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Chapter 4

A Filmmaker's Words: A Journey Through the Archive of Jocelyne Saab's Unfinished Work

Mathilde Rouxel

“I was born in 1948, the year of the *Nakba*, in a house full of secret alcoves, on Emir Abdel Kader Street”. On the second page of an unfinished book of memoirs called *Témoignage* (*Testimony*, uncompleted, 2010-2018), Jocelyne Saab establishes who she is. The house she is talking about was a mansion full of old works of art, bedecked with Ottoman Empire rugs. Her maternal grandfather was a collector and the house held “150 years of history.” This is explained in Saab’s film *Beyrouth, ma ville* (*Beirut, My City*, 1982), as she stands amid the ruins of the past, the ruins of her own family history and those of an entire country: everything the house had witnessed had gone up in smoke, one night, after a conflict.

My grandfather, sitting next to the large oak radio set that stood in the corner of the living room, listened to the news that announced the partition of Palestine. It was a war. Palestinians were being chased off their lands. Every evening, sitting on his lap, I listened to the BBC, to “The Voice of the Arabs”, and “The Voice of America”. Words, dates, phrases that still resonate with me today: “Karameh”, “Deir Yassine”, “1956: the triple aggression of Israel, France and England allied against Egypt...”
(Saab, *Témoignage*)

Jocelyne Saab was born at a moment when the Arab world as an ideological creation was beginning to crumble. She was a daughter of revolution, of the left-wing independence movement which she, profoundly impacted by the many wars that ravaged the lands she lived and worked in, spent her life trying to (re-)define. When she died, Saab left behind several boxes containing the research for films she was preparing. Most of the projects were left unfinished, as was the book of memoirs that she never really had the heart to complete.

Taken together, these archives show us another Jocelyne, and reveal many more layers of her. A daughter of the *Nakba*, an anti-imperialist, Arab and proud of it, Saab was also fascinated with Asia, to which she felt a strong affiliation. Geographically, Lebanon is part of the Asiatic continent, and to place its historical roots within that context, allows one to rethink the country outside of the frame of its endless comparisons to the West, as “the Pearl of the East” as Yasmine quotes in *Il était une fois Beyrouth* (*Once Upon a Time in Beirut*,

1994). This chapter offers a new portrait of Jocelyne Saab, as seen through the work she never had the opportunity to finish. Her own words, quoted from her book of memoirs, will be central to clarifying how she developed her unique creative world.

Jocelyne Saab: An Arab Woman in the Eye of the Storm

In a project she called *La Mère du Monde* (*The Mother of the World*), written around the year 2000, but never developed beyond initial sketches, Saab underlines the contradictions that tear her apart when she reflects on the Middle East:

In 1970 we were living in Beirut, and it was the golden years, the “dolce vita” just before war broke out in 1975. My mother was 40, and she secretly bought one of the costumes of Nadia Gamal, a very popular belly dancer in the Middle East, to wear to the bourgeois parties. My mother had learnt to dance in secret and when she did her number it was quite a success among her friends. This whim of hers surprised me because it didn’t fit in with the usual behaviour in the Christian, very westernised, and fairly conservative part of Beirut society. Lebanon is different today, and the regressive spirit that dominates in the Arab world hasn’t spared the country; my mother has aged and forgotten the audacity of her youth, and she’s become an iconoclast. She reproaches me for speaking out, for looking at the world through my camera, for having ignored the traditional choices that are imposed on an Oriental woman.

This film project is born precisely out of my desire to reconcile myself to the Oriental woman that I am and that I’ve always refused to be.

In *Le Dernier Métro* Gérard Dépardieu tries to seduce Catherine Deneuve by saying to her “there are two women in you”. It’s with the same duality that the West is fascinated with the Oriental woman, who is either the veiled and subdued woman, or the public woman who dances and discovers her body through the gaze of men.

