DANCING ON THE EDGE OF A VOLCANO: A HINGE FILM BETWEEN CATASTROPHES

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Dancing on the Edge of a Volcano (Cyril Aris, 2023) is a creative non-fiction film that operates on multiple levels: as the chronicle of an explosion, the story of a film shoot focalised around the director, and a cinematic reflection on the historical memory of Lebanon. On the first level, it documents the various crises that afflicted Beirut in 2020 and 2021, including the explosion of a warehouse containing remnants of war and fertiliser that killed 218 people, injured 7,500 and devastated an area that left about 300,000 local residents homeless. This tragedy occurred at the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, and it was followed by a drastic devaluation of the Lebanese pound that aggravated the situation of impoverishment already being faced by most of the country's population, and rendered film production of any kind virtually unfeasible. On the second level, it serves as a "making-of" for *Costa Brava, Lebanon* (Mounia Akl, 2021), a fiction film inspired by the 2015 rubbish crisis that presents a dystopian image of the future that is already far surpassed by the reality of Lebanon's present. And thirdly, Aris's film includes excerpts from *Whispers* (Hamasat, Maroun Bagdadi, 1980) with the aim of bringing the destruction resulting from the explosion into dialogue with the decimation caused by the country's civil war (1975-1990), while also exploring the impact of both events on Lebanese political affairs and everyday life. In this sense, the people shown on screen express their attachment to Beirut (an element highly characteristic of Lebanese films) and debate each other over whether to stay and keep fighting and creating art in a place that is virtually unliveable and on the brink of collapse, or to leave and join the Lebanese diaspora. All these elements make this a kind of "hinge" film, positioned between different historical periods in a country that has often been compared to the phoenix, with the ability to rise from its own ashes after burning up again and again in a continuous cycle. To analyse the visual motifs in Aris's documentary, it is essential to con-

sider the other two films named above, as it establishes an explicit dialogue with both of them. Considered together, the view they offer of both past and future evokes Walter Benjamin's criticism of progress, expressed in the allegory of *Angelus Novus*. In addition (and equally important), this analysis establishes a relationship between real historical landscapes and the dystopian settings foreshadowed in science fiction and disaster films.

1. DANCING IN THE RUBBLE OF A DEVASTATED BEIRUT

The image of the Lebanese capital in ruins has many familiar layers. One of the most talented filmmakers who pioneered its depiction was Maroun Bagdadi, who returned to the city in 1975 after finishing his studies in France, shortly before the beginning of the civil war that would last until 1990.[1] In 1982, he made a name for himself on the international scene with the award-winning film *Little Wars*. He went into exile in 1984, having completed a dozen fiction and non-fiction films that always addressed the same theme: the war in his homeland. One of these films, *Whispers*, follows the exiled poet Nadia Tueni (1935-1983) around the country as she visits the few safe-havens that remain in the war-torn country. In the process, the film reveals some inspiring cultural initiatives, presents interviews with important entrepreneurs involved in the country's reconstruction, and places special emphasis on the profound transformation of Beirut and the nation as a result of the conflict. Tueni's reflections hint at a nostalgia for a place and time of peace, as well as a hope for a future when coexistence will again be possible.

Whispers marked a turning point in Bagdadi's career in both aesthetic and political terms. Until then, his non-fiction films had reflected ideological connections to the work of the Arab filmmakers associated with the Third Cinema movement. Although he was not considered part of this movement, his films bear a markedly national, working-class leftist quality and an interest in challenging Hollywood narrative conventions. Films such as *Greetings to Kamal Jumblatt* (Tahiya Kamal Jumblatt, 1977), *The Most Beautiful of All Mothers* (Ajmal al-ummahat, 1978) and *We Are All of the Fatherland* (Koulouna lil-watan, 1979) contain non-linear narratives and explicit references to the project of the Lebanese National Movement (LMN).[2] Featuring political leaders such as Jumblatt and Arafat, proletarian fighters, martyrs and their families, these films depict class inequality and the Israeli occupation as part of the same injustice (Randall, 2020), while suggesting that the war and violence are part of an impending revolution. In contrast, the slow pace created by the pensive shots of long duration in *Whispers*, combined with its message of peace and reconciliation, reflects Bagdadi's conviction that a war that has brought neither national unity nor the hoped-for changes needs to be brought to an end as soon as possible. The choice of Tueni as the film's protagonist and interviewer supports this idea, as she did not belong to any political party or organisation and has nothing in common with the military leaders featured in his previous films. After *Whispers*, Bagdadi would only shoot one more non-fiction film, whose title makes his pacifist turn explicit: *Harb Aala El Harb* (1983), which could be translated as "war on war".

