

# THE EVENING CLASS

SUNDAY, OCTOBER 28, 2007

**2007 AFF: LEBANESE CINEMA—*A Perfect Day, Falafel and The Last Man***



Launched  
in 2006  
and  
supported  
by the  
European

Union, the Caravan of Euro-Arab Cinema sponsored a series of cinematic events (aptly named "Caravan Nights") in various European and Mediterranean cities earlier this year. Focusing on Lebanese cinema, Caravan Nights presented 11 films produced between 2000 and 2006, representing established directors with unique approaches and up-and-coming directors making their feature-film debut. The screened films reflected the uniqueness of Lebanese film production less concerned with traditional issues and heavily influenced by the diaspora from Lebanon. During May and June, the Caravan traveled through the Netherlands where it attracted 4,500 filmgoers and screened Arab films in Amsterdam, Rotterdam and other Dutch cities. It also participated with 11 films in all four competitive categories of June's 7th Arab Film Festival in Rotterdam. In July the Caravan was represented at the 5th Paris Cinema Festival at the Arab World Institute, where it then moved on to the Toulouse Cinémathèque.

San Francisco's [Arab Film Festival](#) brought three of these Lebanese features—Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige's [A](#)

## ABOUT ME



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*Perfect Day* (2005), Michel Kammoun's *Falafel* (2006), and Ghassan Salhab's *The Last Man* (2006)—to the Bay Area. Each employed Beirut at night as their *mise-en-scène* and shared common themes, albeit by individual stylistic flourishes. Kammoun, the youngest of the directors, explored a magical realism unique to the Mideast through *Falafel*; Salhab enunciated Beirut's death wish through *The Last Man*; and Hadjithomas and Joreige used *A Perfect Day* to profile the foolish hope of a Lebanese youth who decides to live life his way.

Throughout the festival, Peter Limbrick's introductory remarks provided working commentary to deepen my appreciation of these three films, specifically his references to "latency" in Lebanese cinema, which he described as "a sense that something is underneath and bubbling up even if it's not directly addressed"; that "something" being Lebanon's past, specifically its recent civil war. Limbrick asked us to give thought to how all three films are trying to deal in many ways with Lebanon's civil war but not by approaching it head-on.

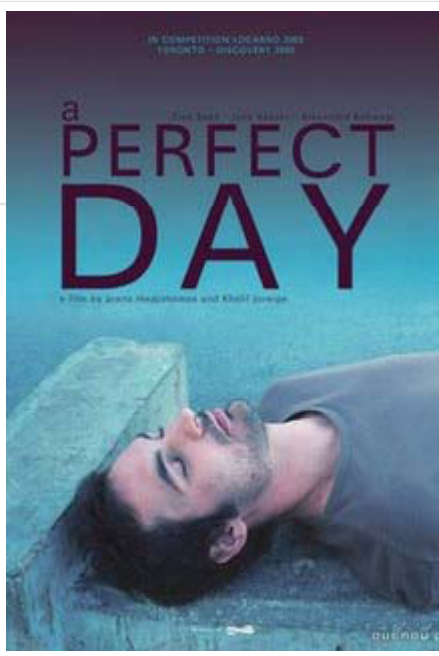
In his Fall 2001 *Middle East Quarterly* article "*Après la guerre*", Martin Kramer specified: "Of the many questions haunting the Middle East, two concern the legacies of recent conflicts when Arab fought Arab with fanatic gusto. Iraq and Lebanon are now both [over] a decade after their wars, but question-marks still hover over the aftermath. ...Has Lebanon moved beyond the trauma of war, far enough to reclaim its suspended independence? Filmmakers have attempted to answer [this] question[], with widely different degrees of art and integrity."

Kramer states Lebanon "remains a place of striking contradictions that few directors can resist" but qualifies that it "is a demographically young country, so memory of the war has very quickly grown foggy—perhaps too quickly, for the war's lessons were never clearly learned by Lebanon's leaders." He notes "the civil war has receded, and been made to recede, from the conscience of Lebanon" and "[t]hose who lived through the war prefer to forget it." The cost of such enforced forgetfulness, however, breeds irresolution of conflicts in the Middle East.

"They enter latency," Kramer cautions.

