

Philippe Aractingi

ON *MIRATH*: EDITED TRANSCRIPT OF Q&A HELD AT
KHAYRALLAH CENTER¹



Akram Khater (AK): Good Evening. On behalf of the Moise A. Khayrallah Center for Lebanese Diaspora Studies, the Film Studies program, and the Middle East Studies program at North Carolina State University in Raleigh, I would like to welcome you here tonight. Philippe Aractingi is one of the foremost film directors in Lebanon with a career that spans decades and genres. Some of you may have seen his previous films. One is called *Bosta* or “*The Bus*.” But, more likely you may have seen another film called *Tahat Alqasf* or “*Under the Bombs*.” I’m proud to say that we in Raleigh are one of three cities in the United States – alongside New York and San Francisco – screening his third feature-length film, *Mirath* or “*The Heritage*.” At the conclusion of the film, we will have a Q & A. So, everyone will have an opportunity to ask Philippe about the film and his experiences. Thank you so much again for being here. And now, it’s my pleasure to introduce Philippe Aractingi.

[Applause]

Philippe Aractingi (PA): Thank you, Akram. I wouldn’t say that this is an experimental film, because experimental film means that it’s boring. This is an experimental film that is not boring. It’s a different type of film. So be open to something different. It’s closer to a documentary than fiction, but it’s not purely a documentary. I thought of making this film in 2006 when the war started between Lebanon and Israel, or Hezbollah and Israel. And I thought I should do something but I didn’t know what to do. In 2006, we left Lebanon to live in France. A year later my daughter, who didn’t understand why we were in France, asked me, “Why did we leave?”; “Why did we leave our country?”; “Why are we staying in France?”. And I started telling her that there was a war

when she was five years old and I realized that she wouldn't understand. And I didn't know where to start, because it wouldn't have been enough if I told her that a war started in 2006. She needed to know more. So, I was compelled to do this film for her. But, then after twelve minutes of the film, I stopped and I wondered, "Who cares about my own story, a bibliographical story about me and my child and my wife?" So, I stopped. But then I showed it to other Lebanese, as well as non-Lebanese. A lot of people told me, "This is not your story. This is our story. We also left our country. We also live this exile and we all have this kind of question about identity and nation." In the end, these are the reasons I did the film.

[Applause]

[Mirath film screening]

AK: So, we have a bit of time to talk with Philippe about the film, about things you thought during the film, about how he made the film and why he made the film. For those of you, obviously, of Lebanese heritage, I'm sure there are many emotions rolling within you after seeing many of these scenes that are very familiar. So, we would like to open up for questions and answers.

[Female audience member stands, asks question in Arabic]

AK: Ok, before Philippe can answer that I would like to sort of translate. For those of you who don't speak Arabic, she thanks Philippe for making the film, but she asks a very pointed question. She said that you made a film about those who can go back to Lebanon, but what about a film for those who cannot go back to Lebanon?

PA: My wife and I, we should go back to Lebanon. So, I don't have an answer. I do not have an answer and I don't advise people to go back or not to go back. It's a personal question. One has to work on it by oneself. I know the film made me put the question aside. And by doing the film, I understood more about what I was suffering from. What I do know now is the importance to not cut with our past. Not to make a cut, a straightforward cut. It's important to know where we come

from. What's the past? It's important to give that knowledge to our children and not to live a life where we think it will make them suffer more. Many of those who leave Lebanon or who leave countries where there is war or whatever. They feel that they are suffering or they are sacrificing their life for their children and it's not very positive thinking. It's important to not sacrifice everything. To think that you still have a relationship with your country and to give your children a relationship to that country of origin. Because if you cut it completely, your child might come back to Lebanon and search for something you never gave him. I did this film so that we can transmit to our children what we've been through. The best way to do it would be as a book, but transmitting is what's important. It's not me who thinks this way, it's psychoanalysis. That it's important to transmit what you've been through.

