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## Restoring and Curating Jocelyne Saab's Cinema of Middle East Struggle

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**ABSTRACT** Jocelyne Saab was one of the most prolific Lebanese directors of her generation. Yet for a long time, her work went unnoticed by Lebanese and international critics alike. Difficult to program due to the quality of the copies in circulation, some of her work on the Lebanese civil war and the great popular struggles of the 1970s–1980s in the SWANA region fell into oblivion. Created in 2019 to promote and enhance the filmmaker's work, the Association Jocelyne Saab has undertaken to train technicians in Lebanon in the specialized field of film preservation and digital restoration. This undertaking, supported by FIAF, the Swiss Film Archive, and INA, who supervised the training courses organized by the Jocelyne Saab Association, enabled the restoration of fifteen documentary films made between 1974 and 1982. This allowed a feminist look at the history of the SWANA region to be put back into circulation. **KEYWORDS** Decolonization, film restoration, Lebanese film history, transmission, transnational collaboration, women filmmaking

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Jocelyne Saab died on January 7, 2019; she left a rich body of work that was too little known during her lifetime. After working as a journalist in Lebanon from 1970, and as a war reporter for French television from 1973, she became an independent documentary filmmaker in 1974. Between 1974 and 1989, she made over twenty documentaries in 16 mm, both short and feature-length. In 1984, she moved into fiction, then continued to produce documentaries for French television, shot on video in the 1990s. In 2005, after seven years of hard work, she directed her first major feature, *Dunia*, also her first digital film, which was stifled by censorship in Egypt, where it was shot. She then turned to another form of expression: video art that integrated mixed-media installation and photography, culminating in her latest work, an image book, *Zones de guerre* (2018).

Testimonies to a vanished world, these images were essential to the vision of Jocelyne Saab. At each stage of her prolific career, Jocelyne Saab returned to her earlier films from the civil war that tore her country apart. From one

work to the next, the images return. Following the Israeli army's 2006 war against Lebanon, Jocelyne Saab built the installation *Strange Games and Bridges* (2007), in which images of the infrastructure destroyed by the Israelis in 2006 intersect with those of the 1975–90 civil war, thirty years after they were filmed. Her last feature-length project—a hybrid documentary in which she tells the story of the founder of the Japanese Red Army in Lebanon, Fusako Shigenobu, and the fate of her daughter Mei, hidden away for twenty-seven years to protect her from the Israeli Mossad—also reveals images of a vanished Beirut.

Fundamental to the writing of feminist history, Jocelyne Saab's images present different points of view, free and daring, which have been exported to television channels and festivals all over the world. It is crucial today that feminist archival curators revisit Saab's work with attention and care. Her films have immortalized an era and a world in transition. Long in the shadows, inaccessible and difficult to distribute, they are now arousing strong interest, which the filmmaker was unfortunately only able to experience in its infancy.

The Jocelyne Saab Association was created to structure the management of the late filmmaker's artistic heritage. The aim was to inventory, collect, restore, and promote Jocelyne Saab's work, to make it known and accessible. The first board was made up of Nessim Ricardou-Saab, her son; Michèle Tyan; Myrna Maaaron; and myself. The members who actively took part in the initiative were people close to the filmmaker—Jacques Bouquin, Jonathan Randal, Sophie Ristelhueber, Bernard Latarjet, Carol Rio-Latarjet, François Hers, Frédéric Beaugendre, Francis Lacroche—soon joined by Jinane Mrad, with whom I codirect the Association, also with the support of Nessim and all the members.

The Association's first task was to collect all available copies of Saab's films in order to make them accessible. We digitized the analog film formats (Beta Num, Beta SP, miniDV). We then resynchronized and subtitled the converted files for broadcast. Now her entire filmography is available for exhibition and in circulation worldwide. I write this piece in part as an invitation to fellow feminist curators who wish to program Saab's work—to wrest it from the dustbins of neglected archival cinema.

Toward that end, our next step was to salvage the original film material. We undertook a vast search that unfolded between France and Beirut. Most of Saab's original footage has been preserved at the Centre National du Cinéma et de l'Image Animée (CNC) since she deposited it there in the

1990s, when she was researching archive footage of Lebanon, which gave rise to her docu-drama *Once Upon a Time in Beirut: Story of a Star* (1994). Other films have materialized in Saab's personal archives, in the homes of private individuals, or in the reserves of LTC Patrimoine. Part of this heritage will be stored at the Archives françaises du film in Bois d'Arcy; rushes, working edits, and outtakes will be deposited in Beirut.

