

## Cinematic Dreaming: On Phantom Poetics and the Longing for a Lebanese National Cinema

**Mark Westmoreland**

“Lebanese Cinema is a myth,” she remarked to me. The filmmaker continued with a common string of grievances about her art, expressing with emphasis, “those who *are* making films don’t even live in Lebanon; they only come here to make their films and then leave again.”<sup>1</sup>

The mythic quality of Lebanese Cinema<sup>2</sup> stems largely from its withdrawn existence as a national cinema, but one would hardly know it from the verve and excitement apparent when many filmmakers in Beirut speak of their efforts for greater things to come. Such soothsaying does not come without precedent. Before the war, Lebanon rivaled Egypt as the premiere location for the production of Arab cinema, but that all vanished, along with other elements of the so-called Golden Age, when war engulfed the country for over 15 years.

While today a cinematic infrastructure is almost non-existent, satellite television has become the dominant image industry in Lebanon, broadcasting throughout the Middle East. Most of the Beirut’s universities have initiated audio/visual programs, which cater to the high demand of students and industry alike. Yet there is no system in place for the funding, processing, or distribution of feature films. Financial investment in creative visual productions, when available at all, comes almost exclusively from European and North American

---

*In the post (civil) war era, Lebanese Cinema has become the thing of dreams, both as part of a general desire for national revival and as a medium to tell the untold stories of war and suffering. In this article, I endeavor to show how Lebanese Cinema embraces “cinematic dreaming” that is simultaneously a forward-looking project, striving to manifest the myths associated with national rejuvenation, and also an act of peering back at the ghostly war-torn world, still so much a part of the present.*

sources. Most of the productions are short pieces shot on video—not technically cinema at all. Furthermore, at least half of the directors of the twelve feature-length narratives released since the end of the war<sup>3</sup> live full or part-time outside of Lebanon, and are thus accused by some of only coming to Lebanon to make their films. Lebanese Cinema has now become the thing of dreams, both as part of a general desire for national revival and as a medium to tell the untold stories of war and suffering.

Despite the apparent success of the satellite industry, the nation has found itself mired in the existence of post-war recovery and dire economic recession. Filmmaker Ghassan Salhab describes this existence as a crack: “Beirut *is* a crack,” one in which daily life cannot escape from a perpetual present; the past is irretrievable, the future, vague. Every moment denies access to temporal escape. Bombed-out buildings serve as a constant reminder of a lurking past; Lebanon is a landscape that beckons renewal. In this perpetual present state, historical redemption has called upon the magic of cinema for the ability to reenter the past and make it anew.

Cinema evokes a notion of magic for its ability to animate the inanimate, to create in life-size unreal realities. Part and parcel of these spellbinding qualities is the frightful nature of the cinema’s characters on-screen, existing merely as ghostly reflections of sentient beings. Traditionally, popular cinemas (especially Classical Hollywood Cinema)<sup>4</sup> have avoided emphasizing this paradox. Likewise, Rachel Moore (2000) indicates that film theory generally neglects to account for the magic of cinema: psychoanalytic, cognition, and cultural critique readings are all interested in uncovering meaning from representation. She points to early film theory and its primitivist impulses to readdress film’s ability to touch without hands, to elate or shock the body. This affective approach to cinema theory helps to articulate a poetics of phantasm recurrent in Lebanese Cinema. Moore calls the space between the signified (thing) and the sign (word) the magical realm of cinema, arguing that the film image has become an eminently modern magical fetish. It is this typically glossed over quality of cinema that many Lebanese filmmakers accentuate in their films and videos.

Concurrent with this poetics of phantasm, Lebanese national cinema suffers from a perceived self-absence or withdrawal. As the “myth” suggests, the very existence of Lebanese Cinema is in question. Despite the hardships faced by filmmakers, artistic visual endeavors

flourish, taking shape in the shadows of big satellite business and government censorship. The desire to create a national cinema runs parallel to an abundance of short videos. Although not necessarily cinema itself, this proliferation of video is believed to indicate a cinema that is becoming.

In this paper I review several short and two feature length films that can be said to belong to recent Lebanese Cinema. I will elucidate a cinematic poetics that accentuates the constructed nature of media representation, which in turn helps reveal the phantasmagoria of wartime traces. This filmic grave digging parallels the nostalgic resurrection of the Golden Era in Lebanon. Thus, I endeavor to show how what I term “cinematic dreaming” in Lebanese Cinema is simultaneously a forward-looking project, striving to manifest the myths associated with national rejuvenation, and also an act of peering back at the ghostly war-torn world, still so much a part of the present. I suggest that the common characteristics of these disparate and varying artistic enterprises offer insight into the building of a national cinematic identity that tries to fill a void left open at the end of the war.

