

'Massaker' - two perspectives, one controversial film

Confronting demons to banish them like Sabra and Shatila, "Massaker" is a political creature and should be handled as such

Jim Quilty
Daily Star staff

BEIRUT: "The full story of what happened in Shatila on Friday night and Saturday morning may never be known, for most of the witnesses are either dead or would never wish to reveal their guilt."

So wrote then-*Times of London* correspondent Robert Fisk in a story on September 20, 1982. In this instance, the veteran journalist was wrong.

Like full disclosure on any contentious event, knowing the "full story" of what happened at Sabra and Shatila on September 16-18 is unlikely. Some of those responsible eventually did, however, choose to discuss their role in the massacre.

Fisk may be forgiven his assuming the assassins of Sabra and Shatila would remain shadowy. It's natural to keep such men at a safe remove. Inhumanity on this scale so beggars polite comprehension that to place its perpetrators within the pale of empathy is to risk emotional complicity.

The disavowal or "othering" of the mass murderer is salubrious, even necessary, as far as personal and national self-esteem is concerned. But it's of no utility in understanding the nuts and bolts of how such horrors happen. There is a reason that the need to "confront our demons" is commonplace in so many languages.

So we come to "Massaker." Directed by Monika Borgmann, Lokman Slim and Hermann Theissen, this documentary is the first look at Sabra and Shatila from the perpetrators' perspective. Other works have recounted survivors' stories. As Borgmann and Slim remarked during the film's first Beirut screening, the victims remain silent. They're dead, in their thousands.

"Massaker" begins with the Elvis Presley hit "It's Now or Never," sung by one of the six unnamed assassins who are the film's informants. The camera then moves from one man to the next, each recounting how he became associated with Bashir Gemayel's Lebanese Forces militia and their relationship with the Israeli Army.

They depict the psychological landscape in the period between Gemayel's assassination and the massacre - the latter described as a reprisal for the former - then discuss the episode itself. Most belonged to units mobilized for the operation. One fellow says he caught wind of the action after it was under way and brought his men in so they didn't miss out on "hands-on experience."

As the film progresses, the audience can discern different characters of varying intelligence. One man wonders why someone who is about to be murdered would obey the executioner's order to throw the previous victim into a pit. "The Jews do not own Palestine," another remarks unexpectedly. "They killed Christ."

One man conveys something like remorse, saying that discussing the episode is always difficult. Another expresses an abiding grief that several horses died. One man savors re-enacting the paramilitary procedure of room-to-room killing. Another demonstrates a ghoul-

ish ritual he claims he used while butchering his victims.

The narrative approaches of the six may suggest variations on a theme of mental instability - though it is left to the audience to speculate as to whether this resulted from the massacre, or vice versa.

Though it became emblematic of the atrocities that mark the contemporary human condition, Sabra and Shatila was neither the first mass murder of Lebanon's war nor the last. The last 23 years have witnessed a depressing number of slaughters that might have been stamped from the mould of Sabra and Shatila, underlining the universal importance of understanding the anatomy of massacre.

For all its notoriety, the Lebanese have been conflicted about investigating, indeed allowing investigation of the atrocity. Several layers of silence enshrouded the massacre virtually from the moment it began. In her book "Sabra and Shatila, September 1982" - the most comprehensive study yet made of the survivors' story - Bayan Nuwayhed al-Hout writes that the Lebanese state under President Amin Gemayel (brother of the assassinated LF leader) clamped down on open discussion of it.

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Such state-sanctioned amnesia - which later characterized the postwar state's attitude to the war as a whole - has posed a challenge to all who stand outside the feudal habit of mind. In lieu of an accountable state, it has fallen to engaged intellectuals to ask unseemly questions about the war, including Sabra and Shatila. Many of Lebanon's most creative artists and activists have taken up this challenge. Their work takes root in common ground and cross-pollinates, shares overlapping media and constituencies. It is worth recalling, though, that their purposes are quite distinct.

This fact may be indistinct at a time when a propaganda film like "Fahrenheit 9/11" can win the Palme d'Or at Cannes, but it so happens that artists and activists are in different lines of work.

True, "politics" and "aesthetics" are not kept in vacuum tubes at opposite ends of the intellectual table. Furthermore, activists who seek to provoke political dialogue by taking up film as a tool of disclosure and dissemination are justifiably subject to aesthetic critique. Given politics' imaginative and opportunistic use of media to manipulate popular perceptions, artists are rightfully territorial about their tools being instrumentalized.