For some films, the original material has yet to be found. This is the case for *La Tueuse* (1989) and *La Dame de Saigon* (1997), for which we have only preserved a VHS copy recorded on television and two BETA broadcast copies (one with English subtitles, the other with French).

In the course of our research, however, we were able to track down the original version of Jocelyne Saab's first feature film, *Ghazl al-Banat*, which premiered in 1985 at the Directors' Fortnight in Cannes under the title *Adolescente, sucre d'amour*. It was then released in French cinemas in 1988 as an edited and shortened version under the title *Une vie suspendue*. Due to lack of funds, Jocelyne Saab had to cut the new distribution copy directly from the edited negative of her film. Fortunately, as the film was coproduced by UPCT Cine video Canada (Quebec), a conservation copy of the original version was rediscovered in 2022 in the collections of the Cinémathèque québécoise. The association is currently working on its restoration.

This incredible rediscovery has implications beyond the film at hand, which we knew had been adapted from an original cut that then disappeared. When we carried out the inventory and identification of the 16 mm elements, we found that many of the films broadcast on French television had in fact been reedited from original elements. These prior versions of Jocelyne Saab's films, preserved in her archives, are obviously more political; the restoration work we carried out enabled us, above all, to rediscover the language and reality of the filmmaker's work. The object of history-writing and feminist curating changes in real time with the collective labor of rediscovery and restoration (see fig. 1).

#### A WORK TO BE REDISCOVERED AND PROMOTED

The opening of the archives enable inaccessible and unknown films to see the light of day. One such film had remained unpublished until Jocelyne Saab's death, a documentary titled *Les Femmes Palestiniennes (Palestinian Women)*, which Saab produced on her own initiative in 1974 while working for the French television channel FR3. In this film, she interviews Palestinian refugee



FIGURE 1. Jocelyne Saab filming on the *Atlantis*, the ship that carried PLO fighters from Beirut to Athens, 1982.

women in Lebanon about their struggle; among them were students, but also armed fighters who swore by armed resistance. Jocelyne Saab filmed these interviews in Beirut and edited them with the FR3 team. When the edited footage arrived in the hands of the editor-in-chief, he considered it “too political,” rejected it, and relegated the film to a drawer. As no release prints were made, Jocelyne Saab never saw the film again.

This first act of censorship was decisive. Jocelyne Saab, who had been approached to become a war correspondent in the Middle East, left French television and decided to work on her own. In 1975, just as she was preparing to depart to cover the liberation of Vietnam, a busload of Palestinians passing through the Christian area of Ain el Remmaneh were shot at by the far-right Lebanese Christian Phalanges party. At a time when no one could have imagined the worst, Jocelyne Saab decided to return to her homeland to film the escalating violence. This first attack, which left twenty-seven people dead, is considered to be the beginning of the war in Lebanon. *Le Liban dans la tourmente* (Lebanon in Turmoil, 1975) directed by Jocelyne Saab and Jorg Stöcklin, is the first film ever made about the fifteen-year civil war in Lebanon. Released at the Olympique Entrepôt in Paris in 1975, it received rave reviews. The seventy-five-minute film was preceded by the short *Les Nouveaux croisés d'Orient* (New Crusaders in Orient, 1975), which portrays

a French mercenary who had served in Algeria and was recruited by the Phalangists to train their militias. For Saab, it was essential to show—against the grain of the French media narrative—that the emerging Lebanese conflict was one of class struggle, not of confession.

By this time, Jocelyne Saab was a well-known and revered journalist, both in French journalistic circles and in militant left-wing circles in Lebanon. In 1975, she was the first reporter to enter a training camp run by the Rejection Front militia. These were the first suicide commandos, a radical practice in the fight against the Israeli occupation. Filming young militiamen ready to die for Palestine, Saab couldn't help but be critical of their methods of struggle. The film, broadcast on television under the title *Le Front du Refus* (The Rejection Front), was a "scoop," as the French press clippings of the time put it. On the Palestinian side, Jocelyne Saab was criticized, particularly by the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), which accused her of not serving the cause. Indeed, from her very first films as a freelance journalist, Saab asserted her freedom of tone and demonstrated a highly personal political commitment, often far removed from the official strategy line of the parties.

