

‘Lebanon, The Youth Roll’: Experiencing Conflict as a Transcultural, Transnational Film Language

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We write this chapter as Lebanon begins to process the impact of one of the largest ever non-nuclear explosions to take place anywhere on Earth. On 4 August 2020, 2750 tonnes of ammonium nitrate caught fire and exploded at the port in Beirut, causing over 200 deaths, 7000 injuries and billions of Dollars in damages, leaving around 300 000 people homeless (Clifton 2020). Within days the population had taken to the streets in protest and the cabinet had resigned, the explosion being blamed on negligence resulting from the entrenched corruption of a political system dedicated primarily to maintaining a balance of power between sectarian vestige interests (Hubbard 2020). By the end of 2019 it was already abundantly clear that this system was failing. The Lebanese Pound had lost much of its value against the US Dollar, to which it is pegged; unemployment was rising rapidly and young people, in particular, were demonstrating for change, building bridges across sectarian divides (Osseiran 2020). COVID-19 forced the protestors off the streets. However, as the explosion made clear, it could not prevent this generation’s dissatisfaction resurfacing, alongside their ever-louder calls for fundamental epistemic change and social justice, ‘a new social contract’, built on inclusive, transparent and meritocratic processes which reject the sectarian cronyism (the so-called system of ‘wasta’) that defines young people’s opportunities in the country today (Next Generation 2020: 77).

The participatory filmmaking project discussed in this chapter predates the events of late 2019. However, its rationale speaks directly to many of the underlying causes of this unrest. The project developed out of a partnership between the Centre for World Cinemas and Digital Cultures at the University of Leeds, the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs at the American University of Beirut (AUB) and the British Council Lebanon and was funded by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council’s Open World Research Initiative programme ‘Cross-Language Dynamics: Reshaping Community’, led by the University of Manchester. It was part of this programme’s ‘Transnational Communities’ strand, and sought to explore how participatory arts could be used as a tool for generating intergenerational, cross-community dialogue to discuss the legacy of Lebanon’s violent past, in order to support and enhance the ongoing peacebuilding efforts of a range of civil-society organisations (CSO), such as the British Council. In so doing, the project was designed also to complement the work of the Changing the Story programme, discussed elsewhere in this volume and on which much of the project team has worked. At the same time, it was able to build on research carried out by the British Council as part of its ‘Next Generation’ research project that is exploring the way young people around the world understand their place in society. ‘Next Generation Lebanon’ (Next Generation 2020) similarly reflects the underlying factors that are currently erupting on the streets of Beirut, highlighting both the various issues that young people perceive to be central to their place in society and how they conceive of themselves as Lebanese citizens.

A key area of concern for our project, which emerged strongly from the ‘Next Generation’ data, was the complex interactions, and inter-relations, of history, culture and language that the around 2000 young people involved in the survey identified as being central to the way they experienced their society today, all of which has influenced their response to current events (Next Generation 2020: 3). The subsequent research we carried out, which formed the basis for our filmmaking project, explored the ways in which a range of CSOs of different sizes are supporting young

people to engage with these issues. Here we were particularly interested in the use of arts-based participatory practices. In post-conflict societies – if Lebanon can currently be even conceptualised as such – participatory arts, including filmmaking, are frequently considered something of a ‘go-to’ methodology, described by Craig Zelizer, for example, as ‘an essential component of peacebuilding work’ (2003: 62). Such work is seen as invaluable in maximising community engagement with, and ownership of, the development process. Having undertaken a critical review of current practice, we then co-produced a pilot project with groups of young people from different communities living in and around Beirut, using film as a tool for critically engaging with what it means to be a young person living in Lebanon today. The specific prism for this work was the legacy of Lebanon’s Civil War, discussion of which was considered by all the stakeholders involved to be a good way of exploring the interconnections between history, culture and language. The project’s title (‘Lebanon, the Youth Roll’) draws on filmmaking terminology. In order to make a film that tells a fully-rounded story, one needs a range of footage: ‘A Roll’, or the main footage that communicates the core narrative, and ‘B Roll’, or supplementary footage that helps to enhance the story being told by the ‘A Roll’. In our project we were looking to bring in a new dimension to the story of Lebanon’s troubled past that could raise awareness of questions the participants felt had often been ignored by the mainstream media but that continue to define who they are today. Hence our project focused on generating what we termed ‘Youth Roll’. In so doing, the project ultimately sought to explore how digital media can be used to investigate the plurality of conflict landscapes in Lebanon, and the ways in which young people might co-produce new narratives through creative practices that can challenge dominant discourses about the past, and ultimately about who they are today.

