

2026 San Francisco International Film Festival—Part 2

A Sad and Beautiful World: “When things get better, we’ll come back to Beirut”

David Walsh
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This is the second of a series of articles on the 2026 San Francisco International Film Festival, April 24-May 4, which made a number of films available online. The first part was posted May 1.

The first film from the recent San Francisco film festival that we commented on, *Inside Amir*, was shot in and focused on Tehran. The second, discussed here, *A Sad and Beautiful World* (*Nujum al’amal w al’alam*), directed by Cyril Aris, takes place in Beirut.

Both cities have been subject recently to savage imperialist bombardments by the US and its vicious attack dog Israel.

If anything, Beirut has fared worse, according to media reports, having suffered more frequent and devastating attacks. The city and its southern suburbs, where many of the poor live, have been subjected to repeated, brutal Israeli bombing raids throughout the conflict. Three thousand people have been killed in Lebanon so far. The strikes have forced more than one million Lebanese to flee. At least 35 percent of those displaced are estimated to be children. The UN reports that 620,000 women and girls have been driven from their homes.

A Sad and a Beautiful World follows Nino (Hasan Akil) and Yasmina (Mounia Akl), childhood friends, who reunite as adults, marry and have a child. The present-day social and political crisis in Lebanon threatens to tear them apart.

Nino and Yasmina were born on the same day, in the middle of Lebanon’s civil war. “On that day, a massacre took place,” the narrator tells us. They spend time together as kids, during the “absurd war.” They even try to run away together, without much success. His parents die, but his grandfather tells Nino they have gone to this imaginary island, a paradise where they are happy. Yasmina’s parents fight and separate, she leaves Beirut with her father, moving to Germany for a time. Nino subsequently tells her: “I kept going to the train station for a month” [looking for her].

Years later, Nino, now an adult, falls asleep in his car and drives into an office that turns out to be owned by Yasmina’s mother. He is married, but unhappy. Yasmina is wary of marriage and everything associated with it. He has a restaurant, with an Italian influence, *Chez Nino*, complete with a temperamental, perfectionist chef. Of course, they resume their relationship.

As noted, Nino and Yasmina have the same birthday. At a party to mark a birthday, he tells her. “Since we were seven, I’ve loved you, and waited for this day. To ask you to marry me...” She hesitates, she thinks six months of their renewed love is too short a time. “My parents destroyed each other, destroyed me. Why the big rush?” And more: “I don’t want children, Nino... I don’t want to bring a child into this world.”

Nonetheless, they marry and have a daughter, meanwhile the situation in Lebanon grows more catastrophic. She wants to leave, like before, and take a position in Dubai. He wants to stick it out with his family’s

restaurant.

At one point, she writes a letter:

I just hate the world we live in
I hate this place that tore my parents apart
[Scenes of civil war]
I hate that the country collapsed, and our savings were stolen by
the banks.
I hate that we’re still living the same struggles as our parents.
My love, is this the world you want to bring a child into?

They go back and forth. Will they leave together? Will she leave and have him join her later. “I thought nothing could ever separate us again.” Then this line: “When things get better, we’ll come back to Beirut.” One can only wince. At another point, intended as a semi-comic moment, everyone reacts to a loud bang. Someone says, “It’s a sonic boom, not an Israeli bombing.”

Finally, even the loyal and irreplaceable chef Chafic (Tino Karam) jumps ship. He and his wife are “leaving for Saudi Arabia.” Nino jokes, “On a pilgrimage?” “I found work there. I have three children.” Nino, angrily: “Grab your things and get moving.”

Lebanese banks are closing, “meat prices are ridiculous,” the restaurant is in trouble. She: This is “no environment to raise a child.” He: “Tomorrow’s a new day.” She: “Stay in your la-la-land, I’ll put in a transfer to Dubai.” He: “You can stand in line at 2 a.m. for a passport like everyone else.”

In the end, “No matter how the world spins, it will bring us back together. We can meet on our island ...”

There are amusing and telling sequences here, but, overall, the film is far “softer” than the horrific Lebanese and Middle Eastern situation demands. A little complacent, fatalistic and wistful. *Inside Amir* from Iran, although it also treats a layer of the middle class, is more penetrating, troubling, urgent. With *A Sad and a Beautiful World*, one feels that the director has adopted the not-very-useful program of “Making the Best of Things.”

Aris, a well-known Lebanese filmmaker, explained to an interviewer about the make-believe island motif.