Every day between six and ten in the morning, Saab took to the streets of her destroyed city, camera in hand, to preserve traces of the world in which she grew up. She would pass through neighborhoods she had loved, places where she had blossomed; this extreme sensitivity to the space of the city makes her work profoundly singular, a far cry from the merely informative



FIGURE 2. Jocelyne Saab in front of her burned house. *Beirut My City*, 1982.

nature of conventional reports produced for television. This exemplifies the choices she made as a director: she speaks of this war from the inside, and her aim is to give the city back its poetry. With *Beyrouth, jamais plus* (Beirut, Never Again, 1976), Jocelyne Saab completely broke away from the classical codes of editing and called on the poet Etel Adnan to write the film's commentary. Saab had met Etel Adnan when she was an intern at the *Alsafa* newspaper, where Adnan wrote. Adnan had published *Jébu* in 1973, a collection of poems that brought together works written and published in the press since 1969, providing a critical account of the violence in the region that had greatly impressed Saab. According to the poet, the commentary on *Beyrouth, jamais plus* was written in front of images already edited by Jocelyne Saab. The poetry of the images meets that of the text, and the film offers a vision of the Lebanese war in which life resists in spite of all.

Cut down by FR3 at the time of its broadcast, probably for reasons of length and political ideology, the film only existed in a shortened version, until now. Restoration from the original material preserved at the Archives françaises du Film has made it possible to reveal *Beyrouth, jamais plus* in its entirety. Two entire sequences had been cut: the first follows displaced persons of the Lebanese war, Muslims living to the east of Beirut and deported to the west after the partition of the city along denominational and political lines. Their hard life in the camps is depicted by Saab, who takes the time to traverse these makeshift dwellings and bear witness to the difficulty of life for these victims of war. The other censored sequence involves the testimony of a young boy who is seen playing soccer and who expresses his concern about the deterioration of his family's living conditions.

Jocelyne Saab's commitment to her country does not stop at Beirut. The Israeli invasion of southern Lebanon in 1975, which followed on the heels of previous invasions by Israeli forces into the territory in 1967, 1970, and 1972, led to the destruction of villages and the displacement of Lebanese native populations. This runs counter to Israel's claims that it only attacks strongholds in southern Lebanon from which the Palestinian resistance is organized. These invasions are ignored by the international media, whose journalists remain in Beirut. Jocelyne Saab was the only one to go to the south of the country, less than 150 kilometers from the Lebanese capital, to report on the real situation on the ground. *Sud-Liban, histoire d'un village assiégé* (South Lebanon, History of a Besieged Village, 1976) documents the desertification of the Lebanese villages of Hanine and Kfarchouba after their destruction by the Israeli army. Saab films and interviews some of the

resistance fighters who refuse to leave—but to live under what conditions? The director also denounces the connivance maintained with the Israelis by the Phalangists, whom she films crossing the border in Israeli jeeps.

#### A CORPUS IN SOLIDARITY WITH INTERNATIONALIST STRUGGLES

On January 17, 1977, the Egyptian population rose up against President Sadat's decision to abolish subsidies on twenty-five products, including bread. This “bread intifada,” led by the workers, escalated in violent clashes with the police and plunged Egypt into a climate of tension. Jocelyne Saab traveled to Cairo shortly afterward to film the reality of Sadat's liberal Egypt. *Égypte, la cité des morts* (Egypt, City of the Dead, 1977)—subtitled “Every Year in January” after the title of a hit song by the iconic Egyptian revolutionary singer Sheikh Imam—dreams up surrealism and poetry in the service of a highly critical view of contemporary Egypt. President Sadat's *infitah* (“opening up”) policies subjected a large and growing proportion of the Egyptian population into deep poverty. Jocelyne Saab was banned from Egypt for seven years because of the highly political tone of her film.

The film was released in Paris in 1978 as the first part of another highly committed film, which also earned Saab censorship and threats. *Le Sahara n'est pas à vendre* (Sahara Is Not For Sale, 1977) is one of the few documentaries to reflect the situation in the Western Sahara, torn by the conflicting interests of three different forces: Morocco (which has claimed the territory since the departure of the Spanish in 1976) and their allies in Mauritania; Algeria (supporting full independence for the Western Sahara for political and economic reasons); and the Sahrawi Democratic Republic (proclaimed by the Polisario Front in 1976).

From 1976 onward, Jocelyne Saab spent a great deal of time in Algiers—considered a mecca for revolutionaries at the time—where she had shown her films about Lebanon at the Cinémathèque. It was in Algiers that she was encouraged to document what had been happening in the neighboring Western Sahara. The film led to Jocelyne Saab's banishment from Morocco. When she tried to return fifteen years later with her son for a festival, she was arrested and expelled by the authorities. Since her first television reports, Saab's work has been characterized by its boldness and determination, but also by a clear understanding of the French or European audience she was primarily addressing. Far from a militant approach, her cinema uses the codes of television, her first training ground in moving image direction, to deploy

the discourse of mass media while remaining legible. This attention to so-called objectivity, the watchword of television reporting in France, is the strength of her cinema today; the testimonies of the warlords of the various parties in *Le Liban dans la tourmente* (1975) and *Le Sahara n'est pas à vendre* (1977) make these films crucial documents that are part of the history of cinema, offering historians rare and vital material for the ongoing struggle. Grandiose narratives told by the victors were not the ones for which Jocelyne Saab chose to aim her microphone.

