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Antoine's Afterlife in Film

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Earlier this week, the Lebanese filmmakers Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige sat in a darkened screening room at MOMA, recounting a bizarre real-life incident surrounding a photo shown in one of their films. Little did they know that the image had another surprise in store for them.

The husband-and-wife duo is renowned for their thoughtful investigations, in films and art installations, of Lebanon's precarious present and turbulent past—specifically its fifteen-year civil war (1975-1990), which defined much of their youth. They were in town for the first installment of “Mapping Subjectivity,” MOMA's three-year

festival of experimental Arab cinema, where they staged an hour-long performance centered on an event around their 2005 feature, “A Perfect Day.” The film is a portrait of a mother and son trying to come to terms with the loss of their husband and father, who disappeared fifteen years earlier. There are seventeen thousand documented cases of people who vanished during the war, Joreige and Hadjithomas explained, but, despite excavations across the country, the bodies have yet to be found. (Joreige's own uncle went missing in 1985, never to be seen again.)

For a shot in “A Perfect Day,” Joreige and Hadjithomas had wanted to create a newspaper clipping with a photo of their disappeared character. This, they found, would be practically impossible given local superstitions toward death. Lebanese actors refuse to play dead, for fear that the fiction would soon turn into reality.

After a long search, the filmmakers found a family willing to provide a headshot of their late beloved, Antoine, as a sit-in for their character. “They were glad to help out because they thought that by so doing they were helping the cause of the missing,” Joreige said.

But after the première of the film in Lebanon, the directors received a troubling call. A woman had recognized the man in the photo and was demanding that it be blurred or removed. Aida, as the filmmakers named the caller, was Antoine's second wife, and was unaware that her husband would be appearing in a movie. “I was sitting in my seat watching the film when I suddenly saw Antoine before me,” Aida told the filmmakers. “Antoine was looking at me and saying: ‘Aida, save me. I don't know what I'm doing in this film, save me!’ ” Further still, in an eerie coincidence, the date the filmmakers had chosen for the newspaper announcement of their character's disappearance

turned out to be the date of Aida's marriage to the real-life Antoine. "You negated our marriage," she told them.

There was still another twist: unbeknownst to the filmmakers, Antoine had been killed, and the investigation around his murder was still open. While presenting the film at a festival in New York, Joreige and Hadjithomas learned that cops back in Lebanon were looking to interrogate them and had tried to confiscate rolls of "A Perfect Day" from local theatres. They rushed home to find that Aida was suing them. The filmmakers at first tried to reason with Aida, to no avail. Eventually the two sides reached a compromise. "We would cut out the image of Antoine from the film for screenings in Beirut only," Hadjithomas said. "Beyond this territory, he could remain a character, and she was able to put up with the fiction."

When the performance at MOMA was over, the filmmakers turned the discussion over to the floor. After a few questions, the mike was passed on to a middle-aged woman with tightly pulled-back hair. "Antoine was my cousin," she said, her voice cracking. "I went to see your film, and suddenly there he was. It was also very difficult for me to see him. I couldn't focus on anything else that was happening in the movie." Her words stunned everyone in the room, including the filmmakers. It was a chilling testament to the power of a photo: precisely the idea that Hadjithomas and Joreige have been mining onscreen and in their art.

The film festival continues this weekend, with screenings of two more films by Hadjithomas and Joreige on Sunday.

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