

A FILM BY JOANA HADJITHOMAS AND KHALIL JOREIGE

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THE LEBANESE ROCKET SOCIETY

THE STRANGE TALE OF THE LEBANESE SPACE RACE



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A FILM BY JOANA HADJITHOMAS
AND KHALIL JOREIGE

France, Lebanon, Qatar - 2012 - 95'



SYNOPSIS

In the early 60's, during the cold war and the apex of Pan Arabism, a group of students and researchers enters the race to space and create the Lebanese Rocket Society. Sometimes, and specially nowadays, dreams can overtake a tormented history...

FEATURING

Manoug Manougian
John Markarian
General Youssef Wehbé
Harry Koundakjian
Joseph Sfeir
Hampar Karaguezian
Paul Haidostian
Assad Jradi
Zafer Azar
Minister Ziad Baroud
Minister Tarek Mitri
Fouad Matta
Jana Wehbé



CREW

Directors
Producers

With the support of

Animation
Cinematographer
Editor
Sound Editor
Sound Mixing
Music

International Sales
International Press

Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige
Georges Schoucair (About Productions-Lebanon)
Edouard Mauriat (Mille et une Productions-France)
Doha Film Institute
Centre National du Cinéma et de l'Image Animée
Arab Fund for Arts and Culture (AFAC)
SANAD
Fonds francophone de production audiovisuelle
du Sud
Pascale et Michael Zammar
Ghassan Halwani
Jeanne Lapoirie, Rachel Aoun
Tina Baz
Rana Eid
Olivier Goinard
Nadim Mishlawi, Scrambled Eggs, Discipline

Urban Distribution International
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JOANA HADJITHOMAS AND KHALIL JOREIGE

are Lebanese filmmakers and artists.

Together, they have directed documentaries such as *Khiam 2000-2007* (2008) and *El Film el Mafkoud* (*The Lost Film*, 2003), and feature films including *Al Bayt el Zaher* (*Around the Pink House*, 1999) and *A Perfect Day* (2005).

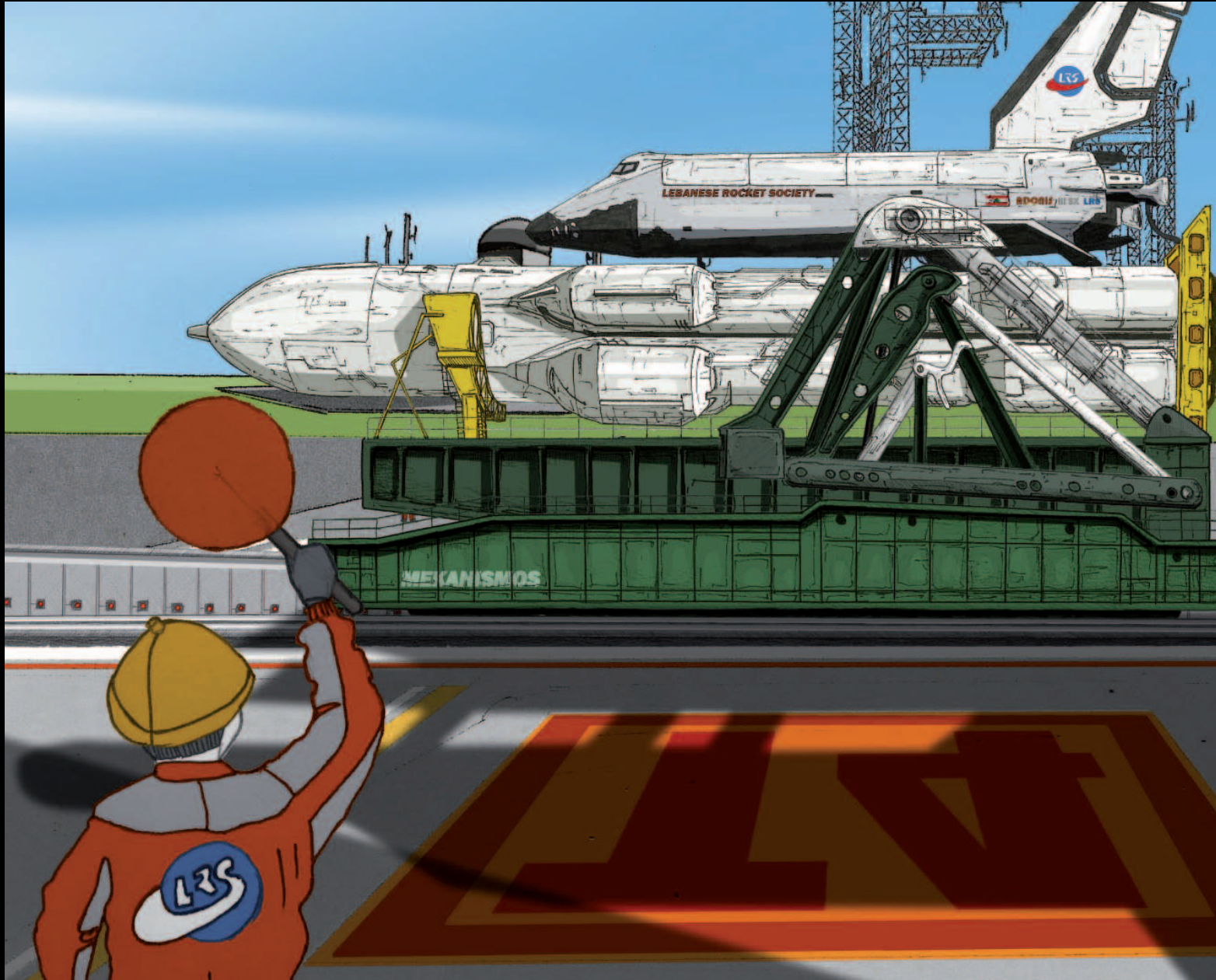
Their last feature film *Je veux voir* (*I want to see*), starring Catherine Deneuve and Rabih Mroué, premiered at the Cannes Film Festival in 2008 in the Un Certain Regard section and was granted the Best Singular Film Award by the French Syndicate of Cinema Critics that year.