## **Bringing Out the Dead**

The “civil” war in Lebanon erupted in the mid-1970s as several internal and external factions vying for power began fighting. Soon the city became divided, generally pitting Christian East Beirut against Muslim West Beirut. Several foreign powers came to bear on the war, making Lebanon a host for regional disputes and manifesting civil chaos.<sup>5</sup> The signing of the Taif Accords in 1989 paved the way for fighting to desist. The role of foreign agents in the war, however, has since been used to displace responsibility from the Lebanese. While effective in bringing the war to an end, critics have attacked the Taif Accords as maintaining the seeds of further discontent. These seeds of sectarian disputes are now heavily monitored in Lebanese media and civic discourse, creating a policy of official amnesia about the internal politics of the war.

During and after the war, the spontaneous nature and low-budget costs of video proved significant in the development of the Lebanese documentary genre and the roots of social criticism in Lebanese Cinema. Although typically deemed an inferior medium, some filmmakers have since adopted video as a cheaper stand-in for film and

many artists engage video for its own qualities. Several Lebanese studying in America and Europe during the war became greatly influenced by video art<sup>6</sup> and their experimental endeavors have since commingled with both documentary and narrative cinema in Lebanon. Many of these artistic endeavors show a fascination with the qualities of video, which emphasize the electronic image over the optical one and video's close ties to television. This is significant in that many of the video productions, both documentary and video art, employ the use of archival news footage. As a place becomes ultra-mediated in the international news, mass media come to dominate the visual representations available to an individual. This is especially the case for those in locations of exile, where disembodied news footage may comprise one's entire visual relationship to that place called home.

One recent video by Nigol Bezjian, *A Road Full of Apricots* (2001), utilizes a dizzying array of found footage from the war to construct its narrative. Bezjian, who lived in the United States during the war, appropriates news footage to create an intimate personal essay about his relationship with Beirut. Juxtaposing news footage with his own dreamy slow motion footage of the places he revisits in memories from before the war, he draws attention to Beirut's overly mediated construction, but also reinserts lived experience where it has seemed absent.

Jayce Salloum, a Canadian of Lebanese ancestry, undertook a similar project shortly after the war in his piece, *This is Not Beirut* (1994). Culling from found footage and video shot during 1992 in Lebanon, Salloum examines the popular misrepresentations of Lebanon and Beirut, chronicling his own assumptions, which he inherited during his upbringing in the West. Drawing attention to the mediated construction of Lebanon, he speeds the audience through the devastated landscape. In unstable shots out of car windows, we are not given a chance to focus on anything, but realize how fragmented representations have already spoken for the place called Beirut.

From the over-determination of Beirut's identity, filmmakers and video artists re-enter the landscape through the magic of film and video to recreate it anew. The official rhetoric of amnesia—masking the “civil” war not as a “Lebanese” war, but as a war in Lebanon between others, namely Palestinians, Syrians, Israelis, Americans, Soviets, et cetera—only limits how the war is brought into discourse. Since sectarian differences are closely monitored to prevent any revival of

unresolved conflicts, engaging in the war requires *not* addressing differing perspectives during the war. Alternatively, Bezjian and Salloum create a space of cinematic fantasy to revisit the war, where the political differences can be dissolved within stories based on individual conflict. The magic of cinema allows a momentary chance to re-enter the war-torn landscape and refashion it for oneself. While a poetics of phantasm reveal the gap between the sign and the signified as disembodied conflict, memory serves to negotiate a visual expression of loss.

And yet, nostalgia haunts the landscape. Surprisingly, several filmmakers express a desire to return to the years of war, because they felt more alive during the conflict than during today's peace. Is it not curious that many of the filmmakers that were exclusively making documentaries during the war have now turned to making fictional pieces about it, constantly revisiting the same theme? Some say this generation of filmmakers disallows discourse to move beyond the war. Others say that this is an attempt to bring away a souvenir; for example, the popular film *West Beirut* resuscitates bellbottoms and the music of the 70s as keepsake signifiers of the youthful innocence at play before the war.

