

0'00'00

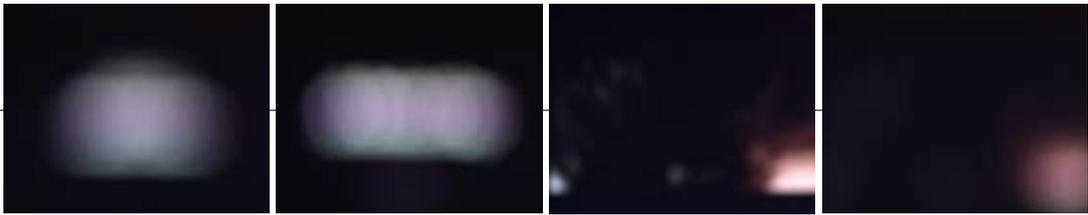


1'00'00

Aida, save me

**Joana
Hadjithomas
&
Khalil
Joreige**

0'00'05



L



0'02'04



2.

1/12

It's the
lebanese
premiere of
«A Perfect
Day»

1. Search for focus on the
credits and the opening
scene of the film
«A Perfect Day»
35mm fiction, 1.85,
Dolby SR, 90 min., 2005

2. Lebanese Poster of
«A Perfect Day»

Here we are standing in the dark, waiting. We've checked the focus and the frame. The sound is good. The image is fine. As the film starts, we throw one more glance at all those heads close to each other in the darkness. The audience seems focused. We slip out of the room and into the hallway, cautiously closing the door.

It's the Lebanese premiere of our feature film «A Perfect Day». A screening took place yesterday, but it was a private event, whereas this one is public. The evening goes well, and the feedback is rather positive. We are relieved.

But the next day, the distributor of the film phones us. He sounds panicked. A woman named Aida H. has just called him. She is outraged and claims that our film uses images of her husband without her consent.

3. Video stills from
« Perfect Day»:
Traffic jams,
Beirut streets
The «Corniche»
(the seaside promenade),
Nightclubs

0 | 02' 54 |



«A Perfect Day» is a feature film that was produced on a microscopic budget. This meant that we had to take a number of budget-related decisions, which translated into radical aesthetic choices. Among others, the film uses very few extras and was literally shot on the run. It hardly ever recreates reality; quite on the contrary, we decided to insert ourselves into reality by filming in public places and using more of a «documentary» style. Some shots were taken on the fly or provoked, according to a method by which you create situations that capture the energy of the place and allow the story to unfold. So when we needed a traffic jam, for example, we got in a real traffic jam and started filming. The same was true for a number of scenes that took place in night clubs where we filmed without extras, simply asking the people who were there if they agreed to be filmed. We thus inserted the entire action of the film into the reality at hand, into



0'03'39

1/12

**Aida
accused us
of having
used the
image of her
husband
Antoine
without her
consent**

the energy of Beirut nights. Following the same principle, we also filmed the streets of Beirut, the Corniche (the seaside promenade), the neighbours...

Our assistants evidently asked everyone we filmed for their consent, but chances were that a couple of permissions were missing and that someone – in this case, a man – was being filmed against his will... Still, we had no idea what exactly Aida H. was referring to nor which sequence in the film she meant nor who her husband was.

A couple of minutes later, Aida phoned us directly on our mobile. She sounded very upset. She accused us of having used the image of her husband in the notice of disappearance of Malek's father who was kidnapped during the Lebanese Civil War – just like Khalil's maternal uncle, whose story inspired «A Perfect Day». During the war, kidnapping was common practice in Lebanon. In choosing their victim,

4.«The Circle
of confusion», 1997,
photo installation,
3000 photo fragments
numbered and
stamped, stuck on
a mirror, 300x400cm



0'05'04

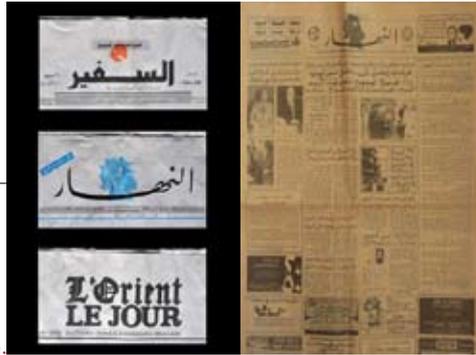
kidnappers mostly relied on ID cards, which state the owner's religious confession. Seventeen thousand people have been reported as missing in Lebanon since the war – a war which has officially ended in 1990, more than 19 years ago. You could consider that the vast majority of those missing have been killed. But how come their bodies have never been found? Beirut is a highly urbanised city, a huge building site, a city in full reconstruction. There is constant drilling and digging, and yet nothing is ever found – no mass graves, no traces.

How to mourn the dead in the absence of a corpse, in the absence of evidence?

The missing bodies come back to haunt us... The disappearance doesn't dissipate: it's an abyss, a chasm that opens up fields of possibilities.

The status of missing people is regulated by a national law voted on 23 June 1995.

0'06'09



2/12

5. Logo of the three
Lebanese dailies
appearing in the film

6. Facsimile of An Nahar
newspaper, reprinted for
the purpose of the film

The law states that a missing person may be declared dead four years after his or her disappearance upon specific demand by his or her relatives. «A Perfect Day» in part tells the story of a young man named Malek and his mother Claudia. In the timeframe of the film – a 24-hour day – they go through the process of declaring the legal death of their father and husband, who has disappeared more than 15 years ago. To this effect, we had to resort to newspaper clippings in which the notice of disappearance would have been published at the time of kidnapping. In other words, we had to forge these newspaper clippings for the purpose of fiction.

Let us briefly consider the notion of forging false documentation for the purpose of a film. In this particular instance we obtained permission from the three main Lebanese dailies – An-Nahar, As-Safir and L'Orient Le Jour – to reproduce a facsimile edition of

0'06'25

7. Facsimile of the front pages of newspapers As Safir and L'Orient Le Jour



7.

