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THE VALLEY

A FILM BY GHASSAN SALHAB

الوادي
فيلم غسان سلهب

CARLOS CHAHINE
MOUNZER BAALBAKI

CAROLE ABOUD
AOUNI KAWAS

FADI ABI SAMRA
YUMNA MARWAN

*High on the soaring mountain, he closed his eyes
He did not wish for a light, thousands of years old, to shine on him
He closed his eyes and went down
Into the valley*

Wadih SAADEH

على الجبل العالي أغمض عينيه
لا يريد ضوءاً قديماً مشى آلاف السنين كي يصل إليه
أغمض عينيه وانحدر
إلى الوادي

وديع سعادة





SYNOPSIS

Following a car accident on a lone mountain road, a middle-aged man loses his memory. Drenched in blood, he continues to walk along the deserted path. Further down the road, he encounters people with engine trouble and helps them get their car running again. They are reluctant to leave him stranded, so they take him home to their large estate in the Bekaa valley, a place where production is not only agricultural, and a place he may never leave again....



The background image is a blurred, high-angle shot of a mountainous landscape. A person is seen walking on a path that winds through the terrain. The colors are muted, with greys, blues, and earthy tones. The overall mood is somber and contemplative.

DIRECTOR'S NOTE

Things don't have significance, they only have existence.
Fernando Pessoa

I was in *Ouyoun El Simane*, one of Lebanon's mountaintops, preparing for my previous film, *The Mountain*. And just like every time I find myself in this place, I was struck by the magnificence of the landscape and its relentless power. On that particular day, however, a feeling of fright, of terror even, insinuated itself. Certainly, the sensation was related to the quasi-glacial majesty of the place, and to my state of mind at the time. Mostly, however, it was as if the state of things in Lebanon, the invariable state of threat in this loaded part of the world, had spread across the mountain heights in an elusive, intangible form.

Strangely, this threat took on its full meaning in this remote, seemingly serene place. It hovered densely, like a low, looming sky, ready to burst. *The Valley* came into being on that day, from that forceful sensation. As senseless as it may sound, I *heard* a car skidding, falling into the void; I *saw* the blood-drenched man appear, then start walking along the deserted road in the heart of the mountainous landscape, underneath open skies.

Who is this man? Why is he walking on this particular road? Where did he come from? Was he heading for the Bekaa valley? Where is his accent from? Will we ever know? This man has suddenly lost all sense of familiarity, not only with the world around him, with the elements of nature, with other human beings, but with himself as well. By force of circumstance, he becomes nothing more than immediate perceptions, *instinct*. The remembrance of certain gestures, of the body, of a song's chorus playing in his head; the anxiety provoked by this *blank memory*.

In *The Valley*, the threat unfolds on several levels before exploding. It is present, from the beginning of the film, even before the first images appear. The threat is present, with the bloodied man without a past, of whom we know nothing, and who knows nothing. A threat to himself, but also to the people whom he helps nonetheless. The unknown, the stranger is, as we all know, threatening.

Similarly, the *stranger* instinctively senses an imperceptible danger from the women and men who take him to their estate, where armed men restrict his freedom of movement.

The threat never ceases to be *present*, it weighs prolongedly over Lebanon, in a region that is unstable, to say the least. And the dreaded war, which we are *promised* year after year, its explosion, which occurs abruptly, brutally, does not necessarily represent, even as it becomes reality, the end of the threat. It opens it up even further, disrupting one's relation to time, to space and to oneself. This war that strikes everything around the estate, but does not directly affect our characters, as if they were standing in the eye of the hurricane.

A *hurricane* whose terrifying impact they can hear, but of which they have no images, and no precise information (telephone and power stations, as well as satellite relay stations must have been hit, isolating them from the rest of the world). A *hurricane* that leaves the protagonists to themselves. The people of the estate to their vain drug production; the armed men to their search for close ones; and the stranger to his recovered memory.

