



The cinema of Mohamad Malas

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The cinema of Mohamad Malas



Film-maker Mohamad Malas

Since his first two fiction movies *Dreams of the City* and *The Night*, director Mohammad Malas was acclaimed as the “Arabic Cinema Poet”, in addition to being recognized as the pioneer of Auteur Cinema in Syria.

Mohamad Malas was born in 1945 in Quneitra on the Golan Heights. He is a prominent Syrian filmmaker whose films garnered him international recognition. Malas is among the first auteur filmmakers in Syrian cinema.

Malas worked as a school teacher between 1965 and 1968 before moving to Moscow to study filmmaking at the Gerasimov Institute of Cinematography (VGIK). During his time at VGIK he directed several short films. After his return to Syria Malas started working at the Syrian Television. There he produced several short films including *Quneitra 74*, in 1974 and *al-Zhakira (The Memory)* in 1977.

Along with Omar Amiralay he co-founded the Damascus Cinema Club.





Between 1980 and 1981 Malas shot the documentary, al-Manam (The Dream), about the Palestinians living in the refugee camps in Lebanon during the civil war.

He directed his first feature film, Ahlam al-Madina (Dreams of the City), in 1983. The autobiographical coming-of-age film was co-written with Samir Zikra and received the first prize both at the Valencia and the Carthage Film Festivals. In 1990 Malas shot Nur wa Zilal (Chiaroscuro), a documentary film about Nazih Shahbandar whom he described as Syria's first filmmaker. The film was banned by Syrian authorities and could only be screened one time in 1993 at the American Cultural Center in Damascus.

Malas's second feature film, al-Lail (The Night), was realized in 1992. The autobiographical film is set in Quneitra in the years between 1936 and the Arab–Israeli War of 1948. It forms, along with Ahlam al-Madina, the first and second parts of a yet unfinished trilogy. Both films were shown at Berlinale's Forum section. Al-Lail received international recognition and won first prize at the 1992 Carthage Film Festival. However, the film was banned in Syria until 1996.

Another collaboration between Malas and Omar Amiralay is the 1996 documentary film Moudaress about the Syrian pioneer painter Fateh Moudarres. Bab al-Makam (Passion), released in 2005, was Malas's third feature film. Ladder to Damascus, released in 2013, was screened in the Contemporary World Cinema section at the 2013 Toronto International Film Festival.

The cinema of Mohamed Malas: Recreating a nation's history

In the final sequence of Mohamed Malas' debut feature *Dreams of the City* – which he completed in 1984 – groups of men and women in Damascus celebrate the 1958 unity between Egypt and Syria. In elation, they dance and ululate, while pictures of Gamal Abdel-Nasser cover the streets. Today, because of difficulties in obtaining an entry visa, Malas barely made it to Cairo for the retrospective of his films hosted by art house cinema initiative Zawya in Cinema Odeon between 8 and 11 May.

Malas, however, does not seem overly upset about the obstacles he encountered. The way he sees it, the restrictions imposed on Syrians trying to enter Egypt are only temporary.

"It is merely a reflection of how things are in both countries right now; the situation in Syria isn't normal or stable, nor is it in Egypt," he says, "but this current tension won't last. The ties that bind our people are way stronger, and they shall persist."

Malas, an outspoken dissident of Bashar Al-Assad's regime long before Syria's 2011 uprising, follows the events engulfing his country with a mixture of sorrow and resilience. He continues to live in Damascus, despite increasing dangers and stifling restrictions on artists.

"But cinema has always suffered in Syria, even before the outbreak of the current events," Malas says. "The state has always enjoyed a complete monopoly of film production and distribution, which compromises the honesty and the freedom with which films are made. Even now, after everything that's happened, this is still the case."

After what he calls a "tiresome experience" with Syria's General Organisation for Cinema, Malas resorted to alternative methods of bringing his films to the light, seeking funds and independent production. "Even when independently produced, films still have to be approved by censors, though, but that doesn't really matter."





Elaborating, he continues, "It doesn't really make a difference whether your film is released in Syria or not, because people no longer go to the movies anyway. The theatres are in poor condition, the projectors are in bad shape; the sound and image quality of the films shown is often disastrous."

