



© About Productions

Al-wadi

The Valley

الوادي

Ghassan Salhab

Producer Georges Schoucair, Serge Lalou, Titus Kreyenberg.
Production companies About Productions (Beirut, Lebanon); Les Films d'Ici (Paris, France); Unafilm (Köln, Germany).
Director Ghassan Salhab. **Director of photography** Bassem Fayad. **Production design** Hussein Baydoun. **Sound** Karine Bacha, Florent Lavallée. **Music** Cynthia Zaven, Sharif Sehnaoui. **Sound design** Karine Bacha, Lama Sawaya, Rana Eid. **Editor** Michele Tyan.

Cast Carlos Chahine (Accident Man), Carole Abboud (Carole), Fadi Abi Samra (Marwan), Mounzer Baalkabi (Ali), Yumna Marwan (Maria), Aouni Kawas (Hekmat), Rodrigue Sleiman (Armed Man 1), Ahmad Ghossein (Armed Man 2).

DCP, colour. 128 min. Arabic.

Premiere 7 September 2014, Toronto International Film Festival
World sales Doc & Film International

Wandering aimlessly after losing his memory in a car accident, a man is taken in by the inhabitants of a farm in the Beqaa Valley in Lebanon, whose secret business is the drugs they manufacture in a laboratory on the closely guarded property. The presence of this nameless stranger has consequences for the clandestine community.

Little separates beauty and horror here. A latent sense of danger pervades the vast swathes of sublime landscape. A catastrophe looms. Tensions also rise in the cramped quarters of the house. The identity of the man without a past becomes an increasing issue as doubts regarding his amnesia rear their head. Is he a doctor or a mechanic? An angel or a spy? Like a blank page, he lends himself to fantasies of all kinds and ultimately becomes a prisoner. At once concrete and otherworldly, with a powerful soundtrack and images of great intensity, the film shows a set of melancholy existences on the eve of the apocalypse. Alongside radio news reports on current political crises, it leaves ample room for poetry, painting and a love song, and thus questions the status of art in times of terror and war, that is, in the here and now.

Birgit Kohler

The omnipresent threat

„Things don't have significance; they only have existence.“

Fernando Pessoa

I was in Ouyoun El Simane, on one of Lebanon's mountaintops, preparing for my previous film, *The Mountain*. And just like every time I find myself in this place, I was struck by the magnificence of the landscape and its relentless power. On that particular day, however, a feeling of fright, of terror even, insinuated itself. Certainly, the sensation was related to the quasi-glacial majesty of the place, and to my state of mind at the time. Mostly, however, it was as if the state of things in Lebanon, the invariable state of threat in this loaded part of the world, had spread across the mountain heights in an elusive, intangible form.

Strangely, this threat took on its full meaning in this remote, seemingly serene place. It hovered densely, like a low, looming sky, ready to burst. *Al-wadi* came into being on that day, from that forceful sensation. As senseless as it may sound, I heard a car skidding, falling into the void; I saw the blood-drenched man appear, then start walking along the deserted road in the heart of the mountainous landscape, underneath open skies.

Who is this man? Why is he walking on this particular road? Where did he come from? Was he heading for the Bekaa Valley? Where is his accent from? Will we ever know? This man has suddenly lost all sense of familiarity, not only with the world around him, with the elements of nature, with other human beings, but with himself as well. By force of circumstance, he becomes nothing more than immediate perceptions, instinct; the remembrance of certain gestures, of the body, of a song's chorus playing in his head; the anxiety provoked by this blank memory.

In *Al-wadi*, the threat unfolds on several levels before exploding. It is present, from the beginning of the film, even before the first images appear. The threat is present, with the bloodied man without a past, of whom we know nothing, and who knows nothing. He is a threat to himself, but also to the people whom he helps nonetheless. The unknown, the stranger, is, as we all know, threatening. Similarly, the stranger instinctively senses an imperceptible danger from the women and men who take him to their estate, where armed men restrict his freedom of movement.

