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The Representation of Youth in Lebanese Cinema

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FILMOVÁ A TELEVIZNÍ FAKULTA

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Reprezentace mládeže v libanonském filmu

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DECLARATION**

—

I hereby declare that I have prepared my Bachelor's Thesis/Master's Thesis, Dissertation independently on the following topic:

The Representation of Youth in Lebanese Cinema

under the expert guidance of my thesis advisor and with the use of the cited literature and sources.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis seeks to analyze the representation of the youth in Lebanese cinema by exploring the sub-themes of different coming-of-age films made in Lebanon from the last decade and explore how they are immediately connected to the country's socio-political situation.

It also explores the evolution of these coming-of-age films and stories with the years, because of the introduction of new shifts in the Lebanese society.

Finally, the thesis aims to paint an overall picture of the Lebanese youth, and analyze the differences it has with the Western young generation.

RESUMÉ

Tato práce se snaží analyzovat zastoupení mládeže v libanonském filmu zkoumáním podtémat různých filmů o dospívání natočených v Libanonu z poslední dekády a zkoumáním toho, jak bezprostředně souvisí se společensko-politickou situací země.

Zkoumá také vývoj těchto dospívajících filmů a příběhů s přibývajícím věkem v důsledku zavedení nových posunů v libanonské společnosti.

Nakonec si práce klade za cíl vykreslit celkový obraz libanonské mládeže a analyzovat rozdíly, které má se západní mladou generací.

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I. Introduction to the Genre

Coming-of-age is a genre that refers to stories about transitions from childhood and innocence into adulthood and maturity. It is a genre that is recurrent in literature, theater, cinema, and other forms of art. Despite the place it takes place, the period, or the culture, a Coming-of-age story is characterized by universal themes connected to the Human experience: the loss of innocence, sexual awakening, decision-making, facing responsibilities, and stepping into adulthood.

¹ **Coming-of-Age** (*noun*): The time when a person becomes an adult.

Even though the themes themselves are universal to all cultures and backgrounds and come from the same Human essence, it is important to say that each coming-of-age story can hold significant differences based on the socio-political or cultural setting of the story; meaning a coming-of-age story based in an extremely conservative family or based in a war-torn country would have a completely different impact than a coming-of-age story based in a very liberal and progressive environment, even though, both stories would most-likely revolve around protagonists sharing similar dilemmas or changes within themselves. While all teenagers and children around the globe must step into adulthood, this adult life could be completely different from story to story; sometimes filled with injustice and heartache, or sometimes filled with plain insignificant reality, and other times, a happy ending. Therefore, while Coming-of-Age is a genre that is so heavily based on universally shared experiences, it could contain its very own unique characteristics depending on every setting.

While the whole world has witnessed timeless international coming-of-age films like *The Graduate* (1967), *The Bicycle Thieves* (1948), *Boyhood* (2014), *The 400 Blows* (1959), and *Carrie* (1976), the following thesis will analyze the specificities of Coming-of-Age films in Lebanese Cinema. A country that has been taken by political instability since its independence, making it a very difficult place for generations to grow.

II. A Brief Introduction to Lebanese Cinema

¹ The Britannica Dictionary

Lebanon experienced its coming-of-age in 1943 when it gained its independence from the French mandate. The years following its independence were known to be Lebanon's only stable years, despite a brief civil war in 1958 caused by religious and political tensions. For a brief period, the country enjoyed a good economy, good infrastructure, and a rise in access to arts and culture through cultural spaces and the production of artistic works. At the time, young Lebanese people still went to the Cinema for divertissement and had a genuine interest in films.

² "From the 1950s to the early 1970s Beirut became the capital of Arab culture, witnessing what could be described as a second *Nahda*. Artists, writers, actors, publishers, journalists, and translators flocked to the city, attracted by its relatively liberal political and social climate."

Since the 1940s, Arab cinema mostly revolved around Egyptian musicals which obsessed the Arab audiences. Egypt had birthed Hollywood-level production studios that hired the biggest talents of the Middle East, from famous filmmakers to actors, and singers.

³ "Like its Hollywood model, the Egyptian studio was essentially a "dream factory" to satisfy the tastes of an ever-increasing population of urban cinemagoers with entertainment that evoked both their fantasies and social aspirations. Most of the films follow what was by then a successful formula: musicals, comedies, and melodramas capitalizing on the popularity of the film stars and affluent setting."

Egyptian cinema was commercially booming during this period in Lebanon and obsessed the Lebanese audiences to later create a collaboration between the countries. Many Egyptian films were brought to be shot in Lebanon, and many co-productions were founded. *My Father Up on The Tree* (1969) directed by Hussein Kamal, is an example of a very popular Egyptian film shot partly in Lebanon, starring the singer Abdel Halim Hafez, one of the biggest idols of the time. This Egyptian success led to a period of scarcity in the independent Lebanese Cinema industry. The Lebanese films that did not revolve around the Egyptian model were rarely created during that period. The first Lebanese feature film to ever compete in Cannes' official selection was *Where*

² Traboulsi, Fawwaz. "From Mandate to Independence (1920–1943)." In *A History of Modern Lebanon*, 88–109. Pluto Press, 2012. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt183p4f5.12>.

³ Gaffney, Jane. "The Egyptian Cinema: Industry and Art in a Changing Society." *Arab Studies Quarterly* 9, no. 1 (1987): 53–75. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41857918>.

To? by Georges Nasser in the late fifties. *Where To?* did not adopt the musical genre and finally showcased dialogues in the Lebanese Arabic dialect. Although the film did not receive commercial success after its release, it still carved a path for the upcoming Lebanese auteur filmmakers.

It wasn't until the 1970s, with the beginning of the civil war, that a wave of auteur filmmakers was born to reflect on the war, its consequences, and its impact. The Lebanese civil war started in 1975 and officially ended in 1990, leaving the country in fifteen years of war, and endless political tensions until nowadays.

One of the most notable directors of the civil war period is Maroun Bagdadi, who made notable films like *Beirut Oh Beirut* (1975) and *Little Wars* (1982). Bagdadi himself was a youngster when he started making films about the war, analyzing Lebanon's unstable political situation and the endless dilemma inside his characters of either leaving or staying.

⁴ "The first film of Bagdadi was marked by his relation to the city, the relation to which would deepen more and more during the War. The young director (who was then twenty-three years old) presented the city in a quasi-documentary way - as if he felt what he was portraying would be set on fire and ruined by the War.

Beirut O Beirut was a decisive point in both the cinematic and political trajectory of Maroun Bagdadi. It was the beginning of a new experience and the end of a past - the past of a family, religious affiliation, and memory."

Jocelyne Saab, Bourhane Alaouieh, Jean Chamoun, Randa Chahal Sabbag, and Heiny Srour are also all renowned Lebanese filmmakers from the same era, and who all also found their inspiration in the terrifying themes of the civil war. With a period that seemed endless for the youth of the time, and a war that nobody truly understood the reasons for its beginnings, filmmakers were overtaken by the themes of never-ending reflection on the war, the dilemmas of leaving or staying to defend one's land, lack of closure and the theme of immigration in their works.

It wasn't until the 1990s and with the end of the civil war, that Lebanon started to witness coming-of-age films in which filmmakers recount their quasi-autobiographical experiences of growing up during the war. The Lebanese cinema industry had finally adopted the Coming-of-Age genre but this time with its own characteristics due to the whole new generation of filmmakers who had

⁴ Waxen, Abdo, نزاو دديع, Ferial J. Ghazoul, and لوز غلايرف. "War as Subject for Cinema / برحلا / تينامنيسد تعيرد." *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*, no. 15 (1995): 229-34.

grown up with the war as their playground. This political instability and violence quickly became the dominating theme in Lebanese cinema, arguably until our modern times.

⁵ “Lebanese cinema has been a domain which trauma of war has received attention. How have Lebanese filmmakers dealt with the wars? How have their works narrated the conflict and, through such narration, contoured the post-war nation?”

⁵ Hourani, Najib. “The Militiaman Icon: Cinema, Memory, and the Lebanese Civil Wars”. CR: *The New Centennial Review*, fall 2008, Vol. 8, No. 2, The Palestine Issue (fall 2008), pp. 287-307

III. Research Method

The following research explores the specificities of the Coming-of-Age genre in Lebanese Cinema by relying on a theoretical analysis of three main recurring themes in coming-of-age films. The three main themes picked are: the loss of innocence, sexual awakening, and stepping into adulthood; these three titles could divide the genre into three general categorized elements that could avoid overlapping with each other and help expand the analysis of the representation of the youth into more detail.

These three themes will specifically be explored in Lebanese Cinema and through the context of the Lebanese socio-political situation. This analysis will expand on the themes themselves to analyze the specificities of the representation of the Lebanese youth on the screen.

The Coming-of-Age Lebanese films and Lebanese Cinema in general, has been connected for years now to the aftermath of the Lebanese war. Therefore, these three themes, divided into the three main chapters of the thesis, will help explore the immediate connection between the representation of the youth, and the representation of the war and the post-war in Lebanese Cinema.

IV. Loss of Innocence and War

As one of the main themes of the Coming-of-Age genre, the loss of innocence is a recurrent theme in most stories that tackle youth. Innocence is naturally a big part of childhood and can be represented by many traits; naivety, purity, lack of knowledge, state of pure happiness and care-free behavior. The moment the protagonist of the story has grown out this state is when the protagonist has experienced their coming-of-age, bringing them closer to adulthood and responsibilities.

The loss of innocence is therefore a normalized step for all humans, almost an obligatory experience to anybody. However, the way that this step comes into somebody's life is what makes the story differ from human to human, from culture to culture, including historical backgrounds and social settings. This is where the normalization of the loss of innocence differs; bringing questions to the surface of what is normalized in certain cultures and what isn't, what could be exoticized in certain cultures and seems exotic to others, and how this normalization can affect certain stereotypes and expectations linked to stories coming from certain cultures.

While American coming-of-age films could be stuck with the stereotypical representation of suburban middle-class family environments and tough or traumatic high school experiences, in Lebanese coming-of-age films, the step of losing one's innocence has mostly introduced itself into the protagonists' stories with the setting of the war or the socio-political conflicts of Lebanon. These conflicts always seem out of the protagonists' control and due to their fate of growing up in an unstable country.

After a long period of attempting to analyze the war through cinema, the period of the early 2000s brought a few notable Lebanese coming-of-age films which gained commercial success within national and international audiences. These films mostly took us back to the period of the civil war but with a modern look. These films also brought us back to the period when most of the notable filmmakers of the modern Lebanese cinema grew up and knew very well.

West Beirut (1998) by Ziad Doueiry is arguably Lebanon's most critically-acclaimed coming-of-age drama to date thanks to its sense of humor, its relatable generational story, and emotional representation of the socio-political conflict of the time. Premiering in 1998 at the prestigious Cannes Film Festival in the Director's Fortnight section, the film has won many international awards and has screened in various international film festivals after its Cannes premiere.

The story revolves around young Tarek and Omar who go around the streets of Beirut, still not aware of the level of seriousness of the war surrounding them. They hang out with a young Christian girl, together looking for adventure within the streets of the city that have become battlefields, ignoring to really see the tragedies happening in front of their eyes. It quickly becomes clear to the audience that many of these little experiences of the protagonists in the film are semi-autobiographical to the author. Doueiry uses very specific slang in some situations, and having the film told without a precise plot, the director takes us on little adventures that seem very personal. The kids explore their sexualities, make new discoveries, to finally, by the end of the film, experience their first step toward adulthood. But it is another type of adulthood; it's understanding that death can be very near, that destruction can be permanent, that war can tear families apart, and that happiness and serenity are a privilege. Unfortunately, this is not going to be the first "innocence loss" set in a Lebanese film that is connected to these themes.