But in the Orient these two women are not always separated; sometimes it is the same woman who’s veiled, who dances, and who passes on to her daughters the gestures of the dance in family celebrations. Dancing is experienced as a foundational act, a personal initiation that reproduces the movements of childbirth. Daily chores are also

reminiscent of the oriental dance, the rolling strides of the women bringing water back to the house, the washerwomen beating the linen on the banks of the Nile, the young women arguing at the marketplace, a child hanging off one hip. (Saab, Director's statement for *La Mère du Monde*, undated, 2000s)

She almost certainly decided to film this after she had finished work on *Dunia* (2005), which revealed the two conflicting sides of its leading actress, who had been torn between her desire to act and the moral rules of religion, and who eventually married a Saudi *sheikh* after the film release. These notes are perhaps a rough outline for *Être femme en Méditerranée* (*Being a Woman in the Mediterranean*, 2011-2012) and the origins of her project *Café du Genre* (*Gender Café*, 2013), that paid homage to Walid Aouni and Alexandre Paulikevich, two contemporary male Arab dancers who revived oriental dance and made it socially acceptable once again. In 2011 she had started more specific research into these men, who had become the guardians of a culture that was perceived as degrading by the increasingly conservative Arab societies.

Despite the dual identity that she claims to have rejected throughout her life, Saab's fascination with Egypt is evident in her work. In *Égypte, la cité des morts* (*Egypt: the City of the Dead*, 1978) she roams around Cairo with the eyes of a besotted lover. In *Les Fantômes d'Alexandrie* (*The Ghosts of Alexandria*, 1986) she films the walls of Alexandria with amazement, while worrying about the political and social situation in her own country. *Dunia* (2005) is perhaps the clearest example. In fact, the problems Saab experienced when the film came out had more to do with her nationality than with the film's themes: a foreigner – even a Lebanese – had no right to criticise the way Egyptians lived in Egypt. But Saab wasn't bound by frontiers, as she also showed in *Le Sahara n'est pas à vendre* (*The Sahara Is Not For Sale*, 1978), which she filmed in four conflict zones: Western Sahara, Morocco, Mauritania and Algeria. With both films the reaction was brutal: Saab was banished from Egypt for seven years after *Égypte, la cité des morts* came out, and in 1978 she was banished for life from Morocco for *Le Sahara n'est pas à vendre*. In 2005, when *Dunia* came out, it was no longer the governments, but rather the religious fundamentalists who condemned her.

At the start of the 2000s, Jocelyne Saab was developing *Dunia* as well as several documentary films with Catherine Dussart Productions (CDP). One of these was a documentary-fiction about Ramses II and Nefertiti in Abu Simbel, entitled *Abu Simbel, La Nuit du Solstice d'été ou le Rayon d'amour* (*Abu Simbel. The Night of the Summer Solstice or the Ray of Love*, undated, 2000s), written by Saab and re-written by Catherine Arnaud.

The difficulties she encountered with *Dunia* did not discourage Saab from thinking about other projects to film in Egypt. After she produced a series of photographs “Sense, Icons and Sensitivity”, she went to the south of Egypt, to Luxor, where she shot another series of photos, which are still unedited. Called “Les Masques” (“The Masks”), this was a series of portraits of the Egyptian Nubians whose faces had been coated in clay that then dried and cracked in the sun. In 2011, she was inspired by the story of the Egyptian singer Asmahan, her brother Farid Al-Atrache and the fate of the Lebanese Druze academic Nazirah Zeineddine who was twenty years older than them. She decided to develop a film about them, a fictional romance set in the context of the 1940s, during Egypt’s royal era under King Farouk. The project is unfinished and does not have a title. In 2013 she shot again in Egypt when she was making *Café du Genre*, to film Adel Siwi and Walid Aouni. At the same time, she launched an ambitious project of Egyptian film posters called *Cet objet flottant du désir* (*This Floating Object of Desire*, 2013) which, although Islamists were taking power in Egypt, hoped to depict:

history in the making (...), the process of closing down and suffocating the freedom of bodies. (...) The spectators, discovering the Arab world at a time when bodies were freer, could ask themselves “what connection is there still between the women of these posters and the women of today?” (Director’s statement for *Cet objet flottant du désir*, 2013).

