

HANAN AL CINEMA:

AN INTERVIEW WITH LAURA U. MARKS

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As the title of your book (Hanan al Cinema: Affections for the Moving Image) indicates, the concept of affection is of central importance for the way you analyze a number of films coming from the Arab world. Reading your book, one immediately senses that you are genuinely affected by the works you write about, and that this affection, and not the idea of doing a comprehensive, neutral survey, is the starting point of your research.

However, the concept of affection has also another dimension in your work: you consider the moving images of the corpus you are analyzing as affection-images in a Deleuzian sense. Situated in the interval between perception-images and action-images, these images constitute a cinema of suspension and thus fall under the category of time-image. Can you reconstitute for us the birth of this book in connection to its title “affections of the moving image”?

First, I'll tell you honestly that I began by looking for an Arabic title that connoted love of the cinema, and that had to transliterate easily into English. *Hubb* (love), *gharam* (ardent love), and other words don't look so good in Latin characters; but *hanan*, affection, fondness, or kindness, is easy to read and pronounce, and has an extra connotation of supportive tenderness, which seems appropriate for the non-commercial genres and practices that the book addresses. Therefore, the philosophical concepts of affect and the affection-image that animate much of the book made it into the title.

But as you ask about the birth of the book, I think you are asking how I came to the topic. Beginning in the early 1990s I was struck by some experimentation going on in works from Arab countries and their diasporas that was not only, or not at all, political in the ways a viewer would expect; instead these works seemed to be developing new languages for feeling, sensation, and thought. There was really a sense of something coming into being in works like Mona Hatoum's *Measures of Distance* (1989), Elia Suleiman's *Homage by Assassination* (1992), Mohamed Soueid's *Indama Ya'ati al-Masa* (*Nightfall*, 2000), Omar Amiralay's *Toufan fi Balad al-Baath* (*A Flood in Baath Country*, 2004) — coming into

being despite a great many constraints — that I wanted to respect by finding the words for it.

You also consider Arab cinema to be a cinema of suspension in the sense of an impossibility for Arab filmmakers, in view of the contemporary political and historical conditions of Arab countries, of doing anything other than a cinema of the crisis of representation and of the action-image. Why did the Deleuzian diagnosis developed in connection to the European post-war context seemed useful and appropriate to deal with cinema developed in the context of the contemporary Arab-speaking countries?

The Second World War caused massive economic and ideological breakdowns in the European countries that lost, Italy and Germany, and Deleuze argues that the resulting blank slate demanded creativity yet destroyed pre-existing creative templates. The cascade of terrible events that the twentieth century brought to the Arabic-speaking world don't parallel the Second World War in Europe, because they also involve colonial and imperial history; but certain events, like the Lebanese "civil" war (1975-1990), the first Oslo Accord of 1993, and the second Gulf War (2003), as well as the entrenched totalitarian governments in Syria and Egypt, erased people's faith in governance or ideals of justice. As Samir Kassir argued, these events entrenched feelings of powerlessness (in the face of colonial and dictatorial powers) without the revolutionary energy of the underdog that had prevailed after the crushing defeat of the Arab allies by Israel in 1967. Blank slates proliferated. At the same time, and departing from Deleuze, I note the various new means of production and skills that began to make independent film and video possible in these disillusioned times.

*On several occasions, not only in *Hanan al Cinema*, but also, for example, in the film that Grahame Weinbren did with you about the book (<https://player.vimeo.com/video/160179965>) you stress the necessity of not confusing Arab and Muslim, namely because many film directors that you mention are Arab, but not Muslim. That you have to insist on this important difference betrays the fact that many of your readers know very little about the context and that such a differentiation between two very different notions — one designating a geographical region, the other a religion — is not evident to many of them. In this regard, do you understand your task, among other things, to be didactic? And is it necessary to have a deeper knowledge of the geopolitical conditions in order to understand not only the political subtext, but also the formal construction of these films?*

Yes, this is a quandary I often face. I want audiences and readers to appreciate these works aesthetically, but the aesthetic response is often deeper when people have a decent grasp of the historical and political circumstances. However, awareness of the historical and political circumstances often throws audiences into a representational mode, which is often reactionary and defensive and misses the delicate pre-discursive achievements of the films. When I programmed the Robert Flaherty Seminar in 2015 with half Arab and half non-Arab artists, I intentionally subtracted politics from the theme — it was “‘*Atr al-Amkina*/The Scent of Places.” This made a lot of people crazy but also allowed them to focus on the creativity of individual works.

