



## Latency

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Translated from French by Tony Chakar

Latency is the state of what exists in a non-apparent manner, but which can manifest itself at any given moment. It is the time elapsed between the stimuli and the corresponding response.

The latent image is the invisible, yet-to-be-developed image on an impressed surface. The idea is that of the 'dormant' – slumber; slumbering – like something asleep, which might awake at any moment.

Latency has connotations with essence, but also with the idea of the repressed, the hidden, the untestable, of an invisible element. It is an obscure form, troubling because it cannot be delineated; it is not a defined territory, but a diffused state, uncontrollable, underground, as if lurking, as if all could resurface anew.

Latency is the introduction to the possible, to the state of becoming.

Latency also evokes what is often felt in Beirut, in face of the dominant amnesia prevailing since the end of the war<sup>1</sup>, in face of this strange paralysis that pervades the city, in face of this violent desire to place things between parentheses – to censure oneself.

This latency of memory coincides with an ambiguous relation to images, as they have been presented since the end of the war. These images oscillate between two temporal registers: The mythified and nostalgic past of Beirut – the pre-war period with its images and its sublimated postcards; and the future – as it is constituted in a supposedly collective fantasy that puts us back onto the track of the 'right road of progress and modernity', with its iconography projected in enormous billboards praising numerous real estate projects.

The image seems to navigate between a 'this has been' and 'this will be'. The present manifests itself, at times, in a hysterical fashion, in a denial of the historicised inscription. Most often, when one approaches the subject of the war, a certain 'cathartic' presupposition – so as not to say a therapeutic program – accompanies it to overcome 'this crisis'. The war is not simply a symptom, but it is also an ontology and process that cannot be reduced, a process that escapes, that

represses itself and that denotes latency one more time. The war's near past becomes this latent figure shrouded in the shadow of the city, ready to gush out from the shade; this memory so quickly strangled, the ruins lying under the modernist's concrete, under the capitalist's dream of an efficient and proficient country.

In our approach to photography, we first began to inscribe the traces and memories of war in our work, insisting on the ruin, but also on the inscription of these modern ruins in the city, on the modes of perceiving the city and its evolution, on the urban tissues and their mutations. We were also re-oriented towards a re-reading of our contemporary history and its representations, which shape us.

This exploration led us to work on borrowed images.

This critical attempt often led us to impasses, to paralysis, to crises of representation. But the act of making images became obstinate, pushing us to seek different ways of 'saying' in an alternative way through photography.

Latency is well illustrated in the works that we will discuss in this paper: *Wonder Beirut* which refers to the work of a photographer, Abdallah Farah, a 'documentary' that we filmed on the Khiam detention centre and our research on an undeveloped 8mm film, which used to belong to Khalil's uncle, who disappeared during the war.

It is always an almost embarrassing bother to speak of one's own work. However, this is a recurrent approach for many of us in Lebanon. In the absence of a

critical and theoretical structure, we often find ourselves in the process of theorising our work, saying it, writing it. It is also difficult to reduce our work to a precise perspective – such as latency – however, it seemed interesting to attempt to do so within this framework.

**Abdallah Farah: *Wonder Beirut*, including various works: *The Novel of a Pyromaniac Photographer* and *Latent Image*.**

Abdallah Farah is a photographer whose approach illustrates the difficulty of creating images during and after the war. Three periods can be distinguished through-out the course of his work. In 1964, Abdallah Farah was only sixteen years of age when he joined the photography studio of his father, a former assistant of Dalati and Nuhra. Studio Wahed was located in Bab Idriss in downtown Beirut. In 1968, Studio Wahed received an order from the Lebanese Tourism Agency for a series of twenty-four postcards on Beirut, as well as twelve illustrations to be used in the official calendar of 1969. The orders continue in the following years.

The photographs, shot over a period of six months for the postcards, attempt to reveal the most beautiful tourist sites in Beirut: The city centre, the bank district, the cinemas, the souks, the hotels, the beaches, the modern infrastructure, the urban monuments, the city's most important avenues and so on. Some aerial views were also taken with the assistance of the Ministry of Tourism and the army.