As the story of West Beirut develops, it slowly sinks into our protagonists Tarek, Omar, and Hala that Beirut is not the same anymore and that this war will not be over before two decades. The kids cannot go around playing anymore, the chaotic war-torn streets are not their playground anymore- real danger is now at risk. What Doueiry draws in his film is an accurate representation of the fate of the Lebanese youth of the time, but also helps us predict a portrait of the upcoming generation to come from that era through these kids.

Doueiry commented on the film not being about the war itself, but about growing up within its environment:

⁶ "The war was just a background. The focus of the film is on how you survive in a difficult environment, how you establish friendship, how people behave under extraordinary pressure, and how you can still have fun under extraordinary pressure."

On top of the film being a war coming-of-age story, West Beirut stays a strong proof that the war was going to be implemented emotionally in the generation to come after the 1970s, integrating every part of them, the stories they were about to tell, the films they were about to make, just like Doueiry himself.

⁶ [Ziad Doueiry in his comment on West Beirut.] Khatib, Lina. *Lebanese Cinema: Imagining the Civil War and Beyond* (Tauris World Cinema) 2008: 301-303.

Both Tarek and Omar are little amateur filmmakers as they make short home movies with their super 8mm film camera. They shoot short videos of their surroundings, sometimes even making the most dangerous moments look like happy memories. In fact, this is how the film opens, the kids catch a jet fighter exploding on super 8mm in the sky of Beirut and start clapping and laughing about it. In a way, their amateur teenage filmmaking, recording violent war footage, becomes a raw example of the influence of the war on the youth in Lebanese cinema. If this is what the upcoming generation of Lebanese filmmaker grew up seeing and being inspired to shoot; what will come out of their artwork?

In the film, the kids barely have time to sit and process their traumas, but by the end of the film something has changed: our main protagonist, who has been a clown-y funny teenager this whole time, falls into tears for the time at the sight of his family being torn apart while war footage plays again. However, this time, the reception of this footage is completely different than the first time: our protagonist (along the audience) finally grasps its injustice, and realizes it is not all fun and games anymore.

The ending is a mix of a montage of found footage of the war and homie super 8mm footage of Tarek's best friends and mother, probably the two people he now will never see again and who meant a lot to him. This blend of emotion of violent footage, happy memories, and the unknown future, all come to translate what the eyes of many Lebanese people have normalized: family and home meaning war and goodbyes. This blend of footage becomes a witness of what many films will be about and look like soon after the war.

After West Beirut came a few notable Lebanese coming-of-age films that tackled the theme of growing up during the war. Each one of these films had its own personal and emotional story where the loss of innocence reflected another experience, in a new environment. Those different stories could leave us wondering if the Lebanese war of 1975 till 1990 truly was a unified generational experience of the time, or if even within those circumstances, privilege, culture, and class play a role in the experience of growing up in a war-torn country and differentiate in the representation of the youth on the screen.

The Kite (2003) directed by Randa Chahal Sabag, *In the Battlefields* (2004) by director Danielle Arbid, *Zozo* (2005) by Josef Fares, and *Memory Box* (2021) by Johanna Hadgihomas and Khalil Joreige are all examples of coming-of-age films that recount stories from growing up during the

war. However, each one of these films differ in their storylines and their characters who come from different backgrounds, cultures, and have different living situations.

In the Battlefields follows the friendship of two young women Siham and Lina. Siham is a late teenager, a few years older than Lina, and happens to be Lina's aunt's maid who lives at their family's house; something that is still common in Lebanon and other Arab countries, even nowadays. Immigrant workers are often brought to Lebanon under a sponsor, but their sponsor, who is hiring them to be their maids, usually exploits them by taking away their passports and forcing them to work 24/7 at their house. These workers are most of the time young women (even teenagers) who have come to a different country having completely different expectations and relying completely on their sponsors. Siham is not an immigrant worker in the film, however. She is played by a Lebanese actress, Rawya El Chab, as a Lebanese character. But if you happen to be familiar with life in Lebanon, the character of Siham would quickly symbolize all the young female immigrant workers you would see in between Lebanese families. Danielle Arbid stays away from portraying another nationality in Siham, but she does portray the difference in social class and the hierarchy that is present within the family she works for. This is the first harsh reality of the Lebanese society and a forgotten migrant youth portrayed by Danielle Arbid in this film, who decided to stay away from unrealistic representations of a perfect happy lifestyle pre-war destroyed by unfortunate circumstances, unlike in *West Beirut*.

Lina is probably the only one in her family who is nice to Siham, either it being because she is still a kid who doesn't know what classism is, or it's because she identifies with Siham and feels as trapped as her in her suffocating household. Or it could be that both teenagers have found fun and entertainment by hanging out with each other while being trapped amid the battlefields of Beirut. They are both young and innocent with a clear desire for exploration, and both seem not to focus so much on the war surrounding them, unlike the "grown-ups" in the film, who seem to always be on edge because of the war. Arbid sets up this family as a depressed, unfair environment, that doesn't feel safe just like the war on its outsides. Instead of having her protagonist grow up in a loving family torn apart because of the war, Lina, the main character is in a toxic tyrannic household she cannot wait to flee from. Lina witnesses what freedom can look like through her best friend's love for rebellion and free spirit.

In the Battlefields does share thematic similarities with *West Beirut* in terms of coming-of-age, seeking sexual liberation, growing up in the war, and the need to be free. Both films' authors also openly spoke about how the stories are inspired by their personal experiences growing up in the war period of Lebanon.

⁷ “Danielle Arbid said of *In the Battlefields*: The war is not the focus in the film and was not the motive behind making the film. The story is a personal one that could have occurred without the war. The film could have been set in a country where there is peace. My relationship with the war is that when I was twelve, I thought war was normal and that the whole world was going through war. Only when I grew up did I discover that war was not the norm, I wanted the film to be harsher than the war that surrounds the characters; the society in the film is harsher than the war”.

Just like Ziad Doueiry, Danielle Arbid also uses the war as just a backdrop to her characters and her story. Both filmmakers have grown up in these conditions and grown to normalize it as an environment; you fall in love, make friendships, and have your first sexual experiences all in the middle of this environment, therefore it all becomes an inspiration, especially to filmmakers and artists.

A fifteen-year-long war that nobody knew how and when would end, more than two decades during when that generation of Lebanese filmmakers and artists grew from teenagers to adults, therefore Lebanese coming-of-age films of that era always had to have the war as a backdrop, otherwise they wouldn't be Lebanese, or would simply be translating a false reality.

In *In the Battlefields*, the young twelve-year-old Lina is mostly an observer and is mostly ignored by her family; until she is not anymore. She witnesses her family members commit the most horrible acts from violence to sexual harassment, while being surrounded by the violent environment of the war. Lina becomes surrounded by violence internally and externally, to finally become as violent as her surroundings. Lina ends up not being afraid to fight, even if it's with her own hands. She does not hesitate to get violent with her own father, trying to hit him as hard as she can. Lina also ends up betraying her till-now best and only friend Siham, after promising her that she would help her make her dream come true: escape Lina's family.

Siham does end up escaping, but the friendship of the two young friends is now broken forever; either because of Lina's broken promise or because they have now both become two different beings. Lina, therefore, does live her coming-of-age in this film and loses her innocence to become the broken, violent human that she was meant to be growing up with these conditions. Even though Arbid claims to have the war as only a backdrop in her film, the broken, forever destroyed buildings

⁷ Khatib, Lina. *Lebanese Cinema: Imagining the Civil War and Beyond* (Tauris World Cinema) 2008: 295-299.

in the battlefields of Beirut that the film observes in its final sequence still works as an allegory for the adults that these two friends have become.

⁸ “[In the *Battlefields* ends with] a sequence – that immediately follows Siham’s – of destroyed buildings in Beirut. While the director Danielle Arbid insists that she did not want Beirut to be a ‘character’ in the film, the shots of Beirut at the end function to symbolize the scars left on Lina and Siham by linking the interior drama to an exterior one.”

With the loss of their innocence during the war, young Lebanese to-be-filmmakers learned to make films about wars and death, and about Lebanese people becoming more and more violent to cope with their traumas and unfortunate situations. *Zozo* (2005) another coming-of-age film, about growing up amid the war, shares yet another similar commentary on the youth’s exposure to violence as *In the Battlefields* and *West Beirut*.

Zozo (2005) is a Lebanese-Swedish feature film directed by Josef Fares, inspired by his experience of immigrating to Sweden with his family during the Lebanese war. *Zozo* was Sweden’s official submission to the 78th Academy Awards for Best Foreign Picture in 2006.

Zozo, a young boy living with his happy family in Beirut has a bad feeling about something yet to come while his family follows the TV news about the current tensions in the country. While the beginning of the film could remind of the cinematic world built in *West Beirut* thanks to the happy-still-childish point of view on the life of Beirut and on the funny grown-ups, the use of slang, the pranks between the kids, and the representation of the Lebanese French schools. The development of the story, however, goes in a completely different way. *Zozo* does live in a happy family, unlike Lina in *In The Battlefields*, however, the director does not hesitate to show us the violence that surrounds this kid in all parts of the society even before the war has even started. Parents slap their kids at any given moment, teachers slap the students caught chewing gum in class, and kids slap other kids even if it’s just for fun or as a game. When *Zozo*’s brother knows that he will never see his little brother again because of the war, the last thing he does is slap him and tell him to wait for him hidden in a garbage disposal. His older brother clearly lies to him that he will be back soon. The young *Zozo* is therefore implemented in violence and injustice from the beginning of his growth, leading the film to develop even more the themes of his condition.

⁸ Khatib, Lina. *Lebanese Cinema: Imagining the Civil War and Beyond* (Tauris World Cinema) 2008: 1539-1545.

This violence and injustice have now been represented by both directors Arbid and Fares in their films inspired by their personal experiences. Even though both have taken different tools to portray it, either it being from a female or male point of view, through physical, mental, or sexual violence, the image of a harsh almost savage Lebanese society despite the war is spotted in both films. This representation could simply be a coincidentally similar point of view on similar childhood traumas that both filmmakers have experienced, but it could also be an allegoric commentary from both filmmakers on the society of the time and on the violence of the civil war of that period. This representation could be an analysis of the anger and brutality within humanity that led the Lebanese population to fight brutally for fifteen years, kill each other, and leave the country suffering and with thousands of deaths. When a society has normalized the use of violence in so many private and intimate situations, maybe its population would not hesitate to savagely turn into crimes against each other. Therefore, maybe Arbid and Fares had built in their films their own childhood predictions on a society that welcomed violence so easily to turn into a country ravaged by massacres.

⁹ “In 15 years of fighting, the [Lebanese Civil] war included both large-scale massacres of civilians (the most notable of which was the infamous slaughter of Palestinians in the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps in 1982) and vast numbers of internally displaced persons and refugees.”

Zozo’s coming-of-age, unfortunately, also happens in the most horrific way. Zozo loses both his parents in an explosion right before they were about to leave for the airport to find refuge in Sweden with his grandparents. Zozo sees both his parents dead; the film shows body parts hidden under the rubble, blood, and his own house completely on the ground. Right afterward, Zozo also loses his older brother who never comes back to pick him up, he is assumed dead.

Zozo’s until-now childish and innocent point of view on Beirut has completely differed from the beginning of the film, the young man is left alone in the battlefields of Beirut on the search for the way to the airport so he can finally fly to Sweden. However, this is where the magical realism overtakes the story, either aiming to make the now orphan’s story a bit less painful to the audience or to immerse the spectators into his unique loss of innocence experience.

