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Jocelyne Saab, Film Pioneer and Witness of a Time

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REGISTO

TÍTULO: Jocelyne Saab, Film Pioneer and Witness of a Time

AUTOR: Mathilde Rouxel

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ENTRADA

Jocelyne Saab was a French-Lebanese filmmaker, active from 1970 to 2019. Since she passed away on January 7th, 2019, her work has been (re)discovered by the younger generation of Lebanese, Arab and international filmmakers that claim their filiation with this audacious form of political cinema. A witness of her time, Jocelyne Saab made films that wrote another history of the last 30 years of the 20th century in the Middle East.

To anyone who is familiar with the Arab World and the history of conflicts that have torn apart the Middle Eastern region, 1948 is a crucial date. It marks the establishment of the State of Israel, and the subsequent displacement of 300 000 Palestinians to neighboring countries, including Lebanon. It is also the year Jocelyne Saab was born. Growing up in a post-1948 Arab world bears a significant meaning for those who chose what might be called ‘creative careers.’ She grew up with her father listening to the Nasserist radio Sawt el-Arab, ‘the voice of the Arabs’, through which the Egyptian president would talk to Arab people from every nation to rally them around a Pan-Arab political and ideological conception of the region. Her family was Maronite and the young Jocelyne was raised surrounded by people of different faiths, social classes and nationalities, in a region yet to be known as ‘West Beirut.’

Jocelyne Saab’s career first took off when she became a war reporter for French television, aged 23. She learned how to make films on the ground and her first projects aimed above all to inform: wars, marches, political conflicts were dividing the MENA region at the beginning of the 1970s and she was there to record the most important events of the decade: Gaddafi’s Green March in Libya, the October War in Israel, Egypt and Syria, the Saddam Hussein-led war in Kurdistan, the struggle of the Polisario Front in Western Sahara, the resistance of the Palestinians in North Syria and South Lebanon, and, of course, the Lebanese Civil War. Today, thanks to the 47 films she made in a span of 48 years, we have been bequeathed a rare testimony to the spirit of a vanished

time, when the Third World represented an ideology, and the struggle for independence and freedom a collective need.

WATCHING THE ARAB WORLD FROM THE POINT OF VIEW OF AN ARAB FILMMAKER, WRITING THE HISTORY FROM ANOTHER PERSPECTIVE

Western contemporary viewers of Jocelyne Saab's films are often astonished by what they see. Firstly because of the powerful images presented 50 years after the Lebanese director first shot them, but also because of the angle itself that she chose to tackle them. From her first TV reports to her last feature films and art installations, Jocelyne Saab always took the opposite stance to the general political doxa, following above all her political engagement and sharing her microphone with people who are generally not heard in mass-media broadcasts.

Shortly after she began working for French television, Jocelyne Saab accidentally became the main journalist of *Gaddafi, The Man Coming from the Desert*, after the official reporter failed to obtain his visa for Libya and the young woman initially sent as a translator replaced him. While the film follows the traditional propaganda that the Libyan chief usually staged for foreign journalists, she was able to create trust between herself and the leader, a skill that was key to her successful career. Following the film, she was promoted to the rank of war reporter and sent back to Libya to cover the Green March and get other exclusive interviews with Gaddafi. In 1973 she was sent to Egypt to cover the October War. The following year, in Iraq, she filmed the war between the Saddam Hussein regime and Kurdish pro-independence groups. Politically closer to the Kurdish claims than Hussein's policy, she decided to cross the border to the Kurdish side of the territory and was kidnapped—on purpose—by the Iraqi forces. She filmed everything. When she got back to the TV studio in France, she came under criticism—French diplomacy was supporting Hussein's policies. For the broadcasting of *Iraq: War in Kurdistan* (1974), the whole sequence was censored. This episode was her first encounter with censorship.

While a Lebanese reporter was precious for French TV, which was eager for key contacts in the region, Jocelyne Saab's political views on the Middle East did not fit in with the French political agenda. That same year, she went to the northern border of Syria, inquiring about the situation of Palestinian women in the camps and their position in the resistance to Israeli occupation. Shot shortly after the end of the October War and just before Anwar el-Sadat's diplomatic visit to Israel,

the film was rejected by the editorial team and Jocelyne Saab was dismissed. *Palestinian Women* remained unshown until her death in 2019. Jocelyne Saab operated on the joint principles of Arab nationalism and anticolonialism, with which she was raised, and fought against Zionism and oppressive regimes. From the beginning of her career she always made a point of defending her ideas through her images, which now bear witness to a troubled time.