<sup>1</sup> A law issued on August 26, 1991 (Law N° 84) stipulates a general amnesty for all crimes committed during the war, up until March 28, 1991. Crimes committed after this date would then be prosecuted.



The idea behind the project, which was wholeheartedly supported by the prominent hotels, was to expose the city's modernity, its diversity and its richness. The quality of this work was such that it was regularly reprinted (and imitated). We still find reproductions of these postcards on sale today in Beirut's bookshops, even if some of the monuments they depict have disappeared. Abdallah Farah was certainly not the only one who produced postcards, but his work still remains among the most distinguished.



After the civil war broke out in the spring of 1975, besieged and invaded by militiamen from different factions, Studio Wahed was destroyed and subsequently burnt to the ground. Abdallah succeeded in rescuing some material – a fraction of his negatives, including those of the postcards and hundreds of rolls of virgin films, unshot and unexposed.

For an unexplained reason, Farah kept quiet about embarking on a new venture.



Three years after the start of the war, and a few months after his father's death, he began to damage his postcard negatives, burning them little by little – an intentional process of deterioration – as if seeking a way to have their states conform to his present. He imitated the destruction of buildings, which were progressively disappearing before his eyes, ravished by bombardment and street battles. In doing so, he inflicted yet another form of destruction. He spent his nights slowly burning his calendar and postcard clichés, making them correspond to his shattered reality.

Through a process, which integrates within it part hazard part accident, these 'damaged' images appear like new photographs. Through the traces of fire and light, an indexical rapport is recreated.

By the time Abdallah finished burning all these images, the official peace ending the war was proclaimed in Lebanon.

During the war, often confined to the house or to the bomb shelter, Abdallah Farah seldom went out (as he himself says, he has nothing of the adventurer or the war reporter). During these long years, he mostly photographed the people closest to him, his neighbours and neighbouring places. He used the un-shot rolls of film salvaged from his studio; but, short on products, fixatives and, most of all, paper, he was not able to develop his images. The photographed films began to pile up, waiting for a better day, for a moment when the shelling would stop and Abdallah would be able to go out. Since, – and despite the end of the war – he maintains this habit. He doesn't develop his images anymore. It suffices just to shoot them. The reels accumulate, without him feeling a need to reveal them. He nonetheless precisely documents each photograph he takes in a small notebook, describing it thoroughly. They are there to be read, leaving an immense space for the imagination. He entitles this work the 'invisible image' or the 'image in the text'.

For us, a little obsessed, we see it as a latent image.

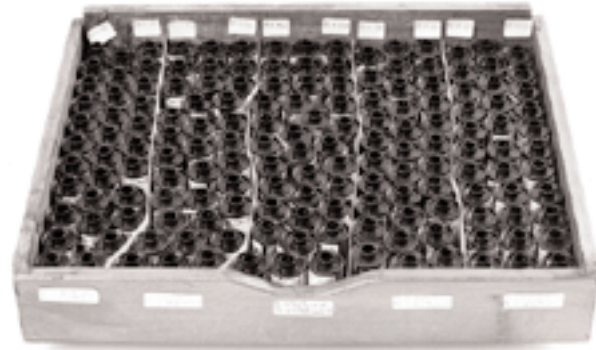
One of our friends, Pierre Ménard, admires the work of

Abdallah Farah. He talks of "a subterranean body of work, endlessly heroic, unequalled and, certainly, perpetually unaccomplished, a sublime attempt to capture each passing minute, fleeting time, running time".<sup>2</sup>

We imagine recovering Abdallah's photographic archives and deciphering his many notebooks, for the purpose of our making a *catalogue raisonné* of his invisible work.

<sup>2</sup> Hadjithomas, Joana; Joreige, Khalil, *Ok, I'll Show You My Work*, Beirut: *Al Adaab*, Publication – January/February, 2001.





