One of the most intriguing elements of Mohamed Soueid’s film *My Heart Beats Only For Her* (2008) is the ambiguous narrative that lies somewhere between fiction and documentary. In this film a man named Hassan tries to retrace the steps of his father Hatem Hatem, a Lebanese revolutionary in the 1970s, on a journey from Beirut to Hanoi to Dubai. Soueid combines and interrelates these two seemingly opposite genres, creating a space for interpretation and growth. In particular, I am going to focus on the scenes where the colour red may point to the theatricality of the setting or the characters. These scenes to me are the “red flags” that bring to the surface and point out the limits of the two genres and show how, combined, they may be able to push forward the story and the issues raised by the filmmaker. I will relate Soueid’s film to the work of Jean Rouch, an anthropologist and filmmaker who had a similar mandate of combining fiction with documentary.

According to Paul Stoller in “Jean Rouch and the Power of the Between,” “the between is a central concept in Moroccan mystical thinking” (134). Stoller refers to Moulay Abedaslem’s description of the between as *barzakh*, “what lies between things – edges, borders, and events” (134). This gap is associated with sleep and dreaming, used commonly in the expression “little death” for sleep. The word *barzakh* is mentioned in the Koran, meaning the great separator. The notion of the between also has deep roots in Sufi thought. According to Stoller, Ibn al-'Arabi, the Andalusian Sufi, says: “Any two adjacent things are in need of barzakh which is neither one nor the other, but which possesses the power … of both.” While the between can generate fear and anxiety, it can also guide one’s experience and bring up questions. In the world of filmmaking,
using the power of the between means combining genres and not only testing how well they work together, but finding out what the newly opened space may illuminate. In a strictly narrative film, the characters are expected to act a certain way at certain times. In a work where documentary and fiction are combined, something very spontaneous and human happens: now the subjects are freer to improvise, and new connections in the story are established. It is true that both kinds of films are edited, which brings in a whole new set of rules, but editing can be done rhythmically and instinctively, calculated but improvised at the same time, instead of sticking to a single formula or code. If one thinks about editing as linking the past, present, and future in telling and retelling, the filmmaker has a lot of power in developing the story and exposing moments he or she considers important.

The dynamics of the between propel us toward the story, as is well illustrated in the work of Jean Rouch. A scientist, humanist, anthropologist, and filmmaker, Rouch spent more than sixty years documenting subjects in West Africa. He describes his work this way: “Good ethnology is a theory and a brilliant exposition of this theory – and that’s what a film is” (Macdonald and Cousins, 266). I have to agree. Especially in a film that concerns itself with a political issue or events in history, one of the most productive approaches is to research and find a lot of information first, and then piece it together like a puzzle. Another filmmaker who explores the connection between the two genres is Frederick Wiseman, who refers to it as “reality-fiction” (Cholodenko, 158), a hybrid form. As Alan Cholodenko puts it, “Just as Wiseman’s films are at the same time both reality and fiction and neither reality nor fiction, Rouch’s films are both science and fiction and neither science nor fiction” (158).

In My Heart Beats Only For Her, Soueid is looking at Yasser Arafat’s rule. Arafat created a complicated and hierarchical power structure, as the head of Fatah and the founder of the PLO (Palestinian Liberation Organization). As the most radical section of
the PLO, Fatah became the main power center. Soueid emphasizes the dreams of change and the popular struggle in Lebanon, as the PLO moved most of its fighting strength there in 1970 in its attempt to attack Israel. Arafat looked at Ho Chi Minh in Vietnam and Mao Tse-Tung in China during their revolutionary periods as models for inspiration. In 1945 Ho Chi Minh proclaimed the independence of Vietnam from Japanese rule; subsequently France trying to take over Vietnam between 1946 and 1954. In 1954 Ho Chi Minh pushed for Vietnam’s freedom, and managed to liberate North Vietnam. China became one of the Communist supporters during the Vietnamese War, which US saw as a threat of spreading Communism. These events inspired Arafat to create left-wing militias and make people think of Lebanon as a new Hanoi.

The complexity of these events can bewilder Western audiences for My Heart Beats Only for Her, and delicate methods are needed to present material for audiences to discover and observe, without simplifying it. One of the ways Jean Rouch avoided subjectivity and bias is what he referred to as “shared ethnography” (Stoller, 142): an early screening during which he would ask the subjects about their experience of seeing themselves on the screen, and whether the information presented in it was correct. This activity helped bridge the two dissimilar worlds, showing the Western audience that this really was how subjects in Africa experienced their life at the time. Rouch also put a lot of emphasis on making sure he is filming and showing subjects, not objects. Realizing he had a lot of power in the way they would be shown, he wanted to take into account his subjects’ own experience of his work, in order to be closer to the truth. In a similar way, because of the relaxed setting during the interviews in Soueid’s film, we can trust that what the subjects are saying is what they truly believe. For example, Rola Shams, a TV producer in Dubai with Kurdish and Lebanese roots, says this: “We are always so proud of the past, and the ‘me’ elements in it. It is never going to take us anywhere. When people say: ‘my grandfather did this, and mine did this,’ everyone’s grandfather
probably did something. We are too attached to the past, and it is not going to get us anywhere.” She describes how the Lebanese civil war united people, as horrible a circumstance as it was. There is a section of the society that hangs on to the past, because that is all they know. A former PLO member supports this, saying, “I only lived through the war.” When Shams explains this, she is speaking in a matter-of-fact way, because to her this is very clear. However, for an audience unfamiliar with the social and political issues in Lebanon, this is crucial information. It is also relatable and straightforward, which helps with the reading of this film.