That same year she taught a course at the Institut d’Études Scéniques et Audiovisuelles de Beyrouth (IESAV) on the cinema of Henri Barakat, setting her students a project on the Egyptian filmmaker and his work. Plunging into the so-called Golden Age of Egyptian cinema, Saab became fascinated by Assia Dagher, about whom she hoped to make a biopic (*L’Honneur de Faten Hamama / The Honor of Faten Hamama*, 2014).

Assia Dagher was an important film producer in Egypt during the 1930s and 1940s. Born in Tannourine in Lebanon, illiterate and married off at a young age, she ran away from Lebanon to Egypt, leaving behind her young daughter. In Cairo she tried her luck as an actress and worked on several silent films. Slowly she established herself, and then opened a production company called Lotus. She was surrounded by entrepreneurial Lebanese women such as Badia Massabni, owner of the chicest cabaret in Cairo, and Rose El Youssef, who published a hugely popular Cairo newspaper that carried her name: *Rosa El Youssef*. At first Saab conceived of the project as a classic biopic, chronologically tracing the life-story of

Assia Dagher from her childhood in Lebanon to the last big films she produced in Nasser's Egypt. The project was well-received, and Saab obtained development funding from the Arab Fund for Arts and Culture (AFAC) in Lebanon. But she also still owned other materials that she felt she should use: footage she had shot when the American University of Beirut had conferred an honorary doctorate on Egyptian actress Faten Hamama, another star of this era of Egyptian cinema.

Fully intending to use this material, Saab developed the project into a documentary with the idea of asking Faten Hamama – who had acted in several films produced by Assia Dagher, and who to some extent owed her success to the producer – to narrate the film. Saab met with Hamama in Egypt and, although the actress had not filmed for many years, she liked the plans. But before another meeting could be set up to start work on the project, Faten Hamama passed away. It was a blow for Saab, but she did not stop developing the project. It was adapted into an Egyptian-style musical, telling the story of three women, all trailblazers on the cultural scene of Cairo for two decades. She was thinking of asking Salma Hayek for the main role, and the Lebanese *baladi* dancer Alexandre Paulikevich to play Badia Massabni who – aside from being a successful businesswoman – was also a dancer, singer and actress. Saab was already discussing the choreography of the film with Walid Aouni, with whom she had worked on *Dunia*.

But Egypt was not the only country to hold a fascination for her. Her connections with the southern Mediterranean remained clear until the end of her life. In *Témoignage* she wrote:

My maternal grandparents were from the Greek Catholic community. But I was born Maronite into my father's tradition. Those who've traced the genealogy of our family tree say that we were originally part of a Bedouin tribe that came from Yemen and adopted the customs and the religion of wherever they settled. The name Saab is found among the three main Lebanese communities: the Druze, the Christians and the Muslims. (Saab, *Témoignage*)

As all of Jocelyne Saab's work seems anchored in a family history that she fights to keep alive despite the way the war damaged the close personal relationships in her family, it's possible that knowing about this distant Yemeni past awoke her particular interest in the country. In 2015 she was considering adapting for television the novel *The Hostage* (1984) by the Yemeni Zayd Mutee' Dammaj. The story, set in the 1940s, is about a 12-year old *duwaydar* (a child taken from its family to be put to work in the Governor's palace), who

decides to find out about his past. In his search he meets a man who initiates him in pleasure, without managing to subjugate him. It is a story not only about the last defence of the common people against the powerful, but also about the vital physical passion that interests Saab in this astonishing story. These are vibrant bodies who derive all their humanity from the right to experience pleasure. The project was never developed, but it speaks of Saab's attachment to the condition of the Arab people, which she was never afraid of addressing despite the fact that she was living her day-to-day life in Paris.