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To assess a self-declared political project in mainly aesthetic terms, however, is a trifle myopic.

As a political project, the most significant critique of "Massaker" is the question of whether these men tell the truth. Truthful or not, some question the ethics of giving murderers a forum to pantomime remorse, or else parade unrepentant sadism like demonic peacocks.

These are valid questions because the psychology of self-representation is a complex one. Not knowing the men's present circumstances, we have no clue

as to their position vis-a-vis the prevailing discourse of the country. It is difficult to discern, then, whether their "remorse" or "shamelessness" is a defiant pose against the status quo or confessions hinging on anonymity. Neither scenario guarantees honesty or accuracy.

Slim has remarked that he is less interested in these men providing the "real truth" of Sabra and Shatila than in capturing their version of what transpired. Whether their testimonials are the full truth, the recollected truth, or fancy, they - like any primary source - can be used for purposes other than those intended.

Those able to disengage themselves from the horrors described - and sort through self-recriminations of voyeurism - can read the film's testimonials against the grain for what they reveal about the perpetrators' psychic map of the world.

Far from hobgoblins, these more or less ignorant men betray marks of sectarian and tribal loyalty that echo virtually unchanged in today's common discourse, both within Lebanon and without.

Their presence among us is no more alarming than the liberty of those who commanded them. The footsoldiers' testimonies reflect badly upon the men but the reflection is amplified upon their leaders, and the politics that has given them postwar legitimacy without accountability.

Listening to murderers speak in anything but platitudes of remorse is uncomfortable because you feel the filth of their crimes on your flesh. One way out of complicity is acting to raze the structures that made these crimes possible, to ensure they can't be repeated.

Tackling postwar amnesia and erasure as cultural production, "Massaker" makes aesthetic choices with political implications

Kaelen Wilson-Goldie
Daily Star staff

BEIRUT: These 99 minutes do not pass nicely. In Monika Borgmann, Lokman Slim and Hermann Theissen's documentary film "Massaker," six men from the Lebanese Forces, the disbanded Christian militia, talk about how they slaughtered some 1,000 to 3,000 Palestinians in the refugee camps of Sabra and Shatila, just south of Beirut, for three days in September 1982.

They talk about their preparatory training in Israel with the Israeli Army, their allegiance to Lebanese Forces' leader Bashir Gemayel and their response to his assassination just after he was elected Lebanon's president. The talk about how they moved into the camps, tossed grenades into houses and sprayed rooms with gunfire and killed at close range.

They talk about one man, a butcher, who exercised his preference for the tautology of killing with a knife instead of a gun.



They talk about another who, mid-massacre, picked up a young girl by the waist, raped her, dropped her on the ground and shot her in the head, saying afterward to anyone who was interested, "I needed a f***." They talk about how they dumped dead bodies into a pit and tried to dispose of them with chemicals. As the minutes tick by, they talk and they talk and they talk.

Culling these 99 minutes from 60 hours of rushes, the filmmakers cut away the bulk of the massacre's details and specificities to leave a spare but legible language of violence at the core of the film. Borgmann and Slim also made a deliberate choice - what they call their "politically incorrect approach" - in portraying the massacre from the perspective of the perpetrators, not the victims. In doing so, they shredded all the filters and mediating frameworks that might otherwise make their subjects palatable.

"Massaker" is no story of survival or redemption, nor is it a clear-cut narrative of moral condemnation. Instead, it is an inquiry, more political than theoretical. What impulses drive a man to commit horrific acts of violence? What conditions transform those impulses from individual to collective actions? "Massaker" made its world premiere at the Berlin Film Festival in February, where it won the Fipresci prize. The film has since been shown in 15 different countries. In France and Greece, "Massaker" is getting a general theatrical release.

But so far the film has only been screened in Lebanon once - in the context of a week-long symposium on civil violence and collective memory that took place last month (the film was approved by the censors just six

hours prior to its public showing).

It made for uncomfortable viewing not only for the claustrophobic closeness of the events themselves but also for the fact that, while elsewhere these six guys might be talking from behind bars or otherwise distanced from viewers, in Lebanon they are talking from, well, anywhere and everywhere.

