

2000 San Francisco International Film Festival- Part 3

War and peace

An interview with Khalil Joreige, co-director of *Around the Pink House*

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Lebanon is in the headlines again, in the wake of the Israeli withdrawal. *Around the Pink House*, co-directed by Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, deals with another aspect of the Lebanese tragedy.

In the aftermath of the devastating 15-year civil war, Beirut is being rebuilt. Two displaced families squatted in a once elegant mansion, the "pink house," during the war. Now a real estate developer plans to turn the place into a shopping center, while keeping the impressive facade. The families are given 10 days to find a new place to live.

Factions emerge, and a conflict. One family accepts the deal offered by the developer, the other plans to fight. Communications between the families come to an end. A "militia," in reality an unarmed gang of restless youth, offers its services to one side. A television reporter attempts to manipulate the situation, to create the greatest "spectacle" possible.

The head of one family loses his job and goes to play cards every day; he dresses for work and leaves at the usual time to fool his wife. Another man, the "cuckold," has had his wife leave him, sick of the entire situation; he's made his room into a shrine in her memory. A teenager has joined the militia; he stays with it until its members are bribed by the developer.

There's something fraudulent about the entire society. Real memories, artifacts, attachments are being replaced by made-up ones. People pour themselves into fantasies and cults to avoid reality. Beirut is to be reconstructed at the expense of those who survived the fighting. And the people in the pink house, unfortunately, have learned nothing. The two families join forces at the end, but that too is a fraud. None of the differences, none of the nightmares have been confronted. What sort of future do they face? The last shot reveals the new Beirut, a giant construction site, from which the poor are being excluded.

This is the feature film directed by Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige (both born in Beirut in 1969). I spoke to Joreige at the San Francisco festival.

David Walsh: Could you perhaps explain a little bit about your own history?

Khalil Joreige: I'm Lebanese, I'm thirty years old. I always work with Joana Hadjithomas, she's not here at this festival, because she couldn't come. I'm a filmmaker, but also a photographer and I especially do installations. I work also in videos. This film is my first feature. I've made three short films.

It's very hard for a Lebanese filmmaker to make features—in ten years there have only been seven films made in the country; because there is no plan, no help from the government, or from the television stations. And the market is very small, so you cannot expect big box office revenue.

This is why films are always co-productions. Our film is a co-production between France, Lebanon and Quebec, Canada. I also teach, as does Joana. Joana teaches at Paris University, Nanterre, and also in Beirut. We teach in the cinema institute. We teach many things, but mostly I teach aesthetics, philosophy of the image. Now we are trying to work more in cinema than videos, and trying to work also on experimental films. I live half the time in Beirut and half the time in Paris.

DW: Where were you living during the civil war?

KJ: Most of the time I was in Lebanon. My family is still there. I traveled a lot during the war. Your house is bombed, you have to move. When I was fourteen I started to study in Paris a little bit, my elementary school. Joana is also Lebanese, she's Greek from Lebanon. She arrived in Paris after the war, in 1990.

DW: What is the origin of the idea for this particular film?

KJ: We worked a lot on the idea of ruins. We did a large exhibit in Paris at the Institut du Monde Arabe. In Beirut there was a city center, a midtown, very popular. During the war Beirut was separated into two parts, east and west. This part was in no-man's land. Before the war ended, I started to go there and take a lot of photographs. I started considering what we could do with all that—what is the place of the ruins in the new city, in our history?

[Rafik] Hariri was the prime minister, he was very rich, he came and proposed a huge program of reconstruction. A company came and demolished every part of it. The last shot of the film shows you Beirut as it is. We thought, what can we do with all of this? The mainstream way of thinking today in Lebanon is: "We want to return to the situation before the war." They want to encourage the myth that Lebanon was an Eden, a heaven, the myth that the war was an accident.

For us, the war is not an accident. It didn't start in 1975 and finish in 1990. It started before and it hasn't finished. So for us it was a matter of reflecting on the facade and what's happening today, what can we do with this memory, what is the mentality you find in Lebanon. It's not a film against one way of thinking. It's more a film where we try to ask questions and give the answers.

DW: The film chooses not to discuss the concrete issues of the war.

