

Cruel Weather, or, belief in the world

One of my first thoughts on looking at these films again was the rather banal one that many of them required a lot of discussion. Not by a rush to what Derrida once characterized as the “rigid formalism of context,”¹ and not necessarily in the form of a conversation by a panel of all-Arab film historians and critics to set parameters, (as Jalal Toufic has written savaging similar notions, he only gained access to *A Thousand and One Nights* by appropriating in turn Pasolini’s film version, or Edward Said, interviewed on the eve of the first *intifada*, referring to non-Arabs Jean Genet and Noam Chomsky as part of Palestinian literature, in its broadest sense), and not even necessarily by resorting to words, in Genet’s sense that “reality in time” actually “slots itself exactly into the spaces [between the words], recorded there rather than in the words that only serve to blot it out.”² To live in and expedite such a void, to be capable of learning from it, has little to do with identification, that staple of mainstream movie-going (much as Genet’s adventure with the Black Panther Party had nothing to do with wanting to be black, and time spent with the young PLO fighters in the hills of Jordan if anything had even less to do with ideas still batted around of identity politics). It often has little to do with information, although these films frequently enough punch huge holes in the great mythologies of information, and show its paucity, while adding other dimensions.³ It is rare, but at moments it is truly a question of time-travel, as in Roy Samaha’s experiment “as a way to investigate one’s own past life.” Or a borrowing, maybe taking back, that is far more than sampling, as the young rappers in Jackie Salloum’s *Slingshot Hiphop* (2008) transform their style (in Merleau-Ponty’s sense of movement or whole “project” world of

¹ Jacques Derrida. *The Truth in Painting*. Trans. Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod. 2nd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987.

² Jean Genet. *Prisoner of Love*. Trans. Barbara Bray. New York: NYRB Classics, [1989] 2003. p. 5.

³ In an interview with a women’s union organizer on the West Bank in November, 2003, the term “information” had been turned into an exclamation. When discussing the Oslo-linked restrictions NGOs often enforced on recipients of aid in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, and the accompanying mass of data and publications and studies that went along with these specious pantomimes of the supposed “peace process,” one activist simply used the word “Information!” as a sign of exasperation with the smoke-screen.

comportment of the body) in response to Tupac Shakur music videos, that seem to emerge from their same milieux.

This set of films is far more about how artistic responses function or innovate in particular circumstances; it has not much to do with defining works from a particular geographical entity, since the knot of presuppositions named “Middle East” is but one of a host that call for unraveling, precisely as a geo-political factor and ethnic description.⁴ Formally, there is sort of a wild multiplicity that exists between the levels of reflexivity in Akram Zaatari’s highly influential experimental documentary *This Day* (2003) and the nearly lurid revival of the Arab melodrama popular decades before in Youssef Chahine’s *Chaos* (2007). It is not an accident so many of these films seem to occupy a zone of impossibility. Wael Noureddine makes a film on why it is impossible to make a film on war (*July Trip*, 2007); living in Beirut, he makes a film on why it is impossible to live in Beirut (*Ca Sera Beau, From Beirut with Love*, 2005). Chahine raises the possibility of justice in a national context, where, according to interviews he gave in the last years of his life, he saw absolutely no hope for fulfillment. In *What Everybody Knows* (2008), conceptual artists Ayreen Anastas and Rene Gabri painstakingly piece together from the details of quotidian life in the Occupied Palestinian Territories a pattern of chilling domination from the jigsaw puzzle made hazy by a willful “promotion of complexity,” a nearly obsessive dedication to what Henry Kissinger, with his gift for language, once termed “constructive blurring.”⁵ Many works are about making links, experimenting with links, braiding images. So it is not surprising Jalal Toufic’s *Ashura* (2002) can form a diptych with his *Lamentations: The Ninth Day and Night* (2005), and is projected as a trilogy. Linking and de-linking in the void are here another way of living what philosopher Alain Badiou, trying to elaborate he called the “terms of a different *durée* to that imposed by the law of the world,” that would stand outside the “dominant order,”

⁴ For a dynamic collection that dissects the current “war on terror” precisely along these lines, see Derek Gregory and Allan Pred. Ed. *Violent Geographies*. New York/London: Routledge, 2005, as well as Derek Gregory’s *The Colonial Present*. London: Blackwell, 2004.

