



Akram Zaatari

Radical Closure

Source: Video Data Bank's *Radical Closure*, 2010

*Send me to the seas of love; I'm drowning
in my blood¹*

Radical Closure²

This program compiles and presents films and videos that are produced within—or that raise issues related to—situations of closure resulting from wars and/or political conflicts and territorial confinement. The program focuses primarily on a region that was united under the Ottoman Empire until the early twentieth century, not to promote it as a geopolitical entity, nor to blindly label its production as one of particular ethnic features or formal characteristics. Rather, this program aims to look at how film and video has functioned throughout a history charged with division, political tension, and mobilization—sometimes as a tool, a vehicle to more political tensions, at other times as a critical platform. The program also looks at what is now known as the Middle East—as site of successive wars, excessive division, and abundant stereotyping—and subsequently presents an opportunity to study film and video's paradoxical ability to describe these situations. The program presents works of different natures and origins—

independent films and videos, artists' films and videos, and documentaries. The program considers these works as documents from a state of closure, presented as research elements for possible study.

In concrete terms, this program looks at films and videos that address the questions of borders, closures, wars and the militarization of public life, as well as the rise of extremist ideologies, and examines the implications of such a state. The program further examines the banality of everyday life in gated communities, protected families, and in the home.

Originally programmed for the 2006 edition of the International Kurzfilmtage Oberhausen, *Radical Closure* initially included many more works; the project was later adapted for this DVD box set. For various reasons it was not possible to acquire the rights for certain works, and therefore several titles were withdrawn from the selection; on the other hand, the program features excellent new works, which were not part of the original project. The films and videos presented here come from Cyprus, Egypt, Israel, Lebanon, Palestine, Iraq and Turkey, in addition to related works from The Netherlands, Germany, and Canada, and are presented as critical commentaries of individual artists facing aggression, status quo, state power, and the threat of the eradication of the basic notions of civil society.

Essential to the shaping and development of this program is a personal interest in artists' study, use, interpretation, and questioning of preexisting documents, and the ways they incorporate them into their own work. From this perspective, the program looks at two essential traditions, firstly that of Jean-Luc Godard who has reflected on the camera's role in mobilization and in war, particularly in his 1976 film *Ici et Ailleurs (Here and Elsewhere)*, which presents us with one of very few documents from the Palestinian military struggle in Jordan and South Lebanon in the early 1970's. *Here and Elsewhere* represents one of few instances in cinema where the discourse of the armed Palestinian resistance is communicated and criticized, while still acknowledging the legitimacy of the Palestinian cause. Godard tried to understand in 1974 why the discourse of resistance is often communicated through pompous slogans, delivered in a theatrical way, and attempted as well to understand (not justify) the hysterical acts that resistance can result in (hijacking and exploding planes, the killing of athletes in Munich, and other terrorist acts) as an effect of global political and social injustice. Godard saw that acts of terrorism exploited the logic of the TV "spectacle", particularly in live news coverage. *Here and Elsewhere* draws a link between the television coverage of terrorism and consumer society, where passive consumers sit in front of the box, putting aside pending social problems.

¹ Based on Sufi poetry by leading Shi'a cleric, Sayyed Mohammad Hussein Fadlallah.

² Based on a concept and writings by Jalal Toufic, *Distracted*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley, CA: Tumbra Press, 2003), pp. 80-92



(Posthume) (Posthumous), Ghassan Salhab, 2007

Godard's work is a valuable contribution in the making and unmaking of documents, constructing and deconstructing narratives around them, presenting them to us, and then revealing that they are false. In *Here and Elsewhere* a woman is ready to give the child she carries to the revolution. A few moments later Godard explains that this woman was acting. He asks us to believe, then to suspend our belief, in his images. He not only makes us aware that images are manipulated, but he asks us to take every image more seriously, suggesting that when studying history, a false document should still be considered a document.

The second tradition explored in *Radical Closure* is that of Harun Farocki, who examines operational images produced and used in industrial military research. Based on his observations of rushes filmed from inside the self-guided machines or robots devised to survey and assess a machine's operation and efficiency, Farocki notes how, since the first Iraq war, operational images have often replaced television images in war coverage. Operational images become a representation of war. Farocki

studies the technology, economy, and the shifting function of these images in order to understand what was otherwise hidden in them. What interests me about Farocki's work is his need to observe the "future" use of these images in order to get the larger picture.