⁹ Paul, Christopher, Colin P. Clarke, Beth Grill, and Molly Dunigan. “Lebanese Civil War, 1975–1990: Case Outcome: COIN Loss (Mixed, Favoring Insurgents).” In *Paths to Victory: Detailed Insurgency Case Studies*, 383–93. RAND Corporation, 2013. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7249/j.ctt5hhsjk.45>.

The next steps for Zozo to get to the airport are immersed in a magical adventure inside war-torn Beirut. Zozo meets a beautiful young girl with whom he finds safety, and with whom he has an immediate connection. The two kids innocently promise each other that they will protect each other and stay together for a long time. Zozo experiences his first love, and the kids now plan on leaving for Sweden together, something that only seems possible to their innocent eyes, and adults are soon enough here to break this plan. The harsh reality filled with violence is back when the young girl's dad comes to find her and does not hesitate to beat her for running away. Zozo is taken to the airport authorities on his own.

When Zozo finally gets to Sweden, one would think that the violence would be over, and he would feel safe in a country where peace and serenity seem to reign. Children seem to be happy here, there is space for them to play away from bombings and death. However, Zozo this time experiences bullying at his new school and random aggression from strangers on the streets. Fares introduces a new kind of violence in his film; the racism attached to immigrating families and people from different skin colors. Zozo's violent loss of innocence is far from being over because of his condition of being Lebanese and from a war-torn country.

Zozo does not seem to feel at home without the love of his mother and father, and the warmth of an environment that he knows well, instead he experiences racist behaviors towards him in Swedish society. With that transition to a new country, violence still follows him everywhere and slightly pushes him to surrender to it. He gets beaten up by other kids, by random racist people, but Zozo still does not know how to fight back. Even his old, almost disabled grandfather tells Zozo stories about the importance of fighting. Fares' storytelling intention here could be an empowerment to staying strong, having to stand up and fight for one's rights, and not giving up in front of the hardships of life. However, Zozo's transition into a man is incorporated with the pressure on him to be able to fight physically. Even his own grandfather brags to Zozo about being strong enough to beat whomever he wants. Zozo even witnesses his grandfather stand up and fight at any given moment, and to this point, Zozo never fought back for himself, he always accepted his fate, while his grandfather keeps pushing him to fight with his own hands to get back his rights. This becomes a delicate in between; from toxic violence to innocent self-defense, the violence incorporated within the Lebanese education comes back to make the youth's transition into adulthood an even more complicated experience.

Finally, when Zozo slowly starts to integrate into his new home by finally making friends and becoming fluent in Swedish, Zozo must face his bullies again, and this time does not hesitate to fight back. At that moment, he is brought back to the traumatizing war-torn streets of Beirut

overtaken by missiles and bombings and is reunited with his mother for final closure. The finale of Zozo could be interpreted as a happy ending where the kid finally processes his traumas and realizes he was only the victim of his fate. He is now in a safe country, making new friends, still within the family nest. However, with his coming-of-age experience one can't help but wonder if Zozo, and all the Arab youth who endured similar traumatizing experiences, will ever heal, and truly get rid of all the violence that has been for years incorporated in their everyday lives.

V. Sexual Awakening and Violence

Sexual awakening is yet another very important characteristic of the coming-of-age genre. As sexuality forms most humans and develops mostly around the teenage years, it has become an essential part of most films that tackle youth. However, in a country where pre-marital active sexuality is still considered a taboo, where homophobia and transphobia still reign, and where women's sexuality is immediately connected to her family's honor and dictated by the patriarchal society, this theme starts to take another complicated route in Lebanese cinema.

Sexual awakening in Lebanese societies is rarely celebrated, it is rather sometimes repressed and ignored. This is where the representation of the Lebanese youth in cinema also starts to differ from foreign films, where the representation of sexuality and love starts to be an act of revolt and have even heavier socio-political attributes.

The Kite (2003) by Randa Chahal Sabbag is an example of a coming-of-age film that tackles the repression of a young girl's freedom, from ignoring her own desires and sexuality to finally costing the heavy price of the young girl's life. Even though *The Kite* balances drama with light absurdist humor in its storytelling, it is still meant to show some of the extremist repressing cultures present in Lebanon.

Young sixteen-year-old Lamia is forced to marry her cousin Sami, who lives in the occupied Israeli territories of Lebanon. The two families on each different side communicate through megaphones as they are not allowed to cross the borders, but one exception is made for the minor bride on the day of her wedding. Lamia is let cross the Lebanese Israeli borders all alone in her wedding dress and finally arrives at her groom's household, unwillingly.

When united with her now-husband, Lamia openly tells him that she doesn't love him, and stays away from him as much as she can making it clear that she does not want to be him. On the other hand, Lamia has been sharing flirty eye contact with a young military guard on the border, and both seem to be fond of each other. This is where it becomes clear to the audience that Lamia is aware of her own sexuality, knowing who she is and isn't attracted to.

The sad coming-of-age story of Lamia is not only deeply rooted in the conditions of the occupied land of her country but also in the unfair traditions of her family. In this story, it is hard to say that the Lebanese-Israeli war is only a backdrop, especially in the work of a filmmaker who has been so influenced by filming the war and its consequences.

¹⁰ [Translated from French] “I started filming the Lebanese war in 1976, tells us Randa Chahal Sabbag, to be able to find a logic for pain.”

On top of her story being rooted in the heart of the Lebanese-Israeli war, Lamia is also from a Druze family, a religious minority in Lebanon and in the Middle East who have been living for years along with other Muslim and Christian sects. However, the Druze sect is distinct from other Islamic sects by ¹¹having a different set of beliefs, practices, and religious manuscripts (wisdom books). Their culture and lifestyle also differ from other sectorial cultural practices in the same region.

¹² “The structure of the Druze society is dualistic. Within the Druze community, there are two types of dualism: 1. Communal (religious) and 2. Familial (political). The communal consists of the initiated and the uninitiated. The initiated, known as the ‘uqqāl’, or the ‘enlightened, are considered sages and keepers of the religious tradition. Druze theosophy figures into the daily lives of this group as the initiated must follow strict dress, dietary, behavioral, and lifestyle codes. For instance, the ‘uqqāl’ must dress modestly. And strictly adhere to a traditional dress code, speak in low voices, refrain from the use of profanity, and avoid smoking, drinking alcohol, and other practices deemed undesirable.”

It is fair to say, however, that this is a coming-of-age story that could happen in any other conservative family around the world from any religious background. In the case of *The Kite*, the absurdist situation of the divided borders and territories, gives this story more specificity and even more barricades around Lamia, imprisoning her taking the only decision she could take, which is risking her life at the price of freedom.

The film opens with kids playing with kites, an international symbol of childhood and the free innocent spirit of children. While the Lebanese borders are closed by barricades and surrounded by the military, the children’s kites on the other hand fly over them freely, and Lamia and her little

¹⁰ Jasser, Ghaïss. “Les Femmes Dans Les Films Documentaires à La 3ème Biennale Des Cinémas Arabes à Paris.” *Nouvelles Questions Féministes*, vol. 17, no. 3, 1996, pp. 44–45. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40619643>. Accessed 26 June 2023.

¹¹ Timani, Hussam S. “The Druze.” In *Handbook of Islamic Sects and Movements*, edited by Muhammad Afzal Upal and Carole M. Cusack, 724–42. Brill, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1163/j.ctv1v7zbv8.40>.

¹² Timani, Hussam S. “The Druze.” In *Handbook of Islamic Sects and Movements*, edited by Muhammad Afzal Upal and Carole M. Cusack, 724–42. Brill, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1163/j.ctv1v7zbv8.40>.

brother can only stare at them from the ground. The kite is the recurrent allegory in the film for Lamia and who she always wanted to be. It also represents her childhood that was so suddenly taken by her parents wanting to get her married to her cousin, her free spirit that was never let to explore, and her sexual desires that are so repressed because of her fate of being born a woman. The director Randa Chahal-Sabbag plants the symbolism of the kite, firstly through the title of the film, and secondly from the recurrent attachment of Lamia to flying kites with her little brother, creating the final allegory that Lamia herself only wanted to be as free as a kite.

“Stop being afraid, and start being afraid for Lamia!” one cousin screams to Lamia’s parents on her megaphone all the way from the Israeli borders, after Lamia has refused to eat for days and is constantly hiding in the park by herself. When Lamia is finally brought back home, the whole village now sees her differently. She is now seen as a dishonored divorced woman, even at only sixteen years old. “We do not take dishonor money,” a baker tells her when Lamia tries to buy some bread for her family. However, the first thing that Lamia does as soon as she is back home is fly a kite with her little brother, but things seem different now; a nostalgic feeling takes over the scene, either because Lamia has lost her innocent connection with kites, or because the protagonist has already taken a big life-changing decision. Lamia’s little brother makes her promise she will never leave him again, but Lamia is soon to break her promise.

The ending of the film is a surrealistic open ending, suggesting Lamia’s death after she has decided to cross the barricades. Realistically, Lamia would in fact die because the area of the borders would be filled with hidden explosives. Yet Lamia is seen again, finally free, and finally pursuing her desires. The audience is left with the image of the flying kite, traveling freely across the borders, flying all the way to Lamia’s crush on his observation tower, where Lamia finally is suggested to have her first sexual experience. In this visual allegory, the director Randa Chahal-Sabbag merges the symbol of the kite with the fate of her young female protagonist, leaving us with a powerful and heartbreaking coming-of-age story where Lamia has finally stepped into adulthood, but sadly at the cost of her death.

The repression of Lamia and her sexuality is, therefore, a big theme in *The Kite*, and Chahal Sabbag treats this theme with even more subtlety by referring, with humor, to the lack of sexual education in Lebanon, especially in little villages (like Deir Mimes where the story of *The Kite* takes place). Lamia is never taught about her sexuality even if she has been experiencing her own sexual awakening by developing a crush on the military guard, or even though she is about to get married. When having a conversation with her friends, Lamia is seen to have no idea what marriage is about or what being sexually active is. With a humorous touch, Chahal Sabbag portrays the innocent and childish conversations that kids can have about sex, especially in a

society where it is considered taboo. A friend of Lamia claims going through her cousin's schoolbooks from Canada, and claims that she now knows what sex is, yet goes on telling Lamia a completely childish interpretation of what she thinks it could be. These scenes are also recurrent with other little boys on the other side of the border. The boys are unsure what sex is, yet they affirm that Lamia now should be seen in a bad way after her divorce.

The representation of sexual awakening in Lebanese films has always differed from story to story, however, and has always depended on the different backgrounds and environments that the characters come from. The Lebanese society is formed of more than 18 sects which lead to a big diversity in traditions and cultures over its map. Beirut, the capital of Lebanon, holds the most diversity in its territory joining populations from all these different sects. It is also always represented as the city with the most progressiveness and openness, where the Lebanese youth usually move for their studies or for bigger work opportunities. Beirut held a big cultural movement between the 1950s and 1970s leading the city into more progressiveness in comparison with other smaller cities and remote towns. Therefore, the representation of the youth can have a big difference between a character growing up in a small conservative town or in a bigger city like Beirut.