Throughout your book you resort to different theoretical positions such as Deleuze’s notion of the fold, Peirce’s third, Spinoza’s idea of the body or the Mu’tazili’s atomism. How do these very different traditions of thinking relate in your assessment of cinema?

Simply, I like to bring concepts from Arabic and Islamic philosophy into contemporary thought, just to freshen it up. More deeply, it’s illuminating to learn that Arabic and Islamic concepts are deeply embedded in European philosophy, an idea I explore a lot in my book *Enfoldment and Infinity: An Islamic Genealogy of New Media Art*,¹ and subsequent research. For example, the concept of the fold in Deleuze and Leibniz is deeply informed by Islamic Neoplatonism in general and Shi’ite philosophy in particular. My work is increasingly informed by cosmology, specifically comparative cosmology: experimenting with bodies of thought, such as the four you mention, that approach the cosmos as a whole: knowable or not, interconnected or not, divinely ordered or anarchic, transcendent or immanent, etc. — in order to test and taste what such a universe feels like. The cinema, a multisensory perceptible, is a wonderful way to test cosmology because it touches our bodies and invites different ways of thinking about the links between the body and the cosmos.

The question of the close relationship between filmic art and politics is central to your analysis. Aesthetic and political aspects go necessarily hand in hand. Even if political struggles are explicitly thematized in a few films only, all films implicitly engage with their political conditions. One of the issues is the fact that Arab artists are confronted with an existing imagery, an imagery elaborated outside of the Arab world - the strong projections on them as religious fanatics or backwards by

“Westerners”, as reproduced by mass media, ideological discourses or certain Hollywood films. In order to allow for a different access to the Arab world, some artists immanently deal with these clichés in order to subvert their ideological power. It seems to be necessary to deconstruct the reigning imagery based on Western, sometimes orientalist representation so as to construct a genuine aesthetical position which is, at the same time, a problematizing of the hegemonic situation. Could you comment on this relation between images from in- and outside the Arab world as constructed in the films you are interested in?

Yes, that is all correct. To complicate things further, there’s never a purely “inside” or “outside” position. Many artists and filmmakers decide to address non-Arab audiences and to explain, or simplify, or self-Orientalize, or in other ways mirror back the demands some non-Arab audiences (and funders, and festivals, etc.) place upon them. In turn, these filmmakers are subject to detailed critique by colleagues and audiences in their own countries. At one point I wanted to call the book “Never the Right Time” because so often films are censored, or self-censored, by the artists themselves, audiences, funders, exhibitors, journalists sometimes, or any number of intermediaries, on their way to more distant audiences, with the explanation that “this is not the right time” (to celebrate Arab art, to criticize Saddam Hussein, to say anything at all about Islam, or other examples that I mention in the introduction). As Egyptian artist Doa Aly wrote in 2011, “There’s something morbidly bourgeois about implying the existence of a ‘time for art.’ The thought that art can only exist to react is disquieting. But more so is the idea that art cannot exist if it cannot react ‘appropriately.’”²

You mention the need on the part of many Arab filmmakers to make a historical research about the repressed communist past in their countries, bringing to the present the forgotten stories of their radical leftist movements of liberation. According to you, these are not nostalgic gestures towards the past, but ways of studying it in order to figure out what went wrong, as if this past still contained a non-fulfilled potential awaiting to be reused and actualized in the present. Could you elaborate on the need to address this quasi total annihilation of secular radicalism in connection to the recent rise of religious radicalism and of Islamic armed movements?

Without looking for it, I found an enormous amount of research and creative production on Communism and Socialism on the part of filmmakers, artists, and scholars across the Arab world, well before the uprisings of 2011, about which I write in the chapter

“Communism, Dream Deferred.” State socialism in Egypt, Syria, and Iraq was initially animated by Communist and Socialist ideals. Lenin would have been proud of the anticolonial revolutionary praxis of Algerian, Moroccan, and Palestinian revolutionaries in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s and of the international Communism that supported them. But none of these anticolonial revolutions succeeded; instead they installed authoritarian governments. One of the best answers to your question comes in Mohamed Soueid’s *Ma Haftu Li Ghayriha* (*My Heart Beats Only for Her*, 2008), which deftly recounts how the guerrilla tactics that pro-Palestinian revolutionaries learned in Vietnam in the 1970s got passed down to Hizbollah, which gained a monopoly on armed resistance in Lebanon, while shedding the Communist ideals that had initially informed it; meanwhile economic imperialism thrives like a catfish in muck. The disastrous events of 2011 only reinforce the Marxist observation that a revolution that doesn’t enfranchise all classes is bound to fail. So the many Arab intellectuals who look back to Communists and socialists of earlier decades are building tools of analysis for a praxis still to come.

