as a willing agent of destruction). As Metzger says, more poetically, in another essay from 1960, also titled *Auto-Destructive Art*:

> Man in Regent Street is auto-destructive.
> Rockets, nuclear weapons, are auto-destructive.
> Auto-destructive art.
> The drop drop dropping of HH bombs
> Not interested in ruins, (the picturesque).
> Auto-destructive art re-enacts the obsession with destruction, the pummelling to which individuals and masses are subjected.[9]

Note as well the distancing from the attachment to the picturesque, which might also indicate a distancing from a certain Romantic view of Nature and of the past as aesthetically apprehended in the form of the majestic ruin. The ruin of auto-destruction is at best a vestige or artefact, the act itself the focus never the ruin. In this sense, it is an inhuman performance, the *essence* of

which is vanishing, as in Jean Tinguely's machines that were designed to self-destruct. As such, they are visible manifestations of the death drive within the living archive of art, a claim that is supported by the fact that the only existence of these works is within archival history where their dematerialized, anecdotal form is far more exciting and provocative than any charred remains of a canvas or glass vials full of excreta could be. This vanishing, performative aspect is also intensely a*nti-ocular*, against visibility in the sense explored by Peggy Phelan in her study of the ontology of performance.[10]

I am bracketing for the moment, acts of destruction of the self and the body as occupying a slightly different terrain, carrying as they do the burden of a different political/philosophical trajectory of anti-humanism and the inhuman. Another study could examine at great length the connection between the harming of the self and the destruction of non-human objects; at the moment, suffice it to say that following my stress on vanishing and invisibility in the understanding of destructive art, "harm" does not fulfil the criterion. Here, Talal Asad's reading of the secular body in pain, Ron Athey's abject performances, and his work on suicide bombing might provide a link that I must leave aside for the time being.

To summarise and repeat the above, destruction in art can take the form of an attack on historical value (art history, good taste etc.) or of a desire to mirror the fundamentally destructive nature of the world at war (the picture of which is in many ways synonymous with the idea of the globalised world). In many instances, these concerns overlap, but it is important to separate them at a programmatic level, to understand better the mechanics of this tendency, which are not just mid-20th century issues. The first kind of attack was evident in Ai Weiwei's performance *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn* (1995), one of the seminal works of radical Chinese art, taking place at a time when artists of that country were creating an entirely re-assembled and accelerated relationship to European art history, the Cultural Revolution, traditional aesthetics in the face of the opening up to capitalism and Western culture.

This moment in the 1990s was paralleled by developments in many other countries around the world with the advent of mass digital communication and the internet. Pakistan, specifically the megacity of Karachi, responded dramatically and innovatively to the sudden availability of information emanating from the perceived centres of the art world, in London and New York. Suddenly, what had once been rumours of movements or art historical narratives and gossip brought back by the few privileged travelling artists, became available to see and read about to anyone with a dial-up connection (which, it must be admitted, was still relatively rare). This overload brought about a shift in the very nature of several allied art practices in Karachi, which in a moment of radical a-historicism, delinked themselves from the aesthetic paradigms of modernism and its values of individual genius, its idea of art history as the story of great men (and just a few women), and even from the idea of art as something inherited from the courtly cultures of Mughal India or the surviving colonial art and design institutions of the British. Instead, the field of practice, in terms of content, style, and exhibition shifted to the public areas of the city itself, as a network of kitsch images, political graffiti, "low culture" and pop music, populist cinema, and advertising. It has taken many years for this work to be somewhat pulled back into a more conventional academic context, and in the process it is possible that it has inevitably lost some of its original radicalism. This is not important here: instead what I am suggesting is that the work of David Alesworth, Iftikhar Dadi and Elizabeth Dadi, and Durriya Kazi amongst others was not only a response from within the world of art to the city as a living informational and experiential territory—but was instead a revision of the idea of art by an opening to another archive altogether. Here it must be stressed that the difference between the subject of art (landscapes, cityscapes etc., are manifestations of the same ocular drive) and the archive of art. It is in this latter sense that the city operated within the practices of the artists involved in what has recently been labelled, somewhat inadequately, as "Karachi Pop".

