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An Unspeakable Memory.

About Jocelyne Saab's unfinished *Joumana* project.

by Mathilde Rouxel

The French-Lebanese filmmaker Jocelyne Saab is known as a documentary and fiction filmmaker, although she has also worked as a photographer and installation artist. She began her career as a war reporter, particularly covering the civil war in Lebanon. After 1982 and the forced departure of the Palestine Liberation Organization PLO from Beirut, she decided to stop filming documentaries in Lebanon and started writing fictional scripts. Her first fiction feature, *A Suspended Life* (1985) was shot in the middle of the war in 1984. She had moved to Paris after her house in Beirut burnt down in 1982, which had changed her perspective on the country and on her film practice. In the 1990s, she returned to film a docu-drama, enriched by documentary elements, and supported by excerpts from historical films (*Il était une fois Beyrouth, histoire d'une star*, 1994), but the majority of her documentary work was conceived outside of Lebanon, right up to the end of her career. At least that's what the history of her completed works tells us. The discovery, after her death, of some fifteen unfinished but archived projects calls into question a number of assertions about her work and her career as she herself had envisaged it. Working extensively on Jocelyne Saab's work since 2013, and also assisting the filmmaker with her writing projects for the last six years of her life, this material first came into my hands before joining the shelves of an institution¹. Among this legacy, one project in particular caught my attention: a documentary project set in Lebanon, although it seems that Jocelyne Saab's desire to make documentary images in her home country had been abandoned after the civil war. This project, however, was aborted, and no images remain of it.

1 The responsibility of this legacy encouraged me to co-found in 2019 with Jocelyne Saab's son the Jocelyne Saab Association, which has since been working to promote Jocelyne Saab's work by restoring her films, circulating them, and digitizing the entire paper archive and making it freely available.

