

AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

LEBANON: DOCUMENTING THE CIVIL WAR

by
CHRISTINA ANNE TKACIK

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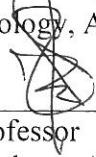
by
CHRISTINA ANNE TKACIK

Approved by:



Dr. Jad Melki, Assistant Professor
Department of Sociology, Anthropology, and Media Studies

Advisor

 on behalf of Dr. Anjali Nath
Dr. Anjali Nath, Professor
Department of Sociology, Anthropology, and Media Studies

Member of Committee

Date of Project Presentation: April 30, 2015

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AN ABSTRACT OF THE PROJECT OF

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The war in Lebanon brought destruction twice. There was the initial destruction of the war, followed by what was arguably an equally damaging effort by the ruling classes to erase the war's memory and to repress its history. This erasure, some say, has perpetuated the war in Lebanon, placing the nation on an ineluctable path toward more violence. Through their work, documentary filmmakers in Lebanon have subverted attitudes of both official amnesia and competing narratives about the civil war. Reflexive techniques – those that call attention to the constructed nature of the film itself – have played an important role in their work. Filmmakers include themselves in their own work – representation of their own bodies, their own voices, and own experiences, reflecting both the subjective nature of media and more generally, the subjective nature of human experience. Following this reflexivity, they are then able to effectively deconstruct prevailing narratives about the war. In doing so, they provide an artistic alternative to physical violence.

This project adopts Ruby's (1980) theory of reflexivity to investigate four films about the civil war in Lebanon: *Sleepless Nights* (2013), *Chou Sar?* (2009), *In Spite of War* (2001), and *A Lesson in History* (2009).

Keywords: Lebanese Civil War, Memory, Amnesia, Documentary Films,

Reflexivity

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

“We live in amnesia always, all so it’s like struggling against amnesia,” the filmmaker Hady Zaccak told me in his office in St. Joseph’s University¹ (USJ) in Beirut, Lebanon, where he is a professor². To Zaccak, amnesia is evident everywhere in Lebanon – in the demolition of downtown Beirut following the war, in the dismal state of Lebanese film archives. Zaccak views cinema as a tool for fighting amnesia – to documenting landscapes before their destruction, to exploring the ugly histories that politicians would rather hide. He has made several films about Lebanon’s civil war, among them, *A Lesson in History* (2009), which investigated the Lebanese government’s failure to unify the nation’s school textbooks, and the proliferation of many competing narratives about the war, and by extension, Lebanese identity.

Social theorists sometimes use the term “amnesia” to describe institutional failure to address dark chapters in a nation’s history. Turkey’s amnesia about the Armenian genocide (New York Times editorial board 2015). American amnesia about slavery (Staples, 2005), or about Vietnam (Herschensohn, 2010). These memories endanger the social order – they

¹ During the war, this was once a dangerous segment of Beirut – close to the National Museum, which was the front line between East and West.

² Zaccak is not only a professor at SJU, he is also a graduate – along with other well-known Lebanese filmmakers Nadine Labaki, Eliane Raheb, and Zeina Sfeir.

must be suppressed (Sontag 2003). Within the context of Lebanon, many have used it to describe the Lebanese state's attitude about the 1975-1989 civil war.

In Lebanon *amnesia* is a byproduct of *amnesty* – the 1991 general amnesty granted toward the war's participants two years after the Ta'ef Accord brought an official end to the war (Haugbolle, 2012). Because of amnesty, most of the people responsible for the war's worst atrocities were never punished. Instead, many gained political office, and placed their own supporters in government. These warlords turned sectarian leaders urged the country to forget the past and move on. When asked about the past, they repeated narrative that the Civil war was simply a “war of others fought on Lebanese soil” (Barack 2007). They used the news as their weapon³ (Abushakra, 2008).

The past, particularly the civil war, remains a taboo topic in popular discourse in Lebanon (Haugbolle, 2010). Although the Ta'ef Accord stipulated that the country's school history books should be unified into a single coherent history of the war, no unified history of the war has ever been published (Zaccak, 2013). The silence is reflected in the architecture of Beirut. Battle-scarred buildings in downtown Beirut were demolished and transformed into shopping centers. Mass graves were buried over – their true locations unknown to the general public to this day. There are no monuments in Beirut to honor the war's many victims; only monuments to the war's sundry militias, places in villages around Lebanon (Young, 2014).

³ News outlets are generally subsidized by individual sects or political parties, and thus can be seen as extensions of the parties they represent.

Lebanon is a country perennially “on the brink,” with unresolved sectarian conflicts internally and any number of outside factors constantly seeming to threaten the outbreak of another war. Amidst these chaotic realities, a number of NGOs, artists, and other filmmakers are laboring to expose the skeletons of the nation’s dark history and tell the history that was never written (Westmoreland, 2010). While sectarianism plagues the Lebanese mainstream media, dependent largely on political parties for financial support (Dajani, 2013), Lebanese documentary filmmakers operate somewhat independently of these constraints. Their work may be of vital importance to both remembrance of the nation’s past and moving it forward into the future.

In this study I will look at documentary films about the civil war, including one directed by Hady Zaccak. I will investigate how filmmakers use reflexive techniques, including representing their own person within their film, to challenge both amnesia and previous discourses on the war.

A. The Civil War in Lebanon and the emergence of documentary filmmakers in the media landscape

The Civil war in Lebanon began in 1975 and officially ended with a 1989 peace treaty signed in Ta’ef, Saudi Arabia. The war was really a cycle of wars, with shifting sides and alliances, and significant involvement from neighboring countries including Israel and Syria (UMAM, N.D.). The participation from outside countries led many Lebanese for years to refer to the war as the “war of others on Lebanese soil” – denying Lebanese

participation in the battle (Zaccak, 2013). The years since Ta'ef⁴ have seen continued periods of violence in Lebanon – for example, the battles between Christian leaders in the Metn region in 1990 -- leading many to conclude that the war did not really end, rather, it simply continued in different forms (Alie Nayel, 2014)

There was an enormous amount of media coverage of the war, however this did not always lead to more meaning. Foreign correspondents flew in from around the world to cover it (Friedman,1989). Reports of a bomb blast in Beirut might be transmitted via telex from the Commodore Hotel, around the world, to the offices of *The Washington Post* headquarters within a few hours. The media coverage became something like a circus. A German film crew received permission to make a movie in the city while battles raged a few streets away. Reuters reported that the director had “crossed the fine line between genius and madness” (Bell 1981). Local media became almost an extension of the war itself – each side in the war with their own radio station and paper, downplaying or exaggerating events to suit their own purposes (Foerch Saab 2014)

In contrast, there was Maroun Bagdadi, a Lebanese filmmaker struggling to make sense of his surroundings and the destruction engulfing his country. The day before Lebanon's civil war began in 1975, Bagdadi had screened his film “Beirut ya Beirut” – an experimental film that in many ways foreshadowed the war. As the fighting continued, Bagdadi documented the war's destruction across the country from the perspective of

⁴ Ta'ef itself was a flawed agreement – like other “consociational” or power-sharing agreements in post-conflict countries, it led sectarian leaders to “divide the cake” of the country “rather than jointly baking a new one” (Leenders, 2014). It has thus produced a political system that is both highly divisive and at the same time highly representative; this has led to severe legislative gridlock and increasing corruption.

someone watching his own country being torn apart. In *Whispers and Murmurs* (1980) Bagdadi traveled the country with the poet Nadia Tueni, reflecting on the impact of the war just a few years in. Tueni reflects that prior to the war, she and her friends used to joke that the city should be destroyed. But now that it was actually happening, it was unbearable. In a few scenes, Tueni can be seen with a war photographer who documents the destruction of the city. In this way, the film both archives the past and invites viewers to contemplate the act of mediation. The image we see, we are reminded, is itself a construction. The photographer meanders through the souks of Downtown Beirut, now long destroyed. Shot in the middle of the war, “Whisper” “bears witness to people and places that are forever gone”⁵ (Bucher 2013).