But the war in Lebanon was not over. In 1978, Israel carried out Operation Litani and once again invaded southern Lebanon. Saab, who had been dreaming of fiction, took up her documentary camera again. *Lettre de Beyrouth* (Letter From Beirut, 1978) is nevertheless a film that works a great deal with *mise-en-scène*. First and foremost, the director appears on screen for the second time (she made a brief appearance as a tourist guide in *Le Liban dans la tourmente* in 1975) to show how difficult it is to get around in her city, Beirut, and in her country as a whole. To counteract this reality, Saab restarts a bus crossing the city from east to west to stage situations that capture the daily life of Beirut's inhabitants in 1978. She then travels down to the south of the country, bypassing the international armies present in Lebanon, until she meets Arafat not far from the Israeli border. Once again, the commentary is written by the poet Etel Adnan; this time, it's a letter composed by Jocelyne Saab to a friend, explaining the dire situation. Through her intimacy with the viewer, Saab draws us into her own experience of the war: she assumes her privileged status by appearing in the evening with friends to discuss the conflict. At the same time, her film presents the subject of the displaced people of the south, driven from their homes by the Israeli invasion, and that of the Palestinian resistance at the border. By showing these different aspects of a society at war, Saab makes it easier for Western viewers to identify with the film.

That same year, Jocelyne Saab acted as fixer for Algerian director Farouk Beloufa, who came to Lebanon to make his first feature-length fiction film. *Nahla* is the story of a journalist who has come to cover the early years of the Lebanese civil war but finds himself swept up in the chaos devastating the country. The country breaks up, as does the voice of Nahla, the singer he has met, for whom nothing will ever be the same again. Jocelyne Saab directed the making of this film, which has become a cult classic in Arab countries. A few years later, in 1980, she approached Volker Schlöndorff to take part in the shooting of *Circle of Deceit* (1981), for which she became third assistant



and forged a solid friendship with the director, who would accompany her in the conception of her first feature film in 1985. At the time, Saab was immersed in her career as a journalist. NHK asked her to make a documentary about the situation in Iran, a country profoundly transformed by the revolution two years earlier. Saab hesitated, but on the advice of her partner who codirected the film, Rafic Boustani, she accepted. It was with this curiosity that they set off to discover Iran. However, Saab's film, *Iran, l'utopie en marche* (Iran, Utopia in Motion, 1981), doesn't evade the reality of the situation: the authoritarian hardening is clearly visible, and the revolutionary crowds are no more present than the massive Friday prayer assemblies, guided by ayatollahs who are also politicians. This unique historical document was first edited in the presence of Saab in Japan for Japanese television, but the editing was entirely reworked by Saab for broadcast in Europe, in the version we know today.

Jocelyne Saab's return to Beirut was a difficult one. Shortly before the siege of West Beirut by the Israeli army, which encircled the city for over two months starting on June 14, 1982, she watched helplessly as her family home was destroyed by fire. Saab nevertheless decided to stay in Beirut during the siege and shot *Beyrouth, ma ville* (Beirut, My City, 1982—see fig. 2). For the commentary on this film, she worked with playwright Roger Assaf. The text, highly poetic but above all highly political, denounces the conditions of the siege of Beirut and pays tribute, from the inside, to the inhabitants of the city. Once again, the restored cut is different from the one broadcast on television; this time, it does not just reveal deleted scenes but a total rearrangement of images and narrative. However, one important scene has been removed: the one showing the Israeli army's treatment of Palestinian prisoners, which had been shown on television. Faced with this act of censorship, which Roger Assaf did not accept, Jocelyne Saab felt it was more important to show the film, even if cut, rather than cancel its broadcast. The film was broadcast on Antenne 2 at 8:00 p.m. prime time. The television version is available in the INA archives.

The end of the siege was another failure. The PLO, which had set up its headquarters in Beirut in 1970 after being expelled from Jordan, was forced to leave Lebanon for Tunisia. The departure of the Palestinians was experienced as a tragedy by part of the Lebanese population. The eviction of Yasser Arafat, personally targeted by the bombardment of West Beirut during the siege of the city, was overseen by the United Nations. The *Atlantis*—the boat that took him to Greece and then Tunisia—was protected by international military vessels. The man known as “Abou Ammar” summoned Saab and

asked her to cover the crossing. Also on board were Libération journalist Sélim Nassib and photographer Fouad Elkoury. Saab's film, titled *Le Bateau de l'exil* (The Ship of Exile, 1982), was broadcast on TF1 in a version that leaves much less room for its political message than the original cut. Rediscovered in the filmmaker's archives and narrated in the first person, the film tells of the end of an era while attempting to deliver a message of hope for Palestinians who must find new ways to maintain resistance.

