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Experience—Information—Image

A Historiography of Unfolding in Arab Cinema

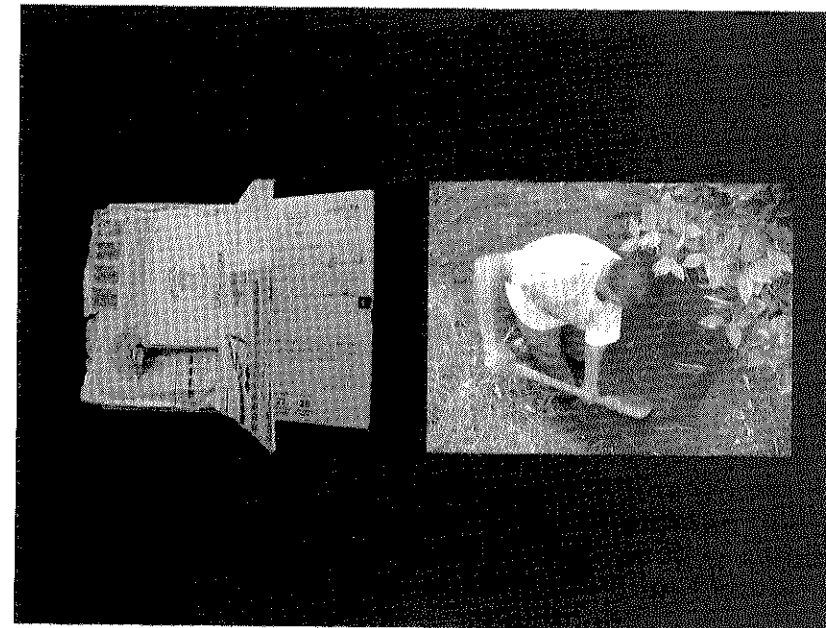
Why do certain images of history reach us, while others remain seemingly forgotten, in the infinite breadth of the past? Why do only certain events seem to matter? I suggest those experiences are not forgotten but enfolded. Looking at the cinemas of the periphery, it is most compelling to understand the way they conceive of history in terms of enfoldment. Being marginal cinemas, usually in a minority position vis-à-vis governments, languages, and other dominant powers, cinemas of the periphery struggle to hold onto local histories and memories. These histories and memories may appear lost forever, wiped out by the colonial or other dominant power, but I want to show that they are simply buried for now, folded away, implicit in the visible face of history. Informed by Gilles Deleuze's revision of Michel Foucault's theory of genealogy, Deleuze's critique of the cliché, and the triadic semiotics of Charles Sanders Peirce as well as the concepts of implicate order from physics and logical depth from mathematics, I have developed an enfolding-unfolding model of the image.

The contemporary politics of historiography can be conceptualized according to the relationship among Experience, Information, and Image; a triadic relationship that I have proposed to understand the nature of the image in the information age. While Experience is infinite, the vast majority of it lies latent. Few Images ever arise from it. In our age, those that do arise tend to be selected, or unfolded, by political and economic interests that deem them to be useful as Information. Nevertheless, anyone can unfold any aspect of Experience to become a public Image. Artists (and others) do so in order to allow other aspects of Experience to circulate, before they enfold, back into the matrix of history. Historiography is this process of unfolding.

As Siegfried Kracauer wrote, a historian should pay attention to the details of the past in order to rescue things from oblivion, "so that nothing should go lost. It is as if the fact-oriented accounts breathed pity with the dead."¹

This relationship can shed light on many kinds of artworks that deal in some way with the past. This is especially relevant in viewing some remarkable works of Arab cinema, which, like other peripheral cinemas, represent history agonistically. Given the power struggles (neo)colonial and local, in the Arab world in the past century, the telling of history in the Arab world is absolutely fraught: the victors' dominant accounts are patently fraudulent, the accounts produced to please outsiders are simple pandering, and the accounts that people most fervently wish to claim are fragile and difficult to sustain. It should be recognized that these relationships hold in many other parts of the world as well; I hope the model I offer will be useful in analyzing films and other works from many regions, including right at home.

The contemporary cinema of the Arab Mashreq (or eastern Arab world) is, for the most part, a nonindustrial, artisanal, and auteurist cinema. Dependent on a combination of local and foreign funding, it circulates complexly among Arab participants with differing interests and between Arab



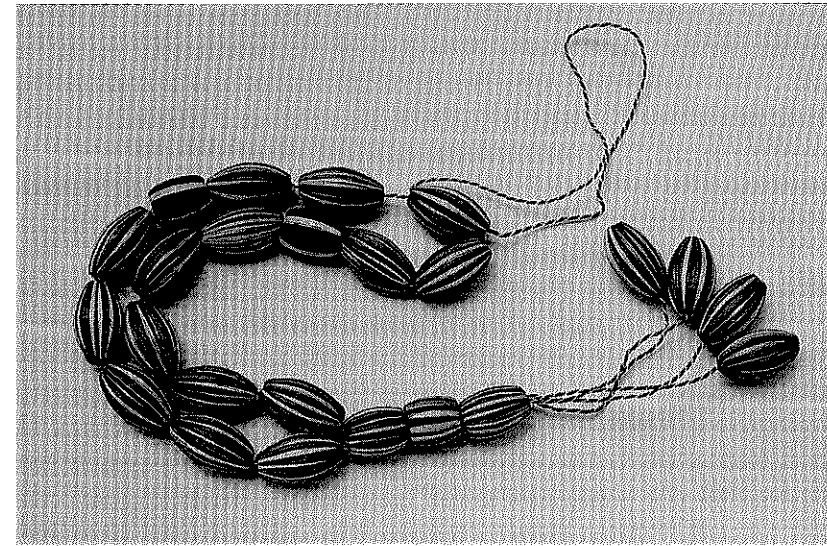
Still from *In This House* (Lebanon, 2005) by Akram Zaatari. Courtesy of the artist.

and Western audiences, all of whom tend to regard Arab films through the eyes of the others. In the heavily politicized Arab milieu, the Image world is constructed as a selective unfolding of only those aspects of Experience that are deemed to be useful or profitable. For these reasons, filmmakers in the Arab world are highly aware that the perceptible world is constructed by political interests, that it is almost impossible for a filmmaker to picture the world without simultaneously deconstructing or negating it.