8. Excerpts from articles relating the bomb car explosion in Tripoli

0'06'34



8.

their newspaper dated two days after the fictional disappearance of Malek's father. We simply had to choose the date of the abduction and insert the notice of disappearance into the newspaper, and they would reprint a copy. After some research, we settled on 25 April 1988. On that day there had been a massive car bombing in Tripoli, in North Lebanon, which potentially could have triggered a wave of abductions. It was a significant date in those months, which helped us establish a parallel between a personal and a collective event from this war. Next we had to find a picture showing the face of Malek's father. This face has considerable importance in the film because it is all that remains from this absent, missing father whose fate is still unclear. More specifically, the face of the father is also the face of an actor – a man who accepts to lend his appearance to a missing

0'07'21



9.

2/12

9. Poster of «Ashes»
(Ramad)
35 mm fiction, 1.85,
dolby SR, 36 minutes,
2003

person, whose death will be announced in the film.

Since the shooting of our short film «Ashes» (Ramad) – co-written and played by Rabih Mroué – we knew that a substantial part of Lebanese society shares a great deal of superstition about death. «Ashes» tells the story of Nabil, a young man who returns to Lebanon with the ashes of his father who died abroad as he was seeking medical treatment.

In Lebanon, however, a country ruled by religious laws, incineration is forbidden. Nabil tries to mourn the deceased, but he has to confront the family who insists on burying the body – a body which no longer exists – according to the local rites and customs. In the preparation of «Ashes», we were faced with a quite disturbing problem. It appeared that most people refused to act or appear in the film because it dealt with mourning.

0'08'37

10. Video stills from a video taken during the shooting of «Ashes» (Ramad) by Feyrouz Serhal, asking each of the actors whether he would agree to play the part of the dead man in the film



Some refused to play the role of a relative – the son or the sister of the deceased – for fear it would cause the death of someone in their own family.

In one sequence of the film, someone is asked to lie down in a coffin and act dead.

It proved extremely difficult to find an actor willing to play this role – so difficult, in fact, that we turned it into a research project, a short film about asking the numerous people on the set if they would accept to play the dead.

Here are some of their answers:

-«To play a corpse in the film...»

-«Would you agree to play that part?»

-«Between us, no, no».



-«It's difficult. It's not my style».

-«My ambition in life isn't playing the role of a corpse.
No. I can't get used to the idea, I don't feel the part.»

-«No, I refuse.»

-«But why?»

-«I don't like it.»

-«You don't like it?»

-«It's not nice to die when you're alive, to see yourself dead.»



-«But it's just a part, a representation.»

-«No.»

-«You mean really dying? No one goes walking to his death. That's why... Yes, no one dies willingly.»

-«No, I don't feel like dying, even in a film. Life is so beautiful.»

-«I refuse. I'm not convinced. I consider death as an invitation from God.»

-«Oh no, please... It's too morbid. Too morbid, no. I'd rather... not.»



3/12

«I'm saying no straightaway.»

-«The part of the corpse? No. We've been through too many ordeals at home.»

-«No.»

-«Why?»

-«We'll all die, there's no escape. But this idea, you can't accept it, it's disturbing.»

-«No, I'm sorry. I apologize. I can't.»

-«No, I'm claustrophobic.»



-«Yee... I'm too scared.»

-«No. I don't feel like it. Could be superstition or claustrophobia. No, I don't feel like it, it wouldn't amuse me.»

-«No.»

-«No?»

-«What?»

-«That you take on the part.»

-«No...»



3/12

-«No.»

-«Why?»

-«I'm scared. I can't.»

-«Honest, people won't admit my doing it. If I tell them I took the part, they won't admit it, the neighbors, etc...»

-«Listen, my dear, it's difficult putting a man into a coffin, for all his relatives, for those who like him. Seeing him dead even before he dies. When they'll really see him dead later... It's very difficult. And that, unwillingly, his relatives should play that part and see



him dead, when they're bound to see that later...»

-«It's rather difficult.»

-«Why?»

-«I can't imagine myself. I know, we're all bound to die, and I'll die. But I want to die without feeling anything. If I play the part of a corpse, I'll feel I'm dying. I might even really die.»

As we tried to come to grips with this problem, we started to have serious doubts. We actually started to be afraid. What if something happened to the actor who agreed to lie down in the coffin? Or to the family who lived in the house in which

0'12'44

10



3/12

10. Video stills from
«Ashes» (Ramad):
Nabil enters the room of
the funeral vigil

we were shooting? And what if someone died in the building in which the coffin stood? Little by little, we let ourselves be overwhelmed by superstition...

All this eventually affected the scenario. The actor we finally found – Marc Mourani, an artist and intellectual, the only one to accept the role, after we pleaded with him – this actor who lies down in a coffin to play dead eventually dies too later on in the film. Nabil, the main protagonist, starts fantasising. He imagines the actor's body stiffening in the coffin, his breath stopping, his hands slowly changing appearance, turning blue and bluer – as though pretending to die was a bit like dying, like actually dying.

When looking for a picture of the missing dad in «A Perfect Day», we therefore figured that we were likely to face the same problems. And so we did. We were pretty much stuck when one of our assistants came up with a solution. Antoine, her maternal aunt's

husband, had died several years ago. His aunt and their two daughters (both over 18) agreed to his image being used in the film, and personally handed us the pictures we needed. They were glad to help out because they thought that by so doing they were helping the cause of the missing. Still, we were cautious and made sure to secure written and signed permission. Thus reassured, we used the pictures of Antoine – with his family’s unrestricted consent – to illustrate the missing notice in the newspapers as well as other images that we rearranged for certain sequences in the film. In actual fact, our assistant had not told us that before his death, Antoine had divorced from her aunt and married Aida. Nor did she tell us that Aida had not been notified of the film. When we questioned her, she simply said: «Come on, what does she want? Forget about her!» We understood that there were still persisting



0'15'46

4/12

«Aida, save me. I don't know what I'm doing in this film, save me!»