In the eye of the hurricane

The threat never ceases to be present, it weighs prolongedly over Lebanon, in a region that is unstable, to say the least. And the dreaded war, which we are promised year after year, its explosion, which occurs abruptly, brutally, does not necessarily represent, even as it becomes reality, the end of the threat. It opens it up even further, disrupting one's relation to time, to space and to oneself. This war strikes everything around the estate, but does not directly affect our characters, as if they were standing in the eye of the hurricane; a hurricane whose terrifying impact they can hear, but of which they have no images, and no precise information (telephone and power stations, as well as satellite relay stations must have been hit, isolating them from the rest of the world). It's a hurricane that leaves the protagonists to their own devices: the people of the estate to their vain drugs production; the armed men to their search for friends; and the stranger to his recovered memory.

The Bekaa Valley is situated between two mountain ranges, Mount Lebanon and the Anti-Lebanon. These two mountain ranges dominate the valley, but also wedge it; they protect it as surely as they threaten it.

Our protagonist's amnesia is at once a kind of black hole and a blank page, on which the instant, the immediate perception writes itself, in sharp opposition with the world of the people on the estate, with their perilous affairs, with their ambition, with the state of the country and of the entire region.

In my previous film, the main character used a trip abroad as a pretext to leave Beirut and isolate himself in a mountain hotel. The film escaped (everything took place at night, which inevitably blurred outlines) and enclosed itself within the walls of a hotel room, which it practically never left, except at the very end. With *Al-wadi*, space, strictly speaking, is totally open. The high mountain, the road, the valley, the large estate, the house with its large windows... And the sky, always immense, domineering, crushing, from the very first shots of the movie. Of course, the space closes in for a while in the room where our amnesiac is sequestered; but the sudden exterior violence will topple everything, opening the field paradoxically and considerably, giving it, if I may say, its full and terrible magnitude, thus merging earth and sky.

Ghassan Salhab

Post mortem omne animal triste

Ghassan Salhab's harsh and demanding filmmaking does not give itself up easily, refusing all compromise or concession, no doubt out of fear of being forced to strike a bargain with the dominant commercial cinematic form it shies away from at all cost. In a world of permanent spectacularisation that is more and more ours, such refusal is a badge of honour. This is not filmmaking that comes to us easily, but one to which we have to go. In a sense, it is filmmaking that 'deserves' such effort.

This cinematographic path that Ghassan Salhab has been steadfastly pursuing for over twenty-five years makes him one of the most important filmmakers in post-civil war Lebanese cinema. This has not turned him into a father figure, but into a rather lonely one (which, when one gets to know him, is aptly fitting); a solitary character hovering right above a Lebanese scene that some claim is in turmoil. This undeniable distinction he holds in the midst of the Beirut melee comes largely from the fact that among all the local filmmakers, he is doubtlessly one of the most rigorous, constant and prolific in his work.

Thus, after a first succession of short films made during the 1980s and until the mid-1990s such as *The Key*, *After Death*, and *Afriqué Fantôme*, which all helped refine his style, Salhab began steadily turning out a progression of fiction feature films, at the rate of one every three or four years: *Phantom Beirut*, *Terra Incognita*, *The Last Man*, and *The Mountain*. Today, these films, along with his latest, *Al-wadi*, make up the core body of his oeuvre. The first three films on the list now constitute a seminal trilogy on Beirut melancholy, without having necessarily been conceived of as such from the outset. An experimental, mid-length film of exceptional aesthetic and metaphysical value, (*Posthume*), formed the closure of this cycle on Beirut melancholy, like a post-script sent from the underworld. A series of shorter films, at once visual essays, studies and intimate diaries, often combining fiction and documentary, such as *La Rose de Personne*, *My Living Body*, *My Dead Body*, and *Narcissus Lost*, join this hybrid, polymorphous body of work, as well as two entirely unique offerings, the feature-length documentary 1958 and the even lesser-known *Brief Encounter with Jean-Luc Godard*, or, *Cinema as Metaphor*.

In fact, all of Salhab's films are poetic-philosophical essays of sorts (with essay here also referring to its original meaning as attempt). He creates a *mise-en-abyme*, challenges and questions both the status of the image (film/video, animated/static, surface/depth) as well as the status of the narrative itself (documentary/fiction, collective/personal, testimonial/interpretive, true/false, empathetic/distantiated, diegetic/extra-diegetic). What Salhab works on, for this is in fact what works on him in turn, is the fundamental question of the double impossibility of being and unbeing in the world. This gives rise to filmmaking over which reigns an uncertainty as ontological as much as it is existential, deeply affecting the relationships of both director and viewer to the narrative, the image, the direction and more generally to art itself.