⁵ The term “promotion of complexity” is Israeli architect Eyal Weizman’s, from his *Hollow Land: Israel’s Architecture of Occupation*. London/New York: Verso, 2007.

termed the “endurance within the impossible.”⁶ Jayce Salloum’s *Untitled part 3b: (as if) beauty never ends* (2000-3) is likewise a link in a chain of four discrete videos, that range in location from South Lebanon to the former Yugoslavia to indigenous peoples in Canada, where “strategies and means’ are arrived at through the laboring over the material collected,” in that “they arise from the material or process itself and the process informs the work being done on it. Stylistically the parts and projects may appear to be drastically different from one another even within the same piece of work where an appropriateness is sought after, determined, and utilized.”⁷ This weaving of relations is analytic, yet, as many of the offerings here demonstrate, this processual critique is one where the cerebral and visceral impacts are at once powerfully wedded. A creativity in the void where the world has withdrawn, yet smacking of Pasolini’s argument that any moment of montage constituted “is always in the present mode...*a historic present*.”⁸

In a region that has suffered by this point an almost incalculable number of massacres, wars, occupations, and enslavements of which the all-out assault on the defenseless population of Gaza in December, 2008 is only the most recent, we must take seriously Toufic’s insistence that beyond trauma, and beyond pain, a more profound withdrawal of “tradition past the surpassing disaster” has taken place.⁹ That is why for the traumatized survivors, Toufic writes, of Bosnia, Lebanon or Rwanda, psychiatric treatment or “subjective working through” cannot on their own “succeed in remedying the withdrawal of tradition, for that withdrawal is not a subjective symptom...but demands the resurrecting efforts of writers, artists, and thinkers.” Without this, even a healthy or

⁶ Alain Badiou. “The Communist Hypothesis,” *New Left Reader* 49 (January/February 2008): 29-42. p. 41.

⁷ Jayce Salloum, “*sans titre/untitled*, the video installation as an active archive,” n. 9, accessed from www.16beavergroup.org/jayce July 25, 2009. Salloum’s essay is also found in Alan Grossman and Aine O’Brien. Ed. *Projecting Migration: Transcultural Documentary Practice*. London: Wallflower Press, 2007.

⁸ Pier Paolo Pasolini, “Observations on the Long Take,” *October* 13 (Summer 1980): 3-6. Pasolini’s discussion of this “pass from cinema to film,” written in 1967, was in the context of the Zapruder film of the assassination of John F. Kennedy.

⁹ One of the main issues at stake in Walid Raad’s exhibition *Scratching on Things I Could Disavow: A History of Art in the Arab World/Part 1_Volume 1_Chapter 1 (Beirut: 1992-2005)*, April 10 – June 14, 2009, Gallery at REDCAT, Los Angeles.

healthier survivor “soon discovers that tradition, including art, is still withdrawn.”¹⁰ The stupefying non-response on the part of the world to the atrocities in Gaza, offers an all too concretized and obscene example, or link, to what Gilles Deleuze meant when he wrote we can no longer believe in the world – “Because the point is to discover and restore belief in the world, before or beyond words.”¹¹ Restoring this “belief in the world” that could “reconnect man to what he sees and hears” is what cinema could possibly accomplish “when it stops being bad.”¹² *Where is the world?* Hence Deleuze’s talk with critic Serge Daney on how, with the advent of the Second World War, with the loss of belief “‘behind’ the image there was nothing to be seen but concentration camps.” After World War II, there was “an altogether new question: What is there to see on the surface of the image?” No longer looking behind the image for the withdrawn world, but rather “whether I can bring myself to look at what I can’t help seeing – which unfolds on a single plane.”¹³ Toufic attributes the prevalence of the video medium in the Arab world to such reasoning, along with its obvious low-cost, writing that the attraction of flat images, rather than of cinema,” is “because we believe in the depth of the earth where massacres have taken place, and where so many...still await their unearthing, and then proper burial and mourning.”¹⁴

One might expect any collection of moving images from the Fertile Crescent to revolve around mourning. There are full doses of that here, but as Deleuze slyly suggested in the documentary *L’Abécédaire de Gilles Deleuze* (1999),¹⁵ there is a profound joy in the lament: this passing beyond any social status, the paradoxical subjectivization wound up

¹⁰ Jalal Toufic. *The Withdrawal of Tradition Past a Surpassing Disaster*. Forthcoming Books, 2009. p. 57. Available as pdf from www.jalaltoufic.com.

¹¹ Gilles Deleuze. *Cinema 2*. Trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, [1985] 1989. p. 172.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Gilles Deleuze. *Negotiations, 1972-1990*. Trans. Martin Joughlin. New York: Columbia University Press, 1995.

¹⁴ Toufic. *The Withdrawal of Tradition Past a Surpassing Disaster*. n.64. p. 103. In this connection, see Nasri Hajjaj’s film *Shadow of Absence* (2007), a documentary that traces where various Palestinian intellectuals, artists, and militants wanted to be buried, and where, in exile, they ended up resting.

¹⁵ Excerpt appears in Toufic’s *Ashura* (2002), where Deleuze describes his ideal occupation as that of a “professional mourner.”

in the feeling that *it is too big for me*. This too, is a passage through the impossible, what was expected as unendurable, or as the most horrible unexpected. It is the root of sacred poetry, for Deleuze, and its transformations and struggles not only yield dangerous insights, but also moments and splotches of real beauty. Present here, too, in full measure.

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