11.

tensions between Antoine's two wives.

Aida told us that she had bought a ticket to see the film, not knowing exactly what it was about. Sitting snugly in her seat, she suddenly saw Antoine appearing on the screen.

She yelled at us on the phone: «I was sitting in my seat watching the film when I suddenly saw Antoine before me – Antoine looking at me and saying: «Aida, save me.»

I don't know what I'm doing in this film, save me!»

The image of Antoine had thus spoken to Aida, who was now asking us to cut it from the film or at least blur it. She flatly refused to have us keep Antoine in the film the way he was now. We tried to explain, we tried to convince her of our good faith, telling her that we didn't know and that we had his daughters' consent, but Aida wouldn't let Antoine stay in the film.

11.Excerpt from the fictitious notice of disappearance inserts in newspapers, reprinted for the purpose of the film

The lawyer we spoke to assured us that Aida had no case against us, since we had acted on good faith and had all due permissions. Everyone we turned to for advice told us we shouldn't bow to pressure, invoking the legal situation (we were certain to win a court case), private cause (the two women's conflict was none of our concern), psychological reasons (it would be a way for Aida to reconnect with her husband) or a potential publicity and commercial boost (our distributor figured that our film, which wasn't commercial enough for his taste, would benefit from a small scandal)... But what if all these reasons were false? What if Aida's shock had been real and we had caused it? What if she was right, and Antoine shouldn't appear in this film and wouldn't have liked it? Should we cut the scenes with Antoine and truncate the film? But at the same time...

0'17'32

4/12

**The police
is searching
for us
seeking to
interrogate
us**

The story dragged on, and when we left to New York, where our film was screened at a festival, we were still haunted by doubts. We had barely arrived when we received a very alarming call from Lebanon. It appeared that the police had visited our flat in Beirut seeking to interrogate us. They had also raided the chain of theatres which had scheduled the film and tried to confiscate the rolls. Fortunately, the copies were rescued but a warrant would soon be issued. We had to fly back home straight away. The whole affair was no longer a matter of image rights but a penal issue.

In real life, Antoine had not died from a natural death but had been killed. The investigation was still underway, and his murderers were still on the loose. The judge in charge of our case was wondering why we used the image of a man killed under mysterious and still unsolved circumstances. She wanted to interrogate us and considered adding the

12.Excerpts from
the fictitious notice of
disappearance inserts in
newspapers,
reprinted for the purpose
of the film

12.



film to the file as a piece of evidence. This left us speechless. We were devastated and headed back to Beirut.

The picture of Antoine – one of the few images in the film that we had actually «staged» due to the documentary-style production – was no longer a fiction. Antoine was no longer an actor or a protagonist. The image had been invested with legal potency and had become a piece of evidence. It was now a testifying image. From a totally fictional and staged, fabricated work, it had turned into a document.

Quite irrationally, we had become suspects, echoing the irrationality that governs much of our country and judicial system. It is this very irrationality that explains why, in all these years, our country hasn't been functioning according to the principle of cause and effect: you kill someone but you don't necessarily go to prison,

former militia chiefs are now ministers or members of Parliament...

This lacking relationship between cause and effect is the main momentum of the narrative in «A Perfect Day», a film about states of being and feelings rather than linear narrative and resolved conflicts. Many of our works ask this question: how to write a story in the traditional sense of the word when the very thread of History has been disrupted by a still unresolved civil conflict?

Suddenly, it was no longer the documents which were tainted with fiction, but the film – a fiction – which became a legal document.

A further element – a coincidence, in fact – contributed to enhance the «unbelievable-but-true» aspect of this story. Aida told us that she and Antoine had married on 25 April 1988. The date we had chosen for the publication of the notice of disappearance in the

« (...) you
killed him
before I
married
him.»

0'20'26



13.



newspapers – the date we had chosen because it coincided with an actual car bombing in Tripoli – was the same: 25 April 1988.

How was this possible? The coincidences kept accumulating. Aida wondered if we had not been instrumentalised by Antoine's first wife. Were the two women actually using us and the film to fight a private war? Aida said: «By making him disappear on the day of our marriage, by dating the notice of disappearance in the newspaper to 25 April 1988, you killed him before I married him, you negated our marriage.»

By staging the picture in a document announcing the father's disappearance in the film, we had annulled Antoine's and Aida's marriage ex post facto.

How could such a clash of timeframes have happened? How could this picture acquire such power? Aida never considered the image of Antoine to be an element of



14.

14.Excerpt from article relating the bomb car explosion in Tripoli

fiction used in a film. In her mind, it was Antoine himself whom we caused to disappear. Presumably, this was also the opinion of the judge who, like Aida, took for granted the principle of fiction for the entire film but not for the particular part involving Antoine, which thus became a moment of reality, a document. Aida's identification with Antoine effectively led her to «de-fictionalise» the film and turn it into a document.

This story carried strange echoes to our research as filmmakers and visual artists. In our artistic practice we often rely on fiction – not in order to pretend to question or approach some kind of truth, but to use existing documents and thus question images and representations, to instil them with fictional matter and rework the writing of Lebanese History or Histories.

Our project «Wonder Beirut», for instance, is based on a series of postcards from the

15.«Wonder Beirut
The story of
a pyromaniac
photographer»
1997-2006

Historical process,
The battle of the hotels
N° 1

Photographic print on alu
with facemounting
165x30 cm

15.