The Sectarian Context: History, Culture, Language and the ‘Next Generation’ in Lebanon

Before we begin to discuss the filmmaking project, and in particular the vision of society presented in the films the young people involved made, let us first explore in more detail the inter-related nature of history, cultural practice and language that informed our underlying approach to project design. To a certain extent, Lebanon has long been considered a model of pragmatic sectarianism, with power-sharing between Christian and Muslim sects enshrined in the constitution, and this notwithstanding 15 years of civil war between 1975-1990, the Taif Agreement that brought the armed conflict to an end maintaining the so-called ‘confessional’ political system to the present day (Hager 2017, 1). Indeed, the way the country has dealt with the legacy of this particular conflict is a case in point. The Civil War was a complex moment in the nation’s history, involving shifting religious and political alliances and causing widespread displacement of the population, with Lebanon providing the location for a conflict that spread far beyond its borders, a product of tensions in the geopolitics of the Cold War, on the one hand, and their particular manifestations in the Middle East on the other (Fisk 2001). There have been other important – even seismic – moments of political unrest and indeed armed conflict in the country since 1990 (Arsan 2018). However, by August 2020, for much of the country, the images of destroyed buildings that dominated international news reports during the Civil War were a somewhat distant memory. On the face of it, Beirut seemed to be a flourishing modern city. There was very little public discussion of this conflict, particularly amongst young people. At the same time, as the ‘Next Generation’ data as well as the subsequent research we carried out in preparation for our filmmaking project makes clear, familial narratives about this period remain key reference points in the way this generation marks its identity. History is central to each community’s sense of self (Next Generation 2020: 25). This is reinforced by the fact that there is no ‘national’ curriculum addressing this period of history, the consensus being that the best way of maintaining

peace is not to rake over old disputes, each community being allowed to present its own version of the past to its youth (Yoder 2015). Thus, understanding the nation's history is both central to understanding the national psyche and yet deeply problematic because it is largely left unspoken in public. This is made more difficult still by the continuing geopolitical tensions Lebanon faces in the region, not least the impact of 1.5 million Syrian refugees living in the country, displaced by the ongoing conflict there, in addition to the 20 000 Palestinians that have come to the country since the first Arab-Israeli war in 1948 (UNHCR 2019). Consequently, while the specificities of history would seem to be a clear marker of national disunity in the country, as the 'Next Generation' data also suggests, there is a widespread shared understanding of the importance of Lebanon's past for society today. Overall, 'history' was viewed by participants as the third most important factor in the way they identified as Lebanese citizens (52.7%), the second being the importance of understanding the complexity of the nation's cultural life (52.8%) and the first being 'language' (63.7%) (Next Generation 2020: 25).

As noted above, our project sought to unpick the relationship between these three factors: language, history and culture. Turning next to culture, the project looked at the extent to which arts practices were being used to both reflect and negotiate sectarian divisions. If one takes mainstream culture, for example, some of the most successful Lebanese films of recent decades highlight very clearly the continuing importance of sectarianism to cultural identity. Indeed, for evidence of this one need look no further than the huge success of the filmmaker Ziad Doueiri, from his story of cross-community love during the Civil War, *West Beirut* (1998), to his more recent legal drama about a small dispute between a Christian mechanic and a Muslim foreman that leads to large-scale political unrest, *The Insult* (2015). Similarly, one might look to the work of Rabih Mroué, one of the country's best known theatre directors and writers, whose theatre is dedicated to voicing those sectarian issues that he feels are being 'swept under the table in the current political climate of Lebanon' (Mroué 2010). His play *How Nancy Wished Everything Was an April Fool's Joke* (2007), for example, presents the history of the Civil War through the experiences of four fighters who served in different militias. Mroué is a hugely controversial figure in Lebanon, indeed this work was censored there for several years before being put on stage (E-Flux, 2016).

Lebanon has a vibrant arts scene that has always reflected the tensions between historical memory, the language of sectarian identities and contemporary politics. Given this, and in conjunction with the prevalence of participatory practices in post-conflict development work noted above, it is perhaps no surprise that from the 20 interviews we conducted during research for 'Lebanon, the Youth Roll' with a range of CSOs and other experts focussed on working with young people in and around Beirut, the use of participatory arts was widespread. From Laban Performance Art Theatre to the Lebanese Association for History, from Forum ZFD, Fighters for Peace and the International Center for Transitional Justice, to Nadi Le Kol El Nas and Advanced Democracy for Sustainable Peace, CSOs are using a broad range of practices, including 'Playback Theatre', 'Photovoice', 'Participatory Filmmaking' music, graffiti and other forms of street art, sculpture, even furniture design, as ways of encouraging young people to actively engage in cross-community dialogue (Zeidan 2020). The reasons behind each individual choice of approach varied. This was, at times, seen as part of a wider psychosocial engagement strategy, such as the project led by the organisation Acts for the Disappeared, which involved designing chairs to represent the missing lives of the approximately 17 000 so-called 'disappeared', or kidnapped victims of the Civil War who are still unaccounted for. The project was conceived in order to support the families of the victims and to stimulate cross-community understanding (Critical Review CSO interviews 2018: 31). Other organisations see the use of participatory arts

