

Film Review: *L'Insulte* (The Insult)

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Abstract.

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Keywords.

Lebanon, civil war, transitional justice, film, memory

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Recommended Citation

Ragin, Renee Michelle (2018) "Film Review: *L'Insulte* (The Insult)," *Genocide Studies and Prevention: An International Journal*: Vol. 12: Iss. 2: 203-205.

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.5038/1911-9933.12.2.1608>

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/gsp/vol12/iss2/19>

Film Review: *L'Insulte* (The Insult)

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L'Insulte (The Insult)

Director: Ziad Doueiri

France, Cyprus, Belgium, Lebanon, United States, 2017

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Though the civil war (1975-1990) has long since ended, Ziad Doueiri's contemporary Lebanon remains embroiled in conflict. In *The Insult*, a personal dispute between two individuals on either side of an ethno-political divide threatens to reignite national conflict. Under normal circumstances, such a storyline might seem improbable, but the realities of the post-war environment in Lebanon render it plausible.

Since being placed under French mandate in the early 20th century, Lebanon has divided political power among a plurality of ethnic and religious groups organized into political "confessions." Since its independence, the Lebanese government has been weak and largely unable to address civil unrest resulting from economic inequality and conflict between the confessions. In 1958 and again in 1975, this unrest took the form of civil war. The war in 1975 was exacerbated by armed Maronite Christian resistance to the presence of Palestinian fighters who used Lebanon as a base from which to combat the neighboring state of Israel. Over the course of the next 15 years, Lebanon's government was largely defunct as domestic militias and foreign armies fought for control. The negotiated end to the civil war in 1990 resolved few, if any, of the conditions which provoked the conflict, serving instead as an acknowledgment of political stalemate. Accordingly, the country's post-war leadership pursued a policy of amnesty (and, according to some, amnesia) rather than transitional justice.

With a series of provocative, if difficult to answer questions, *The Insult* joins a robust corpus of post-1990 Lebanese films meditating on what, if anything, it means to be "post-war" in Lebanon. Doueiri begins in the modern-day Lebanese capital of Beirut. From the street, a Palestinian foreman, Yasser Salameh, instructs his team of engineers on their day's work in the neighborhood. As Yasser speaks, a resident in an apartment above him begins to hose off his balcony, sending dirty water pouring out of the drainage pipe and onto Yasser's head. Shaking off his annoyance, Yasser asks permission to replace the antiquated pipe. Though the resident, Tony, refuses, Yasser instructs his crew to replace the pipe anyway. The insults commence: an enraged Tony sets about destroying the brand new pipe as Yasser stands below, flabbergasted and swearing at him. When he finishes, Tony marches into the construction supervisor's office demanding an apology from Yasser.

The implied power dynamics in this scene are critical. Tony and the other residents of this neighborhood are members of a right-wing nationalist Christian party who warred against the Palestinians only a few decades earlier. Moreover, the Lebanese government bars non-Lebanese from a range of employment types, including engineering. Yasser is therefore illegally employed in a hostile neighborhood. With this in mind, the supervisor insists that Yasser apologize, and brings him to Tony's place of employment the next day. As Yasser approaches, he notices that Tony is listening to a recording of the Christian party's former figurehead, exhorting his followers against Palestinians. Tony approaches Yasser to receive his apology but the apology is not forthcoming. Infuriated, Tony spits out "I wish Ariel Sharon had wiped you all out!" Yasser strikes Tony, fracturing several ribs. Shortly thereafter, Tony takes Yasser to court for assault.

The film becomes a parable about Lebanon told along two parallel narrative arcs, one which explores how individuals manage interpersonal conflict in the post-war period, and one which probes the ability of the state to enact traditional justice. Tony Hanna's assault suit against Yasser

Salameh effectively becomes a battleground on which the country can revisit a legacy of insults and grievances left unresolved by the civil war. In so doing, the film also raises the question of how far Lebanon has come in “turning the page” – an expression evoked repeatedly throughout the film.