1960s and 1970s which are still being sold in Lebanese bookshops – despite the fact that most locations they depict have been destroyed during the war. For this particular project, we invented the character of Abdallah Farah, a photographer from the 1960s who presumably took these postcard images showing City centre or the Lebanese Riviera and its lavish hotels – pictures which contribute to convey an «ideal» image of pre-war Lebanon.

During the war, Abdallah had burned his own pictures according to the scheme of bombings and street battles. To do so, he followed a very precise recording of events, retracing the trajectory of the bullets and the destruction they caused, as though he tried to conform the images to the present. After each burning, Abdallah re-photographed the image. These images thus document the events as they unfolded



and can be likened to an attempt to chronicle certain episodes of the Lebanese Civil War. To a certain extent, we fictionalised these documents, or you could say that we documented these fictions very thoroughly in order to enable a reflection on this history. After burning his slides, Abdallah Farah, who frequently lacked chemicals and paper during the war, took to shooting pictures without developing them. The film rolls thus kept accumulating. This project, entitled «Latent Images», presents the hundreds of exposed but undeveloped film rolls. Each of these latent films has been dated, listed and stored in a drawer. The content of each photograph is described with precision and detail. Presented as contact sheets, they form a diary recounting Abdallah's family and sentimental life, his photographic research and the tormented story of contemporary Lebanon.

16.«Wonder Beirut
Latent Images»
1997-2006
Drawer of films (extracts).
Films from 21/11/97 to
21/02/98 (#452-604)
Photos indexed but not
developed
Photographic print on alu
with facemounting
58x47 cm

1. Jalal Toufic, «Distracted»,
2nd ed., Tuumba Press,
Berkeley (CA), 2003
2.«Joana Hadjithomas and
Khalil Joreige», «Latency» in
«Homeworks», Edition Ashkal
Alwan, Beirut, 2002.

0'23'31

16.

We have never developed a single roll. The rolls of film are still there, remaining in their latent state: invisible images of an exposed surface.

There remains a fundamental question, which we shall briefly evoke. It has been asked by the writer and artist Jalal Toufic and concerns the conditions of appearance, or rather revelation, of latent images. At which moment and for which reason would the photographer Abdallah Farah decide to develop his film rolls, to expose his images to the light? And what would then have changed around him, in him and beyond him?¹

Several years ago we initiated a reflection on the notion of latency² as the state of that which exists in a non apparent manner, yet which can at any moment manifest itself – like something sleeping that could maybe wake up. «A Perfect Day»

0'23'40

17



6/12

17. «Wonder Beirut
Latent Images»
1997-2006
Contact sheet of a latent
film
Digital print on alu
30x40 cm

addresses this particular condition. Malek, who suffers from sleeping apnea, falls asleep as soon as he stops moving. The city itself was filmed so as to convey the feeling which we experienced in Beirut at that time: to be surrounded by latent images, stuck in a continuous and hysterical present.

Latency also has connotations linked to notions of the repressed, the hidden, the inscrutable, the invisible... We tried to convey this latency in the film as an obscure, disquieting form, a vague and uncontrollable, covert state – as though everything could resurface, as though everything were still there.

Latency can furthermore be a political attitude against dominant representations – both those of the authoritarian powers in place and those of Orientalist imagery – which consists in emphasising the notion that «we are there even if you don't see us» and in

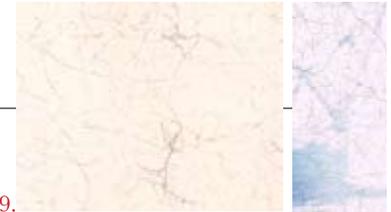
18. Envelop of
the Super 8 film shot by
Alfred Kettaneh, Jr.
Found in March 2001.
Developed in May 2002.
Telecine and color
correction in June 2003



18.

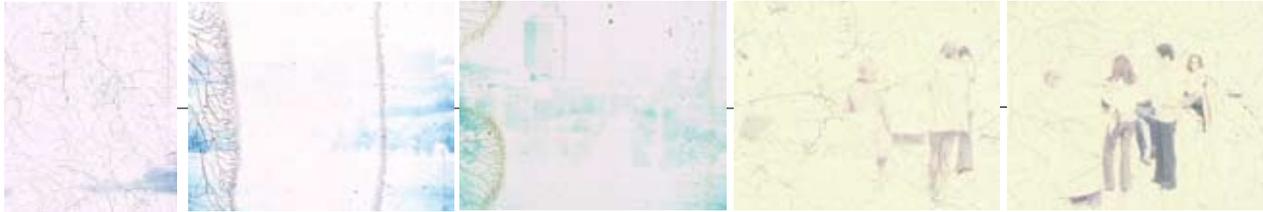
0'27'42

19.



telling our personal stories, our secret histories, our lasting images. Lasting, because despite the latency, images often refuse to disappear and come back to haunt us. This is another point which links Aida's adventure to our work: the image of Antoine suddenly reappeared in the film before her eyes – like a lasting image that came back to haunt her.

Some time before, we had produced an installation based on an 8 mm film that we had found among the personal belongings of Khalil's maternal uncle, Junior Kettaneh, who had been kidnapped during the Lebanese Civil War, on 19 August 1985, and whose body was never found. He is still reported as missing, and the circumstances of his abduction remain mysterious. The evidence that would allow us to ascertain what really happened is scarce.



7/12

19. Video stills from
«Lasting Images»
Super 8 film by Alfred
Kettaneh, Jr.
Born in 1937.
Kidnapped in 1985
during the Lebanese
civil war.
Considered since as
missing.

