

Rania Stephan: Film-Director

(Born in 1960, in Beit Miri; currently living between Paris, Beirut and West Bank, Palestine; recorded in Beit Miri family home. Language: Arabic, with large parts in French or English.)

From what we said earlier, I feel I should introduce myself as a film director. So I will begin with how I got into film directing, how I chose to be a film director - or how film-directing chose me. It took me a lot of time to realize that I am a film director. The first time I realized this was when someone called me a director. He said, "Now we are going to introduce director Rania Stephan." It was when a film of mine won a prize; its title is 'Qabila'(Tribe). I made it in 1990. It was in the Los Angeles Video Festival. It was practically the only video art film from France. So I sent it, and it was accepted in the festival, and I went to Los Angeles to present the film, and I was introduced as 'Rania Stephan, director.' It is only then that I realized I had become a film director. It is very strange how things happen. From then on, I considered 'Qabila' as my first film even though I had made films earlier.

How I got into the films -- in Lebanon it was very difficult to choose to be an artist. I mean in my family, there was nothing against art, no taboo. But in our environment, and in a situation of war, it was very difficult for me to finish the Baccalaureate and say I want to be an artist. It was unrealistic. You couldn't earn money, there was no horizon, there was no way, no openings towards art. I didn't know what to do. During the Baccalaureate year, I remember very well, there was a scene from life, I was in the Collège Protestant, and someone came from France, an inspector. He came to see how the Collège was functioning during the war, and he asked us what we were going to do. Everybody in my class knew, they had already chosen, "I am going to be a doctor," "I am going to be an engineer," "I am going to do biology, or agriculture." I said, "I don't know." Everybody looked at me and said, "Shu!" ('What!') In fact I used to know very, very, very well what I wouldn't do, definitely not architecture, or agriculture, or anything like that, but I didn't know exactly what I would do. There were things inside of me struggling, not knowing what they are, or how to express themselves. That was on one hand. On the other, we didn't have a strong cinematographic culture at home, or in my environment. And there was the war.

I remember very well going to the cinema on my own in Beirut. Nobody in my class used to do that. I remember walking on Hamra, I'd find an interesting movie and go in. This was something not many people did. I used to watch everything, from Kong Fu to Bergmann. I did not have in my head a specific category of films I wanted to see. I did not have a 'culture cinéphelique.' I used to watch Kong Fu, action films,

everything. I used to pass by a cinema and go right in. I don't know how the idea of cinema got crystallized. In fact, when I was eighteen, after finishing the Bacc, my sister was in Australia and we had relatives over there, I decided to join her rather than go to the American University of Beirut. I was accepted, but there was nothing I wanted to do at AUB. Going to Australia was a very important step, because I left home and family, and started living on my own. I left school and entered university. I left Lebanon and lived abroad. So there were three new factors in my life. It took a lot of time to grasp these. When I reached Melbourne, I didn't leave the city. It took me four years to digest all the changes that were happening in my life. I was discovering myself, I was discovering the university and Western culture.

What did I want to do in the university? I went 'instinctively towards' the arts, and I decided I had a sort of curiosity about the cinema. I thought, let me try Cinema Studies, let me try Art History, let me try Religious Studies, let me try Theater Studies. No one was telling me what to do. On my own, I chose things that I was 'curious about', and wanted to explore. So it was by chance that I arrived at cinema, theater and art history. I started studying the cinema, and then something strange happened. A door opened in my mind. Studying cinema was like a door for me, which made me understand how the world functions. Because with cinema we studied history, sociology, psycho-analysis, linguistics, semiotics, Marxism, political history and feminism. Everything went through the door of Cinema Studies. It was as if one opened a window and light came in. I was understanding how everything functions, how the world is constructed, how everything works. It was really great. I fell in love with cinema and I started specializing in film direction. But I didn't imagine I would make films, or that I would hold a camera in my hands. I remember that during the four years in Australia, I visited Lebanon, someone had given me a three minutes 'Super - 8 film', I was supposed to film the family, but I was too shy even to hold the camera. Now when I look at the film, the only thing I filmed is the spaces between people. Neither my mother, nor my father, nor my sister or brother show in the film (laughs), only the spaces between them. I was too shy to point the camera at anyone. The passage between theory and practice was blurred and obscure, I don't know how I got through.