as part of a more directly activist impulse, supporting young people to become proactive ‘agents of change’, to take ownership of the issues they face and advocate for new approaches to dealing with the past, as well the other seemingly intractable problems they face (Critical Review CSO interviews 2018: 4, 76). However, what unites much of this work is the urge to help young people see the breadth and complexity of competing sectarian positions in order to help them come to a more nuanced understanding of history and thereby gain a wider perspective on events in order to promote peace. As one female NGO director, speaking for many, put it: ‘Art helps a lot in the process of reconciliation. It reveals everything as it is. [...W]e learnt that all of us were negatively affected by the war (killed, kidnapped, injured) and this helps us to feel with the other’ (Critical Review CSO interviews 2018: 8). Also noticeable in responses by interviewees is the emphasis put on the use of visual arts as an effective method for engaging young people, helping them to reflect critically on the legacy of the past for their experience of society today. As one NGO programme manager who specialises in transitional justice suggested: ‘I think that with the youth it is very important to have a visual and artistic approach in order to grab their attention, and so that they would like the work they’re doing and focus on it’ (Critical Review CSO interviews 2018: 28). Similarly, another programme manager interviewed claimed ‘Anything to do with visuals like YouTube or Instagram, this is something that is very natural and approachable [for young people]’ (Critical Review CSO interviews 2018: 81). In particular, filmmaking was picked out as an interesting approach in this regard. However, with some noticeable exceptions (such as the organisation Fighters for Peace), this was largely viewed as an aspirational practice, out of reach of most CSOs due to either a lack of experience or equipment (Critical Review CSO interviews 2018: 18, 53).

Finally, the question of language was seen as the most important marker of Lebanese identity by participants in ‘Next Generation’ Lebanon. This, too, is considered a contested space, reflecting wider sectarian tensions, on the one hand, and, on the other, opening up new ways of reflecting on the legacy of the past and how it relates to the experience of young people from different communities today (Womack 2012). The categorization of Lebanese dialectic and linguistic systems into patterns that reflects the socio-political realities of life in the country dates back to the Ottoman period, perceptions of the language continuing to be shaped by these realities throughout the twentieth century. Until the fall of the Ottoman Empire in 1920, Arabic was closely associated with Arabism and was used to strengthen a sense of (trans)national identity across the Middle East. Working against this impulse, the close ties which Lebanon developed with France via the Mandate System gave rise to the Lebanese-Phoenician Nationalist Movement, led by a group of activists who sought to play down their Arab origins and argued instead for the importance of the country’s European connections. Besides the question of origins, as is clear from discussion above, religion has played an important role in shaping identities in Lebanon. This is reflected in the language and history of missionary work in the country, and the language of instruction in educational institutions established by American Protestants and French Jesuits. The use of a particular Arabic dialect, or fluency in either French or English, continues to reflect the ways in which an individual or a community positions themselves in terms of religious and/or political affiliations. This was, to a degree at least, exacerbated after the Civil War when inter-group boundaries were reinforced, and has become more complex still with the influx of Syrian refugees since 2011, who, as we shall see in some of the films produced by our project, often consider their particular dialect as a way of ensuring their exclusion from mainstream Lebanese society. This is a complexity rarely recognized by Western and Northern European paradigms of conflict, post-conflict and displacement in the Middle East, where the dominance of Arabic in the

region has been seen by some as ‘flattening’ or obscuring the variations of culture and relative experience of different groups (Salameh 2010).

At the same time, and to a degree seeming to work against the growing sectarian division of society suggested here, Globalization has increasingly impacted Lebanon since the mid-to-late Twentieth Century, leading to growing international opportunities across sectarian divides for those with the wealth and cultural capital to take advantage of them (Sinno 2008). The increasing need for foreign languages in the international sphere has led the majority of schools to adopt educational models that teach Arabic, French *and* English. Nevertheless, as intimated above, this does not mean that markers of linguistic differences between different socio-political spheres in Lebanon have completely disappeared. Far from it, fluency in a certain language, and not in another, often continues to signal an individual’s sectarian affiliation. Similarly, dialect also continues to be widely used as an indicator of an individual’s origins, or their ideological views. However, and complicating the picture still further, an increasing number of people who have migrated to the capital Beirut from different backgrounds seek to preserve religious and political anonymity by adopting a so-called ‘white tongue’, a new Beirut accent from which signatures of regional origins are almost erased (Mermier 2013).