Faced with an ailing industry, Malas is still driven by a burning passion to make films, but a passion stemming from his own personal stories and the desire to tell them. His cinema heavily bears the imprint of his childhood and adolescence, with the personal and the political invariably intertwined in his work.

When listing his influences, Malas never fails to mention Igor Talankin, his mentor and teacher at Moscow's Gerasimov Institute of Cinematography, from which he graduated in 1974. "I learned so much from him, but he always told me: 'The only thing I taught you is how to know yourself,'" Malas remembers, "and that, to me, is what cinema is all about; knowing yourself and expressing it."

In Malas' eyes, cinema is powerful enough to re-imagine history, to recreate it for those who were not there to see. "I've experienced things and places that are no longer there, no longer visually accessible; but in my head they are so vivid and I want to share them with the world. As a filmmaker, I see this as a responsibility; a calling."

This, precisely, is what Malas sought to achieve with his renowned trilogy, beginning with *Dreams of the City* in 1984 and ending with last year's *Ladder to Damascus*, where he attempts to chronicle the last 50 years of modern Syrian history.

In *Dreams of the City*, a coming of age drama that is indisputably autobiographical, a traumatised family moves from the destroyed village of Quneitra -- Malas' birthplace -- to the urban whirlwind that is Damascus. There, the young boy Adib (the director's alter-ego), simultaneously begins to discover himself as well as the capital he inhabits.

The Night, the second instalment in Malas' trilogy, made in 1992 but never released in Syria until 1997, is the ultimate

manifestation of the iconic filmmaker's obsession with his 'home'; Quneitra. Part of the still-occupied Golan Heights, the village was bombarded beyond recognition by Israeli forces. In the film, Malas brings Quneitra back to life through a young man searching for answers about the life of his rebellious father, who inhabited the village in the 1930s and 1940s.

"The occupation destroyed the village; but cinema managed to rebuild it," Malas muses.

The third and final film in Malas' trilogy, *Ladder to Damascus*, is the only one that is not autobiographical, yet it still reflects characteristic elements of the auteur, namely his love for cinema. The protagonist, Fouad, is a struggling director who lives with a group of young people from all over Syria in a small establishment housing artists and creative individuals as the revolution rages on the streets.

"It seemed natural and appropriate to end the trilogy with a film exploring the present moment in Syria, after revisiting the past with the first two," Malas says.

Filming in Damascus during the peak of the violence devouring the country, Malas was fully aware of the difficulties involved in making *Ladder to Damascus*. To evade interferences by the state and ensure the safety of his crew, he restructured his script so the film would take place almost completely indoors.

Yet making a film about the ongoing situation in Syria was challenging in more ways than one. Works of art that revolve around events of historical magnitude and are made while such events are still unfolding prove irreconcilably tricky, and often come off flat, limited and short-sighted. On how he managed to avoid falling into that trap, Malas says, "I wasn't really trying to politically analyse the situation or predict how it would evolve. I merely wanted to reflect what was happening, to capture the hope and uncertainty it stirred, and to convey its effect on the characters."

In *Ladder to Damascus*, Malas wanted his characters to be a representation of the Syria he and so many others like him





desired: free, diverse and inclusive. To pull that off, he chose amateurs for the lead roles rather than professional actors and gave the characters their real names. "There was a dialogue between them and me -- a free flow of ideas that created people on screen who were a mixture of their real personalities and the characters I had initially written to convey my own vision."

Throughout *Ladder to Damascus*, clips from other works of cinema are incorporated into the film and tributes are paid to other directors, most notably the late master of Greek cinema, Theo Angelopoulos. "I particularly included Angelopoulos because he had died in a tragic accident only weeks before we started shooting, and I wanted to pay homage to that great filmmaker who has profoundly influenced my work," Malas says, "but, most importantly, I chose Angelopoulos because his work is often centred around exile and return, and this is what I want for my people who were forced to leave their country over the past three years: to come home."

For Malas himself, however, leaving Syria is not an option – so far, at least. "If I leave the country now I will be doing it as a refugee, and I refuse to live the few remaining years of my life as one," he asserts, "I want to stay in my city; even if it's no longer safe."

For someone whose cinema is as personal and as place-centred as Malas, staying in Damascus is also a matter of artistic survival, although it puts his actual life at risk. "I cannot make films outside of Syria, my work is bound too tightly to the land," he explains. "I stayed and managed to make *Ladder to Damascus*, and it would've never come out the way it did had it been filmed somewhere else. I don't really know if it's possible to make that happen again, but I know I'd rather try than leave."

