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شعور اكبر من الحب

Shu'our akbar min el hob

A Feeling Greater Than Love

Mary Jirmanus Saba

Producer Mary Jirmanus Saba, Lara Jirmanus. **Production company** Tricontinental Media (Souq el Gharb, Lebanon). **Written and directed by** Mary Jirmanus Saba. **Director of photography** Karam Ghoussein, Mary Jirmanus Saba, Ziad Chahoud. **Editor** Louly Seif. **Sound design** Tareq Rantisi. **Sound** Ziad Fayed.

Colour & black/white. 99 min. Arabic.

Premiere February 14, 2017, Berlinale Forum

A car with a loudspeaker on its roof is driving through southern Lebanon. The old man at the wheel is calling for people to join a demonstration to support their brothers and sisters who've occupied a tobacco company and are now being besieged by the army. His words come from the past, as he's referring to events from 1973 – events that few remember today. Neither the protests made by the tobacco farmers from the south against the large landholders' monopoly nor the strike for better working conditions by workers at a Beirut chocolate factory are anchored in the country's collective memory. All recollection of this social movement was erased by the civil war and society has since been marked by deep sectarian divisions. Looking for both a lost era and strategies able to be applied to current struggles, the filmmaker sets out in search of clues. Starting from the death of a young woman killed during the strike, she asks questions of the activists of the time, archival photos, documentaries from the 1970s, her own person and the possibilities for militant action in film and society. The layering of these diverse materials allows the old man's pleas to reverberate in the present day.

Birgit Kohler

Why did the revolution fail?

'I was wondering if I might die before someone remembered the Gandour strike, and it even occurred to me that I had dreamt it altogether.' On 11th July 2011, I received this e-mail from Nadine, who became one of the film's protagonists. Listening to her speak about the 1972 uprising and the revolution it almost launched, I felt she could be voicing the thoughts of my own generation, our hopes for the potential of the Arab Spring.

For me, the same questions linger about past and present, about Lebanon, the Middle East and beyond: What produced those moments of seeming revolutionary possibility, and why did the revolution fail? Are we repeating the same gestures of popular movement, and do they bring us closer to justice and equality? Today, what do we do with such desire for change and unity?

I began my research in 2010 at a time of relative apathy. Returning to Lebanon after working in Latin America as an organiser of agricultural labourers and as a community television producer, I wondered why our own Arab social movements paled in comparison. Looking to the past, the Gandour and tobacco farmer strike emerged – linked in popular memory as the cusp of revolutionary possibility and social unity in Lebanon in 1972 and 1973, right before the country devolved into civil war. Following the trail of Fatima, a girl whose death at the hands of Lebanese police galvanised the nation, I searched for the answers to my questions.

The film proceeds as if in a dream, through the memories of our main characters, their personal stories of political involvement and disillusionment; an exploration of the past and its traces today in the gestures of everyday life.

The militant cinema of the 1970s

The tradition of Lebanese militant cinema invades the film, as images from the films of Borhane Alawouie, Kamal Kareem, Christian Ghazi, Maroun Baghdadi, and others intertwine with the crisp, present-day scenes. At times they interrupt the film, commanding us to behold their dream of a more just future. Films made to inspire change. As their future becomes our present, they reveal the failures and successes of past movements and mirror our own. At other moments they intervene (...), echoing my protagonists' stories, their gestures of struggle so similar to ours. I interrogate the old films to consider: can a film do more?

Fatima's story further complicates the picture. The photo of a young woman looks back at us with a gentle half-smile, above an obituary. Fatima Khawaja, born in tobacco-producing South Lebanon, who travelled to the capital to make a living in a factory, only to be shot and killed by Lebanese police during a workers' strike. Her gaze is almost too casual. Was she an innocent teenager caught in the crossfire? Or was she the Fatima remembered by her fellow striking workers for fighting back against police? Or perhaps the Fatima who asked questions of her would-be communist comrades, for which they had no answers?

An uncomfortable truth

Fatima is everywhere and nowhere in the film. Mirrored in each woman who contributed anonymously or famously to a dream of social change. She is reflected in every martyr's image in the film and in our collective memory. As we follow her name through the film, we discover an uncomfortable truth. Although martyrs' deaths are glorified as the ultimate sacrifice for their cause, their commemorators define its significance. Fatima's seeming

connection to the tobacco farmers of South Lebanon and the factory workers in Beirut, and the fragility of her identity in the telling and retelling of her story, become a metaphor for this failed revolution.

Today, the revolutionary aspirations of the Middle East veer toward civil war and sectarian violence. The world faces an unprecedented level of inequality, and revolutionary movements seem increasingly feeble. The situation in the Middle East is dangerously reminiscent of Lebanon forty years ago: familiar, yet so seemingly impossible to prevent.

Today, can popular movements bring social justice and equality to the Arab world? How can we avoid the errors of the past? What is the role of cinema?

Mary Jirmanus Saba



Mary Jirmanus Saba was born in Boston, Massachusetts in 1983. She studied Social Studies at Harvard College from 2001 until 2006, and Geography at the University of California, Berkeley, from 2011 until 2015. From 2006 to 2008, she produced the weekly community broadcast television program *Via Comunidad* with the Vientos del Sur media collective in Ibarra, Ecuador. Mary

Jirmanus Saba lives in Beirut, where she works as a filmmaker and geographer. *Shu'our akbar min el hob* is her first full-length film.

Films

2014: *Mulahazat hawl al 'awdeh/Notes for a Return* (14 min.).

2017: *Shu'our akbar min el hob / A Feeling Greater Than Love*.