

Director of *A World Not Ours*, *A Man Returned* and *A Drowning Man*

An interview with Palestinian filmmaker Mahdi Fleifel: “A film is like a historical document, it should be solid enough to endure”

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Mahdi Fleifel is a Danish-Palestinian filmmaker, whose feature film *A World Not Ours* premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival in 2012. We commented on the remarkable work and interviewed Fleifel at the time.

His short film, *A Drowning Man*, was selected for the official competition at the 2017 Cannes Film Festival and was also screened in Toronto at last year’s festival.

Fleifel’s grandparents were driven out of their village by the Israelis in 1948, and eventually settled in the Ain El-Hilweh refugee camp in southern Lebanon. The future filmmaker was born in Dubai in 1979, where his father had moved for employment. The family moved to Denmark in 1988.

A World Not Ours is both a personal memoir and a tracing out of the Palestinian condition. In a lively and even entertaining fashion, the director edited and shaped an enormous quantity of film and video footage shot by his father and Fleifel himself over the course of several decades. The final product recounts his family’s experience, the general experience of Ain El-Hilweh and the fate of three individuals in particular, Fleifel’s grandfather, his uncle Said (actually, his grandfather’s half-brother) and his good friend, Abu Eyad (named after the murdered PLO intelligence chief), a former Fatah fighter.

A World Not Ours deservedly won more than 30 awards, including the Peace Film Prize at the 2013 Berlinale and the Edinburgh, Yamagata and DOC NYC Grand Jury Prizes.

Fleifel’s 12-minute film, *Xenos* (*Stranger*, 2014), follows Abu Eyad and other young Palestinian men from Ain El-Hilweh who were smuggled through Syria and Turkey into Greece, where they struggle for some kind of a future. “Like so many other migrants, they come looking for a way into Europe but found themselves trapped in a country undergoing economic, political, and social collapse,” the filmmakers note.

Fleifel directed another strong, engaging work in *A Man Returned*, a 30-minute film about Reda, a young man who also tried to escape the Palestinian refugee camp by emigrating to Athens. After three years of economic and personal difficulty, Reda returns to Ain El-Hilweh with a heroin addiction, in the words of the film’s publicity, “to life in a camp being torn apart by internal strife and the encroachment of war from Syria. Against all odds he decides to marry his childhood sweetheart; a love story, bittersweet as the camp itself.” *A Man Returned* is a painful,

sensitive film, which won the 2016 Silver Bear at the Berlin film festival.

In fictional form, *A Drowning Man* (15 minutes) treats the fate of a young refugee trapped in Greece.

I recently spoke to Mahdi Fleifel.

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David Walsh: I’ve now seen *A World Not Ours*, *Xenos*, *A Man Returned* and *A Drowning Man*. These are some of the important films currently being made. *A Drowning Man* covers some of the same territory as *Xenos* and *A Man Returned*. Why did you decide to do a fictional version of this story?

Mahdi Fleifel: It’s a question I often get. You could say that *A Drowning Man* is a fictional adaptation of *Xenos*, the essay documentary.

My background is in fiction. When I started out, that’s what I wanted to do, narrative cinema. I studied fiction in film school. But for some reason, since I graduated I’ve only made documentary films, from 2009 until this year.

I’d been working on a fictional story set in Greece, dealing with all the themes that came out of *A World Not Ours*. I followed Abu Eyad in *Xenos*, Reda in *A Man Returned*. Then there were some other guys who had stories I’d heard, and I put them into a script I’ve been trying to finance for the last four years.

It’s been difficult. People say, you’ve been doing documentaries, you’re good at that, but how can we trust you with a big budget and send you to Greece to make a film? And so I did *A Drowning Man* to test the waters, to try and work in fiction again, for the first time in almost ten years. I wanted to see what it was like to make that transition back to fiction, work with a bigger crew and have a sense of authority in regard to the material itself.

I wanted to try out the things you can do in fiction. For example, there is the dream sequence at the beginning, which was much more elaborate in my script. I wanted to try something different, and I think I failed to a certain degree.

A Drowning Man is the film I’m least happy with. I came out of the process feeling disillusioned with filmmaking and the nature of the industry, all the bureaucracy. The more people you involve, the more money you involve, the less control you have.

A Drowning Man, which is 15 minutes long, cost ten times more than *A Man Returned*. For me, it’s the least satisfying of all my films. Despite

the fact that it premiered in the official selection at Cannes, that it sold to television, that it's still playing many festivals, and has already won two Academy Award-qualifying festivals (the Grand Prix at Cork and Dubai). For me, creatively, as the author of the piece, I feel like I made a safe film, it wasn't daring enough.

DW: That's interesting, I think the issue is complicated. I would not underestimate *A Drowning Man*.

MF: I'm at a place where I have to revise, to think about where I go next. I've been labeled, for better or worse, the "refugee director."

DW: I've seen that reference. Since we spoke in 2012, a number of things have happened in the world. Without in any way relativizing or minimizing the Palestinian experience, one might almost say that experience has become a global one. In *A Drowning Man*, the undocumented refugee in Athens is Palestinian, but now he could be from Syria, Libya, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, the Central African Republic, or from any one of 20 different countries, and the story would be virtually the same.

I don't think you're the director of the "Palestinian refugee crisis," you're the director of the "global conditions of life crisis."