Saab travelled extensively, and her life was mostly spent in Paris and Beirut. And the eternal subject of the films she longed to make was, of course, Lebanon.

My first friends in the neighbourhood were called Issam, Christian, Ghada, Gisèle, Alain, Henri, Ahmed, Vahé, and Sélim. They were Muslims, Christians, Armenians, or Jews. So, I grew up without making any difference between us.

One day my mother flew into a rage because my younger brother had fallen in love with a young Muslim girl. I couldn't understand why she was so angry. I was incredibly upset with her. I found it unfair that my younger brother couldn't be in love with the beautiful Hala, who lived a few streets away on the Basta hill, just because her parents were Muslim.

Inter-communitarian marriages are still rare, and the civil war didn't help things. Religion is an identity, not a belief. So, you can understand why I never wanted to be part of one camp or the other, in which only one religion is accepted. You can also understand why I could never accept the holy war. You can understand why since the beginning of the war I consistently defended tolerance and human rights. (Saab, *Témoignage*)

During the civil war all Saab's projects focused on Lebanon. In the first years of the war she had prepared, with Jonathan Randal, a series of four documentaries for television, under the title *Les Amours contrariés de l'Orient et de l'Occident* (*The Thwarted Loves of the East and the West*, undated, 1980s), which was meant to retrace the history of the Middle East since the Ottoman Empire. But she was also already interested in fiction, and at the end of the 1980s she wrote the screenplay for a feature film, *L'Arrière-quartier* (*The Backstreets*, undated, 1980s) set in Beirut, with Sélim Turkié. The story depicted the animosity between

the communities, even in places and among people who believed in mixed communities. At the end of the war, in 1989, she developed *Le Temple de la Tortue* (*The Temple of the Tortoise*, 1989) out of the following synopsis:

Equinox. The city that has been at war for 15 years has been evacuated after suffering deadly radiation. Only a handful of orphan children are hidden away in their underground kingdom, the Temple of the Tortoise. They're determined to stay in the city: it's all they have. They dream of their future and that of their city, telling their fortunes by looking at the shells of tortoises. The outside, adult world, can't bear the threat of the radioactive city and decides that the children have to leave Equinox within 72 hours so that the city can be flooded. They use every trick in the book to "save the children": temptations, threats and violence. These children of war, used to violence and death, play games to calm their fears, re-writing the rules for the 72 hours they have left in Equinox. The flood will have no mercy. (Synopsis of *Le Temple de la Tortue*, 1989)

In this script Saab shows how worried she was for the children growing up after the civil war. She was a mother herself at this point, and she was particularly concerned about the children who had seen conflict, who had experienced bereavement or been orphaned. It is clear from her casting proposals that she was thinking of working with the children of her closest friends.

At the heart of the film is not the perpetual confrontation between the adult world and the child's world but rather the experience of childhood that survives despite the war raging in everyone. The screenplay and the concept of the characters was read to groups of children, traumatised by the war, in therapy sessions in Beirut. Their reactions and commentaries were included in the dialogue. (Director's statement for *Le Temple de la Tortue*, 1989)

A few years later, she again wanted to work with some of these children. At the start of the 2000s, Saab became interested in the story of a woman, Joumana, who had been injured in an attack that had killed her husband. She had been in a coma and lost all memories of several years of her life. In the documentary she developed, Saab introduced a young man, Kamal, whom she had wanted to cast as the head of the gang of children in *Le Temple de la Tortue*.

In the screenplay of the documentary she constructs the revelation of the amnesia and Joumana's tragic past in the interaction with four young adults in their 20s who interrogate her. Joumana was the wife of an ambassador who had, at the outset of the Lebanese civil war, been involved with the extreme right-wing militia groups. He had been assassinated in Spain by a bomb thrown into the embassy building where they were living. A large scar on Joumana's neck is a physical reminder of the attack. This film, which Saab was developing with France Saint-Léger, was meant to become a film about the difficulty of writing down memories.