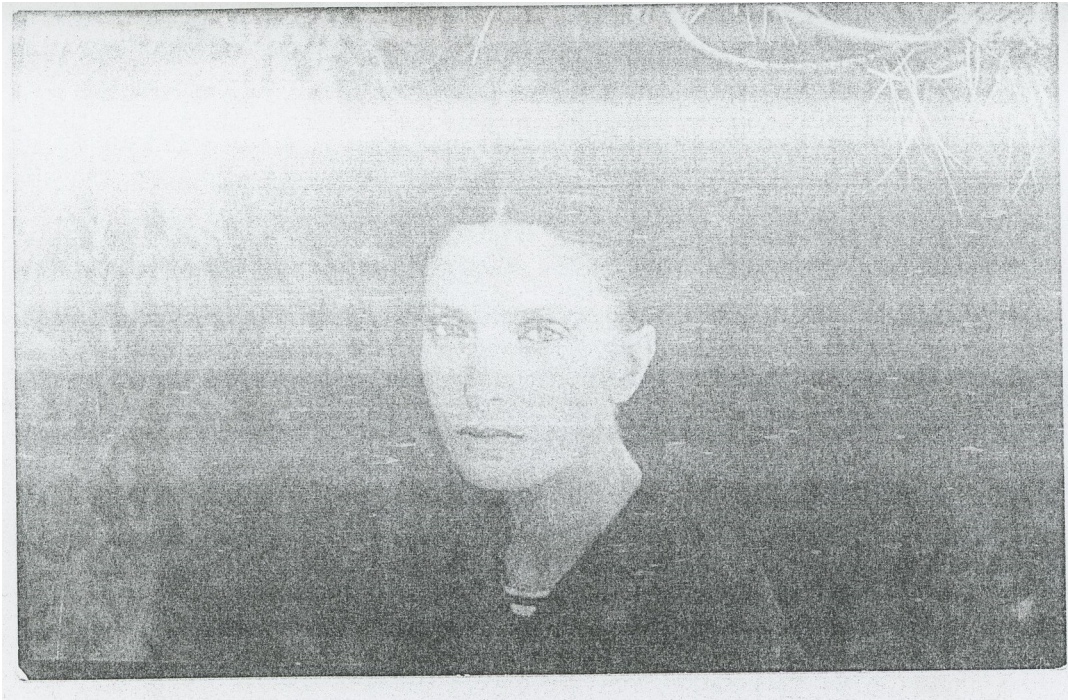


FIGURE 1 - Joumana's portrait - Saab's research project

The aim of this essay is to understand, in light of Jocelyne Saab's known work, the reasons why this project was abandoned and the place it occupied in Saab's career at the time it was written. This exploration of her incomplete work through the paper archives that have been preserved may initiate a reflexion on the potentialities of unfinished projects as creative imaginaries. My intention is to stay as close to the work as possible, without creating yet any metadiscourse on this work in progress. The only additional elements called upon to understand the abandoned work will be extracts of Saab's finished work, based on the premise that the filmmaker's *œuvre* offers a continuity specific to her personal commitment and vision of cinema.

An unnoticeable work in the post-war period: the treasure of the paper archive

Jocelyne Saab passed away in 2019, leaving behind an extensive personal archive of unfinished projects. This collection of research documents and notes of intent reveals a whole side of her ambition as an artist which is not apparent if we consider only her finished work. Indeed, her completed work mainly covers the SWANA region (South West

Asia and North Africa), with a particular focus on Lebanon and Egypt, where she has lived.

Of her documentary filmography, only one project was shot in East Asia: *La Dame de Saïgon*, made in 1997. It's a portrait of Doctor Hoa, a former maquis who became a minister in the Communist government, which she eventually left to work on child malnutrition. And yet, when we consult the boxes of Saab's unfinished projects, most of the many projects written in the late 1990s and early 2000s focus on Asia, from Turkey to India and Vietnam. All but *La Dame de Saïgon* remained in the draft stage for lack of production.

Yet this interest in the East never left Jocelyne Saab, who saw the history and culture of this continent as a useful political tool to understand his country's history and develop new forms of thinking. By the end of her life, Jocelyne Saab was campaigning for greater consideration of Asian culture in Lebanon, a country whose eyes are often turned towards the West but whose roots lie in the Asian continent, through the creation of a film festival in Lebanon, bringing together films from Asia and the Mediterranean. It's another definition of identity that she wanted to propose to a Lebanon that was trying to heal from the civil war, and another heritage with a broader horizon that she hoped would be more tolerant. In the late 1990s, Saab even considered relocating to Asia, an unsuspected ambition if we look at her filmography and her work as an artist, which until the end of her life would document social and political issues related to the Middle East.

This work on Asia marks a transformation in her work as a documentary filmmaker. After covering the wars and struggles in the MENA region, Jocelyne Saab began to question the roots of contemporary societies. In the projects she has produced or not, Saab seems to have tried to find answers in this part of the world to the questions she asked herself in Lebanon: revolution, violence, collective memory, reconstruction, the future. This same movement eventually brought her back to Beirut, where the question of history and memory had necessarily become crucial after fifteen years of armed conflict.

By the end of the war, Jocelyne Saab returned to Lebanon to produce a very short report, for the private French channel Canal+, on a major militia figure of the civil war: Jocelyne

Khoueiry. A Phalangist known for having founded a women's militia with military outfits tailored by fashion designers, she had attacked and beaten up Jocelyne Saab in 1976, after the broadcast of her film *Les Enfants de la guerre (Children of War)* about the orphans of the Karantina massacre. In 1989, a year before the armistice, and after the war had changed face countless times, Jocelyne Saab went to Mount Lebanon where Jocelyne Khoueiry was trying to repent. There, a three-metre-high Christian cross welcomes visitors. Without animosity, Jocelyne Saab tried to get Jocelyne Khoueiry to talk about her relationship with war and death. Despite her best efforts, she couldn't get her to talk about anything other than her repentance. While insisting on the atrocities Jocelyne Khoueiry committed during the war, Jocelyne Saab made this report as an outstretched hand towards tolerance and peace. This was the first time since *Le Liban dans la tourmente (Lebanon in Turmoil)* – her first film, and in fact the first film ever about the Lebanese civil war, made in 1975 – that Jocelyne Saab turned her camera towards the opposing camp. The report's tone is harsh, almost mocking, but the conclusion it draws is nonetheless profoundly optimistic and tries to defend a belief in the possibility of peace between communities: if even the most bloodthirsty surrender their weapons, concord may finally be possible.