In *West Beirut*, the sexual awakening of the young two male characters is represented with less pressure and less taboo. The kids have access to pornographic magazines and have more freedom and privacy to explore their sexualities. The two kids also end up discovering Oum Walid's brothel, where they find soldiers from all the political parties in the same place searching for the same thing: pleasure. Their visit to the brothel ends up being a step that affects their coming-of-age experience forever. Tarek, the main character, comes from a rather intellectual family, and therefore maybe from an environment that is more accepting of his sexuality and growth into a young man. His friend Omar, on the other hand, is from a religious family; he tells his friend that his sister is now forced to wear to veil (the hijab). In Omar's case, it could be suggested that his freedom is immediately linked to the fact he is male and therefore with less pressure on how he appears in society.

In *In the Battlefields*, on the other hand, the sexual awakening of the two young female characters is immediately linked to the pressure of being a woman and having to portray a good image in Lebanese society. Siham is often shamed by Lina's family because of how comfortable she is with her sexuality and because she is suspected to be sneaking out with men. Lina is also sexualized by men in her family even at only twelve years old. However, both Lina and Siham seem to have

less pressure on their personal lives than the young Lamia in *The Kite*, maybe thanks to their being in the city, rather than in a small village.

While these three coming-of-age films recount approximately the same periods and tackle similar themes of growing up amid a politically unstable and heavily traumatizing environment, *West Beirut*, *In the Battlefields*, and *The Kite*, all represent the different experiences that the youth could go through in Lebanon while stepping into adulthood. All these films were also released around the same period between the late 1990s and the early 2000s. With time and with the access of Lebanese Cinema to international audiences and international funding, some Lebanese directors did not fear developing the theme of sexual awakening even further.

In 2015 the Lebanese director Danielle Arbid came back with another feature film *Parisienne* (or *Peur de Rien*) and took us back in time to the 1990s. This time she took us back to a relatable Lebanese coming-of-age story yet in the heart of Paris, France. *Parisienne* had its World Premiere at the Toronto International Film Festival, and one could argue that its story could be a continuation of *In the Battlefields*. Both films' main characters are named Lina, with similar physical looks and similar family environments. Both Linas, in *Parisienne* and in *In the Battlefields* experience sexual harassment from their uncle in their households. Finally, in *Parisienne*, the grown-up eighteen-year-old Lina has the power to leave and claim her freedom on her own.

When watching both films it is not hard to have a sense that the stories are semi-autobiographical, especially when being familiar with Arbid's filmmaking career. Arbid has been based in France ever since she left Lebanon for Paris for her studies, and most of her films explore the themes of immigration, the need to leave, the emotional struggles of being from a war-torn country, feminism, sexual discoveries, and liberation. Most of her films' protagonists are female, with arguably similar traits and looks; long curly brown hair and deep brown expressive eyes, maybe a nod to the stereotypical Arab Woman's appearance that could be distinctive, especially in some Western countries. Her protagonists also all share similar wants and needs to a certain extent, even though her characters have ranged from many different age groups and have different backstories. These repetitive similarities in her films give the audience hints of how personal these stories might be and could be generated from the same place. It could be that in *Parisienne*, Arbid recounts her semi-autobiographical experience of immigrating to Paris for her studies.

Lina, a young Lebanese woman, has just moved from Lebanon to Paris to start her studies in economics at the university. Lina is staying at her aunt's household in the outskirts of Paris which is supposedly safer for her as she still does not know anybody in Paris. However, the moment

Lina's aunt has left the house for a few days, her husband starts sexually assaulting Lina making her uncomfortable and wanting to leave. Lina quickly realizes that she wants to run away. When Lina finally leaves her aunt's toxic household, her little adventures start along her coming-of-age journey to lead her to become a grown woman.

One of the reigning themes of the coming-of-age story of Lina is her sexual discovery as she goes from being an insecure woman who is constantly harassed by an older man, to a confident and sexually active woman who starts to know what she wants. Even though Lina is portrayed as a young and innocent teenager at the beginning of the film, she is not afraid of saying "no" to her harasser and being firm, she also leans towards leaving and wanting to become independent which could give the audience a hint of her personality-to-be by the end of the film.

On top of being sexualized by an older man in the first act of the film, Lina also says openly to her girlfriend that she is not interested in being intimate with anybody at the moment. This could either be a traumatic reaction to the harassment she has been living, or the internalized Lebanese conservatism that she is still carrying with her. With the big step she takes of leaving and being on her own in the streets of Paris, Lina's new wants and desires also start to surface. Lina is also now not afraid of lying and stealing to protect herself and find refuge for herself, but with every step she takes that brings her closer to her independency and happiness, something wrong takes place. She gets fired, broken up with, and almost deported. These experiences also come hand in hand with her romantic and sexual adventures, which only seem to make her stronger.

¹³ *"Cette jeune fille venue de Beyrouth à Paris pour y suivre des études et, plus sûrement, échapper à une mère hystérique et à un père malade ainsi qu'à un pays instable, est, elle aussi la proie d'un prédateur: le mari de sa tante, chez qui elle vit, en banlieue, et qu'elle doit fuir. Ce film est moins l'histoire d'une innocence perdue que celle d'une fuite et d'un apprentissage, celui du Paris du 1993 avec ses prédateurs innombrables, tous les hommes se ressemblant dans ce schéma terriblement prévisible, répétitif et banal, qui est une des marques du démoniaque.*

[*Translation:* This young woman coming from Beirut to Paris to follow her studies and certainly to flee a hysterical mother and a dying father, but also an unstable country. She is also the prey of a predator: her aunt's husband whom she lives with in the suburbs and whom she must run away from. This film is less the story of the loss of innocence than a runaway story and an apprenticeship

¹³ Millet, Richard. "Trois Femmes." *Revue Des Deux Mondes*, 2017, 183–85. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44436399>.

of 1993 Paris and its many predators. All the men resemble each other in this outline which is expectable, repetitive, and mundane, and which is a representative of the demonic.]”

During a party with her friends, Lina meets an older rich man who is fond of her. Lina seems to already know that he will break her heart, that he is into her only because of her youth and good looks, but she still decides to follow her desires and get into this experience. The way Arbid portrays this experience is like a first sexual experience for Lina. Even though it isn't really her first time, Lina is still unconfident and shy within her body. She keeps turning off the lights while in bed with her lover, but he turns on the lights pushing her to accept and love herself. The relationship between them quickly ends when he has now decided to stop picking up the phone.

Lina's second romantic adventure happens with a young waiter and aspiring musician, who this time, seem to be romantically into her. With him, Lina's self-confidence rises, and while she is still shy to turn on the lights when she is in bed with him, his reaction is more caring; he turns on a few candles but keeps the lights off for her. With this young musician, Lina discovers her new taste for rock music. In addition, this time Lina experiences a little bit more love and care instead of being solely sexualized by older men. However, this new relationship breaks yet another innocence in her, this young man is not only a drug dealer, but he is also a low-key drug addict. When going out of the party, two police officers follow the couple, suspecting them of drug dealing and Lina does not hesitate to hide the drugs in her hair. This is another big moment when Lina's character development becomes obvious, she has become even more courageous than before. Since she has till now not been afraid of stealing and lying to survive, she won't be afraid of protecting her boyfriend by hiding these drugs either. This second romantic adventure ends again quickly with Lina's trip to Lebanon to visit her dying father.

Back in Lebanon, Lina is reunited with her family, which is far from being a happy and harmonious one. Her life there is slow and depressing, her father is dying, and all the family members seem depressed. During an argument, Lina's mother immediately gets hysterical, her brother is always on edge, and her other uncle does not hesitate to get violent with her. Even though Arbid does not show much of life in Lebanon, or Lina's hangouts, she does portray a dysfunctional and aggressive country through the family environment of Lina. The young protagonist cannot wait to flee yet another toxic household and go back to her harsh freedom.

With Lina's third romantic experience, comes the world of revolution and her discovery of leftist politics. To this point, Lina has grown even more into a confident woman who does not mind being in bed with a man while the lights are on. As she discovers that she might get deported from

France for unfair reasons, Lina has finally joined a group of friends where she feels more like herself and accepted the way she is. Even the young man she is going out with seems to care genuinely for her without forcing her to be somebody she is not. The film ends on a freeze frame of Lina smiling genuinely as she hears the judge's ruling that she won't be deported to Lebanon anymore. With this ending, the need of this character becomes clear; she wants to be free and independent away from Lebanon, the country that holds her toxic family and an unstable fate.

While *Parisienne* is a typical coming-of-age film based on the young character's adventures and experiences leading her to adulthood, Lina's character development and personal growth still seem to be directly connected to her sexual awakening which could've been repressed because of her Arab background. There is a clear difference between Lina and her female peers at the beginning of the film, while she seems to be naïve with barely any sexual education or experience in navigating life by herself, her friends are portrayed as more comfortable with their bodies, sexually active and with more independency. Even though Arbid does portray Lebanon as a progressive country through the scene where Lina tells her friend about her new boyfriend at the beach, however, sex still seem to have traumatic connotation to the main character. Lina doesn't seem like she had a sexual life before the start of her runaway story, and her rebellion against patriarchy has led her to become a stronger woman. With every romantic adventure, she discovers something new about life, and something new about her personality.

Lina navigates her romantic and sexual adventures in the middle of Paris, and the struggle of her life still seems to differ from most of the people surrounding her, especially her French friends. While Lina must struggle with her own womanhood, she also must deal with the pressure of being a young Lebanese immigrant on top of being a fugitive from her own household. She says she is not interested in politics, but her fate of being an Arab in France would only lead her to become more politically aware. She attends a trial with other immigrants, all coming from different countries and backgrounds, all wanting to be in France for different reasons, and while Lina escapes her fate of being deported, some are still taken back to their country's borders. Somehow Lina seems to belong way more in this trial than she does within her group of friends. She is going through exactly what these people are going through, while her European friends live a very normal life of studying, working, partying, and drinking. While Lina still tries to do all these normal teenage things with her friends, her Lebanese identity always comes knocking with issues that are out of her control: her visas, her working status and her having no refuge away from home.

Parisienne closes on the endless smile of Lina when receiving the news that she could stay in France, and that ending evokes the repetitive dilemma that this Lebanese character is going

through. While all the good, the bad and the ugly of France unfolded throughout her journey, she still does not feel good about going back to Lebanon to sadness and instability. However, her presence at this trial is proof that Lina might never feel at home neither in France nor in Lebanon, a fate that many of the Lebanese youth have been forced to accept. This coming-of-age story of Lina becomes a solidification of the eternal non-belonging that most immigrants feel, and unfortunately, Lina's identity is what makes this Lebanese coming-of-age story a special one to be seen on the screen. Her sexual awakening is portrayed with more freedom than a standard Lebanese film, as the film is mostly a French production, however around the same period as *Parisiennne* was released, Lebanon started witnessing a bit more progressiveness when it comes to intimacy and sexual themes in its films.

In 2017 Mazen Khaled's queer feature film *Martyr* was released and premiered at the 74th Venice International Film Festival in the Biennale College Cinema section. Lebanon is not known for its queer films because of its still ongoing criminalization of homophobia; however, Lebanon could still be considered one of the most "queer-friendly" countries in the Middle East. Lebanese censorship on the other hand does not allow the screening of films without pre-approval, making queer films or films with sexual content way less accessible to Lebanese audiences.

¹⁴ "Censorship is a significant problem in the Middle East. Nearly all Arab Middle Eastern countries employ government censors. Censorship is often aimed at stopping the publication or distribution of content deemed politically, morally, or religiously sensitive or that runs counter to regime interest".

