

Official Selection, Cannes 2008  
*Un Certain Regard*

Catherine Deneuve  
Rabih Mroué

# **Baddi Chouf (I want to see)**

A film by Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige

Lebanon / France – 2008 – color

Duration : 1h15

Press :

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## Synopsis

July 2006. A war breaks out in Lebanon. A new war, but not just one more war. A war that crushes the hopes of peace and the momentum of our generation.

We no longer know what to write, what stories to recount, what images to show. We ask ourselves: “What can cinema do?”

That question, we decide to translate it into reality. We go to Beirut with an “icon”, an actress who, to us, symbolizes cinema, Catherine Deneuve. She will meet our preferred actor, Rabih Mroué.

Together, they will drive through the regions devastated by the conflict.

Through their presence, their meeting, we hope to find the beauty which our eyes no longer perceive.

It is the beginning of an unpredictable, unexpected adventure...

## **An interview with Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige**

### **The beginning**

On July 12, 2006, the day before we were due to leave for Beirut, war broke out in Lebanon, and we were stuck in Paris. For the first time, we were living the war at a distance, as spectators. The war was a real upheaval in our case. It put an end to the hope for peace and to the momentum of our generation.

The impact of the war on us was very strong because at the time, we were in our thirties, the same age our parents had when they went through the civil war. It wasn't just any war, or one more war. By plunging us again in a cycle of violence it crowned an historic evolution and was part of a more global division of the world, made more radical by 9/11. Beyond the conflict as such, the 2006 war deepened the unrest in Lebanon, the internal tensions, the antagonist projects splitting the population. Once again, we were confronted with the difficulty of having to live side by side.

We then questioned our ongoing work, the scenario we were writing at the time. We were full of doubts when we met Tony Arnoux who, as in a reverse process, had been struck in Lebanon by the war. He had come back, intending to do something. He was willing to help us meet a great actress if we wanted to. We started writing. Our producers, Mille et une productions and About productions, went along. The project was born from this sense of urgency, from this same concept of cinema.

### **Faced with war images**

In the face of a very violent war, of the spectacular images of television, what kind of images could we produce?

What can cinema do in such situations of extreme violence?

Our sadness and pain had to be countered by something in the realm of adventure. Very soon, we found the set up of the film: Introduce fiction by way of a cinema icon, in a situation which seems to admit only a flood of images hastily termed real or documentary images. And through the presence of the icon, ask some questions: What can fiction, what can cinema do? Suggest to Catherine Deneuve, an actress we greatly admire and who, through her choices, represents Cinema, to drive till the border of South Lebanon together with Rabi'h Mroué, an artist and actor with whom we work constantly. The idea seemed close to alchemy. In such a context, what would their meeting produce? What emotion could arise?

### **A film, an adventure**

The preparation of the film was very complex, uncertain. We soon realized that filming in those regions would be difficult, even dangerous. The production had to obtain authorizations from practically everybody: The Lebanese army, UNIFIL (United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon), Hezbollah, Israel (through Unifil), the French embassy... Making the film therefore became one of the stakes of the story. It turned into an adventure which we had to capture and which modified the way the filming was conceived: We chose to work in HD and to film nearly constantly. And decided that should anything

unexpected happen, we'd welcome it, even prompt it. Catherine and Rabih would play their own parts, just as we'd all do: the directors, the team, the bodyguard, the soldiers we met, the UNIFIL Commander, the French ambassador...

At the outset, the film was to be a short one. While filming, we no longer thought in terms of length, even though it was hard to imagine doing a feature film: the shooting with Catherine took six days, plus one more without her... We were totally free on the temporal and rhythm levels since there was no commercial stake. The duration of the film was not integrated at the outset but during the editing.

The film, in every aspect, was a dream come true: Catherine Deneuve accepted the adventure, the production and all the people we wanted to work with followed suit, we never felt we had to make concessions although we were working on a very tiny budget. All in all, a series of small miracles and opportunities occurred. For example, a road that we filmed, security wise, it would have been impossible to do so a week before or a week after. It's as if the tensions in the country had shifted to "pause" so that we could do the film.

### **Catherine Deneuve**

She soon became an evidence. We had a great desire to film her. Catherine Deneuve embodies a certain idea of cinema, of a cinema with a long history. She also embodies intelligence. You feel she always maintains the right distance. Her film choices reflect a spirit, a trend of thought. She is far more than an icon, she is free. Her freedom, her availability, her openness, we discovered them more and more as we worked with her. She could have feared a possible danger to her image, let alone the physical danger. But she immediately said yes.

