

THE MISSING LINK

**Cecilia Andersson
Marwa Arsanios**

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This text is the first part of a body of research involving the film 100 faces in a single day (1972) by Christian Ghazzi

PRELUDE

When we first received an invitation from Anthony Downey to talk about the history of new media or curatorial practice in Lebanon or/and the MENA region, we thought that perhaps he was not addressing the right people. We sat there facing each other separated by a thick wooden table that was leaning on super designed stands 'borrowed' from our friend Zico.

The ground floor of our project space, where we were sitting, has a vitrine to the street, and in a conscious choreographed move, we both turned our heads and looked out for a minute; two guys fighting over a parking spot, usual routine.

We then looked back in and immediately responded, 'maybe it is just the terminology he is using'. As if the street scene had mechanically brought us back to Downey's email and triggered those words.

We then remembered having seen a quite remarkable film from Christian Ghazzi produced in 1972. Its experimental, cinematographic language and the use of sound had an air of the avant garde. And we liked it. This was something to look for and engage with, we thought, especially if we wanted to understand contemporary filmic practices in Lebanon.

We had heard that Ghazzi's archive had been burnt in Beirut in the early 1980s and that *100 faces in a single day* (1972) was the only remaining film, as it had been kept in the archives of the Syrian National Film Institute in Damascus at the time of the fire. It had even won a prize at one of their festivals sometime in the mid-1970s. Perhaps this film would be a sort of



Christian Ghazzi and friends, Making of Christian Ghazzi, *100 faces in a single day*, 1972.



'missing link', as the filmmaker Ghassan Salhab puts it.

We could arrange, we decided, a round table discussion with filmmakers and video artists from different generations and ask them how they would relate and remember that movie. And we could also talk to actors that were part of it.

We made our list of people and Ghassan Salhab was our first invitee, as well as Mohammad Soueid (whom we couldn't meet before the deadline of this text), Nadim Tabet (who is very busy and can only meet in May), Rami Sabbagh (who is in the middle of editing a movie) and actors Raymond Gebara and Jalal el Khoury (whom we have yet to contact but will do so soon).

We couldn't talk to Ghazzi directly because he had disappeared into life a long time ago, leaving scattered traces like empty wine bottles, cigarette butts and half finished cups of tea in his trail. In a kind of mythical gesture, he had escaped the art realm, fulfilling the avant-garde artist ideal. Throughout the conversations, Ghazzi became this character that everyone is trying to recreate.

CHARACTERS

Cecilia Andersson: a curator in her late 40s. She moved to Beirut recently because she was bored with the art scene in Europe.

Marwa Arsanios: an artist in her early 30s. Quite ambitious but sometimes lost in too many quests.

Ghassan Salhab: a filmmaker in his early 50s. Passionate, handsome and often troubled.

Raymond Gebara: An icon from the early modern Lebanese theatre, cinema and TV productions. He acted with Christian Ghazzi and is now hemiplegic.

Mona Gebara: Raymond Gebara's wife and a former actress.

Scene 1

Ghassan Salhab is one of the most prominent independent filmmakers of the postwar generation in Lebanon. We wanted to touch upon a history of experimental filmmaking and see where he would stand in relation to that and to the work of Christian Ghazzi.

Cecilia Andersson and Marwa Arsanios are present. They talk to Ghassan Salhab in his house next to the Mayflower Hotel. Sitting on the same couch, they watch 100 faces in a single day and talk.

Ghassan is browsing through the film in different directions and with pauses. He goes through different scenes. The initial ones are from hospital beds, with the radio voice-over announcing greetings to family members in villages from the south of Lebanon so as to let them know they were in good health.

These are followed by the semi-documentary and underexposed mountain scenes where fedayeen soldiers are climbing and hiding behind bushes. Ghassan mentions a John Ford atmosphere to the scene, a sort of Wild West fedayeen. Against this backdrop there are scenes suggesting that the factory worker's romance is less important than the revolution and a section on the bourgeoisie and their lack of commitment to anything but their own vain lifestyle.



And all the time, the displacement of sound; the rattling of tying one scene together with the next, and all of it unmoored by the frazzled soundtrack.

Ghassan Salhab: I see the clear 'influence' of Godard's *Ici et ailleurs* (1976) even though Ghazzi's film was done earlier. In fact Godard came here with the PLO [Palestine Liberation Organisation] but he didn't do a film. He did *Ici et ailleurs* two years after he had been to Lebanon, so with a degree of distance. Also Godard was more involved in the so-called international struggle so he had a distance from the place where the actual struggle was happening. You know, I was also involved in this and at that time you couldn't think of your own struggle outside of the international struggle, outside of Vietnam and Angola. Godard's film wasn't made in a country where struggle and war were taking place. He was looking at the events from a distance. Ghazzi didn't have that distance, he was totally immersed in the conflicts and this influenced his film. He was physically involved with the FDLP (*Front Démocratique pour la Liberation de la Palestine*).