Some Arab filmmakers, like filmmakers everywhere, pursue the liberal practice of image critique, fighting images (in the usual sense of the word) with images, in order to reveal that what is apparent is an effect of ideology. The shortcoming of this approach is the failure to realize that images and stories do not arise directly from Experience but from a filter over Experience, which I call Information. Other filmmakers focus on the level of Information, looking neither at history (which is unrepresentable in itself) nor at the available Images of it, but the filters between the two. These filmmakers focus on the blocks to representation, which include censorship and funding restrictions. A radical, ascetic approach, which produces films that barely register in the audiovisual, this Information strategy is quite popular in Arab cinema. Finally, there are those filmmakers who try to get close to the details of history itself, lingering on what I call the level of Experience. Accepting that the resulting films may seem inconsequential, they prefer to carry out their own unfoldings, explicating hitherto latent events, knowledges, and sensations. Thus in these films what official history deems merely personal, absurd, microevents, or not events at all, becomes the stuff of a rich alternative historiography. The latter two processes characterize the work of numerous filmmakers in the Arab world, both in fiction and documentary, a few of whom I will discuss in what follows.

An Enfolded Model of the Image

I began with questions—why do certain images of history reach us, while others remain seemingly forgotten? Why do only certain events seem to matter?—questions that emphasize the unknowability of the past and the seeming arbitrariness by which some aspects of it arise in the present.² I suggest the past is not forgotten but *enfolded*. The terms *enfolded* and *unfolded* (or their Latinate synonyms, *implicate* and *explicate*) echo Deleuze's explication of the baroque aesthetics of Leibniz.³ Leibniz's principle that the smallest element of matter is a fold makes it possible to conceive of what Deleuze and Guattari term the *plane of immanence* as composed of infinite folds. The actual is thus infinitely enfolded in the virtual. The past, then, reaches us or



Still from *Khiam* (Lebanon, 2000) by Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige. Courtesy of the artists.

becomes actual to us through selective unfolding, in a relationship among Experience, Information, and Image. I posit that each of these three levels is a plane of immanence: a membrane in which an infinity of stuff lies virtual, or enfolded.⁴ Now and then certain aspects of those virtual events are unfolded, pulled up into the next level. Images, perceptible representations of history, come into the world and retreat back into Experience in a ceaseless flow of unfolding and enfolding.⁵

You may recognize in this model a triad typical of the epistemology of Charles Sanders Peirce. Indeed its three levels, Experience, Information, and Image, have the qualities that Peirce termed Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness.⁶ The first level is Experience. I use this term to signify not personal experience, but Experience in the sense that all experience is experience of something by something, which is the principle at the basis of Peirce's semiology.⁷ Experience, then, is the history of all experiences. While Experience is infinite, the vast majority of it lies latent. Few Images arise from it. Most events remain forgotten, and when they do arise, they quickly slip back into the enfolded thickness of Experience.

The second level is Information, which entails a selection from the infinite material of Experience. As a Peircean Second, Information implies a

struggle by which certain results are actualized, and not others. As Peirce writes: "In the idea of reality, Secondness is predominant; for the real is something which insists upon forcing its way to recognition as something other than the mind's creation . . . The real is active; we acknowledge it, calling it the actual. (This word is due to Aristotle's use of ενεργεια, action, to mean existence, as opposed to a mere germinal state.)"⁸ Applying Peircean categories to film aesthetics, Sean Cubitt considers the *cut* to be the element of Secondness in filmmaking, given that it implies decision and disjunction; he also suggests the cut is where ideology enters.⁹ The category of Information I posit here emphasizes that, in information society, the force behind Secondness is institutional. Power consists in the ability to exert some sort of regulatory, instrumental, or ideological force in terms of what aspects of Experience are deemed important. Information is a particular iteration of this phenomenon; it is that aspect of Experience that can be translated into Information that is somehow useful. Information, I would suggest, is the new Spectacle.¹⁰ Power exerts its hegemony by selecting, from the infinity of Experience, only that which can unfold to serve power. It matters little whether this Information produces Images. However, the typical Image that power selects from Experience is the cliché, an Image that confirms ideology and blocks more nuanced and multifarious aspects of Experience. This is why Deleuze so tenaciously critiqued the regime of the cliché, which reinforces commonsense, ideological notions while preventing access to the richness and singularity of Experience.¹¹ Capital is a particular expression of Information, which in our time determines to a great extent what Experience is selectively unfolded as Information—insofar as it translates directly into a useful investment.¹²

The third level is Image. It is a Peircean Third in that it reflects on the *relation* between Experience and Information, First and Second. There are two kinds of Image: those that directly unfold Experience, and those that are manifestations of Information or Capital. We would think all Images are direct reflections of Experience; but in fact they are selective unfoldings of Experience. In our age, as noted above, those Images that do arise from Experience are often selected, or unfolded, by political and economic interests that deem them to be useful as Information. Nevertheless, anyone can unfold any aspect of Experience to become a public Image, and artists (and others) do so in order to allow other aspects of Experience to circulate. We cannot perceive Experience as such, it has to be mediated through an Image; but films can emphasize the quality of Experience—its presence, detail, strangeness, noninstrumentality, infinity. For example, one of the best-known types of cinema that unfolds directly from Experience is neorealism.