Two years after the peace signed at Ta’ef in 1989, the Lebanese Parliament issued a blanket amnesty for all crimes committed during the war. At the time, amnesty was meant to encourage the country to move forward after the long years of fighting. However, amnesty has also contributed to significant dysfunction in postwar Lebanon, creating a culture of impunity in which politicians feel free to place their own self-interest above the law (ICTJ, 2014). Families of the disappeared in Lebanon have been unable to obtain answers about the whereabouts of their loved ones, or compensation for their losses (El Hassen, 2014,

In the absence of a formal truth and reconciliation commission like that of post-apartheid South Africa, activists, filmmakers, artists and NGOs have responded to the

⁵ Notably, Bagdadi’s films were largely unavailable for public consumption until a 2013 initiative by a local NGO to release them.

failure to account for the past (Haugbolle, 2010). At times they have used documentary films as a tool in memory projects. For example, an NGO called the International Center of Transitional Justice (ICTJ)⁶ opened an office in Beirut in 2004 and has published a number of reports on the failure to address the crimes of the war. The NGO also commissioned the documentary film by Carol Mansour “We want to know?” which includes Lebanese people talking about their wartime experiences, often for the first time.

Within the work of memory activists, documentary films stand out for their ability to offer a more balanced and thorough perspective of the war. For example, the 15-part Aljazeera documentary “Lebanon’s War” (2001) became “the most widely distributed piece of civil war history in the region” (Haugbolle, 2010 pp. 78), a testament to its broad appeal. While the documentary was widely debated among the Lebanese public, only one newspaper chose to write about it at the time of its broadcast in 2001– reflecting the barriers to open discussion of the war (Haugbolle 2010). This may also be a reflection of shortcomings within more mainstream news outlets, which often reflect strictly sectarian viewpoints (Dajani, 2013). In contrast, documentary filmmakers are usually not reliant on sectarian funding for support – rather, they are funded by non-profits and grants that allow filmmakers relative autonomy to express independent viewpoints⁷ (Neidhardt, 2012).

Many documentary films are reflexive -- they pose questions about the act of mediation itself. In particular, there has been a move in recent years by many directors to include themselves -- their own bodies, words, and stories -- in their own work. At times

⁷ This is not to suggest that NGOs and other organizations are free from ideological constraints, however, they are less likely to reflect Lebanon’s sectarian viewpoints.

they reflect on their own experiences – for example, De Gaulle Eid, who investigates a massacre committed against his family in his film “Chou Sar,” or Zeina Sfeir, who reflects upon the personal impact of the war on her life in “In Spite of War.” In other films they appear on-screen to reflect their own role in the construction of their films – for example, in “A lesson in history,” director Hady Zaccak appears on-screen throughout the film, as does Eliane Raheb in “Sleepless Nights.” While the texture and the impact of the director’s on-screen appearance is different within each film, but there are certain commonalities. Each film becomes a subjective, personal text, rather than either an ideologically driven news report or a foreign dispatch by a parachute journalist. Ironically, this subjectivity makes the documentary films more balanced than the sectarian mainstream media in Lebanon. In acknowledging their own constructed nature, they disavow typical claims to truth and encourage viewers to take a more skeptical view of all media.

Despite – or perhaps because of this potential – filmmakers are often limited in their ability to air unpopular viewpoints. Filmmakers in Lebanon face is official censorship of anything that might “stir political or military sensitivities” (Khoury, 2012, p. 22). As dictated by a law from the time of the French mandate, films in Lebanon are subject to “prior censorship” – meaning that filmmakers must have their scripts approved by censors – in this case, part of General Security -- before they can even begin shooting. Application of prior censorship to theater and film can be seen as an anachronism, and particularly hypocritical in light of the fact that live TV stations – largely controlled by the political elite -- are not censored. In interviews, filmmakers expressed their frustration at the sheer randomness of film censorship, and that what is permitted to air on live TV in Lebanon is

frequently censored out of film scripts, suggesting that General Security perceives film to be a “more dangerous tool” than other media (Zaccak, 2014). Additionally, it seems likely that the more stringent censorship of films over TV broadcasts is due simply to the requirement of prior censorship of film scripts, which would not be logistically feasible for TV broadcasts.

CHAPTER 2

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

“Truth is singular and lies are plural, but history—the facts of what happened—is both immutable and mostly unknowable. Can I somehow remember enough to type my way to an unvarnished recitation of what happened to me? No chance.”

(Carr, 2008, p. 58)

"There's no reason why documentaries can't be as personal as fiction filmmaking and bear the imprint of those who made them. Truth isn't guaranteed by style or expression. It isn't guaranteed by anything"

(Errol Morris quoted in Williams, 1993, p. 314).

Documentary films are a type of historical text. Nichols (2008) defines them in terms of their relationship to history; they refer directly to the historical world, offering a unique perspective on real events that have already happened. Moreover, Wahlberg (2008) compares the documentary filmmaker/editor to the historian, who pieces together a historical narrative from the available fragments. Echoing Walter Benjamin, she points out the distance between the filmer and the object filmed – the person behind the camera never “knows” exactly what (or whom) they are filming – for example the stories that make up their subjects’ identity (p. 102). The meaning of an image may change over time – this

contributes to the documentary's ability to offer alternative histories to those offered in the mainstream or official versions.

Whereas in the past, documentary filmmakers may have constructed films with a "voice of God" narration, present-day filmmakers are more likely to engage in at least some degree of reflexivity – calling attention to their own construction or at least to mechanics of mediated realities (Oberacker, 2009). Within the field of postmodern critical theory, reflexive practices – which acknowledge the subjectivities and the role of the producer behind a work -- are seen as a tool to counter hegemonic ideologies, often dispersed through mainstream media (Ruby, 1980). There is no consensus on a single definition of reflexivity. For theorists like Williams (1993), true reflexivity will convey a "postmodern awareness that there is no objective observation of truth but always an interested participation in its construction." Generally speaking, however, reflexive elements call the viewer's attention to the fact of a film's constructed or artificial nature, and to the means of documentation itself (Nichols, 2010).

In my examination of Lebanese documentaries about the civil war, I will use reflexivity to refer to the ways in which a film draws the viewer's attention to its own constructed nature and thereby problematizes the act of representation itself. Reflexive films will call the viewer's attention to matters such as authorship, and the relationship between an image of reality and reality itself (Oberacker, 2010). As Ruby (2005) states, a reflexive film will demonstrate that all films regardless of genre are "created, structured articulations of the filmmaker and not authentic, truthful, objective records" (p. 44). Nichols (2010) reiterates this attention to representation: for him, a reflexive film will not

only address the historical world, but will also look at “problems and issues of representing it as well” (p. 125). Some theorists argue that in order to be truly reflexive, a text must also contextualize itself within the larger society it is a product of (Ruby, 2000).

Reflexivity is not just a matter of style; it becomes a tool to subvert hegemonic representations. Ruby (1980) distinguishes reflexivity from other types of filmmaking that simply call attention to the apparatus of filmmaking without having political aims. Nichols (2010) further designates politically reflexive films as those that “induce an ‘aha!’ effect” where we, the viewer, are able to understand some larger aspect of the representation process, and become motivated to change the status quo (p. 130). Nichols’ quote seems to connect with the historical materialist imperative of Marx (1845): “the philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways, the point is to change it.” Reflexivity, then, takes on the mantle of this Marxist imperative. Lebanese documentary films about the civil war do not simply interpret the war, they interpret the interpretations.