Junior Kettaneh is one of those 17,000 individuals who are listed as missing up to this day. «A Perfect Day» was inspired from his personal story and his family's suffering. While we were writing the script, we found a latent film among the belongings, among the archives, photographs and films of Khalil's uncle. Junior must have filmed it shortly before his abduction and he didn't have time to send it to the lab to get it developed. It had thus remained in its yellow bag for 15 years and had survived the turmoil of war during which Junior's house had burned down. This film possibly contained the last images taken by Junior, maybe some frames showing himself. The various technicians we asked for advice discouraged us from developing the film. According to them, the latent image wouldn't show much after all this time. And indeed, despite all our precautions and prior research, the film came out veiled in development,



0'30'46

showing nothing but a long sequence of white images.

We then decided to scan these images, one by one, to scan the 4,500 frames of this three-minute-long film and find out what they still contained. Working on colour correction and contrast, we eventually noticed slight variations, subtle shifts in the images. Piercing through the whiteness of the film, an image resurfaced – an image that was still there, as though it could not be completely erased and remained present, albeit as a ghostly appearance. All you need to do is to look at it for it to appear and to ceaselessly reveal itself.

Can ghosts, can the missing return? In the course of «A Perfect Day», Claudia, the mother, learns to control her fear. In one of the final sequences of the film, she is seen taking refuge in her son's room, listening to the noise in the rest of the house,

20.



7/12

20. Video stills
from « Perfect Day»
Claudia sees the «ghost»
of her husband

hearing a choppy breath approaching... As she had hoped, she sees what she perceives as a presence, as the ghost of her husband. She comes to terms with this idea, accepts to live with it, accepts to remain haunted by the man she loves – a ghost who refuses to die or whom she in turn refuses to «kill» symbolically.

This idea echoes another notion outlined by Jalal Toufic: «In post-war Lebanon, Rwanda, Cambodia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, etc., the survivors are faced with the following choice: either they tolerate the ghost, resist the temptation of repressing or banishing him, or else they gradually turn into zombies (in the Haitian sense of the word)»³. Toufic continues by drawing a parallel with Hamlet, who sees and hears the ghost of his father whereas his mother doesn't see it, doesn't sense it, as though all her senses were atrophied, as though she had become a zombie. This also characterises what

3. Jalal Toufic, «(Vampires):
An Uneasy Essay on the
Undead in Film», 2nd ed.,
The Post-Apollo Press, Sausalito
(CA), 2003.

«Sometimes,
I see him,
I sense him
– you don't.
You don't
see him, you
don't sense
him.»



distinguishes Malek (who roams the city, falls asleep as soon he stops moving, wants to mourn his father) from his mother Claudia, who senses the father's presence and clearly tells Malek so: «Sometimes, I see him, I sense him – you don't. You don't see him, you don't sense him.»

Aida saw Antoine again. He appeared before her, she saw him, she heard him...

Unwittingly, in this film, we had awoken the image of Antoine.

Eventually we had to find a solution to Aida's story. It was Monday, the judge in chambers was to sit on Tuesday, and our film was to be launched on Thursday.

Everyone pleaded with us to make a gesture towards Aida to get her to drop charges, to avoid the whole matter making it to court and dodging the penal issue.

Meanwhile the judge had calmed down somewhat and acknowledged that we had

acted in good faith, but she still didn't understand why we were reluctant to alter the image, for instance by blurring it as is common practice on TV. We explained to her that this was a film and not a video, but she looked at us as though she thought we were refusing to make the slightest effort. Joana's father even came to see us, proposing to use pictures of himself instead of Antoine's. We tried to explain to him as well that this simply wasn't possible. The judge then made another proposal, suggesting that we add a moustache to the picture of Antoine and make him unrecognisable. Again, we tried to convince her by explaining that film operates with 24 frames per second, which meant that we would have to rework thousands of frames...

But what if we added a beauty spot on Antoine's left cheek (a dot being easier to add on thousands of frames than a moustache)? In that case, would Antoine still be Antoine?

21. Fragment of the
35mm film roll of
« Perfect Day»

21.

22. Video stills from
«A Perfect Day»: Malek
in his father's office

22.



0'35'43

Would he not become someone else?

As a matter of fact, the images we used for the film aren't recent. They show the Antoine Aida has never known: Antoine at the time of his first wife and his elder daughters. These pictures are not Aida's; they are from a different time, when the two of them didn't even know each other... But our proposals were rejected. And yet the question remains: at which point are we still the same?

This question is at the heart of our artistic reflection. The image is there, it reappears, it is lasting. But which image returns? Does it live up to our expectations? We have thought a lot about images of martyrs. In Lebanon, we call martyrs the men who died tragically during an

0'36'35



23.

8/12

23.«A faraway souvenir»,
extract, 2001-2007
In collaboration with
Ahmad Gharbieh
Lambda print
100x600 cm

attack, who were killed in combat or suicide operations. They are from different political backgrounds, various creeds and religions, and different regions of the country. We live surrounded by their images, which are posted throughout the city: images of the dead looking at us.

In 2001 we illustrated a text⁴ with photographs taken by graphic designer Ahmad Gharbieh. His pictures show 34 electrical posts on a large avenue in a popular district in the southern suburbs of Beirut. The avenue was lined with posts covered with framed pictures of young men, of «martyrs». What struck us most, however, was the presence of numerous empty posts, as though waiting for pictures to come.

The 34 electrical posts on the same avenue were photographed again in 2007. Meanwhile the posts had been repainted and the avenue had been refurbished. But what had

4. Joana Hadjithomas &
Khalil Joreige, «A State of
Latency», in «Iconoclasm»,
Edition ZKM & MIT Press,
Cambridge (MA), 2001.