The Bekaa valley is situated between two mountain ranges, Mount Lebanon and the Anti-Lebanon. These two mountain ranges dominate the valley, but also wedge it; they protect it as surely as they threaten it.

Our protagonist's amnesia is at once a kind of black hole and a blank page, on which the instant, the immediate perception writes itself, in sharp opposition with the world of the people on the estate, with their perilous affairs, with their ambition, with the state of the country and of the entire region.

In my previous film, the main character used a trip abroad as a pretext to leave Beirut and isolate himself in a mountain hotel. The film escaped (everything took place at night, which inevitably blurred outlines) and enclosed itself within the walls of a hotel room, which it practically never left, except at the very end. With *The Valley*, space, strictly speaking, is totally open. The high mountain, the road, the valley, the large estate, the house with its large windows... And the sky, always immense, domineering, crushing, from the very first shots of the movie. Of course, the space closes in for a while in the room where our amnesiac is sequestered; but the sudden exterior violence will topple everything, *opening* the field paradoxically and considerably, giving it, if I may say, its full and terrible magnitude, thus merging earth and sky.



DIRECTOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Born in Dakar, Senegal. In addition to making his own films, Ghassan Salhab collaborates on various scenarios in Lebanon and in France, and teaches film in Lebanon. He has directed six feature films: **Beyrouth Fantôme**, **Terra Incognita**, **The Last Man**, **1958**, **The Mountain**, and **The Valley** — in addition to numerous short films and “videos”, including **Everybody know this is nowhere – diptych**, **Le massacre des innocents – triptych**, **(Posthume)**, **Narcisse Perdu**, **My living body My dead body**, **La Rose de personne**, **Baalbeck** (co-directed with A. Zaatari and M. Soueid), **De la séduction** (co-directed with N. Khodor), **Afrique Fantôme**, **Après la Mort...** In 2010, La Rochelle International Film Festival made a tribute to his films.

He has also published his texts and articles in various magazines, and a book, “*fragments du Livre du naufrage*” (Amers Editions) in 2012.

The Mountain (2011, 84')

Selected by FID Marseille, Toronto International Film Festival, Doha Tribeca Film Festival, Nowe Horyzonty...

“This film, which nods in passing to Johnny Cash as Louis-René des Forêts, raises a serious and time-honored question in an original way: how to make a work of art in time of war.” (Jean Pierre Rehm, president of FID Marseille)

“Ghassan Salhab offers some intense cinema to the viewer.” (Isabelle Regnier, *Le Monde*)

1958 (2009, 66')

Selected by FID Marseille, Locarno International Film Festival, MEIFF Abu Dhabi, International Istanbul Film Festival, JC Carthage...

“A haunting meditation in which the strata of the present and the past find themselves intermingling, on both the intimate and the geopolitical, on poetry and armed struggle...” (Isabelle Regnier, *Le Monde*)

“Ghassan Salhab created a participating visual text where the spectator is induced to reflect, research, to some extent, take part to the film.” (Celluloid Liberation Front, *Vertigo Magazine*)

The Last Man (2006, 101')

Selected by Locarno International Film Festival, Cinemed, Torino Film Festival, Dubai Film festival, Singapore, Tribeca Film Festival, 'Tous les Cinémas du Monde' - Cannes...

"*The Last Man* may mark something of an artistic turning point, as a film that isn't necessarily about politics but inextricably of it." (Ann Hornaday, *Washington Post*)

"As it turns out, a Lebanese vampire movie not only makes perfect sense but it is also the best thing to happen to the genre in a long time." (Peter Martin, *San Francisco Bay Guardian*)

Terra Incognita (2002, 120')

Selected by 'Un Certain Regard' - Cannes 2002, Viennale, Göteborg International Film Festival, Festival International du film de La Rochelle, JC Carthage...

"A complex and polysemous film, diffracted to the extreme. Salhab has thoroughly grasped the Godardian legacy." (Vincent Ostria, *Les Inrockuptibles*)

"The beauty and emotion revealed by *Terra Incognita* is due to the way in which it escapes the categories of both traditional fiction and documentary." (*Chronicart*)

Phantom Beirut (1998, 116')

Selected by Les Trois Continents-Nantes, Göteborg International Film Festival, la sélection ACID - Cannes, JC Carthage, Fajr International Film Festival, Valencia...