Film RE 145

1. 6/3/2000 at 11:20. Autoportrait in the mirror; impassive attitude just after a dispute
2. 7/3/2000 at 11:01. Autoportrait in the mirror; impassive attitude but interiorized feeling of euphoria
3. 7/3/2000 at 13:52. Autoportrait in the mirror; impassive attitude but interiorized feeling of hunger
4. 7/3/2000 at 14:30. Autoportrait in the mirror; impassive attitude but interiorized feeling "I've had too much to eat"
5. 7/3/2000 at 16:24. Autoportrait in the mirror; impassive attitude. Attempt at detachment but, rather, interiorized calm
6. 7/3/2000 at 17:06. Autoportrait in the mirror; impassive attitude. Attempt at detachment but, rather, interiorized feeling of boredom
7. 7/3/2000 at 18:08. Autoportrait in the mirror; impassive attitude. Attempt at detachment but, rather, interiorized feeling of expectancy
8. 7/3/2000 at 19:07. Autoportrait in the mirror; impassive attitude. Attempt at detachment but interiorized exasperation
9. 8/3/2000 at 12:42. Autoportrait in the mirror; impassive attitude but interiorized feeling of excitement
10. 8/3/2000 at 13:08. Autoportrait in the mirror; impassive attitude but interiorized feeling of expectancy
11. 8/3/2000 at 13:52. Autoportrait in the mirror; impassive attitude but interiorized feeling of irritation
12. Ibid. (feeling of having been expressive, hence re-irritated)
13. 8/3/2000 at 15:25. Autoportrait in the mirror; impassive attitude but interiorized undefinable feeling
14. 8/3/2000 at 16:44. Autoportrait in the mirror; impassive attitude but interiorized feeling of "I'm too hot"
15. 9/3/2000 at 03:20. Autoportrait in the mirror; impassive attitude but interiorized feeling of fatigue

On the left, we see images of two of the many drawers he uses to store his films. The first contains films shot from Sunday, November 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1997, to Saturday, February 21<sup>st</sup>, 1998; the second from Wednesday, November 4<sup>th</sup>, 1998, to Sunday April 11<sup>th</sup>, 1999. Also depicted are the textual descriptions of films that Abdallah Farah continues to call 'contact sheets'. We have taken the liberty of translating the descriptions and simply typing them out on a computer (Abdallah's handwriting is very hard to read). Please note that, of course, this is not a facsimile (an image of the image), as resorting to the image of these latent images would be problematic.

A fundamental question remains that I will evoke only here: That of the conditions of apparition, or rather, the revelation of these images. At what moment, and to what purpose, would Abdallah Farah choose to develop his films – to subject his images to light? What would have had to change around him, in him, beyond him?

In his book, *Distracted*, Jalal Toufic writes that the fact that Abdallah Farah describes his photographs, in a notebook, "can be considered a contribution to the resurrection of what has been withdrawn by the surpassing disaster. The intended effect of the work of the one trying to resurrect tradition past a surpassing disaster is fundamentally not on the audience, except indirectly; it is on the work of art to resurrect it".<sup>3</sup> If we were to witness this change in Abdallah Farah's work, as well as in other artists whose work may evolve in a similar perspective,

it could signify that certain conditions – perhaps linked to the state that the country is in, or to the state of the art scene – have been made present for the 'revelation' of the image to occur. Of course, this would presuppose a transformation in our anticipation, in our rapport with images, in general, (The images would gain an 'aura', a different strength: They would be efficient, "terrible", in the sense used by Barthes).

<sup>3</sup> Toufic, Jalal, *Distracted*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed., forthcoming from Tuumba Press, 2003.