Catherine's presence creates a dreamlike atmosphere, an improbable vision amid the ruins and the landscapes of South Lebanon. In fact, she radiates fiction, an aura which reminds us of the definition given by Walter Benjamin "the appearance of a remoteness that seems so close to us".

### **Rabih Mroué**

Rabih, somehow, represents us, the film makers, in the film. He is the actor with whom we mainly work in Lebanon. He is an important artist and performer who works on Lebanese reality and creates a new relation to theatre and representation. We have cooperated for a long time and we share the same esthetic and political interests. So we went fully confident into the film. Moreover, Rabih is from a village of South Lebanon, Bint El Jbeil, which was almost completely destroyed during the 2006 war. He had not returned there since then, and in his own words, he was weary of going back. The place got heavy media coverage and was visited by many people. Rabih felt dispossessed, as if he was "a tourist in his own country".

We were also interested by his attitude. So we suggested to Rabih to drive to the south with Catherine and go to his village. As he put it: "Things with her will be different." So there he was on the images, by her side, although he greatly mistrusts images.

### **The meeting**

One of the stakes of the film was to see whether the "meeting" between Catherine and

Rabih would take place. That meeting really occurred in front of our cameras. We recorded that instant, their embarrassment, and the way they built up a relation little by little.

Usually, in our *modus operandi*, the actors are not giving the scenario. Catherine and Rabih shared the instant without knowing where they were heading. We filmed them through a set up that enabled us to catch the unforeseen, that allowed them to improvise in the different sites and with the various people they met. We were filming in chronological sequence, and witnessed what happened in front of us.

Catherine and Rabih shared together an experience, the discovery of the ruins, of the memory of South Lebanon, of the beauty of its landscapes, the discovery of each other, but also of fear.

It was important that Rabih should not be really fluent in French, and that he should not resort to English. The “meeting” became more effective, with things left unsaid, silences, a certain form of invisible and impossible sharing of some experiences. Even though they really sympathized, each one lived personally his own emotions.

Between Catherine and Lebanon, there was a real meeting. She was not there as a humanitarian envoy, she represented herself, not the Western world. She reacted as an individual and did not meet the Lebanese in general, but a few people in particular. When you go to a country, you don’t perceive it as a whole, you live through experiences, you establish relationships. This can be a way to build up a certain knowledge of a country.

## **I want to see**

There are many things to be seen, but what do we see? Not necessarily the expected. We did not want to give our own vision of Beirut, to say “This is Beirut”, but we wanted the viewpoint to be more complex, devoid of bias. Catherine never pretends she knows, she is not affirming anything. She asks questions and Rabih tries, with her, to find answers to them. Catherine herself says: “I don’t know if I’ll understand anything, but I want to see”. In today’s world, it is important to be in a time of questioning. We are never finished with what there is to see, the important is the feeling.

In the film, there is a sharing of the vision. As film-makers, we ask Catherine and Rabih to help us see anew. Rabih needs Catherine’s vision, and she needs his. They are delegations, translations of visions which keep fabricated emotion at a distance and take the required time to allow emotion to rise, to take into account the complex situations, to relate to the other. In our cinema, the other, the viewer, is at work and contributes with us to a sharing of sensibility.

## **The ruins**

The ruins are one of the starting points of our work. How to accept the ruins, live with their ghosts? We spent years filming the ruins of the civil war, wondering how to live with the problem, how to set them out without turning them into an esthetic viewing, without being fascinated by them. And once again, in 2006, we were faced with new ruins, new devastated sites, and permanent and latent tensions arising from the thousands of cluster bombs scattered in the landscapes of the south.

Filming Catherine Deneuve in the middle of the ruins was a risky proposal. But we were interested by this type of danger, of experience. We had to avoid exploiting one or the other, to remain at the right distance from each.

At the end of the film, on the way back, along the coast, there is a huge site, with tens of cranes, bulldozers, trucks, bathed in thick dust, men with their faces covered by a piece of cloth sorting the ruins of the shelled buildings, which were razed after the war, and the

remains of which were brought here, in bits and pieces, close to the sea. Iron, metal, anything that can be sold is sorted out, the rest is crushed and thrown into the sea. Whole buildings, bedrooms, sitting rooms, walls, furniture, pieces of material...Whole lives vanish into the water, which has turned brown. That town thrown into the water, those submerged ruins are a part of lives that are vanishing.

More generally, this reveals something of the human condition: destruction, recuperation, reconstruction, and it starts all over again ...

