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The Singular of Seeing
[*Al Marra Min al Nazar*]

Akram Zaatari

My friends are aware of my close relationship with the popular Egyptian films of the 1940s and 1950s. I perceive them as a rich archive, rarely 'read', despite their regular broadcast on most Arab television channels. They have been so over-watched that they have become a mere background to our domestic life. We sing songs from musicals and memorise lines from films, using them in our daily language, but rarely do we go beyond the storyline to question or study their narrative content or structure. While researching the history of photography in the region,[1] I have become increasingly attentive to the fact that these popular films are inseparable from a larger visual culture, which includes photography, print, and fashion. The photographic work of Armenian-Egyptian photographer Van Leo (1922–2002), for example, had a fundamental connection to fashion, acting, the local film industry of the times, and even Hollywood through American film journals that he used to buy. Any attempt to read Van Leo's photographic work without situating it in the context of the visual production of the period, or the craft and technicality then, may fail to grasp some of the cultural links that strengthen the reading of his work in harmony with his original intentions.[2] The study of this context often helps to identify narrative patterns and possible deviations from those patterns, which sheds light on the practice itself in relation to given socioeconomic and political contexts.

One usually finds photographs separated from their narratives, whereas films – whether to an advantage or disadvantage – carry their narratives within them, often in packaged, edited formats such as feature or short films, documentaries, or reports. When separation between image and narrative occurs, the narrative, or illustrative information, in a certain fragment is reduced to the strictest minimum observed in that fragment. What is of interest at this instant is the state of initial cognition before any meaning is generated or synthesised by the audience, and before any links with other fragments are made. I am attracted by the fact that the Arabic word *Nazra*, which means a 'view' or a 'glance', also means 'point of view'. *Nazra* is explained linguistically as the singular of the act of seeing, *Al Nazar*.[3] The term for this act is constantly meant,

1. This refers to my ongoing research for the Arab Image Foundation conducted in Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and Egypt, which has been exhibited and published on several occasions (see also: http://www.fai.org.lb).

2. I am not dismissing here any possible reading of a visual fragment or of an entire work outside given sociopolitical or cultural contexts.

3. Baalbaki, Munir and Rohi, *Al-Mawrid Dictionary*, Dar el-Ilm Lilmalayin Publishers, Beirut, 2001.

even defined in a plural sense – as if the one fragment of an act of seeing signifies a piercing, sharp, and focused point of view.[4]

Evidence is a narrative element and is rooted in belief, ie, that which lies in the audience's minds. It is fascinating to observe, for example, how popular films invite the viewer to – willingly – suspend and re-establish belief several times in the course of one film. For example, in the Egyptian film entitled *Ghazal el-Banat* (Anouar Wagdi, Egypt, 1949), one observes this complex system of encoding within a film's narrative in order to make a work 'believable', even when it is not. If the elements of evidence are used in order to make one believe what is hard to believe, then one wonders what the value is of this evidence. And once those elements are stripped from the faith in them – when used in a different context – what possibly remains? In my opinion, what remains is simply the document value of the fragment. In this context, value is defined as the precise and strictest minimum used to describe what is referred to in the photograph, film, or video. It is information that is so basic, so clear, that the item's existence – undeniably facing a camera – cannot be questioned.

Studying the work in isolated fragments allows for the possibility of looking at a set of visual traits before they are appropriated within a narrative, whether in a fiction film, in a documentary, on the news, or even in a descriptive caption at the bottom of a photograph. If the initial role of photographs, films, or videos is to invite their audience to 'look' before they are entertained, seduced, refreshed, provoked, or impressed, then the value in question is simply that which is looked at. What I am referring to is as straightforward as a photograph of a colour scale. Imagine the spectrum of colours in a photograph relative to its reference on the visual scale. If the film development is carried out according to recommended standards, colours should be exactly the same in both the visual scale and in its photographic representation.