There are many films, often transcendently beautiful, that linger in the fullness and simplicity of Firstness. Cubitt remarks of Jean Renoir, for example, that he is a filmmaker of Firstness, refusing to submit the evanescent infinity of profilmic reality to the finality of the cut.¹³ We can also include in this category filmmakers like Michelangelo Antonioni, Chantal Akerman, Krzysztof Kieslowski, and Abderrahmane Sissako.

The second kind of Image is the visible manifestation of Information and Capital; it is the skin of Information, if you like. With such Images, Deleuze's observation that "the film within the film is money" is truer than ever.¹⁴ Cinema that reflects on the Information from which it unfolds, as well as on the Experience that the Information unfolds, includes conspiracy movies, which are Information-driven in a complex and interesting way. Deleuze categorizes such films as films of Thirdness. Many contemporary movies specifically reflect on the Information from which they unfold, from the *Matrix* trilogy (Andy and Larry Wachowski, USA, 1999–2003) to the television series *24* (2001–), and countless other films whose pivotal scenes involve characters hunched around a computer screen. Digital spectacles and films that rely on computer graphics also are Information-driven Images. More generally, a film whose Images directly unfold Information about what is instrumentally useful, such as pornography or propaganda, can be considered an Information-driven film.

The richness of the Image level is that, as a Peircean Third, it shows us how Information has selected, unfolded, and expressed certain aspects of Experience. The Image does not mask Experience (or Information) but puts these two into relation with each other. In my examples from Arab cinema that follow, we will see that what we see and hear in a film tells as much about what remains hidden or inaccessible, and even why it does.

As in all Peircean triads, the relationship among these three terms is fluid. Images and Information are eventually reabsorbed or reenfolded into Experience, the first term of the triad, and return to a state of latency.

What is the enfoldment model of the image good for? For evaluating how artworks (and other things) actively triangulate between Image, Information, and Experience. For the *style* of their selection of what elements to unfold; for example, Akram Zaatari and Omar Amiralay draw attention, in almost diagrammatic fashion, to what they are prevented from showing, while Mohamed Soueid and Yousry Nasrallah are interested in the smallest sights and sounds that usually seem unimportant. Conversely, the enfoldment model permits willing certain elements to remain in a state of latency, as in Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joriege's delicate bypassing of well-known facts about prison life. This model does not evaluate art on the basis

of its authenticity (which would be to seek a correspondence between Image and Experience, like realism). Likewise, it has no need of the criteria of reflexivity and criticality, for these criteria are also based in a dualist model. Rather it gives a positive or Experience-embracing criterion for criticism: what Experience is privileged, what passed over, in the selection of Information? And what Information is privileged in the selection of Image? Paying attention to the infinity of Experience that remains enfolded is similar to a materialist critique, except that it does not oppose (true) material and (false) ideal, a dualist model, but attends to all the Experience that went into the Information, Capital, and Images that arrive to us. The enfolded model of the Image does not distinguish between material and immaterial.

This model also shows that in our time, much art is concerned with the nature of en/unfolding rather than with producing representations; these artworks (and other things) thus are not so much representational as performative.¹⁵ It is the way they unfold sights and sounds, the struggle to make things apparent, the acknowledgment of censorship and other prohibitions that characterize these and many other contemporary works. The final resulting Image is just the trace of the activity of unfolding.

When I proposed an earlier version of this model in a lecture at the American University of Beirut in April 2003 (at the beginning of the war on Iraq), I privileged remaining enfolded or “invisible” as a political strategy. Artist Walid Sadek objected, “in the Arab world, we are already invisible.” He found my suggestion to be more appropriate for artists in Western countries where there are already too many Images, and thus a creative strategy is to refuse to let your art enter the public arena. Lebanese and other Arab artists have a different problem: there are too many ideological, clichéd Images of Arabs, too few alternative representations, too much Experience going uncounted. It is always necessary for the misrepresented to represent themselves. But how to do so without getting pulled along the clichéd, overdetermined unfoldings of capital and state?

The answer may be to deal craftily and stylishly with that striating,¹⁶ instrumentalizing, and homogenizing plane of Information (which empties Experience of everything that is not instrumental), by staying under it *or* by leaping over it *or* by drawing attention to its tracks in the Image.

Funding and Censorship as Information

I consider film funding, and equally film censorship, to exist at the level of Information in the process of filmmaking. Filmmaking in countries without a production infrastructure relies on external or irregular funding, which

often comes with crippling strings attached. Similarly, and sometimes in the very same act, filmmaking is subject to external censorship and self-censorship. Funding and censorship striate, homogenize, and selectively unfold Experience. They magnetically draw certain aspects of Experience from its enfolded state. Whether they show it (funding) or hide it (censorship), they perform similar gestures of effacement with regard to the infinity of Experience.

Censorship determines what may not be unfolded from Experience for common viewing, what Images may not be seen. Yet in that very negative attention to Experience, censorship draws attention to what it means to hide something, at the expense of everything else. A most ironic example of this occurs in *Al-Film al-Mafkoud/The Lost Film* (2003) by Lebanese filmmakers Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige. It concerns a film of theirs that was never returned after a screening in Yemen, and the filmmakers' fruitless search for it. Ironically, they received several feet of footage in the mail after their return from Yemen, the bits the censors removed—an obscene shout, an obscure gesture. Finally all that was salvaged of their film is that which was selectively unfolded at the level of Information, precisely in order that it *not* be unfolded as Image, namely the censored fragments.

