



Opinion

Images help stem erasure of a nation's darkest memories

Festival of war and reconciliation films seeks to undo silence about civil war

Jim Quilty
Daily Star staff

Lebanon prefers to forget its war. Indeed a great deal of ink has been spilled about the "state-sponsored amnesia," the "erasure," that has been the hallmark of government policy here in the years since the Taif Accord was imperfectly implemented.

Yet there are many Lebanese who know that the period from 1975-90 cannot simply be explained away in terms of "others fighting their wars on Lebanese soil." These people say that recollection, not erasure, is the only way to ensure that civil war never re-ignites here.

In this regard, the Committee of Relatives for the Disappeared and Kidnapped in Lebanon has collaborated with Beirut Development and Cinema film cooperative to present Images Against Forgetfulness, two days of war-related films to be screened April 11-12 at Masrah al-Madina.

The program includes a choice selection of award-winning documentaries and feature films and it strives to place the Lebanese experience in an international context, discussing issues of war and reconciliation worldwide.

Friday evening will commence with Bernard Debord's 1996 short "Folles" d'Istanbul (The "Crazy" of Istanbul, French with Arabic subtitles), which examines the women who make up Turkey's "Mothers of Saturday" movement.

Coalescing in 1995 and taking their inspiration from the Mothers of the Disappeared in Buenos Aires, these mothers, wives and sisters of missing men meet every Saturday morning at Istanbul's Galatasaray Square to bear silent witness to the disappeared victims of Turkish political repression.

As the film points out, the mothers are Kurdish as well as Turkish, come from a wide range of social classes and occupations and, more often than not, are themselves victims of state suppression.

The evening continues with David Channer's 1985 short Pour l'Amour de Demain (For the Love of Tomorrow, French with Arabic subtitles), which examines an exercise of reconciliation between citizens of France and Germany overseen by Frank Buchman in Caux, Switzerland, from 1946-50.

Images Against Forgetfulness will also screen Maroun Baghdadi's 1980 short Nostalgia: Hanin min Ared al-Harb

(Longing for a Land at War, Arabic), a sketch of the experiences of young Lebanese poet Nadia Tueini as she returns home after a period of enforced absence. With Beirut somewhat more wrecked and with more of her friends fled or dead with every return visit, Nostalgia is an intimate snapshot of Beirut's torn social fabric after five years of conflict.

Friday evening's screenings will conclude with Jocelyne Saab's 1975 feature-length *Le Liban dans la Tourmente* (Lebanon Under the Storm, Arabic with French subtitles). This winner of the Prix des Critiques Arabes in 1975 is a methodical sketch of Lebanon's social, religious, and regional tensions when the country was literally on the brink of war. It features interviews with figures like Musa Sadr and Kamal Jumblatt, whose images still festoon the political landscape.

Saturday's program will commence with Frances Reid and Deborah Hoffman's 2001 *Long Night's Journey Into Day*, the critically acclaimed treatment of South Africa's experiences with its Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

As overseen by long-time anti-Apartheid activist Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the commission's purpose has been to find the truth about the Apartheid regime and in so doing provide an opportunity for both the criminals and victims to redress that regime's crimes.

The power of screening this film here lies both in the commission's relative success in healing old wounds and in the fact that nothing like a truth and reconciliation commission was ever set up after Lebanon's inconclusive conflict.

How appropriate, then, that Reid and Hoffman's film be followed immediately by Zeina Sfeir's 2001 documentary short *Pied de Nez a la Guerre* (In Spite of the War, Arabic with French subtitles). The winner of the Golden Award for best Lebanese Film at 2001's Beirut International Film Festival, Sfeir's piece underlines how the mentalities that characterized Lebanon's war generation have not only persevered but been handed down to those of the youth, who actually feel a nostalgia for the certainties of the war period. A rather different study of nostalgia follows in Bourhane Alawiyeh's 2001 feature-length documentary, *To You Where You Are* (Arabic). Five years after returning to Beirut from his Parisian exile, the director struggles to present the city as it is for his friend Karim, who still lives overseas and whose recollections of home are like a fairy tale.

Images Against Forgetfulness will close with Danis Tanovic's classic black comedy from 2001, *No Man's Land* (Serbo-Croatian, French, English w/Arabic subtitles).

Tanovic's award-winning film re-spins Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* within the context of the Yugoslav civil war: a Serb and a Croat hold each other hostage in a trench between the front lines, awaiting rescue by the international community, in the form of a ravenous press corps and an inconvenienced, ineffectual UN force.

Lebanese are especially well placed to appreciate the absurdity, and the bitterness.

All films show at the Medina Theater starting at 7pm, April 11-12. For more information call 03/253099