



Jean Chamoun (1942–2017): Lebanese Filmmaker and Champion of the Palestinian Cause

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ACCLAIMED LEBANESE FILMMAKER Jean Khalil Chamoun passed away on 9 August 2017, in Beirut, following a long struggle with Alzheimer's disease. His death marks the end of a vibrant era of Lebanese documentary and feature filmmaking, during which he worked alongside other notable cinematographers such as Borhan Alawiyyeh and Maroun Baghdadi. With his wife and partner in Nour Productions, Palestinian filmmaker Mai Masri, Chamoun made a dozen documentaries, many of which won prestigious awards, between 1982 and 2009.

A rich, compelling, and rare chronicle of Lebanon's long war years (1975–1991), the body of work that he and Masri created (he being a producer for many of her films, and she being a producer for many of his) focused not on the war's complicated politics, but rather, on the lives and dreams of average people whose worlds were upended by a vicious conflict that was simultaneously local, regional, and international in scope. Masri and Chamoun's subjects were primarily women and children—Lebanese and Palestinian, Sunni, Shi'ite, and Christian; rural and urban—whose voices were rarely heard during the war years. Chamoun was much more interested in the human element of the war than its political or military dimensions. He was a humanist, not an ideologue, who maintained close and supportive friendships with the people he filmed until the end of his life.

Chamoun came to Beirut from his village in the Beqaa Valley in 1965 to study theater at the Lebanese University. He was a talented actor and had key roles in plays by Roger Assaf and Nidal al-Ashqar, starring in the play, *Majdaloun*, before traveling to Paris in 1970 to pursue a master of arts in film. Living and working in the Vincennes neighborhood of Paris, Chamoun absorbed the post-1968 spirit of revolutionary change and youthful hope. He returned to Lebanon in late 1974, keen to make feature films, just months before the civil war broke out.

Chamoun's interest in film and his commitment to the Palestinian cause, of which he was a lifelong champion, intersected dramatically when he began working at the Palestinian Cinema Institute, a division of the Palestine Liberation Organization in Beirut, in 1975. He codirected a film about Tel al-Za'atar with Palestinian filmmaker Mustafa Abu Ali, and he filmed a documentary in Cuba about Third World liberation movements, *Hymn of Liberty*. While working at the Palestinian Cinema Institute, he met his future wife and partner, Mai Masri, who was visiting Beirut during a summer break from her film studies at San Francisco State University in 1981. Mai recounts that she wondered, "What is this Maronite guy with a

surname like that [Jean was a distant relative of Lebanon's right-wing president, Camille Chamoun] doing working on Palestinian films?" Jean and Mai were drawn to each other through their love of filmmaking and its potential to impact, and not only depict, people's lives. He urged her to go back to San Francisco, study hard, get her degree, and return to Beirut. Chamoun already had joint projects in mind for them to pursue.

Masri returned just as the Israeli invasion began in 1982. She and Chamoun recorded copious and stirring footage that summer, often under very dangerous conditions. They married in 1986, and founded Nour Productions. Chamoun and Masri never left Beirut, despite the trials of the war years and the scarcity of funds for filmmaking in Lebanon.

Chamoun was particularly interested in portraying the lives of strong women surmounting challenges. His wife, Mai, says that this was not surprising, given his childhood. Chamoun's father died when he was just one year old, and his mother and sister were his pillars of strength, guidance, love, and courage as he grew up in the village of Sar'in in Lebanon's Beqaa Valley. Although he became a fixture of Beirut's sophisticated art and literary milieu, Chamoun remained a son of the village through and through: he never forgot his roots in a strong, close-knit community devoid of sectarian disputes and ideological politicking. In addition to his open, lively personality and no-nonsense approach to life, Chamoun's distinctive and memorable voice—loud, enthusiastic, and always tinged with humor and hope—was another mark of his village origins. "In the open village in the valley, you had to speak loudly to be heard," Mai said.

Chamoun himself was an integral part of Beirut's collective memory and consciousness. His evening radio program, cohosted with famed musician and playwright Ziad Rahbani, *Baa'dna tayyibin, qul Allah!* inspired, entertained, and comforted listeners during the early years of the civil war. The program, ahead of its time in an Arab radio milieu, was a lively and daring mixture of news, wry commentary, and satirical skits that spoke to the worries and experiences of a city living in the shadow of war. In 1997, I was with Jean and Mai on a film shoot in north Lebanon. As we enjoyed our coffee before returning to work at the end of our lunch break, Jean regaled us with stories and told jokes, his voice booming throughout the café. Suddenly, a middle-aged woman came around a corner, rushing towards us. "I'd recognize that voice anywhere!" she exclaimed. "It takes me back to the beginning of the war and all the emotions we had. You got us through the war!" Jean stood up and hugged her, smiling broadly, as tears filled her eyes.

Jean Chamoun was larger than life; he was open, genuine, and never took himself seriously or looked down on others. His warmth, optimism, and joyful energy were rare gifts, especially in a country where people had grown tired and cynical after fighting a decade and a half of war. All who knew Jean treasured the memories he made, both on screen and in everyday life. He has left us an invaluable record of the courage and hope of ordinary Lebanese and Palestinians in his documentaries and his one feature film, *Taif al-madina* (In the Shadows of the City), released to critical acclaim in 2000. The film is a warm recounting of the war years from the perspective of its victims and survivors.

Lanterns of Memory was Jean's last film, made just before his Alzheimer's illness took hold. Ironically, his commitment to shining a cinematic light on Lebanese and Palestinian memory never dimmed, even as his own was fading.

Jean is survived by his wife, Mai Masri, and his two daughters, Nour and Hana.

About the Author

Laurie King is associate teaching professor of cultural anthropology at Georgetown University. Her research has focused on Palestinian citizens of Israel, Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, urban studies, human rights, and international humanitarian law. She lived and worked in Beirut from 1993–98. King was editor in chief of *Middle East Report* from 1998–2000, and served as managing editor for *JPS* from 2007–9.