Hadjithomas and Joreige have created numerous photographic and video installations that have been shown in many museums, biennials and art centers around the world.

Their last project is about the Lebanese space program which include several artistic installations and the long feature documentary, *The Lebanese Rocket Society, the strange tale of the Lebanese space race*.

They are University teachers, board members of Metropolis Cinema and co-founders of Abbout Productions along with its main producer Georges Schoucair.





FILMOGRAPHY

- | | |
|------|---|
| 2008 | JE VEUX VOIR (I want to see)
Film (35mm, 75 min) |
| 2008 | KHIAM 2000-2007
Documentary, (DVCam, 103 min.) |
| 2006 | OPEN THE DOOR, PLEASE
Fiction (35mm, 11 min)
part of ENFANCES (Childhoods)
(35mm, 80min) |
| 2005 | A PERFECT DAY (Yawmon Akhar)
Fiction (35mm, 88min) |
| 2003 | RAMAD (Ashes)
Fiction (35mm, 26min) |
| 2003 | AL FILM EL MAFKOUD (The lost film)
Documentary (Beta SP, 42 min) |
| 2001 | BARMÉ (Rounds)
Fiction, (DV. 8 min) |
| 2000 | KHIAM
Documentary, (Béta SP, 52 min) |
| 1999 | AL BAYET AL ZAHER (Around the pink house)
Fiction (35 mm, 92min) |

IN CONVERSATION WITH JOANA HADJITHOMAS AND KHALIL JOREIGE

The starting point for *The Lebanese Rocket Society* is a fact that was mysteriously erased from Lebanese history: the active participation of a group of Lebanese scientists in space research during the 1960's, and the construction of rockets in Lebanon. How did you come to learn about this forgotten history?

Joana Hadjithomas (JH): First through my sister, who was doing research on Lebanese history. Then we saw a few images in *Vehicles*, a book published by Akram Zaatar and the Arab Image Foundation. But we didn't have very much to go on: a few lines in a book, a few pictures. And then we saw an official stamp that carried the image of the rocket we see in the film. So we realized that this had been a project of major scale! That really surprised us, because we had never heard about it before.