"This is a film that defines the character as an eternal unknown soldier, and cinema as the ultimate battleground." (Jacques Mandelbaum, *Le Monde*)

"There are always a film or two that leave a mark on their time, their era, their generation. Film-matrixes. The film-beacon of this in-between, fundamental paradigm is undoubtedly *Phantom Beirut*." (Raphael Millet, *Simulacres*)



He looks through the lens to see his death mask.

Ghassan Salhab's harsh and demanding filmmaking does not give itself up easily, refusing all compromise or concession, no doubt out of fear of being forced to strike a bargain with the dominant commercial cinematic form it shies away from at all cost. In a world of permanent spectacularization more and more ours, such refusal is a badge of honor. This is not filmmaking that comes to us easily, but one to which we have to go. In a sense, it is filmmaking that "deserves" such effort.



This cinematographic path that Ghassan Salhab has been steadfastly pursuing for over twenty-five years makes him one of the most important filmmakers in post-civil war Lebanese cinema. This has not turned him into a father figure, but into a rather lonely one (which, when one gets to know him, is aptly fitting). A solitary character hovering right above a Lebanese scene that some claim is in turmoil. This undeniable distinction he holds in the midst of the Beirut melee comes largely from the fact that among all the local filmmakers, he is doubtlessly one of the most rigorous, constant and prolific in his work.

Thus, after a first succession of short films made during the 1980s and until the mid-1990s, such as *The Key*, *After Death* and *Afrique Fantôme*, which all helped refine his style, Salhab began steadily turning out a progression of fiction feature films, at the rate of one every three or four years: *Phantom Beirut*, *Terra Incognita*, *The Last Man* and *The Mountain*. Today, these films, along with his latest, *The Valley*, make up the core body of his oeuvre. The first three films on the list now constitute a seminal trilogy on Beirut melancholy, without having necessarily been conceived of as such from the outset. An experimental, mid-length film of exceptional aesthetic and metaphysical value, (*Posthumous*), formed the closure of this cycle on Beirut melancholy, like a post-script sent from the underworld.

A series of shorter films, at once visual essays, studies and intimate diaries, often combining fiction and documentary, such as *La Rose de Personne*, *My Living Body*, *My Dead Body*, and *Narcissus Lost*, join this hybrid, polymorphous body of work, as well as two entirely unique offerings, the feature-length documentary *1958* and the even lesser-known *Brief Encounter with Jean-Luc Godard, or, Cinema as Metaphor*.

In fact, all of Salhab's films are poetic-philosophical essays of sorts (with essay here also referring to its original meaning as *attempt*). He creates a *mise-en-abyme*, challenges and questions both the status of the image (film/video, animated/static, surface/depth) as well as the status of the narrative itself (documentary/fiction, collective/personal, testimonial/interpretive, true/false, empathetic/distantiated, diegetic/extra-diegetic). What Salhab works on, for this is in fact what works on him in turn, is the fundamental question of the double impossibility of being and unbeing in the world. This gives rise to filmmaking over which reigns an uncertainty as ontological as much as it is existential, deeply affecting the relationship of both director and viewer to the narrative, the image, the direction and more generally to art itself.

It is Salhab's acute awareness of the tragic, sometimes pathetic dimension of historical existence that affords his work a certain form of empathetic distance. Of course, the experience of war in his native country, in all its horror and absurdity, has only served to compound that feeling. What remains, then, is a powerful sense of historical and existential melancholy, (dis)embodied in slow-

moving figures that circulate their way from film to film, ghosts (or vampires, like in *The Last Man*), wandering all alone, just as absent to themselves as they are to others. By being forced into their furthest cinematographic corners, the very substance of these creatures, of the city, begins to disintegrate, both literally and figuratively, reduced to the improbable possibility of their presence. In *Afrique Fantôme*, the old man on his deathbed put it perfectly when he intoned: “That which a recording captures is nothing but a ghost.”