Partial answers to these questions can be identified through the intergenerational dynamics on display throughout the film. The lawyers defending Tony and Yasser, for instance, are father and daughter. Wajdi Wehbe, a lawyer who once defended a senior Christian politician and militia leader, now defends Tony. Wajdi represents the “old guard”: loyal to the party, its causes, and its ideology even after the war. Wajdi’s daughter, Nadine, defends Yasser. She represents the “new guard,” a younger generation insistent that not every conflict should be an excuse to reactivate old animus. The repartee between the two lawyers is demonstrative not only of a political transition but also a shift in attitudes toward gender: the female judge presiding over the case takes Wajdi to task for interrupting Nadine while she speaks, signaling a movement away from patriarchal social norms. Tony’s pregnant wife, Shirine, is also mindful of the legacy of the war on the coming generations. Vexed by her husband’s intransigent prejudice, she despairs of the fate awaiting the post-war innocent.

Doueiri’s film is perhaps most compelling in its consideration of a particularly thorny matter: the possibility that one can be both victim and perpetrator. In court, Wajdi plays a series of slides depicting Tony’s natal village prior to the war. He interrupts the images of a placid, banana-farming rural landscape with footage of an infamous massacre which occurred in the same village only a few months after the war began. Under attack by leftist Lebanese militias and Palestinian fighters, Wajdi narrates, a young Tony flees with his family. The traumatic memory of the massacre, Wajdi implies, lay the groundwork for Tony’s animosity toward Palestinians – not sheer prejudice.

In this provocative scene, Wajdi’s courtroom audience, and implicitly Doueiri’s viewers, are confronted with the plurality of victimhood in war, and an interminable timeline of grievances. Acknowledging these factors makes it more difficult to forge a simple narrative, and, Wajdi hopes, forces the leveling of what he considers an uneven playing field in the post-war blame-game: “We talk so much about [the Palestinian] cause,” he says, “there’s no room left for anyone else’s.” In crafting his argument, Wajdi asks listeners to allow their circle of empathy to become capacious enough to include Tony. We are to see him not as a man who allowed enmity to govern his heart and cruelty to issue from his tongue, but also as a child for whom another’s hatred, cruelty, and violence proved life-altering.

Wajdi’s call is both thought-provoking and emotionally resonant – yet to extrapolate an exculpatory logic from this painful reality would be a mistake. For all of Wajdi’s objections to the supposedly unquestioning embrace of the figure of the Palestinian victim, such expressions of empathy have yet to result in the amelioration of their condition. Moreover, the behavior of Tony’s father complicates Wajdi’s assertion that hostility is a foregone conclusion in the wake of trauma: not only does Tony’s father harbor no hostility toward Palestinians, he also bitterly admonishes his son for his treatment of Yasser. Finally, the film marshals little evidence to support the notion that Tony himself has been dogged by trauma: though the trial provokes occasional nightmares of his family’s escape, there is little to suggest that these memories serve as the force that motivates his words and behavior. Instead, there is ample evidence that the orientation of his neighborhood, the ongoing influence of his political party, and his attraction to Gemayel’s rhetoric are at the core of his adult prejudices. In a fleeting illustration of the power of social conditioning, Doueiri includes a brief exchange between Tony’s neighbors: a man too young to have lived through the war expresses solidarity with Tony and his generation in the wake of Yasser’s assault, shouting: “They want to wipe out the Christians!” Yet the myriad types of evidence undermining Wajdi’s defense of his client seem muted in comparison to the force of Wajdi’s impassioned rhetoric, causing Doueiri to miss the opportunity to more thoroughly explore the means by which polarization continues post-war.