In our project, we were initially interested in how participants’ relationship to language inflected the way they engaged with the past and the extent to which any latent or explicit linguistic hybridity that might be produced from the various socio-political drivers outlined above could provide an opportunity to develop new societal narratives that could engage with the nation’s difficult past in new ways. As we shall see in our discussion of the films produced, and underlining the discussion above, language generally, and dialect specifically, is indeed often seen as a marker of sectarian identity. However, frequently in our project, rather than language highlighting *differences* between the various groups of young people involved, Arabic was celebrated as a *lingua franca* language that could help to overcome difference. That said, and as the films produced at times also suggest, the ability of different groups to speak versions of the same language is often not enough to prevent xenophobia towards, for example, Syrian refugees or the Palestinian refugees that preceded them. Moreover, what also came across very strongly during the project was that while the specificities of the Lebanese Civil War were not necessarily seen to speak directly to the young people involved, the experience of living with and through conflict certainly did, and this provided a further quasi *lingua franca* through which the group could share their experiences and find ways of communicating across community divides.

Lebanon, the Youth Roll: Methodology

Our study followed a mixed methods approach and was conceived in three phases. Phase One began with an initial period of data collection, the main tools for this being surveys with young people as well as semi-structured interviews with NGO leaders and other relevant development experts. Through these tools we sought to gain insights into the perspectives of Lebanese youth regarding the country’s troubled past, as well as the work being done by different stakeholders in the scope of memory and post-conflict studies, reconciliation and social cohesion. The survey was designed and disseminated to 106 Lebanese youth. It was composed of 38 questions and was divided into four sections; the first section included socio-demographic questions, the second was related to the youth’s knowledge about past conflicts, the narratives they heard related to this issue and the sources of all the information they had. The third section focused on the youth’s community engagement and had questions that tackled their level of involvement and interaction with other people in their community. The final section was about language and dialect and aimed to address how this issue affects the youth’s experience of daily life in Lebanon and the way

others perceive them. In addition to these questionnaires, 20 semi-structured interviews were conducted with artists, civil society actors and other experts who work in the field of youth, arts, post-conflict and transitional justice. The research team sought to capture the interviewees thoughts and perspectives on Lebanese youth's rights, and in particular their right to know more about Lebanon's past and the implications of this issue for the nation's present and future. These data were then subsequently further enhanced by a literature review on the role of languages and arts in the collective understanding of conflict, reconciliation and social change in Lebanon, exploring past practices of artistic and socially-engaged community-based cultural interventions. Detailed results from this process of data collection are currently being prepared for publication (Zeidan 2020). However, the emergent findings, as they relate to the rationale for subsequent phases in the project, informed the previous section of the present chapter ('The Sectarian Context').

In the rest of this chapter, we wish to focus on Phase Two of the project. This was a participatory filmmaking intervention designed to build on the findings of Phase One. The decision to use participatory filmmaking was informed by the sense of this being a particularly interesting new practice for many of the CSOs we interviewed, but considered to be beyond their scope due to concerns about colleagues lacking the necessary technical training and organisations not having access to equipment. The project was conceived of as a pilot, designed to support the British Council, and other CSO's approach to youth-focussed, peacebuilding work, to provide both an approach that could be easily adapted and adopted to local needs, and filmmaking equipment that could be borrowed and used by local organisations.

Phase Two began with a week-long workshop at AUB that provided training for the 32 young people who would be involved in this part of the project (17 young women and 15 young men aged between 16-26). Participants came from the Ghbeyré and Bourj Hammoud centres of the non-sectarian humanitarian organisation Mouvement Social and from Tahaddi, an organisation that specialises in supporting the minority, and particularly marginalised, Dom community in Lebanon (Terre des hommes 2011). These participants were supported by a group of five media students from AUB who acted as mentors throughout, and beyond, the workshop. The aim of the workshop was threefold. First, participants were introduced to the principles of participatory action research methods (community mapping, interviews, surveys, photovoice) and the value of their community knowledge for inter-community dialogue. Second, they learnt about filmmaking. This involved learning about video and sound recording, as well as how to structure a story, ethical considerations and the question of 'informed consent' as well as the basics of editing. Third, participants were given the opportunity to learn about and discuss how the various communities involved in the project understand the legacy of past conflict for the country today. Here they were able to engage with some of the NGOs that had been interviewed during Phase One of the project.