Martyr did contain frontal nudity in its visuals, however these scenes had to be cut in the MENA released version. The story on the other hand, remained faithful to the director's initial intentions and portrayed the repressed homoerotic tensions present within the young Lebanese men. The young Hassan lives a lazy, almost empty, and depressing routine in the heart of Beirut. He stills lives with his parents, with who he barely has privacy and who constantly shame him for being jobless. Hassan's most happy moment is when he is united with his male friends on the rocky shore of the sea in the Beirut, and with who he jumps in the sea without hesitation. Underwater, Hassan is alone with his thoughts and his desires, and the film intercuts with experimental video

¹⁴ Schwartz, Lowell H., Todd C. Helmus, Dalia Dassa Kaye, and Nadia Oweidat. "Barriers to the Distribution of Media Products in the Middle East." In *Barriers to the Broad Dissemination of Creative Works in the Arab World*, 1st ed., 3–16. RAND Corporation, 2009. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7249/mg879osd.9>.

art style scenes of him dancing with his friend sensually on a dark stage. While the film never holds queer intimate scenes, Khaled plays with the realistic homoeroticism present within these kinds of Lebanese male groups; the eye contact, the subtle touches, the motorcycle rides with each other. What is told out loud in this film is constantly different than what is connotated; Hassan and his friends speak about having girlfriends or being attracted to women, yet there is an underlying tension and jealousy when that is brought up, between him and his best friend.

Hassan jumps from the rocks, and the best friend he seems to have connection with promises him that he will catch him in case something happens. The two young men get made fun of as queers when they promise each other that, and unfortunately Hassan hits his head at his jump and sinks deep in the sea. This death could be translated and analyzed in many ways, both in its symbolism and its use in the storytelling. Khaled balances in his film between experimental emotionally evoking scenes and quasi-documentary moments that leave the audience the freedom to give their own personal concrete meanings to the story.

Hassan's death happens in the sea, and until now it had been represented as the place the protagonist feels the most accepted and connected with his true self, his death could be a let go, or an acceptance of his queerness and maybe, a celebration of it. Maybe Hassan surrendered on purpose to his true self which he becomes under the water of the Lebanese sea and realized that he could never be that person freely above the waters.

This death could also be the queer director's personal commentary on the Lebanese and Arab societies, sometimes leading their queer youth to death because of their eternal alienation. So many young Arab queer people commit suicide just because of their struggle to accept their identity. Sarah Hegazi is only one of many examples; She was a young Egyptian socialist, writer, and queer activist who got arrested in Egypt solely for flying a rainbow flag at a pro-queer Lebanese rock band concert in Cairo. Sarah was imprisoned and tortured, then was granted asylum in Canada before she took away her life because of the post-traumatic stress disorder she developed from that experience.

In *Martyr*, the young Hassan's death could also be a suicide in disguise after the young protagonist has understood that he is in love with his best friend. The use of the term "martyr" in the title could be a nod to all the queer people that have been lost because of a homophobic society. The death of Hassan as a martyr could be a way to celebrate them and never forget their fight and the reason for their death.

The term martyr, however, still has an immediate connection to the Lebanese war and the country's society. While having passed through fifteen years of war, Lebanon witnessed a big number of deaths.

¹⁵ "The Lebanese Civil War resulted in an estimated 120,000 fatalities and the exodus of almost one million people from Lebanon."

A lot of the young men of the war generation were scouted by political parties to hold guns and fight against their enemies, that alone led to a big number of deaths among the Lebanese youth of that period.

¹⁶ "High wartime unemployment acted as an incentive for young men to join the militias. It was quite common for militia's personnel to earn an amount exceeding their regular salary from side activities, most of which were illegal."

Most of the young fighting men dead during the war were referred to as martyrs, and had their funerals turned into memorial events within their communities. However, the term "martyr" expanded in the Lebanese society by being used not only concerning the soldiers lost while fighting for their militias, but also on any other young person dead without any justification. This is what the director Khaled refers to in his film where he films a scene of Hassan's mother (played by Carole Abboud) loudly claiming that her son has died as a Lebanese martyr. Even though Hassan was never portrayed as an activist, not involved in any political movements nor specifically religious, his mother still uses this culturally and politically heavy term to justify the death of her son. This is maybe Khaled's way to express their point of view on a country that is so politically torn, it lurks in denial and in a need to always portray strong masculinity.

While the main protagonist was painfully living a life of self-loathing, unacceptance, unemployment, and with a lack of opportunities, his family still avoids accepting his pointless death. The reaction of his family could symbolize the whole Lebanese society, only giving meaning to war experiences and still celebrating it, while human rights, queer rights, women's rights, safety, and stability are still somehow ignored.

¹⁵ Byman, Daniel, and Kenneth Michael Pollack. "Things Fall Apart: Containing the Spillover from an Iraqi Civil War." p. 139

¹⁶ MAKDISI, SAMIR, and RICHARD SADAQA. "The Lebanese Civil War, 1975–90." Edited by Paul Collier and Nicholas Sambanis. *UNDERSTANDING CIVIL WAR: Evidence and Analysis*. World Bank, 2005. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep02484.7>.

Martyr deals with the modern aftermath of the civil war in Lebanon, and it is clear that the film could not be considered a classic coming-of-age film when it comes to comparing it with the standard themes apparent in other coming-of-age films; the characters are young adults, in the beginning of their twenties instead of being teenagers. The film is about death and mourning, rather than about self-discovery or stepping into adulthood, and finally, the main character's journey quickly comes to end in the film, and the audience is only left with the aftermath of his death. However, the film still portrays a big chapter of the Lebanese youth; their day-to-day life, their struggles, their dilemmas, and does explore the sexual discovery theme.

While Lebanon was still experiencing a scarcity in coming-of-age films that are far away from recounting the war or memories of the war between the 1970's and 1990, the release of *Martyr* in 2017 changed that by focusing on the portrayal of the modern times' Lebanese youth. However, with its title being so connected to a war term, and with the themes of death and religion so dominating in its storytelling, did Lebanese cinema tackling stories about the youth truly get to grow out of its war and violence dominated themes?

In 2017 alongside *Martyr* that same year, another Lebanese coming-of-age film was released in cinemas: *One of These Days* by Nadim Tabet. With a group of five protagonists ranging between the ages of seventeen to twenty-two, the film follows the young group's sexual and love experiences in Beirut. A few years after the end of the Lebanese war but still amid political instability, the film has an indie feel to it while it tries to portray the life of these millennials in Beirut.

¹⁷ A 24-hour youth chronicle in Beirut. They are in their early twenties, they are smart, beautiful, and hungry for life. Beirut is experiencing yet another terrorist attack with street demonstrations and police checkpoints. For this generation who has known war since birth, it's sadly just one of these days. They still have the music, their youth, and their dreams. They play the game of seduction, fall in and out of love and kill the boredom.

Shot in an almost similar feel to *Skins*, the 2007 British coming-of-age TV series, *One of These Days* tackles the coming-of-age experiences of young Maya, Tarek, Yasmina, and Rami. With a backdrop of an unstable Beirut, a city on the edge of falling apart any second, these characters are mostly interested in experimenting with their love lives, their sexualities, doing drugs, and going out. Tabet tries to portray for the first time in this film, characters whose storylines are truly

¹⁷ *One of These Days* (2017) by Nadim Tabet – official synopsis

less connected to the socio-political backdrop of the country; a portrayal of the Lebanese post-war generation who wanted to cancel the memory of a violent past and live a youth similar to the one showcased in films and media of the west.

¹⁸ “The complex and ambivalent position of the Lebanese youth is caught between the contradictory forces of collective remembrance and social forgetting.”

While directors like Ziad Doueiry and Danielle Arbid did mention having their films recount stories about growing up yet having the war only as a backdrop, their characters were simply impossible to detach from that backdrop and their coming-of-age had to be affected by the war.

In *One of These Days*, we are in post-war times, however, it is clear in the film that Beirut is still going through many traumatizing events: there are terrorist attacks, young people involved with demonstrations, and a general “unsafe” environment that the parents of the kids keep talking to them about. In this film, Tabet shows how these young Lebanese people who are not interested in the socio-political environment they are in, but also how this environment is still affecting their lives indirectly, and how hard it is for them to feel like they belong in it. The young Maya (interpreted by Manal Issa) is seen multiple times in the film trying hard to understand politics and to have an opinion. In a quirky touch, Tabet portrays Maya repeating the political opinions of her brother to her friends to be able to seem more politically aware. Yasmine (interpreted by Yumna Marwan) is on the other hand an ex-drug addict who is running away from rehab and who wants to reconnect with her friends.

Maya and Yasmina are two complete opposites, Maya is naïve and innocent, while Yasmine is experienced and witty. It could be that Tabet tries to portray the two opposites of the young Lebanese generation of the time through his two female protagonists: the tired, on the verge of giving up people, and the naïve ones, still full of hope.

With the supporting cast, Tabet also tries to portray more “rock n’ roll” through his characters: from a rock band front signer to a quiet depressed gothic girl, these characters seem taken from a British TV series more than from the Lebanese society. They sing in English, ignore all the checkpoints, the protests, and the rise of the Syrian refugees all around them, taken only by the want to seduce each other, to kill boredom in any way possible, and to explore their sexualities. Tabet tries to portray the generation’s carelessness, which is a true coming-of-age attribute. He

¹⁸ Larkin, Craig. “BEYOND THE WAR? THE LEBANESE POSTMEMORY EXPERIENCE.” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 42, no. 4 (2010): 615–35. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41308712>.

portrays them as disconnected from the toxic environment that surrounds them, stuck in their own teenage Western movie-like experiences.

¹⁹ A few words from Nadim Tabet, the screenwriter, and director, on the intention behind writing and directing his film *One of These Days* (2017):

“In the story of Rami, Yasmina, Maya, and Tarek, these two axes are embodied in their thirst for experiences and the streets of Beirut, where we come across protesters, Syrian refugees, and army checkpoints, where we hear radio broadcasts about past and future disasters on a daily basis. Even if they manage to ignore it for a while, the atmosphere of this besieged city eventually intrudes into their field of vision and their context. It is this disconnection between the world of the youth and the reality of the country that interests me and represents the thread of the film’s narrative.

This “ordinary” day, where our four young protagonists engage in games of love and seduction, will also witness the gradual reduction of their living environment, leaving them with barely any room for carelessness. It is as if in Lebanon, in order to become an adult one has to be contaminated by the reality of the country and the region. ”

Tabet’s intention is arguably very clear in the film with the way he works with his actors, the dialogues, and the mise-en-scene. However, critically, it is a question of whether *One of These Days* only portrays a niche of privileged middle-class teenagers who have the luxury to ignore all the toxicity around them, or if it’s truly the portrayal of a whole post-war generation. Many youngsters of this same generation do suffer from very little information about their country’s past, sometimes because of the lack of information given in their history books, the taboos associated with talking about the war, and their family’s attempts at the erasure of these traumatic events.

²⁰ “The elusive search for a consensual history textbook in Lebanese schools dates back to 1946, the last date of a unified history curriculum. Despite Tai’f promises and educational committee proposals, there remains no official agreed-upon text but rather a diverse array of history books, which according to one Lebanese scholar, Antoine Messara, reach the

¹⁹ *A Few Words From the Director* for Onassis Foundation

²⁰ Larkin, Craig. “BEYOND THE WAR? THE LEBANESE POSTMEMORY EXPERIENCE.” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 42, no. 4 (2010): 615–35. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41308712>.

“end of history in 1943” and ten to valorize Lebanese coexistence, claiming Lebanon as a “tolerant society whose members love one another and associate as brothers”.

However not all Lebanese youngsters react to this collective amnesia in the same way, and not all people of that generation had the luxury to be so disconnected from their environments as the kids in *One of These Days*. Maybe another way that Tabet could've portrayed a more unified picture of the post-war Lebanese generation, was to have characters from different backgrounds, living their post-war denial in different ways, instead of having a monotonous display of characters with the same core of dilemmas and social status. By portraying only one part of the youth of Lebanese society, unfortunately, Tabet's film comes across as an erasure of the Lebanese youth belonging to the low-class or the working class, or any other Lebanese troubled youth because of an incapable government.