CHAPTER 3

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

“For those still puzzling over Lebanon's violent descent into hell during its "little wars" of the 70s and 80s, this extraordinary documentary chronicles the yet unhealed wounds of long suffering survivors of that increasingly faraway but still ever present conflict. Watching the interplay between its protagonists-- a guilty-ridden [sic] Christian killer and an obsessed, grief-stricken Muslim mother searching for her long missing son -- is worth a lifetime attending conflict resolution seminars lecturing about the benefits of truth and reconciliation catharsis. The characters in *Sleepless Nights* are Lebanese, but, alas, their shared problem of memory is universal.”

Randal (2014), Beirut correspondent for *The Washington Post*

Academics have researched the state of memory and amnesia in Lebanon as well as efforts to write the history of the civil war through film. Overall, they have paid little attention to the role of documentary films, although such films have often received high praise from other outlets, as the above quote demonstrates.

In this literature review I will look at research on the topic of amnesia and memory in Lebanon by Khalaf (2002), Barak (2007), and Haugbolle (2010), who approach the topic of amnesia from a range of perspectives – Khalaf viewing amnesia as a sociological

problem of postwar Lebanon, Barak arguing that such amnesia is a “state-sponsored amnesia” advanced by the ruling class, and Haugbolle taking the dissenting viewpoint that amnesia in Lebanon is over-stated. Chahine (2013) researched the censorship of one war documentary as a channel for probing larger barriers to remembrance in memory. Investigating the work of visual artists in Lebanon, Westmoreland (2013) has researched the work of experimental filmmakers, while Khatib (2008) has looked extensively about the work of narrative filmmakers. Overall, there has been little close textual analysis of documentary films; in fact, discussion of documentary films is brief when they are mentioned at all. Rather, scholars generally focus on the role of fiction films instead (Zaccak 2013).

Khalaf (2002) argues that “collective amnesia” in Lebanon – the willful lack of remembrance among the people regarding the atrocities of the war -- is apt to be disable the country in the long run. Khalaf looked at the broad decline and “vulgarization” of cultural values, as well as ‘retribalization,’ -- or the increasing tendency of Lebanese to identify with their tribal roots following the trauma of the war. Khalaf criticizes modern trends toward nostalgia for Lebanon’s pre-war, or even Phoenician past. He looks to indirect solutions to Lebanon’s societal problems, including performing arts and education. Non-political solutions such as these, he argued, may prove more fruitful than “obsessively” hammering away at political solutions.

Barak (2007) investigated several groups that have countered the “collective amnesia” -- including Lebanese films on the topic of the war, which demonstrate an increasing interest amongst the Lebanese public on the topic of war (p. 60). These works

may also prove the limitations of the medium of film for change, being that filmmakers themselves may be subject to some of the same sectarian biases as their leaders. Barak engaged with only a limited selection of three films and his interaction and judgment of modern limited filmmakers was based largely on anecdotal observations (p. 61). He blames Lebanese politicians for “collective amnesia,” he also looked at various means non-state institutions have used to combat institutional forgetting. Sectarian politicians have subscribed to the state-sponsored narrative of the war which conceives of it as nothing more than a ‘war of others’ fought on Lebanese soil; to suggest otherwise would implicate many of the current state leaders and be disadvantageous to politicians (p. 70).

In looking at the work of “memory makers” in Lebanon, Haugbolle (2010) argues that the role of collective amnesia has been exaggerated in postwar Lebanon. He frames amnesia as the unsurprising consequence of the complex nature of the war itself and additionally its unfinished nature. While some members of Lebanese society are in favor of forgetting the past and moving on, pro-memory actors such as these operate from the belief that forgetting or repressing of war memories will lead only to the war’s repetition. While he praises the “humanist” project of memory in Lebanon for attempting to overcome the violence of the past, at the same time he is somewhat critical of “memory makers” – who may oversimplify the real causes of the war without addressing the practical application of sectarianism in present-day Lebanon.

Thus far, however, academics have largely ignored the role of documentary films such as *Sleepless Nights* and other films. Chahine (2013) covered new ground in her thesis on the film *Chou Sar?* of discussing the political as well as religious elements which

contribute to censorship of documentary films about the civil war in Lebanon. Still, she engages only in limited textual analysis of the film *Chou Sar?*, focusing instead on censorship and barriers to memory in Lebanon. However valuable such analysis may be, close textual analysis of *Chou Sar?* as well as other documentary films about the war, is needed.

Westmoreland (2013) investigates how visual artists have used experimental and subjective techniques to respond to the civil war. He argues that the over-representation of Lebanon by mainstream/ Western media had "essentially rendered the Lebanese experience already spoken for" (p. 721). In response, Lebanese artists have taken to re-appropriating documentary evidence, and creating a new aesthetic which blurs the lines between the artistic and anthropological. For example, Lebanese artists have frequently mimicked archives in their work; this in turn serves as a "critique of a definitive historical record" (p. 721), that is problematizing any notions of a single objective narrative account. Elsewhere, Westmoreland (2010) probes the work of experimental artists who respond to amnesia by creating subjective histories of the war, which allow mourning and acknowledgement of past trauma. However, Westmoreland did not address the work of documentary filmmakers, or any potential relevance of these pieces within the broader Lebanese society.

Khatib (2008) articulates a central tension of Lebanese narrative films as being the desire to reveal the past, versus the desire to move on. Those that would brush aside the history only reinforce the war's divisions. "When it conceals, cinema becomes part of the war machine, a silencing mechanism that stands in the way of achieving national reconciliation" (p. xix). Alternatively, she argues, those that probe the history in-depth can

serve the greater good – or part of a “national therapy” (p. xix). I find Khatib’s notion of a ‘national therapy’ somewhat problematic, as it risks assuming that one particular individual knows what is in the best interest of the whole country.

Recently, film reviewers and non-academic publications have begun paying more attention to Lebanese documentary films. *Sleepless Nights* received extensive media coverage and praise for shining a new light on the history of the civil war (Randall, 2013, Jaydalliya, 2013, and Chamas, 2013). They posit that films like “Sleepless Nights” play an important role in grappling with existential questions faced by modern Arab audiences as they attempt to navigate the present, while affected by the past. According to Chamas:

There is a need for films without answers that, instead of trying to neatly define Lebanon, Palestine, Bahrain or Syria for a foreigner, encourage the inhabitants of such countries to ask what it means to be Lebanese, Palestinian, Syrian or Bahraini for them today, and what it should or possibly could mean tomorrow.

Sleepless Nights, she argues, is just one such film. Rather than simply translate the Lebanese experience for a foreign audience, the film is meant to address Lebanese issues for Lebanese audiences. Unlike those films that may over-simplify the war or its effects, these works embrace ambiguity and at times even the unanswerable questions. At the same time, they encourage viewers to reject easy answers.

In this project I will examine a selection of four documentary films that tackle the subject of the Civil war in Lebanon. I will look to see:

RQ1: How are the directors present in their own work?

RQ2: How does the film achieve political reflexivity?

RQ3: How do the films articulate the representation between space and memory?

CHAPTER 4

METHODOLOGY

I will address the aforementioned research questions by conducting discourse analysis of four different documentary films about Lebanon's civil war. These films are *In Spite of War* (2001), *A Lesson in History* (2009), *Chou Sar?* (2009), and *Sleepless Nights* (2012). Each of these films had either a theatrical or was broadcast on television. With *Sleepless Nights* and *A Lesson in History*, I obtained copies of the films from the director directly. *In Spite of War* was available online. *Chou Sar?* was banned in Lebanon; however, I was able to obtain a copy from a professor at AUB.