In line with the 'learning by doing' ethos central to many youth-focussed participatory filmmaking projects, the emphasis of this week was on participants producing their own films, taking as their starting point what they knew about Lebanon's past and why they wanted to get involved in the project (Lunch and Lunch 2006; Makamba et al. 2019; Cooke et al. 2020). Our focus here was on how film can be used to present a story in ways that might not be as easy to achieve via other media, encouraging participants to experiment with the equipment provided, giving them free reign over the films they wanted to produce during the workshop. After some introductory sessions, the young people spent most of the week planning, shooting and editing their films. These were then screened in front of an audience from a number of local CSOs, artists and filmmakers, providing participants with the opportunity to reflect on what they had learnt, both

about the research and filmmaking processes and about the content of their films. This workshop then led to a further round of filmmaking, during which groups of young people worked in their communities, supported and mentored by the media students from AUB. Here they had the opportunity to build on and enhance their learning from the initial workshop, again both in terms of their research and filmmaking skills and in terms of their understanding of the legacy of Lebanon's past on their experience of society today. This phase in the project culminated in community screenings of the films, as well as a series of focus group discussion and interviews with participants and the AUB mentors to explore their impressions of the project and how it could be improved or further developed.

The final phase of the project sought to bring the young people involved in the filmmaking process into dialogue with policymakers, in order to bring their perspective to bear on youth-focussed policy development, and to explore ways in which the programme could be developed further by colleagues at the British Council. While recommendations have been developed and agreed by the project team (Zeidan 2020), the planned dissemination event that would facilitate this dialogue between the policymakers and the young people has had to be put on hold due to present circumstances. Indeed, to some extent at least, current events have superseded any policy-dialogue event we might organise. At the same time, it is interesting to note that some of the research and filmmaking skills acquired by participants during our project were put to use by them as they took part in demonstrations at the end of 2019, some of the young people involved in our project recording events and interviewing demonstrators, as their generation expressed its views directly to the political elite, demanding its voice be heard.

Participatory Filmmaking: Focussing on the Films

Most accounts of participatory filmmaking as a specific development tool trace its history back to the 1960s and the National Film Board of Canada's 'Challenge for Change' programme. Such projects tend to bring together a filmmaker with a non-filmmaking community to make short audio-visual products, with the aim of creating, as Colin Low, one of the key filmmakers involved in Challenge for Change, describes it, 'a community development program [...] that use[s] film as a catalyst to generate local debate – to give local people a voice and even editorial control – and to provide those people with access to people in power, via film' (Low 2010: 17). Interest in participatory filmmaking has grown exponentially in recent years, continuing to be seen as a powerful tool that can support marginalised groups to advocate for change in their lives, becoming more popular still in the age of digital social media (Literat et al 2018). Yet while there has been a growth in interest in this type of work, there is, as E-J. Milne notes, still relatively little literature that engages critically with such projects. Citing Bronwen Low et al., Milne notes the 'descriptive' and 'celebratory' tendency of much of the recent work on participatory film: 'In such accounts, participatory video is almost unilaterally regarded as an unequivocal means to empowerment and engagement' (Milne 2016: 401), frequently conceptualised, as we also see in Low's comments on Challenge for Change, as a way of 'giving' a community 'voice' (however patronising such formulations may be) (Makamba et al. 2019). Moreover, it is interesting to note that the discussion around such projects has largely been confined to development studies, with relatively little exploration of such practice by film studies scholars (Thomas and Britton 2012: 208), something which also shapes the nature of the discussion, in particular deemphasising the examination of the types of film texts such projects produce, focussing instead to a large extent on the process of carrying out such work. As Claudia Mitchell, E-J Milne and Naydene de Lange note, 'this is an area worthy of study but often left out of participatory filmmaking studies. The process is of course important, but then so are the producers and their productions' (Mitchell,

Milne and de Lange 2012, 9). In the rest of this chapter we wish to build on the small body of work that explores the texts produced in such projects (Jipson and Paley 1997; Barone 2003; Raht Smith and MacEntee 2009; Butler-Kisber 2010), as well as investigating what participants in our project saw as the benefits, and limitations, of using film as a tool to support their active engagement in social change.

In total, the young people involved in the project produced 11 films over two rounds of filmmaking, the first taking place during the initial workshop week at AUB, the second taking place across the various communities where the young people involved live. The five films produced during the workshop week ranged from interview-based documentaries about xenophobia to docudramas about drug addiction and adopted an interesting array of aesthetic strategies. Personalised archival footage was created out of family photographs, used to complement interviews, alongside news footage from various regional past and present conflicts. One group even made a social-realist Hip Hop music video (*War and Drugs*) telling the story of a young man who, having been damaged by war, turns to drugs – both as a user and a dealer – in order to overcome the trauma of his past and to survive economically in the present. Given the speed at which the project teams had to work, and given the fact that most of the people involved had never made a film before, some of the material produced was remarkably strong aesthetically. Indeed, one could see the influence on these young people of the cinema verité style of contemporary Lebanese film, which is currently riding high internationally, with Oscar nominations of late for films such as *Capernaum*, a story about street kids in Lebanon by Nadine Labaki, the first Arab woman ever to be nominated for an Oscar.

