

COMPTE-RENDU : 1982, DE OUALID MOUANESS

Pamela Nassour

IESAV, Université Saint-Joseph de Beyrouth

ABSTRACT | War is the main element in the Lebanese collective consciousness and memory. Throughout the years, Lebanese citizens fight its residue, which still traumatizes them and defines their existence. For artists, the reaction appeared through their work, and in this article, the Lebanese film *1982* by the director Oualid Mouaness will be tackled. This film is to be analyzed through its aesthetics and plot. Mouaness had a story to tell, like any other Lebanese witnessing that era. Thus, his film *1982* is to be added to the long list of Lebanese war films. Yet, what makes it different? In this article we study Mouaness's chosen aesthetics in representing this national catastrophe, wavering between labeling this film as a children film or a war film. The question is: Under which category of genres does this film fall, and what do Mouaness has to say, in such a post-war film?

MOTS-CLÉS | Lebanese cinema – Civil War – War Film – Coming-of-age.

ABSTRACT | La guerre est l'élément principal de la conscience et de la mémoire collective Libanaise. Tout au long des années, les citoyens libanais combattent ses résidus, qui les traumatisent encore et définissent leur existence. Pour les artistes, la réaction est apparue à travers leur travail, et dans cet article, le film Libanais *1982* du réalisateur Oualid Mouaness sera abordé. Ce film est à analyser à travers son esthétique et son intrigue. Mouaness avait une histoire à raconter, comme tout autre Libanais témoin de cette époque. Ainsi, son film *1982* s'ajoute à la longue liste des films de guerre Libanais. Pourtant, qu'est ce qui le rend différent? Dans cet article, nous étudions l'esthétique choisie par Mouaness pour représenter cette catastrophe nationale, hésitant entre qualifier ce film de film pour enfants ou de film de guerre. La question est: Dans quelle catégorie de genres ce film tombe-t-il, et qu'est-ce que Mouaness a à dire, dans un tel film d'après-guerre?

KEYWORDS | Cinéma libanais – guerre civile – film de guerre – récit d'initiation.

Throughout the Lebanese history, the civil war was a major event, which marked all sectors, including cinema. Thus, many are the Lebanese filmmakers who chose the war as the leading theme in their filmic styles. Besides the rise of documentaries in that era and the documentations of the events from inside the war zones, directors like the late Maroun Baghdadi and Burhan Alawiyyi filmed fictional stories during wartime using the existing battlefields as their film sets. In the post-war era, a shift in the Lebanese cinema took place, not in terms of themes but in terms of production. The war hunted many Lebanese artists and did stay as the focus of their work, but this time using different means. Most post-war films operated in small form scenes choices or chose to tell a story happening during the war but away from the battlefields.

In 2020 Oualid Mouaness directed his feature film *1982*, telling the story of the Israeli invasion of Beirut from the perspective of students and teachers in a school located somewhere in Mount-Lebanon. In this movie, spectators do see Beirut from far, they do hear aircrafts and bombings, and do feel the stress and anxiety as much as being in the battle field itself. His story in *1982* is one of an unreachable safety and resistance.

The year 1982

Oualid Mouaness made the simple choice of naming his feature film of 200 minutes, *1982*. In a bold move, and over a low angle wide shot of an aircraft crossing the Lebanese blue sky – a scene often to be seen throughout the story - Mouaness announces the film’s title using a big brown font on screen, perhaps as a statement to mark this year as one of the hardest in the contemporary Lebanese history.



Figure 1: film title overlapping the sky's low angle wide shot

As it is stated in the opening credits, “based on true event”, Mouaness, portrays the six hours of the Israeli invasion of the Lebanese capital Beirut, taking us to Mount-Lebanon where the teachers and students are trying to coop with the

rising event. The main character is named Wissam – played by Mohamad Dalli – accompanied throughout the film by Yasmin and Joseph who are teachers at the same school. These two characters are played by the well-known actors Nadine Labaki and Rodrigue Sleiman. Love finds its place in this story: Yasmin and Joseph are fighting their political differences of Christian parties to keep their relation growing; Wissam is in love with his classmate Joana, but they are dealing with the fundamental Lebanese problem: religion. Both kids come from different religious backgrounds, yet they join each other daily on the school campus. The diversity of characters in Mouannes' film is a sample of the diversity in the Lebanese community, making it for a foreigner to easily understand it and the Lebanese to easily identify with it.

To be more specific, it is important to position the movie in its right historic context. On the 6th of June 1982, the Israeli army did in fact enter Beirut. This attack, which took six hours only to be done, shocked the Lebanese people in a way that they never expected. After years of civil war, religious intolerance and inner divisions, this attack was the cherry on top. With lots of local and foreign parties fighting over the Lebanese lands, citizens found themselves being victim again of a bigger game, surrounded by foreign troops. This is expressed in 1982 with many suggestions in the film's scenes and lines. In a fictional one hour and a half long story, spectators accompany the film's characters as they found themselves stuck in the school, trying to escape towards safety, watching the attack from one of the Broumana hills in Mount-Lebanon.