Other than the industrial cinema of Egypt, Mashreq Arab cinema is basically artisanal. These days it is almost entirely dependent on European and other Western funding, including foreign coproductions, European and other television, and NGOs and cultural organizations: the latter include the European Union's EuroMed Audiovisual Programme, UNESCO, the Ford Foundation, the Prince Claus Fund for Culture and Development of the Netherlands, and others. The funding relationship is a delicate one of mutual preemption.¹⁷ Foreign funders want to privilege certain desired aspects of Arab experience, such as attitudes toward the West, Islamic fundamentalism, terrorism, Arab-Israeli cooperation, women's voices, sexuality, and—with voracious fascination—the veil. Arab filmmakers who receive this funding work within its constraints to make films of varying quality. Foreign audiences scrutinize these films for signs of authenticity and for the confirmation or contradiction of received ideas. Local Arab audiences scrutinize them according to what they understand to be Western assumptions, and critique them for how they present the Arab world to the West. So while Western audiences think Arab cinema shows them an Image of Experience, Arab audiences know they are seeing Information.

Funding decides from the outset what aspects of Experience are deemed useful. This is the case in commercial and industrial cinema, of course. But it is especially felt in the funding of small national cinemas, especially in

highly politicized regions like the Arab world. Every funder has an interest in producing certain Images, regardless of their correspondence to Experience. Since Experience is infinite, it will always be possible to selectively unfold those aspects of it that correspond to the funder's wish, for example, the many Western funding initiatives to get Arab women to "voice their experience." Such initiatives assume that certain Experience is more authentic and more valuable, and in the process they efface entire other realms of Arab experience. Or, the many initiatives since September 11 that seek to support Arab filmmakers who will explain themselves to the West, such as a Sundance-funded project in 2006 to "award a \$50k production grant to an Arab filmmaker to make a film on solidarity/coexistence between west and middle east," in the words of a Sundance talent scout in Lebanon in a letter to me.

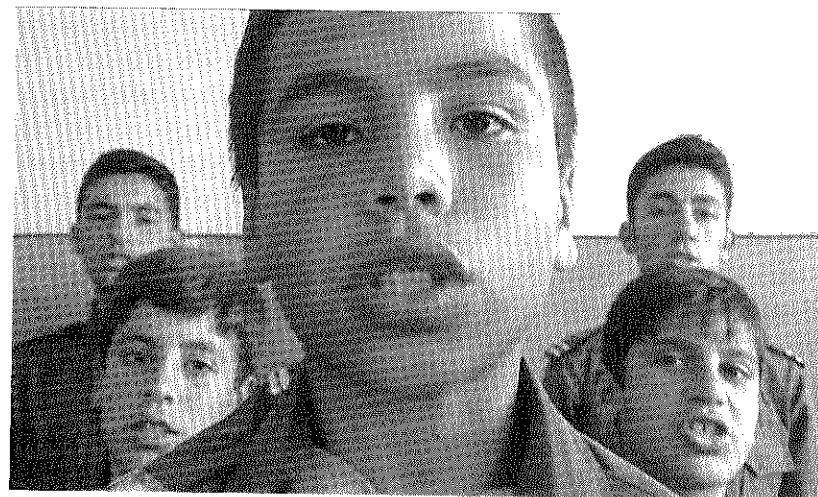
In another example, the EuroMed Audiovisual Programme has goals to enhance cooperation between European and Mediterranean countries in the training, production, distribution, and promotion of audiovisual projects. Another of its goals is regulation, which seems to suggest the EU wants to control the bootlegging rampant in the Arab world. EuroMed's goal in 2006 was to fund twelve projects from a budget of €15 million. One applicant was the little-known Adam Zuabi. Organizer of the Ramallah International Film Festival, Zuabi lost all credibility with Palestinian filmmakers for several reasons: he did not collaborate with respected filmmakers based in Ramallah; he accepted funding from an Israeli organization, the New Foundation for Cinema and Television (NFTC), that refused to take a position against the Occupation (and thus would likely not fund films that were critical of it); the organization was not an NGO but a private company listing Zuabi as sole shareholder; and, in order to seem credible, it listed people on the board of directors who "completely disown[ed] it."¹⁸ All these were signs that Zuabi's festival was not a pro-Palestinian event. Yet Zuabi, in partnership with the NFTC, attracted the interest of EuroMed to open a documentary film center based in Tel Aviv. Forty Palestinian filmmakers protested to EuroMed, and sixty-seven Israeli filmmakers petitioned in support of them. These protests caused Spanish and Turkish partners to withdraw from the pan-Mediterranean documentary project. But EuroMed persevered, so fond of the fantasy of equal Arab-Israeli cooperation that it did not wish to examine the motives and spotty track record of the organizer.¹⁹

Films of Information

Some thoughtful contemporary Arab cinema is about the paucity of Experience that has not already been neutralized as Information, or the impossibil-

ity of extracting an Image from Experience. Films in which there is very little to see or hear, they dwell on the impossibility of producing an Image.

First I offer two examples from Syria, a country where surveillance is a form of censorship that snuffs out Experience the moment it is born. Film-making, like any other form of public expression, is strictly surveyed and censored by the Assad government, and even when publicly funded, almost never screens in Syria itself. Yet, as Rasha Salti points out, Syrian filmmakers "have succeeded in carving out an independent, critical and often subversive cinema under the sponsorship of a vigorous state ruled by a single party actively invested in suppressing dissent and coercing an official dogma."²⁰ Omar Amiralay's documentary *Toufan fi Balad al-Baath! A Flood in Baath Country* (Syria; French funded, 2004), surveys the effect of one of former president Hafez al-Assad's monomaniac public works projects, the Assad Dam on the Euphrates river. Amiralay indicts the self-serving Baath regime with unremitting yet subtle sarcasm. He listens to Bedouins who were displaced by the dam, he films the eerily still water of the artificial lake. In interviews, the officials of the Baath Party hoist themselves on their own petards; Amiralay has only to observe the local official Khalaf el Machi, obsequiously praising current president Bashar al-Assad, through a wide-angle lens to undermine his propaganda. The cute children who comprise the Vanguard of Light, and who in the classroom absorb lessons that the dammed Euphrates



Still from *A Flood in Baath Country* (Syria, 2004) by Omar Amiralay. Courtesy of the artist.