None of the first round of films produced addressed the Lebanese Civil War directly. However, all of the issues examined in the films were clearly shaped by this past, as well as the broader legacies of war in the region. A number of the films reflect far more directly on the experience of living through the Syrian Civil War, in particular, and the impact this has had on the lives of some of the young people involved in the project. *Road to Relief*, for example, presents a series of intercut interviews with a group of young Syrians reflecting upon their experience of the war, the displacement they have faced and their efforts to integrate (largely without success) into Lebanese society. Interviewees lament their inability to access either education or work, as well as emphasising their wish to return home, manifest most poignantly in the opening song sung by Qais Areed, one of the project's filmmakers, which recalls the impact of the war on his home region of northern Syria (*al-Shām*). In discussions about the legacy of the Lebanese Civil War during the workshop, it was clear that it was frequently the Syrian participants, with their very direct understanding of the implications of war, who best understood the urgent need for peace-building both for Syrian and Lebanese society. The film *Under One Sky*, for example, creates a visual and temporal bridge between the bombed out skyline of Beirut in the 1980s and the rubble of destroyed houses in Aleppo and other Syrian cities today. The film opens with a montage of shots from both countries to a threnodic sound track. Cut to a close up of a young Syrian participant (who wished to remain anonymous), deep in thought, staring out over the skyline of present-day Beirut. The film then goes on to explore the irony of the fact that many who live in Lebanon, a country which has such recent experience of the disruption of war, appear to have little empathy for others who have similarly lived through violent conflict. This, it would seem, is largely to do with the fact that young people in Lebanon are forced to see the past through their parents' eyes rather than their own. The young man tells his friends: 'Many people see the world not by their lenses but through their parents', the environment they live in and the communities they live with. Although we all live under one sky'.

Noticeably, language is seen as a particular marker of difference in these films. *Remainders of War*, for example, plays on the project's expectation that the films would be about the legacy of the Lebanese Civil War to instead present a docudrama about present-day Syrian-Lebanese interaction. We meet a young Syrian man on his first day at university in Beirut. He attempts to talk to the young woman sat next to him, who stares stubbornly at her phone, unwilling to engage him in conversation. It is clear that she has picked up on his Syrian dialect. The film then cuts to another Syrian man and Lebanese woman reflecting on what we have just watched and the underlying causes of such xenophobia, specifically the negative impact of sectarian politics on cross-community understanding, and the implications this has for Syrians living in the country, who are unable to integrate and get on with their lives. Prejudice leads to the continuation of conflict. The film then rewinds to the start again, replaying the encounter between the two students. This time the young woman puts down her phone and engages the young man in conversation, deciding to simply get to know him.

The ethos of the end of *Remainders of War* can be found across several of the films produced during the training week. Indeed, the dominant theme is, perhaps, a call for youth-led cross-community solidarity. The film *Starting Point*, for example, brings together a group of young Syrians and Lebanese from various communities to explore what they have in common and, most importantly, what their hopes for the future are. These young people are at the starting point of their adult lives. However, they feel that their lives have already been shaped by their, and their parents' experience of the past. The group refuses to be defined by this past, defining itself instead by the group's common sense of civic duty. By coming together to share experiences, these young people realise that they have the shared hope that they will be able to change their society for the better.

The experience of making these films fed into a further round of community-based documentary filmmaking. These films focussed far more directly, and indeed more intimately, on the experience of the Lebanese Civil War than the first round. Generally, the films involved talking to an intergenerational group of friends and family. Some of the most powerful sequences in these films came from the young filmmakers talking to members of the older generation about the war, and how their memory of it compares to the way it was presented to the young participants in the introductory workshop. When the films step back and reflect on the macro-political forces that led to the war in the first place, they tend to present a clear sense of sectarian positionality. But when they foreground the experience – or familial history – of a particular interviewee, the overwhelming sense that emerges across the films is the human cost of war. At times the interviewees are overcome by the force of their recollection and their continued sense of impotence, describing the nightmares they still experience, or their feelings of frustration at events that they feel never needed to come to pass. 'How it all happened, I don't know,' declares Aziza al-Zein, a woman in her 60s from Ghobeiry, a town just to the south of Beirut, 'We need to go back to how we were in the beginning' (*To Be Remembered Not Repeated*). The camera lingers uncomfortably on her face as she describes the death of one of her Christian neighbours during the war. In feedback from the filmmakers, all aged between 18 and 24 from Lebanon, Iraq and Syria, it was clear that this moment caused a good deal of discussion, not least with Aziza al-Zein herself, who was happy to give permission for this sequence to be used. For some in the group, this was the moment when the project became very real to them, causing them to reflect – in many cases for the first time – on the continuing impact of the past on their present and how this shapes the opportunities that are available to them today (FGD 5 2019).