Jocelyne Saab did not go back to French TV, deciding instead to work independently. On the 13th of April 1975, a civil war began in Lebanon, which would only end 15 years later. Her priority became to explain her country's falling apart to the world. Testifying to, showing and preserving what could be preserved through images—the color of the walls, the atmosphere of the coffee shops on the shore, the children playing in the streets despite the ruins surrounding them. Jocelyne Saab wanted to show what would not be shown by other journalists; she did not film the massacres, but, instead, the Lebanese civilians suffering from a never-ending war that divided them and drove them, in many cases, into forced 'displacement'. She was one of the only journalists who went to the south of Lebanon to record the violence of the Israeli forces not only against the Palestinians but also against the Lebanese civilian population, destroying villages with no cameras around to show it.

Jocelyne Saab made more than ten films during the Lebanese civil war. When the war ended in 1990, the amnesty law that was enacted by the Taif Agreement ending the confrontations prevented the establishment of a Lebanese national history of the conflict. Each community, each political group has its own narrative. In this context, images are highly valuable, especially for the new Lebanese generation that needs elements to understand the traumatic experience that their country had to face.

A supporter of Third Worldism, Jocelyne Saab was in the habit of documenting the struggles and memories of others. In 1977, she went to Western Sahara to document the Polisario Front guerrilla war against the Moroccan authorities (*Sahara Is Not for Sale*, 1978). Around the same time, she started going to Egypt to show the consequences of Sadat's 'opening policy' for the country's vulnerable populations (*Egypt, The City of the Death*, 1977). She was banned from both countries because of these two films. Later, she traveled to Vietnam to collect the testimonies of Dr. Hoa, an old communist guerrilla fighter who later became a minister (*The Lady of Saigon*, 1997). Through more than 40 documentaries and documentary art installations, Jocelyne Saab preserved the history of her region and its ideologies, offering the coming generations landmarks to define

themselves socially, historically and politically.

A FREE-SPIRITED ARAB WOMAN FILMMAKER IN THE 1970S

Jocelyne Saab is one of the women pioneers in Arab cinema. Courageous and audacious, she covered the majority of the most dangerous conflicts of the 1970s and went to places where male journalists had never been able to go. It is commonly said that being a woman in the field of cinema makes things more difficult. Jocelyne Saab is a counter-example of this general idea. As a woman and a young journalist, she was trusted by the most important left wing leaders. Close to the Palestinian resistance, she obtained the right, when she was only 25 years old, to enter a training camp for Palestinian fighters in Northern Syria. *The Rejection Front* (1975) was a scoop: it was the first time anyone had been able to document the act of suicide bombing. The film is strong; it is far from the realm of propaganda films. Horrified by the extremism of such a practice, Jocelyne Saab showed uncompromisingly how far the resistance went, and opened a path for empathy towards the sixteen-year-old boys ready to die for their ideas.

Jocelyne Saab always kept her free spirit; she always refused to follow any party. She has been criticized for this free mindset, but she is also respected for this untamable independence.

The leader of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (P.L.O.) trusted her too. She filmed him several times as the embodiment of the resistance in Southern Lebanon (*Letter from Beirut*, 1978) or the strongman of the Palestinian struggle during the siege of Beirut by the Israeli forces in 1982 (*Beirut, My City*, 1982). She was asked by Arafat himself to board the boat *Atlantis* that carried the Palestinian fighters out of Beirut at the end of the siege. She was the only TV journalist allowed to go with the Palestinians. She made *The Ship of Exile* (1982), which has been broadcasted by the most popular French TV stations and sold to many international TV channels. The rare images she took of the trip are precious; they document this spirit that animated the Palestinian cause, which never accepted defeat.

Being a woman did not stop her from following the guerrilla war of the Polisario Front fighters in Western Sahara. In *Sahara Is Not for Sale* (1978), she goes to the front to film the conflict between the Moroccan forces and the guerrilleros. Jocelyne Saab has the unique ability to connect with all belligerents: Moroccan, Mauritanian and Algerian leaders speak freely to her camera with little care as to where their words are going. In a certain way, as a young female journalist in 1977, she was not taken seriously—at least, she did not seem dangerous to them. Still, the release of the film earned her censorship in Algeria, and a ban for life in Morocco.

Beyond her rich and diverse journey through the Middle East armed with her camera, what is most interesting to observe, at today's distance, is the way Jocelyne Saab would film her subjects, compared to her contemporary male colleagues. Jocelyne Saab never ran into a massacre to film violence and death. When she reports on the battle in the Quarantina area in 1976, where the community of mainly poor Muslims was attacked and massacred by Christian militias, she chooses to spend time with the children rescued. These orphans recounted the deaths of their parents and when Jocelyne Saab asks them to play in front of her camera, the only game they like is imitating the war. *Children of the War* (1976) resonates with other films made by women in the region who were living during the same period—as if during hard times childhood is the only hope that remains: they wear the dignity of their people in documentaries such as *Al-Sandwich* by Atteyat al-Abnoudi (Egypt, 1975) or *Children's Game* by Nabiha Lotfy (Egypt, 1989), as well as in fiction films such as Leila Assaf's *The Gang of Freedom (Al-Sheikha)*, (1994).