The years preceding the war are often referred to as the Golden Age, and many hoped for a return to these glorious days of carefree abundance once peace was declared. Unfortunately, the long sought end of the war did not deliver a return to a golden age and the tedium of existence has given way to nostalgia for the war itself. Life nowadays is talked about as mere routine, as boredom. The war years are remembered as a time that made one feel alive; every minute counted. The excess of violence and the closeness of death offered a perceived excess of life. Whereas being alive now, amid the long hoped for peace, offers only emptiness and melancholy. Nostalgia for the past exists alongside the death-time of the present; the irony is that the peace of the post-war situation is perceived much like a living death-time, as if the war left no survivors, only ghosts. Likewise, cinema's shadowy figures of flickering light are fleeting, bodiless figures akin to phantoms. The parallel between the death-time of nostalgia and the death-time of cinema becomes articulated in the resurrection of ghostly, ephemeral figures of war and espionage.

Shortly after the war Michel Kammoun returned to Lebanon with a Super 8 camera on a so-called "reconnaissance mission" to capture the destruction before it was all cleaned up. His short film, *Shad-*

*ows* (1995), portrays a man chasing and being chased by a martyred ghost. In the end we realize the referential quality of this ghost: when the man finally catches up, the ghost is only one of many martyr posters publicized on ally walls—only an image. These posters proliferated during and shortly after the war, demanding remembrance of the dead. The ghost and the ephemeral quality of the sign are synonymous. In a similar fashion, the short video entitled *11 Rue Pasteur* (1997), filmed entirely in one shot with overlaid cross-hairs to represent the scope of a sniper's rifle, peers down and narrates upon the street below from the safety of an unseen vantage point. By marking the invisible presence of the sniper, we are made painfully aware of the similarities between the sniper's scope and the camera lens. Unavoidably we are forced to identify with the subjectivity of this uncomfortable voyeurism.

The reference to ghosts is again conjured in Ghassan Salhab's feature film, *Beyruth Fantome* (1998), as Khalil, believed killed during the war, suddenly resurfaces ten years later in Beirut. His friends are outraged and determined to discover the truth about his disappearance. Meanwhile, his existence among the living is emotionally blank and lifeless. All the makings of a thriller ensue, yet with a twist: to remind us of the film's referential quality, Salhab intercuts video footage of his actors commenting on the film's narrative, creating a multi-diegetic approach for reacting to the war. Each of these films/videos accentuates representation, as manipulated and somehow false, but in so doing, utilizes the unique quality of moving images to enchant into existence certain shadowy figures embedded within Beirut's memories, still haunting the allies and rooftops.

### **The Phantom Poetics of Revealed Representation: *West Beirut vs. Once Upon a Time, Beirut***

The following section will develop a better understanding of the poetics at play in Lebanese Cinema and how they are particularly suited to a postwar cinema. I will consider two disparate examples, both feature films, both made by filmmakers now living outside Lebanon, and yet, radically different in their style and content. The first, *West Beirut*, enjoyed great theatrical success in Lebanon and abroad. The second, *Once Upon a Time, Beirut*, has also been successful, but has been more limited to film festivals for its viewership.

Returning from the United States with a well-established career as a cameraman for the likes of Quentin Tarantino, Ziad Duweyri made *West Beirut*, a popular coming of age film set during the onset of the “civil” war. Tarek and Omar are two teenage boys set loose from academic obligations after the war forces their school to close. Omar’s Super 8 camera becomes a device to record their liberated escapades and a subsequent adventure ensues while the boys try to develop their film footage. Enter May, a shy, orphaned, Christian girl befriended by Tarek. Conflict quickly arises between Tarek and Omar (both Muslim) over the girl and then over the need to get the film developed (available only on the wrong side of no-man’s-land). Meanwhile, Tarek’s parents are constantly debating whether to stay or leave Beirut and Lebanon. These character conflicts motivate the narrative through the backdrop of war; like the Hollywood paradigm, we experience “history [as] unknowable apart from its effects upon individual characters” (Bordwell, et al. 1985:13). Duweyri himself admits, “it’s not a war film, it’s my perspective on the era” (Dick 1998). As the opening credits begin running over black leader, we hear the winding and running of a Super 8 camera. Our first shots are black and white images of fighter jets juxtaposed with smiling kids’ faces posing for the camera. With several rough cuts between shots and the whirl of the camera noise over the mute images, the scene is made to seem like Super 8mm film footage, despite the fact that we occasionally see the camera in the hands of an individual on screen, seemingly recording itself recording the scene we watch. Diegetic sound fills in as we simultaneously see one of the jets explode; the distant explosion is followed by cheers (as though at an air show) and finally, dialogue. Tarek and Omar are on the playground of their school with other students, all staring up with fascination at the spectacle.