After the war, Saab still felt a strong need to address this topic of memories and remembering, to depict and discuss it meaningfully on screen. In 1996 she thought about adapting the novel *L'Homme de parole* (*A Man of His Word*, 1996) by Nazir Hamad, and with Randall Holden she wrote a screenplay in which she wanted to "tell a story with great simplicity about honour and dignity after the fire and blood of war," as though to exorcise the civil war (Director's statement for *L'Homme de parole*, 1996). And yet Saab had for many years not focussed on Beirut. After she made *Il était une fois Beyrouth* (*Once Upon a Time in Beirut*, 1995), she left her country and only rarely went back with her camera in hand. Her last feature film, *What's Going On?* (2009), was filmed in Beirut amidst the ruins of a reconstructed city that Saab barely recognised.

In parallel to the filming of *What's Going On?* Saab shot some scenes for another film with the working title *Le Rouge et le Blanc* (*Red and White*, 2009). It was to be an unusual love story between two people, which takes place in a car park – the car park that stands on the land where Jocelyne Saab's house, burnt down in 1982, had once stood. "The car park where the action between Ishtar and Simon takes place, is a subtle mirror of their mental universe; the life of the car park is choreographed," she wrote in the notes she put together with Ishtar Yasin, who had already acted in *What's Going On?* (Director's statement for *Le Rouge et le Blanc*, 2009). It was an implicit portrait of what Beirut had become after the reconstruction.

Two years later, in 2011, again with Ishtar Yasin, she wrote a screenplay conceived as a love letter to her two favourite cities: Cairo and Beirut, which she wanted to portray in a project called *Landscape from Beirut and Cairo to Romeo and Juliet's Town: My Architectural Cities' Love*. Of particular interest to her in this project was the architecture of the cities: each would be assigned a character: Ishtar in Beirut and Dunia in Cairo. "To be a filmmaker and a photographer is also to be an architect, to build with light and create a visual

pleasure just as you give pleasure through urban planning.” (Director’s statement for *Landscape*, 2011).

Exile in France

During and after the civil war Saab lived alternately in Beirut and in Paris. The French capital held little charm for her. Only the hospital rooms really attracted her attention. She started observing them after the war, when she was hospitalized for an ulcer. After the war, when she had already filmed *Fécondation in video* (*Fertilization in video*, 1991), which was a great success, Saab was inspired by the technical advances in medicine. In 1994 she underwent an operation for myopia – both eyes at the same time, which was very risky, as she herself admitted – and the procedure amazed her. She wrote the screenplay for a documentary called *L’Oeil et le miracle du laser* (*The Eye and the Miracle of the Laser*, 1994) that she sent to her doctor. The film was never made, but the screenplay shows how avidly Saab was inspired by anything and everything in life.

In 1992, Saab fell into the Canal de l’Ourq in Paris due to a stroke. It was her first stroke. This accident gave rise to a project that she developed with Francis Lacloue, which nearly made it to the production stage (a trailer was created) and which was entitled *Paris Amoureux* (*Paris In Love*, 2002). Conceived of as four short films, it was to be a poetic and phantasmagorical meander around Paris as she rediscovered the city after her stroke. These are the only two unfinished projects that evoke her life in Paris.

