

BOX

A FILM BY

JOANA HADJITHOMAS AND KHALIL JOREIGE





MEMORY BOX

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JOANA HADJITHOMAS AND KHALIL JOREIGE

RIM TURKI, MANAL ISSA, PALOMA VAUTHIER

2021 - FRENCH, ARABIC, ENGLISH - 1H42 - SCOPE - 5.1

INTERNATIONAL SALES

PLAYTIME

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WOLF CONSULTANTS

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SYNOPSIS

On Christmas day in Montreal, Maia and her daughter Alex receive an unexpected delivery from Beirut. There are notebooks, tapes and photographs, a whole correspondence, that Maia, from 13 to 18 years old, sent from Beirut to her best friend who had left for Paris to escape the civil war. Maia refuses to open the box or confront its memories, but Alex secretly begins diving into it. Between fantasy and reality, Alex discovers the world of her mother's tumultuous, passionate adolescence in the 80s, and well kept secrets.





INTERVIEW WITH JOANA HAD JITHOMAS AND KHALIL JOREIGE

THE GENESIS OF THE FILM

Memory box seems to have originated from your own set of memories. What exactly is the story behind the story?

Joana Hadjithomas - The story comes from notebooks and cassette tapes I sent to a very close friend who'd moved to France during the Lebanese civil war. As we'd been separated, we promised each other we would write to one another. Between 1982 and 1988, from the ages of 13 to 18, we did write to each other every day, also sending along recorded tapes and photos. For 6 years, I told her about my life, every moment of my adolescence in the slightest details, and also about the civil war raging around me. From Paris, she did the same. Every month, we'd both send and receive a parcel containing notebooks and cassette tapes. And then we lost touch. One day, twenty-five years later, we found each other back. She, as I, had kept absolutely everything! So we swapped our mutual correspondence. Having this massive archive at hand, immersing myself in these journals, these teenage and war memories, hearing on these tapes a childish voice - mine - which I didn't recognize, was a highly emotional experience for me - especially since our own daughter, Alya, had just celebrated her 13th birthday.

Khalil Joreige - Alya really wanted to read them! So we had to ask ourselves whether we could hand over our adolescence to our daughter, a teenager herself. what it would mean to share these mementos, this memory, this history. What kind of repercussions would it have?

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The story is based on these notebooks, the written correspondence, and the tapes, but did your archives also contain all the photos that we see in the film?

KJ- We wanted to add a visual dimension based on the photos I had taken during my adolescence in Beirut during this lapse of time. We each had expressed ourselves through the medium of our choice available at the time, through our individual passion. We combined the two archives, our two stories.

In the film, we can see that the archives are both real and reconstituted, mixing documentary artifacts and fictional recreation.

JH - The film is a fiction based on writings as well as sound and visual archives, and also at times documents such as newspapers, which we used in the movie and whose purpose is to support the narrative. Though we didn't want to make a documentary about my adolescence, we still used this existing material as it was a fantastic source.

KJ - It opened a wide range of possibilities, artistically. We wrote the film with Gaëlle Macé, and the three of us wanted to translate these archives into fiction. This allowed us to distance ourselves from the source material and as a result we felt we had much more freedom.

JH - In the movie, we see notebooks that actually are my notebooks and real photos taken by Khalil, but we also included other writings and another narrative thread. For instance, the graphs describing the mood of the day are actually mine, but they become Maia's, our fictional character. Khalil's photos create a cartography for the love story between the characters.





You animate your photos, and you include your fictional characters in them. Was it important that the transition from reality to fiction pass through the medium of your own photos?

KJ - This allowed us to blur lines and boundaries: What is real? What is fictional? In a certain way, revisiting the pictures taken during our respective adolescences also brought us closer to the film's own reality, closer to the 1980s. We draw from this original source that we are lucky to have. These photos give young Alex, stuck at home because of a blizzard in Canada, a concrete basis for her imagination and her way of visualizing the stories she reads in her mother's notebooks, recreating and reconstituting moments, a country, and an era that she doesn't know at all. The story of a person stuck in a room, who will imagine and fantasize things is for us a metaphor of the cinema. It is the evocation, the off-camera, the trace, the absence proper to cinema.

