

Skript

HISTORISCH TIJDSCHRIFT

Recensie: What is home if not a memory? The inherent search for home in a world not ours

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Verschenen in *Skript Historisch Tijdschrift*, jaargang 46.4, 61-64.

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ISSN 0165-7518

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RECENSIE

WHAT IS HOME IF NOT A MEMORY?

THE INHERENT SEARCH FOR HOME IN A WORLD NOT OURS

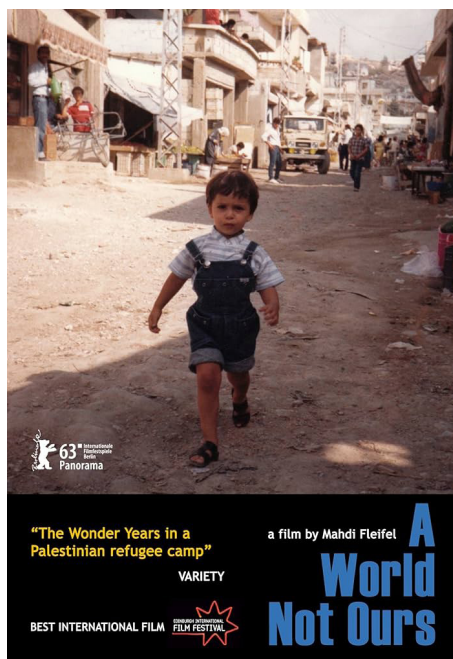
Teodora Georgescu

In 2012 Mahdi Fleifel finished a project that was born far before him. Born in Dubai but partly raised in Ain al-Hilweh refugee camp, Mahdi would re-enter the camp. Papers and documents waving in one hand whilst his film camera peered from between his fingers in the other, as he recounted the steps of his family. Ain al-Hilweh, or 'sweet water spring',¹ is the largest Palestinian refugee camp in Lebanon. Mahdi's grandparents came here after the Nakba in 1948 and would remain since.

A world not ours (2012), with a title inspired by Ghassan Kanafani's short story collection *A world not our own* (1965),² is a beckoning to childhood, reaching out to all the years that have passed and everything that has changed. We watch as Mahdi reconciles a lifetime of memory through the testimonies of his grandfather Abu Osama, his friend Abu Eyad, his uncle Said, and the famed hero of Jamal.

Mahdi's grandfather is obstinate in his human spirit, Jamal stands as a reminder of a revolutionary prophecy yet to be fulfilled and Abu Eyad remains static in a piece of all of us. He is overcome with grief and desires a better future. His story is paved with an unwavering humanity.

But is unwavering humanity enough? And what does return to the homeland entail for displaced people? *A world not ours* is a tactile mirror of the human condition, not just of Mahdi himself, but of the heritage that has stood stone-faced and immovable around him his whole life.



Bron: Mahdi Fleifel, *A world not ours* (2012), Nakba FilmWorks, <https://www.amazon.co.uk/World-Not-Ours-DVD/dp/BooIG3LIH2>.

‘One day the old will die and the young will forget’

The above quote is from Ben Guiron, the first prime minister of Israel.³ It is a piercing proclamation spelling out one of the only real and tangible beads of expectation that was gurgled on Palestinians. The expectation to forget and disappear.

Memory was all many people were left with. ‘Memory as homeland’, published in *Dissent magazine*, provides meditations on memories of the homeland as sources of trauma as well as forms of resilience.⁴ This is something we see most ardently in Mahdi’s grandfather, who refuses to leave the camp, refuses to lose identity and roots once again. His memory is glaring and in line with a conscious reconciliation with return, with not forgetting. He believes not in the crumbling houses of the camp, or the grave filled fields, but in the landscapes of the Palestine where he was born. This reconciliation sees its purpose as a return to Palestine. On the other hand, Abu Eyad tosses and turns with us, the audience, the most during this documentary. Every single shred of his torments becomes symbolic of everything that was lost.

He is tested with each passing day as he must balance his future, his mistakes, his successes, and his regrets on the same side of the scale and hope that it will equal out and point to something tangible. His memory’s reconciliation with Palestine is secondary to the pressure and desire for a future. He does not see resistance in a persistence to remain.

When people are left with nothing but ruins of a land they want to call home but may never return to, life no longer becomes your own. When hunger runs so deep, for some the only way to survive is to remember, to chase their memory like a horse chases relief from a whip. For others memory is a tormentor.

The world cup: memory and community

A phenomenon that fervently agitates most of the world has a special place in Ain al-Hilweh. When the world cup rolls around every four years, everyone in the camp assumes some sort of nationality. The camp begins to bubble over with Italians, Germans, Spaniards, and Englishmen alike. People celebrate the win of ‘their’ country and fight those from ‘other countries’ tooth and nail.

Not long before the world cup returns to camp Ain al-Hilweh, Abu Eyad curses out Palestine, ‘I wish Israel would kill all of us.’⁵ Despite this moment of community and unity, Mahdi quickly refocuses on the reality that is embroiled beneath the surface. Beneath this glimpse of community boils a deep recognition of statelessness. Abu Eyad and Mahdi challenge both our and ultimately their own idealized perception of what it means to acknowledge their homeland. In fact, in ‘Return of the descendants’, published in *Aeon magazine*, we can see this common experience of tension between this idealisation of a homeland and the realities that hiss beneath the surface;⁶ although there is opportunity for community, this does not take away from the fact that the suffering will persist.