Film PE 103

1. Zakiyeh, drunk, shouting and threatening the sky
2. Close-up, low shot on Zakiyeh, seemingly possessed
3. Mr. Srour, furious, on the stairs in front of his door
4. Zakiyeh dragging herself up the stairs
5. Mr. Srour in low shot looks at me inquiringly
6. Zakiyeh crawls to the landing
7. Zakiyeh asleep, collapsed on the doormat
8. The same (closer)
9. Close-up on Zakiyeh's open mouth
10. Half-closed eye-lid
11. The chain around Zakiyeh's neck and her pendant lying on the ground
12. The bottle of arak, on the last stair before the landing
13. Medium-low shot, Elham opens Zakiyeh's bedroom door
14. Medium shot, Elham tries to lift Zakiyeh (risk of moving, missed)
15. The same
16. Medium close-up on the faces of Zakiyeh and Elham, cheek to cheek
17. Mr. Srour in low shot, with his hands on his hips
18. Elham picks up the bottle of arak on the stairs
19. Elham puts down the bottle inside the room
20. Elham closes Zakiyeh's door while looking towards my direction
21. The sky seen through the window of my room
22. A cloud shaped like an elephant
23. Jnah. Painted film poster: Julia Roberts, completely deformed, is unrecognizable
24. Close-up on the face of Julia Roberts
25. New electric yellow pole, unused, stuck to an old wooden pole covered with electric wires
26. Front façade of a destroyed building being restored
27. A workman on a crane opposite the building
28. The workman, a tiny speck, atop the huge suspended crane
29. Mileage gauge of the car at 99,999 kilometres
30. Mileage gauge of the car between 99,999 and 100,000 kilometres
31. Mileage gauge of the car at 100,000 kilometres
32. Parked car, with mileage gauge at 100,000 kilometres
33. Medium long-shot of the car parked on Mar Elias street
34. Close-up on the horoscope in the paper "You have found the key to happiness among some old things, but you don't know what door the key opens"
35. Photo of one of my old photos (the postcard of burnt *Place des Canons*, published without my authorisation in the newspaper)
36. List of the managers of the newspaper for eventual proceedings

**Khiam: (Documentary, 52 minutes, April 2000)**

Until the liberation of South Lebanon in May of 2000, it was impossible to go to the Khiam detention camp, run by the South Lebanon Army (SLA), a proxy militia for Israel. We always heard 'talk' about this camp, without having seen any images of it. All our information basically came from the testimonies of liberated detainees and the few Red Cross members authorised to enter Khiam. Here was what seemed to be an impossibility of representation.

Through the testimonies of six detainees, three men and three women that we interviewed, we were confronted with a raw, yet partial, document – acts of 'speaking', which lacked an image. In the documentary, the only images that are presented are those of the six detainees who take turns speaking.

The images of the camp are latent.

The setting used in the film is strict, the camera fixed, the gaze of the detainees calls out to the camera. Through the editing, we wait for something to occur. The experience lived by the detainees, their act of speaking, attempts a reconstruction, as meticulous and as detailed as possible, of the camp – and of the daily life in such a place: How the camp and the rooms were precisely structured, how they used to live in a 1.8 x 0.8 metre space, what they ate, what they did, how, with only a handful of material, they used to fabricate craft-like objects, clandestine and utilitarian, such as needles, pencils, etc. By being extremely meticulous, and by giving the utmost attention to detail, one attempts to make things exist.

The work is a form of experimentation with the narrative, with the way that the image, through the discourse, can slowly construct itself on the principle of evocation. It is evocation that is supposed to compensate for absence.

The missing image would then be filled with the image created through the detainees' act of speech. This act of speech becomes a screen on which each spectator projects his own images. The frame expands its limits, until it provokes a breach through which the missing image becomes an open image, and the absence of the image a possible image.

The frame itself becomes a screen, a mask, a relay.

Today, after the liberation of South Lebanon and the dismantling of the camp, one can go to Khiam. The image, at least the image of the physical presence of the camp, is in proximity.

The latent image of the camp stumbles over reality and its confrontation. It has become a reference, even if the testimony of the detainees is not concentrated on the reconstruction of the camp's space as much as it is on the experience lived in that space – an experience always difficult to represent, the experience of the camp being irreducible, an 'impossible experience'.

When visiting Khiam, everything becomes significant. A new fictional process enters the relay. The camp's walls become yet another screen where the repressed 'real' refuses to reduce itself, where it overflows itself.