In the film *Ghazal el Banat*, Layla (Layla Murad) and her Arabic teacher, Hamam (Naguib El Rihani), seek refuge in a villa late at night in order to avoid an insolent intruder. After knocking on the villa door, they discover the house is that of the famous actor Yussef Wahbi, who plays himself as a guest star in the film. Layla is surprised to see him face-to-face and is ecstatic to find out that Wahbi is hosting singer Mohamad Abdel Wahab. Abdel Wahab is getting ready to rehearse *Aashik el Ruh* before a large orchestra. In this late night cinematic fantasy, which regroups four major film celebrities, Yussef Wahbi and Abdel Wahab's characters are treated differently from the other two:

Sleiman:	Yes? Wait a bit. Pardon me, but what do you want?
Hamam:	A glass of water.
Sleiman:	A glass of water? What do you think this is, a café?
Hamam:	We are thirsty. Is water that expensive?
Sleiman:	It is not a matter of being expensive but why are you knocking on people's doors at this hour asking for water?
Hamam:	Isn't this Ismail Bey's house?
Sleiman:	Who's Ismail Bey?
Hamam:	Ismail Bey Abu Manakhir.
Sleiman:	There is no one here by that name.
Hamam:	Maybe it's the house before or after this one?

4. Similarly, isolating one frame of a film and video that captures live action allows one to perceive this action differently, providing an opportunity for a different reading of that fragment. In my video installation entitled *Another Resolution* (Ayloul Festival, 1998), I asked people to stand in poses that were inspired by photographs of children while my video camera was running. The result was a combination of frozen action with a moving background, which was intended to attract the viewer to the eroticism existing in the original photographs. Please refer to: Akram Zaatari, *Another Resolution* (MTGé, Beirut, 1998).

Sleiman:	It is neither.
Hamam:	Then maybe we've come to the wrong street? Good-bye.
Sleiman:	You are not going anywhere but to the police station. You are burglars. Mohamad, Osman, tie them up! These are tricks you've invented to rob people's houses. You burglars!
Yussef Wahbi:	What's the story Sleiman? Who are these people?
Sleiman:	Mr?
Layla:	Yussef Wahbi? Oh my God!
Hamam:	Mr Yussef Wahbi the movie star? Oh shit!
Layla:	Bonsoir Monsieur.
Yussef Wahbi:	Bonsoir? You mean Bonjour. It's almost dawn. Anything I can help you with?
Layla:	Yes. Ehh!… Please tell him why we're here.
Hamam:	Because, because we love trouble.
Yussef Wahbi:	But I don't get it. Who is he?
Layla:	He is my teacher and his name is Hamam.
Yussef Wahbi:	Your name is Hamam (pigeon)?
Hamam:	Yes my name is Hamam. They gave me this name so people would make fun of me.
Yussef Wahbi:	And you?
Hamam:	She is Layla, the daughter of Murad Basha who lives at the end of the street.
Yussef Wahbi:	Welcome. Please have a seat. What honour grants me this nice visit?
Layla:	In reality…
Hamam:	In reality, we… we…
Layla:	We were having a walk, out to get some fresh air.
Hamam:	We have to leave.
Yussef Wahbi:	But isn't it early?
Sleiman:	Sir, Mr Mohamad Abdel Wahab says he's ready.
Yussef Wahbi:	OK. I'm coming.
Layla:	Mohamad Abdel Wahab? The singer?
Yussef Wahbi:	Yes he is here, inside.
Layla:	It's not possible!
Yussef Wahbi:	Don't you believe me?
Hamam:	Let's go.
Layla:	Wait. He is going to sing now.
Hamam:	Sing? Oh my God! Save us from this hell. Abdel Wahab and Yussef Wahbi in the same house. We escape one guy and fall into the hands of others!
Layla:	Is it true that Abdel Wahab will sing now?
Yussef Wahbi:	Yes. He will sing an excerpt from my last novel, which I am writing for him.
Layla:	What is this novel about?
Yussef Wahbi:	It is about a man who loves a woman so much that he cannot but see her happy, even if her happiness is with another man.
Layla:	This is a great story. I am sure it will be very successful.
	Hush! Listen! Abdel Wahab is about to start.
Layla:	Mr Hamam? What's the matter with him?
Yussef Wahbi:	Ms Layla, this man loves you.
Layla:	Don't say that. He loves me?
Yussef Wahbi:	To the point of craziness
Layla:	This is not possible!

