

Film tells a story for the children of 1982

Munira Khayyat
Daily Star staff

A new film by a Lebanese student explores the feelings of the emerging generation of young adults coming to terms with the pain of its war memories, by viewing the conflict from a child's perspective.

"The film looks at the happy childhood memories of war of Ahlam, a Lebanese child growing up during the worst years of the conflict, and how she uncovers the pain in those memories as she reaches adulthood," said Dana Kahil, 25, director of the 12-minute movie, entitled "Maktoub" (Written Destiny).

Ms. Kahil has been filming in the Chouf with her fellow screen and radio students from the University of Kent in Britain. It takes place in two times and places – Lebanon in 1982 and the U.K. in 1999 – and portrays the Lebanese war through the eyes of its children, who were then too young to understand the violence shaping their exist-

tence. "All we knew was that one day we had school and the next day – to our delight – there was no school and we'd either be in a shelter playing cards with our friends or go up to the mountains," Ms. Kahil recalled of growing up in wartime Lebanon.

"I'm archiving a memory of a war that's totally different from how most Western audiences perceive war. I'm looking at war through the rose-colored glasses of childhood," she said. She described the film as a personal diary, "something that I needed to do so that I could get on with the rest of my work," said Ms. Kahil.

"I needed to express the contradictions of what I know we should feel about war and what I actually felt as a child," she added.

Ahlam, the movie's protagonist, has left Lebanon and is living in Britain. Her distance from her homeland and the onset of adulthood bring her revelations about her childhood that she relives through violent dreams.

Scenes from the movie contrast the inno-

cence of children at play in lush mountain scenery with the bloody slaughter of cows in an abattoir. "The slaughter symbolizes how the Lebanese were massacring each other like animals," Ms. Kahil said.

"Maktoub" is about acceptance, reinterpreting the past and the painful rebirth of the war's children, she said.

Opening a shoe box in which she has kept remnants of her past, Ahlam recollects old memories in a harsh new light that brings new but painful insight.

"The terrible irony is that the worst years of war were the best days of our lives," she said. The innocent delight of her memories is transformed into horror as Ahlam understands the war context of her childhood.

Ms. Kahil feels she is portraying the generation of Lebanese who "weren't lost by the war the way the 30-somethings of today are. Those who were children during the war experienced it as their natural environment, because they didn't know anything else."

It was only with adulthood and the end of war that those "children" realized how it had affected them. They were now able to realize more powerfully the full extent of the evil that orchestrated their daily lives as children.

"But the children of 1982 are the youth of today, the youth that are full of hope," the director said. "This is the youth that wasn't destroyed by the war, but made by it. Their hope is to give Lebanon what Lebanon could not give them during their childhood."

In the end, Ahlam exorcises the demons of her past. Realizing what the war has taken away from her, she throws her box of memories into the turbulent North Sea.

"Maktoub" is meant to help the war children relinquish the past. It's not meant to revive the past," said Ms. Kahil. "The war didn't kill us, it made us stronger."

• "Maktoub" will be released in November in cooperation with the British Council.



"The children of 1982 are the youth of today:" A still from Dana Khalil's "Maktoub" shows children playing at war

Anger about the waste, nostalgia for the chaos

Twenty-four years ago this month, the Lebanese civil war began. The children of that war are now young adults.

"Shooting a Kalashnikov and getting to know your local militia was a natural part of our childhood years," Bassam, 25, recalls. "We didn't realize there was anything different about us. When we were kids, the phrase 'when the war is over' was an abstraction that none of us understood."

Militias, checkpoints, machine guns, bombs, tanks and invaders were all part of his generation's growing years. Water and electricity shortages were accepted hardships. Shelling and shooting were everyday nuisances. Lebanon's war children accepted the chaos as normal.

The war did end, and as these children matured, their memories soured as they came to realize what they'd missed out on.

"I led a very limited and unaccomplished childhood," Bassam continued. "I can't believe the universe of difference between mine and that of my 11-year-old sister." "Just after the war ended I missed it,"

said Masha, 23, "but now I realize how terrible it actually was."

"Life back then was chaotic and unexpected. We didn't have to be responsible. The circumstances were so strong that we were always responding to something," she said. "Everyone lived day by day."