Picking at Beirut's scars produces amazingly consistent complexes of images, which I seek to explore and elucidate through these three films. "Beirut, of course," Kramer writes, "is strewn with silent ruins." It's perhaps worthwhile to note that *The Last Man's* Arabic title is literally translated "Ruins." Kramer analyzes that "these terrible places where bloody massacres took place are attested to by no more than pockmarked walls, which will no doubt be bulldozed into the ground; they are no substitute for a proper memorial, which are entirely missing. The bereaved keep private memorials on their mantles, but there is no sense of collective loss. ...In fact, nowhere in Lebanon is there a single memorial to the fallen." I would suggest that Lebanese cinema itself has become the necessary memorial demanded by the Lebanese collective psyche to counter the institutionalized denials of demolition and erasure, under the guise of reconstruction.

"The man who personifie[d] the will to forget," Kramer profiles, "is Rafiq al-Hariri, who served as prime minister from 1992 to 1998 and was reelected again in October 2000. One purpose of Solidère, Hariri's private corporation for the reconstruction of Beirut, [was] to bulldoze away the physical traces of the war." Laboring under the profitable premise that "out of sight is out of mind", Kramer characterizes Hariri as "the clean slate, a man not implicated in Lebanon's wars, a super-contractor who [tore] down the past to build a new, antiseptic present behind reflecting glass." Reconstruction is configured as a form of cleansing and yet Lebanese cinema implies the stains—resistant to such efforts—go much deeper than the surface. Despite Hariri's efforts to put the past behind, he was assassinated by a presumed Syrian suicide bomber. So much for the will to forget through sanitized surfaces.



I bring this up only to underscore that the protagonist Malek (Ziad Saad) in *A Perfect Day* is a construction worker at just such a demolition site who, curiously, suffers from bouts of narcolepsy, unable to stay awake to complete the job of reconstruction. The film's theatrical poster shows him unconscious. The demolition is further

hindered by the discovery of corpses. The film's title connotes "a perfect day" when the exhaustive burden of vigil and memory can finally be put to rest. After 15 years of awaiting news of his kidnapped father, Lebanese law allows the bereaved to officially declare missing loved ones dead. And yet Malek and his mother Claudia (Julia Kassab) find themselves unable to follow through on the legal declaration and Malek is morbidly obsessed that the corpse discovered at the demolition site might bear some identificatory marks that would identify him as his father. These are wounds of absence that shun legal remedy. Curiously, in *Falafel* the father never makes an appearance and is, in effect, likewise absent.

Further, in *Falafel* there is a moment when protagonist Tou (Elie Mitri) witnesses a kidnapping while making a telephone call. He is ineffectual and can do nothing to help the victim. When he is later himself the victim of random abuse, he can only look at his wounds in the mirror and weep. In his



fantasies of violent revenge he is momentarily valorized; but, in life he is consistently emasculated. The "wages of silence", Kramer suggests, become evident by the fact that "[a]cross Lebanon, revolvers are still under pillows (and easy enough to buy on the street)." A revolver plays into both *A Perfect Day* and *Falafel* as a necessary prop, a kind of wishful thinking that violence will bring resolution, if not healing.

Another similarity in both films is how mothers wait, estranged and distanced from their husbands and sons. Lebanese women can no longer rely on men to protect them. They maneuver the stages of grief on their own. Perhaps they represent the abandoned body of Lebanon?

Another scholar who has mined the subtleties of latency in Lebanese cinema has been [Laura U. Marks](#), author of *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment and the Senses* (2000) and *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* (2002). Dr. Marks has curated programs of film, video, and new media for venues around the world and is the Dena Wosk University Professor in Art and Culture Studies in the School for the Contemporary Arts at Simon Fraser University, Vancouver. Though her research far exceeds a Lebanese subject, her insights are valuable.

In her recent essay "Mohamed Soueid's cinema of immanence" (*Jump Cut*, No. 49, spring 2007), Marks states that Beirut is "already performing a psychoanalysis. It is already archaeological. It knows all about ruins." Film out of Lebanon, and specifically Beirut, require not only interpretation but excavation, aligning with the familiar practice of philosopher William Benjamin to interpret "the failures of ideology from the ruins of its demise."

