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## Book Review: Laura U. Marks, *Hanan al-Cinema: Affections for the Moving Image*



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In *Hanan al-Cinema*, Laura U. Marks offers a sophisticated theoretical survey of the experimental video and film emerging from the Arabic-speaking world. She defines this media broadly, including installations which may or may not have appeared in theaters. Those researching Arabic-language cinema will find in-depth discussions of a plethora of examples which, due to their status as gallery installations, in many cases are not accessible to the reader. Through a series of close viewings contextualizing these works from both an historical and theoretical perspective, Marks analyzes this media in terms of its visuality, as well as its somatic and haptic impact. Her contributions to the field will be of significant interest to scholars of experimental and Arabic-language cinema and provide a relevant complement to studies of the avant-garde, international and transnational visual traditions.

Marks complicates many of the theoretical investigations she began in her earlier volume *Enfoldment and Infinity: An Islamic Genealogy of*

*New Media Art*.<sup>1</sup> Instead of continuing *Enfoldment's* focus on dichotomy and synergy between the past and present art forms coming out of these national spaces, *Hanan al-Cinema's* primary emphasis is upon the multiplicity of contemporary Arabic-language cinema. Marks's methodology is introduced through historical references before progressing to a more theoretical framework and ending with a return to a haptic analysis, now informed by the intervening examples she has discussed. By combining theory with her exploration of the contemporary social and political implications of the experimental elements on which she focuses, Marks redefines the somatic potentiality of the avant-garde.

The book is fifteen chapters, each of which is dedicated to a thorough and specific examination of different facets of Arabic-language visual art and cinema. The introduction defines *Hanan al-Cinema's* periodization, starting with the 1990s and continuing up into installations in 2014. Discursive in nature, this opening effectively delineates the ways in which the author skillfully navigates oft-

contested terms, such as “Middle East” and “Arab.” A striking example of this sensitive treatment is her sixth chapter, “Can Cinema Stop the Flow of Blood?,” which addresses films on the practice of Ashura within Lebanon. As Marks identifies, Ashura is a “minority practice within Islam.”<sup>2</sup> Engaging with the use of the body in a thread which recalls the somatic traditions of Vivian Sobchack’s *Carnal Thoughts* and Marks’ methodologies of *The Skin of the Film*, Marks lends an increased degree of cultural and regional specificity to an analysis of the somatic.<sup>3</sup> A viewer’s reaction is tied to an individual’s knowledge with respect to an understanding of or experience with the significance of the rite within the communities which practice this ritual. This discomfort felt by these viewers while watching Ashura films is particular to the tradition’s context.

The interplay of caution and desire is introduced in Chapter Eight, “Archival Romances.” The chapter references the challenges Palestinian filmmakers face when using footage recorded “unevenly and often by outside or hostile agents.”<sup>4</sup> The movie *Hand-Me-Downs* (Yto Barrada, 2011) depicts a period in which Moroccans were not allowed access to 8mm cameras. Scenes are shot by outside viewers, a dynamic which Marks explores in terms of “the way the montage of image and voice gives rise to imaginings richer than pictures.”<sup>5</sup> The resultant presentation for Marks, therefore, includes both the invisible and interpolated, as well as the literal and the photographed.

The theoretical approach of *Hanan al-Cinema*’s final chapters blends Marks’s career-long engagement with haptics and touch (emphasized in her evocatively titled earlier collections *The Skin of the Film* and *Touch*) with the scholarship of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (also invoked in *Enfoldment*).<sup>6</sup> Key examples that serve to ground the algorithmic study include Roy Dib’s *Under a Rainbow* (2011) in which the image of singer Re-Mi, wearing a red dress, is mirrored and expands into what Marks identifies as “a dizzying haptic surface.”<sup>7</sup> This multiplicity calls to mind the grotesque and also the visceral. Footage fading into wartime carnage draws a viewer into an experience that is reminiscent of the glitches of low-fi TV. These images emulate the experience of a child growing up in front of such a television, “savoring

a potent cocktail of death, abandonment, fame, and sparkingly packaged female beauty.”<sup>8</sup> Roy Samaha’s *Transparent Evil* (2011) uses textural surfaces and aesthetics of digital manipulation to create a haptic aesthetic which employs the visceral to enact social and political commentary. The close readings of these scenes are just two examples of Marks’s facility in skillfully deconstructing these films.

The final chapters further tie the close-viewing techniques employed thus far to this conceptual approach, using as a hinge discussions of algorithmic cinema and then geographic mapping through filmic images. Chapter Thirteen, “From Haptic Vision to Networked Space,” raises the question, “How do people receive network-based movies?,” a form which Marks understands as mobilizing “not only Palestinians in diaspora but all viewers who care enough to fight for Palestinian rights.” In the section “Images in Motion and Facts on the Ground,” the author succinctly outlines the relationship between the film *Palestinian Windows* (Ala’ Abu-Ghoush, Ahmad Habash, Esmail Habbash, Dima Abu-Ghoush, and Mohammad Jaber 2002) and the Deleuzian time-image, identifying the synergy between these films and the individual unable to act, who “becomes a ‘seer.’”<sup>10</sup> Marks’s exposition ultimately transitions into a call to action directed toward the viewer: her final invocation of “what can a body do?” suggests that the viewer, through resonance with the onscreen images, experiences empathy and is summoned into action.<sup>11</sup>

One reading of *Hanan al-Cinema* engages with discourses of phenomenology and visceral tactility that brings about a shift in how Arab-language experimental cinema is to be understood. Rich in historical context, the book is an instructive survey of this media and clearly conveys both the significance of and Marks’s passion for this visual art form. The author successfully constructs a highly approachable text of remarkable depth which has broad appeal to a variety of academic subfields such as film and philosophy, transnational film studies, and, specifically, studies of Palestinian diasporic cinema. A useful bibliography at the end of Marks’ book suggests supplemental information about some of the archives and websites which house films related to her subject.

## HANAN-AL CINEMA BOOK REVIEW

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### Notes

1 Laura U. Marks, *Enfoldment and Infinity: An Islamic Genealogy of New Media Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010).

2 Laura U. Marks, *Hanan al-Cinema: Affections for the Moving Image*. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015). 135.

3 Vivian Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2004); Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000).

4 Marks, *Hanan al-Cinema*. 176.

5 Marks, *Hanan al-Cinema*. 181.

6 Marks, *The Skin of the Film*; Marks, *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).

7 Marks, *Hanan al-Cinema*. 259.

8 Marks, *Hanan al-Cinema*. 259-260.

9 Marks, *Hanan al-Cinema*. 292.

10 Marks, *Hanan al-Cinema*. 294.

11 Marks, *Hanan al-Cinema*. 344.