4. SAVING THE WORLD: THE MIND OF THE DRONE

Finally, I want to return to the idea of destruction as it has presented itself to us in recent years through the spectacularity of terrorism, and how it can be seen to relate to the ways in which we have thought destruction—and indeed terror—in art. Further, I want to begin to think about how the particular forms of this spectacle, its aesthetics as well as its politics might demand an engagement that is not limited to liberal shock and dismay at the very notion of destructiveness, especially since this phenomenon has symbolically and literally occupied an important place in the narrative of modern and contemporary art. Instead, I am suggesting an engagement that begins by understanding how our allegiances and subjectivities are founded in the heat flash of particular acts of destruction.

Earlier I suggested that the image of the world at war is congruent with the image of globalisation. By this formulation, I wish to invoke not just Martin Heidegger's essay titled, "The Age of the World Picture",[11] but also Rey Chow's more contemporary response in "The Age of the World Target".[12] Briefly, where Heidegger characterises the essence of modernity as the world becoming a picture (for better and for worse), Chow claims that the contemporary world is pictured as a *target for warfare*. This is at the largest cosmic scale and the minutest quantum one, to be precise, but also at the everyday human level of landscapes of war: in the devastation of Hiroshima, the returning of the Middle East and Afghanistan to the Stone Age through the War on Terror, the attack on Sehwan Sharif, but also in the displacement of cities and antiquities to build dams and housing schemes, in the accidents of Chernobyl and Fukushima. Nowhere is this shift to surveillance-modernity better embodied than in the phenomenon of

drone espionage and warfare, where the aim is to subtract the human eye and body from the act of destruction as far as possible. Indeed, as Susan Schuppli has shown,[13] the algorithmic nature of the decision making process that drones are programmed with requires a deep shift in the legal and ethical frameworks that bind the global space today.

Of course, Heidegger's analysis does not imply that new media have come to replace an intuitive human understanding of the world, out of nowhere. Instead, these ways of encountering and experiencing the world through calculation, planning, and technology (which have in some sense, as mediation, always existed) have acquired a certain seemingly unstoppable traction that characterises the very subject of the modern. There is no unmediated human-world relationship on offer here, to be clear—there is, in fact, nothing outside the text or the archive. Chow's supplementary reading powerfully extends this historicising of technology to the modern need for destruction, not just calculation:

> [...] we may say that in the age of bombing, the world has also been transformed into—is essentially conceived and grasped as—a target.[14]

The inaugural moment of this shift, for Chow, was the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki: these effected a major epistemic shift that we inhabit to this day:

> The atomic bomb did not simply stop the war; it also stopped the war by escalating and intensifying violence to a hitherto unheard of scale. What succeeded in "deterring" the war was an ultimate (am)munition; destruction was now outdone by destruction itself.[15]

After this moment of deterrence (where what was "saved" was a certain future at the cost of hundreds of thousands of lives in two cities), war was to be waged increasingly in *virtuality* and in terror, rather than through the outright use of the most (auto) destructive means available. No longer was violence operating at its outer limit, but manoeuvring in new terrains of surveillance and display. As Paul Virilio says, "A war of pictures and sounds is replacing the war of objects [...]."[16]

Benjamin Bratton[17] sees the 2009 attack on Mumbai by a Pakistani terrorist outfit as illustrating a new intensification in the ways in which technologies of mapping and imaging are enabling a certain kind of destruction as well as the resistance to it: evidence that the young, foreign attackers had made use of universally available personal communication platforms and Google Earth to picture their hitherto unseen targets must be seen along with the remarkable outflow of information in real time from the potential victims, on Twitter, Facebook, and other social media. In a sense then, this attack was made possible by the existence of these archiving technologies, as was the resistance to it facilitated at least by them. This makes the human attackers who are relying on the ocular prosthetic of the satellite and the drone a new kind of techno-biological composition: and to the extent that these imaging technologies have their own algorithmic constitutions, these humans (and by implication all of us) are prostheses of the technology, the scattered organs of an entity that inhabits the clouds.[18]

