“Introduction: A Synthesis and Testimony of Jocelyne Saab’s Life and Work”

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in **ReFocus: The Films of Jocelyne Saab: Films, Artworks and Cultural Events for the Arab World**

Mathilde Rouxel, Stefanie Van de Peer (eds)
Series: ReFocus: The International Directors Series
Copyright Date: 2021
Published by: Edinburgh University Press
Pages: 304
https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctv1vtz8c3

Introduction: A Synthesis and Testimony of Jocelyne Saab's Life and Work[1]

Mathilde Rouxel and Stefanie Van de Peer

Jocelyne Saab's films, photography and artworks bear witness. From her early beginnings in television in the 1970s to her recent contemporary art installations, her *oeuvre* challenges its spectators. Born in 1948 in Beirut, as a young woman with a great curiosity for the world, she began as a journalist and war-reporter at the start of the 1970s before going on to become a film director, photographer and artist.

Saab's training was not in filmmaking. In Beirut, and later in Paris, she studied political economy, and while this fulfilled her family's expectations rather than her own desires, she recognised the importance of that education in her work:

> When I was little I always wanted to work with images, but I wasn't allowed to. 'It's not a job for girls'... I'd spent my whole school life at the Dames de Nazareth, surrounded by girls. So I chose to go into the world of men. My father, who was a businessman and had travelled a lot, was a role model for me. I threw myself into studying political economy. I followed it through. It wasn't what I wanted to do, but I've since understood the important influence that this training had on my way of structuring my work and of seeing the world. By nature, I'm someone who's instinctive rather than reflective, but there's a certain rigour in my films that I inherited from the ways of thinking instilled in me while studying economy. (Rouxel, 2015: 262)

Saab was born in Beirut on 30 April 1948. She grew up in a Christian family, in a huge mansion in a cosmopolitan area in West Beirut. She went to a Christian school in the east of the city. She started studying economics in Saint-Joseph University in Beirut and discovered political activism. Although she stayed away from the political groups, she did take part in meetings and humanitarian actions for the Palestinian refugee camps around the Lebanese capital.

It was in Paris that she was finally able to get closer to the image. After a few freelance jobs on Lebanese radio – where she presented a music programme called "Les

1 This introduction is a translated (by Miriam Heard), abridged and edited version of the introduction (in French) to Mathilde Rouxel's 2015 monograph *Jocelyne Saab: La Mémoire Indomptée*. Beirut: Les Éditions Dar An-Nahar.

Marsupilamis ont les yeux bleus" ("The Marsupilamis have Blue Eyes") – and on Lebanese television where she presented the news, she was hired by French television as a reporter. Daring and fearless, she covered the conflicts in Egypt, Libya and the Palestinian territories, to report on the political situation. Saab was one of the very few women working in the field, which, while it attracted the contempt of some, won her the trust of others. She was commissioned to report on Libya (*Gaddafi: The Green March*, 1973; *Portrait of Gaddafi*, 1973); in Egypt (*October War*, 1973; *Middle East: Egypt*, 1973; *War in Orient: Egypt*, 1973); in Syria (*Golan, On the Frontline*, 1973); in the Golan (*Middle East: Israel*, 1973); in Iraq (*Iraq, War in Kurdistan*, 1973). She reported from Palestine (*Palestinians Keep Fighting*, 1973; *Palestinian Women*, 1974; and *The Rejection Front,* 1975) and was about to set off for Vietnam with a French team when war broke out in Lebanon. Prioritising the need to document this terrible upheaval, she decided to return to Beirut and report on the war as an independent journalist. Her reports were shown on three major public French television channels (TF1, Antenne 2, France 3), throughout Europe (Canal Plus in France, RAI in Italy, ZDF in Germany, TV Romande in Switzerland and in Sweden), and internationally (NBC in the US, NHK in Japan, RTA in Algeria and CBC in Canada). Her reports describe the development of the civil war and its deterioration over the years into a stalemate. She dedicated approximately fifteen documentaries to the subject: *New Crusader in Orient*, 1975; *Lebanon in Turmoil,* 1975; *Children of War*, 1976; *South Lebanon, History of a Sieged Village*, 1976; *Beirut, Never Again*, 1976; *For a Few Lives*, 1976; *Letter From Beirut*, 1978; *Beirut, My City*, 1982; *Lebanese, Hostages of their City*, 1982; *The Ship of Exile*, 1982; *Lebanon: State of Shock*, 1982; *The Woman Killer*, 1988; as well as one fiction film: *Ghazel al-Banat (A Suspended Life)*, 1985.