A frame, a mask, a relay. The confrontation between latency and the revealed image functions ambiguously.

In *A State of Latency*<sup>4</sup>, I describe the Ouzai road in the southern suburb of Beirut, where forty-two posts punctuate the road's axis. Forty-two electrical posts and streetlights, invested with frames of identical dimensions, recto-verso. Some of these frames contain images, portraits representing fighters who belong to one of the two principal Shiite political and religious movements in Lebanon, Amal and Hizbullah. Under each portrait, a sign with the words, 'the martyr fighter' or 'the martyr hero', precedes the name of the man. Other frames are still empty, waiting for the portraits of new martyrs. "It is strange to realise that the same post carries the tribute to the martyr and also the negation of the martyr by a criticism of the very status of the image, an empty frame".<sup>5</sup>

#### **Research based on the archives and 8mm films, retrieved from among the belongings of Khalil's uncle**

Latency is also risk of loss. From this perspective, it constitutes the hope of something that will be revealed; the confrontation with a real that can be potentially disappointing.

On the 19<sup>th</sup> of August, 1985, my uncle, Alfred Kettaneh Jr., was driving a Red Cross ambulance when he was kidnapped.<sup>6</sup>

My uncle was never found, and never returned. He is still reported as missing; and, the circumstances of his disappearance remain a mystery. There is very little evidence to explain what really happened.

17,000 people disappeared this way during the war, and have yet to be found. A law issued on June 23, 1995, defines the status of the

kidnapped<sup>7</sup>. The onus is on the families to demand that the law becomes effective: A missing person can be declared deceased four years after the date of his or her disappearance. The families who have been put in this situation are confronted with a difficult choice: To declare someone dead without a trace, without the physical presence of a body, a corpse.

A few months ago, I stumbled across the archives, photographs and films that once belonged to my uncle. He had a passion for pictures; he photographed and filmed regularly. I found 8mm films, family footage.

Among these, I found one 'latent' film still waiting to be sent to the lab for developing. My uncle probably didn't have the time to send it. It remained in its yellow bag for over fifteen years, surviving the ravages of the war and a fire that struck the house. The film could contain the last pictures my uncle took, and even some photographs representing himself. I pondered for a long time whether or not to send the film to be developed; whether to take the risk that this 'latent' image may reveal nothing, causing a disappointment, which would be impossible to compensate.

Finding the right lab, the best chemistry and taking great precautions didn't help. The film came out veiled, irreparable. A long series of white images unfold, and sometimes a shadow emerges; we recognise a hand, a rooftop, a vague image of a group of three joined by a fourth... The film thus reveals small variations of colour, of movements. We worked on this project about my uncle, even if developing the film didn't succeed in 'bringing him back'. Latency

4 Hadjithomas, Joana; Joreige, Khalil, *A State of Latency*, Germany: *Iconoclash*: ZKM/ Centre for Art and Media, Cambridge, MA: Karlsruhe, and MIT Press, 2002.

5 Ibid.

6 The practice of kidnapping was common in Lebanon during the civil war. These kidnappings were carried out mostly on the basis of the holder's identity card, on which the holders' religious sect was printed. The kidnapped were then usually used for the purpose of exchange.

7 Text of the law of June 22, 1995 (see Appendix)

presupposes, in itself, the acceptance of being revealed and the risk of loss.

These latencies we have presented, as well as others, point out possible gestures, traces, some reminiscences, which become ghostly and haunt the photographs, the films, the documents, whether true or false.

This is a story about return, of the undead, the revenant, of something resembling the capacity of remembrance that makes us human. By remaining haunted, we do not succumb to cynicism in the acceptance of images and of realities in a continuous present.

Being haunted is refusing the mechanical state, the machine; it is time that refuses to efface itself. It is something that resists. Being here, today, is accepting to live with our ghosts, to long for them, to feed them. It is reminiscent of an image, of a knowledge that inhabits us, a knowledge difficult to pin down. This seizure, this gesture, we find important – whether in its failure or in its quest to incarnate as images.

