I Want to See
A film by Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige

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I Want to See (Lebanon/France, 2008) presents an interesting solution to two major concerns of the Lebanese filmmakers Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige: how to find a new modality of seeing that would restore the “lost faces” of the constantly problematic, conflicting, and bleeding regions of the Middle East, and how to build a more intimate, active, and transformative relationship with their spectator. The film not only is designed to act as itself an experiment developing before our very eyes, but it also very actively involves us, the spectators, to participate in these transformative processes.

The process of questioning the notion of seeing is introduced right away, with our first moments into the film. The presence of Catherine Deneuve, and particularly her first phrase, “I want to see,” while she is framed standing in front of a wall-sized window, looking down at the vista of the city of Beirut, immediately sets in motion the scopic machine. However, uttered by the protagonist, who happens also to be a mega-star of world cinema, that is, an icon meant to be the destination of the scopic act, not its agent, signals an inversion that subverts the conventional order of cinematic rules. This hint of something unusual is reinforced by the rest of the scene: not-quite-clear figures move and cross the frame, rapidly exchanging short phrases, from which we start to discern that two of the participants are the authors of the film and the rest are people responsible for Catherine Deneuve’s schedule and security. The scene can be seen as a concise “thesis” of the film: it voices the intentions of the filmmakers, to film the one-day journey of Deneuve to the South of Lebanon; and it indicates the risks, dangers, and obstacles awaiting the characters of the film, as well as the film’s premise: Deneuve insists to see
for herself the aftermath of the “last war” (in Summer 2006), as the unidirectional Israeli bombings of Beirut and South Lebanon were called. We are puzzled how to “identify” the film: it starts to unfold as a strange hybrid, a mixture of genres: fiction-documentary-travelogue-film essay; the actors play themselves; the filmmakers appear in front of the camera, etc. Thus, from the very start, we are immersed in a special mode of perception of the film: as an experiment, as an exercise in “seeing” differently.

The prehistory of the film helps us better grasp the motivation and the elements defining the experiment. In their own account of that time, the filmmakers explain their complex feelings in regards to the above events: they were in Paris when the July 2006 war started; they felt terribly isolated and helpless to do anything but to act "symbolically and desperately," because they couldn’t just be inactive outsiders (Hadjithomas and Joriege 102). Thus, the film’s idea was born out of this desperate search for ways in which cinema (and any other art) can face and respond to the irrational realities of war. The binary division of the world after 9/11, the assassination of the Prime Minister of Lebanon in February 2005, and now this unthinkable return to a new cycle of wars, put before Joana and Khalil the urgency to reconsider their approach to image-making and, more importantly, to change the way these images (and representations of the region in general) are perceived (Cotter 50).

In the process of this search the filmmakers were preoccupied with questions about what cinema can/cannot do in order to witness and truthfully reflect the historical realities in regions toward which the world has already been desensitized by the amnesiac touch of mass media. In this vein, British writer-sociologist Paul Connerton draws attention to the “perverse” effect of the informational media: he argues that instead of reinforcing affective attitude and memory, the news media’s purpose seems to be to disperse the broadcast events to oblivion as rapidly as possible. Part of the reason for this approach, he writes, are the very journalistic principles of freshness, brevity,
rapid alteration, juxtaposition of unlinked images and events one to another. But he sees
the root cause of desensitization in the general acceleration of life through new
technologies (of communication and otherwise), shaped and controlled by the latest
guise of capitalism, the modern, global, informational capitalism of our century. As a
result, our contemporary culture suffers from a severe form of mass amnesia and
anesthesia to life’s crude realities (Connerton 84). Hadjithomas and Joreige aren’t
foreign to those ideas, as some of their comments attest: they state that with their films
they struggle against the "pseudo-life" that is often "composed of illusions and
phantasms imposed on us by today’s society, with its frenetic capitalism, its latent
colonialism, and the conflicts it helps engender, like those in the Middle East, like that of
the Arab apocalypse” (Hadjithomas and Joreige 101).

Joana and Khalil arrived at the bitter realization that the seemingly zealous
journalistic treatment of the people and history of the Arab region produces a mostly
distorted picture of them. The manner of delivery of “hot” information effaces any
singularity, being disinterested in individuals and their personal problems. Instead,
according to the artists, the media reduce the people from the affected regions to a mere
function: the victim. In their viewers, respectively, the media cultivate a specific way of
watching: the victims are perceived as a mass, they lose individuality, nobody asks them
about their singular story; they, write Joana and Khalil, “have lost their faces.” So what
the artists want to do with their art, and particularly with their films, is to give back to
people their faces, to change the way people in war and conflict zones and their
personal stories are represented, perceived, understood, and, possibly, remembered in
the world.