This war changed her relationship with the moving image. Fortified by the strong sense of independence that characterised her, both aesthetically and politically, from 1975 onwards Saab decided to escape the constraints of the journalistic format in order to develop her own language. The war, engulfing her country, inspired her to pick up the camera and create her images; but when she turned the focus away from the war and examined what had been "the garden of her childhood", Beirut and Lebanon, her language became markedly more personal, the tone less militant and increasingly poetic. Overwhelmed by the horrors of the war, by the absurdity of a world that had become impossible to describe, she turned to other art forms, plastic and narrative, using them as different tools to bear witness: when it was no longer possible to show reality, fiction became the necessary tool of expression in an infernal war. Her first feature-length work of fiction, *Une vie suspendue* (*A Suspended Life*,

selected at the Directors' Fortnight in Cannes in 1985 under the title *Adolescente, sucre d'amour* [*Adolescent, Sugar of Love*]) was filmed in the middle of the war. This film was followed, after the war, by other feature-length fiction projects, two of which were set in Beirut and were about Lebanon (*Il était un fois Beyrouth: Histoire d'une star*, [*Once Upon a Time in Beirut: Story of a Star*] 1994; *What's Going On?* 2009). More recently Saab turned to photography and video installations to depict her understanding of the world. *Strange Games and Bridges* (2007), a video installation presented in Singapore, portrays her thoughts about the renewed outbreak of war in Lebanon in 2006, shedding light on the severity of the wounds caused by the war and re-opened by the resurging violence. Once again, to depict the unspeakable emotion engulfing her, she renewed her artistic practices of representation. With the videos exhibited in a specially-designed space, she proposed a particularly creative alternative to fiction and documentary. In 2015 she turned to painting, re-colouring with gold, blue or green tints the black and white photographs she had taken in the Syrian refugee camps in Lebanon. These photos were printed in *One Dollar a Day* project, in the format of billboards and put up around Beirut to denounce Lebanon's "new urbanism" which welcomed more than a million refugees who were then left to survive on less than $1 a day. In this work the colours and medium of paint emphasise hope, as the refugee children are depicted as gilded angels in a world in which value shifts multiple times: from the photographed jewels onto the billboard canvases displayed in the upmarket areas of Beirut, to those billboards being torn down and re-used by homeless people to build shacks, allowing a protective environment to develop despite the circumstances: without cement to build with, the rocks holding down the canvas material of the billboards become precious stones in themselves.

Towards the end of her life, Jocelyne Saab was working on a feature-length film project dedicated to Mei, the daughter of Fusako Shigenobu, leader of the Japanese Red Army in Beirut in 1973. Mei Shigenobu was born in complete secrecy in the Lebanese Beqaa. Her father was a Palestinian Fedayeen whose name was kept a secret; her mother was a militant internationalist activist who dedicated her life to the revolution. Telling their stories allowed Saab to talk about one of the most shocking experience of her life, the Siege of Beirut in 1982, which forced Palestinian fighters to leave Lebanon. Fusako Shigenobu went with them, while Mei was raised by the Comrades and barely saw her mother before she was arrested in Osaka in 2000. After this date, Mei took back control of her identity. However, Saab was too ill by that point to finish this large-scale project, and instead she decided to create a very short film that emphasised Mei's story. *My Name Is Mei Shigenobu* (2018) is

not just a short extract of the film that she was aiming to make, but a testimony of her last political preoccupation in front of a world she was slowly leaving.

Beirut and Lebanon, though her preferred subjects, are not the only places that Saab turned her attention to from 1975 onwards. However, the aesthetic and emotional fracture that marks the evolution of her artistic work from the very beginning of the war, merits attention. In order to understand the context within which she was reporting, it is useful to provide a brief overview of the events that stand out during the period of the civil war.

Lebanon and Civil War(s)

Lebanon, because of its religious and cultural diversity, as well as its geographical position, has often found itself at the centre of regional ambitions and international geopolitics. An unstable recent history culminated in successive waves of Palestinian refugees and fighters arriving after the creation of the State of Israel in 1948. The interplay of these factors led to an increased communitarianism and polarisation within society, and the formation of pro- and anti-Palestinian militias, which led to the outbreak of war in 1975.

