

JOCELYNE SAAB

جوسلين صعب



TERRASSEN presents a selection of works by Jocelyne Saab divided in four screenings: Part 1 devoted to her films about Palestine, and Part 2 to her Beirut Trilogy on the 16th of June. Followed by a double screening of her feature films Part 3: *A Suspended Life* and Part 4: *Once Upon a Time in Beyrouth* on the 14th of August.

Jocelyne Saab (1948, Beirut – 2019, Paris) was as a filmmaker active for decades, leaving behind a precious body of work characterized by urgency and human resilience. Originally trained as a reporter and war journalist, her deep personal investment in the times and places she lived and worked is evident in her irreducible cinema. Her work spans from intensely political non-fiction to narrative filmmaking and critical reflection, including both short and feature films.

All the films are presented in newly restored versions with English subtitles.

Jocelyne Saab, the Stars of War

Nicole Brenez, 2013

Translated by Jonathan Mackris

Reporter, photographer, screenwriter, producer, director, visual artist, founder of the Cultural Resistance International Film Festival, Jocelyne Saab was born and raised in Beirut. Her work has been devoted entirely to underprivileged populations, displaced peoples, exiled combatants, war-torn cities, and those in the fourth world without a voice. Her creative journey has been one of the most exemplary and profound, rooted completely in historical violence, the multiple ways in which one can participate in it and resist it, and the awareness of the gestures and images needed to document it, reflect on it and remedy it.



After being hired as a journalist by her friend Etel Adnan in 1973, Jocelyne Saab became a war reporter. In this respect, her work belongs to the great literary tradition of Albert Londres or Ernest Hemingway, as well as other great poets and filmmakers such as Peter Whitehead, who got his start on British television, or Dick Fontaine, who never stopped working for it. This anchor in the here and now of a situation determines the principle characteristics structuring her practice: a demand for factuality, relevance, clarity and speed with respect to the practical and stylistic decisions one takes. However, such an emphasis on current events, for Jocelyne Saab, is systematically linked to the political analysis that flows through her films.



Jocelyne Saab's art thus engages in a profound relationship to images: a relationship that consists in understanding at the outset who will participate in constituting collective history, in evaluating the importance of images for constituting its memory, and in filming and editing them in a manner that is equal to the

historical stakes of their task. On all these levels, her films raise cinema to the fullness of its responsibilities. This is most evident in the fresco she painted of her country, Lebanon. *The New Crusaders of the Orient* (1975), *Lebanon in Turmoil* (1975), *Children of War* (1976), *Beirut, Never Again* (1976, with Etel Adnan), *Letter from Beirut* (1978), *The Ship of Exile* (1982), *Beirut, My City* (1983), *What's Going On?* (2009), *One Dollar a Day* (2016, on Syrian refugees) ... to which we can add the fiction films *A Suspended Life* (1985, with Juliet Berto), then later *Once Upon a Time, Beirut: Story of a Star* (1994, a cinematic fable on the visual memory of a city in ruins) together form the panels of one of the most remarkable frescoes in the history of cinema, not simply regarding Lebanon but as far as all relationships between an artist and a nation are concerned. Jocelyne Saab documents her country's bruises, the

terrible wounds, the divisions, the aporias, the poetry and the formidable energy that is always reborn. We may compare this lengthy enterprise, which offers an account of events, collective realities and deeply intimate feelings, to the work Johan Van der Keuken has done in Amsterdam or that Wang Bing is currently doing in China.