[Female audience member stands, speaks into microphone]

Audience Member (AM): Thank you very much. It was a very wonderful movie. My question is, is this suffering going to end one day?

PA: Is the suffering going to end? That's a broad question. We are in a region of the world where it's going to carry on like this for a few years. Now, we have to live with it, we have to fight against it. My way of fighting is making film. The Dalai Lama when you ask him, "What can we do against the Chinese?" He says, "All you can do is raise consciousness." I think the best way to fight is to raise consciousness, and one way of raising consciousness is making films. So, the way of stopping this is to make people understand and this is what I've been doing, but is it going to stop? I don't know. I don't know. I don't have the answer.

AK: It's ok, Philippe. We don't either. So, it's alright. [Laughter]

[Female audience member stands, speaks into microphone]

AM: Philippe, we enjoyed the film very much and you made us cry. I was crying. My neighbor was crying.

PA: I'm sorry about that. [Laughter]

AM: Do you have any regrets when you made the decision to move back to Lebanon? And now that all of your family is in Lebanon. Do you have any regrets?

PA: You know, in one way I feel much better by being in Lebanon. I was sick of being in France, personally. And I knew I couldn't give the best of myself being in France. I am also somebody who considers his job as, I wouldn't say duty, but it's a very hard work to make films in Lebanon. We're not helped by the government. We don't, I mean, people like me, there aren't many, there are maybe three Lebanese film makers who make films that are seen abroad, as well as in Lebanon. So, we are not a lot of people, but I know that by doing films, sometimes, I get so much reward by seeing people enjoying the film. Not only enjoying. For instance, this film was used by so many parents. They didn't know how to tell their own story to their children and they've used this film they've seen with their children to talk about their own childhood with their own kids, and it was very important. So, these films are sometimes useful. I feel like I'm doing something useful. Living in France was not satisfying enough for me because I was a filmmaker successful in France. I was making films for French people, and I wasn't very happy, you know, not to do something for my own country. So for me, being back in Lebanon, working for Lebanese is something that I feel very rewarding and in that sense I do not have any regrets. I don't have regrets either for my kids, in the sense that, living in a country where everything is unstable is not necessarily negative. I mean, we have lived in an environment, which is unstable, and we became fighters. We became survivors. So, that type of dedication is not necessarily negative. I do have sometimes the regrets because the question is, as the lady was asking, "Is it going to end?" There is sometimes no hope and we can't see the end of it and at times I feel desperate and tired, and that probably my sons and daughter feel it with me as well. So, yes, sometimes I do have these questions, but should I come back to France? I don't think so, no. Shall I widen the audience for my films? That is what I'm doing now and that is why I am here. People who see my films are Lebanese living in Lebanon as well as the French, the Americans, the diaspora, and people from elsewhere. It's important.

AK: I just want to add something really quick before the next question. What Philippe was saying about film making in Lebanon is quite true. I was kind of joking last night about the 4,000 dollars that the Ministry of Culture promised him and took him two years to get from them. So, I think one of the things that, what Philippe is doing, what other artists as well, may I say historians are doing, was just to preserve these memories. I think that one of the things that we in the diaspora can do is certainly to support them, their efforts in terms of filmmaking, and to allow them access to these international venues. So, I think if you're interested, by the way, in helping this because the Lebanese government does not help at all, you should have a conversation with Philippe about ways in which you can contribute to this process.

[Female audience members stands, speaks into microphone]

AM: Philippe, thank you so much. This is one of the best movies I have ever watched, I should day documentary. I also watched the other one. And I really appreciate you taking this approach to the movies and kind of documenting our lives and what we look at. I lived through the war in Lebanon and I went with you on this journey. And this movie was really touching. Thank you very much for that. I have basically two questions. The first one is when I watched the movie, I went through an emotional turmoil with you. Can you comment on what you felt making the movie? What was it like experiencing with your children, and wondering how it would affect them? Second, if you can comment on how was this movie received, not by the Lebanese, but more internationally? This view of Lebanon and what has happened there. Thank you.