An Asian identity

My grandmother was originally from Deir El Kamar, that is, “the convent of the moon”, the capital of Mount-Lebanon at the beginning of the 17th century under the reign of the Druze Emir Fakhr-al-Din II until his death in 1635. It used to be called DAR EL KAMAR, which means “the residence of the moon.” I concluded that her silences and her reserved manner were linked to her origins: she was in the moon, and like her I often withdrew into myself as well. I’ve never fallen out of this pleasant habit. I can still remember her faraway gaze while she described to me the pig celebration, or while at mealtimes she regaled us with anecdotes about the emirs so as to teach us a bit about Lebanese history. Then she’d lose the thread of her story as she talked about Bashir the Great and Fakhreddine II. (Saab, *Témoignage*)

Jocelyne Saab's fascination with the Ottoman Empire and its aftermath was born out of the countless tales her grandmother, grandfather and her father told her about the history of Lebanon. It is the nostalgia for a world and a region rich with intellectual fervour and vision, that she would carry with her throughout her life, as numerous Lebanese or Arab citizens did. Her fascination with the Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser, an Arab nationalist who took power and settled a socialist Revolution in Egypt in 1952, and his pan-Arab way of considering politics is indicative: the idea of restoring an Orient that is proud of its culture and civilisation is very present in Saab's work, and is perhaps at the origin of her desire to develop a project around Mustafa Kemal and his vision for a modern Turkey. In 1997 Jocelyne developed a portrait of the Turkish head of state known as Atatürk for the production company that had produced *La Dame de Saïgon* (*The Lady of Saigon*, 1997). She was intensifying her research into this Middle Eastern statesman who had been, in her eyes, capable of singlehandedly taking his country into the modern era. A director's statement that she wrote about the project testifies to her interest:

Why make a film about Atatürk? (...) Mainly because Mustafa Kemal was a formidable statesman in an Islamic environment; and Islam – from Morocco to Pakistan – has never encouraged the emergence of statesmen, that is, men who govern and think about the needs and the future of a nation, rising above the vested interests of clans – whether corporations or families – that is so typical of the sociology of the Muslim world. The modern state that founded a new connection of solidarity – citizenship – is above communitarian or religious connections. (...) Seen this way, the foundational example of Turkey that has been a reference for several nationalist movements in the Arab world, seems to be a particularly interesting subject to analyse. (Director's statement for *Mustafa Kemal*, 1997)

The documentary was never made because of a disagreement between Saab and the person at ADR Productions with whom she was writing the script. A year's worth of work was lost, but the extremely detailed research material that she kept shows her fascination with this man whom she felt had established "the first nation state in Islamic lands." She had been developing this project to coincide with the celebrations for the 75th anniversary of the Turkish republic. In her director's statement she wrote:

It is during this period that Turkey develops a film industry, specifically at the instigation of Kemal who loves cinema and artists. In fact, Kemal appears as himself several times in the triptych by Muhsen Urtugrul about the war of independence. (Director's statement for *Mustafa Kemal*, 1997)

Jocelyne Saab chose Atatürk because he loved cameras. He was an excellent character for a film, complex and strategic, a real film hero:

What is seductive about Mustafa Kemal is also his strategy for coming to power. The Kemalian saga from 1919 to 1923 perfectly illustrates one of the recommendations developed by Machiavelli in *The Prince*. Mustafa Kemal knew how to make the most of an opportunity to exercise his nationalist vision, to impose it on his opponents because of his military talent, to found new republican and authoritarian institutions and to stay at the head of the country until his death. (Director's statement for *Mustafa Kemal*, 1997)

As well as books on the subject, innumerable press cuttings and lists of archive film material that could potentially be used in the documentary, her archives also contain transcriptions of interviews with specialists on the subject, and proposals for editing.

For another film project set in Turkey, in Antioch, there is very little written information in her archive, but she had already filmed a significant amount of material. She began this project much later, in 2011. She had started to follow Meltem, an Alawite Syrian by birth, with both Turkish and Dutch nationality, who had returned to the region she came from in search of her identity. With Meltem, Saab was investigating how traces of the borders had been established in the maelstrom of the years between the two world wars – a theme that had been central to Saab's work since the first images she shot. In the same year, 2011, she wrote a fiction: *Salwa la Turque* (*Salwa, The Turkish*, 2011) which tells the story of the emigration of a Turkish family to Colombia after the fall of the Ottoman Empire. Fascinated by this monumental civilisation, Jocelyne Saab always rooted her Arab identity in the Asian soil and focused her interests beyond the borders of the so-called Arab world.