In the same years, Jocelyne Saab embarked on another project aimed at uniting parties and peoples. In *Beirut, 1001 images*, she appears to have sought to reunite the history, geography and mental imaginary of Lebanon and the Lebanese through cinema. This project, intended to lay the foundations for a future national film archive, also became a film: *Il était une fois Beyrouth, histoire d'une star (Once upon a time in Beirut: story of a star, 1994)*, featuring two young girls who had never known Lebanon before the war, and who discover their country through the cinema. After the war, for Saab, it was time for reconciliation. However, the project of a national film archive did not see the light of day – culture was not the priority, nor was the writing of a common memory. As many Lebanese say, the 1990 amnesty signed the amnesia of a people.

In this context, during the mid-1990s, Jocelyne Saab began a film project titled after the film's protagonist: *Joumana*, a former classmate of Saab's at the Notre-Dame de Nazareth school. During the civil war, Joumana had become close to the far-right Phalangists. An artillery strike killed her husband, the Spanish ambassador Pedro de

Aristegui, in 1989. The man was politically committed to peace, this attack is often regarded in Lebanon as an assassination. The attack left Joumana heavily wounded. She fell into a coma that lasted a month, causing her to lose her memory. Joumana kept a large scar from the wound that tore her neck. Seeing Joumana as the personification of a wounded, amnesiac post-war Beirut, Jocelyne Saab wanted to confront her with her past and portray a woman recovering her memory of the horror of her own history. In the course of its conception, the projected film took different directions but was never completed. The reasons for its stoppage remain unclear to this day.

LIBERATION

18 Abril 1989

- récupérer les images à la TV
Espagnol.



L'écrivain libanais Awad tué dimanche par un obus était inhumé hier avec sa fille à Beyrouth.

Madrid enterre la mort de son ambassadeur à Beyrouth

En se gardant bien d'imputer officiellement à un obus syrien le décès de Pedro Manuel de Aristegui, la diplomatie espagnole cherche, à sa manière, à maintenir un certain consensus européen.

FIGURE 2 - Archive attack - Saab's research project

The *Joumana* project includes numerous research documents (press clippings, photographs, handwritten notes and printed e-mails), interview transcripts and two applications written to seek funding for the film, which contain a note of intent, a synopsis and a treatment. The first document is dated 1997; the second 2002. From one application to the other, the note of intent is quite similar, but the film has changed. In the notes, several handwritings are interwoven – mainly that of Jocelyne Saab and probably that of her co-writer France Saint Léger, with whom she worked on the film. Mentioned in these documents are rushes, “preciously kept” by Jocelyne Saab, which remain untraceable today, as do the filmed family images of Joumana’s father, the poet Toufic Youssef Awad, killed in the same attack, and her husband’s, Pedro de Aristegui. It is therefore difficult to understand what stage of maturity the project had reached, and to really grasp all the issues at stake when Jocelyne Saab stopped working on it. However, there is evidence of a great deal of research and complicity between the filmmaker and her subject.

An unspeakable memory

In 1997, the note of intent for the film project begins with a portrait of Joumana based on Jocelyne Saab’s wartime memory of her:

In 1976, Lebanon plunged into its second year of civil war, with Beirut cut in two. Joumana lives on the “big hotel front”, where the war is taking place; as a matter of course, she migrates to her country house in the Christian zone in the middle of the Phalangist stronghold.