Given the media industry's reliance on the visual, its need for illustration makes it dependent on available archived material, even if this material originates from automatic recordings made during military operations by invading armies. Audiences often find themselves looking at war from the point of view of the killing machines themselves. If Godard's approach is based on building up and then deconstructing narratives around visual documents, by filming scenes and juxtaposing them with TV footage of a terrorist bombing, for example, Farocki is interested, rather, in an extensive examination of the documents themselves, viewing and re-viewing them and showing them to us repeatedly, scratching up layers of meaning in order to reveal their hidden aspects. Farocki's work with operational images remains one of few approaches to

film and video that builds a concept around the conventions of the media industry developed during situations of war.

Influenced by the work of these two axial artists, *Radical Closure* also examines the position of the individual. Positioned outside of the broadcasting industry, video has inevitably become the tool of the individual voice. A constellation of artists and filmmakers communicates this notion well in their work, starting with Elia Suleiman's valuable cinematic and political statement *Homage by Assassination*, in distribution for the first time on this box set. In his short vignettes such as *Wa*, *Tambouro*, and *The Rope*, Ziad Antar enjoys creating and filming homemade tricks and mechanisms, playing music, cooking, and watching television. In the work included in this program, *Safe Sound*, he examines the boredom of living through the last moments of a violent Israeli attack that turned his city, Saida, into a refugee center in the summer of 2006. Guy Ben-Ner's work often focuses on his family at home. In *House Hold*, he gets stuck under his son's bed and spends the entire film absurdly trying to exit. Hatice Güleryüz's

iconic work *Intensive Care* documents in close-up her nephew's circumcision.

This compilation also includes two historical pieces: Mona Hatoum's *Measures of Distance* in which she represents through photographs and sounds intimate moments spent with her mother, and Lisa Steele's *Birthday Suit with scars and defects*. While presented here as a footnote to a regional program, this is a key work which highlights a primary function of video as a tool for the individual's voice and as a means to explore personal history, in this case through the artists' examination of her own body.

Radical Closure addresses closure as a metaphor, a state of suspension, somewhere between a violent present and a desired-for life of peace and prosperity—seemingly impossible given the continuous injustices in this world, particularly in the Middle East. It is inevitable not to mention pressing and long-debated situations such as the right of the Palestinian people to return home, thereby putting an end to the ongoing misery of the millions living in camps in Jordan, Syria and Lebanon, with limited access to mobility, jobs, proper healthcare, and education; the ongoing occupation of Palestinian territories; the oppressive status quo that produces further social damage and extremism; the constant militarization of public life; and the ongoing lack of tolerance everywhere. Each of the thematic programs in this compilation creates encounters through the juxtapositions of works, of individual voices.

It was not always easy to compile and secure the rights to all of the included works, and I am very thankful to the patience of the Video Data Bank team. I am grateful for the generosity of International Kurzfilmtage Oberhausen for having initiated the original program upon which this compilation is based. This is indeed an unprecedented collection that I am sure will further enrich scholarly work around issues related to the Middle East, and to its history.

– Akram Zaatari, 2010

***Radical Closure* was initially presented at the International Kurzfilmtage Oberhausen 2006.**

Recommended titles for a further understanding of the subject:

Al Makhdou'oun (The Dupes)

Tawfiq Saleh

1972, 1:47:00, Syria/Egypt, b&w, sound, 35mm

Cut

Nizar Hassan

2000/01, 1:10:00, Israel/Palestine, color, sound, 16mm

Hurubuna al-Taishah (Our Heedless Wars)

Randa Chahal

1995, 52:00, Lebanon, color, sound, 16mm & video

Ici et ailleurs (Here and Elsewhere)

Jean-Luc Godard

1976, 53:00, France, color, sound, 16mm

Interview with a Housewife

Sherif Elazma

2001, 7:30, Egypt, color, sound, video

Nightfall

Mohamad Soueid

2000, 1:08:00, Lebanon, color, sound, video

The Roof

Kamal Aljafari

2006, 1:03:00, Palestine/Germany, color, sound, video

Route 181

Michel Khleifi & Eyal Sivan

2004, 4:30:00, Belgium/France/UK, b&w, sound, video

Wall

Simone Bitton

2004, 1:36:00, France/Israel, color, sound, video



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