For Bratton, a theorist at the intersection of software design and cultural studies, the implications of these technological ensembles, and their coherence in the unlimited cloud archive, goes beyond the honing of targeting abilities and extends to the territorial imaginaries that are produced by data visualisation tools:

> [...] as it stands today, we have no idea what the terms and limits of a cloud based citizenship of the 'Google Caliphate' will entail and curtail: some amalgam of post-secular cosmopolitanism, agonistic radical democracy, and rational actor microeconomics, largely driven by intersecting petabyte at-hand datasets and mutant strains of Abrahamic monotheism. But specifically, what is governance (let alone government) within this?[19]

The term "Google Caliphate" is no mere provocation; rather, it is an acknowledgment of the fact that the old nation-state paradigms—within which the modern political and cultural subject operated—have been most radically challenged in our times by the internationality of cloud based data and data collection technologies, and this challenge has been grafted onto by Islamic visions of a supranational theocratic state as well as by the neo-medievalists of the so-called alt-right. In a very real sense the archive has shifted to the cloud, and the archivable content has become the earth itself—not as *world*, not as experience in the sense indicated by the Walter Benjamin quote at the beginning of this essay, but as terrain—real only to the extent that it is zoomable, navigable, taggable, and usable. It is in this terrain that the battles for radical futures are being plotted, and it is here that the destruction of shrines and temples and loci of irreducible difference is being calculated.

But in what *qualitative* way is the attack on Mumbai or the attack on Sehwan Sharif different from the continuing, low-grade attack on and takeover of "unregistered" villages and townships by land developers around Pakistan? I am not suggesting they are the same, not by any measure of symbolic importance (but even then, symbolic to whom?). They are forms of destruction, discrete but conceptually related. Reading Bratton reminds us that each of these attacks, and their technological apparatuses or archives must be seen as design interventions, attempts to change the visible landscape to make it conform to a different vision of society—to return an environment to its substratum before replanting it as a (artificial) garden: in this respect, and only in this respect, Latham's burning of the books is no different from the attacks on shrines, which to the radically a-historicist strand of fundamentalist Islam are troublesome accretions on a pure degree zero of Islam, its absolute desert origins. And yet, today, burning books, staging

a protest in front of a museum might seem hopelessly romantic at best, obsolete paradigms at worst: what destructive act could similarly traumatise the archive of the cloud?

I will end by indicating questions or areas for further investigation, rather than offering any definite answers.

First, the earth itself as archive is being eradicated or rewritten, on the one hand by its "development" in the framework of advanced techno-capitalism and on the other by those who are seeking to redesign it on utopian lines, by removing its ability to speak of the past. A unique confluence of the two impetuses is in the modern Saudi programme of levelling traditional sites of veneration that are associated with the historical lives of important figures in Islamic history, in the name of a sweeping anti-idolatry.[20] This active removal of the earth's evidence is matched by the profound neglect of the archaeology of early Islam and its pre-history, in the form of inscriptions, rock carvings, proto-Arabic writings, and very early religious manuscripts. The fear of history in the Islamic world means any investigations of these artefacts have to be made in a certain secrecy,[21] away from the danger of difficult interpretations. The fact that the Islamic world has not spoken against this redesigning of history must speak of something more than a *passive* apathy.

The reduction of the earth-archive and its evidence to desert is explored in Zahra Malkani and Shahana Rajani's work as the Karachi Art Anti-University (KAAU), "The Gadap Sessions."[22] This project investigates the ongoing and illegal takeover of inhabited land in Sindh by major urban developers. They attempt to document the tools of this invasion and to reveal the founding mode of *visuality* that enables this erasure of communities and their landscape. Google maps and satellite imagery provide a drone-eye view of the land as map, terrain rather than lived and living experiential space. Bahria Town (the developer) uses digital imagery to both negate the existing landscape as well as to produce a vision of its imminent future development: green communities, golf courses, shaded avenues, modern buildings. The terms for the existing land in the Bahria advertisements are pejorative: desert, barren, uninhabited. The transformation is not merely a commercial one, then, but an ethical one perhaps: making the desert fertile gives rights over the land in a tradition that goes back to the Bible and extends to contemporary debates over the right to territory in the Middle East.[23]

