

# Post-Orientalist Aesthetics: Experimental Film and Video in Lebanon

Mark R. Westmoreland

---

In Mona Hatoum's experimental video, *Measures of Distance* (1981), she densely layers fragmented clips of audio recording, written correspondence, and intimate images in a way that accentuates the distance of exile. Nude photos of Hatoum's mother appear in close-up, rendering them initially undecipherable. A second visual layer of hand-written letters from Hatoum's mother further obscures the images on screen, the letters themselves only revealing fragmented Arabic script that prevents the viewer from reading more than a few discontinuous phrases. Meanwhile, we hear a conversation in Arabic between two women that competes with the louder voice-over translations in English. While these communiqués between Hatoum in London and her mother in Beirut are themselves markers of separation, the way the layers compete and obscure each other speaks directly to the infrastructural ruptures of phone lines and postal services during the Lebanese civil wars. Furthermore, the way the narrative reveals familial tension offers another dimension of distance inflected but not caused by Hatoum's exile. While ostensibly about family relations and the experience of exile, *Measures of Distance* demonstrates a vexed relationship between modes of communication and technologies of documentation.

In this article, I argue that Lebanese film and video consistently demonstrate an aesthetic ambivalence with mimetic modes of mediation, which poignantly engages the limitations and possibilities of post-colonial discourse around the politics of representation. In the first part of this article, I attempt to contextualize this ambivalent aesthetics vis-à-vis the Lebanese civil war(s) and the post-war aftermath. Next, I make an argument for identifying this stylistic approach as a "post-orientalist aesthetics." In the final sections, I provide a close reading of two films—Maroun Baghdadi's *Hors la vie* (1991) and Jocelyn Saab's *Once Upon a Time, Beirut* (1994)—and give particular attention to the way these films have been engaged by Lebanese visual theorists Walid Raad and Jalal Toufic. These close readings enable me to situate these films within a contested field of representation, in which the modes of remembering Lebanon's

violent past (and present) remain a defining issue in Lebanon's (post)war period.

## LEBANESE VISUALITY

While scholars and critics have given much attention to contemporary video art emerging from Lebanon and the way artists like Walid Raad, Akram Zaatari, Jayce Salloum, and Lamia Joreige have disrupted the production of historical evidence, considerably less attention has been paid to the use of ambivalent aesthetics in feature films made in Lebanon. The reflexive distrust of film and video's own apparatus becomes evidenced in the work of several filmmakers who emerge during the Lebanese civil war(s), including Maroun Baghdadi, Jocelyn Saab, Borhane Alaouié, Heiny Srour, Randa Shahal Sabbag, among others. These filmmakers came of age at a time when Lebanon celebrated its "golden age." Lebanon served as the outlet for the two largest oil pipelines in the world, which resulted in Beirut becoming the banking center of the Middle East. The allure of ancient ruins, sunny beaches, and snow-capped mountains combined with cosmopolitan notions of a "Paris of the Middle East," which fostered a burgeoning leisure industry. The displacement of the Egyptian film industry during the nationalization period of Gamel Abdel Nasser meant that Lebanon had also emerged as the filmmaking capital of the Arab world during this period. The films that were made during this time tended to be melodramas in Egyptian dialect. They demonstrated increasingly liberal sensibilities, incorporating partial female nudity and hyper-sexualized plotlines.<sup>1</sup>

The reader should bear in mind that underlying tensions emanating from the Cold War between capitalist and communist regimes, their manifestation within the Middle East, and a historical precedent of sectarian violence had already resulted in the first Lebanese civil war in 1958. These issues should temper the idealism of this golden era, which ultimately came to a close once political violence reemerged in 1975. While a mythologized nostalgia emerged about the past, the death, destruction, and depression that followed in effect superseded the myth of the golden age and replaced it with

---

<sup>1</sup> Samir al-Ghoussayni's *The Cats of Hamra Street* (1972) draws on the sexual revolution of American hippie culture.

chaos and sorrow. The critical sensibilities of contemporary Lebanese visual culture emerged during this period of social conflict and prewar nostalgia, as evidenced in Borhane Alaouié's *Beirut the Encounter/Beirut al Likaa* (1981).

Alaouié's film depicts a chance meeting between two young friends separated by the war. Shot on location during the conflict, the encounter is emblematic of the displacement and uncertainty faced when navigating inter-sectarian relationships and the obstacles of everyday political violence. Zeina and Haidar agree to meet at the airport to exchange audio letters before Zeina leaves for America, where she plans to pursue her studies. Rather than offering an air of overt violence, the backdrop of war shows instead a society paralyzed by the material signs of disjuncture (sporadic power, water, and phone connectivity, as well as roadblocks and traffic jams) or, in other words, measures of distance. Under such conditions, time is hostage. No one knows how long it will take to cross the city, or for the war to end. At the end, Zeina is stuck in traffic on the way to the airport and Haidar gives up and leaves. As a master symbol of departure and disconnection, the airport is filled with competing affective intensities of longing for the past and fantasies about the future. Alaouié's treatment marks it with the ambivalence of impossible goodbyes. As Haider leaves the airport in despair, he unspools the audiocassette out the window of the taxi. His undelivered message is reduced to its material form, fluttering across the streets of Beirut, destined to join the rubble of war.