Loud sound: *distorted radio archive from the film. Ghassan puts the volume down and carries on.*

Marwa Arsanios: What were the other influences on this film?

GS: Ghazzi worked with radio, a medium which influenced his work in a major way. As a son of this time he was exposed to the Situationists, Surrealists, Letterist International, Dada, Cobra and to the revolutionary times of 1968 in France. These influences become clear as he juxtaposes things that wouldn't necessarily belong together. But his work doesn't become homogenous. He never loses the friction of these juxtaposed elements. The sound and the image are out of sync for instance, something formally very radical at the time.

Scene from the movie: *a bunch of rich kids sitting in a hotel bar drinking.*

Cecilia Andersson: And would it be fair to say this film influenced your own work?

GS: When I saw his film I didn't intellectually connect to all of this in the first instant, only later on. But it stayed in me. Unconsciously, he made me think that the fight is on all levels. It's obvious that the Situationists, Dadas and Surrealists all rejected each other while simultaneously acting as continuations, amalgamations of all those traditions. But this idea of blowing everything up - writing, music, image - I am a son of those ideas too. There's even the idea of an anti-narrative in his film, used as one way to break the traditional narrative structure.

Ghassan and Cecilia sip green tea.

MA: You're both 'radicals' somehow, or come from a radical tradition. Perhaps the struggle towards a revolutionary goal unites your work. What has radical practice, Marxism, Leninism, and all the engagement in political organisations contributed to artistic languages?

GS: I'd say it's not Marxism or whatever that brought the change. It was the time, the 1960s hippie movement. The idea was that things had to change and the world had to change. I was influenced in a literal

way but during that time I was too much involved in the actual fight. What becomes clear is that Ghazzi is a real revolutionary in terms of images, sounds, the relationship between men and women, family. In this sense he's really a son of 1968. He's in tune with reality but he's not reality. And one thing I observe is that he places absolutely everything, all messages at once, in his movie because he doesn't know if there'll ever be a next one. A typical Third World reflex (*laughs*).

MA: It's interesting how he rebels against his own influences.

GS: I don't think he rebels against them. At that time there was a permanent reconsideration of things. Something happened in the 1960s and you see filmmakers deconstruct and re-arrange the structure, the narrative. But he is a parasite on himself and his material and his influences, with the sound as well. It's as if Ghazzi took the style of the images and digested them in his own personal way. Meaning: he digested a lot in one film! He loved cinema, his real love was cinema, not the revolution.

Scene from the film: *We see a scene of fedayeen going around in the camp of Bourj el-Barajneh, trying to collect donations from the people.*

CA: So it's his own, very personal struggle reflected in the film?

GS: He's a witness, actor and artist and strangely he's got the distance and assembles it all, sound, training, fighting. You feel the cuts, their presence. He wanted the cut to be visible. This film was talking to my senses both mentally and physically. It had to do with the physical experience of film, as diary, scrapbook; it was his way of digesting daily life. It's a very melancholic film but what messed him up were these Marxist/Maoist ideas. I'd say Marxism didn't take him anywhere. His art was in the 'service' of the revolution but he didn't seem to notice that. Or maybe he didn't quite understand the impact of what he'd done. He was an artist and somehow part of that lost generation that blossomed in the 1970s.

MA: Was he too much of an idealist?

GS: There's a clear lack of critical distance to his own work. I think it has to do with the fact that he was fully involved in the idea of a revolution. I converted from a fighter to an artist but Ghazzi was both. He believed that the camera was a machine gun. I couldn't do things without distance, which meant I couldn't do it at all. Ghazzi lost himself because he couldn't keep the distance from what he was doing. And you know, there's the mysterious idea that he lost all his material during the war. I can imagine it's true. I lost stuff too. The PLO lost its entire archives. But you never know what is fiction and what is reality. Anyway, when they talk about Lebanese cinema everyone mentions



Christian Ghazzi.



Maroun Baghdadi and Borhan Alawiyeh. But in my opinion, in the poor chain of Lebanese cinema, Ghazzi is an important link, a missing link. But this is normal: he was on the margin. But for people like Akram Zaatari, like Mohammad Soueid and for me, we are not his sons because we didn't really know him, but in a way we are the continuity of his ideas but without the militant side.

And, as you said about the Maoist thing (watching a scene of a woman in the field that resembles fiercely some Chinese cultural revolution propaganda aesthetics), we had to go into the field. It was an honour to be the son of a worker more than the son of a bourgeois.

CA: So it's almost like film as a form of anthropology.

GS: Exactly, its like what Jean Rouch was doing.

Scene 2

Raymond Gebara started acting very young, in his village, and later became a theatre director and a writer. He featured in many movies with Omar Amiralay and in 1976 was in The Message (1976) by Moustapha Akkad. He had one of the lead roles in 100 faces in a single day but hadn't seen it yet. It was shot almost 40 years ago.