What the KAAU's work aims to produce is a "countervisuality" that opposes the smooth digital gaze of technocapitalism with the texture of the desert, marked by borders (at the particulate as well as the anthropometric scale), textures and "glitches" (such as shrines that both disrupt and create the territory around them). The problematic of this project—if we set aside for the moment the politics of empowering local communities through providing access to networks—is visibility itself; as conceived through the lens of Glissant's thought, where "opacity" is the required resistance to the transparency demanded by European secular/philosophical projects.[24]

Inevitably, there is a difficult choice between becoming more visible or less. I would suggest that this can be sidestepped by thinking of what this visibility or invisibility might serve in the particular instance, and how it relates to a particular form of life that we consider worth living (i.e. not simply "preserving" as a museum exhibit, or a tourist attraction—which is what many shrines and sites of pilgrimage threaten to become in our time). In places like rural or semi-rural Pakistan, there is a still further choice: whether to become "networked" in the first place. Ulises Ali Mejias suggests that opacity cannot simply be "dropping off" the grid, but requires a certain "unmapping" of the terrain already created by the interaction of the digital network and its world. This means moving away from what he calls the "nodocentrism" of our theoretical world and a new thinking of the "paranode", that which is neither edge nor node in the rhizomatic map that is often assumed to characterise the modern distributed networked world:

> Unmapping the digital network needs to involve both working within the spaces of resistance that digital networks have already made available and asking what it means to obliterate those very spaces.[25]

To obliterate methodically, yet again, something we have set up: does this not echo a familiar motif in European philosophy stretching from the Enlightenment, and the legacy of Heidegger's *Destruktion* and *Abbau*? Is this philosophical history itself then not a desert of shifting traces, unsettled inhabitations, and temporary settlements without permanent landmarks?

DELETE?

I began this essay by asking "Why save anything at all". I have subsequently tried to show that it is the act of saving and the decision we make about what to save that characterises a certain culture and its ethics. Saving, especially today, means saving from vision and transparency. As curators never tire of reminding us, the word "curate" derives from the Latin "*cura*", to care; and the fact that everyday curatorial activity has become such an important part of contemporary life indicates the immense anxiety about conservation that we take for granted now. Conservation of borders and national identities and managed immigration are the cosmopolitical form of this new practice. My claim here is that it is the very anxiety of saving that marks "the curatorial" as such, and places it in relation to the possibility of erasure. From this, it follows that each curatorial decision, and perhaps artistic decision, must be made each time in light of the question of saving anything at all, rather than assuming that all things are to be preserved forever, until the end of time as it were.

From zones of viewing comfort, we partake in the 'worlding' of Gadap. We simulate a whole new world of elite desires and imperial fantasies – *mehfooz aur mukamal* – on a supposedly uninscribed earth, taking full pleasure in its transformation.

We began mapping Gadap's emergent and degraded ecologies – its disappearing hills, bodies of water, plant and animal species – to uncover the erasures and transformations of this sentient, nourishing landscape, the degradations and slow violence of resource extraction and sand mining.

To pay attention to fields of sound, the acoustic traces needed to hear the land's cry, as mountains are gouged and rivers are dried, as soils turn toxic.

This visualising gave priority to the biosphere, claiming a planetary viewpoint in laying bare human-nature entanglements – a practice of ecopedagogy where learning and research is not just a relation between humans, but a process of being with and in an environment.

In cosmology 'texture' is a glitch – it is the break in the system, a breakdown in symmetry, a topological defect.

The materialization of resistance.

Bahria Town's smoothness and symmetries do not remain unquestioned, they cannot always hold – they are haunted by glitches. The shrines of Dadhar Pir and Misri Shah Bokhari still left standing. We were told the tractor froze every time it approached the Pir's grave and so these graves have stayed, these textures that blemish, these breakages in symmetry dotting the Bahria Town landscape, rough the smooth, matte the gloss.