Through various, but consistent, visual references to mediation from cassette tapes and photographs to cameras and television screens, these filmmakers deploy a reflexive critique of mediation and representation. *West Beirut* (1996), Ziad Doueri's light-hearted coming of age film, became an instant success in Lebanon, won an award at Cannes, and was released in theaters throughout North America and Europe. *West Beirut* reflects a wave of films made after the war by "returnees" still fascinated by this traumatic event.<sup>2</sup> For Ziad Doueri, who escaped the war to live in the United States and work in the film industry as a cameraman for Quentin Tarantino, his first feature film enraptured audiences with a nostalgic look at the start of the war, a hip disco soundtrack, and better production standards than most had been able to deliver during the war and

---

<sup>2</sup> Ibrahim al-Ariss, "An Attempt at Reading the History of Cinema in Lebanon: From Cinema Society and Vice Versa," in *Screens of Life: Critical Film Writing from the Arab World*, vol. 1, ed. Alia Arasoughly (St. Hyacinthe, Quebec: World Heritage Press, 1996): 19-39.

post-war eras. Despite its seemingly uncritical narrative, Doueri deploys reflexive devices that prevent easy dismissal. The main characters in this film are introduced and motivated by the textured presence of a super-8 camera and several key scenes are sutured to this amateur lens.

The opening scene of the movie is presented in grainy black-and-white, and cuts back and forth between the film's main characters on the playground of their school and two enemy fighter jets maneuvering against each other in the sky. The juxtaposition between the "playground" for leisure on the one hand, and the battleground for hostilities on the other, should not be lost on us here. These seemingly stable differences blur into each other as the film progresses. This foregrounding of space and the placement of the viewer looking up at the political events unfolding in the sky above contrasts with the way Hollywood often deploys an aerial optic that brings to viewer into a space in which she or he sees from an elevated position of authority.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, the super-8 camera is reflexively introduced as a tool for recording evidence. But the documentary integrity of the super-8 footage is constantly undermined by its duplicitous self-referentiality. In these first scenes, not only has this "silent" film recorded the motor winding, it has somehow magically recorded its own presence as the viewer sees the super-8 camera through its own lens. By seeing and hearing the camera as it records, the contradictory layering of self-referential media works to create a more phenomenologically holistic experience for the viewer as filmmaker. This creates an effect of bearing witness, the feeling that one is given the embodied sense of not merely watching, but documenting the observable world.

The playful insertion of this mimetic technology into a coming-of-age story inscribes a subtle critique of scopic regimes. The use of amateur filmmaking reveals the general lack of agency the Lebanese had in representing themselves during the war. Meanwhile, international news media have flooded the archive with images of lawless militias terrorizing the apocalyptic landscape of Beirut. Nevertheless, the proliferation of modern media may serve as a surrogate for those in exile. "[I]ntensive identification with national politics and the rhythm of life lived elsewhere is made possible through new communications technologies."<sup>4</sup> However, the steady

---

<sup>3</sup> Lina Khatib, *Filming in the Middle East* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2006).

<sup>4</sup> Michael Humphrey, "Lebanese Identities Between Cities, Nations and Trans-Nations," in *Lebanese Presence in the World* (Beirut: Lebanese American University, 2001), 5.

stream of disembodied and violent news footage may dominate one's visual relationship to a place called "home." Not only is the violence of the war mediated by the evening news, home itself is also mediated through these lenses that claim objectivity and realism. Indeed, for most of us in the west, headlines about conflict in the Middle East dominate our understanding of this region. The dominance of international news media and its presumed ubiquity over worldwide current events serves as yet another aesthetic dimension of Lebanese visual culture. Televisual imagery and newsreel footage figure strongly in Lebanese film and video as a reflexive commentary on representation.

In the experimental documentary *Introduction to the End of an Argument/Muqaddimah Li-Nihayat Jidal* (1990), a collaboration between Lebanese Canadian Jayce Salloum and Palestinian Elia Suleiman, the filmmakers present a powerful montage of dozens of clips from American news and Western popular media to create a cutting critique of the media coverage of the Middle East. These artists use video for documentary research, not in an endeavor to establish a factual record, but to situate "representation itself as a politicized practice" and to critically engage the fantastic tendencies of media and its ability to make certain "realities" believably real.<sup>5</sup> While these artists endeavor to show how these representations fill a particular western imagination, they also try to re-calibrate interpretive frameworks and offer new perspectives to consider. For instance, a montage of scenes of French soldiers in *The Battle of Algiers* (1966) is edited together with news footage of Israeli soldiers storming a building. The scene cuts to another montage of news clips of Yasser Arafat, each framed by the derisive commentary of the news anchor or reporter. Ominous music accompanies these scenes and title cards frame a deconstructionist project (e.g. "Speaking for oneself" changes to "Speaking for others"). By overloading the viewer with pejorative representations from cartoons of *Ali Baba* and *I Dream of Jeannie* to *Indiana Jones* and *The Thief of Baghdad*, the resulting forty-minute video re-articulates the way western news and popular media interpret the Middle East.

Salloum's video, *(This Is Not Beirut)/There Was and There Was Not* (1994), is a similar endeavor, but with particular interest in the way Beirut has come to evoke nostalgia and horror, both in the way it was hailed as exotic and cosmopolitan during the so-called "golden era" and then violent and chaotic during the Lebanese civil wars. In

---

<sup>5</sup> See [http://www.111101.net/Artworks/index.php?Jayce\\_Salloum/index.php](http://www.111101.net/Artworks/index.php?Jayce_Salloum/index.php).

such conditions, the very presumption of making sense or understanding a place becomes fraught. In this video, the critique of anthropology (and its presumed ability to attain 'local knowledge' by spending a few months or years in a place) is challenged by political violence that makes factual evidence elusive: even those who have spent their entire lives in Lebanon do not understand the situation. These filmmakers reference western media sources, but also put themselves in compromising situations in order to problematize documentary methods of both procuring knowledge and producing meaning. Salloum draws on a toolkit of techniques to rupture expectations about narratives, images, subjectivities designed for the "suspension of belief," rather than the "suspension of *dis*-belief" on which Classical Hollywood cinema is based.<sup>6</sup>

In these films and videos, the witness of history reveals her- or himself through mediated forms of self-referentiality, thus inserting a physical referent (a media object) as a gap between history and memory, between the "real" and the "image." The physical presence of these objects and devices disallows the short circuit of representational mimesis, but it also accentuates the subjectivity of the witness as withdrawn. They tell nonlinear stories that exist always between states of being, in a process of becoming. Deterritorialized histories, personal narratives, documentary value, and media recycling engender a liminal quality to post-colonial visual representation in which the filmmaker/film-viewer/film-subject are implicated together in shared intersubjectivity. This "haptic" quality of post-orientalist aesthetics blurs boundaries between fact and fiction, art and documentary, and identity and subjectivity.