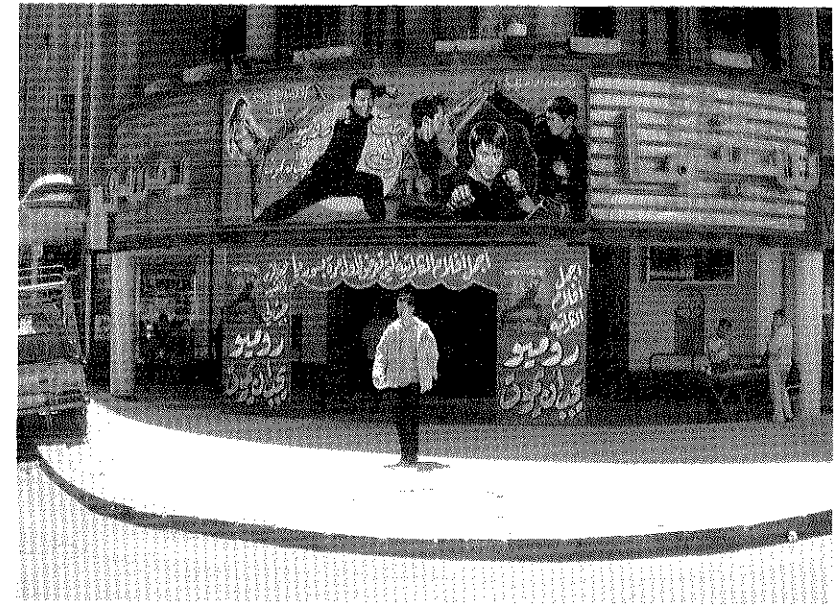


Still from *A Flood in Baath Country* (Syria, 2004) by Omar Amiralay. Courtesy of the artist.

is now “a civilized river,” noisily sing a song in praise of Assad. By attending to their antics, the film gleans hints of the wealth of Experience that even the most disciplined children cannot help but express.

Many first films by “third-world” filmmakers are about the impediments to the making of the film. Meyar al Roumi’s *Cinéma muet* (Syria/France, 2002), his graduation project from La Fémis in France, takes the rather familiar form of the innocent *ballade* of a young filmmaker who returns to his home country after a Western cinema education, intending to devote his cinematic abilities to his native land, only to be shocked by the actual conditions of filmmaking back home. Al Roumi planned to make a conventional documentary about the Syrian film industry, but he is only allowed to film two shots in the Syrian National Film Organization, and these are banal enough to dash his hopes. Next he visits the great Syrian filmmakers Omar Amiralay, Mohammad Malass, and Ousama Mohammed, with the awe of a spiritual initiate, only to find them frustrated, cynical, and less prolific in cinema than in *arak*-laced sarcasm. The state’s censorship system has effectively silenced these filmmakers. Instead we are treated to astonishing clips of some of their great films from the 1970s and 1980s.²¹

A fourth example of a film that focuses on how Information filters Experience is *Fi haza al-bayt! In This House* (Lebanon, 2005), by Lebanese film-



Still from *Cinéma muet* (Syria/France, 2002) by Meyar al Roumi. Courtesy of the artist.

maker Akram Zaatari. I discuss this fascinating film in detail elsewhere.²² Here I will just note that it is exemplary of a filmmaking practice that struggles to produce an Image in the face of censorship on every level, in a country where people have good reason to be paranoid. Recent Lebanese history is so heavily overdetermined by such a host of political factors—even before the assassination of prime minister Rafiq Hariri in 2005 and the devastating conflict that I hesitate to call “the Israeli-Hezbollah war” of 2006—that filmmakers cannot approach history directly. This would be unthinkable naïve. Instead they have to delicately hint at Experience by analyzing Information, or against all odds try to get Experience to express itself directly in the Image.

In This House resorts to strategies that *recede* from the audiovisual Image in order to tell the story of the missed encounter, after fifteen years, between a Christian family and the socialist fighter Ali Hashisho, who occupied their house in southern Lebanon for six years during the civil war. The film happens because Zaatari learns that Hashisho buried a letter to the house’s own-

ers in the garden, and he sets out to excavate it. Only two characters are willing to appear on camera. One is Hashisho, who was a militia member of the Democratic Popular Party and is now a journalist. He recounts to Zaatari his story of living for six years in the house of Charbel (whose last name we do not learn) when it was on the front with the invading Israeli army. Other characters—the family who live in the house and the three sets of local, police, and army officials who insist on showing up—refuse to appear on camera and barely register their voices. The other character who appears on camera is Faisal, a gardener whom Zaatari hired to dig for the time capsule.

In short, because the people refuse to show their faces to the camera, and because the act itself, of digging for the time capsule, is not very photogenic, the event at the center of *In This House* barely registers visibly. Here is a story suffocated by Information. Zaatari counters with Information of his own: texts, audio tones, and silhouettes that compensate for the absence of the people, render the video barely visible—a line drawing, an abstraction. Experience refuses to arise into Image, and so all that is left is a film about how Information—a filter of official surveillance, self-censorship, and fear—takes the place of Experience. As historiography, *In This House* is extremely revealing, because it shows that present political circumstances heavily affect what kind of access to the past is possible.

Films of Experience

The former are examples of films that operate at the level of Information, observing and rerouting the tortuous passage from Experience to Image. Other Mashreq Arab filmmakers use strategies to tease Experience into unfolding into Image, despite the heavy layer of calculation and cliché barring its passage.

Mohamed Soueid is one filmmaker determined to fish in the teeming sea of enfolded Experience, and to hoist his catch up to the level of Image as a kind of absurd, barely useful Information (which, if it were a fish, might be sardines). His documentary trilogy (Lebanon, 1998–2002) deals personally and obliquely with cinema, love, and the Lebanese civil war and uneasy subsequent state of “peace.” This trilogy I also discuss in detail elsewhere,²³ but it is such a key example of a “historiography of unfolding” that I would like to mention it here.