Jocelyne Saab's first fifteen films as an independent journalist have now all been restored. The boundaries of this corpus (1974–82) were dictated primarily by historical circumstances: they open with Saab's first independently produced reportage—devoted to the Palestinian resistance and unpublished until 2019—and close in 1982, after Saab's departure from Beirut following the siege of her city by the Israeli army and the departure of the PLO. This slice of filmography, which Mohanad Yaqubi sees as a “collection,” takes on a new meaning when it is understood in its chronology, without being fragmented.<sup>1</sup> To give context and cohesion to dislocated fragments was an animating challenge of the restoration work that fueled our efforts. We refused to abandon a single film.

#### A COLLECTIVE RESTORATION PROCESS TO RECLAIM THE MEMORY OF HISTORY

The trust placed in us by Nessim Ricardou-Saab enabled us to work freely on the restoration of Jocelyne Saab's films. Having ruled out the possibility of restoring the films one by one or from a corpus reduced to those considered the most important, we decided to involve Lebanese technicians in the restoration process (see fig. 3). This decision was due not only to the quality work they carried out in postproduction, but to our commitment to restore images of their country to the Lebanese people. As a result, we were quickly sidelined by conservation institutions from their usual support for digitization and restoration processes. We were forced to build up our own network of professionals interested both in Jocelyne Saab's images and in acquiring a new expertise: film preservation and digital restoration. While the digitization work unavoidably had to be carried out in Europe, it became possible to undertake the digital restorations directly in Beirut.

A series of training workshops were organized across the city with the support of FIAF's technical commission, INA and the Swiss Film Archive, and ten technicians were trained in Beirut in the ethics of film restoration.

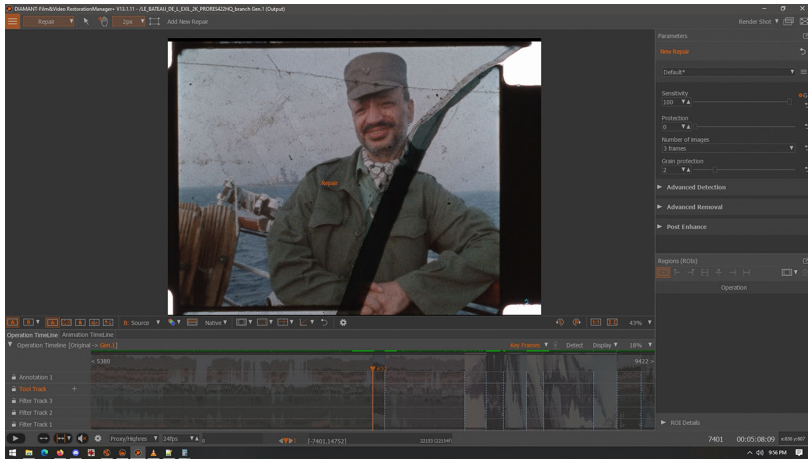


FIGURE 3. Digital restoration process on *The Ship of Exile*, 1982.

The fifteen restored films are now available on DVD and DCP, with subtitles in English, French, Arabic, and Spanish. They further await wider theatrical exhibition in a variety of digital formats. Jocelyne Saab's films deserve to be experienced on the big screen, with collective community, and in educational contexts for further discussion and political engagement.

## CONCLUSION

The activity of the association has made these long-obscure films easily accessible: digitized, cleaned up, and revitalized, despite the very small means of the Jocelyne Saab Association and the provisional technical training of its teams. It allowed also to give back to the Lebanese people themselves access to their country's archives, which had been scattered all over the world and left behind, like too many others. The tragedy of an archive is that it can never preserve all the material it collects or acquires. It is precisely this precarious plenitude that makes the need to find alternative venues for putting marginal images back into circulation all the more pressing. Doing so is the task of feminist archival film curators. ■

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## NOTE

1. Mohanad Yaqubi welcomed me to his research program on imperfect archives titled CRAMP, at KASK & Conservatorium in Ghent. There, we inventoried all the original material of the fifteen films restored by the Jocelyne Saab Association and released on DVD in December 2023, prepared the films for digitization, and carried out the first digitization training workshop, in collaboration with Jean-Philippe Bessas of the Institut National de l'Audiovisuel.