At the same time, it is very clear from these films that while the communities presented in them have lived through extraordinary times, the young people we see here demand their right to

normality, and to have the same sorts of experiences that young people in other non-post-conflict countries can have. In *Lebanon's Wars Part One*, the filmmakers again interview a cross-community, intergenerational group of people about their knowledge of the past. The young people interviewed all emphasise the human cost of war. A young man talks about the injuries that his father suffered during the conflict. Again, one gets the sense that the young people's understanding of the war is filtered through the sectarian position of their parents. However, through the use of an aesthetic that foregrounds a behind-the-scenes 'making-of' approach to storytelling, the film also highlights how these young people cannot be defined solely by their knowledge of the past. They are more than this. Friends cheer at the end of one of the interviews, the young man on screen proud of having been able to take part in the film, and doing such a good job of it. A young woman being interviewed outside a café wants to know if her hair looks ok, before she will begin, suggesting that her hairdresser needs to appear in the film credits. This is her main concern. That said, when talking about the legacy of the past she has a great deal to say, particularly about the need to move beyond present-day sectarianism. And, from the way in which she is presented on screen, it is clear she, at least, will not be confined by such boundaries.

Conclusions: Effecting Community Dialogue through Film

Having looked at the films produced in the project, in conclusion we would like to explore how the issues raised in this work relates to participants' motivations for taking part in the project as well as the project's overarching aim to facilitate inter-community dialogue and support organisations such as the British Council in using film and other arts-based practices to engage in this endeavour, while acknowledging that much of this work, Phase Three of the original project design, is yet to take place due to both the political situation in the country and COVID-19 restrictions.

In order to obtain feedback from participants, six focus group discussions (FGD) were carried out with the young filmmakers involved, as well as three individual interviews with some of the AUB student mentors. From the feedback collected it would seem that the experience of all involved was overwhelmingly positive, with people emphasising the pride they felt at seeing their films screened to an audience either at AUB or in their communities: 'We were so proud of ourselves', said one participant from Tahaddi, 'We realized that we are able to do something even if there was fear at first. [...] It was something great. We felt that we are progressing, we are not going back. We can make films!' (FGD 4 2019). The main reason for getting involved in the programme cited by participants was skills development. Whether they had ever tried to make a film before or not, virtually everyone said that they wanted to learn more about filmmaking and felt that this was a key benefit of their taking part, with several participants emphasising the wish to learn more about editing, specifically, as this is an aspect of filmmaking which was considered particularly technical and not something that they could just pick up without support (FGD 1, 2, 3). Participants also emphasised the value of the 'hands on', practical, approach to learning, which many had not experienced previously: 'I really liked the kind of the boot camp model of the project, which just threw us in there, teaching us how to use the equipment' (Interview 3 2020). In at least one case, the skills acquired during the project have subsequently helped a participant to develop new career opportunities by producing online content for a YouTube channel (See www.youtube.com/channel/UCZSHI9I0GsAhCBUMZFH5VRQ; Interview 1 2020). Some of the project mentors also used the extra practical skills they learnt during the project to take part in a separate filmmaking project during the demonstrations at the end of 2019, interviewing participants about their reasons for taking part (Interview 1 2020).

While learning about filmmaking appears to be the key reason why people wished to take part in the project, some (albeit fewer) participants came to the project because of its focus on ‘history’ and the way this is experienced by different communities (FGD 2 2019). Moreover, the ‘content’ of the project, beyond the skills being learnt, clearly grew in importance for many over the course of their involvement: ‘Honestly, at first I didn’t take it seriously, the second workshop I didn’t come, but after I felt that there is a specific goal [to the films] and after that I really got into it’ (FGD 3 2019). Indeed, it is ultimately a false dichotomy to separate the ‘skills’ from the ‘content’ side of the project, as it is also clear from the feedback that the medium of filmmaking was important to the way the young people’s interest in the history of the Civil War and its legacy grew over time. As one participant from Bourj Hammoud put it, film ‘has more of an effect. Expressive pictures, with sound and words, work better to convey the idea/message’ (Focus Group 2 2019). In particular, participants found the filmmaking process to be a good way of empathising with the war experience of others: ‘We learned how to be *empathetic*. [...] We also should not look at people based on their race and ethnicity. You should deal with the person based on them as a human being’ (FGD 5. Our emphasis). This emphasis on the human cost of the Civil war, as well as the other conflicts discussed by the groups, was a common refrain of much of the focus group discussion (as well as emerging from the films themselves, as discussed above). Indeed, in discussions film was specifically mentioned as a good medium for this, allowing the viewer to see beyond social markers such as dialect or class. Discussing the experience of conducting and watching back the interviews they conducted, one participant suggested, for example, ‘Each one would tell us something. If you look at the film, you can see the facial expressions of people and know that they suffered. If you tell me something and I tell it to someone else, I wouldn’t be able to deliver your pain and suffering as well, because you are the one who lived the tragedy. Using film was very important’ (FGD 4 2019). The power of film as a communication tool was also emphasised in this regard: ‘If you have seen the film, one of them got really emotional and we really felt bad about. And then, we thought that maybe this film could do well and benefit a lot of people’ (FGD 5 2019). This was, of course, a key impetus for the project and it would, indeed, seem to be the case for participants that film can support cross-community understanding, widening participants perspective on the nation’s history. In Phase Three of the project, the project hopes to organise further screenings in order to generate further dialogue on the issues raised and thus to stimulate wider reflection on the need for empathy in approaching the competing narratives of Lebanese history. As already noted, this dimension of the project was inhibited somewhat both by the unrest of 2019 and the COVID pandemic of 2020. However, there are still plans to develop this aspect. With this in mind, a selection of the films (all those of approved for wider usage by participants) have been collected together and curated on the ‘Yarn Community’ website. This is an online tool designed to allow communities to present their local resources however they wish, free from any institutional bias (see <http://yarncommunity.com/stories/804>). As we explore ways to develop the programme further, and to generate discussion with policymakers, we are also seeking to use this online space to stimulate further online community-level interaction. This work is, however, still in an early stage of development.

