Fictionville: A Place Beyond Good and Evil [i]
Reflections on Violence and the Society of Spectacle

"I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked, dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn looking for an angry fix..." [ii]
-- Ginsberg, *Howl And Other Poems* (1956)

"Nothing exists that doesn't have this senseless sense..." [iii]
-- Bataille, *The Impossible* (1962)

"Everything takes place in a fiery penumbra, it's meaning subtly withdrawn." [iv]
-- Bataille, *Guilty*, (1944)

Humans have a remarkably unique escalating capacity to commit violence against themselves or others with over one and a half million violent deaths every year wrought upon man by man. Whilst never have we demanded more truthfulness of ourselves and of our leaders about the use of violence and its purpose, citizens of modernity are insatiably voracious consumers of the *spectacle of violence*. "If it bleeds it leads". This "orgy of universal atrocity", in the words of Baudelaire, is "the loathsome appetizer [with which] civilised man daily washes down his morning repast". [v] Rokni Haerizadeh's recent bodies of work embody a prolific and feverish expose' of exactly this dualistic interplay: the reality of violence and the spectator's inherent (passive) voyueristic relationship to that reality.

In *Whip of a Foe* (a group of five triptychs exhibited in 2010), with burning visceral fury, Haerizadeh's expressionistic brush paints macabre and sadistic scenes of human torture in *remembering* the whole tragic and suppressive historical reality of his birthplace (Iran), exposing them as "emblems of suffering" or secular icons (to borrow from Susan Sontag) like *memento mori*, objects of contemplation serving to heighten and deepen a *sense of reality*. [vi] The artist distinguishes between what Harold Pinter called "the search for truth in art and the avoidance of truth in politics" [vii], exposing reality such that there is no possibility for pretensions of normalcy. Despite the possibility of numbing through exposure, *remembering* is celebrated by the artist as an ethical act. Viewing as a phenomenon is confronted on several layers and the artist not only *explores and exploits* the aphrodisiacal spectacle of violence but comments on the act of watching, of peering, spying at an accepting distance – "proximity at no risk" [viii] - bringing to the fore the problematic question of complicity on both the personal (artist/spectator) and collective levels (society).

Devoid of pitiful moralising and surpassing fetishistic infatuation with candid descriptive depictions of human sordidness, the present series entitled *Fictionville* marks a new *close proximity with violence* for Haerizadeh.

Cunningly and controversially he turns to *violate,* through gesso and watercolour, actual found photographic media images depicting human suffering and to transform them, sometimes unrecognisably, into imaginary fairytales: humourous, grotesque, satirical, bitter. With spontaneous violent fantasy Haerizadeh applies layers of gesso and bonding, breaks down the apparent integrity of the image, drains away the moral stance, absolves his found canvas of its account of truth and in the Nietzschean sense unmasks all *accounts* of the truth in order to arrive closer to the truth. It is *ruthless criticism in the spirit of creative play* and Haerizadeh de- and re-constructs the narrative revealing a new plain of reality, in his own words "releasing obscure inherent potential". The artist's *violent conversion and perversion* of one image into another mutate horror into fairytale, neutralises reductive moralising victim/perpetrator, right/wrong boundaries.

In their origin, these found images depict riotous demonstrations, street combats, militarised marches, feeling victims, brutalising *security* forces, natural disasters, earthquakes, floods, amalgamating all varieties of suffering. In mutation, street demonstrators are elephant men and fox, goat, or feline-headed anthropomorphic creatures, riot police roaring monsters and fleeing victim and brutal police morph gently into hooved beasts like delirious Greek *Centaurs*, Indian *Gandharva* or Roman *Luperci* in an Orwellian world of storytelling. Negative spaces might reveal human forms or vice versa and whole swathes of congestions might wash away in abscurity. Where the original photographic media image showed stranded men perched onto the provisional safety of some railings awaiting rescue, the transformed image shows a man approaching a community of female nudes. The original image depicts a harrowing scene from the recent floods in Pakistan while the converted scene promises a voyage to sensual delights. The artist uses amalgamated images from *anywhere* and of a*ny* disaster - inflicted by nature or man - to consume the whole breadth of our modern voracious need for such spectacles regardless of any inter-relational empathy, understanding or knowledge. Most often the original printed captions remain wholly or partially visible to emphasise the real news source. In a final act of defiance, the projected animation *perverts* the most symbolic of all tragic Iranian contemporary attempts at democracy: the shooting of Neda, the adopted face of (innocent) resistance. A red carpet flows between her fallen legs as though it had been spread out for her instead of her blood that flowed and she is made to concupisciently *perform* on it as the media (and society) demanded of her in death.

Haerizadeh's fairytale mutations reference simultaneously *Panchatantra (Five Principles*) the ancient Sanskrit book of fables, translated as *Kelileh and Demneh* in Persian and another Persian animal fable the modern political satirical play *City of Tales* (1968) from which his own title *Fictionville* is directly derived. The anthropomorphic characters inhabiting these Old or New World tales are vehicles for sentimentally free frank political expression - either moral or amoral - and conveyors of *niti*, the worldly "wise conduct of

life".[ix] The animal actors pierce the humbug of everyday ideal[x] precisely as the artist intends to undo the logic at work in these crimes and tragedies.

Haerizadeh steps consciously into the Nietzschean injunction of assaulting the morality of pity and aspiring to a transcendental freedom *beyond good and evil*, the vortical Bataillesque symbiotic linking of violence/violation and freedom, and the transgressive realm of Bakhtinian carnival and grotesque realism. For Haerizadeh as for Bataille containment of violence within *safe* limits is itself violence. Crime and perversion must be integrated within the human totality; their exclusion is itself an act of violence and one that does not destroy or diminish them but serves to increase their power. It is through this feverish and liberating critique of violence that Rokni Haerizadeh has produced some of his most powerful and most *beautiful* works to date.

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[i] Nietzsche, Friedrich, *Beyond Good and Evil*, translated byWalter Kaufmann, (New York: Random House, 1966); reprinted in Vintage Books, and as part of *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, (New York: Modern Library, 2000)

[ii] Ginsberg, Allen. *Howl And Other Poems*. San Francisco: City Lights Books, (1956), p.9.

[iii] Bataille, Georges, *The Impossible*, (1962), Trans. Robert Hurley, (City Lights Books, 1991), p.20

[iv] Bataille, Georges, *Guilty*, (1944), Trans. Bruce Boone, (The Lapis Press, 1988), p.12

[v] Baudelaire, Charles, From the diaries of the author cited in Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, (Penguin Books: New York, 2004), p. 96

[vi] Sontag, Susan, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, (Penguin Books: New York, 2004), p. 107

[vii] Pinter, Harold, *Art, Truth & Politics*, (The Nobel Peace Prize for Literature, 2005)

[viii] Sontag, Susan, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, (Penguin Books: New York, 2004), p. 99

[ix] Ryder, Arthur W., *The Panchatantra*, (University of Chicago Press, Translation based on Hertel's North Western Family Sanskrit text, 1925)

[x] *ibid*, Translator's Note.