The admiration Saab felt for her father, who died too young – before he could shatter the myth that she had built up in her childhood and then as a young woman – directly led to her exploration of the Asian continent.

My father's journeys took him to India and China. An autodidact, he had taught himself more than ten Chinese dialects, as well as Hindi, Malay and Laotian... In Li Chou in Laos he had owned a gold mine that had been abandoned by the English. I went at least five times with my nanny, in secret, to the Empire Cinema in Beirut to watch Marilyn Monroe and Robert Mitchum in *The River of No Return*. I imagined my father going down the river on a makeshift raft to take the cargo of gold to the town. I saw him battling the rapids and cascades while fighting off the attacks of all kinds of brigands. I returned to Laos when my son was five years old, to look for the Li Chou goldmine. Unfortunately, I never managed to find it. (Saab, *Témoignage*)

Saab also went to Vietnam, as though to satisfy an age-old curiosity. In 1975, as the extreme right-wing Christian phalangists were shooting at a bus transporting Palestinians through Ain el-Mreisse in Beirut, she was preparing for a journey to Vietnam to document the liberation of the country. The journalist friends with whom she was meant to travel had disappeared or been killed. She chose to stay in Beirut; but the curiosity always remained. The years of research that Saab had dedicated to *La Dame de Saigon* (*The Lady of Saigon*, 1997) inspired her to develop several different projects in Asia, both in Vietnam and in India, where she had even considered moving to. With the novelist Philippe Franchini she wrote *Vietnam, notre amour* (*Vietnam, Our Love*, undated, mid of the 1990s), a fictionalised version of the story of Doctor Hoa, whom she had portrayed in a 1997 documentary. With the producer Catherine Dussart she researched and wrote *Portrait d'Hanoi, ou Comment inventer la modernité* (*Portrait of Hanoi, or How to Invent Modernity*, undated, mid of the 1990s), spending several weeks in the city looking for locations for this project that she was, in the end, unable to produce. Her approach to the city was, naturally, informed by her personal experiences:

After decades of war, the population continues to live with a spirit of survival: the Vietnamese live in the present, in the here-and-now. There's no sense of a project. Yet the city is changing daily and it has to negotiate its move into modernity. Is the population aware of its urban heritage in order to accompany it in this new and delicate evolution? It's up to those who live in and use the city that have to make it theirs." (Director's statement for *Portrait d'Hanoi*, undated, mid of the 1990s)

She developed this project six years after the ceasefire in Lebanon. The questions that she asked here are already present at the heart of *Il était une fois Beyrouth: histoire d'une star*

that deals with Beirut's ability to rebuild itself after the disasters of war. With *Portrait d'Hanoi* she intended to show the experience of a city and its citizens in the process of reconstruction – urban reconstruction but also a social and psychological regeneration.

Saab was also fascinated with India. Surprisingly enough, she never wrote about the subcontinent. In her archives all there is, is material written by Rose Vincent for a fiction-documentary about the history of the city Fatehpur-Sikri in the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh:

When I was a bit older, my father often spoke to me about Ghandi. During the time he was working on Indian construction sites, he'd often walked for kilometres to listen to this man whom he greatly admired. It was also a way of having a little break from the pythons whom, he said, circled his bed at night. Because he slept in the open air on the construction sites, and only survived because he kept his feet in bowls of water overnight.

My father was my first hero.

Ghandi was my second hero. (Saab, *Témoignage*)

A Look Back at a Past That is Disappearing

Towards the end of her life, Jocelyne Saab was able to bring together two sides of her life, what she made in the Arab world and her experiences in Asia. She did this both with the project of the Cultural Resistance International Film Festival in Lebanon, where the programming focused on films from Asia and the Mediterranean, and with her last feature film project. This last project was based on the story of Mei Shigenobu, the daughter of Fusako Shigenobu, (female) founder of the Japanese Red Army (JRA) in Lebanon.