This gesture forces us to think

and to produce our images outside of a flux, to constantly interrogate their necessity, existence and implications in the world that we live in, in the video or photographic practice we use. Latency appears also as the possibility to exist outside hegemonic and monopolising networks (taking the form of censures and exclusions), which sanction alternatives, going so far as to annihilate them. This is also one of the conditions for the 'other' not to consider that it is possible to exhaust us with hazardous appreciation, a diagnosis of us, of our manifestations (especially in artistic work).

All our work is rooted on the frontier of a real; where the questions of the self, of the social body and of the individual body in a communitarian society pose themselves; where it is difficult to pose oneself as an individual, to say "I", to say "I am here, even more than an individual, I am a singular subject".

Latency is this 'being-there', although you don't see me; it is the necessity beyond the evidence.

Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, both born in 1969 in Beirut, are two filmmakers and artists. In 1999, they directed their first feature film, *Al Bayt el Zahr (Around the Pink House)*, a French-Canadian and Lebanese co-production. In 2000, they directed *Khiam*, a 52-minute documentary film; and in 2003, *The Last Film*. They are the authors of various video and photo installation exhibitions. Among these are: *Beirut: Urban Fictions*, *Poste Restante*, *The Circle of Confusion*, *Don't Walk* and *Rondes*. Lately, they have been working on different facets of their project *Wonder Beirut*, which include: *The Novel of a Pyromaniac Photographer*, *Postcards of War* and *Latent Images*. They both worked on various articles and publications, including the book, *Beirut: Urban Fictions*.

Joana teaches scriptwriting, and Khalil teaches the aesthetics and philosophy of the image at the Institute for Scenic and Audiovisual Studies (IESAV), St. Joseph University in Beirut, Lebanon.

#### APPENDIX

##### PROVISIONS RELATING TO MISSING PERSONS

###### ARTICLE 33

The missing person is the person whose whereabouts are unknown and of whom no one knows whether he is dead or alive.

###### ARTICLE 34 (as amended by law N° 434 of May 15, 1995)

The decease of the missing person shall be declared by judgment of his disappearance and the lack of news from him for the last four years, at least, since the date of his absence, at the request of any involved party.

The Civil Court of the First Instance of the place of residence, or the last residence, of the person for whom a judicial declaration of death is requested, shall hear the case. If the disappearance occurred outside Lebanon, the Civil Court of First Instance of Beirut shall hear the case.

###### ARTICLE 35 (as amended by law N° 434 of May 15, 1995)

The Court, mentioned in the preceding article, shall examine in court chambers the request for a judicial declaration of death and, to ascertain the facts, the court shall resort to the various legal elements of proof, including publication of inserts in local and foreign newspapers, if necessary, and the various means of advertising, which the court shall deem useful, as well as taking into account presumptions, especially in the cases and situations where the probability of death prevails without a body being found.

###### ARTICLE 36 (as amended by law N° 434 of May 15, 1995)

The heirs of the missing person, whose death has been declared by judgment, can enjoy his estate, but shall not be allowed to transfer ownership of the property or entail it before a period of six years as of the publication of the judgment, declaring the death in the local papers and in those of the country where he might be, has elapsed, and at the end of a period of six months as of the said publication.

###### ARTICLE 37

Should the missing person inherit from a third party or be the beneficiary of a bequest, his share shall be left in abeyance for five years as of the judgment declaring the death. At the end of that period, his share of the estate shall devolve to the heirs of the deceased, and his bequest shall devolve to the heirs of the testator.

###### ARTICLE 38

Should the missing person reappear within a period of five years as of the judgment declaring the death, he shall recover all his estate from his heirs, as well as any inherited shares or bequest remaining in abeyance.

Should he reappear after the period of five years has elapsed, he shall recover whatever assets still remain with the heirs. However, that does not prevent him from retrieving the share of this estate acquired mala fide (in bad faith) by third parties.