Apart from celebrating a particular stage in Bagdadi's career, the inclusion of archive footage from Bagdadi's film in *Dancing on the Edge…* responds to a number of issues that can be conceptualised as an arrangement of mirror images. First of all, Tueni's reflections on exile and her wanderings around the country echo some of the thoughts and feelings of Mounia Akl, the director of *Costa Brava, Lebanon*: both women want to live and create art in a country that they love deeply, but that does not provide them with the conditions of stability necessary to pursue an artistic career. Even for the most privileged classes, it is

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almost impossible to live in the country without feeling constantly racked with panic. And yet despite the hardships, Beirut is a city that comes to life at night, where people meet, dance and enjoy themselves in order to endure the destruction all around them. "Everything is so beautiful. Every woman is a butterfly. Every man is a prince," recites the poet, while images of the discotheques and nightclubs of the past alternate with those of the present. Dance and music offer a necessary erotic release for people who are living in the shadow of death. The title Aris has chosen for his film is thus an explicit statement of intent: the people are dancing on the edge of a volcano, which is their own city, burning before their eyes.

Secondly, the harsh conditions of the city are never presented as a spectacle. Tueni remarks to the camera that over time, "the ruins become beautiful [...] but I will never get used to them." In both historical moments, the ruins are wounds that have not healed, symbols of collective pain. The act of wandering around the city, of becoming a *flâneuse,* reflects an attempt to escape the negative effects of the saturation of media images of war and catastrophe, which Susan Sontag critiques in *On Photography* (1977; 2008), notwithstanding her retraction of that criticism years later in *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2013). Although it is not their only potential effect on the spectator, if images of Beirut in ruins are all we are shown, we run the risk of being numbed by the sight of them. This is why the situated, complex narrative with as slow a pacing as possible is so important to elicit empathy and invite reflection on what is happening there.

All of these considerations seem to suggest that these archival images are presented as a symptom of a malaise: Beirut is a city plagued with traumas. This raises a couple of political questions that are becoming topical once again: What role should poets (or filmmakers) play in the country's reconstruction? And what can artists do to contribute to the improvement of community life in a context of destruction? The tentative response appears to lie in the approach chosen to represent the people. Neither Bagdadi nor Aris attempt to depict them merely as victims of the situation; instead, they are depicted as individuals actively engaged in the practice of hope, the search for solutions and the transformation of the status quo. The intention is to show Western audiences a side of the conflicts that avoids the usual sensationalism and victim narratives. In this respect, one of the tropes critiqued by Bagdadi, the so-called "godfather" of Lebanese cinema, is the perspective of the war journalist. Both *Little Wars* and even *Whispers* contain testimonies by reporters interested in filming or photographing a spectacle: striking images of explosions, armed clashes and deaths that will capture the attention of the Western spectator. This is why Bagdadi's depiction of Beirut es-

Image 1. Nadia Tueni wandering around Beirut in 1980

chews what Edward Said (1990) describes as the Orientalist vision, which conceives of Lebanon as part of a primitive, irrational, violent and despotic world. In its place he offers a cultural critique on the persistence of the colonial past in the present, similar to Sontag's view on the question.

> Generally the grievously injured bodies shown in published photographs are from Asia or Africa. This journalistic custom inherits the centuries-old practice of exhibiting exotic—that is, colonized—human beings: Africans and denizens of remote Asian countries were displayed like zoo animals in ethnological exhibitions mounted in London, Paris, and other European capitals from the sixteenth until the early twentieth century. (2013: 72)

Bagdadi's critical stance can be better understood in the context of Ignacio Ramonet's reflections in *La tiranía de la comunicación* (1998) on the images captured by a small group of news agencies (CBS, CNN, Visnews, WTN) that have "reporters located in the most remote 'hot spots' on the planet" (1998: 26) and offer "spectacle at all costs" (1998: 27) in coverage whose objective is to make a profit by being sold to the largest number of media outlets, with a clear bias towards the trivial surface of events, the thin layer of violence, blood and scandal that covers them, rather than the "ideas and explanations" that lie beneath the conflicts they portray (Ramonet, 1998: 27). Moreover, the fascination with these types of images of conflict and the focus on profit can be linked to a particular trend in Colombian *miserabilista* cinema condemned by Luis Ospina and Carlos Mayolo in their 1978 manifesto titled *¿Qué es la pornomiseria?* ("What Is Poverty Porn?"):

> poverty became a shocking topic and therefore ultimately a commodity that could be sold, especially internationally, where poverty is the flip side of the consumer's opulence. While poverty once served independent cinema as an object to be denounced and analysed, the zeal of mercantilism turned it into an escape valve for the very system that generated it. (Hambre, 2015)

