

# ALI CHERRI

## Gazing at the Catastrophe

“The world groans and begins crumbling into bloodied rubble to the astonishment of humankind unaware of the sort of monster it had brought into being, brought proudly into being.” Thus begins Argentine writer Ernesto Sábato’s seminal book of essays, *The Writer in the Catastrophe of our Time*, with its opening salvo about the apocalypse heralded by the atomic bombs deployed in Japan. As each age brings with it its own catastrophe and tenebrous universe, the assertion of an affective and rallying humanism manifestly follows like a cautionary voice haunted by evil and expressive of a “demented faith.” Demented, surely, because of the scale and insidious scope of destruction and cruelty perpetrated across the globe, and yet resistance ensures our continuation rather than our capitulation. Our “tragic crossroads,” to quote from Sábato again, are no worse than those of our predecessors; simply, they are uniquely our own.

Lebanese video and visual artist Ali Cherri has consistently explored, through subjective immersion, the effects of war upon his

own psychic imaginary without skirting the larger social context in which conflict has resided and reigned. Having grown up in Beirut during the Lebanese Civil War, his work has not only been informed by personal experience but a desire to delve into the contradictions and paradoxical tendencies evoked from living in an urgent, unpredictable, and ever-changing state. With abortive metaphors and spatial-temporal intervals for self-containment, Cherri’s multi-disciplinary work repudiates the didactic codes of engagement, instead often combining performative impulses with observational camerawork and the appropriation of found materials. When employed, voiceover is never cold and anonymous; rather it is sensual, literary, fragile, exploratory, curious, plaintive, and thoughtful. Through videos, installations, print works, and an increasing movement toward cinema—his latest film, *The Digger*, won the New Visions Award at this year’s CPH:DOX—Cherri has distinguished himself among a host of talented Lebanese artists such as Walid Raad, Joana Hadjithomas & Khalil Joreige, and Akram Zataari,



whose respective and often ingenious practices have challenged how art responds to war and the slippery terrain that is nationhood.

Younger than many of these peers, Cherri is undoubtedly hitting his stride and making works of greater complexity and ambition. Intrinsic to many of his videos has been the act of looking: his looking at the atrocities of war and our looking at him, the interplay of active/passive observation/participation not only a theoretical study of moving images themselves but reflexive of the artist's role in general. Fascinated by the symbolic value of archival materials, such as the recording of a Lebanese radio station's interception by the Israeli army during the July war of 2006 in *Untitled (To the Lebanese Citizens)* (2006), the black-and-white photographic images of the devastation caused by a number of violent earthquakes in Lebanon in *The Disquiet* (2013), and YouTube footage from *Pipe Dreams* (2012), Cherri interrogates visual history as a form of collapsing contemporaneity whereby imagination is a constant source of re-thinking and re-seeing, and thus ultimately a form of renewal and resistance. *The Digger* and its related research projects delve into the fraught provenances, trajectories, and looting of Middle Eastern archeological objects and their roles in constructing national historical narratives. In many ways a prescient shift, Cherri's digging of the past is what is playing out rather disconcertingly in the present.

**Cinema Scope:** Much of your video work has dealt directly with the psychological repercussions of war. As a Lebanese artist who has lived between Beirut and Paris during such unstable times, do you feel a responsibility to make work that directly engages with world events?

**Ali Cherri:** I was born around the beginning of a 15-year civil war in Lebanon. I have spent most of my life in Beirut. And even after the official end of the civil war in the early '90s, this city has been in an ongoing state of political unrest, with assassinations, car bombs, a war in the summer of 2006, and now in the turmoil of a regional crisis with the war in Syria and its subsequent effects on Lebanon. So war for me is not a rupture that cuts through the quotidian; war was a chore of my childhood experience and part of a certain normality. If we consider artistic creation as being nurtured by life experience, inevitably war would be a pivotal theme in my work. I don't treat war as a singular event; it is a lens through which I try to read social, political, or personal narratives. Today, we are all children of war.

**Scope:** Politics in art can obviously vary wildly, and is perhaps an overly prescribed term where aesthetics are subsumed by content. Do you think social engagement within art has changed in recent times, and where do you situate your own work and focus as a moving-image artist in an age of mass production, mediation, and consumption of images?

**Cherri:** In recent years, I could sense how there is a demand from artists to "respond" to certain political events, and the easiness with which works that deal with "hot topics" are circulated and distributed. It's true there is a rise of the figure of the artist as activist, especially in the wake of the social uprisings in different parts of the world and the mass circulation of certain "politically engaged" artworks. But I don't think art and social practice, or creative forms of activism, are radical or specific to our times. Aesthetics are central

to politics. There are different aesthetic "regimes": different forms of organization, forms of visibility, ways of doing and making, and ways of conceptualizing. Our way of imagining, of producing images, is tightly linked to our way of being politically active. As an artist accountable to the images I produce, I try to resist the temptation of being always in response to what the media is producing. Refusing the temporality that is imposed by mass-media outlets is a way of resisting singular narratives. I vindicate slowness, laziness, and inefficiency as a posture when observing the world around me.