One of These Days had its world premiere at the International Rome Film Festival, which in comparison with other Lebanese films that had their world premiere in A-list film festivals, could be a less successful critics' reception. Especially while the same production company's films have toured film festivals like Cannes, Venice, Locarno, Toronto, and Berlinale. It is worth analyzing this low interest from film festivals in this coming-of-age film. Maybe *One of These Days* did not deliver the standardized expectations of the West on Lebanese films; maybe it lacked showing the conservative societies present in the Arab world, the marginalized communities, the war, and its violent effects. It also might have lacked stereotypical representations of the Arab world and did not show enough of the Islamic culture that is so often exoticized in films; no veiled women, no praying scenes, no Mosque calling of prays. Instead, Tabet showed the lives of the progressive kids of a mixed Beirut, partying, doing drugs, and having sex. The stories of the protagonists of *One of These Days* could have been too similar to European and American stories, and maybe that was its biggest disadvantage among international film audiences.

In comparison to *The Kite*, *Parisienne*, and *Martyr*, *One of These Days* tackles Lebanese youth's sexuality through a more liberated and progressive lens, showing a side of Lebanon that most Western audiences are not aware of. However, these three films from Randa Chahal Sabbah, Danielle Arbid, and Mazen Khaled still shed light on stories that are common within many communities in Lebanon and that deserve to be told. Whether it is decriminalized underage marriage in *The Kite*, sexual harassment, and female sexual discovery in *Parisienne*, and finally queerness and homophobia in *Martyr*, all these stories remain a part of the real side of Lebanese society and cannot be ignored.

However, since Lebanon is a very diverse country with eighteen different religious sects, refugees, and migrant workers, it wouldn't be a surprise that so many different coming-of-age films would emerge tackling many different personal experiences about growing up. With a society that could be so liberal yet conservative, unsafe yet beautiful, violent yet colloquial, the youth can only grow to be a confused one, with a representation in cinema that is so diverse in comparison to other societies.

VI. Stepping Into Adulthood and Leaving the Land

The story of Arab migration has been a topic of many social analyses since the rise of political instability in the region. Countries like Brazil, the United States, and other countries in South America witnessed a big number of Lebanese immigrants ever since the 1880s.

²¹ “From the 1880s till the 1920s, an increasing number of Syrians mostly Christians from Mount Lebanon reached Brazil and the United States, primarily propelled by economic and demographic pressures in their homeland, as well as by stories of economic success achieved by returning emigrants.”

Later, other countries also started hosting the Lebanese diaspora like France, Canada, and Australia.²² While the Lebanese population is estimated to be between 8 and 18 million, the vast majority of that estimation is constituted of the Lebanese diaspora, which is 4 to 14 million. Only 4.7 million of the Lebanese population are estimated to be living in Lebanon itself. Nowadays, a big number of Lebanese diasporas can be found all over South America, North America, Australia, Europe, West Africa, and the Gulf countries.

Within a population that has been so massively influenced by displacement and having to integrate somewhere new, it is not a surprise that the Lebanese diaspora’s identity had sometimes to be rethought, recreated, or very much held on to.

²³ “The term diaspora has come into vogue in the last decade because it captures the ambiguities of contemporary social belonging. Diaspora refers to a form of social relations produced by displacement from home. It implies a very conventional anthropological perspective on social life, the persistence of tradition (identity) despite its displacement from the place of origin. It fits within the old dichotomy between tradition and modernity in which the anticipated loss of tradition is resisted. Yet the current usage of the term includes not only the persistence of tradition (identity) as a product of collective resistance to cultural

²¹ Truzzi, Oswaldo M. S. “The Right Place at the Right Time: Syrians and Lebanese in Brazil and the United States, a Comparative Approach.” *Journal of American Ethnic History* 16, no. 2 (1997): 3–34. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27502161>.

²² ["Lebanon 2017 International Religious Freedom Report"](#). *United States Department of State*.

²³ Humphrey, Michael. “LEBANESE IDENTITIES: BETWEEN CITIES, NATIONS AND TRANS-NATIONS.” *Arab Studies Quarterly* 26, no. 1 (2004): 31–50. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41858471>.

loss but also qualified acceptance by the host society. Diaspora identity is constituted against the national society out of a sense of loss and conditional belonging.”

With films like *Parisienne* and *Zozo* by Danielle Arbid and Josef Fares, which have been already analyzed in the previous chapters, the theme of leaving one’s land and having to reintegrate has been widely explored.

The exploration of these themes in films did not only come from the harsh reality of most of the Lebanese families who had to flee their countries but also from the common journey that most of the Lebanese youth take. While it is very common for most young students to leave Lebanon for study opportunities abroad, this is also a very common route for Lebanese filmmakers. Many established directors had left Lebanon and came back to Lebanon to produce their films in their homeland.

Even today, many members of the Lebanese film industry are based in between Lebanon and another Western country, and work in between the two. Danielle Arbid, the director of *Parisienne* and *In the Battlefields*, for example, pursued her cinema studies in France and came back to Lebanon frequently to make films. Ziad Doueiry, the director of *West Beirut* had been living and working in the United States for years as a filmmaker before coming back to Lebanon to direct *West Beirut* and *The Insult*. The director of *Zozo*, Josef Fares, had emigrated to Sweden at a young age but also came back to Lebanon to make this film based on his childhood. Randa Chahal Sabbag, the director of *The Kite*, had also pursued her cinema studies in Paris and had been based between France and Beirut during her filmmaking career before her death. Mazen Khaled as well pursued a screenwriting program in the United States and had been working there while directing his independent and experimental films on the side. Nadim Tabet, director of *One of These Days* also pursued his studies in France before coming back to Lebanon to direct his first feature film. All these directors, as well as Joanna Hadgithomas and Khalil Joreige whose coming-of-age film will be analyzed in the upcoming texts, have been living in between Lebanon and Western countries and making films in between their two homes. It is therefore not a surprise that the themes of migration, leaving the land, and identity crises would be recurrent in Lebanese films.

Many filmmakers, other than the ones mentioned above, tackled this theme, even before the start of the war. Films like *Where To?* directed by George Nasser in the late fifties was the first Lebanese feature film to ever compete for a Palme d’Or at the Cannes Film Festival. *Where To?* tackles the theme of migration even before the start of the civil war, at that time the Lebanese diaspora was mostly settling in Brazil and other Latin American countries. Nasser’s film explores the need to leave Lebanon to provide for one’s children. It is also a generational representation of

young men needing to step into their fathers' footsteps, which meant leaving the country and providing for their families.

The exploration of this theme stayed until modern-day Lebanese cinema and had an even more powerful presence in Lebanese coming-of-age films. Packing one's bags and leaving for another, still unknown country can be a very tough thing to do for full-grown adults and even harder for the youth. It is a theme that evokes the impossibility of being able to belong in one place, neither comfortable nor safe in one's original home, and neither feeling at home in one's new country. This theme can evoke situations of culture shock, and sometimes experiences of racism and hate. It is also a commentary on the current Lebanese socio-political situation that has somehow kicked many of its citizens away, making their countries an impossible place for them to return to. For the youth, this new settlement can mean new experiences, new languages, and new cultures that they quickly must adapt to and to able to master. With the youth, this could be even more of a challenge because of peer pressure and homesickness.

²⁴ "Today the use of diaspora refers to a sense of exile, the feeling of wanting to return home but being unable to because of exclusion by politics or history. One is made an outcast because of present need or fear, or because generational distance makes it impossible to find one's way back home. But diaspora is not merely understood as banishment or being made an outcast from one's home society but from all society. Its usage moves between the specificity of a historical experience to an existential condition. It is even used as a metaphor for the existential condition of post-modernity to refer to uncertainty, displacement, and fragmented identity."

It is also certain that the Lebanese diaspora has many generational sectors and phases to it, as it could be coming from different parts of the Lebanese community: the pre-war generation, the civil war generation, and the post-war generation. All these communities probably experienced exile in different ways and were affected differently by their current days' politics.

²⁵ "The contemporary use of the term Lebanese diaspora embraces all these different senses of exile. The 'Lebanese diaspora' and its present self-consciousness were brought into existence by the displacement of people by the Lebanese war. In their case, the

²⁴ Humphrey, Michael. "LEBANESE IDENTITIES: BETWEEN CITIES, NATIONS AND TRANS-NATIONS." *Arab Studies Quarterly* 26, no. 1 (2004): 31–50. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41858471>.

²⁵ Humphrey, Michael. "LEBANESE IDENTITIES: BETWEEN CITIES, NATIONS AND TRANS-NATIONS." *Arab Studies Quarterly* 26, no. 1 (2004): 31–50. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41858471>.

diasporic experience is the product of national resettlement in migration. But alongside the 'new' war refugee communities are the 'older' Lebanese communities who experience the diaspora as a nostalgic sense of exile experiencing a loss of culture and loss of social connections with the past. In addition, the diasporic identities of the 'new' and 'old' communities are being shaped by the corrosive effects of globalization which are accelerating the loss of cultural identity not just across generations but within generations."

The Lebanese diaspora is therefore made from different generational experiences, and a coming-of-age film that explores these generational experiences by focusing on the Lebanese youth and the pressure they are faced with is *Memory Box* (2021) by Joanna Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige. *Memory Box* is a Lebanese, French, and Canadian co-production that premiered in the Berlinale International Film Festival in its official selection.

The film's first act takes place in Canada, where a Lebanese single mother Maia (played by the Lebanese actress Rim Turki), lives with her teenage daughter Alex (played by Paloma Vauthier). On Christmas Eve, they receive an unexpected delivery: notebooks, tapes, and photos Maia sent to her best friend Liza, from the 1980s Beirut. Maia refuses to open the box or confront its memories, but Alex secretly begins diving into it. Between fantasy and reality, Alex enters the world of her mother's tumultuous, passionate adolescence during the Lebanese civil war, unlocking mysteries of a hidden past. The audience, along with Alex, experience in the second act of the film a journey back to Lebanon, where young Maia (who is played by actress Manal Issa) lives her romantic and traumatic adventures during the war. This throwback to Maia's past opens a whole dimension of a war generation on the screen.

The two filmmakers Joanna Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige have been known for their artistic and experimental works and their exploration of a war-torn Lebanon. They have also explored similar themes in their previous film *A Perfect Day* where they try to retrace the absence of the disappeared Lebanese people during the Lebanese war through the main character whose mother has declared his father dead after fifteen years of disappearance.

In *Memory Box*, the filmmakers reexplored their own memories from the civil war by using Joreige's photographs from that period and Hadjithomas' own personal journals and tapes. The result is a film that mixes mediums, between digital camera, super8mm styles, photographs, and animation, and a mix of timelines between present modern days in Canada and civil war times in Beirut. The film is also a generational representation of the Lebanese diaspora; three women all

united yet completely different. The grandmother lives with her daughter and granddaughter but misses her home country every day and refuses to speak French. The mother is in denial of her traumatic past and has forced herself to adapt to her new reality. And finally, the daughter, Alex, who feels neither Canadian nor Lebanese, tries to speak Arabic but cannot, and she is so curious to discover where her descent is coming from. What is interesting about *Memory Box* is that not only is it a coming-of-age film of two young women, but it is the coming-of-age story of both a mother and a daughter in two different timelines, who seem so different yet still connected to the same roots.