Yet the affinity of *Dancing on the Edge…* with Bagdadi's work goes much further. In 1982, the Beirut director was one of the fifteen filmmakers who participated in *Room 666* (Chambre 666, Wim Wenders), providing a significant response to the question of whether cinema is an artform on the brink of death, a language that is becoming extinct. In doing so, he affirmed the value of the art of making films that are born out of life itself. As Bagdadi himself put it, "the anguish of creation has to do with the fact that people who make films don't take the time they need to live [...]; cinema and life are so powerfully intertwined, the relationship between them is so strong that I don't know how much filmmakers and film lovers take the time they need to live." When he made this statement, Lebanese cinema had just emerged from the bubble that had characterised it since its origins, projecting an exotic daydream image utterly divorced from social concerns. The director formed part of a new generation of filmmakers who made auteur films in the years from 1975 to 1991, transforming and diversifying the aesthetic identity of Lebanese cinema. These were the years "of the appearance and consolidation of the documentary genre" (Hotait Salas, 2020: 107), along with a whole catalogue of low-budget films that broke away from the commercial film production of the time to depict the everyday reality of war and document the country's profound social and regional fragmentation, especially in Beirut, which had been transformed from a fantasy backdrop into a film topic.

By a totally unforeseeable twist of fate, Cyril Aris, one of the editors on *Costa Brava, Lebanon*, would work on a documentary decades later that took almost three years to complete. Asked in an interview about the intergenerational dialogue he had established with his predecessor, he replied: "[*Whispers*] quickly became a point of reference because I realised that for 40 years we have been making the same film over and over again, and that is very revealing in terms of the cyclical na-

ture not just of Lebanese cinema but also of Lebanon itself. The truth is it is constructed, destroyed, reconstructed and destroyed again endlessly" (Chen, 2023). Hovering over this succession of tragedies, through Aris's filmmaking, is Walter Benjamin's angel of history:

> His face is turned towards the past. [...] The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such a violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress. (Benjamin, 1969: 257-258)

The continuity between the images of yesterday and those of today attests to the failure to achieve peace and the promises of progress.

Nevertheless, there are also notable differences. The images from *Whispers* described above have little to do with certain meanings Aris seeks to convey in his film. The clearest of these is the fact that *Dancing on the Edge…* has no nostalgia for happier times, no Proustian search for a space-time that no longer exists; instead, it depicts a time that shines in the "moment of danger" of a present in which the devastation continues. The "suspended dialectic" of "anachronistic images" (Didi-Huberman, 2011: 21) is interrupted and can be updated and observed from a new perspective; not everything is identification and parallels. There are issues that emerge as a product of the passage of time in a socio-economic reality where people have become accustomed (although not resigned) to permanent conflict. Finding and explicitly showing the archival footage is not just a way of recognising their forebears, but an acknowledgement of the impossibility of forgetting, given the circumstances. In this sense, the mise-en-scène of *Dancing on the Edge…* could not be more explicit. First, it offers Tueni's reflections on the ruins left by the civil war; then, a completely black image is the background chosen for the screams of horror and confusion of different anonymous victims of the explosion; and finally, a camera wanders unsteadily among the debris and wounded bodies. It is an image-testimony of the chaos that is associated with a memory-image before concluding with signs of blood and a voice crying out: "Mounia! Mounia!" At the time he was filming, the camera operator did not know whether the director of *Costa Brava, Lebanon* was still alive.

DANCING ON THE EDGE… HAS NO NOSTALGIA FOR HAPPIER TIMES, NO PROUSTIAN SEARCH FOR A SPACE-TIME THAT NO LONGER EXISTS; INSTEAD, IT DEPICTS A TIME THAT SHINES IN THE "MOMENT OF DANGER" OF A PRESENT IN WHICH THE DEVASTATION CONTINUES

2. MAKING FILMS AND LOOKING TO THE HORIZON IN A CONTEXT OF COLLAPSE

Aesthetically, *Dancing on the Edge…* takes the approach of a filmed diary. It is edited as a linear narrative covering the period from the first days after the explosion to the protest demonstrations that took place shortly after the première of Akl's film at the Venice Film Festival. Most sequences are constructed based on the observational style (Nichols, 1997: 72-77), although at certain moments they establish a dialogue with archival footage and excerpts from *Costa Brava, Lebanon*. The director provides minimal information about the event of the explosion itself, combining audio material of news reports with images of the debris, many of which are aerial shots filmed by drones, but there are no interviews with witnesses or examples of the kind of expository-argumentative format (Nichols, 1997: 68-71) used in the well-known Australian documentary *Shock Wave* (Adam Harvey, 2020).