Each of the films I chose include of at least some representation of the director within the film itself. I excluded narrative films, as well as experimental films and other documentaries that did not include representation of the director within the film, even if these were relevant from a topical standpoint. *Whispers and Murmurs* (1980), *Suspended Dreams* (1992), *The War of Lebanon*, and *Lanterns of Memory* (2009) are examples of such films. Additionally, I excluded documentary films that included representation of the director but did not extensively deal with the war as subject matter, for example, *One Man Village* (2008).

I will conduct what Rose (2001) refers to as "Discourse Analysis I" – which focuses on the text itself, in this case, films -- as opposed to the institutional practices surrounding a text. This stems from the understanding that the text itself merits study on its own terms. In particular, I will examine the means in which the films represent the director on-screen,

how they represent conflicting viewpoints, and finally how they articulate the relationship between memory and space. Within the category of representation, I will also address matters of tone, style, and subject matter.

Finally, I will investigate how the problem of memory is represented – and how the director articulates the failure to remember in Lebanese society. Additionally, I will analyze how contradictory viewpoints are placed in dialogue with one another – particularly how narratives of people in power are placed in conflict with memories of war victims. Ultimately, I will seek to determine what solutions, if any, the filmmakers appear to offer postwar Lebanon.

One limitation to my study is my own lack of proficiency in Lebanese Arabic and lack of familiarity with Lebanon's history, which meant that I relied on the films' subtitles in order to understand them. Should a mistranslation exist I would not be able to catch it. Additionally, I might miss out on certain cultural references that would be more readily obvious to Lebanese audiences. However, I felt I was able to remedy this shortcoming by corresponding with film directors to obtain background knowledge about the films – I conducted informal interviews with Hady Zaccak, and exchanged emails with Eliane Raheb and Zeina Sfeir as well.

Below I will provide a brief synopsis of the films.

Sleepless Nights – Interweaves the stories of a former high-ranking Phalange officer named Assad Chaftari, with the story of Mariam Saiidi, the mother of a young Communist fighter who went missing during one battle. Chaftari made a public apology for his actions during the war and speaks frankly about his own war crimes – though he hesitates at providing

information that might implicate his fellow members of the Lebanese Forces. Saïdi is tormented by the quest for information about her son.

Chou Sar? –Is about filmmaker De Gaulle Eid’s quest to obtain the truth about a brutal massacre that killed 11 members of his family and drove the family from their native village. The filmmaker appears on screen as he confronts both family members who survived the massacre and individuals who were responsible for the murders.

In Spite of War – The first-person narration of a woman’s reflections on the war, over ten years after it had ended. The director never appears on-screen, but her narration provides the backbone of the film as she interviews various friends, family members, and other Lebanese people about their understanding of what happened during the war in Lebanon. The film illustrates a broad range of conflicting viewpoints about what happened, as well as frustration with efforts by the state and local corporations to plaster over the war’s history.

A Lesson in History – Looks at the failure to unify the school history books in Lebanon. The film takes viewers to schools of all different sects in Beirut, and interviews students about their understanding of Lebanese history as well as identity. Filmmaker Hady Zaccak appears throughout the film, reading through various textbooks. Ultimately, the film makes the point that the history of the Civil war is not the own issue in debate in Lebanon – depending on sect, Lebanese young people may hold fundamental and seemingly mutually exclusive differences of opinion on what it means to be Lebanese.

CHAPTER 5

ANALYSIS

“Everybody is invited to watch *Sleepless Nights* and be a "responsible viewer." We offer the experimental material in the film to provoke the viewer to dive in and take “responsibility”: responsibility for collecting more narratives about this war, and dislodging the general amnesty and resulting culture of impunity in which there has been no prosecution—and arguably little accountability—for acts committed during the war.”

(Raheb, ND)

I. Reflexivity - presence of director & problematizing of representation

In this section I will review each film, paying particular attention to its reflexivity and how the director is present in the film, and whether the director calls the viewers attention to the apparatus of filmmaking. Each of the documentary films is reflexive in some way – it reveals its own constructed nature, and in turn, explores deeper questions about the nature of perception. Within these films, the director appears on-screen or their voice may be heard in the narration. At times, the film’s subjects question the director’s motives for investigating the past. I will also examine tone, and what role tone plays in establishing subjectivity. We become painfully aware of the staging of scenes and the

presence of the camera: whatever truth emerges from these scenes is the product of the interaction of the camera and the director with the subject.

In *Sleepless Nights*, director Eliane Raheb calls the viewers attention to the filmmaking apparatus throughout the film. She frequently appears on-screen, we see her manipulating and directing her subjects throughout the film. The viewer is given space to judge what is happening on-screen, to form their own assessment of the filmmaker and the subjects. In the film's opening scene, the camera operator breathes on the lens, fogging it up. "I can't get it clean," he complains. Instantly the viewer is reminded: this is not a true picture, but a mediated reality. In a voiceover, Chaftari tells the director:

I feel that for you it's all about images and film and getting a wonderful scene. As for me, I need two weeks to recover after the shooting! The whole past hits me again, the anxiety and sleepless nights.

He walks down the stairs of a modernist school building. (See Fig. 1) The scene, in fact, appears to be carefully composed from a formal perspective. We, as the audience, wonder: is Chaftari correct in his assessment that Raheb cares only about the image? How has that shaped the picture we are now seeing? Within the film, the subjects frequently contest the director and question her own motives in making the film. This, in turn, forces us to question what we are seeing on-screen.



Figure 1. *Sleepless Nights*

Raheb is seen in various instances manipulating her subjects – for example, asking Chaftari to read a certain text about his life, while she and her camera crew look on – their equipment visible in a mirror. In another scene, she is shown calling Mariam Saiidi, the mother of a missing Communist fighter named Maher, telling her only “There is someone I want you to see.” The following scene shows Saiidi at the home of a British psychotherapist who tells Saiidi, through a translator, that she wants her to help her leave behind her pain. Saiidi walks out of the woman’s home, furious. But we may wonder: why did Raheb send her to see a therapist in the first place?

Raheb’s reflexivity allows us to question her own ethics in the filmmaking process. We wonder, did Raheb’s film cause harm – emotional or otherwise -- to the subjects? Then again, does it matter? One of Raheb’s chief subjects is a man guilty of war crimes who never faced any sort of punishment for his deeds. Isn’t it permissible for Raheb to break the rules to serve a greater good? In exposing the apparatus of filmmaking, Raheb forces the viewer to probe into such questions, which in turn could be asked of nearly any documentary film.

Another reflexive technique by Raheb is the use of audio recordings where video footage is not available – subjects may be willing to admit things on audio recordings that they will not say with a camera present. The man who knows where Saiidi’s son is killed will allow his voice to be heard, but not his face. Saiidi’s daughter can be heard in voice recording, but Saiidi does not want her other children interviewed. Chaftari may have told Raheb things in previous interviews that he is unwilling to admit on-camera – the location of mass graves, or the names of certain accomplices. In an early scene, Raheb sits with Chaftari and plays for him a tape of a previous discussion they had, in which he discussed his complicity in various war crimes, like an investigator interrogating a criminal. The recordings themselves become a type of evidence⁸.

Overall, the tone of the film is ironic and somewhat detached. Assad Chaftari shaves his face while talking about a priest who provided absolution to Phalange fighters before they would commit murders. Only at times does the ironic tone break – primarily when Saiidi is expressing her grief for her son. Saiidi’s rage and grief are treated as the heart of the film, breaking through the ironic and carefully crafted facades.