Following up on the reconstructive strategies of Rafiq al-Hariri and bringing his profile up to date, Marks writes: "Lebanon is a country whose vulnerability to outside powers (including Israel, the United States, Syria, and lately Iran) and internal divisiveness make it impossible to assert a unified narrative of the nation's

history or confidently to draw causal connections between historical events. There has been no agreement as to the facts of what happened during the civil war (1975-1990), no Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and no official strategy for healing from the war's savage effects. The political upheaval surrounding the murder of former prime minister Rafiq Hariri on February 14, 2005 and the subsequent Syrian withdrawal continued acutely to test Lebanese people's ability to narrate history in a linear and non-contradictory way. In July 2006, Israel criminally bombarded civilian targets all across Lebanon, in an attack supposedly against Hizballah that demolished the infrastructure that, during Hariri's rule, had begun to unify the country geographically. This attack divided Lebanon's population even further along religious lines, and further underscored the country's utter vulnerability to the whims of international powers.

"In the post-civil war era, it was already impossible for documentary filmmakers to identify historical events and fix blame. Now this situation is only exacerbated. Insofar as Lebanese documentarists are able to continue to function at all, they continue to work by imaginatively stretching the truth, mixing documentary, fiction, personal and conceptual approaches. They confront the country's history like a plane of immanence. The acts that are known and demonstrable are less politically salient than the teeming sea of virtuals, events that have been bulldozed over, witnessed only by the dead and disappeared, forgotten in the official history that seeks to reinsert Lebanon into the global economy, and even forgotten by the participants in the war, for who can afford to live with a gaping wound?"

By applying her comments to feature films, Marks lends insight into the nature of "latency" in Lebanese cinema. Latency, as Limbrick implied in his introduction, characterizes the domain of the repressed in Lebanese society which pops up to assert itself. Marks describes this as happening through narratives "structured by a symptomatic course of declarations and disavowals" and "a tendency to avoid attributing root causes and to favor this-ness,

fragmentariness, indirection." The fatigue and stress of living with postwar uncertainty connotes a collective trauma. Though writing on the films of Mohamed Soueid, Marks' comments could equally apply to the characters in the three films under discussion. They are obsessive characters. They are people "whose neuroses and tragedies make them truthful historical subjects." By "subjects" she means individuals who are essentially "knots of tics, bad habits, and accommodations that allow them to deal (not without flair) with impossible situations. They are not so much psychological subjects as knots in a political field, their individual neuroses the manifestation of political trauma."

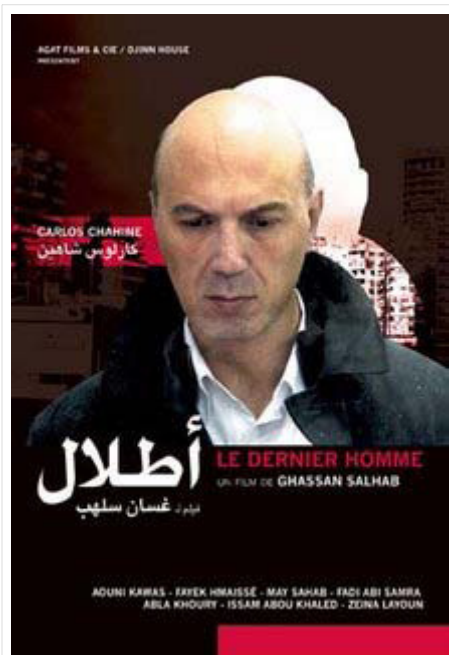
In an earlier interview on the question of latency, Dr. Marks described the phenomenon where "everything that is expressed conceals many other things that have not been expressed." Not only is this observed through the effects of the civil war on the particularities of everyday life as registered through individual narratives of neuroses, but also through a quest for truth in media representation. Extolling the virtues of Lebanon's experimental video documentary movement—which Marks proclaims is "Lebanon's greatest contribution to contemporary Arab and world cinema"—she then notes with interest that "what the contemporary film and video makers in Beirut are doing ... is mostly about what counts as truth, how do you represent what really happened?"