PA: First of all, it's a cathartic film. It's a film that you do. It's a journey. For me, it's not a story. I don't see this film as a story, and this is why I was saying at the beginning of the presentation, that it's something different. It's really a journey. It's quite something to, you know, to go back to all the pictures that you have taken, all the videos that you have taken with your kids, all the films that your father has taken about yourself, all the images that were taken about the country you live in and look at them, and then put them in a film, and edit them. It's like resetting, you know, like looking at all of your life and doing a reset. That's the feeling you have. Now, while doing the film, I was

wondering whether I should do it or not. It took me four years and a half to do the film. Two-years full time, but four years and a half to manage to bring in the money. And the film was not easy to sell because it is neither completely a documentary nor a fiction. It's a genre that doesn't exist. It was difficult to sell. I was often wondering whether I should show this, whether I should show the past to my children, whether I should let them go through it or not. So, I went to see a lot of psychoanalysts and people who are in this field. One of them was Boris Cyrulnik, who is very famous for French people. Boris Cyrulnik did a lot of work on memory. I showed him the first and the fourth chapter, I think, the one with the bullets. He said, "You did something that I couldn't do." And I said, "What did I do that you couldn't do?" And he said he grew up in World War II. He was eight and he was Jewish. He was taken, where they take the Jews to the camps. And he ran out of one of these things. I don't know exactly his story, but I know that he escaped. And he came back to his family, and he start telling his story to the people he knew. He started telling these stories and the people didn't believe him. They told him, "You're a child. You're completely nuts. Stop talking. Just stop talking." And he stopped talking. He never told his story to anybody, except his wife. He never said it to his children. And one day, his daughter, when she grew up, she became, she was going to become an academic. And she changed direction, and she became a filmmaker and a theatrical playwright. Not playwright, but actor. Anyway, he says a filmmaker is like a god, because he invents life again, which I liked as a definition, because I like to see myself as a god.

[Audience laughing]

AK: You have a god in front of you.

PA: So anyways, Cyrulnik went to see one of the plays that she did, and he saw a scene that he lived when he was a child, but he never told the story to his daughter. And he says, "Everything that is not said is given anyway." I mean the child will see your wound, even if you don't talk about it. He will see it. He will feel it. He will understand it. So, it's important to discuss, to talk about the past. This is what I was saying in the beginning. But he said the best way is not to do it frontal, in a direct way. Like I have lived, like I went through a trauma. I'll take my child and I'll tell him my trauma. No, the best way to do it is indirectly

through a third party. The third party can be a historian, but the best third party is art. And the best of the best is having your children play in the metaphorical sense and in the proper sense, play the role of their ancestor. Instead of telling the story of my grandmother, I asked my daughter to play my grandmother. And that was the best. So, the film is really transmitting my past. And it was in that sense cathartic, and it was important. Also, and as I said in another answer, this film came about in Lebanon, and that addresses the second question. This film became, for a lot of parents, and even a lot of children, a cathartic way of talking about the past. So, you have 25,000 people, which is quite a lot for a documentary in Lebanon, who went to see this film, using it for a discussion. A lot of people came to me and said, "We went and I left the film and went to my room and took out the bullet." He had a suitcase full of bullets, the same one that I had. I heard a lot of parents brought their kids to see the film. Even kids who brought their parents for a second viewing of the film, to see the film. So, it was an important element for memory. Specifically that we don't have a memory. I am saying it at the end of the film. We don't have a book of the history of Lebanon. So, it was an important element. Now I know that Lycée Français and other French-language schools, which number around forty, are using this film as an obligatory program. Every year, they're going to show this film and discuss it. So, for me, I'm very proud of having done this film. And I was very scared, because I was showing everything about myself, about my life.

