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Ruins - Chapter I: Codename Bourji

June 2020



Norwegian University of
Science and Technology

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MFA Critical Reflection

Submission date: June 2020

Norwegian University of Science and Technology
Trondheim Academy of Fine Art

Abstract

According to a rumor by my mother's grandfather, Nour el-Houda is related to my family. Via a quest to yet discover Nour El-Houda's exact kinship and childhood in my hometown, the film is a partly improvised, autobiographicized history of now-deserted cinemas in El-Mina, Lebanon, through interviews with people who worked as cinema operators and relatives of deceased ones. The film presented here is a quest to discover, via the movie theaters in my hometown and their history, the singer-actress's kinship to my family.

Body

Central Urge:

During my 2 years at the art academy in Trondheim, I worked on what became a trilogy of works that autobiographicize histories from my hometown El-Mina, in Tripoli. These works deal with the artist performing complicity, the disappearance of analog cinemas, and cinema ruins in Mina.

The second of these projects was *Tree* in 2019, an installation consisting of a 6m x 1.3m print of the Debs/El-Debs family tree (my mother is Debs, my father El-Debs), prints of digital photos of some of the deserted cinemas from El-Mina and of film posters placed on a red velvet fabric invoking cinema curtains, as well as an iPad showing excerpts of Mohamed Soueid's *Tango of yearning*¹ (1998), which bears the title of one of her songs. In this film, Soueid touches on the old cinemas in Hamra, a topic he wrote on extensively in his book *Ya Fouadi [My Heart], a cinematic Chronicle of Beirut's Late Movie Theatres*². *Tree* was an investigation into a family rumor about the kinship of famed singer-actress Nour el-Hoda to my family. The photos were meant as a draft for a future project in Mina.

The idea for this project started in Spring 2019's chapter of professors Annett Busch and Jakob Jessen's class "Line-linearity". At the end of the course, we were required to do a group exhibition, on an idea that relates to different concepts of the line and/or linearity in arts. This made me think of the family tree as a web of lines connected and expanding.

I also remembered my mother telling me about a rumor in her family that actress-singer Nour el-Hoda (Alexandra Badran) was related to the Debs family, more specifically her grandfather's Bassili family. Thus, I decided to make my own family tree, to try to find how Nour el-Hoda's Badran family could be related to the Bassili. I only managed to approximate her (third cousin of my maternal grandfather).

It was now only logical to pursue back in Mina the Nour el-Hoda and cinema theaters quests. So I decided to travel to Lebanon for El-Mina in September 2019. I requested family records, birth

¹ *Tango of Yearning* (1998), directed by Mohamed Soueid. Beirut, produced and distributed by: Ayloul Festiva.

² Soueid, M. (1996), *Ya Fouadi, a Cinemati Chronicle on Beirut's Late Movie Theatres*. Beirut: Dar An-Nahar.

certificates and other official documents of my extended family, from local moukhtars and priests. It proved more difficult to find Nour el-Hoda's traces in town, and I still haven't found the proof of her relation to my mother's family, if any.

It was then that I realized I needed to find Nour el-Hoda through my subjective history of Mina's cinemas, rather than official documents. This got confirmed to me since there was an implicit collaboration with Soueid's work on cinemas, and his film that gives homage to Nour el-Hoda.

On the other hand, what first began as a plan for a public intervention on the cinemas, to claim those spaces back, soon morphed into another medium. I became aware that my investigation into the cinemas and their history needed a different way to dig into that history. So I revisited the location in the square in El-Mina and the cinemas surrounding it, shooting footage, and I sought people who were involved as cinema operators and managers, cinephiles, cine-club organizers, etc. and filmed them. Nour El-Hoda would come up spontaneously in the conversations when mentioning Egyptian movies, and the quest for the singer's kinship to me got intertwined with that of the cinema history in the town. During one walking filming day, we asked an old lady in an alleyway about Nour El-Hoda, and she pointed to us a house where the child used to live. On another occasion, during a talk with a woman, she mentioned remembering Nour el-Hoda as a child leaning on a wall near her house and singing. I also had the chance to borrow photographic archive from the Haddad (alias Bourji) family which I scanned.

Thus was the start of what I later envisioned as a film, in October 2019.

