

Once Upon A Time, Once Upon No Time

A Solo Exhibition by Azin Feizabadi

Galerie Wedding

Love, if not true, is but a plaything of the senses,
fading like youth. Time perishes, not true love. All
may be imagination and delusion, but not love.
The charcoal brazier on which it bums is eternity
itself, without beginning or end.
*The Story of Layla and Majnun*¹

Day after day of the dead we were
desperate. Dark what the night
before we saw lit, bones we'd
eventually be... At day's end a
new
tally but there it was, barely
begun,
rock the clock tower let go of,
iridescent headstone, moment's
rebuff... Soul, we saw, said we
saw,
invisible imprint. No one wanted to
know
what soul was... Day after day of
the dead we were deaf, numb to
what the night before we said moved
us,
fey light's coded locale... I fell away,
we momentarily gone, deaf but to
brass's obsequy, low brass's
croon begun. I fell away, not fast,
floated,
momentary mention an accord
with the wind, day after day of the dead
the same as day before day of
the dead... »No surprise,« I fell away
muttering, knew no one would
hear,
not even
me
Nathaniel Mackey, *Day After Day of the Dead*²

¹ The Story of Layla and Majnun, translated by Jr om the Persian, published by Bruno Cassirer in 1966, available at: https://archive.org/stream/TheStoryOfLaylaAndMajnun/Leyla%20and%20Majnun_djvu.txt (retrieved 10.01.2018).

On this morning too
 today, early in the morning
 I shall take one look at the density of her vernal grace
 and for the thousandth time
 shall fall in love with her
 I know—
 in a single glance.
 I swear by your life, friend
 I am absolutely sure
 already
 that this whore of an elegant lady
 this graceful bitch
 this unaging pine lady
 at night
 every night
 first washes her hair
 under a shower of rain,
 next
 ever so gingerly
 gets herself to a salon,
 then
 returns in a strut
 and stands
 exactly here
 on this very spot
 along the roadside.

Esmail Khoi, *Pine Lady*³

Tales, legends, fables, fairy tales, myths, folklores are actually the disguised spaces of veracities in or about societies. Ironically, they are too often associated with falsehood, fictitious narratives, fictions, as the etymology of fable would like to make us believe. At all times in human existence – then as now, as much as a then can be a now – legends, tales, and lores have been spaces in which timeless topics like love, joy, disappointments, issues of morals, faith, ethics, humanity/humankind as well as one's being in the world, and gods, demons, man's fight against his/her demons etc. have been cached. Indeed, it is in and through legends, myths, tales that one can find the cosmogony or the imagination of certain societies, as much as one can find the cultural values and history of certain places and their

² Nathaniel Mackey: *Day After Day of the Dead* (from *Nod House*), published by Nathaniel Mackey, reprinted by permission of New Directions Publishing Corporation, 2011.

³ Vahabzadeh, Peyman: *Space, Identity, and Bilingual Poetry: Rethinking Iranian "Emigration Poetry"*, published in *Literary Review* in 1996 (Vol. 40, No 1), p. 42.

ideas of society. Such stories, be they true or false, too often have something in common, which is how – in too many ways – they succeed in defying our conceptions of time. The time of ‘once upon a time’ implies a far reaching, far fetched, distant time, which might be in the past, but as much in the future. And even more so, in a non linear time scale, in which the future doesn’t necessarily stand in front of the past, that time of ‘once upon a time’ can or must also suggest an immediacy of the now. Many of what we call tales, myths, legends besides the symbolical value they have, are indeed traced back to real happenings, that have been told and retold, watered down or hyperbolized to suit certain times and weathers. One such story that has stood the test of time, that has been narrated by poets, writers, filmmakers and artists, analysed by philosophers and cultural theorists and enacted in plays from India through Iran and Turkey to West Sahara is the 7th century love story between Layla Al-Aamiriya and Qays ibn al-Mulawwah in ‘Arabia’. According to anecdotes documented in the book of songs *Kitab al-Aghani* or in Nizami Ganiavi’s 12th century poem of this legendary and notorious love affair, Qays ibn Al-Mulawwah meets and falls in love with Layla Al-Aamiriya, as a schoolboy. When he began to write and proclaim his love to her in poems which he read passionately aloud on street corners, he was dubbed Majnun (the madman) by his contemporaries. Majnun, upon asking Layla’s father for his daughter’s hand in marriage, was refused, as she was already promised to an older man from another village; moreover, it would have been scandalous for his daughter to be married to a ‘madman’. Shaken by this disappointment, Majnun sought refuge in solitude in the wilderness, dedicating his life to poetry. Those who passed Majnun in the desert asserted that he was indeed driven to madness by a broken heart. What is certain is that Majnun's parents passed away and Layla’s husband, too. What happens thereafter has been a source of speculation and imagination by poets, writers and artists of all generations ever since. In some of the various narrations of the story, Layla is said to have died of her love and longing for Majnun, whom she was never allowed to meet again, and Majnun in turn, upon hearing of Layla’s death, carved three verses of poetry on a rock and then grieved himself to death at her graveside.