Later, from outside the classroom, Tarek witnesses the massacre of a busload of Palestinians by masked gunmen. The climax of this first scene is announced with the first non-diegetic song on the soundtrack: as we witness the gunmen position for the ambush, Fairuz’s mournful voice serves as an affective building device. Coupled with this rousing music is the date, imprinted for historical authenticity, the signature of factuality. (Ironically, critics argue that students would not have been in school because this event was on a Sunday.) Between watching the Syrian and Israeli jet fight through the lens of Omar’s camera and Tarek’s helpless observation of this Sunday massacre, we

quickly realize the precedent of character over history in the narrative flow of this film, but the character is an innocent witness, passively watching the country spiral into war. The referents (black and white Super 8 film stock and the imprinted date) at once remove the subjects from history while marking their alienated perspective.

The Super 8 camera emerges for the second time filming the young bride of Omar's uncle through a slit between Omar's bedroom doors. Watching the rough black and white footage, the audience stares on as they ogle the girl's cleavage and bare legs. A homoerotic fantasy follows the filming as Omar narrates himself as the young woman to arouse Tarek, only ruptured at the end by Omar's joking punch line. Frustrated, Tarek announces, "You ruined the film." The potential fantasies attached to re-watching the footage of the young aunt spawn the motivation to develop the film. The Super 8 footage becomes the device to move the narrative forward and to create purpose for our characters.

Later in the film, after Tarek has befriended May, he takes her to Omar's where the initial signs of fraternal conflict arise between the two friends. But Tarek is able to calm Omar and the second at-play-in-the-city montage begins. Playful music envelops our three characters as they cruise the streets of Beirut on bicycles. After this short montage we realize the motivation for their cruising: they are on a mission to get the Super 8 film developed. Tarek is determined to get to the other side of no-man's land to develop the film. When they arrive at the "Green Line" (the war zone between East and West Beirut), they have the Kodak shop in their sights. However, their attempt to cross is stymied by militia, who decide to play cat and mouse with them, accusing them of being Christian spies. They eventually escape from the gunmen, but frustrations mount as they have been unable to reach the photo shop.

This scene fades to newsreel footage of war scenes and chaos, reminding us of the historical backdrop to the narrative. At the end of this newsreel montage, the film cuts to a young man with a missing leg and crutch poking through trash on the side of the street. As the camera tracks past him he gazes straight into the lens at us. The anonymity of this individual and the return of his gaze at the audience mark a break with the Hollywood paradigm's rule of "invisible" storytelling. Immediately after seeing disembodied and generally impersonal scenes of news coverage, an emotionally embodied personal image suddenly appears staring right back at us, making us consciously aware of the

war's personal victims and the act of watching Beirut as a site of terror. Later, we see a television broadcasting Kamal Jumblatt's funeral footage with a protest chant bridging us to protestors on the street. The boys join the march but ask each other, "Who is Kamal?" Neither knows that he was the Druze leader just assassinated by the Syrians, but the protest provides a spectacle that prompts the third use of the Super 8 camera. At the protest march we see Omar filming Tarek. The black and white footage and the sound gaps filled with camera winding evoke a removed diegesis. By association, this footage relates back to the television broadcast and newsreel footage. While motivated by the narrative, this use of the Super 8 and newsreels hints at *West Beirut's* own constructedness, but also that the reality of the war seems merely mediated for Tarek and Omar.

The film continues in much the same way, carefully building narrative tension until a concluding climax. The narrative form is not unique in itself, but I argue that the self-reflexive elements in the film are indicative of an alternative poetics recurrent in Lebanese Cinema. The youthful viewing of the city is juxtaposed by archival war footage and the nameless wounded. While this may equate the Lebanese as innocent onlookers to their own civil war,<sup>7</sup> *Duweyri* should be recognized for shifting the perspective of the visual representation during the war from disembodied, impersonal news accounts to a personalized, indigenous perspective.

Whereas *West Beirut* maintains the structure of narrative causality common to Hollywood Cinema, *Once Upon a Time, Beirut* (1994), by Jocelyne Saab, actively challenges this convention in its narrative structure. While some have criticized *West Beirut* for playing to the dominant ideologies and merely using the war as fodder for mass entertainment, it does enact a subtle critique of how Beirut has been overdetermined and disembodied in the media. *Once Upon a Time, Beirut*, on the other hand, subverts the narrative to give greater dominance to this alternative poetics.