'Anyway'- Cinema Studies - I did a BA with honors in



Australia, I came back to Lebanon after 1982. Then, something very dramatic happened in my family, my mother died and the family was somehow dismantled. All the children left. The whole 'dynamics' of the family changed after the death of my mother. We were very close to each other, but physically we were distant, even though we were trying to maintain a close relationship with each other in spite of the distance between us. 'Definitely,' things changed in the dynamics of the family after my mother's death.

I went to France, I don't know how to tell you (pause) 'en fait,' I met Jacques in Lebanon, three months after my mother died. I want to make a parenthesis here. I was born in 1960, so that when the war started I was fifteen. So I lived four years of war and then I went to Australia for four years and then I came back for a year to Lebanon, in 1983, when my mother died. I was here two months before she died. So I was here practically all that year. After the death of my mother, three to four months later, I met Jacques. He was a graphic designer and photographer from France, and was working here. So something like a 'combinaison de deux événements'. Jacques was supposed to leave Lebanon, we were going out together, and I was not working because I was involved with the family, and with my mother. I had finished my BA and didn't know what to do. So I decided to go to France, and go to the IDHEC. And at the same time I was with Jacques.

Zeina: What is the IDHEC?

Rania: Institut des Hautes Etudes Cinématographiques, in France. Jacques was going to France; I was going out with Jacques; I was not doing anything in Lebanon. So why not continue my studies in France and at the same time be with Jacques? I didn't know that I would stay with Jacques. The situation was rather dynamic. I left Lebanon. It had never occurred to me before that I would go to France, not like the Francophones who had the 'French Dream'. I didn't have any 'particular attachment to France' even though I was at the Collège Protestant. We were very much inclined towards Arabic culture; we were not very westernized. As a flashback, I remember once in the Collège we made a small film. I don't know whether this helped me decide to go into film directing or not. I remember that it was very exciting to make a film. But it wasn't after doing the film that I decided to do cinema studies. All the choices were a bit mysterious. Perhaps because in Lebanon, one is not encouraged to choose an artistic profession. Anything like that was not 'stressed', it was more of a 'hobby'. In short, I went to France and entered a university to do my MA. This university - Paris VIII - had both practical and theoretical training. So I continued theoretical studies, and I started using a camera, and I was living with Jacques (smiles). I won't talk about my personal life.

Zeina: No, no, it is part of you as well.

Rania: I lived with Jacques, and went to the university. But Paris VIII was a very 'interesting place'. It had been very active in 1968, so all the important people in cinema of 1968 used to teach there - Deleuze and all those of the Cahiers du Cinema.

But at the same time, it was not well known, it was not approved by the government because it was left wing, and at the same time it was not well-equipped. We made a student co-operative, and bought equipment, and started in this way to practise film-making together. We used to work on each other's movies, and make new ones. This is how I started to make films, in the co-op circle, doing videos which are a marginal product. I got into it bit by bit. At the same time, it was very difficult, I think that my relationship with Jacques (sighs), prevented me from doing something very open in my profession. There was pressure. Our relationship was very passionate and very ... confused. I was so involved in the relationship; it was difficult to do anything outside it. The only door outside Jacques was the video group, unconsciously this thing was continuing without my knowing where it came from. My relationship with Jacques lasted for seven years. We got married and then we separated. I left Jacques in 1990, about the time I was starting to make my first film. I think 'ce n'est pas un hazard', because in the relationship I had with Jacques, he wanted me to be totally his. It was very difficult to do anything outside my relationship with him. So, when I started making the film, our relationship was shaken and fell apart. It was the 'tip of the iceberg.' It became obvious that it was impossible to stay together because I had to express myself, and he was not giving me the opportunity to do so. When I left Jacques, I started making video films on a very small scale. I used to make videos and send them to film festivals. I always used to have a 'travail alimentaire', and to make my videos in the context of our small association where we had equipment. This was something constant. I gradually became able to survive from film-making at a very low level. But I couldn't live without a job.