If we leave aside the found footage, most of the images can be classified into two basic categories. The first includes a wide range of images that can be defined (using the terminology of Charles S. Pierce) as *indexical*, i.e. as signs of the explosion and the various crises that the country was suffering at that time. The second category is of images following the director, Mounia Akl, who also acts in the film, which create a close-up view resulting from a pact: neither she nor the rest of the film crew ever speak directly to the camera, but instead try to interact as if it were not there. Otherwise, the documentary also makes use of the performative format in a sequence of considerable narrative importance: the conversation between the director and her father about Lebanon's past and present, which contributes to a more historical and intergenerational reflection on political issues and ways of dealing with different circumstances.

Before analysing the film's visual motifs, it is worth noting that in narrative terms *Dancing in the Edge…* is reminiscent of two of the most legendary "making-of" documentaries in film history: *Lost in La Mancha* (Keith Fulton, Louis Pepe, 2002), documenting Terry Gilliam's impossible dream to make a film about Don Quixote, and *Hearts of Darkness: A Filmmakers Apocalypse* (Eleanor Coppola, Fax Bahr, George Hickenlooper, 1991), about the tumultuous and controversial process of making *Apocalypse Now* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1979). In fact, in a display of cinematic self-awareness, members of the film crew jokingly mention both these films at different moments. However, Akl's film bears two very clear differences from these works. The first is the incorporation of microhistorical elements that clearly transcend the limits of the "making-of" genre, as in addition to depicting the vicissitudes of a complicated film shoot, the film also proposes a dialogue with the history of cinema and of the country itself based on that depiction. The second difference relates to the difficulties faced by Mounia Akl, which are related to a very different situation from those that Coppola or Gilliam had to deal with: shooting a film in circumstances that could be described as a crisis on multiple levels (economic problems, environmental issues, energy shortages, the war and the sociopolitical context) in a country veering dangerously close to being deemed failed State.

THIS MULTIDIMENSIONAL CRISIS RECALLS SOME OF THE VISUAL MOTIFS IMAGINED IN SCIENCE FICTION AND DISASTER FILMS. IN FACT, CYRIL ARIS EXPLAINED IN AN INTERVIEW THAT WHEN WALKING AROUND JUST AFTER THE EXPLOSION, HE FELT AS IF HE WERE ON THE SET OF *CHILDREN OF MEN* (ALFONSO CUARÓN, 2006)

On the economic level, Akl was making her film at a time when the Lebanese pound had been devalued and money could not be withdrawn from the bank without losing three quarters of its value, which posed an obvious obstacle to the continuation of the production. This situation echoes part of the plot to the series *Years and Years* (Simon Cellan Jones, 2019), as well as the *corralito* economic measures taken in Argentina during the economic crisis of 2001. In relation to the energy crisis, we see the complications arising from rendering the sound for *Costa Brava, Lebanon* as a result of the constant power outages in a city suffering from a shortage of fossil fuel to run its generators, where for decades they have had to do without electricity for many hours a day and put up with total darkness at night. On the environmental level, the city streets reflect the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, which forced the filmmaker first to delay filming and then to obtain special permits and finances to lock down the 35 people on her technical and artistic team. The impact of the war was felt when the lead actor, the Palestinian Saleh Bakri, was detained for

almost a whole day at Beirut airport because of his Israeli identity card. Finally, the socio-political turmoil included protest demonstrations, riots and massive clashes with law enforcement forces that resulted in injuries and images of chaos and violence.

This multidimensional crisis recalls some of the visual motifs imagined in science fiction and disaster films. In fact, Cyril Aris explained in an interview that when walking around just after the explosion, he felt as if he were on the set of *Children of Men* (Alfonso Cuarón, 2006), a film that also features hand-held camera shots moving through a devastated city and exterior images captured through windows with broken glass. The mise-en-scène, with panorama shots that document the destruction of buildings from which the smoke is still rising, is also reminiscent of scenes in *Elysium* (Neill Blomkamp, 2013), and the huge traffic jams in the city resemble the mass evacuations shown in *Armageddon* (Michael Bay, 1998) and *Independence Day* (Roland Emerich, 1996). Images of piled and charred cars also have precursors in fiction films such as *The Cars that Ate Paris* (Peter Weir, 1974). In this sense, it could be argued that part of the spectator's aesthetic experience involves consciously or unconsciously connecting the film to cinematic references such as those mentioned above, which clearly influences their reading and interpretation. At the same time, it is interesting to note the affinities between the dystopias depicted in hypothetical futures and the account of present-day life in a country in the Global South.