Raymond is now in a wheelchair. His wife Mona Gebara is there and is very happy to see the film as well because Madonna Ghazi, her best friend, had the lead female role in it. Madonna had died in an accident on her way to Jordan in 1978 and Mona hadn't been able to watch any of her movies since.

Suddenly all the figures of the early modern Lebanese cinema and theatre started emerging; Madonna Ghazi, Jalal el Khoury, Salah Moukhalalati, Rida Khoury, Refaat Tarabay, Micheline Daou. But obviously Madonna had a special place.

We start to perceive Christian Ghazzi in his community of friends and artists.

Cecilia Andersson and Marwa Arsanios watch the movie with Raymond and Mona Gebara. We sit in the living room with our backs to Beirut. There was no real need to talk, we just watched.

Marwa Arsanios: Why haven't you watched the movie yet?

Raymond Gebara: They told me once that they would screen it at a festival but I couldn't go. When Madonna died I didn't see Christian Ghazzi anymore. She is one of the most important actresses I have ever seen. She had a part in my first play in 1970. In Ghazzi's film there was also Salah Moukhalalati and Madonna Ghazi.

Mona Gebara: What is this film about?

RG: It is about the fedayeen, we filmed it with Madonna and Salah.

MG: And with Omar Amiralay?



MA: No, with Christian Ghazzi.

MG: Where? In Damascus?

RG: No, in Jordan.

MG: Why did you make this film?

RG: It was about the resistance and Palestine.

Looking at credits.

RG: Ah! Micheline Daou (while looking at the film's credit) was in the movie, I didn't even remember.

MG: Ah! Jalal el Khoury.

RG: Kais el Zoubeidy - he's a friend of mine.

MG: Pauvre Christian!

RG: This is Maaloula in Syria.

MG: Oh Madonna ... ouf. She is the only person I couldn't grieve after her death. It's as if she had just disappeared. I still can't come to terms with the fact that she died. I never watch any of her movies anymore.

RG: This is the camp of Bourj el-Barajneh ... That's Jalal el Khoury.

MG / RG: Oh, that's Micheline Daou!

RG: She was the most beautiful woman in Beirut - she died two years ago. She used to work as a model for painting.

RG: This is Mona Wassef, one of the best Syrian actresses

MG: What was your role in the movie?

RG: Fedayeen. You will see me wearing the *keffiyeh* (*laughs*).

MG: It's a documentary about the situation that was dominating that time.



RG: (*Looking at screen*) This looks like a demonstration. Maybe they gave him some archive from the FDLP?

MG: They used to talk so much. They constructed so much hope and then destroyed everything. They used to get drunk and talk so much.

RG: He is making fun of all the leftist theoreticians of that time here (*laughs*). I don't remember but I think I die in this movie.

MG: It was the peak of surrealism. A way of approaching surrealism. Of course it was worldwide.

RG: Madonna was everything.

RG: Christian Ghazzi is an authentic communist, he was really committed, not a bourgeois that plays communist.

MG: He was more a poet than a filmmaker

Scene 3

Cecilia and Marwa enter the 98weeks project space again and distribute flowers and cookies to the audience.

COMING SOON: THE MISSING LINK 2

About the authors

Cecilia Andersson studied photography at the International Centre of Photography and received an interdisciplinary BA in photography and biology at the Empire State College, New York City (1996-99). She holds an MA in Creative Curating from Goldsmiths, London (2000-02) and is a freelance curator and founder of Werk, a platform for discussions about urban transformations www.werkprojects.org

Having collaborated internationally with artists and organisations from conception to production, Cecilia stages exhibitions, workshops and seminars, writes articles, reviews and texts and gets involved with the promotion of contemporary cultural events. Recent projects include *Madrid Abierto* (2009-10), an exhibition of ten commissioned works for public space in Madrid; *Urban Marketplace for Ideas* (2010), a workshop concerning the immediate neighbourhood surrounding Arteleku art centre in San Sebastian, Spain; *Fokus Kina* (2009), a touring video programme for Riksställningar in Sweden; the group exhibition *On Cities* (2008) at the Swedish Museum for Architecture, Stockholm. She is currently based in Beirut working with 98weeks project space <http://98weeks.blogspot.com/>



Marwa Arsanios is a visual artist based in Beirut, Lebanon. Marwa completed her BA in Graphic Design from the Lebanese American University (2001), and obtained her MFA from Wimbledon College of Art, University of the Arts, London (2007). She has exhibited in London, Beirut, Athens, Oxford, Lisbon, Santiago de Chile, Rome and Damascus. Her work was shown at Art Dubai in the Bidoun Lounge (Art Park), at Forum Expanded at the Berlinale 2010, at the Homeworks V forum in Beirut and at Tokyo Wonder Site in Tokyo. Her videos have been screened at several festivals and events such as the Rio de Janeiro film festival in 2010, the e-flux storefront in New York, and most recently at the Centre Pompidou in Paris. She is a founding member of the artist organisation, and research and project space *98weeks*, and one of the organisers of the travelling exhibition project *Platform Translation*.