Among the pieces of this fresco, the "Beirut Trilogy" stands out, comprised of *Beirut, Never Again*, *Letter from Beirut* and *Beirut, My City*. Caught in the heat of war, Jocelyne Saab creates new relationships between political analysis, subjective position, and visual expression, which document at one and the same time the eventfulness of combat, the collective reflections on the situation, and the multiple ways that war affects the psyche. Such an alliance is demonstrated in the opening to *Beirut, My City*: standing in the smoking ruins of her house just after it has been bombed by the Israeli air force, Jocelyne Saab, microphone in hand, describes the situation, then explores the ruins, evoking 150 years of family life destroyed before her eyes. Rarely has the expression "presence of mind" been so embodied. In long silent tracking shots, filmed at dawn when the shooting stopped, *Beirut, Never Again* documents both the devastation suffered by her beloved city and the residue of daily activities that suddenly seem surreal in this nightmarish landscape. Like the opening of *Germany Year Zero* (Roberto Rossellini, 1948) over the ruins of Berlin, the visual power of this sequence returns cinema to its necessity, that is to say its descriptive power. *Letter to Beirut*, sent to her friends abroad, likewise reports on the destruction of South Lebanon, refugee camps, soldiers on the war path. Her conclusion is final: "Lebanon no longer exists," and until now history has proven her right. Despite the endless violence of the conflict in Iraq or today in Syria, Beirut remains the paradigm of relentless agony. The writer and visual artist Etel Adnan sums up the relevance of the *Beirut Trilogy* with the following:

Jocelyne instinctively grasped the essence of this conflict, thanks to her political courage, her moral integrity, and her profound intelligence. No document on this war has ever equaled

the importance of the cinematic work [*travail cinématographique*] Jocelyne produced in the three films she devoted to Lebanon. It's a rare work, of primary importance for the history of Lebanon, but it is also a study that goes beyond Lebanon and should be studied in university departments interested in sociology and the politics of today's world. (Letter to the author, 20 August 2014).

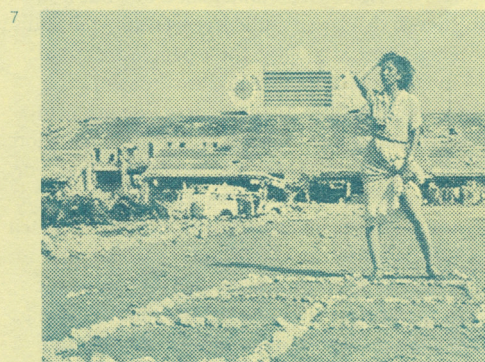


Jocelyne Saab has equally applied her incomparable art of visual political analysis to other territories: Palestine (*Palestinian Women*, 1974; *Palestinians Keep Fighting*, 1973), Iran (*Iran: Utopia on the Move*, 1980), Vietnam (*The Lady of Saigon*, 1997), Turkey (*Imaginary Postcards*, 2016), Iraqi Kurdistan, Syria, and especially Egypt, where she often lived (*Egypt, The City of the Dead*, 1977; *The Ghosts of Alexandria*, 1986; *Al'Alma', Bellydancers*, 1989). In 2005, *Dunia*, a musical comedy made in Cairo dedicated to pleasure in an Islamic context, earned her death threats and censorship.

As each of her films attest, whether documentary or fiction, Jocelyne Saab brilliantly articulates a situation, its context and its different dimensions: social, political, cultural and affective. In this respect, *The Sahara is Not for Sale* (1977) is a masterful example of how to document conflict that could be taught in any film school or journalism program. This methodological work, which captures points of view of all the parties involved without forgetting anyone (for example, prisoners of war), is sustained by the admirable visual treatment of the desert, a limitless motif that remains so through all of its variations and specific deployments. At the same time, objective rationality does not exclude taking an ethical position. Thus, the film begins with the fate reserved for women and for children, where any other, less subtle essay would have ended.



Since 2007, Jocelyne Saab has also worked in contemporary art. Under the title "Strange Games and Bridges", she completed her first installation, a 22-screen piece drawing on her work on war, for the National Museum of Singapore. The same year, she exhibited her photography at the Dubai Art Fair. At the time of her death, in January 2019, she was preparing several films, including a portrait of May Shigenobu (daughter of Fusako Shigenobu), an autobiography, and her first printed collection of photographs. With its unique combination of analysis and sensitivity, Jocelyne Saab's fearless and crucial work documents four decades of our collective history from the Middle East, with both love (towards the victims of its conflicts) and irony (towards its political leaders).