Yussef Wahbi:	Why not? Many novelists have addressed this subject, including me.
Layla:	Thank you.
Yussef Wahbi:	Hey… What is life, if not a great theatre?

Unlike Layla Murad and Naguib el Rihani, Yussef Wahbi, and Abdel Wahab preserve their 'real characters', as they contribute to the narrative of the film. In other words, Yussef Wahbi plays the character of Yussef Wahbi, and Abdel Wahab sings as Abdel Wahab.[5] It is possible for one to argue that these characters are simply cultural landmarks, icons, or textual references introduced within this context exactly as a possible visit to the Cairo tower or the Pyramids in an Egyptian film would be. However, as it is unusual for an actor to be as passive as a monument with regard to a film's narrative – in the sense that actors are expected to interact with one another – such blocking of interaction introduces an ambiguous situation that can be believable only through the faith of the spectators, whether this blocking happens on the level of 'seeing' – as is the case with Abdel Wahab, who does not even notice the presence of the girl and her teacher[6] – or on the level of 'recognition' – as is the case with Yussef Wahbi.

Layla and Hamam recognise Yussef Wahbi as the writer and comedian Yussef Wahbi, who – and contrary to what one would normally expect – does not recognise them, as if he is seeing them for the first time, although the pair – if one considers the level of the two actors' stardom – are equally famous. Ironically, Layla Murad's character's name in the film is also Layla Mourad. But her character is not representing the star 'Layla Murad' with whom everyone in the audience is familiar. If one were to apply the idea of the visual scale, such a plot would fail, and thus threaten the unity and credibility of the film. Only faith, this predetermined submission on the part of the audience, makes it believable.

Since the icon, in this film's context, refers to a famous personality in film history, and belief depends on the audience's knowledge of Wahbi's previous films and plays, it is valid to claim that this is a cinema of historical and popular notoriety, to the extent to which it can be considered self-referential. One might, also, rightly see this scene as an attempt to penetrate a star's intimate life, even if this life has been staged for the purposes of the film. This tactic, or 'artistic licence', takes advantage of the audience's voyeuristic tendency and their curiosity about what Wahbi's house might look like, how he might behave at home, who might be in his company, etc. But, when faced with the historical reality of the film industry in Egypt, Wahbi's role – like that of Abdel Wahab – is perceived and recognised as a character in a bubble. It is a one-way recognition that can be identified as iconic recognition, where the two characters are transformed into screen-figures. What appears to be a window into an icon's daily life is more of a showcase display.

What we are watching is a pre-staged intrusion that is at the service of the star system, which aims to seduce a greater audience; the plot is pre-scripted and, contrary to its obvious claim of penetrating the star's daily life, it reinforces a 'halo' around the star. In simple terms, it communicates the following: that even if you – as a member of the audience – succeed in breaking into this actor's life, you will experience

5. This is not the only example where Egyptian film stars play their characters in a film. Hind Rostom played a memorable role in Fatin Abdel Wahab's *Isha'et Hobb* (*A Love Rumour*, Egypt, 1960), as did Ismail Yassine in several of his films.

6. Layla Murad played the leading female role with Mohamad Abdel Wahab in Mohamad Karim's *Yahya el Hob* (*Long Live Love*, Egypt, 1937), and even sang with him the duet, *Yadi Naim*.

what looks like a film; and furthermore, it is a film with which you are familiar.

Abdel Wahab's stardom is reinforced when Wahbi invites Layla and Hamam to listen to Abdel Wahab sing, while he is unaware of their presence at a spectacular performance. Two points are interesting here. The first is the assumption that the audience is to believe this plot; and the second is how the role played by Abdel Wahab is reduced strictly to singing, to the extent that it becomes legitimate to pose the question, is he 'performing' for the film, or is it true that he is 'really' singing?[7] He simply sings which, in my opinion, adds to his aura, and reinforces the existing image of him. If I were to describe Wahbi as a screen figure in this film, then Abdel Wahab can be described as an icon on the wall behind Wahbi. He is set at a deeper level within the film, and does not interact with any of the actors. His act is so simple that one can no longer consider it acting. It is such a simple act, an act as simple as chewing gum, which leads me to why and how *Red Chewing Gum* was born.