THE RELATIONSHIP WITH PICTURES

The film is a flow of time periods and generations but also technologies; the passing of time is felt through the narrative, chapters in the characters' lives from one era to another and also through the texture of the film itself.

JH - Photos are essential in the movie; they're almost like a film within the film. Our wish was also to show a moment in the history of traditional film photography, and work on this material using contact prints, polaroids, super 8 reel, and latent images from the period, as well as things that we had filmed or photographed but never shown.

KJ - We are not at all nostalgic about this era, but we wanted to see how the very materiality of these images, which had worked well for us, worked differently today for our daughter's generation and for the character of Alex, Maia's daughter. Without taking a moralistic stance with regard to the Internet and social media, it seemed interesting to us to compare the two eras. I have approximately 60,000 negatives from my twenty-five years practicing photography. Our daughter in just 6 months has taken 50,000 photos with her cell phone!

They are obviously not the same kind of photos, but they also make up a sort of log. This relationship with images through the times also changes a number of things such as the connection and balance between the public and private spheres, the social vs. intimate representation of one's body.

JH - Rereading my notebooks allowed us to understand our daughter's relationship with her smartphone. As a teenage girl, I would relate my daily life in the smallest and finest details in very much the same way. The film addresses the question of the status of images and documents. On the one hand, there is the physical presence of the notebooks, the tapes, the photos of Maia, with their secrets and unspoken words, as well as the inexactitude entailed in remembering, and on the other hand, there is Alex's technological connection with Facebook, WhatsApp and Instagram, the overflow of information, communication and sharing, immediacy and virtuality. Today, the overabundance of images and information is such that the sheer flow can't be fully processed and implies, unexpectedly, something akin to oblivion. The image galleries in our smartphones evoke the shared and split screens that we explore in the film, and are shown as essential for Alex to develop her own imagination. She ends up following her mother's story, from one notebook and cassette tape to the next, much like she would binge on a series, and becomes addicted to the saga. She is so engrossed in her mother's past that she loses sight of the present and finds herself gradually disconnected from her friends. She gets lost in parallel temporalities.









Is playing freely with image and sound treatment at the heart of all your artistic work – including this film, which seems to recap it all?

JH - We do not like boundaries or definitions. We aspire to a great level of freedom, the possibility to shift between making movies, documentaries, art videos, photographic installations, performances, sculptures... It all depends on the subject grabbing our attention, our inspiration, our research, and experimentation... With Memory Box, we aimed to transform our artistic and formal exploration into something cinematographic and accessible, something that an audience would truly enjoy.

KJ - The film embodies freedom, but also a certain idea of craftsmanship. We didn't want the esthetics to be akin to "special effects". We like artistic, experimental, jack-of-all-trades approaches. And we wanted this visual experimentation to open new, powerful emotional perspectives. Traditional film photography and contact prints fuel Alex's imagination; they help her recreate and imagine in fanciful, inventive ways Lebanon, the 1980s, daily life in war times, or the passionate love story between Maia and Raja. We cut up pictures, burnt up photograms, worked on off-screen presences, which become a presence in the memory as in the sequence where Alex imagines a whole scene based on just one of the photos she has – itself only a fragment of a whole – and so the continuance of the décor becomes black because she no longer has a reference point. We actually created these black surroundings by lining and covering the street in which we were filming with black fabric...