These are the events that led Jocelyne Saab to abandon her journey to Vietnam and return to Beirut to witness and record events. She filmed *Le Liban dans la tourmente* (*Lebanon in Turmoil*), reporting on a conflict in which everyone waged a war on everyone else, "with a flower in the gun" – guns seized by more and more hands, as more and more people joined the militias; guns that men, women and children became experts in handling. Beirut was soon divided in two. The films Saab made on this subject (*Lettre de Beyrouth*, (*Letter from Beirut*) 1978; *Beyrouth, ma ville*, (*Beirut, My City*) 1982) are enlightening: despite the best efforts on the part of the militias to separate Christians and Muslims, the civil population was never really divided – not in the same way that the communities in ex-Yugoslavia were for example.

One event led to another: assassinations, changing political alliances, and the involvement since 1976 of Syria and Israel in the Lebanese conflict. The fighting escalated and spread within each camp, until 1989, when the Taif Agreement was signed, reaffirming the independence of Lebanon and introducing major political reforms. As such, the war was interrupted by a general amnesty that demanded a ceasefire and national reconciliation. Saab filmed this war right up to the end of the siege of Beirut. With her feature-length fiction *Une vie suspendue* (*A Suspended Life*, 1985) she proposed an entirely new way of looking at the war. In 1989 she investigated Jocelyne Khoueiry's radical turn from war to religion, but she could no longer film conflict. After 1991 Lebanon entered into a phase of reconstruction. In

her own way, and well before others, Saab was an active agent in that reconstruction, as she lay the foundations for a Cinémathèque Libanaise with her 1992 project "Mille et une images" ("1001 Images") and the film, *Il était une fois à Beyrouth* (*Once Upon a Time in Beirut*, 1994) was born out of this project. This is a film that functions as heritage, an homage to pre-war Beirut, a record for future generations who had never known the Beirut of their parents – this so-called "Switzerland of the Middle East" where life had been sweet. A retrospective that was at once historical and cinematographic –the first of its kind – gave hope for a future.

She then turned her gaze away from Beirut until the bombing started again in 2006, when she filmed the bridges and motorways destroyed by the Israeli bombing campaign on the southern outskirts of the city and the south of the country. The wounds reopened; the pain was raw. Finally, in 2009 Saab made peace with her home city, and with Nasri Sayegh she went in search of its urban gardens in *What's Going On?*, a film in which the country takes on a mythological dimension, finding its strength and its beauty.

Cinema, Archives and History

Jocelyne Saab's position in this particular political context was personal. Her anguished interest in Lebanon was due to her experiences, her history, her identity as a Lebanese Christian woman who defended the Palestinian cause in a country strongly afflicted by sectarianism. Her position was delicate, dangerous even. She received death threats and was actively targeted after the release of her 1976 film *Les Enfants de la guerre* (*Children of War*). In the film she depicted the blood-thirsty nature of the Christian militias who massacred men, women and children in a Muslim neighbourhood in the north-east of Beirut, La Quarantaine. She refused to leave the country or stop recording what she was seeing. However, she did develop a new language to express herself. That traumatic period made her reflect on the meaning of images and their impact. Always open-minded, she left behind her explicit and militant rhetoric, which – while always characterised by a remarkable objectivity – had, up to then, motivated her reporting, in order to adopt a language that is increasingly poetic but remained politically engaged.

In 1991 the Lebanese parliament voted an amnesty law applicable to all war crimes committed between 1975 and 1990, thereby relegating immeasurable suffering of often profound trauma to individual memories, rather than developing a collective work of remembrance. It became impossible to look backwards. Yet in Beirut everything still points to a past that nobody wants to remember. With a film such as *What's Going On?* (2009), or

her video installation *Strange Games and Bridges* (2006), Jocelyne Saab showed that she at least has not forgotten anything, and that she is determined to remind the Lebanese people and the wider world of what her country went through. The way in which she filmed what was left standing and not what had been rebuilt, what was and what can no longer be, referred to the issue of constructing a collective memory and conserving a heritage that bears witness to the history of a country.

At the start of the 1970s, Saab was part of what is now called the New Lebanese Cinema. The young Lebanese filmmakers working since the civil war in Lebanon wanted to propose a new form of cinema, while committing themselves to depicting as honestly as possible the political and social realities of their country. Many of these young filmmakers were trained journalists who had studied in Europe before returning home; their activism – in general left-wing and sympathetic to the Palestinian cause – gave their productions a distinct political colour. Besides Saab, one could mention Borhane Alaouié or Maroun Baghdadi who share a similar concept of filmmaking as a form of resistance and protest. The artists and filmmakers who openly took sides or who were creatively active during the violence that shook Lebanon are few and far between. As such, because of their scarcity, the productions of these three filmmakers are precious documents.