24. Images of electrical posts with photos of martyrs

0'37'07



happened to the pictures of martyrs? They had slowly vanished, bleached over time by the weather. Does the image ever live up to its promise? In our project entitled «Faces», we extended this research to other places in Lebanon. We photographed martyrs from all confessions and political backgrounds, choosing only posters that had been substantially altered by the weather. Often located in spots high up in the air and difficult to reach, these posters simply remain there, while the features and names of the individuals they represent disappear. All that remains is an outline of the face, a sketched and mostly unrecognisable shadow. We photographed these images at different stages of their vanishing process. With the help of a graphic designer and various drawing artists, we then tried to recreate certain facial features and highlight others, thus attempting to recover,



25.

8/12

**But how are
these images
to be read?
As disap-
pearances or
appearances?**

by means of drawing, a trace, matter, a lasting image. But how are these images to be read? As disappearances or appearances?

Below the images of martyrs, one often reads the Arabic expression «Hay fina», meaning «alive in us». We thus live or coexist with the dead, but they are living dead inside of us – living dead whom we can never quite bury. What if these martyrs, by thus vanishing into blankness, tried to escape from their image, from their frame, from us? Since we cannot mourn them, can the dead themselves decide to retreat?

By inserting the image of Antoine in the film, we also put Aida face to face with the impossibility of mourning. For Aida – as for the wives and mothers of the missing – there can be no peace of mind until she knows the truth, until she knows what really happened to Antoine, until she knows who killed him. Unwittingly, and by sheer

25.«Faces», 2009
Photography and
drawing
A series of 44 images,
about 50x35 cm

26. «Faces», 2009
Photography and
drawing
A series of 44 images,
about 50x35 cm

26.



0'38'49

coincidence, we had – through our film and by addressing the issue of the missing – drawn a parallel between her situation and that of these 17,000 women who are still waiting to learn what has happened to their sons, husbands or father. We also put Aida face to face with the Antoine from before their encounter, Antoine with wife and children – the Antoine whom she did not know, yet recognised.

It's been a while that the question of recognising, or recognition, has been preoccupying us. «Recognition is the action by which one recovers in one's memory the idea or image of an object or a person when faced again». Does recognising, establishing an identity, perceiving oneself as the same resist the temporal confusion in which we are sometimes embedded, the discontinuity of our history and the violence of certain events that we experience?

0'40'04



27.



9/12

27. «The bestiaries»
1997
Series of 16 photos on
baryté paper 30x40 cm

In certain contexts, reality evanesces, and an excerpt from reality can lead to confusion. In the 1990s, in the devastated city centre of Beirut, we no longer recognised anything. We were looking at buildings, places where the architecture was chaotic and upside down, places whose architectural substance or everyday features we no longer recognised. The impact of destruction shifts the gaze and transforms our relationship to what we see...

This brings to our mind a sentence in one of Mahmoud Darwich's poems: «the form of a form which has no form».

Several years ago, one of our friends lapsed into a weird state of mind marked by great confusion. We no longer recognised him. We unsuccessfully tried to bring him back towards us. We went to see a psychotherapist for advice. She gave us only one tip:

If we had
told him
that we
recognised
him, would
he have come
back?

28.«The Equivalences»
#2
1997
C print on aluminium
80x120 cm

29.«The Equivalences»
#3
1997
C print on aluminium
80x120 cm



28.



29.

0'41'06

«Tell him that you recognise him. Tell him: «I recognise you.»» We tried, but somehow failed to pretend recognition; can it actually be played? We often think about this. If, with a lot of conviction, we had told him that we recognised him, would he have come back? Do we have this sort of power? The power to recognise and identify? Could we have brought him back? This thought keeps on haunting us... Another very strange episode happened when «A Perfect Day» was being promoted. Ziad Saad, the main actor who plays Malek, is a musician. He wasn't too keen on doing promotion work, but several days before the film hit the Lebanese screens (pretty much at the same time we were negotiating with Aida), he was invited to a popular show on one of the big local TV networks. He decided to ask one of his friends to go in his stead. So here was his friend on the set, and the live TV

30.



30. Video stills from
«Ayoun Beirut» by Ziad
Saad, extract from the
TV program

programme started. At first everything went well, and Ziad's friend was doing alright. But then the presenter decided to show a clip from the film. Obviously, there would be a confrontation between Ziad's face in the movie and his friend's face on TV. Strangely enough, even after the excerpt was broadcast, things went on undisturbed. The presenter resumed the talk as though nothing had happened. But next came a second excerpt with a lot of close-up shots of Ziad. No doubt that this time around, the presenter would spot the fraud. But no, they continued as though everything was normal and started speaking about music. It wasn't until the third excerpt that the presenter told Ziad's friend that she thought he had changed quite a bit since the film had been shot :



Interviewer: «Having seen another extract, Ziad, I find that you have somehow changed since the film?»

Ziad's friend: «I have changed, I've lost weight, cut my hair...»

Interviewer: «You look younger!»

Ziad's friend: «Yes, the camera makes us look older too!»

And she would let herself be easily convinced by the answers offered by the false Malek, and so the show continued.

What's really striking about this story is that throughout the time of broadcasting no less than four excerpts from «A Perfect Day» were shown, focusing on Malek, often showing his face in close-up. It certainly must have appeared that the guest on



0'45'17

9/12

the programme was not the actor in the film, that he never played this role, and yet still...

The presenter, the directors and producers of the show, the technicians in the control room scanning the countless screens – no one seemed to notice that it wasn't the same person.