(Yasmine Zohdi, 12 May 2014, [ahramonline](#))

Dreams of the City



FICTION FILMS

Dreams of the City

(Ahlam al-Medina) أحلام المدينة

With a string of socially oriented features, Syrian cinema has moved recently into the forefront of Arab film production. And one might add neo-realist "street films" en vogue again throughout the Arab world, if entries at international fests are any indication. Mohammed Malas' "Dreams Of A City" is a prime example of this trend. Pic is impressive as a debut feature. Malas is a creator to watch, so, too is Yasmine Khlat as the other. (Variety, May 1984)

The film is excellently composed and powerful in its colors. The work of Mohamad Malas reminds one of Pagnol, yet of a Pagnol who is not satisfied with superficial beauty. (L'Humanité, May 1984)

If the cinematic structure in his country will allow, one can expect a lot from Mohamad Malas in the future. (Jeune Afrique, May 1984)

CONTENT

When his father dies, Dib, his younger brother and their mother (Yasmine Khlat) move away from their hometown Quneitra to Damascus. The mother's despotic father reluctantly takes them in and tries to force the mother to remarry. Overwhelmed by the magic of the city, Dib wants to discover everything and is full of dreams. His daily life is shaped by insults and punishments however. Dib grows up





against a backdrop of the political upheavals of the 1950s (the end of the military dictatorship in Syria and the nationalization of the Suez Canal, Nasser's taking of power in Cairo, Egyptian and Syrian unification in 1958) and loses his childish illusions in the face of such violence and brutality. The dreams of the city prove to be a nightmare. Mohammad Malas' partly autobiographical debut film marked the transition to auteur cinema in Syria.

The film earned eleven awards including the Tanit d'Or at the Journées Cinématographiques de Carthage, Tunisia in 1985, and The Golden Palm at the Valencia Festival, Spain in 1985.

Syria 1984, 130 min, color, Arabic with English or French subtitles



Director Mohamad Malas | Script Mohamad Malas & Samir Zirka | Director of Photography Urdijan Engin | Editor Haitham Kouatly | Line Production Georges Bishara | Production National Film Organization | Cast Yasmine Khat, Rafik Sbeit, Bassel el Abdiadh, Hisham Khcheifati, Talhat Hamdi, Adnan Barakat, Naji Jabr, Adib Chhadeh, Ayman Zeidan, Nazir Sarhan, Raja Kotrach, Hasan Dakkak

Semaine de la Critique, Cannes 1984
Forum, Berlinale 1985



The Night



The Night (Al Leil) الليل

Rightly the main award of the festival was given to the Syrian film AL LEIL by Mohamad Malas.
(Neue Züricher Zeitung, January 1993)

From the interwoven layers of time extremely deep images, which also visually always symbolize a clear view to something else, unearth details of a much more complex biography in which the history from below irrefutable unmarks the history from above as well as the individual and national life lies.

(Film Dienst Nr. 1, 1993)

CONTENT

In the destroyed city of Quneitra is the grave of a resistance fighter for Palestine. His son, the director, tries to restore the dead man's history by mixing echoes of his mother's memory and his desire to give his father a more honorable death.

Through the daily lives, dreams, fears and hopes of its citizens, Malas chronicles his hometown Quneitra in the Golan Heights between 1936, the year of the first revolts against the British and Zionists in Palestine until the year of the city's destruction. He seeks to exorcise a feeling of shame and humiliation that long accompanied the image of his father and also his town, occupied by Israelis in 1967.





Syria 1992, color, wide screen, 116 min, Arabic with English or French subtitles

Director Mohammad Malas | Script Mohammad Malas & Ossama Mohamad | Director of Photography Youssef Ben Youssef | Editor Kais Al-Zubeidi | Musical arrangement Vahe Demergian | Sound Sophie Bastein | Mixing Thierry Sabatier | Cast Sabah Jazairy, Fares Helou, Rafik Sbeïl, Riad Charhour, Omar Malas, Maher Sleibi, Hazar Awad, Raja Kotrach, Abdullilah Dawleh | Production National Film Organization, Damascus – Syria | Maram for Cinema & Television, Beirut – Lebanon | Co-Production La Sept Cinema, France, Channel 4, England

Forum, Berlinale 1993

From the Press

The Syrian city of Kuneitra, almost completely destroyed by the Israelis in the 1967 war, is the setting for this autobiographical reconstruction of the 1930s and '40s, which links individual fate with the history of a nation. The grave of Alallah, a resistance fighter from Palestine, lies in the city. His son, the filmmaker, tries to piece together his father's story with the help of his mother's memories and a handful of old photographs.