*Once Upon a Time, Beirut* actively seeks to understand how media representations have manipulated the identity of Beirut. The film reveals an explicit interest in memory, especially traumatized memory, calling upon a non-causal approach to presenting the narrative. Nadia Seremetakis (1994) suggests that sensory memory is a form of storage and assemblage of this memory is always an act of imagination, not necessarily causally linked (1994). In this spirit, Saab strings together

a cinematic memory of Lebanon that pays little attention to causality and chronology for constructing its narrative. And an opening epigraph announces the film's preoccupation with memory (translation from subtitles):

Like you, I have forgotten. Like you, I wanted my memory to be inconsolable, a memory of shadow and stone. I struggle for myself, everyday, with all my might, against the horror of no longer understanding the reason for remembering. Like you, I have forgotten. Why deny the obvious need to remember? Listen to me, listen to me once more, it will start again.—*Hiroshima Mon Amour* (A. Resnais / M. Duras)

One way to envision this film is as a historical mapping of the cinematic landscape of Lebanon. Culling from hundreds of films, Saab portrays the cinematic fantasies that proliferated in the prewar era. From temptresses to spies to villains, Beirut was a playground in which consistently fantastic narratives took place. Saab moves us and the film's two female leads through cinematic spaces which draw attention to Beirut's own cinematic construction, creating fantastic worlds within these cultural productions. *Once Upon a Time, Beirut* employs a structure that ensures the audience will not make causal connections by jumping through space and time with a liberty atypical of the Hollywood paradigm. Quoting a screenwriters' manual, Bordwell reminds us that it was believed that the "unmotivated jumping of time is likely to rattle the audience, thereby breaking their illusion that they participate in the lives of the characters" (Bordwell 1985:43). Saab either rejects this belief or is utilizing its anxious capabilities.

The film opens with a drive through city streets exposing bombed-out buildings on either side. We see a girl blindfolded in the back of the taxi. Yasmine begins giving an internal commentary about it being her 20th birthday. She and Leila are going to see Mr. Farouk. They want to watch his films and to share some of theirs with him. Leila and Yasmine's journey to visit Mr. Farouk offers a narrative structure with defined characters; however, the goal to meet Mr. Farouk does not offer a clear-cut narrative structure for the remainder of the film. The characters' motivation guides us into an endless series of film clips, but the organization of these clips relies more on thematic association than on causal connections.

After the taxi driver delivers them to an abandoned theater, we

are left to wander the cinematic terrain with our heroines. Mr. Farouk says that he has been hiding out there for years with his films. Now the two young women are prepared to show him a film clip of theirs. A title card announces, “1914 Leila and Yasmine play a trick on Mr. Farouk.” We watch very old archival footage of people in markets. Extra-diegetic music of a classical Middle Eastern variety accompanies. With a simulated film texture, we pan to the two girls on screen and they announce, “these are the only images that we’ve found of our city, Mr. Farouk. They are undoubtedly very beautiful, but, frankly, a little out of date.” More early footage with music follows, and Leila continues:

We haven’t found anything else, Mr. Farouk. Yasmine tends to fib, but for once, she is telling the truth. We found nothing else, except some clichés as: Beirut, the pearl of the Middle East, hidden in the blue casket of the Mediterranean. Lebanon, the Switzerland of the Orient. A haven of peace in the heart of a tumultuous region. Beirut, a cosmopolitan city where East meets West. That’s all we’ve managed to come up with, on our city, Mr. Farouk. A head-spinning series of clichés.

Yasmine follows:

You know, nowadays, guys don’t say to us: “you’ve got beautiful eyes.” They say: “You have machine-gun eyes.” I thought that, maybe, with you, we would find a little *savoir-vivre*. We came to ask you some questions. If you could answer us...It’s true, we were told that you were Beirut’s living memory.

Mr. Farouk will show them his Beirut. He leads them to a huge archive of films that the girls explore. This scene abruptly ends as we enter another film; the title card says, “the 1950s Leila and Yasmine meet two handsome young men.” We see a montage of city scenes from the period; we also get a sound montage of film music. A young girl is helped out of a speedboat and then suddenly we see Yasmine and Leila walking with boys at seaside as if part of the same diegesis. This quickly turns to another film with a woman listening to a record. Then music introduces the audience to a series of sexualized romance film scenes, presenting Beirut as a place of emerging sexual desires. The romance

soon takes on a more dangerous genre, the title card announces, “*the 1960s Our two heroines become besotted with a gangster.*” We see a gangster drug-running movie unfolding, which then merges with Garo, a bandit hero compared to Robin Hood. From a window, Leila and Yasmine overlook, watching him climbing over the city rooftops.