Then, on October 17, while I was planning for further shoots (going back to people I've interviewed to add touches and adapt their presence into my material, doing some fine-tuning...), a revolution broke nation-wide all over Lebanon and which went on for about 6 months, with now some protests breaking out occasionally despite the country shutdown. People had long become fed up with the corruption permeating the government: embezzlement of money from state projects since 1992, crooked privatization plans (telephone companies, taking over public properties such as beaches), lack of proper social healthcare, ineffective electricity plans unequally distributed across regions. The country is almost bankrupt, mostly due to a Ponzi-like scheme that's been taking place for 27 years by the state bank. I managed to shoot some footage of the protests in Tripoli, where I was staying most of the time. Tripoli proved to be a leading example of the revolutionary movement, even surpassing the capital Beirut.

When I returned home in January 2020, I filmed more interviews.

Concept:

In today's art world, I believe artists and filmmakers are innately accomplices, and one of the symptoms of this complicity is the disappearance of analog cinemas, since the early 2000's, all around the world. This project started as a need for me as an artist, from Tripoli, living at the time equally between Beirut and Tripoli, to reactivate the movie theaters as potential spaces for art, with the lack of engaging, independent spaces in the city long neglected by the rest of the country. Many artworks I've been creating lately revolve around me as a subject, and how this self has the agency to construct spontaneities using improvisation. Here came into play the sudden search for Nour el-Hoda as a relative, and the need to resurrect her childhood in El-Mina arose. From then on, the 2 directions (Nour el-Hoda and Mina cinemas) became somehow inter-related.

I believe it is important now to revisit what the closing of cinemas means for us currently as consumers of films and as humans.

About Nour el-Hoda and Arab singers in Egypt:

Nour el-Hoda (1924-1998), born Alexandra Badran, was a Lebanese singer and actress who rose to fame in Egypt in the 1940's. She was the daughter of a 2 Lebanese immigrants who fled to Mersin in Turkey, where she was born. Her mother was Badhia Dibo, from Tripoli, El-Mina. Alexandra spent part of her childhood in her father's house in El-Mina, in solitude. Her father wouldn't let her sing, but she defied him³. However, Nour El-Hoda stayed in father's shadow for most, if not all, of her life. She was quoted saying that she was married to her father.

Since the 30's, it was a dream for many middle eastern young talents to become Egyptianized in the hope of reaching stardom. Egypt, considered "the mother of the universe", was the cinematic and musical cultural hub of the Arab World. Other such people included Lebanese singer-actress Sabah (although she remained "Lebanese"), Syrian singer-composer-actor Farid Al-Atrash and his sister the singer Asmahan, as well as Lebanese actor Omar Al-Sharif (born Mishel Shalhoub).

³ Zibawi, M. & Makhoul, A. (2018), *Female Singing Stars of the Lebanese 40s*. Beirut: Dar El-Nimer for Arts and Culture, IRAB Association for Arabic Music. Supported by: the Arab Fund for Arts and Culture (AFAC)

Nour el-Hoda, the young Lebanese coming from Beirut to Cairo to steal the spotlights from big Tarab names such as Oum Kalthoum and Leila Mourad, faced fierce competition from these stars. The Egyptian tax authority prohibited her later on from performing concerts in Cairo, limiting her singing only within movies. Against such aggression, Nour el-Hoda returned to Lebanon, but didn't get much attention (the Rahbanis were too busy with their Fairouz), and only managed to star in a film that didn't find success.

From Lebanon, resurgence in Trondheim, and back to Lebanon:

I had been working on the project technically from 2016, when I made a photo-walk of all the 6 cinemas (they are 7, but Alam cinema has now become 100% unrecognizable). Later on this year, I wrote a text about the productivity of the artist in times of war and calamities, more specifically his/her inability to produce. This text became the *Backfire and Consequence*, a "lecture with performative ground" that I gave at Kunstarken during Trondheim Open's Open Academy in 2018. In this work, I argue, via a slightly unfortunate childhood incident and pop singer Majida el-Roumi, that the domino effect closing of all movie theaters in El-Mina was the cause of the armed clashes in Tripoli between Bab al-Tebbeneh and Jabal Mohsen, thus recreating a recent history of war through my personal prism.

This project's original intentions were a need for me as an artist and filmmaker to access spaces that are seemingly shunned from me, in my hometown. In Lebanon, artistic and filmic production is heavily based in Beirut. There's actually no fitting art space or gallery where I could show my work, not only in Mina, but Tripoli in general.

So when I made the 2nd part of my trilogy ("Tree"), I referred in it to a future project. In this project, I planned to announce anonymously the re-opening of some of the cinemas (through posters on the town's wall), on a specific date. When people would gather, they would instead find a film projected on the gates of the cinemas. That was intended to be my gesture of reclaiming those theaters.