A strand of Modern art has shown us that its contextual ethical framework needs to be periodically refigured through acts of destruction, radical revaluation, anti-historical and anti-iconic terrorism by inflicting traumatic injury from which a new, plastic art might emerge. In the existing informational landscape, radical political groups have accelerated with advances in technology to produce themselves as inhuman subjects and agents of historical destruction, in a way only dreamed of by artists. These shifts require theorists and artists to perhaps not simply distance themselves from this history of violence, but to reclaim it in the service of another agenda. A sensibility that is horrified by the destruction of a shrine or a statue or a library cannot *simply* condemn the destruction as evil in itself (this would amount to a profound conservatism, dressed as liberalism). It must produce as well a theory of experience, as Walter Benjamin attempted a century ago; one that matches the precise terror of our times, from which a beauty—melancholic or affirmative—can emerge in the name of *another* design for the future, another mode of visibility/invisibility. This design can be deployed in the Cloud, plugged in to the mediascape, inhabiting its geoscape, hacking, subverting, or destroying its limits and capacities; it can describe a theory of collective and futural experience that follows the contours of affectivities produced by the confluence of ideologies and technologies; or it can be un-plugged, unsighted, deeply entranced in the proximity of rhythmic bodies, the particularity of the destination, the experience of the pilgrimage, the explosive reality of the shrine. In every case, something is destroyed, so that something must be—must ask of us to be—saved.

Notes

1. Shahab Ahmed, *What is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton, 2015).
2. Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).
3. Catherine Malabou, *What Should We Do With Our Brain?* Translated by Sebastian Rand (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008).
4. Benjamin H. Bratton, "On Geoscapes and the Google Caliphate: Reflections on the Mumbai Attacks," *Theory, Culture & Society* 26, no. 7–8 (1 December 2009): 329–42.
5. Jorge Luis Borges, *Fictions* (New York: Penguin 2000).
6. Fredric Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic* (London: Verso Books, 2010).
7. David Chalmers Alesworth and Adnan Madani, People's Art and Historical Garden Centre Project (PAHGCP, October 2009), accessed 10 March 2017, http://davidalesworth.com/p-a-h-g-c-p/.
8. Alex Danchev, ed., *100 Artists' Manifestos: From the Futurists to the Stuckists* (London: Penguin Classics, 2011), pp. 344–345.
9. Ibid., p. 345.
10. Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1993).
11. Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology, and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2013).
12. Rey Chow, *The Age of the World Target: Self-Referentiality in War, Theory, and Comparative Work*, Series: Next Wave Provocations, Series eds. Inderpal Grewal, Caren Kaplan, and Robyn Wiegman (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).
13. Susan Schuppli, "Deadly Algorithms: Can Legal Codes Hold Software Accountable for Code that Kills?" *Radical Philosophy* 187 (September 2014): 2–8.
14. Chow, *The Age of the World Target*, p. 31.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid., p. 33.
17. Bratton, op. cit.
18. I want to stop short of suggesting—as some do (and some proponents of a certain "Dark Accelerationism" welcome this event)—that humanity is shifting to a radically new mode of machinic or cyborg existence. It seems to me that this singularity seems much closer in the major technopoles of the world—near the hype of multi-billion dollar technological industries and their cultures—than it does in the vast poverty ridden stretches of the world, in cities like Karachi and Mumbai that are still composed of all-too human slum dwellers, whose technology is *bricolage* and whose mode of existence is survival. I am merely suggesting, that a *significant* shift is occurring in our time, and art and politics have been slow to respond to it.
19. Bratton, op. cit.
20. Carla Power, "Saudi Arabia Bulldozes Over its Heritage," *Time*, 14 November 2014, accessed 10 March 2017, http: time.com/3584585/saudi-arabia-bulldozes-over-its-heritage/.
21. Yehuda D. Nevo's work on early Kufic inscriptions in the Negev desert in Israel (*Ancient Arabic Inscriptions from the Negev* [1993]), for example.
22. They also work under the name Karachi LaJamia, http://karachilajamia.com/project/the-gadap-sessions/, accessed 22 August 2017.
23. See Martin Buber's quote from an open letter to Gandhi cited at the opening of this essay.
24. Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1997).
25. Ulises Ali Mejias, *Off the Network: Disrupting the Digital World* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), p. 16.

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