Figure 2 -3 : film scenes showing the characters stuck in Brumana High School

One of the interesting characters is the bus driver Moussa - played by Joseph Azoury – who delivered through his performance the most authentic opposition to the chaotic situation at school and in his bus: he screams at the fighting students saying: “We’re all getting home. It does not matter how small the bus is. We can all fit. Isn’t what’s happening outside enough?” At this moment of the film, the bus might be compared to Lebanon during the invasion. Small but fitting together diverse people, stuck in the middle of a chaos, led by foreign politics. Perhaps the director himself wanted to represent these political and religious contradictions by portraying them in this scene: through love, relationships and friendships, in the whole country and in the small space of Moussa’s bus.



Figure 4 -5 : during the bus fight scenes

The classroom: A resistance

It is not by accident that a school with this geographical location is the film's set. Due to its secular background, CHS School was accessible for both inhabitants of West and East Beirut. Consequently, it became a subtle mid-point for the divided communities in Lebanon, gathering under its roof different people from different backgrounds. This social connotation matters. The school obviously managed to stay away from the militia's war; and as the invasion was about to reach Beirut, the teacher Yasmine refused to give attention to what's happening outside.

One of the most interesting scenes of this film is the exam scene where Yasmin is watching her students as they finish their tests. The rhythm is slow; silence is dominating, with only the sound of the aircrafts from outside the school disturbing it. Gradually as the events escalates, the students get nervous. A bomb hits close, distracting the kids and making them jump on their feet. At this moment, Yasmin's efforts of keeping he student calm and quiet weaken and she loses control over her classroom.



Figure 6-7 : in the classroom when near bombings are heard

The director Mouaness chooses to silence her voice at this point. We see her screaming on screen but we cannot hear her. The frightening sounds of the warplanes overlap everything and become the solo sound of the scene. Her defense mechanism pushes her to the limit and she desperately closes the windows. She obviously intends to disconnect the classroom from whatever is happening outside applying her own words earlier in the scene: "What's

happening outside is none of your concern!”, as if she wants to form some sort of safety bubble. Majid then pleads Yasmin to keep the window glass open. He affirms: “you shouldn’t close the windows. My dad says we shouldn’t close the windows when there’s bombings”.

This is a shocking statement from a child of his age. While watching this film, one faces contradictions; spectators engage with students who draw and play to spend their time, yet they are aware of the difference between west and east Beirut. These children also know about war tricks like opening the glass in case of potential bombing; surreal. This long scene in the classroom portrays the intensity of the event. With simple means, Oualid Mouannes manages to deliver the message of resistance, far away from guns and blood. He forces his spectators to stay in a room full of kids, facing the approaching invasion, unable to leave or to run.

Safety and mixed media

What makes 1982 different from any other war film deriving from war and post war era are Mouannes’ chosen aesthetics of sound design and mixed media in order to deliver the effects of the story.

In 1982 spectators hear the war, but they do not see it from close. The director made sure that the film’s sound design fill the background of the film scenes. The sounds of the news broadcasted through the radio, the aircraft sounds, and the far bombing were gathered together by the director in a way that spectators feel the suspense of the attack without the need of confronting deadly and bloody scenes. Sound in this film is as important as the image. It do not support it; instead, it is the main connection to the invasion. Mouannes made sure that the radio is visible to spectators. He films his character Joseph in many scenes clutching to the radio in order to know what is going on outside. As if the radio is his only way out from the school’s bubble. He films Yasmin attempting many times to call her parents without getting a proper line. Same thing goes from Ms. Layla – the school’s principal – who is trying to get in touch with the students’ parents in vain. The radio and the telephone serve as the umbilical cord providing mental safety to the films character, and it is cut by Joseph’s statement to Yasmin who literally says: “you won’t get through. The country’s in a state of war”.