Our narrators have the uncanny ability to move between Mr. Farouk’s theater and the films we presume they are watching. Blending the diegesis of several films along with that of the current one starring Yasmine and Leila, Saab’s creative geography draws attention to the devices used to meld cinematic space, even as it ruptures our expectation for consistency. While the Hollywood paradigm restricts the ability to jump through time, “the most evident traces of the narration’s omniscience is its omnipresence... The camera can roam freely, cross-cutting between locales or changing its position within a single room” (Bordwell, et al. 1985:30). Saab takes this a step further by cutting between different diegeses as if they had no distinction.

Back at Mr. Farouk’s theater, a strange fellow enters playing cowboy. He is appointed by Mr. Farouk to show the girls “the real Beirut, without lies or illusions.” Yasmine replies, “One day, I’ll tell you about my Beirut filled with lies...” Later a title card announces, “*the 1960s Leila and Yasmine ‘star’ in ome [sic] big budget foreign films.*” A French movie shows a man checking in at the airport just before he sees a plane explode at takeoff. We cut to an American film with people flying into Beirut and an airport police officer confronting the protagonist. After he leaves the airport, the American and French films are suddenly intercut to seem concurrent. A series of agents, voluptuous women, wire-tapping, and assassinations foreshadows a scene in which we are told Beirut is due to blow up in two days. Embedded within the scene, Leila and Yasmine comment on James Bond, bombs, and how all this chaos started during this period (1960s and maybe early 70s). “All these spies in Beirut at the same time. And nobody here seems to suspect a thing,” say the girls. An evil mastermind announces that his bomb will kill Beirut’s people while leaving its vaults intact for him to clean out. Immediately following this we witness apocalyptic scenes and footage of a haunting drive through the war torn damage of Beirut.

The film continues to meander through “history lessons,” the streets of Beirut, and Lebanese folksongs. We eventually return to more war and intrigue movies before the cab driver returns with the second

film reel Leila and Yasmine had accidentally left in his cab. The film is of a religious school, with various Muslim religious leaders commenting on the notion of “truth”—all in contradictory metaphors. A student exposes the ruse and calls “truth” a monkey. One teacher agrees, saying that that student is wiser than the Masters. The last shot in the film shows Mr. Farouk’s young boy assistant laughing at the monkey joke. Fade to black.

How do we make sense of this dizzying array of plots and people? The last clip offers the most substantial hint. There are various notions of truth, but they are ultimately contradictory, and like a monkey, make a fool of you. For in the story portrayed by Jocelyne Saab, the lack of causality and a clear-cut ending most appropriately characterize the impossibility of “making sense” of the war or the forces at play that lead up to it. Saab’s acute interest in revealing the artifice of the craft relates directly to her presentation of Beirut’s history through cinema, thus extending the same poetics utilized in *West Beirut*. While Saab uses reflexive poetics more centrally in her film, the more commercially driven *West Beirut* clearly shares these same techniques that make the audience aware that it is watching the construction of a cinematic Beirut.

## Making Lebanese Cinema a Reality

Meanwhile, efforts are underway to create a national cinema for Lebanon. While such aspirations do not play to overtly nationalistic agendas, many artists believe that a unique and worthy cinematic presence requires greater interests and investment by the Lebanese government and visual industries. Akin to the “myth” of Lebanese Cinema is the myriad of plans and proposals to bring it to life. There have been attempts to create a film syndicate to pressure for change, but it has been largely inactive. While I was told that meetings are frequently held to discuss the current state of Lebanese Cinema, many feel that the rhetoric is redundant and has failed to offer viable suggestions. There also has been some pressure on the government to assist in the funding of films. The Minister of Culture is sympathetic to these demands, but has yet to garner the necessary support to implement a state sponsored program. Others indicate the need to create a structure for distribution and presentation. One suggestion calls for an agreement between countries in the region that would create a small network for

under-represented cinemas to be shown in respective countries. Currently, many Arab films do not get shown in Arab countries, including the country of origin. Egyptian cinema is the exception. Some critics argue that it is a question of dialect; everyone knows Egyptian Arabic because Egypt dominates the Arab popular culture industries while Lebanon is a small country that does not have the audience base to support a film industry. Others challenge that with the popularity of Lebanese satellite television, the issue of dialect is mute; people throughout the region have been exposed to Lebanese Arabic and could provide a widespread audience base. Unfortunately, the interregional distribution network necessary for this to manifest remains largely absent.