The delicacy of unfolding Experience directly into Image animates the trilogy. The third film in the trilogy, *Harb Ahliyal Civil War* (2002), investigates the mysterious death of Soueid’s cinematographer friend Mohamed Douybaess. The film gently skirts the memory of this shy man, who took care



Still from *In This House* (Lebanon, 2005) by Akram Zaatari. Courtesy of the artist.

of his siblings after the death of their father, smoked five packs a day, and did not like to be photographed. Five months after Douybaess disappeared, his body was found in an abandoned building, and it had to be identified by his dental records. A terrible irony is that this Mohamed was obsessed with his dental hygiene and retained at least two dentists. Soueid interviews them and listens as they expound on the teeth of the Lebanese people, circumlocuting the cause of Douybaess’s death. According to the dentists, Lebanese have the highest rate of tooth decay in the world. Thoughtfully smoking, the lady dentist Sahar tells how stress causes a sudden “explosion of caries” in mouths that were healthy just six months earlier. Sahar’s observation shows that it is not the speaking mouths, but the mute and painful teeth of the Lebanese people that tell the story of their postwar experience: stress, fatigue, living with uncertainty. Although a vast proportion of Lebanese have suffered from posttraumatic stress disorder during and since the civil war, few seek psychotherapy because of the associated social stigma. So the symptoms of stress all come to the surface in the dentist’s chair.

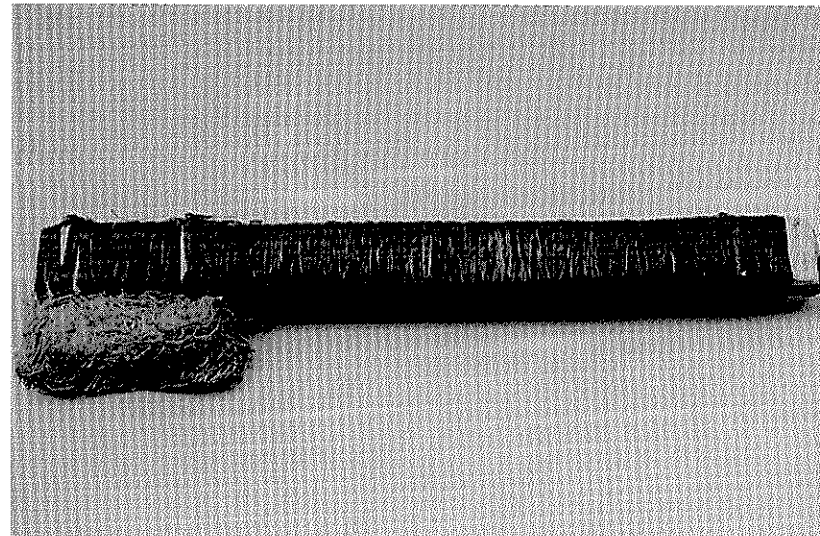
This is Soueid’s method of unfolding Images directly from Experience.

That teeth can lead to a diagnosis of the causes and effects of war is not the answer to how to understand the history of the civil war. It is one of a potentially infinite number of paths among seemingly unrelated singularities, a kind of counter-Information conducive to a rich and unexpected unfolding of Images.

When you mention the name al-Khiam to Lebanese people, they tend to react predictably. Al-Khiam was an Israeli detention center, named after the town near which it was based, run by proxy on Lebanese soil by the pro-Israeli Southern Lebanese Army from 1985 until the Israeli withdrawal from southern Lebanon in 2000. It is well known as an example of the evil wrought upon Palestinians and Lebanese by the so-called Zionist entity; to some people it has become a cliché. But the documentary *Khiam* (Lebanon, 2000) by Hadjithomas and Joreige spends very little time on the information, already well known to Lebanese though still shocking to foreigners, that the detainees were tortured, humiliated, kept in solitary confinement, held in cells in which it was impossible to stand, sit, or lie, and forbidden any contact with one another. We learn these facts, as well as the facts of their arrest, quickly from the six former detainees, three women and three men. The film is minimal in the extreme, consisting only of medium-shot interviews of each subject against a blank ground and, toward the end, a series of close-ups of objects.

The subject of *Khiam* is not the inhuman and unjust conditions of their detention. It is how they managed to remain human while in detention. It is about creativity—activities so tiny, so embedded in the invisible field of Experience, that one might not notice them at all. One by one, the prisoners begin to tell how they resisted, and kept their sanity, by making things. They tell how, forbidden to speak to one another, and punished if they were found working, the prisoners worked in secret. They produced objects from nothing: needles, a toothbrush. They recount making tiny gifts to be surreptitiously slipped into another's hand: prayer beads carved from hard olive pits, ornaments carved from bits of soap, yarn pulled from their garments and knitted into tiny objects. And, as they describe with rising enthusiasm, they contrived to write.

To prohibit working and writing is one of the central ways that torturers attain the goal of dehumanizing their victims, as Elaine Scarry has described.²⁴ When the prisoners at Khiam managed to abstract from their material existence, to produce and to write, they maintained their humanity. The detainees' writing is Information that unfolds from the extreme specificity of Experience. For them, writing and making were performative acts that set in motion a strong cycle of unfolding, of Information and Images



Still from *Khiam* (Lebanon, 2000) by Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige. Courtesy of the artists.

(objects) from Experience, and from these, an enriched understanding of the preciousness of life.

As they tell of their experiments making things, the question that comes to mind is something like, “what makes life worth living?” But it is not until the end of the film, when one by one the objects of their extreme effort are revealed to our eyes, that we understand—in the surprising beauty of these beads, knitted ornaments, and writing implements—that they are not touching or poignant, but works of art. We understand that to live, to love, and to create can occur in the same gesture. The smallness, freshness, and unexpectedness of these objects flowers at the level of Image with a shock, because they mean nothing at the level of Information.