"In the film, six men are appearing and they are living between us," say Borgmann and Slim in a postscreening interview, "inside Lebanese society, leading today a normal life."

|| What impulses drive a man to commit horrific acts of violence?

Thanks to the 1991 general amnesty law that followed the cessation of Lebanon's civil war, these six guys - and untold numbers like them from every social, political, economic, religious and sectarian notch on Lebanon's complicated cultural bandwidth - have been pardoned, their crimes forgotten without ever being acknowledged as such, as crimes.

Much has been made of high-ranking wartime militiamen who segued directly into postwar ministerial posts and remain in positions of political and economic power today. But what about the rest? Of the men in "Massaker," one may be your neighbor, another may make your *manouche* in the morning, yet another may work at the gas station down the street. One of the more difficult, implicit and never fully articulated questions that "Massaker" raises is, so how are you going to live with that?

"This film is a kind of protestation against a whole political culture based on forgiveness and amnesty," explain Borgmann and Slim. "The Lebanese will not have the chance - each time a crime is committed - to have an international inquiry commission. This film is - among other things - an invitation to the Lebanese to assume their present and future as well as their long-lasting, violent past. In general, we believe that history cannot be ignored. The process of revisiting [one's] own history can be sometimes extremely painful, but no one can, in the end, avoid it."

Those intentions are admirable, but does the film bear them out?

In formal and aesthetic terms, "Massaker" is all over the place. Each scene is set in the rooms of random, anonymous apartments. Because the film was shot during the summer months and because, apparently, the filmmakers kept the windows closed from prying eyes, the six men who speak in the

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film disrobe as they do so. The camera avoids their faces and focuses on their bodies, so what you get as a viewer is an awful lot of profusely sweating flesh.

This emphasis on the body should convey a great deal of meaning, employing a visual language to underscore and undermine the film's verbal language all at once. But because the quality of filming is so poor, "Massaker" squanders the opportunity to match form to content in an impactful way.

It's not just that the film is, on the most practical levels, difficult to see and hear -

Borgmann and Slim tweaked the sound and darkened the image in postproduction to prevent the possibility of anyone identifying the six subjects. Every shot seems accidentally, even amateurishly composed.

The camera jerks left and rotates 90 degrees, as if to frame the subjects, cheaply, as monstrous. It drifts to a bulky shoulder and spins around a character's foot for no reason at all. Technically speaking only the editing - tracing the massacre from start to finish and giving the film a rhythm that quickens in intensity and tightens like a vice - is masterful.

Also vexing is the way in which the filmmakers prompt their subjects with photographic evidence of the massacres at Sabra and Shatila. One man flips through a stack of press pictures - gruesome shots of dead bodies piled in dirt - and crumples each one into a paper ball as he goes. How is one to read this?

Does he destroy these images because there is no truth in them? Because they are inadequate containers for a horror too great to be referenced, much less represented? Because they don't conform to his memory? Because they haunt his memory? Because they upset him? Because they confuse him? How do these images, reproduced and repeated, relate to the trauma of Sabra and Shatila?

If a trauma is precisely that which cannot be absorbed into conscious thought and is therefore repressed, and if the filmmakers are using these pictures to trigger a return of the traumatic, then they are painting their subjects, the perpetrators, as victims, suggesting they too have been traumatized. The problem with that, notes art critic and historian Hal Foster, is that "a traumatic subject ... has absolute authority, for one cannot challenge the trauma of another; one can only believe it, even identify with it, or not."