Feedback from participants also pointed to other ways in which the programme could be enhanced, or developed further, to address a number of issues they faced in making their films. As one frequently finds in participatory processes, the manifestation of societal pressures impacted on power dynamics within the project. The issue of gender was raised by one of mentors, and the difficulty she had at times in working with some of the young men in her group (although she was keen to say that this was something she felt she had to negotiate rather than

it being something that spoilt her overall enjoyment of the project) (Interview 1 2020). There was discussion about some young women who potentially wanted to take part in the project but were not able to do so, because it was not approved by their parents (FGD 4 2019). There was also a good deal of discussion about the sectarian sensitivities that were at the heart of the project while, at the same time, pointing to the potential of the project to support efforts to move beyond sectarianism:

The filming that we were using, the fact that we had to film people's faces saying their thoughts about the war, proved that we are still afraid, no matter how open minded we are [...] I put all my energy in that video and I felt that this video was the best video we did. We discussed hope since the video revolved around how to look at life from a different perspective. We called the video *The Starting Point* because we aim to put everything that passed behind us and move on (FGD 1 2019).

The tension between emphasising sectarian sensitivities and the potential of the project to move beyond them was also raised with regard to the broader question of the intended audience of the films. Here we return to the question of exhibition. The original aim of the project was to raise awareness of the continuing legacy of the past for Lebanon today, using film as a way of connecting young people across communities to the policy community. Concerns were raised that the films could be misconstrued, if screened in different contexts not originally envisaged by their makers. For one participant, although in principle she wanted to see young people's films going beyond Lebanon and speak to an international audience, she felt that, with the regards to the films she helped make in the project, 'these are issues that are very internal to Lebanon', and if people outside the country saw them 'it [would feel] like we're being objectified, as like third world country'. This, the participant suggested, came from the fact that, on the one hand, the groups did not have enough time to go into detail, to 'dig deep into the real social issues. [...] I think we need to get past this and discuss other things'. On the other, this participant also suggested that it might have been good if the project had taken a more open approach to deciding on the overall topic to be explored in the project: 'I would have loved to make a movie about, you know, the falafel vendors in the street, or, like, the guy who owns the newspaper stand and yeah, I think these are some ideas. I would love to see a kind of more artistic, personal cultural, approach to, you know, this kind of project' (Interview 3 2020).

Both of these are important points and need to be carefully considered for further iterations of the programme. This participant certainly spoke for many in asking for more time. This is a common concern in such projects and also speaks to some of the other concerns raised here. Of course, developing longer programmes requires more (financial) resources. However, as the literature on participatory filmmaking also shows, this is generally money well spent, as time is required to build up the relationships of trust across groups to overcome the issues around power dynamics mentioned above, as well as helping groups develop their skills in order to be able to present the issues *they* wish to explore in the way *they* wish to discuss them, with the level of nuance *they* wish to achieve (Lunch and Lunch 2006; Milne 2016; Makamba et al. 2019). In order to do this, such work needs to be built into the longer-term objectives of the organisations involved, rather than being seen as a one-off project. We are fortunate in that this was always the plan for our pilot programme, and these reflections will guide us as we develop further iterations of this project, including the wider curation and dissemination of the films produced in this pilot, in order to support the further amplification of youth voice in Lebanon, as this generation continues to demand transformative change.

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