In the ensemble of films about Beirut, it is clear that the historical fracture wrought by the war provoked a crisis in language and representation that would profoundly disrupt Saab's relationship with images. This is particularly clear if one looks beyond her films at her entire body of work. If prior to 1977 her work focused on Lebanon, after 1977 she reported from countries across the Arab world, touching on subjects that interested her: in 1977 she filmed *Le Sahara n'est pas à vendre* (*The Sahara is Not for Sale*), about the inhabitants of the desert forced into exile by the rivalry between Morocco and Algeria in the El-Aioun. That year she also returned to Egypt, whose culture and Arab identity she felt very close to, in order to report on the impact of globalisation and the modernisation of Cairo on poorer communities, and the mood in the City of the Dead, which she captured with an attentive and sympathetic gaze in *Égypte, la cité des morts* (*Egypt, the City of the Dead*, 1977). After briefly returning to Beirut to film her city and examine the Palestinian issue during the conflict, she went to Iran where she shot *Iran: l'utopie en marche* (1981), an analysis of the political and social situation in the country after the revolution that had ended the Shah's reign and brought Ayatollah Khomeyni to power. Then it was back to Cairo for a series of reports on the source of Egypt's wealth: beginning with *l'Architecte de Louxor* (*The Architect of Luxor*, 1986) – a portrait of Olivier Sednaoui, the innovative architect who

rejected modernism and concrete in favour of mud brick and majestic constructions of domes placed on square bases, thereby following in the path of the ancient master builders. This was followed by *Les Fantômes d'Alexandrie* (*The Ghosts of Alexandria), La Croix des Pharaons* (*The Cross of the Pharaohs*) and *L'Amour d'Allah (L'intégrisme)* (*The Love of Allah (Fundamentalism)*), all in 1986. The style of these documentaries was different from the commissioned reportage work at the beginning of her career. War, and the impossibility of its representation through traditional means, enabled her to develop a new language, entirely her own.

After the Lebanese civil war wound down, Saab refused to film conflict situations. Aside from her installation *Strange Games and Bridges*, for which she returned to Beirut to film the bridges destroyed by the Israeli bombing campaign during the 2006 war, she decided to dedicate herself to life instead. In 1989 she filmed a documentary about belly dancers in Egypt, *Les Almées*, shown on Canal Plus in France. In 1991, in Bordeaux she made a documentary about the process of *in vitro* fertilisation in hospital, *Fécondation in video*. For this she used a medical probe equipped with a camera – the most advanced of its time – that allowed her to film the inside of a woman's body and biologically situate the origins of life. The following year she began the enormous task of recuperating films – both national and international productions – shot in Beirut before the war. This project, "Beyrouth, Mille et une images" ("Beirut, 1001 Images") was undertaken with the aim of building a heritage of Lebanese cinema and creating a cinemathèque in Beirut. It also facilitated the programming of a film festival at the Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris. The archive materials that she gathered formed the basis for a new film, *Il était une fois à Beyrouth: histoire d'une star* (*Once Upon a Time in Beirut: the Story of a Star*,1994) which, built around the plot of two young girls born during the war, used film extracts from a variety of genres and provenances to bring to light countless images of the city before the war.

In 1998 Jocelyne Saab returned to the documentary format with *La Dame de Saigon* (*The Lady of Saigon*), a portrait of a female doctor and activist working with minorities in Vietnam during the war. In some ways a mirror-image of the director herself, the doctor became a politician at the end of the war, and still, today, despite her age, leads the battle against child malnutrition. One recognises, in the courage of a woman who committed herself to her country and its people, a reflection of the director herself, who – in her own time – committed herself to Beirut and its populations suffering around her.

In 2006 she made *Dunia*, a feature film about a young woman studying poetry and Sufi dance in search of a sensuality in a country where sexual pleasure is forbidden to

women. A study conducted by the World Health Organisation in 2000 showed that 97% of young girls in Egypt still undergo female genital mutilation (Tag-Eldin et al, 2008). The film was censored in Egypt and Saab was issued with a *fatwa* by religious fundamentalists. The sanction was hard, and the repression against the film was traumatising for the director. In fact, the censorship only intensified awareness of the culture of repressed freedom that the film had itself denounced.