KJ: There are two things about the war. First, if you notice, we are not saying that the war has finished. Because all the mechanisms are still the same. In the film, as soon as there is this little problem between the people, all the mechanisms of the war come back—separation, boycott, slander about the others. All the mechanisms of the war are still present. So, if they are still here, it means the war is not over. We are trying to speak about these days, not the war. The war is very easy to speak about and at the same time it's very difficult. It's very personal how you deal

with the war.

DW: What are the consequences of this reconstruction of Beirut for the poor?

KJ: There is no place for them in the city center. It's too expensive. Those in charge want to build huge projects, very expensive, for big companies, for things like that. If you want to build a city today you don't build a market, a soukh, you build a mall. A market is something organic. If you want to design a city, you will make a mall. We have forgotten the human dimension of the reconstruction.

DW: Who is in control of this process? In terms of the old factions, Christian, Moslem, who is running things? Or are those factional terms no longer valid?

KJ: All the leaders of the factions are still there, but not the factions. Because they are cabinet ministers. What we tried in the film is not to enter into the conflict between Christians and Moslems. I'm not saying that there is no conflict between Christian and Moslem. But to reduce the conflict in Lebanon to a war between Christian and Moslems is the Western way of thinking. It's to reduce the problem in order to understand it. But it's much more complex than that.

The war among Christian factions produced more dead than the war between Christian and Moslem, and the war between Moslems did the same. This is important for me, to get out of the cliché.

Even the way we represent Beirut, with these colors, is very ironic. Yellow, pink, especially the pink. We chose these colors because usually Lebanese films are made with dark colors, black, green. But these are colors in Beirut also. We wanted to avoid the clichés. It was important for us not to say "this is Beirut," we are speaking about a fiction, not a documentary. Even the dimensions of the house are not logical. You have this little doorway that opens on this huge space. Because this is not logical. All the people coming from outside the area are always lost. They say, where are we? It's not on the map. Of course it's not on the map, it's a fiction.

DW: What is the impact of globalization on Lebanon?

KJ: Lebanon is a country of great contrasts, between a very small elite, the rich, 10 percent of the population or even less, and the rest of the population. The middle class completely disappeared during the war because of the devaluation of the currency. Now they've created a new middle class again, over the past ten years. It's not very important.

Globalization for whom? For the rich and the poor it is not the same. We have McDonald's, Johnny Walker, Starbucks. This is a kind of globalization, but at the same time it involves just a few people.

DW: Is there rivalry between foreign investors, French, American, British?

KJ: Foreign companies invest a great deal in Lebanon. This is why today most of the people outside say there's no more war. People *inside* say things haven't changed. But when you have a company that's going to invest \$10 billion, you cannot say things are not secure.

DW: Are the French the biggest foreign investors?

KJ: It's a competition. The Americans are very important, even when it's indirect. The French are important, the Japanese. All the banks are there. Chase Manhattan, and so on.

DW: What do you think of the present talks going on, the negotiations with the Israelis and so on? What do you think will happen?

KJ: I don't know. What's sure is that the Israeli presence in Lebanon has caused a lot of damage, even to them. This is why they've decided now to get out. I'm not sure the situation with them will be very peaceful afterward, because nobody knows. Each time there is an act of resistance in south Lebanon, their planes come and destroy our infrastructure.

In three years they've bombed the electrical system three times. With all the bridges also. This is a way of behavior, very aggressive. Even after they're behind their frontiers, and we are at our frontiers, if there is one crazy guy who wants to send a Katyusha rocket, they may decide that this

is a terrorist attack and send back their planes.

DW: Can you describe some of the psychological impact of the civil war on people?

KJ: We wanted to call the film *The Facade*. The facade is something very important. Because all of the characters want to show something about themselves even if it's not real. If you take Omar, the father, who pretends that he's not unemployed. He wants to maintain the facade. At the end, they all eat together, because this is what's happening today in Lebanon. We are eating and drinking. But all the problems are still there. But we make like, "Let's have a party."

At the beginning one character says to the other, it was normal during the war that I had to leave my house, but now in peacetime, it's not normal. In other words, I'm outside the process of peace, I'm still in the process of war. And this is something very psychologically disappointing about the peace. During the war period, people had a lot of hope, they expected a lot. Today the hope doesn't offer anything. They don't expect a new system, new people, new way of thinking. The only difference today is there's no hope.

DW: You're saying in some ways it's worse psychologically. Because before they expected that when the war ended things would be better.