The life we have been given is nothing but an ephemeral flutter (of a wing, an eyelash, a heart, of whatever we want), and there is very little comfort to be found anywhere or with anyone. Neither love nor war are viable outlets. *Phantom Beirut* already showed us what might as well have been its motto: *post bellum omne animal triste*. Worse yet, death itself seems to bring no respite, for no one is sadder in Salhab’s films than the spectral figures haunting them; for even when the threshold to the afterlife has been crossed, as in *The Mountain*, it is a film that could, upon its closing like a nighttime tomb, end with the epitaph: *post mortem omne animal triste...*

Yet the only path this filmmaker treads, for it is the only one offered to us all, is the one that goes through the land of the dead, this land where we must all go, losing our memory along the way, desperately trying to hang on some debris from the past in order to reclaim some fragments of a present that also escapes and eludes us. One of the actors in *Phantom Beirut*, speaking as himself in an extra-diegetic commentary within the film, said: “We want to rise again. To be reborn. Even though we aren’t really dead. We’re merely dying.” This is exactly who Salhab is: one dying, incessantly reminding us that we are too. Is that why he is, to my knowledge, one of the only filmmakers to have put his own death into one of his films? At the end of *The Mountain*, he appears for a few seconds, unexpectedly, lying in the snow, the camera capturing his last breath after he has just seemingly killed himself with a shotgun blast. This practically non-diegetic insertion of himself into his own fictional universe conjures up an extreme image, where the director’s cinematic suicide becomes the drain, both literally and figuratively, through which both his blood and his film escape.

The only rebirth possible, as far as he’s concerned, seems to be the one that will take place through the next film. Perhaps, however, it is not so much a question of rebirth as a matter of temporary survival, or better yet, a simple, ephemeral and maybe terminal spurt, in a never ending cinematographic agony. *The Valley* is today the most recent of this filmmaker’s spurts of energy before death, showing us that as of yet, whether he wants to or not, he still walks amongst us although he sometimes dreams that is almost not one of us anymore.

Raphaël MILLET



CARLOS CHAHINE

After graduating from ENSAD (École Nationale Supérieure d'Art Dramatique) in TNS (Théâtre National de Strasbourg) he worked with many theater directors, such as Michel Vinaver, Matthias Langhoff, Sylvio Purcarete, Alain Françon, Rene Loyon, Stuart Seide, Philippe Van Kessel, Christian Rist, etc. He also acted in films directed by Raoul Ruiz, Olivier Assayas, Ghassan Salhab... In 2008, he wrote, directed and acted in his first short film, *The North Road* that received many international awards. He is currently developing his first feature film.

Filmography

Le vertige de la feuille blanche by Raoul Ruiz

Terra Incognita by Ghassan Salhab

La danse éternelle by Hiam Abbas

The Last Man by Ghassan Salhab

Une famille Libanaise by Nadim Tabet

Carlos by Olivier Assayas

Persepolis by Marjane Satrapi

Azur et Asmar by Michel Ocelot

The Valley by Ghassan Salhab

CAROLE ABOUD

Born in Beirut, she has a BA in acting and directing from the Lebanese University, and a Masters in Performing Arts from University Paris 8-France. She featured in local and international production of theater plays and films.

In 2011, she opened her own production company, 'c.cam production'.

The Valley is her third collaboration with Ghassan Salhab after *Phantom Beirut* and *Terra Incognita*.

FADI ABI SAMRA

Born in Lebanon, he graduated from the Institute of Fine Arts at the Lebanese University in 2002 with a diploma in Theatrical Acting and Directing. He played in several plays and directed several of them, and acted in several films.