Khalil Joreige (KJ): We questioned our friends and family, but none of them knew anything about it either. We began to ask ourselves: if this was indeed a serious scientific project, then how come everyone has forgotten about it? Why had it disappeared from our collective memory and imagination? Then

we started searching! A lot of our work involves history that is forgotten or kept secret, which is often more interesting than the official history.

JH: This idea that Lebanon had participated in the space race was pretty unbelievable. And also the fact that it happened in the 60's, which were very interesting years for the Middle East: it was the peak of Pan-Arabism, a time when worldwide revolution seemed like a possibility, a time for big ideas and ideologies. The obsession with space also developed during this period out of the competition between the USA and the USSR and the way that competition affected the rest of the world. Manoug Manougian, the Haigazian University Mathematics professor who initiated the project with his students, believed that they were participating in international research. They saw themselves as

contemporaries of their peers around the world, in the strict sense of sharing a common time. This contemporaneity could also be seen in the spirit of the revolutions happening around the world, which all seemed to be interconnected.

KJ: In any case, that's how we imagine it...





Why was the project stopped, and then so quickly forgotten?

JH: There were some objective reasons: the President and the army wanted to stop it due to the international pressure they were receiving. The rockets were becoming too powerful and could be potentially used for less peaceful purposes. They also needed to divert funding and were dreaming of launching a satellite ... But for us, maybe another important reason why the project was aborted was its connection to dreams. The men who started it were dreamers, but ever since the war of 1967 and the major Arab defeat, there has been a sense of disillusionment – and maybe we don't allow ourselves these kinds of dreams anymore... This is why such an adventure seems nearly inconceivable today, impossible even to imagine. The images do not match up with our imaginations anymore. We are unable to recognize them.

KJ: There isn't a lot of science fiction in the Arab World, and more specifically not very much anticipation, projecting ourselves in the future, or uchronia. Why? Is it political? Is it to prevent the development of excessive imagination, of dreams that could eventually reveal themselves to be subversive? We wanted to establish that dimension of projection into the future in the film through the animation created by Ghassan Halwani, whose work we have long admired. The animated section closes the film and imagines Lebanon in the year 2025, what it might have looked like if this space program had continued.

This faith in a different world that was a big part of the 1960's reappeared as you were making the film, with the emergence of the Arab spring... Quite an astonishing synchronicity...

KJ: We started preparing the film in August 2009 and the shoot went from November 2010 to March 2011. We were trying to tell the story and re-live its hopes and dreams when suddenly, as we were editing, things started happening in the Arab world. In Tunisia, in Egypt, in Libya, in Syria, in Bahrain – men and women were taking to the streets. Despite their fear, they were starting to dream again. And their dreams were not going to be stopped...

JH: Without you even realizing it, artistic desire feels and feeds off the pulse of what is happening around you. It is sensitive and permeable. Things had been pulsating for some time in the Arab world, and we couldn't avoid absorbing them. In a way, we've just re-transcribed them.

The way this comes through in the film makes it different from a typical historical documentary. There's almost an 'action movie' feel to the way you depict the construction of the Lebanese rocket...

JH: This story is a space adventure. Its main protagonists may be scientists, but they are dreamers at heart. Manoug Manougian and his students believed they could make their dreams and desires a reality. They said to themselves: "I want to send a rocket into the sky. I need the right fuel. It's not available, so let's make it..." Listening to them tell their stories was like following the adventure from start to finish, with all its moments of great excitement, disappointment, fear, joy... There was an enthusiasm and exhilaration surrounding the race to space that we wanted to preserve in the film.



KJ: When we met Manoug and he gave us access to his extraordinary archives retracing the entire project, along with telling us the whole story, we started to feel strongly that this was the way to go. We wanted to focus on filming and listening to the real life protagonists of this adventure. They are the witnesses, and their words are extremely important for us.

At the same time, both of you remain quite present through the voice-over...

KJ: Yes, because we wanted to continuously question the past from the perspective of our own present.