Women filmmakers rarely went to the battlefield with their cameras. Not because they were not allowed to do so: Jocelyne Saab documented the Polisario Front's liberation struggle from the middle of a fight in the Sahara Desert, and the Lebanese Heiny Srour followed a group of guerrilla fighters, composed mainly of young women, in their struggle to liberate Dhofar from the Sultan's domination in Oman. But women, without claiming any feminist position, have always had special access to the home front, led and organized by women, without which any form of armed resistance would not have been possible. This is the subject of Heiny Srour's fiction film *Leila and the Wolves* (1984), which recalls the role of Palestinian and Lebanese women in the history of the Liberation struggle; before her, many documentaries made by women were shedding light on women's resistance in the camps. In *Because Roots Don't Die* (1975) Nabiha Lotfy films survivors of the massacre of Tell el-Zaatar in Southern Beirut, where Lebanese Christian militias killed the inhabitants of this Palestinian camp. The people left behind, most of them women and older people, have to keep resisting. Jocelyne Saab follows the same logic with *Palestinian Women* (1974), in which she interviews Palestinian women about their position in Lebanese society and their role in the struggle for liberation, as well as with *The Sahara Is Not For Sale*, which follows women's social organization in the desert.

Today, the pioneering work of Jocelyne Saab is considered exemplary for the new generation of Lebanese filmmakers, who are looking for new ways of discussing politics through filmmaking. Since her death, her work has been shown all over the world, resonating with other cinema

histories and different cultures of female creativity: her films are discussed in the contexts of feminist, postcolonial and political studies, as they embrace different fields and propose new aesthetics.

THE RECEPTION BY THE PUBLIC TODAY

Jocelyne Saab's career peaked in the late 1980s with her first fiction film *A Suspended Life* (1985), selected for the Cannes Directors' Fortnight. Later, she became internationally known for her fiction film *Dunia*, which dealt with the excision of young girls in Egypt. The film was censored in Egypt but nonetheless toured many prestigious festivals (Sundance, Toronto, APSA...). Despite this recognition, her documentary films were barely shown, and some of them remain completely unknown. This was due to their public unavailability; in Lebanon, where she remained very active until the end of her life, even if her name and her work were well known, only a select audience knew of her films, and that for a long time.

This mystery cultivated around her work made people curious, and after she disappeared the need to see her images boomed everywhere, especially in Lebanon and the Arab world. The reception of her work is diverse, depending on the place where it is screened. In the Arab world, the younger generation are thrilled by these rare images that tell a history they could neither experience nor can quite understand. This is part of a wider heritage and a common reflection around the preservation and re-evaluation of Arab film archives that has been taking place in the cinematic field in different Arab countries since the mid-2010s.

Internationally, Jocelyne Saab's films are received with astonishment. The francophone audience used to the rhythm of the Lebanese civil war as portrayed on the news sees these films as rare documents that unveiled what was not shown. The courage she demonstrated by sticking to her political engagement as a documentary filmmaker followed through when she started conceiving fiction films: *A Suspended Life* was shot in Beirut in the middle of the conflict; *Once Upon A Time in Beirut* (1994), an audacious film made up of extracts from more than 30 films shot in Lebanon between 1890 and 1990, claims that there is nothing stronger than cinema to retain the memory of a city; *Dunia* (2005) is a film against fundamentalism with regard to physical and mental excision in contemporary Egypt. *Dunia*, in particular, is always received with admiration and great interest by international audiences, wherever they are (Europe, North and South America, Asia); Jocelyne Saab knew how to speak to and touch the universal spectator.

After *Dunia*, Jocelyne Saab turned to contemporary art creation (art video, installation, photography). Lesser known, this work still has to be discovered. Through this different way of crafting images, she developed a new way of thinking about the world around her. Her last long feature film, *What's Going On?*, is part of this new reflection: constructed as a long love poem dedicated by the filmmaker to her city, Beirut, this film carries within it all the fragility of the artist, hurt forever by a war which changed her life and her world view. More personal, differently political, this last work will intrigue new admirers of and specialists in Jocelyne Saab's cinema. Everyone is henceforth free to find a way to appropriate this whole filmography and art work, to think through it and keep sharing.

BIO

Mathilde Rouxel is a French cinema researcher, specializing in Arab cinema. She worked with Jocelyne Saab for six years of her life. In 2015, she published the first monography on Jocelyne Saab, *Jocelyne Saab, La Mémoire indomptée (1970-2015)* (Beirut, Dar an-Nahar). She also curates for various festivals and coordinates the Lebanon-based scriptwriting residency *Films Femmes Francophones | Méditerranée (FFFMed)*.