**Scope:** There is a duality or binary in much of your work, which oscillates between observation and performance. I think of *Slippage* (2007) and *My Pain Is Real* (2010) as pendants to one another, whereby your face in close-up (seen holding your breath in the former, and the template for added wounds and bruises in the latter) becomes the physical repository of trauma. Why implicate yourself in such a personal way?

**Cherri:** I am interested in the question of being active or passive in front of an image, or behind the camera. Who is doing what to whom? The cycle of violence where people are enacting, witnessing, recording, viewing, and reviewing violence repeatedly, in real time, is an endless loop. In many of my early works, I use myself in my films to bring in the question of authorship. Reclaiming the possession or our authority over our mediated image is essential. I shot *Slippage* during the 2006 war between Lebanon and Israel, while I was stuck like many Beiruties in my apartment, watching on TV the war as it was happening outside. By holding my breath in front of the camera, I wanted to be in control again over my life, even though this attempt keeps failing at the point where I lose my breath. In *My Pain Is Real*, while I gaze at the camera, a computer cursor draws wounds on my face taken from actual people who were injured during the July war. Despite the overtly computer-generated image, looking at my wounded face is highly disturbing. Working with explicitly violent images was an attempt to expose modes of operation of media violence. This kind graphic material is becoming less and less visible in my work. I think I don't want to produce more violence. Problematizing the dissemination of violent images can also happen in other types of representation that might be more efficient.

**Scope:** Likewise, the texts in many of your videos include historical literary references to figures such as Blanchot or Mishima, but they are often delivered with such a strong subjective voice as to ground grand claims and political statements in an experience that can only be personal, whether imagined or real. Can you discuss this strategy?

**Cherri:** It is true that literary references are always present in my work, whether they are explicit or implicit. This "citing without quotation marks," as Benjamin would call it, puts these texts in a dialectical relationship with the image and the sound. These elements are used on the same level as the raw material of found footage or archival footage with no special authority or meta-narrative. Sometimes quoting is a way to take sides, to align, or identify with a certain view. But it could also be to disrupt what is happening on screen.

**Scope:** How has partially moving to Paris changed your experience as a moving-image artist? I ask specifically as notions of place have been central to many of your videos.

**Cherri:** When I want to talk about cities, or the notion of place or urban affects, Beirut is still my reference. It's the city that I know best. But bringing the image of a place brings with it the imaginaries built around it. I am always arriving after an existing image. We tend to associate the imagined filmic space with existing places. And I play on this deception. Almost every time I was filming Beirut, I was manipulating the image: either I added a building here or there, or I erased some landmark, or created an impossible camera tilt. Usually these are subtle interventions but they leave the spectator with an uncanny view. Maybe being away from Beirut pushed me to explore new geographies, like the desert landscape in my latest film.

**Scope:** Like many contemporary artists and filmmakers, your videos include both documentary impulses and ones that veer toward fiction. While drawn from *actualités*, their investigations seem rooted in a different register. Can you discuss ideas of inspiration and process?

**Cherri:** Documentary and fiction are not opposed, but this does not mean that they are not different. Documentary can be seen as a type of fiction that takes the real as its point of contestation rather than an effect to be produced. This opens up to new possibilities for fictional invention. In my work I play on this growing attention of reality-driven illusory representations: to see is therefore to have witnessed the "Truth" (or at least a truth). Blurring the boundary between fact and fiction, reality and representation, is not to highlight the condition in which all images are downgraded to the status of deceptive stereotypes and in which there is no possibility of producing knowledge. By deploying essayistic or autobiographical narratives I put forward the mediated character of the experience of truth.

**Scope:** Both of your home cities have been the target of horrific terrorist attacks by ISIS this month (November 2015). As someone who has lived in Beirut, a city that "was eating itself" by being at war, to quote from *Un Cercle autour du Soleil* (2008), how do you experience these events differently?

**Cherri:** I am not sure if I can separate my experience of these two events. Of course each has its specific political reading, but what I am interested in is what do they bring out on a personal level. These are moments of synchronized emotions, as everyone, at the same time, share the same feelings: fear, anger, disgust, outrage, etc. This type of violence becomes the crash-point between the inside and the outside. Violence has become not only a collective spectacle, but it's also the place where private desire and the public realm meet.

**Scope:** Many of your videos employ archival materials, such as a radio broadcast captured on your mobile phone, iconic television footage, or archival black-and-white photos. Are these materials that you chanced upon for the most part, or were they researched for each project?

**Cherri:** These elements come from different sources; some I have collected over the years in a personal archive of "found" material; some are coming from my research into official archives. I do not dismiss factual history, but I like to mix it with dreams, memories, desires, traumas, and political ideals; bringing all this together articulates significant layers of the truth that should not be neglected. The recognition of these affective archives adds complexity to our knowledge of the past and the present rather than simply suspend-

ing them in doctrine—fiction and representation are precisely the place where these layers can be made visible.