This especially comes across in *Falafel* during a compelling reimagining of the lunar landing as watched on a television set. A giant falafel approaches the lunar surface like a massive meteorite and spins history awry. This underscores Marks' assertion that the problem of mainstream media is a problem of "indexicality" or—as she states it—"there are so many images in the world that don't tell the truth. Any mainstream representations, whether they are from the west or overseas, or whether they are local, official images; for example in Lebanon the official histories of the civil war try to cut it up, erase it, and smooth it over."

Just as cinema provides the memorial sorely lacking to



commemorate the missing and the dead, so does it also provide a means to express what remains latent and inexpressible, particularly through an audio-visual expression "rather than simply reiterating something that has already been expressed." On that point I consider Malek's narcoplepsy in *A Perfect Day* to be a profound effective expression of trying to awake or to keep awake even as the culture aspires towards forgetfulness. All three films traverse a nocturnal vigil that waits or maneuvers towards dawn or some incremental increase in consciousness.



Perhaps the most interesting of these three in that respect is *The Last Man*, highly touted as Lebanon's first vampire film; but as Peter Limbrick has swiftly pointed out, "it's the *strangest* vampire movie that you're ever going to see."

In his introduction to *The Last Man* at its Roxie Film Center screening,

Limbrick stated Ghassan Salhab had made two previous feature films—*Beyrouth Fantôme* and *Terra Incognita*—whose titles provide a sense that his films all tend to use Beirut as a focus. "They're all interested in multiple kinds of layers of history of Beirut," Limbrick explained, circumambulating around the now ready theme of ruins and psychological excavation. "Salhab describes his own city as a place where he says 'constantly small fissures can turn into gaping abysses.' I've seen him also quote—I think Samuel Beckett—who said 'Beirut is a city continually being undone and redone.'" Again, the theme of reconstruction as a means of forgetting and cleansing.

Acknowledging that—despite its thematic similarities to *A Perfect Day*—*The Last Man*, Limbrick clarifies, "does its



work in a really different style and I'd like to say a couple of things about that style. First of all, as befits a vampire movie, it is certainly not shot in a realist style. We can see a lot of places where there is a kind of naturalism about the way Salhab presents the city, but he and [Jacques Boquin](#)—who did the absolutely incredible cinematography in this film—have really sort of ... as you see the film unfold, you begin to realize that it presents Beirut in a way that is stranger and stranger. It has a stylized color palette in places, we see architecture and space of the city given to us in ways that are alienating and distancing. Its editing works like that as well. This is a film that is put together in a discontinuous style. So don't be watching thinking for everything to make absolute narrative sense. It doesn't flow like a Hollywood film. The result is enigmatic. It sat with me for a long time after I saw it. I grew to appreciate its enigma. I should mention also the soundtrack for this film is stunning. Here again there's a link to [A Perfect Day](#). Both these filmmakers are interested in the soundscape of Beirut and are attentive to the sounds found in the city, everything from cell phones to other aspects around us."



In fact it is the audio-visual design of *The Last Man* that proves stunning as a means of expressing the gradual recognition on the part of its protagonist Dr. Khalil Shams (in a completely understated yet mesmerizing performance by Carlos Chahine) that he is becoming something unknown, nearly unfathomable, to himself. Lapses of sound pull him out of his common world into another requiring a different attention and an altered self-perception. Silence, an aversion to daylight, and a lack of

reflection become the vampiric tropes by which Shams intuits his new self. As Limbrick writes for the program capsule: "***The Last Man*** evokes the layers of the past that make up Beirut's sedimented present. Rather than approach history and politics head-on, Salhab's film does its work through an unlikely idea: a vampire is sucking the lifeblood from Beirut's citizenry, one victim at a time." Dr. Shams gradually suspects *he* is the vampire. "Recoiling from sunlight, [he] explores the darker dimensions of a wintry Beirut ... as he increasingly questions his own capacity for intimate violence."

Summoned into fraternity with his "maker", ***The Last Man***'s final image of Dr. Shams receding underground as dawn approaches is devastatingly nihilistic. All three films provide nuanced reactions to recent events in Lebanon expressed in indirect but insightful ways and I am immensely grateful to the Arab Film Festival for providing this welcome exposure to Lebanese cinema.

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