At the time, Joumana’s elder sister Samia is the girlfriend of a Phalangist military leader. Joumana admires her, and some even say she tries to imitate her. She falls in love with a close advisor to the Phalangists... Their father, Toufic Youssef Awad, a renowned Arabic-language writer famous for his open-mindedness, takes a very dim view of these liaisons, but does not intervene [...]

It is at this time that Samia’s friend asks Joumana to film the night-time clean-up operation in the Karantina neighbourhood. Joumana is hooked. “I was dressed in battle dress, given a Bolex [camera], they ordered people to assemble and

threatened to kill them if anyone turned around... Only one turned around and they shot. Tac tac, tac..." With a wave of her hand, Joumana illustrates these falling bodies...

Many years later, Joumana marries the Spanish ambassador of Lebanon, Pedro de Aristegui, and has two children with him. When Pedro takes a strong political stance, a bomb exploded at the embassy, killing Joumana's father, husband and sister. Joumana is seriously wounded and plunges into a coma. Minutes after the explosion, two Spanish TV journalists film the disaster.

France Saint Léger is intrigued by this chaotic destiny, in the midst of the civil war, which allows Joumana, by chance of love, to slip from the side of the "executioners" to that of the "victims".

Is it a lack of vigilance, a failure to reflect on the story unfolding alongside her? Is she one of those people who are sometimes overwhelmed by their own lives and events?