The film’s closing scene provides some sense of moral resolution to the ethical questions the film raises. After a scene in which she interviews one of Maher’s fellow fighters, the director takes Saiidi to the Faculty of Sciences building in Beirut where her son was believed to have gone missing. She points to him the final place Maher was seen.

⁸ The families of the missing persons in Lebanon have used the film as evidence in legal proceedings to force the state to dig up mass graves (Raheb, N.D.)

In a sense, the scene serves to redeem Raheb as well: whatever ethical compromises she has made in filming her subjects, ultimately she has done her best to provide a resolution.

(See Fig. 2)



Figure 2. Mariam Saiidi in *Sleepless Nights*

While a victim of the war is a major subject in *Sleepless Nights*, with *Chou Sar?* the victim is actually the film's director. The movie documents director De Gaulle Eid's efforts to find the truth about a massacre that killed 11 members of his own family during the war. Unlike *Sleepless Nights*, however, *Chou Sar?* rarely draws the viewer's attention to the apparatus of filmmaking itself. Rather, the film resembles a cinema-verite narrative film more than a traditional documentary. The dialogue appears always to be natural and spontaneous; there are no direct interviews. As in *Sleepless Nights*, the director is frequently in front of the camera; however, here he interviews his own family members about the massacre as they go about the business of daily life – an uncle tends to his garden, a cousin prepares coffee on the stove. As viewers, we realize that the subjects carry their traumatic memories with them wherever they go. However functional they may appear on the exterior, on the inside they are suffering greatly.

The film opens in Corsica, where Eid lives with his family. In an early scene he is pictured having breakfast with his wife – the conversation flows naturally in French. A single tear streams down Eid’s cheek as he speaks – he answers the phone “Everything’s fine.” The dichotomy the viewer that everything is not well. They have dinner at a family member’s home – a festive anniversary party. One guest begins singing a somber ballad: “My family and strangers struck down by this calamity/ This human madness that no war satisfies/ All I have is this poem to soothe their souls.” The camera pans for reaction shots of the party’s guests including Eid, who looks on intently. The scene serves as a foreshadowing for what is to come; despite the picturesque setting of Eid’s home in the Corsican hillside, we are aware that Eid is continually affected by his memories. Additionally, the song may be seen as a metaphor for the film itself – “a poem to soothe their souls.” Such scenes give the film an expressive and poetic quality. As he leaves for Beirut, Eid hugs his young daughter goodbye. Held in her mother’s arms, she begins to cry uncontrollably. He stops to hold her, breaking down with emotion. Eid’s grief makes it appear that he may be imagining his own separation from his parents.

The presence of the camera is rarely acknowledged; it becomes almost a phantom, suspended in space. In an early scene, De Gaulle Eid exits his taxi, having just arrived in Beirut. The camera is initially in the back seat of the car, then follows him outside of the car. As the viewer, we may expect to hear the rear car door slam, or a slight shake of the camera as the operator exits. But it never comes. When the director greets his sister Rosie, whom he hasn’t seen in a long time – she makes no mention of the presence of a camera. This creates a feeling of intimacy, but at the same time unease – scenes feel uncomfortably voyeuristic. Should I be seeing this man’s grief? Why should I look?

In a later scene of *Chou Sar?* the director sits beside his sister Rosie, reflecting on what he has heard from family members about the massacre. She describes a trip to the family's home, years after the massacre had taken place. Rosie is filmed in close-up, there is a slightly claustrophobic feeling to the scene. (See Fig. 3). The viewer sees that although she may appear happy on the outside, this exterior belies great internal suffering. She sensed the walls screaming with horror, "as though there had been a voice in the house." This "scream" is now a part of her and her siblings. In turn, the viewer may suppose that Eid views the film as an expression of his own suffering.



Figure 3. Rosie Eid in *Chou Sar?*

The director's family members in Beirut warn him not to return to the family village, telling him the experience will be too painful, that just a few hours there will haunt him for years. This creates anticipation for the final scene, in which the director returns to his family's village where the massacre took place. As he stands in the ruins of his childhood home, sobbing, the words and warnings of his relatives reverberate in the audience's mind. Does he, like his sister, sense a screaming behind the walls? Given the larger film, Eid's documentation of his return to the village seems to take on elements of

performance art. One senses he is returning – and filming – for a larger purpose. (See Fig.

4)



Figure 4. De Gaulle Eid in *Chou Sar?*

The scene in the village is one of the rare scenes when the presence of a camera is acknowledged – as Eid walks by, a bystander asks “What are you shooting?” Children observed playing appear to run inside when they realize they are being filmed. In a final, climactic scene, Eid confronts an old man who he says killed his mother. He tells him: “Strange you do not remember me... How could I forget my mother’s assassin?” (Fig. 5) The man stands before him, seemingly embarrassed, frozen. The camera lingers on him, and he fidgets but does not move out of frame. In this context, the camera takes on the role of a weapon for Eid. He has captured the face of the man who believes killed his mother.



Figure 5. *Chou Sar?*

Eid repeatedly comments to family members about the purpose of his journey back to Lebanon, and the necessity to find the truth of what happened. He frames his own quest for information within the broader Lebanese society – he speaks for the war’s many victims. In an early scene of the film, in Corsica, he tells his brother, “It’s a whole country’s tragedy, not just one or two people’s.” Eid closes the film with a dedication, first to his family, and then: “To all those whom justice condemns to injustice for reasons of state.” (Fig. 6) In this manner Eid contextualizes his family’s tragedy not just within the Lebanese tragedy, but even in the tragedies of all modernity.

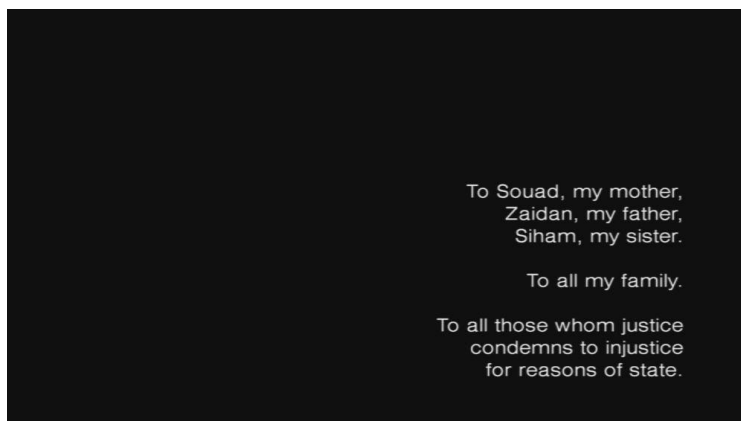


Figure 6. *Chou Sar?*

Like *Chou Sar?* and “Sleepless Nights,” Zeina Sfeir’s *In Spite of War* provides a personal account of the war – she interviews her parents, friends, and others about their war memories, and recalls her own fears around the war. However, unlike *Chou Sar?* Sfeir’s tone is relatively upbeat, additionally, she intercuts between interviews with people from various backgrounds and sects about their memories of the war.

Sfeir’s 1st-person voiceover narration forms the backbone of the film; she reflects on her relationship with the war several years after an official end to fighting. The director herself never appears on-camera; her words are featured over the image of a chicken. In the narration, Sfeir self-mockingly refers to herself as a “chicken” that feared the bombs and dangers that war brought. She anthropomorphizes the war as her “friend.” (Fig. 7).