Prior to the “civil” war, Lebanon was well known for the vibrancy of its visual culture. Throughout the sixties and early seventies, Lebanon competed with Cairo as the center of cinematic production in the Middle East (Shafik 1998:28). As Viola Shafik indicates, the work being produced in Lebanon during this period “not only followed the same entertaining formula as its model, but even developed in cooperation with Egyptian film makers and actors” (Shafik 1998:28). With the outbreak of war, however, Lebanese cinema dramatically changed. The industry disintegrated and the predominance of the documentary form for social critique informed cinematic identity during the decade and a half of civil strife. Film critic Ibrahim al-Ariss suggests, “[Lebanese] Cinema was born from the ashes of the war” (al-Ariss 1996:21). The years of conflict and “return” both disrupted and recharged the creation of visual media in Lebanon.

In the post-war decade, Beirut has made aggressive strides to quickly become a media leader in the region, launching several international satellite channels through the 1990s. Of course, some Lebanese fear the increased presence of media as another form of Western cultural imperialism—most channels continue to program a significant amount of Western shows and movies if not imitating them in their own productions. Some Lebanese filmmakers also critique the predominance of Western funding for feature films, believing that this dependence negatively dictates what gets made and how it gets made. For example, funders often require a portion of the dialogue to be in the native language of the funding source. The failings of one feature, entitled *Around the Pink House*, are blamed on the disjointed combination of Arabic and French used to appease the French funders. Some

also critique the West's fascination with watching the Arab world at war, saying funding for films that probe into the "civil" war is easier to come by than other themes. The alternative poetics I have outlined above speak to this anxiety, expressing a loss of control in making films that is in common with an independent national identity. In an ironic twist, however, some fear that even this funding will dry up since the Balkans have become the West's new war-torn fascination. It is uncertain how the post-September 11th trauma will affect funding. Nevertheless, some filmmakers desire that Lebanese cinema shed its dependence on foreign investment and for internal sources to start financing film productions.

In place of a large feature film industry, more economically viable forms have proliferated. As filmmaker Eliane Rahib indicates, "in the absence of a film industry structure in Lebanon, short films have performed the invaluable task of chronicling life in Lebanon after the war. They provide the material for a potential cinema" (Rahib 2001). While this potential cinema continues to percolate, many have begun performing more focused and isolated tasks. Several organizations have formed to offer a kind of grassroots production service. Rahib and others formed Beirut DC (DC standing for Development and Cinema), which offers workshops for producing short socially-minded videos. Most filmmakers, however, rely on either the television stations or the universities to provide them with production-oriented work. Of course, the proliferation of university programs has churned out several hundred graduates in the last several years, all searching for their own employment opportunity. Many are hired by advertising agencies or one of the satellite stations in Lebanon or another Arab country; however, some maintain a desire to produce their own films despite the apparent absence of opportunity.

Despite the scarcity of viable sources for funding within Lebanon, the lack of widespread audience reception, and the presence of strict censorship laws, there permeates a persistent desire to utilize visual modes of expression and Lebanese Cinema continues to attract attention at home and abroad. The energies being invested in creating a cinematic society run counter to the restricted existence of its national cinema. While the poetics suggest a shedding of previous foreign-dominated portrayals of Lebanon, the infrastructure still relies on foreign involvement. For the underground efforts to make a national cinema, for the marking of the sign as both inauthentic and yet recurrent, and

for the fascination with ghostly figures—the martyr, the sniper, the spy—Lebanese Cinema seems aptly to exist, albeit dreaming and withdrawn, within the cracks and shadows of post-war Beirut.

## NOTES

1. Unless otherwise indicated, all quotes in this article are taken from interviews the author conducted in English during fieldwork in July and August 1999.

2. While cinema has traditionally been reserved for the art of projected celluloid, I am choosing to use it more liberally here. In part, this is to dislodge the preferential treatment of film over video, but as digital cinema is becoming more popular in the West and any understanding of a national Lebanese Cinema requires placing video and film in relation, I find it necessary to use unifying terminology and cinema seems most appropriate despite the clear bias toward celluloid.