## POST-ORIENTALIST AESTHETICS

Lebanese experimental film and video give expression to a distinct set of aesthetics that is at once critically conscious of Orientalist representations and acutely attentive to the traumas of war and exile that inform the Lebanese experience. As such, "post-orientalist aesthetics" provides a critical response to the representational violence of overdetermined media coverage, while also articulating

---

<sup>6</sup> Jayce Salloum and Molly Hankwitz, "Occupied Territories: Mapping the Transgressions of Cultural Terrain," in *Framework* 43 (2002), 93.

the traumatized subjectivities engendered by political violence and displacement. Although these subjectivities emanate from a common context of contemporary Lebanese history, this framework does not suggest the commonality of a “Lebanese experience.” Indeed, the recurrent subversion of historical representation in this body of work insists on the impossibility of providing a unified national narrative, particularly regarding the experience of violence during the past several decades. Furthermore, while a variety of Lebanese films and videos gives expression to this alternative aesthetics, the post-orientalist’s perspectives are not the sole dominion of the Lebanese. My usage of post-orientalist aesthetics therefore aims to identify an alternative poetics that reflexively evokes the failure of various historical projects situated within the Middle East.

In the context of Lebanon, Lebanese cinema has been faced with the burden of representing the failure of the nation and its replacement with prolonged political violence. As such, experimental approaches emphasize the impossibilities of historical representation, as exemplified by the work of Walid Raad, Lamia Joreige, Rabih Mroue, Joana Hadjithomas, and Khalil Joreige, amongst others. Narrative, documentary, and video art in Lebanon often depict the political context through individual relationships with media. Tape recorded letters, amateur filmmaking, family photos, mnemonic objects, etc. all promote the corporeality of self-mediation. In other words, the phenomenological relationship between the filmmaking subject and the media object leaves residues of embodiment, which reflexively reveals the personal experience of everyday violence and lingering trauma. In this way, post-war mediation uncovers withdrawn subjectivities evocative of ghosts that have not been mourned and spectres that have not been tried for their crimes.

Despite the particularities of experience and location, almost all Lebanese films are dependent on western benefactors, transnational co-production, and alternative modes of dissemination for their vitality. That said, to dismiss these productions as merely catering to a universal liberal humanism—the antithesis of nationalism—would risk becoming ensnared in over-determined oppositions. On the contrary, nonlinear and non-causal narratives disrupt humanist expectations and leave room for interpretation and confusion. Under these conditions, filmmaking always entails an act of translation: representing one’s life world on film constitutes a cross-cultural exchange. This occurs through the linkages with western/non-western co-productions as well as with trans-regional cross-fertilization between Beirut and other, more localized centers of

urban cosmopolitanism, like Cairo, Damascus, and Jerusalem.

Accordingly, this paper advances the notion of “post-orientalist aesthetics” in order to loosely frame experimental film and video projects emerging from the eastern Mediterranean (a.k.a. the Levant, *al-Mashriq*, the Holy Lands, etc). These visual projects critically engage the politics of representation, both inherited from colonial relationships and historical nationalisms. These intra-regional aesthetics have a common history in relation to the ongoing violence that has reverberated around the Arab/Israeli conflicts for more than sixty years. The contours of post-orientalist aesthetics as it relates to this Levantine regional locality, trace the shared features of what film scholar Hamid Naficy calls “deterritorialized” cinemas: cinemas neither belonging to a single social location nor apprehended by a single cultural logic.<sup>7</sup> Rather than privileging the notion of a national cinema, Arab cinema, or even a transnational cinema, I privilege a historic and ethnographic framework, because it gives greater context to the lived experience of these filmmakers and those depicted. Filmmakers and video artists in Beirut, Damascus, and Jerusalem (not to mention Baghdad, Cairo, and Istanbul) share similar relationships with the West and co-participate in the circuits of global festivals, art exhibitions, vocational training, higher education, media careers, and cosmopolitan citizenship. Often times the common language with these artists is English or French, rather than Arabic.

This restructuring of cinema according to the processes of post-orientalist aesthetics moves beyond national boundaries and takes advantage of intersections of exilic mobility. Sites like Beirut speak simultaneously to deterritorialization and cosmopolitanism. As a site of exilic ruination and imperial failure, Beirut has become an essential hub in the reworking of representational paradigms.<sup>8</sup> While these critical aesthetics can be traced through the cinemas in Palestine, Syria, and elsewhere, I argue that post-orientalist aesthetics have taken root most noticeably in the film and video of Lebanon. Within the context of transnational cinema, I evoke a “dialectics of orientalism” in order to provide a more nuanced reading of cross-cultural representation.<sup>9</sup> As a deterritorialized and yet localized site

---

<sup>7</sup> Hamid Naficy, *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

<sup>8</sup> Catherine David, “Presentation,” in *Tamáss 1: Contemporary Arab Representations, Beirut/Lebanon* (Barcelona: Fundació Antoni Tàpies, 2002): 10-14; Stephen Wright, “Like a Spy in a Nascent Era: On the Situation of the Artist in Beirut Today,” in *Parachute* 108 (2002): 13-31.