Figure 7. *In Spite of War*

The war and I have the same age, you can say it’s one of my oldest friends. And since I’m seven months younger, it tends to make a fool of me, bouncing me back and forth like a ball. Hating me, loving me, making me believe it’s over. It follows me around like a shadow.

This overtly literary, reflexive gesture makes room for Sfeir’s subjective experience, and in turn allows the viewer to take a more in-depth look at the war’s complexities.

Additionally, we hear Sfeir's voice off-camera as she interviews others about the war in Lebanon. She calls out to them, asking them questions about where they were. She asks her own parents about the war, and recalls that in 1990 her mother was stuck in the hospital for 17 days, unable to leave due to shelling, her whereabouts unknown to her family. This creates a feeling of familiarity and shared vulnerability between the subjects. She approaches them not as a foreigner seeking to translate the Lebanese experience for someone else, but as someone who has shared in the experience of war.

At one point, Sfeir's monologue recalls a major turning point for her Christian community during the war – in 1990, when the Christians formed an alliance with the Syrians, previously an enemy. With no clear explanation given, Sfeir finds that the situation is a “riddle” and she is only an “informed spectator.” This reflexive statement not only establishes the director as belonging to one specific community within Lebanon – the Maronites-- but demonstrates how her own sense of belonging to that community shifted. Toward the end of the film, Sfeir addresses the war itself, as though it were a person. “I heard a lot about you, but I still don't know you very well. Not that you are a mystery or a secret, but... I don't know.” When assessing the war based on her own personal experience, rather than the explanations or narratives offered by others, she concludes that the war was baffling.

Like Sfeir, Raheb, and Eid, Hady Zaccak struggles to make sense of the war's history in his film “A Lesson in History.” Zaccak appears on-screen at intervals throughout the film, pictured as solitary and silent in an office in Downtown Beirut, reading a variety of history books, as well as newspaper articles about failed efforts to unify Lebanon's

history book. He holds a magnifying glass, as if a detective attempting to get to the bottom of a mystery. (Fig. 8)

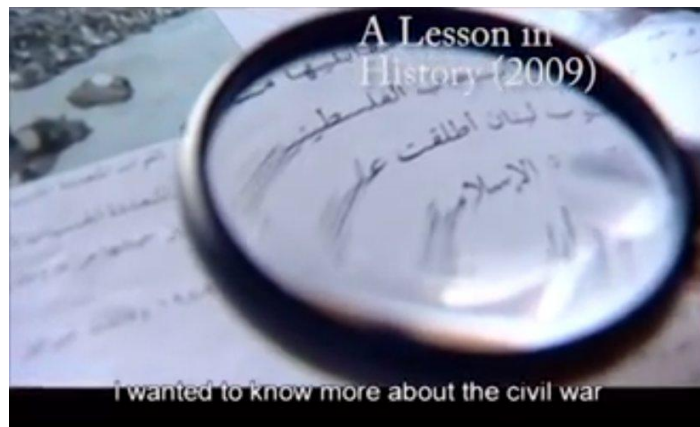


Figure 8. *A Lesson in History*

The film opens with an epigraph, a quote by Paul Valery about the problems of history⁹: “History produces dreams and drunkenness.” Zaccak thus problematizes modes of knowledge production before delving into the more concrete matter of the multiplicity of textbooks. The opening scene shows a young boy playing at a piano; this student, Majd, seems to serve as Zaccak’s young doppelganger throughout the film – bright and inquisitive, he seeks to learn the facts of the history in the face of several barriers.

Viewers see only an extreme close-up or the backlit side profile of his face. Throughout the film, Zaccak appears only in the dark room – the observer trying to piece together the “truth” amidst the conflicting narratives he is faced with. Zaccak’s appearances represents the role of film director in piecing together “the facts” – in the process he seems to urge viewers to complicate their own understanding of history.

⁹ “History produces dreams and drunkenness. It fills people’s hearts with false memories. It exaggerates their reactions, exacerbates old grievances, torments them in their repose, and encourages a delirium of grandeur or a delusion of persecution. It makes whole nations bitter, arrogant, insufferable, and vainglorious.”

The words from the pages he reads help form the narrative structure of his film. The basic structure of the film is relatively straightforward – a montage of different perspectives that at times seems recalls “Kids Say the Darndest Things” – the presence of Zaccak serves to remind the viewer of the role of the director and editor in shaping the on-screen film. Each of the books will have a different perspective – how is one to decide which to give more weight? He thus seems to cast aside any notions of pure objectivity.

In a later scene of the film, Majd is seen first flipping through pictures of Lebanon during the war, then taking pictures on his own at various spots around Beirut. In the absence of more accurate representations, he will make his own representations of reality. He walks past enormous photos of the likes of Samir Gagea while sounds of the radio news from the civil war years plays in the background, perhaps indicating the presence of civil war-era conflicts in the present-day (Fig. 9).



Figure 9. *A Lesson in History*

The film closes with a montage of individual students struggling – and failing—to sing the Lebanese national anthem. No one knows all the words – except for Majd, who

sings it proudly. The moment is a nod to a previous film of Maroun Bagdadi, a filmmaker Zaccak frequently emulates in his work. The final scene shows a profile of Zaccak – with a close up of his glasses, and then cuts to a profile shot of Majd, overlooking the street below him, also wearing glasses.

Both *Sleepless Nights* and *Chou Sar?* include the director at length throughout the film – they are chief protagonists. Alternately, in *In Spite of War* and *A Lesson in History* the director appears only at specific intervals. However, this structural breakdown is not necessarily indicative of tone. Both *In Spite of War* and *Chou Sar?* are personal in tone – the director reveals some aspect of their personal life and how the war impacted them firsthand. Through this subjectivity, the filmmakers reveal themselves to be personally impacted by the events they are discussing. Alternately, *A Lesson in History* and *Sleepless Nights* do not reveal any aspect of the director’s own personal life, rather, the representation of the director on-screen serves to reflect and problematize the act of mediation. Taken together, the films each offer an alternative viewpoint of the war in Lebanon, and force viewers to renegotiate previously heard narratives about the war.

II. Political reflexivity

Reflexivity is a tool that serves a broader political purpose, and the films do not simply problematize their own constructed nature; rather, each subverts ideologies in some way. Within the films, competing narratives come into conflict with one another, people express fury over unresolved damage from the war, and victims are given the rare opportunity to confront the perpetrators of crimes. In this section I will focus on politically reflexive moments in the documentary films – in particular, moments of conflict.

Confrontation plays an important role in the political reflexivity of “Sleepless Nights.” The director Eliane Raheb confronts her subjects about the past, the subjects confront her, as well as one another. In an early scene, Assad Chaftari confronts his own parents’ narrative about pre-war Lebanon. Sitting inside a stately home in Beirut, Chaftari’s mother and father wax nostalgic about how wonderful pre-war Beirut was. By their estimation, Muslims and Christians and Druze were all on good terms with one another. Chaftari’s father, whose eyes well up with tears when he sings the French national anthem, tells the director, “I had Muslim friends. I liked them better than my Christian friends.” Chaftari interrupts his father. “No, no, no, you did not have relationships with Muslims.” The scene serves to subvert the well-worn narratives of a perfect Lebanon-prior to the war, and seems to encourage viewers to revisit their own conception of history (Fig. 10).