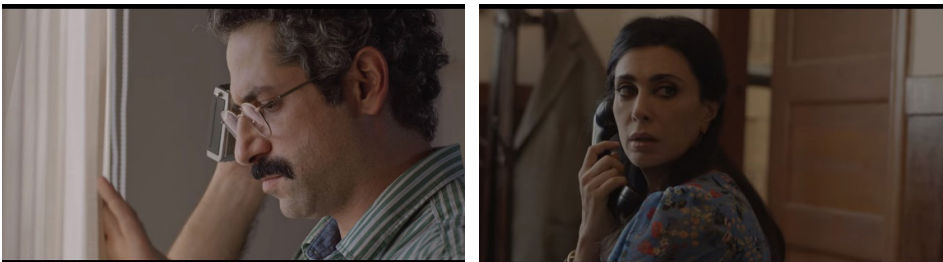


Figure 8-9 : Joseph and Yasmin clutching to the radio and the telephone

In addition, Mouaness uses the mixed media as an important tool in his movie; this could be considered as the most important aesthetical dimension in 1982. This audacious choice did not suddenly appear in the last part of the film. Oualid Mouaness did in fact prepare his spectators for such move: from the early minutes of the 1982, we meet Wissam as being a talented kid with drawing skills. All along the film, Wissam keep on sketching and coloring a cartoonish character similar to the popular character of Grendizer in the early 80's. When his teacher Yasmin notices his drawing in one of the film scenes, as he was handing the paper to the principal, she asks him: "Who is this? Grendizer?", Wissam corrects his instructor by saying: "No. Tigron. He's stronger. His protective powers are greater than Grendizer's. And nothing can stand in his way." In this scene, a star shines out of the paper, announcing the build-up of a surreal dimension. That same star appeared many times throughout the films before the amazing final scene, when Tigron himself ascends walking towards Beirut in a grandiose powerful and colorful scene.

Besides the surreal stars appearance, other story elements prepared Tigron's interference. In the last part of 1982, situation get tensed. Parents and students are trying to safely leave the school as they watch Beirut from the hill of Mount-Lebanon becoming a complete war zone. They are panicking and shouting hysterically in their cars while the Syrian and Israeli air forces fight over the city. Wissam's friend Majid gets re-assured by his mother. She comforts him by saying "it's okay sweetie. Only a bit longer and then we'll get to Solemar. Over there you can do whatever you want. It's safe over there". The kid then asks her: "Why is it safer over there?" she answers him back hesitatively: "Because... it just is".



Figure 9-10 : Parents and buses stuck in the school as battles get tensed

The combination made by Mouaness of these two figures in the last part of the film is interesting: when things get tensed, the frightened mother and Wissam find a safety zone in Solemar (an existing beach resort on Kaslik-Jounieh coast) and in Tigron (the imaginary character); Thus, the film's characters are in a state of complete denial. For the child, the solution for his impossible love story appeared right in front him, coming out from his imagination and his sketch books, in a form of what it appears to be a 2D frame by frame animation

technique, giving the spectator the feeling of watching an 80's cartoonish series. Tigron, as named by Wissam, appears rising from the sea, walking towards Beirut, surrounding it with his colorful light. Through this image, it is clear that the director Oualid Mouannes pictured hope through this character based on a childish imagination. The drawing of the colorful sky overlaps the real one and then it produces light reflection on the faces of the kids, intertwining the imaginary with the real. Tigron's protective powers – as defined earlier by Wissam – transforms the city of Beirut into a safe bubble, colorful and hopeful, suggesting that the Lebanese capital is safe like the resort Solemar. Tigron walks away once his mission is accomplished.



Figure 11-12 : Tigron ascending and walking towards Beirut



Figure 13-14 : Tigron transforming Beirut into a safe bubble

One cannot miss the fact that the appearance of the character Tigron was in a form of sketching, and then coloring. Spectators see Tigron being visually shaped. As he walks towards Beirut, Tigron is in the process of its actual creation. The sketching and coloring procedure finishes once he reached the battlefield and starts spreading his powers and colors all over Beirut. This choice is directly related to Wissam's imagination and talent. All along the film, Wissam draw Tigron in different situations. As a result, the saving operation of Beirut is a result of the child's on going imagination, making the desired safety bubble by Yasmin and Majid's mother come true.

At the end: The Denial

With a simple story, Oualid Mouaness produced a 2020 film reviving the devastating invasion. A national surreal tragedy of six hours cinematically told by Mouaness in one and half an hour film. Heroes includes children whom, with their dialogues and actions, shed the light on this Lebanese tragic day. In this film, spectators feel the war. They hear it. They live it. Suspense masters the scenes through the mean of sound and it is delivered by the performance of both Mohammad Dalli the child, Nadine Labaki and Rodrigue Sleiman along with their fellow actors.

This movie might be mistaken and labelled as a children movie, considering the 2D animation of the character Tigrion in the last part of the film. Whereas it is not: mixing a child's perception into a forced adult view is very advanced idea. Tigrion saved Beirut in the film. He made a safe zone, just like the desired destination of Solemar. Are the characters in the film in complete denial? Are the war and post war problems too bad to be solved in real life? Do Lebanese need a Tigrion? Or the state of denial will always accompanies the Lebanese in general and artists in particular?

Hence, 1982 by Oualid Mouaness is a story of resistance, desired safety and perhaps, a collective complete state of refutation of war.

Notice biographique | Pamela Nassour is an award-winning Lebanese filmmaker, film critic and an educator. Her short experimental film *Ila Haythou – To Nowhere* received numerous accolades and awards at its festival run. She was an assistant director and editor on numerous television commercials and music videos before she delved into film directing. She graduated from the Holy Spirit University of Kaslik (USEK) with a master degree in Visual Arts - Cinema and television, and she is currently pursuing her Ph.D in Film studies at the Université Saint-Joseph de Beyrouth (USJ). Pamela is also an educator and instructor at the Lebanese International University (LIU). She is part of FFTG Awards 2021 official Selection Committee.