An ephemeral flutter of life

It is Salhab's acute awareness of the tragic, sometimes pathetic dimension of historical existence that affords his work a certain form of empathetic distance. Of course, the experience of war in his native country, in all its horror and absurdity, has only served to compound that feeling. What remains, then, is a powerful sense of historical and existential melancholy, (dis)embodied in slow-moving figures that circulate their way from film to film, ghosts (or vampires, like in *The Last Man*), wandering all alone, just as absent to themselves as they are to others. By being forced into their furthest cinematographic corners, the very substance of these creatures, of the city, begins to disintegrate, both literally and figuratively, reduced to the improbable possibility of their presence. In *Afrique Fantôme*, the old man on his deathbed put it perfectly when he intoned: "That which a recording captures is nothing but a ghost."

The life we have been given is nothing but an ephemeral flutter (of a wing, an eyelash, a heart, of whatever we want), and there is very little comfort to be found anywhere or with anyone. Neither love nor war is a viable outlet. *Phantom Beirut* already showed us what might as well have been the motto of *Al-wadi*: *post bellum omne animal triste*. Worse yet, death itself seems to bring no respite, for no one is sadder in Salhab's films than the spectral figures haunting them; for even when the threshold to the afterlife has been crossed, as in *The Mountain*, it is a film that could, upon its closing like a nighttime tomb, end with the epitaph: *post mortem omne animal triste*.

Reborn in the next film

Yet the only path this filmmaker treads, for it is the only one offered to us all, is the one that goes through the land of the dead, this land where we must all go, losing our memory along the way, desperately trying to hang on some debris from the past in order to reclaim some fragments of a present that also escapes and eludes us. One of the actors in *Phantom Beirut*, speaking as himself in an extra-diegetic commentary within the film, said: "We want to rise again. To be reborn. Even though we aren't really dead. We're merely dying." This is exactly who Salhab is: one dying, incessantly reminding us that we are too. Is that why he is, to my knowledge, one of the only filmmakers to have put his own death into one of his films? At the end of *The Mountain*, he appears for a few seconds, unexpectedly, lying in the snow, the camera capturing his last breath after he has just seemingly killed himself with a shotgun blast. This practically non-diegetic insertion of himself into his own fictional universe conjures up an extreme image, where the director's cinematic suicide becomes the drain, both literally and figuratively, through which both his blood and his film escape.

The only rebirth possible, as far as he's concerned, seems to be the one that will take place through the next film. Perhaps, however, it is not so much a question of rebirth as a matter of temporary survival, or better yet, a simple, ephemeral and maybe terminal spurt, in a never-ending cinematographic agony. *Al-wadi* is today the most recent of this filmmaker's spurts of energy before death, showing us that as of yet, whether he wants to or not, he still walks amongst us although he sometimes dreams that he is almost not one of us anymore.

Raphaël Millet



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Ghassan Salhab was born in Dakar, Senegal, in 1958. In addition to making his own films, he collaborates on screenplays in Lebanon and France. He also teaches film in Lebanon. Ghassan Salhab has also published his texts and articles in various magazines. In 2012, he published his first anthology, *Fragments du livre du naufrage*.

Films

1986: *La clef* (15 min.). 1991: *Après la mort* (21 min.). 1991: *L'autre* (10 min.). 1994: *Afrique fantôme* (21 min.). 1998: *Beyrouth fantôme* (116 min.). 1999: *De la séduction* (Koregie: N. Khodor, 32 min.). 2000: *La rose de personne* (10 min.). 2000: *Baalbeck* (Koregie: Akram Zaatari und M. Soueid, 56 min.). 2002: *Terra incognita* (120 min.). 2003: *Mon corps vivant, mon corps mort* (14 min.). 2004: *Narcisse perdu* (15 min.). 2005: *Brève rencontre avec Jean-Luc Godard, ou le cinéma comme métaphore* (40 min.). 2006: *Le dernier homme/The Last Man* (101 min.). 2006: *Temps mort* (7 min.). 2007: *(Posthume)* (28 min.). 2009: *1958* (66 min.). 2011: *La Montagne/The Mountain* (80 min.). 2014: *Al-wadi / The Valley*.