

**“It’s Time for Storytellers
to Go to Battle”**

**A Conversation with
Sophia Al-Maria**

Where did the character Bitch Omega come from?

A dream.

She came trotting out the fog of my subconscious. In and out of shadows. Recurring in phases. In drawings. In trips. In poems.

She's a kind of werewolf. So, like all shapeshifters, it's hard to get a clear picture. I just feel her hanging around the firelight of my waking sometimes.

Her good eye glows. The blind eye is blue.

The video is an accumulation of different videos and voice notes. It's still in progress and will only be visible in its entirety at the end of the project. What motivated you to keep the format open?

It's an experiment. An exercise in speculation. I've never made anything like this before. So it scares me a little. It's vulnerable to show something unfinished.

But I wanted it to be presented in progress. As an act of sharing (probably oversharing). The feel of it is quite trashy and the video itself becomes a dumping ground. A gathering of digital detritus that grows over the course of its time in the collection.

When I set out to make this work, I wanted to dissolve the viewer/narrator's POV into a kaleidoscope of perspectives. The whole thing has a collaborative element to it, as well. It's filled with the voices of friends and lovers and family and strangers both living and dead.

What about the format of the film? It's in disparate pieces. Like debris.

My favorite stories are incomplete ones which leave room for the audience. I think a lot about *Earthseed*, *One Thousand and One Nights*, *The Satyricon*, fragmented or unfinished stories. The contents of the video are accruing around the idea that there is no "perspective" to take on history now other than to acknowledge the blindness of the present.

Because of this the format is chaotic. And the process has been chaotic too. I'm letting go of control over a narrative or the illusion of control one has when editing on a timeline. It's changed and will keep changing. *Bitch Omega* simply throws information at the audience. I add videos then delete them. Some change altogether. It's a casting of dice almost. The work is an invitation and a puzzle. You draw your own conclusions. Read your own runes.

There is no teleological function to it other than to encourage grokking, that deep unquantifiable understanding rather than acquisitive knowing. At least that's my POV. One of the diary entries opens with the blind narrator saying "Try to see it my way" and that could be another subtitle. If there were a thesis it would be that objectivity is a myth...as is the idea of an ending.

Is there a story?

I'd been thinking about Vladislav Surkov in the making of this. He is known for being the malevolent architect of the post-truth panopticon we are living in. And he essentially believed that if you tell the story you create the world.

This is repeated again and again from different perspectives, you see this sentiment in Frantz Fanon's writing, it comes up in discussion with activists, and I just came across it in Ebony Elizabeth Thomas's book *The Dark Fantastic: Race and Imagination from Harry Potter to the Hunger Games*, so I feel this idea is an understood if not totally acknowledged truth. I feel like if Surkov, Putin, Trump, and co. understand the power of fiction and story, then it's time for storytellers in particular to go to battle. The future place needs to be seeded with the dreams of those who will inhabit it.

There is still a narrative, entries from a found diary kept by a survivor of an apocalyptic event.

Maybe that diary is my attempt at writing a piece of apocalyptic literature.

Like all apocalyptic stories, it's speculative. There is always a possibility that there is no conclusion.

I began writing the diary in the voice of a person going blind in isolation in January and February 2020. It has taken on a very different feeling for me after being under lockdown for two months because of COVID-19.

In the background story, the blind writer's lover, referred to only as "B," has left her and taken the dog Angel with them. Depending on where you start watching, the story opens with a catastrophe that happened and the neighbors are all gone, either hiding or dead. The writer, "O," is left with nothing but a Bic pen and her memories. If in the beginning was the word, that's where O begins. O is Omega, the end of all things including the alphabet. It's only through the absence of Angel and her lover that O begins to write and draw. The hierarchy of the home and the world is gone. And it's through the hind and foresight of the "weak" that a new world, a new perspective, emerges.

There are angels throughout Bitch Omega. Even if there's no formal narrative there are themes or motifs which emerge.

Yes. It started with the text Walter Benjamin wrote about Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus*, casting it as the angel of history.

Then I had the dream about Bitch Omega who is an angel but also a beast. An all-seeing eye dog. Her coat is brindled the color of petroleum and her eyes glow like an oil flare.

Angelus Novus's gaze follows what Ursula K. Le Guin calls the "killing-arrow" of linear time. Bitch Omega's good eye is a swirling black hole and her blind one is a spiraling galaxy. She perceives the many-faceted multiverse and all of time and all possible stories from beginning to end at once. In some ways she is like a Laplace's demon but in a non-deterministic universe. Her contracting pupil is the Omega Point.

How is the project related to "History"?

History ... Angel growls at the word. I think because, like those other monoliths of canonical Western perspective, the trouble is it presumes omnipotence.

An all-seeing eye or "I."

And while the architect of our non-consensual reality based this world on the foundation that nothing is true therefore everything is permitted ... (I mean Surkov via William S. Burroughs via Hassan-i Sabbah.)

I want to believe that actually everything is true in the extreme subjectivity of this little god's point of view.

And in the absence of an imposed narrative, trust in the storyteller is required.