We reached 1990 - I divorced Jacques and started making my first film. Maybe I can (pause) think a bit on my own, or with you out loud why -- I think maybe if there hadn't been the war, or if my mother hadn't died, my life would have been different. Maybe I would have finished my BA at AUB, got married and had three children (laughs). But this didn't happen. What happened is - - how to say it? Okay, let's take it from another side. Now I'm thirty eight. I'm trying more and more to focus on my professional and artistic life. Though I have a personal life and a very blossoming relationship, I don't think I will marry again. Because I feel that I haven't spent enough time on my professional life. It is very important for me, the choice which was so obscure and came from so far away, and which took me so long to express myself in. If I were to stop and do something more traditional, I would go mad. The older I get the more I feel that I should go deeper in this unclear road. Being an artist is not something clear, because one has to manage one's job and one's artistic work, even in video. I was always in a situation where I could either make films for money, or make my own films, video art, the films I think about. So this struggle is always present, and gets into a more traditional frame, that is having a life, a more conventional one - or to have children. All three things keep on coming up - art, work, children. It is not that I have put an X on them. But every time I have to make a decision I feel that I have to engage more in this road, art, which

is getting clearer and clearer to me as I go forward. It is something like 'nécessité'. The Ancient Greeks believed in 'le hazard et la nécessité'. I believe in this as well. There is chance and there is destiny. Maybe it was just luck that I got to Australia and found cinema studies. Yet I can not do anything else except go on in this obscure and tough road. When I think how my life could be, or could have been, or if I could have done something else, I don't know, I don't think so.

So in 1990 I left Jacques, I divorced him. Bit by bit, I started getting into this life, but I had still a 'travail alimentaire', and small films. I stayed like this till 1995, when I received a grant from UNESCO, in France, I had applied for a grant to make a video film in Palestine and I won the grant out of 1500 candidates who applied for art grants, and twenty who applied for art video. I won the video grant and went to Palestine to make a film, its name is 'Baal and Death.' In parentheses, this is the first time that I live totally from my work. This is very important for me. I reached a new phase where I can sustain myself. For two years I went back and forth between France and Palestine to make this film. I jumped from video 8, art video, to more professional equipment. I jumped from no production to production, I jumped from not being able to sustain myself from film-making to being able to do so. And I went to Palestine, something I'd never thought of doing. I discovered a lot of important things, the situation of the Middle East in general, and the situation of the Palestinians and the Lebanese.

So I lived in France from 1983 to 1995. I went to Palestine from 1995 on and off until 1998. I used to go for three months to Palestine and come back to France. What I want to say is that when I won the grant to make the film in Palestine, I had a feeling that I wanted to come back to the East. I had absorbed the West in a certain way. Of course no one can absorb it completely, but I understood how Europeans function, how they work, and how they live. And I had like a feeling to come back to the East, and rediscover it. I think that here as well there was 'le hazard et la nécessité'. I won the grant and I had a 'désir d'Orient' as they say. Lots of things developed in me in the West, and blossomed in those three years, in my return to the East. My Arabic improved a bit, I started thinking more in Arabic, speaking in Arabic. I started seeing how Arab societies function, at an older age. It is not that I had lost contact completely, but it is different when you live in the society.

I think there is something else, I don't know if it's related to the fact that I am a woman or an artist, I don't know if I am an artist anyway. It is more that I can't stay in one place. I keep on going back and forth to Lebanon. I am not able to come back permanently. I don't know if I can. For sure it is not going to be a final settlement in Palestine, it is only for some projects. But for sure I can't live all the time in France either. There is something like 'wandering' now which is happening to me. I don't know if I have a stronger relation with -- because now I'm

now thirty-eight, I am a woman, I don't know how they will accept this in Lebanon. There is something like 'mouvance' one has to live it, I don't know how. All I know is that when I look at my school friends, I see that we have different pathways. All my friends - most of them -- when I got divorced I was thirty, they had just got married or had their first child, and I started making the first film. When I first met Jacques, they were finishing their university education and were going out, they hadn't settled down, but I had settled down. When they started settling down, I gave up stability. When they started making children, I started making films. It's something like a reverse progress. I come to Lebanon every now and then, I haven't lived here for a long stretch since 1983. So I'm not looking to see if I'm accepted as a person in Lebanon, with the 'status' I have. I mean I have an unusual 'statut social'. But this doesn't worry me a lot. I don't know if it's because I'm an artist that they will accept that I'm divorced, or because I'm divorced they may accept the fact that I'm an artist. I don't know what is covering what. But for me, I feel very comfortable with myself, because the older I get, the closer I get to what I really feel inside of me. 'So I don't judge myself negatively.' (pause)