This coming-of-age mother/daughter story is worth being analyzed from the point of view of both characters to explore and find it out what makes them both so different yet so similar and connected in their own way.

Alex is the same age her mother was when Alex rediscovers her mother's past, however, their lives are completely different. Even though they both seem to share the same essence of their womanhood and characteristics of being young with their stubbornness, the same love for wanting to be surrounded by friends, to explore their love lives and for wanting adventures, the two young women's fate is divided by a lifetime of circumstances that breaks their similar personality traits apart. The character of Alex is portrayed by both the co-directors with a little of judgment on her obvious Canadian privilege.

²⁶ "You'd almost think that Hadjithomas and Joreige constructed the film as a service to contemporary parents dealing with privileged first-world teens complaining about trivial problems such as poor WIFI or revoked car access."

If familiar with the two co-directors' career and personal lives, one would imagine their take on Alex could be possibly inspired by the couple's own kids. Hadjithomas and Joreige are not only a filmmaking couple but also partners who now live in France with their kids. *Memory Box* could be inspired by their personal experience of having to now connect with a new generation that might have a completely different life and culture than theirs.

Alex lives in a perfect, icy, and white world, in one of the most progressive and advanced countries on this planet: Canada. She lives in what seems like a middle-class suburban house, and her life

²⁶ FELPERIN Leslie. "MEMORY BOX REVIEW – FAMILY SECRETS AND LIES FROM LEBANON'S DARKEST DAYS". *The Guardian*. Film Review (2022)

with her mother and grandmother seems to be peaceful. Her only worries seem to be about classic teenage clashes with her mother, yet her father seems to be out of the picture. When Alex dives into the world of the past of her mother, something changes in her. Alex suddenly becomes aware of the heaviness of her mother's youth and starts to reconnect with her Lebanese roots. During a scene where Alex is seated with her friends talking about innocent teenage things, Joreige and Hadjithomas incorporate the sounds of a bombarded Beirut to communicate an interesting juxtaposition. They mix the world of these teenagers, safe and fun for them with the world of the war and violence that they experienced. Alex is now barely interested in her perfect reality anymore; her thoughts are taken by the traumatic past of her mother.

While we see Alex and her mother Maia fight at the beginning of the film, with the development of the story of *Memory Box*, Alex tastes a piece of her mother's youth and the affection they have for one another grows, the experience only brings them closer. By listening to her mother's voice during the civil war, complaining about her parents who are being protective, and young Maia wanting to sneak out, the audience, along with Alex, quickly realizes that the two women are more alike than they both think. Alex rediscovers her mother's lost friendships, her first love, her fights with her parents, and her obsession with her looks that Maia does not identify with anymore in the film's today times. Alex also discovers her mother's love for music and films since a young age, and her poetic side that she seems to repress now.

As the film develops and we get to live Maia's life from the eighties, it also becomes clear that Maia has lived very traumatic experiences, like losing people close to her and places that she lived in. Alex is finally able to see her mother as the human that she is. It could be argued that this is Alex's coming-of-age moment, where she steps out of her child's self and enters adulthood, finally enabling her to see her mother as the human that she is, rather than just the authority figure that is usually either idolized or despised by the child. With the long flashback into Maia's youth, Alex finally understands her mother's behaviors and her traumas, giving meaning to their clashes and to her mother's personality.

Maia's coming-of-age story, on the other hand, is rooted deeply in the civil war and takes us back to yet another youth film taking place in the war. Maia's journey is made from little vignettes that remind us of the spirit of *West Beirut*, or the beginning of *Zozo*; young Maia just wants to go out with her friends, have a lot of fun, explore her sexuality, and party to good music. Joreige and Hadjithomas also portray the denial and the carelessness that most of the Lebanese youth had at that time, listening to eighties music, ignoring the fights and the scares of their parents while dancing and singing from the bottom of their hearts. Maia is seen sneaking out many times to see

the guy she is in love with, however, ends up being in a near-death experience. Maia's stepping into adulthood happens as she also realizes that death is too near and that carelessness is a privilege. Young Maia's spirit does change from the beginning of the film until the end. Her teenage spirit quickly comes to terms when the reality of the war hits.

Maia ends up burying all her memories in a box and sending them to her best friend Liza who, unfortunately, died. In a way, maybe younger Maia was trying to bury the memories of her adolescence with her now-dead best friend, but these memories do end up coming back to the surface, just like this memory box. When Maia is faced with her past, and traumas of her past, she has a hard time accepting them and letting them become a part of her again. It is only through her daughter Alex that Maia is able to accept her harsh childhood and reconnect with what was once part of her.

Alex pushes her mother to fly to Lebanon and reconnect with her past that she decided to leave behind for years. While Maia has been living in Canada for years, comfortable in her nest that she built with her mother and daughter, Maia has been ignoring the city that made her the woman she is today. In a way, it could be said that adult Maia reexperiences a second coming-of-age story, this time as a full-grown adult. With the help of her mother and her daughter, Maia is encouraged to go back to Beirut, to reconnect with the people she lost contact with, and face all her traumas to finally grow out of them. Through this experience, a mother/daughter story comes together beautifully for finally finding a connection and building a relationship that is based on maturity and honesty. However, Hadjithomas and Joreige also use this connection, to build a symbolic connection between three generations that have been experiencing the ripple effects of the war all in their own way. These three generations finally come together, accepting their wounds and their fates, now trying to co-live peacefully for a better future.

Memory Box is, therefore, more than just a coming-of-age film, but way more in the themes that it tackles. The film does portray the Lebanese youth but on two of its sides. The youth of the war, and the youth that came as a result of that war: the second-generation immigrant youth. *Memory Box* takes us on a coming-of-age journey that explores a generational incommunicability that translates into the whole of modern Lebanese society. What has the youth of today become and what is left of the youth of war? How are both of these two generations co-living today, in a world rising with Lebanese diaspora every day?

Another Lebanese film that deals heavily with the theme of immigration is *Capernaum* (2018) by Nadine Labaki. *Capernaum* won the jury prize at the 2018 Cannes International Film Festival and was nominated for Best Foreign Picture at the Oscars. *Capernaum* is far from being a "classic

coming-of-age film”, but as it portrays a kid as the main character, it is hard not to mention it when analyzing the representation of the youth in Lebanese cinema.

The representation of the youth in this film focuses on the unfairness, injustice, and eternal suffering that some societies have in this world, especially in Lebanon; a country that is massively populated by refugees and migrant workers. This film tries to represent, in a cinema-verité style, portraying people playing their real selves in the film, the poverty that is ravaging Beirut and some of its populations.

²⁷ “Over the last seven years, even as most Western countries slammed their doors, Lebanon admitted some 1.5 million refugees fleeing the Syrian war. This influx has transformed Lebanon, pushing an already fractured and fragile society to new limits, and testing the resources of a small country that is already home to generations of Palestinian refugees. These shifts form the backdrop for Labaki’s profoundly unromantic new movie.”

It is centered around Zain, a 12-year-old who lives in the slums of Beirut, and who is sentenced to five years of prison because he has stabbed a man who he calls a “son of a bitch”. The film goes back in time as we live with him what has built up to him stabbing this man. Zain lives with his parents and takes care of at least seven younger siblings of his who make money in various ways for their parents instead of going to school. Zain works as a delivery man, and a low-key drug dealer, and even tries passing for a young Syrian refugee to get access to charity money. When his sister Sahar gets her period, Zain goes to buy her period pads and teaches her how to use them. He tries to hide it from their parents as much as possible, so she doesn’t get married off to an older man. The two siblings plan on running away together before their parents find out that Sahar did in fact get her period. They marry Sahar off in exchange for two chickens. Zain ends up running away on his own, maybe looking for a better life or for a better family nest.

It is hard to say that Zain steps into adulthood in this film. Unfortunately, with the conditions of life he has been enduring, Zain already acts like a grown-up and is exposed to the harsh realities around him. He takes care of his siblings, feeds them with what he knows best, ice and sugar, he hustles his way to protect them. Instead of stepping into adulthood, Zain goes after his basic rights and his basic needs, which are to deserve existing in such a country where many refugees and

²⁷ Qureshi, Bilal. “Broke in Beirut: In *Capernaum*, Nadine Labaki Finds a New Way for Film to Deal with Poverty.” *Foreign Policy*, no. 231 (2019): 104–7. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26642253>.

immigrants do not have rights to have any identification papers, to work, or to be taken care of. When we flash back to present times in the film, we hear Zain demanding that his own parents get persecuted. When the judge asks him why, "Because they gave birth to me" he answers. Zain is full of hate and despise for having to live in a world that is so unfair for his young age. He did not choose this life, just like many kids similar to him.

Once Zain is by himself, he doesn't know where to go. He meets a knock-off Spider-Man who calls himself the "Cockroach Man". Labaki brings this superhero figure into her film and destroys it by having it called a cockroach. Maybe a way to illustrate the lost childhood and the loss of the innocence of Zain, and the very little faith he has left in this world. Or maybe a way to portray the role models figures in a country like Lebanon, where most of them are corrupted and without any impact. This Cockroach man gets off at the attraction park, and Zain follows him there. This realistic non-superhero works as a dramaturgic drive in *Capernaum*, bringing Zain closer to his new chosen family: Rahil and her son Yonas who end up adopting Zain and letting him sleep in their house. In exchange for his stay, Zain must babysit the little baby, Yonas, who also is an undocumented kid, with a father who does not want to recognize him as his son.

Rahil is an Ethiopian migrant worker whose documents will expire soon. While having no money to be able to pay for a document forger to make her fake documents, Aspro, the forger, asks her to give him Yonas in exchange for free fake papers. Rahil of course refuses, and her papers expire. One day as Zain is babysitting Yonas, Rahil never comes back home. She is arrested by the Lebanese authorities, and Zain is back to taking care of a kid on his own. However, Zain is experienced at this point, he goes back to drug dealing and begging for money to be able to survive with his new little baby brother Yonas.

While Zain tries to look for Rahil around Beirut, Zain meets Aspro, the documents forger who promises Zain he can send him to Sweden as a refugee. Aspro asks for baby Yonas in exchange and tells Zain to go home and grab his identification. Zain gives away Yonas and goes back home asking for his identification to his parents. His parents mockingly tell him that he does not have any and mention that his sister Sahar, has died because of early-age pregnancy. Zain stabs his sisters' ex-husband and ends up in prison.

At this point, the story of Zain is just a revelation of hardships and unfortunate situations which the audience wonders where the director is planning to take. Zain is constantly trying to find a place to find refuge, however, reality always comes back kicking, making him more and more imprisoned in his reality. While at the prison and during a visit from his mother, Zain finds out she is pregnant

again and plans on calling her expected daughter Sahar as her passed away daughter. Zain is disgusted by his mother's heartlessness and asks her to never visit him again. Zain's story finally comes to an end when he decides to call a live TV show requesting call-in commentaries about child abuse. He publicly asks parents like his to stop having children and talks about his suffering. He exposes Aspro who has been trafficking little kids and Zain ends up getting a Lebanese ID.

The ending of the film does not really feed the story of Zain, nor does it close his journey or his character development. Instead, his story is used as a global commentary on refugees, migrant workers, and the unfair treatment of these communities in Lebanon by the director herself. It is almost like Labaki was trying to look for a solution to save all these unfair fates through her film and failed. *Capernaum* is rather somehow kept as proof for higher authorities to take a stand or make a change.