To that end, they conceived of the film as a meeting between two people, two
stories, two faces: one from the Western society and culture, the other a Lebanese.
They wanted nobody else but Catherine Deneuve to act in their film, otherwise, they say,
the film wouldn’t have been made. So they had a strong and definite vision of what they wanted to achieve. Still, not everything in their style of filmmaking is calculated and planned beforehand. The originality of this style consists in the balance they seek to maintain between the part of the pre-planned, pre-calculated, and well prepared, and the part left open to the unpredictable and the spontaneous. A characteristic side of it, they explain, is that they "plant the frame" and leave it open for the outside reality to leave its imprints on it, for "the events to crop in" (Hadjithomas and Joreige 109). This somewhat adventurous approach provides them with an invaluable balance between “what was produced” and “what was undergone.” The two ends often cannot be distinguished, and the result is an interesting synthesis: the blurring, merging of fiction and reality, until you cannot tell anymore what is real and what is fictional (104).

J.-M. Frodon, jokingly, calls this synthesis "the great cinematographic machination," implying that the originality of the film lies in its ingeniously conceived, virtuosically executed, artful design. He enumerates all the elements constituting this design: "Catherine Deneuve and Rabih Mroue, the foreigner and the Lebanese; the woman and the man; the star and the actor"; the “awkwardness and determination of each of them; the past and the present; the threat of the militias and the buried mines; the car and walking on foot; seeing and not seeing": all those elements, writes Frodon, are necessary in order to step by step, shot by shot, minute after minute, and frame after frame, to manufacture a film text telling of “knowledge and ignorance, phantasms and facts, visible and invisible” (Frodon 62). Thus, “with humor, elegance and affection,” they engender the conditions for a “different perception, different understanding” (62).

Although Frodon notices the elements and conditions necessary for the cinematic experiment of Hadjithomas and Joerge, he doesn’t elaborate on what exactly is different in the “different perception, different understanding” of the act of seeing, achieved in the film.
What starts emerging from this mixture of elements, conditions, styles, genres, characters, interactions, unexpected/expected events, etc., is the tempting image of the rhizome (Deleuze and Guattari 7-9). Some of the principles of the rhizome, as defined and explained by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus*, are: principles of connection and heterogeneity; no hierarchy, complete equality in the interconnectivity of elements and between entry/exit points of data; and multiplicity which isn’t subordinated to the concept/dominance of the One.

How does the making of the film (and the finished film) resemble the rhizome? First of all, in the idea of equality of all positions and roles involved in the film, in the refusal to assign a dominant status to any of them or to apply a hierarchical structure to the process of filmmaking and to the notion of visuality. Thus, Catherine Deneuve is an icon of the Cinema, and this connotation of her cinematic image is part of the complex message of the film; but she is also the person Catherine from real life, who accepts the invitation to take part in the film with motivations probably not far from those of her character “Catherine,” taking risks in both a fictional and a real, dangerous and unpredictable, journey in the post-war Lebanese countryside. She is also the film protagonist, created by the authors, who wants to see, who doesn’t want to be “on the edges of the events,” numb, indifferent, complacent. Rabih Mroue, too, is both a fictional and a real character: the talented Lebanese artist/ the unknown Arab “guide” of Catherine Deneuve; Rabih the ‘tourist in his own country.’ And Joana and Khalil, the writers and directors of the film, are also participants in the journey-adventure on equal terms with the others, appearing in cadre, being part of the image. All these multiple metamorphoses, multiple roles of each of them, bear an equal weight for the final meaning of the film, and convey a rhizomatic sense of collaboration.

Second, the above-mentioned mixture of elements of different genres and styles also works in the “rhizomatic” mode: none of those cinematic forms dominates the
others, none is given supremacy or preference. They act in a perfect, delightful symbiosis, proving that hierarchy isn’t the cornerstone of creation, that equality and multiplicity are.

Further, although there was a “scenario” written beforehand, the authors chose to let their actors improvise their dialogue, and didn’t give them a script. Thus, improvisation has been given equal rights with directorial instructions; openness with prediction; unexpected external intrusions with fixed, prepared outcomes. This attempt at analogy with the philosophical model of the rhizome doesn’t claim to be profound or exact. Yet, Joana and Khalil’s experimental filmmaking doesn’t aim at reproducing any exact model; in this, too, their work bears resemblance to the “acentered, nonhierarchical, nonsignifying system without a General and without an organizing memory or central automaton” (Deleuze and Guattari 21): the rhizomatic model of thought which speaks of freedom, equality, and unlimited possibilities.