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7. In the second part of his autobiographical trilogy, *Haddutah Masriyah* (*An Egyptian Story*, 1982), Yousef Chahine includes a scene that he filmed in the early 1970s revealing Oum Koulthoum singing on stage. In the film, this scene is intercut with another scene which zooms in on the actor Nour el Sherif, playing Chahine while sitting in the audience. The spectator is led to believe that Chahine is watching Oum Koulthoum sing. However, the spectator is also aware that at the time the film was shot, and at the age in which Nour el Sherif appears in this film, Oum Koulthoum had been dead for years. Oum Koulthoum's role is restricted to singing here, while previously shot documentary material is used to give credibility to the narrative of the film.


Red Chewing Gum (10 minutes, 2000) was my contribution to the Hamra Street Project, curated by Ashkal Alwan in 2000, reflecting on the rise and fall of this famed Beirut street. The project allowed for debate to take place on the street's pivotal history in the city and its present condition. I wanted to stage a scene of a boy chewing gum; videotaping this scene over and over, adding new information in each take, removing the viewer one step further away from the plot. The image of the boy chewing red gum becomes a recurring *icon* that acquires more meaning as the video unfolds. The work was conducted on two levels, adapting my personal interest in pursuit, as a structure, to my commitment to the nature of the street. The work plays on the theme of consumption which I found relevant to a commercial street such as Hamra

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The concept behind *How I Love You* (29 min, 2001) was born after *Majnounak* (Crazy About You, 26 minutes, 1997) which provided a platform for three men to speak 'proudly' about their conquests of the other gender, describing their sexual encounters in detail. *Majnounak* was meant to be a critique of the definition of masculinity, as it is conceived and propagated by men – in general – in contemporary Lebanon. *How I Love You* extends the exploration of male sexuality to homosexuality. I wanted the images to portray traces of the time and location in which they were being produced, which led to a blurring and the overexposure of the image, as homosexuality is still considered illegal in Lebanon