Image 2. Jocelyn Saab in 1982, filmed amongst the ruins of her destroyed home

THE MISE-EN-SCÈNE, WITH PANORAMA SHOTS THAT DOCUMENT THE DESTRUCTION OF BUILDINGS FROM WHICH THE SMOKE IS STILL RISING, IS ALSO REMINISCENT OF SCENES IN *ELYSIUM* (NEILL BLOMKAMP, 2013)

In this aesthetic context, beyond parallels and similarities, the documentary proposes an interesting and distinctive poetics of space: the skyline of the ruins seen from the apartment of Joe Saade, cinematographer for *Costa Brava, Lebanon*, who first appears filmed from behind in a room full of broken glass, taking in the damage. This image effectively evokes another very important and memorable sequence of Lebanese cinema: the opening to *Beirut, My City* (Jocelyn Saab, 1982), which shows its director standing in front of the camera with a microphone in hand, presenting the shattered remains of what had been her home before the civil war. Beyond this connection to the past, in the aforementioned sequence we

know that Saade has been blinded in one eye, an injury he describes as "ironic for a cameraman", in a humorous tone that reflects an idiosyncratically Lebanese way of dealing with life's hardships that appears repeatedly throughout the narrative.

In another sequence, Mounia Akl is shown with her back to us in her father's office, which has also been damaged by the explosion. This iconic shot is clearly a very pertinent visual translation of the question that drives the film, as discussed above: What can artists do to respond to the general sense of loss and tragedy caused by the explosion and the situation in the country? It is a question that ties in with the usual approaches of Lebanese cinema. As Laila Hotait Salas suggests,

> The stories reveal that the combination of chaos and fear can fray an individual's nerves, destroying our capacity for endurance and driving us to madness, or at least to the step before it. That is why the ultimate goal of all the protagonists of these stories is to survive and keep their sanity, maintaining both their individuality and their common sense. In all these films and in their different storylines, the characters seek refuge in physical spaces or in acts that respond to the chaos (2020: 128).

For Mounia Akl and her film crew, filming is a refuge. The film makes various allusions to the dimension of dreaming and collective therapy that filming can have, as it allows a degree of temporary isolation from the critical reality of the moment. Carrying on with day-to-day life is the essence of Spinoza's *conatus*, the innate need to persevere that is useful not only to move ahead and achieve previously established goals, but also to bring the crew on *Dancing on the Edge*... into contact with real people and characters of Lebanese cinema seeking shelter amidst the destruction.

The climax to the film is set in the area of the devastated port, where people gather in a protest and tribute to the dead exactly one year after the explosion, a demonstration in which the director herself takes part. The explicit tone of condemnation effectively places this sequence in what Mark R. Westmoreland defines as a "post-orientalist aesthetic" (2008: 63-68) of experimental documentaries on Lebanon since the civil war. This approach involves foregrounding not only the criticism of Western Orientalist attitudes (Said, 2003), but also the capacity for agency of Lebanese filmmakers to adopt a situated point of view to denounce the country's political system as a source of oppression., thus also entailing the positioning of the images. On the one hand, without resorting to nihilism, it can produce

Image 3. Mounia Akl looking at the devastated port from her father's office

something wonderful (as Akl's father suggests) out of the combination of catastrophes. On the other, it constitutes a political protest against the fact that one year after the event, there is still nobody who has been held accountable for the tragedy. Far from being rectified, the dire situation in the country continues unchanged, as pointed out by some street art paintings shown in the film, including the explicit image of the blindfolded goddess Iustitia.

3. LIVING AND BREATHING RUBBISH

The first image shown in *Costa Brava, Lebanon* was not planned. One of the effects of the explosion was the change it made to the skyline of Beirut; among the most noteworthy losses were the enormous silos characteristic of the city's port area. Their skeletal remains serve as the starting point for the story. This is the place chosen for the statue of the president to begin its journey around the city until it reaches its destination: the Costa Brava recycling plant, located right opposite the home of the Badri family (the film's protagonists), which will shortly be revealed to be an unregulated landfill.

This is a significant beginning for two reasons. Firstly, it employs a neorealist style, showing the ruins of the present standing for posterity as a visual testimony to a specific past event. Secondly, it is introduced with an ironic caption that reads: "Beirut, in the near future." The film was originally supposed to be set in the year 2030, but reality brought it forward. In other words, recent events led the director to place the story in a realist setting rather than to imagine a hypothetical future catastrophe. This relationship with reality is essential to understand the film beyond its surface appearance.