We may find the emblem of Jocelyne Saab's art in her penultimate short film, *One Dollar a Day*, a plea to raise the minimum alms given to Syrian refugees in Lebanon. In the Bekaa plain, thousands of families live in exile under enormous advertising banners recycled into tents. A small, ragged population protests under enormous images of necklaces, perfumes and luxury brands, forming a sinister collage contrasting the waste of unbridled capitalism with the immense destitution of its victims.

Jocelyne Saab photographs and films the camps, makes enormous portraits of the refugees and, with the help of cranes, suspends them everywhere in Beirut. Over billboards across the city, she superimposes the haunting question: "How to live on one dollar a day?" So that the image becomes a visual cry in favor of the underprivileged, so that no one escapes the consciousness of suffering and injustice, so that humanity becomes again the synonym for kindness and understanding it once was: these are the tasks that Jocelyne Saab has devoted to cinema.

This portrait of Jocelyne Saab (1948-2019) was originally written to accompany a 2013 retrospective of her work at the Cinémathèque Française, and it was later published in modified form in the essay collection *Manifestations: Écrits politiques sur le cinéma et autres arts filmiques* (de l'incidence éditeur, 2020). Its French title, "Les astres de la guerre," is a play on the title of Goya's series of paintings on the Napoleonic Wars, *Los desastres de la Guerra* (1810-1820).

This translation was published on the occasion of the series 'The New Lebanese Cinema of the 1970s and 1980s'. Courtesy of Nicole Brenez

> <https://sabzian.be/text/jocelyne-saab-the-stars-of-war>

1 - *Les femmes palestiniennes*, 2 - *Les enfants de la guerre*, 3 - *Beyrouth jamais plus*, 4 - *Lettre de Beyrouth*, 5 - *Beyrouth, ma ville*, 6 - *Once Upon a Time in Beyrouth*, 7 - *A Suspended Life*

SUNDAY JUNE 16, 2024

(Part 1 and Part 2)

Gloria

Rådhuspladsen 59, KBH

Part 1 (16h00):

PALESTINE

Les femmes palestiniennes (1974, 10 min.)

Le front du refus (1975, 13 min.)

Les enfants de la guerre (1976, 11 min.)

Le bateau de l'exil (1982, 16 min.)

Part 2 (17h30):

BEIRUT TRILOGY

Beyrouth jamais plus (1976, 37 min.)

Lettre de Beyrouth (1978, 50 min.)

Beyrouth, ma ville (1982, 37 min.)

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WEDNESDAY AUGUST 14, 2024

(Part 3 and Part 4):

Vester Vov Vov

Absalonsgade 5, KBH

Part 3 (19h15)

A Suspended Life

(1985, 90min)

Part 4 (21h30)

Once Upon a Time in Beyrouth

(1994, 104min)

Conversations with Etel Adnan
and Jocelyne Saab

Olivier Hadouchi, 2014
Translated by Sis Matthé

[Excerpt]

Saab: Etel, what did the screening of Lebanon in a Whirlwind (several decades after it was made) at the Cinémathèque française provoke in you? 1

Adnan: In your film, we clearly see that all young people looked alike. They all lived in a similar way, except that they all blamed the others. The Muslims spoke like the Phalangists, who themselves spoke like the Shiites, and so on. Fundamentally, they had the same problems. They led similar lives. They suffered from the same economic and social mismanagement of the country, from the same corruption. The political parties diverted them towards ideas of fear, so that every group we see in the film says: "I'm afraid." Instead of saying: I'm afraid, so let us talk to each other and work together. The parties had an interest in people not getting along, in not fully discussing their shared problems, because if they had faced these problems, these similar common demands, it would have created the possibility of democracy. The leaders responsible for this state of affairs, through their clientelism and feudal practices, knowingly lied, feeding hatred of the other, pitting their troops against other communities. It was an operation of propaganda and manipulation; the keys to the problem were never exposed. Foreign television stations did not allow us to speak, did not invite us to take part in debates, the French spoke for the Lebanese.

Saab: Does the film still seem relevant to you?