Tony’s conscience clearly weighs on him throughout the film. Defensive when criticized by his wife or father, and belligerent when he has the backing of his courtroom supporters, he appears distressed in private moments. In one scene, Yasser’s car stalls in front of Tony and he silently fixes it, as if enacting a token penance. By the end of the film, he is considerably subdued. Yasser, however, is not afforded as much room for character development. With considerably fewer spoken lines than his counterpart, the character of Yasser is less nuanced, and at times even resembles a

caricature of the Palestinian “other.” In the courtroom, Wajdi draws from his arsenal of discursive weapons to paint Yasser as an innately violent non-citizen whose political interests are inimical to Lebanese national security and domestic peace, and who takes advantage of his condition to enjoin sympathy. The excitable and sometimes ludicrous nature of Wajdi’s performance in these moments undermines his claim, making blatant the insidious nature of anti-Palestinian sentiment.

Elsewhere, however, Yasser’s own behavior paradoxically confirms the stereotype. As a result of the controversy brought about by the trial, for instance, the head of the construction company for which Yasser works fires him. In response, Yasser hyperventilates and then strikes relentlessly at the windows of the office. His rage seems grossly out-of-character for the otherwise mild-mannered and deferential demeanor he exhibits overall. By placing the Palestinian protagonist at the center of yet another act of violence, Doueiri ironically bolsters the very caricature that he seemed to critique elsewhere. The flattening of Yasser’s character has the effect of refocusing attention away from Yasser and onto Tony. Perhaps this is intentional: after all, Tony is the Lebanese citizen and the film is intimately concerned with how the Lebanese have, or have not, moved on.

Finally, the manner in which Doueiri attempts to create a parallel between the individual and national post-war obstacles are inexpertly wrought, causing them to lose their efficacy. In a series of short and un-contextualized montages, Doueiri cuts back and forth between the court house and rioting Palestinians who burn cars, thrust their fists into the air and yell menacingly while Lebanese Christians chant, wave flags, and demonstrate peacefully. Taken as a whole, the scenes feel disjointed, requiring the viewer to use their own imagination to explain how an obscure neighborhood conflict led to national unrest. The suspension of disbelief is also required for the extremely brief scenes in which Yasser and Tony are inexplicably invited to meet with the Lebanese President for a peace summit, or in which a reformed militia leader uses a television interview as a platform from which to enjoin Tony to put the war behind him. Performing leaps from personal to public with little structural support, Doueiri misses the opportunity to critically explore how the logic of othering gives rise to mass violence, whether in 2017 or in 1975.

The film ends with a 2-to-1 decision finding Yasser Salameh innocent of all charges. The “insult,” the judges imply, was suffered by Yasser, not Tony. It is the insult of wishing for a people’s extermination, and not that of a physical assault, which poses the greater danger to law and order. And yet, the impact of the verdict feels underwhelming in light of the aforementioned shortcomings. The verdict also feels muted in light of the scene that immediately proceeds it: Yasser returned to Tony’s garage and taunts him, intentionally provoking the latter to violence. Reversing the circumstances which inaugurated the legal proceedings, this scene is meant to signal rapprochement. They have effectively settled the score between themselves in a form of extralegal justice that renders the verdict a formality.

Doueiri’s film thus leaves us with a question: if the true catalyst for post-war coexistence is enacted in the public sphere, what role does the state play? And if the role for the latter is small, has Lebanon made any progress since the war that collapsed the state in 1975?

Title of the Film: *L'insulte* (The Insult); Director: Ziad Doueiri; Producers: Rachid Bouchareb, Jean Bréhat, Julie Gayet; Screenplay: Ziad Doueiri and Joelle Touma; Music: Éric Neveux; Cinematography: Tommaso Fiorilli; Film Editor: Dominique Marcombe; Production Designer: Hussein Baydoun; Cast: Adel Karam, Kamel El Basha, Camille Salameh, Diamand Bou Abboud, Rita Hayek; Country: France, Cyprus, Belgium, Lebanon, United States; Language: Arabic; Year of Release: 2017; Production Companies: Rouge International, Tessalit Productions, Ezekiel Films; Duration: 112 minutes.