KJ: Yes.

DW: What about the militias?

KJ: It's strange, because people from outside always say these are militias. But in Lebanon we know it's not a militia. It's little more than a gang, trying to play at the war, nostalgic for the war. Their uniforms are destroyed, they have no weapons. Nothing. They get weapons only when they go to work for the people in power, because they are no danger any more.

There was no ideology during the war. At the beginning there was, at the end there was. During the war, the enemy changed all the time. One day you fight with someone, the next day you're fighting against him. There was no real ideological positions during the war.

DW: What are the dominant parties today?

KJ: Most of them are pro-Syrian, but there is no politics. The argument about whether we are Arab or not Arab is completely old-fashioned, we are Arabs, we speak Arabic. We have no politics in Lebanon. Politics means debates. The formerly powerful people are still there. The only politics is the politics of money.

DW: What's the alternative?

KJ: To think about it. To start asking questions, not to give quick answers, because the answer will be fascistic. The people who interest me in Lebanon are the people who feel that there is a gap between their thinking and what's happening, in this gap, first, is the location of their freedom, the place of their intellectual work, their personal evolution and things like this. I'm not sure today we can speak about nations, we are speaking more about "territoires" [territories], and in these "territoires" many interesting things are happening.

KJ: In Lebanon when there are only seven films in ten years, it might be better to have no films than to have commercial films because it will completely destroy any perspective of artistic work.

DW: You have to create about some kind of alternative.

KJ: When you see that Time-Warner has merged with AOL ...

DW: It's a real danger to democratic rights.

KJ: In Lebanon the films that are shown are all American films. For example, there is a chain that takes all the films from MGM. They cannot choose, they send them everything, they have to show everything. They control the process from here, not from there. You have to have an industry to have an alternative. To have a camera, to have equipment, the material. We don't even have it. It's very hard.

A film like mine, I'm trying to get it into some kind of a network, to be shown at universities here in the US, but I don't have the contacts.

DW: Did you make a conscious decision about the aesthetic approach to

this film?

KJ: Of course when you shoot a film there are always accidents. And what I enjoy in films, especially when you are working with a lot of people, is that there are always accidents. It makes the film better than you had imagined it. If not, you say, we shoot it again. This is a good surprise. Of course there are things that you don't have time or money to do. Most of the things were decided before the shooting. Why we are going to make this movement, etc.

The aesthetic is also an ethical problem, as Godard says. For me, it was important, because it was our first feature, to think about all the things before, and to be open-minded to accident. I like accidents, things that happen and take you to different places—it's like a tree, you start and there are branches. For us, as I told you, it was very important the colors, the actors. We did a lot of rehearsing. The movements were prepared. We built this street. Even the house, we worked with architects, we didn't want a typical house, we wanted something more fictional, more impossible. We didn't want to say 'This house is Lebanon.' It would be too symbolic, too cliched.

There's the importance of the image. The television reporter speaks about the "spectacular." Things in reality are not so impressive to the characters. Only when they see them on television do they seem important. Because television is more important now than reality to people.

DW: Are there filmmakers you particularly admire?

KJ: There are so many. There are certain films I have to see every year because it helps me think better. Just as you need certain books, music. *Le Mépris* [*Contempt*] by Godard, for example.

DW: Why do you make films? Why do you make art?

KJ: I don't know really, I don't have one reason. It's my way of life, my way of thinking. I live with Joana, we work together all the time, we don't have real separation between our lives and our work. It's a way of thinking, it's a way of life.

DW: I want to raise the question of censorship and democratic rights. You've seen the appeal in defense of Deepa Mehta. The attack on her is clearly part of an international trend.

KJ: It's a very big debate in Lebanon too, especially over the film of Randa Chahal Sabbag, *Civilisées* [*Civilized People*]. It's showing here at the festival. Her film has been censored a lot in Lebanon, even our film has been censored. But her film was censored for 47 minutes.

DW: Why?

KJ: Because of all the obscenities. The newspapers criticized that, and the censor said, print those words. Nobody would. For me it's very dangerous what's happening in Lebanon, because they censored this film, and our film. They sued a famous singer for using lines from the Koran. The government wants to show something. They want to destroy the specificity of Lebanon, make it more like Syria, destroy the image of Lebanon as a country where things can happen more than in other Arab countries.



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