

REVIEW

First-born in the year of the first war

Ghassan Salhab's "1958" marks a lyrical beginning to Ecrans du Reel

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BEIRUT: By now, the components of the tale are so familiar they can be broken down and re-assembled like an AK-47.

The political class seems irreconcilably divided in its efforts to divide the carcass of state. Since both sides frame their bickering in geopolitical terms – those putatively “with” the West and those apparently “against” it – both have strong support outside the country.

Locally, where both sides justify their existence in sectarian terms, the population (out of conviction or not) is divided against itself. The less-mobile – often the politically less-sophisticated – are armed by their leaders. Others, in one way or another, leave.

War, migration and civil conflict are the recurring signposts of history. If Lebanon is unique among states in its historical experience of civil conflict and migration, it may be because this same dismal story seems to reiterate itself. The same families, the same actors, reprise their roles from crisis to crisis.

It could be the stuff of comedy, if it weren't for all the killing. As it is, from time to time it is the stuff of challenging art. A good case in point is Ghassan Salhab's “1958,” which had its Lebanon premier at Metropolis Cinema – Sofil Tuesday evening, the opening film of the Ecrans du Reel documentary film festival.

“1958” is a lyrical documentary that contemplates the recollection of the past and how that is deflected through the performance that tends to shadow representation. The title refers to the year 1958 and two significant events that the film's informants remember.

At the personal, autobiographical, end of the spectrum, 1958 was the year the film's writer-director was born. Though she remains unnamed until the end credits, in defiance of talking-heads doc convention, the filmmaker's mother is his principal informant. Zahia Salhab sets his birth within the context of her meeting his father, marrying and moving with him to Dakkar, Senegal.



‘Self-portrait from yesterday’: The filmmaker and his mother a few years ago, above, and, in the upper right, Mrs. Salhab today.



Particular to her own experience, many parts of her tale will still reverberate with other migrants (Lebanese or not) – the curiosity underlying her decision to begin a life overseas, alienation from the host community, separation from her family and the relationship between place and identity.

At the geopolitical end of things, the film takes up the events that rocked Beirut in the summer of 1958 – when, according to the conventions of national reckoning, the contradictions in the Lebanese state first expressed themselves in armed conflict, self-consciously placed within a regional geopolitical context.

Here, the oral history is provided by a pair of male voices (identified in the credits as Obeid Zwein and Mohamad al-Chami). From the way the two men recount their stories, it seems that 50 years ago they sat on opposite sides of the conflict. Habitues of the written history of this period will find that the two men not only accent their histories differently but stray from the historical record from time to time.

A more “objective” recounting takes the form of crisp, black-and-white newsreel footage. Some of that appears

to have been shot in Senegal, but most recounts events during the 1958 Lebanon crisis.

The sole English-language intrusion into the film also proves to be the most amusing. Here, the BBC-ish journalist – left hand stuffed with theatrical casualness into his slacks, collar deployed outside the lapels of his blazer like that of a Knesset member – stammers through his report from the front line.

Poised beside him, a grim-faced Lebanese soldier stares into the camera, a Tommy gun clutched in both hands. An explosion sounds nearby, then, and the camera drifts left, in search of something photogenic. It finds the two soldiers assigned to man this position, glancing furtively in the direction of the noise.

“Is that one of ours?” one fellow asks. Both men grin as they huddle behind the sandbags.

With three feature films under his belt, Salhab is one of Lebanon's most-distinguished (and productive) art house filmmakers. Though he has also generated a few small video art pieces, “1958” is his first feature-length documentary.

“1958” was shot in the wake of Lebanon's most-recent spate of geo-politically spun sectarian clashes, in the spring of 2008.

At that time several local observers noted similarities between this conflict – which pit Hizbullah and its supporters against the so-called “Future Movement” and its allies – and that of 1958.

Insofar as the 2008 troubles (and the 2006 Israeli air and sea bombardment that abetted it) catalyzed the creative process behind this film, “1958” joins a cluster of distinguished work created by Lebanese artists of Salhab's generation.

In 2007, for instance, Rabih Mroué and Fadi Toufiq unveiled their stage play “How Nancy Wished that Everything Was an April Fool's Joke.” Here, four actors depict four militants of the civil war era, all of whom are killed, only to be repeatedly reincarnated in order to return to the fight – generally fighting for a different party than the one with which they began the conflict.

Like his colleagues, Salhab has devoted some portion of his career to sublimating Lebanon's unsettled post-civil war condition into art. With “1958,” he may provoke confusion from audiences who want his documentary to document that conflict.

Though both the recollections and the newsreel footage

found in “1958” have an intrinsic archival value, it is obvious that Salhab has no didactic interest in this material.

At certain times the soundtrack will air the activists' recollections alongside the mother's memories. Sometimes they speak in turns. Often the political history is submerged beneath the personal.

The historical footage from Lebanon in particular has been selected and arrayed in order to undermine any authenticity these images may be assumed to represent.

Men are arrayed in dense clusters, glaring down the barrels of their rifles, in a manner that is obviously of more use to the camera operator than it would be to their commander. These images are no different, in the end, from the shots of uniformed militants, SSNP insignia affixed to their arms, marching in close-order drills.

The same is true of the shots of abandoned materiel – tanks and armoured personnel carriers (APCs) presumably residual of the 1958 era – that the film crew finds littering the countryside, or else submerged offshore.

Though lateral camera movement early in the film allows the machines to be identified for what they are, archaeologists of

early-20th century warfare will be frustrated that subsequent shots frame the objects from such proximity that they cease to be identifiable as “tanks” or “APCs,” becoming indistinct emblems of derelict modernity.

The contemporary footage is generally interspersed in lyrical counterpoint to the newsreel material. This is most obvious in the contribution of Lebanese actor Aouni Kawas, who portrays the downtime routine of a fictive Lebanese militiaman – mostly comprised of smoking, dozing and assembling his Kalashnikov assault rifle.

Salhab's poetry infuses the work – whether it be in the poetic voiceover (spoken by the director in French) or in the camera's rendering of landscape, seascape, geometrically framed interiors of hallways and stairwells.

At times, the camera follows the filmmaker through these spaces. In the end, the camera finds him staring out to sea from a boat. In seconds the vista turns 360 degrees, from sea to shore and back again, rudderless.

Ecrans du Reel documentary film festival runs at Metropolis Cinema – Sofil until March 31. For more information, ring +971 1 420 243 or see www.metropoliscinema.net.