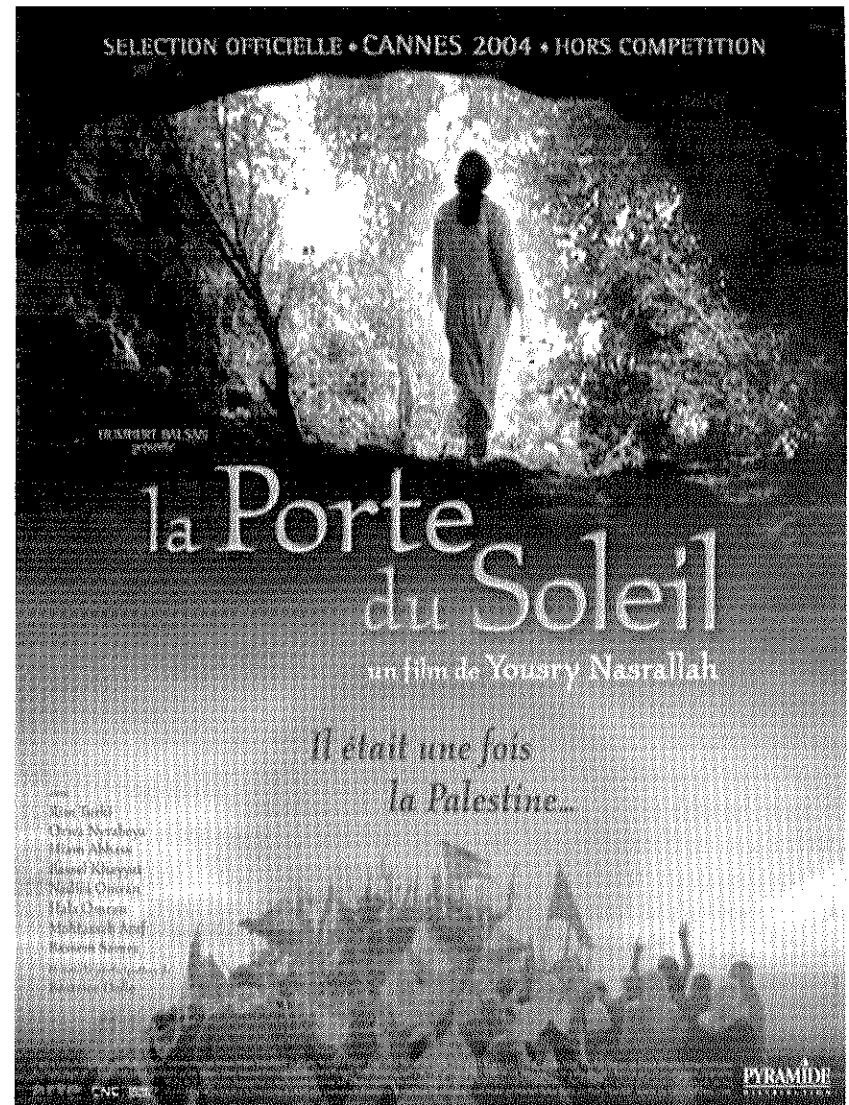
What is special about the tiny things that detainees surreptitiously passed to each other in *Khiam* is that they are not world-making, but signs of love and survival. By contrast, the objects that get smuggled among prisoners usually draw attention only when they are the catalysts of historical action. A contemporary example is the eighteen-point National Accord Document, drawn up after long discussion by Marwan Barghouti, leader of Fatah, and Sheik Abdel Khaliq al-Natsheh, a founder of Hamas, and other imprisoned faction leaders in the high-security Israeli prison Hadarim. The document

was made public in late May of 2006. Drafts of this document were rolled into tiny scrolls, stuffed into capsules, and passed in embraces between prisoners and visitors. Virtually a charter for Palestine at a time of desperate danger of civil war, the smuggled document was potentially historic. (It seems at the time of this writing, when civil war has broken out between Fatah and Hamas, that it arrived too late.)

By contrast, the attention *Khiam* places on the act of fabrication itself recalls Robert Bresson's *Un Condamné à mort s'est échappé/A Man Escaped* (France, 1956). There too, though the moral stakes are abundantly clear—the good French resistants are in a prison operated by the bad German occupiers—the film's interest lies in the hand-working of objects, as the protagonist determinedly, even with wretched slowness, manipulates his door, his wire bedsprings, his lantern, and torn rags into tools with which he will be able to escape. As his fellow prisoners urge him on, without volunteering to join him, and as the film mimics his unwavering, obsessive attention to his tasks, the issue that arises from the project is freedom. Why should we care to be free? What risk is it worth? In this existential film free of political ideology, these are veritable questions that arise from Experience. And in *Khiam*, a similar set of questions arises from the physical and temporal experience of the detainees. The detainees' activity during their long imprisonments shows that unfolding is life itself.

Yousry Nasrallah's great four-and-a-half-hour epic *Bab al-Shams/The Door to the Sun* (Egypt and foreign coproduction, 2004) certainly had every pressure on it as the first fiction feature about the Palestinian *nakhba*, or historic dispossession from their land by the Jewish Army in 1948. The pressure is especially intense as the film spans more than fifty years: the massacre, expropriation, and exile of 1948, the PLO-dominated resistance of the 1970s, and present-day refugee existence in Lebanese camps. Certainly, many were awaiting a heroic, clear-cut, emotionally appropriate film, a film that exists as Information (or propaganda) about the *nakhba*, with just enough Experience to give it texture and humanity. However, in this film largely funded by Arte, Nasrallah (the Egyptian director), Elias Khoury (the Lebanese author of the epic book from which Nasrallah's film was adapted), and Mohamed Soueid (who with Nasrallah and Khoury adapted the book into a screenplay) did not have their eyes on the epic prize, but rather on the infinite richness and strangeness of Experience.