Of course, we could say that this episode – which Ziad Saad subsequently turned into an artwork – demonstrates how the television machinery crushes people and feeds off the flow of images without actually knowing what it ingests, or that it proves that a man can pass himself off as someone else without anyone noticing or even caring. But beyond that – as in the case of Antoine and Aida – we have to ask ourselves at which moment we are ourselves. Are the things around us, around this film, in this time and age, struck with

**Are the
things
around us
struck with
non-
recognition?**

31. Video stills from
«A Perfect Day»
Ziad asks his girlfriend
«What are you looking
at?»
Ziad finds the contact
lenses Zeina took off
Ziad puts on the contact
lenses
The lights of the town

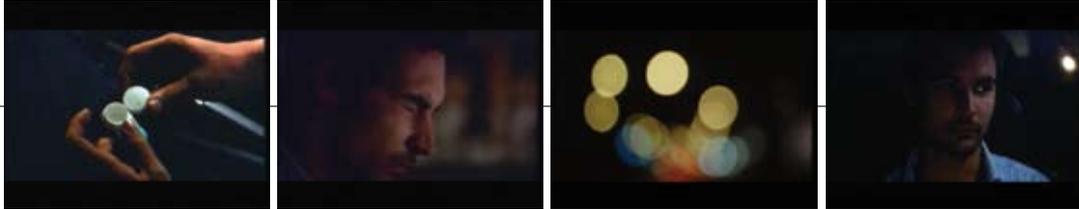
31.



non-recognition? Here lies some kind of mystery that eludes us.

In one of the scenes in «A Perfect Day», Malek is seen freewheeling through Beirut with Zeina, with whom he is very much in love. She has removed her contact lenses and looks at the city lights, which appear skewed because of her short-sightedness. When she departs from Malek, she forgets her lenses in the car. Malek picks them up and decides to try them on, to adopt the viewpoint of his beloved, to try and look at the world through the eyes of the other. Since he is not short-sighted, the optical correction effect of the lenses allows him to experience an impression of what Zeina has previously seen. In other words, it is the reverse correction – the counter-process – that provokes the same effect.

Seeing through the eyes of the other – be it in a skewed way – conveying, invoking



the other when we feel blinded... This is the subject of our latest film, «Je veux voir» (I Want to see), which simultaneously references a personality from the history of film, Catherine Deneuve, and a personality from our artistic territory, Rabih Mroué, in an attempt to recover another perspective after the war in Lebanon, in 2006. The film questions the way we look at wars, according to the premise that the perspective on war can be displaced at the risk of confronting the void, at the risk even of not seeing anything.

How to show or represent after the terrible, unbearable images shown on TV? How to recover a different emotion, how to refuse getting used to or tolerating these images, which provoke the viewer's compassion while keeping him at distance and confused? Seeing, identifying, recognising, but also undermining dominant representations in

32. Poster of
«Je veux voir»
(I want to see)
Fiction, 35mm, 2.35,
dolby SR, 75 min, 2008

32.

5. Jean-Luc Godard,
«Notre Musique» (Our Music),
35 mm, 76 min., 2004.

order to re-engage a common reflection on the political, to inscribe our history in a more global History, be it the history of cinema... «Je veux voir» evidently references Alain Resnais's «Hiroshima mon amour», echoing its famous dialogue line:

«I saw everything in Hiroshima.» – «You saw nothing in Hiroshima.»

«Je veux voir» is a film that tries to unravel the phantasm by which today's representations of war are covered up or disguised. It is a deliberate attempt to undermine the scopic impulse, voyeurism, the notion of «wanting to see the war».

The film furthermore questions the return of fiction in a devastated reality.

In his film «Notre musique» (Our Music)⁵, Godard shows two photographs from 1948, suggesting that they function like a shot/counter-shot: «In one, the Jewish



33.

11/12

What can cinema do?

people rejoined fiction, in the other, the Palestinian people, documentary.» For us, this statement, which has been the subject of countless interpretations, alludes to the weight of reality when it is too heavy, too imposing, when it problematises fiction and asks ethical questions: which distance should our camera adopt in its approach of things or events to avoid instrumentalising the real, to allow us to create images in which we can believe? And where do we position ourselves? What can we do? What can cinema do? «Je veux voir» works with the very matter of the image, of fiction, with the very matter of cinema, trying to provoke a kind of chemical reaction between an icon of cinema – a fictional figure embodied by Catherine Deneuve – and places in which the weight of reality is excessively present, excessively heavy. Will the clash between the two allow us to see, to show and, as Jacques Rancière puts it to «shift the gaze», to change «the repre-

33.Video stills from
«Je veux voir»
(I want to see)
Rabih Mroué in the
destroyed village of Bint
Jbeil, where he recognizes
nothing.
Catherine Deneuve
watches Rabih Mroué
walking away,
in search of his
grandmother's house.

34. Video stills from
«Je veux voir»
Rabih Mroué and
Catherine Deneuve
together on the road

34.



6. Jacques Rancière,
Section «Hommage à
Joana Hadjithomas & Khalil
Joreige», in cat. Paris Cinéma,
Paris, 2007.

sentation of Lebanese as eternal victims of wars» so as to reflect not «on the images of war but on what war does to images» and to the representations of ourselves. Rancière wrote that «from this violence to images, Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige have derived the principle of a new art of resistance. [...] The politics of art do not serve the cause of the oppressed. They subvert the positions of victor and victim by subverting the relationships between reality and fiction.»⁶ «Je veux voir» recounts and films an “encounter” – the encounter of Rabih and Catherine, which effectively took place in front of our camera at the very beginning and which we then followed throughout the film. By telling the story of a specific encounter – the encounter of Rabih and Catherine – the film addresses the issue of our faces, our history, our singularity, and the way in which we have progressively

35



11/12

35. Video stills from
«Je veux voir»
Angle and reverse angle
of Rabih Mroué and
Catherine Deneuve
at the gala evening

lost them in the West to adopt the status of victims – victims for whom one feels compassion but with whom one doesn't identify, whom one pities without actually seeing. To this effect the film uses one of the central devices of classic fictional cinema: the shot/counter-shot. Catherine and Rabih start by looking, standing next to each other – together but separated by the outline of the frame. At the end of the film, they are reunited in a shot/counter-shot, which we here use for the first time in the film. Catherine is attending an official reception. She seems lost. She's looking for Rabih and eventually sees him. Instantly, her eyes light up. This is where the shot/counter-shot sets in: Catherine/Rabih/Catherine/ Rabih. They look at each other. They recognise each other. It is the moment of mutual recognition, the recognition of the other's face, the other's history – the affirmation of life after the disaster, the return to fictional possibility.