<sup>9</sup> Stephen C. Caton, *Lawrence of Arabia: A Film's Anthropology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).



of cultural production, independent transnational filmmaking in Beirut engenders new modes of post-colonial cosmopolitanism. Beirut has emerged as a premier site of experimental media and avant-garde art due in large part to the symbolic potency of its violent past and the displacement of its diaspora. Artists and filmmakers present their experiences to audiences abroad in ways that captivate while they avoid a reduction to comprehensible clichés. Their film and videos infuse Arab publics with social critique without privileging western liberalism. These polyglot exiles can move easily in and out of transnational urban publics, while also orchestrating a zone of exilic Arab sensibilities accessible to those “in the know.”

The decentering of critical discourse to the “periphery” utilizes the colonial idioms of scientism, objectivity, and documentary in order to critique imperial tropes of mastery and conquest, but this attention does not preclude criticism of other forms of over-determination. Indeed, this alternative aesthetic works to become unencumbered by patriarchal hegemony and self-indulgent humanism. For instance, Lebanese filmmakers and artists employ stylistic and thematic motifs that transcend Edward Said’s monumental critique of Orientalism as an intellectual extension of colonial politics.<sup>10</sup> One of the critiques of Said’s argument was the lack of agency and influence by those considered the object of Orientalism. On the contrary, these filmmakers shift the conventional boundaries of orientalist discourse, not only by critiquing western representations of the Middle East, but also by critiquing the Middle East from localized positions. For instance, the work of Akram Zaatari, particularly with the Arab Image Foundation, critically examines both the fantasies of sexual desire and the discourse of Lebanese resistance movements. Whereas films like Danielle Arbid’s *In the Battlefields* (2005) demonstrate a critique of patriarchal authority, films like Ghassan Salhab’s *Beirut Phantom* (1998) and Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige’s *The Perfect Day* (2005) register the political kidnappings that occurred during the civil war.

Despite participating in western film festivals and art house cinema, Arab filmmakers and artists assert their cultural difference in ways that provide historical and political specificity, rather than advancing notions of universal humanism. This contemporary assertion of “oriental” agency parallels recent efforts to expand Said’s conceptualization of Orientalism to include a broader range of cross-cultural exchange in the context of nineteenth- and twentieth-century

---

<sup>10</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).

visual culture.<sup>11</sup> For instance, they situate Francophone Orientalist painting as “an art of the interstices,” in which Algerian artists Etienne Dinet, Azouaou Mammeri, and Omar Racim perform a strategic mimicry in order to make space for oneself in a colonized context. While I am not situating nineteenth century Orientalist painting within a paradigm of post-orientalist aesthetics, I am emphasizing the way multi-faceted cross-cultural relationships complicate notions of unilateral representations. In other words, referencing recent work on Orientalist art is meant to decenter simplistic modern/traditional frameworks and draw attention to the simultaneity of difference and similarity that occurs through aesthetic processes of mimesis and alterity.

In this way, post-orientalist aesthetics challenges the “dogmas of Orientalism,” which Said identified as: 1) the presumption of an absolute hierarchical difference between East and West, 2) the predominance of abstraction over contextualized realities, 3) the privileging of western expertise over self-definition, and 4) the preclusion of self-rule.<sup>12</sup> Rather than a primordial difference between East and West, difference is situated contextually. That is to say, post-orientalist aesthetics contextualizes the hegemonic differences between East and West, deconstructs the abstracted clichés, favors situated representations, and privileges self-determination. Under such conditions, identity is authenticated by political disempowerment rather than cultural essentialism. Acknowledging the poignancy of these Arab self-critiques disrupts the Orientalist assumption that the “orient” requires imperial oversight in order to manage fiscal corruption, liberate dominated democracies, and empower passive women.

My assertion of a post-orientalist aesthetics that characterizes post-war Lebanese cinema, however, is also decidedly different from a mere outgrowth of orientalism and its auxiliary trajectories. This assertion is neither endorsing a post-modern anti-structure, nor necessarily a proclaimed “third space,” because this tertiary dimension tends to endorse a generalizable framework outside of specific contexts.<sup>13</sup> Having said this, I am not necessarily trying to assert something new and fresh. Indeed, my usage of “post” should

---

<sup>11</sup> Jill Beaulieu and Mary Roberts (eds.), *Orientalism's Interlocutors: Painting, Architecture, Photography* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002).

<sup>12</sup> Said, 300-301.

<sup>13</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994); Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991).

flag it as something tired and overused. In a way, the moniker of “post-orientalist aesthetic” feigns newness, originality, and excitement, in order to accentuate a certain fatigued redundancy. In other words, at the core of such periodization is the presumption that modernism and colonialism are somehow closed systems with definable beginning and ending points. In this way, “post” does not denote a conclusion as much as a spillage.

In the context of Lebanon, *post* is most often associated with the notion of “post-war” society or a “post-war” period. This model of a discernable Lebanese historiography relies on a series of presumptions. First, it presumes that political and civil violence gave way to reconciliation. Second, it presumes that the Lebanese were able to put the war behind them and begin the process of collective healing. Third, it presumes that political violence ended and that civil antagonism would be publicly addressed. Instead, crimes are so heavily policed as to foster interpretations of sectarian conflict even where it may not be the case.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, prolonged occupations by both Israeli and Syrian armies, as well as earlier occupations by the PLO and MNF, have been responsible for “keeping the peace.”<sup>15</sup> Moreover, internal power struggles are demographically dispersed by a hierarchical quota system.<sup>16</sup>

Under these parameters, post-orientalist aesthetics suggest a contentious and cynical sensibility, in which post-war means the return of the repressed rather than the end of violence. Neither have orientalist (mis)representations ended, nor has the political opportunity for reconciliation emerged. Instead, newness is created by altering the aesthetic codes typically assigned to recording, documenting, and archiving the historical record. This particular tension between stale modes of historiography and generative reframing of aesthetic codes finds poignancy in the remediation of historical artifacts and images and the accentuation of constructed reflexivity. In the context of experimental video and art, the work of

---

<sup>14</sup> This dynamic has been poignantly demonstrated in by performance artist Rabih Mroue, whose 2005 performance *Who's Afraid of Representation?* was partially based on the media reaction to the shooting spree by Hassan Maamoun, who entered his office after 20 years of employment and killed eight of his co-workers.