Additionally, Mariam Saïdi, the mother of the missing Communist fighter, repeatedly confronts politicians and other members of the state, as well as Assad Chaftari (who, although no longer in a position of power, represents the former ruling class). In one scene, the director Raheb goes to interview a Communist party official about the

whereabouts of Saiidi's son. Soon after beginning the interview she receives a – clearly staged -- phone call from Saidi – Raheb answers. Unbeknownst to the Communist officer, viewers will see his face, but hear Saiidi's voice denouncing him as someone who has “sold out” his Communist values. This constructed moment serves to totally undermine the official – we will not believe a word that comes out of his mouth. In the film's most memorable scene, Saiidi confronts Assad Chaftari at an exhibit of photographs of people who went missing during the war. “This country is a big lie. Our politicians are liars. The civil society is a lie. Our life is a lie!” Saiidi says, before screaming at Chaftari. The scene also serves another reflexive purpose, that is, a commentary on representation. We are reminded that for every photograph of a missing person, there is a family, and a criminal (Fig. 11).



Figure 11. *Sleepless Nights*

Raheb uses various reflexive techniques to dwell explicitly on the taboo topic of the Phalange collaboration with Israel. Interviewing him in his home, Raheb presses Chaftari for more information on the topic. Chaftari doesn't wish to discuss the coordination preparing for the Israeli invasion, saying that it is a secret that belongs to the larger

Christian community – it is not his persona secret to share. However, Raheb presses him for more information, saying that the topic had been discussed in several books, and even in Israeli investigative committees (Fig. 12). Chaftari protests that Raheb should let go of her search for the “journalistic scoop” and discuss why the coordination took place at all. In one scene, Raheb asks former fighters -- “Did you train in Israel?” “We trained in ... various countries,” responds one man – nodding like an apprehended criminal -- makes it clear both that he, in fact, went to Israel for training¹⁰.



Figure 12. *Sleepless Nights*

De Gaulle Eid uses similar techniques when confronting individuals who perpetrated or were accomplices to the massacre that killed his family members. In certain cases Eid accuses individuals of crimes directly -- the camera lingers on subjects as an

¹⁰ Raheb (2014) reported in an email that General Security, the body in charge of film censorship in Lebanon, had initially wanted her to remove scenes that made reference to Israeli collaboration with the Lebanese Forces. However, she was able to fight to keep the scene in. “It is not a secret that the Lebanese forces collaborated with Israel,” she wrote.

implication of guilt. In one scene, Eid goes to the Kitaeb party headquarters to meet with his cousin, Emile, about his knowledge of the massacre. In contrast to De Gaulle's other family members, who live in humble-appearing homes, and speak slowly and naturally as they go about their daily lives, Emile speaks in a politician's rehearsed-sounding statements. He denies his involvement in the family's massacre, and tries to look on the bright side. "I think that exodus – crime and horror aside – allowed our youth to broaden their horizons, to get out of the village." Eid watches his cousin. Emile smokes a cigarette and checks his watch. The camera lingers, uncomfortably, suggesting there is more to say – but that Emile refuses to say it. In a later scene, Eid discusses the matter with another family member to ask him what he thinks of Emile's guilt. "Who benefited from the massacre?" the cousin asks. "Emile did."

Later on, Eid again visits Emile. Having learned more about the massacre, Eid asks his cousin if he knows what happens. Emile says, "I don't know the details," dismissively, and in turn, De Gaulle Eid confronts him in a statement.

I cannot understand how it is possible to hold children responsible. That responsibility belongs to a country, its ministers, its parliament, its politicians who went through the war in Lebanon. There lies the cause of what took place. It's not only the war's fault. It's the fault of the powerful, not the children who paid dearly, like me, like my cousins, like your murdered uncles as well.

Emile remains silent. He pulls another cigarette from his pack and lights it without looking at Eid. Again, he neither confirms nor denies responsibility – however, in this case, his silence seems to implicate him (Fig. 13). The scene serves a larger performative purpose – similar to Miriam Saïdi's confrontation of Assad Chaftari.



Figure 13. *Chou Sar?*

Such scenes were part of the reason the film was ultimately banned from Lebanon, when the director refused to omit them from the final version. As Chahine (2013) recounts in her thesis, both members of Kitaeb and the SSNP may have launched complaints against the film; given both parties' political leverage in Lebanon, the film was banned. This seems to indicate both the subversiveness of the film, and simultaneously the limits to subversion given the censorship restrictions in Lebanon.

In contrast to “Sleepless Nights,” and *Chou Sar?* the film *In Spite of War* does not directly confront people in positions of authority; rather, it places contradicting viewpoints held by average people in conflict with one another. The director includes montages of interviews with people from varying sects and political persuasions about their knowledge of the war, and stages scenes where subjects of opposing viewpoints debate different aspects of the war. “What happened on April 15, 1975?” One interviewee recalls: a group of Christians fired on a bus, and the war began. Who was on the bus? Either Palestinians or Muslims, says one. The film cuts to another respondent who says – it was Syrians on the bus. Yet another, shown in the interior of a destroyed building, says simply “Some events

led to war.... We had nothing to do with it.” None of the respondents appear to have any real sense of exactly what happened that led to the war, much less the underlying causes (Fig. 14).



Figure 14. *In Spite of War*

In other scenes, Sfeir puts two people of differing views in the same frame to debate various aspects of the war. In an early scene, she interviews two men who sit together at an outdoor café about the bus massacre. One man says his friend was driving the bus that the Kitaeb fired on; his friend swears there were no weapons on the bus. The man sitting next to him contests this: if there were no weapons on the bus, he asks, then how were members of the Phalange¹¹ killed? The man has no counter-argument— he says “Pardon me, I’m not into politics” and the scene cuts to various news footage of the battle scenes from the war. We the viewers are clued in: even in a situation where there is – ostensibly – a simple

¹¹ Josephe Abou Assi and Antoine Hussein were two Phalangist militants who were killed the day the war broke out, in an event called either the ‘Ain el-Rammaneh incident’ or the bus massacre.

answer (were their weapons on the bus or not?) the narrative is politicized (Fig. 17). *In Spite of War* demonstrates an effort to literally force conversations to happen – people from opposing sides must come into contact and debate – however, the film, while starting the conversation, also shows limitations to dialogue.



Figure 17. *In Spite of War*

In later scenes, members of opposing sects debate the sectarian confessional nature of Lebanese society, the law that there must be a Christian president, and the legacy of Bachir Gemayel. In one scene, Sfeir asks a respondent “What did Christians represent to you?” He responds in a circumspect manner: “They’re ordinary people, but from a different confession, fighting against me.” Sfeir, having already established her own Maronite identity, prods “They’re the enemy then.” The man admits, “Yes, they’re the enemy, for sure.” These conversations – which go back and forth from Muslim and Christian perspectives are somewhat unsophisticated– they are short snippets from only a small selection of voices that provide a sampling of the spectrum of political opinions. However they reflect the very superficial understanding that many people have of the war. When asked whether they would go to war if fighting broke out again, the respondents say things

like “It depends” or “With the government” – the muddiness of their responses suggests that war could, in fact, break out again.

Like *In Spite of War*, Zaccak’s film, *A Lesson in History* cuts between various sectarian perspectives, showcasing the wide range of opinion and ultimately predicting that further violence seems inevitable. Unlike *In Spite of War* people of opposing viewpoints never come into contact with one another directly, instead, the editing is what places them in conversation. Seemingly straightforward questions such as “Who is the friend of enemy of Lebanon” prompts one boy to answer “Lebanon has no friends,” while other children name the United States and France, and still others name Iran and Syria, or Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Such a diverse array of viewpoints will surprise no one familiar with Lebanese politics; still, it is unusual to see all these views gathered in one place and expressed with such fearlessness and guilelessness.

The film forces viewers to ask how people living in such close proximity could have such wildly varying views about history and Lebanese identity. “All for which country?” asks a banner emblazoned with the Lebanese flag in one scene – a play on the national anthem “All of us for the country.” The question seems to loom in the background throughout the film (Fig. 15).