It was only in 2009 that Saab decided to return to Beirut, after the tragic episode of the 2006 war, which she had depicted in *Strange Games and Bridges* (2007), a video installation of twenty-two screens showing archive images of her old films as well as recent images of the bridges destroyed by the Israeli bombing. With her inimitable optimism and zest for life, Saab decided to arrange these images of conflict so as to invite the spectator to wander between them along the paths of a hanging garden. Indeed, throughout her childhood and in her memories, Beirut resembles a large garden that she has continually explored in her work. Her last feature-length film, *What's Going On?* is testimony to this, as it tells the story of a young man, Nasri, looking for the gardens of Beirut and the rest of the world, that seem to have been lost but which the director unearths with boundless sensuality.

The relationship that the artist has with Beirut is unique and profoundly moving. However, the challenges that she faced when she attempted to define her Lebanese identity without referring to the suffering this entails, encouraged her to extend her interest to the whole of the Middle East and the Mediterranean, where she searched for the foundations of her particular aesthetic tendencies and influences. If Egypt and its traditions (particularly the poetry, architecture and dance) occupy a place of privilege in the construction of her personality and the body of her work, the other Mediterranean countries and even further afield in Asia, are no less significant. Many of these countries share the same traditions and have similar taboos, notably concerning the human body, as is evident in *Café du Genre,* her series of six short films produced in 2013 for MuCEM (Musée des civilisations de l'Europe et de la Méditerranée, Museum of European and Mediterranean Civilisations). Made up of six portraits of artists or thinkers critically engaged with issues of the body and gender in the Mediterranean, the films raise questions about liberty and the control of one's own being, questions that resonate with the rest of Saab's work.

So, despite being impressively multidisciplinary, Saab's work has a deep coherence. Through the gaze of the film camera, Saab explored with curiosity and tenderness every corner of her city, her country and the geographical zones that form its culture.



Image 1: Jocelyne Saab and her DOP Olivier Guenneau filming in Western Sahara

By creating a platform for those whose voices are normally not heard, she created portraits of places (Beirut, Cairo, the mountains of Kurdistan, the Bedouin camps in the desert, etc.), that are both unusual and poetic. She captures – in Beirut, Cairo, Kurdistan and in the Saharan desert – something that is at the point of disappearing, of slipping away: the houses, the streets, the traditional buildings, the atmosphere of Beirut of her childhood; in Cairo, the modesty of life, and the culture of dance and poetry; in Kurdistan the potential and risks of independence; in Bedouin culture the possibilities of a peaceful life in the desert. She recorded what might soon be no more than a memory, and she fought against its obliteration. She constructed a heritage. At a retrospective dedicated to the director in March 2013, Olivier Hadouchi wrote about her cinema that it is "a fight for life against everything that mutilates or tries to imprison or restrict it"; that it is a "a battle for the right to talk about and transmit something freely" (Brenez, Hadouchi 2013). Her strong foothold on reality provided her with the means to fight the disintegration that afflicts the culture and identity that she so values. Always willing to listen to women and children, Saab's camera was, time and again, witness to earth shattering events by which war, or a reactionary return to traditions, or increased globalisation, changed the daily lives of those we pay least attention to. Increasingly, the

fracture imposed by war brought her to use her camera in the first person, to go in front of the camera and talk about what *she* saw and what *she* experienced.

Saab's engagement for others was total. She knew how to make the nuanced choices that lead to the construction of a collective memory. Her oeuvre is situated at the intersection of multiple narratives, at the cross-roads of several civilisations, and it appeals to each of us, engaged in the construction of a world history, who are aware of the need to learn the lessons of the past.

Her political engagement and her cinematographic treatises propose alternative terms, methods and instruments for emancipation. "Violent censorship inherently validates that which it is attacking" (Voltaire, 1756); the danger the director faced, throughout her professional life, whatever the format of her productions, is testament to her remarkably sincere ideology. She faced problems of censorship early on in her career: during the war, aside from the death threats she endured after the screening of her report *Les Enfants de la guerre* (*Children of the War*) and nearly being kidnapped in 1982, she was, after the partition of Beirut in 1976, forbidden from crossing the city from east to west – where her family still lived – because of her political positions. *Le Sahara n'est pas à vendre* (*The Sahara is Not for Sale*, 1977) brought her a life-long ban on entering Morocco; *Dunia* in 2006 angered the Egyptian Islamic fundamentalists who pronounced a death sentence on her; and more recently some of her images from the *Sense, Icons and Sensitivity* photography exhibition in several Beirut galleries were censored as some of the subjects were considered indecent.