**Scope:** The idea of catastrophe and human resilience is an ancient and enduring one. But so is the role of the artist as one who grapples with the trauma of the times. I am thinking specifically of a collection of essays by Argentine writer Ernesto Sábato, *The Writer in the Catastrophe of Our Time*. As each generation claims its own trauma, how do you approach or think about this idea of catastrophe and continuation?

**Cherri:** In our modern times, the present surfaces as a "worried" present, anxious about the catastrophes of the past that it seeks to overcome, and the anticipated catastrophes of the future that it seeks to avoid. The future is no longer a promise, but a threat for which we are all fully responsible. I tried to capture this in my film *The Disquiet*: the eruption of the uncanny in a natural catastrophe, a disaster in its most pure form where human subjectivity has little space for intervention. The film opens with a quote from a Bertolt Brecht poem, announcing how we might perceive the apocalyptic times of our current era, or of any era actually. The quote is both disheartening as it is true time and time again: "In the dark times — Will there also be singing? — Yes, there will also be singing — About the dark times." There is hope when one manages to leave the document(ary) mode of narrating and enter into speculation, in solitude and lucidity of one's own mind and beliefs.

**Scope:** In *Pipe Dreams*, one of your most widely exhibited works, we witness the heartrending observations of a cosmonaut, who is exceedingly moved from seeing the beauty of his country, Syria, from space, and recalls the experience with pride to the country's leader, under whose rule the nation has only continued to rage and be ravaged ever since. Was the idea for the video tethered to Syria and its ongoing conflict under Assad, or was it about an Arab astronaut's achievement in space?

**Cherri:** *Pipe Dreams* was made at the end of 2011, eight months after the start of the Syrian uprising and before it turned into a bloody war. The installation captures an historic phone call between the late Syrian President Hafez al-Assad and Syrian military aviator and astronaut Muhammed Faris, who was part of the 1987 Soviet space program. In this archival footage, we see the "father of the nation" questioning the "hero" about his impressions, as Faris looks down on the Syrian lands from space. Some 25 years later, in the early days of the protests in Syria in 2011, fearing vandalism, the authorities removed the statues of al-Assad in the dissenting cities in order to protect them. Haunted by the images of destruction of statues—from Stalin to Saddam Hussein—the Syrian regime attempted to turn the tide by losing the Symbol in order to safeguard the Image. This interface between two moments in recent Syrian history encapsulates the history of the entire region: the mechanisms of the construction and deconstruction of totalitarian power, the dreams and disillusion of an entire nation. By fragmenting moments in history, reducing them to debris, I try to put them in a dialectical process.

**Scope:** In some ways *The Digger* is a departure, and a much more ambitious film. How did you come to the subject, and also decide upon its style, which is more cinematic than it is video essay?

**Cherri:** When I thought of *The Digger* I wanted it to start where *The Disquiet* had ended. While in the last shot of *The Disquiet* a per-



son ventures into the darkness of an enchanted forest with eerie bird wings dangling from trees, *The Digger* opens on a night shot of my character walking down the mountainous desert like an annunciating figure. The film is set in the desert of Sharjah in the United Arab Emirates, on a 5,000-year-old archaeological necropolis. I was drawn to this excavation site for its post-apocalyptic landscape. I have to say I have a fascination with the archaeological gesture of excavation. Let's not forget that the uncanny lies in the act of digging up, not in the property of being buried. Burying is what we naturally do. Unearthing the earth is by definition an "uncanny" act. Anyone or anything buried in the ground is in the realm of the dead, and to excavate or exhume is a transgressive gesture. The film is constructed in a different strategy than my previous works: I wanted to explore the intense charge of silence, of emptiness, of absence, and to find a cinematic temporality that could bring out the spectres of the place.

**Scope:** As a general observation, your work also engages with symbols and mythologies inherent within nationhood—a prescient and ever-important subject given all that is happening today in the world and the often frightening political response to these realities. What are you working on now?

**Cherri:** My interest in archaeology stems from its questioning of our founding mythologies. *The Digger* is part of a larger project I have been working on for the past year. At a time when many Arab nationalist states are collapsing (Syria, Iraq, Libya, Yemen...), and ISIS is destroying heritage sites, Gulf countries have a big interest in archaeological excavations. Of course these are "young countries" that are still in the process of writing their history. I thought it would be interesting to see how can one write an alternative history in the desert. Western modernity was built around the city, urban life, commerce, and centres of power. I thought by going to the Arabian Desert, and with the fragility of the place, I could find alternative narratives and other temporalities than what we see in



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Top: *The Disquiet*

Above: *The Digger*

Western museums today. Unfortunately, this was a missed opportunity, and instead of finding "other narratives," these countries seem to be reproducing paradigms of Western nations in early modernity by trying to link to a pre-nomadic past. What we witness today is the collapse of the archaeological project of preservation that started with modernity: from the fetishization of historical artifacts, to the capitalist spectacle of national museums.