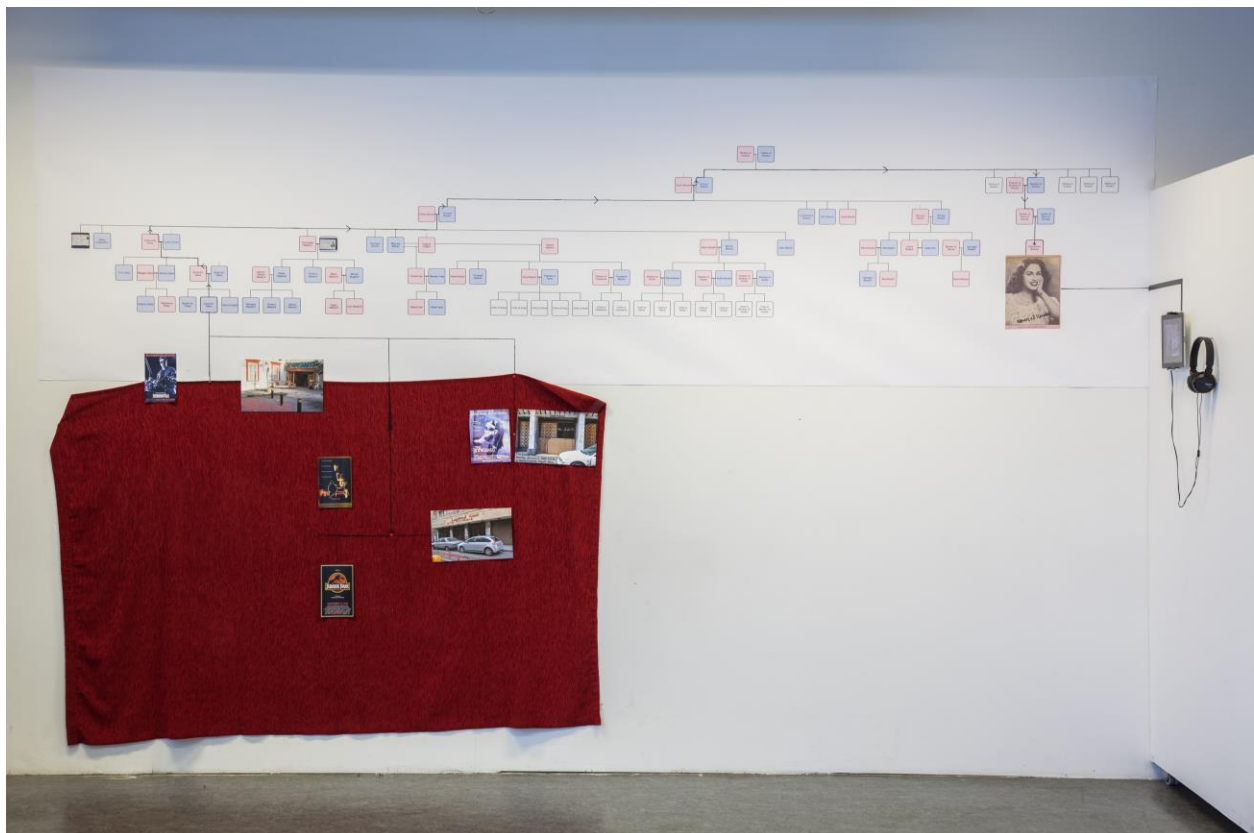
But during my trip to El-Mina, in September 2019, I realized that the work to be done was a movie looking into the history of these cinemas, in order to immerse myself in them. I've been filming in a process-oriented manner, letting the cinemas and people guide me (often speaking for themselves), just like my writing. Research would often resurface back during shooting.

Obstacles:

- Digging into official records to find the right Badran family (Nour el-Houda's) in Mina. Badran seem to originate from Koura region in North Lebanon, with Shammass as initial family name. So far, I know that Nour el Hoda's mother is Badiha Dibo. There is talk in my family that Dibo are related to Debs or Bassili, but that is still not confirmed yet. A baptism book record of the Christian Orthodox families in El-Mina was stolen. This would be my hardest challenge probably.
- There was talk that Nour el-Hoda's sister Angèle is still alive; she would be 94. It was challenging to find records about her, or the location of other Badran relatives in Beirut.

Pre-shutdown exhibition plan:

Before the outbreak of Corona and halting of activities in Norway, I envisioned an exhibition that would be a reworking of *Tree* (image below) from 2019 into a new format incorporating the film from El-Mina.



The cinema photos on the cloth would be replaced by the movie, with a TV monitor mounted into a rectangular cut of the fabric. The archival analog photos would be projected to the right of the fabric via a slide projector. The TV and the slide projector would thus work together as a narrative, with the Bourji family interviews synchronizing with Shehade Bourji's photos, and the interview with Gabi Bandali showing along with photos of his father Fouad in Hollywood Cinema.

