



A still from Volker Schlöndorff's "Circle of Deceit," screening tonight at Masrah al-Medina.

# Umam D&R tackles remembrance, reconciliation, amnesty, and justice

Nonprofit puts Lebanon in perspective through program of film and debates

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**B**EIRUT: "This is not a new Lebanese film festival," says Monika Borgmann-Slim, sitting outside one of the last grand villas still standing in the Beirut suburb of Haret Hreik, running her index finger down a list of film screenings printed on a poster whose corners are, like everything and everyone else, wilting in the muggy morning heat.

The nonprofit foundation Umam Documentation and Research (or Umam D&R) occupies the ground floor of the villa, along with Umam Production, which Borgmann-Slim established four years ago with her husband and partner Lokman Slim, who was born in Lebanon, studied philosophy in Paris, and founded the Dar al-Jadeed publishing house in 1990. (Slim's family owns the villa where Umam is based. They refused to sell it or leave it as the surrounding neighborhood, now a Hezbollah stronghold, suffered massive, often forceful demographic shifts during the 1980s).

Both organizations are committed to the preservation of collective memory in Lebanon, where collective amnesia about the country's Civil War has become de facto public policy. Where Umam Production helps to finance and facilitate film and television projects, Umam D&R tackles the trickier intersection of culture, civil society, and political life.

The Slims are amassing a substantial library of books related to Lebanon and the Arab world (including novels as well as policy analyses) and a room full of archives (such as old newspapers and other printed materials). In April, they opened an exhibition space next to the villa in Haret Hreik called "The Hangar," where they have presented films, photographs, and site-specific installations. This summer, they

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held a three-week workshop for Lebanese and Palestinian youth to discuss how they experienced the start of the Civil War in April 1975 (largely through anecdotes and beliefs passed down from previous generations, since the 16- to 18-year-old participants were born toward the war's end). Now, the Slims are gearing up for what they consider their main event – a six-day schedule of film screenings, supplemental exhibitions, and debates held under the banner of "Civil Violence and War Memories: Here and Elsewhere."

Call it a conference, call it a symposium, or call it a week-long meditation on issues of remembrance, reconciliation, amnesty, and justice. Just don't call it a film festival. Beirut has plenty of those. Umam D&R's

event – held in collaboration with the Heinrich Boell Foundation, the Goethe Institut, the Institut Francais du Proche-Orient, the French Embassy, the Frankfurt-based Medico International, Masrah al-Medina, and Zico House's Al-Mawsam – is not a showcase of artistic production on its own terms. Rather, it is a more pointed and purposeful exploration, in comparative perspective, of how members of a given society individually and collectively choose to deal with a past scarred by civil violence.

"Confronting one's own memories is a very painful thing," says Borgmann-Slim, who studied Arab philology and political science in Bonn and Damascus. She worked as a radio and print journalist before taking up filmmaking and relocating to Lebanon. The point of Umam D&R's event, she says, "is to see that you are not alone and are in some way sharing a similar history, to see that you are not alone in having to deal with your past."

"Civil Violence and War Memories" unfolds at Masrah Al-Madina in Hamra as a succession of region-specific "evenings." Tonight's "Lebanon Evening" presents a feature film by German director Volker Schlöndorff. Entitled "Circle of Deceit" and produced in 1981, the film follows the turbulent experiences of a German journalist sent to Beirut to cover the early stages of Lebanon's Civil War, throwing his personal and professional life into a tailspin. (For one reason or another, "Circle of Deceit" was never released in Lebanon. For Borgmann-Slim, using it to open Umam D&R's event is a corrective measure.)