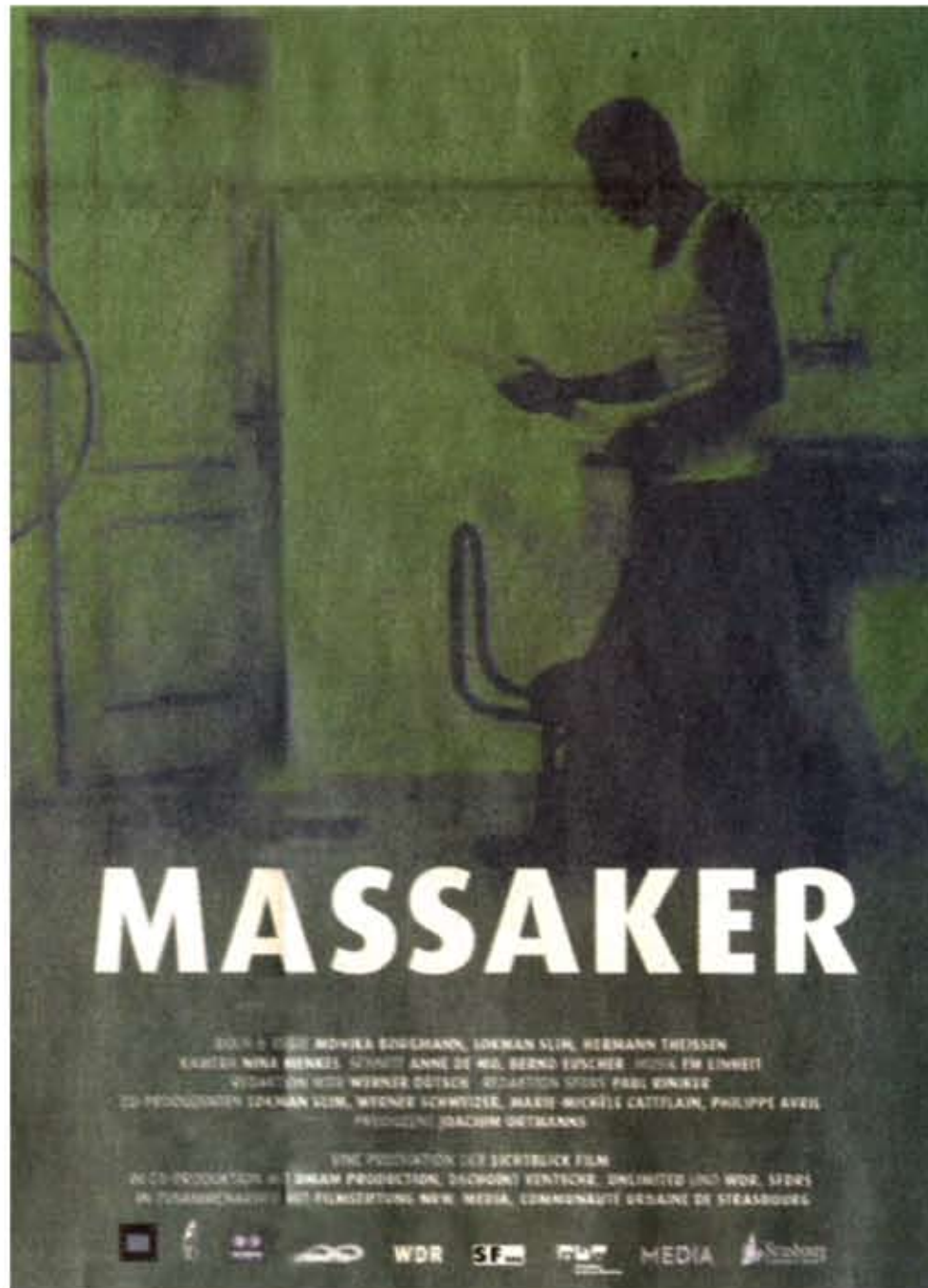
Because Lebanon has pursued an official policy of postwar amnesia for over 15 years, artists, novelists and filmmakers have taken up the task of beating back historical erasure in the realm of cultural production.

"Massaker" may not be the most visually sophisticated piece of work to come down this pike. But it points to a serious problem. A film, even a documentary with a bent more activist than aesthetic, is an artwork. It may be seductive, convincing, provocative or not. But it cannot confer the status or legitimacy of official postwar reconciliation policies, however barren and suspect those may be. It cannot demand truthful confessions or mete out meaningful consequences.

The six men who talk and talk in "Massaker" do so without fear of prosecution. They are not on trial (even though one says that being filmed, he feels "as if" he were). They are off the hook. With perhaps one exception, they show no remorse.

"Massaker," in effect, provides these six men with a platform, a productive space, from which they make excuses for themselves and boast. For that is the thrust of their talk. It is the boasting of men who take advantage of the opportunity to freely assert their masculinity and virility, their chest-pounding status as men.

Does this humanize them to such an extent that viewers - neighbors, fellow citizens, victims' families - may learn to forgive them? Maybe, maybe not. Maybe the best "Massaker" can do is document such talk and hope an audience responds. Otherwise all viewers are left with is despair.



A theater poster for Borgmann, Slim, and Theissen's "Massaker."