There was also a possibility of turning the tree into a physical, 3-dimensional tree that would allow for panoramic exploration. This form would allow for a mapping of the project. The branches would have TV monitors dangling from them. Each branch would show an interview with one of the characters. Other branches would bear archival travel documents of relatives in my family that might be more directly related to Nour el-Hoda.

Due to the current circumstances that prevented a physical exhibition at either Galleri KiT or the Kunstmuseum, my work shifted on working on my film footage and photographic archive.

The Film:

In its current form, the movie is a 3-chapter film. The first chapter is titled 'Codename Bourji'. In El-Mina (and a big part of Tripoli), families have alias names, sometimes linked to professions associated with the ancestors. For example, my mother's uncle is from the Bassili, and his alias is Kawwa (the one who works in ironing). However, his siblings aren't associated with the alias Kawwa.

Shehade, the focus of Chapter I, is of the family Haddad, aliased in El-Mina as Bourji. By titling codename (which could appear on a black screen preceding the first scene of the final film), there is an implication of the codename being mine. In other words, since this movie is partly autobiographical/self-portrait, I could be in this chapter the artist/Oscar as Shehade Bourji or even as all the Bourji family members figuring in my film: Shehade's wife Layla, his son Jean, along with Elias who would appear in a later chapter and who is an 'indirect' cousin, as is the custom in El-Mina (for example, if my parent and someone else's parent are cousins, I would be that someone else's indirect cousin). Another peculiar detail is that the word codename in Arabic could translate to 'movement name', which goes well with Jean talking about his memories of organizing and acting in plays using his technical cinema skills on the stage of the Orthodox Youth Movement house.

In fact, each of the Bourji members figuring in the film refers to my parents or grandparents while recounting his/her memories. In the opening scene, Jean welcomes me as the son of his childhood friend, going back in his memories through the history of this town. At some point, he tells me (the scene isn't in the movie cut) that my late grandfather was good friend with his father, and that had he been alive, I could've talked and interviewed him for more anecdotes.

Layla talks about either my grandmother or my mother's aunt sewing a dress for her from the Egyptian movie *Chair of Confession*⁴, starring famed actress Faten Hamama.

The opening scene then fades into Layla going through photos of Shehade as she talks about them and brings memories back in front of the camera. I have chosen to incorporate these photos, superimposed on the image of the scene. Childhood actress and singer Fayrouz, from Egypt (not the Lebanese Fayrouz), came to her house when she was 11 with her parents and sisters. They stayed in for about a week. Shehade is then posing near the projector of his Cleopatra Cinema. The next photo shows Shehade disguising for a carnival sitting with his friends. Layla remembers who these people were. This photo is placed in the shot near her, making the impression that she is sharing the sofa with these people.

Now a dissolve back to Jean talking about how his father got a cinema projector from an Armenian guy in Beirut, who assembled the projector himself from various parts.

Next, a few back and forth's between Layla and Jean, where they talk about memories relating to Eid al-Fitr, with Layla remembering how they would wake at 2 a.m. to decorate the whole street, and Jean reminiscing an incident where viewers in a cinema theater in Baalbek got furious about the hero getting imprisoned that they started shooting their weapons in objection.

The second chapter starts with an intertitle displaying "Inside Hollywood". A small vaulted neighborhood is shown in a glimpse, then Gabi Bandali talks about Hollywood Cinema, which was managed by his father Fouad, popularly known in the area as el-khal (the uncle). Then, when Gabi goes around the building to show how people got a secret spot from the opposite building to watch movies from Hollywood for free, the scene dissolves into an encounter with Georgette Soury, with Gabi Srour and myself asking her about Nour el-Hoda's house. Georgette figures earlier in chapter I off-screen talking near Layla. She leads us to the house, right opposite to

⁴ *Chair of Confession (Kursi al-I'tiraf)* (1949), directed by Youssef Wahbi. Cairo, produced by: Nahas Films

Hollywood Cinema, where her father used to take her as a child when Nour el-Hoda and her brother would come from Beirut. Cut to a scene with Gabi Srour and Miled Karam, whom we encountered in the window of his house, talking about another house that Nour el-Hoda inhabited, located in another street and neighborhood. Miled then brings a big medal in honor of his martyred brother in the communist party Maurice. The inscription on the medal is a lamentation of Lebanese Communist Party martyrs by Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish and reads as follows: "I don't know them, but I know in them my party, my country and my people."