Jocelyne Saab's ideological coherence is just as profound in her aesthetic engagement. The most powerful lesson to be drawn from her work as an artist is without a doubt the idea that an image can be manipulated, shaped, constructed: if the militant discourse and raw images of her early reports have been toned down over the years into a poetic and dreamlike expression, of which *What's Going On?* is the most majestic example, it is because Saab understood that the image can also be a demagogue and that art, by virtue of its ability to confer meaning, has a power that surpasses discursive rhetoric. And as a result, she was profoundly aware of the importance of disassociating form and content.

It is interesting to highlight some of the forms that span this body of work and that stand out, independent of the era, the place, or the political situation in question. What gives meaning and unity to her work? What do these forms express concerning the engagement that motivates them? The sensitivity, full of hope and humanism, which makes Saab's images so touchingly unique, manifestly describes different constitutive elements of her identity. The question that drove her work for forty years is how, as Lebanese – and more broadly, Arab –

and as a woman, one can situate oneself in this world. In the images that form the body of her work, the figure of a engaged woman is implicit, committed to life in a world torn to pieces, pointing out injustices and, using historically significant evidence, documenting remarkable situations with a poetic sensitivity clear in the language and the gaze that she adopts to confront the events of the world she lives in.

This engagement, marked by an active desire to better understand the world in order to better understand oneself, to denounce horror so as to assertively confirm the beauty of life and the importance of liberty, emerges as the heart of Jocelyne Saab's work and the discourse she constructed around aesthetic problematics that interest her intensely.

Transnational Scholarship

The two editors of this volume, Mathilde Rouxel and Stefanie Van de Peer, were, like many women working on film and the arts in Lebanon, personally acquainted with Jocelyne Saab. We have experienced, first-hand, the strength, generosity and deep sincerity Saab put in her films, photographic projects, or monumental events. As young scholars of Arab cinema, we both reached out to her for interviews and became admiring friends. Mathilde Rouxel worked closely together with Jocelyne Saab in the last six years of her life. At the time, Rouxel was studying for a Master's in film between Lyon and Beirut, and graduated with a dissertation on Saab's films, supervised by the director's close friend Nicole Brenez, who organised with Olivier Hadouchi the first retrospective of Jocelyne Saab's films in the French Cinematheque in March 2013. When Rouxel met Saab, the director was organising a film festival in Lebanon and needed an assistant. Rouxel worked on the three editions of the Cultural Resistance International Film Festival (CRIFFL), from 2013 to 2015, and later on the organisation of the Lebanese International Biennale for Cinema and the Arts (BLICA), which Saab launched in 2017. From 2013 onwards, Rouxel participated in all of Saab's projects, finished and unfinished. She mainly researched for and assisted Saab in the writing of her various film projects, and helped her in the making of her book of photograms and photographs *Zones de guerre* (2018), edited by Nicole Brenez. In 2015, Rouxel published her Master's dissertation on Saab's cinema, under the title *Jocelyne Saab, la mémoire indomptée*. On the occasion of this publication, Saab dug out her unreleased films (such as *For a Few Lives*, 1976) and decided to make her work available. Unable to contemplate the release of her films on DVD before finding the financial support to restore them, she decided to offer most of them on video on demand, despite the quality of the files. Rouxel also assisted Saab when she started the monumental task of archiving her work and life, and in the search for

partnerships for the restoration of her films. She deposited the original materials of the films at the French Film Centre (CNC) in the 1990s while making *Once Upon A Time in Beirut*. The conception of *Zones de guerre* was an opportunity for Saab to gather her positive reels that were, back then, stored between Beirut and Paris. Most of the images in the book were taken from these positive reels. Later, she decided to deposit the films at the French Cinematheque. This act was the second step in the preservation process. When Jocelyne Saab passed away in January 2019, Nessim Ricardou-Saab, her son, asked Mathilde Rouxel to continue this work. Together with other friends of the director they founded the Association of Jocelyne Saab's Friends,[2] which aims to archive and enhance her artistic heritage, and to find partners and funding to restore her 23 documentaries in 16 mm. One of the purposes of the association is to fulfil Saab's dream of releasing DVDs of her complete filmography (47 films and videos). Stefanie Van de Peer has written extensively on Saab's work, focusing on the documentaries, in her first monograph *Negotiating Dissidence: The Pioneering Women of Arab Documentary* (EUP, 2017). She also screened many of Saab's films at international film festivals in Scotland, England and Belgium and hosted the director on a few occasions at events in Lebanon and the UK where she was an invited guest. Over the years, Rouxel and Van de Peer had been aware of one another's work, and indeed used it in their own publications, but they have still not had the opportunity to meet in person. The last time Van de Peer met Jocelyne Saab was in London in 2017, on the occasion of the Essay Film Festival, which screened a number of Saab's early documentaries. This also became the event to mark the publication of Van de Peer's book, and Saab's picture features prominently on the cover. Saab confided in Van de Peer that she was very ill and that she was really happy about the attention we were paying to her films at the event, as the anglophone world has overlooked her work for so long. At the time, Van de Peer was planning more screenings of her films, and Saab mentioned Rouxel's work. After screening *A Suspended Life* (1985), *Once Upon a Time, Beirut* (1994) and *Dunia* (2005) in 2018, the news that Jocelyne Saab had passed away came as a shock. Van de Peer finally got in touch with Rouxel, and together they started planning this long overdue book, dedicated to her memory and to her long, brave and very productive career.