3. As best I can determine, all the features made since the war are as follows: *When Mariam Spoke Out* (2001) by Assad Fouladkar; *Al-Fajr / The Dawn* (2000) by Tony Abu Iliyas; *Civilisés / Civilized People* (2000) by Randa Shahal; *Taif al-Madina / (In the) Shadows of the City* (2000) by Jean Chamoun; *SL FILM* (2000) by Shadi Hanna; *Autour de la Maison Rose / (Around the) Pink House* (1999) by Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige; *Beyrouth Fantome* (1998) by Ghassan Salhab; *West Beirut* (1998) by Ziad Duweyri; *al-Shaikhah / Gang of Freedom* (1994) by Layla Assaf; *Time Has Come* (1994) by Jean Claude Cods; *Once Upon a Time, Beirut* (1994) by Jocelyn Saab; and *The Tornado* (1992) by Samir Habchi.

4. See *Classical Hollywood Cinema* (Bordwell, et al. 1985).

5. Due to the limits of space and theme, I only gloss over the dynamics of the Lebanese civil war in this article. It should be understood that any attempt to “make sense” of the war becomes increasingly problematic when accounting for the confessional distribution within the country. Though the “civil” war is understood in general as a dispute between the Lebanese Christians and the Lebanese Muslims, this greatly undermines the complexity of sectarian identities within the country, foreign interests from outside it, and the shifting alliances among them all during the war. In brief, the French colonialists occupying Mt. Lebanon and Greater Syria after the First World War received pressure from the slight majority of Christians to partition Lebanon off from the predominantly Muslim Greater Syria. With French support, the Maronite Christians drafted a constitution that tipped the balance of power in their direction, therein sowing the seeds for future unrest. This “balance” was threatened in part by the increasing Palestinian immigration into Leba-

non, which played a large factor in sparking the civil war. While Maronite Christians, Shiite Muslims, the Druze, the PLO, Israel, and Syria were central contenders in the war, Sunni Muslims, Greek Orthodox, Greek Catholics, Armenians, and others also comprise the Lebanese sectarian identities. And this does not even begin to account for the foreign involvement that would prompt severe terrorist attacks on US and French diplomatic and military sites. For a more comprehensive description of the war, Robert Fisk offers one well-respected account in his *Pity the Nation: Lebanon at War* (1992).

6. The video art scene burgeoned in North America in the 1970s and 80s with such artists as Andy Warhol and Nam June Paik.

7. As noted by Sherene Seikaly (n.d.). The author wished not to be quoted.

## WORKS CITED

al-Ariss, Ibrahim

1996 An Attempt at Reading the History of Cinema in Lebanon: From Cinema to Society and Vice Versa. *In Screens of Life: Critical Film Writing From the Arab World*. A. Arasoughly, ed. Pp. 19–39, Vol. 1. Quebec: World Heritage Press.

Bordwell, David, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson

1985 The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style & Mode of Production to 1960. New York: Columbia University Press.

Dick, Marlin

1998 West Beyrouth Director Faces Public Inquisition. *In The Daily Star*. Beirut.

Fisk, Robert

1992 *Pity the Nation: Lebanon at War*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Moore, Rachel O.

2000 *Savage Theory: Cinema as Modern Magic*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Rahib, Eliane

2001 Lebanon: Independent Voices. *In Arab Screen Independent Film Festival: Documentary and Short Films #2*. M. Maklouf, ed. Qatar: Al Jazeera Channel.

Seikaly, Sherene

n.d. Denial and Nostalgia: West Beyrouth in Today's Beirut. Unpublished manuscript.

Seremetakis, C. Nadia

1994 The Memory of the Senses. *In Visualizing Theory: selected essays from V.A.R., 1990-1994*. L. Taylor, ed. Pp. 214–229. New York: Routledge.

Shafik, Viola

1998 *Arab Cinema: History and Cultural Identity*. Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press.

## **VIDEO AND FILMOGRAPHY**

*Il Rue Pasture* (1997) video short, Nadine Labaki.

*Autour de la Maison Rose / Around the Pink House* (1999) feature, d. Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige.

*Beyrouth Fantome* (1998) feature, d. Ghassan Salhab.

*Garo* (1965) feature, d. Gary Garabidian.

*Once Upon a Time, Beirut* (1994) feature, d. Jocelyn Saab.

*A Road Full of Apricots* (2001) video short, Nigol Bezjian.

*Shadows* (1995) 8mm short, Michel Kammoun.

*This is Not Beirut* (1994) video short, Jayce Salloum.

*West Beirut* (1998) feature, d. Ziad Duweyri.