As a storyteller, don't like to be boring. This is why I am not giving 'boring details.' If I think about the films I made, I think, oh, can I add something? When I was with the video group, there were three tendencies. A friend of mine used to make movies in which he filmed himself, very closely, 'his own body, his own experiences, his own sexuality, his own deviances, his own craziness.' It was as if the camera was stuck to him. Another used to film 'one step further,' I mean she used to film herself, but from distance. I feel I talk about myself in my movies, but 'one step even further.' Maybe it is our background, because the two persons I have talked about are French, and they are used to being 'articulate' about themselves, 'being an artist and talking about themselves.' We were not brought up to talk about ourselves. Okay, you can talk about yourself, 'but how to articulate this in an artistic manner is an apprenticeship, it is not natural.' You feel like putting yourself in this situation, but you have to learn how to articulate it. I feel a bit 'removed,' my films talk about myself, they talk about me of course, but 'one step further even than them.'



For example my first film, the film I consider to be the first, is the one we talked about, 'Qabila.' It was about my tribe in Paris. After I left Jacques, my life changed completely. Before, I was always concentrating on the couple, and the relationship with Jacques, and it was difficult for me to do anything outside the relationship. And I continued with the video group 'by miracle, or by addiction, or by a survival thread that was leading me throughout this.' When I left Jacques, I had something like a 'quasi-tribe' in France. I thought that we should get something good from the East and put it in the West, that is the intimate relationships we have here among people. I was trying to create

a family circle in Paris, which would be my new family, where you don't have to be related by blood to each other, but to be like a family, or a tribe, in which we take care of each other and love each other. So the first film was 'Qabila,' 'the portrait of my tribe.' The second film I made was about a relationship I had after Jacques. It was very 'unrequited love.' So I made 'Phèdre,' a tragic, unrequited love. After that I made a film about the end of love, and it was called 'Tentatives de jalousie.' It was someone I loved who went with someone else. Every time it was one step further, it was never me talking, it was someone talking on my behalf. 'Tentatives de jalousie,' 'c'est un poème russe d'une femme qui est quittée par son aimant, et moi j'ai fait ce poème et je l'ai mis en images. Bien sûr c'est moi qui parle à la place du poème'. After that, I made 'Baal.' 'Baal' was also a change in my life, there was production, there were actors, costumes, a whole process which I discovered or at least I practiced this process with 'Baal.' Filming in Palestine was very difficult. Most of the time, I was the only woman in the team. All the rest were men. There were two women actors. I don't know, there is something strange, I was simultaneously aware of the actual situation of women, and feminist theories. I didn't feel while filming 'Baal' that, because I am a woman, it was easier or more difficult. But for sure, no woman went to the places I went to, and filmed where I did. It was the first time.

I don't think that it's 'par hazard' that I'm working in video. Video technology almost coincided with the women's liberation movement. It was in the 1970s that video technology was introduced, and in the 1970s that women started voicing themselves, and saying 'that they wanted to contribute in the arts.' So a lot of women used the video 'as a means of expression.' It is not only because it is an accessible means, it's also because you can have your own means of production, which is very 'important. I feel that because I am into video art, which is a marginal category of film making, and being a video art artist and a woman, I feel that I am a bit on the margin still.' Now I am writing my first feature film so I don't know if, 'when you go into the mainstream' - I won't do a mainstream film - but when 'you go into a type of industrial product, an artistic product,' the issues may change a bit. Because I will discover 'the amount of antagonism.' I think that with video art, since it was a new medium, women took it to express themselves. No one told them where to start and where to stop, there was 'no antecedent male art before them. They were not influenced. It is an interesting thing to study video art. As a woman film maker, I think that writing a feature film - because I think I am writing a feature film about Lebanon, the events will happen in Lebanon - it is a way for me to get back into Lebanon. I cannot imagine myself coming back to Lebanon and settling in Lebanon without having a project. I thought it would be interesting to get back to Lebanon, and at least try and work out something, since the film is about my relation to Lebanon which is a bit conflictual. I think it is a good way into resolving my relationship to Lebanon. Also it will maybe reveal the difficulties a woman will have in a product which is more industrial. Everything will be involved in this film. When you make a feature film, it is a more expensive process, it becomes