Death, love, narration, history, historiography, collective memory, time, identity are some of the issues that occupy filmmaker and visual artist, Azin Feizabadi, who has found himself in a genealogy of creative thinkers and artists who have been caught by the *Layla and Majnun* charm. But back to that in a bit.

Once Upon A Time, Once Upon No Time is the title of Feizabadi’s solo exhibition at Galerie Wedding. The first part of the title immediately calls to mind the traditional formula

in the art of storytelling. These lines we have heard time and again, as we lay our heads down to sleep while our parents read us bedtime stories, or as we kill time sitting around the fire as the sun sets in the horizon. »Once upon a time, there was a queen in far of x« so the story begins. »Once upon a time, Once upon no time« are also the opening words of Fatih Akin's epic film »The Cut« as he introduces a tale that too walks the line between fact and fiction, but that reveals the long-silenced crime against humanity, which is the Armenian genocide in Turkey. By evoking this formula of narration, Akin hopes to use cinema as a podium of narration through the visuals to encompass the duty of memory and history. But by using this medium he also sought to engrave this history in public memory. As different as Akin's and Feizabadi's works and interests might be, they actually do have some things in common that culminate in »Once upon a time, Once upon no time,« namely, an interest in writing histories, and an interest in challenging time as a linear concept, as well as deliberations and negotiations of complex identities.

One must necessarily savour this body of works by Azin Feizabadi through different entry and various vantage points. Like many artists, poets and thinkers before him, Feizabadi speculates on possible outcomes of Layla and Majnun's love affair. In his seminal film »Uchronia« Feizabadi transposes the idea of a non-place to a non-time.

[But if one defines »place«] as relational, historical and concerned with identity, then a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place. The hypothesis advanced here is that supermodernity produces non-places.⁴

A person entering the space of non-place is relieved of his usual determinants. He becomes no more than what he does or experiences in the role of passenger, customer, or driver. . . . The space of non-place creates neither singular identity nor relations; only solitude, and similitude. There is no room for history unless it has been transformed into an element of spectacle, usually in allusive texts.⁵

If Marc Augé's concept of the non-place is to be understood as a transient space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity, and a space that creates neither singular identity nor relations; only solitude, and similitude, then within a space-time relation, the non-time could imply a non-relational, a historical time with plural identities and multiple relations. In »Uchronia,« Feizabadi stages these multiple relations and identities in three different chapters. All of characters and their relations are riddles of a possible re-enactment of Leyla and Majnun's relation in multiple ways, as multiple identities, in a non-

⁴ Augé, Marc: *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, Verso: London, 1995, 78.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

time. What is common in all actors/characters is that they have all experienced a certain migration in their real lives. As Feizabadi puts it »the film embodies a timeless experience of migration.« Chapter one portrays Leyla and Majnun as two dark matter aliens that have migrated to Berlin and are seeking a love reunion as incarnated humans. In chapter two, Leyla and Majnun manifest themselves in one individual with multiple identities, i.e. a transgender person, experiences a gender transitioning. In chapter three is the narration of 9-year-old Bashir Abou Ezzah's migration experience manifested in his social DNA. In all cases, the characters experienced migration without really moving. In all cases, the actors who embody the main characters of the film, their identities vary within a time frame rather than a geographical frame. With this work, Feizabadi pursues further his long interest in finding alternative forms of historiography, and inscribing or translating previously geographically defined collective memories into the language of film. Finding ways of encapsulating histories or expressing histories through the usage of more poetical and experimental containers or modes of expression than scientific and ideological means.

The quest for and question of identity are two constants in every being in the diaspora. With the shift in geography and time, one develops another relation to space and time. Spaces become transient, as identities become fluid in relation to changing times. If one assumes that not even the past is conversed, but in a flux and always in development, i.e. always in a process of becoming, then how can identity be fixed? Therefore, identity should be perceived as a vector related to time, identity should be regarded as a time based concept, which always becomes and always develops. So the question to be posed isn't really are you Iranian or German, but rather, since when or how long are you Iranian or German, as Feizabadi fondly says.