<sup>15</sup> MNF refers to the Multinational Force (comprised of US, French, and Italian forces) that entered Lebanon in the wake of the 1982 Israeli invasion in order to remove the PLO (Palestinian Liberation Organization).

<sup>16</sup> This sectarian system of governance, commonly called confessionalism, is based on a 1932 census and an unwritten National Pact, which aimed to fix the balance of power between Lebanon's eighteen Christian and Muslim sects.

Walid Raad exemplifies this approach. For instance, his strategic reappropriation of the “western hostage crisis” in *Hostage: The Bachar Tapes* (2000) introduces Soheil Bachar, a fictive Kuwaiti embassy employee held captive with the American hostages in the 1980s. Bachar is inspired by real-life Soha Bachara, a living-martyr who spent ten years in Khiam prison after a failed assassination attempt on Antoine Lahad, the head of Israel’s proxy militia installed to police southern Lebanon. In this way, Raad pairs the narratives of the western hostages with the occupation of southern Lebanon and the captivity of its people. So instead of trying to author a narrative that stands in opposition to the dominant one, Raad inserts an alternative story within the master narrative to rupture its integrity.

*Hostage* begins with an informational intertitle that credits 53 video tapes to Soheil Bachar, who has donated the tapes to the Atlas Group, but only allowing tapes #17 and #31 to be screened in North America and Western Europe. We learn that Bachar was held hostage for ten years in solitary confinement “except for 27 weeks in 1985 with Americans Terry Anderson, Thomas Sutherland, Benjamin Weir, Martin Jenco, and David Jacobson.” At the beginning of *Hostage*, Bachar provides very explicit directions for how he should be dubbed over by “a neutral-toned female voice,” thus pinpointing the way dubbing and subtitles often silence or distort spoken words. At this moment, the screen turns blue for several moments before cutting to Bachar sitting in front of the camera. This amateur-looking footage has Bachar framed in the lower middle of the screen. He has affixed a muted background cloth behind him, taped to the wall, but the camera is not zoomed tight enough to obscure this aesthetic decision. As he lowers the remote control, he begins telling his story of confinement. He is dubbed over by a woman’s voice with a North American accent. These aesthetic decisions mock the veracity of the documentary confession, but also strategically insert a counter-narrative within the dominant discourse on western victimhood.

## OCULARITY OF FOREIGN INTERVENTION

In his doctoral dissertation “Beirut... (à la folie): A Cultural Analysis of the Abduction of Westerners in Lebanon in the 1980s,” Walid Raad’s analysis of Maroun Baghdadi’s *Hors la vie* (1991) helps

articulate a refined and critical version of post-orientalist aesthetics.<sup>17</sup> Raad's cultural analysis of the representation of the "western hostage crisis" in Lebanon in the 1980s forwards a critique of the way neo-orientalist representations of and narratives about these abductions delimited culpability of western foreign powers in the Lebanese "civil" wars.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, it provides one of the first theoretical articulations of post-orientalist aesthetics in the Lebanese context. Raad provides an aesthetic critical of the politics of representation, but it is one also belabored by a recurrent (absent) presence of violence.

First, inspired by photojournalist Roger Auque's real-life account of his abduction, captivity, and release, Maroun Baghdadi's *Hors la vie* mirrors Auque's story with the fictional protagonist Patrick Perrault. Raad is particularly concerned with the character's identity as a French photojournalist and the way the presumed mimetic objectivity of the journalist's camera erases Perrault's national biases. As Raad says, the "politically and ideologically neutral witness" enables the construction of "uncontested proof."<sup>19</sup> Photojournalism's ability "to ideologically neutralize and ontologically naturalize" the Frenchman's relation to the war presumes and reifies the semiotic supposition of photography.<sup>20</sup> Although Baghdadi's film does not directly critique French political involvement, Raad argues that Baghdadi makes more subtle critiques of western influence and the politics of representation. First, the sequence that leads to Perrault's abduction moves from the heroics of an intrepid photojournalist, then to militiamen forcing Perrault to witness and photograph them standing proudly over a fallen corpse, and then to Perrault's intentional exposure of the roll of film to daylight, and finally to his capture and blindfolding. The symbolic importance of Perrault's blindfolding during his abduction, as Raad points out, makes a link between his camera's ability to alternately witness and be blind to images of violence. On the one hand, the war

---

<sup>17</sup> Walid Raad, "Beirut... (à la folie): A Cultural Analysis of the Abduction of Westerners in Lebanon in the 1980s," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Rochester, 1996.

<sup>18</sup> Typically rendered as a national dispute between Muslims and Christians, the conflating of Lebanon's eighteen official sectarian identities, called confessions, into a civil duality belies the role of secular militias, shifting alliances, and prolonged history of foreign intervention. For an expansive record of this war, see Robert Fisk's *Pity the Nation: Lebanon at War*, second edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), which provides an extended presentation of the shifting alliances, outside manipulations, and internal power dynamics.