As regards the rest of the work, I know it's going to be distributed in France this year, in probably April. So, I'm waiting. I've shown it in different festivals. I've shown it in San Francisco, in New York. It's funny, there are different type of reactions. In San Francisco, we had a lot of Americans, who very much related to the film. I had a Japanese woman who came to me and said, "I'm half Japanese and half American, and my father, I know he has a lot to say about what he's gone through, but he doesn't speak. How can I make him speak?" And that was very interesting for me. A lot of people who are binational, half American, half whatever, they related to the film a lot and will continue to do so. In New York, they were laughing all the time. I don't know why, it's not a funny film, but they were laughing all the time.

[Audience laughter]

PA: So, it's really different, but at the same time, people relate to it. This is what I feel, at least. People who come to me, this is what they tell me, you know, there are some people who went out, who don't know whether they liked the film or not. I don't know.

AM: In the movie it looks like there were children who were bi-cultural or bi-religious. I was wondering how did they reach that stage and has it always been that or did they have an identity crisis of some sort?

PA: They didn't have identity crisis as such. Their parents have an identity crisis. They felt it through their parents, but it's true that the film helped them to think about it and say it out loud. You know, this problem of being both French and Lebanese. I feel that they're not Lebanese yet, since they still speak French a lot, even in Lebanon. The language issue is very important, but that doesn't have to do just with my children. A lot of Lebanese speak different languages, which is up to the point where they don't speak much Arabic anymore. It was quite expensive to move every summer back to France, so that they keep their friends in France, because it was important for my wife that they stay French. And I understood, and we made all the effort to do it. Now we are in between and each time we talk about the future, I try to neither say you will be in Lebanon, nor you will be in France, just keeping it open as much as possible. Voila.

[Female audience member speaks]

AM: It's somewhat more of a statement than a question. It seems to me this just looks at the American experience, in which everybody in this room is an immigrant, who comes from an immigrant family. And so I think it would be very appropriate for Americans to see this film. In particular, where our first generation often has difficulty adapting, the second generation, which is the kids, they feel more comfortable in France, they feel more comfortable in the new country. So, first off, if we wanted to see this film again, will it be distributed in the United States, or could you buy a copy of it? And, secondly, what do you think your kids will do when they reach adulthood and they make their own decisions?

PA: I've shown it to two distributors in New York. We're currently discussing with others. I mean, I know that one of them did love the film and wanted to distribute it, but he still wants the opinion of his boss, so I'm waiting. I'm also showing it to different distributors in the US. I'm sure the film will resonate differently here, because of the reasons you just mentioned, the fact that everybody is from somewhere in this country. So, I will soon let you know whether it will be distributed in the US or not. So far, there is no DVD. The chances of distributing it in the US might improve if you want to go and click on the website, on our website, on Fantascopie Production, or you like the Heritage page on Facebook, we will surely update you on what is going on. You had another question. I can't remember.

AM: What do you think the children will do?

PA: Yes, what would the children do? They, I the children are relieved, I mean, the metaphor of the bags that we throw away at the end of the film from the hot air balloon is very important. I think, you know, at the end of the film, I said the past is like suitcases that you inhabit. And once you know about the past, then you decide what to take as a suitcase with you and carry on. And the fact that we did this film, we made them unconsciously decide that they're not going to take from the suitcase of their parents at least. So, they are lighter than we are. And I'm sure that their decisions later on will be less of a decision made by guilt or by duty, but more as a free person. I think we made them lighter. I'm not saying that I think that I can see them. I know that my son, and he says it in the film, he says I wanted to create a machine and go back in your past and live like you lived. Now that I see what you've been through, I don't want to go back into your real past. And the fact that he is lighter than I am, than my heavy baggage, he will make better decisions than maybe I did. Maybe most of my decisions were out of guilt, out of duty for my country, out of duty to my baggage. Maybe I didn't make all the decisions as a free man. I think this is why I decided to do this film. To explain what all the American films, the opposite of what all the American films say, that we are free, and we make our own destiny, and we are heroes. No, we are not free, and we do not make our own destiny by ourselves. It is partly true, but not completely. At least when you come from these kind of countries. It's a big step.