harder for a woman to do it because men have the power.'

Zeina: In terms of funding?

Rania: 'In terms of funding. As a first film. There are lots of bodies in Europe that help first film makers, enough money to exist, but you have to know how to knock on the right doors, and go into a certain process. But I will try to do this. Maybe I should say something else. When I was doing cinema studies in Australia, an idea came to me about a film. And I persisted in this idea, maybe this helped me go into holding a camera. I come from Joun.' I don't know why I am speaking in English. 'Maybe I can say things in English I can't say in Arabic?! I come from Joun village.' As a family, we Stephans are very attached to Joun. We have a very intimate relationship with it, because my father used to talk a lot about it, and we used to go there for three months every year. There was a Lady Stanhope who lived in Joun, 'an English Lady, an 18th Century traveler.' She settled in Joun, and died there. 'I always wanted to do something about her because she was an exceptional woman, because I wanted more to talk about Joun than Lady Stanhope. To talk about both. It is when I came to France, I said that I am an Oriental woman in the West, I wonder why a Western woman would go to the Orient? All this problematic came up to me, and I said I have to do something about Lady Stanhope and why she wanted to go to the Orient. So this idea about doing something about Lady Stanhope -- I always say that if I have only one film to make in my life it will be this one, and it will be more focused on why an Occidental woman would choose to settle in the Orient. And also what is very funny is that I read a lot about Lady Stanhope, she was exceptional, interesting, very probably difficult, a very strong personality, a bit lunatic, interesting anyway. What I remember of her as a child, what I used to hear when I was running about in the village, is about her outrageous sexual life. It is funny that two hundred years, one hundred and sixty years later, what remains about her are the rumors of her crazy sexual life. One story running in the village is that she used to imprison her lovers, especially those who disobeyed her, in her dungeon'. So imagine you grow up on these stories of this weird English lady who imprisoned her lovers in a dungeon! (laughs) These are the sexual fantasies running in the village. When we grew up a bit, my aunt told me that her uncle was her lover. So people in Joun had a relationship with her. 'I think she is a powerful image, a powerful woman, and a powerful sexual object, yes object. So when I first started cinema, I always had in mind that I should do something about her. And I might, no, no I will do something about her, because I read a lot about her and I like her. Ça va?'

'Let's conclude this section.' I have to say that this film I'm writing on Lebanon is finally a film where I am talking about myself. Of course the main character will not be me. 'I will not be acting definitely, the character will have to resemble me. Maybe finally, not finally, this film about Lebanon will be a first person enunciation, more than the other films that were always (pause) a tool, an intermediary between myself and representation. So the film about Lebanon, the one I am writing, is definitely about my relation to Lebanon, my relation to my

own épanouissement, my own history. It has more to do with myself directly, maybe it will be the child I will make at the age of forty. That concludes a chapter of my life'. (pause)

I was thinking that it is strange how one speaks about oneself in oral history, there is something organized and there is something loose. I was talking with a friend about Rossellini, an Italian director. He was saying that Rossellini made a horror movie. When one reads biographies of big film makers, you feel that everything was ordered, everything was organized, one thing after the other, they knew what would happen next. People write about others retrospectively in a very organized manner, they tend to forget that there is a lot of 'barbottage' (muddle). There are, in one's life, a lot of things you don't realize or absorb. You only realize them when they are in the past, or when you see them from a distance. When one is -- as an artist one passes through obscure periods, not knowing where one is going, if what one has done has meaning or not. This is very personal and private, because what is difficult in art is that your life and your work are intrinsically woven together. You are not going to the office from nine to five, no, you're working at home, and it is your life you are talking about. It is difficult when you say this is important, or I think I will do this, you cannot but do

what you are feeling, or what you think you should be doing. But you cannot always evaluate. Or at least that is how I see it - maybe geniuses do not feel this way, but I on my little level go through very obscure and unclear periods - should I be doing something or not, all the choices you have to make.