<sup>19</sup> Raad, 85.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

photographer's *raison d'être* is to capture the violence and suffering of war on film, but his intentional over-exposure of his film roll shows an effort to recoil from this purpose into a state of intentional blindness. On the other hand, the blindfold means that he cannot directly witness his abduction, but must look peripherally through the gaps in his blindfold. The peripheral gaps in the blindfold spatially reorganizes vision "from the center to the margin."<sup>21</sup> Raad points out that this shifts the "representational authority from the French photojournalist to the Lebanese filmmaker."<sup>22</sup>

Second, Raad analyzes Baghdadi's representation of the city, which juxtaposes the cinematic devices of panning and tracking shots. The panning shots present Beirut as a city like any other with minimal traces of the war, while the tracking shots of Beirut are viewed "through the windshield of a moving vehicle as we are led through the rubble and debris of streets" and "decimated buildings."<sup>23</sup> The destruction evidenced in the tracking shots of Beirut "is of an unimaginable scope." The audience can only assume that this decimation extends indefinitely through a labyrinthine "no man's land."<sup>24</sup> Baghdadi's divergent aesthetics of panning and tracking shots respectively parallels Lina Khatib's juxtaposition of background/foreground in the cinematic space of Hollywood and Middle Eastern films. In Khatib's analysis, Hollywood films shot in the Middle East tend to treat space as a backdrop and thus of secondary significance to the protagonist's adventure, whereas Middle Eastern films foreground the social context of cinematic space.

Inter-cutting these disrupted tracking shots of spatial violence with Perrault in his cell "day-dreaming" cause a slippage of these "real-life" images from the factual record into "reminiscences" and "hallucinations" haunting the Frenchman.<sup>25</sup> The repetition of these scenes in his imagination can be quickly interpolated into a post-traumatic stress disorder as "a process of retroactively managing

---

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 118-119.

<sup>22</sup> Raad argues that Baghdadi's production experiences in Lebanon and Europe gave him the perception of a balanced view. "Baghdadi's film projects have ranged from a series of short documentaries for the Lebanese National Movement (LMN)—a political and military coalition formed in 1969 by Kamal Jumblatt, and which grouped socialist, communists, Arab nationalists, and various other leftists and secularists—to fiction and non-fiction films for French and British TV" (92-93).

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 102-103.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 103-104.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 104.

trauma,” but repetition also “acts as a link to this ‘forgotten and repressed’ occurrence, event, and history.”<sup>26</sup> Here Raad suggests that in *Hors la vie* these repeated representations of Beirut’s streets not only corresponds to the “experience of captivity,” but also works “to master retrospectively some other trauma.”<sup>27</sup> That is, the trauma of colonial occupation.

While *Hors la vie* omits any direct reference to France’s “special” historical relationship with Lebanon,<sup>28</sup> Raad makes a case that Baghdadi’s inclusion of photography as a narrative device enables him to resist “complicity in the forgetting of France’s colonial history,” and provides a crucial shift in the analyses of the “western hostage crisis.”<sup>29</sup> This shift is achieved by undermining the photojournalist’s agency to get the shot, forcing him to re-organize his vision away from a direct, forward-looking perspective. The symbolism of the blindfolded French photojournalist and the strategies of repetitive tracking shots make demands for re-reading this French-Lebanese history “not straight center, but on the periphery of this crisis, on the margins of the hitherto dominant representations of Lebanese civil war, along that temporal and spatial boundary known as the colonial periphery.”<sup>30</sup>

Raad’s assertion that the aesthetics of Baghdadi’s film makes subtle critiques of France’s colonial history in Lebanon, despite featuring a Frenchman kidnapped by Shi’a militiamen, parallels Steve Caton’s reading of David Lean’s *Lawrence of Arabia*. Caton employs a “dialectical critique” of Orientalism in order to convey the contradictory complexity of the colonizing project, thus revealing the instability of colonial hegemony. He argues that it is necessary to consider the way colonial texts reveal both the traumatized colonized subject and the traumatized colonizing subject, thus registering “the ambivalences (read also horror or terror) they betray or, perhaps more rarely, by consciously engaging in a criticism of colonial

---

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 106.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 107.

<sup>28</sup> Since the nineteenth century, the French envisioned themselves as the protectorate of the Levantine Christian populations. Following the Sykes-Picot agreement, France convinced the League of Nations to partition the rich coastal region away from greater Syria in what would become Lebanon. In 1920, the State of Greater Lebanon became established under the French Mandate. Even after independence, France has been significantly involved in Lebanese cultural and political affairs.

<sup>29</sup> Raad, 117.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 120.

practices and regimes."<sup>31</sup> These subtleties do not refute the dominant (orientalist) representations outright; however, they insert tensions within the film that work to rupture the integrity of these discourses.

## REMEDATING THE CINEMATIC ARCHIVE

Jocelyn Saab actively challenges narrative convention in her experimental re-editing of Beirut's cinematic record. *Once Upon a Time, Beirut* (1994) subverts the narrative structure to give greater dominance to an alternative poetics of representation. *Once Upon a Time, Beirut* actively seeks to understand how media representations have manipulated the identity of Beirut. Nadia Seremetakis suggests that sensory memory is a form of storage, and that assemblage of this memory is always an act of imagination.<sup>32</sup> In this spirit, Saab strings together a cinematic memory of Lebanon that pays little attention to causality for constructing its narrative chronology. While the film reveals an explicit interest in memory, particularly traumatized memory, the insurmountable political violence depicted always remains hidden, somewhere else, and unspeakable. The troubling past becomes a plaything and violence, merely an act of representation: never acknowledged in its lived brutality.

Culling from hundreds of films, Saab revisits the cinematic fantasies that proliferated during the prewar era. From temptresses to spies to villains, Beirut is depicted as a playground in which consistently fantastic narratives took place. Saab moves the film's two female leads and the viewer through spaces that draw attention to Beirut's own cinematic construction, creating fantastic worlds within the recycling of cultural productions. The narrative of *Once Upon a Time, Beirut* moves through space and time with a liberty atypical of the classical Hollywood paradigm, to refuse the formulation of causal connections. Quoting a screenwriters' manual, David Bordwell reminds us that it was believed that the "unmotivated jumping of time is likely to rattle the audience, thereby breaking their illusion that they participate in the lives of the characters."<sup>33</sup> Saab either

---

<sup>31</sup> Caton, 12-13.