For me, *Image + Sound* (5–7 minutes, 1995–96) was based on de-contextualising televised images. It is a fieldwork of interpretation, but also a critique of the entertainment value of broadcast television. The technique used was to choose one location, shoot totally improvised scenes inspired from that location in one afternoon, and attempt to complement them with a selection chosen from television archives, in a quest to generate a third interpretation
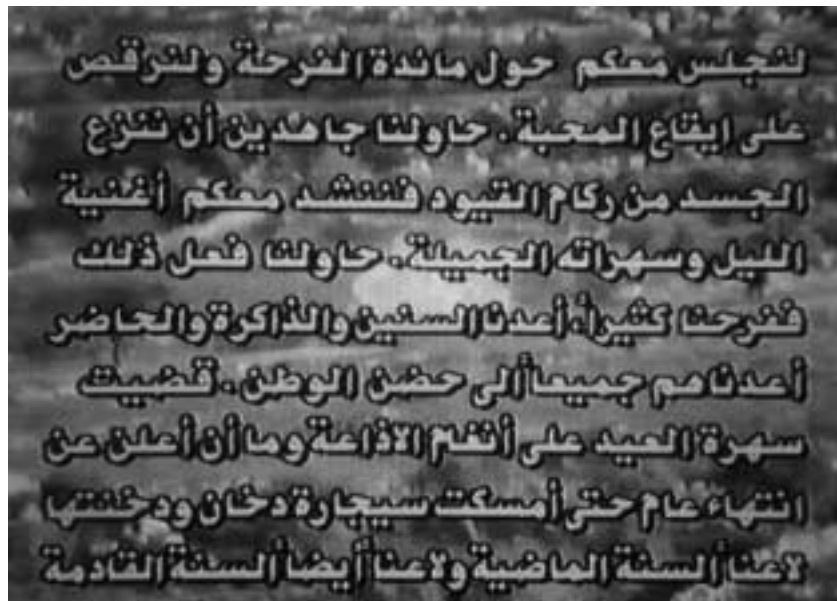
All is well on the Border (43 minutes, 1997), explores the Lebanese-Israeli conflict in South Lebanon through its mediated/televised images. The manipulation of television images is emphasised, sometimes by playing with speed and other times by separating sound from its corresponding image. The video shows staged interviews with former Lebanese detainees in Israeli prisons as a comment, a self-mediation. *All Is Well on the Border* aims to deconstruct the conventional narratives of resistance by breaking myths of the hero/traitor, the victor/victims and illustrating the impossibility of representing a conflict without further constructing oppositions.
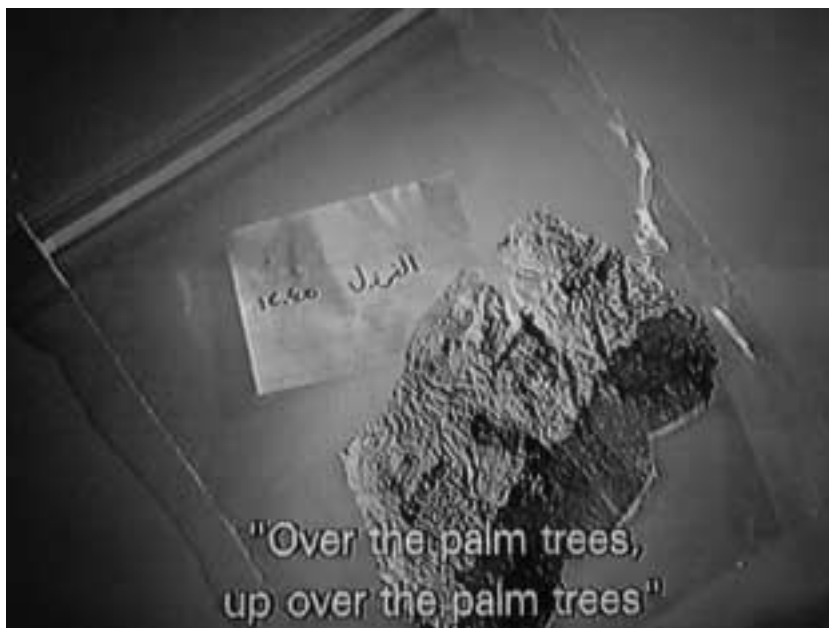
Baalbeck (a collaboration with Ghassan Salhab and Mohamad Soueid, 60 minutes, 2001), is a road film in three parts set between Beirut and Baalbeck, where two men – a journalist and a photographer – cross the country from West to East, from the coast up to the Syrian borders, in order to cover a story about the Syrian singer Sabah Fakhry. Their journey is repeated three times, according to three interpretations, conceived and realised by the three of us. As in *Red Chewing Gum*, I worked on the idea of pursuit as the two journalists get attracted to a young man, and decide to deviate from their original itinerary in order to follow him. Their attraction – as it is presented in the video – is

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blurred, between potential investigation and physical desire. I find the two very related. The two characters desire this man, but they do not admit it – even to themselves – let alone to society. They justify their pursuit of him with the pretext of the investigation, where their desire of him is camouflaged with suspicion. Pursuit is a form which can be interpreted as both desire and/or investigation. I take their interest in the man as a pretext to penetrate a person's life and explore his cultural identity. Take, for example, the idea of collecting what the young man uses then throws on the road; a chocolate wrapping, an empty soft drink can, or lip balm. They even go so far as to look into his clothes and make a detailed inventory of his possessions. For me this description provides the work with an opening into the intimate world of this person, just as an X-ray would. I asked the young man (Nabil Kojok) to take his handbag with him to the set, and asked the two journalists to start describing and take notes of its contents.
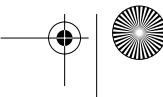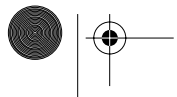
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