Adnan: I'd never seen it in its entirety, and I had the impression that we hadn't made any progress, that it was a film about a burning issue in Lebanon. First of all because the leaders are the same, except replaced by their children. The discourse of the men in power has not changed. The government, the members of parliament and the party leaders use the same words. This film also showed the naivety of the common people. Poor children, young people who are innocent, courageous, maybe even admirable, but who don't talk about the real issues. They don't say that they're unemployed, that they're poor and frustrated... They tell us that they're afraid because their boss tells them that whoever it is is going to attack them. And they are incapable of dialogue. They all had the same social background, but their political leaders stressed their religious difference in order to push them to fight. It wasn't even a theological war like in the Middle Ages, like in the religious wars between Protestants and Catholics, for example. Today, no religious group understands anything about the other: Muslims know nothing about Christian religion and vice versa. It's not a war of religion but a war in which religion is used for strictly political purposes, against a background of corruption. The party leaders get rich, have young people who are willing to die for them, literally, and they're worshipped, which goes right to their heads. The common youth feed this madness, this lust for power of the leaders.

Saab: Do you think that a film like Lebanon in a Whirlwind can teach us something?

Adnan: I think it's necessary for people to be able to analyze it and put it into context, if we show it to a larger audience in Tunisia, Egypt or Paris, for example. A short introduction to the film to inform the audience seems necessary. At the screening at the Cinémathèque française, the audience understood. Some of my French friends were there and they understood, and an American friend understood too. But if you show it to a larger audience, even an Arab audience, some might say: these people are afraid... But in reality, these people are the same. The fear was instilled by the leaders. The problem isn't religious or theological, it's the exploitation of religion, the way of playing on emotions. For example, for me, Beirut was murdered after the war, rather than during the war. We constructed so much. Twenty-storey buildings on roads that only allow one car in each direction. The concrete has suffocated Beirut. The rich spend their holidays abroad, and the poor suffocate without even realizing it; their windows are being swallowed up by those of their neighbours, less than a metre away. If the neighbours talk to each other, and they both find out they have the same problems, it could bring them closer together. The most beautiful mountains in the Mediterranean, the Lebanese mountains, have been devastated.

[...]

Saab: What is your analysis of the fact that it was a woman and not a man who felt the need to analyze what was happening in Lebanon?

Adnan: Perhaps it was a coincidence. Maybe if you hadn't done it, there wouldn't have been another woman to do it. You were a young, innocent, courageous and intelligent woman who wasn't looking for personal profit. I'm not saying a man couldn't have done it, I don't know. In my opinion, in Lebanon, and even if it is difficult to generalize about women and men, women have proved to be more interesting. In art, and even in business or journalism... Women fight more, they are happier when they manage to do something. They know they're pioneers. I know that I was the first girl of my generation to take a taxi. I was one of the first girls to work in an office. Because of the Second World War, there were foreign offices: the French army, the British army... This period coincided with the first generation of female graduates. Historically, women moved around much more in these countries. They took risks, and they suffered. Much more than the men, who continued on their path. When you see Saudi women going to study in America, doing PhDs and living by themselves. If they return, they're made to wear a chador, they get locked up. They become schizophrenic and depressed, you know. It's a happy coincidence, Jocelyne. You picked up a camera without going to film school, and you have a keen eye. You need talent as well as courage, one is not enough, you need both. And a little genius.

[...]

Adnan: Anyway, we had a nice conversation.

Saab: Olivier, you didn't say anything.

Adnan: He's amused by our discussion.

It was very interesting.

Adnan: And I must say that even if the French and the Jews have left Algeria, I have the impression that the idea of diversity is still present there. The energy there is different from Morocco or Tunisia. It reminds me of Lebanon.

> <https://www.sabzian.be/index.php/text/conversations-with-etel-adnan-and-jocelyne-saab>

TERRASSEN is a roving cinema in Copenhagen that engages with the social life of film. All screenings are free and open to everyone. For information on past and future screenings visit terrassen.bio.

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JOCELYNE SAAB



جمعية جوسلين صاب