<sup>32</sup> C. Nadia Seremetakis, "The Memory of the Senses," in *Visualizing Theory: Selected Essays from V.A.R., 1990-1994*, ed. Lucien Taylor (New York: Routledge, 1994): 214-229.

<sup>33</sup> David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style & Mode of Production to 1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 43.



rejects this belief or is utilizing its anxious capabilities. The rattled viewer becomes aware that he or she is not participant in this imagined world, but is only an observer or witness, reflexively aware of the reconstructed cinematic space.

At the beginning of the film, we cut to a taxi driving through war-ravaged city streets, with bombed-out buildings flanking each side. Two girls sit blindfolded in the back of the taxi. Yasmine begins giving an internal commentary about it being her 20th birthday. She and Leila are going to see Mr. Farouk. They want to watch his films and to share some of theirs with him. Leila and Yasmine's journey to visit Mr. Farouk offers the semblance of a narrative structure with defined characters; however, the characters' motivation does not offer a linear structure. Instead, Yasmine and Leila guide us into an endless series of film clips, moving quickly through space and time, while remaining grounded in Beirut. The blindfold, the taxi, and the unviewed film reel left in the back of the car all serve as iconic modes of structuring visibility. Each presents a defined mode of seeing. The blindfold, as discussed in relation to *Hors la vie*, pushes vision to the edges, forcing one to look askance. The taxi chauffeurs the protagonists and the audience through the demolished streets, but the semi-private space of the vehicle structures one's experience based on movement and spatial division from the streets. The film reel presents itself as a media object. Imagined notions of its invisible contents remain sealed in a casing, while the materiality of the reel reminds the viewer of the gap between the image and the object. Meanwhile, these initial elements of visibility serve as a type of allegory for the remainder of the film, in which decontextualized clips are strung together and projected within the hidden chambers of this pre-war movie house. As we are blindfolded, chauffeured, and reminded of the materiality of representational media, this reflexive layering of visual codes serves as a key trait of post-orientalist aesthetics.

After the taxi driver delivers Yasmine and Leila to an abandoned movie theater, we are left to wander the cinematic terrain with our heroines. Mr. Farouk says that he has been hiding out there for years with his films. Now the two young women are prepared to show him a film clip of theirs. A title card announces, "1914 Leila and Yasmine play a trick on Mr. Farouk." Early documentary archival footage of people in markets rolls are accompanied by extra-diegetic music of a classical Middle Eastern variety. From this footage, we cut to a scene made to look anachronistic in its tone and texture. The camera pans to the two girls on screen as they announce, "These are

the only images that we've found of our city, Mr. Farouk. They are undoubtedly very beautiful, but, frankly, a little out of date." More archival footage with music follows, and Leila continues:

We haven't found anything else, Mr. Farouk. Yasmine tends to fib, but for once, she is telling the truth. We found nothing else, except some clichés as: Beirut, the pearl of the Middle East, hidden in the blue casket of the Mediterranean. Lebanon, the Switzerland of the Orient. A haven of peace in the heart of a tumultuous region. Beirut, a cosmopolitan city where East meets West. That's all we've managed to come up with, on our city, Mr. Farouk. A head-spinning series of clichés.

Yasmine follows:

You know, nowadays, guys don't say to us: "you've got beautiful eyes." They say: "You have machine-gun eyes." I thought that, maybe, with you, we would find a little *savoir-vivre*. We came to ask you some questions. If you could answer us. . . . It's true, we were told that you were Beirut's living memory.

As children of the war, Leila and Yasmine are tired of the old and clichéd representations of Beirut. Their desire for a "real" Beirut seeks resolution in the media landscape of Mr. Farouk's secret archive of films. Mr. Farouk agrees to show them "his" Beirut. He leads them to a huge archive of films that the women explore. Physical exploration of the archive is matched by the uncanny ability to move between the space of Mr. Farouk's theater and the diegetic space of films we presume they are watching, thus simultaneously entering the material world of the archive and the visceral world of the images. Mr. Farouk's theater becomes a darkened bunker of cinematic contraband, enabling Leila and Yasmine to move through imaginary landscapes of Beirut. Saab's creative geography creates a cinematic space, in which the viewer and the characters can enter these spaces and move between them. In this treatment, there is no difference between Saab's own footage in Farouk's theater and the scenes from Lebanese, Egyptian, French, and American films. Even if it ruptures our expectation for consistency according to classical Hollywood criteria, why should there be a clear distinction between these mediated moments? While a viewer's expectation would assume a distinction between different diegetic temporalities, in reality, all these films only exist in the present. Beirut's burden is the weight of all of these histories simultaneously and contiguously coexisting.

For instance, a French movie shows a man checking in at the airport just before he sees a plane explode at takeoff. We cut to an American film with people flying into Beirut and an airport police officer confronting the protagonist. After he leaves the airport, the American and French films are suddenly intercut to seem concurrent. A series of agents, voluptuous women, wire-tapping, and assassinations foreshadows a scene in which we are told Beirut is due to blow up in two days. Embedded within the scene, Leila and Yasmine sit at a poolside of one of Beirut's luxury hotels and comment on James Bond, bombs, and how all of this chaos started during the 1960s. "All these spies in Beirut at the same time. And nobody here seems to suspect a thing," say the girls. Cut to an evil mastermind announcing that his bomb will kill Beirut's people, leaving its vaults intact for him to clean out. Immediately following this utterance, we witness apocalyptic scenes and footage of a haunting drive through the war-torn damage of Beirut. Through this juxtaposition, we are led to believe that the destruction of Beirut was the result of an evil conspiracy, thus erasing the culpability of Lebanese and Palestinian militias and the Syrian and Israeli armies.