The existing scholarship on Jocelyne Saab, while limited in quantity, is equally as broad ranging as Saab's output. Approaches to her work vary just as much as the work itself, but scholars often do their research in isolation. Individual chapters and journal articles have

2 The website of the Association, https://jocelynesaabasso.com/, collects and makes widely available information on the legacy of Jocelyne Saab's life and work.

been published by French, English, Australian, American, Lebanese, Egyptian and other scholars (an indicative bibliography is included at the end of this book). While Rouxel's book was the first anywhere to be entirely devoted to Saab's work, the present book is the first one in English. It brings together anglophone as well as several francophone authors, who are not used to writing or publishing in English. Most of the authors have known or worked with Jocelyne Saab – and so have some of the translators of the original texts by Mathilde Rouxel (Miriam Heard) or Ghada Rahal Sayegh (Abraham Zeitoun). As a pioneer of Arab cinema, Saab is often mentioned and praised, but a full picture of her work remained absent for a long time – just as the recognition Saab deserved for her contribution to Lebanese cinema has remained slow to emerge. The emphasis in scholarship seems to either be on her so-called Beirut trilogy or on internationally successful fiction films like *Dunia*. It was perhaps the inclusion of a chapter on Saab in Josef Gugler's much-quoted book *Ten Arab Filmmakers: Political Dissent and Social Critique* (2015) written by Dalia Said Mostafa, that brought her work to the foreground in anglophone Arab cinema studies. Nevertheless, the emphasis in publications on Saab's cinematography tends to focus entirely on the immediate national context in her Lebanese and Egyptian work, rather than opening up to the international nature of her oeuvre and significance. This may be a reflection of Arab cinema in general: historically, Lebanon and Egypt have been the most successful cinemas in the region.

In contrast, with this book we emphasise the broad internationalist and emancipatory ideology central to Saab's oeuvre. From her earliest reportages for French television to her last, unfinished films, and from her experimental art installations and photography to her curatorial work for cinematheques and film festivals, this book covers a broader range of Saab's work than any previous publications. This book brings together international scholars and critics from across Lebanon, France, Egypt, the US, the UK, Australia, Switzerland and more, to reflect the transnational accomplishments of the director and artist. The multicultural nature of the book is its strength, and is reflected in the variety of approaches, both highly poetic, testimonial and analytical. This provided us with the opportunity to paint a picture of an artist whose life was entirely dedicated to the visual arts, and whose curiosity, open-mindedness and idealism brought her to places and topics others may have feared to go or address.

The book is divided into four main sections, which do not necessarily follow a chronological order. Instead, we focus on diverse themes and issues that were crucial to Jocelyne Saab's development as an artist and activist. In part one, entitled Jocelyne Saab: 50 Years of Creation in the Turmoil of Arab History, this book offers four chapters, in which the

passing of time offers a way to find the past, both of the filmmaker and her films. Starting with an extended reflection on several in-depth interviews done over the years with Saab, Olivier Hadouchi's chapter provides space and time for Saab's own voice. She was an eloquent and engaging speaker. Putting this chapter at the start of the book enables the readers to engage with Jocelyne's voice first, before scholars from around the world and with diverse perspectives engage with her films, art installations and cultural events. Ghada Sayegh paints a revised picture of the Lebanese cinema of war through a reading of Saab's position as a Lebanese filmmaker of the so-called New Lebanese Cinema of the civil war. Joan Grandjean shows that Saab was more than a filmmaker. His work re-evaluates her as a cultural agent and a contributor to the global art world. Delving deep into Saab's archive, Mathilde Rouxel likewise testifies to Saab's very diverse oeuvre and sheds light on some of the final and unfinished work the artist had started just before her passing. As such, this first part of the book illustrates Saab's multi-dimensional artistic practice, the social and political significance of her work for Lebanese film history and the importance of history as a philosophical and material subject for the study of her work.