This imaginary place is paradise—it’s where [Nino’s] parents are, and they are happy. In reality, they transform something quite dark and macabre into something absolutely beautiful. Later, young Yasmina hears about this island and appropriates it, turning

it into a place where families—hers, whose parents have separated—remain intact, united and happy. And in the end...this island becomes a kind of imaginary escape, a refuge when the world around them grows too harsh. And I think the final shot, where they meet again on the island and we see that postcard image of Beirut and Lebanon, suggests that this island could be Lebanon—if one chooses to see it that way.

And furthermore:

I knew I wanted to tell a story that unfolds over time, where a true love is confronted with reality and ultimately survives despite all those years. But also because I wanted to speak about different periods in Lebanon—I wanted to show a Beirut marked by drama, wars and tragedies, but also a Lebanon that goes through moments of peace, moments of prosperity, where one feels it is a truly wonderful country.

This tendency, to look for silver linings, to present only a portion of the painful truth, is not conducive to the richest, most important work.

I believe it is precisely hope, because in the end it is all we have left. ... And yet, I think love is a prism that offers a certain distortion of reality, allowing us to keep believing through it. Ultimately, that is what allows this country to survive: love—love between friends, between families, between partners. It is the main engine that keeps this country alive.

This is weak.

The recent history of Lebanon is very difficult. In the 1975-1990 civil war an estimated 150,000 people were killed, with another 300,000 injured and an estimated one million people displaced. At present, Israel is attempting to transform southern Lebanon into another Gaza.

Unfortunately, like a number of Lebanese films, *A Sad and Beautiful World* leans toward treating this history as a natural catastrophe, as something incomprehensible (this “absurd war”) that befell the country. A series of more or less heartfelt films, *1982*, *West Beirut*, *Around the Pink House*, *Skies of Lebanon*, *Costa Brava*, *Lebanon* and numerous others (*Capernaum*, which depicts the social misery of the population is somewhat different) legitimately bewail the ghastly civil war and the carnage it produced, but never hazard an analysis as to the roots and sources of the decades-long conflicts.

The Lebanese situation is complex, with different powers and parties taking part, with shifting alliances and so forth, but, as the WSWs noted some years ago, under the Bush administration, imperialist policy had been aimed at reversing

the outcome of the Lebanese civil war, which raged from 1975 until 1990. The US, Israel and other imperialist powers, notably France, played a central role in inciting that long and bloody conflict and keeping it going, including the introduction of American and French military forces and an Israeli invasion in 1982 that was followed by an 18-year Israeli occupation of the south. Washington’s chief ally was the fascist Phalange, which headed a coalition of right-wing forces arrayed against an alliance of the Palestine Liberation Organization and the Lebanese Left.

Imperialist intrigue and intervention succeeded in driving the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) from Lebanon, but the eventual settlement curtailed the power of the Phalange, on the one hand, and saw the rise of the Iranian and Syrian-backed Hezbollah on the other. This is what Washington is determined to change.

And then as now

The Israeli offensive is above all a war against the Lebanese poor. The more affluent residential neighborhoods of Beirut and other parts of the country have been largely spared. This is in keeping with US and Israeli policy during the civil war, when they were allied with the Phalange against the Shiite masses and the Palestinian refugee population.

On April 8, 2026, a particularly black day, reports the BBC, “a deadly wave of [Israeli] strikes [began] at 14.15 local time and saw about 100 targets across Lebanon hit in the space of just 10 minutes.” The death toll “for the day reached 361, according to the Lebanese authorities, with more than 1,000 injured.”

As a result of the day’s bombing,

In the southern suburbs of Beirut, the neighbourhood of Hay el Sellom is barely recognisable. What was once a densely populated, lively community is now a landscape of collapsed concrete, twisted metal and exposed wires. Homes have been reduced to layers of rubble. Staircases lead nowhere. The sounds of everyday life have been replaced by silence.

We refer to these events only to underscore the fact that the middle class soul-searching and to-ing fro-ing in *A Sad and Beautiful World* is very distant from this and inadequate to the devastation. Yasmina and other professionals may be able to leave, for Dubai, Saudi Arabia, Germany and points beyond, but the poor in southern Beirut have no means of escape. As the same BBC report notes, explaining why the April 8 attack was so deadly,

Beirut’s southern suburbs had faced repeated Israeli evacuation orders and air strikes since the start of the war, *but residents told us few people left Hay El Sellom, as they had nowhere to go.* (emphasis added)

The filmmakers need to keep various things in mind, including this. A sensitive, humane approach is a starting-point, but actual social and historical knowledge as well as an angry, partisan stance are indispensable too.



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