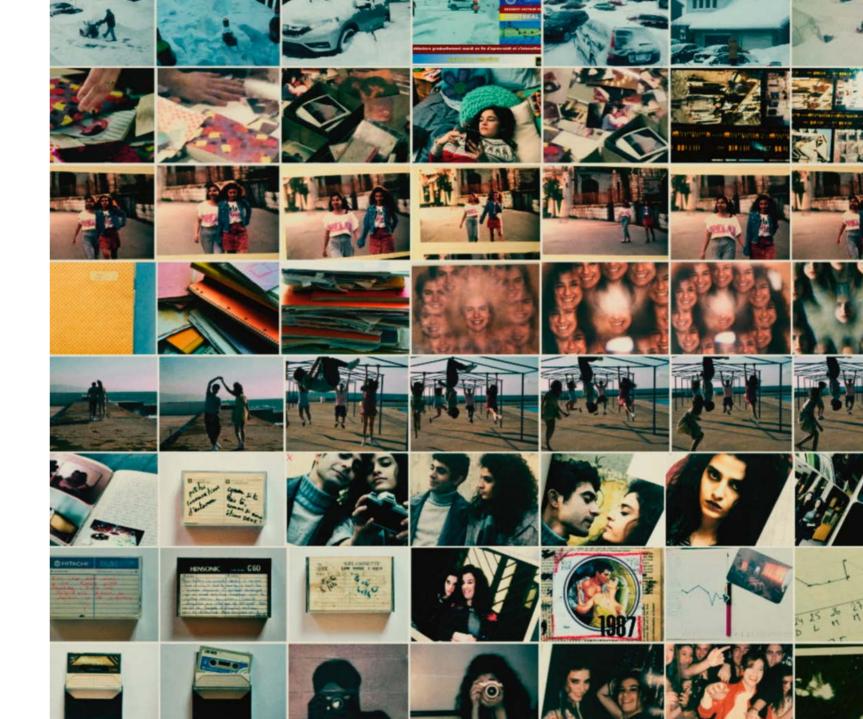


You talk about craftsmanship. Indeed, when we see the wealth of documents in the film, the preparation work must have taken quite long? You had to recreate photos, notebooks, we imagine a solid workload of cutting and collages?

JH - We already had the notebooks and cassette tapes I'd sent my friend as a base, but we also made, with the help of our creative team, most of the notebooks that we see in the film. We took over 10,000 photos with the actors at different moments of their lives, working on the passing of time and changing looks: new wave, punk and disco — these years were strong esthetic markers. It was a tremendous amount of work but also extremely amusing and fun, though sometimes we felt pangs of melancholy during this immersion in our youth.

A number of sequences directly refer to your own works of art. Can you please explain this very strong image from the film: the photos that Maia takes of her father on his deathbed, overexposed photos which almost erase the trace that she is trying to capture.

KJ - These images refer to the history of photography as a medium. The very first photos were often overexposed, and they were often the portraits of deceased people. At the same time, these photos give something back to the dead, they help with the grieving process. Maia had left the photos taken 30 years before in her camera. They're latent and waiting to be revealed.





























































HISTORY, TRACES AND MEMORY

Aren't your film, your notebooks, and your tapes solid blocks of memory? A form of resistance to the fragility of memory and amnesia, whether deliberate or unconscious?

KJ - It's a possible interpretation. We are not trying to do the work of historians, but we are reflecting on what history is, the underpinnings of history. It is in the absence of a common, shared history that memory become important.

JH - The story of the Lebanese civil war doesn't exist in history books; it couldn't be transmitted. Historians, artists, and authors have tried to report fragments; certain films or documents are there, attesting a little to what happened. So, there are traces but they are tenuous, they tend to change and disappear, like the buildings that were destroyed by the war or by real estate renovation projects. We did not study filmmaking or art, and our drive to make movies and create works of art comes from our obsession with leaving traces and the questions that arise from that. What are we to do with traces? If we keep no traces of the past, is it even possible to live in the present? Memory Box is asking this very question.

The memories that the film deals with aren't just part of an intimate, family story, they're also part of the collective, historic memory.

KJ - One of the questions we all ask ourselves, regardless of our own personal experience, is indeed about this relation to memory, the past, history, and how it is transmitted. What will remain - what should remain?

Another question is how to reflect, based on our personal story, on our relationship with the greater, collective History with a capital "H". Our work as artists and filmmakers has for many years raised the questions of the representation of violence, the making and writing of history, and the building of our "imaginaries".

JH - What fascinated us, when we read my notebooks, was that we didn't really get a feeling for the ongoing events, but we followed everyday life within this context - how we lived, what we ate, our activities in the shelter, our sensations, or our political debates... Everything experienced was recounted in the smallest detail, and these details are definitely part of our collective memory.