The lack of causality and a clear-cut ending most appropriately characterizes the impossibility of "making sense" of the war or of the forces at play that lead up to it. Saab's acute interest in revealing the artifice of the craft relates directly to her presentation of Beirut's history through cinema. And yet, if Saab goes to the effort to cull through hundreds of films to achieve this, then crisis presents a paradox in which Saab still relies on representation. Jocelyn Saab's *Once Upon a Time, Beirut/Kan ya ma Kan Bayrut* (1994) is an example of critical remediation of Beirut, which characterizes a post-orientalist aesthetics. While employing techniques that accentuate mediated constructedness, embedding a critique of (mis)representation, and focussing the narrative around a crisis of violence and exile, *Once Upon a Time, Beirut* does not exemplify the "radical closure" of memory advanced by Jalal Toufic.

In fact, Toufic's critique of the film elucidates an imperative perspective on the mediation of "post-war" (non)subjectivity.<sup>34</sup> If *Once Upon a Time, Beirut* is a film about forgetting, Toufic regrettably

---

<sup>34</sup> Jalal Toufic's notion of the "undead," developed around his reading of vampire cinema, corresponds to those who witnessed their own death by being "survivors" of the civil war. In other words, the undead disrupt notions of rational subjectivity, because they have witnessed the most irrational of experiences. See Toufic, *(Vampires): An Uneasy Essay on the Undead in Film* (Barrytown, NY: Station Hill, 1993).

reflects that it is “unfortunately mainly in the sense that it is an unmindful film.” Saab’s major flaw, says Toufic, is that she limited memory “to human recollection and archival images.” By bestowing the “memory of Beirut” to an elderly projectionist who lives in the bombed out ruins of Beirut in a secret archive of cinema reels, Saab constructs a “[m]emory of what has thus been withdrawn,” which Toufic dismisses as, “a betrayal of it, a false memory.” Furthermore, because Saab places the two young actresses within these archival images, she in effect “hides that the images are inaccessible.” To show the images as inaccessible would instead acknowledge the impossible referentiality that results in the wake of a disastrous ordeal: what Toufic calls a “surpassing disaster.”<sup>35</sup> This distinction about the way remediation either draws attention to nostalgic reconstructions of lost memory or to an acknowledgement of its irretrievable loss elucidates a spectrum of post-orientalist aesthetics. This aesthetic spectrum aims to critique the politics of representation, but often becomes mired in representational impossibilities (what video artist Akram Zaatari calls a “cycle of diminishing returns”).<sup>36</sup>

Saab provides a pastiche of cinematic history, but what does the montage achieve? Her rigorous critique itself runs out of material and seems to retreat to a comedic farce. The final reel of film from the taxi returns: it has a clip of religious students denouncing truth as a monkey. Her ending would suggest that since there is no real understanding available, one should laugh it off. Toufic argues that in the face of a “surpassing disaster” one experiences an existential crisis, so rather than retreating into comedic escape, he argues that one must acknowledge what has been lost. Toufic’s advancement of an “undead” post-war subjectivity ushers in unimaginable potentials—becoming a non-subject, becoming latent, becoming monstrous—which enables the resurrection of imaginary memories which may or may not have occurred in the past as a way to mourn the invisible and disappeared, if only by witnessing them askance. Since the disappeared, the undead, can never be imaged directly, post-orientalist aesthetics enables an indirect mode of witnessing.

---

<sup>35</sup> Toufic, *Forthcoming* (Berkeley: Atelos, 2000), 68.

<sup>36</sup> Hannah Feldman and Akram Zaatari, “Mining War: Fragments from a Conversation Already Passed,” in *Art Journal* 66:2 (Summer 2007): 48-67.

## CONCLUSION

Critical of nationalistic and imperialistic violence as well as fundamentalist and orientalist patriarchy, Akram Zaatari, Jalal Toufic, Borhane Alaouié, Jayce Salloum, Joana Hadjithomas, Khalil Joreige, and others embody the euphemistically “absent (Muslim) moderates”—a sensibility that western media and politicians frequently say is missing in the Middle East. Between notions of fanatic Islamic fundamentalists on the one hand and passive Muslim women on the other, exists a diverse spectrum of ideological perspectives neither passive nor fatalistic, but necessarily politicized by the ever-present violence and instability of a routine lived experience. This unstable experience disrupts the notion of coherent subjectivity. The process of thinking visually through this wreckage enables a critique with affective intensity. A careful reading of post-orientalist aesthetics in Lebanese experimental documentary provides new theoretical considerations about visual registers of difference.

## FILMOGRAPHY

*The Battle of Algiers* (1966) Gillo Pontecorvo  
*Beirut the Encounter/Beirut al Likaa* (1981) Borhane Alaouié  
*Beirut Phantom* (1998) Borhane Alaouié  
*The Cats of Hamra Street* (1972) Samir al-Ghoussayni  
*Hors la vie* (1991) Borhane Alaouié  
*In the Battlefields* (2005) Danielle Arbid  
*Introduction to the End of an Argument/Muqaddimah Li-Nihayat Jidal*  
 (1990) Jayce Salloum and Elia Suleiman  
*Lawrence of Arabia* (1962) David Lean  
*Measures of Distance* (1981) Mona Hatoum  
*Once Upon a Time, Beirut* (1994) Jocelyn Saab  
*The Perfect Day* (2005) Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige  
*(This Is Not Beirut)/There Was and There Was Not* (1994) Jayce Salloum  
*West Beirut* (1996) Ziad Doueri