36. Video stills from
«A Perfect Day»
Malek unfold the news-
papers announcing his
father's death.
Malek examines the
photo of his father in the
newspaper

36.



The question of documentary and fiction lies at the heart of Aida's adventure.

The image of Antoine has become a document, reality has caught up with the film's fiction, it has pierced every inch of it...

The shot/counter-shot is an equally important figure in «A Perfect Day», although in a different sense. At a certain moment in the film, Malek is looking at the images of his father and seems profoundly disturbed – as though the image of his father were also looking at him. How were we to make Antoine disappear from the film and deal with this absence? What would Malek look at instead? This would only emphasise the disappearance of the father in the film. By cutting out the image of Antoine, we would change the meaning of the film and turn this shot/counter-shot into an impossible figure. Malek could never look at his father, whose image would totally

elude him. In keeping with Jalal Toufic's statement, Malek would become even more of a zombie: he would neither sense nor hear nor see.

Sometimes images elude us. There is nothing we can do about it except observe them eluding us...

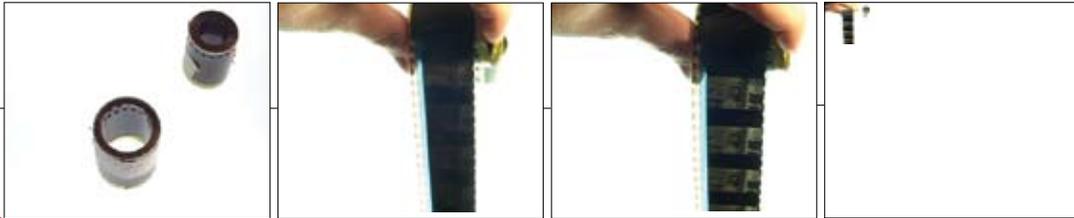
We eventually reached an amicable agreement with Aida. At no point did Aida try and gain financial advantage from the situation. Her request was sincere, dictated by the love she felt for Antoine and the respect with which she would like to surround his death.

We heard her request, we learned a lot from this adventure and, together, we took the following decision: We would cut out the image of Antoine from the film for screenings in Beirut only, while it would remain in the film for the rest of the country and all other territories and audiovisual supports. There was only one territory – her own – where Aida

had problems seeing Antoine pictured like this. Beyond this territory, he could remain a character and she was able to put up with the fiction. But in her neighbourhood, her town, the place where they had lived together and where he could be recognised by their families, friends and neighbours, he could only be Antoine and therefore could not embody someone else after his death. Very simply. Images, documents and fiction can also be issues of geography. Recognition can be an issue of context. This left us thoughtful as to the way in which our films and images are perceived at a given time, in a given place, country or territory.

Aida even asked us to phone her up from time to time. We had something in common: we now shared Antoine. We spent two nights erasing the image of Antoine from the film, cutting out the frames, amputating our own film. The image of Antoine is still in

37.



11/12

**Soon, the
images will
return into
the film.**

37. Video stills from a
video: «Pieces of the cut
movie»

our home in Beirut, on cut-out and rolled-up film, hidden in a large metal box. One of our friends told us how something had struck him. He didn't know anything about the whole story. He had attended a private screening of the film before Aida had seen it and started the whole affair. He had seen the images of the father, which somehow had caught his attention. He saw the film once more in a theatre when it was released – the film which by now had been cut. He told us that when he saw the film for the second time, he felt that some images from the film were missing. He was so puzzled that he actually wondered if, on his first viewing, his imagination hadn't simply added certain images – those of the father – thus compensating for his absence through evocation or imagination. We still hesitate whether we should tell him the whole story. Because soon, the images will return into the film.

This text led to a performance entitled « Aida, save me » given in December 2009 at the
« Halles de Schaerbeek » in Brussels
« Une co-production des Halles de Schaerbeek, Chantier TEMPS D'IMAGES 2009 »

Translation : Boris Kremer

Concept and design : Sans nom et sans figure

ISBN : 978-2-36086-008-1

Printed in Italy by Artigrafiche

Many thanks to :

Maryline Robalo, Fabienne Verstraeten, the team of Les Halles de Schaerbeek, Alexis Gaillard,
Ziad Saad, Feyrouz Serhal, Caroline Tabet, Tina Baz Legal, Thomas Fernandez,
Corinne Chawi, About Productions, Georges Schoucair, Mille Et Une Productions,
Edouard Mauriat, Anne Cécile Berthomeau, Farès Ladjimi, Tony Arnoux, Christine Tohmé,
Diane Dufour, Jacinto Lageira, Galerie In Situ (Paris), Fabienne Leclerc, CRG Gallery (New York),
Carla Chammas, Glenn Mc Millan, Richard Desroches, Jack Persekian, Sharjah biennial SB9 co producers
of the project «Faces», Rabih Mroué, Walid Raad, Jalal Toufic, Cyril Hadji-Thomas, Tamyras,
Mona Joreige, Alya Joreige, Boris Kremer and all the staff at Gasworks, Anna Colin, Jamie Stevens, Alessio
Antoniolli, Amy Walker, Gemma Saville, Katie Orr, Kristel Raesaar and Catalina Lozano
© Hadjithomas/Joreige, 2010

With the support of Gasworks,
About productions and
The Lebanese Association for Plastic Arts, **Ashkal Alwan**

GASWORKS



Supported by
**ARTS COUNCIL
ENGLAND**