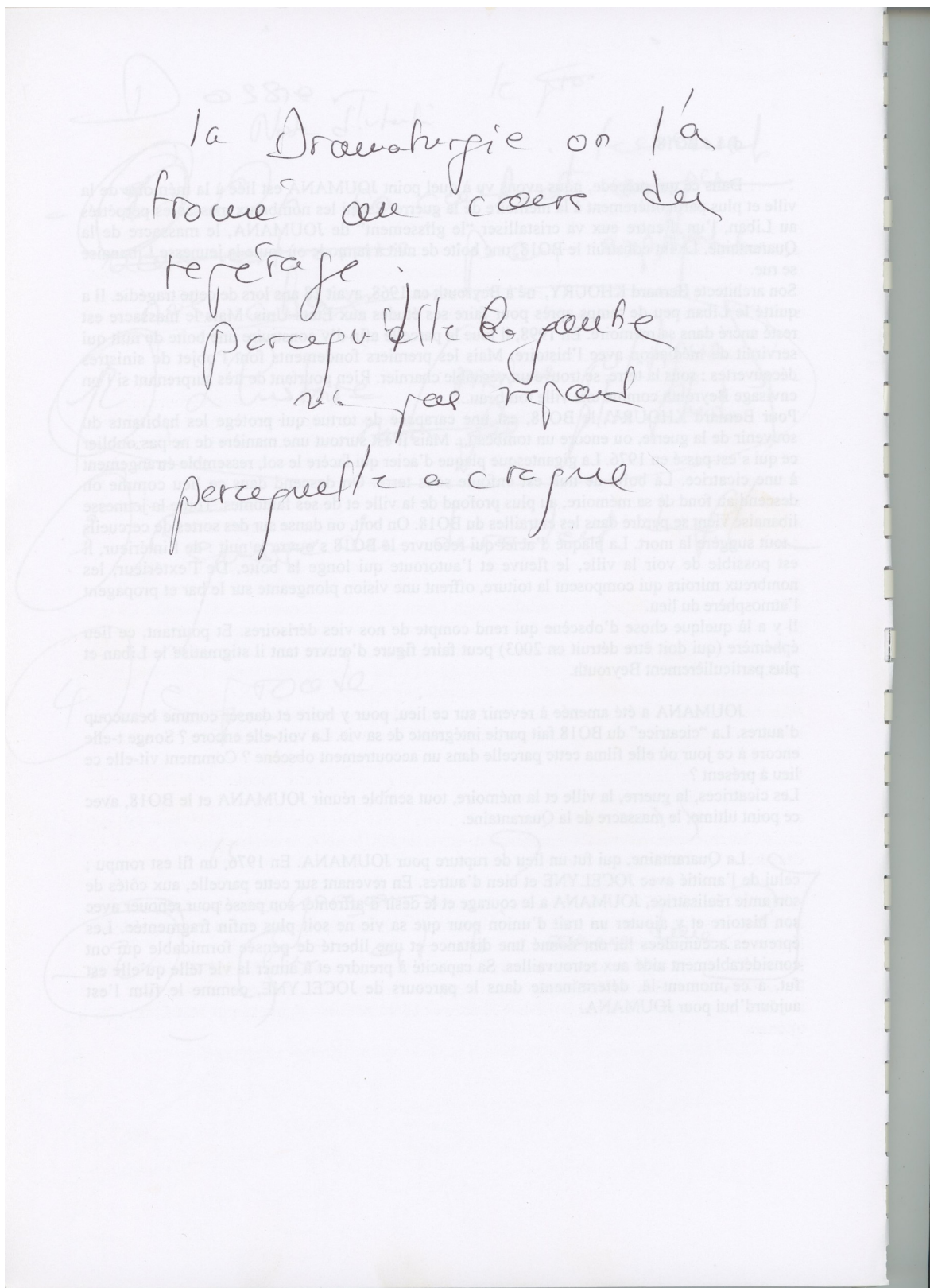


FIGURE 3 - 'We found the drama at the heart of the location scouting because she didn't respond because she broke down', Saab's handwriting, 2002

To anchor this film in the present, and even the future, Jocelyne Saab entrusted two young men in their twenties, Kamal and Alain, with the task of participating in the research surrounding the film and interviewing Joumana about her experience. Embodying a youth that had grown up in war and was thirsty for answers, they were to appear in the film as those who would have guided Joumana along the path of her own memory. The presence of youth was important to Jocelyne Saab. I've already mentioned her previous film, *Il était une fois Beyrouth*, which features two young girls immersed in the history of images from their mysterious city. For Jocelyne Saab, youth represented innocence and curiosity: it was through youth that the salvation of a generation embroiled in war would come. By including Kamal and Alain in the project, Jocelyne Saab proposed a writing of the history of the civil war that went beyond political affinities.

Saab imposed just one condition: never to give Joumana the work in progress on the film to read. The two young men failed and, seduced by Joumana's charm, let her read Saab's work, which had a devastating effect on Joumana. She no longer wished to make the film under the same conditions. She then asked for an actress to play her role. She even wanted certain scenes to be fictionalized so that she wouldn't be equated with this testimony. We know all this from the film's original brief. By the time Jocelyne Saab submitted her application for funding, her project was already severely hampered. Saab exposed the risks involved in the film she was trying to write, while explaining that it is these very risks that prove the urgency and necessity of this film to be made.

Following the scouting, which ended with this difficult episode, the focus of the film became evident: how difficult and traumatic it is to work on memory, before it leads to appeasement, relief or reconciliation. There's no question now except the sheer necessity of this work. Joumana once said to me, "I want this film to be a film of joy, despite my very dark cloud."

The second application was written five years later. The project is now entitled *Joumana, la cicatrice et la mémoire (Joumana, the Wound and the Memory)*. The application shows some of Saab's handwritten notes, and was to be submitted by Catherine Dussart's production company in Paris, which was already producing Saab's film *Dunia*, a drama shot in Egypt to be released in 2005. France Saint Léger is still working on the project,

