

REVIEW

# 'I Want to See' asks audiences to think about what they're not seeing, too

*Deneuve lends star power to a very different kind of film*

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**B**EIRUT: The pivotal scene of "I Want to See," the new feature by Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, is a moment of dialogue, most of it exchanged after the frame has been blanching of its image and faded to black.

Actor Rabih Mroueh (playing himself) recites to Catherine Deneuve (playing herself) the interior monologue her character delivered near the end of in Luis Bunuel's 1967 film "Belle de Jour," a rehearsal of an explanation to her husband of why she has taken a part-time job in a bordello.

"I recognize that," Deneuve tells Mroueh, then remarks upon the odd bits and pieces you will recall from a movie, while forgetting others – sometimes something as basic as the name of a character you played.

By this time the image of Mroueh's car has returned to the screen, driving slowly up a dirt road in South Lebanon. The filmmakers' voices intrude on the scene, then sundry crew members burst into the frame, chasing after Mroueh's car to prevent it taking a road they fear is littered with cluster bombs.

It's one of the most laboriously staged sequences of "I Want to See," a half-scripted mingling of documentary and fiction film, one that – as some audience members at the film's Arab world premier remarked – contributes nothing whatsoever to the plot. The fact that the sequence is essential to the filmmakers' intentions underlines the challenges confronting those who want to enjoy this film as a piece of naturalist cinema.

The plot of "I Want to See" is simple enough. For undisclosed reasons, Deneuve is in Beirut shortly after the conclusion of Israel's summer 2006 war upon Lebanon. Standing in the window of a north Beirut tower – with anonymous voices sputtering at the prospect of her stepping outside her set itinerary – she reiterates, "I want to see."

The filmmakers (playing themselves) arrange to have Mroueh drive Deneuve to South Lebanon, where Israel concentrated most of its firepower. Hadjithomas and Joreige drive immediately in front of the actors throughout the journey and periodically re-enter the frame. Along with some early (perhaps deliberately) awkward camera work, this lends the film the quality of a "making of" documentary.

The actors are strangers before stepping into the car and Mroueh admits he's not entirely comfortable speaking French, so much of the passage is accompanied by a minimal exchange of pleasantries, or else passes in silence.

After a brief stop in Dahiyeh, they continue on to Bint Jbeil, the Mroueh family's village. He climbs out of the car to look for his grandmother's house. They stop again at the Lebanese-Israeli border, then drive back to Beirut where, at a reception held in Deneuve's honor, they exchange glances.

Though a semi-documentary, "I Want to See" never actually documents the collective punishment inflicted upon pop-



Which way to grandma's house? Deneuve and Mroueh walk through a ruined Bint Jbeil.

ulation centers for no other reason than that inhabitants happened to be Shiite Muslim. Neither are the filmmakers interested in creating a maudlin fiction about victims and villains.

Like Hadjithomas and Joreige's previous output – which consists of two feature films and cerebral conceptual art – this film is interested in the aesthetics of disjuncture. True to its title, "I Want to See" makes repeated references to aesthetic and political ramifications of seeing.

On one hand, placing an actor of Deneuve's stature in the film is an effort to invoke the European cinema tradition she embodies (deliberately juxtaposed with the film's war-shattered setting). On the other, Deneuve's need to see the detritus of state-sponsored terrorism is a, possibly critical, reference to "bearing witness" as an activist position.

As the journey begins, Deneuve asks about some ruins of earlier conflicts. Mroueh answers her questions but Beirutis may recognize that merely naming iconic structures like the Murr Tower – which operated as a snipers' nest and a torture chamber – does little to identify their historic resonance.

The actors climb out of the car in Dahiyeh to be filmed but their cameraman is twice abruptly forbidden to shoot. Local audiences will recognize Hizbullah's

renowned camera-shyness – which might be lost on foreign audiences, as may the aesthetic implications of being forbidden to film ("to see," if you like).

In their tentative conversation, the two actors depict their differing stakes in gazing upon the destruction first-hand. Deneuve wants to go simply because South Lebanon is so close. "It feels impossible to remain on the fringe," she tells Mroueh. "I want to see."

**|| 'I don't like to be a tourist in my own country ... but with you it'll be different'**

For his part, Mroueh says that all the bombings and destruction make him want to not go to Bint Jbeil. "I don't like to be a tourist in my own country," he explains. "But now, with you it'll be different. The film will make it interesting." The television images of the destruction, he continues, were repellent, but returning to be in those pictures himself makes the process worthwhile.

