



THE LEBANESE ROCKET SOCIETY

Photo credits: Jessica Ford

Maker husband and wife **Khalil Joreige** and **Joana Hadjithomas** tell the story of a team of students who founded the Lebanese Rocket Society and ask why Lebanon's contribution to the space race is missing from the country's collective memory

Why is this story particularly relevant now?
J We first heard about this in 2009. My sister Tania Mehanna; we were searching for a story in Lebanon that connects individual dreams and reality. This story came out of a bunch of people who wanted to create a space project. It was the perfect time to work on it because it deals with shifting limits.

It's about shifting the gaze.
 We're looking at a period of interest in our history. It was while we were questioning ourselves on the contemporary that this project became important for us.

So it became more relevant as time went on?
J It's an investigation. While we were doing the research everything changed. At the beginning we thought it would be a project about why everybody forgot, about whether we have forgotten because our dream changed. When we found Manoug Manougian (professor of mathematics who led the Lebanese rocket project) who had all the archives, the notion of the film changed completely.

Was Manoug Manougian surprised to find someone so interested in his long-forgotten project?
K For him it is unbelievable that this happened. The information was there on his website but nobody had told the whole story and articulated it with all the events that were happening at that time.

J I think he was waiting to tell the story for a long time. At the beginning he had to see whether we were serious. He wanted to show the project as it was – a scientific project and not a military project. It was very important for him to see that we would be respectful of the project and not change the meaning.

The story is very hopeful, but is there also a sense of mourning for the loss of this sense of community and a time when people were dreaming for the possibilities of the future?
K We are not interested in nostalgia at all. It's a tribute to those dreamers without being cynical at all about what we can do today. We can still be dreamers but a dream should be redefined. The transport of a rocket today in the streets of Lebanon is something that is completely symbolic and completely bizarre, but it is also

an attempt to change things in a place like this. **J** It's not about mourning; it's about releasing yourself from the story of the past to activate something in the present. Why do we accept things as they are? Why don't we each individually do something that can push our own boundaries?

Your creation of a replica of the rocket seemed, for me, the point where you both crossed over from documentary filmmakers to leading the direction of the story. Had you become so connected to the story that you needed to give it a more positive ending?
J If you stopped the film before, it would have been a fantastic story in the past and how we were in the '60s. We thought why not give this project a materiality and build a rocket as it was? When people see this rocket they will ask questions. [In the '60s] the rockets used to go from Haigazian to Dbayeh and our rocket, by coincidence, was built in Dbayeh, so we did the reverse and took it from Dbayeh to Haigazian and presented it to the University. The idea was to bring it back to student life, a scientific project and an artistic one, and change the way you see the rocket. It's like a missile, but it's not.



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Is the background of pan-Arabism seen in the film something that is still desirable today?

K Even in the film we're not saying it was a desirable thing in the '60s. It's a fact. It was a moment when there was this kind of enthusiasm where people felt they were linked together. This idea of a global movement is not something that we are nostalgic about, but just to notice how we can be sharing the same temporality. **J** Scientists like Manoug said they were sharing the same research of the time. The mythology of the '60s – revolutions, ideology, changes – we are all in a way sharing the same ideas. One of the ideologies of that time was an alternative of possibilities, so it connects with this idea of revolution that is more contemporary. This is something that has to do with collective



dreams, while us building our own rocket is an individual gesture. It was important to take the background but show how it echoes within us.

Why did you choose to end on an animation showing this very utopian view of what Lebanon could have been?

J We did the animation because we thought we were missing archives and had no images. We thought we'd do a melancholic film about not finding images, about it being forgotten. When we found Manoug we no longer needed an animation but we decided to keep it because the rest of the film is in the past. By building a rocket we bring the story into the present and we continued this gesture by projecting into the future. This continuity is something that we missed in our personal life here. We rarely project ourselves into the future. It was really important to have this hope.

If this fantasy did exist and Lebanon had its own space exploration project, where would be the first place you would explore?

J The moon is already taken. **K** Space is already colonised. We are going to attribute the name of a star to the internet for somebody. We are colonising the whole universe to a few people [laughs]. I like the idea of traveling to Mars than reaching a planet. Actually, that's what we started. When you do it becomes a question that will be somewhere, and it's always something we are not expecting. **J** We would be making films so far out of space.

Interview by Natalie Shooter

Lebanese Rocket Society opened on Thursday 11. hadjithomasjoreige.com