Because when you read the biographies of famous directors, they seem linear. But if you go into the details of their lives, it is not like that. They have messed up, they have films no one talks about. I am reading about Pasolini to see why he was interested in Palestine, and why he actually went there in 1963. He also made films that no one has ever seen, or that are less important than the rest. So when one is in this position of talking about one's life, and how to organize it, and what to say, there is at the same time a 'ligne directrice' and a lot of superfluous details that fall out from the 'curriculum.' So it is strange how one talks about oneself. 'I can say that I am thirty eight, and I feel I am way behind. Maybe what I am living now, I should have lived when I was twenty eight. The seven years during which I did not do much while I was with Jacques delayed me a bit, but now there's more concentration, less superfluity. I know better how to work now. At the same time what you live is what makes your work richer. You cannot say that seven years are lost, but at the same time I say they are lost. I have two versions. I feel the more I, I am discovering myself more, I am trying to be truer to myself. I am discovering myself more, not less. It is not always easy but I think it is more mature at least to know myself. I think if I should retrospectively try to understand why I chose this path, why I lived the experiences I did, why I lived in so many countries, and why I have a sort of nonlinear life unlike other women. I



have to know myself. I have to live my experiences to the limit, I have to know myself, I have to go deeper, to be more and more conscious about myself.

My dream - maybe the conclusion should be my dream - my dream for the future, is to try - because I think that it is hard to combine economic assets with this process of self-knowledge and self-learning - my dream would be to be able to live from my work. To be more financially independent, because now, as an artist, I live on a very limited budget. I am very tight. I am self-sufficient but I cannot. I cannot provide for my friends, for the family. So my dream is to be able to live from my work more, in order to be more socially, more large, more solid, more at ease, not for climbing the social ladder but to provide for my friends and my loved ones. To provide for my family if needed, I mean to be more dependable economically. Now, I managed to be self-sufficient, but I cannot be dependent on family or friends, never. So in this sense, my professional - - the path which was very obscure has become a bit clearer now.

In this self-knowledge process, I was reminded that - you see how aware I am of the economic aspects of my life - I was reminded that I have the opportunity to teach a course at Bir Zeit in the Women's Studies Program, which is a very active and interesting department. In fact they are trying to prepare an MA curriculum, so 'they asked me to give a course in cinema studies, I will be teaching, Women's Representation in Films in the WSP, which is very interesting for me. Because for a long time, since university, I haven't gone into theory, I went into practice. It is not that I have forgotten theory, no, but I am no longer up-to-date. So this course will allow me to refresh my memory about feminist and film theory, and to be more articulate about it.' And also to know that - since this film I am writing is about a woman and her experience with the reconstruction of Lebanon - 'so it's not by chance. Here it's le hazard et la nécessité - like the Greeks again. I am writing about a woman who is living the reconstruction of Lebanon, and, simultaneously, I have to articulate theoretically women's representation in films. Maybe they will feed into each other, probably they will. I am very happy to do this because I have never taught at a university. I think it's important for me to refresh my theoretical background, to try to present the women's issue in a sort of 'hot spot.' Because it is not easy in Ramallah to talk about this issue. Since I am writing in a very personal way about this woman, the whole process is going in the same direction, which is good. I think I need to know if I am any good at teaching at university. 'As an artist, you need to have a job to be able to earn a living, maybe one opportunity will be to teach and do my films. So this is it, now I am going this way, we will see what happens.

Recorded and translated by Zeina Misk.

End Notes

1. 'It is a Russian poem of a woman whose lover left her, and I wrote this poem and I put it into images. Of course it was me who was talking through the poem.'