As the political changes flash by in rapid succession - the French occupation, the Second World War, the independence of Syria, the British Mandate - the son comes to realise that the legend he had created, that his father perished fighting the Jews, conceals quite another reality. Alallah, who has twice fought in Palestine, had challenged the Syrian government's hollow declarations of support for its liberation. He died after being beaten up by the secret police. »In the end, there are only fragments of memory«, says the son. The night pieces them together using a visual language of extraordinary potency, combining a range of oriental metaphors with intimate human portraits.

An arranged marriage that becomes a union of love, the world of a little boy who dreams of emulating his militant father, the enclosed kitchen existence of the veiled women, the everyday life and fortunes of a city and its people ... all this and more is captured by the impressive cinematography of Youssef Ben Youssef. Like a cook at an eastern banquet, director Malas has concocted a rare feast of politics and poetry, with a unique spicing of piquant humour. (Berlinale Journal, 1993)



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Passion



Passion (Bab el Makam) باب المقام

Remarkable (Austin Film Society – Essential Cinema 2005)

CONTENT

Iman (Salwa Jamil), a devoted Umm Kulthoum fan, lives in Aleppo with her taxi driver husband and daughters, and her brother Rashid's daughter, Jumanah. She feels that she owes it to Rashid, a political prisoner, to make it as a singer; meanwhile, her uncle, nephews and even her brother spy on her, sure that her passion for singing is proof that she is having an affair.

Inspired by a newspaper announcement and set against the backdrop of the 2003 Syrian elections, with streets filled with demonstrators against the American Invasion of Iraq, Mohamed Malas's film is an intense and extraordinary study of contemporary Syrian society.

Syria 2004, color, 100 minutes, Arabic with English, French or Italian subtitles

Director Mohammad Malas | Producers Ahmed B E Attia, Febienne Servan Schreiber, Intissar Safia | Scriptwriter Khaled Khalife | Cinematographer Tarek Ben Abdallah | Editor Kahena Attia | Composer Marcel Khalife | Cast Mahmoud Hamed, Naceur Ouerdiani, Oussama S Youssef, Salwa Jamil, Yara Chakra



Awards

WINNER — Special Jury Award,
Marrakech International Film Festival





PASSION

PASSION is one of the exquisite and powerful films I have seen in my recent memory.

I admire the poise, patience, and elegance with which you have told Imene's story.

Your camera is so confident. Your cutting, editing, sequences, camera locations, sound design, and above all the color of your film, its melancholic boding of a tragedy about to happen are all extraordinary.

I also believe in Imene's husband, his infatuation with the news of the US invasion of Iraq, in Rachid's absented character, and in the sense of futility you detect in the street demonstrations you have successfully added a critical, though perfectly nuanced, factor to the terror of Imene's life. Such perfect balance between the politics of our despair and the terror of our inherited stupidities I have rarely seen.

The character of Joumana is astounding (and she is wonderful and amazing actor). In her, and in Imene's little daughter--in the very last sequence, before Imene is murdered--you have given the world a gift of grace, a sign of hope, a promise of emancipation.

What has remained with me most is how you have elevated a few lines of a small town crime into an astounding work of art, with malice towards none, not even the Abu Sobhi character, not Imene's father, brother, cousins--none. There seems to be an inevitability in the fate of all these people, caught as they are in a web of their own fears and anxieties, the hope they have lost, the dignity they have forgotten--and how wise, judicious, and careful you are in introducing just a smidgeon of politics to point to the deeper roots of despair, without forfeiting the weight of the more enduring social malaise you detect and canvas.

Your work in the interiors of houses, Mohammad, are just Unbelievable.

You have a visual sense of the space, of the interior architecture of Syrian houses, of streets and alleys, windows and doors, shrubs and trees, that speak eloquently of your extraordinary command over your camera.