The explosion of 2,750 inadequately tonnes of poorly stored ammonium nitrate is a symptom of a broader issue, which serves as the film's main theme: over the past decade, the Lebanese capital has been turned into a landfill. This fact became clear to the world with the 2015 rubbish crisis, with images of Beirut's streets filled with piles of waste, sprayed with poison to prevent the proliferation of rats. The crisis arose when the contract between the Lebanese government and the waste management company Sukleen ended on 17 July 2015, without having secured an alternative service provider due to power struggles between different political blocs over the choice of a replacement. Adding to the dire state of affairs were the road blockades by the people of Na'ameh, a coastal town where waste from Beirut and Mount Lebanon was being provisionally dumped (Ali Nayel, 2015). Since then, this issue has attracted extensive news coverage.

THE EXPLOSION OF 2,750 INADEQUATELY TONNES OF POORLY STORED AMMONIUM NITRATE IS A SYMPTOM OF A BROADER ISSUE, WHICH SERVES AS THE FILM'S MAIN THEME: OVER THE PAST DECADE, THE LEBANESE CAPITAL HAS BEEN TURNED INTO A LANDFILL

The visual motif of piles of rubbish is reminiscent of the dystopian landscapes shown in sci-fi films, which could be conceptualised as "landscapes of uncontrolled development" (López Brizuela, 2022: 31-36) that suggest future worlds resulting from contemporary ecosocial problems to serve as a vehicle for political, ideological and social criticism. A paradigmatic example of such landscapes can be found in the aforementioned blockbuster *Elysium*, which depicts an urban wasteland of inequality in the year 2154, where the upper classes live in a *Muskian* utopia, in luxury dwellings on a space station with avant-garde architecture and access to meticulously tended green spaces, while the impoverished masses struggle to survive in the filth of Los Angeles's underground neighbourhoods.

THE TITLE OF THE FILM IS TAKEN FROM REALITY. COSTA BRAVA IS A LANDFILL CREATED IN 2016 AS AN EMERGENCY SOLUTION AFTER THE CLOSURE OF NA'AMEH. IT IS ONE OF MANY ENVIRONMENTAL CONFLICTS DOCUMENTED IN THE *GLOBAL ATLAS OF ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE* (2023)

Prior to *Costa Brava, Lebanon*, Mounia Akl had already dealt with the theme of Beirut's rubbish problem in her short film *Submarine* (2016), produced by Cyril Aris and starring Akl herself, with a screenplay co-written with Clara Roquet. In this film, Akl plays Hala, a woman who refuses to leave the city even when the waste begins flooding directly into her home, breaking through the glass windows that connect it to the outside world. Apart from an urban landscape steeped in filth, the story also presents images that reflect the poor air quality, such as three men wearing masks who watch in the background as Hala goes in search of a solution for her desperate housing situation.

The iconography of unbreathable air is extensive, but the mask is its most commonly used motif, encompassing a wide variety of types ranging from the masks used by doctors during the Black Death of 14th-century Europe to the gas masks of the First and Second World War, the air pollution masks worn in cities such as Beijing today, and the face-masks that became commonplace during the COVID-19 pandemic. The text *Aire* (Herrero, 2023) offers an insightful perspective on this issue, as it addresses various aspects of air pollution and the health problems it has caused both in the workplace (for example, the foundry workers in Santa Lucía de Peñarroya in southern Spain who are interviewed in *The Year of the Discovery* [El año del descubrimiento, Luís López Carrasco, 2020]) and in society in general (the massive numbers of premature deaths in countries with pollution levels that exceed the limits established by the WHO).

> We call the modification of the air's composition "air pollution". The increase in greenhouse gases that are raising global average temperatures and changing the rules of life on the planet, the dioxins emitted by incinerators, the heat waves putting ozone molecules in all the wrong places, the toxic particles from car exhaust pipes, the heavy metal dust, the radiation... a civilisation that has declared war on life is violently colonising the air, along with the plants, water, animals, people and words. We know that there are many ways human beings can exploit, subdue and humiliate others. I think forcing them to breathe filth is one of the most atrocious examples. Breathing makes us sick, and as we cannot stop breathing, we cannot help but get sick. (Herrero, 2023: 51-52)

In *Submarine*, people are fleeing the city just to be able to breathe. It is a matter of life and death, with no hint of explicit political motivations at any moment. Conversely, *Costa Brava, Lebanon*

Image 4. The film *Submarine* (Mounia Akl, 2016)

raises a different question: the two protagonists, a married couple who in the opening sequences are shown looking after chickens and tending the garden with their daughters, left Beirut after an explosion to escape the toxicity of the air and the many problems caused by the husband's activism. After eight years, however, the rubbish has caught up with them.

