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Experimental Arab Cinema: Film as Sensory Experience

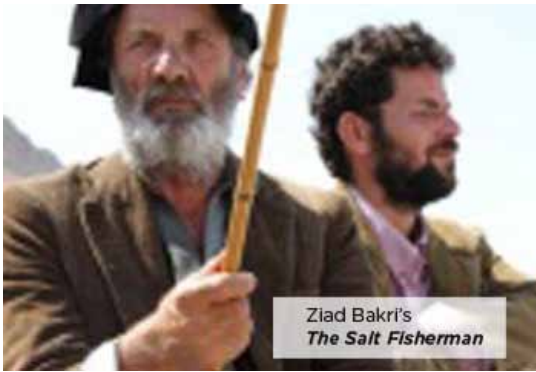
20.02.2012 - Many of us expect to walk away from a film with some kind of a cognitive grasp on what just unfolded in front of us, with a neat summation or explanation that we can confidently relay to others. We use aspects of a film like dialogue as a crutch, leaning on it for support, looking for it to either communicate the 'point' to us directly or to provide us with a riddle we are capable of solving.



We delve into a variety of cinematic genres, from the horrifying to the heartbreaking, comfortable in the knowledge that we are detached from the narrative on screen, witnessing it from a safe distance. We often passively watch a performance unfold, waiting for it to induce a temporary and superficial reaction: fear, sadness, joy, etc. We walk away touched, moved or entertained, impressed that a given movie managed to draw out our tears or laughter. But we emerge relatively unscathed; able to quickly shake off whatever mood a given film put us in because of an awareness of our role as mere observer of a projected story.

In the realm of experimental film, there are directors who challenge the traditional cinematic experience by pushing the viewer to participate in the performance. Using minimal dialogue, abandoning imposing musical scores that work like tour guides pointing viewers in the direction of appropriate emotional responses, and choosing to playfully amplify background noises and linger over images, these directors weave visual poems rather than linear narratives. They refuse to show or tell, and instead, put the viewer's body through an ordeal, sucking her into the screen, dissolving the distance between film and viewer. They don't pose clear-cut questions and answers or invite viewers to contemplate the meaning of planted symbols. Rather, such directors cultivate a sensory experience that engulfs the viewer and lingers in her extremities long after the credits roll. Such methods have become increasingly popular among independent Arab filmmakers as they push the boundaries not only of regional cinema, but film as a whole.

A case in point is Ziad Bakri's directorial debut, *The Salt Fisherman*. This 17-minute film follows a fisherman who leads an isolated life as he engages in the same routine activity everyday: fishing in the Dead Sea. After the film's screening at the 2011 Dubai International Film Festival, a woman from the audience complained to Bakri that she didn't understand the point of the film. It was frustrating, she explained, repeatedly watching an old man getting out of bed, slowly making his way to the sea, sitting on a stool, attempting to catch a fish in a sea with no fish in it, and returning home empty handed. She couldn't understand why the director chose to tell such an uneventful and seemingly boring story. Bakri's intention however, was to frustrate his viewer, to make her feel uncomfortable and restless, to prompt her to wave a fed up hand at this fisherman who insists on repeating this hopeless expedition day after day.



The film attempts to bring the viewer into the fold of this man's dreary existence. It does so by creating a monotonous rhythm, dragging the viewer through the same scenes over and over again; scenes of the fisherman waking, walking and sitting that stretch on, exposing the viewer briefly to the tediousness that defines the fisherman's life. Instead of dialogue, the fisherman's journey is punctuated by the sounds of nature that surround him, heightening the sensation of loneliness and emptiness that seems to encompass him, making him increasingly appear like another part of the background scenery. We hear only the noises that accompany

him on his daily journey: his shoes against the rubble, the splashing of the waves. As he fishes, the camera lingers over his tired, sorrowful and yet determined face. The viewer stares into his eyes, drawn over and over again into this waiting game, each time growing a little more frustrated and a little more hopeless, and each time becoming more aware of the impossibility of this expedition while watching the fisherman's unchanging, resolute expression.