Passion



Your perfect sense of the interior is very much reminiscent of Ozu.

One hour and 38 minutes with your film, and I feel I grew up Aleppo!

HAMID DABASHI

(Yet unpublished letter by Mr Hamid Dabashi Iranian Critic and Professor Cinema Critic at the Columbia University - New York . U.S.)



Ladder to Damascus



Ladder to Damascus (Sulam Ila Dimashq)

سلم إلى دمشق

This is obviously a work made from the heart by a masterful director. (Hollywood Reporter)

CONTENT

Ghalia is possessed by Zeina's spirit. Haunted by the life of a girl, who drowned the day she was born, Ghalia travels to Damascus, where she studies acting. There, she meets Fouad, an aspiring film-maker who becomes fascinated by Ghalia's duality. He takes her under his wing and helps her find a place to live. Fouad's love for Ghalia and Zeina blossoms, while the tumultuous events in Syria start unfolding in the streets around them and gradually encroaches on their idyllic isolation.

Syria/Lebanon/Qatar 2013, Arabic with English subtitles, color, 97 minutes

Director Mohammad Malas | Producer Georges Schoucair |
Scriptwriter Mohammad Malas, Samer Mohamed Ismail |
Cinematographer Joude Gorani | Editor Ayhan Ergursel |
Composer Toufic Farroukh, Charbel Haber | Cast Najja El
Wazza, Bilal Martini, Gianna Aanid



From the press

Acclaimed Syrian director Mohamad Malas speaks from the heart in the language of poetry.

Filmed in the midst of armed conflict with bombs exploding near the set, *Ladder to Damascus* partakes of the tragic ongoing reality of Syria today. Like the Egyptian *Rags and Tatters*, which also made its bow in Toronto, its fictional story can't avoid being influenced by events happening around it. But Mohamad Malas, Syria's dean of filmmakers, is a poet not a documentarian, and the film is a cry of anguish told through expressive filmmaking. Containing no up-close views of fighting in the streets or explicit references to the warring factions, its audience is likely to be limited.

Another factor that cuts into its appeal for Western viewers, but which should be a plus for Arab speakers, is the frequent referencing of Arab writers and thinkers. The subtitles sometimes read like a street sign with a hasty description of the person cited. Even its mention of a religious group called the Alawites or a Suwayda accent, or its salute to the outspoken dissident documaker Omar Amiralay, who died in 2011, will probably come as news to most viewers outside the region. There are enough of these references to be daunting. This is obviously a work made from the heart by a masterful director with no thought to compromise for his international audience.

The film's style itself belongs to the kind of elaborate filmic calligraphy that is usually found in experimental art films. The extraordinarily crisp images bathed in light by masterful cinematographer Joude Gorani turn into multiple layers of imagery, highly suggestive of the depth of issues being touched on. A huge projection of a strip of 35mm film instantly creates an association with the ladder in the title, and the idea that through cinema one can reach truth and freedom. These are big ideas and risk feeling like abstractions to the casual viewer, who is left trying to decipher oblique statements like, "I live in a country that gives me no refuge."

Naturalism and realism are the farthest things from the filmmaker's strategy. The opening scene, which introduces the two young protags, Fouad (Bilal Martini) and Ghalia





(Najla El Wa'za), is set on a small college stage where aspiring actress Ghalia recites a monologue while aspiring filmmaker Fouad tapes her. As she strips out of a floor-length white burqa to street clothes, she talks about feeling that another woman lives inside her: Zeina, a girl from her town who committed suicide when her father was arrested. "When the uprising began, I felt Zeina return," she says, and spends a great deal of time talking to her smiling, silent doppelganger, played by Gianna Aanid.

The sense of theatricality continues in the old multi-storied house in Damascus where Ghalia goes to live on Fouad's suggestion. It is basically a rooming house for students run by a nice old lady (Rana Malas). It's interesting to see the Syrian boys and girls from different ethnic backgrounds, including Christian, living together and developing romantic entanglements. But between their Apples and cellphones, tenderness and love affairs, the war is more than a shadow over their lives. In the courtyard, Fouad projects his anguishing interview with a man who has spent 17 years in prison, while helicopters and planes cross over the open courtyard and are reflected in the troubled waters of a fountain. This complex shot is typical of the symbolic level of cinematic language Malas uses to describe the inner turmoil of his characters. And even if the layers of gauze and window panes and mirrors can seem cloyingly Baroque at times, the esthetics are always metaphoric and never an end in themselves.