This situation causes a schism in the family (which serves as a microcosm of society), and gives rise to all kinds of everyday conflicts. The mother, grandmother and elder daughter all make it clear that they do not want to continue living in their secluded location; they believe it no longer makes sense now that they have lost the benefits of silence and clean air that such seclusion previously offered. However, the father wants to keep fighting and imposes his patriarchal will on the rest of the family, while the younger daughter, closer to her father, expresses some doubts about staying. The father is convinced that the proposed plant is nothing more than a show for the public that will never be carried out as planned; sooner or later, the project will be abandoned. This conviction reignites his activism and he takes a hand-held camera and starts filming the construction site and the incineration of rubbish to use as evidence in a hypothetical trial that a lawyer friend plans to file at his request. The trial will never make it to court, although the plant will end up being torn down due to mass protests.

The title of the film is taken from reality. Costa Brava is a landfill created in 2016 as an emergency solution after the closure of Na'ameh. It is one of many environmental conflicts documented in the *Global Atlas of Environmental Justice* (2023). As in the film, there were protests led by local residents and by the Lebanese environmentalist movement, which resulted in the closure of the facility in 2017, although the problem remained unsolved as the piles of waste were dumped in the sea. In the film, the closure of the landfill and the subsequent toppling of the statue of the president who promoted it—an image that could be added to those categorised by Sorolla-Romero and Loriguillo-López (2023)—will not prevent the family from returning to Beirut. With this conclusion, the film seems to be attempting to convey a clear message, that it is not possible to escape from political corruption or rubbish, the latter being nothing more than a metaphor for the former. If there is a solution, it necessarily involves collective organisation.

In other fields, there are authors who define the current environmental situation in Lebanon as an ecocide or a Lebanicide (Elías, 2020); it is a country poisoned by decades of war and political mismanagement, where neither human rights nor the terms of international environmental law are respected. Outside the film industry, other artistic projects, such as the installation *The Land Remembers* in the Lebanese pavilion at the last Venice Architecture Biennale (2025), confirm the bleak diagnosis: the memory of the Earth's destruction and the magnitude of the ecocide are of such a scope that it is becoming increasingly urgent to work together to repair them.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Fictional accounts of contemporary disasters, such as *The Collapse* (L'Effondrement, Les Parasites, 2019), to give a significant example, offer stories that could be described as *Hobbesian*. When the system and the State collapse, the war of all against all ensues. However, Rebeca Solnit (2020) has convincingly documented the extraordinary communities that rise up in response to disasters. One of the most famous paintings depicting the days after the explosion, *Angels* (Tom Young, 2020), portrays volunteers cleaning up the debris after the catastrophe. While Lebanon was careening towards the abyss of failed statehood, it was being reconstructed first and foremost through acts of mutual aid, as is usually the case in such extreme situations.

Undoubtedly, *Dancing on the Edge…* is a historical document that has more in common with *Angels* than with *The Collapse*. It is a film portraying cultural workers from the city's privileged classes reacting to the situation in the terms described throughout this article. Cyril Aris has thus made an important contribution to the history of Lebanese auteur cinema, constructed through personal microhistories representative of broader contexts.

In a particularly poetic sequence, the real-life owner of the house where *Costa Brava, Lebanon* was filmed remarks that he would like to be a fisherman and watch the country's history from the sea. This observation serves as a segue to archive footage from *Whispers* that shows a fisherman looking at Beirut from the coast. This is followed by archival footage from Lebanese fiction films of the 1960s, reflecting times of peace and prosperity, along with excerpts from fiction and non-fiction films about the civil war. All this footage effectively offers the spectator an audiovisual overview that serves to interrogate a past of great relevance to the preset. "To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it 'the way it really was' [Ranke]. It means to seize hold of a memory, as it flashes up in a moment of danger" (Benjamin, 1969: 255).

Dystopia has been a reality for the people of Lebanon for the past fifty years. It is very difficult today to imagine a fictional account that could present a bleaker picture than a present in which catastrophe is a constant. Dystopian science fiction imaginaries have moved into the social reality. The worsening environmental situation and the persistence of war speak for themselves. Creation in this context thus means contributing to the aesthetic of "wounded art", the name given to a 2020 exhibition that featured many of the artworks that had been damaged by the explosion. It also constitutes an existential condition for which Joe Saade's loss of sight in one eye stands as documentary evidence.