Part two, Film as a Weapon Against War and Oblivion, contains four chapters, focusing on the way memory functions as a narrative device while it also defines the changing style of Jocelyne's filmmaking practice and her involvement with CRIFFL, the Cultural Resistance International Film Festival of Lebanon, which she inaugurated. Giovanni Vimercati writes about the spectral quality of the Beirut memory across her documentaries and fiction films. He shows that, in the Beirut Trilogy, the Lebanese director tried to make sense of the Civil War, while in *Une vie suspendue* it is the choreography of time and space that portrays the senseless degeneration of an estranging conflict. Mark Westmoreland looks at the film from a material culture perspective, paying special attention to intertextual and architectural responses to the trauma of war and the way in which Saab's play with Beirut's representation and reality reveals a deconstructive vision of history. Yomota Inuhiko testifies about his own intense collaboration with Jocelyne Saab on her last film about Mei Shigenobu, and their attempt to revive and set right a forgotten piece of rebellious Japanese and Lebanese history, in Saab's effort to connect more visually the Asian continent. It is in Nemesis Srour's chapter that this cinematic connection within the Asian continent really comes into its own, as she shows Saab's interest in the continent not only through her own films and artwork, but also in her efforts to bring to life a Lebanese past of Asian cinema through CRIFFL.

The five chapters in part three, entitled Liberating the People, Freeing the Body, delve deeper into the activist nature of all of Saab's work. First, we look at Saab's internationalism in films from the late seventies and early eighties, through an exploration of her allegiances with Kurdish, Sahrawi and Iranian citizens fighting the powers that oppress them, in Stefanie Van de Peer's chapter. Margaret McVeigh then delves deep into the script development and metaphorical representations in Saab's most well-known fiction film, *Dunia*, exploring the connections between women and family and these relationships' impact on women's bodies. likewise, Maram Soboh's chapter looks at women's bodies and relationships across Saab's four fiction films, with and emphasis on the filmmaker's philosophy of dance and how physical self-expression leads to liberation of the feminist mind. Corinne Fortier's chapter then explores the concept of emancipation further, through the anthropological analysis of the male dancer in *Cafe du Genre* and the Syrian women and children refugees' lives and figurative depiction in Beirut's wealthy centre. Samirah Alkassim's chapter closes this part of the book with a closer look at Saab's later artistic work in photography, video art, and cultural curatorial practice. Exploring increasingly flexible formats of video art, photography, and installation allowed the filmmaker a greater freedom of expression, that continued her quest for emancipation of the oppressed and that simultaneously expanded her own and other's geographic borders.

Finally, part four, Advocating Poetry, contains three chapters of exceptional poetic power, in which the literary and poetic strengths of Saab's camera and voice are discussed in detail. Marie Chebli's chapter returns to Saab's enigmatic first fiction film, *A Suspended Life*, and explores the lyrical and narrative elements this film borrows from fairy tales. Through a Deleuzian reading, Chebli places emphasis on the mysterious identity of the young girl protagonist and the space and time she occupies in war-torn Beirut. Expanding on this preoccupation with urban spaces through a Deleuzian lens, Gregory Buchakjian discusses the destroyed architecture of Beirut through his own artistic practice, impacted by Saab's vision of Beirut in the eighties. Connecting Saab's films with the city's present, he asks how the present state of a city obliterated by external and internal power structures echoes the artist's philosophical preoccupation with art and its ability to reconstruct material and ideological memories. In light of the destruction of Beirut's harbour on 4 August 2020, his concluding point about the October 2019 revolution is more pertinent than ever. Likewise, Lea Polverini discusses Saab's cinema as an attempt to recompose vanishing worlds through fiction. The power of fiction to start to deal with the trauma of reality is read as an effort to restore an atmosphere or to recollect past events in order to preserve its memory. Finally, the book ends

on a chapter by Mathilde Rouxel that provides a full catalogue of Saab's work, both finished and unfinished, which also highlights the efforts needed to restore and preserve her legacy for future generations. As Lebanon in 2020 undergoes another devastating financial, social and political crisis that revives its young population's disillusion with their leaders, Saab's work is more important than ever.

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