In his reflections on Iranian emigration poetry in relation to space and identity, Peyman Vahabzadeh writes about Esmail Khoi's poem *Pine Lady* as depicting an everyday experience of the poet's life in exile:

»Beholding this particular pine in front of his home in London, Khoi personifies it as an »elegant« and »graceful« street prostitute awaiting patrons. Much can be said about this particular poem, but I shall discuss here only one aspect of it: through such a personification, the specificity of the poet's experience is faded: no longer has the signifier any peculiarities; all traces that might link this tree to a specific juncture of time and space are removed. As such, this pine can be anywhere, the poet anyone. The question of the contextual experience has been consciously absented in this poem. The poet sacrifices it in order to represent through his poem one of the many seemingly insignificant everyday scenes of his life in exile, where apparently the only

being he can express any emotions for is this particular pine tree across the street.«⁶

The identity of the pine, like that of the poet are not limited to a particular space or time, but rather manifest on the tightrope of faded and fluctuating notions of time and space. In other words, if one were to narrate the fate of the pine and the poet, one would be better off starting with »once upon a time, once upon no time.«

Tales, legends, fables, fairy tales, myths, folklores are actually the disguised spaces of veracities in or about societies. They narrate something about the infinity of time, but enclosed in the moment of narration and being. The now. The eternal now. In stories narrated, figures are born and die over and over again. Whenever the story is told, the now of the story is transposed into the now of the moment. Life. Death. In tales, legends, fables, fairy tales, myths, folklores and many arts mortals can become immortal, especially through re-telling and re-enactments. But also through other forms. If one were to learn from the laws for thermodynamics, one would say that the total amount of energy and matter in the Universe remains constant, merely changing from one form to another. Which is to say that mortality is a matter of state and form. Thus when the musician Petit Pays sings in *Machine Ma Bosinga* »Je chante pour les morts et pas pour les vivants, cars les morts ne sont pas mort,« (I sing for the dead and not for the living, for the dead are not dead) he does actually evoke that possibility of eternity. When one state perishes, the others arise and flourish. Layla and Majnun perish in what can be considered a reality, but through the arts of storytelling, painting, poetry, theatre, and film, they do live forever. This seems to be Feizabadi's concern when he embarks on the multimedia installation *Brigitte Na-Mira* (2018). In this piece in which the artist constructs a grave box for the late German actress Brigitte Mira in the gallery space, Feizabadi reflects on mortality and immortality. By planting flowers on the grave that will blossom over the course of the exhibition, the artist seems to imply that it is upon the mortal that immortality thrives. The seeds/plants are edited together by the artist and his collaborators, assembled and 'montaged' next to each other; like two shots which have been recorded in different times and different places but once edited together next to each other in the film, they are experienced in a homogeneous time and place. The art piece is in the process of becoming throughout the duration of the exhibition. It is time based, also like a film. Each flower stands for a particular character and identity that Brigitte Mira played in her films.

⁶ Vahabzadeh, Peyman: Space, Identity, and Bilingual Poetry: Rethinking Iranian "Emigration Poetry", p. 42.

In addition, a soundscape collage of Brigitte Mira's voice, collected from various films in which she embodied a variety of characters and identities. While Brigitte Mira couldn't embody all these identities at the same time, while she was alive, upon her death, all these identities can flourish. Just like most of the plants that are staged together usually do not grow together, as they usually do not flourish in the same season or same environment. In some cultures, when a child is born, a tree is planted. In others, when a person dies, a tree is planted. As Feizabedi says »we are scared of death, because we fear extinction, we fear that no one and nothing will remember us, while when we die we continue living through becoming nature, becoming earth, soil, plants and trees, air and water and other things.« This project takes its cue from the Farsi word *Mira*, which means »mortal« and immortal in Farsi means *Na-Mira*.

For Feizabadi, this immortality does necessarily exist in the *Now*. Now as in the moment and »Now« (2018) the art piece. The artist's deep concern about the non- versus multiple- relationality, and plurality of the non-time leads to the constant interrogation of how we each experience our »Now« differently. In Trinh T. Minha's film »The Fourth Dimension,« there is a passage that states that in the fourth dimension the past and future collapse in the now. This resonates with Siegfried Zielinski's notion of Deep Time (Tiefenzeit), when he writes in »Entwerfen und Entbergen: Aspekte einer Genealogie der Projektion« that:

»The idea of deep-time enables us to elegantly intertwine the past and the future with each other: to design and to unconceal, to lay two different forms of approaches on a time scale that can pass through the present.«⁷

With the exhibition **Once Upon A Time, Once Upon No Time**, Azin Feizabadi seeks to project the viewer, the beholder into a space of narration beyond the narration, into space of the non-place and non-time, into a dimension that could be qualified as Fourth or Deep. What ever the case might be, it is one in which we must renegotiate our notions of identities, collective memory, our concepts of time, and our perceptions of histories and the way they might be 'written'. What identities do we embody in fulfilling our various tasks of the quotidian, and how do they vary with different spaces and times as we perform and transform our being?

Text by Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung

⁷ Siegfried Zielinski, *Entwerfen und Entbergen. Aspekte einer Genealogie der Projektion*, Köln: König 2010, S. 53.