It's more difficult to adapt to the theatrical acting style imposed on the cast. As Ghalia comments, she doesn't know if she's awake or asleep. El Wa'za's passionate performance is remarkable in such a young actor, but it is kept on a highly abstract plane that doesn't brush reality as most films conceive it.

Though politics are, out of necessity, approached obliquely, the film's position is probably represented by Ghalia's father, an ex-army officer stripped of his rank when his son was arrested. Of his former hero President Hafez Al-Assad he says, "You have booby-trapped the country and turned every protest into conflict."

Besides the superb cinematography, music by composers Charbel Haber and Toufic Farroukh make a major but never obtrusive contribution to the atmosphere.

(Hollywood Reporter, 2013)

Ladder to Damascus

TIFF 2013 Review by Jared Mobarak

A non-violent, secular movement began in Syria in early 2011 led by young protestors calling for democratic freedoms and the fall of president Bashar al-Assad's Ba'ath regime. It evolved into a civil war that rages on today with mounting chemical attacks by Assad's government raising the threat of international interference to the point of our own country's possible involvement. But while it's easy for American media to speculate and fear-monger as thousands die in the streets, there's no way to truly understand what the Syrian people are feeling during their struggle for freedoms our own ancestors won centuries ago other than hearing their voices and seeing their pain. Mohamad Malas' *Soullam ila Dimashq* [Ladder to Damascus] is therefore as much a document of an actual war as it is the fictional drama inspired from it.

Shot in Damascus months after the first protests turned into battles, the production inevitably put cast and crew in constant danger. As the character Fouad—nicknamed "Cinema" (Bilal Martini)—explains at the start, having a camera to shoot the injustices outside your door is as good as holding a gun to the opposition. Whereas documentarian Omar Amiralay openly spoke out against government oppression through his work in the decades previous, this new flood of chaos won't afford such luxuries.

His films and the art of many others inspired this new mobilization of twenty and thirty-somethings and anything more would only exacerbate the situation by increasing the number of citizens against Assad. But as Malas' story—co-written by Samer Mohamad Ismail—shows, it's never long before war knocks on your door anyway.

There is a powerful notion of human universality at play with an Ibn Hazm quote, "You are haunted by people who are like you," leading us into the fantastical idea that Ghalia (Najla El Wa'za) lives with the soul of another young girl who died the day she was born named Zeina (Gianna Aanid). It points towards a sort of survivor's guilt wherein soldiers your age are dying in the streets for their and your freedom while you stand on the fringes watching it happen. When will enough be enough before you too join the war? How many friends and family must die or be imprisoned before you realize the rebellion is no longer something you can pretend is happening farther than the suburbs mere miles away. The bombs will always get closer.

It is the meeting of Ghalia and Fouad at art school that begins our journey. Her passionate embrace of Zeina's ghost intrigues him as a subject he could film on his camcorder while her desire to be with





those of like mind and spirit nudges her to move into the large and elegant home he shares with other artistic souls slowly letting the revolution creep into their work. This refuge serves as an escape from the bombs still only heard in the distance—a place where Fouad can screen films on the wall as a cathartic reprieve the rest may use to forget what's happening if only for a brief moment. While some images soothe, however, others can embolden. An interview with Zeina's father released from prison proves one that touches the souls of all watching.

At this point things escalate and Ghalia's duality converges into one young girl tired and determined in the face of unavoidable turmoil ripping families apart. She feels the pain Zeina must have felt, believing her own father is the one who wallowed in prison when we've already seen him sitting by a fire at her childhood home. This empathy spreads like wildfire as the more radical housemates—Hussein (Hussein Marii) and Lara (Lara Saade)—leave to join the resistance at meetings setup via Facebook; landlord Emm Sami (Rana Malas) is seen breaking down during prayers courtesy of the heartbreaking tragedies around her; and Zarzour (Mohamad Zarzour) finds himself the victim of abuse in the streets without provocation. The war has arrived at their door and Malas shows us their newfound readiness to enlist.