The Deleuze-Guattarian theoretical field, together with the theoretical insights of Laura Marks into haptic visuality, explored in her book Touch, provide us further with a framework that can be instrumental in analyzing the complex, interconnected issues of visuality and spectatorship embodied by the film. It could be assumed that Hadjithomas & Joreige’s determination to return the “lost faces” to people and images logically leads them to strategies of deconstruction of the conventional, compromised notion of cinematic vision, mostly based on the optical kind of visuality, and to seek to incorporate within it new modalities, new aspects of vision, such that would restore its lost link to understanding and feeling “the other” and building in result a more meaningful and lasting relationship with it. It seems that the artists turn their attention to the resources of the whole sensorium and its relations with the sense of sight, a connection realized in the notions of haptic image and haptic visuality. Haptic perception, as Laura Marks explains it, is the combination of tactile (refers to the sense of touch), kinesthetic (sense
of motion), and proprioceptive (the sense the body has of itself) sensory inputs. Interestingly, the eyes themselves can sometimes function as organs of touch, simulating sensations proper to other senses—primarily touch and kinesthetics (Marks 2). This kind of visuality is more tightly connected to the experiences delivered by the other senses; thus, it is opposed to the basic, optical visuality, because it involves the viewer’s body in a more intensely and directly experienced way (3). Optical visuality supposes a clear image which lends itself to be easily identified, understood, and situated in the surrounding context; the haptic image lacks of clarity; it is incomprehensible and confusing and draws the viewer to its surface, creating a feeling of close contact, a feeling of touching with one’s eyes. In reality, the relationship between those two types of visuality is a matter of degree, says Marks. Most processes of viewing manifest an interplay and alternation between the two kinds, “a dialectical movement from far to near, from solely optical to multisensory” (3). Conventional cinema, though, in its historical development, seems to privilege the optical type of visuality, benefiting from the manipulation of a viewer’s sense of mastery over the image.

Marks also makes an important distinction between the terms haptic visuality and haptic image: while the former represents the viewer’s dwelling in the mode of perceiving haptically, the latter refers to a particular kind of image contained in the work of art. Characteristic for the haptic image is that it provokes a bodily kind of contact and response between viewer and image rather than a process of identification. Apparently, the skillful utilization of those two visual properties in cinema gives the artists valuable tools to make their art more touching and evocative, as, according to Marks, the cinematic perception/experience shouldn’t be confined to the audio-visual dimension alone, but we are to understand it as synesthetic, as the concerted, simultaneous act of all senses co-working with the intellect (13).
These notions put a strong emphasis on the relationship viewer-film, which is the second great concern of Hadjithomas and Joreige, one that transpires in the descriptions they give of the current tendencies in their art. In their works, they put the accent on the possibility of meeting the other, the one [Robert] Bresson calls “the spectator”, that person we do not know, but recognize. There’s the desire, the hope for that meeting, the call for the participation of the person looking …. A spectator who thinks, appropriates the space, the void sometimes, who touches the work, transforms it, gives it meaning. The experience is intellectual, but physical and visual, as well…. For some time we’ve been trying to make films involving sensation, that make the spectator feel, almost physically, the invisible, the latent, the absent, but also the other. (Hadjithomas and Joreige 103)

This so-described, desired spectator-collaborator is elaborately captured in Vivian Sobchak’s phenomenological model of the viewer, cited by Marks in Touch. This viewer is distinguished from the usual passive, projective, or indifferent one; if one wants to understand cinema as a relationship, as an exchange between two bodies - that of the watching person and that of the watched film - then one must allow for this viewer to participate in the very production of the cinematic experience. Rather than just inertly consuming the film as something like visual food, the active spectator, says Sobchack, "shares and performs cinematic space dialogically” (Marks 13). Haptic visuality is an active element in this dialogue. Sobchak’s term for it is “volitional, deliberate vision.” (Marks 13). It differs from passive, easy, effortless image-digestion, because the spectator has to work on the image, to help it emerge from its latent state.

This idea is interesting with its implication that the image/s (hence the whole film) never are a completely finished, perfect product; the image remains in a latent,
semi-finished state, anticipating the loving, mutually enriching and completing dialogue with the spectator. An erotic quality seems to emanate in this kind of cinematic relationship, engendered to a great extent by the haptic kind of visuality. While purely optical images keep the viewer at a cool, reserved distance, a distance insisting on the sense of mastery, superiority, and possession, the haptic images demand that the viewer renounces his scopic “right” of mastery, that he remain vulnerable, open, willing to “dissolve his subjectivity” (Marks 13) into the mutual merging; they invite him to feel, taste, touch, use all his bodily resources in this moment of art, where the film meets him half-way with its embodied energy which needs and expects the energy of its spectator—sensory, intellectual, bodily—so that a powerful fusion can take place, a fusion that will transform the old order of things.