²⁸ "An audience member asked Labaki whether she thought her film could "do something." But Labaki's film has no actionable policy prescriptions; as the filmmaker explained, her hope was that *Capernaum* would simply shake audiences out of their chronic lethargy. In fact, *Capernaum*'s success with international critics and audiences underscores an unsettling truth about how wealthy nations face the world's refugee crises: instead of addressing their political responsibility, countries celebrate extraordinary works of art drawn from these stories. To be sure, Labaki has made a manipulative polemic that inevitably puts its sentiments front and center."

Zain can finally escape his fate of being in prison thanks to a TV show that he watches by chance. This is when he is finally heard and finally experiences sympathy. Therefore, maybe this TV show is somehow a representation of the production of this film for the director. They both could be representing the same solution to her, a film in real life to expose the realities of these mistreated people, and a TV show in the film to save Zain from prison and reunite Yonas and Rahil with each other. Both could be used by Labaki as her opinions on the power of media and the impact it could have on people. When watching *Capernaum*, the sensitivity of the director to Zain's reality is very present, the audience can almost feel her pain and tears with him, and it becomes clear that this film is made as an exposure of this reality more than it is for the storytelling.

²⁸ Qureshi, Bilal. "Broke in Beirut: In *Capernaum*, Nadine Labaki Finds a New Way for Film to Deal with Poverty." *Foreign Policy*, no. 231 (2019): 104–7. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26642253>.

Capernaum takes traits from the Cinema-Verité filmmaking style. Labaki worked with non-actors in this film, aiming to bring the reality and the pain of her characters with more realism to the screen. Aiming to work with a quasi-documentary style, breaking between the world of reality and the world of fiction, Labaki is the only cast in her film who is an actor. The kid who plays Zain is a real Syrian refugee, whom Labaki scouted through her casting team. Rahil the Ethiopian migrant worker is also a migrant worker in Lebanon in her real life as well. The actor playing the role of the judge does that for a living too, and all the remaining members of the cast were also scouted as real members of their communities. These attributes are one of the characteristics of the Cinema-Verité working style, however, Labaki did construct a script which her characters had to follow instead of purely following them to have their daily life build its own story in the film.

²⁹ “There is a cinema-verbatim technique which is the result of the way we are forced to work. We are attempting to capture what happens, to move with our characters without interfering in what they are doing. We are thus forced to use handheld cameras and mobile sound equipment. Despite our best efforts the camera sometimes jiggles. This is the technique. It is not a form.”

In a film where reality is so merged with fiction, it is hard to divide between the character’s fictional stories and their personal lives. Especially in a film that sheds light on such big issues as poverty and racism. It is therefore interesting to mention the young actor Zain’s coming-of-age story in real life, away from his character in the film. Thanks to Labaki’s exposure, Zain, and his whole family were able to move to Norway and get support there. Labaki stated a few times in her interviews that Zain never had the luxury to sleep in a bed, he always slept on the floor with his siblings, and now they have a nice house for their whole family to enjoy.

Unfortunately, Zain is only one of the lucky ones who had the chance to flee their war-torn countries. Some countries, like Germany, did welcome a big number of Syrian refugees during the Syrian war, but escaping one’s country has always been, however, a step that many Arabs build all their lives for and look forward to. The reasons for leaving the land, outside of asylum or refuge, have also mostly been economic for the Lebanese people.

²⁹ Lipscomb, James C. “Cinéma-Vérité.” *Film Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (1964): 62–63. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1210954>.

³⁰ “Most Lebanese émigrés expect to send a portion of earnings to their loved ones back home. This can lead to jostling within extended families, as relatives form different ideas regarding who has due claims to these monies, to how much, and for how long. Furthermore, kin are not the only ones maneuvering for a share. Entire villages and small towns are often active in soliciting charitable contributions from their sons and daughters abroad.”

This coming-of-age story of Zain is similar to many other ones around the Arab world and Lebanon. Leaving the land has been portrayed as a milestone for so many Lebanese people and especially for the youth. Arabs and Lebanese young generations either feel the pressure of having to leave to provide for their families, or feel the need to flee a country where a bright future is hard to be foreseen away from war, political conflicts or extreme conservatism.

Whether it is leaving for studies, for work, or for asylum, the West has always been portrayed as a utopia in Lebanese films or to Arab characters, where they think all problems quiet down and a “happily ever after” is reached. The three generations of women living in Canada in *Memory Box*, Zain from *Capernaum* wanting to flee to an unknown Sweden, Lina who never wants to come back to Lebanon in *Parisiennne*, and Zozo who finds peace in Stockholm, all these characters portray a realistic version of how Lebanese people see the West, and the way they have experienced it.

Does this portrayal of the West feed even more stereotypes about Arab countries to Western cinema audiences?

And does this create a rejection from the West in normalized Arab coming-of-age films, that neither tackle war nor oppression?

³⁰ Pearlman, Wendy. “Competing for Lebanon’s Diaspora: Transnationalism and Domestic Struggles in a Weak State.” *The International Migration Review* 48, no. 1 (2014): 34–75. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24542836>.

VII. Conclusion

In comparison to the youth of most of the Western societies, the Lebanese and Arab youth, from the 1970s until today, had endured a lot. Unfortunately, however, their struggles, don't seem near to be over in the foreseen future.

If speaking about Lebanon alone, the country is far from attaining political stability and will probably never attain a social unity. With the on-going war with Israel, and Lebanon's geopolitical presence, with religious political parties still dominating parts of the country and passively calling for the division of the territories, with a corrupted government, an economic crisis, and over a million of the population on the verge of going on protest any second, Lebanon is still far from reaching a peaceful environment for children to grow peacefully and a youth to dream of an assured bright future.

The films analyzed in the previous texts assure that Lebanese coming-of-age films can rarely be disconnected from their socio-political environment and the period the storyline takes place in. Until now, most coming-of-age Lebanese films dealt with even bigger themes than simply the loss of innocence or growing-up, they dealt with war, death, poverty, and trauma. The films analyzed all tackle so many different social issues that have been passed to generations of Lebanese people.

The films *West Beirut* and *In the Battlefields* brought us back to the traumas of the civil-war generation of filmmakers with stories about growing up within the war. *The Kite* raised the very important matter of minor marriage in Lebanon which is still legal for some religious courts in Lebanon. *Parisienne* tackled the post-war era, with themes of immigration, alienism, and feminism. It also portrayed the sexual harassment that is present within conservative societies. *Martyr* is set in modern-days Lebanon where homophobia and transphobia are still very dominant in the society. Being gay is still illegal in Lebanon and all parts of the Arab world, and homosexuals could be arrested just for existing. On the other hand, openness and progressiveness do exist and could still be found in Lebanon, and that is what *One of These Days* portrays. However, for a generation that could be so massively taken by two extremes of conservatism and progressiveness, identity crises and confusion can easily emerge.

Memory Box analyzed the Lebanese diaspora, and the generational transformation it is having on the current Lebanese population. More and more of the Lebanese youth is growing outside of their

country with very little connection to their homeland. And finally, Capernaum tackled the injustice that most refugees and immigrants face in Lebanon, making their lives truly unlivable and unfair.

While a vast majority of Lebanese films did get stuck in stories about the civil war and the effects of the war, a few films nowadays did tackle a new side of the Lebanese society's issues like the illegal queerness or the hardship of womanhood in such a conservative society. However, with a country that keeps going forward and unraveling new crises, what will the modern-day coming-of-age films be tackling?

The generation of filmmakers generating from the civil-war era is still making films surely. Just like in Hadjithomas and Joreige's case, for example, the theme of the war is still coming back even till their recent films' productions. However, there is surely a new generation of filmmakers, who experienced a whole different youth of their own in Lebanon, and who will soon make coming-of-age films based on these experiences.

The Lebanese revolution itself contained approximately hundreds of thousands of the Lebanese population and grouped people from all generations. However, many of the protesters were young Lebanese people demanding change and better conditions of life. The revolution created a big collective expression of anger from the population and an oppressive response from the government. The police were not afraid to fight and repress their own people and were encouraged to throw tear gas at any out-of-hand moment. The revolution lasted months before the recent economic crisis hit the country, and the COVID pandemic forced people to stay in their homes. What came after those events in 2019 was only a decline in the Lebanese quality of life, causing more and more poverty and leading to a new wave of migration.

³¹ "The revolution in Lebanon broke out spontaneously in October 2019 as a "WhatsApp protest", following the imposition of the new taxes by the government on the messaging app. It spread throughout Lebanon, with the demand to change the sectarian political arrangement defined in the Taif Agreement (1989) and replace the entire corrupt leadership in the hope of improving living conditions. IT continued in waves throughout the year of a national carnival-like celebration, to smaller – due in part to the coronavirus – but

³¹ Mizrahi, Orna, Yoram Schweitzer, Shmuel Even, and Tomer Fadlon. "Lebanon, One Year Later after the 'Revolution': Grim Reality and Bleak Prospects." Institute for National Security Studies, 2020. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep27772>.

far more violent demonstrations. The protests failed to bring about change, and they reflect increasing popular despair.”

A year later, Lebanon lived yet another horrible event on the 4th of August: the port explosion. A big amount of nitrate ammonium exploded in the Lebanese port, after hours of fire, and only a few kilometers away from the center of Beirut and from people’s homes. This explosion was due to the government’s lack of responsibility, and the real reason for the presence of these explosives in the Lebanese port is still unknown. The explosion resulted in thousands of deaths and injuries, and in the destruction of a big part of the city. The explosion went out in one of the most culturally booming areas of Beirut, near the streets of Gemmayze and Mar Mikhael, where many of the Lebanese youth hangout in bars, galleries, and cafés. It is sure that today there is a big part of the Lebanese youth who will carry the trauma of the port explosion with them forever.

These dramatic changes and constant new political events in Lebanon alone could be proof that the new Lebanese generation has experienced new shifts in their day-to-day life. This means that a new generation of cinemagoers would need new stories to relate to and share their angers with. This also means that there could be a new generation of filmmakers who could have a new point of view on the representation of the Lebanese youth in cinema.

In conclusion, this previous analysis of the representation of youth in Lebanese cinema sheds the lights on the hardships that the Lebanese youth have gone through and keep going through till today, on top of their constant battles in a country filled with so much instability and injustice. These texts also aim to clear a part of the stereotypes that are on the stories of the Lebanese and Arab communities by giving an in-depth explanation of the socio-political situation of the region, specifically Lebanon. And finally, this thesis also works as a calling for the Lebanese filmmakers to make films for a the new Lebanese generation, whose dilemmas and traumas haven’t yet been explored as much as the generation’s that preceded them.

VIII. Filmography

- ***Beirut Oh Beirut***, dir. Maroun Bagdadi (1975)
- ***Bicycle Thieves***, dir. Vittorio De Sica (1948)
- ***Boyhood***, dir. Richard Linklater (2014)
- ***Capernaum***, dir. Nadine Labaki (2019)
- ***Carrie***, dir. Brian De Palma (1976)
- ***In the Battlefields***, dir. Danielle Arbid 2004
- ***Little Wars***, dir, Maroun Bagdadi (1982)
- ***Martyr***, dir. Mazen Khaled (2017)
- ***Memory Box***, dir. Joanna Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige (2021)
- ***My Father Upon the Tree***, dir. Hussein Kamal (1969)
- ***One of These Days***, dir. Nadim Tabet (2016)
- ***Parisienne (Peur de Rien)***, dir. Danielle Arbid (2015)
- ***The Graduate***, dir. Mike Nichols (1967)
- ***The Kite***, dir. Randa Chahal Sabag 2003
- ***The 400 Blows***, dir. François Truffaut (1959)
- ***West Beirut***, dir. Ziad Doueiry 1998

- ***Where To?*** dir. George Nasser 1957
- ***Zozo***, dir. Josef Fares (2005)

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