KJ - For young Maia, war isn't something exceptional, it's her daily life. Joana's notebooks are clearly indicative of this. Above all, Maia wants to live her life. Civil wars are often considered from the perspective of trauma; however, it's not what we are showing in our work. In Joana's correspondence, what appears most is the wish to live fully, to love, have fun, to be free and respond to life's impulses no matter what.

JH - Memory is a process that also involves sensuality, specific gestures, the texture of the movie itself. It was very important to give a visual, tangible rendering of the immateriality of memory. This involves and invokes esthetics, references, music but also at times minute details, like the sound cassette tapes make when being rewound. This sound is a memory trigger for us but can perhaps also become iconic for a generation that isn't familiar with them. If our film speaks to our daughter's generation, something has been transmitted.





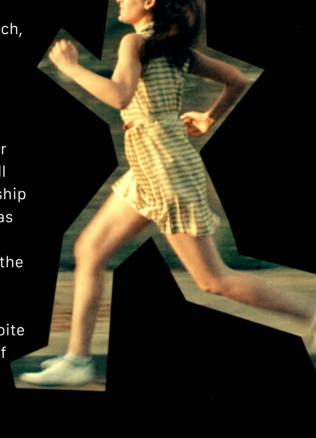
KJ - Our film stages three generations of women. We have Teta, who voluntarily withholds the memory of the family's history, fearing that their secret might resurface — a secret that made her flee the country that she loves and whose language she speaks. A language which her daughter Maia, in her desperate wish to fully integrate, no longer speaks and which she hasn't really transmitted to her own daughter, Alex, who in turn, will try to go back in time towards these hidden, latent events. The two women have tried to forget by coming to live in Canada, they have voluntarily left the painful past behind them. But this past comes back to haunt them with the arrival of Maia's notebooks after the death of her friend Liza.

JH - We wanted to experiment with different ways of telling the story as well as with several temporalities: contemporary times in which the characters live, the time period of the 80's imagined and recreated by Alex when reading her mother's life, and also flashbacks recounted in voice over by Maia when she takes over to tell her story. In our previous films, we were mostly interested in the present, reporting situations, current states of affairs or emotional states. Here, we felt the need to tell a story, paying great attention to the narrative, complex and fragmentary as it may be, with its lapses of memory, its being rewritten.



KJ - This is also the story of an exile, an adoptive country that is far away, Canada, and the return to the country of origin, initiated as is often the case by a younger generation that needs to know. It's also about an exile from oneself: Alex is trying to understand how her mother could change so much, where her passion for photography, her great friendship and her being madly in love have all gone... It is, for us, a way of questioning and preserving this intensity.

JH - It's as though Maia had been cut off from her youth until the "memory box" was opened and all the ghosts came back to haunt her. The relationship between Maia and Alex fails to be woven as long as this continuity and this possible transmission between past and present is missing. In reading the notebooks, Alex disobeys Maia, but it's a fruitful disobedience. Alex brings back images from the past and the the possibility of remembering in spite of the fantasies, imagination and the rewriting of the history of each one. The past escapes, slips away... in spite of everything, the imaginary remains stronger and it is perhaps that what is important, it is this imaginary which returns to haunt us like oases in the desert, as Hannah Arendt wrote.



BEIRUT TODAY, THE END OF THE FILM

How can we not mention the present and the economic catastrophe that has overtaken Lebanon, but also the fact that the film was shot before the explosion of August 4th. Don't you see in it a dreadful cycle, that of an eternal recomencement?

KJ - Maybe not a restart since the situations evolve anyway but yes, there is a terrible echo to the 80's that is the heart of this film. It is a country that is sinking back into nightmare.

JH - We finished shooting the film in May 2019 and started editing in the midst of the revolution, in the fall of the same year. A revolution against the corrupt and criminal leaders and against the banking system that has taken the Lebanese hostage. Of course, this resonates in a tragic way, like a terrifying mirror, with many pages of my notebooks that are quoted in the film, and which echo the violence of the war, the current devaluation of the the pound, the insecurity, the despair and the total collapse of the systems in Lebanon, the temptation and sometimes even the terrible obligation of exile. And also the tragic explosion of August 4th, the third explosion after Hiroshima and Nagasaki, which destroyed a third of the city and a part of our lives.