Figure 15. A Lesson in History

In one of the final scenes of the film, montages of children playing in school are over-layed with soundtracks from battle scenes; the director foresees a future in which these children break out into war once again. In the end, future fighting seems inevitable.

In conclusion, directors use three tools to confront various ideologies related to the civil war. 1) Direct confrontation of participants in war crimes, often with the camera lingering in moments of silence, as in *Sleepless Nights*, *Chou Sar?* 2) Montage of conflicting narratives, as in *In Spite of War* and *A Lesson in History* and 3) Confrontation between individuals, as in *Sleepless Nights* and “In Spite of War.”

III. How space and place contains memory

Places –the site of a battle, or of a massacre -- play an important role in each of the films – at times the subjects and director appear to respond to places in Beirut and in greater Lebanon as though it were another character in the film. In particular, two of the films, *Sleepless Nights* and *Chou Sar?* are framed as a search for place that implies a search for memory, and by extension, identity. In *In Spite of War* and *A Lesson in History*, characters reflect on the space of Downtown Beirut, and the erasure of memory there.

In *Sleepless Nights*, the film’s protagonist lives in search of her son, the Communist fighter who went missing during the war. Perhaps it is the absence of any bones or knowledge of grave that has caused her to sculpt bust and pictures of her son, ad infinitum. At the Faculty of Sciences Saïidi tells Raheb that she heard that Maher was taken by the Lebanese Forces to a building. She looks out at a nearby building. “Is this where Maher is

still detained?” she asks. Maher may have disappeared many years ago, but to Saiidi, he may be alive, detained – somewhere in Beirut. Towards the end of the film, Raheb contacts an ex-fighter in the Lebanese Forces who fought in the battle and claims to know the location where all the bodies were laid. The fighter guides Raheb through the Faculty of Sciences campus; his voice is heard (though his face doesn’t appear on camera). They navigate the space – now a modern-looking campus with no sign of battle remaining. In the closing scene, the director guides Saiidi to a site that may be the place where her son was buried. Saiidi stops at the spot and walks away. Finding this ground seems to provide an element of closure – albeit somewhat limited.

In a similar vein, *Chou Sar?* is structured around De Gaulle Eid’s return to Lebanon, and, eventually, to the family’s village of Edbel, which they were driven from during the war. The film’s climax comes when Eid returns to his family’s home, both to visit the house and to confront the killers, as a sort of grim pilgrimage. He touches the graves of his parents and weeps – thus far, we have seen no pictures of the family members, thus, this is the first time the deceased have “appeared” on screen. Back in his family’s home, he breaks down weeping – however upset he may appear elsewhere in the film, nowhere is it more evident than in this spot.

Like *Sleepless Nights* and *Chou Sar?* the film *In Spite of War* also connects space with memory and identity, in this case, by connecting the destruction of the Downtown Beirut area with the destruction of war memories. From various spots in Downtown Beirut, various respondents comment on the reconstruction of the Downtown area. Once a dirty, bustling, city center, it is now devoid of people. “There is something human about that

ugliness,” says one respondent, speaking from a clean but abandoned side street of Downtown Beirut, referring to the war years. In demolishing and then rebuilding the Downtown area, Solidere (although neither he nor any of the other respondents refer to Solidere by name) “washed out the intestines” of the country. Another woman, sitting at a café on another largely empty side street in the Downtown area says of the area that “a strange sadness” overcomes her whenever she is in this spot. “Why have they done all this? Why did they swallow the city up? Why did they erase our memories? Imagine someone without memories. What would become of them?” (Fig. 18). Here, the connection between architecture and memory and identity is made explicit. Sfeir’s camera then cuts to different shots of ruined interiors of buildings – as if her camera itself becomes an effort to preserve the memories of the war. In a subsequent scene director Eliane Raheb complains about efforts to put up a “false façade” in Lebanon.



Figure 18. In Spite of War

Finally, in *A Lesson in History* director Hady Zaccak is pictured in an office in the middle of downtown Beirut – with a window overlooking the area that was once close to the Green Line, dividing East and West. We see various landmarks of downtown Beirut through the windows. Since the war's end, this area has famously been demolished and rebuilt. Zaccak's presence here – with the books, seems to represent a quest to find memory in a space where memories have been destroyed.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

In this analysis I investigated a selection of four documentary films about the Lebanon's civil war to study the films reflexivity. In this aspect I focused primarily on how the director is represented within their own work. Two of the films, *In Spite of War* and *Chou Sar?* were personal, dwelling upon the director's own relationship with the war as a starting point for further reflection, while two of the films, *A Lesson in History* and *Sleepless Nights* featured an explicit commentary on the act of mediation itself. Tone varied from film to film; while *Chou Sar?* was mostly bitter and somber, both *Sleepless Nights* and *In Spite of War* were ironic and at times playful. The tone of *A Lesson in History* was somewhat detached. Second, I looked at how this reflexivity extended to political reflexivity, and what reflexive techniques directors used to contest ideological viewpoints or denial of history in their own work. I determined that directors 1) direct confrontation of people in power, with lingering on silence to demonstrate guilt as in *Chou Sar?* and 2) on-screen confrontation between individuals about matters of history, and 3) montage showing the existence of a wide variety of viewpoints, as in *In Spite of War* and *Sleepless Nights*. Finally, I looked at how space, and the search for place was linked with the search for memory, and, by extension, identity.

Lebanese documentary films about the civil war do not simply interpret the war, they interpret the mediation of the war. Overall, the films reveal the constructed nature of their own work, and by extension, the subjective nature of human experience and our efforts to make sense of it. However pessimistic they may appear, they seem to point an alternate path to violence – one that acknowledges the coexistence of conflicting narratives and differences of opinion, and ultimately, that allows for peace.

This study implies that reflexivity will play an important role in future efforts to write the history of Lebanon's civil war. Whether academics or filmmakers, those who write Lebanon's history must reflect both on their own individual role in the construction of history, as well as on the purpose and inherent structural limitations of the work they are advancing.

Theorists do not agree on a single definition of reflexivity – however, this study implies some overlapping practices: an interest in mediation as a practice, a willingness to draw attention to the author's role in the work (rather than implying some 'voice of God' detached perspective), and finally, a willingness to place dueling perspectives in conversation with one another. While a reflexive film may give more weight to certain voices than others, it should generally convey the difficulty or even the impossibility of determining the precise truth of a given event, as well as some of the barriers to truth.

This study implies that reflexivity can be a particularly useful tool in situations where the "history" of a given event is not widely agreed-upon or debated, as is the case in Lebanon.

In 2015, the American University of Beirut's Secular Club marked the 40th anniversary of the outbreak of Lebanon's Civil war with a timeline called: 40 Years of Conflicting Narratives. Putting together a timeline of the war's events was no small task. Students viewed the 12-hour Al Jazeera documentary on Lebanon's Civil war and read two books on the topic, one by Fawwaz Traboulsi and another by Samir Kassir. In the absence of a single, widely-agreed upon text about the war, the students concluded the best way to frame the discussion was one of dueling narratives.

One possible area for further study is an analysis of the ideological constraints of NGOs and other groups that may provide funding for documentary films in Lebanon. While Haugbolle (2010) repeatedly urges people to take a critical view of memory projects, arguing that they tend to reflect one specific leftist viewpoint, I would contend that theorists must negotiate a balance

between allowing memory works the possibility to transcend typical sectarian boundaries in Lebanon, while still understanding that these works, too, are not free from biases, even biases that reflexive practices are meant to counter.

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