JH: It was important to make it clear from the beginning that we were born in 1969 and we were taking a deeply subjective approach to our historical investigation. Of course there are the facts as they happened, but another essential aspect was the echo those facts provoked within our own imaginations. The full effects of that process become clear in the second half of the film when we decided to create the sculpture representing the Lebanese rocket. An act of the present, but with its source in the past and the memory that was passed on to us. We didn't want to come off as nostalgic. On the contrary, we wanted to accomplish something for the present time, an act that paid tribute to everything these people had done.

KJ: It was about doing something crazy today, rather than just contemplating and admiring the courage and hope of this group of scientists who believed they could send rockets into space. Our working process usually involves taking steps to reinterpret and re-enact, to make things come to life and exist in the present. This film ended up becoming something very personal, and the voice-over allowed us to re-transcribe our questions and thoughts as they came to us. The film is also about dreams and our ability to still dream today.

Rather than just exposing this "confiscated history", you also re-appropriate it using your tools as visual artists – by reconstructing a rocket yourselves.

KJ: We wanted not only to link this past history to our present situation but also to work with the close connection between art and cinema. The installations we created can be seen in the film, and the process of making the film inspired and nourished our artistic practice.

The Lebanese Rocket Society is a project that includes a film as well as several works of art, including the reproduction of one of the rockets in the form of a sculpture, the Cedar 4 but all white, as a kind of strange monument to science in a country where we rarely agree on symbols, where people very seldom gather around monuments.





The Lebanese Rocket Society, like some of our other films, asks a question: what can cinema do? And gradually an answer emerged: it can pursue a dream that was interrupted by creating a replica of the rocket and donating it to the university. Dedicating this strange monument was a way to pay tribute to the original scientific project and the original dream.

JH: This project wasn't born just anywhere, but at Haigazian, an Armenian university. Its initiator Manoug Manougian comes from Jerusalem and his students came from all over – Jordan, Syria, Iraq... They were members of a community that had been the victim of genocide at the beginning of the century. And what do they go and do? They create a rocket, the first one in the Arab world, and they give it to Lebanon. It's a beautiful gesture of gratitude, a gift to the country that took them in. For myself as the granddaughter of Greek immigrants and for Khalil who is part Palestinian, we are very sensitive to this history of displacement and exile, but also gratitude. Offering this new rocket to the university was a contribution in the continuity of that history.

After reconstructing the rocket, you took it on a journey across the city. Why was this also an important act for you?

JH: The rocket was an object that lent itself easily to confusion, especially in Lebanon where people are more used to dealing with political conflict than they are with science: was it a rocket or a missile, a weapon or an artifact of modernity and scientific research? Reintroducing the rocket into an artistic space, both in our film and at the university, represents the belief that these spaces can protect us from this kind of confusion and misunderstanding.

KJ : Within the space of the university, the rocket can be recognized for what it actually is: a scientific undertaking. And in the artistic space, it can be understood for what it is also, an artistic intervention. It was provocative but also vital to show the city that: "This is not a weapon."

The Lebanese Rocket Society is not only a film about investigating the past, but also about conquering it: conquering the sky as the Lebanese wanted to do back then and re-imagining the conclusion of the story in your own way at the end of the film. Are you in a certain sense re-writing history?

KJ: There is a lot of memory in Lebanon, but because it is no longer connected to a unified history, every event becomes personal and subjective.

JH: Historians, witnesses, artists, writers and filmmakers can potentially participate in making traces that are absent visible again. But we're not rewriting history - we try to intervene in the real world, which is something completely different. In our work, both of us always follow the accidents or signs we encounter along the way. We are completely permeable to reality, and the way we work is very organic. Our films are experiences in every sense of the word and also experiences of cinema, often difficult to classify or define.

KJ: In our films we always felt a need to symbolically push back the limits that seem to be everywhere, a vital need to expand the boundaries. It was the same with the rocket: recreating it, transporting it through the city, donating it to the university. Pursuing this dream in the present and saying that we once were researchers and utopians, that once we dreamed and that we can become dreamers again.

JH: And this is at the heart of our faith in art and in cinema.

Interview by Claire Vassé



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