

Memory Box turns its directors' personal archives into art

Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige's intergenerational drama revisits the horrors of the Lebanese civil war using the directors' own letters and photographs.

19 January 2022

By Katherine McLaughlin

SIGHT AND SOUND



Manal Issa as the young Maia, Hassan Akil as Raja in Memory Box (2021) © Courtesy of Modern Films

Memory Box is in UK cinemas from 21 January.

“If we opened people up, we’d find landscapes,” Agnès Varda mused in *The Beaches of Agnès* (2008) as she walked backwards across the shore, trawling her own memory and film catalogue to celebrate her 80th birthday. In Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige’s exquisitely crafted *Memory Box*, the recent past acts as an occasionally painful but ultimately hopeful bridge between three generations of women. It’s a film that deals in the ephemeral and contains the same compassion, curiosity and joyful invention found in Varda’s body of work.

Blurring the line between documentary and fiction, Hadjithomas gives her own adolescent experiences in wartime 1980s Beirut to a fictional character, Maia, who receives a box of diaries, photos and cassettes from a friend she hasn’t seen in years, who has recently died. Though forbidden to investigate the box’s contents, Maia’s teenage daughter Alex ignores her mother’s wishes and begins to delve into their family history. Through archived sounds, images and words, Alex reimagines her mother’s youth from her own perspective, using a smartphone to creatively toy with the past.

The film originates in reality – Hadjithomas was inspired by a correspondence with a close friend who moved to France during the Lebanese civil war. Between the ages of 13 and 18, the two swapped a parcel of memories each month. Hadjithomas’s friend returned the correspondence after 25 years, and revisiting the material made the filmmaker think about the implications of allowing or denying her own daughter access to her teenage diaries.

Throughout their careers as photographers and filmmakers Hadjithomas and partner Joreige have documented forgotten histories and queried bias in the telling of history. Here, they inventively embrace digital, print and analogue media to reflect on the underpinnings of history and the power and beauty of archived material seen by new eyes. Framing Maia’s teen years from Alex’s perspective, the film shows reconciliation between mother and daughter. Alex’s modern reimagining is a conduit that allows criticism and connection between multiple generations.

Alex is thrilled and humbled by her discoveries. It’s an education that somewhat separates her from her peers in Canada but brings her closer to understanding her mother and grandmother’s secretive behaviour. The film ends on a powerful note, with the sun setting and rising over Beirut in accelerated motion. The landscape of Maia’s adolescence and foundations is now passed on to Alex to build upon and share in her own way.