Finally, in terms of the politics of representation, the refusal to give up hope or to be presented merely as victims are part of the endeavour to share the sensibility that defines Lebanese cinema, trying to make room in the aesthetic field for archetypes that offer something beyond the omnipresence of death and neo-colonial dynamics. Free of any idealism, with obvious limits and with human lives as their central focus, both *Dancing on the Edge…* and *Costa Brava, Lebanon* constitute exercises that pursue what Mahmoud Darwish sought for the Palestinian people: "Hope for a normal life where we shall be neither heroes nor victims" (2002). In the meantime, however, filmmaking stands as a powerful act of resistance and an effort at reconstruction. ■

NOTES

1 The country's religious diversity, a distribution of power inherited from the colonial era, the war between Israel and Palestine and the fight over its national identity ultimately plunged Lebanon into a war that lasted from 1975 to 1990, with more than a dozen factions and numerous foreign interventions. The 15 years of combat left more than 130,000 dead, 800,000 displaced and an aftermath that the country is still recovering from today. The event often cited as the moment that triggered the war is the massacre by Lebanese Phalangist militiamen of 27 Palestinian refugees on a bus in April 1975.

2 The LMN was a broad coalition of armed fighters, led at its peak by Kamal Jumblatt and comprised of different parties and organisations such as the Lebanese Communist Party (LCP), the Progressive Socialist Party (PSP), the Syrian Social Nationalist Party in Lebanon (SSNP) and the Organisation of Communist Action in Lebanon (OCAL). It was one of the most important political movements in the Lebanese Civil War. It supported the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and was an opponent of the Lebanese Front, which included the Lebanese Phalange and was supported by Israel.

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DANCING ON THE EDGE OF A VOLCANO: A HINGE FILM BETWEEN CATASTROPHES

Abstract

Dancing on the Edge of a Vulcano (Cyril Aris, 2023) is first and foremost a testimony to the various crises that ravaged Beirut in 2020 and 2021, beginning with a warehouse containing remnants of war and fertilizer exploded, killing 218 people, injuring 7,500 and devastated an area that left 300,000 without homes. It is also the "making-of" for *Costa Brava, Lebanon* (Mounia Akl, 2021), a fiction film inspired by the 2015 rubbish crisis. Moreover, Aris's film includes excerpts from *Whispers* (Hamasat, Maroun Bagdadi, 1980) with the aim of bringing the ruins resulting from the explosion into dialogue with the decimation caused by the country's civil war (1975-1990), while also exploring the impact of both events on Lebanese political affairs and everyday life. To analyse the visual motifs in Aris's documentary, it is essential to consider the other two films named above, as it establishes an explicit dialogue with both of them. Considered together, the view they offer of both past and future evokes Walter Benjamin's criticism of progress, expressed in the allegory of *Angelus Novus*. In addition, this analysis establishes a relationship between real historical landscapes and the dystopian settings foreshadowed in science fiction and disaster films.

Key words

Beirut; Documentary cinema; Visual motifs; Ruins; Catastrophes; Maroun Bagdadi; Mounia Akl; Cyril Aris.

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DANCING ON THE EDGE OF A VOLCANO: UNA PELÍCULA BISAGRA ENTRE CATÁSTROFES

Resumen

Dancing on the Edge of a Vulcano (Cyril Aris, 2023) es, en primer lugar, un testimonio de las diversas crisis que asolaron Beirut en los años 2020 y 2021, cuando detonó un almacén que contenía residuos bélicos y fertilizantes, dejando tras de sí un balance de 218 muertos, 7.500 heridos y un paisaje devastado con 300.000 personas sin hogar. También, es un *making of* de *Costa Brava Líbano* (Costa Brava Lebanon, Mounia Akl, 2021), una ficción inspirada en la crisis de las basuras de 2015. En tercer lugar, incluye fragmentos de *Hamasat* (Maroun Bagdadi, 1980), con el objetivo de poner en diálogo las ruinas beirutíes posteriores al estallido con aquellas resultantes de la guerra civil del país (1975-1990), así como vincular los afectos políticos y vitales existentes en ambos momentos históricos. El análisis de los motivos visuales del documental es inseparable del de las otras películas, ya que establece un diálogo explícito con ambas. En conjunto, por su mirada hacia atrás y hacia delante, evidencian la crítica *benjaminiana* del progreso, formulada a través de la alegoría del *Angelus Novus*. También, dicho análisis pone en relación paisajes del mundo histórico con paisajes distópicos anticipados por el cine de ciencia ficción y de catástrofes.

Palabras clave

Beirut; cine documental; motivos visuales; ruinas; catástrofes; Maroun Bagdadi; Mounia Akl; Cyril Aris.

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