And yet you chose to keep a rather positive ending with this return to Lebanon?

KJ - It's strange to hear that the end seems positive, when you know that the country, the very place where the end was shot, everything exploded after the end of the shooting, in a figurative sense but also in a real sense. This end of the film appears since then as a dream, a kind of fantastic (science)fiction, the dream of a return to the community, to a country that has been rebuilt only to be destroyed again today. And again, as in the film, exile is at the center of our lives. The last part of the film also tells the fantasy of a return at a time when a majority of people of all generations are leaving the country.

JH - Maia does not find her home, nor the graves of her brother and father, nor the Beirut she once knew. But in a small country, some reunions are possible, like the one with her friends of yesterday, with her great love Raja, her ties are renewed despite the lost youth...

Maia finds again loved faces, an energy, just for one evening, just one... Like a parenthesis...

KJ - It is political and vital to be able to not end a film of the region in a dramatic way even if the tragic violence and chaos eventually catch up with us.

JH - In our deep despair, we cannot accept absolute despair, we need light so badly. There will be light, promises the song at the end of the film...











Is the end of the film, with the sun rising and setting in accelerated motion, a metaphor for this family's story and life in general, with its vagaries, fragility, dawns and twilights - its cycles? What does it say, also, about the terrible situation that the country is once again going through?

KJ - With the lockdown, everyone feels all the more strongly their belonging to a regeneration cycle and a continuance of perpetual cyclic motion. The impact of our lives taken in the much greater motion of life is represented in the film's ending, with the idea of the sun setting and rising again and thus new beginnings, with bright moments alternating with dark moments...

JH - We have worked a lot around archaeology and geology and around the vertigo of time which seems infinite when approached from this angle. But there is something permanent, unchanging, like a cycle, after each catastrophy, there is a regeneration, after each disaster, perhaps one can hope for a renewal.

THE FILM CREW

KJ - There were people whose support was decisive, helping us focus, inspiring us, like Laurent Bret, who did a wonderful job, extremely inventive with special effects, or our cinematographer, Josée Deshaies. We were exactly on the same wavelength. She is very talented and demanding, and just like us, she likes experimenting. The days were short, our means limited, we needed to be reactive and maneuver freely and Josée is perfect for that. With her, we worked a lot on the notion of Canadian whiteness, whereas in Lebanon, we worked on the 1980s and the specific light of that era. We had to distinguish the time periods, work with images but also textures, a certain grain, visual effects... I'm referring to the sound crew as well, because it was also fundamental to capture the range of those years, which is very specific, the recorded voices and bombings, the reality of the 1980s resurfacing in Alex's Canadian bedroom so many years later. And last but not least, the editing!



JH - Our editor, Tina Baz, was crucial, indeed essential. We know each other well, we're very close and we've worked with her since our very first film - and we also enroll her skills for our videos and artistic work. Memory Box is a highly heterogenous film, which is something we like, but it needed a smooth appearance. The material generated while making this film was abundant. In processing this material, it was as though she was processing all the material she'd previously worked on with us.

KJ - Many things are written in the editing room, as in the way we work we do not give the full screenplay to our actors: they don't know the story, the way sequences segue, etc. We give them key indications, directions, and then we try to have them improvise when we're shooting the film. If this doesn't work, we can revert to the screenplay. The actors' improvisation can sometimes bring more interesting, unexpected things.

Can you tell us about the wonderful leading actresses: Rim Turki, who plays Maia as a mom, Manal Issa, and Paloma Vauthier?

KJ - We looked for an actress to play Maia for a long time, but we kept thinking of Rim, whom we hadn't seen since The Gate of Sun (by Yousry Nasrallah, 2004) and the tragedy she went through with the death of her companion. Because of what she'd experienced, we felt she could understand Maia well. At first we didn't dare propose the role to her but in the end she was completely ready for it. She could feel things with a great intensity, an unbelievable sincerity, with strength and fragility; this combination is something that is unique to her.