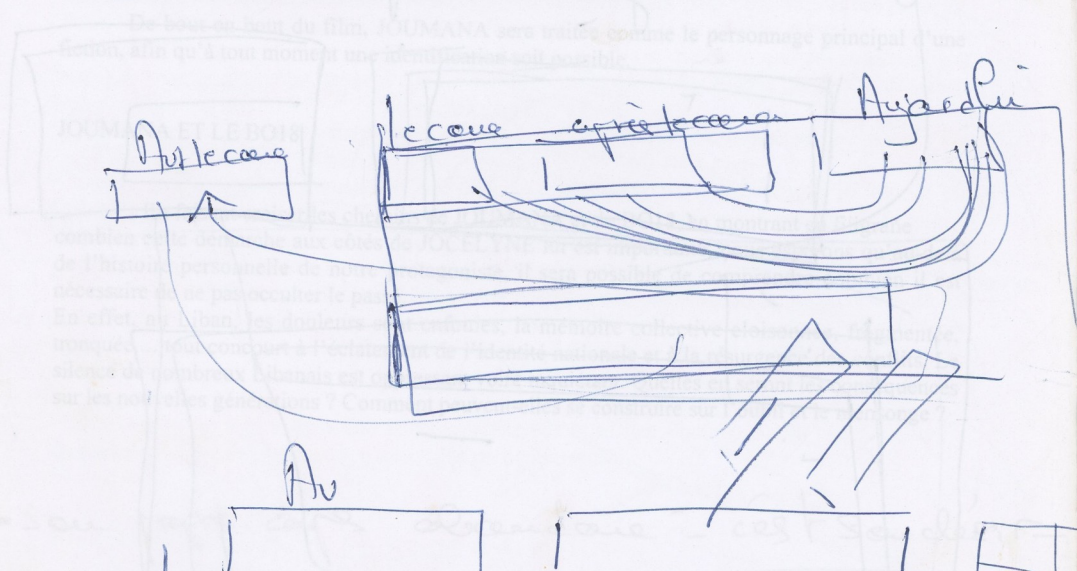
but now appears as co-writer – whereas she was not mentioned in the first application. This new mention probably reflects Jocelyne Saab's desire to distance herself from a project that, until now, she had wanted to handle in a very personal way, despite the support France Saint-Léger had given her in the writing process from the very start. An actress is mentioned for the role of Joumana. Kamal and Alain have disappeared. It's Saab herself who stands out in the document as a discussant opposing Joumana. This duo of women, with very different experiences of war, was to give Joumana the strength to testify, accompanied by her former classmate. Jocelyne Saab's position as filmmaker in this story is different from that initially attributed to Kamal and Alain: a political point of view is finally assumed, and it is no longer a question of playing on the naivety of young people to get Joumana to talk about her past. The challenge is now to put Joumana's personal story, her choices and her amnesia into perspective with the history of Beirut and Lebanon, in a metaphorical and assertive way.



Heure → la difficulté du travail
 de mémoire à travers l'Etat.
 corps humanisé d'une face
 sans à un come.
 parallèle avec un ville

Résumé

JOUMANA est Libanaise. C'est une très belle femme de cinquante ans. Jeune, elle craignait de n'être que belle aux yeux du monde ; selon elle, cela pouvait masquer "sa vérité". Trente ans sont passés. Aujourd'hui, son cou est traversé par une large cicatrice, son visage a été recousu à plusieurs reprises. Est-ce là une cicatrice de guerre ? Que cachent ces années qui l'éloignèrent de beaucoup de ses amis, dont la réalisatrice Jocelyne SAAB ? En effet, la guerre les a placées dans des camps opposés. Lorsqu'elles se retrouvent presque trente ans plus tard, tout un passé douloureux refait surface. Les retrouvailles sont délicates mais le désir de comprendre ce qui s'est passé leur est commun. Jocelyne propose alors à JOUMANA de faire un film qui revisite son passé ; elle accepte aussitôt. L'amitié est là, indéfectible. Ce travail de mémoire sera difficile. En se penchant sur sa vie, JOUMANA sera à nouveau confrontée à certains événements douloureux et plus particulièrement à un lieu (la Quarantaine), qui fit l'objet d'un massacre en 1976. Cette parcelle cristallise à elle seule le "glissement" de JOUMANA et son isolement consécutif....
 Aujourd'hui, paradoxe, une boîte de nuit y est enfouie sous terre, le BO18 ; mais coïncidence troublante, l'architecture fait également œuvre de mémoire.