Filmography

West Beirut by Ziad Doueiry

La maison rose by Khalil Joreige & Joanna Hadjithomas

The Street by Dima El-Horr

The Labyrinth by Loarn Theyson

Bashar's Tapes by Walid Ra'ad

Door of the Sun by Youssef Nassrallah

The Last Man by Ghassan Salhab

L'Homme Perdu by Danielle Arbid

Chaque Jour est une Fête by Dima El-Horr

Dans le Sang by Katia Jarjoura

Carlos by Olivier Assayas

Beirut Hotel by Danielle Arbid

The Mountain by Ghassan Salhab

The Valley by Ghassan Salhab

MOUNZER BAALBAKI

Lebanese artist who graduated from the Institute of Fine Arts at the Lebanese University in 2002 with a diploma in Theatrical Acting and Directing.

He played roles in several theatrical plays both in Lebanon and abroad, including: *Jazz* by Siham Nasser; *Ikhraj Kaid Aa'ili* [Family Civil Registry] by Lina Saneh; *Lucy, La Femme Verticale* by Roger Assaf; *Les Paravents* by Jean-Baptiste Sastre; *L'émigré de Brisbane* by Nabil-El Azan; *Life is Short Although the Day is Long* by Rabih Mroueh and *1906-1994* by Issam Bou Khaled.

He also took part in many short and long movies, including: *Mounzer* by Samar Kanafani (Video

Art); *Falafel* by Michel Kamoun; *The Last Man* by Ghassan Salhab; *Beirut Express* by Houeida Azar; *Carlos* by Olivier Assayas; *Caramel* and *Where Do We Go Now* by Nadine Labaki; and *Stable Unstable* by Mahmoud Hojeij.

More recently, Mounzer wrote and presented his first solo performance entitled *Rapid Eye Movement* at Ashkal Alwan's Home Workspace in Beirut in December 2012, a performance which also took part in the 2013 Images Festival: Occupy Utopia in Denmark in September 2013.

AOUNI KAWAS

Born in Beirut, Lebanon. He is a businessman and an actor.

Filmography

Phantom Beirut by Ghassan Salhab

Terra Incognita by Ghassan Salhab

Dans Les Champs De Bataille by Danielle Arbid

Falafel by Michel Kamoun

The Last Man by Ghassan Salhab

1958 by Ghassan Salhab

Ya Nousak by Elie Khalife

The Valley by Ghassan Salhab

YUMNA MARWAN

Born in Beirut, Lebanon, she lived her teenage years in Ames, Iowa. After enrolling in the American University of Beirut in 2009, she transferred to Smith College in Massachusetts and completed her BA in Anthropology in 2014.

Filmography

The Fall of the Artists' Republic, Experimental

Video by Anton Vidokle & Pelin Tan

The Valley by Ghassan Salhab

Shankaboot, Web Series

A close-up photograph of a hand holding a yellow pencil, poised to draw on a white sheet of paper. A small, faint circle has already been drawn on the paper to the left of the hand. The background is a dark, textured surface.

CREW

Writer-Director	Ghassan SALHAB
Image	Bassem FAYAD
Sound	Karine BACHA
Sound design	Lama SAWAYA Rana EID
Mix	Florent LAVALLÉE
Editing	Michèle TYAN
Assistant director	Wael DEEB
Set	Hussein BAYDOUN
Visual effects	THE COUNCIL
Make up	Stéphanie AZNAREZ
Line Producer	Abla KHOURY Lara CHEKERDJIAN
Music	Cynthia ZAVEN Sharif SEHNAOUI Gya KANCHELI Cheb Ahmad ZERGUI JOY DIVISION

2014 - colours - 134mn

*He could not remember past lives,
vigils, these winters forever ruined,
these springs, these summers, these falls.
The world was opening beneath his feet.
The sky was ablaze. Dawn is no more.
Night is day, day is night, ink is wine,
wine is blood, earth is sea, sea is constellation,
numbers are projections, the first is the last one of them.*

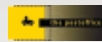
*We are right at the start, as though before everything,
with a thousand and one dreams behind us and no act.
We are like fruits, we hang from up high
on strangely twisted branches and we endure many winds.*



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