JH - Manal is a fantastic actress, who gives her all and even more. She is fully involved in her roles and does so with extreme intelligence. She's a free spirit but a committed, intense young woman, and this corresponded well with the freedom that Maia embodies as an adolescent. Manal, without reading the screenplay, without knowing the story or the dialog, completely became one with her character.





She brought a lot to the film; we see her grow up, transition from one age to another, from carefreeness to experiencing a tragedy that will transform her.

KJ - Paloma Vauthier, who plays Alex, is a young woman that we met in Paris. We were instantly taken by her talent and a level of professionalism that was impressive for her age. We needed someone who grew up outside of Lebanon, who was used to multiculturalism. Afterwards, we discovered that Paloma actually had a connection with Lebanon: her father was born there, but she herself knew nothing about the country. It was really interesting in relation to the character. Indeed, in the scenes of their return to Lebanon, we see how strong, how true the emotion is on her face — it moved her greatly as an actress and as the character she played.

In Memory box, music also plays a significant role in reminiscing...

JH - The 1980s are at the heart of the movie and the music sets the tempo of these years; it is faithful to what we used to listen to at the time. It conveys the esthetics of the period, a certain youth and a kind of carefreeness while also serving as an operative mechanism for Alex's visions: it helps her project into her mother's past. We also wanted songs evoking the creativity of the 1980s. Blondie's One Way or another ties a group of friends together, makes them dance, share, forget about their daily life in wartime...They play it again when they are reunited thirty years later, and we measure the extent of their bygone youth.

KJ - We are structured by the music genres that we listen to when we're adolescents, they shape who we are. Music is a link between generations; there's nothing more moving than hearing your child listen to a song that you loved. It's a form of transmission, which works well between Maia and Alex, and which is also what is going to reconnect the group of friends thirty years after they were separated..



A B O U T J O A N A H A D J I T H O M A S AND KHALIL JOREIGE

The work of filmmakers/artists Joana Hadjithomas & Khalil Joreige interrogates the creation of images and representation, from the construction of the imaginary to the writing of contemporary history. Their feature films *The Lebanese Rocket Society*, *A Perfect Day* and *Je Veux Voir* (featuring Catherine Deneuve and Rabih Mroué) have been screened and awarded in major international festivals, and their artworks exhibited in prominent museums, biennales and art centers worldwide. In 2017, they were awarded the prestigious Marcel Duchamp Prize.

SELECTED FILMOGRAPHY

OF JOANA HADJITHOMAS AND KHALIL JOREIGE

2021 MEMORY BOX

2012 THE LEBANESE ROCKET SOCIETY - Documentary

2008 JE VEUX VOIR - Cannes Film Festival 2008, Un Certain Regard

2005 A PERFECT DAY



C A S T

MAIA RIM TURKI

MAIA (Eighties) MANAL ISSA

ALEX PALOMA VAUTHIER

TÉTA CLÉMENCE SABBAGH

RAJA HASSAN AKIL

C R E W

DIRECTORS

JOANA HADJITHOMAS

AND KHALIL JOREIGE

COPRODUCERS HAUT ET COURT (FRANCE)

CAROLE SCOTTA AND BARBARA LETELLIER

ABBOUT PRODUCTIONS (LEBANON)
GEORGES SCHOUCAIR AND CHRISTIAN EID

MICRO_SCOPE (CANADA)

LUC DÉRY, KIM Mc CRAW AND JASMYRH LEMOINE

SCREENWRITERS GAËLLE MACÉ, JOANA HADJITHOMAS

AND KHALIL JOREIGE

DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY

EDITOR

VISUAL EFFECTS

MUSIC

JOSÉE DESHAIES

TINA BAZ

LAURENT BRETT

RADWAN GHAZI MOUMNEH

with the participation of CHARBEL HABER
SOUND GUILLAUME LE BRAZ, RANA EID

AND OLIVIER GOINARD

PRODUCTION DESIGNER MAÏA EL KHOURY, MARY LYNN DEACHMAN

AND FRANCKIE DIAGO

COSTUME DESIGNER

CASTING

LARA MAE KHAMIS

SARAH TEPER, ABLA KHOURY

BRIGITTE VIAU AND ISABELLE THEZ-AXELRAD