The film is an unconventional meditation on the way Palestinians experience time. The hands on the fisherman's clock don't move. He inhabits a sort of time loop that he can only break out of, it seems, when he catches a fish in the Dead Sea, where no fish live. By walking us repeatedly through this time loop with the fisherman, Bakri enables us to experience the sensation of being frozen in time and constricted in space, waiting for an impossible solution, holding on to a vision and memory that can never be recreated, all of which is characteristic of the tragic Palestinian experience. Images of massacres, tanks and soldiers, crying mothers, refugee camps and war zones, might fill us with anger, sadness and outrage, but they cannot enable us to share in the experience of being Palestinian, to fully grasp what it's like to inhabit their circumstances. Rather than presenting us with the epic images, sounds and narratives we would normally expect from a film about Palestine, Bakri uses a simple, visual fable to recreate a certain *sensibility*, to allow his viewers to temporarily inhabit a kernel of Palestinian experience.

Similarly, watching Ghassan Salhab's *The Mountain* is not a pleasant affair. The film's value, however, for me, lies in how challenging it is to sit through. All that one can confidently assert about this film is that it is, in large part, a story of isolation. It centers on a middle-aged Lebanese man who leaves Beirut and retreats to an unidentified mountain village. He checks into an almost empty hotel for a month and asks the staff not to disturb him, insisting that they not clean his room and requesting that they leave his meals outside his door. We know nothing about this man aside from the fact that he writes poetry. Everything, even his name, is kept from us. The film doesn't contain the usual condiments one expects to top a Lebanese narrative. There is very little trace of politics, sectarianism or war. There is nothing for the viewer to latch onto and extract, nothing that would allow her to comfortably say that this unknown man, this nondescript room, this poem he is writing, or this snowy mountain, together compose some grand metaphor.

The film isn't trying to 'say' anything. Rather, it is exploring the psychological and physical repercussions of isolation without attempting to come to any conclusions about them. It perches us on the unknown man's shoulder, inviting us to descend into isolation with him. We sit with him in his room, listening to his scratchy breathing, the clawing of his pen on typewriter paper and the constant howling of the wind, waiting patiently with him in the dark when the electricity cuts, watching him stare, with the wonder of a child discovering his extremities, at the blot of ink his pen left on his thumb. Shot in black and white and glossed over with artful lighting that creates soft shades of grey, the film has the texture of a dream. The velvety visuals, coupled with the anonymity of the character, cultivate an air of intimacy between film and viewer. The camera lingers over scenes of the character sitting contemplatively, presenting them almost like photographic stills, positioning the viewer to stare at the unknown man as he stares into space or at his paper, to hover with him in separate but intertwined contemplation. The brilliance of actor Fadi Abi Samra's performance is concentrated in the subtlety of his bodily movements and stillness and the intensity of his facial expressions. He acts, often, with his eyes, which appear at different stages of the film empty, forlorn and crazed. As we watch this unknown man we listen to the sounds that penetrate his room, together forming an eerie, spine tingling and unnerving symphony, unhinging the viewer as they seem to do the unknown man.

As his stay drags on, we begin to shift in our seats, becoming increasingly anxious and frustrated as he slowly comes unhinged, walking around in the nude, hiding all the mirrors in a closet, refusing to eat and unplugging the phone. We have to work to stay with the unknown man, to keep from abandoning him. The longer we stay with him the more we begin to feel anxious, disturbed and unbalanced, and the more we hope for the film to end so we can return to the relative sanity of our real lives.

Instead of transmitting a clear message or theory about isolation, Salhab manages to instill in his viewer a profound sense of discomfort, teleporting her into the unknown man's skin to share in his isolation. Watching this film is an unpleasant experience and that is precisely where, for me, its brilliance lies, because it is capable of introducing the viewer's body to the horror of isolation in a way that could only have otherwise been possible if one actually spent a month alone in that hotel.

Film, in such cases, becomes more than a moving image one watches from afar. It creates a space for the viewer to step into temporarily, a pocket sewn onto her reality where she can be made to partake, however minimally, in an unfamiliar experience.