Une femme visite sa mémoire, une couleur
 à sa demande, se place toutes les scènes
 ou elle pense peut être trop dur

FIGURE 4 - Saab's drawing of the BO18 - Second draft of the project, 2002

In the new version of the film, the curious innocence of a war youth is replaced by the cold building of an underground nightclub called B 018, built in 1994 by Lebanese architect Bernard Khoury on the very site of the Karantina massacre. The application contains sketches made by Saab of the specific place. For her, this nightclub represents the scar of Beirut, mirroring the one Joumana wears around her neck. B 018 was already evoked in the first version from 1997 – as the subject of a previous project, on which Saab had stopped working while starting to work on Joumana's experience.

Reflecting on this “shift”, I think back to my fictional film project on memory, which was to feature young people at B 018, a nightclub built on the very site of the Karantina massacre. [...] It seems obvious to me that there are many connections between this film about memory, which I won't be making, and the forthcoming film about Joumana.

In 2002, the nightclub becomes a protagonist of the project. Joumana is ultimately relegated to the background. The film, initially very intimate, which was intended to testify to an intergenerational transmission of memory and the repentance of those who participated in the horror of the war, becomes a more theoretical and conceptual film on the impossible memory of the Lebanese civil war. Interventions by Joumana's psychiatrists and the nightclub's architect, coupled with testimonies by the Joumana's family and close friends, now keep Joumana at a distance. She is no longer the personification of Beirut that she was in the earlier version of the film, but a mere case study, sharing the limelight with the city itself. And yet, while Joumana was keen to fictionalize the events to distance her from her own testimony, she remains firmly at the heart of the project, as her entire entourage is called upon to testify.

Renouncing *Joumana*, facing impossible communication

It's difficult to understand from the existing documents what really happened to Saab and Joumana's complicity, presented with strong arguments in the first dossier submitted to the French national film fund CNC five years earlier. To explain both the transformation and the sudden end of this project, the first application from 1997 already provides some elements: it shows Joumana's very strong involvement, as she immediately accepts

Saab's proposal to make a film and insists on taking part in the research and interviews, which Saab eventually accepts, even though she is well aware of the danger posed to her project run if Joumana understood too well the ins and outs of the film in preparation.

In the same application, Saab admits to having "surrendered" to Joumana, whom she presents as a seductress and charmer – a diplomatic way of calling her manipulative. However, it's difficult to know from the documents what Joumana, who had placed her trust in Jocelyne Saab, understood about the filmmaker's intentions. In an interview I conducted with Kamal, one of the two young men featured in the first version of the film, he explained that they themselves had no insight into Saab's work on the film; she extensively recorded the interactions between Joumana and the two young men, but they were never able to see this footage afterwards. Information about the film seems to have been distilled by Saab in the form of instructions to the protagonists of her film, without them having any overall vision of the project. This overt suspicion is undoubtedly also at the root of Joumana's curiosity and responsible for the breach of trust that led to the transformation of the project, to which the 2002 version bears witness.