"Now that the war is over, we're thrown into a world where we're expected to be responsible and to plan for the future. But we are unprepared. When we say we miss the war, I think it's the sense of irresponsibility we miss," she added.

"The war robbed me of a normal childhood. I feel very bitter," said Maha, 26.

"People go on about the intense relationships that they had during the war, but we were the victims. Fine, we were unique, growing up among guns and tanks and militias, but I now realize that how much I missed out on," said Bassam. "I'm glad I didn't realize it back then because it would have made life unbearable," he added.

But there is also a strange nostalgia that this generation is trying to grapple with.

"After Iran won the World Cup match against the United States, Beirut's southern suburbs went gun-crazy," said Rabih, 24. "As I was standing on my balcony listening to the all too familiar sound of machine-gun fire and watching tracer bullets fill the sky, a strange wave of nostalgia washed over me," he said.

"During the war we were unique. We were living in war and there was a big reason for why things weren't perfect. But now we're the same as everybody else and all our shortcomings no longer have any justification," Rabih, 24, said.

"I think the good memories have to do with the age we were back then," said Maha, 26. "It could be that I miss the age that I was during the war."

"The war didn't provide us with fun, it was about us being able to have fun in the middle of war that was so phenomenal," Bassam said.

"Maybe now we can laugh about our experiences because we're no longer afraid the war will return," he added.



Kahil and cameraman Eric Trometer at work

Saving the environment from home

Peter Speetjens
Special to The Daily Star

Cutting the amount of greenhouse gases emitted from power plants will be impossible without adopting alternative sources of energy and encouraging the public to save electricity at home, a leading academic has warned.

Electricity generation produces nearly a third of carbon dioxide emissions, second only to cars and trucks. Under the 1997 Kyoto agreement on climate change, Lebanon is required to reduce the level by at least 5 percent before 2012.

Riad Chedid, professor of electrical and computer engineering at the American University of Beirut, drew up the suggestions as part of a national program to find ways to reduce the production of gases that add to global warming. His research focused on cutting consumption levels as well as finding cleaner and more efficient ways of producing electricity.

"In neighboring countries – such as Jordan, Syria and Cyprus – most water is heated by solar energy," he said. "In Lebanon it's only 0.6 percent."

"Solar panels would save 20-25 percent of the energy used in domestic hot water consumption, which now amounts to 60 percent of the country's electricity use."

In Japan, Europe and the United States, the market for solar energy is growing rapidly every year. The states of Arizona and Nevada even have solar-powered electricity plants. The biggest such plant in the world is under construction in Crete.

Solar energy makes sense in areas with a daily average of five hours of sun in the winter and 13 hours in the summer. The Bekaa is one such place.

"Wind energy would also be a cheap and clean means of pro-

viding electricity in Lebanon," Mr. Chedid said.

But the lack of environmental awareness still leaves much room for simple electricity-saving measures in the home, he added.

"Hardly anyone here buys hydrogen or other lamps that are designed to use less electricity but burn longer, and most people never switch off the water-heating system," he said.

Mr. Chedid said that part of the problem was weak controls over imports: "A fridge that is no longer allowed in Europe because it uses too much electricity can still be sold here. The government should create certain green qualifications for im-

'Neighboring countries heat most of their water by solar energy'

ported goods." He also advocated updating the country's power stations to use different fuel. "Lebanon's power plants are thermal – they burn oil to produce electricity. I looked at replacing

these fuels with natural gas, which is much cleaner," Mr. Chedid said.

"The government says that it intends to replace the plants at some stage, but the question is whether Syria can meet the gas demands or if Lebanon can afford to import European gas," he said.

Under the current system, "there's an energy loss of 15 percent in electricity plants," Mr. Chedid said. "About 15 percent of the energy produced from every liter of oil leaks into the air, which is twice the international norm."

He stressed that using less electricity in the home would immediately slash consumers' bills, as well as cut down on carbon dioxide emissions.

"It would also mean a reduction in the country's trade deficit. Lebanon doesn't have its own fuel resources, so 97 percent of energy is imported and accounts for around one-third of the country's total imports," Mr. Chedid said.