### **The border**

On the Lebanese side of the border with Israel, there is a small road which is closed. Some time before we began filming, our request had been rejected: It was out of the question to walk along it or even to photograph it using a tripod. The more we thought about it, the more we wanted to use it in the film. Could the presence of Catherine Deneuve help us obtain temporary access to that road, just for the time required to film one scene? Can cinema get a road open?

Walking along that road was certainly highly symbolic. But we need symbols, and even more “possibles”. Suddenly, in a highly militarized environment, such a thing becomes possible. The road turns into a parallel territory which transcends nationalities, in the words of Godard: “one more country, one more continent”, that of art and cinema.

### **Documentary or fiction?**

Is “*I want to see*” a documentary or fiction? It is very difficult, in this film, to make out the distinction. We had a very good knowledge of the sites, and we had personally been through most of the adventures of Catherine and Rabih in the film, and inserted them in the scenario.

The film’s scenario is very close to the end product. However, all that happens belongs to the category of the documentary adventure. The actors didn’t really know what was going to happen, where they were going. They were placed in situations we had personally been through, but there were accidents, unexpected occurrences, which we integrated into the film. In our work as visual artists and film makers, we often resort to this set up : Wait for something to happen, for a reality to appear suddenly in the shot, accept to be overcome by it...We had that and even more during the filming.

We can say that we truly lived a cinematographic adventure.

### **Catherine Deneuve’s smile**

At the end of the film, Catherine returns to some kind of reality: a gala dinner, a fashionable environment where she is the center of attention. They all tell her she is beautiful, but it’s clear she’s looking for someone, her eyes are shifting constantly. When her eyes meet those of Rabih, she smiles at last. Is it because she’s inviting him to join her? Is she already back into her own world, the film being just a parenthesis? Her smile can be interpreted in so many ways!

This smile reveals an astonishingly free and complex woman. What about Rabih, will he join her? When he drives off into the night at the very end of the film, is he alone in the car? Is Catherine by his side? It’s open to interpretation.

It was important for us to end on this image. In Beirut, we like to drive by night. You open

the window, put some music and drive. Suddenly, you breathe more easily, you try to find a certain freedom, to exist as a human being in a country that always drags you back into your cultural, social and religious community.

### **A film of peace**

What came out first and foremost from this adventure is not violence or destruction, but the time of meeting, of construction. When we finished the film, we felt appeased. We did not make this film for certain sides or ideologies to cash in on it. That was not our purpose. It is devoid of propaganda, accusations or political bias. The fact that Catherine, Lebanon and Rabiha could come together is like a hope for peace. It is essential that this film should be considered as a film of peace, that we should attempt, at our level, to counter, through images, the increased splitting of our world in two parts. Lebanon can also be a land of meeting, peace, exchange and beauty. Images that are seldom seen, unexpected images. It is hard to admit that we live on a land that will probably face wars for a long time to come. *I want to see* expresses the end of a certain carefree life, but also the hope that there can still be life, a process of renewal that echoes the human cycle of destruction/reconstruction; and we wanted the film to express this movement. We are in need of fiction, dreams and beauty.

### **Interview by Claire Vassé**

# List of crew

Actors : Catherine Deneuve ; Rabih Mroué  
Directors : Joana Hadjithomas et Khalil Joreige  
Image : Julien Hirsch  
Sound : Guillaume Le Braz - Sylvain Malbrant – Emmanuel Croset  
Editing : Enrica Gattolini , Editing consultant : Tina Baz Legal  
Assistants directors : Wael Deeb, Emile Sleilaty  
Script : Zeina Saab de Melero  
Production coordinator : Marianne Katra  
Make up : Mina Matsumura  
Hairdresser : Jean-Jacques Puchu-Lapeyrade  
Costume dresser : Nadine Fenianos  
Still photo : Patrick Swirc, Nadim Asfar  
Music : Scrambled Eggs  
Produced by : Edouard Mauriat, Anne-Cécile Berthomeau, Farès Ladjimi  
(Mille et une productions - France)  
Georges Schoucair  
(About productions – Lebanon)  
Tony Arnoux

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## **The directors**

Born in 1969 in Beirut, they work together as visual artists and filmmakers.

They have written and directed short films as "Ramad" (Ashes) in 2003 and "Open the Door" in 2006 as well as two fiction features, in 1999, "Al Bayt el zaher" (Around the pink house), then, in 2006 "A Perfect Day" which was enthusiastically received.

They also make documentaries, such as "Khiam" in 2000, and "El film el mafkoud" (The lost film) in 2003.

Their films have been shown in many festivals and have garnered numerous awards, but are also screened in art centres, museums and galleries.

Furthermore, they have created several photo and video installations. They teach at the University of Lebanon and contribute to several publications.