During her lifetime, Jocelyne Saab only explained her decision to stop the project by invoking Joumana's withdrawal. What remains to be investigated, however, is Joumana's actual contribution to the development of the film. While she demanded greater involvement in writing the screenplay, it would appear from the second, more distanced version, which features an actress instead of Joumana, that Joumana's actual words were reproduced without her consent. The shooting of the second version of the film was to take place in Joumana's presence, but seems to have been based primarily on the research work carried out in 1997. At the time of writing in 2002, Saab admits that "the situation being particularly difficult for Joumana, many things remain pending to this day". Indeed, Joumana's call for fictionalization seems to have been completely subverted by Jocelyne Saab, who ultimately planned to use Joumana's story as an initial pretext and shining example of the culpability of right-wing action in the war. Unable to get Joumana to recount the horror of the Karantina massacre she witnessed, and equally unable to film the return of the guilty memory as she had planned, Jocelyne Saab decides with this new version of her film to illustrate the amnesia of the Lebanese people with other traces, and to bring back the memory with other clues. Among these clues, Saab proposes in both

applications the use of her own images, those filmed in the Karantina district in 1975 in *Le Liban dans la tourmente* and those shot after the massacre in 1976 with the surviving children, entitled *Les Enfants de la guerre*. This desire is present right from the first project description, but the presence of these images takes on a different coloring in a less personal film that proposes a more theoretical approach to Lebanese amnesia: Saab's desire to come to terms with her Christian and bourgeois community, which has rejected her, appears much more clearly; it seems in fact that her use of cinema to push her interlocutors to repentance was also intended to legitimize her own choices, since she had spent her life and career fighting against violence and injustice.

This level of personal involvement is evident in the 1997 version, where she fails to script Joumana's retreat other than by presenting it as a failure due to her own mistakes as a filmmaker. France Saint Léger was working regularly alongside Jocelyne Saab at this time, as is documented in materials pertaining to other unfinished projects from the late 1990s and early 2000s. Her collaboration with Saab on this specific project was intended to allow a distancing that is evident in the analyses emanating from the handwritten notes. Nevertheless, it was not sufficiently asserted in the face of Saab's personal objectives to be able to situate the project in a more objective posture before the elaboration of the second project, written in 2002.

Whatever the reasons for halting this project, its content and its very incompleteness say a lot about the history of contemporary Lebanon: incapacity of building a collective memory after the armistice, the breaking of friendships between people who knew each other before the war and who made different political choices, the impossibility of thinking rationally about the war because of the extreme sensitivity of those who lived through it. Yet it seems difficult to draw clear conclusions about the history of this project without undertaking an investigation and interviewing the main protagonists of the film. Diving into the existing documents of a project rarely mentioned by the artist during the last years of her lifetime does not answer all the questions raised by this project, also shrouded in a certain mystery maintained because it undoubtedly concealed a certain guilt. At this stage, it is probably only possible to propose a cross-disciplinary reading of the archives that have come down to us, to shed light on an important film project, both in terms of the rest of Jocelyne Saab's career and in terms of a different reading of the history of cinema

that takes into account the difficulty of bringing a project to fruition. Saab's paper archives have been digitized and made freely available, in the belief that beyond the artistic projects and what they tell us about Jocelyne Saab's own creative process, the research carried out for these films is a source of history, and a fascinating archive to explore. This insight provides the material basis for further research. Indeed, through its abundance, and because Jocelyne Saab has carefully preserved it, this project allows us to immerse ourselves in the filmmaker's creative spirit a few years after the end of the Lebanese civil war. It also allows us to re-emerge, as a finished film would have done if it had been able to circulate in cinemas, forgotten stories that resonate differently today with the contemporary world. Non-film archival material is often considered an interesting source for the researcher seeking to explain a filmmaker's approach. However, this project, like many others left incomplete by their creators, helps to assert the character of work in the full sense of the term for these unfinished works. Over time, despite all the questions that incompleteness raises for the reader of these archival materials, these projects take on other dimensions and inspire, as a completed film might, their viewers and other artists. It's important to continue studying them as objects which are complete in their incompleteness, and to make them accessible so that as many people as possible can study and reflect on them: in the case of Lebanon, this work contributes to the consideration of a collective memory.

Film references :

Lebanon in Turmoil, 1975, 75 min

Children of War, 1976, 10 min

The Woman Killer, 1989, 5 min

Once Upon a Time in Beirut : story of a star, 1994, 100 min