

*Alone with War*

Directed by Danielle Arbid

First Run/Icarus Films, 2000

*Alone with War* is an odd little film. The film consists of filmmaker Danielle Arbid's return to Beirut after her exile to France during the civil war. She returns looking for answers, though it immediately becomes clear that she is equally searching for questions, questions in any case that few appear to be willing or able to address. Her interview subjects are mostly defensive and evasive, so the film at first appears to be a frustrating exercise in futility. Arbid does not help matters by failing to provide the audience with the necessary context to understand why her subjects respond the way they do, nor does she do much other than hint at her own motives for her post-war return to Beirut. Most viewers would not have the patience nor motivation to await the slow unfolding of information and events. For those who do have patience—an audience that I imagine to be those who already have a personal or scholarly interest in the civil war, as well as enough background knowledge to contextualize the sketchy interviews—the film does pay off, to some extent.

Arbid encounters many interesting characters along her journey. One man is an opportunist who charges Arbid for a tour of the traces of the civil war, including sites of “massacre, torture and kidnapping” for an extra price. She also crosses paths with Interior Minister Michel El-Murr on a hurried path to his car, who tries in vain to evade her question about the possibility of a war memorial. In one of the more chilling scenes, she visits children who gleefully play upon the ground of the war dead. They boast of finding skulls bereft of their eyes. Most of her interviewees claim to know little about the war, or if they participated, they rationalize or minimize their involvement in some way or another. One former militiaman continues to relive the war. “I live in a dream,” he says. “I want [the war] to come back.” In a chilling scene, a militiaman, Mohamed, gives Arbid a tour of the war ruins. He relives the war with us, acknowledges its evil, and quakes with post-traumatic terror. Otherwise, there is an apparent veil of shame and secrecy about the war. In another scene, mothers of the war's missing protest on a street corner, holding up pictures of their sons. We learn that 17,000 men are missing after the war, yet the city responds with an eerie silence, except for the mothers, who are brushed aside by city police. These are arresting images.

Above all, it seems clear that Arbid desires her countrymen to recognize the war in some way, to provide a public acknowledgment of some kind, a memorial. Yet the city seems to have other plans to forget it as soon as possible. Arbid at least accomplishes the task of documenting on film what would otherwise soon disappear from the public eye. In essence, then, her film occupies an interesting place as a memorial in itself, and on this score, it succeeds wonderfully.

*Reviewed by Brent Dean Robbins, Allegheny College*