‘I want to go on a mission and blow myself up... no future, no work, no education... that’s why those other guys blew themselves up, they just used Palestine as an excuse.’⁷ These are the words of Abu Eyad towards the end

of the documentary, before he announces his plan to flee the camp and go to Greece. Abu Eyad stands as the face of this generational split; of memory persevering not as a reminder of what there is to gain, but rather what will always lack. He admires heroes like Jamal, who fought against violent IDF soldiers and became embalmed in the memory of the camp for his heroism. But Jamal died young and as much as Abu Eyad may believe in a revolution, he does not see a future in fighting for this.

Young Palestinians like Mahdi and Abu Eyad had been raised to believe in the prophesy of revolution, in the reality of freedom. The more that dwindles and the more people die at the hands of the Israeli army, the more that people like Abu Eyad fall into this gaping hole of *having* to forget, being forced to assume new roots and nationality.

The Soviet film *I am twenty* (1965) toyed with a similar realism. Boys had been raised with the singular intuition of going to war and fighting, of protecting and representing their country. When the war had ended and they returned home, they became lacklustre, no direction or knowledge of where and what to do.⁸ There is an undying theme here. Young people displaced at the hands of those in power only to be used as tools. But what makes Mahdi's documentary relevant is its insistence on reality. There is no bigger symbolic metaphor for friendship or family. Just individual stories with unresolved endings.

The stranger in the shadows, the hidden identity

In the article 'The right of return: why we want to come home' (2021), Kamal al-Solyalee analyses migration patterns of displaced people and delves into the emotional and cultural complexities that surrounds the return from emancipation. Returning can often highlight a desire to reconcile memories of the 'homeland' with its realities.⁹

Returning to the camp allowed Mahdi to create a visual reconciliation of the memories of his childhood with the realities of his life. Facing his own innocent assumptions, and reconstructing what his identity meant to him. Within each face in his documentary, he sees a piece of himself.

The move to Denmark

After living in the camp until the age of nine, Mahdi describes his move with his family to Denmark. He and his family had been gutted from the charred and gun-bearing utopia of Ain al-Hilweh into the charming suburbia of Danish society. Mahdi describes how, as a child, this was the last place where he wanted to be: 'I couldn't tell anyone at the time, but the truth was I just wanted to go back to the camp.' He didn't recognise himself in the landscapes and could not consolidate his identity with the flat lands that marked Denmark.

For many people, leaving homeland and coming to the 'new' home builds a metaphorical wall between the two places. Just like Gogol in Jhumpa Lahiri's novel *The namesake*, who fights to balance American upbringing with his Indian ancestry, immigrants are forced to try and assume one identity, although it may be a self-instructed expectation as opposed to a realistic one. Usually, the key to this quest for identity lies in the middle: a utilisation of this divide as a tool for self-discovery.¹⁰ And this is how Mahdi uses his documentary, a middle ground between what he remembers and what is the

truth.

Whilst a university student, Mahdi's college organised a trip to Israel, his family uproared in excitement 'their son was returning home!' For him, the trip glistened with a hidden confusion. Why was he stood here looking at Yad Vashem, the biggest Holocaust memorial in the world? Walking around Jewish graves, whilst just beyond the horizon stood the camp that held the displaced heritage of his entire family. He was stood within the 'homeland' but for him 'Palestine, whatever that was, was still somewhere in Ain al-Hilweh.'¹¹ The shadow of this adoptive homeland lingered on. It had now become a confrontation for Mahdi; Ain al-Hilweh and Palestine were not the same.

The gap between Ain al-Hilweh and Palestine had grown so fervently, the memories had grown legs. Dragging 'home' in to Ain al-Hilweh. Thus, Mahdi felt disillusionment as to what he saw on his trip. And for the first time, perhaps he saw Palestine more in the words and anecdotes of his grandparents than in the physical land around him.

'I've always seen myself as someone who zooms very closely in to the human condition,'¹² answered Mahdi Fleifel in an interview about his documentary. At its core, this is what this documentary is, an analysis of the human condition. An analysis that is not plagued by scientific method and psychological definitions but is enchanted with real faces and real experiences. A real search for home in a world where home was not apparent. An endeavour so psychologically frying that it whittles down the memory, strength, and power of all those displaced. The documentary almost makes personas out of its faces. Paradoxically it is the lack of relatability with the lives of those in the documentary that remind us of the importance of such stories; to give Palestine the attention it has been devoid of and to continue the voyage to liberation. And so, the documentary shows us just what it means to persevere. Not because you want to, but because it has become instinctual.

Eindnoten

- 1 Peter Bradshaw, 'A world not ours – review', *The Guardian*, 20 February 2014), <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2014/feb/20/a-world-not-ours-review>.
- 2 Ibidem.
- 3 'The old will die and the young will forget: David Ben Gurion', *Arab News*, 25 April 2002, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/220313>.
- 4 David Marcus, 'Memory as homeland', *Dissent magazine*, 25 September 2023, <https://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/memory-as-homeland/>.
- 5 Mahdi Fleifel, 'Alam Laysa Lana', *IMDb*, 21 February 2014, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt2233762/>.
- 6 Jessica Buchleitner, 'I migrated to my ancestral homeland in a search for identity', *Aeon magazine*, 23 April 2024, <https://aeon.co/essays/i-migrated-to-my-ancestral-homeland-in-a-search-for-identity>.
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- 9 Kamal al-Solaylee, 'The right of return: why we want to come home', *The walrus*, 7 September 2021, <https://thewalrus.ca/the-right-of-return-why-we-want-to-come-home/>
- 10 Jhumpa Lahiri, 'The Namesake', *The Antioch review* 62:3 (2004) 581, <https://doi.org/10.2307/4614714>.