Malas constantly juxtaposes archived footage onto his scenes through Fouad's projector or Ghalia's dreams, injecting the emotional tug of war at play that finally proves too much to ignore. At times he'll cut scenes so the voice we just heard coming from a character's mouth is playing over a briefly silent image before synching back up as though reading his/her thoughts. There is an introspective quality throughout as we evolve alongside these men and women and let the passion rise within us too. We understand the burgeoning love between them all as couplings become clear, each embarking on an existence wherein they no longer are living for just themselves. It's a microcosm of rebellion with their house becoming a metaphorical Syria its inhabitants must fight tirelessly to keep free.

We see this through instances of Malas turning Fouad's camera into our eyes so Ghalia can bare her soul directly to us or so Hussein can tellingly joke about his friend needing to film indoors as it's unsafe outside much like cinematographer Joude Gorani must for this whole. A majority of is captured within these walls out of necessity, but also as a way to instill the claustrophobic feeling Syria has felt since the Ba'ath Party took over in 1963. These artists and philosophers must break free from the constraints of their own bodies and fears as much as the establishment suppressing their humanity. And as the war inches closer and their anger and frustrations rise, Ladder to Damascus' title finally comes to fruition on their rooftop. They will no longer be contained.

The dream



The Dream (al-Manam) المنام

"Haj: Don't you see the horses carrying soldiers in the sky?
Woman 1: They landed on earth and transformed to green
(blue) and brown roosters; they started to fight each other.
Old man: they are fighting each other so as to liberate
Palestine.
Woman 2: Like Cain and Abel."

Shot in 1980-81, the film is composed of interviews with different Palestinian refugees including children, women, old people, and militants from the refugee camps of Sabra, Shatila, Bourj el-Barajneh, Ain al-Hilweh and Rashidieh in Lebanon. In the interviews Mohamad Malas questions them about their dreams at night. The dreams always converge on Palestine: a woman recounts her dreams about winning the war; a fedai of bombardment and martyrdom; and one man tells of a dream where he meets and is ignored by Gulf emirs.

During filming Malas lived in the camps and conducted interviews with more than 400 people. In 1982 the Sabra and Shatila massacres occurred, taking the lives of several people he interviewed, and he stopped working on the project. He returned to it in 1986 and edited the many hours of footage gathered into this 45 minute film, released in 1987.





Syria 1987, Arabic with English, German or French subtitles, 45'

Director Mohamad Malas | Camera Hazem Bayya'a, Hanna Ward | Editing Kais al-Zubaidi



Aleppo, Magams for Pleasure



Aleppo, Magams for Pleasure (Halab... Magamat al-Masra) حلب ... مقامات المسرة

CONTENT

Sheik Sabri Mudallal (83 years) is the last of the Masters of Tarab reciting in Aleppo. The troupe (turath) he established is considered an oriental orchestra that maintains originality and purity, as far as singing, music processing and used instruments, are concerned.

According to Mudallal this kind of singing expresses the loyalty to the traditions of singing and the preserving of the classical school of Aleppo which is one of the main schools in oriental music. Although the education was based on religious reciting, many masters have revived and developed its basics in the beginning of this century, among them were, Sheik Ali Darwish, Omar Al Batch and Bakri Al Kurdi. Sheik Sabri Mudallal, a disciple of these masters, remains the witness and the keeper of this school. His memory and experience are a historical reference to all his predecessors.

Syria 1999, 52 min, Arabic with English subtitles

Director and Author Mohamad Malas | Photography Yussef Ben Yussef | Editor Qais Al Zubeidi | Production Suedi Film, Abu Dhabi; AMIP, Paris - France | Executive producer Dunia Film, Damascus - Syria



On the Sand, under the Sun



On the Sand, under the Sun (Fawq al-Raml, Taht al-Shams) فوق الرمل ... تحت الشمس

CONTENT

Short documentary about political prisoners struggling to come to terms with haunting memories, produced for the anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The film presents a reflection on the effects of prison in general and on the theatre director Ghassan Jbaili in particular. The artist used his work to come to terms with his haunting memories and regain the world outside the prison walls.

Syria 1998, 32 min, Arabic with English Subtitles

Directors Mohamad Malas & Hala Alabdallah | Director of Photography Pierre Dupouey | Editing Dominique Pâris



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