When referring to the program of the film festival you organized many years ago, Palestine, the Aesthetics of Exile, you mention the contradiction between, on the one hand, that which makes a film politically rich, and which has nothing to do with its message — elements such as the disjunctive narrative style, the intrusion of the director in the film, the ambiguity between fiction and documentary, the pastiche of found-footage — and, on the other hand, the fear expressed by some, that precisely such a richness might compromise the political message, identified with a positive and unambiguous image of the situations and stories of Palestinians. Do you sense that such a contradiction is still at work in the expectations regarding the reception of Arab cinema in general, and of Palestinian films in particular?

Yes, aesthetic richness often makes people uneasy that the work will not transmit a clear political “message.” However, I notice they are always uneasy not for themselves — they understand the political ambiguity perfectly well — but on behalf of other people, who they suspect can’t be trusted to receive and interpret the film. This phenomenon isn’t exclusive to Arab cinema; it happens everywhere. It is a form of censorship.

You talk about a specific Arabic “archive fever” or “mal d’archive,” where what you call a desire for the archive is inseparable from the recognition that the access to Arab culture and to its past/history/memory is, for a great deal, dependent on non-existent archives. The archives in Arab countri-

es, laden with voids and blank pages as they are, show, although negatively, that an archive is the result not only of what has been kept, but also of what has been lost or forgotten. And this points to the impossible neutrality of the archive, since it is always the result of a combination between the remains of history and the collective and social uses given to those surviving fragments. How is the particular condition of the existing archives, and the subsequent subjective and creative approaches to the materials, apprehended and transmitted by Arab cinema? Do you think that cinema is more capable than other forms of practice to undertake an archeology of the Arab archive in the sense of Foucault, i.e., of the statements and visibilities articulated by a certain epoch or historical moment?

Yes, cinema is very good at crashing together statements and perceptibles (the term I prefer to visibilities, as it is more multisensory) in order to release and, sometimes, mobilize potentialities. That chapter is the longest in the book, discussing about 37 films and doing a lot of philosophical heavy lifting, because Arab filmmakers apprehend and transmit the state of archives in a great number of truly inspiring ways. They also draw attention to the fact that it's never "the archive" but "*this* archive," a singular and precious collection of materials. They turn archives' absence, poverty, and even their antagonism (as in colonial archives) into means for creativity and invention — in a way that may give pause to those in wealthier countries who believe that our state and commercial archives represent history pretty well. Arts workers in Arab countries are also exemplary at building their own archives, something I've pursued further since *Hanan* was published.³

At one point in your book, you say that some aesthetic forms and some political contents could only have been developed in the Arab world, precisely because cinema there is not in the dominant position. This reminds a bit of Hegel's dialectic between the master and the slave — the slave being the one able to become self-conscious, to slip out of his condition as an object for the master. Could you elaborate on your idea?

Yes, it's not exactly that the slave knows what the master does not know, but that the one who is disenfranchised is in a better position to bring into existence what is not yet known. It is possible to turn disenfranchisement into a luxury. In this vein Fares Chalabi, as I mention in the chapter "Cinematic friendships," celebrates self-organizing artists' movements: "movements and meetings devoid of an identified goal, and images with no commercial value or sometimes with no value at all."⁴ Refusing the status quo can actualize more distant, almost unimaginable potentials.

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1. Laura U. Marks, *Enfoldment and Infinity: An Islamic Genealogy of New Media Art* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2010).
 2. Doa Aly, "No Time for Art," 15 June 2011, <https://moabdallah.wordpress.com/2011/06/15/no-time-for-art/>.
 3. Laura U. Marks, "Poor Images, Ad Hoc Archives, Artists' Rights: The Scrappy Beauties of Handmade Digital Culture," *International Journal of Communication* 11 (2017): 3899–3916.
 4. Fares Chalabi, "The Idiots," in Mirène Arsanios and Suna Kafader, eds., *How to Make (Nice) Things Happen* (Beirut and New York: 98weeks and ArteEast, 2010), 36.