Receptivity and openness and participation are the cost of entry to the play.

Bitch Omega drags you off leash through the trash accrued on my phone in fragments of conversations, books, and thoughts started but not finished and correspondences old and new.

Ultimately, I'd like to let go of authorship. There is a book referenced in the piece called *The Art of Raising a Puppy* by "The Monks of New Skete," which is collectively written by all the monks and none at all.

And how is it related to the camera, the phone, and the internet?

Just as the arcades Benjamin was obsessed with were cast in iron, the phantasmagoria of our phones are cast in glass and encase us. This video is made on the phone, for the phone.

And I've been wondering what happens when the God's eye view of Google goes out?

And with it, like the Library of Alexandria, the total accumulation of human knowledge?

Who is our Hypatia?

We are still evolving as a species but failing at adaptation.

In this inversion of the "first" and "third" worlds' preparedness for disaster, the meek SHALL inherit the earth.

But you/me/we are not them.

And every apocalypse is an opportunity for a genesis.

The end for one thing, the beginning of another.

And if, like the heirs to the earth, you have nothing to lose ... then it goes without saying you have everything to gain.

Can you talk a little about the use of perspective in the videos?

Bitch Omega takes the extreme subjectivity of POV.

And then the project proposes that an "abject" or "lowered" gaze actually has the most important place in the telling of "history" or the telling of us. See: our downcast gaze and gait with a phone in our hands. A worm's eye view feels true.

Marxist historians and citizen journalists have been attempting this forever. The record of events deemed significant not by the victors but the oppressed.

Our instincts are changing. Now, for example, we instinctively take out our cameras to document the police assault someone or any injustice big or small or in fact when anything mundane is occurring. We do so not as an act of a feasting vulture like off the carrion of others' pain as Susan Sontag describes it, but as a tool for balance. La justice. So I do feel our relationship with the camera, now that it has been so levelly distributed across the strata of humanity, has undergone a really interesting and important shift.

It's a special moment in the relationship as we become almost biologically entwined with our devices, and cameras in particular. We are becoming more refined, more sensitive.

And this is why I am interested in our phones.

If ever there were a carrier bag ...

But it's also a tombstone.

Yes. I ask myself all the time: Do I want this slab of sensitive glass to be mine?

The phone is the womb/tomb of we.

Do I want all the unfinished notes and unflattering angles to be tossed in with me like roses down a six-foot hole? And will my life flashing before my eyes just be a montage of snap-filter selfies and screengrabs? I feel like asking this of myself: When my body (protective water-resistant case) eventually fails me and, like my phone, I will die, what would I want all my data, my life story, to do?

Maybe phones mark the death of humanity and the birth of something else. The great web of knowledge we've amassed will give AI an omniscience not possible for us or our brains physically, let alone in any other way.

Imagine, instead of hard philosophy, AI using poetry. Instead of a satellite view it will look up at us, like a selfie-gaze. Imagine the entire dynamic of power shift to a non-hierarchical one, where there are no alphas or betas or omegas.

I told a friend recently, when the term "beta" came up, that it would be a mistake to identify with only one role because they weren't a wolf but an upright ape with the capacity to evolve and grow and change.

I feel we are losing the sacred right and even the ability to change. It happens to humans especially as we grow older. Because of hierarchy. Hardwired pecking orders. Fear of chaos.

Evolution is another theme. And technology, at least in the sense of the way in which "technology" the word is, as Le Guin describes in The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction, an unexamined shorthand standing in for the "hard sciences and high technology founded upon continuous economic growth."

I think of evolution and extinction in relation to our phones again as an umbilical cord for the AI we are gestating.

Because of the downcast gaze they give us. Making us walk with the fearful, subservient gait of a cowardly animal. It's not a healthy pregnancy.

I can't help that my downcast gaze as a phone user bent while walking leaves me unaware of my surroundings. I become a non-participant. I'm a hypocrite. Imagine how aberrant it would seem to our hunter-gatherer ancestors. It looks like supreme stupidity even to me, let alone those forebears.

I am optimistic about other forms of technology. Poetry is technology. Yoga is technology. I remember distinctly the first time I encountered that way of diverging from the "hard SF" definition was *The Last Angel of History*, which opens with a description of jazz as a technology.

So yes, storytelling is one of our very first technologies. It's certainly one of our first methods of transmission of "history." What's all that begetting in the beginning of the Bible if not old men's way of preserving ancestors. Trouble is, that part of Genesis is boring.

Anything else?

There is something about the eye of this particular camera in our phones, as lovingly focused on us as we are on it.

It does not appear malevolent as HAL slowly dying to the tune of "Daisy Bell."

The relationship to the mirror/camera/phone is for many our most intimate relationship.

It keeps our secrets and nude pics and voice notes full of lonesome sighs. But it is also inverted infinitely outward.

Privacy a known illusion.

If there's everything to see there is also nothing.

This goes back to the whole erotic of drawing veils in the first place. Which is another subject for another time.

Because to know you can know nothing is maybe the beginning of the path away from apocalypse to genesis.