_I Want to See_ testifies that Hadjithomas and Joerge have made a creative use of the resources of the "haptic" in their search for new ways of image-making and for a co-operative relationship with the true spectator. The whole film displays exactly the alternation, the “dialectical movement from far to near”(Marks 3), the constant sliding of the optical into the haptic, and vice versa, the way Deleuze and Guattari understand them as an interaction, not a dichotomy (Marks xii). This stylistic feature is particularly evident in the scenes on the road where wide, magnificent, peaceful vistas of the Lebanese landscape, with scarcely visible, crawling, miniature bug-like figures, are alternated with abrupt zoom-ins, revealing the bugs to be the modern “nomads,” proudly enjoying their amazing auto-mobility. Interestingly, the haptic here is generated by distance, not closeness to the image; it is experienced not in the feeling of merging with the less-visible, but in the tension between the two modes, in the fast adjustment and re-adjustment required from us. In my opinion, the authors need it this way in order to visualize a sense of scale, and thus to convey the idea of human fragility and vulnerability to forces of aggression and destruction. For instance, this fast change of
distant-close focus evokes the association with a predator, a bird of prey scanning the earth’s surface from high above for its doomed game. This association remains latent, though, experienced merely as a slight stirring in the stomach, until it gets re-activated at a later moment in the film, when we see a big falcon sliding smoothly high in the sky: our primeval fears of predators are awakened and our survival instincts alerted. Still later on, terrifying loud sounds come from the sky, deafening and startling both characters and viewers. Rabih explains to the scared Catherine that those are Israeli airplanes breaking the sound barrier; they sometimes cross the Lebanese air space to make intelligence photographs, sometimes just imitate false attacks to evoke fear. The verbal explanation, the growling sound, the image of the slowly circling falcon, the invisible airplanes imagined as monstrous birds sowing death, the fast zoom-in from the earlier shots, all merge and form a mental image of the aggressor. This image is formed in multiple layers, which we gradually, step by step, experience first with our whole body then interpret with our intellect: when the stimuli awaken deeply embodied, archaic memories and fears imprinted in our genes, and stir up adrenaline rush through our veins, we respond with our whole sensorium, receiving the artistic message with each of our firing synapses. Catherine and Rabih, the film crew, and we, the viewers, share this moment of danger and this image of the aggressor—an experience that will unite us perhaps more powerfully than any open ideological statement.

To me, the most beautiful “haptic” images in the film are those in the scene in which Catherine, tired from the fears and dangers she has experienced, but feeling now the calming caress of the surrounding Lebanese nature and evidently at ease with her companion Rabih, falls asleep; the car slides slowly through a cedar grove, closely shielded by the protective embrace of the trees, through the branches of which sunshine penetrates and dazzles us, awakening childhood memories. A lush, airy pad plays jazz chords, which is a standard tool in modern electronic music, but in this case it is singled
out and plays by itself, creating a dreamy, gliding soundscape. (Original music is by Scrambled Eggs and Joseph Ghosn of Discipline.) The sample includes a vague bass line; indiscernible voices and a loud smack fade into the mix, looping in a slow thumping rhythm, creating a slight feeling of anxiety with its slight harmonic clashing, but also one of dogged perseverance. A subdued wail of an Arabian-style vocal harmonizes and rides over the chords, playing with the sampled rhythm to create the sense of something eager to pierce through those drowsy, solemn chords, trying to break free. The slow driving of the car and the shifting and progressively softening focus of the camera, capturing a vast golden field, come together with this music cue to perfectly recreate the feeling of calm, trust, and surrendering oneself to a feeling of closeness and safety in the presence of the other. The golden, blurry surface, swaying under the gentle touch of the wind—shimmering, tempting—and the singing voice, as if coming from a deep, deep past, telling perhaps of suffering and passionate love, evoke a deep feeling of longing which somehow we associate with the internal, psychical life of both Catherine and Rabih, at the same time. We dwell in a haptic, multisensory state of perception where haptic visual, sound, and kinesthetic sensations all combine to create a rich, profound experience of the scene as caress, as longing for intimacy, friendship, human closeness, as longing to be recognized by the other.

Thus, through the concerted perception of our own bodies, feelings, and intellects, the film powerfully conveys its message: let's always see each other's faces, let's remember each other's stories, let's be there when some of us are in pain or in danger. It takes one face, one friend, one shared moment of true feelings, in order to start understanding, “seeing” the other, to stop being indifferent. In an unconventional, bold and risky way, experimenting with “rebellious” cultural models such as the rhizome and the haptic visuality, Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joerge show a possible, unbeaten path for cinema in its battles against cultural numbness and amnesia.
References:


