

For a disappeared cinema

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For many the advent of cinema at the dawn of the 19th century brought an end to humanity's long quest for an artistic medium that could present to audiences the physical world, in all its movements, colours and sounds. The photographic - thus mechanical - basis of cinema granted the new medium a purchase on everyday reality that the visual arts could not achieve. This attitude has in many ways come to define cinema: this is born inside the material, physical world and thus its practice is constrained and of course made possible primarily by this very fact. The earliest filmmakers were so impressed by cinema's natural adherence that they travelled the world to produce 'views', one-shot films simply presenting landscapes, such as waterfalls or the sea in James H. White's seminal work. For these filmmakers, films are not made, they are found. The fascination with this medium that needed almost nothing (compared to the skills required of a painter) to present us the world as such, cannot be underestimated and audiences were often transfixed on these moving postcards. For the German critic, Sigfried Kracauer, cinema 'redeems physical reality', in that it shows how all of it is worthy of our attention and interest. For cinema, like for Spinoza, the perfect and the real coincide (*per realitatem et perfectionem idem intelligo*). Cinema subverts the hierarchies of significance, Aristotle's natural ladder, and transforms any ordinary instance of existence into something captivating. On screen a leaf, a doodle on a piece of paper, a tuft of hair, an unmade bed, a foot, a donkey, a cigarette, a broken

leg, an occasional conversation in a cafe, a rainy day, amount to as much if not more than epic characters. In this sense, films are not made, they are found.

What could then one do in relation to disappearances, with a medium that is so steeped in material reality? Why then filming disappearances?

In 2020, with a group of activists based in Lebanon, I engaged in the task of making a film about the more than 17,000 people who disappeared during the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990) and never returned. Whilst virtually no exhumation has taken place, it is believed that the remains of at least some of these people are located in the more than 100 clandestine graves scattered around the country. The film, released in 2023 with the title *The Soil and The Sea* (UK/Lebanon, 72min) is neither an investigation nor does it offer the kind of historical context that could make it a useful introduction to the Lebanese Civil War. Rather, it is an attempt to grapple with what the practice of filming disappearances might be like. *The Soil and The Sea* is also not a film about the past. We used a very limited amount of archive material and we used it in a way that does not support or illuminate a better understanding of the past. It is rather a film that tries to install itself in the skewed temporality that disappearances impose on relatives and on a social body more generally. One can say that the film is much more anchored in the present than it is in the past.

Feeling the presence of absence

Most of the film is a search not for visible traces that the disappeared have left before vanishing - their clothes, their pictures, their rooms, their musical instruments, books or tools, and other belongings. It is not in this sense an attempt

to reconstruct their identity prior to their enforced disappearance. Instead, the film searches for (and in my opinion finds) absence. There are at least two possible angles to approach this: the places of disappearance and/or clandestine burial; the disappeared bodies.

The sites of disappearance and burial have certain physical qualities; they are inscribed in a landscape and themselves form – or rather constitute – a landscape. They possess certain ‘here’ or ‘there’ attributes. We were clear from the beginning that we wanted a film made of places, because it is especially the places that are significant here. It is in these places that we can register how much has been forgotten and how the country has moved on, without however dealing with what it has moved on from. The places you see are completely ordinary and by and large do not show any sign of violence. The film therefore composes a geography of things that you cannot see.

On the other hand, the disappeared manifest themselves only in the past, most often through photographic portraits kept and carried around by their relatives. These pictures might be months or years old and in some cases describe a person who would have changed considerably since the picture was taken. The disappeared cannot be located in the present and is on the other hand fully constituted in the past, a past that both stops at the moment of their disappearance and that continues because of that disappearance.

The juxtaposition between visible places and invisible bodies, however artificial, in fact the site and the disappeared cannot be separated. The site is not the same as it was, but most importantly it shares some of the same features as the disappeared. What does the site show? As mentioned, it shows very little, no violence, no commemoration. The absence of violence and of memorialisation

gives the places in the film an odd, suspended status. The more we register the physical world indifferently going on about its business, branches moving under the weight of a cat, the wind gently filling a curtain, clouds crossing the sky, taxis and motorbikes, the waves of the sea, the more we are attracted by this present, brought into this fascination, the closer we get to absence, absence becoming the very thing we are watching. Whilst this doesn't become visible (one could have found plenty of metaphorical, allegorical or literal ways to figure absence), its pressure becomes impossible to ignore.

The intention is to stay here within a disappeared cinema, a cinema functioning under the pressure of absence, without however turning this absence into something visible.

The philosopher Jean-Louis Déotte explicitly acknowledges how a shift takes place once film - art more generally - encounters the politics of enforced disappearance, inasmuch as 'the representational regime of the arts - *mimesis* - is radically undermined' (19: 2000). The disappeared and their clandestine graves, the unmarked burial sites that co-exist with and exist as the landscapes inhabited daily by the living, impose that the arts work in the 'interstices'. Since disappearance therefore cannot be treated like an object (visibility is disrupted since the beginning), the idea is that the work is contaminated by the disappearance itself and work alongside this contamination. The disappearance is in this case not the object or even the subject of the film, but the principle that influences approach and style, it becomes a matter of method.

What becomes visible then in this framework? What we do see is invisible violence or rather violence made invisible. It is this act of making violence invisible - by hiding bodies, by disappearing them, by burying them in unmarked graves, by

literally *hiding death* - that the film tries to contend with. The image makes visible that the violence was meant to be hidden, erased and because of that doubled. The image therefore addresses directly the fact that the violence was meant to disappear, to leave no trace, to perpetuate itself precisely because it was not evident, destroyed destruction. Absence is there, it occupies the film.

Gathering Material survivals

On the other hand the film agitates another register. This is a material one, beyond the commonly accepted idea that disappeared and their ecologies are ghostly, spectral, immaterial, to be thought about purely in terms of a lack. As Didi-Huberman writes, following a walk around what is left of Birkenau: 'They are there, they are really there: in the flowers of the fields, in the sap of the birches, inside this little lake, where the ashes of thousands of dead people rest'. The disappeared continue to live in very material ways, by physically altering the soil and waters that host them. The many bodies dumped in clandestine or massclandestine graves - many are being filled as you reading in Mexico or by the Israeli army in Gaza - - more are being created right now in Mexico for instance or by the Israeli army in Gaza - continue to live and become part of the nature that hosts them. They release nutrients that feed the flora, change the chemical structure of the soil, cause the roots of olive trees to be redirected, and attract species that privilege sites of organic decomposition as their habitat. In the film, we hear of two sites of clandestine graves having been turned to agricultural land. We hear that vegetables come from these sites and are sold to the public. The disappeared survive not only in the memory of their relatives (sometimes as a Palestinian woman says, in their dreams), not only as files for search committees,

human rights activists, truth commissions and so on. They survive as organic matter that becomes or is in the process of becoming nature. This also allows us then to see “nature” (in all its complexity) as intrinsic to systematic violence.

In other words, film - with its automatic adherence to the physical world - is perfectly apt at filming disappearances and in fact a disappeared cinema might open up different ways to think about them. It is about tuning in both to the presencing of absence - the way absence occupies certain places, makes itself felt, marks a landscape - and attending to the manifold material survivals of the disappeared.

The Soil and The Sea can be watched on Curzon Home Cinema

<https://homecinema.curzon.com/film/the-soil-and-the-sea/>