From there, "Civil Violence and War Memories" proceeds to a Bosnia evening (presenting Laurent Bécue-Renard's documentary "War Wearing," about three women undergoing therapy after the violent breakup of Yugoslavia), a Rwanda evening (presenting Anne Aghion's documentary "In Rwanda We Say... The Family That Does Not Speak Dies," about reconciliation efforts 10 years after the massacre of 800,000 Tutsis), a Chechnya evening (presenting Tamara Trampe and Johann Feindt's documentary "White Ravens: Nightmare in Chechnya," about the state in which young Russian soldiers returned from the fighting in Chechnya), and an Iraq-Kurdistan evening (presenting Bahman Ghobadi's feature "Turtles Can Fly," about a 13-year-old boy named Satellite who possesses exorbitant knowledge of television and comes to be considered a strange postmodern prophet in the squalor of his Kurdish refugee camp).

The event returns to Lebanon on Sunday, September 25, with the first full screening in Lebanon of the Slims' film (with Hermann Theissen) "Massacre," a controversial documentary about six members of the Lebanese Forces who speak candidly about their role in perpetrating the massacres at Sabra and Shatila in 1982 – in other words, about what they were thinking and about how they killed.

Umam D&R is screening just one film a night to leave time for a lengthy discussion between the audience and the filmmaker afterward. (For "Circle of Deceit," the screening will be followed by a dis-

cussion with the film's executive producer Georges Nasser.)

Buttressing these discussions are two exhibitions – one on local political graffiti, on view at the Hangar through October 1; the other on children's photographs of the war in Kosovo, running from September 20-25 at Masrah Al-Madina – and a series of round tables. Like the films, the round tables are organized around different geopolitical situations.

"Somehow, you cannot compare each experience," admits Borgmann-Slim. "Each experience is taking place in its own context. But the questions are often the same."

Among the questions these round tables will tackle are: Between victims and perpetrators, who has the right to speak or give testimony? Is memory a duty of all citizens in a country recovering from civil conflict? Is amnesty a right open to all? Which works better in a post-conflict situation, to forgive or to forget?

In the balance between political content and aesthetic concern, Umam D&R's event is heavily weighted to the former. That said, Borgmann-Slim admits: "We don't want everyone to go out from this event in a depression. The films we are screening are not always easy to watch. Sometimes it's easier to watch a feature, and I like the mixture we have on a personal level. If it had been two weeks I would have liked to have seven documen-

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taries and seven features."

Still, the style of any given film is rarely just palliative and all aesthetic choices are ultimately political. This issue will surely come into play during the discussion to follow the final screening of "Massacre." The Slims' film debuted at the Berlin International Film Festi-

val in February, where it picked up the prestigious Fipresci prize. It has since traveled to more than 15 film festivals worldwide, screening in the United States, France, South Africa, Australia, Portugal, Korea, and more. On September 22, it is being presented in Bethlehem. On September 27, it will be shown in Ramallah. Surprisingly for an extremely difficult documentary, it has earned a theatrical release in both Greece and France.

Borgmann-Slim doesn't imagine that "Massacre" will ever make the rounds of regular movie theaters in Lebanon. "I don't think it will. I don't think I would want it to," she says. "Now, the political situation in Lebanon is troubled. It may change. We dream about it. But until today, I doubt it very strongly."

A sliver of the film was shown at the American University of Beirut this past spring, in the context of an academic conference. The discussion that ensued there was heated and intense, so the debate after the complete screening will surely follow suit.

"Either people defend the film or they hate it profoundly," says Borgmann-Slim. "This has been the case everywhere. On a personal level, you can only do one film like this. I would be happy if this film encouraged artists, journalists, writers – all creative people – to do something similar. On a political level, I hope overall that an event like this starts a debate in Lebanon. As a foreigner, I hear all the time that the Lebanese want to forget. But I see to the contrary. For spectators, I hope they come to the event and become more conscious, maybe even more courageous, to confront their own history, to open up a little bit to other perspectives, and to reflect on their surroundings."

For more information of "Civil Violence and War Memories," check out [www.umamproduction.com](http://www.umamproduction.com)



Poster for the upcoming six-day film screenings on civil violence.