Collaborating with the PLO, the JRA fought for the Palestinian cause. Mei was born in 1973, in secret, and her father's identity was never revealed – he was a Palestinian leader. Mei's safety was constantly under threat from the Israeli Secret Services, and she grew up in Lebanon as though she were a mini-secret agent, regularly changing her identity and school until the Palestinians were forced out of Lebanon in 1982. Her mother had to flee, and Mei also had to leave Beirut. When she returned on later occasions, it was always under an assumed name. The day her mother was arrested in Osaka in 2000 was also the day of Mei's liberation: she could finally start the process of getting back her true identity and, for the first time in her life, had a real passport.

Saab was inspired by this woman's story and how it allowed her to tell one last time, before her death, the story of the siege of Beirut. With the feeling that she was reaching the end of her life, at a time when it seemed that the world had lost the capacity for engaging with ideals, Mei Shigenobu's story also allowed Saab to revisit the principles she had fought for her entire life. Right up to the end, she argued for the need for a revolution, and the large-scale pan-Arab ideals never left her. This planned film gave her the chance to express her outrage, while at the same time focusing on a generation that had suffered because of their parents' militant engagement, and who today absolutely refuse to commit themselves to a cause. Saab understood that generation: she lost many friends who died because of their political militancy. So her project was uniquely sensitive: what she wanted to show of Japan were the myths with which Fusako, the mother, had nourished her daughter Mei during those years hidden in the mountains of Lebanon – the samurais from the past, the rice cakes of her mother and the cherry blossoms in Spring.

Shigenobu: Mère et Fille (Shigenobu: Mother and Daughter, uncompleted, 2018), would be a documentary about childhood and motherhood. To retrace Mei's early years Saab turned to a graphic novel that Fusako had written in prison, and that detailed her life with Mei in Lebanon between 1973 and 1982. Saab's idea was to use animation to tell the story of Mei's past. Initially, she considered using manga, but then decided to use Fusako's drawings – they're simple, easy to animate and have a naivety that inherently captures the childlike nature of the world she's depicting. As such, the documentary would give her the opportunity to tell a story of Beirut in 1982 without telling the story of the civil war once again. Among the JRA guerrillas were a number of excellent filmmakers: Masao Adachi and Koji Wakamatsu had come to support the Palestinian cause in Lebanon. Adachi had set up home in Lebanon and was close to Mei throughout his life. Wakamatsu financed the resistance from a distance. It was he who organised Mei's "coming out," arriving in Lebanon with an entire film crew, he filmed the young woman and sent the material to all the Japanese TV channels. It was a sort of second birth for her. Wakamatsu's creative universe interested Saab tremendously, and she decided to use extracts from his films from the *pinku eiga* era of his work in the 1960s, to express the violence of the times. The development of this ambitious film began not long after her diagnosis and occupied the last three years of her life. She planned for the film to be an edit of found material, as she was fully aware of the fragility of her health.

Conclusion

Jocelyne Saab's catalogue is extensive: 47 films, as well as various collections of photographs and installations. On top of that, her unfinished work reveals numerous unknown facets of this filmmaker who was so deeply engaged in the story of the Middle East. A traveller like her father, she went far and wide. Her imagination was carried by the rivers of Asia in an incessant ebb and flow, while she constantly felt the need to record the story of her own damaged country.

As her body of work is brought together in this book and in forthcoming events dedicated to her work, the archives described here reveal an artist who never stopped re-inventing herself. Everyone with whom she collaborated became part of a process that made her work curious and diverse, embracing science-fiction, historical re-enaction, classical documentary-making and experimental montage-film. The only thing that these various elements of her extraordinarily varied body of work share, is a deep desire to defend social justice, and an irrepressible need for poetry. This is a need that underpins her work as though to shield her from a tragic and burdensome family history which, as much of the material examined here reveals, haunted her right to the end of her life.