

Skies of Lebanon: The shattering impact of civil war on one family

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Directed by Chloé Mazlo; written by Mazlo and Yacine Badday

Skies of Lebanon (*Sous le ciel d’Alice*), by writer-director Chloé Mazlo, is a semi-autobiographical blending of the personal and political, centered on the impact of the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990) on one family. It is a poetic, imaginative and colorful work that uses stop-motion animation and surrealistic drama to make its point about the irrationality of war and internecine, ethnic conflict. The film opens in New York July 22, and in other locations in following weeks.

In the 1950s, a young Swiss woman disconnects from her tight-knit family—dramatized in claymation—to move to Beirut. Once in Lebanon, Alice (Alba Rohrwacher), now become a human, falls in love with Joseph (Wajdi Mouawad—author of the play *Incendies*, the source material for Denis Villeneuve’s 2010 film of the same title), an eccentric astrophysicist who dreams of sending his fellow citizens into space.

Their story-book existence is devastated in the late 1970s by the country’s brutal civil war, which resulted in an estimated 120,000 dead, tens of thousands internally displaced and nearly a million people driven out of the country.

At one point, Alice prays for peace and lists Lebanon’s many religious and ethnic groups: Protestants, Druze, Shiite, Sunni, Alaouite, Ismaili, Melkite, Roman Catholics, Maronites, Greek Orthodox, Catholic Greeks, Apostolics, Assyrians, Syrian Orthodox, Orthodox, Copts, Aramaic, Chaldeans, Jews, Hindus and Buddhists!

Mazlo told an interviewer earlier this year that she wanted to talk about the Lebanese civil war “as my family told it to me. The character of Alice is very much inspired by my grandmother. She’s Swiss, but

she moved to Lebanon around 1955. This rather radiant and perceptive character is the gateway to the story. She actually felt reborn when she arrived in Lebanon. Her experience raised more questions than if she had been Lebanese. It’s difficult to convey one’s attachment to a country because it isn’t rational. We struggle to understand why we fall in love with a country that isn’t ours.”

The writer-director further explained that at first she had wanted to make “a serious, naturalistic film. After a while, I realized that that’s not how I talk nor direct films.” At the same time, she explained, “I needed the emotional bedrock of the story to be real. When my co-screenwriter, Yacine Badday, and myself had doubts about the characters’ reactions, I would go to my grandmother to ask questions about their experience.”

Mazlo observed that she had decided to use animation “only when absolutely necessary. This technique should not be used systematically: every time she ponders or dreams ... animation really had to be part of the story. I felt I was getting closer to life that way, rather than by making a standard documentary.”

Skies of Lebanon is a visually sumptuous and appealing piece. Its innovative narrative style and quirky, humane characters are delightful. It is only the latest in a series of sensitive and compassionate films to emerge from Lebanon in recent years, including *1982*, *Costa Brava Lebanon*, *Capernaum* and others.

Nonetheless, it does need to be pointed out that appeals to tolerance and social solidarity alone cannot begin to make sense of or address the Lebanese civil war (or any other traumatic social event, for that matter). The conflict, ultimately, had social and economic roots—and has a social and economic solution.

Moreover, American imperialism has a lengthy,

bloody record in Lebanon and bears a major responsibility both for the oppression of the Lebanese and Palestinian masses and for the vast numbers killed or maimed during the country's 15-year-long civil war.

The present situation in Lebanon is volatile in the extreme. In January massive demonstrations erupted in Beirut, the northern port city of Tripoli (Lebanon's poorest city) and the eastern province of Baalbeck, denouncing the collapse in the value of the lira, the national currency pegged to the US dollar.

At the time, the WSWS explained "that ever more frequent and lengthy power cuts have forced people to turn to private suppliers, often paying out more than the cost of their rent." Fuel prices soared as the Central Bank cut subsidies in a bid to hold onto Lebanon's dwindling foreign currency reserves. It cost more to fill a car's tank than the monthly minimum wage, currently worth just \$20.

The WSWS noted in April that Lebanon's currency fell by 200 percent against the US dollar last year, "resulting in surging inflation, estimated at 145 percent last year, that places it in third place after Venezuela and Sudan. ... Access to the most basic goods, including food, water, health care, with hospitals only accepting payment in US dollars, and education is in jeopardy. Widespread electricity outages are the rule due to fuel shortages, rampant corruption and mismanagement of the power supply."



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