MF: I hear you, though I think I make niche films about a particular place: the camp in Lebanon, where I grew up, Ain El-Hilweh, and people from Ain El-Hilweh. So that world is where all my stories come from, all my characters come from there. Even the kid in *A Drowning Man*...

Of course, when you zoom in on a microcosm like the camp, or a day in the life of an undocumented guy in Greece, I always ask myself: what would you do in these conditions? What would I do if I didn't have any documents, and I was in a city where I didn't speak the language? What would I do to eat and survive? How would I operate if the world around me becomes a jungle full of predators? That's why I'm drawn to these characters.

Take Reda in *A Man Returned*, for instance. At first, I had no intention of making another film in Ain El-Hilweh. I went to spend a holiday with my grandfather, and I'd made a deliberate choice *not* to film that time. Yet I was confronted with Reda. I had last seen him in Athens, but there he was again, back in the camp. The Greek authorities had sent him back, and now he was selling drugs in Ain El-Hilweh. Not just any drugs, but heroin.

I had never seen that before in the camp. It had become a serious problem. You could say that a lot of these kids "caught the bug" in Athens. There you see people shooting up in broad daylight. Reda found a way to bring heroin into the camp. Where there's a will, there's a way, I guess. With the situation in Syria, it's no big deal bringing heroin in through Afghanistan, into Lebanon, into the camps.

Now how do you treat a drug addict in a refugee camp, with all the social constraints, shame, the family structures and so on? How do you treat a sick man in these conditions, a man suffering from the disease of addiction? There are no rehab facilities, no "12-step programs."

DW: One of the most moving lines in *Xenos* is when Abu Eyad steals a Greek woman's purse in Athens, discovers it only has seven euros, and says, "I found that she was starving too."

MF: I've always seen myself as someone who zooms very tightly in on the human condition. All you see on the news are numbers, statistics, all the rhetoric of fear with which we're hammered daily. "Hundreds have drowned off the coast of Lampedusa," "Thousands have crossed the borders" of this country or that country, and so on.

But who are these people? That's the story I want to know about and tell.

We're bombarded with the idea that refugees are these mysterious strangers, these aliens. But where are they coming from? Why are they here?

I remember a journalist in Berlin a couple of years ago asking me, "But what do we do about all these coming into our country [i.e., Germany]?"

All I could say was that these people were fleeing because "we" were responsible for the fact that their homes were burning.

If my home in Berlin caught on fire, if I was under bomb attacks, I would pack my stuff and go somewhere safer. Simple. The refugees are not leaving their homes, their loved ones, on a whim. A lot of these guys leave their wives and kids behind, hoping to make it, so they can find a way to bring them over. It's not for an adventure.

DW: Wars led by the US, Germany, France and the other powers have created these unbearable conditions.

But in regard to what you were saying before, about investigating and picturing the particular, concrete human conditions, that's what art does, that's what fiction does.

MF: I understand as well the desire for escape. Cinema provides an escape from reality. The thing that I liked about *A World Not Ours* was that it played with the magic of memories, nostalgia, it had comedy and serious elements too. That's a balance I've been missing in my recent work. I do it well, and I love films that have this balance.

DW: That's a real issue. First of all, in terms of your own situation and your filmmaking, there is also the state of the world to take into account. It became grimmer, even more deadly in recent years.

However, I do think, in the long run, that the great books, great films strike the balance you speak of. You know as well as I do that even very oppressed people are not always gloomy. That's not how it works in the working class or among the poor. There's laughter and humor too, sometimes in very difficult conditions, sometimes *because* of the very difficult conditions.

MF: There has to be hope.

DW: Yes, and people resist in their own ways, all the time. If I were to register a complaint about *A Drowning Man*, that would be it, that it has one tone, one grim tone. I think you're right in that sense, there are different elements of life to bring forward. I have no doubt you will find that.

MF: I'm ready to press pause at the moment. I need to find another way. I just turned 38, I've made a couple of films, I've traveled around the world and seen the way the industry works—I'm quite disillusioned with it, actually. I think I work more like a visual artist, someone who just picks up his camera and goes for it. With *A World Not Ours*, it was only three key people working on it.

I want to find a way to up my game, without having to sell my soul to the devil. I spent four years developing this project in Greece. I finished the script two years ago, and I was ready to go shoot it. I could have shot it for very little. But the producers were saying, "No, there is a certain way to go about things," and they thought the budget could be a little bigger so everyone would get paid more, and they of course would get a bigger cut. I went along with it.

Naturally, I don't mind that everyone gets paid a decent salary. But I've been waiting for two years, and now I've reached the point where I look at the story, and I realize it's changed, because I've changed and the world has changed, and I'm not sure I want to make this anymore. This is "development hell." It's dragging on unnecessarily. It's disillusioning.

Filmmaking does not need to cost that much. You don't need a huge crew.

Some people see making films as work, but for me it's not just work. If I don't burn inside to tell it, I'd much rather not do it.

DW: I can understand your disillusionment, or disappointment, but the final word hasn't been spoken, either for your career or the world. Big things are going to happen. New possibilities will open up, unexpectedly perhaps.

MF: I hope you're right. We'll see ... I want to make work that stands the test of time. A film is like a historical document, it should be solid enough to endure.



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