The difference is emphasized in the equal weight the film gives to the Palestinian resistance hero Younes, who, forced into exile after 1948, continues to fight, and to his wife Nahila, who remains in Israel, surviving on trade with the Israelis and raising the children the couple manage to conceive de-



Poster for *The Door to the Sun* (Egypt, 2004) by Yousry Nasrallah.

spite Younes's banishment. Their parallel lives are sketched with attention to sensuous fact as well as heroic deeds: Nahila smells of the *zaatar* (thyme) she grows and coffee she grinds for a living; Younes gets instructions on French kissing after watching a Rita Hayworth film in the Shatila refugee camp. The land and its fruits are important reminders of Palestine for the diaspora: one moving scene shows the present-day refugees gorging on oranges gathered from the land they once owned. But the film emphasizes that oranges are not only a symbol but also a sensuous and juicy fact, an embodied emblem of exile.

The difference between epic Information and intimate Experience is also reflected in the shifting of gender roles throughout the film. The dying Younes is cared for with feminine devotion by Khalil, a wounded and failed fighter, pretending to be a doctor. The local two-bit "resistance" leader mocks Khalil for not beating Shams, the woman he loves—since "every husband beats his wife." Their tender and passionate lovemaking opens the film, and it is Shams, the militia leader, who totes the gun. Thus the film *The Door to the Sun*, like the book, critiques and reverses the common tendency to derive Information from masculine activity, while passing over women's Experience as irrelevant. Slogans and militancy speak clearly at the level of Information, while intimacy and sensuality, as well as the unbearable ache of losing them, loiter in the ground of Experience. *The Door to the Sun* dwells passionately on the texture of Experience, on the reasons life is worth fighting for.

So we have a few answers to the question, how can events arise from the infinite breadth of the past and bypass the censorious and idiotic codes that filter them into "meaningful" narratives, to reach us in the present? The best of contemporary Mashreq Arab cinema avoids the sloganeering demanded by censorship and funding alike. It draws attention to the steely grip of Information, our contemporary spectacle, which preempts its engagement with Experience, as in the films of Meyar Al-Roumi, Omar Amiralay, and Akram Zaatari. Or, in the microfocus of Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, the fond absurdism of Mohammed Soueid, and the sensuous exuberance of Yousry Nasrallah, Arab cinema yields unanticipated and heart-stopping Images that, in turn, make Experience richer. These filmmakers lift away the Information curtain so that, if only briefly, they and others may tickle Experience itself.

Notes

1. Kracauer, *History: The Last Things before the Last*, 136.
2. This understanding of history as knowable not in itself but only in its repre-

sentations, which are themselves historical, is drawn from Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, and from Deleuze's interpretation of Foucault's philosophy of history, *Foucault*.

3. Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*.

4. On the plane of immanence, see Deleuze and Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?* chap. 1.

5. I first introduced this enfolding-unfolding model of the Image in Marks, "Invisible Media," in *New Media: Theories and Practices of Digitextuality*, 3–46. It is explicated in animated diagrams in Marks, "Enfolding and Unfolding: An Aesthetics for the Information Age," pursued in Marks, "Information, Secrets, and Enigmas: An Enfolding-Unfolding Aesthetics for Cinema," and summed up in Marks, *Enfolding and Infinity: An Islamic Genealogy of New Media Art*.

6. See Peirce, "The Principles of Phenomenology," 74–97.

7. Peirce's definition of the sign—"A sign, or representamen, is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity"—indicates the ceaseless flow of communication that constitutes the semiotic process. Peirce, "Logic as Semiotic: The Theory of Signs," in Buchler, 99. I take this flow to be the basis of experience itself; note that my use of "Experience" in this essay differs from Peirce's use of the term.

8. Peirce, "The Principles of Phenomenology," 79.

9. Cubitt, *The Cinema Effect*, 64.

10. Guy Debord placed spectacle at the level of the Image, while my model shifts it to the level of Information that is not necessarily perceptible. See Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*.

11. See, for example, Gilles Deleuze, "The Crisis of the Action-Image," in his *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, 201–8; and Deleuze, "The Painting before Painting," in his *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, 71–80.

12. I discuss this point in more detail in Marks, "Invisible Media."

13. See Cubitt, *The Cinema Effect*.

14. Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, 78. On conspiracy, see Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, 209–14.

15. Indeed the attention to the flow of unfolding and enfolding can help us understand many artworks (and other things) as performative in their origins and their effects in the world. They become fluid and transformative, like the Peircean sign itself.

16. See Deleuze and Guattari, "The Smooth and the Striated," in their *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, 474–500.

17. See the detailed discussions of NGO and other types of funding in Al-Zobaidi, "Hyper-Nation: Palestine as a Cinematic Real," 19–39; and Marks, "What Is That 'and' between Arab Women and Video? The Case of Beirut," 41–70.

18. Quilty, "Palestinian film' through an Israeli Lens." These events are documented on the website of the Palestinian Campaign for the Cultural and Economic Boycott of Israel, at www.pacbi.org.

19. Quilty, "Greenhouse: EuroMed Film Center Built on Shaky Ground: Controversy Has Roots in Failed Ramallah Film Festival."

20. Salti, "Critical Nationals: The Paradoxes of Syrian Cinema," in *Insights into Syrian Cinema: Essays and Conversations with Contemporary Filmmakers*, ed. Salti, 21–44.

21. Interviews with some of these filmmakers appear in the excellent book edited by Rasha Salti (ibid.) that accompanies a touring film program she organized. For information about the film program see www.arteeast.org.

22. Marks, "Akram Zaatari's *In This House*: Diagram with Olive Tree," in *Akram Zaatari: Unfolding*.

23. Marks, "Mohamed Soueid's Cinema of Immanence."

24. Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*.

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