AM: I want to know what happened with the life and the mission first of all. Did you keep it? Did you get rid of it?

PA: I didn't know what to do with it, because if I get rid of it, somebody else will use it. So, I didn't know what to do with it. I ask few friends, where can I throw them and completely destroy. And I didn't have any answer, so they're still there. They're still there. And also, I wanted to do an exhibition with the release of the film. I am very ambitious, so I wanted to do an exhibition at the same time of the film release, you know, do like Lucas films. A lot of proverbs and songs, but I finished by doing just the film. So, I kept them in case I wanted to do an installation with them, but then I didn't do the installation. If I have the means, I will still do the installation on these things. That's the first time somebody asked me this question.

AM: And also, when you were talking about your parents talking to you or your grandparents letting you know, you know, what happened during their lifetime. My dad came over in 1912, he was a teenager, and now I wonder why, you know, what happened that he left the country? If his parents were still living, I have no idea, because when you're young, you don't ask your parents these questions, you don't talk to them about it. But now I wish I had, because I would like to know what he was going through before he came to America.

PA: I know these questions are recurrent. Genealogy sites are very much sites that people, especially in the US, go a lot because they want to know where they came from, and what their parents and grandparents have been through. Because, as I said, we, at one point in our life, specifically when we get older, we feel the need to understand where we come from. There is a saying in French that goes something like, "A past without history, is a future without hope" or without, you know, something to build on. So, you need to know the past so that you can build the future, specifically when you are going into a future, which is an unknown, which is death. This type of film, usually people do it when they're eighty. I've done it when I'm fifty. I'm fifty now. And, I've done it because I've felt that, you know, the hard disk, my hard disk, my memory was filled with too many things. I couldn't bear with going farther in my future. It was too much, I've lived through so many things. I've been through war. I was a war reporter when I was sixteen. I did my first film when I was twenty-one and I've seen so

much. I needed to reset the machine. And, also, I felt that it was important for my kids not to take all the burdens that I've been through. It was very important. So yes, it's important to know about the past. And, because we don't know about the past, I mean, there is a new, a new trend for psychoanalysis, and its psycho genealogy. It tells you if your father, or your grandfather, have been through something that he didn't cope with. You know, he was, he died without resolving the problem with his wife, with his son, or whatever with his life. The children will inherit it, and they might take it without even knowing. They might take the same problem and do it again, you know, as a sin. And, and it's proven that you take the problems. For five generations, none of my great-grandparents, grandparents, or parents were born or died in the same place, and when I was taking the boat to go to France, I realized that I was doing the exact same thing. So, maybe I was repeating a scheme that was in my genes, or in my heritage. And I needed to solve this, I needed to understand it so eventually I don't give it as an inheritance to my children. I'm giving you a wider answer to your question.

AM: Here's what I was wondering. I am slightly older than you are, as I am just about to talk about here. One of the things you talked about is this idea that I see recurring with a lot of Lebanese authors or, in your case filmmakers, about being Levantine, who is kind of linked to the west. And I see it recurring in a lot of our writers. Is that unique to the Lebanese authors and filmmakers? Is it something, is that how you feel as well? And, how do you feel about that? Is that a theme that you see a lot? That you're conscious of?

PA: It's not a theme, it's an identity. I feel like, yes, I am a Levantine. I think that Lebanese are very much Levantine, because the Armenians are so, so very much Levantines, they've always been there to translate the Muslim world to the west, because they understand it better, and that comes from Christians and Muslims who are in Lebanon. We are born, I believe, in a sort of, destiny. If I was born in Lebanon, there is a reason for it. Therefore, I should do something about it. Not just ignore it. Just know about it, and eventually translate that language to the rest of the world. And this is the true nature of a Levantine.

AK: Thank you again so much for being with us tonight. [Applause]

NOTES

¹ Held on January 26, 2015. The entire presentation and Q&A can be viewed at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=86FLOXx_kw8.