

FILMS. REVIEWS

Memory Box (Review): The Power of Photos



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Memory Box (Modern Films)

★★★★☆

A picture paints a thousand words. Perhaps that phrase has become a bit of a cliché, but its sentiment is very much at the heart of *Memory Box*, from writer/directors [Joana Hadjithomas](#) and [Khalil Joreige](#). It's a film that emphasises the power of images, of diaries and newspaper clippings scrapbooked together to form a time capsule, and their ability to tell a story that might be too difficult to verbalise. It's a film that takes stylistic risks to bring such mementos to life, and to explore **trauma, generational connection and the realities of being a teenager in 1980s Beirut**.

An unexpected delivery arrives at the home Maia ([Rim Turki](#)) shares with her daughter Alex ([Paloma Vauthier](#)), a package full of **notebooks, photographs and cassette tapes**. They are the remnants of Maia's correspondence with her best friend throughout the **1980s in Beirut**, Lebanon: memories from a past that Maia had firmly left behind. After her mother refuses to go through the contents with her, Alex starts sneaking tapes and journals up to her room, and slowly pieces together a version of her mother that she'd never known before.

Adapted from the journals of Hadjithomas, and using photographs and footage from Joreige, *Memory Box* really leans into its style and its source material. With really slick editing from Tina Baz, the film plays with the shift from analogue to digital, using a passion for photography as a way of both connecting mother and daughter, and also telling a **visual story**. Alex takes pictures of Maia's pictures; a synergy that shows the similarities between them, even as Alex discovers elements of her mother's past that she hadn't known. Maia's pictures are sent in the mail to her friend, and Alex sends hers to a group chat. Alex takes pictures as a way of cementing memories, and Maia documents her war-ravaged city. Maia ignores the pictures as a means of forgetting, and Alex looks at them to learn what her mother hasn't shared.



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Montages of pictures from Maia's youth (played by Manal Issa in flashback) are overlaid over a visual history of war-torn Beirut, intermingling the film's themes and the juxtaposition between **the joys of youth and the harsh realities of war**. The film starts off feeling almost free-spirited, with Maia in love and keen to experience life with her friends, and Hadjithomas, Joreige and Baz cut together sequences of images and actual film footage to bring Maia's history to life. Maia dances wildly to Blondie with her friends and runs along a pier into the arms of her secret boyfriend Raja (Hassan Akil). But on the outskirts of their exuberance is the war. As Maia and Raja speed off together on a bike, the conflict is literally creeping ever closer to their happiness, as explosions and artillery fire light up the dark street behind them. It's a really effective way of incorporating the real images with the fictional, of painting a really colourful history with without too much reliance on voiceover or traditional flashback scenes.

But as the film shifts into a more serious tone, when the war gets intense for Maia and Alex's perception of her mother starts to radically change, it transitions into a less hyper, more straightforward style. We get to see longer scenes of a younger Maia, learning more about the traumatic circumstances of her leaving Beirut and get a better understanding of how she became the woman she did. It adds gravitas and a more sombre atmosphere for the film as it begins to explore **Maia's trauma** in more detail and the performances really lend themselves to this tonal shift. Vauthier's Alex retreats inwards as she discovers more and more about her mother, stops replying on her group are almost a cathartic counterpoint to Turki's repressed emotion simmering under the surface. They are both delicate performances, not showy or overly dramatic, but really **heartfelt and authentic**.

Memory Box is certainly **stylish, but it also delivers in the substance**. It's a film that explores the idea of confronting the past, of how our experiences shape us and how sharing memories can forge strong connections. It's a film that combines a coming-of-age story against a background of conflict and fear with a mother/daughter reparative dynamic. It's a film that uses a curated exterior to focus on the raw humanity, that paints as accurate a depiction of 1980s Beirut as it can in relevance to Maia's individual journey.

It's textured, layered and immersive. *Memory Box* is a visually interesting, but also emotionally affecting film, and a testament to the power of memory and documenting, of



Memory Box: Trailer (Modern Films)

Memory Box will be out in UK and Irish cinemas and through virtual cinema platforms from 21 January 2022.

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