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'The Calm After the Storm: Making Sense of Lebanon's Civil War' at Walter Reade

Lebanese film series illustrates the absence of sense in a 15-year fight

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A scene from Randa Chahal Sabbag's *The Kite*.

Details:

The Calm After the Storm: Making Sense of Lebanon's Civil War

May 5 through 15,
Walter Reade
Theater

Being not Lebanese, I wouldn't mind having the circumstances, alignments and meanings of the country's 15 years of cataclysmic civil strife clarified for me, as this Walter Reade series' title promises. But if there's a takeaway from the films collected, it's that the '75-'90 shitstorm in Lebanon was comprised of almost as many wars as there were witnesses and participants.

The film that best represents this notion in Lincoln Center's lineup is Mohamed Soueid's *My Heart Beats Only for Her* (2008), which began in concept as a son's attempt to suss out his late revolutionary father's role in the war. But Soueid is no daddy's boy whiner: His film is an impetuous, skittish, unpredictable mélange of the personal and the historical, with interviews of his father's surviving compatriots, news footage, and a deep consideration of the entwined relationship between Vietnam's freedom fighters and Lebanon's. Much like filmmaker Chris Marker, Soueid encourages free-associative debate to sprout from the staggering complexity of the era, with Lebanon subject to the homicidal contests between Muslims, Christian Falangists, Syrian-Baathists, Iraqi-Baathists, Palestinians, the

invading Syrians, and Israelis, plus the fragmenting factions in each of those groups, ad infinitum. Soueid also employs actors, contrasts the rise of Khomeini then to the ascension of Dubai now, and references enough cultural jetsam to fill a mini-series, all of it in memoriam, finally, to his father— but also to the "her" of the title: Fatah, as it was in the revolutionary days, before Israel's 1982 invasion and the group's subsequent role as a political party in Palestine.

Things don't get any simpler in the films of the late Randa Chahal Sabag, whose movies are filled with an outrage that is at least partially fueled by the conflict's muddy essence. Her festival hit feature *The Kite* (2003) is set entirely on the swatches of desert on either side of the shifting Lebanon-Israel border, with a Druze village split through by the Israeli occupation so that marriages must be arranged and family arguments hashed out via megaphone and binoculars, across an expanse of valley guarded by gun towers. "Making sense" this is not— Sabag's fable-like set-up is fabulously funny and biting, and everybody, even the Israeli soldiers, is a shrugging participant in the absurd.

Sabag's earlier documentary, *Our Intemperate Wars* (1995)—a title that could fit the whole retro—surveys the history of the war by way of her family: Sabag's sister was a revolutionary activist/politician with the non-sectarian Communist militia, her brother was that sister's bodyguard, her mother and father fiery Christian Commies and spies subject to midnight raids by Falangists and Muslim "extremists" alike, and believers in North Korean leader Kim Il Sung's rose-colored dreams of utopia. It's a terribly fair-minded film; Sabag acknowledges that the Lebanese "tried everything," from being victims and refugees to being torturers and murderers, as combat ran into the '80s with a befuddling hailstorm of tragedies and confused alliances. "The Syrians were the biggest threat," maintains Sabag's sister, who also admits, as a movement leader, to staging fake battles in Beirut in order to apply political pressure to the endless negotiations. This surreal tidbit is ironically echoed with footage from the on-location Beirut shoot of Volker Schlöndorff's *Circle of Deceit*, which was allowed in the middle of the war by way of a special cease-fire.

A sullen mood piece in which all of Beirut feels haunted—specifically by the heightened bloodshed under the Saddam-backed Aoun administration in 1988-89—Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige's *A Perfect Day* (2005) studies a day in the lives of a widow still on the balls of her feet waiting for her long-disappeared husband to return, and her grown son, who is plagued by a wholly symbolic case of narcolepsy. Together but separate, they bridle at the sense of stasis in their lives, and the movie feels hypnotically on the verge of a disaster that never comes—or has come and gone years before. The tone is sophisticated and hyperaware of urban tension, abetted by compelling performances, especially by Julia Kassar as the wife-mother who feels obliged to mourn anew after signing an in absentia death certificate.

A Perfect Day is one of the rare genuinely sad Lebanese films—thankfully, the culture tends toward satirical self-knowledge. Michel Kammoun's *Falafel* (2006) balances its indie-noir plotline with fluffy doses of life-loving effervescent comedy that smacks of recent French hits. (Most Lebanese films are, in fact, French-funded.) Much more substantial, Danielle Arbid's *In the Battlefields* (2004) soaks its traumas in war-bludgeoned irony, as a 12-year-old girl (Marianne Feghali) has more difficulty dealing with her self-cannibalizing, extended Christian-Arab family—you could call their dynamics Middle-Eastern Gothic—than with the daily bombings of 1983. Helplessly apolitical, the movie paints a forceful portrait of childhood bled dry by a self-concerning and inept adult world.

Ziad Doueiri's *West Beirut* (1998) may still be the look-back-in-anger Lebanese film to beat here. It certainly hits the ground running (the director worked as an assistant cameraman for Quentin Tarantino and Robert Rodriguez), dramatizing a "90 percent autobiographical" odyssey in 1975 Beirut, just as the Israeli-Palestinian fighting morphs into a Lebanese civil conflict. Sixteen-year-olds Tarek (Rami Doueiri, the director's brother) and Omar (Mohamad Chamas) don't really know what's happening in their city and couldn't care less. What they do know is that school is closed. For its first half Doueiri's film has the loopy elan of John Boorman's childhood Blitz-drama *Hope & Glory*. It all seems to be some kind of cosmic farce until a night bombing blows out Tarek's house windows, a scene that Doueiri handles with just the right amount of documentary terror. After that, the pair of amiable Muslim punks spend their time filming neighbors' infidelities in Super 8 (and then attempting to cross the armed mid-city barricade to get it processed), harassing their neighbors, digging American culture despite the haranguing from Omar's father ("Is Paul Anka the work of Satan?" Omar asks innocently), and squabbling about exactly how much war matters to teenagers in love with rock 'n roll. West Beirut has a loose, spontaneous, freewheeling feel that comes from real experience. With its irate French schoolteachers, Jean-Pierre Leaud-ish pranksters, late-'60s youth fashions, and handheld camerawork that catches every snarky detail, the New Wave vibe is hard to miss but, eventually, the torque of the absurd is just as unavoidable.