Later, on the road back from Bint Jbeil, an Israeli fighter jet breaks the sound barrier overhead. It's a mock air raid, Mroueh explains to the startled Deneuve. "It's to take photos." "Is it always to take pho-

tos?" she asks.

"Sometimes ..." he hesitates.

"It's to terrorize?" Deneuve continues.

"Yes."

Joreige and Hadjithomas' contemplation of the image continues when the actors arrive at the Lebanon-Israel border, where they are meant to wait for a spell. They have to wait for the various actors – the Israeli Army, UNIFIL, Hizbullah, etc – to give them permission to place their tripod on the road.

While they are waiting, some French peacekeepers have their photograph taken with Deneuve. Once the crew gets clearance to shoot, the two actors walk toward the border, only to find a bomb crater in the middle of the road.

So not much happens in this movie. This may surprise audiences, given the drama inherent in Israel's 34-day-long bombardment and the manifold possibilities for dramatic frisson between actors of Deneuve's and Mroueh's abilities.

Some critics and audience members draw unfavorable comparisons between "I Want to See" and last year's "Under the Bombs." Philippe Aractingi's meta-melodrama follows a young mother who returns to Beirut late in the 2006 war and hires a taxi to drive south so she can find her young son.

"Under the Bombs" may be cheesy and exploitative, some opine, but at least the film has a story that somewhat engages with some of South Lebanon's residents – who bore the brunt of the Israeli onslaught – and their stories.

In "I Want to See," by contrast, the camera is generally fixed on the two actors' terse exchanges, or else on the shattered architecture and infrastructure (or the lovely dales and hills of South Lebanon) that frame them.

When Southerners do appear, their role is restricted. Mroueh has left Deneuve in the car while he reconnoiters Bint Jbeil. Looking around nervously, she finds an array of local men, staring – making their mute presence one of threat.

Though there are superficial similarities between "I Want to See" and "Under the Bombs,"

Aractingi's film is not the best tool to grasp Hadjithomas and Joreige's work. More useful is the 2002 film "Adaptation."

Written by Charlie Kaufman, this movie centers on a high-minded screenwriter named Charlie Kaufman, who's been commissioned to adapt an unadaptable book, called "Adaptation," into film. Immobilized by the task, Kaufman eventually attends a script-writing seminar held by Robert McKee, the reigning doyen of American commercial cinema.

Our neurotic hero, surrounded by hundreds of note-taking careerists yearning to work the Hollywood machine, stands and asks the evangelist of formalism what advice he has for a screenwriter who wants to tell a real story – a story free of the clichéd conventions of human tragedy, one in which nothing in particular happens, as in real life.

"Are you out of your f\*\*\*ing mind?" McKee spits with celebrity-infused venom. "People are murdered every day. There's genocide, war, corruption. Every f\*\*\*ing day, somewhere in the world, somebody sacrifices his life to save someone else. Every f\*\*\*ing day, someone, somewhere makes a conscious decision to destroy someone else. People find love, people lose it ... If you can't find that stuff in life, then you, my friend, don't know crap about life. And why the f\*\*\* are you wasting my two precious hours with your movie? I don't have any use for it."

It may seem unfair to compare the American apple that is "Adaptation" with the Gallic orange of "I Want to See." But Kaufman's pivotal exchange between the art house cinema mentality and that of its commercial Other is pertinent when assessing some of the intentions of Hadjithomas and Joreige's effort, its successes and shortcomings.

If audiences respond to "I Want to See" with the same visceral contempt McKee expresses for Kaufman's film, that reflects Hadjithomas and Joreige's praxis, and their conception of their audience in particular.

Kaufman's work – like that of writers who occult mature themes into children's film, thereby preventing parents from committing suicide at the Saturday matinee – has the wit (and the resources) to speak to a popular and elite audience, to entertain and provoke thought, simultaneously.

Like "Adaptation," "I Want to See" intends to appropriate the stuff of commercial cinema – in this case Deneuve's magisterial presence – and use it as a delivery mechanism for preoccupations more frequently explored in art theory and the white-cube art gallery than the multiplex.

But rather than engaging the narrative possibilities of their scenario – the "stuff" McKee talks about in his rant – Hadjithomas and Joreige bend their resources to a contemplation of the image-taking upon which such narratives depend.

In doing so, they raise the film's discursive bar, inviting their audience to think about war's several aesthetic ramifications. Wider audiences will accept this invitation when the language in which it is issued is less exclusive.



Deneuve has a look around.