When dealing with something not yet known to us, the role of the documentary filmmaker is to “excavate” the information and facts, and present them in a way that is the closest to the truth. However, the notion of truth is complicated. Jean Rouch was one of the founders of the cinéma-vérité movement in France. It was inspired by Dziga Vertov’s concept of kino-pravda (literally, cinema truth), which was Vertov’s attempt to show life as it were, as close to the reality as possible. Cinéma vérité practices diverge from those of direct cinema, the documentary approach created by Richard Leacock, D.A. Pennebaker and Albert and David Maysles, in that they question the relationship of cinema to reality and emphasize the artifice of filmmaking. Cinéma-vérité abandoned the possibility of doing science (anthropology, ethnography, psychology), “documenting that the only truth is that there is no truth,” as Alan Cholodenko puts it in Baudrillardian terms (157). In a work like Soueid’s, the truth is also complicated because of the time that has passed between the original events and the year that the film was made (2008). Soueid seems to deal with this problem by establishing historical links, rather than looking for witnesses. While narration has always been a problematic topic in cinema studies, in this film it brings something more than just a description of what is shown visually. By focusing on the story of Hatem Hatem, Soueid describes events that did really take place—but as seen through the eyes of a fictional character, for Hatem Hatem is an
invention. This becomes an unreliable narration of sorts, but helps connect different parts of the film into one lifetime, an experience of a single person. In films described as “mockumentaries” characters and appearances betray themselves on purpose. Instead, in My Heart Beats Only For Her, the viewer is given small clues about the film's level of artifice.

I think the recurrence of red in the film is one such clue. For example, there is a moment in the film where four people walk by the camera, all dressed in red. On the one hand, what we are seeing is a city street on a regular day, with people rushing around, perhaps taking care of errands. On the other hand, it is somewhat unlikely for all of these people to wear the exact same hue of red. The viewer starts to wonder if this is a coincidence or if the scene was staged. In other instances in the film people wear a red ski suit and a red tank top; there are red wreaths and red uniforms, and in one specifically interesting moment, an ad states “Experience Red Hot Love.” The recurrence of red becomes an interesting connection to Communist ideals (with the association of red and Communism) and how perhaps they still linger in the society in these “red cues.” The environments the subjects are shown in are often red as well, with deep red walls in homes and casinos, decorations, floor tiles, bridges, and entrances to houses. There are red flags and people rushing by on red vespas. Red is all over, though subtle enough not to overwhelm.

Gilles Deleuze discusses a similar phenomenon in his work Cinema 2, in a section titled “The Powers of The False.” He distinguishes what the camera sees and what the character sees, subjectively and objectively, and demonstrates that this is a kind of circuit, making the viewer question what is being shown (Deleuze, 129). During the interviews with the subjects of My Heart Beats Only For Her, the film first shows us the person and then cuts to footage of something related to what they were saying. In this way, the camera assumes a subjective presence, what Deleuze referred to as
“internal vision, which enters into a relation of simulation (‘mimesis’) with the character’s way of seeing” (136). It is not a direct point-of-view shot, where the camera takes on an embodied physicality and points at whatever the character may be seeing. Rather, it makes a subtler connection between the person’s words during the interview and the scene that follows. For example, Ho Chi Minh’s small red notebook is referenced, and then we see Mao Tse Tung’s little red book. These are two different things, but with a historical link between them. Or in another instance, a former PLO member explains how politics are complicated by the connection to faith, and the next shot shows a vase of carnations (carnations have a cultural connection to faith and death in many countries; for example, in Russia, carnations are known as funeral and honor flowers). In this way, the connections still have logic to them, but sometimes it is arbitrary, or open to interpretation. The symbolism in this film is not heavy and direct, but rather that of suggestions and metaphors.

Deleuze writes, “Time has always put the notion of truth into crisis” (127). While acknowledging this problem, Soueid finds a roundabout way of dealing with it in this film: he introduces poetry and music. Not only does it help make the film flow in a kind of smooth narrative, but it also acts as a relief from the scenes of tension that discuss the political agendas and military groups. Although the film is about events of the past, it feels as if it is always in a state of becoming: not in an unfinished sense, but in a way that it affects viewers by putting seeds of thoughts and questions into their minds. One moment the viewer is given a sequence about Dubai as the new economic center, full of glass, escalators, and advertising, and another moment it is back to discussing Ho Chi Minh’s strategies. At one instance, the viewer is put in an airport, which in itself is a space of transition, one of the most complicated time-spaces, and next it is back to political events of 1969. So are these time jumps illogical and inconsistent? Perhaps they appear that way at first. But the further one is into the film, the more accepting of
them one becomes. It goes back and forth between the direct story told in the interviews and the indirect/pseudo story of Hatem Hatem’s life. Deleuze privileges the character of the forger as the one best capable of exploiting the powers of the false. If there were one main forger in the film, it would be either Hatem Hatem himself or his son, another fictional character, who retraces his father’s steps in the film. The two of them are in a constant metamorphoses, expanding on each other’s existence, turning fiction into possible fact.

In conclusion, by exploring the grey zone between documentary and fiction and giving the viewer small cues, Soueid manages to put the viewer in the positions of fictional characters, both Hatem Hatem and his son. By doing so, Soueid guides the viewer to develop a level of understanding and empathy towards the events in Lebanon in the 1960s. We understand the perspective of Hatem Hatem through the eyes of his son Hassan, as he travels between Beirut, Dubai, and Hanoi, experiencing the three cities’ history of revolution, economy, and urban development. Following in the steps of Jean Rouch, Soueid experiments between documentary and fiction and opens up a space for discourse.
Works Cited


